

บทความที่ :
Article : 20



Dao Din Student Activists: From Hope to Victims under the Thai Society of Darkness

ดาวดิน : จากความหวังสู่เหยื่อกับความมืดบอด
ในอนาคตของสังคมไทย

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Abstract

The Dao Din group is a gathering of students from the Faculty of Law, Khon Kaen University, a leading university in the northeast of Thailand. The Dao Din group has been one of the most prominent student movements to have emerged in the past four decades since the bloody massacre of 6th October, 1976. The group of students is a movement which gathers to oppose and protest against different capitalist-run projects that have had an impact upon the environment since 2009. The students have become heroes in some parts of Thai society and receive support from various groups, especially both the conservative middle class and the liberal middle class. Some of whom regard the students as role models for Thai youth, mainly the conservative middle class. As a result, the Dao Din group received numerous awards between 2011-2013. However, the Dao Din group opposed the military coup d'état of 2014 and the subsequent military junta. Under the military dictatorship regime (2014-present), security officials have hunted, insulted, arrested, and jailed members of the group many times amidst silence from most of the conservative middle class. Therefore, this article posits the question of why the Dao Din group, which was once the hero and hope of Thai society, has become a political victim in only a few years. The study methods used are the analysis of documentaries and news articles. The author argues that Thailand's conservative middle class previously demonstrated a positive perception of the Dao Din group precisely because that group had earlier opposed policies of the elected Yingluck Shinawatra government, which many of the conservative middle class already despised. However, once

the group began to protest against the anti-Yingluck military government, then the conservative middle class turned to harshly criticize the Dao Din group. So, it can be concluded that the Thai conservative middle class tends to put its partisan interests ahead of a civil society group which has been critical of elected as well as military administrations. This has led the conservative middle class to support the demolition of Thai democracy. Such a Thai middle class characteristic not only poses a strong bulwark for the perpetuation of military rule but also destroys a civil society group composed of young people who should be the future hope of the nation rather than be cast into the darkness of Thai society.

Keywords: Dao Din Student Activists; Thai Politics; Human Rights’
Violations

บทคัดย่อ

กลุ่มดาวดินเกิดจากการรวมตัวของนักศึกษาคณะนิติศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น เป็นกลุ่มที่ทำให้พลังของนักศึกษากลับมามีบทบาทมากที่สุดนับแต่เหตุการณ์วันที่ 6 ตุลาคม 2519 พวกเขาเคลื่อนไหวร่วมกับชุมชนเพื่อต่อต้านและคัดค้านโครงการต่าง ๆ ที่ส่งผลกระทบต่อสิ่งแวดล้อมของกลุ่มนายทุนตั้งแต่ปี 2552 เป็นต้นมา จนกลายเป็นวีรบุรุษที่หลายคนทั้งจากชนชั้นกลางอนุรักษนิยม และชนชั้นกลางเสรีนิยม โดยเฉพาะกลุ่มแรกต่างก็ชื่นชมและยกย่องพวกเขาในฐานะเป็นเยาวชนตัวอย่างจนทำให้พวกเขาได้รับรางวัลอย่างมากมาย ต่อมา พวกเขาได้ร่วมเคลื่อนไหวเพื่อต่อต้านการรัฐประหารในปี 2557 ภายใต้อำนาจเผด็จการทหารเช่นกันจนเป็นผลให้พวกเขาถูกไล่ล่า จับกุมและคุมขังหลายครั้ง แต่ในชนชั้นกลางอนุรักษนิยมกลับเกลียดและปล่อยให้พวกเขาเผชิญชะตากรรมโดยลำพังจากการถูกดูหมิ่นเหยียดหยามมากมาย ดังนั้น บทความนี้จึงตั้งคำถามว่า ทำไมกลุ่มดาวดินจากที่เคยเป็นความหวังในสังคมไทยจึงกลับกลายมาเป็นเหยื่อทางการเมืองภายใต้ระยะเวลาเพียงไม่กี่ปี วิธีการศึกษาของบทความนี้ประกอบด้วยการศึกษาเอกสารรายงาน ข่าวและบทความจากหนังสือพิมพ์ บทสัมภาษณ์จากสื่อ ผู้เขียนมีข้อถกเถียงว่า จากการเป็นวีรบุรุษในสายตาชนชั้นกลางอนุรักษนิยม มิใช่ว่าชนชั้นกลางอนุรักษนิยมสนใจในความเป็นธรรม ความยุติธรรมและประเด็นสิทธิสิ่งแวดล้อมที่ดาวดินทำ แต่สนใจที่พวกเขาต่อต้านนโยบายต่าง ๆ ของรัฐภายใต้รัฐบาลประชาธิปไตยที่ตนเองรังเกียจ นั่นคือ รัฐบาลชินวัตร ชนชั้นกลางจึงยกย่องดาวดิน ในทางกลับกันกัน เมื่อดาวดินเคลื่อนไหวล้มล้างรัฐบาลเผด็จการ ชนชั้นกลางอนุรักษนิยมกลับมาโจมตีดาวดิน ดังนั้น ชนชั้นกลางอนุรักษนิยมจึงสนใจแค่การเป็นปฏิปักษ์กับประชาธิปไตยและการเลือกตั้ง คุณลักษณะของชนชั้นกลางเช่นนี้เอง ที่เป็นฐานสนับสนุนที่เข้มแข็งให้รัฐบาลเผด็จการในสังคมไทยอยู่ได้อย่างแข็งแกร่ง และทำให้กลุ่มวัยรุ่นที่ควรเป็นอนาคตของชาติกลับกลายอยู่กับการถูกรังเกียจภายใต้ความมืดบอดของสังคมไทย

