

# *Divided Virtual Politics: Micro-Counter Transcripts in Thailand*

Malinee Khumsupa

Politics and Government

Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration

Chiang Mai University

Chiang Mai, Thailand

malinee.k@cmu.ac.th

**Abstract**—Mass demonstrations known as “Rally politics” has been mobilized in Thailand for over a decade since the 2006 coup. It has deeply shaped and divided the country for many years. Two main coalitions, PAD (Anti-Thaksin) and UDD (Pro-Thaksin), utilize yellow and red T-shirts respectively to mobilize and campaign. Both camps staged protests on streets and organized media, TV and radio to peddle their agenda. Each camp has a legion of followers that watch what goes on in real time, day and night, for months as if it were a reality TV show. While medias captured footages of the street protests to audiences who followed the progress with great interests, the streets itself became a place of confrontation and increasing conflicts. On the other hand, new media has changed protesting on many levels, whereby active resistance can now generate content that communicate their own messages, and thus shape perspectives and stories that align with their respective agenda and visions. In other words, divided virtual politics mediatized online instead of mass rallies on the streets. Particularly, under the authoritarian military government, new media has assisted individual self-initiated resistance or small groups to counter virtually instead of mass mobilization. They create hidden transcripts in public and online medias such as selfies, short clips, social media posts, click support, as well as performances including the following activities: wearing masks, raising three-finger salutes, uploading clips, reading controversial books in public, etc. Thus, even though Thai virtual politics is still very much divided, confrontation and violence has not increased. New media transforms mass mobilization to disappear and give birth to a new self-initiated micro-counter public and hidden transcripts instead.

**Keywords**—*virtual politics; micro-counter; transcript; rally politics; polarization*

## I. TWO COALITIONS AND RALLY POLITICS [1]

Thai polarization and divided politics emerged as a result of some of these following phenomena: network monarchy [2], Hyper-royalism [3], judicialization within deep state [4], inequality and income divide [5], and cosmopolitan villager [6]. However, the most visually obvious divided politics confrontation is from the two coalitions of the two highly segregated antagonized groups. The rallies of two coalitions appeared increasingly hostile after the 2006 coup—People’s Alliance Democracy (PAD) who are anti- Thaksin united under the yellow-shirt color known as the yellow-shirts, meanwhile

the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) – who are pro-Thaksin known as red-shirts. The yellow-shirt group represented nationalists and royalists who are mostly middle-class people in Bangkok, while the red-shirt group was mainly from rural Thailand, North and Northeastern Thailand in particular. The divided politics arising from the two coalitions has increased with the greater use of media, such as TV channels including ASTV, Asia Update, and Blue Sky, and also community radio stations [7]. These protests assisted by media mobilized the mass to gather on streets. Huge rallies took place in 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013-14, and were led by the core leaders of each coalition. Propaganda media evoked mass participation, but also increased polarization at the same time. Thus, rally politics in Thailand is “manufactured crisis” in many ways [1].

## II. MEDIA MAGNATE , POLITICAL LIVE ENTERTAINMENT AND MANIPULATED POLITICAL ADVERSARIES

The rise to power of Thaksin Shinawatra presumably came from his recognition of the political potential of rural countryside to mobilize and merge with his own political “Interests” [8]. Based on “populism” policy, the people in the countryside were electrified and awoken to join their voices and that was later named the red shirt [9]. This group mostly supported liberal, democracy-based policies. The landslide election victory of Thaksin twice in 2001 and 2005 created fear among the middle and upper classes in Bangkok, especially the “tyranny of majority” that pushed the liberal-conservative of middle and upper class in Bangkok who were afraid Thaksin’s popularity would lead to lacking transparency, including potential abuse of power within his network. So they turned to the authoritarian liberalism group, which supported pro-military, monarchy and bureaucracy. This latter group, namely called the yellow shirts, prefer guided- democracy [10]. Thus, mass politics on both sides utilized symbols and colors to form and maintain coalitions, and mobilize mass polarization in the country. As a result, the polarization gradually increased and Thai people ultimately faced increasing conflict and violence after 2008. The scenes of conflict and violence were replayed or re-scripted by media and shown on TV and other channels.

