

"All People Unite" - What is the Thai Hip-Hop Project RAD Against?

- Sho Fukutomi

<https://i-d.vice.com/jp/article/439v3n/hiphop-project-rap-against-dictatorship>

"Prathet Ku Mee," the music video posted on YouTube on October 22, 2018 by the Thai hip-hop project "Rap Against Dictatorship" (RAD), has already been played over 30 million times. What are the factors behind this unprecedented surge of interest? The keys to answering this question lie in the lyrics and MV, which are sure to stun any citizen of Thailand. Sho Fukutomi, a scholar and translator of Thai literature, sheds light on the factors behind the birth of the track and the intents that went into its composition.

Rap Against Dictatorship, "Prathet Ku Mee"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=VZvzvLiGUtw

With the opening guitar riff, rapper Liberate P makes his appearance from the left side of the screen. Behind him is a crowd of youth who are yelling with delight at something unseen. Liberate P begins his rap with some provocative lines: "What has this shitty country got?/You tell me and all of us!"

So begins "Prathet Ku Mee" ("What My Country's Got"), the music video posted on YouTube by RAD, the Thai hip-hop project on October 22, 2018. To the accompaniment of the BPM84 melody with a slightly slow tempo, the ten rappers recruited for this number take turns delivering eight lines each in double- or triple-time. Their lyrics are scathing denunciations of events under the military junta which has remained in power since May 2014, and each rapper ends his part with the refrain "prathet ku mee, prathet ku mee" ("what my country's got, what my country's got").

The number of views increased at an explosive pace; the MV was played some 600,000 times in its first two days, but the story did not end there. On October 26, Deputy National Police Chief Srivara Ransibrahmanakul and the technological crime unit of the Thai police took action against it. They issued a warning to the effect that the artists, MV producers, and even people who shared the MV on social network services could possibly be charged with a crime under the law governing computer-related offenses. They alleged that the lyrics of the number constituted "false information that could damage the national stability." On top of this, there was even speculation about the existence of some mysterious existence "pulling the strings behind the scenes."

But the stir created when the story was extensively taken up in the news and other media was a boon for RAD. The track shot to the top of the Thai iTunes chart on the same day and started trending on Twitter. Naturally, tweets both for and against the number flew back and forth, but by evening, the number of plays rocketed into the millions at a single stroke. (It was a Friday, and the MV was also reportedly played at all restaurants and clubs into the night.) On October 29, just one week after the MV was posted, the play count topped 20 million.

Once it had ballooned to this extent, it was hard for the authorities to squelch the MV by threats akin to trumped-up charges. The aforementioned deputy police chief

again made an appearance and retracted his previous statement, saying that there was no evidence that the song was in violation of the law, and that no one would be charged with a crime for singing it, listening to it, or sharing it. (Meanwhile, RAD consulted with lawyers and took steps such as closing the comment space on YouTube.) The number of plays continued to increase and passed the 30-million mark as of November 9.

The RAD song grew into a social movement of the type rarely seen in Thailand in recent years. What exactly does "What My Country's Got" have? For one, "my country" has corrupt authority. The following sections trace the events in Thai society mentioned in the lyrics of "Prathet Ku Mee."

"A country where a panther felled with a rifle drops/A strong country where people eat wild panther meat like raw tuna"

- An allusion to privileged treatment for the very wealthy. In February 2018, Premchai Karnasut, Chief Executive Officer of Italian-Thai Development (ITD), Thailand's largest construction company, and members of his group were arrested in the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary in Kanchanaburi Province in the western part of the country. In addition to poaching black panthers and other wild animals, they were suspected of illegal possession of rifles and ammunition as well as other crimes. But a few days after their arrest, they paid a huge sum in bail and were set free. The investigation and trial surrounding this so-called Premchai Incident is still making very little headway.

"A country where they build housing for judges in a national park"

- In April 2018, controversy erupted over reports, accompanied by aerial photos of the site, about a housing project for judges near a national park. The plans called for the clearing of land near Doi Suthep-Pui National Park in Chiangmai Province in northern Thailand at an investment of 1 billion baht (about 3.5 billion yen). The project is being promoted in a strictly legal manner, but the junta was subjected to a barrage of criticism for approving large-scale logging of natural forestland while advocating protection of the environment. Ultimately, the junta's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha ordered a suspension of the plans when the construction had almost been completed. Subsequently, however, it was found that judges were residing in some of the housing units in spite of the suspension, and this triggered another wave of criticism.

