

# [On Thailand's 2019 election: The Isaan Red Shirts have returned, but where is Godot?](#)

written by Saowanee T. Alexander | January 24, 2019

*Guest contribution by Saowanee T. Alexander*

“Waiting for Godot” is a play written by Samuel Beckett. The plot focuses on the main characters who are endlessly waiting for a mysterious character, Godot, to appear.

But Godot never arrives.

Many in Thai society have been waiting for an election which, like Godot, never seems to arrive. The military junta has scheduled the election many times, only to delay it again and again.

While society has waited, from the immediate aftermath of the coup in May 2014 until now, anti-junta political activists and intellectuals in Isaan—the Red Shirt movements’ stronghold—have been under constant threats and suppression by the junta, which my colleague and I discuss in detail [here](#).

Many things have happened without bringing Thai society any closer to an election. Another constitution was drafted by the junta-appointed committee and later ratified in 2016 by a curious referendum process in which the public knew very little about its contents (for analyses, see my [commentary](#) and research [article](#)).

Ordinary people in the region have grown more and more discontent with the junta’s rule. But it was not until December 2018 that a political ban was [“partially” lifted](#). As if to relieve their frustrations, ordinary people started talking about elections. Political party members started visiting their constituencies. Political rallies surfaced in some areas.

One of my research interests is gauging the sentiments of Isaan people when it comes of the prospect of an election, especially that of the Red Shirts. Between December 2018 and mid-January 2019, I have traveled through southern Isaan provinces observing signs of political activity and attitudes of the locals, especially those who have been harshly suppressed before—the Red Shirts and supporters of (Thaksin-affiliated) Pheu Thai Party (PTP).

I’ve observed six rally speeches by Pheu Thai Party leaders: one in Sisaket Province’s Wang Hin District by Chalerm Yoobamrong, and five by party leader Sudarat Keyuraphan in various districts in Yasothon and Roi Et provinces. Both Chalerm and Sudarat are seasoned politicians and flamboyant speakers, garnering a total of some 20-25,000 people in these six events.



In Yasothon's Loeng Noktha District, many in the audience had to stand listening to the speech by Pheu Thai Party's Sudarat Keyuraphan at a rice mill owned by Pheu Thai MP candidate. It was estimated at least 8,000 people showed up for the visit, which was nearly three hours late.

What I have observed so far in the crowds from the way they reacted to the speeches was that these people are ready to have their voices back through the election. However, it is true that in many speeches like these, the audience is actually a group of those "invited" to the gatherings. They have been transported from their villages or communities near and far to show support for the local candidates who will run in the upcoming election. It is a sight that many students of Thai politics are familiar with.

In Wang Hin District, there were approximately 2,000 people at the rally, and around 8,000 people each in Loeng Noktha, Yasothon City and Phon Thong District.

But my interest is not with the size of the crowds. Instead, I was looking specifically for their reactions, whether they be verbal or body language, their demeanor, and even what clothes they were wearing. This is because reactions reflect their sentiments and emotions, which in turn reflect their political engagement.

Speakers were not only these two prominent PTP figures. Local candidates also had their share of microphone time. The speakers drew the audience's attention to economic hardships due to falling agricultural product prices and attacked the junta government's policies citing that they were not sustainable while making a reference to Thaksin era policies as a comparison.

Some speakers such as Nisit Sinthuprai resorted to gallows humor by making fun of his own plight as a political prisoner for about a year. Obviously these speakers drew upon the pre-existing discourses shared by those in the same political camp—the Red Shirts. Answering questions, chanting slogans, laughing and smiling, dancing to the cheerful *luk thung tunes of the campaign song, and clapping hands were common reactions.*

