

## Thai Protest Songs After the May 22, 2014 Coup

By

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### Abstract

This research article is a part of a thesis on Thai protest songs after the May 22, 2014 coup, the research found that the emergence of the People's Party 2020 made the song of the commoner band become the main song in the protests. The commoner band is a popular music band. The difference from the general popular band is that the commoner band is not affiliated with a music company and has developed the band in line with political events since the May 22, 2014 coup.

The music of the commoners is similar to songs for life or art for life, influenced by ideas derived from socialist realism. Protest songs from the commoner band have served to bridge the gap between reality and the ambition of an ideal society. It listens to the voices of the dialogue in the protest area and serves to challenge and document the history of the commoners.

**Keywords:** Thai protest songs, coup, commoner band

### Introduction

Music found in social protests is often associated with resistance, countering the authority, and going for the revolution that varies in a social context (Dillane, J. Power, Haynes & Devereux, 2018: 6). Protest songs occur in protest activities for change to a better society by progressive political activists of the left (Berger, 2000) or derived from socialism. Protest songs are often produced by the oppressed, or a group of people with a lower status in society using music to communicate political ideology to communicate and put pressure on powerful groups. Therefore, protest songs from opposing groups in society play a role and function in inspiring and persuading people to join the protest.

Protest songs take the form of propaganda to attract, motivate, and achieve solidarity, with a duty to support activities aimed at social change movements. It can also link political events in the past and present to create an ideal society. The song itself can't change the world, but protest songs can change people's minds, so people can change the world Haycock (2015: 429). The protest songs in the 60 centuries evoked the social significance of the civil rights

movement, problems from war arising from nuclear destruction including living justice, and demands for social change. Many artists believe that their music can be used to convey ideas, raise awareness, and persuade various social issues.

This study looks at the traces of the mass civil uprising that began in the 2020s, with the content of intense protests as well as developing forms of protest in various forms that have been adapted into the forms of cultural festivals, music, art, and performances. It can be said that if politics is good, the quality of life of artists will be good, but if politics is bad, the art of resistance will flourish. The researcher has studied the commoner band's songs which is a band that has been very popular in protest rallies after the coup on 22 May 2014.

### ***Objective of Research***

To study Thai protest songs after the May 22, 2014 coup.

### ***Scope of Research***

In this study, the researcher has studied protest songs from commoner bands which plays a huge role in the protests in Thailand after the May 22, 2014 coup, with a period to complete a thesis on "Thai Protest songs after the May 22, 2014 coup". It began with finding the related literature, field data collection, and data analysis during the year 2021 until the presentation of research results within the year 2023, a total of 2 years.

### ***Definition Of Research Terminology***

**Protest songs** refer to songs that have been influenced by ideas from socialist ideas that aim to spread the concept of urban ideology and it must to demand a better quality of life today. They are unlimited musical styles but focus on the content of Music and the artist's political ideology.

**A coup** refers to the use of force to convert or change the ruling power from the existing rulers at that time only with after the coup on 22 May 2014 was after the coup on 22 May 2014.

**A commoner band** refers to a band formed by social activists after 2014. A commoner band has nurtured individual ideas through activities with political movements which adhere to the concept and fight for the ideology of democracy, creating music in the style of popular music. The songs of the commoner band are very popular among the People's Party 2020.

**People's Party 2020** refers to the joining of various political alliances that oppose the government of Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha, who has moved on various issues, and demands for a better quality of life have occurred in 2020.

## **Research Conceptual Framework**

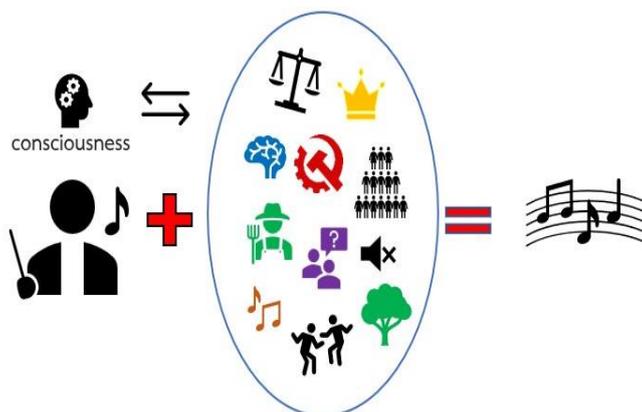
Music is a human creation. Humans are shaped by the environment and society (Chalermtrak Pikulsri, 2017). Humans do everything with reason with a background that is controlled by feelings and emotions irrationally. Human consciousness is determined by social structure causing music and songs to be composed to serve one thing all along. Music has never been politically independent and pure without powerless domineering.