#### A. PAD: Yellow Shirts Movement

The yellow shirt protesters strongly embedded color-coded ideology and hegemonic domination of royal-nationalism [11] (They are sometimes also referred to as Anti-Thaksin. The PAD demonstration was deeply invested with every kind of royal colors and symbols. The reason why most protesters wore yellow shirts was because it could be related to Monday, the day the King was born. The shirts first began to appear on May 25, 2008; particularly on the rally stage, whereby the leader's performance attracted a lot of attention from the mass and media alike, making him somewhat of a media magnate. Arranged programs on stage was well-organized and televised 24-hour live, similar to reality TV shows, through several TV channels such as ASTV or Blue Sky. The styles that the core leaders wore were intentionally set up based on vibrant yellow colors, which guided followers to follow the example and wear yellow T-shirts, headbands, and scarfs. Indeed, many booths of yellow T-shirts were on sale nearby the rally camps, with complimentary food provided to participants every day. The atmosphere around the camp was festive, noisy, and temple fair-like[12]. All speeches from the main leaders were broadcasted live with propagandized commentaries, which were followed by swift entertainment from live singers and bands sometimes. Trademark plastic hand-clappers became a must-have accessory to use while listening. In addition, the leaders would go on TV to urge supporters to follow broadcasts, while yellow shirts toured many towns across the country. Moreover, once the rallies were shown live on big screens, they were then recorded on DVD for selling at the same time. The language used by the PAD were usually full of symbolic and emotional expressions [13].

#### B. UDD: Red Shirts Movement

Contrary to the yellow shirt mobilization, UDD or United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship was a movement of populism mass supporters that took the side of Thaksin. They rallied with the color red and largely represented rural Thailand. They were mobilized from countryside to stage in Bangkok. This move increased the risk of confrontation and conflict since they were seen as being pro-Thaksin.

Main supporters of pro-Thaksin were mainly grassroots who settled in rural areas or were population of lower class in Bangkok. As Thaksin was exiled overseas, he mainly acted behind the scenes. The red shirts mainly watched "*Truth Today*" TV program, which took footage on the streets during the encounter with the yellow shirts in 2008. Asking audiences to wear red shirts and using T-shirts to symbolize political interest emphasized their visibility and political agenda. UDD demonstrators also used foot-clappers in response to the hand-clappers of the PAD. Moreover, they organized a stadium event where everyone wore red shirts and Thaksin addressed the stadium crowd via a telephone link, his speech was later broadcasted on TV. Audiences both inside and outside the country watched the show with great interest [12]. The rise of 24-hour news cycles and online partisanship have facilitated "distinctive project of 'people-making' with contingent political outcomes that cannot easily be classified as participatory, democratizing or resistant [12].

Provocative language and vibrant colors including other symbolic actions were used to motivate the movement. One of the most shocking actions was when protesters poured donated blood in front of several significant places in Bangkok [14] In regards to language used, the main stage was surrounded with slogans and banners, placards, flags, singing and dancing popular anthems including provocative dialogues and speeches. Significant meaning popular songs were also sung in *Luk thung* style (distinct provincial and unsophisticated), the lyrics of the song echoed the socio-economic senses of communal identity, especially inequality of justice. Another significant provocative was the use of two Thai words: *prai/am-mart* dichotomy, *prai*-means uneducated peasant or serf; and *am-mart* means elite including high level government officials, also reflected inequality in Thai society. This strong pour of emotions led to a collective feeling of anger and a sense of injustice. The language displayed on shirts, jackets, hats, bandanas, banners, placards, and stickers expressed personal words with rural, folk undertones, and family values [15, p. 71].