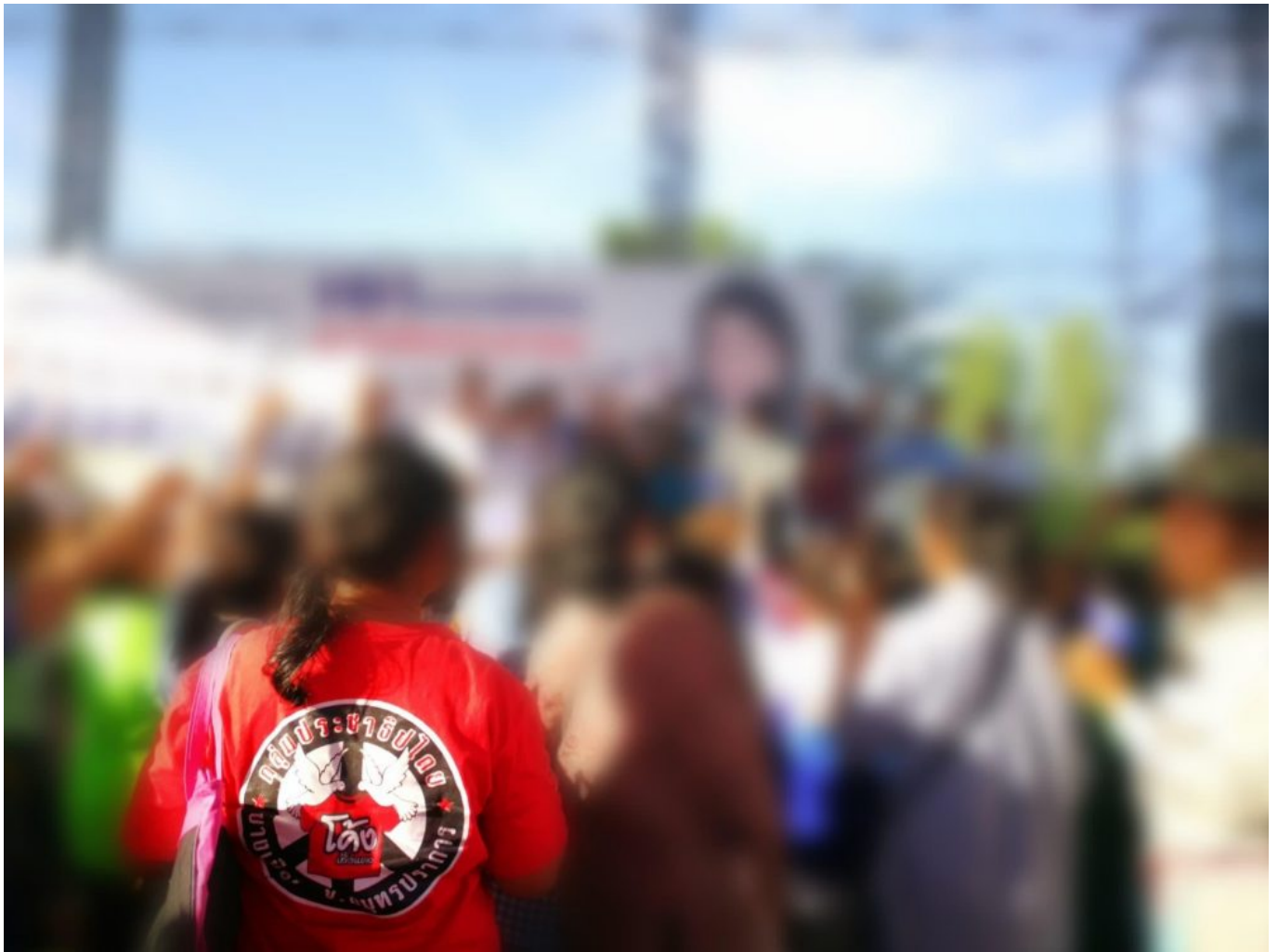
However, some in the audience took it to another level by constantly responding to most of the speakers' utterances as if they were having a conversation with the speakers. An older man sitting near the stage in Wang Hin kept nodding his head and at one point uttered in Lao Isaan "*bo tong wao lai. Phom lueak phuea thai ma talot. Tuea ni ka si lueak Pheu Thai ik.*" [*No need to say much. I've always been voting Pheu Thai. This time I'm going to do the same.*].

In another example, Sudarat said that the people have already listened to the "seven songs," referring to the number of songs allegedly written by the military junta's head over the past four years. When she then asked if the audience wanted to wait until that number climbed to a 20th song, the crowd began booing at the thought.

Sudarat did not explicitly state what songs she was referring to, but the crowd could recognize the hidden discourse, understanding what songs were being talking about, the context, and the implication of the response they gave to the question.

The audience's reactions suggest that the people knew not only the contents of what was being talked about, but also the background. They knew about Thai politics, enough to react in the way they did, which probably was not terribly complimentary to the junta.

Skeptics, however, may wonder whether the audience only wanted to please the speakers. But given the fact that the Northeast has been heavily monitored and suppressed, attending these speeches in itself was a risk to begin with, let alone passionately responding to the speeches.



A woman with a Red Shirt-affiliated logo at a rally in Yasothon City, which was attended by around 3,000 people. This rally, too, was held at a privately-owned soccer field.

If verbal reactions do not suffice to make a conclusion about the audience's true sentiments, we can turn to what they had on. Many put on Red Shirt-associated clothing items such as t-shirts and hats, some of which appeared to be often-worn and wearing out. Judging from the images and writings, these shirts came from the 2009-2010 protests. One of the most common logos on those shirts was the logo of United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). These pieces of clothing suggest that the ones wearing them are long-time Red Shirt movement participants who were dormant when the junta's suppression was at its peak. They took this opportunity to embrace in public their political identity, despite the potential risk of being identified and monitored by security agents who were mingling amongst them.

What I witnessed in the past few weeks then is that the Red Shirts have returned and are anxiously waiting for elections.

Yesterday, the military government made it official: Elections have been called for 24 March. Now let's see if Godot finally arrives.