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Laugh Your Way Back to Democracy:  
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## **Abstract**

This article seeks to analyze the impact humorous nonviolent actions had on a social movement operating under repressive circumstances. The focus rests upon Thailand's Red Sunday group which emerged after the 2010 military crackdown. The group showed that humorous nonviolent actions could induce two political advantages: disarming of the opponent and disarming of the movement itself. Playful nonviolent tactics enable protesters' avoidance of possible arrests by creating a crisis of legitimacy for the authorities. For the movement's members, humor helped them to achieve self-reflection, encouraging a positive outlook of where nonviolent options were available they were creative enough. The Thai case resonates with the experiences of social

movements in many societies where humor contributed to overcoming fear and creating hope.

**Keywords:** nonviolent protest, humor, Red Sunday, Thailand

## Introduction

One year after the 2010 bloody crackdown on Red Shirt protesters, a Red Shirt-backed government led by the Pheu Thai Party won the election. As expected, the Thai traditional elites who had perceived representative democracy as their arch-enemy did not welcome this comeback. Some of them staged a protest calling for a military intervention, proposing that Thai democracy should be at least temporarily abolished or 'frozen' – to use their term. In response to this conservative stance, Sombat Boonngam-anong, the founder of the 'Red Sunday' group emerging after the 2010 crackdown, organized a counter protest. But in contrast to the elites' serious demonstration, Sombat opted for a satirical stunt by inviting protesters to wear their best winter outfit amidst Bangkok heat. The aim was to exaggerate the traditional elites' rhetoric about 'frozen' democracy. Protesters took a ride on the skytrain for a few stops before dropping by at a mall's ice-cream parlor. Demonstrators held self-styled banners that read 'It's freaking freezing,' 'As a result of freezing Thailand ('s democracy), I feel so cold!,' or 'Thailand – the iced country!' To be sure, they posed for tourists' photographs with their mouths quivering as if it was unbearably cold.

Satirical skits like the one aforementioned had been a trademark of the Red Sunday group. Red Sunday's approach to street protests was different from that of the key antagonists – Red and Yellow Shirts – which have inflamed a decade long political conflict in Thailand. While the two dominant political camps utilized mass mobilization to achieve the disruption of incumbent power holders, Red Sunday's activities were entertaining and at the same time symbolically defiant. This article seeks to explore these characteristics of Red Sunday's satirical skits and carnival-like protests. It attempts to bring into light the way in which playful nonviolent actions helped overcome fear and sustain the hope of pro-democracy protesters amidst the gloomy backdrop of post-2010 crackdown.

### **Thai political turmoil and the emergence of Red Shirts' struggle as background of *Red Sunday***

Hailed as one of the four “pathologies” currently plaguing Thai society (Montesano, 2011), the conflict over governance is principally underpinned with heated debates over a legitimate form of governance. Fault lines are arguably created between the coalition of aristocratic elites and urban middle class (dubbed Yellow Shirts) and emerging rural middle class, the poor and local tycoons turned politicians (dubbed Red Shirts) (Montesano, 2009). Yellow Shirts have largely accused the Red Shirts' leaders as being corrupt and abusing power. This has predisposed them to question the merit of representative democracy which has allowed politicians' maneuvering of clientelism to their own electoral advantage. For Red Shirts, Yellow Shirts' accusations reflect

the desire of traditional elites to retain their grip over Thai politics by bypassing a democratic process. The rise of a middle class from rural Thailand has threatened Bangkok elites, and therefore Yellow Shirts are against representative democracy for fear of losing their status quo (see, for example, Saxer, 2014; Pavin, 2014).

The Red-Yellow division has manifested in a tit-for-tat overthrow of governments favored by supporters of the opposite camp. Remarkably, nonviolent mass demonstrations have been instrumental. Spearheaders of these demonstrations were no longer confined to the circle of seasoned activists. Rather, they were characterised by the odd cooperation between politicians, army and NGOs, with an aspiration to achieve the ruling position in the government (Kasian, 2010, p.274). In addition, the logic of winning and losing in this political battle has shadowed the conflict. Victory always implies partial legitimacy to the winning party, while the relinquished and their mass supporters find it hard to accept this outcome.

The military ousting of former Prime Minister and Thai Rak Thai Party leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, on September 19, 2006 was a stepping stone for the Thai political turmoil. Between February and April 2006, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or Yellow Shirts, staged nationwide campaigns demanding Thaksin's resignation (Pye and Schaffar, 2008). The street protests culminated in PAD leaders' call for "the restoration of the Royal Prerogative and the King's appointment of a new prime minister and cabinet in Thaksin's place" which later gave ground to the military coup (Kasian, 2006, p.35). The coup shocked many, invoking outrageous reactions from Thai Rak Thai Party

politicians, intellectuals and activists alike. At the same time, its effect in polarizing Thai society was brought the fore. For instance, activists and academics who once were classified as progressive tended favor the coup in pursuit of their anti-Thaksin strategy. Meanwhile, those who used to fight against Thaksin became disillusioned with the army, and set in motion the defiance of Thailand's aristocratic class (Jessada and Wittayakorn, 2012, pp.112 - 113).

