

# Carnavalesque humor, emotional paradoxes, and street protests in Thailand

Diogenes  
2022, Vol. 63(1–2) 76–88  
Copyright © ICPHS 2020  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/0392192120970409  
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



**Janjira Sombatpoonsiri**

Chulalongkorn University, Thailand and the German Institute for Global and Area Studies, Germany

## Abstract

Conventional wisdom has it that street protests are typically driven by rage due to grievances perceived to inflict on a group. This emotive atmosphere can shape protest methods to be vandalistic to the point where armed attacks against targeted opponents are justified. This paper suggests that rage-influenced struggle can be counterproductive as it obstructs a movement from building a coalition broad enough to challenge the ruling elites it opposes. This paper argues that carnivalization of protests can prevent this setback in two directions. First, it potentially transforms protesters' collective emotion from rage to cheerfulness. This effect may lessen a possibility where protesters project violent revenge on those thought to represent the ruling elites. Second, while helping protesters to address sources of their grievances, carnivalesque protests create a "friendly" image that may convince a public audience outside the movement to support its cause. In assessing a political process of carnivalesque protests, this paper bases its analysis on an account of protest actions by Thailand's Red Sunday group emerging after the 2010 crackdown.

## Keywords

Thailand, protest, carnivalesque, emotion

\* \* \*

Paradoxically, those engaging in street politics are explained to be passionate and at the same time rational. From Gustav le Bon's seminal work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1960) to the police crowd control manuals, the crowd and "mob" are depicted to be irrational, angry, hysterical, and thereby prone to anti-state violence.<sup>1</sup> Such a depiction can render state agents a justification to suppress street demonstrators violently—despite their legitimate demands and non-violent characteristics (see, for example, Schweingruber, 2000, Martin, 2007). Meanwhile, social movements and civil resistance scholars contend that taking to the street necessitates a goal formulation, strategic calculation, and resource mobilization. Protests are organized by rational agents of change (Bond, 1994; Burgess, 1994; Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Della Porta and Diani, 1999;

---

## Corresponding author:

Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, and the German Institute for Global and Area Studies, Hamburg, Germany.

Email: [jsombutpoonsiri@gmail.com](mailto:jsombutpoonsiri@gmail.com)

McAdam et al., 1996; Nepstad, 2011; Schock, 2005; Sharp, 1973; Tilly, 1978; Zunes et al., 1999). In the reality of protest activism, things get blurry as both rationality and emotion constitute factors driving people to the street. Protest organizers are likely to emphasize participants' grievances, reinforcing existing resentment so as to emotionally empower their movement. "Injustice frames" are seemingly accompanied by anger (see, for example, Gamson, 1992). Protest repertoires carried out to attract new supporters and sustain the movement feed the atmosphere of street protests with this rage. As a result, an identity of the oppressed is forged in opposition to that of the oppressor, fixating the imagination of popular struggle to the overthrow of a ruling person (Goodwin and Pfaff, 2001; Peterson, 2002).

Through the concept of carnivalesque humor, this paper seeks to explore an alternative emotion to rage generated in street protests. I argue that anger-filled protests can be counterproductive to a movement's political strategy. Rage can influence certain protesters to opt for violent vengeance, and consequently taint the movement's image as "gung-ho." These circumstances are likely to undermine any attempt in building a coalition broader than the movement's existing supporters, thereby precluding a chance for inclusive political change. Thailand's Red Sunday group serves as an example case to understand how this carnivalesque process works.

## Protest movements and carnivalesque humor

Over the past few decades, the carnival-like form of humor—featured by costume parades, street parties and concert, street theatres, ironic banners, symbolic parody, and many more—has been increasingly incorporated into the protest repertoires of social movements. For example, in its anti-transnational corporation campaigns, "Reclaim the Streets" often occupies busy London streets by organizing parties and feasts. The idea is to symbolically take the street back from automobiles, which represent the dominance of transnational corporations (Jordan, 1998; Klein, 2009: 320). The "Absurd Response" group has staged a series of avant-garde street performances in opposing the United States-led war in Iraq. Rather than embracing the sober approach of traditional pacifists, activists dressed in "fluorescent colored gowns, opera-length gloves, and two-foot high Marge Simpson-type wigs." They carried a banner that read "an absurd answer to an absurd war." Rather than chanting "Give Peace a Chance," their chanting contained a sarcastic tone: "We Need Oil! We Need Gas!," "Watch Out, World, We'll Kick Your Ass!" and "We Love BUSH! We Love DICK! All You Peaceniks Make Us SICK!" (Bogad, 2006: 46). Recently, the US-based Occupy Movement paraded through New York's business districts, donning mock costumes of Guy Fawkes and zombies. In another march, participants assumed their role as "billionaires," holding a banner that read "austerity for you, prosperity for us" (Tancos, 2011).

This emergence of carnivalesque protests is related to their political advantages conceived by movement members. Before the formation of organized resistance, carnivalesque humor can serve to lower fear and strengthen morale within the grievance group. "Having fun together" through participation in carnivalesque activities can also facilitate the formation of collective identity as it can bind people together. When conflict between the grievance group and its ruling opponent becomes overt and protest campaigns are launched, this form of humor can function as a recruitment tool. Carnivalesque protest events potentially attract new participants and members. In addition, it is instrumental to uniting existing members, sustaining solidarity within a group. For a wider public, carnivalesque humor constitutes a communication method rendering protest messages entertaining and recognizable (Bogad, 2006; Kenney, 2002; Romanienko, 2007; Shepard, 2005, 2010).

