

“Hunger Games” salute now banned by Thailand’s military leaders

Source: Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff

Life is imitating art in Thailand—or at least imitating a very popular movie. Students there are using a hand gesture from the “Hunger Games” movies to protest against military leaders now running the country. The Thai army has banned the three-finger salute.

Three students in the capital, Bangkok, were arrested in a movie theatre showing “The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 1.” The students were the latest protesters accused of using a hand gesture from the movie. “Mockingjay” is the newest movie based on the books by Suzanne Collins about teens fighting a dictatorship.

Thailand’s military took over the government on May 22 and imposed martial law, cutting back civil liberties and preventing people from protesting. The military said it was necessary to restore order after months of protests.

Reading “1984”

Thailand had been affected by demonstrations for and against the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Opponents accused his government of corruption and said it should go. Supporters of the government said it was elected democratically and should stay.

Gathering of five or more people have been banned since the military took over in May. Frustrated by not being able to gather and demand a return to democracy, young protesters are using symbols.

Some protesters are reading in public George Orwell’s “1984,” a novel about a dictatorship. Other protesters are raising the salute borrowed from the movies to protest against Thailand’s military leaders.

Premieres of “Mockingjay” were cancelled at two Bangkok movie theatres. Student organizers had brought up hundreds of tickets. They planned to give tickets away and gather opponents of the military. A colonel with the city’s police said the three students arrested were taken to an army camps for “attitude adjustment.”

The Chinese government has also put off the release of “Mockingjay” in the country’s theatres until next year, said the magazine Variety. It wasn’t clear if that was because of the movie’s popularity with pro-democracy activists. Chinese officials have been dealing with protesters demanding more democracy in Hong Kong for more than a month.

Three-Finger Salute to Leader

In Thailand, five other student protesters were arrested for using the three-finger salute. They flashed the sign during a speech by the army’s leaders, Prayuth Chan-Ocha.

Prayuth told journalist it only bothered him when the students used the hand sign because it could “ruin their future.” Prayuth also told reporters that martial law will continue until the time is right to end it.

Defenders of human rights criticized the government for banning even symbols of protest.

These actions are part of a pattern of human rights violations, said Matilda Bogner, a United Nations human rights official. The actions shut down critics and independent voices, she said.

“Life in Thailand is growing more absurd by the day,” John Sifton wrote in a Twitter post. He works for Human Rights Watch.

If Prayuth’s government is that afraid of young people imitating a movie, that is a sign that things need to change, Sifton wrote.