"A country where a national minister wears the watches of a corpse"

- From late 2017 to early 2018, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, the No. 2 man in the military junta, came under mounting criticism for wearing many extremely expensive watches. He owns more than 20 such watches, which have a combined worth of more than 100 million yen. The junta is professing to root out corruption, but Prawit's wristwatches were not declared in the register of his assets. Prawit is asserting that all of the watches were "borrowed from a friend who died." The investigation by the National Anti-Corruption Commission is, as might have been expected, making almost no progress.

For another, "my country" has people who are resisting the junta's repressive policies and seeking the reinstatement of democracy and holding of elections.

"A country where the national assembly is held in a soldier's living room," "a country

where power was grabbed by the baddies," and "Four years, man, I mean damn/A country with no elections still."

- At present, legislation in Thailand is in the hands of the National Legislative Assembly as opposed to the legitimate National Assembly whose members were chosen by democratic elections. All 266 members of the Legislative Assembly were picked by soldiers led by the Kor Sor Chor, i.e., the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), which forms the core of the sitting junta and instigated the coup of May 22, 2014. Close to 60 percent of these Legislative Assembly members are military personnel. While it has continued to postpone elections so far, the NCPO has announced that it plans to hold elections in February 2019, but there is no guarantee that the elections will actually take place.

"A country where no one has the courage to criticize the government" and "A country where they use magic spells to change law into excuses"

- From the 2014 coup to the present, the junta has issued more than 500 decrees and orders of all sorts. By means of such decrees and orders, it has the authority to, for example, order people with dissenting opinions to turn themselves into the police and in effect ban political assembly by five or more people. Furthermore, citizen rights and freedoms are restricted by various provisions in Thai criminal law, such as Article 112 on the crime of lese majesty and Article 116 on that of sedition, as well as the aforementioned law on computer-related crime. According to iLaw, a Thai human rights organization, during the four years of military rule, the authorities have indicted at least 94 people for lese majesty, at least 91 for sedition, and 421 for violation of the ban on political assembly.

In an interview with the news website Prachatai, members of RAD made the following comment on the composition of the lyrics: "...we made a song with content that general people without any basic politics could listen to and get it without having to interpret it, or we didn't use comparisons since it'd be hard to understand." RAD stated that any person who had lived through the last four years would immediately grasp the lyrics (including those cited above), regardless of whether or not they support the military junta.

What really distresses RAD, however, is not the corruption at the top or the crackdowns by the junta, but the division that has split the citizenry.

Let us go back to the music video. A closer look reveals that the crowd yelling behind the rappers is apparently not cheering on the artists speaking for them as people oppressed by the junta. Yet many of the Thai people who eagerly awaited the release of this MV (because the sound only was released on October 14, this means people who routinely access sites such as Apple Music, Spotify, Fungjai, JOOX, and Soundcloud, and have a keen interest in both culture and politics) surely remember seeing a crowd like this before.

When eight of the ten rappers have finished their raps, the guitarist takes a solo. This is the only part of the MV that is in color; the rest of it is in black and white. The guitar is painted with stripes of red, white, and blue, which signify the Thai people, religion, and king, respectively, in the pattern of the Thai flag. When the last two rappers begin their raps after the guitar solo, the footage, which flowed from left to right until then, swings to the left. What then appears on the screen is a dummy symbolizing the body of a man hung from a tree and another man brandishing a folding chair and

vigorously beating the dead man with it. The people in the crowd were cheering the actions of this man.

This scene, which is even more shocking than the lyrics, recalls an incident that actually took place in Thailand.

On October 14, 1973, there was a demonstration demanding democratization by university students and members of the general public who were fed up with the prevailing rule by the military junta. They had mobilized more than 400,000 people, and many were left injured after the clash with the security forces. After arbitration by King Rama IX, the head of the junta stepped down and a program of democratization commenced. The incident became known as the "Popular Uprising of October 14, 1973" or simply the "October 14 Uprising."

