



The Power and Precarity of Tactical Performance in Thailand's Political Movements

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between playfulness and political constraint in Thailand's youth-led protest movements in 2020-2021, with a focus on the strategic use of costume, satire, and performance. Drawing on L. M. Bogad's concept of "tactical carnival," it argues that the carnivalesque operates as a powerful—though precarious—mode of civic expression in contexts where speech and assembly are restricted. While such performances can open temporary spaces for collective imagination and emotional solidarity, they are often enacted under conditions of surveillance and legal risk. In the Thai context, symbolic gestures in public space have, in some instances, led to serious personal consequences, highlighting the complex visibility-performance nexus. The paper proposes that collective, decentralised forms of carnivalesque protest may help to diffuse individual vulnerability while fostering affective bonds and cultural memory. Tactical carnival is thus considered not only a method of protest but also a performative archive—a living form of memory-making that resists forgetting and affirms the right to speak through play.

Keywords: Performative resistance, Tactical Carnival, Political Movements

1. Introduction

In 2020, amid Thailand's escalating political tensions, a group of secondary school students known as the Bad Students emerged as a symbol of youthful dissent. Without formal training in political theory, these students mobilised creativity, digital platforms, and performative tactics to challenge established authority. In one instance, teenagers dressed as cartoon characters raced around the Democracy Monument, satirising state corruption through hunger-themed popular imagery. What began as fragmented symbolic acts soon developed into widespread demonstrations across Bangkok.

These youth-led protests did not arise in isolation. They reflected more than a decade of growing frustration following the 2014 military coup, which steadily eroded democratic norms and limited public space for dissent. In this context, the movement's irreverent humour and theatrical flair offered an alternative grammar of political engagement—rooted in irony, visual symbolism, and affective expression (Thammaboosadee, 2021). When conventional political discourse became stigmatised and surveilled, performative tactics emerged as powerful modes of communication.

Although initially dismissed by many adults as mere “online activism”, the movement was in fact deeply rooted in digital culture, where young organisers cultivated solidarity, shared memes, coordinated protests, and subverted authority through irony and play. Social media platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, and Telegram served not only as tools of communication, but also as incubators for creative resistance. Over time, these virtual performances spilled into physical space, transforming from hashtag campaigns into mass mobilisations in city streets. This digital-to-physical departure marked a significant shift in Thai protest culture, bridging virtual dissent and embodied defiance.

Following the 2023 general election, however, aspirations for democratic reform diminished as the Pheu Thai Party entered a coalition with military-aligned factions. Since then, concerns over human rights have persisted, including the subtle suppression of dissent and increasing reliance on legal mechanisms to regulate public expression. In this tightening landscape, the personal and legal risks of creative protest have intensified. This paper examines how symbolic protest tactics—particularly the use of costume, props, and carnivalesque performance—function under such conditions. As civic space contracts, it asks: What becomes of those who once enacted dissent in public space? And when the broader legal environment grows more restrictive, do playful tactics offer protection, or do they heighten exposure?

Globally, scholars have documented the rise of creative protest strategies in response to neoliberal crises and shrinking democratic space (Bogad 2010; 2016). Studies of the Occupy Gainesville and Food Not Bombs movements in Florida, for instance, highlight the role of spatial and affective citizenship in collective resistance (Sbicca & Perdue, 2014). Humour and symbolic inversion have also been examined as deliberate tactics, as seen in Occupy Wall Street (Hammond, 2020) and. Humor has been recognised as a distinctive tactic within nonviolent resistance, capable of disrupting dominant discourses through its emotional appeal and strategic ambiguity; for instance, in twentieth-century Sweden, humorous activism functioned as a form of “discursive guerrilla warfare,” breaking power structures and enabling alternative political imaginaries (Sørensen, 2017), while protest spectacles in rural China have elicited strong state responses and public sympathy (O’Brien & Deng, 2015). Taken together, these studies illustrate how affective, symbolic, and spatial strategies can challenge dominant power structures, while also revealing the heightened risks faced by activists operating within repressive or surveilled environments.

