

With Greater Caution, Article 112 Reform Returns to KKU

KHON KAEN – For the second time in recent weeks, the Campaign Committee to Amend Article 112 (CCAA 112) continued its effort to reform the lèse-majesté law (Article 112) on Khon Kaen University's campus, this time employing a non-confrontational tactic akin to “don't ask, don't tell.” The organizers from the Thai Undergraduate Student Union sought to avoid conflict with the university and chose to identify the event at KKU's Kwan Mor Hotel as a meeting of the innocuously named “Community Development Institute.” The university, for its part, received a statement of purpose from the Student Union and opted not to inquire about future meetings.

Though the organizers' procedural sleight of hand could be easily overlooked, it is emblematic of the treacherous pas de deux that Thai intellectuals and universities have been practicing ever since the CCAA 112 began its controversial campaign in mid-January.

Indeed, the [previous meeting of CCAA 112 at the campus hotel](#) on January 29 saw its headlining speaker and KKU academic Dr. Buapun Promphakping drop out at the last minute. The Associate Professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science later clarified his absence by saying that Manager Online reporters [had incorrectly identified](#) his faculty to be one of the event's organizers and Dr. Buapun, “thought the [faculty] would not be happy with that.”

This Monday afternoon, however, Dr. Buapun sat in on the forum, though he was the only KKU professor in attendance. After last month's confusion, he chose not to address the audience.

“The upcountry universities are very careful about this sort

of thing,” said Dr. Buapun. “Khon Kaen University is not like Thammasat University or Chulalongkorn University [in Bangkok]. We are a [provincial] university and we seem to understand that we are part of the government. Government policy is concerned with security, so [KKU] is more concerned with security than freedom of speech.”

On February 13, Thammasat University decided to [officially allow](#) Article 112 activities on campus after its [ban on such activities](#) two weeks earlier created much controversy. The decision by Thammasat, notoriously the most politically active campus in Thailand, has not visibly influenced other state-run schools in the provinces.

In addition, Dr. David Streckfuss, the foremost scholar on Thai lèse-majesté law and a resident of Khon Kaen, gave a short presentation on lèse-majesté laws in other constitutional monarchies. He did not, however, utter the word “Thailand” even once.

When asked why he had chosen not to speak about lèse majesté in Thailand, Dr. Streckfuss responded without mention of self-censorship. “Thais might have less access to different kinds of laws or other kinds of provisions [on lèse majesté] from other constitutional monarchies,” he said. “Thailand, or at least the new government, has made a case of wanting to follow international standards of human rights. If that’s the case, then we would look at what those standards are and how they are observed in countries that are members of the European Union, for instance, and how these countries handle lèse majesté.”

Even though Monday’s event proceeded with much circumspection, its student organizers were not distressed by the kind of caution exercised by students and academics alike. Instead, they saw it as integral in their campaign to spread information about Article 112 and the proposed reforms.

“We’re not afraid of anything, but we evaluated the situation and we didn’t want there to be pressure that would have disallowed us from holding the event at all, like the last time when a professor had to remove himself [from the panel],” said a student organizer from the Thai Undergraduate Student Union. “Next, we’re looking to go to Loei or Sakon Nakhon, or if there are people in villages who want to know about 112, we can even set up talks in small communities.”

One Thousand Red Villages Open in Isaan

UDON THANI – From a stage outside Udon Thani’s Provincial Hall, the Red Village movement grew rapidly Sunday evening as it welcomed 1,000 new Isaan villages as official Red Villages for Democracy. The Federation of Red Villages, a branch of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, now boasts a total of 10,260 Red Villages in Thailand.

The Red Village movement [garnered media attention](#) last July when just a few hundred villages celebrated Red inauguration ceremonies in Isaan. Now, the Federation of Red Villages is aiming to expand its reach nationwide to 30,000 Red Villages within the next couple of years.



Representatives from the Federation of Red Villages hand out signs for newly inaugurated Red Villages for Democracy.

On and offstage on Sunday, local politicians and Red Shirt leaders touted the movement's success in encouraging the free flow of ideas among Red Shirts fighting for democracy.