Two anti-coup movements emerged in this context. The first movement was the activists-intellectuals (including students). Right after September 19, various civic groups created a network to carry out activities that criticized the coup. Efforts by these civic groups sparked critical discussions regarding the future of Thai democracy. In terms of popular mobilization to undermine the legitimacy of the coup, these groups had limited achievement with only a few thousand attending their activities (Uchane, 2011a, pp.142 - 146).

In contrast, the second movement led by Thai Rak Thai politicians could mobilize a critical mass that would challenge the traditional elites' control. They kicked off media campaigns to destabilize the coup-backed government. For instance, TRT politicians founded the People's Television (PTV) which broadcasted anti-coup TV programs nationwide. In addition, they held live talk shows that served to summon Thaksin supporters in different provinces. This tactic became essential when the Constitutional Court dissolved Thai Rak Thai Party and during the 2007 constitutional referendum. According to Uchane Chiangsaen (2011a, p.142), the figure of demonstrators at

some stage rose to 30,000. The constitutional referendum, in particular, was a turning point where many anti-coup activists and intellectuals decided to merge their struggle with that of the former Thai Rak Thai Party politicians. Soon after, the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) was formed to serve as the instrument of mass mobilization.

The popular association of the UDD with the color red and eventually 'Red Shirt' became evident only after Thaksin's newly founded party won the 2008 election. From this point onwards, the vicious circle of the Thai intractable conflict kept repeating. The PAD took to the streets, stepping up their tactics from rallies to occupation of important sites, including Suvarnabhumi International Airport, in request for the government's dissolution. Shortly after, the Constitutional Court banned the government's party and stripped a number of party executives of their political rights for a period of five years. The UDD leaders perceived this as another round of aristocratic intervention in electoral democracy, and as a result organized a number of street rallies and broadcasted speeches criticizing the conglomeration of the court, army and aristocratic elites. Participants in these rallies were asked to wear red shirts to symbolize the movement's struggle.

The parliamentary power shuffle followed by the rule of the Democrat Party constituted the tipping point for street clashes and crackdowns in 2009 and 2010. By 2008, many pro-Thaksin MPs had been banned from politics, and Newin Chidchob – former key ally of Thaksin – was brought to defect. This enabled the formation of a new parliamentary majority led by the Democrat Party. Its party leader, Abhisit Vejjajiva, was consequently

appointed as the new prime minister. However, the UDD leaders found this process illegitimate as the Democrat Party came to power without going through any election. The movement launched a nationwide protest campaign calling for the PM's resignation. As with the PAD during its 2008 campaigns, the UDD employed protest tactics that were at times close to vandalism. A major clash between UDD supporters and security forces occurred on April 13, 2009 when Red Shirt protesters raided a hotel hosting the ASEAN summit. Security officers dispersed protesters with the use of force, which further enraged and motivated protesters to fight head-on (Uchane, 2011a, pp.144 - 146; Truth for Reconciliation Commission, 2011, pp.63 - 64). The result was twenty injuries and approximately six deaths (Bangkok Pandit, 2009).

Red Shirt leaders' interpretation of the 2009 crackdown as their defeat induced the movement's militarization in the name of self-defense. High rank military figures who defected from the army started to announce their allegiance with Red Shirts. In January 2010, Major General Khattiya Sawasdipol, during his speech, proposed that the UDD's struggle consist of three pillars: political party, the masses and force. Later on, General Panlop Pinmanee suggested the establishment of A National Army for Democracy. Although some Red Shirts' leaders who had insisted on the necessity of nonviolent protests tried to sideline the rising armed wing of the movement, its influence lingered on (Wassana, 2010, pp.74 - 75; Truth for Reconciliation Commission 2012: 67; The Information Center for Victims of the 2010 Crackdown, 2012, pp.118 - 21).

The overall protest tactics of the Red Shirts remained nonviolent in character (Strategic Nonviolence Committee 2011: 8), but the influence of an armed faction accounted for spiraled street violence. By mid-February 2010, the UDD's leaders called for mass protests, declaring the ultimatum that the Abhisit government had to dissolve in 24 hours. If not, it would face serious popular uprisings (Uchane, 2011b). For the government, this timeframe was too brief. They asked for an extension, while proposing a roadmap for 'reconciliation.' Eventually, both sides could not strike a deal. The army was brought in to deter the overthrow of the government by The Red Shirts. Meanwhile, military involvement reminded Red Shirt leaders of their experience during the 2009 crackdown. It also gave the signal to The Red Shirts for a possible clampdown, deteriorating their mistrust towards the government.

