

Senate Candidates Campaign Without Politics



Crowds gather at Khon Kaen's provincial hall to hear senatorial candidates speak.

KHON KAEN—When Komet Teekhathananon took to the stage outside the provincial hall on Thursday, he described his experience as a business owner and a local politician. Mr. Komet is running for senator, and this was his sole chance to speak to voters before Sunday's senatorial election. But there was one catch: he was not allowed to talk about politics.

“As a senatorial candidate, there are many laws that control what I can say,” said 57-year-old Mr. Komet, whose family owns a marketplace in Khon Kaen. “So it's hard to explain what I really want you to understand.”

Mr. Komet is one of seven candidates running for senator in Khon Kaen Province. Strict rules aimed at maintaining a non-

partisan Senate in Thailand bar candidates from carrying out many common campaign practices, including discussing current political issues.

The few permissible activities include posting billboards with their names and slogans on government offices, and submitting photos and short biographies to be circulated by mail and broadcasted over government radio.

On Thursday, each candidate in Khon Kaen was also given 15 minutes to speak on stage before a crowd of approximately 2,000 people in front of the provincial hall.

Because senatorial candidates are prohibited from discussing political issues, most of their speeches focused on personal qualifications.

Like Mr. Komet, prominent radio D.J. Wan Suwanphong, 75, also addressed the limitations placed on his campaign speech.

"I believe that we still need to amend the constitution, but I am not permitted to speak much on what I want to see change," said Mr. Wan.

Instead, Mr. Wan discussed his background as a lawyer. Yet he did finish with a comment that made clear his view of the Constitutional Court's recent ruling to void the February 2 election of MPs.

"I am afraid that the March 30 election could end up the same as the MP election on February 2," Mr. Wan said. "If it becomes invalid again, I will be the lawyer that sues whomever invalidates it."

Mr. Thitinan Saengnak, 53, also gestured towards his political position without being explicit.

"We have to work with people from the bureaucratic system, like the Office of Ombudsman. We have to work with these people. You know who they are and what they believe," said Mr.

Thitinan.

The Office of Ombudsman is one of several government agencies considered to be aligned with the anti-government camp.

“I want to stay with you on your side,” Mr. Thitinan told the Khon Kaen audience. “I believe that we have the same position, the same point of view.”

Other candidates avoided politics and focused on more neutral issues.

Suwit Namboonroeng, age 62, cited a lifelong commitment to democracy and stressed the importance of education.

Forty-seven-year-old Suthon Sornkhamkaew, who has a background in accounting, stressed his personal impartiality.

“I’m totally independent, I am not interested in backing up any color in particular, “ said Mr. Suthon. “I think the most important thing for the senator is to be honest and have integrity.”

Senatorial candidates cannot be affiliated with a political party, so it is especially valuable to have high name-recognition.

“You cannot be just anybody and run for senator,” said Khon Kaen Election Commissioner Thitipol Thosarod. “There are always some unknown candidates who use this situation to introduce themselves to the public, but usually the people who run for Senate are already very well-known in the province.”

Although anti-government protesters have vowed to block any MP election that is held before a series of national reforms are implemented, they [say](#) they will not interfere with Sunday’s Senate election. This is likely because the Senate, which holds the power to impeach the Prime Minister with a three-to-five vote, is essential to any effort to oust Prime Minister Yingluck.

As a result of the 2007 constitution, Thailand's Senate is only half-elected; the other half is appointed by judges and government officials who are widely considered to be members of the anti-Shinawatra establishment.

The committee that appoints senators includes senior leaders from the Constitutional Court, National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), Election Commission, State Audit Commission and a representative of the Supreme Court.

With a strong influence from these agencies, the Senate is expected to back a decision to impeach Prime Minister Yingluck if the NACC recommends it.

The NACC has charged Ms. Yingluck with negligence of duty in overseeing the government's controversial rice-pledging scheme. The Prime Minister is scheduled to appear before the NACC on March 31, and the corruption commission is expected to announce its verdict early next month.

With the current government hanging in the balance, the Senate candidates elected on Sunday are set to play a pivotal role in determining the course of Thailand's political crisis.

Law Students File Complaint Against Constitutional Court



Law students demonstrate in front of Khon Kaen's Administrative Court.