Functions aside, carnivals convey subversive connotations and symbols, enabling the oppressed to imagine, and at times achieve a change of power relationship. Historically, carnivals have been central to many societies. In Europe, the origin of carnivals dates to the Roman Saturnalia, which

later influenced the Feast of Fools (*fête des fous*) in France and the “feast of the ass,” for instance. During the Middle Ages, the Church condemned laughter as originating from the devil, thereby prohibiting unreserved laughter. Nevertheless, jokes and laughter were allowed after Lent (known as “Easter Laughter”) and during Christmas (mostly expressed in joyful songs) (Bakhtin, 1984: 197–277; Zijderfeld, 1982: 65–66). In Latin America, carnivals have been organized that combine Catholic religious processions with indigenous rituals (Harris 2003). There is also a long tradition of carnivals in Hindu society (the Feast of Krishna or “Holi”) and mainland Southeast Asia (Water festival or “Songkran”) (Scott, 1990: 172–182). In Africa, carnivals are merged with weddings, funerals, and the rites after male circumcision (Apte, 1985: 156–160; Douglas, 1984).

In these carnivals, role inversion and temporary transgression of established norms are common. Men dress as women and vice versa. The young can scold the old. People of low caste are permitted to beat up those from the ruling class. Masters serve slaves while slaves are invited to join the banquet of elites. In medieval carnivals, jesters were proclaimed bishops while clerics were allowed to be follies, dancing and hopping through the church (Bakhtin, 1984: 83; Kunzle, 1978: 39–90; Scott, 1990: 173). Typical for these role inversions is the wearing of clothes and masks that exaggerates a social image of particular elite groups. For instance, in some carnivals during Europe’s Middle Ages, pseudo kings and queens were elected from the peasantry (Bakhtin, 1984: 83–84). They deliberately donned clothes turned inside out and hats inscribed with mocking parodies. At times, the mimesis of the powerful personalities took the form of effigies made in a ridiculous fashion (Burke, 1978: 123).

“Free speech” is an additional crucial feature of carnivals, which reflects the popular opposition to the institutional control of the freedom of expression. During medieval carnivals, participants talked in a scatological manner with obscenities, curses, profanities, and swearing. The reciting of sacred texts was infused with parodies (Bakhtin, 1984: 145–195). Another crucial instance that marks ways in which carnivalesque speech overturned the official courtesy of conversing was the expression of oaths and profanities mostly concerned with sacred names: “the body of Christ,” “the blood of Christ,” holy days, saints, and relics. The expression of these oaths was strictly prohibited by the Church and the government. Nevertheless, the market constituted the site where people deliberately uttered these oaths as “the verbal protest” against the official convention (*ibid.*: 189).

Carnivals provide a space for both an open conflict and a dialogue between the antagonists. The free speech in medieval carnivals enabled the subordinates to insult the elites who were immune from criticisms at other times. Numerous accounts note the events in which unpopular rulers, abusive soldiers, corrupt local officials, and priests were cursed by peasants during carnivals. Abusive terms and satirical chants, common in carnivals, were used to maximize the insult of these elites. The scale of verbal abuse could be so extensive that some of the nobles refused to participate in carnivals, fearing that the verbal threats would erupt into physical assaults. Gilmore (1987: 98) explains that carnivals became a channel for the poor to express their accumulated frustration against the rich, “to indict social injustice, as well as to chastise peasant offenders against the moral traditions of the pueblo, its ethics and its norms of honesty.”

The subversive space offered in carnivals is facilitated by processes that encourage the subordinate to imagine their triumph over an oppressive situation. Carnivals provide a metaphor of power-relations inversion (e.g. subjects became rulers). When this metaphor seems to achieve nothing visible, it can nevertheless fulfil the imaginative aspirations of the subordinate: “[Carnivals] do, at least at the level of thought, create an imaginative breathing space in which the normal categories of order and hierarchy are less than completely inevitable” (Scott, 1990: 168; see also Docker, 1994: 168–197). In the carnivalesque space, hierarchy is dismissed, gender role is reversed, and taboo violation is allowed. Hence, carnivals at least serve to remind us of the possibility of a change of status quo when the reality of oppression seems to occupy our perceptions. The opportunity for

“carnavalesque humor” generates a scenario wherein a change of power relations can be contemplated, however fleetingly, but perhaps realized in time to come.

The subversive potential of carnivalesque humor is due to its creation of open space facilitating deconstructed realities and decentralized speech. Medieval carnivals did not only postulate the destruction of officialdom, but they also generated new perspectives. This is why the image of the lower parts of the human body, such as the belly and buttocks, are central to the carnivalesque image. They connote the continuum between releasing wastes and producing energy, between death and birth, and between ending and renewal (Bakhtin, 1984: 303–436). The regenerative image of carnivals provides the metaphor of constant change. The end of something always marks the beginning of something else. From this viewpoint, multiple possibilities can always emerge. The carnivalesque world offers a scenario where alternative realities to the seemingly fixed present one may just be possible (Handelman, 1981; Le Goff, 1997).

The carnivalesque emotion embodies this sense of openness. Carnivals generate the joyfulness of doing things and laughing together. This inclusiveness necessitates the expansion of imaginative horizons, which implies liberation from a fixed outlook toward the present reality and the persons involved. If that fixed reality is an acute conflict separating friends from enemies, carnivalesque events would invite these antagonists to laugh together, instead of laughing at each other. However, this does not lead to a dismissal of justice or naive forgetting of grievances (Nussbaum, 2013: 257–313). When street protests demanding justice are infused with carnivalesque emotion, reinterpretation of the situation emerges. Social injustice is systemic, rather than personal. Accordingly, an ostensibly oppressor may be victimized by this unjust system, and thereby should be included in the struggle.