In music education, therefore, the scope is wide. Music research should be divided into two aspects: 1) Music studies in the areas of rhythm, melody, chorus, sound quality, and patterns. Such elements appear in all musical cultures. 2) Music studies are studies of relevant knowledge surrounding music (Chalermtrak Pikulsri, 2018: 122). In this research, the

researcher applied the concept of music education as the main concept of the research study. It also applied to socialist ideas.

What does the song communicate from the composer to the listener? How did protest songs create experiences and consciousness among the listeners? When using the music analysis concept of Chalernsak Pikulsri to add to the framework of this study, the composition of that song inevitably arises from the sound of music that the composer had experienced hearing through various senses. The music that still rings in their minds is derived from imaginary creation, and then the notes were written to symbolize the recordings that the composer had envisioned. Therefore, the composition is a snatching of perceptions of the real world, blending them with imagination and then distilling it into a form of recording of musical notation, in which musical notation is considered a symbolic system. It can be described as a musical creation as a third space formed by an imaginary composition of an artist, in which the artist sometimes simulates another identity, or another story, creates a story, and transmits it to the third space, which is the recording of music notation.

For the conceptual framework used in this research, the researcher took the concept of socialism to analyze the content and various experiences. Based on the concepts mentioned above, it shows the relationship between music and society and various knowledge sets around music. A model can be created as a guideline for conducting research to be used to show the conceptual framework of the research and the relationship between music and society as shown in the figure1:



**Figure 1:** *Research Conceptual Framework*

## **Research Methodology**

In this research “Thai protest songs after the May 22, 2014 coup”, the researcher used qualitative research methods by relying on musicological study methods to collect data leading to data analysis as follows:

1. Preparatory phase: Preparation before fieldwork, the researcher conducted a literature review from the literature and related research. After a literature review and relevant research, it revealed that the commoner band originated after the events after the May 22, 2014 coup and it has continued to become a regular protest band until now. The following songs were selected for the study: 1) Commoner band’s song, 2) We are friends (Rao Kue Puan Kan), 3) You know who he is (Khon Tee Khun Kor Roo Wa Khai), 4) Want a better life (Yak Ja Mee Chiwit Tee Dee Kwa Nee), 5) Rainbow (Rung), and 6) Similar and Different (Taektang-Hmuankan).

After that, the researcher studied and found preliminary information about the commoner band and determined the key informants as follows: 1) the commoner band's members and 2) academics. Then the researcher designed question guidelines for interviews to be used in field data collection methods. When the researchers had finished the interview form, the researcher submitted it to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from Khon Kaen University for verification.

2. **Field Data Collection:** In the field study, the researcher used a study method of traveling to interview the key informants in different locations as appropriate in terms of location and time. The researcher used an interview form that was validated by the Institutional Review Board, to interview key informants both in formal and informal interviews. In addition, the researcher visited the areas where the commoner band performed and participated in the protest for recording data from field studies with audiovisual data storage.
3. **Data management and analysis:** Information obtained from both documentary and field studies is managed following the objectives of the research. Then the researcher analyzed the songs of the selected commoner band by using popular music genres and socialist concepts to analyze.

## Conclusion

The study revealed that Thai protest songs were composed of social situations from the events of 14 October 1973 onwards. Songs for life in the student movement in that era were influenced by socialist realism which has the same meaning as the word “protest song” in English. The changing social context has affected the protest song that makes protest songs with socialist ideology become the songs for life in the form of liberal popular music.