คำสำคัญ: กลุ่มดาวดิน; การเมืองไทย; การละเมิดสิทธิมนุษยชน

Introduction

In the political process of all countries, in addition to fundamental political institutions, pressure groups are regarded as very influential (Satawetin, 1976). One kind of pressure group that has an important role in social and political change is the student movement. By nature, students are organized and interested both in new ideas and learning about examples of students' political movements in different countries. And because students are powerful groups, they typically reject traditional values of society and demand new kinds of ideals. Furthermore, students are recognized as intellectuals and thereby gain the confidence of people in society for their knowledge and integrity. These factors make students an influential group in demanding and protecting civil rights (Jirakraisiri, 1980).

In Thailand, students have had an important role in politics since the political revolution of 1932. There were the Indochinese border protest marches against France in 1940 and the protests against the fraudulent elections of 1957 (Chiangkul, 1993); but at that time, their protests did not have a major impact on politics and society because students had little power and lacked political awareness. In addition, the government limited their role in politics. However, the influence and power of student movements became more apparent in the early 1960s when student numbers increased rapidly while educational opportunities spread with the establishment of many new universities in an era of development and modernization.

The rise of the student movements in Thailand was the result of social conflict. They rejected traditional values and wanted social change in the midst of military dictatorships which abolished the right to political freedom of speech. They also wanted to participate politically for economic and social change in Thailand. Student groups formed and accumulated experience through academic seminars, volunteer camp development groups, clubs or associations; additionally, independent groups at various institutions were formed, fueled by criticism from within the universities which expanded into disapproval regarding different political problems. Students learned and gained experience in developing their members, eventually leading to the establishment of the first formal student organization in 1970 under the name “The National Student Center of Thailand – NSCT.” After that, students were able to develop their role as political opposition leaders on several occasions earning them recognition among the general public in protests and marches, political assemblies and seminars for exchange of ideas, and as authors of books and articles published in journals and newspapers with new leftist thoughts as commonly found abroad in countries like France. Later, these new left ideas were used in opposition in Thai politics (Kongkirati, 2013).

Students were involved in various kinds of political activities such as boycotts of Japanese products, opposition to American policy during the Indochina war and the stationing of armed forces in Thailand. They also organized protests against the decision by the Ramkhamhaeng University president to expel 9 students for writing an article about Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn (the Prime Minister) and Field Marshal Phaphas Charusathien (the Deputy Prime

Minister and Minister of Interior), and called for a constitution which later led to the massive uprising of student groups and members of the public on 14th October, 1973. Protesters took to the streets calling for the military junta government to step down. An estimated 500,000 people participated in this protest (The National Student Center of Thailand, 1974) which successfully led to the downfall of the military dictatorship system at the cost of large numbers of students' deaths and disappearances.

After the events of 14th October, 1973, Thai people had won the freedom and opportunity to participate in politics for the first time in their history. The student movement had won the confidence of large groups of the public and gained a leading role in politics as never before. Students became leading advocates for civil rights and welfare for urban and rural people and spread knowledge of democracy to remote villages. Some student groups supported the fight of the working class in protesting against falling crop prices, the problems of debt and insufficient incomes, as well as demanding welfare and social justice. In addition, some students helped to change the living circumstances of the population and instilled political consciousness among communities while at the same time spreading socialist ideology. This was seen as the solution to social problems resulting from democratic disappointments, the failure of the government system to solve people's problems, and its inability to protect the interests of the majority of the people.