To investigate these dynamics in Thailand, this paper analyses two emblematic cases. The first is the “Harry Potter protest,” led by human rights lawyer Arnon Nampa on 3 August 2020 at the Democracy Monument. Framed as an act of magical resistance, the protest received wide public attention; Arnon has since been imprisoned (iLaw, 2021). The second is the “People’s Runway” protest of 29 October 2020, where an activist appeared in ornate traditional Thai dress during a fashion-themed demonstration (iLaw, 2022). While these events brought cultural visibility to the movement, they also exposed participants to legal scrutiny. Together, they reveal the double-edged nature of tactical performance in a setting where civil liberties remain fragile, and human rights protections are increasingly contested.

2. Frameworks

Bogad (2016) conceptualises tactical carnival as an oppositional, unsanctioned form of protest that draws on the joy and subversive energy of carnival. Unlike the state-approved, temporary inversions of power described by Bakhtin (1968), tactical carnivals are spontaneous and insurgent. They aim not only to challenge authority but to reimagine protest identities and destabilise dominant narratives through what Bogad puts: “joyous, participatory, and semi-

anonymous” action (2016: 100). The laughter invoked is not merely ambivalent but politically charged, reframing the carnivalesque as a strategic tool for ongoing resistance.

De Certeau’s (1984) distinction between *strategies* (used by institutions to organise power) and *tactics* (used by the marginalised to navigate and subvert) further supports this reading. Tactical performance, in this sense, reclaims everyday space and meaning by repurposing symbols and practices—transforming, for example, a wizard’s costume or a fashion runway into instruments of critique and imagination. In turn, Fominaya (2007) highlights the collective function of humour in protest, noting its role in fostering emotional resilience and group cohesion. In contexts where dissent carries legal and personal risk, shared absurdity and satire may also serve as subtle mechanisms of protection.

Together, these concepts frame protest performance in Thailand not as naïve or isolated acts, but as deliberate, affective tactics and interventions. Whether through fantastical cosplay or choreographed silence, such gestures carve out alternative spaces for expression—producing visibility, solidarity, and vulnerability in equal measure.

3. Methods

This paper employs document analysis and case study methods to examine two key performative protest events in Thailand: the Harry Potter protest (3 August 2020) and the People’s Runway protest (29 October 2020). These cases were selected due to their explicit use of costume, staging, and theatricality to challenge state power, making them particularly rich for analysis through a performance studies lens.

Source materials include news coverage, photographs, activist statements, social media content, court documents, and academic commentary. These artefacts are approached not merely as factual records, but as cultural texts—sites where political meaning is performed, contested, and reimagined. The inclusion of diverse media forms, particularly social media content, reflects the increasingly hybrid nature of protest, where digital platforms function as stages for extending, documenting, and amplifying tactical performances.

This methodological approach serves two purposes. First, it enables a contextual reading of protest as performance, attending to costume, gesture, spatial dynamics, and audience interaction as communicative acts. Second, it allows for an examination of state and institutional responses, tracing how protest is reframed or disciplined through legal, political, and media channels.

Grounded in performance studies and interpretive analysis, this method treats documentation as a site of meaning-making—particularly important in contexts where live protest events are ephemeral, censored, or criminalised. In settings where public dissent is subject to state restriction, visual and textual traces may become the only enduring records. Analysing these artefacts thus becomes essential for understanding how dissent is expressed, remembered, or obscured over time.

By combining document analysis with case study within a critical interpretive framework, this paper positions symbolic protest not only as resistance, but as a contested text—its meanings shaped through performance, spectatorship, media circulation, and institutional regulation. This layered approach foregrounds how performative protest operates both in physical space and across digital platforms, revealing the complex interplay between creativity and precarity in Thailand’s political movements.