The song uses a tool to communicate political stories, whether from the powerful or the opposition by the authority called “rousing songs” and “national songs”, but for the opposition, they are called protest songs. In Thailand, songs have always been associated with politics. The government used the song for creating a nationalist political ideology for the people to build loyalty. In the era of Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram's government, Luang Wichitwathakan was an important composer. At the same time, the people wreaked their grievances and hardships by having Mr. Nath Thavornbutr, a composer who took the lifestyles of people from different professions to compose songs to reflect social conditions and ironize authority. Later, in 1940, the song "Khon Jorn Mon Min", sung by Saengnapha Boonrasri, was regarded as the beginning of Thai life song which influenced Sanae Komarachun's song “Suphap Burut”. This song is a satirical song about Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram's policy of believing in the leader focusing on the creation of nationalism. However, the song “Sam Lor Kaen” by Khamron Sam-Punanon talks about the sufferings of the motorless tricycle drivers along with satires the Members of Parliament. As a result, this song was banned to broadcast. The song “Ta See Kam Suan” by Phaibun Butkhan discusses economic problems where the cost of living is higher and the song “Klin Klon Sap Kwai” is forbidden to broadcast by reasoning that the lyrics contain inappropriate messages, showing the inequality of life of different classes. After this song became a taboo song, later, students and intellectuals presented new ideologies through literature, art, and music during the period from October 14, 1973, to October 6, 1976. The student movement was influenced by ideas from Socialism that relies on music as a means of countering opposition to the powerful. The powerful group also had rousing songs and nationalist songs to counter the music from the students which created a song for life with intense content to create a new ideology according to the socialist ideas of

the Communist Party of Thailand. They would like to spread the idea to the people in society by waiting for the war to seize power at a later time. However, the state and the powerful parties did not stop. Instead, it hastened to create a patriotic ideology in the greater sense by emphasizing nationalism and liberal Democracy with the King as the Head of State. For arousing songs such as “Nak Paen Din” were used to attack the student movement as communism. State mechanisms for mass communication, such as the National Broadcasting Station and various army radio stations play arousing music all the time. However, the Student Life Song is only played during protests because the government has prohibited playing music for live or live music performances on television programs and radio stations, causing the dissemination of students' ideas to be limited. Music has; therefore, become an arena of ideological struggle. However, the mechanisms of the powerful side are more conducive. As time went on, socialist left-wing ideas gradually weakened, leading to the establishment of the 66/1980 policy that brought students and people out of the forest. The comeback at this time made liberal ideas come to dominate the ideology of Thai culture and it has made the concept of capitalism with songs for life homogeneous. In other words, liberal democracy has come to dominate songs for socialist life and makes the content of the song for socialist life transformed into a liberal democracy. This is in line with the music business that the content of songs for life is left to the only reflection of liberal life.

Songs for life means songs that present ideas for a better life and society than in the past. The business system has played an important role in causing the process of creating meaning to the image of artists' songs for life. As a result, the content of songs for life has changed from the existing root meaning of songs for life, that is to say, songs for life were created to help and fight for society or to support political movements but this content has declined and become love songs (Nattanicha Nanta, 2010). 316 songs for life from 16 bands in the book of people for life (Khon Pue Chiwit) do not serve to reflect the difficulties of life, being taken advantage of, demand for democracy, and irony in political conspiracies. The content of most songs talks about entertainment and love. It can be said that in Thailand today songs for life are not songs for life in their entirety. It revealed that artists only reflect society in terms of entertainment and love rather than political content (Phaiboon Phowangpravit and Thanaporn Phooming, 2012). Even though the word “art for people” or “art for life” Chit Phumsak's idea was influenced by socialist realism art that corresponds to the word protest song in English, it leaves only the word “songs for life” that does not offer a solution to a problem or to create a good quality of life with the majority of the people of the country. The content has been reduced to art for the masses by liberal ideas. A protest song that has become a song for life has the characteristics of a manufactured product for the romance of increasing capital accumulation for the record company. In addition, songs for life do not act to stab or reflect the truth of a society that aims to cause social change. Thus, this makes songs for life no different from other love songs in the popular music market. Most of the current songs for life do not mention the problems of structural violence in the form of socialist realist art concepts.