## The Thai Red Sunday’s carnivalesque protests

For a decade, Thailand has been trapped in the conflict polarizing camps of different political aspirations. With its central battlefield in Bangkok and resources mobilized from the provinces, the conflict pitted the established middle class in Bangkok and aristocratic-military networks (dubbed “Yellow Shirt”) against rising middle class in the rural and cronies of politicians (or loosely defined as “Red Shirt”). This house divided has manifested in the tit-for-tat overthrow of governments by supporters of each political camp (Chiangsaen, 2010; Tejapira, 2006; Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011; Saxer, 2014). Mass demonstrations orchestrated by “Yellow Shirt” in 2005 led to military coup in 2006 ended the era of elected Thaksin’s *Thai Rak Thai* government. When a new government backed by Thaksin was elected in 2008, “Yellow Shirt” protesters took to the street, seizing the Government House and international airports. These highly disruptive actions resulted in influencing a parliamentary power shuffle which allowed the Democrat Party—a “Yellow Shirt” ally—to form a new government, pushing Thaksin’s politicians to the parliamentary periphery.

The 2008 political maneuver deepened Red Shirts’ perception of “injustice” Yellow Shirts’ leadership inflicted on them. In 2009 through to 2010, Red Shirts staged a series of protests generally demanding the restoration of electoral democracy. According to the think tank Strategic Nonviolence, 60% of Red Shirts’ protest repertoires were featured by nonviolent rallies, symbolic demonstrations (e.g. blood pouring), and non-cooperation (TRF, 2011: 8). Nevertheless, as protests prolonged, they began to be vandalistic, showing signs of militarization. For instance, Major General Khattiya Sawasdipol, during his speech in January 2010, proposed that the Red Shirts’ struggle consist of three pillars: political party, the masses, and the force. Other proposals included General Panlop Pinmanee’s suggestion to establish the National Army for Democracy—though this proposal was later dismissed as being merely a rumor (TRTC, 2011: 67). Despite leading activists’ attempt to remain nonviolent, there were incidents where protesters responded to the

authorities with stone and bottle throwing, arson, and the use of explosive devices allegedly by a clandestine *agent* (Human Rights Watch, 2011, TRTC, 2011). This created the atmosphere of fear and resentment among the urban population, which tends to support the Yellow camp. They had even more reason to associate Red Shirts with “threat” and to justify a military crackdown on Red Shirt protesters. And they did. After another failed “truce” in May 2010, the army moved to clamp down on Red Shirt, causing some 90 deaths of Red Shirts, 10 deaths of officers, and nearly 2000 injuries (Human Rights Watch, 2011; TRF, 2011; TRCT, 2011).<sup>2</sup>

Many feared that the May crackdown could prompt Red Shirts to form an armed guerrilla movement (Sidhisamarn, 2010, see also Cunningham and Beaulieu, 2009, Cederman et al., 2013).<sup>10</sup> This tendency was, however, reversed. Among other factors such as the UDD leaders’ electoral victory in 2011, Red Sunday’s playful nonviolent protests contributed to precluding Red Shirts’ possible armed insurgency. And this potentially allowed conflict parties to express resentment and defiance while creating room for nonviolent possibilities for the ongoing conflict.

“Red Sunday” was a loose network of Red Shirt veterans whose missions were to carry out nonviolent protests despite the Emergency Decree imposed after the 2010 clampdown. Years of struggle enabled Red Shirts to develop themselves from being “politically indifferent” mobs to becoming active participants in the 2010 uprising. Somsak Jiamthirasakul, a prominent Thai historian, argues that prior to the violent suppression in 2009, Red Shirts joined the demonstrations, and yet they “failed to actually participate in them” (Chiangsaen, 2010). The crackdown to a large extent altered this pattern. By early 2010, many organized themselves as community-oriented learning groups conducive to successful mass mobilization during the April–May 2010 demonstrations in Bangkok (Thabchumpon and McCargo, 2011: 1009–1014). The widespread feeling of “being oppressed” by then government consolidated their solidarity, urging them to demand justice collectively. This atmosphere of despair convinced many to speculate Red Shirts’ possible adoption of armed tactics. However, there remained a belief that the majority of Red Shirts were prone to the use of nonviolence. Red Sunday emerged to amplify this tendency. For instance, Sombat Boon-ngamanong, Red Sunday’s leading activist, pointed out that his aim was to show other Red Shirt activists unarmed alternatives during struggle against oppression (personal communication).

Constrained rights to freedom of expression and self-censorship clouded the atmosphere of post-2010 clampdown. Under the draconian law, hundreds of UDD activists were detained while many went hiding. Public gathering of more than five citizens was strictly prohibited (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The authorities anticipated that this policy could set the scene for emasculating the UDD. In other words, whereas the course for Red Shirts’ resurgence of street struggle was visible, the draconian laws could work to control mass mobilization. This atmosphere shaped the protest actions by Red Sunday to overcome the challenge of reclaiming a political space for Red Shirts—thereby bringing the movement back to life—while preventing a risk of protest crackdown (personal communication).

Sombat’s leadership and his unique knowledge in the art of theatre performance, marketing techniques, and information technology influenced Red Sunday’s playful approach to street protests. Sombat has engaged in anti-coup activities that were later merged with the Red Shirts’ demonstrations. As a practitioner of nonviolent resistance, Sombat believes that nonviolence could constitute a more effective tool for the UDD than the employment of armed tactics. “This is a political battle necessitating political victory. Thus, violent means is not an option,” Sombat explains (personal communication). However, he views that existing conception of protest activism lacks creativity, and this accounts for limited nonviolent alternatives. An assumption is that nonviolent options are exhausted. Thus, shifting to using arms is justified. His experience in theatre performance allowed him to incorporate elements of carnivals into renewed activities of Red Shirts. Protest actions with these elements were projected to be fun for participants, and simultaneously attractive enough

to get media coverage. In this light, Sombat relied on marketing texts he has drawn to over the years. They rendered him ideas about how to make serious social campaigns more interesting and relevant to the urban middle class and the younger generation. In addition, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube became instrumental for publicizing his campaigns and mobilizing advocates (personal communication).<sup>3</sup>

Staged virtually every Sunday between late May 2010 and June 2011, Red Sunday activities were characteristically playful echoing a satirical undertone. Networks of Red Sunday such as Prakaifai, Tonkla Institute, We Change, and Iskra Drama also improvised their own skits corresponding with Red Sunday's. The ludic protests can be categorized into three types (which might manifest all together in one protest action): resistance through everyday life practice or "protest without protesting," commemoration and satirical performance, and festivals.