"In truth, the idea of the Red Villages did not come from the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, but rather from the people themselves after the protests in Bangkok," [shouted the Member of Parliament \(MP\) and Red Shirt leader Jatuporn Prompan](#). "Finally, the people are capable of moving forward by themselves." In response, thousands of red clad supporters burst out in cheers.

Surathin Pimanmekin, Udon Thani MP and Chief Consultant for the Federation of Red Villages, also spoke of the movement as one that encourages grassroots mobilization. "We want the Red people to take steps forward by themselves," he said in an interview. "They should have their own political ideology and political thoughts without just following the direction of certain leaders."

According to the head of the Federation of Red Villages, Kamonsil Singhasuriya, a given village can request a Red Village title if 50% of its constituents sign a petition in favor of the Red branding. Some local Members of Parliament,

however, prefer to see a larger show of support. Party List MP Cherdchai Tantirin from Khon Kaen, for example, believes a village should receive a Red title only if more than 70% of the constituents give support.

Though critics have blamed the Red movement and particularly the Red Village movement for [inspiring disunity](#) among Thais, Mr. Kamonsil insists that the opposition groups in Red Villages are rarely uncomfortable with the title.



Before the ceremony kicked off, a Red Shirt performer sat with posters demanding constitutional amendments.

“People who are not Red Shirts are beginning to understand that Red Shirt activities are good for democracy,” he claims. “The opposition tries to blame the Red Shirts, but our fight is peaceful.”

In recent months, the Red Village movement has expanded into the North (with several hundred already inaugurated in Lampang) and the South as well. Local politicians and the Federation of Red Villages have also begun to [inaugurate certain districts as Red](#).

As the sun set behind the Provincial Hall, Red performers led the crowd in [song and dance](#). Between chants and cheers, Red supporters chatted about constitutional amendments and Prime

Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's imminent arrival in Udon Thani.

"I like being a part of this movement because I want to see a return to a fair constitution in Thailand," said Samanjit Khotchomphoo from Nong Khai. "It's as if our rights were stolen after the 2006 coup." Huddled under a tent, five new friends nodded behind her in agreement.

After the Floods, Plans for Factories in Isaan

When the mobile cabinet meeting rolls into Udon Thani on February 21, Withoon Kamonlnaruemet, the president of the Khon Kaen branch of the Federation of Thai Industries, is prepared to woo cabinet members with a presentation. Mr. Withoon and a committee headed by Khon Kaen Governor Sombat Triwatsuwan plan to request a 50 million baht appropriation to conduct a feasibility study and create the blueprints for Northeastern Thailand's first industrial estate.

"Khon Kaen has all the favorable conditions to attract investors here. We are a hub in the Northeast for logistics, education, and health care. And we have golf," Mr. Withoon said.

If Mr. Withoon's presentation is as well received as he expects, thousands of jobs will be created in new Khon Kaen factories. However, it is not yet clear whether Northeastern laborers, long the backbone of Central Thailand's industrial workforce, would follow investors back home to Isaan.

Heavy industry is not entirely foreign to Khon Kaen. Government policies have promoted the decentralization of

industrial development for more than four decades. While most heavy industry remains concentrated in Greater Bangkok and along the Eastern Seaboard, Khon Kaen boasts fifteen large industrial factories.

Yet despite decentralization policies intended to increase the incomes of workers in the Northeast, the manufacturing divisions of at least half of Khon Kaen's large industrial factories are still staffed with Burmese laborers. "The fish net factories, the garment factories and the shoe factories," Mr. Withoon explained, listing three of Khon Kaen's five major areas of industrial concentration, "are mostly staffed with foreigners".

Indeed a Ministry of Labor official, who wished to remain anonymous, is skeptical that a Northeastern industrial estate would offer wages that Isaan workers would find attractive. "The investors who move operations, will their decision be related to the 300 baht minimum wage policy?" she questioned.

Under the revised 300 baht policy scheduled to go into effect on April 1, the 300 baht per day minimum wage will only apply to Bangkok and six other provinces. Though Khon Kaen's minimum wage will see a 40% increase to 234 baht per day, it will remain significantly below Bangkok's.

