

Where Have All the Students Gone?

KHON KAEN – Khon Kaen University's lone May 19 Red Shirt demonstration was something exceptional. Though there were the well-known calls for an end to double standards, the requisite declarations of love to capital-D Democracy, and one young man sporting the macabre face-paint of a corpse, the student rally could not have been more unconventional. In the heart of one of the largest and reddest provinces in the country, these students were missing one thing the Red Shirt movement almost never lacks: numbers. At a school of 24,000 undergraduates, 14 showed up.

"This has to do with Thai society," student leader Patiwat Saraiyaem, 20, said of his pro-democracy group's small turnout. "Society doesn't really teach young people to do good for the country... The education system doesn't teach young people to be aware of the people around them."

May 19 marked the one-year anniversary of the bloody military crackdown on Red Shirts who had stormed the streets of Bangkok to demand a fair election.

Granted, May 19 comes late in the University's summer holidays and many students had been home for several weeks by the time the group Sumkiawdao congregated in front of KKU's student center. Still, even by its members' own estimates, the group was operating near full strength. On a good day, Mr. Patiwat told reporters, Sumkiawdao would not see more than 20 students in attendance.

This, KKU's Associate Professor of Sociology Buapun Promphakping says, is in marked contrast to student involvement in the Black May protests of 1992. Almost everyday for a month, Dr. Buapun led student activists on the six-

kilometer motorbike ride to downtown Khon Kaen to protest Army Commander Suchinda Kraprayoon's appointment to the Prime Ministership. Back then, Dr. Buapun says, more than 20 percent of the student body was politically active. Now, he estimates, the number is less than half that.

And what's to blame for this decline? "It's consumerism," said Dr. Buapun. "Education in Thailand is for promoting people's status so they can make more money. And if you ask students what their priority is, they'll say it's money." This consumerism, Dr. Buapun went on to explain, is the direct result of the last twenty years of Thailand's explosive economic development and rapid modernization.

The rise of consumerism is a common explanation for student disengagement on university campuses, but former KKU Student Union President (and one-time Red Shirt arrestee) Mr. Yanyong Piwphong offered another, more insidious interpretation. "There are some people that you might think are red, but most people do not want to show themselves as red." According to Mr. Yanyong, there is significant institutional and social pressure against overt political expression.

Though discussions of Thai politics in KKU's English classrooms have sometimes inspired shouts of "I hate Thaksin," or its equivalent, an antiestablishment remark is almost never heard. According to a KKU English teacher who prefers to remain anonymous, only one of this teacher's hundreds of students has ever betrayed Red Shirt sympathies. In hushed tones, a first-year medical student confided that though he would like to publicly express his left-wing beliefs, he fears the academic repercussions it may have.

Even Sumkiawdao's membership was less than fully confident in publicizing their associations. At their May 19 demonstration only eight of its members were wearing red and several refused to give their names when interviewed.

In recent days, student activism has been thrust into the spotlight after an anti-hazing group at Mahasarakham University sparked [controversy](#) when its [video](#) of a June 5 hazing protest went viral. In response, MSU President Supachai Samappito told ASTV Manager that the anti-hazing protesters were “too knowledgeable,” and that “they [had] been studying human rights too much....”

The Isaan Student Union and the Thai Student Union, however, came to the protesters’ defense in an [open letter](#) calling for an end to the SOTUS system (Seniority, Order, Tradition, Unity, Spirit) of freshman indoctrination. The groups claim that the system infringes on the rights and freedoms of Thailand’s freshmen.

The MSU kerfuffle, though not explicitly about student political demonstrations, does provide some insight into University administrators’ conception of student expression on Thai campuses. In what very well may have been the MSU president’s most revealing remark, Mr. Surachai said “If students complain about [the hazing], Thailand will be in a terrible way.”

If the simple act of expressing dissent is enough to endanger the very foundation of the entire country, then it’s little wonder students retreat into easy consumerism and intimidated silence.