Between April and May 2010, a deficit in trust, negotiation deadlock and threats to use force by both sides culminated into episodes of deadly confrontation. The majority of Red Shirt protesters remained unarmed civilians, although protected by armed militias who were alleged of staging clandestine attacks against security forces stationed around their protest site. In contrast, the army deployed full forces mobilized from all over the country, and employed heavy weapons to at some point shoot at protesters indiscriminately. This caused some ninety deaths of UDD protesters and two thousand injuries (Truth for Reconciliation Commission, 2011, pp.10; The Information Center for Victims of the 2010 Crackdown, 2012, pp.415 - 422). This violent crackdown and subsequent political restrictions could have hindered Red Shirt protests, but in fact things turned out differently. Now we will explore the reasons why.

## Red Sunday's Playful Nonviolent Actions

An answer as to why the crackdown did not discontinue Red Shirt activism may lie in the playful nonviolent actions of Red Sunday. The group constituted a loose network whose members overlapped with those of the Red Shirt movement. Its mission was to carry out nonviolent protests despite the Emergency Decree imposed after the 2010 clampdown. The group's protest repertoires were symbolic, playful – if not absurd at times – and theatrical in character. Two elements gave rise to these unusual features: the post-crackdown context and Sombat Boonngam-anong's leadership.

The atmosphere subsequent to the 2010 clampdown was clouded with fear, hopelessness, and self-censorship. The Abhisit government imposed the Emergency Decree and enforce the existing draconian law of *Lèse majesté* in a stricter fashion. Accordingly, hundreds of UDD activists were detained, while many more went into hiding. Public gathering of more than five citizens was strictly prohibited (Human Rights Watch, 2011).<sup>1</sup> The authorities anticipated that this policy could set the scene for emasculating the UDD. In other words, whereas the course for Red Shirt resurgence of street struggle was visible, the draconian laws worked to curtail

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<sup>1</sup> The Center for Resolution of Emergency Situation (CRES) publicized the 'Anti-monarchy chart' pointing out a plot to overthrow the monarchy. The UDD leadership, the Puea Thai Party, pro-UDD media, university lecturers, activists, and government critics (living in Thailand and abroad) were accused of attempting to overthrow the monarchy.

mass mobilization. This atmosphere shaped the protest actions of Red Sunday to overcome the challenge of reclaiming a political space for Red Shirts – thereby bringing the movement back to life. At the same time, resuming of protest activities should not put lives of protesters in danger as had happened in 2010. Different forms of art and humor became instruments in this context (Sombat Boonngam-anong, personal communication, December 10, 2012; see also Worapoj (2010, pp.146 - 148)).

Sombat's leadership and his unique knowledge of the art of theatre performance, marketing techniques, and information technology influenced Red Sunday's playful approach to street protests. Sombat had engaged in anti-coup activities that were later on merged with the UDD's demonstrations. As a practitioner of nonviolent resistance, Sombat believed that nonviolence could constitute an effective tool for the UDD, rather than the employment of armed tactics. This is because "the battle is political which necessitates political victory. Military doesn't help you to achieve this goal so it's not an option" (Sombat Boonngam-anong, personal communication, December 10, 2012). However, he viewed that the existing conception of protest activism lacked creativity, and this accounted for the limitation of nonviolent alternatives. An assumption is that nonviolent options are exhausted. Thus shifting to using arms is justified. His experience in theatre performance allowed him to incorporate elements of absurd theatre, satire and carnivals into the renewed activities of the Red Shirts. Protest actions with these elements were projected to be fun for participants, and simultaneously attractive enough to get media coverage. In this light, Sombat relied on marketing texts he had drawn from over the years. They rendered him ideas about how to make

serious social campaigns more interesting and relevant to the urban middle class and the younger generation. In addition, social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube became instrumental for publicizing his campaigns and mobilizing potential supporters (Sombat Boonngam-anong, personal communication, December 10, 2012; see also *Sarakadee Magazine* (2009, pp.42 - 48)).

Staged virtually every Sunday between late May 2010 and June 2011, Red Sunday activities were characteristically playful and satirical. Networks of Red Sunday were pro-democracy artist and activist groups such as Prakaifai group, Tonkla Institute, We Change and Iskra Drama group. They improvised their own skits corresponding with Red Sunday's. The ludic protests can be categorized into three types (which might manifest all together in one protest action): resistance through everyday life practice or 'protest without protesting.', commemoration and satirical performance, and festivals.

### ***Resistance through everyday life practice / “protest without protesting”***

The post-crackdown atmosphere prompted the onset of Red Sunday actions to fuse everyday life activities (such as dining, donning certain outfits, shopping and exercising) with political protests. According to Sombat, the reason was to protest without protesting. That is, the protest did not occur on the street, but rather in everyday life space. This unusual repertoire would help participants to get away from possible arrests. In late May 2010, the group named 'Little Red Riding Hood' gathered at the Imperial World Department Store – where the old UDD TV station aired its programmes – and

ate 'red [brown] rice' together. This was a symbolic subversion of the Decree. In addition, it confused the authorities who were not sure if eating hamburgers constituted any form of protest, and thereby should be considered as unlawful (*Prachatai*, 2010a). A Few days after, Sombat encouraged the UDD veterans to collectively wear red T-shirts, which symbolized the comeback of Red Shirt activities and the official launching of the 'Red Sunday' campaign (*Prachatai*, 2010b). He viewed that the Decree could curb people's freedom of expression, but that this people would assume that violation of the right to body, to wear what one wants, is unacceptable. Wearing red shirts – amidst the fear of being associated with the Red Shirts – served as a symbolic defiance against the draconian law (Sombat Boonngam-anong, personal communication, December 10, 2012).