### *Resistance through everyday life practice: "protest without protesting"*

Post-crackdown atmosphere prompted the onset of Red Sunday actions to fuse everyday life activities (such as dining, donning certain outfit, shopping, and exercising) with political protests. The reason was to protest without protesting. That is, the protest did not occur on the street, but rather in everyday life space. This unusual repertoire would help participants to get away from the arrest. In late May 2010, the group named "Little Red Riding Hood" gathered at the Imperial World Department Store—where the old Red Shirt's TV station aired its programs—and ate "red [brown] rice" together. This was a symbolic subversion of the Decree. It also confused the authorities who were not sure if this kind of action could be deemed unlawful.<sup>4</sup> Few days after, Sombat encouraged the UDD veterans to collectively wear red T-shirts, which marked the launching of "Red Sunday" campaign.<sup>5</sup> He viewed that although the Decree could curb people's freedom of expression, people would assume that violation of the right to body, to wear what one wants, is unacceptable. Wearing red shirts—amidst the fear to being associated with Red Shirts—symbolized a form of resistance against the draconian law (personal communication).

A breakthrough of Red Sunday's activities was the aerobic dance at Bangkok's biggest public park on 25 July. Around 400 participants wore their red sport outfit together with ghost makeup (to remind the public of those killed in the 2010 crackdown). As with other park visitors, they gathered at the public park for a popular dance sport. But theirs was unusual. The trainer (who was actually a Red Shirt activist) led them to dance to Red Shirt songs and move in different silly steps, which at some point captured the attention of passers-by. The gig ended with Sombat's pantomime. He concluded his show by holding the self-styled banner reading "The only way to prohibit my speech is to stop me from breathing."<sup>6</sup>

Similar action included Red Shirt's jogging at the Santipab public park in early August. The message conveyed to the public was to promote healthy Red Shirts both in literal and political sense. Sombat announced that the exercise—which could garner approximately 300 participants—was necessary because this struggle would be prolonged. Hence, Red Shirts as individual and as movement should stay fit for the combat" in pursuit of justice.<sup>7</sup>

The logic of protest without protesting, moreover, manifested in actions such as "The Picnic of Red [brown] Rice," "Shopping for the Nation," "Dining at McDonald's," and "Cycling on Sunday." While participants in the first action reached around 1000 at its peak, the second action conveyed a strong symbolic message. Red Shirts gathered at the Imperial World Department Store where their TV station was once located. Instead of staging rallies or occupying the building as one could expect, these protesters turned themselves into shoppers. Through the process of walking and shopping, Red Shirts re-appropriated the political space once belonging to them.<sup>8</sup>

### *Commemoration and satirical performance*

Street performance was an integral method that Red Shirts employed to remind the public of the 2010 clampdown. It was an anti-public amnesia tactic. Various student groups performed the scenes allusive to the power that be allegedly masterminding the protest suppression.<sup>9</sup> They had actually coined the phrase “there were dead people here” or “I saw dead people here” that later on inspired several street performances some of which emphasized absurdity of army intervention in politics. Prominent was the prank staged on 11 July in which Sombat led around 500 Red Shirt supporters to paint their bodies and faces in red. They lay down on Ratchprasong street, where the May crackdown took place, as if they were murdered. The protesters held the banner that read “there were dead people here.” This form of action became popular and was repeated by numerous anti-government groups.<sup>10</sup> Afterwards, Sombat tied a piece of red cloth around the placard of the Ratchprasong street sign. He recalled that the security forces nervously surrounded him, getting ready to respond to the act of breaching the Decree. However, by doing that, the authorities appeared absurd as onlookers could see these stern-looking security officers were rounding up just a piece of red cloth they perceived as a threat of national security (personal communication).

The commemorative action of “There were Dead People Here” was taken a step further when the Prakaifai group, together with other student networks, brilliantly staged the skit “Haunting the authorities.” Approximately 10 students got dressed in different styles of ghost costumes gathering at the monorail stations close to the sites of 2010 crackdown. They took a ride, mingled with passengers, and even greeted military personnel stationing at checkpoints. Rather than uttering a word, these students showed the placard “Cursed 19<sup>th</sup> [September 2009].” Their aim was to demonstrate the role of the army in undermining Thai democratization (thereby pointing out the coup date), relating this to the April–May crackdown in order to prevent forced amnesia of the atrocities.<sup>11</sup>

In a similar vein, on 19 September, Red Sunday group organized a commemoration which comprised the action “Writing Letters to the Sky.” Hundreds of Red Shirts assembled at the Ratchaprasong intersection on the memorial of the coup and fourth month anniversary of the latest crackdown. There were no rallies or public speeches being carried out. Instead, Sombat invited the participants to “write a letter to the sky.” This was a symbolic defiance. Its implication can be traced back to a Red Shirt leader’s speech associating followers of Red Shirt movement with commoners analogical to the “soil.” In comparison, the ruling elites symbolized the “sky.” The letters were attached to balloons that were released to the sky.<sup>12</sup> Reportedly, the messages contained a number of provocative statements criticizing the ruling elites. Stationing at the protest site, the authorities nervously asked Sombat for reviewing the letter contents before drifting the balloons. He recollected, “I told them the message was complete since we announced the title of the action ‘Writing Letters to the Sky’ basically because it implied our awareness of the power that be wanting to destabilize democracy” (personal communication).<sup>13</sup>