Three years later, the radicalization of the student and labor movement invited turmoil in the country. The movement gradually lost the support of the general public as a result. Meanwhile, the neighboring countries on the Indonesian peninsula were all turning communistic, and there was increasing antipathy toward communism within Thailand. The right wing and military began to intensify their attacks against the left wing forces.

At this juncture, the general who had headed the junta in 1973 and later fled the country returned to Thailand. In response, leftist students initiated protests against him on the campus of Thammasat University, a national university. Rightist citizens launched a counter-protest, on the grounds that an actor playing a youth who was massacred in a skit staged on the campus looked like then-Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn (the current Rama X). Joined by the police and military, they surrounded the university campus and attacked the crowd of student protestors. Students who tried to escape were met with merciless gunfire, beatings, and rapes by the members of the rightist and security forces.

This incident, which took place on October 6, 1976, is known as the "Thammasat University Massacre." It left at least 41 dead and 145 injured. Although arrests numbered over 3,000 just among the students who were taking part in the protest, not a single one of the individuals who were actually involved in the massacre was charged with a crime. The incident remains unclear in many aspects, and is treated as a dark chapter in modern Thai history.

On Ratchadamnoen Klang Road in the old part of Bangkok, right near the towering Democracy Monument, sit a big monument and display space praising October 14 as a "democratic revolution by student demonstrators." In contrast, for "October 6," there is only a monument standing inconspicuously in a corner of the campus of Thammasat University, just a short distance away.

The incident is symbolized by a photo taken by the U.S. photographer Neil Ulevich. In his photo, a man holding a chair over his head is about to bring it down on the body of a student who was hung from a tree by the rightist mob. The faces of the crowd of onlookers are charged with an excitement. Among them is that of a child wearing a big smile.

It is this photo which provided the idea for the "Prathet Ku Mee" MV. Teerawat Rujintham, who directed the RAD MV, did the filming upon repeated discussion with researchers examining the incident.

In the aforementioned interview in Prachatai, Teerawat states: "Sometimes we also have to present violence using a straightforward method, so that people will feel and see certain truths." He felt that people had to squarely face the incident, the facts of which still remain largely clouded even after the passage of 40 years. By panning over the faces of the surrounding crowd in a long take, he was trying to depict the whole of Thai society, which has similarly experienced repeated intervals of division and confrontation in its modern history.

(At the bottom of the MV on YouTube is a list of ten persons credited as artists. All of the names are pseudonyms, and close inspection shows that many of them allude to people and organizations involved in the October 6 events. For example, "Lady Thanom" recalls Thanom Kittikachorn, who headed the junta in 1973, and "Gentle Prapas," Praphaht Caarusathian, who was the interior minister and deputy prime minister in Thanom's regime. The return by these two to Thailand sparked the incident. "HomeBoy Scout" and "Kra-Ting Clan" derive respectively from the Village Scouts and Krating Daen, two rightist civilian groups. "Kitti Lamar Wuttoe" refers to Kittiwuttho, a Buddhist monk who assisted attempts to provide theoretical justification for the murder of leftists by the rightist faction. Asked whether or not it was a sin to kill leftists and communists, he replied that those who destroy the nation, religion, or monarchy are not humans but devils, that killing them therefore would not be murder, and that Thai, as Buddhists, ought to do so.)

Yes, the division continues today.

"A country where political parties are divided into two extremes."

"A country where the people are divided into two camps."

"A country where people die, die, and die in demonstrations by two extremes."

A deep division exists in the Thai society of the 21st century, too.

Inaugurated in 2001, the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra garnered enormous popularity especially in the rural areas of northeastern Thailand due to his populist policies. The middle class in urban areas, on the other hand, did not benefit from the policies of Prime Minister Thaksin and were opposed to his political methods, which were high-handed and smacked of corruption. They organized the Yellow Shirts group of protestors and held demonstrations that were against Thaksin and for protection of the monarchy system. By way of taking their side, the military staged a coup in 2006 and ousted Thaksin. In opposition to this turn of events, the Thaksin supporters organized the Red Shirts and began demonstrations of their own. Confrontation between the Yellow Shirts and the Red Shirts intensified in the process.