The students' attitude toward political, economic and social change resulted in socialist ideologies that in turn gave rise to the military and conservatives, or the ultra-right-wing, seeking to protect the status quo. Right-wing groups were created in society to counter

the student movement with names like the Red Bulls group, the Nawaphon movement, and the Village Scouts among others (Bowie, 1997). These groups, acting as hooligans, tracked down and attacked students in different areas and stirred up anti-student sentiments. Therefore, members of the student movement for democracy went from being social heroes to communist criminals undermining and attempting to overthrow national institutions, religion and the monarchy. The climax of disgust against students occurred on 6th October, 1976 at Thammasat University, an event which later became known as the Thammasat Massacre; this was a crackdown on student protesters resulting in large numbers of violent deaths and injuries as well as sexual harassment and rape by the military (Ungpakorn, Yimprasert & The 6th October 1976 Investigating Committee, 2001). This event forced part of the student movement to escape into the forests and join the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) which was their last hope and last resort to create social justice. However, they grew frustrated with the communist dictatorship that ruled the revolutionists and fled back into urban areas. After this, the student movement, which was once seen as an important and influential group with great political power, was persecuted and suppressed by the state leaving them with virtually only few political roles whatsoever. There were only few activities, for example, the 14 October 1973 and the 6 October 1976 massacres commemoration in every year.



The Photograph 1 : A right-wing protester hanging a student and using a chair to hit the lifeless body on the head amidst a group of spectators who express their enjoyment on 6th October, 1976. Photograph by Ulevich (1976, published in Prachatai (2015, October 6)).

Four decades have passed and although the social context has changed, students have almost no role in society and politics. However, a student group has emerged to fight for justice and protect the interests and rights of many people by using peaceful means. This group was admired as a role model for modern youth and as a hero of Thai society; Dao Din students from Khon Kaen university. This topic is further discussed below.

Objectives

1. To study the Dao Din students movement before and after the 2014 coup.
2. To study social reaction toward Dao Din students movement.

Methodology

The author uses many sources such as books, journals, articles and documentaries involved mainly about the Dao Din student movement.

Results

From Soil to Star: Hopes and Dreams of Thai Society

The northeastern region, also called Isan, is a region of Thailand with economically important natural resources. The area is especially rich in minerals like gold, iron ore, gypsum, and manganese found in Loei province; copper found in Loei and Nong Khai provinces; and rock salt found in Chaiyapum, Maharakam, Roi Et, Ubon Ratchathani and Yasothon provinces. Potash is found in Chaiyapum, Nakhon Ratchasima and Udon Thani provinces; and natural gas is found in Nam Phong district of Khon Kaen province and Phu Horm district in Udon Thani province (Department of Mineral Resources, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2016). The value of these natural resources is what attracts the increasing attention of investors who attempt to gain a business benefit. Whenever investors receive licences from the government to exploit these natural resources, this opens up avenues to profit from the depletion of those natural resources.

Even though there are laws governing mining activities that have to be adhered to, environmental and health impact assessments are not carried out by government. This failure paves the way for investors to negatively impact mining regions through

environmental pollution, noise pollution, and dust from the use of explosives as well as contamination of water and soil. There are severe negative health effects among surrounding communities.

The affected populations in several provinces reacted by organizing themselves with the aim of resisting and opposing business operations in the mines. This led to intimidation and the use of violence against people who opposed the mining activities and eventually to the assassination of protest leaders. This was the case at the quarries in Chompoo sub-district in Nern Maprang district, Pitsanulok province and Khao Cha-Ang Klang Thung in Khao Chamao district, Rayong province (National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, 2004). Such events also happened in the Isan region where a group of more than 300 masked men armed with steel bars, knives and guns attacked, bound and held villagers leaving several seriously injured. There also was the case of villagers who gathered to oppose the mining of gold and copper in Wang Saphung district, Loei province (Thaipublica, 2014, May 18). These incidents and several other problems gave rise to the formation of a group of students with extensive legal knowledge and the ideology to fight injustice in society. This group, called Dao Din (Star-Soil), participated in the opposition alongside villagers and community members, especially in the numerous locations where mining was planned in the Isan region.

In past years, various people have raised the question of what happened to the power of the students who fought alongside the people 40 years ago and whether it is true that capitalism has swallowed the courageous ideologies of students and blurred the suffering of fellow community members. Is this the dark age of Thai student groups? Amidst the criticism of the role of modern era

students, there is the image of the Dao Din student movement pleading with the military and sitting in the rain to form a human barrier facing the officers in order to protect villagers who had suffered injustice at a gold mining site in Loei province. These images were widely shared in the online world where numerous people expressed their admiration for the courage and ideology of the students, comparing them to heroes who dared to stand up to protect the rights of the community. This reflects the dreams and hopes of a new generation of youth in Thai society today and in the future. The media and pictures of this event (see the photographs below) have left a lasting impression.