Satirical criticism was at times incorporated in street performance as a response to the authorities’ repression and the ruling elites’ rhetoric of reconciliation. An example was Sombat’s reaction to local police in Chiang Rai province. They had accused a high school student holding the sign “There were dead people here” of breaching the Emergency Decree. During his Red Sunday tour there, Sombat donned a student uniform imitating the act of the accused student. But instead of simply showing the placard, he tied a piece of red cloth in city center and announced that the student had the right to freedom of expression and should not have been detained because of his exercise of this right. Later, Sombat and his crew staged the street performance called “There were dead people here” by lying down on a main road as if they were shot dead. Other Red Shirts pointed at them, yelling “These are real dead people!”<sup>14</sup>

Red Sunday-style protests inspired various student and activist groups to infuse their activism with satire. One of them was “Prongdong [reconciliation] Rangers,” a pseudonym of pro-democracy student networks that juxtaposed a Thai term for reconciliation with Japanese manga. When Ban Ki-moon, the secretariat to the United Nations, visited Thailand, five activists staged a dance show in front of the UN headquarters. They wore the masks representing the PM, Interior Minister, other leading commissioners of reforms and reconciliation commissions, and Ban Ki-moon himself. Apart from the silly, cheeky dance to the Japanese superhero soundtrack, these activists held a basket of “*kanom chine*,” the Thai term for rice noodle. But they looked sad because there was no “*nam ya*” or the noodle sauce typically taken with this particular rice noodle. The skit contained a pun referring to a Thai idiom “*Mai mee nam ya*,” which literally means the noodle sauce is missing, but implies “incompetence” of a person or an institution. The performance conveyed this implication to the ruling elites, the appointed commissioners and the UN secretariat perceived to fail in protecting human rights.<sup>15</sup>

### Festivals

Organizing festivals—mostly in the period of 2010’s final months until and September 2011 (briefly after the electoral victory of Pheu Thai Party affiliated with the Red Shirt camp)—marked the increase in the audience of Red Sunday campaigns, and in turn their enhanced confidence in returning to protest activism. Themes of these festivals were usually based on existing festivals in Thai calendar. But in symbolically subverting the official rhetoric, organizers tended to twist the actual titles to correspond with their political agenda. For instance, the Chiang Mai Red Shirts arranged a Loi Krathong (Floating Decoration) festival in mid-November 2010. But theirs was an extraordinary one, entitled “Floating Decoration to Oust Dictatorship.” The main activity was to collect donations of winter clothes for the northernmost villagers who had encountered the piercing cold. The organizers pointed out that donations would go to those who were still alive (in reference to the deaths of the May incident), but were about to die (มอบให้อุ่นให้กับคนที่ยังไม่ตาย แต่กำลังจะหนาวตาย).<sup>16</sup>

On the National Children’s Day in January 2011, Red Shirts in many parts of Thailand prepared festivals for kids, hoping to cultivate anti-dictatorship culture for the youngsters. At the Bangkok 14<sup>th</sup> October Memorial, the event entitled “Our kids endorse democracy, and shall not mingle with soldiers” was organized. The idea was to change the usual ritual of National Children’s Day in which the army would allow children’s visit to their bases in part to glorify military heroism. By turning around this ritual, the event served to challenge military glorification which largely legitimized the army’s intervention in democratic rule.<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, the Chiang Mai branch of Red Sunday put together a Children’s Day festival. Instead of taking children to visit an army base out of military admiration, activities that would educate them about idea of human rights and democracy were put in place. The organizers announced that in 2011, children would not play with soldiers, climb on a tank, or help sustain war-mongering policies.<sup>18</sup>

On part of the Bangkok Red Sunday group, festivals helped testify to the general public the increase in its popularity. On 6 December, Sombat went ahead with his own talk show “Asking for it. Being behind bars” (จอน นอน ลุก). Around 1500 tickets were sold out. Sombat aimed for this talk show to constitute “a site for a constructive engagement in politics, with humor and laughter, so as to tone down tensions and lessen possibilities of violent confrontation on the street” (Voice TV, 2010).<sup>19</sup> Despite mockery in light of criticizing the army and the government, Sombat’s jokes were considered quite humanizing and at times self-deprecatory. For instance, he told his audience the rumor in which “Red Shirts were believed to dislike Hollywood films. Guess why? Because people thought we don’t like Phanthamit” (the Thai short name of the yellow shirted People’s Alliance for Democracy; it is also the name of a popular company for foreign language movie dubbing).



