

# European Union Thailand National Debate Tournament Moves from Bangkok to the Northeast

KHON KAEN-For the past seven years, the European Union has sponsored the European Union Thailand National Inter-varsity Debate Tournament (EUTH) with the objective of stimulating critical thinking, democratic values, and English proficiency among Thai youth. However, this year marks a first for the event as organizers moved the tournament outside of the capital in an effort to expand beyond the predominantly Bangkok-based participants. For the tournament's eighth year, Khon Kaen University (KKU) won the bid to host.

University and high school students from schools from across the country came to Khon Kaen this past week to participate in the five-day tournament in which debaters discussed a wide variety of motions including human rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) issues, international relations, media, environmental issues, and the imminent ASEAN economic community.



EU representative and debate judge Ms. Ana Beatriz Martins presents the winning team from

Chulalongkorn University  
in Bangkok their award.

Moving the debate to Khon Kaen this year was strategic in fortifying the blossoming debate culture that has been developing in the province over the past few years according to the tournament's advisor and outgoing chair, Mr. Chainarong Sangsranoi.

The Thai education system has often been criticized for its focus on rote memorization rather than critical thinking. Within this system, Isaan has suffered as the standard of education and resources available in Isaan have fallen behind those of other regions, explained Mr. John Draper, KKU lecturer and one of the judges for the debate. By hosting this tournament, however, Khon Kaen University administrators and teachers are hoping to work against that trend by promoting the skills involved in Western style debate and subsequently nurturing a new generation of open-minded and analytical Thai youth.

Participants and spectators alike who expressed their discontent with the traditional education system commented on how events like these can successfully challenge this system.

Siravich Sincharoenkul, a debater from Mahidol University echoed the critiques of Thai education and went further saying, "[Through debate I've learned how to use analytical thinking and to be more responsive. We cannot just learn by rote learning, just memorizing the information. That is not effective because you will not be able to apply it in the future."

Student participants from outside of Isaan recognize the greater implications that the move out of Bangkok has for the Thai education system, and Isaan in particular. "I think that it shows that education or the opportunity to learn is not only limited to the center of Thailand," said Siravich. "I

think the rest of the country has more opportunities to access materials and information and education. I think this is a good step for Thailand so that we can continue to develop a young generation of educated people.”

Mika Apichatsakol, Chulalongkorn University debater and second place winner, explained that debate is motivation for her to stay informed about world issues. “It’s an incentive to research. I want to be an informed individual,” she said. She does recognize, however, that this is not common for the majority of Thai youth, but hopes that through debate, she can help to stimulate critical thinking and self-initiative among others in her generation.

Subsequently, the arguments made throughout the week, from LGBTQ-only schools, to the use of drone warfare, to whether or not Thailand should move its capital, seemingly left a resounding mark on spectators and student volunteers by sparking conversation beyond the walls of the auditorium.

The hope from the organizers and the European Union is that events such as this will help to fortify the regions outside of Bangkok in terms of English proficiency and freedom of expression as debate culture continues to gain momentum. The EU has already helped to create regional workshops that they hope will inspire participation from even more universities from outside Bangkok by providing greater opportunities for practice in preparation for the EUTH National tournament. Nakhon Ratchasima, for example, attended this year’s regional debate in the hopes that next year they will be able to participate in the tournament.

Ms. Ana Beatriz Martins, Head of Political, Press and Information Section of the EU and a judge of the final debate, expressed the influence she hopes the expansion of debate culture will have on Thailand’s next generation, especially given the current political climate. “The intention is to create a next generation and new society that learns to debate

constructively. To overcome differences of views in dialogue rather than aggression or violence. I think that is the path Thailand is taking.”

Ms. Martins believes that this year’s move to Khon Kaen is a significant step in building the EU’s relationship with the Northeast through their support of the region’s growing debate culture. “We are very happy KCU has agreed to host. As one of the biggest universities in Thailand, they’re a natural partner for us. We hope to continue this path of encouraging debate culture outside of Bangkok and to link it up with other regions.”

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## Panel Garnerers Red Shirt Support for the International Criminal Court

KHON KAEN – Cheers erupted the instant former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva’s face appeared on the projection screen, but they were not cheers of support for the former figurehead. The enraptured audience was instead hailing the speaker’s assertions accompanying the slide.

