

Modern media maiden has govt underwraps

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Articulate and professional, Supinya is the epitome of the new generation of NGO staff who appeal to the young. Polished and well-educated, Supinya Klanarong, 29, has added a new face to Thailand's non-government organisations (NGOs). The deputy secretary-general of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform (CPMR), a grouping of 45 NGOs nationwide formed to monitor crucial reform under the Constitution, says new-generation activists like her are not what people would usually perceive.

"In my opinion, contemporary activists don't always have to be a bunch of radicals, but they certainly need to have a strong conviction about the public good. And we don't need to be violent either," she says.

"[In former times], activists were often labelled as politically violent or extreme sorts of people. They usually had backgrounds as college activists who later engaged in political violence [during the dark age of Thai political development]," says Supinya, who joined CPMR about two years ago.

A masters degree holder in communications arts from Thammasat University and the University of Westminster, Supinya has witnessed the evolution of NGOs since she was a teen. "The stereotypes of NGO workers used to be '5 Yor', which means they usually wear long hair (men included), jeans, T-shirt, rubber shoes and carry a yam [ethnic shoulder bag]. The previous generations seemed to have grown out of the Western movement of similar pursuits.

"I agree that there is still a connotation of radicalism and extremism in the image of today's NGOs, so many parents do not wish their kids to become activists. For me, I'm more comfortable with contemporary values. Politically, I regard myself as a centre left with liberal leanings."

Of her work, she says CPMR recently took its latest movement against the government's controversial change of telecom concession fees into an excise tax to young audiences at Bangkok's Siam Square (a popular hangout for teens and young adults) and the business district on Silom Road where thousands of leaflets were handed out.

"We want to inform young people of the negative consequences [of such a move] because telecom services are public property. These days, mobile phones, for instance, are ubiquitous and many users are young consumers. They should be aware of what's going on."

Simply put, the government has superseded the authority of yet-to-be-established National Telecom Commission by issuing an executive decree to convert billions of baht in fees that operators are supposed to pay the state into a new form of excise tax – “which is not right”.

“The opposition has already submitted this matter to the Constitution Court for further decision. Even though there isn’t a big chance that the executive decree will be nullified, we think the public should be aware of political and business interests vested in such a crucial government move since it means competition in the mobile phone business as well as consumers will be hurt in the future,” she says

“As you know, mobile phones have become increasingly like water and electricity supplies. Therefore, universal access and fair pricing are very important.

“However, this issue is rather too technical and complicated for many young people. I guess only a few at Siam Square are aware of the issue. However, there was more interest on Silom Road due to the large numbers of business professionals and middle-class people.

“Still, we’d like to give all of them a primer,” she says. “By handing out leaflets, we hope to provide the ABCs and stimulate their interest before we advance to the next stage. Our capital is our conviction in the right principles for the public good. We don’t have much funding and our activities are all carried out by volunteers.”

Supinya observes that today’s youngsters have quite a different background from their predecessors.

“They have grown up in an era of more democratic governments and lack the experience of the oppression of the previous dictatorial regimes. As a result, they are members of a new consumerist society who embrace the modern lifestyle in terms of trendy fashions, entertainment, electronic gadgets etc. Their freedom of choice is usually in picking the latest models of mobile phones, the latest movies or the latest places to hang out.

“All these ‘enjoy-life’ attitudes are certainly not their fault. I guess adults have to help socialise them so that they’re aware of more public issues [that could affect their lives in the future]. Otherwise, our society will have less and less ‘active’ citizens.”

Supinya says she was the only one in her college class who has become an activist as her other classmates are mostly in business, advertising or the mass media.

“I see myself as a professional in this field who would like to help ensure justice in society. I’d like to see checks and balances in the capitalist system.”

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