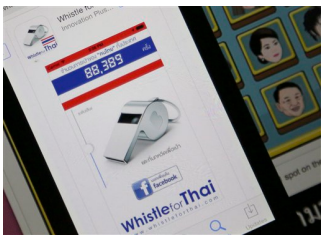
Protest Apps Bring Hi-Tech Flair to Thai Rallies

Jocelyn Gecker, Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — For years, protesters in Thailand have used social media to organize rallies. Now they're taking smartphones to a new level.



Apps have been created that allow phones to help protesters perform the high-pitched, raucous noisemaking that is a staple of Thai demonstrations.

More than 70,000 people have downloaded one application that mimics the shrieking sound of a whistle — the symbol of the "whistle-blowing campaign" against Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The new app is called "Nok Weed," Thai for whistle, and it lets users choose the color of their whistle, adjust the volume and then tap the screen to sound it.

According to its creator, the app "doesn't do much and isn't very useful" but it claimed the top spot on Google Play Store's trending list last month within days of its Nov. 4 debut. Most of the downloads for the Thai-language app were in Thailand but 1.2 percent have come from Egypt, another country fraught with political turmoil.

The app's popularity coincides with the rallies that started six weeks ago, attracting thousands of Bangkok's smartphone carrying upper- and middle-classes in a country that is one of the world's biggest users of social media.

Nok Weed's developer, Narit Nakphong, figured there was a new untapped market after demonstrators first took to the streets on Oct. 31.

"I got the idea from seeing protesters blowing whistles. They blew them so much, they got tired. So I created the app," said Narit, an independent developer who says he's working on an update to address the main critique from users. "Most of the criticism is from people saying the volume is too low. I want to make it as loud as possible without breaking the phones' speakers."

The protesters say they're fed up with the Shinawatra family's dominance over Thai politics. They say Yingluck is a proxy for her billionaire brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was deposed in a 2006 army coup after being accused of corruption and using his power to enrich his family.

Thaksin fled the country in 2008 to avoid jail time for a corruption conviction, and now lives mostly in Dubai.

However, Thaksin's avatar has surfaced in an iPhone game called "Thai Fight." The game lets users pitch Thaksin or Yingluck against one of 28 opponents, including Thai celebrities or other politicians like opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva whose Democrat Party is backing the protests.

"Everyone is so stressed out about politics. I wanted to balance the stress with humor," said Supasheep Srijumnong, the game's 30-year-old creator. "I didn't want them to hit each other. But if politicians throw things at each other, that's funny."

Each character has his or her own weapon: The well-heeled Thaksin strikes a golf ball at opponents, Yingluck — whose childhood nickname is "Crab" — throws crabs at her enemy. Abhisit — an English Premier League fan — hurls soccer balls. The showdowns take place at local landmarks, including inside a Muay Thai ring or on the runway of Bangkok's international airport.

The game debuted Nov. 19 and four days later hit the No. 1 spot on the Thai iOS App Store. It stayed there for about a week, which coincided with one of the largest anti-government rallies in years, drawing over 100,000 people in a march through Bangkok.

Currently, Thai Fight has over 80,000 downloads, and its developer is working up an iPad version and a sequel, Thai Fight 2. None of the new versions will address the chief complaint he gets from users.

"I'm getting all these comments from people who want to see more violence. Some people want to cut the head off (the politicians)," he said. "I really cannot do that. I don't want more violence."

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