KHON KAEN – Khon Kaen University Law students filed a complaint against Thailand's Office of the Ombudsman on Monday in regards to the recent Constitutional Court decision to invalidate the February 2 congressional election.

The student-run human rights group, Dao Din, argued that the Office of the Ombudsman did not have the authority to forward the February 2 election case to the Constitutional Court. They also requested financial compensation for the cost of traveling to the polls on February 2 and for the retraction of their political right to vote.

"I feel that the court has lost their legitimacy," said Jatupat Boonpattaraksa, a 23-year-old law student at Khon Kaen University and member of Dao Din. "They have made a

mistake and created a dead end for Thailand.”

Before filing the complaint on Monday, Dao Din staged a skit in front of Khon Kaen’s Administrative Court mocking the Constitutional Court judges and depicting what they consider to be the court’s “silent coup.”

After the demonstration, members of Dao Din affirmed their commitment to democracy and read the group’s official position on the political crisis that has gradually unravelled Thailand’s elected government.

“We don’t want a reformed government or one that comes from the military, through the independent agencies, or through any power which overthrows the democratic system by undemocratic forces,” the group’s official statement said.

A group of academics known as the [Assembly for the Defence of Democracy](#) (AFDD) also criticised the Office of Ombudsman’s actions on Monday. In an official statement, the AFDD argued that the Office of the Ombudsman can only forward complaints to the Constitutional Court that concern the constitutionality of legal provisions, which they argue the “the holding of a general election” does not fall under.

[Court Annuls February 2 Poll, Khon Kaen Responds](#)



Activists erect a banner on Khon Kaen's Democracy Monument that says, "Here there stands only a 'monument' but no 'democracy,' which has now disappeared. RIP democracy."

KHON KAEN—Student activists in Khon Kaen wrapped a black banner around the city's Democracy Monument on Saturday to condemn the Constitutional Court's annulment of the February 2 election.

Thailand's Constitutional Court judges ruled in a 6-to-3 vote on Friday to nullify the election because of a constitutional clause that requires voting to be held in every part of the country on the same day. Voting was not held in every constituency on February 2 because anti-government protesters

prevented candidates from registering in 28 districts in southern Thailand.

The ruling raises many questions about how the country will resolve the political stalemate that has left it without a fully functioning government for months. The court's decision may also set a troublesome precedent in which entire elections can be voided if protesters succeed at blocking voting in a single district.

Voting in the 28 constituencies that were unable to field candidates on February 2 was expected to take place at a later date, but the court's ruling requires a new election to be held countrywide.

The Election Commission has not announced when the new poll will take place but said it could [more than two months](#) from now.

With a complete legislature even further from being formed, and Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's status on the line as she faces impeachable charges from the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NAAC), Thailand's judiciary branch is emerging as one of the most powerful players in the country's political crisis.

"I think the [Constitutional Court] has trampled on our democracy just to get rid of *this* government," said 18-year-old Chongphithack Namlao, who helped organize Saturday's demonstration. "We cannot exchange the whole democratic system simply to chase away the current government."

Activists took turns speaking over a loudspeaker to a small crowd gathered around the shrouded monument in Khon Kaen.

"We are not Red Shirts or Yellow Shirts," announced a student. "We are dressed in black to say that our democratic system is dying."

A Red Shirt rally in protest of the court's ruling was also planned for Saturday in Khon Kaen, but it was canceled at the last minute, said radio D.J. and Red Shirt leader Bhutdhipong Khanhaengpon.

Mr. Bhutdhipong said that many Red Shirt supporters in Khon Kaen are angry over the election's nullification, but they don't want to cause any additional problems for the already beleaguered caretaker government.

"We are thinking more than we did in 2010 because we don't want to lose anybody on the streets anymore, and if we do anything under this government it might just give them more trouble," said Mr. Bhutdhipong. "For now, we are just waiting. If something else happens, like a coup or an attempt to replace this government with an unelected one, that will be the last straw."

"If the UDD needs them, the people here are ready to join." added Mr. Bhutdhipong, in reference to the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, a Red Shirt political group whose leaders have made increasingly [militant remarks](#) in recent weeks.