While it is too soon to ascertain if the proposed industrial estate will draw Northeastern labor back home, the estate's development seems relatively certain. "The probability is about 70%," Mr. Withoon predicted. He attributes the high likelihood to the 2011 floods which severely disrupted production and brought billions of baht in damage to factories in Central Thailand. "Businessmen are not in a position to take on any more risk," Mr. Withoon explained, "and the government hasn't come forward with a short-term plan or a long-term plan to deal with the threat of flooding. So, an industrial estate in the Northeast is looking pretty good to investors."

Organic Farmers Get Raw Deal

KHON KAEN – The floodwaters have receded, the fields are cleared, and Udom Phanprasri spends his week transplanting his new rice stalks in straight lines across his muddy plot. Neighbors drop by and watch quietly as he sinks the stalks one by one.

In Yangyong village, Mr. Udom is well known for his mastery of farming and villagers often ask to learn his techniques. But while his neighbors are eager to learn his tricks, none have followed suit in his most important decision. Unlike the rest of his village, Mr. Udom embraces organic practices in his farming. The remaining 60 farming families still prefer a far more popular method that relies heavily on agrochemicals.



Mr. Udom transplants his rice with his wife.

“It’s difficult to convince the villagers to switch to organic substances,” says Mr. Udom. “Even though I tell them not to use chemicals, they don’t listen because their method is easier. Many farmers try to use bio-fertilizer but then, one

month later, they resort to chemicals again.”

Since the 1960s, the use of agrochemicals in Thailand’s agriculture sector has skyrocketed. According to Greenpeace International, an organization that campaigns on environmental issues, Thailand’s farmers have [increased their use of chemical fertilizers](#) by a multiple of 94, from only 18,000 tons in 1961 to nearly 1,700,000 tons annually in 2003. The nationwide yield of rice has barely doubled.

This staggering increase in chemical fertilizer coupled with a relatively low gain in crops has led many to worry about possible impacts of chemical waste but has convinced very few farmers to go organic. Excessive or misused chemical fertilizers can threaten farmers’ health and often deplete the quality of the land.

Farmers and experts agree that organic farming remains unpopular mainly because there is no international market for organic produce from Thailand.

“The government focuses on exports so it doesn’t offer organic farmers a rice price guarantee,” explains Professor Wichian Saengchoti of the Research Development Institute at Khon Kaen University. “The government isn’t interested in supporting an alternative production process.”

While the popularly exported jasmine rice can be sold to the government for 20,000 baht per ton, a price nearly double market value, other rice strains that are used in organic farming are not supported by government insurance schemes.

Organic farmers like Mr. Udom are left with little choice but to sell their rice to private millers who often undervalue the product. “The local government officers tell us not to use chemical fertilizers. But when we try to sell to the government, they prefer to buy rice that has been chemically treated,” Mr. Udom complains.

Enticing farmers to turn organic is yet another obstacle. With chemical fertilizer, farmers can see positive results of higher yields and healthier plants within the same season the fertilizer is used. With bio-fertilizers, it can take two to three years to see results.

The Ministry of Agriculture initiated a project to tackle over-dependency on agrochemicals about fifteen years ago. The ministry employs officers in every province to teach Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), a set of farming standards that encourages a mixture of agrochemicals and bio-fertilizers.

“In the past, farmers used only agrochemicals. It’s our duty to reduce the use of chemicals and encourage bio-fertilizers. The results show that a mixture is better than just one or the other,” says Amphon Sirikham, an agricultural specialist for the Ministry of Agriculture.

Nevertheless, in recent years, imports of pesticides have surged from 42,000 tons in 1997 to 137,000 tons in 2009.

Mr. Amphon estimates that in Mr. Udom’s sub-district, Kok Si, about half of the farmers use only agrochemicals and the other half now use a mixture of chemical and bio-products. The switch to organic farming is very rare.

“If Udom is the only organic farmer in his village, he might face difficulties in selling his rice for an appropriate price,” says Dr. Patcharee Saenjan, a professor at KKU’s Faculty of Agriculture. “He needs to join a group of organic farmers or persuade his neighbors to join him. If he is alone, he can’t do anything.”

Networks of organic farmers are sparse in Northeast Thailand. The largest network, the [Alternative Agriculture Network](#), is in Yasothon and Surin and smaller co-ops are scattered throughout other provinces.