The Photograph 2 : the Dao Din students who form a human barrier and sit pleading with military officers in the rain to support villagers in opposing an environment and health impact assessment in the process of expanding the licence of the gold mining company in the Na Pong sub district in Mueang district, Loei province on 8th September, 2013 (Kongmuang, 2013)

The birth of the Dao Din group was seen as the beginning of a student movement with important influence and power. This group had made students prominent once again after 40 years due to their dedication and self-sacrifice for the greater good fighting injustice in Thai society. After the student movement prospered in the 1973-1976 period, their power in Thai society virtually disappeared after the mass killings on 6th October, 1976, but the revival of the Dao Din student movement reminded society of the power of students which was absent for a long time. This power became apparent once more in their fight, alongside the community, against injustice through their courage, pure energy, and great intellectual capacity. Although the Din Dao group is small in size, their actions are a small ray of light appearing in the dark night sky leading the way. The group is also an important role model for other students on the campuses of universities. Although it is not easy to win over the groups that hold the finances and power of the state, the young men and women under the Dao Din name do not hesitate to take a stand alongside suffering people.

The Dao Din group are mostly students studying at the Faculty of Law, Khon Kaen University who undertake activities for society. The group was created at the time of the establishment of this faculty. The first batch of students organized activities like exchange projects to take students out of the classroom environment and learn about the real world through camps on location. They studied problems faced by local villagers in different areas in the Isan region. On many occasions when they visited locations, they saw the suffering of villagers and were asked questions about legal processes and the protection of rights. Students returned to the university

questioning what they had learned and asking “Why doesn’t the law link the problems of the villagers that we have seen with society?” (Freedom of Expression Documentation Center, 2015, June 19). With this shared question they created a group under the name “Center for Human Rights Law for Society” working under the following 4 principles: 1) Learning about real problems on location, 2) Using these issues as topics for discussion, 3) Publishing problems in the mass media, and 4) Presenting freedom of thought and freedom to share knowledge about fundamental constitutional rights to the public, as well as the problems of villagers as if these were the problems of their own families and friends. In this regard, Kornchanok Saenprasert, one of the founders of the Dao Din group said: *“Learning in the classroom is not enough, so we want to learn from villagers. This shows that the real problem in society is injustice at all levels done to villagers. Therefore, we gathered in a group to study the various problems of injustice and their origins.”*

Jatupat Boonpattaraksa, a Dao Din group member also said: *“As students, we have a lot of freedom which gives us pure power. If we spend four years just studying and after graduation we look for a job for ourselves, our lives are very self-centered. We, however, think that during these four years we have the opportunity to learn more than others. We should repay society by helping others and learn the truth about what happens in our society.”*

Dao Din is also the name of a journal dedicated to human rights for society that was created to share knowledge gained from going on location. About the meaning of the Dao Din name, Jatupat Boonpattaraksa said: *“The name Dao Din is a star in the sky that looks beautiful. However, that beautiful star is the soil. We students*

are the stars who have the chance to study and gain knowledge through studying. Those who stand on the top of a mountain or on the stars do not shine a light on the community. Therefore, we are a group of students who have a dream to visit locations and work to change society and make it more beautiful and equal. This dream unites everyone with the common goal of a beautiful and equal society.”

Because the Dao Din group gained experience from working with villagers in various communities in Isan who faced a wide range of problems, they have evolved into a movement with an important role in opposing different private business and state projects that may impact the livelihoods of villagers or areas since 2009. They have done so in the form of being volunteers offering legal advice and recommendations on legal action to protect rights. Examples of this are the opposition to the potash mines in Udon Thani province, the protests against the construction of a cassava flour factory in Nam Pong district, Khon Kaen province, conducting a study of the problems from the construction of a power plant in Kalasin province, as well as strengthening legal protection of the community surrounding the gold mining activities in Loei province among other cases (Matichon, 2014, November 24). In other words, the Dao Din group is an environmental protection group comparable to community movements who fight for protection of rights in various areas in the country. Although sometimes the fight alongside villagers has resulted in arrests of students and charges of obstructing officers (which made them look like black sheep), and conducting activities with villagers in community movements have negatively impacted their study results, the students have kept their faith strong and have

not let this form a barrier to the pursuit of their ideology. On the contrary, this has made them even more persistent in doing that to which others pay little attention.