4. Findings

4.1 Case Study 1: The “Harry Potter Protest” and the Spectacle of Tactical Carnival

On the evening of 3 August 2020, at Bangkok's Democracy Monument, a group of activists staged a performative protest titled *Casting a Protective Spell for Democracy* (iLaw, 2021). The event invited participants to gather in costume—dressed as witches, wizards, and characters from the Harry Potter series. In a climate marked by fear and legal constraint, the protest drew upon popular culture to engage youth, dramatise resistance, and evoke the collective imagination needed to confront entrenched power.

Participants began arriving in wizarding attire by late afternoon. Police officers were already stationed around the monument and nearby pavements, signalling the state's readiness to monitor even symbolically playful forms of dissent. At 6 p.m., a speaker—dressed as a wizard—addressed the crowd with a story drawn from Harry Potter, about young witches and wizards resisting a dark regime. He concluded with the incantation *Expecto Patronum*, a protective spell, and called on the crowd to remember a Thai activist who had disappeared in Cambodia. The collective repetition of the spell transformed the space into a site of magical mourning and hopeful defiance.

A visually striking moment followed when a participant appeared in a wizard's robe and a mask depicting Deputy Prime Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan. Walking slowly towards the stage, the masked figure drew laughter, cheers, and raised phones from the crowd. When they raised three fingers—the widely recognised symbol of Thai protest—a blend of satire, spectacle, and subversive mimicry emerged. This was protest as carnival: the transformation of fear into humour, and of power into parody.

The evening culminated with human rights lawyer Arnon Nampa taking the stage. Calling for structural change, he held a makeshift wand and led the crowd in chanting spells toward a replica of the Constitution's pedestal. Fiction and political reality interwove: metaphor became method, and the protest became a performance of collective aspiration.

Yet the consequences were swift and severe. Arnon's speech, delivered in a public space long marked by crackdowns, became a pivotal moment. He was subsequently arrested and imprisoned. While the event was shaped by collective energy, his act of speaking openly in a climate of caution underscored both the power and the peril of performative dissent. It was not only the theatricality of the protest that mattered, but the courage of speech in a space where silence often prevails.

The Harry Potter protest illustrates how carnivalesque tactics—costume, parody, popular narrative—can infuse protest with affective force and symbolic clarity. It brought joy and visibility to a moment of political uncertainty. Yet it also revealed the limits of such play in a restricted civic environment. Laughter and spectacle did not insulate participants from legal consequences. In this sense, the event operated as both a protective spell and an invitation to risk: a fleeting reimagining of power, shadowed by the threat of its return.

4.2 Case Study: The People's Runway and the The Politics of Interpretation

On 29 October 2020, at the height of Thailand's youth-led protests, a striking event unfolded in the heart of Bangkok's business district. Protesters organised a fashion show titled “The People's Runway” (iLaw, 2022). Unlike conventional rallies, this protest relied not on speeches but on the embodied aesthetics of movement, costume, and presence. Participants walked a red

carpet dressed in elaborate outfits, among them Jatuporn Sae-Ung, a 23-year-old activist, who wore a traditional Thai dress in pastel pink. She did not speak, chant slogans, or stage any overt mimicry. Her gesture was minimal, performative, and, on the surface, ambiguous. Yet this silence became the very site of her persecution.

Jatuporn was later prosecuted following her appearance on the runway, facing multiple charges related to public assembly and other legal provisions. Although she made no explicit statement or gesture, authorities interpreted her appearance as politically significant. This interpretation emerged largely from contextual elements—such as individuals in the crowd reportedly shouting “Long live the Queen”—highlighting how meaning can be shaped less by intent than by reception. Here, the performance's carnivalesque nature becomes critical. Unlike Arnon Nampa's explicit invocation of democratic reform in the Harry Potter protest, the People's Runway relied on abstraction. It blurred art, fashion, and protest in a way that opened interpretive space. The runway allowed for multiplicity—where protest was suggested rather than declared, and where symbolism operated through style, not speech. This ambiguity, however, did not protect Jatuporn. Instead, it became the basis for state prosecution, enabled in part by academic testimony.

