

[Nick Sarakham: The voice of grassroots people \(4\)](#)

written by Donlawat | November 18, 2020



By Donlawat Sunsuk

His gestures and tone of voice on the stage are of a certain type. His words are clear and straight to the point. These characteristics, each time he picks up a microphone on stage, makes him reminiscent of Nattawut Saikua, a leader of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), so much so that people started calling him “Nattawut 2” and “Nick Sarakham.” His real name is Thanawit Sepsuk, a student of history at Mahasarakham University.

Charged with a sense of hope and a growing political awareness, new generation protests are taking place on a daily basis. Just about anyone can go on stage to deliver a speech. The name “Nick Sarakham” is well known among participants of these protests which appear to have no leaders and thus dubbed as an “organic movement.” Video clips of his speeches have appeared on many social media platforms, and many hope that Nick will become a new star on stage.

The Isaan Record talks to Nick about the factors that are driving him to speak out about society’s problems at a time when demonstrators are hitting the streets in Thailand.

Inequality makes an adult

Nick was born and raised in Surin province. He grew up with his grandmother while his parents worked in Bangkok. He spent most of his childhood in rice fields, playing in mud and fishing like a typical countryside kid.

But his life changed when he went to a school in Surin’s Muang district in the second grade because his family wanted him to gain more knowledge and expand his social circles. In reality, that was not what he experienced.

“When I was in a rural school, I saw everyone as equal. But when I went to school in the city, I became a second-class citizen. I immediately became a poor person, in terms of how I dressed, the money I brought to school, and even when I had lunch, I didn’t have money to buy snacks like all my friends,” Nick says of the situation that prompted him to question inequality in society.

Several incidents caused him to become almost friendless since the day he went to school in that city.

“When we were assigned to work as a group, my family didn’t own a car or motorcycle, so I couldn’t travel to work with my friends in the city. It turned out that my friends didn’t want to work with me, only because I was poor,” he says, noting how he felt like an outsider as a rural boy.

His suspicions increased when he tried to socialize with his friends, but was prevented from doing so due to his poverty.

Even when he hoped to continue his studies at the province’s preeminent high school, Surawittayakan School, he was discouraged from doing so: “You aren’t fit for studying at the provincial school. You won’t be able to pay the tuition fees. You won’t be able to study there,” said one of his teachers.

Nick worried the teacher’s warnings just might be true because he didn’t have the opportunity to study with tutors like his friends and he also couldn’t afford to buy the books he needed to prepare for exams. He lost hope in studying at Surawittayakan. But when he told his parents, they said, “You need to fight. Don’t lose hope.”



Thanawit Sepsuk or “Nick Sarakham” while speaking on stage at a political rally on October 18, 2020. Photo by [MSU Democracy Front](#).

Asking Questions

When the exam results came out, he discovered he’d made it into Surawittayakan School, just as

he'd hoped; it proved that the teacher at his old school was wrong.

At the new school, he was part of a different society that was more open. He felt like he could express himself and he could argue. He found that he could get along with other students.

But before entering high school, he experienced another turning point when he questioned the school's sport's day event. This time, he voiced his concerns.

"I asked my friends why the school had to collect more fees for sports days and why they had to invest hundreds and thousands of baht for the event. All that for only some snacks. Why do you have to create disunity in the school, and why do you have to hold on to old beliefs without considering any change?" he asked.

Nick was elected as the student president. He was supposed to represent the student body but he quickly found that the student council had no authority to make decisions and was under the control of teachers and the school administrators.

"I became part of the bureaucratic system and started questioning why I had to strictly follow the orders of the people in authority and even why the student council was under the control of adults and why children aren't allowed to think for themselves."



"My family's red-shirt supporters. I know the hardships of fighting for democracy and what it means to be a red shirt and to be in a grassroot community because they are all part of my life." said Nick Sarakham

Despite being a student president and carrying out many activities to change the traditional way of thinking, many questions arose for Nick, such as what type of system it was that took control over democratic values at school, as well as questions related to bureaucracy and authoritarianism. It was these kinds of questions that Nick mulled over.