The caravans of rallies were made up of cars, pick-up cars, trucks, and motorbikes. The location of demonstration was a very important factor of UDD. Particularly, it needed to be large enough for a lot of provincial protesters to gather when they came into Bangkok, such as gymnasiums or main roads or even the tragic intersection ground in front of Central World department store at *Ratchaprasong*. This site of protest was widened, overflowing the glittering shopping malls at the intersection. Furthermore, UDD also promoted to kick start the mass as "Million Man March" [15, p. 63]. Therefore, the size of the crowd was a considerable factor to put pressure and was also strategically located at the same time. The convenience for coming in-out or shuttle between capital and provinces maintained the numbers of protesters. The center stage at the counter-public sphere in Bangkok, which was also a critical point where the sky train forks above the shopping district to the business district, ultimately led to the crackdown [16].

In retrospect, two factors were very crucial for the rallies. First, personal media was very important. Second, UDD satellite television channels, community radio stations, and direct printed media were also main channels for political information to be spread and reach targeted supporters [17]

In brief, the characteristics of rally politics coupled with electronic mass media in this case can be described by these following factors:

- Large critical public space for gathering large amount of protestors for example; PAD (airport), UDD Democracy monument, Ratchaprasong intersection King Rama V, King Rama VI monument, Stadium
- Mobilized large amount of protestor or followers
- Centered, Manipulated, or organized the rally or demonstration by core leaders
- United and symbolized accessory on traditional symbols
- Assisted by electronic mass media
- Guided with the weapons and violence
- Collective emotion

### III. NEW MEDIA AND DIVIDED VIRTUAL POLITICS

Cyberspace situation in Thailand was damaged by suppression and promulgation laws and censorship after the 2006 coup. The movement of PDRC and after the crackdown of May 2010 at the *World Trade Center at Ratchaprasong*, there were almost 100 deaths. Thus, a small group tried to organize activities to remind the Bangkokians to remember the painful memory. After the clearance of the main rally site at *Ratchaprasong*, the red shirts were muted for a while, with most of its leadership in jail. However, smaller groups, like The Red Sunday Group led by *Sombat Boon -Ngam-Anong*, soon began to rally again [18]. In this case it was not a top-down approach, but it used space and site of contention as a platform for debate. There are also graffiti targeted at the lese majesty law which used language as a tool for communication and share values and goals of allies of the movement. The main key of their success was building political engagement networks. They made their own strategies and shared them by video clips that were reposted.

#### A. *The Great Mass of Protesters*

New media created a new way for a movement to happen via social media. Starting with “V for Thailand” movement, the Facebook page borrowed the symbol of Guy Fawkes mask from film “V for Vendetta” that inspired the cyber protest. Similarly, a *white mask* group was organized to protest Ying Luck government to pass the amnesty bill in 2013. The Success of V For Thailand inspired the latter movement uprising on cyber movement. The intensive street protests led to the setting of the stage PDRC (Flag-color / *Kor Por Por Sor*) movement that was staged for six weeks (204 days). Before the mobilized mass, Democrats went through the 73 stages program “*Investigate Truth*” (literary *Pha kham jing* in Thai) around one year, which allowed them to gain experience and learn how to mobilize mass. After that, 5-7 August 2013 the leader decided to stage overnight “*Shut down Bangkok*” which invested funding around 5.8 million to mobilize the great mass. Several other stages were also set, including 13 Jan 2013; altogether 5-6 stages in Bangkok cost around 1.4 billion baht.

The concept theme of PDRC are composed of: 1) providing good music in a good place (located at Democracy monument; symbolized meaning of place, a place of Democracy Revolution since 1932); 2) Entertain mass with meaningful sweet songs and live music; 3) Create these new symbolic, including whistles, flags, identity colors (yellow or red); create a leader position as head of the community and called “*uncle*” (literally called *Lung Kamnan*). The movement later used the whistles to blow and make noise; adopting the literary “*whistle blower*” term. The movement was very popular for the mass of middle class in Bangkok [19]. At rally sites, there was symbolic fashion, like-minded communities, celebrity protesters, call for donations, large stages with giant screens, live TV and Facebook livestreams, posts on Instagram, and other entertainment like free concerts and political commentaries from academics and experts alike. All these drew large crowds every evening.

