

Lensman captures colours of a conflict

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German freelance photographer Nick Nostitz is no stranger to either the red-shirt or the yellow-shirt political rallies. In fact, he stands out as having the most detailed photographic records of Thai political turmoil over the past few years and his 160-page photo book « Red VS Yellow, Volume 1 : Thailand's Crisis of Identity », published earlier this year by White Lotus, is testimony to that.

It contains disturbing images, such as the funeral of a slain Chiang Mai-based member of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) with his young daughter wailing at her father's side, as well as pictures of the red shirts' adulation of their leaders such as the now fugitive Democratic Alliance against Dictatorship (DAAD) leader Jakraphob Penkae.

Nostitz is no quiet photojournalist either and can easily get vocal when the topic of Thai politics is on the table.

« The PAD is a violent organisation, » said Nostitz. « I have photos of them showing violence. Definitely both [the PAD and DAAD] have strong potential for violence. No doubt about that. »

The comparison continues as Nostitz passed on the verdict that the DAAD, from his observations, is « a complete amateur » against the PAD's « professionalism ».

The German photojournalist is not shy about predicting the Thai political future as well. More political messes are to be expected in the short term but he added, « I believe Thailand is ready for proper democracy. »

The path to becoming a proper democracy is hazy even to Nostitz, however, as he admits that there are so many factors involved. Among them, he said, are where the PAD political party will head to, how factions in the military will react to future political turmoil, as some young officers appear to be « p***ed at both sides », and more.

Most foreign correspondents are branded as pro-red shirts these days, and Nostitz is no exception.

Nostitz defended himself by saying such a characterisation is « completely unfair », adding that whatever sympathy he may have for the reds is strictly non-ideological, but a result of having observed their struggle.

« People have to have empathy for the [rural] villagers [who supported ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra]. They know that Thaksin is a faulty person but the fact of life is that Thaksin has improved their lives more than any political party in the past and the present, » Nostitz, who married a rural Thai woman and is fluent in Thai, argued.

Nostitz, who has worked and lived in Thailand since 1993, added that he has also included « potentially damaging pictures of the reds because it's the truth ».

Despite his vehement denial, a Swedish man who is a big supporter of the PAD accused Nostitz of using dirty tactics by trying to have PAD guards attack him by misleading the guards into believing that he was the pro-red-shirt photographer instead of the German - a charge that Nostitz has denied.

Nostitz said some Europeans in Thailand are nostalgic for a strong monarchy system, something they lost in their home countries, and so became obsessed with the PAD's ultra-royalist stance.

Nostitz, who admitted feeling somewhat unsafe at yellow-shirt rallies, turned the tables around and said he thinks editors at Thai mainstream media are « too chummy with the PAD ».

He insisted that the notion that Western journalists are anti-PAD is « rubbish » and gave the PAD some credit when pressed to say something « nice » about the yellow-shirt alliance.

He said some PAD members have a genuine desire to see Thailand improve and that some of their analyses of the problem « are right ».

As for the red shirts, he warned that the April riots were a lesson and that it is a « dangerous situation » when « lots of common people are very angry ».

Though Nostitz said he had won some respect from PAD supporters and at least one had told him he is unlikely to be working on the secret payroll of Thaksin, it is still too premature to conclude whether such statements will guarantee his future safety as he continues photographing the PAD in action.

Nostitz did not indicate that he would stop anytime soon, as he continues to visit both red- and yellow-shirt rallies.

P.-S.

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