Article 112 Reform in the Provinces

KHON KAEN – The Campaign Committee to Amend Article 112 of the Criminal Code (CCAA 112), the first aggressive, nationwide campaign to reform the world's harshest lèse-majesté law, made its way to Khon Kaen this past Sunday with a panel discussion and petition-signing held at Khon Kaen University (KKU). Over 100 signatories gathered in the Kwan Mor Hotel to endorse the amendment drafted by the small group of Thammasat Law lecturers know as the Nitirat group.

Both CCAA 112 and the Nitirat group have come under intense criticism since [the search for 10,000 signatures began](#) on January 15. For many Thais, the proposal to amend the lèse-majesté law has been construed as a direct attack on long-reigning King Bhumibol Adulyadej himself, and in response, social media users and demonstrators have spared little vitriol for the movement.

Long considered the third rail of Thai politics, the lèse-majesté law has garnered increased media scrutiny and international attention in the past few years as the number of charges have grown by 1500%: from 33 charges in 2005 to 478 reported charges in 2010. Furthermore, the law's minimum mandatory sentence is an exceptional three years long, with a maximum sentence of 15 years for a single count.

Though Sunday's Khon Kaen discussion proceeded without incident, KKU's academics were conspicuously absent, with much of the modest crowd composed of local Red Shirts, independent community members, and student activists.

Boonwat Chumpradit, a Khon Kaen Red Shirt villager in

attendance, found the silence of KKU's professors troubling. "Professors at the university should be the ones leading us," she said. "We shouldn't have to be the ones leading them."

Still, the campaign is so politically treacherous that even a professor from the Nitirat group declined to attend Khon Kaen's meeting, telling the event's organizer that it might endanger his relationship with his employer, Thammasat University. His fears seem to have been justified. The following day, Thammasat University rector Somkit Lertpaithoon [announced on his Facebook page](#) that Nitirat was banned from meeting on university property.

Complicating matters is the second campaign launched by Nitirat on January 22 that, among other things, seeks to nullify the legal effects of the 2006 military coup that ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Critics, however, claim this is simply a veiled attempt to pardon Mr. Thaksin for his 2008 corruption conviction. As a result, the group is seen as unthinkably transgressive: both pro-Thaksin and anti-monarchy. Indeed, over 200 members of Khon Kaen Residents Who Love the King gathered at the city's spirit house on Friday night to protest the group on these very grounds.

Sunday's motley crew of attendees cut across social, if not political boundaries. There were out-and-proud Red Shirts ("I came because I'm a Red Shirt... everyone should be able to critique [the king] just like they can critique a movie star."), adamantly color-less university technicians ("The movement to correct the constitution is different from the Red Shirt movement."), closeted Marxists, Yingluck apologists ("In truth Yingluck wants to change the law, but there are many factions in Thailand and she doesn't want to fight with all these groups."), and the likes of Ms. Boonwat, who came dressed to the nines in a floppy-brimmed red hat and flowing red dress.

At times, this audience grew rowdy and vocal as they were stirred to applause and cheers by the seminar's three speakers: Prawet Praphanukul, lawyer to the anti-112 poster-child, Da Torpedo, Wad Rawee from CCAA 112, and Phornchai Yuanyee, Secretary of the Thai Undergraduate Student Union. Together they addressed the history, contradictions, absurdities, and abuses surrounding the lèse-majesté law.

As Sunday afternoon's seminar came to a close and the floor was opened up to audience members, one KCU student took the microphone and pleaded for more action. "After we sign the petitions, we need to get in touch with our Pheu Thai representatives," he said. "We are the ones who elected these representatives and now we need to get in touch with them and get them to change this law."

This outlook, however, is bleak. Late last week, numerous Pheu Thai representatives [swore off making any changes](#) to Article 112. "The government and the Pheu Thai Party will never change Section 112 of the Criminal Code," Deputy Prime Minister Chalerm Yubamrung said. "Even the thought of it can send us to hell."

The next anti-112 event to be held in Khon Kaen is tentatively scheduled for February 27.

[Correction February 28, 2012: An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported that there was a 1500% growth in lèse-majesté "cases" between 2005 and 2010. However, the 1500% increase was actually in lèse-majesté charges issued in that time frame, oftentimes with several charges filed in a single case. The article has been amended to reflect this change.]