In another gag, he mimicked the statement by coup generals, changing their original coup title from “The revolutionary commission for democracy under constitutional monarchy” (คณะกรรมการปฏิวัติเพื่อการปกครองในระบอบประชาธิปไตยอันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุข) to “The commission to refuse any form of democratic rule” (คณะกรรมการปฏิเสธการปกครอง ระบอบประชาธิปไตย).<sup>20</sup>

“Horizontal Leadership Expo” was a final festival that saw the conclusion of Red Sunday’s protest campaigns. On 17 September 2011, several anti-coup groups such as Red Sunday, Student Social Networks for Democracy, Tonkla Institute, Prakaifai group, and Turn Left Organization organized an exposition that would serve as a platform for growing collaboration among civic groups and concerned citizens. This festival in many ways denoted a changing strategy of Red Sunday, from being a protest-based group to being community-building network (แกนนอน). Sombat encouraged civic groups across different provinces to move beyond simply opposing the person in power. He viewed democracy as more crucial. The task of แกนนอน is to create networks of education for grassroots for their active engagement in politics.<sup>21</sup>

### Red Sunday’s carnivalesque protests and their emotive effects

Red Sunday’s protests bear crucial carnivalesque characteristics, which are role inversion, creation of imaginative space for defiance, and jocular undertone. Unlike medieval carnivals where role inversions were related to the existing hierarchical social order, Red Sunday activists often reproduced the image of the oppressed—namely those dying at the hands of the authorities in 2010. The aim was to register this horrendous incident in the Thai public memory. Accordingly, this pattern of role exchange did not take place between the powerful and the subordinated (such as servants become masters, and vice versa). Rather, it was the living taking the role as the dead so as to sustain the sense of solidarity with them, and at the same time to remind their society of injustice inflicted on the dead. At times, activists moved beyond the subject of death to mock the power that be. In the action “Prongdong Rangers,” they donned clothes and masks to resemble masterminds of the 2010 crackdown. But instead of being sober, they danced to a comical song and participated in a symbolic act subverting authority of the impersonated. Like “effigy” central to carnivals, the activists used their bodies as “living effigies” to embody and simultaneously ridicule the ruling persons they wore outfit and masks to imitate.

Striking were numerous carnivalesque actions that carved out an imaginative space for defiance. The imposed draconian laws hindered any protest movements to emerge after the 2010 crackdown. Red Sunday group avoided the government’s potential repression, while keeping the defiant spirit of its supporters through the creation of “protest without protesting” scheme. Everyday acts such as wearing T-shirts, walking, jogging, cycling, shopping, and aerobic dancing (at least for Bangkok population) were turned into protest actions. Hence, protest sites were no longer the street, but rather the loci where these everyday acts are normally undertaken; e.g. on one’s body, in public park, restaurant, and shopping mall. Carnivalesque protests characteristically construct “sub-universes,” inviting their participants to escape the paramount reality—that is, the fixed belief in the congruence between ideas and appearance—and join these universes (Berger, 1997). In this sense, Red Sunday’s protest sites were imagined anew, while their protest methods became “out of ordinary.” This innovation could help protesters overcome an imaginative blockade. On the one hand, this blockade is instigated by the draconian laws that curbed “conventional” protests. On the other, it is caused by the old school-style of protest repertoires that associate the level of defiance with the large number of people taking to the street. Defiance, according to Red Sunday’s breakthrough, now implies the people’s will to imagine multiple ways of creative struggle.

“The protest without protesting” repertoires and festivals generated the atmosphere of fun and togetherness. Rarely anyone would have thought of aerobic dance as a form of demonstration.

Rather, it is a fun sport—you dance and get fit. However, when aerobic dance was incorporated into a Red Sunday's political protest, its undertone of having fun together could be felt. Protesters were asked to dance to musical beat, rather than chanting or marching. If typical moves got boring, activists who led the activity invited participants for a silly dance. Dancing was thus accompanied with laughing. In a similar vein, although festivals such as Loi Krathong and Children's Day were turned into a serious protest event, it was also for some fun of participants. Slightly different was the talk show "Asking for it. Being behind Bar," which was deliberately designed to get Red Shirts together for some laugh. At times, the jokes targeted Red Shirt's opponent. But some of them were self-mockery. These different natures of laughter reflect a carnivalesque mood which encourages subversion, and simultaneously invites self-criticism.

These carnivalesque characteristics shown in Red Sunday's activities have an impact on protest dynamics in three directions. First, the 2010 clampdown generated fear and resentment. While the latter emotion urged Red Shirts to take to the street demanding justice and accountability, the former could hinder this decision-making. For those who did not succumb to fear, the desire to retaliate violently was detected. But such a desire would be tactically suicidal because it would draw military responses from the government backed by the army. And Red Shirts as well as Thai society might not be able to afford the high political cost of an all-out guerrilla warfare (Tejapira, 2010). This is an emotive dilemma intertwined with Red Shirt movement's strategic challenges. Red Sunday's carnivalesque protests helped overcome certain aspects of this dilemma. Through the creation of imaginative space for defiance, Red Sunday proposed a platform for Red Shirts to express their resentment despite fear of imminent repression. Because of absurd and at times jocular features of the activities, fun displaced rage in this emotive space. Vandalism was, as a result, irrelevant.

Second, Red Sunday's carnivalesque protests helped defuse the image of "Red Threat." Sporadic vandalism and alleged armed attacks during the 2009–10 protests contributed to the construction of Red Shirts' image as a threat to national security.<sup>22</sup> This resulted in excluding potential sympathizers of their causes, and precluded a possibility for the movement to build an inclusive coalition deemed necessary for a struggle for justice and democracy. Existing literature in civil resistance emphasize the importance of "nonviolent discipline" (i.e. protesters' commitment to the use of nonviolence throughout their struggle) in winning support from divergent groups upholding the regime's legitimacy, especially security forces. And this is a decisive factor for a movement's success (Burrowes, 1996: 235–238; Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011: 57–58; Sharp, 1973: 594–635, 2005: 390–394). Consolidating nonviolent discipline requires subversive repertoires that avoid inciting participants' hostility, which can translate into physical threats against their opponent. In this sense, protest tactics shape certain collective emotion that can undermine or enhance a movement's chance to achieve its stated goals. Red Sunday's awareness of this dynamic was shown in its leading activists' statement that nonviolent struggle was the only option. And many activities were deliberately engineered to resonate with lifestyle of Bangkok population to encourage a shift in urbanites' perception toward Red Shirts. It may be difficult to assess to what extent Red Sunday group could succeed in this strategy of winning the hearts and minds. But at least they showed the collective will to make use of carnivalesque characteristics to dissociate the movement's image from threat.