At Khon Kaen University’s College of Local Administration last Saturday, a panel of speakers advocated for the role the International Criminal Court could play in bringing justice to the Thai court system by ending impunity for political figures.

Mr. Abhisit’s picture concluded the slide show of a handful of world leaders, including Thomas Lubanga Dyilo of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Charles Taylor of Liberia,

who have been taken to the International Criminal Court for committing crimes against humanity. The former prime minister, the speakers said, should be next.

“People in power tell [the military] to kill the people, and this [practice] is still alive,” said Pheu Thai MP Ms. Jarupan Kuldiloke. “It hasn’t stopped yet.”

Thus was the thrust of the arguments included in the forum entitled “The Right of People to Protect Themselves with the International Criminal Court.” Local Red Shirt supporters packed COLA’s auditorium beyond capacity to hear Pheu Thai MP Mr. Sunai Chulponsatorn, Thammasat professors Mr. Piyabutr Saengkanokkul and Ms. Sudsanguan Suteesorn, KKU professor Mr. Kittibodi Yaipool, and Ms. Jarupan present on the subject.

The Thai judicial system, the panelists asserted, has historically been biased towards people in power by granting impunity to those who have committed what the speakers believe to be crimes against humanity, most recently for those involved in the 2010 April and May military crackdown. Additionally, they said that the court has been biased against the rural poor, in the case of the 2010 crackdown on the overwhelmingly Isaan-based Red Shirt movement.

The event was doubly significant for Thais fighting for human rights as the date marked the 36th anniversary of the Thammasat University massacre, a tragedy that still resonates in the memories of many Thai people. Those behind the military orders that claimed the lives of at least 46 student activists and wounded countless more have never been brought before Thai court for what the panelists asserted were crimes against humanity. Consequently, the speakers used the October 1976 event to provide historical context for the pervasive injustice they believe still runs rampant within the Thai court system.

“The government has a duty to protect its people’s rights, but

the government is abusing its power," said Ms. Sudsanguan. Consequently, the ICC, she asserted, would be a mechanism to alleviate the inequalities of the Thai court and reinforce the political rights of all people, not just those in power.

In 1998, the United Nations created the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as a court of last resort. The court's jurisdiction covers individuals who have committed genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes of aggression, but only under the condition that the country's national justice system is unable or unwilling to do so itself. As it stands, however, Thailand has yet to ratify the Rome Statute of the ICC although it became a signatory 10 years ago.

"Basic democratic societies should be equal. Every human should be equal, but does Thai society really respect this?" Mr. Kittibodi posed to a captivated audience. "Isaan has many minerals and resources, but why are Isaan people still poor? Why are Isaan people not treated equally?"

Though speaking to an overwhelmingly Red Shirt audience, Mr. Piyabutr argued that utilizing the ICC would be a step forward for all Thais, not just for the Red Shirt movement. "If the ICC is successful in Thailand, it will be able to move the country forward. The ICC will be good for the Thai people because the power of the Thai soldiers will be restrained so that they will stop hurting [the] people as they have in the past," he said, alluding to both the Thammasat massacre and the 2010 crackdown.

Mr. Piyabutr, a member of the controversial Nitirat group of law academics at Thammasat, spoke vehemently about the need to curtail impunity for political figures. In particular, he focused on Article 12 Paragraph 3 of the ICC which asserts that the ICC can exercise jurisdiction over states not yet part of the statute under certain conditions. This article, he asserted, is significant because former Prime Minister Abhisit

Vejjajiva and his Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban could be taken to the ICC under it, if Thailand fits the preconditions.

Not all the speakers advocated for the inclusion of the ICC, however. Mr. Kittibodi, although supportive of the ICC's potential role in ending impunity for political figures, asserted that there should be a more stringent focus on fixing the current Thai judicial system to mitigate the need to take such cases to the ICC. "Other countries will laugh at Thailand because it can't take care of itself and needs to go to the ICC [to solve its problems]," Ms. Sudsanguan said, in support of Mr. Kittibodi's suggestion.

As Thais debate how to pave the road to national reconciliation, many stand divided on the potential support of an international court like the ICC. The reactions of the audience at the forum, however, indicate that support for the international court's intervention continues to grow among Red Shirts of the Northeast.

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