After the 2014 coup, the songs of the commoner band have been involved in the opposition to the coup onwards. The commoner band's voices have been established throughout the protest areas until during the protests in 2020, thus making a commoner band the core of the protest both in terms of content and outstanding music. Consequently, the commoner band was very popular in the protest rallies during the year 2020. The development of the commoner band began with the arrest of students and political activists after the coup in 2014 as well as the songs of the commoner band are consistent with the protests until now. Therefore, it is very appropriate to study for understanding protest songs in Thai society after the 22 May 2014 coup.

The commoner band is a band that produces music in the form of bringing contemporary technology to create music in the style of popular music. There is a quality production process distributed through online channels like general popular music, but different because the commoner band does not have a music company to support it. Therefore, the content of songs from the commoner band can be able to do without limitations. It found that the content of the song coincides with the period of protests against the coup led by Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha, so the members of the band were politically prosecuted. The band members also go through serious music studies and music competitions at the national level, So it can be said that the commoner band has developed music in line with the timeline of contemporary political events. Since the coup of 22 May 2014, the songs of the commoner band are similar to songs for life or art for life that have been influenced by the concept of socialist realism which is something that has been missing from Thai society for a long time

The study revealed that in Thai protest songs after the 22 May 2014 coup, the contents of the songs are more than the image, artist's fashion, or a form of musical identity, but it found that the style of music in modern times was adopted with popular music to apply to create songs. Some sounds and characteristics have been borrowed from other styles of music, so this kind of song can create an impression and communicate more politically with the audience. The most popular band in this period is a commoner band which applied the characteristics of popular music to create protest songs. Popular music has a musical structure AABA. Kultee Banchukaew (2015: 26-29) stated that popular music's musical structure has evolved from classical music which is mainstream music of the Western world, and the interplay between African American native music cultures, as it turned out, in a 12-bar blues musical style. It produces the 32-bar AABA structure, with the chorus being the most important part of popular music. The music and the lyrics are the most different and important parts of the song; especially in the form of verses/ chorus style, where parts of the chorus are replayed and contain the important feature of the song and it is the harmony of the melody musical structure, so it often ends the song with this part. The chorus content is usually the name of a song or a section that is called a hook because it can engage the listener with interest and remember it from the chorus, or allow the listener to sing along (Kultee Banchukaew, 2015: 26-29). The structure of popular music has affected the current structure of protest music compositions. In addition, in the musical dimension, parts A and B are different. This may use the method of changing the pitch or music key to create a song's dimension. Each section can create a song to loop back in the A section, which makes it easier to remember the song. The introduction of the characteristics of popular music to compose protest songs plays an important role in making protest songs easier to popularize because the characteristics of popular music have distinctive features easily remembered, can impress, and allow listeners to interpret their consciousness widely. It is suitable for listening to music nowadays because it emphasizes the content of the music rather than the complexity of the musical characteristics. As a result, popular music can reach many groups of people and expand quickly along with the characteristics that do not attach much to musical traditions. It can be developed, improved, and reproduced more easily than classical music. Subsequently, popular music has been continuously created without stopping.

Protest songs play a role and function in linking political ideologies to the daily life of people in society. Songs are composed to connect political issues, making it easy for listeners to remember public issues. Protest songs can make society more associated with the theme of the song referred to and presented. The songs of the commoner band raise questions about the problem of social structural violence and present solutions to social structural violence. Protest songs were composed for organizing protests suitable for gatherings in public spaces to awaken

consciousness and raise awareness among the protesters. Choosing a musical instrument is suitable for easy-to-carry instruments such as airy guitars, and light rhythmic instruments that can be easily moved because they may have to perform live on the street. For the use of musical features, simple chord structures and harmonics are used and can be easy to access. It is not a commonly used difficult musical key like F#, but it is commonly used in the musical keys of D, G, C major, and E and often has I-V, I-IV, I-IV- V-I, and I-vi-IV-V chord paths. It also showed that it has created an easy rhythm to engage protesters. Protest songs are a political communication tool that connects the masses who participated in the protests to historical and ideological stories to support social change caused by protests. Therefore, protest songs are an aesthetic of resistance and they are an art form that has evolved to create new ways to engage, grow, think, and create awareness among the people. However, protest songs alone cannot change the world or society, songs can affect mass consciousness and the mass can create change.

