

Thaksin's Red Birthday Bash

written by กองบรรณาธิการ | July 27, 2011

KHON KAEN - Though July 26 does not mark a Thai festival or a royal birthday or even a Buddhist holy day, the city's largest temple was filled to capacity yesterday morning with close to 600 Red Shirts observing a most unlikely holiday: exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's 62nd birthday. For the third year in a row, Nong Waeng Temple played host to a United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship's (UDD) merit making ceremony for its beloved Mr. Thaksin.



Red supporters pay their respects.

In a post-election climate typified by cautious optimism amongst the Red Shirts, the city's first major UDD gathering was not to celebrate the Red-supported Pheu Thai party's "landslide victory," nor presumptive Prime Minister (and Mr. Thaksin's youngest sister) Yingluck Shinawatra's endorsement by the Election Commission, but a birthday party.

"Many people still see [Mr. Thaksin] as the best Prime Minister they ever had," local Red Radio DJ Numchaiya explained yesterday. "People haven't seen what Yingluck is capable of, so Mr. Thaksin is still very important."

Thongbai Phanmai, a Mahasarakham Red Village leader, agreed. In between making donations to the temple and buying some UDD-branded merchandise, Ms. Thongbai explained that Mr. Thaksin has done a lot for the Red Shirts. "He didn't take anything, he gave a lot to poor people," she added.

But it is more than just Mr. Thaksin's populist legacy that brought people to Nong Waeng Temple's expansive main sanctuary. Dr. Somchai Phatharathananunth, a scholar of the Red Movement from Mahasarakham University, explained in a phone interview that Mr. Thaksin's image among Red Shirts has grown far beyond his social welfare policies. "At the moment, Thaksin is quite far away from them, but they still love [him].... He's a kind of symbol, a support."

Indeed, for much of the UDD's membership, the 2006 military coup that tossed the popularly elected leader from office has made Mr. Thaksin into a symbol of the Thai elite's disregard for one of the most basic principles of representative democracy - that an elected leader has the right to lead the country.

"For villagers, they know that Thaksin came from elections. They support the people who win an election. [They feel] he has the right to run the country," Dr. Somchai said.

Mr. Thaksin has been living in self-imposed exile in Dubai since a 2008 Supreme Court decision found him guilty on corruption charges and sentenced him to a two-year prison sentence. For many of his supporters, this exile has only inflated his image as a victim of an undemocratic system. They believe he is entitled to a second chance.

For Ms. Thongbai, it is plain and simple. "He deserves to come back, he wants to come home," she said.

Still, despite having all the trappings of growing into an out-and-out birthday celebration, Khon Kaen's UDD leadership chose to postpone a scheduled concert event on the banks of Kaen Nakhon Lake, just a stone's throw from Nong Waeng's golden stupas.

"[The Red Shirts] want to celebrate," Mr. Numchaiya said, "but I think it is better to wait until the government is formed."

Would they celebrate then? "Absolultely," he said.