A breakthrough of Red Sunday's activities was the aerobic dance at a public park on July 25. Around 400 participants wore their red sport outfits together with ghost makeup (to remind the public of those killed in the 2010 crackdown). As with other park visitors, they gathered at the public park for a popular dance sport. But theirs was unusual. The trainer (who was actually a Red Shirt activist) led them to dance to Red Shirt songs and move in different silly steps, which at some point captured passers-by's attention. The gig ended with Sombat's pantomime. He held a self-styled banner reading "The only way to prohibit my speech is to stop me from breathing (*Prachatai*, 2010c)."

Similar action included Red Shirt jogging at the *Santipab* public park in early August. The message conveyed to the public was to promote healthy Red Shirts both in a literal and political sense. Sombat announced that the exercise – which could garner

approximately 300 participants – was necessary because this struggle would be prolonged. Hence, Red Shirts as individuals and as a movement should stay fit for ‘combat’ in pursuit of justice (*Prachatai*, 2010d).

The logic of protest without protesting, moreover, manifested in actions such as ‘The Picnic of Red [brown] Rice,’ ‘Shopping for the Nation,’ ‘Dining at McDonald’s,’ and ‘Cycling on Sunday.’ While participants in the first action reached around 1,000 at its peak, the second action conveyed a strong symbolic message. Red Shirts gathered at the Imperial World Department Store where their TV station was once located prior to the government’s ban. Instead of staging rallies or occupying the building as one could expect, these protesters turned themselves into shoppers. Through the process of walking and shopping, Red Shirts could reclaim the political meaning of the Department Store which used to host their media mouthpiece (*Prachatai*, 2010e).

### ***Commemoration and satirical performance***

Street performance was an integral method Red Shirts employed to remind the public of the 2010 clampdown. It was an anti-public amnesia tactic. Various student groups performed scenes allusive to the power allegedly masterminding the protest crackdown (*Prachatai*, 2010f). They had actually coined the phrase ‘there were dead people here’ or ‘I saw dead people here’ that later on inspired several street performances some of which emphasized this absurdity of army intervention in politics. Prominent was the prank staged on mid-July 2010 in which Sombat led around 500 UDD supporters to paint their bodies and faces in red.

They laid down on the street of Ratchprasong (where the May crackdown took place) as if they were murdered. The protesters held a banner that read 'there were dead people here.' This form of action became popular and was repeated by numerous anti-government groups (*Prachatai*, 2010g). Afterwards, Sombat tied a piece of red cloth around the placard of the Ratchprasong street sign. He recalled that the security forces nervously surrounded him, getting ready to respond to any act breaching the Decree. However, by doing that, the authorities appeared silly as onlookers could see these stern-looking security officers were rounding up just a piece of red cloth, which they somehow perceived as a threat to national security (Sombat Boonngam-anong, personal communication, December 10, 2012).

In sending the message 'there were dead people here' to the Thai public, the Prakaifai group together took a step further by staging the skit 'Haunting the authorities.' Approximately ten students got dressed in different styles of ghost costumes gathering at the skytrain stations close to the sites of 2010 crackdown. They took a ride, mingled with passengers, and even greeted military personnel stationing at checkpoints. Rather than uttering a word, these students showed the placard 'Being cursed on the 19<sup>th</sup> [September 2009].' Their aim was to demonstrate the role of the army in delaying Thailand's democratization (thereby pointing out the coup date). In addition, protesters wanted to relate this action to the April-May crackdown in order to prevent public amnesia of the atrocities (*Prachatai*, 2010h).

In a similar vein, on September 19, the Red Sunday group organized a commemoration which comprised the action 'Writing