One of the prosecution's key witnesses was a theatre lecturer. Citing her credentials in scriptwriting and directing, argued that Jatuporn's performance was a deliberate impersonation. Although she admitted that interpretation depends on the audience, she nevertheless insisted that the performance “degraded” the monarchy and reflected an intent to ridicule—a claim built entirely on subjective analysis. Her testimony illustrates how performance analysis can be drawn into legal discourse in ways that support official interpretations. However, this subjectivity was not critically examined in court and was instead treated as authoritative, contributing to the justification of legal action.

This case highlights the precarious nature of performative protest in tightly regulated environments, where the gap between intention and interpretation can carry significant consequences. The ambiguity of the fashion protest—its lack of explicit messaging—became a point of contention rather than protection. In this context, the carnivalesque did not shield participants but instead heightened their visibility. Unlike traditional protests that articulate clear demands, the People's Runway operated through atmosphere and presence. Yet even this abstract mode of expression was subject to scrutiny and sanction.

5. Discussion

Carnival is a vital tool within the repertoire of global protest movements—one that fuses spectacle, subversion, and joy to reclaim public space and reimagine collective identities (Duncombe, 2003). Unlike the calendrical, state-sanctioned carnivals described by Bakhtin, tactical carnival is unsanctioned, improvisational, and often confrontational. It emerges when and where needed, offering a vision of “another world” that is not only possible, but performable (Bogad, 2016). Both the Harry Potter protest and the People's Runway exemplify this spirit within the Thai context. These events were not conventional demonstrations but performances of imagined futures. Through costumes, fantasy, collective chanting, and ritualised gestures, activists temporarily suspended fear and created affective spaces of possibility. In Bogad's terms, they became “joyous, participatory, and semi-anonymous” acts of power inversion—forms of protest entered through play rather than ideology.

Yet unlike some of the “relatively safe spaces” associated with tactical carnival in other contexts, Thai activists have faced significant consequences. Arnon Nampa’s use of magical symbolism during a public demonstration preceded his arrest and ongoing imprisonment. Jatuporn Sae-Ung’s silent walk—absent of direct speech or mimicry—led to legal proceedings and her eventual departure from the country. These cases reflect a central tension in tactical carnival: its capacity to generate joyful, symbolic resistance while also exposing participants to legal and political risk, particularly in settings where expressive acts are subject to strict interpretive scrutiny.

Bogad outlines five aims of tactical carnival, including disrupting hegemonic media narratives and creating inclusive, emotionally resonant spaces for participation. Thai activists achieved many of these. The Harry Potter protest disrupted a climate of despair with imaginative symbolism, while the People’s Runway redefined protest as presence—stylised, embodied, and unspoken. These performances offered a shared vocabulary of resistance that was emotionally powerful and visually compelling.

However, the Thai context also reveals the fragility of this strategy. In both cases, state and media actors reinterpreted these performances through criminalising narratives. In Jatuporn’s case, courtroom interpretation became central. A theatre scholar testified that her act constituted mockery, assigning fixed meaning to what was, by nature, ambiguous. Her testimony—grounded in subjective analysis—was not treated as interpretive, but as evidentiary. This illustrates how performance scholarship itself can be mobilised to affirm authority, transforming interpretive flexibility into judicial certainty.

This dynamic reveals a core challenge in repressive contexts: the gap between intention and interpretation becomes a tool of regulation. Where tactical carnival thrives on ambiguity and multiplicity, these qualities can be refigured as threats. Protesters are not only performing resistance; they are being performed upon—read, reinterpreted, and punished within state and institutional scripts.

In such contexts, the collective nature of carnival may offer some protection. As Fominaya (2007) argues, shared laughter and humour build collective identity and emotional resilience. Participatory absurdity—particularly when widely enacted—can confuse authority and raise the political cost of repression. By contrast, highly visible individual performances, even when situated within mass movements, can intensify personal risk.