With a low possibility of winning an election even if one were held, the Yellow Shirts = conservative and royalist forces collude with extralegal powers including the military and judiciary. The Red Shirts, in turn, call for fair execution of the electoral process as a first step. The two sides frequently clash, and a lot of blood is being shed.

The biggest incident was the forcible removal of Red-Shirt demonstrators by security forces in central Bangkok from April to May of 2010. It involved tens of thousands of troops and more than 100,000 rounds of live ammunition, and nearly 100 people lost their lives. Many Thai activists and artists view this trouble as a key turning point for

the country in the 21st century.

After this incident, Yingluck, Thaksin's sister, was elected prime minister, and the People's Democratic Reform Committee, which was affiliated with the Yellow Shirts, began organizing massive demonstrations against her administration in 2013. On the pretext of ending the disturbances, the military staged another coup in 2014.

This chain of events threw into sharp relief not only political divisions but also the social structure and thinking that legitimize disparity, exclusion, inequality, and injustice in Thai society.

There is the paternalistic notion that virtuous "good people" ("khon dee") on top ought to have compassion (rooted in brute force) for people on the bottom (referred to by the lyrics "a country where the really good people are not praised as idols" and "people keep saying do good, do good"). There is also the organic nation outlook likening the nation-state to a living body and the members of society to its various organs (referred to by the lyrics "a country where hope is for the top half and poverty for the bottom half"). These ideas are also linked to those of karma and metempsychosis in Theravada Buddhism.

The absolute hierarchy topped by the monarchy, the military tied to it, and the upper class is the true shape of Thai society. The people below are told that they should merely wait to be given the right things from the good people above, that their current lot is due to their sinful behavior in their previous life, that they should accumulate a store of good acts and virtue, that those with the status of feet should not expect to become the head, that feet have their own role to play, and that they should submissively perform that role. This is the kind of thinking that is behind the turmoil in Thai society.

Moreover, artists, who should be questioning the values and thinking dominating the society and driving change under these circumstances, are instead becoming puppets of the military and the establishment. Disappointment and anger about this situation is expressed by the lyrics "a country where artists merely act like rebels" and "a country where rebels obey the government like swarms of ants."

In just 80 lines of rap, the lyrics paint a well-dimensioned picture that brings out the various layers of history, politics, society, mindset, and feeling in a single country. This is the power of "Prathet Ku Mee."

At the end of the MV, the words "ALL PEOPLE UNITE" appear on the screen. This is the message which the members of RAD really wanted to convey. By calling on people to "unite," they are not urging them to adopt any specific line of thought or to join some political faction.

In an interview available for viewing on the television station Voice TV, Jacoboi, one of the members of RAD, commented on this message as follows: "In reality, people cannot actually unite into a single entity. This is because they all have differing, varied outlooks. Our unity is to protect a space where we cannot be obstructed by powers other than the people."

Rap Against Dictatorship can be characterized as a group of artists who are against the powers that continue to intervene and the division in the citizenry. At the end of

the same interview, they state: "Unless people engaged in artistic and cultural activities protect freedom of expression, it may become impossible at some point in the future to express things that we can now safely express without even thinking about it. This is footing that ought to be shared by artists in all fields."

- So "handing out chairs instead of answers" is never again repeated.
 - For the lives that have been lost, for the blood that has been spilled, and to free minds that have been repressed.
- "Are you ready?"

* Update

November 3, 2018 saw the release of "Thailand 4.0 - Thai People Can Do It," a rap song that is apparently the junta's answer to "Prathet Ku Mee" (although the junta side denies this intention). Thailand 4.0 is a model proposed by the junta for economic development revolving around innovation, productivity, and service trade. Although I do not have the space or energy to provide details of this track here, I have translated some of the lyrics below and encourage any interested readers to access YouTube and check the song out for themselves (it may also be a good idea to compare the number of "Like's" and "Dislike's").

"Good morning, Thailand/Stop all your yawning and get up, get up/Don't just sit there sighing/Let's try again and get more 'Wows'!/.../Just by putting our hearts and strengths together/We can go far and even farther/Our world continues to spin/Thai people can do it with innovation"

What my country's got, what my country's got....

- Translated by James Koetting