

“We won’t take this anymore...it stops with our generation” - Observations from a youth protest in Ubon Ratchathani

written by Patawee Chotanan | July 25, 2020

By Patawee Chotanan

“It’s my future, and I can decide it for myself just fine. The future lies with the new generation,” a young man addressed the crowd.

“On the outside I may look like a boy, but I’m actually a girl. Why are our rights never recognized? Why are we still being derided as sexual deviants? How am I being deviant simply by being me?” a highschool student from Nareenukul School told the audience.

“Everyone, our parents, the poor, we all pay taxes somehow, right? So why is the wealth concentrated in Bangkok? Why do we have to compete and struggle to make it to a Bangkok university when we could be going to university closer to home? We pay our taxes, too,” said a student from Benjamaharaj school.

“It’s time to stop saying that politics has nothing to do with us. Look at our incomes... all gone! Our parents are suffering, and for what? Who’s going to be held responsible?” a young protester said on stage.

These were some statements made at a protest outside the provincial hall in Ubon Ratchathani on July 19.



Between February and March 2020, just as the government was about to declare a state of emergency under the 2005 Emergency Decree in an effort to stem the COVID-19 outbreak, students mobilized. They began organizing demonstrations against the government of General Prayut Chan-ocha. The dissolution of the Future Forward Party in late February drove students out to protest in droves nationwide.

These activities ceased for about four months as the COVID-19 outbreak progressed. Not only did their summer break make it harder for them to gather, students were also prevented from holding rallies by the state of emergency which the government ostensibly declared to combat the spread of the pandemic.

But there is another side to the emergency decree that has raised eyebrows among the vigilant; Prime Minister General Prayut has been using the emergency powers to plaster over the squabblings of his fragile coalition. It has also allowed him to steamroll over the opposition in parliament since the decree takes control of each ministry away from the ministers and puts it into the hands of each ministry's respective permanent secretary, who reports directly to the prime minister.

The government also uses the emergency decree to muzzle dissent and prevent protests and demonstrations. Between April and June, there were a number of events that would have been problematic for the government, such as the commemoration of the massacres of citizens by the government in 1992 [and 2010](#), as well as the day that Thailand abolished the absolute monarchy and became a constitutional monarchy [on June 24, 1932](#).

When the Free Youth movement held a [large demonstration at the Democracy Monument in Bangkok on July 18](#), the organizers announced three demands to the government. First, that parliament should be dissolved; second, that the harassment and intimidation of citizens should

cease immediately; and third, that a new constitution returning Thailand to a path of democracy should be drafted.

These demands arose from the government's dubious legitimacy and the numerous corruption scandals that have dogged the Prayut administration from its very first days. The contention is that the government did not even fairly win the election, because it relied on the votes of 250 senators appointed by the military junta.

Beyond this, the government is widely regarded by society as using double standards in the application of the law. This government has also continually harassed and intimidated activists, to the point of [hospitalization](#) or disappearing them in some cases. The restrictions of the emergency decree have also placed enormous strain on the economy, putting hardships on the vast majority of Thai society.

The demonstration organized by the Free Youth movement stimulated a great deal of interest in politics in Thai society, especially online. The hashtag #FreeYouth was trending with over 10 million tweets on Twitter. Physically, demonstrations taking the name of Free Youth, answering the call of the one in Bangkok, sprang up in provinces all over the country.

The [Run For Thailand](#) page on Facebook publicized the event in Ubon Ratchathani, and invited the public to participate outside the Ubon Ratchathani provincial hall on July 19.

About 500 members of the public attended this gathering. The main activity was the declaration of the three demands by the Free Youth group. The protesters sang songs and held talks where views were aired, critiques were made, and feelings were vented.



As someone who both observed and participated in this event, I noticed a few things about this activity that are noteworthy.

First of all, most of the participants were young people aged between 17 and 25. They grew up during a period of political instability, violence, and upheaval.

Importantly, Ubon Ratchathani province has been one of the hotbeds of political activism over the past decade. Some of those who attended the gathering would have witnessed one or both of their parents, or a relative engaging in political activism to demand democracy after the coup of 2006. Some may have attended the political rallies of 2010 with their parents, or at least seen them on television.

On the day of the protest, their parents and elders came to watch and support them, as their young voices demanded that the government dissolve parliament and rewrite the constitution.

