

## **ASEM Meeting in Italy: Thais in Milan rally for and against junta leader's visit**

Thursday 11 December 2014, by [Saksith Saiyasombut](#), [Siam Voices](#) (Date first published: 17 October 2014).

The attendance of Thailand's junta Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha at the 10<sup>th</sup> Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Milan has prompted Thais to take action to either protest against his arrival or to display support for him as the political polarization among Thais extends abroad, writes Saksith Saiyasombut.

"Dittatore NON sei benvenuto!" – The message in Italian makes it clear in no uncertain terms that somebody isn't welcome and judging by the face on the image it is also very clear who it is directed at: A drawing of the trademark stern look of General Prayuth Chan-ocha. A few of these stickers (in different languages) have been put in the northern Italian city of Milan.

One such sticker was put on a lamppost, when Mrs. Wiyada discovered it. She immediately put up her own sign on the post (and took it down again after snapping the picture): a portrait of a proud-looking General Prayuth in front of an Italian flag above silhouettes of a crowd waving Thai flags with the slogan "Welcome Thai PM to Italy."

It comes to no surprise that the recently retired army chief is causing such an uproar: in May 2014, he launched a military coup – the second within 8 years and the 12<sup>th</sup> in total since 1932 – and his military junta has appointed a quasi-parliament dominated by military officers, who in return have appointed General Prayuth as prime minister. Furthermore, his military government intends to "reform" to political system in a self-proclaimed crusade against "corruption" that may eventually results in fresh elections some time in late 2015 – or not. Also, not to mention the countless summons, detentions and trials against dissidents critical of the coup and severe media censorship, especially online.

Contrary to general impressions and most appearances in recent months, the Thai junta seems not to be completely tone-deaf of the opposition it has suppressed in recent months, as the Foreign Ministry anticipated that there'll be protests against General Prayuth's visit to ASEM in Milan in order to explain the political situation to leaders of the European Union heads of states from Europe and Asia from their point of view.

Junya "Lek" Yimprasert is one of the people protesting against Prayuth in Milan. A veteran labor and political activist, she is forced to live in exile after being charged last year with lèse majesté for writing a 2010 essay critical of Thailand's monarchy, for which she could face a jail sentence of up to 15 years. Now she lives in Finland and has traveled to Milan a week before the ASEM to attend the associated Asia-Europe People's Forum to explain her opposition against Prayuth at a panel discussion on Thailand under military rule. (Disclaimer: This author was one of the other panelists at this forum, following an invitation of the Asienhaus Foundation)

"The ASEM must not allow a military dictator to come to Europe and collect stamps of approval," said Junya in a rapid-fire manner during the three hours panel talk. Her demand would be later echoed in the final declaration (PDF) of the bi-annual and bi-continental meeting of NGOs and social movements, adding that "democratic governments to grant asylum to all citizens who have been put

under pressure and have been prosecuted in Thailand.”

The other part of her plan to protest against Prayuth is to mobilize local activists, as she and her group of other concerned Thai citizens have met with Milan-based groups to jointly organize a rally on Thursday, when the leaders from Europe and Asia arrive at ASEM. “It is an act of international solidarity,” Junya would say later.

Meanwhile, the other side was also preparing to convene in Milan. Mrs. Wiyada (full name withheld), a 38-year old resident of Cervia (roughly 3 hours away from Milan) who has called Italy her home for 9 years now, is in charge of PR for several groups “all across Europe in 18 countries” that are aligned with the group that have held prolonged anti-government protests from autumn last year and whose actions have paved the way for the military coup in May 2014.

Talking to Asian Correspondent, Mrs. Wiyada says that initially she only planned to greet General Prayuth with a small group of Thais. “But when we heard that the other side (referring to Junya Yimprasert) were coming, we decided to meet up,” she said, claiming that Thais from “all over Italy and some from Switzerland” will join to show their support to the Thai junta leader – all on their own initiative and nobody in the background paying them.