Although the Dao Din group was formed in 2009, the event that made them widely known in society is the movement they formed with villagers in protesting against the environmental and health impact assessment and the licensing of Thung Kam Ltd. in Na Pong sub-district in Loei province on 8th September, 2013. In order to demand health protection and protection of the lifestyle of surrounding people, the Dao Din group formed a human barrier in the middle of a severe rainstorm in protection of the villagers facing military officers who were not afraid to use force. They believed that the violence they were subjected to and the injustice done to them would spread in the mass media and online social media leaving a lasting impression among the public.

Because of this incident, the Dao Din group has been admired and praised as a model for youth. Some people on online media, like the well-known Pantip blog, called the Dao Din group heroes with the ambition of the young generation and their ideologies (<http://pantip.com/topic/30967340>). The activities by these students were called courageous as they stood up against influential powers with some people expressing opinions such as: “They give the impression that they value the student uniforms that they wear a lot and this makes them model students with intellect, sacrifice and generosity. Their fathers and mothers must be very proud of them”, or “I would like to praise the actions of these students. Looking at these photographs my hair stood on end; the photographs brought about good feelings. No matter what the

ideology, this should be admired. No matter what the future will bring, today they have fully expressed themselves to society and one cannot help but be proud.” In addition, there also were news scoops and columns from various press agencies at the educational institutions where they study expressing admiration. The actions also won the students several awards. For example, at the end of 2013 the Dao Din group won the “Model youth award” from the “Khon Khon Khon” TV program from Channel 9 Modern Nine TV (Matichon, 2014, November 24).

Although the Dao Din group has received words of praise and admiration from society, and has won many awards, this has not been their goal. What they aim for is to see an improved society with more justice without people being restricted or taken advantage of in any way. Their activities do not stop there; they also started many social movements attempting to raise ideas on various topics among villagers to improve their bargaining power towards the government. The formation of groups and going on location, as in the case of the Hometown Conservation Group in Wang Sapung, the Huai Sua Ten Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation Group and the Khok Hin Kao Group in Nampong district of Khon Kaen province, the Environmental Conservation Group in Udon Thani province, the Namchi Network in Roi Et province, and the Anti-Gas Drilling Conservation Group of Kalasin province, were the result of joining villagers who were faced with problems of livelihoods and natural resources. These groups were aimed at placing these topics in the political spotlight. The legal and resources injustices together with the abuse of power by capitalists gave rise to new movements in Isan. Kornchanok Saenprasert, one of the founders of the Dao Din group

said: *“We believe that we have done the right thing and we take the standpoint that if injustice is done we stand behind the weaker people; the people who are taken advantage of, mistreated by law and policy. We believe that it is correct and we are proud of it.”*

The Dao Din group is a new movement in activist circles, not only concerned with natural resources but also with livelihood problems, inequality and violation of human rights. The movement fundamentally works in cooperation with villagers and is, therefore, compared to a star that not only lights the sky but also shines a light on the ground in leading the way for hopeless people to escape the darkness of injustice. The group is like a small star that shows society that the pure power of students once again offers a ray of light. For many, the Dao Din group is compared to heroes in Thai society. But these words of praise did not last long; the image of the students turned around after they were condemned by society as villains who created conflict and as extremists working for politicians. This negative image was created because the group not only fought for community rights, but also fought and protested by raising questions on human rights’ violations by the government at the national level. This was especially true when they protested the 2014 military coup d’état, the turning point in the lives of the Dao Din group.

From a high star leading the way to an extinguished fallen star

In the period 2013-2014, Thailand was in political crisis due to social conflict and violent political clashes with protesters of the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) who aimed to overthrow the government led by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra,

the sister of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. This group of protesters were eventually successful in ousting the government and had additional demands that went against democratic principles, such as a prime minister appointed without elections based on Article 7 of the Constitution of The Kingdom of Thailand, 2007, political reform before elections are held, and demands for the military to put an end to political conflict. Although there were some students who joined the PDRC political movement, there was another group of students who joined up with the opposing groups and organized activities to express their views and demand that all parties search for peaceful solutions through the democratic process. These activities included a candle light parade campaigning for an end to the political violence, campaigning for voting during the election held on the 2nd of February 2014 and organizing academic discussion forums. One of the student groups under this movement was the Dao Din group.

The Dao Din group started to have a more prominent role in national politics by expressing their ideas on the violent political crisis that was intensifying at the time. The students were vocal on the bizarre, anti-democratic political proposals, especially the attempt of the PDRC to prevent elections from being held at the beginning of February 2014. These ideas were so opposite to the democratic governance principles that the Dao Din group stands for and believes in, that the Dao Din group organized academic discussion activities to express their standpoint under the name “Allergy to Coup D’état” at the Faculty of Law, Khon Kaen University. This event aimed at analyzing the political conflict of that time as well as retaliating against the PDRC proposals that they felt would lead the country to

a dead end. At the same time, they organized peaceful candle light events in public areas at Khon Kaen University as a way to express their vision of conditions that could put an end to the violent rallies and the military takeover. These activities instantly gave the group an image of being part of the political opposition and they were condemned as being Red Shirt students.