Letters to the Sky.’ Hundreds of Red Shirts assembled at the Ratchaprasong intersection on the memorial of the coup and fourth month anniversary of the latest crackdown. There were no rallies or public speeches. Instead, Sombat invited the participants to ‘write a letter to the sky.’ This was a symbolic defiance. Its implication can be traced back to a UDD leader’s speech. It associates Red Shirts with the ‘soil’ or dirt, which indicates the low status of rural working class (the social strata of the majority of Red Shirts) in the existing feudal order of Thailand. In comparison, the ruling elites symbolized the ‘sky’ or the social top dogs in this feudal order. The letters were attached to balloons that were released to the sky.<sup>2</sup> Reportedly, the messages contained a number of provocative statements criticizing the ruling elites (that was why the letter was sent to the sky). At the protest site, the authorities nervously asked Sombat if they could review the contents in the letter before drifting the balloons. He recollected, “I told them the message was complete since we announced the title of the action ‘Writing Letters to the Sky’ basically because it implied our awareness of the power that was wanting to destabilize democracy (*Prachatai*, 2010i; Sombat Boonngam-anong, personal communication, December 10, 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> When the unruly crowd seemed to be out of control, Sombat called off the demonstration. He asked the demonstrators to avoid obstructing the traffic as that would further damage the image of Red Shirts. He also said that helping to facilitate the traffic connotes the victory of demonstrators. See more in “Red Shirt called off the Ratchaprasong demonstration. Pickets might be expected. The Police Chief Commander anticipated the Chiang Mai mob would disperse at 8 p.m (see more in *Matichon* (2010)).

Satire was at times incorporated in street performance as a response to the authorities' repression and the ruling elites' rhetoric of reconciliation. An example was Sombat's reaction to local police in Chiang Rai province. They had accused a high school student holding the sign 'There were dead people here' of breaching the Emergency Decree. During his Red Sunday tour there, Sombat donned a student uniform imitating the act of the accused student. But instead of simply showing the placard, he tied a piece of red cloth in the area of city center and announced that the student had the right to freedom of expression and should not have been detained because of his exercise of this right. Later on, Sombat and his crew staged the street performance dubbed 'There were dead people here.' They laid down on a main road as if they were shot dead. Other Red Shirts pointed at them, yelling "These are real dead people!" (*Prachatai*, 2010j).

Red Sunday-style protests inspired various student and activist groups to infuse their activism with satire. One of them was 'Prongdong Rangers,' the pseudonym of pro-democracy student networks that juxtaposed the Thai term for reconciliation (*prongdong*) with Japanese manga. When Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary General of the United Nations, visited Thailand, five activists staged a dance show in front of the UN headquarters. They wore masks representing the PM, Interior Minister, other leading commissioners of reforms and reconciliation commissions, and Ban Ki-moon himself. Apart from the silly, cheeky dance to a Japanese superhero soundtrack, these activists held a basket of '*kanom chine*,' the Thai term for rice noodle. But they looked sad because there was no '*nam ya*' or the noodle sauce typically taken with this particular rice noodle. The skit contained a pun

referring to a Thai idiom ‘*Mai mee nam ya*’ which literally means the noodle sauce is missing, but implies ‘incompetence’ of a person or an institution. The performance conveyed this implication to the ruling elites, the appointed commissioners and the UN secretariat perceived to have failed in protecting human rights (Prachatai, 2010k).

### ***Festivals***

Organizing festivals – mostly in the period of 2010’s final months until September 2011 (briefly after the electoral victory of *Pheu Thai* Party) – marked the increase in the audience of Red Sunday campaigns, and in turn their enhanced confidence in returning to protest activism. Themes of these festivals were usually based on existing festivals in The Thai calendar. But in symbolically subverting the official rhetoric, organizers tended to twist the actual titles to correspond with their political agenda. For instance, the Chiang Mai Red Shirts arranged a ‘Loi Krathong Festival’ (Floating Decoration) in mid-November 2010. But theirs was an extraordinary one, entitled ‘Floating Decoration to Oust Dictatorship.’ The main activity was to collect donations of winter clothes for the northernmost villagers who had encountered the piercing cold. The organizers pointed out that donations would go to those who were still alive (in reference to the deaths of the May incident), but were about to die (*mob ai oun hai kab kon tee young mai tai tae kamlung cha nhao tai*) (Prachatai, 2010l).

On the National Children’s Day in January 2011, Red Shirts in many parts of Thailand prepared festivals for kids, hoping to cultivate anti-dictatorship culture for the youngsters. At the Bangkok

14<sup>th</sup> October Memorial, the event entitled 'Our kids endorse democracy, and shall not 'play' with soldiers' was organized. The idea was to change the usual ritual of National Children's Day in which the army allows children to visit to their bases in part to promote military heroism. By turning around this ritual, the event served to challenge the 'heroization' of military which largely legitimized military intervention in democracy (*Prachatai*, 2011a). In a similar vein, the Chiang Mai branch of Red Sunday put together a Children's Day festival. Instead of taking children to visit an army base out of military admiration, activities that would educate them about ideas of human rights and democracy were put in place. The organizers announced that in 2011, children would not play with soldiers, climb on tanks or help sustain war-mongering policies (*Prachatai*, 2011b).