After finishing high school, Nick chose to study at Buriram Rajabhat University's Faculty of Education with a major in social studies. He hoped that one day, he would be able to manage a school in order to create change for the better.

Nick found out very early on that he didn't like the system and methods of teaching at Ratchabhat. He decided to quit in order to study history at Mahasarakham University where he found that he enjoyed studying history as the teaching was open to debate and encouraged alternative viewpoints.

Speaking up

"Since I was a child, I enjoyed speaking in front of the classroom because it was the only way people would listen to me. It reflected my thoughts, and was the only way for me to express myself, apart from the fact that I was poor and from the countryside," Nick says.

Nick found happiness in speaking. When asked to speak on various occasions, he was glad to as it was something he'd found he could do well ever since he was a child, and it was the single thing that boosted his confidence.

In February 2020, he spoke at a political event organized by the Mahasarakham University Democracy Front following the dissolution of the Future Forward Party.

His gestures, tone of voice, and words—clear and straight to the point—so resembled Nattawut Saikua that many started calling him "Nattawut 2". Within a few hours, his videos typically go viral.

"Many people say that I'm like Nattawut when I'm on stage. I don't think too much about that. This is who I am. I recently looked at the videos again and I see some resemblance, but I don't think we should compare. I am who I am."

But he admits that he has been partly influenced by the speeches made at red-shirt rallies which he attended with his parents during the 2010 protests in Bangkok.

"My family's red-shirt supporters. I know the hardships of fighting for democracy and what it means to be a red shirt and to be in a grassroots community because they are all part of my life."

What makes Nick stand out from other students on stage is the content of his speeches which usually refers to problems of Isaan people at the grassroots. Nick wants to become a voice for people at the grassroots in the student-led protests.

"I talk about problems that come from the central government or about things that people don't really talk about despite the vast amount of problems. There should be a better balance of power as Isaan has many problems and we should talk about the issues people at the grassroots are facing. That's why I've had to speak up."

Bringing Isaan's marginalized people to center stage

“What red-shirt supporters have learned is that they were just fighting for their livelihoods, their freedom and rights, and their equality. Those are the only things that people at the grassroots want. They’ve always been suppressed and looked down upon. They’ve only been seen merely as a base of resources that the central government can take away.”

Nick spoke about his attempts to connect with marginalized people in Isaan and to encourage them to express themselves politically so that their problems are heard.

“People at the grassroots are afraid to participate in this fight, partly because they don’t identify with the topics we’ve been talking about. It makes them feel distant and that they aren’t affected by those issues. Once we speak about their problems, they will immediately have a sense of belonging.”

Nick said students leading the current anti-government protests have not yet spoken about problems related to the region and people at the grassroots. If they do, it will help create solidarity in the current fight.

“The popular uprising of October 14, 1973 in which people were able to overthrow the military dictatorship required a joint effort by students, laborers, and farmers who came out to fight. But this time, we will probably have to wait for the same unified effort in order to win.”

He sees the current movement as lacking support from many sides. So he and his friends have gone out to meet people in various areas as an opportunity to learn from a wide range of people from different occupations and sectors and find ways they may participate in the current movement. His own group—MSU Democracy Front—is coordinating with various groups to incorporate a wider range of supporters to fight against the dictatorship.

“The future of Thailand can’t be created by just one group of people. We need to walk together. If one part is lacking, there will be some hiccups and we will not reach the destination,” he says.

Although Nick agrees with the three core demands of the People’s Party 2020 agenda, which include the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, the passage of amendment bills to pave the way for a brand new charter, and reforms of the monarchy, what he most wants to see is equality in Thai society, especially of people from the grassroots and farmers, as well as an equal distribution of resources for all people.