The second point to note is that they were not merely demanding democracy in the abstract, but they were basing their demands on tangible problems they face in their day-to-day lives.

One student from Benchama Maharat School spoke out against the authoritarianism of his school which still insists on crew-cuts for boys despite recent ministerial regulations allowing boys to have other hairstyles.

An LGBT student from the same school criticized society at large for being slow to accept gender differences and emphasized that their rights as Thai citizens should trump any qualms over their sexuality.

The people gathered also spoke of other issues affecting Ubon Ratchathani province, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) which threatens to upend the agricultural livelihoods of their families. They spoke about the state of the roads, public transportation, the inequalities in development compared to Bangkok despite paying tax just like anyone else in the country. They also spoke of the people being disappeared by the state security apparatus, with Benjamaharaj School alumnus Wanchalerm Satsaksit being the most recent case.

The third interesting observation is that many of the youth in attendance had obviously been closely following political events, both at the national and local level. Importantly, they were able to make the connection between the way that national-level politics affects them in the day-to-day. They can see very clearly that without change at the policy level, the chances of change on the ground level are virtually nil.



The fourth observation is that apart from university students, the event was also well attended by younger students from Ubon Ratchathani's various secondary schools, both from within the city district and from neighboring districts such as Warin Chamrap. They came from Benjamarachutit School, Nareenukul School, and Luekhamhan School—the three largest schools in the province.

Interestingly, school students more often than the university students took the initiative to address the crowd. They spoke of the issues they have to deal with in their everyday lives, both in and out of school. It shows very clearly that interest politics among younger people is no longer the preserve of university students, as is so often assumed.

The fifth observation is that this political gathering was heavily facilitated by technology. The youth can access information in an instant, and news spreads just as quickly through the various online groups that they are members of, where political issues are discussed in depth. They also have a wealth of options when it comes to news and information sources, be they media outlets or thought leaders and commentators on Facebook and Twitter.

The end result is that they have an enormous amount of information from which to draw their conclusions, and to decide what to believe and what not to believe. They have had the opportunity to exercise critical judgement over the information that they receive from an early age, and it shows in the arguments they bring forth at the gathering; they are far from being the sort to be led by the nose.

The sixth observation is that the technology held in the palms of these youngsters makes them both media content consumers and content producers at the same time. When there is an event, an activity, or some words being said that catch the attention of the crowd, the phones come out and they start photographing or videoing. They then share, sometimes adding their own views and commentary, on various social network platforms. They are telling their peers what is going on, and

it is much harder for the government to control the spread of the information than in previous times, when the government effectively held a monopoly on the media.

The seventh observation is the horizontal and flexible nature of their organization. Taking their lead from the Free Youth movement in Bangkok, they adjusted the agenda to suit the local crowd and allowed them to freely air their views. It gave all who attended a sense of ownership over the event.

Importantly, the event didn't drag on and on. There was a clear timeframe which was adhered to. When it ended, everyone made their way home. The costs for the organizers were very low as there were no overnight stays-and the event did not demand too much from the lives of those who decided to come.

They all left with an attitude of being ready to come together again should the government do something that warrants it.

The eighth and final observation is that there was an abundance of signage and political symbology being displayed. Through these signs, they very clearly showed their feelings and views on the issues they were facing to the government and the ruling classes, should they care to read the signs.

All of these observations combined point to the fact that the youth are not afraid of the government or the emergency decree which forbids such gatherings. It also reflects their willingness to participate in political gatherings and activities in the public sphere.

It is also interesting to note that prior to the event, police set up check points on the streets leading to the event's location. They were singling out motorcycles for checks, probably because they knew that many of the students from Ubon Ratchathani University campus in Warin Chamrap district would be traveling by motorcycle. It did not affect the event but it did cause a minor annoyance to those attending, as well as slowing down traffic for all motorists in general.

From the above, we can see that taking to the streets to call for the government's resignation has already started. So, too, have the calls for the constitution to be redrafted yet again. But this time, the leaders, the spearhead of this movement are the youth of the nation.

These calls are spreading across the nation—from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, Ubon Ratchathani, Sakon Nakhon, Maha Sarakham—because people are sick and tired of the same old problems that seem to be stuck in an endless loop. They are calling from a future where these problems will not be inherited by those who come after them. Their rallying cry is, "We're not taking this anymore... it stops with our generation."

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