As part of the Bangkok Red Sunday group, festivals helped testify to the general public the increase in its popularity. On December 6, Sombat went ahead with his own talk show 'Asking for it. Being behind bars' (*Won non khuk*). Around 1,500 tickets were sold out. Sombat aimed for this talk show to constitute "a site for a constructive engagement in politics, with humor and laughter, so as to tone down tensions and lessen possibilities of violent confrontation on the street (*Voice TV* 2010). Despite mockery in light of criticizing the army and the government, Sombat's jokes could also be considered as humanizing and at times self-depreciatory. For instance, he told his audience the rumor in which "Red Shirts were believed to dislike Hollywood films. Guess why? Because people thought we don't like *Phanthamit*" (which is the Thai name of the yellow shirted People's Alliance for Democracy, but also the name of the most popular company for

foreign language movie dubbing). In another gag, he mimicked the statement by coup generals, changing their original coup title from ‘The revolutionary commission for democracy under constitutional monarchy’ (khanapatiwat peu karn pokkrong nai rabob prachatippatai un mee pramahakasat song pen pramuk) to ‘The commission to refuse any form of democratic rule’ (*khanapatiseth kan pokkrong rabob prachatipatai*) (Prachatai, 2010c).’

‘Horizontal Leadership Expo’ was a final festival that saw the conclusion of Red Sunday’s protest campaigns. On September 17, 2011 several anti-coup groups such as Red Sunday, Student Social Networks for Democracy, Tonkla Institute, Prakaifai group and Turn Left Organization hosted an exposition that would serve as a platform for growing collaboration among civic groups and concerned citizens. This festival in many ways denoted a changing strategy of Red Sunday, from being a protest-based group to being community-building network. This network would involve the creation of a horizontal organizational structure, dubbed *gaen non* in Thai, which potentially enables inclusive participation from all parties and self-motivating initiatives for sustainable political change. If social hierarchy and patronage underpin the protracted conflict by disempowering grassroots groups to break away from the elites, Sombat – through the conception of *gaen non* - was encouraging these groups to move beyond simply opposing the person in power. He viewed the cultivation of democratic social organization as more crucial (Matichon, 2011).

## **Social movement, nonviolence and humor**

Within social movement scholarship, humorous protest actions – like the ones staged by Thailand's Red Sunday – have recently received increasing attention. In particular, the phenomenon has been examined in 'frame theory,' which relates social movements' perceptions of causes of struggle to the nature of mobilization and their strategy (Goffman, 1974; Melucci, 1996; Benford and Snow, 2000). A common analysis is that political jokes with an antagonist undertones provide platforms for subordinates to articulate their experiences of injustice, and identify perceived oppressors. This can contribute to subordinates' collective subversion to challenge elites' status quo. In addition, frame theorists are interested in emotive functions of humor in reducing fear and creating bond among activists. Joking 'with' the security officers on the street can even generate the atmosphere of amity, arguably helping diminish risks of protest clampdown (Hiller, 1983; Barker, 2001).

The latter impact is sometimes explained to be a disarming effect of humor. When an organized movement opts for humorous and playful protests, it may appear to the public as being innocent and harmless. These images can reverse the consequence of repression anticipated to discourage the movement from challenging a power-holder. The general public may view the violent suppression of just a group of 'funny' activists as excessive and absurd. In this light, state apparatus and ruling elites can run the risk of encountering a crisis of legitimacy and losing political momentum to their challengers. However, without even repression, the regime will still come to be seen as representing an illegitimate political entity

because it will have failed to sanction protest actions ridiculing it. Moreover, the failure will enable activists to continue exposing the regime's illegitimacy to the public. Expressed differently, humor creates a situation where the usual repressive tactics launched against a social movement becomes counterproductive to the repressor (Romanienko, 2007; Sørensen, 2008; Janjira, 2015).

This effect of humor is detectable in Red Sunday's playful protests which to a large extent allowed protesters to remain subversive despite the draconian law being imposed to undermine their demonstrations. These street skits – especially those identified as the act of resistance through everyday life practice – were designed to serve as symbolic defiance (e.g. wearing of red shirt, gatherings of shoppers, joggers and cyclists, and public assembly through participation in a sport dance). They might look trivial, compared to earlier episodes of Red-Yellow street demonstrations. However, in the post-crackdown context where public assembly was strictly prohibited, these symbolic actions could have been a violation of law and order, and possibly instigated severe punishment. Despite brief detention of leading activists, serious cases of repression were not reported. And it was possible that the absurd and playful characteristics of Red Sunday's protests substantially contributed to the then government's reluctance to launch another round of crackdown (Sombat Boonngam-anong, personal communication, December 10, 2012). Contrary to what is usually assumed about the role of humor in weakening the political content of protest activism (Benton, 1988, pp.46 - 47), Red Sunday's playful protests demonstrated the political advantages of absurdity. Fusing protest actions with sport dance – for instance – might be perceived as 'absurd.' But the authorities' arrest of a bunch of aerobic dancers could increase

the level of absurdity fundamentally because state violence needs justification. Failing to justify the use of force against unarmed people can result in the demise of the perceived legitimacy and power to rule. What humor does is to reveal the unwise fabrication of justification needed for the repression of activists. And incoherent justifications further undermine the legitimacy of the ruling elites.

