

Lottery price cap is a litmus test for NCPO credibility



The high cost of lottery tickets continues as vendors shun the NCPO's price-control measures. Will there be more challenges to the military regime?

THINK PRAGMATIC

Veera Prateepchaikul



In mid-July, the Krung Thep Poll by Bangkok University released the results of an opinion survey involving about 1,200 people whose views were gauged on how confident they were with efforts by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) to solve the problem of overpriced lottery tickets.

Almost 43% of the respondents said they were confident the NCPO would be able to tackle the problem in a sustainable manner, while 39.4% admitted they were not confident. Some 17.7% said they didn't know.

The high rating given to the NCPO was not to be unexpected as the military junta appeared to be riding the crest of a wave of popularity, with terse announcements on bringing down the retail lottery price to 80 baht per ticket from prices that ranged from 100 to 110 on average — and even more if the tickets were sold in batches of two to 10.

At the time, the NCPO had imposed new measures to put in order the employment of migrant workers from neighbouring countries to ensure they were accorded fair treatment and were not exploited by brokers, human traffickers, employers and even corrupt government officials.

But there were critics who doubted the junta could solve the lottery overpricing

problem permanently through a half-hearted approach that appealed to lottery sellers not to overcharge buyers. One of the critics was Mae Look Chan, a columnist for the mass-circulation newspaper *Thai Rath*.

Mae Look Chan said by relying on the retailers to sell the tickets at no more than 92 baht apiece — the price was adjusted upwards by the NCPO after it felt that the 80-baht rate was unrealistic — was not the right approach.

He said he did not understand the rationale of NCPO leader Gen Prayuth Chan-ocha in believing he could appeal to the good nature of lottery vendors.

Mae Look Chan was definitely right then and now — that you cannot appeal for cooperation from the Big Three of lottery vendors who form the first tier of the trade to the street vendors.

He pointed out that at a 92 baht retail price per ticket (and 72 baht at wholesale price), gave a margin of 17 baht profit to be shared among the second-tier, third-tier and final tier of traders or retailers.

I am not a regular lottery ticket buyer, although once upon a time I would buy a few tickets just for kicks.

A few days ago, I walked past several lottery stalls in Klong Toey and in Bang Sue and found the vendors had put up the prices to 100-110 baht in open defiance of the NCPO's suggestion that the price be capped at 92 baht.

What does that mean? It means a lot of things. It means the lottery traders from the top down to the bottom don't give a damn about the NCPO, and Gen Prayuth in particular.

It also means the junta has failed in one of the first jobs it tackled after the May 22 coup.

What is more worrisome is that this may have an impact on the credibility of the NCPO and undermine public confidence in the junta as it and its nominee government embark on more complicated challenges such as national reform, economic problems and national reconciliation.

If the lottery overpricing problem is allowed to continue and it is left in the hands of the Government Lottery Office to handle without a new round of intervention from the NCPO — this time with more seriousness — I wonder whether its efforts which appear to be partially successful — such as the new order for motorcycle taxi services, illegal parking and eviction of encroachers on forest reserves and national parks — will turn out to be just a flash in the pan.

The dropping of anti-NCPO leaflets in front of the army headquarters on Ratchadamnoen Avenue before dawn on Friday amounts to “pulling the whiskers of the tiger”, as an old Thai saying goes.

The perpetrators could have dropped the leaflets anywhere else and more people would have had a good chance to get hold of one of them. But no. They wanted to defy the junta and dropped the leaflets right on its doorstep.

The NCPO is bound to face more challenges or acts of defiance by its opponents once martial law is lifted and national governance is passed on to the interim government.

But it cannot afford to be half-hearted

if it wants to rectify the many wrongs which have been ignored by previous governments.

"Don't spoil the chance!" are the words of advice from those who don't want to see Gen Prayuth fail in the same way as his preceding coup maker, Gen Sonthi Boonyaratglin, whose tenure failed miserably.

Veera Prateepchaikul is former editor, Bangkok Post.