Next, there was violence in January 2014 during advance voting for the general election of 2nd February, and protests and sieges by the PDRC group prevented the opening of numerous polling stations which eventually led to the Constitutional Court ruling that these elections were void. Subsequently, the Dao Din group traveled to the Administrative Court Region 4 of Khon Kaen to protest this ruling and complain to the ombudsman. They did this so that the ombudsman could file the case with the Constitutional Court and rule that the elections of 2nd February were legitimate. At the same time, the Dao Din group organized symbolic activities in which they dressed up as bushpeople and clowns to mock the court for being backward and undemocratic, similar to bushpeople. Furthermore, the group colored their faces white in mourning and stood motionless holding their national identity cards and a sign that read “February 2nd elections are void”. This was their way to show that the military coup d’état, although not at gunpoint, was initiated by an independent organization and to show that they opposed a prime minister from outside or put in place through Article 7.

Nevertheless, the political conflict did not show signs of decline. On the contrary, it became worse when rallies were joined by the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, or the Red Shirts, in support of the government. This group expressed

themselves as opposing the PDRC and against seizure of power through undemocratic means and military takeover. The rallies led to numerous violent clashes causing several deaths and injuries to many. These factors were used as justification for the military coup d'état carried out by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), led by General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, the army commander at that time, on 22nd May, 2014. This threw Thailand back under the military rule that has governed ever since.

Only one day after the coup d'état, several groups of citizens, activists and students, including the Dao Din group, issued statements protesting against the coup and calling for the NCPO to return power to the people. The Dao Din group on several occasions tried to create a movement to protest against the coup and continually attempted to organize and protest the abuse of natural resources in this unusual political situation. They encountered many barriers. They were called in by the military for talks and were told to stop political symbolism on several occasions. Eventually an important incident happened that is seen as the turning point of the Dao Din group. Five members of the student group, Jatupat Boonpattaraksa, Wasan Setsit, Jetsarit Namkot, Payu Boonsophon and Witthckorn Anuchon wore black t-shirts on which was printed the words “We-do-not-want-coup” while making the three-finger salute to the prime minister at the city hall in Khon Kaen during his visit to assign policy to the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation in the provinces of the Northeast region on 19th November, 2014. Because of this incident, the students were arrested and held in custody at the Khon Kaen Province Police Department before being transferred to the 23rd Military Circle Headquarters for interrogation.

Here, all 5 students were forced to sign a document stating the terms of their release set by the military. These conditions included a ban on political activities and a threat of losing their student status (Matichon, 20 November, 2015). This event also led to the Dao Din group being heavily attacked by society with vulgar comments and severe accusations, as well as harassment from state officials, police and undercover officers who were sent out to photograph the homes of the Dao Din members. They said they went because “The village head asked them to check up on the students”. This led to many Dao Din members leaving their homes because they felt intimidated and were afraid it was not safe to stay (Duangthip Kareurit, 14 June, 2015). Accusations were made that the Dao Din is a group of students hired by politicians to create chaos. This was especially apparent in an interview with Lieutenant General Kampanat Ruddit, Army Headquarters Region 1, commander of the Peace and Order Maintaining Command (POMC), who said that the Dao Din group was hired by local politicians for 50,000 baht to get in the news by attacking the person of General Prayuth Chan-Ocha (Banmuang, 2 December 2014). Links were made with the Khon Kaen Model (extremist Red Shirts in Khon Kaen) aimed at creating unrest in society through publications by news agencies, newspapers and different blogs .



The Photograph 3 : the Dao Din students wearing black t-shirts spelling the words “We-do-not-want-coup” and making the three-finger salute in front of the prime minister before being arrested and taken away for interrogation at the 23rd Military Circle Headquarters, Khon Kaen (source: Matichon, 19 November, 2014)

After the Dao Din group was severely attacked for making the three-finger salute in front of Gen. Prayuth Chan-Ocha the movement had to lie low for a while. Next, the movement became vocal once again through their activities commemorating the 1-year anniversary of the 2014 coup d’état. Students held up a sign opposing the coup at the democratic monument in Khon Kaen province as an activity held in cooperation with members of the general public protesting in front of the Bangkok Art and Culture Center. The students were arrested and charged with “conspiring and political rallying in numbers of more than 5 individuals” under Article 44 of the Interim Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2014. The students were prosecuted for civil disobedience for not reporting at the police station despite the deadline having passed. The students argued that the charges were unlawful and that they were victims of violence by

officers during their arrest. Some students were kicked in the testes and injured by officers during their arrest (Kareurit, 14 June 2015). At the same time, they did not let go of their ideologies demanding justice for the community; in their view, the military government's policies impact villagers without giving them the opportunity to voice their opinions. The Dao Din group reemerged in Wang Sapung district, Loei province because this area is affected by gold mining activities which harm villagers for which the Dao Din group called for justice for local villagers but military officers came with arrest warrants.



