

The “disobedient” Northeast returns: the case of “Run Against Dictatorship” in Ubon Ratchathani

written by Saowanee T. Alexander | February 11, 2020

The military-dominated government has enjoyed a free ride so far, running roughshod over people’s rights and issuing threats when challenged. But last month, the regime got a wake-up call. Saowanee T. Alexander reflects on the Run Against Dictatorship events that erupted throughout the Northeast last month.

By Saowanee T. Alexander

Shortly after 4:30 a.m. on January 12, while heading towards the Ubon Ratchathani city grounds, I was stopped by the police at a temporary checkpoint. After learning that I was on my way to the Run Against Dictatorship or *Wing Lai Lung* (Run to oust Uncle), they asked for my identity card, took a photograph of it and myself while still seated in the car, and told me to turn on the inside light just so they could see if I had anything “symbolic.” They found two campaign t-shirts that my colleagues and I made to raise funds for a short story publication project. They had nothing to do with the run but they took a photo of them anyway, perhaps thinking, “just in case...”

Why Ubon Ratchathani?

Unlike most provinces in Northeast Thailand, which tend to be politically homogeneous, Ubon Ratchathani is a place of great contradictions. It is home to many anti-establishment Red Shirt activists, many of whom had been sentenced in questionable judicial processes that handed out severe punishments for the arson of the provincial hall during the 2010 unrest. The province was also one of the main sites of military suppression after the 2014 coup.

As for electoral politics, the Thaksin Shinawatra-associated Pheu Thai Party has long been the favorite at the ballot box, including in last year’s election despite the new rules of the game and depressing electoral moods. Though not earning any constituency seats, another anti-junta party, Future Forward, received strong support from city dwellers and young voters with many of its candidates ranking in the top three in terms of vote counts.

But the province has also been a political fortress of the conservative Democrat Party with its longstanding presence in the region’s electoral politics. In the election last year, the province also allowed one pro-junta Palang Pracharat Party

candidate to win one constituency seat. The province is essentially one of the most important sites of political struggle in the Northeast.



The Run Against Dictatorship event in Ubon Ratchathani drew a diverse crowd of Red Shirt activists, Future Forward Party supporters, Pheu Thai Party MPs, and high school and university students.

Nearly six years after the coup that silenced the entire country by harsh measures of intimidation, the Run Against Dictatorship event was one of the two events that came closest to reflecting the true sentiments of the people. The other event was the 2019 election, which despite being little more than just a farce, did allow pro-democracy political activists to regroup and boost their morale. The run took place alongside ones hosted in Bangkok and other provinces. Many of the attempts to host it had been blocked. The event in Ubon Ratchathani was originally allowed but was then abruptly banned. The organizers and supporters took to social media by spreading the news about the reversed decision. Once the news made national headlines, the police backed off. However, the fact that the authorities stopped and checked runners on their way to the gathering point suggested nothing but intimidation.

The run and the return of the Red Shirts

[As I have discussed elsewhere](#), the Red Shirts returned to the political scene in the run-up to the 2019 elections despite extreme, repressive measures in the prior years. They appeared in campaign rallies of the Pheu Thai Party, their long-term political ally, but also at Future Forward rallies (but just not wearing red).

The run last month allowed them to express themselves in a bolder way. While Pheu Thai won the largest number of constituency seats, its lack of party-list seats aroused discontent among Red Shirts. The Election Commission's controversial interpretation of the election laws and its subsequent calculations of the party-list MP seats did nothing but add fuel to the fire. Coupled with this, Palang Pracharat Party's hijacking of the chance to form the new government, former junta leader Prayuth Chan-ocha's continuation of his premiership, and the fortune enjoyed by Red Shirts and Pheu Thai defectors' to the pro-junta camp together have made frustrations grow among many Red Shirts.

I had argued before that the Red Shirts became dormant since the 2014 coup. Now the run woke them up from their sleep. Nearly half of the attendees were Red Shirts who I recognize from the 2010 protests. Many of them are now well into their old age, but their determination did not seem to have waned.

When the police demanded that runners replace their Run Against Dictatorship-shirts with something else, some of them adamantly refused. One participant told me that a police officer grabbed him by his arm and demanded him to remove the campaign shirt. He jerked back and walked away fearlessly despite a potentially harsh response. Several removed their shirts only to put on red ones. As if to taunt the authorities, the red polo shirts they put on had a cartoonish portrait of former prime minister Thaksin screened on the back and on the front that of a high-ranking party leader.



Red Shirt activists joined the run wearing red shirts with the image of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

More interesting was the appearance of Pheu Thai politicians in the crowd—something of a bold move considering the fact that the party has been criticized for not showing strong enough leadership in butting heads with the junta and its elite-establishment allies. This could be one of the reasons for a shift in support from Pheu Thai to Future Forward in the last elections.

What can we make of this appearance though? In my estimate, this was the most confrontational move by Pheu Thai MPs since the 2014 coup, especially in provincial context. I did not interview them, but by all accounts the logic was simple: the people had a constitutional right to gather either for sports purposes or peaceful political protests.

The emergence of new, younger faces

Mingled among the Red Shirts were younger runners. Some of them wore the same flamboyant polo shirts while some were clad in serious athletic outfits or the run's campaign t-shirts. It was my impression that they too were here to exercise and make a political statement—a statement directed at the current prime minister who had been in power for nearly six years since the coup. These

runners made up about half of the participants of the event in the early morning hours.

It was the first time in years that such a mix of age groups congregated in the same gathering for the same cause. The youngest of all, not counting small children who tagged along with their parents, appeared to be high school students. But the largest number had to be university students. The latter group caught my attention because I believe this is the group that the authoritarian regime fears the most. They are young and enthusiastic about politics. Some had already voted in the last elections. They had the experience as stakeholders in politics just like the Red Shirts do. And chances are they did not vote for the military-backed Palang Pracharat. They are no longer bystanders or observers. That they appeared in the race despite intimidation must have raised concerns among those fighting against democracy.

The outlook

The run has created a space where people, beyond social media platforms, could finally express their views. The state, however, took a hostile attitude towards the event by attempting to block it in several provinces. Thanks to widespread publicity, the run in Ubon Ratchathani managed to go ahead. That it did so much displeased the powers-that-be that the senior police officer in charge of overseeing it was transferred a few days after the event.

Despite the fact the run against the prime minister took place in a peaceful manner and ended with the organizers' thankful note to the hundreds of police officers deployed along the route to supposedly "provide security" to the participants, even the most naïve observer should be able to discern the tension between the Thai authoritarian state and its very own people.

Given this, does it take much to imagine the next round of street politics appearing on the horizon soon?