Lastly, Red Sunday's activities demonstrated the potential of carnivalesque protests in transcending several paradoxes arising from this Thailand's decade-long conflict. For instance, the conflict has polarized the ruling elites whose goal to sustain their power is almost uncompromising. At the same time, people yearning for different kinds of polity are drawn to political programs proposed by elites of these two political camps. For Red Shirts, the key motivation is inseparable from the sense of injustice felt due to deep-rooted income disparity and existing dominance of the establishment preventing the rising rural middle-class to have a "fair share" (Hewison, 2015). In

this quest for justice, they have voiced their resentment with anger. Meanwhile, the ruling elites have viewed this popular demand as a sign of national disunity, and thereby call upon national “reconciliation.” An additional paradox lies between rebelliousness and apathy. When clamped down on in 2010, many Red Shirts sensed further grievances being inflicted on them and pushed for further resistance of the establishment. Meanwhile, the atmosphere of despair and apathy was ubiquitous convincing some protesters that compliance might be a wise option.

Red Sunday’s carnivalesque activities provided an escape from some of these emotive dead-end. They offered an insight as to how justice could be pursued through street protests in a cheerful manner. While participants are encouraged to remember grievances, they are asked to envision a future of change. This may help abate the level of collective obsession with antagonistic past. Moreover, carnivalesque activities showed the path to a constructive dialogue where speech defying the powerful opponent is welcome, but accepting differences is also reinforced. Conflicts are emotionally charged but not necessarily bitter. Carnivalesque engagement in a conflict constitutes an alternative emotion when one is trapped in conflict-induced emotional paradoxes.

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrated the way in which characteristics of carnivals are incorporated in a movement’s protest repertoires, and how they affect an emotive outcome of that movement’s campaign. The case in point was Thailand’s Red Sunday. After the 2010 crackdown, fear and resentment among Red Shirts were prevalent, and became counterproductive for the movement to continue pursuing its objective. Red Sunday’s leadership designed several carnivalesque protests to overcome this atmosphere of fear and rage, while disarming Red Shirts. This enabled a non-threatening portrait of the movement, which in turn helped invalidate any call for the elimination of “Red Threat.” Finally, Red Sunday’s carnivalesque actions generated an alternative emotion that enabled protesters to overcome certain emotive paradoxes emerging due to the conflict polarizing Thai society.

## Notes

1. See the U.S. Army SEA-DOC Academic Notebook (1972) and the Thai Royal Police Korakot 52 Plan (2009).
2. In 2013–14, the Yellow Shirts staged the nationwide demonstration to bring down an elected government that was believed to represent Thaksin and his agendas. The protests concluded when the army stepped in and installed a military rule (May 2014).
3. See also ‘Mirror.or.th ภาพสะท้อนงานจิตอาสาผ่านโลกอินเทอร์เน็ตของสมมติ บุญ งามอนงค์’, *Sarakadee*, Oct 2009.
4. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/05/29669](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/05/29669)
5. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/05/29773](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/05/29773)
6. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/07/30446](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/07/30446)
7. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/08/30625](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/08/30625)
8. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/09/31064](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/09/31064)
9. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/07/30202](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/07/30202)
10. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/07/30289](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/07/30289)
11. [www.prachatai.com/journal/2010/09/31066](http://www.prachatai.com/journal/2010/09/31066)
12. When the crowd seemed to be out of control, Sombat called off the demonstration. He asked the demonstrators to avoid obstructing the traffic as that would further taint the image of Red Shirts; see [m.matichon.co.th/readnews.php?newsid=1284884248&grpId=00&catid=no](http://m.matichon.co.th/readnews.php?newsid=1284884248&grpId=00&catid=no).
13. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/09/31153](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/09/31153)
14. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/08/30616](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/08/30616)
15. [www.prachatai.com/journal/2010/10/31660](http://www.prachatai.com/journal/2010/10/31660)

16. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/11/31898](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/11/31898)
17. [www.prachatai.com/journal/2011/01/32581](http://www.prachatai.com/journal/2011/01/32581)
18. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2011/01/32579](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2011/01/32579)
19. Additional information about this show can be found in the archives of Voice TV (archive.voicetv.co.th).
20. [www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/12/32188](http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2010/12/32188)
21. “บ.ก.ลายจุด” จัด “ถนนอนเอิร์ชไป” เพิ่มคุณภาพเสื้อแดง เน้นสื่อสารกับคนชั้นกลาง มากขึ้น’, *Matichon*, 17 Sep 2011.
22. Notably, this image was a result of official construction as much as extreme stances of Red Shirts’ hawkish wing.