The Photograph 4 : the Dao Din students are violently injured during arrest for activities commemorating the 1-year anniversary of the 2014 coup d'etat at the democracy monument in Khon Kaen province (source: Photograph taken by author)

Wongsakorn Saraprang, one of the Dao Din members, commented on the movement opposing the coup d'etat: *“The movement opposing the military takeover comes from our feeling that the coup impacts communities and that villagers are affected*

by the development plans. These problems are interlinked. We cannot just move ahead in leaps. There are explanations that, because of the military coup d'état, the rights of villagers are violated too. The Dao Din group therefore thinks that this is an important factor and a reason for us to protest the coup. In the past, we could express ourselves; although they would not listen, villagers could gather to protest and voice their opinions. But after the NCPO stepped in and took over, activities by villagers articulating their views are all blocked and prohibited and locals are threatened. The situation was bad but has now worsened."

Furthermore, the Dao Din group joined political movements with students from many other universities leading to the forming of the New Democracy Movement (NDM) which is founded on the 5 principles of democracy, human rights, justice, participation and peaceful means. Subsequently, different activities were organized like the distribution of pamphlets campaigning for a new constitution at the Phukiew market, Chaiyaphum province. These pamphlets contained criticism on the Constitution Drafting Commission. Also, an academic discussion forum on the topic of the constitution drafting referendum held at the Faculty of Agriculture Khon Kaen University was disrupted by army and police officers while equipment used at this event was confiscated. The organizers were placed under special surveillance of state officials which took away their freedom and led to their incarceration on several occasions under various charges ranging from adversely commemorating the 1-year anniversary of the coup d'état to distribution of pamphlets criticizing the Constitution Drafting Commission. At the same time, there were suspicious events on the side of state officials, especially the Military Court hearing for

Jatupat Boonpattaraksa that took place in the middle of the night, a time when state offices in Thailand are officially closed. He appeared before the court on charges of insulting the monarchy under Section 112 of the criminal law by sharing a link to a BBC Thailand article on the background of King Rama X. Facebook members shared this news article more than a thousand times but were not persecuted.



The Photograph 5 : Students and public gathering to support the Dao Din group at the Khon Kaen police department after arrest by police and army officers following the 1-year anniversary of the 2014 coup d'état at the democracy monument in Khon Kaen (source: Photo taken by the author)

Photographs of the arrest of Dao Din students spread rapidly online amidst criticism and mocking of the arrest. A stream of accusations and attacks coloring the Dao Din group followed. For example, there was a satirical poem on the page of P. Khondee (P. Khondee Kawee Samak Len) which is followed by more than 100,000

followers. In this poem he retaliated against the Dao Din movement aiming to start court cases for preventing peace from returning. Photographs of the Dao Din group were shared in which they held signs against the military takeover put up at the monument to Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, one of the dictators of Thailand. These pictures were modified to represent an image of King Rama V. Also, the YouTube channel of a user called Vihok News, followed by more than 200,000 subscribers, posted a video attacking the Dao Din group as part of the network of Thaksin Shinawatra, who is accused of offering financial support to trash the government of the NCPO. It is also said that the Dao Din students have liberal ideas that oppose the monarchy. The confidential educational records of Dao Din students have been dug up and used to ridicule them for being stubborn students who participate in activities but are not interested in studying which results in them having very low grades. Lieutenant General Nunttach Makswat, former director of the National Intelligence Agency said in online media about the study results of the Dao Din group: “Looking at the grades of the protesting students, it looked very miserable. Average students who don’t study very hard should be able to achieve at least a grade point average of 2, but not one of these students was able to achieve even that. This means that they never had the intention to study at all and they cannot even take care of themselves. Don’t forget that each student costs several hundred thousand baht of taxpayers’ money. You have to understand that students not only study on their parent’s money but a lot of state money is invested in them to produce quality citizens. And they get grades like this.”