That humor can help maintain a movement of nonviolent discipline constitutes an additional 'disarming' impact of humor which was observed in Red Sunday's street actions and yet has been little explored by frame theorists. The concept of carnivalesque humor is instrumental in comprehending this impact. As much as carnivals provide a space for an open conflict (Burke, 1978; Scott, 1990, pp.172 - 182; Docker, 1994, pp.198 - 197; Bruner, 2005), they enable a dialogue between carnival participants and their antagonists. In Europe, the origin of carnivals dates back to the Roman Saturnalia which later on influenced the Feast of Fools (*fête des fous*) in France and the 'feast of the ass,' for instance. During the Middle Ages, the Church condemned laughter as originating from the devil, thereby prohibiting unreserved laughter. Nevertheless, jokes and laughter were allowed after Lent (known as 'Easter Laughter') and during Christmas (mostly expressed in joyful songs) (Zijderveld, 1982; Bakhtin, 1984). In Latin America, carnivals have been organized that combine Catholic religious processions with indigenous rituals (Harris, 2003). There is also a long tradition of carnivals in Hindu society (the Feast of Krishna or 'Holi') and mainland Southeast Asia (Water festival or 'Songkran') (Scott, 1990, pp.172 - 182). In Africa, carnivals are merged with weddings, funerals and the rites after male circumcision (Douglas, 1984, pp.156 - 160). These traditions

often depicted the image of the lower parts of the human body, such as the belly and buttocks, which are central to the carnivalesque image. They connote the continuum between releasing wastes and producing energy, between death and birth, and between ending and renewal (Bakhtin, 1984, pp.303 - 436). The regenerative image of carnivals provides the metaphor of constant change. The end of something always marks the beginning of something else. From this viewpoint, multiple possibilities can always emerge. The carnivalesque world offers a scenario where alternative realities to the seemingly fixed present one may just be possible (Handelman, 1981, pp.321 - 370; le Goff, 1997, pp.40 - 53).

Ways in which carnivals foster dialogue between protagonists and antagonists is through the creation of opportunities for exchanging conversations and interacting, despite existing prejudices. Through interactive activities, carnivals create a dialogical space among the participants and between the participants and their antagonists. The medieval feasts exemplified how a frank conversation with the enemies was carried out over the dining table. However, acute antagonism was abated by the act of eating and drinking together. The feasts could unite people, encouraging them to overcome past hostilities. These feasts carried with them the prospect of reconstructing relationships, suggesting “looking into better days to come” (Bakhtin, 1984, pp.286).

Combining street protest with some carnivalesque activities can generate an atmosphere where antagonist emotion transforms into cheerfulness, potentially avoiding clashes between protesters and security forces. Carnivalesque activities such as theatre performances, concerts, plays, and games invited protest participants

to laugh among themselves, at the police and even with the police (Scheff, 1984, pp.146 - 169; Barbalet, 2001, pp.155). In turn, the joyfulness of the civic multitude produced a self-sustaining emotional climate for the protests which influenced ongoing playful behaviour among protesters. This collective behaviour helped mitigate any chance a protester would be incited to translate their resentment toward the security forces into verbal insults or vandalism (Shepard, 2005 and 2010; Wettergren, 2009).

The emotive analysis of humorous protests can fill the existing gap within civil resistance literature which points out the political advantages of sustaining activists' nonviolent behavior, but offers limited explanations as to how to achieve this. For instance, in strengthening the mechanism of 'political jiu-jitsu' – the rebounding of the opponents' repression to undermine their legitimacy through the consistent use of nonviolence – scholars stress the importance of "nonviolent discipline" (Sharp, 1973, pp.594 - 635; Burrowes, 1996, pp.235 - 238; Sharp, 2005, pp.390 - 394; Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011, pp.57 - 58). Nonetheless, there is a tendency to overemphasize the advantages of methods that can otherwise generate hostility toward the parties activists oppose (Pelton, 1974, p.186). At times, taking to the street, public speeches and road blockades – for instance – are staged to dominate the protest scene. As a result, tension between the authorities and protesters rises. And protesters' hostility can translate into their provocatively dangerous reaction to the security forces. This straying from nonviolent discipline induces at least two negative impacts for a protest movement: 1) a decline in the leverage the movement can exercise among third parties and thus diminishing chances for the campaign's success; 2) it provides the regime with a justification

for a crackdown which can cause a large number of casualties and discourage prospective participants from joining the campaign (Burrowes, 1999, pp.235 - 238; Sharp, 2005, pp.390 - 394; Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011, pp.57 - 58).