The people who joined collectively was called “*The great mass*” and they posted photos of themselves and activities at rally stage areas in social media to demonstrate the number of

supporters and show that it was indeed “*the great mass*”. One of the significant tools was selfies, and it became the fashionable statement of the movement. It helped protesters to create images of them attending the protest and post these pictures with selected hashtags.

#### B. *The Coming of Selfie Coup*

‘Selfie’ is a popular action that provides people in the online world proof that you have joined in an event or movement. Thai people love taking photos of them, anywhere, anytime. As with the case of political upheaval in Thailand, People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) was knowingly aware of the ‘*Whistle Blower*’ movement in mid-November 2013, due to the number of selfies. Moreover, selfie is one way for people to share with others their own points of view. The ‘*selfie*’ phenomenon here is being used for protest. Using selected props, scenes, and poses, they can portray themselves to be ‘*good people*’ ‘*khon dee*’ (as reiterated in Thai). Thus, actions in the online world may be more important than the real world. Cyber laws were enacted by the military junta during the 2006 coup; and the year after the coup government enforced the Computer Crimes Act of 2007 including Article 112 in Criminal Code. The social engagement to control the opponents especially *Cyber scout Group* [20].

### IV. VOICES UNDER DOMINATION

James C. Scott (1990) argues that the manifold strategies of subordinate groups manage to insinuate their resistance, in disguised forms, into public transcripts. Subordinate groups typically have self-control and are powerless, and thus contrast sharply with the less inhibited directness of the powerful. Therefore, the example way of subordinate cultures include rumors, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, and anonymity. For good reasons, nothing is entirely straightforward. The realities of power for subordinate groups mean that much of their political action requires interpretation because it is intended to be cryptic and opaque. This ambiguous area of political conflict is the site of public political discourse. To listen to this side of the dialogue, to learn the dialect and codes and uncover the hidden discourse, requires a grasp of the arts of political disguise. The basic or elementary techniques of disguise include: anonymity, euphemisms, grumbling found in oral culture, folktales, and symbolic inversion [21]. In Thailand, as mentioned earlier, when the junta seized power and suppressed the opposition, they tried to depoliticize Thai people with suppressed contentious politics with discourse of “*Happiness*” for example the coup leader wrote songs by himself namely “*Restoration Happiness*” to campaign with declaration twelfth core values. However, divided and polarized groups were not reconciled overnight. Some groups who supported the coup took selfies with the military and included supporting messages posted on social media which the evident known as “*Coup selfie*”. Washington Times tweeted “*Thailand Birthplace of the Martial Law Selfie*” along with a photo of two women aiming for a selfie with soldiers holding machine guns. In the 2006 coup also, people went out to take photos with soldiers.

Formal anti-coup appeared on October 14, 2006, when *Nuamthong Priwon* hanged himself from the elevated crosswalk in front of the headquarters of Thailand’s biggest newspaper, *Thairath*. “I do not want to live under the junta’s ruling”. For the 2014 coup, individuals immediately showed up with banners shouting “Junta get out”; this event was captured by smartphone and uploaded to YouTube and thus was spread on social media [22]. In the 2014 coup, the movement of individual self-initiated and small group flash mobs emerged, and was assisted by social media; i.e. coming out in small groups in public, holding up anti-coup signs, meanwhile students used the “*Hunger Games*” three-fingered salute gesture, or sit down in public to read 1984 novel by *George Orwell*[23].

