

# The political crisis and students with high expectations (6)

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Amid calls from Thailand's new generation for the resignation of the prime minister, the amending of the constitution, and reform of the monarchy, the Isaan Record talks with Assoc. Prof. Dr. Somchai Phatharathananunth from Mahasarakham University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences about a solution for the country's political crisis.

***The Isaan Record:*** How do you see the student-led movement, especially the part of it led by students in Isaan?

***Somchai Phatharathananunth:*** It's unexpected. Nobody knows exactly how it happened. But if we were to analyze it and look at what students have said in interviews or on stage, there's one thing that they highlight, and it's that the current political system is destroying their future.

We can say that when they see the current administration is causing Thailand to move backwards, and they see no future for the country, they realize that the current government is in power because it was they who'd written their own political rules that led to and has kept them in power.

University students are no different than school students because they have experienced one government or prime minister in the past six, seven years that has governed the country in the same old ways and has not led to any change for the better. This has caused young people to feel like the government is destroying their future.

If you're talking about Isaan, if these young people are in their first and second years of university, it means they were probably in the seventh or eighth grade when the coup occurred. They might not know that much about the military coup of September 19, 2006, or about red shirt protests, but they might have heard their parents talking about them and so developed a sense of sympathy.

That is why they had a negative view of the 2014 coup—because they are aware that the struggle in Isaan is about the fight for democracy. So these students have been seeking to find out who was behind the coup and the writing of the constitution, as well as the 20-year national strategy plan.

"I think these young people are highly interested in history. They are interested in the history of the 1932 revolution and they are talking about how the 1932 revolution has not yet been finished."



***"If Thailand wants to end conflict, the constitution needs to be amended." —Somchai Phatharathananunth, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mahasarakham University***

**IR:** So is it that the 1932 revolution has caused them to have higher expectations and given them courage to propose reforms to the monarchy?

**SP:** Yes, partly. They think the current problems that cannot yet be resolved and the attempt to bring back an absolute monarchy might be because the 1932 revolution was unsuccessful. This is why Thailand has not become a true democracy, and the new generation is studying the obstacles behind this. Therefore we can see that the new generation is interested in studying Thailand's political history and they can link the current problems to problems in the past.

**IR:** When the students set high expectations for their demands, a group of yellow shirts who might have been recruited also came out to protest. Do you think this might lead to violence?

**SP:** I think the yellow-shirt opposition to the student movement cannot escalate the violence. There might be some minor clashes, but high-level violence can only occur with state interference.

Many people are concerned that the situation might end up like the massacre of Oct. 6, 1976, an

event which saw lots of police coordinating with mass groups, especially those who were recruited by the government, such as village scouts, who mostly came from the countryside. But now I think it would be hard to recruit people like that [now] because in the past three decades, Thailand has transitioned to a democracy.

**IR: Is this phenomenon considered to be an effect of the semi-direct of democracy in Isaan?**

**SP:** I didn't think there was going to be so many students who came out to participate. In the past, activities that were conducted in Isaan were mainly trips [to communities] and not political activities. Most importantly, these people are able to think for themselves and learn by themselves, and so they have the courage to make decisions on their own.

**IR: To what extent are villagers and red-shirt supporters participating in the student-led protests?**

**SP:** We need to understand that the red shirts grew up in a different political situation. They grew up after elections where they saw the government they'd elected deliver with policies that benefited them. And so there was a bond. When that government was toppled by a coup, they felt dissatisfied and turned into the red shirts.

The student-led movement might not be directly related to the red shirts. They're related only in the sense of wanting change and democracy, but they're not yet emotionally connected to it. We can see some red shirts agreeing with the movement, but they're not yet into it to the extent that they might want to be involved because they don't see it as something urgent.

**IR: Is there a possibility that red-shirt supporters are too afraid to get involved in the protests because they are still hurt from the 2010 crackdown that resulted in 94 deaths?**

**SP:** That is another factor—their defeat in 2010 and during the 2014 coup. They have been heavily controlled. That feeling, combined with what is happening now which might seem distant, are two factors. Even though they might know that they can come out now, it might not yet seem like the final straw.

**IR: Students in some areas are now calling themselves the “second generation of red shirts.”**

**SP:** Some of them are: some are the children of red-shirt supporters or those related to red-shirt supporters. Some of them have a bond or have a positive impression of the struggle of red-shirt supporters, and so they call themselves red shirts. Some of them see the importance of expanding cooperation among those who love democracy.

**IR: The People's Party 2020 is demanding the prime minister to resign, for the constitution to be amended, and for the monarchy to be reformed. Is there a possibility that these things might happen?**

**SP:** If students stick to peaceful methods, even though they may not be successful in the near future, they still have a long time to put pressure on the government. This is because Thailand is in a crisis and this government needs to solve critical problems. They can't get someone more talented to solve the issues. Since they aren't able to solve the economic crisis while having an ongoing political crisis, there will be more people wanting this government to leave.

These conditions are conducive to the protestors, but they need to be calm and need to know when

to push and when to rest. I think even if they stop for a while, the tension will remain because the government can't solve the current problems, including the economic crisis. When people are in trouble, they expect the government to solve their problems. If the government can't find a way to do so, people will want it to get out.

**IR: What should happen after the PM's resignation and amending of the constitution?**

**SP:** Elections need to be held.

**IR: One of the demands of the student movement is that the power of the monarchy should be reduced. How likely is it that this demand is met, that the king is truly under the constitution?**

**SP:** We don't know whether that will happen. Even though the demands are there, we don't know where the demands for political changes will end up. If he [the King] can't withstand the large amount of pressure, he might give in and say, "Ok, I will accept these demands and I'd like to take a break," or something along those lines. There's a possibility that this may happen.

**IR: Finally, do you think all this should end with negotiations?**

**SP:** That is the best outcome of a peaceful protest because we're not aiming at using force. "Peaceful means" are not only negotiations but also include creating pressure. When there is enough pressure, it will force the other side to negotiate.

**IR: The government is now using violence against protesters and they are arresting those involved in the protests. What would you propose as a solution?**

**SP:** Even if Prayut stays on, there's no future for him. He won't be able to solve the current economic crisis and he won't be able to solve the country's problems. At the end of the day, he will have to leave. If this is the case, then why doesn't he take the opportunity to lessen the damage caused towards the country? And those who support Prayut need to know that no matter how much support they give him, he cannot stay on.

The current government is incapable of handling the severe outcome of the problems, and the current political rules are not helping to alleviate the conflicts in Thai society. If Thailand wants to end conflict, the constitution needs to be amended.