

Opinion: Anti-Communist Song Belongs In Thailand's Past, Period

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Indoctrination isn't what it used to be, not when competition for people's ears and eyes has become so intense.

Army chief Gen. Apirat Kongsompong must have reached that disappointed conclusion after ordering 160 army radio stations to play Cold War-era propaganda songs in response to the mere suggestion by PM candidate Sudarat Keyuraphan that military spending would be cut 10 percent under a Pheu Thai Party government.

The hawkish army chief's quick-draw response Monday was to suggest she listen to anti-Communist song "Nuk Paen Din." The song, best translated as "Scum of the Earth," was drilled into people's heads by state and army radio in the latter half of the 1970s, toward the end of the communist insurgency which ceased in 1980 with a general amnesty granted to the weakened and divided rebels.

Today, communist China, Vietnam and Laos are good friends of Thailand, Chinese tourists are the largest group of tourists to Thailand and anti-communist laws were abolished two decades ago.

Yet Apirat thought it would be a brilliant idea to order all 160 army radios to air the song on a daily basis. His decision didn't last beyond Monday. In fact it was rescinded within an hour or two.

Perhaps he realized how ineffective and futile such an attempt was. Perhaps the strong and immediate backlash on social media changed his mind very speedily.

No matter the reason behind the very quick U-turn, what took place earlier this week was a symbolic clash between a post-modern society and a dictatorial, militarized mentality.

As a number of people have noted on social media, even if the order persisted, it would have been very hard to grab the ears and eyes of the public, particularly the younger generation, which no longer sits passively to watch television or listen to radio.

Many stream it on demand, whether via Netflix or Spotify. They spend more time watching viral videos or reading Facebook posts from online friends and social media influencers on Twitter than passively waiting for the army to indoctrinate them through repeated airing of archaic propaganda songs.

Apirat's boss learned it the hard way. Prayuth Chan-ocha's Friday-evening TV monologues are far less than popular (and that's an understatement), and even the junta leader himself has lamented more than once that his "show" is not getting due attention.

Basically, you can't force people with one-way propaganda messages any longer, particularly listeners and viewers who don't want to listen or watch. It's simply crude and ineffective.

The clash between the two worlds will continue, and it will definitely take more than a crude attempt at indoctrination to win the hearts and minds of Thai people, particularly the younger people who likely have never heard such songs hatefully suggesting those who disagree with the state are enemies of the nation.

Despite Thailand being subjected to nearly five years of military rule since, Thai society remains pluralistic and challenges to military rule in the form of competing narratives, criticism, mockery, satire and just ignoring the army generals have thrived.

It's simply not possible for the junta leader and his generals to drag Thailand back into the past to instill an obsolete Cold War mentality in people. Any further attempts are likely to be met not just with resistance, but ridicule and disdain, if not laughter.

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