Sandwiches, 1984 and wristwatches: four years of the NCPO, four years of creative resistance—part one

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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 symbolic 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.

Anti-coup sandwiches

Activists never intended to use sandwiches during protests—rather, it was the authorities themselves who seized upon sandwiches in 2014, making their own, unintended contribution to anti-authoritarian emblems.

Kate, an activist leader*, recalls that after the junta announced its ban on political gatherings of five people or more, she and her friends (who at the time were still students) decided they should organise some kind of resistance activity. Not wanting to draw the ire of officials, they decided to revolve the event around an everyday activity: watching a movie and eating snacks together. So Kate and fellow activists created an open Facebook event for 6 June 2014: "Picnic Under The Shade: Poetry, Movie Screening, Coup".

At first, Kate and the activists had no ulterior motives in serving sandwiches at the event to attendees—they had brought them because they are easy to cut and hand out. But before the event began, authorities gathered at the event location and forcibly cancelled the event. The students requested to merely eat the sandwiches and then go home, seeing as they had prepared them already. The authorities refused—leading to a now notorious image of a security officer snatching sandwiches from a small-bodied student. In that second, sandwiches were transformed into a resonant anti-authoritarian symbol.

"The best spokesmen for the activists isn't Rome or Ja New, but the NCPO itself," Kate laughs.

Kate and eight other friends decided to make the best out of a bad situation, and organised an event to eat sandwiches—'Nothing Much, We Just Want To Eat Sandwiches'—outside the Siam Paragon mall on 22 June 2014. The students were promptly arrested and detained in a camp for 'attitude adjustment'. Several other sandwich-eating events have been since been staged, leading to international headlines such as "4 Absurdly Harmless Acts Now Criminalised By Thailand's Military Rulers" and "Man Eats Sandwich, Gets Arrested".

*At the time of this article's publication, Kate is being detained in a police station for leading a protest demanding elections at Thammasat University.

Subversive reading groups

‘Peach’ (pseudonym), the activist behind past stunts where civilians gathered to do nothing more and nothing less than read books together, recalls following the news of activists being harrassed in the aftermath of the coup. She felt that the NCPO was succeeding in building a climate of fear through open collisions between protesters and authorities. She and her friends began divising resistance tactics that avoided overt political expression—to give authorities no cause to interfere—but which could still impart forcefully an anti-authoritarian sentiment. When a friend told Peach about a stunt in Turkey in 2013 where civilians gathered to read books at a park to protest plans to turn the public space into a mall, Peach borrowed the idea and applied it to the recent coup.

Peach felt that the activity of reading was not overly confrontational, but that the choice of books—George Orwell’s 1984 and other political books—would still impart that the gathering was aligned against the coup. In total, she organised four gatherings to read books: at the National Stadium skywalk, the Chong Nonsi BTS skywalk and near Wat Pathum Wanaram. The fourth reading session was mobile—readers rode on trains.

Peach recounts that the reading sessions were closed events, in that attendees were invited by word of mouth, out of fears for their safety. Only the fourth session was advertised through a Facebook event. At each gathering, Peach brought a cheap phone that she could quickly discard if necessary, rather than her usual smartphone. Though the reading sessions were organised secretly, Peach contacted trusted media contacts to cover the events and disperse images of civilians reading political texts together. She did not experience any direct harassment from authorities, which she puts down to their covert organisation.

Peach and her friends also poked holes in the junta’s laws, by reading in groups of four—not enough to violate the ban on gatherings on five people or more. Though Peach felt some fear while reading, she feels now certain they brought new tactics to Thailand’s resistance space that left authorities scratching their heads over law enforcement manuals—Peach recalls with humour that after the third reading session at the Chong Nonsi BTS skywalk, a stage for aerobics was conspicuously erected covering the space where the event had been held.

The three-finger salute

Protests against the NCPO took place as early as 23 May 2014 (the day after the coup). But in the coup's immediate aftermath, protesters in their urgency did not think to seek a unifying symbol of resistance—individuals constructed their respective signs, converged at agreed meeting points, and

shouted their grievances. Gatherings that took place on 1 June 2014 were probably the first time that protesters performed a shared symbolic gesture across a number of disparate meeting points (the National Stadium skywalk, outside the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, outside the Terminal 21 Mall, Thammasat University’s Tha Prachan campus).

This gesture was a raising of three fingers, a salute borrowed from The Hunger Games. In the book and film series, the three-finger salute "means thanks, it means admiration, it means goodbye to someone you love". But for protesters on the ground, the raising of three fingers is laden with further meaning borrowed from other "revolutionary trios" such as the 1789 French Revolution’s liberty, equality and fraternity.

On 19 November 2014, while General Prayuth was visiting the province of Khon Kaen, five students from the local activist group Dao Din stood in a line and raised the salute, while wearing shirts reading, “No To The Coup”. The students were arrested quickly—the day the first part of The Hunger Games: Mocking Jay was scheduled to come out in Thai theatres. The following day, another student from Bangkok University stood in front of an advertisement for the film, raised the three finger salute and placed her other hand over her mouth. Unsurprisingly, she was "invited" by police officers to Pathum Wan Police Station.

The salute has been repeatedly performed at resistance events in Thailand, capturing considerable public attention. But its meaning has also shifted with political context. The formation in early 2018 of the People Who Want Elections (???????????????), an activist network mobilising against the entrenchment of military rule, has vested the three-finger salute with the following messages: "1. elections in 2018 2. down with dictatorship 3. long live democracy".

This article was submitted by iLaw as an amended version of its annual post-coup report.

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