## References

- Apte ML (1985) *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bakhtin M (1984) *Rabelais and His World* (trans. Helene Iswolsky). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Berger PL (1997) *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Bogard LM (2006) Tactical carnival. Social movements, demonstrations, and dialogical performance. In: Cohen-Cruz J and Schutzman M (eds) *A Boal Companion*. London: Routledge, 46–58.
- Bond D (1994) Nonviolent action and the diffusion of power. In: Wehr P, Burgess H and Burgess G (eds) *Justice without Violence*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 59–80.
- Burke P (1994) *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Burrowes R (1996) *The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Cederman L-E, Gleditsch KS and Buhaug H (2013) *Inequality, Grievances, and Civil War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chenoweth E and Stephan MJ (2011) *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Chiangsaen U (2010) กำเนิด “เสื้อแดง” ในฐานะขบวนการได้กลับ. *ฟ้าเดียวกัน* 9(3): 90–106.
- Cunningham KG and Beaulieu E (2010) Dissent, repression, and inconsistency. In: Chenoweth E and Lawrence A (eds) *Rethinking Violence: States and Non-State Actors in Conflict*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 173–196.
- Della Porta D and Diani M (1999) *Social Movements: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Docker J (1994) *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Douglas M (1984) Jokes. In: Douglas M (ed.), *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*. London: Routledge, 90–114.
- Gilmore D (1987) *Aggression and Community: Paradoxes of Andalusian Culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Goodwin J and Pfaff S (2001) Emotion work in high-risk social movements: managing fear in the U.S. and East German civil rights movement. In: Goodwin J, Jasper JM and Polletta F (eds) *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 282–302.
- Handelman D (1981) The ritual-clown: attributes and affinities. *Anthropos* 76: 321–370.
- Harris M (2003) *Carnival and Other Christian Festivals: Folk Theology and Folk Performance*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Hewison K (2015) Inequality and politics in Thailand. *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 17, Available at: [kyotoreview.org/issue-17/inequality-and-politics-in-thailand-2](http://kyotoreview.org/issue-17/inequality-and-politics-in-thailand-2).
- Human Rights Watch (2011) *Descent into Chaos: Thailand’s 2010 Red Shirt Protests and the Government Crackdown*. Available at: [hrw.org/report/2011/05/03/descent-chaos/thailands-2010-red-shirt-protests-and-government-crackdown](http://hrw.org/report/2011/05/03/descent-chaos/thailands-2010-red-shirt-protests-and-government-crackdown)
- Jasper JM (1998) The emotions of protest: affective and reactive emotions in and around social movements. *Sociological Forum* 13(3): 397–424.
- Jordan J (1998) The art of necessity: the subversive imagination of anti-road protest and reclaim the streets. In: McKay G (ed.), *DIY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain*. London & New York: Verso, 129–151.

- Kennedy P (2002) *Carnival of Revolution*. Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press.
- Klein N (2009) *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs*. New York: Picador.
- Kunzle D (1978) *World Upside Down: The Iconography of a European Broadsheet Type*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Le Bon G (1960) *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* [1895]. New York: Viking Press.
- Le Goff J (1997) Laughter in the middle ages. In: Bremmer J and Roodenburg H (eds) *A Cultural History of Humor: From Antiquity to the Present Day*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 40–53.
- Martin B (2007) *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- McAdam D, McCarthy J and Zald M (eds) (1996) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nepstad SE (2011) *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum MC (2013) *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Panpong W (2010) ผู้ก่อการแดงหวานชื่น. *October Magazine*, October 9: 123–157.
- Peterson R (2002) *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Romanienko LA (2004) Antagonism, absurdity, and the avant-garde. In: Bos D and 't Hart M (eds) *Humour and Social Protest*. New York: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 133–152.
- Saxer M (2014) *In the Vertigo of Change: How to Resolve Thailand's Transformation Crisis*. Bangkok: OpenWorlds.
- Scheff TJ (1984) The Taboo on coarse emotions. *Review of Personality and Social Psychology* 5: 146–169.
- Schock K (2005) *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Schweingruber D (2000) Mob sociology and escalated force: sociology's contribution in repressive police tactics. *The Sociological Quarterly* 41(3): 371–389.
- Scott JC (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sharp G (1973) *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Boston, MA: Porter Sargent.
- Sharp G (2005) *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Practice and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Potential*. Boston: Porter Sargent.
- Shepard BH (2005) 'The use of joyfulness as a community organizing strategy. *Peace & Change* 30(4): 435–468.
- Shepard BH (2010) *Queer Political Performance and Protest: Play, Pleasure and Social Movements*. New York: Routledge.
- Sidhisamarn K (2010) ความรุนแรง และการต่อสู้เชิงสัญลักษณ์. *Manager Online* October 9, Available at: [www.manager.co.th/daily/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9530000141986](http://www.manager.co.th/daily/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9530000141986).
- Tancons C (2011) Occupy wall street: carnival against the capital? Carnavalesque as protest sensibility. *e-flux* #30, Available at: [www.e-flux.com/journal/30/68148/occupy-wall-street-carnival-against-capital-carnavalesque-as-protest-sensibility](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/30/68148/occupy-wall-street-carnival-against-capital-carnavalesque-as-protest-sensibility).
- Tejapira K (2006) Toppling Thaksin. *The New Left Review* 39: 5–37.
- Tejapira K (2010) ทิศทางการเปลี่ยนแปลงการเมืองไทย: ก่อนและหลังมหา-พฤษภาอำมหิต. In: Sonthisamphan K (ed.), *Red Why: แดงทำไม: สังคมไทย ปัญหา และการมาของคนเสื้อแดง*. Bangkok: Openbooks, 268–287.
- Thabchumpon N and McCargo D (2011) Urbanized villagers in the 2010 Thai Redshirt protests: not just poor farmers?. *Asian Survey* 6(51): 993–1018.
- Tilly C (1978) *From Mobilization to Revolution*. New York: Random House.
- TRCT (2011) รายงานฉบับสมบูรณ์ คณะกรรมการอิสระตรวจสอบและค้นหาความจริงเพื่อการปรองดองแห่งชาติ (คอป.) กรกฎาคม 2553 – กรกฎาคม 2555. Bangkok: Office of the Prime Minister.
- TRF (2011) โครงการยุทธศาสตร์สันติวิธีสำหรับสังคมไทยในศตวรรษที่ 21. Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund.
- Turner V (1986) *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Zijderveld AC (1982) *Reality in a Looking-Glass: Rationality through an Analysis of Traditional Folly*. London: Routledge.
- Zunes S, Asher SB and Kurtz L (eds) (1999) *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.