

Four years of the NCPO, four years of creative resistance—part two



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For the past four years, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) has sought to control political resistance. Measures have included confining protest leaders and key political figures in detention for ‘attitude adjustment’ and coercive memorandums on political activity. Soldiers, police and other security officers continue to pay visits to the homes of activists. Laws to curb political assembly, enacted via executive powers, include but are certainly not limited to NCPO Order No. 7/2557 and NCPO Order No. 3/2558 (bans on political gatherings of five or more people), and NCPO Order 49/2557 (a ban on providing support for political assembly).

At a glance, the NCPO’s efforts may appear to have had some measure of success. Key political movements such as the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) has ceased organising rallies at the scales seen before the 2014 coup. Yet the UDD’s quietness does not at all mean that civilians who disagree with military rule have surrendered to the finality of the NCPO. In

a context where peaceful assembly is outlawed, activists are managing the risk of open conflict with authorities by creatively transforming everyday activities into expressions of frustration.

These strategies are as much about toeing the lines set by law, as they are about imparting a message that political expression is a normal thing that all people can do, rather than a dangerous and scary thing as suggested by the NCPO's discourse. To mark the fourth anniversary of the NCPO's coup, I have compiled a tapestry of activist inventiveness that military rule has not been able to stamp out.

Part one can be found [here](#).

Time stops for no junta

While activists have long drawn upon the motif of clocks to symbolise lost time under the junta, they have in an unexpected twist come to represent the corruption of high-ranking officials in the NCPO.

Kate is now a leader of the We Want Elections group, whose leaders were recently detained for protesting the fourth anniversary of the most recent coup. On the first anniversary of coup, Kate led an event that invited the general public to gather at 6pm outside the Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre and quietly look at their watches. While the theme of "watches" intended to symbolise all that the people had lost under the junta, Kate also felt that the activity was accessible to all since most people have access to a time-telling device, at least on their mobile phones. Four years later, a case against Kate and 8 other student activists for participating in the stunt is still making its way through military court.

Fast forward to the fourth year of the NCPO's rule and Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Prawit Wongsuwan birthed a whole new terrain of satire revolving around watches. On 4 December 2017, netizens collated a collage of the Defence Minister's outfits on various occasions, calculating that Prawit possesses at least 25 different luxury watches—none of which had been included in his assets declaration to the National Anti-Corruption Commission upon entering office in 2014.

Widespread criticism and ridicule ensued online. Ekkachai Hongkangwan, a prominent activist, has, for example, taken to tailing Prawit in a shirt adorned with cut-out pictures of luxury watches—wearing it to submit a request to the Anti-Corruption Commission to investigate Prawit's assets on 5 March 2018. Ekkachai has vowed to wait outside the state cabinet meeting every Monday to bestow another watch onto the deputy PM.

On 30 January 2018, the artist Headache Stencil unveiled a large graffiti mural of a fake Rolex watch featuring Prawit's face on the clock-face, accompanied by the caption: "You have many

watches, but your time is up. All parties have to come to an end". On 2 February 2018, the prominent activist, Toto, distributed photos of a security officer covering the mural. Two days later, Headache Stencil reported that plain-clothes officers had stationed themselves near his residence on an almost 24-hour basis.

Prayuth Pinocchio

We Want Elections first unveiled "Prayuth Pinocchio" on 24 February 2018: a cartoon of the junta leader General Prayuth with a long nose like Pinocchio's.

In November 2014, Prayuth announced to media that elections would be held within one year, as per the junta's "road map" to democracy. But in February 2015, he announced that there would not be elections that year after all, as the National Reform Council had not yet approved the draft constitution. In October 2017, the Organic Law on Elections finally came into effect and Prayuth told reporters that an election date would be announced in June 2018. From there, elections would supposedly take place in November 2018.

In January 2018, however, it became apparent that elections were likely to be delayed once again. That month, the special committee from the junta-appointed National Legislative Assembly tasked with vetting the Organic Law on Elections voted to amend Section 2 of the law. The reform means that the Organic Law on Elections will come into effect 90 days after its publishing in the Royal Gazette, rather than immediately as specified in the original draft of the law. Elections may now be pushed back to February 2019.

This prospect mobilised the formation of the We Want Elections group, which on 24 February 2018 distributed "Prayuth Pinocchio" masks in a stunt to demand elections this year. Kate recalls that the masks were sketched in a humorous design, to lessen the stressfulness of engaging in politics. But distributing masks also served to allowed attendees at the event to participate and take photos while mitigating the risk of identification by plain clothes officers.



From there, the group decided to print and distribute various paraphernalia featuring Prayuth Pinocchio, such as fans and waterproof phone cases. Kate and other activists intend to make Prayuth Pinocchio ‘go mainstream’—rather than just an image seen at protests—by making the cartoon of the junta leader with a long nose as ubiquitous as ‘those stickers with the names of temples that are always on the back of pick-trucks’.

During this year’s Songkran festival, We Want Elections distributed waterproof phone cases featuring Prayuth Pinocchio at the annual water fights along Khao San Road, hoping to impart that elections too should be a regular feature of the Thai calendar. Kate admits that at first, she was nervous to distribute the phone cases at Khao San, knowing she would encounter people of different political leanings. In the end, the response was largely enthusiastic: people were curious about Prayuth Pinocchio, some asked for photos with the We Want Elections members, and nobody tried to start a quarrel. Others however, upon seeing that the phone cases featured a pro-election message, hesitated to accept them.

The symbolic acts featured in this series are just a fragment of the creative elements of resistance that have survived under four years of the NCPO. These stories and images provide good cause to

