

On a recent trip to Mega Bangna, I had a brochure thrust into my hand.

This is not an uncommon occurrence, since you need to get a parking card upon arrival at Mega Bangna. Machines are installed at the entrance for this purpose but alas, they require one to press a green button and take a ticket before the gate goes up, an act beyond the capability of the average driver. It is a much better idea to hire somebody in a uniform to press the button for you, and thus an official is on hand to dispense the cards.

Besides, having a driver pressing a green button is a lost opportunity for ad agencies.

I have a theory about Thailand that the proliferation of serene temples must be counterbalanced by screeching TV ads in every public nook and cranny, as well as loud literature such as the type thrust into one's hand when receiving a parking ticket.

Forewarned is forearmed. Having ventured into Mega Bangna on previous occasions (this time to order a new pair of glasses), I was aware the parking official would try to slip some form of advertising under my parking ticket.

Thus when the friendly lady attempted to hand over an Ikea promotion — two sausages and chips at the obscenely cheap price of 50 baht — I brushed it aside. "No advertising for me!" I barked.

The friendly lady then handed me a *second* brochure; her audacity caused a momentary lapse in my forthrightness and I accepted it, and ventured further towards my optometric destination.

It wasn't until I was inside that I realised what I had been handed.

Subversive literature.

Specifically, a brochure clearly telling me to vote YES in the upcoming referendum!

Thailand goes to the polls on Aug 7 to vote in a referendum about the new draft constitution. The Thai public doesn't just vote YES or

MORE SUBVERSIVE THAN AN IKEA AD

The yes-no questions for the Aug 7 referendum aren't exactly open to debate in the literature handed out at the mall **By Andrew Biggs**

NO; there's an added question asking if it's OK for the Senate to appoint the prime minister for the next five years.

That is all I am allowed to write about the referendum. I can't proffer an opinion, because if I do, then I risk military prison.

The government has made it clear there are to be no debates on the referendum. Well, it is a grey area, with various ministers and the prime minister himself taking slightly differing stances on what exactly "no debate" means. At first it was fairly clear, until the news got out overseas, and organisations like the UN started voicing their opposition to Thailand's restriction of thought. Nowadays the military government has softened its stance and it is only illegal to voice an opinion, either for or against, in public with the aim of swaying opinion. Apparently one can do it from the comfort of one's own home.

This is why the Thai-language media hasn't made any break-out boxes showing the pros and cons of the constitution. This is why I am under strict instructions at the radio station not to make any little asides after reading news of the referendum.

This is also why we have seen dissident students and red shirt followers ending up in military holding camps. They have been printing or attempting to distribute literature

that explains some of the negative aspects of the new draft constitution. If the area of presenting an opinion is grey, then printing NO literature is not.

One cannot blame the military government for this stance. It is inherent in its very nature. The military is a structure not conducive to differing opinions; when your boot-camp sergeant-major tells you to do 100 push-ups, you have no opportunity to relay detailed rebuttal as to why you should not undertake such a punishment.

Nevertheless reporters did ask about this a few months ago. If offering a NO opinion in public was illegal, then did it logically follow that a YES opinion was illegal as well? Well, kind of, the government replied, shuffling its feet, nervously picking at its cuticles, then finally falling back on the "no debates" ruling. The bottom line: Don't say anything that might make the general public restless. Or conflicted. Or, perhaps, *think*.

Unfortunately this has had a negative effect, as demonstrated by recent opinion polls. Just last week, a Bangkok Poll revealed Thais had next to no knowledge about the draft constitution, the date of the referendum and the added question about the Senate appointing the prime minister. More than 90% had no idea of that extra question and



why would they? Who's told them about it?

Things are clearly changing, if Mega Bangna is anything to go by. That brochure I received was clearly subversive because it took a stance, just like those dissident students and the red shirts did before they got arrested. The cover depicts the Democracy Monument and a headline: HELP BUILD AND DEVELOP THE COUNTRY! HELP BUILD QUALITY FOR THAI PEOPLE!

Inside were nine different points about the draft constitution with a short explanation of each, such as "Everybody is equal from the moment you are in your mother's womb," "Sincere efforts will be made to wipe out corruption," and "The gap between the wealthy and the poor will lessen." Having read those topics, how did I feel? Like I wanted to rush out and vote YES? Of course I did. And if everybody feels like this, not just one sole disenfranchised columnist languishing in an eastern suburbs monolith, then this brochure is clearly against the law. It proffers an opinion.

Or is it that things are changing? Last Monday it was announced the government would make a TV show, 10 episodes over the next two weeks, explaining the constitution. Best of all, it would include opposing opinions — and this coming from a military government. (The programmes go to air from 1pm to 2pm, Monday to Friday, on Thai PBS. This is a television station whose viewing public at that time is the dreaded "asterisk" on the ratings sheet; that is, too small to be able to be properly measured. But let us not be negative about this.) There was even last-minute talk of having a debate — it was almost as if saying no so often had put them off message.

Perhaps Mega Bangna is a good sign, too. As I waited for my optometrist to calculate how much of my arm and leg he would require for my lenses, I wondered if the fault lay at Mega Bangna and not with the government. I had originally intended to report Mega Bangna for distributing literature with a single bias, until I realised the literature is the work of the Constitution Drafting Commission itself. Then I wondered if maybe there were *two* brochures that the parking lady had on hand — one for the constitution, and one against. That would certainly make more sense,

wouldn't it? I got the pro-literature already; maybe there is a brochure explaining the cons of the constitution as well.

A week has passed. Yesterday I had to pick up my prescription sunglasses from Mega Bangna. They are very trendy, as well as ensuring my diet for the next month will be restricted to steamed rice and Maggi sauce. As I approached Mega Bangna in my car I wondered if the friendly lady in the parking booth had any of those NO brochures. A hand shot out with the very same YES brochure I received the week before. It didn't hurt to ask. "What about the other one?" I asked. The pleasant lady in the booth smiled back. "Sorry?" "The other brochure. Is there another one? The one that goes with this one!" She looked a little quizzical. Then her face brightened up. "Oh! Yes! Sorry! I nearly forgot!" Triumphant, she handed over the brochure about the Ikea sausages and chips. ■