



## NETIWIT CHOTIPHATPHAISAL

21  
FREE SPEECH  
THAILAND

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At 14, Netiwit Chotiphathaisal inadvertently became the face of Thailand's student activism movement – a daunting role, given the country's history of draconian *lèse-majesté* laws, military coups and state violence.

Considered a “disgrace” for his “extreme thinking” by the leader of Thailand's military junta, the 21-year-old political science student now works with other students at Chulalongkorn University to advocate for educational reform, democracy and free speech.

“We want a free and fair society, to have people be able to speak, to write, to collaborate freely,” says Netiwit, sitting beside a stack of his freshly printed book *I Can Love My Country Without Having to be Drafted*.

Though Thailand has a long tradition of student activism, past movements – like the 1976 massacre of student protesters by state forces and a royalist mob – are rarely taught in schools. Their omission from history textbooks, and Netiwit's own ignorance of them before founding the Thailand Educational Revolution Alliance, is what inspired him and his friends to start a press. They publish their own writings and translate foreign texts, like *On Tyranny*, so that students can take charge of their own educations.

Netiwit became infamous after questioning Thailand's mandatory haircut styles for students – first in a school paper and then on national TV. Since then, he's made international headlines as a conscientious objector, faced sedition charges and been removed from his position in student government.

“If the education here is good, why do teachers have to be afraid of students who raise questions? We are afraid of many things in Thailand: afraid of the military junta and getting in trouble,” he explains, admitting that “it can be very dangerous to live like an activist,” which is why so many of his peers keep a low profile. He believes that older people are less willing to take risks since it isn't their own future they're fighting for. Young activists, meanwhile, push for change because they don't rely on what hasn't worked so far.

His greatest hope? “That Thai society will be more open and that more people will challenge the power” of the junta. “We can create that change,” he says with a confident nod. “For our future and for our human dignity, we have to fight.” **I**

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