While she admits that the current military government “isn’t a democracy,” she claims that the toppled government of prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra “wasn’t democratic either,” reiterating the claims that her and previous affiliated administrations may have won at the polls, but weren’t acting in the interest of the country.

It is not known where exactly the political allegiances are among the roughly 5000 Thais living in Italy, but like in the rest of the continent, political groups from both sides of the spectrum exist and regularly meet to discuss the state of the Kingdom. However, Mrs. Wiyada claims that “the other side doesn’t have the support from most Thais here in Italy. That’s the difference!”

On Thursday, Wiyada’s group – roughly two dozen – are waving Thai flags and holding signs at the hotel where General Prayuth stays in the morning and later in the afternoon (see below), and then waiting for him at the famous Duomo cathedral in the evening, cheering to him whenever the group saw him.

In a different part of town, at least 200 to 300 protesters are rallying through the streets of Milan – the overwhelming majority being Italian students. Nevertheless, Junya and other Thais are to be seen front row holding anti-Prayuth signs, joined by other students as well. Junya was also holding the picture of Fabio Polgenhi, the Italian photojournalist killed in the deadly crackdown by the Thai military on anti-government red shirt protesters in 2010. The investigation of his death has dragged on and may never be fully concluded.

While some local Italian media outlets would later refer to these protests merely as a student rally against the Italian far-right party Lega Nord and racism in general, other media outlets specifically point out the opposition to the Thai junta as well. Regardless that it may appear for some that the anti-Prayuth angle was an afterthought, the pictures of Mrs. Junya leading a large rally protesting the leader of Thailand’s military junta have effectively framed her cause.

Talking after the rally to Asian Correspondent, Junya Yimprasert thinks it was “a success” and emphasized the cooperation with Italian activists. When asked about whether the participation of mostly Italian students in a protest about a Thai issue would diminish her campaign, she counters that “Italians also have a right to discuss issues in Thailand. The case with Thailand is an international problem (...) and it is time for the world to tell Thailand that enough is enough!”

While Thais were protesting for and against him, General Prayuth himself was shaking hands with leaders from Japan, China, Singapore and many other heads of states from Europe and Asia. According to the junta, these pictures of the encounters will be spun as a sign of acceptance by the international community of Prayuth and the military government – regardless of what was actually said.

Thus it is astonishing but unsurprising that a junta spokesman in Thailand claims that there have been no protests against Prayuth in Milan – Thursday’s events evidently rebuke that assessment, showing that the junta cannot control the complete narrative. Both the rallies for and against Thailand’s junta prime minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha prove that not only does the political polarization exist among Thais abroad, but also that he not necessarily welcome everywhere.

### **Saksith Saiyasombut & Siam Voices**

\* Oct 17, 2014 11:39AM UTC:

<http://asiancorrespondent.com/127401/thais-in-milan-rallying-for-and-against-junta-leaders-visit/>

\* Saksith Saiyasombut blogs extensively about Thai politics and current affairs since 2010 and works as an international freelance broadcast journalist. Read his full bio on [about.me/saksith](http://about.me/saksith).

---

### **London**

Thai citizens in London showed the three-finger salute and held “#District Thai” signs at the premiere for the latest Hunger Games movie Monday night at Leicester Square, London.

Protesters used coverage of “Mockingjay – Part I” as an opportunity to protest Thailand’s military government after the salute became a symbol of its opposition earlier this year following the coup in May.

"Since then the Thai people have adopted the Hunger Games 3 finger salute as peaceful symbol to oppose the military regime, as do people in Panem facing oppression by the Capitol," explains the District Thai group on Facebook.

After months of anti-government protests led to the imposition of martial law and military intervention, public protests have been entirely banned in Thailand. Dissidents have taken their message elsewhere, such as a protest by Thais and Italians at an October conference in Milan, Italy, attended by junta chief Prayuth Chan-ocha.

\* <http://bangkok.coconuts.co/2014/11/11/thais-london-protest-junta-hunger-games-premiere>

---