In addition to uncertainty over when a fresh poll will be rescheduled, there is concern over how the government will avoid another invalidated election if protesters decide to blockade polls again.

Legal expert and political commentator Verpat Pariyawong expressed worry over the precedent that Friday's court ruling could set.

"The reasoning of the court is paving ways for anyone to have the power to nullify an entire election simply by obstructing candidates from registering in a single district," said Mr. Verpat.

Although the protests in Bangkok have dwindled over the past

month, Suthep Thaugsuban, the leader of the opposition movement, vowed before a crowd of supporters on Thursday to obstruct any attempts to hold a new election before national reforms are implemented.

Anti-government leader Kamol Kitkasitwat, the chairman of Khon Kaen's PDRC chapter, reiterated the necessity of carrying out reforms before a new election is held.

"Everyone needs to accept that we have to reform," said Mr. Kamol. "People in Khon Kaen should watch and listen to what happens in Bangkok. If anything happens that we don't want to see, we are going to have street rallies again."

The Democrat Party, which boycotted the February 2 poll, has not yet said whether it will participate in the rescheduled election.

Khon Kaen Promotes Female Leadership

KHON KAEN— In a run up to International Women's Day today, Khon Kaen hosted a regional event focusing on the role of women in Northeastern Thai society on March 4. The ceremonies, sponsored by government agencies, featured a market with women entrepreneurs, awards for women leaders, and a keynote speech by former senator, Dr. Krasae Chanawongse.



Dr. Krasae's speech emphasized education, the role of Buddhism, and leadership, and it drew on a traditional description of a good woman: "Know how to use words, know how to work, know how to be generous."

Audience members were invited to share their impressions of Dr. Krasae's speech. One woman said to the audience of 500 overwhelmingly women, "The main idea is that giving, and not receiving, will make you a better person."

Those sharing were presented with Dr. Krasae's book, *Success is Reachable*.

Women from Khon Kaen province were recognized for outstanding achievements in 12 themed areas. Among those receiving awards was Ms. Pithayaporne Sukkho, 47, from Chonnabot district who was recognized for efforts toward "environmental care." After encountering health problems with chemical-based dyes, Ms. Pithayaporne developed a system to make organic dyes with leaves and flowers. Her entire community has since adopted the method. "If we don't start now, then there's no one who will," she commented about organic dyes.

Ms. Pithayaporne also expressed that women needed to organize among themselves and not just come together when “there is government funding.” She said, “Being more serious about holding women’s events can change women’s lives.”

This year’s annual event is in its twelfth year. Its organizers wanted to focus on family, community and local government, and to build ways for women to step up, become educated, and get involved in public life.

An entrepreneur selling her woven handicrafts outside the meeting hall, Kannika Unkam, 44, from Khon Kaen was more skeptical. “Selling my products doesn’t really empower me. Even though I own my own business I don’t think I am equal to men.”

Ms. Kannika also questioned the choice of asking a man to give the keynote speech. “The speaker should have been a woman. Today is about women’s power, so a woman should have spoken.” As she had come to the event to sell her crafts, she was unable to attend the keynote or awards ceremony.

She noted that the role of women had changed a lot. Before there were no women leaders, she said, “but today we can see that women have stepped into leadership roles like village headperson.”

In 2004 women represented only 5.6 percent of Tambon Organization Administration (TAO) ministers in the Northeast, while in 2011 that number increased to 12.41 percent.

One attendee, a graduate student working on women’s issues at Khon Kaen University, observed that there was very little in the event about the status of women in the Northeast or the challenges facing them. “I expected or hoped to hear about the current status of women and the direction of a women’s movement,” she said. “But today the goal seemed to be to give awards, compliment women, and to show examples. There was nothing concrete about the role or status of women in

Thailand.”

She said that Dr. Krasae “didn’t talk specifically about women; he just talked about management. We are still under a patriarchy. Men do everything and they don’t believe in women’s ability.”

In Thailand, statistics show that women still lag far behind men in terms of vying for public office. Ranked at 90 in the world for national public offices held by women by the Inter Parliamentary Union, women accounted for 15 percent of the parliament in 2013. In nearby Vietnam and Indonesia, women held 24 and 18 percent of the seats respectively.