Through its carnivalesque approach to street protests, the Red Sunday group brought to the fore ways to avoid these drawbacks. It should be noted that the 2010 crackdown on the UDD was justified on the basis that the movement allegedly opted for armed tactics. Among other factors contributing to this methodical shift, the UDD leaders' orchestration of hostile speech against the ruling elites and their initiatives of several provocative actions generally incited rage among protesters. Unsurprisingly, Red Shirt protesters at some point became so radicalized that they refused to negotiate their demand for less than the government's resignation. They even criticized their leaders for responding to the authorities' invitation to the negotiation table (Uchane, 2011b). Red Sunday's approach to street protest was significantly different from the UDD's in that solidarity through joke making and having fun among protest participants stood at its core. Narratives of the government atrocities were retold, while a demand for justice was a common scene. But none of the activities urged protesters to take revenge. More importantly, the message conveyed in some activities – such as 'Cycling on Sunday' – reflected a general awareness that the UDD supporters were also responsible for damages done to many Bangkok residents during the 2010 street clashes.

Theoretically, Red Sunday's carnivalesque protests allowed a process of reflection among protesters. They did not induce activists' nonviolent behaviour directly. Rather, these protests

probably constructed a climate of playfulness wherein past injustice was recognized, but was not necessarily conducive to collective rage. Rather, playful protests conveyed an ambiguously emotional undertone, which helped protesters to step back looking at the past crackdown. This process could reach the stage where collective forgetting of rage and desire to retaliate were fostered. A theory of carnivalesque humor as discussed earlier sheds light on the possibility wherein humor shapes the emotive undertone of protest repertoires. At the same time, this helps generate the atmosphere in which maintaining activists' nonviolent discipline is deemed necessary and perhaps fun.

In contrast to the concluding period of the 2010 demonstrations in which violent protest actions became exclusive to only young men, Red Sunday's new round of protests was packed with participants from diverse walks of life. There were women, children, elders and urbanites. Rather than joining normal street protests, they got a chance to enjoy themselves picnicking, shopping and sightseeing. The level of participation might not have been as high as that in 2010. Nevertheless, the fact that there remained hundreds and thousands brave enough to breach the draconian law by gathering in public places demonstrated the way playful protests enabled the renewal of contentious politics in the aftermath of deadly confrontation.

More importantly, Red Sunday's activities marked an ingenuity of ordinary people in proposing nonviolent alternatives amidst political turmoil virtually turning Thai society to be on the brink of 'civil war.' They constituted a transformative option, allowing an escape from the deadlock between submission to

injustice and violent retaliation. While a degree of conflict settlement could not have been achieved without the Red Shirt-backed Pheu Thai Party's electoral victory, Red Sunday succeeded in demonstrating to the Thai public that conflicts could be dealt with nonviolently, creatively and even cheerfully. Humor was instrumental in this context. Amidst the emotional backdrop of fear and rage generated after the 2010 clampdown, Red Sunday's humorous skits offered an exit for these emotional setbacks which could have aborted the resurgence of Red Shirt movement as the whole. The survival of the movement is important for a democratic change in Thailand as it encourages participation of a new social class. Democracy is sustained through the struggle between advocates of different ideologies. The dominance of the Thai traditional elites will need to be counterbalanced by this new social class. The goal is not to win the struggle and defeat the antagonist. Rather, it is to contain the power struggle among different groups through the use of nonviolent methods. This aspect potentially brings about a democratic balance of power.

## **Conclusion**

At the time of writing this article, political conflicts in Thailand remain unabated. In 2013, the Red Shirt-endorsed Pheu Thai Party proposed the draft Amnesty Bill, which many believed would pave the way for Thaksin's impunity from corruption charges. This gave legitimate ground for mass mobilisation by Yellow Shirts/PDRC whose agenda was first and foremost to annul the draft bill, and later on the stepping down of the Red Shirt-dominated government. By the end of the campaigns, the Yellow Shirts'

demand was to 'reform before election,' expressing dissent with electoral democracy which they believed only allowed, the Red Shirt party's victory. Episodes of the government crackdown on PDRC protesters, PDRC militias' clashes with Red Shirts, and armed attacks against the PDRC generated the atmosphere that Thailand was on the brink of civil war. On May 22, 2014, the army stepped in and took control. Red Shirts' leading activists and politicians have been witch-hunted. Sombat is not an exception. Refusing to report himself to the junta after being summoned, he has been charged with at least three court cases, one of which is *Lèse majesté*. At present, it seems that humorous nonviolent actions do not have the disarming impact experienced by Red Sunday. Students, activists and artists staged satirical from time to time, but they were consequently detained. Does this mean humorous tactics have lost their magic? If we look at the scale of repression inflicted on activists at the moment – regardless of the characteristics of their nonviolent activism – the answer may be yes. But if we pay attention to jokes mocking the junta scattered in social media, the answer may be that defiant humor has gone underground, waiting for the right moment to render ammunition of ideas for anti-coup activists.

**Acknowledgement:** This paper was a constitutive part of a research project on humor and nonviolent action funded by the Thailand Research Fund. The Thai version of this article is published in the book *Speaking Mirth to Power: Humor and Nonviolent Protests (Hauror tor amnaj: aromkhan lae karn prathaung dauy santiwithee)* (Bangkok: Matichon Publishing, 2015).

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