Obviously, the significant phenomenon of Clicktivism related to political statement expressed by actions taken on social media is a new form of political resistance and a new platform that enables a new type of symbolic activity. This space allows an individual to express their political frustration and resistance. In addition, small groups use the hidden transcripts communicated within networks for satiric or express the political messages to counter the coup as Scott defined it as “*hidden transcripts*”.

“*Resistant Citizen Group*” emerged to counter the coup suddenly. They produced video clips often based on the controversial issues that the junta implemented. For example, the satirical clip named *Chup Yoei Chan-(o-cha)*, to mimic the surname of Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha, the leader of the junta’s National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) and Prime Minister of Thailand. Another video clip released featuring most of the leading anti-junta activists was initially produced by *Resistant Citizen* to campaign about the upcoming public referendum on the junta-sponsored draft constitution. The clip went viral on social media [24].

**V. MICRO-COUNTER TRANSCRIPTS: INDIVIDUAL-INITIATED AND SMALL GROUP IN VIRTUAL POLITICS**

Regarding political struggle and resistance through visual forms in the age of digital culture, we should pay attention to phenomena mediated through communication networks, such as social media. In Thailand, the changing pattern of resistance in the digital age, tracing to see the self-initiated anti-coup resistance by using bodies to generate visuals such as selfies was a very fashionable statement. It represents communication mobility and the characteristics of visual politics in social activism at present. Moreover, it reconfigures the form of political resistance in multiple ways. *Penchan* (2017) states that the First is becoming selfie-initiated, which is diffused and gathering has no centered controller except allies. In 2014, decentralized individuals who came out to express their political frustration on streets were young people who were eagerly generating digital forms of visuals – the selfie becoming the online trend for protesting. Second, these individual-initiated acts engaged with popular culture and radical symbols to attract allies and others who share the same values and attitudes. Lastly, these visuals staged offline and circulated online in social media generates networks.

New communication channels such as video clips or selfies might not yield immediate results in politics, but they can quickly capture and embody the people’s collective consciousness. Indeed, social movements have shifted from mass rallies to decentralized individuals in resistance, generating self-initiated acts merged with the technology of network communication, allowing for an amplification of the visual force of protest in the digital age. Under severe suppression from institutions of power, individuals resort to using their bodies as resources for resistance. Bodies as political actors. Human bodies are the sites of discourse and contestation. In communication, bodies can be the sources of argumentation. Activists utilize their bodies as a means to form arguments in protests [25, p. 145-161].

Individuals take ownership of their acts of resistance, generating selfies, quickly leaving the scene, mingling with the crowd in public places, and posting their visuals of resistance, such as flashing the *Hunger Games* three-fingered salute as an act of defiance against junta. College students staged another act by organizing a group of book readers in public places. Others organized picnics to watch *The Hunger Games* while eating sandwiches.

After PDRC and the emergence of self-Anti-2014 coup and small counter groups appeared, it is apparent that the mobilize mass on the streets for over six or seven years ago have faded away under authoritarian military junta regime. Mass rally is difficult to mobilize, instead, nowadays it is smaller groups or decentered individuals who arrange loosely organized gatherings via social media networks. The crucial role of selfie events or small group activities become the micro-counter spaces of political polarization at present instead. The mass in large public space is transformed. Individuals are the bodies that were active and engaged in performing, sharing, and broadcasting what they did, saw, or witnessed on the streets. The practice of social movement turns to the visual and bodies at important sites. Visuals in social movements enable us to see people advocate for their causes and beliefs with passion. People put their bodies on the line, creating their own space, and generating images of contestation [25, pp. 16-17]. The transformation of divided politics is summarized in Table 1.

TABLE I. TRANSFORMATION OF RESISTANCES IN DIVIDED POLITICS IN THAILAND

Resistance	Characteristics			
	Leader	Symbol	Location	Protester
Rally/Mass politics	Top-down manipulate	Traditional color-coded	Public spaces	Mobilized protesters
New Media/Virtual politics	self-initiated	Body languages	Cyberspace online	Individual / Small group

*The patterns examined during 2008-2014*

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