Furthermore, there are numerous comments that support this viewpoint in the news and blogs, for example: “These students from the back of the classroom have a lot of time on their hands, so they make extra money by disturbing the town, better than doing nothing. This fits the muddled buffalos they are”, or: “The new job is demanding democracy.” (Naewna, 5 June, 2015). However Supachai Pukrongploy, one of the Dao Din members commented on this topic: *“When I saw this for the first time, I was shocked too. This information really is confidential and should not be published. I am not sure how they got these records but I believe that the political culture in our country makes inevitable the use of hate speech aimed to discredit us and it is not creative. I am one of the victims because I have low grades. I think grades do not measure the value of humans or the correctness of their ideas.”*

Also, Suwittha Thipangkorn, a Dao Din member added: *“I admit that we are not the best students but I don’t feel inferior because of it. At least we do things to raise awareness in society. We learn together with these villagers and although my grades are low, I have never use them for my benefit. I study at the Faculty of Law and I am proud that, although I have bad grades, I do things for our country.”*

It can be concluded that the good image of the Dao Din group, which once was honored and recognized in society for their courage in fighting the power of the state and the influence of capitalists, in protection of the natural resources of the nation as well as the rights of the community, a group that was once compared to heroes and role models for students and a new generation of young men and women, did not last long. Quite the opposite has

happened; from being the ray of light from a star that led the way for Thai society, they became an extinguished fallen star without value to society, just because they have liberal ideas and do not kneel to things they regard as wrong. There are social trends that attack and scandalize them, hate speech, and breach their privacy. Although the students have had to trade in their independence and individual freedom for attacks and harassment from the side of state officials and imprisonment, they have not succumbed to these challenges whatsoever and stand strong to fight for their ideology and belief in democracy. They hold onto the conviction that their actions can create equality and justice.

Discussion

This article the author argues similar to in the views of Nidhi Eawsriwong, a retired history professor, he stated that the conflict can be explained as a result from a paradigm of the political future where there are extreme differences between the old middle class and the new middle class. The latter engages with liberal ideology. This group dreams of development of the country in a democratic political landscape where the people are seen as the answer without interference by powerful groups from outside the democratic system, aiming for equality not only politically, but also in other facets. While the old middle class has visions of a corruption-free country with a government run by honest and good people. In this vision, equality is not a major issue or even necessary, especially in politics. Similarly, Kasian Tejapira, a political science professor sees the old middle class as a group that aims at fighting the new middle class (lower middle class) which predominantly has developing ideas of individualism.

Although they once were on the side of democracy, they have separated themselves to support the side of the military government. They use legal and social powers like Section 112 to fight and eliminate the new middle class (Prachatai, 8 October, 2016). This is a case in point that shows to what the Dao Din group is currently constantly subject. In summary, of the Dao Din group it can be said that Thailand's middle class previously demonstrated a positive perception of the Dao Din group precisely because the group had earlier opposed the policies of the elected Yingluck Shinawatra government, which was already despised by the majority of the middle class. However, once the Dao Din group began to protest against the military government overthrowing the Yingluck government, the old middle class turned harshly to criticize the student movement. We can conclude that the old middle class tends to put partisan interests ahead of a civil society group which has been critical of elected as well as military administrations. This has led them to support the demise of Thai democracy. These characteristics of them not only form support for the perpetuation of military rule, but also destroys civil society groups (composed of young people) who are supposed to be the future of the nation rather than the black sheep in a dark Thai society.

Conclusion

The role and power of Thai students has prospered and was in the ascendancy during the period 1973-1976 during the fight to break free from tyrannical dictatorship and achieve justice and social equality. After the massacre of students on 6th October, 1976 the

influence of students in Thai society disappeared. Since then, more than four decades passed before the rise of a student group called the Dao Din group, which gained prominence in their fight for social justice. The students created a movement standing alongside the community in protecting their rights and interests. The group used peaceful means which earned the Dao Din group praise for being role models for a new generation of youth and heroes of Thai society. The military coup d'état of 2014 was an important turning point for the Dao Din group. From being heroes they rapidly became the subject of hatred from the conservative middle classes and were condemned as crooks in society just because of their political viewpoints and liberal ideology. The group fought for justice and opposed the military government which oppresses and bullies people with the backing of the conservative middle class. Therefore, it cannot be denied that in the recent past period, the student movement and modern youth did not have much power or influence on society. Conversely, it is the conservative middle class that has the power to dictate the direction of society. We can see that there was a unifying factor between students and the middle class in their fight against the military government which was successful in 1973 but a split between the conservative middle class and students became an important factor leading to the massacre of 1976. The demands of the conservative middle class to step in and overthrow the civilian government caused the changes as in the cases of the 2006 and 2014 military coups d'état as well as the clashes between protesters in 2009 and 2010. It should raise the question of what the conservative middle class really wants and what Thai society hopes for and wishes for from the new generation of youth.

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