These cases also prompt a broader consideration of how power itself is performed. State actors—and even expert witnesses—deploy narrative, theatrical language, and symbolism to assert control. In this sense, the courtroom becomes another stage, where authority performs itself with interpretive force.

Ultimately, these risky performances must be understood not only through their consequences, but through their imaginative agency. Thai activists, in defying the spectacle of fear and the constraints of conventional protest, created what Bogad calls a “celebratory culture of active defiance.” Tactical carnival in Thailand redefined what protest could feel and look like—not just oppositional, but participatory, artistic, and emotionally resonant. Even under legal threat, these performances opened fleeting but powerful spaces of joy, satire, and collective play—reminding us that the symbolic and affective dimensions of protest remain potent tools for civic expression.

Importantly, the consequences of such performances should not be interpreted as indicative of strategic failure on the part of the activists. Rather, they reflect the profound risks entailed in confronting authoritarian structures through creative means. The activists’ turn to joy, humour,

and theatricality signals not naivety, but a deliberate and courageous expansion of the repertoire of resistance. What warrants critical scrutiny is not the imaginative tactics employed by protesters, but the repressive legal apparatus that constrains civic space and criminalises symbolic dissent.

6. Conclusion

The protest performances analysed in this paper—whether through wizard costumes invoking protection or silent walks in traditional dress—were not mere acts of spectacle. They constituted embodied expressions of dissent within an environment shaped by surveillance, legal uncertainty, and collective anxiety. That Arnon remains incarcerated and Jatuporn lives in exile underscores the considerable personal costs associated with symbolic resistance in Thailand's contemporary civic landscape.

Yet perhaps most striking is not only the repression they endured, but the gradual silencing that followed. Among younger generations, few recall these events, and fewer still are aware of the risks undertaken by their peers only a few years prior. This absence speaks not simply to the passage of time, but to a broader culture of forgetting—shaped by fear, fatigue, and institutional mechanisms that discourage public remembrance.

This raises important questions: How might past acts of resistance be remembered when direct commemoration remains sensitive? What role might performance—particularly the carnivalesque—play in resisting erasure? The fusion of humour, ritual, and play may offer more than a tactical response to constraint; it may act as a cultural archive, preserving dissent in affective and embodied forms.

Tactical carnival, when enacted collectively, holds potential to transform protest into remembrance—to narrate difficult histories not as fixed records, but as shared, lived experiences. In contexts where traditional memorialisation is limited, performative protest may remain one of the few avenues through which contested memories can persist. Costumes, parody, and collective chanting are not only strategies of resistance in the moment; they are also forms of civic memory that challenge silencing.

Recognising these performances as part of an ongoing cultural archive invites deeper critical engagement with how resistance is remembered, reinterpreted, or rendered invisible. It also calls for a broader commitment—not only to document such moments, but to sustain space for them in public discourse. In doing so, we acknowledge not only those who dared to perform dissent, but also the enduring value of creative acts in shaping political memory.

In the aftermath of these performative protests, as legal proceedings unfold and public assemblies diminish, digital platforms continue to serve a meaningful, albeit less visible, role. The absence of physical spectacle does not signal disengagement, but rather a shift in mode—a turn toward sustaining cultural memory and collective narratives through digital means. Social media spaces function as archives, affective forums, and sites of narrative rehearsal. Here, past acts are revisited not only to remember what occurred, but to reaffirm the values at stake, acknowledge ongoing injustices, and keep the discourse alive. In this way, the online sphere becomes a space of ongoing engagement—less visible, yet potent—ready to catalyse future movements in physical space when memory is transmitted, injustice is felt, the will for a fairer order is rehearsed, and collective action is once again performed.

Future research may further explore how performative protest circulates across generational and digital spaces, or how its meanings evolve in the absence of official recognition. Such work

could contribute to ongoing discussions on cultural memory, embodiment, and the politics of visibility in contested civic environments

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