

# 'Gun at your throat': viral rap song tests freedom of speech in Thailand

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## **New song taps in to pent up anger over corruption and nepotism under country's ruling junta**

In a sweaty Bangkok basement over the weekend, hundreds of young Thais, hands in the air, roared angrily along with a rap song being performed on stage. "My country points a gun at your throat," they sang. "It claims to have freedom but gives no right to choose."

Over the past week, the refrain "Which is my country" has become the rallying cry for dissent in Thailand. It is the chorus of [an anti-military rap song](#) Prathet Ku Mee (What My Country's Got) which has become an unprecedented phenomenon in Thailand, racking up over 21 million views in just seven days and directly challenging the military government.

The song, performed by a group called Rap Against Dictatorship, has emerged as an unlikely opponent to the military government's determination to maintain absolute control in [Thailand](#) while also trying to win popular support in the build up to the planned general election in February next year. The unelected junta took over in a coup in 2014 and now intends to run as a legitimate political party in the polls, which will be Thailand's first election in eight years.

The song's lyrics, which confront corruption, nepotism, the lack of accountability and transparency, poor healthcare, suppression of freedom of speech and the privileges afforded the rich while the poor suffer, are some of the most forthright criticism of the military government to appear in popular culture since they took power. Such anti-regime sentiment is usually censored through the use of the draconian computer crimes act, where people can be arrested for just sharing or even discussing the video on social media.

Initially, the police threatened the artists with arrest for damaging the country's image and breaking the computer crimes act. However, the threats only served to elevate the song's status and its popularity has made it impossible for the military to prevent it being shared online.

In an unusual u-turn on Monday, the police backed off. Maj Gen Surachate Hakparn, deputy director of the technology crime centre, even wrote [a public post](#) on Facebook declaring that no-one could be stopped from expressing opinions. For a regime that has spent the past four years locking up its critics, including arresting over 100 people under the computer crimes act, it was an unorthodox move.

"The timing of this song was crucial, people are increasingly fed up and frustrated with this military government and they have not had a say for a long time, so it's a combustible situation," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University.

“So when you have a rap song like this which is a broad statement against what’s wrong with Thailand – the unaccountable corruption, the lacklustre performance of the military regime, and the nepotism – you can see that the litany of complaints has really hit the spot. They’ve tapped perfectly into this pent up disaffection in Thailand.”

Pongsudhirak said that the military’s desire to court public opinion in the run up to February’s polls had put them in a “bind” which the popularity of this song had accentuated; neither wanting to lose control in Thailand and allow the spread of anti-military feeling but also not wanting to lose the support of the tens of millions who have now watched and shared the Prathet Ku Mee video.

Even Thai prime minister Prayut Chan-o-cha seemed to respond to the allegations in the song on Monday presenting himself as a benevolent leader rather than a military dictator. “Is life really that hard? Is it that oppressive? Am I so dictatorial?,” he said. “Don’t let anyone distort the facts.”

While political campaigning is still banned in Thailand, new political parties have been allowed to register and recent weeks have seen an increased flurry in political activity across the country, with even pro-democracy activists joining newly formed parties such as the pro-reform Future Forward party. An anti-coup punk concert, which was forced to cancel last year, has just been re-announced at Bangkok’s Thammasat university in November.

“This song could lead to the opening of the floodgates of popular dissent,” said Pongsudhirak. “It absolutely spells trouble for the military.”

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## **Hannah Ellis-Petersen**

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