

# Changes that can't be denied

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**Phreuk Thaothawin, a political scientist from the Faculty of Arts of Ubon Ratchathani University, is one of the few academics who have not been shy to say that they are sympathetic to the red shirts' cause. On 21 March, he shared his views on the red shirts in a public forum in Bangkok.**

Over the past year, Phreuk has followed the red shirts' activities in Ubon Ratchathani. Since after Songkran last year, he has found that the red shirts have become more active, and their numbers have expanded. There are now about 7-8 groups of them. Some groups are based on local radio stations. They work with the masses through talking and socializing at local events like funerals or weddings. Some people who have no one to turn to come to the radio stations for legal help.

Before the New Year, one group that Phreuk has lately mingled with more frequently organized a two-day political training, with UDD leaders Jaran Dittha-aphichai and Weng Tojirakan as resource persons. They discussed the history of Thai politics on the first day, and analyzed the problems and solutions on the second. The number of participants was higher than expected. Those who came were active citizens and vocal persons from their villages, he says.

Phreuk says that the notion that the red shirts are paid to come to Bangkok should be reconsidered. 'They have come because they have a clear political cause, although I don't say that it's 100% for everyone. The idea that they were paid should have been dismissed as obsolete.'

He believes that what has happened in other provinces would not be much different.

He wants Bangkokians to realize that changes in mentality have really occurred.

To understand why these people have stood up, one has to look at political development in Thailand over the past ten years or more, from the decentralization which started in 1992, the constitution in 1997, to Thaksin's two consecutive terms of administration. Many things have happened in the rural areas. Rural people aged 40-50 or more know that previously they were nothing more than subjects taking orders from the authorities.

Rural people were powerless economically and politically, and were controlled. They were treated like 'animals' who had to be developed. Branded as stupid, poor and wretched, they were surrounded by officials from various ministries who dictated to them what should be attained; such as 100% sanitary toilets and 100% literacy.

But when there were elections for local administrations, things changed a lot. From being powerless and voiceless, they came on stage, becoming actors and voters. Although in the eyes of urban pro-democracy people, this is money politics, this is not their concern.

Through several elections at various levels, rural people have had a new experience. During the Thaksin years, national and local politics became connected, and they could see that their power was not limited to just voting for village heads and Tambon Administrative Organizations. They could vote for a political party that improved their lives.

This is the reason why the red shirts' movement has not died down after the violent Songkran incident, Phreuk says.

Previously, only the elite and the middle class took the stage. But during the past ten years or more, rural people's voices got louder and louder, and they will not let themselves be forced off the stage.

The people are said to be addicted to populism. But why is the Democrat Party's populism not popular among the people, Phreuk asks. He says the Thai Rak Thai Party gave them power, making them feel that they can vote and get what they want. And they have got used to it.

Many cast doubts as to what these people are fighting for. Democracy? He also felt awkward when he first mingled with them. When asked why they joined the red shirts, they told him that they 'loved Thaksin'.

That did not sound a bit like democracy. They should have mentioned other things like the constitution. However, they loved Thaksin because they loved the policies and his ability to run the country. Thaksin did deliver what he had promised. He was not loved because he was handsome or good.

In his view, this is political loyalty, and Thaksin represented their share of political power. Now he no longer feels awkward to hear such praise for Thaksin.

However, if one looks at Thaksin as a corrupt politician, this sounds intolerable. This is what Thaksin means to the middle class, vis-à-vis the rural people; thus the doubts as to why they support such a crooked person.

Whether Thaksin was corrupt or not is one issue. But the rural people should not have been deprived of access to political power, through all the means that have been used after the coup.

Phreuk mentions that his fellow academics and intellectuals feel too embarrassed to say anything that might sound supportive of the red shirts and politicians. They are afraid to appear 'cheapened', if they say anything in favour of Thaksin.

He says what has happened [with the red shirts] is real. Even if the middle class dislike it, they cannot deny it. They cannot just take the red shirts off the stage, and they have to think of how to live with it.

Now there is a form of political will which is expressed through the rural people's own words like phrai and ammat. They are making demands for things which they think they are entitled to. This is not to say that all they claim has to be right, and those who come to Bangkok are all purely ideological. The Bangkok middle class should reconsider their views, and be open to listen to them, he says.

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