

'Thai Banksy' tests boundaries with gallery show before election

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Headache Stencil's work portrays Thai democracy as a game for the ruling elite

His works began appearing overnight on the streets of Bangkok and Chiang Mai five years ago, incendiary satirical depictions of the military officials who took power in Thailand in the 2014 coup.

The authorities worked quickly to erase all trace of the graffiti, but there was no stopping the artist, who calls himself Headache Stencil and is often referred to as the Banksy of Thailand. Pictures of his works portraying the Thai prime minister, Prayut Chan-o-cha, as Dr Evil from Austin Powers or the deputy prime minister on the face of a Rolex have been shared millions of times on social media.

In the buildup to elections on 24 March, the country's first official poll in eight years, a new Headache Stencil installation is again testing the boundaries of political expression.

Thailand Casino was rejected by various Bangkok institutions before WTF Gallery accepted it. The work draws on the idea that the future of Thailand and Thai democracy is nothing more than a game for the ruling elite, who keep hold of power through cheating and manipulation.

"At first I did not plan to provoke the government too much with this exhibition. The most important thing was to get people to engage with this election, which I think is one of the most important in my lifetime," said Headache Stencil, who uses an alias for his own protection.

Recent developments, however, have changed his mind. The military government has gone after political opponents. It recently disbanded a pro-democracy party, and passed a cyber-security law this month to extend already intrusive powers.

"How dare they?" the artist said furiously. "Now I plan to make more works that will annoy the government because the more this election goes on, the more you can see they don't care about the people ... they keep passing all these bullshit laws and over the past five years have used all our country's money to buy weapons while people get poorer."

Works in the show include a golden piggy bank with the face of a junta official accused of corruption, and stencils of casino chips, guns and the words "military fund" scrawled across a wall.

Political satire and critical depictions of the government can be severely punished under Thai law, and a number of provocative art shows have been censored or shut down since 2014. Headache Stencil was visited by 12 police officers last year and he was forced to flee to the Thai-Cambodia border after images of his work went viral. It was only after his well-connected family intervened that he avoided conviction under computer crimes laws.

The more the authorities have pursued him, the more obstinate he has become. "I do just what I want to do, and if I have problems with the police or the government I will just run away again," he

said.

The election is supposed to mark Thailand's return to democracy, but few in the country are optimistic that it will make much difference.

"I want to believe that the 8 million first-time voters in this election can force change, but I cannot bring myself to hope because this is Thailand and hope always ends in disappointment," the artist said. "This will not be a fair election. The military will cheat, we can see them doing it already.

"That's what this exhibition is saying, that the whole game is manipulated for the military to win and for the Thai people to lose."

Hannah Ellis-Petersen

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The Guardian

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