Song creation through careful analysis of the situation to seize the right time and sharp content presents demands that are anchored to the struggle of the masses that can increase the potential of protest songs and protests leading to change and liberation. Live music performances with audience evaluation produced musical processes, such as setting a performance pattern, setting a list of songs, and choruses during live performances, or even interacting with the audience's arousal. Live music has a process of production that focuses on creating new meaning, communicating, changing perception, and caring about the existence of something else. There is always movement on the stage. Conversation creation takes on the emotional impact of both the musicians on stage and the audience. While the artist performs live on stage, the audience interacts with the artist, and dialogue, language, and some soft power can frame a new culture. In both language and culture, the musical performances in protest areas appeared in language, sign production, and symbolic expression that generates political notations. Music performances in protest create a challenge to the authority as well as create new awareness in society. For the protests to be held, there is hope that one day there will be leading to something better in the present. When considering the songs of the commoner band they can find content that leads to political struggle, especially the song "wants to have a better life" (Yak Ja Mee Chiwit Tee Dee Kwa Nee) that talks about the policy and problem-solving after the battles are over. When considering the commoner band's song publishing timeline, it found that there were publishing songs that connected with the content of the rally to pick up political opportunities to present ideas and ideologies after the 2014 coup.

The songs from the commoner band have the content of the songs by the art of socialist realism because their creative works are not only aimed to reflect the truth of society but also serve to create fantasies and dreams whose goal is to break free from the boundaries or order of society towards an ideal society to a better quality of life. These have disappeared from Thai society for a long time. Therefore, both the content of the song and the fact that the commoner band is not affiliated with capitalists and does not make music for profit. Furthermore, the background of the band members who are connected to the opposition to the 2014 coup, the commoner band has become the main band of protests in Thailand after the 22 May 2014 coup. Protest songs from the commoner band are a tool of political expression used to fight through the dismantling of arms and create the history of commoners. Commoner bands are also cultural guidelines that are not only a mirror reflecting the truth that appears in front of you, but it is also a hammer that smashes the dominance and acts as a pointer to the possibilities of the future. The songs of the commoner arose from the context of the 22 May 2014 coup, a song "We are friends" (Rao Kue Puan Kan), that communicates the same ideology that was acted against the coup. The song "You know who he is" (Khon Tee Khun Kor Roo Wa Khai) has served in support of the 2020 rally. The song "Want a

better life” (Yak Ja Mee Chiwit Tee Dee Kwa Nee) presents a society in which everyone, regardless of political ideology, class, or gender in society would like to get a better quality of life than nowadays. Song “Rainbow” (Rung) with sharp political content and symbolism tied to the leaders and the masses in 2020 and the song “Similar and Different” (Taektang-Hmuankan) was composed to emphasize the equality of people.

Protest songs are; therefore, an artistic creation that preserves the possibility of leading to an ideal society and provides space for the public to imagine other possibilities. This imagination also allows the masses to break free from the politically dominated mindset of those in power and create dreams that affect human life. Kengkit Kitirianglap (2022: 115) states that art contributes to the destruction of the gap between reality and Utopian ambition to know why it has to change the world. Art influenced by the Avant-Garde concept, or socialism allows this ambition to remain a utopia and is a small force for change. Aspiration with reality must create a dialogue together on the path of history in the future (Kengkit Kitirianglap, 2022: 115). A protest song from a commoner band has served to bridge the gap between reality and the aspirations of an ideal society and served to listen to the conversations in the protest area. In addition, it serves to challenge the history and record the history of the common people.

## Recommendation

The time frame and the scope of research have been clearly defined; therefore, this research has limitations that have not yet been identified other forms and compared them with foreign protest songs.

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