

## Prachatai's Person of the Year 2016: Naritsarawan Keawnopparat

She would not let the death of her uncle be worthlessly forgotten, braving legal, physical and mental threats in a fight against military-backed torture. Prachatai introduces Naritsarawan 'May' Keawnopparat, our Person of the Year 2016.

### Naritsarawan 'May' Keawnopparat

In 2011, May's uncle Wichian Puaksom volunteered for army service in Narathiwat province, in the restive Deep South of Thailand. Only a month after his service started, he died from brutal torture and maltreatment committed at the hands of some 10 soldiers. An investigation by the 4th Army Region found that Wichian was severely tortured by his superiors and other soldiers after he was accused of running away from military training.

'My grandma said she hardly recognised her son's body because it was so covered in bruises and torture marks,' May said.

Instead of finding the criminals, the military camp offered her family over three million baht in exchange for not prosecuting and keeping silent.

'After [Wichian] first meet a doctor, the camp insisted on bringing him back with them [to the camp]. But the doctor protested and immediately transferred him to Narathiwat Hospital. It seemed like [the military] wanted him dead,' May explained.

'When Wichian arrived at the hospital, he wrote a list of phone numbers and asked his roommate to contact them to deliver his last words: 'the first lieutenant ordered'. He died that evening.'

From these last words, May's family decided to refuse the compensation in order to bring those responsible for Wichian's death to justice. Their pursuit of the truth has subsequently led to the dismissal of nine soldiers — but not 'the first lieutenant'. It is a fight that has risked May's life.

Wichian Puaksom had been ordained into Buddhist monkhood for over eight years before volunteering for army service. (Photo from May's Facebook account)

### Bravery in the face of bullets

Quickly, mysterious envelopes filled with bullets and incense began arriving at May's house in Songkhla Province. Local officers began sending neighbours to convince, and sometime threaten, her family into accepting the compensation.

'They told us the dead cannot be brought back. Those alive should take the money and live their lives. If not, we will follow the dead.' The intimidation seemed to cease as May's story was reported more widely, going viral on social media.

But this year, 'the first lieutenant', since promoted to the title of Captain Phuri Perksophon, launched a campaign of vilification against May. She was accused of violating the defamation law

under Thailand's Criminal Code and the controversial Computer Crimes Act, a law against the importation of illegal computer content.

The prosecution came after she shared a Facebook post saying that Phuri managed to evade punishment, and was even promoted to a higher rank, because his father is an influential general. She was arrested from her workplace in Bangkok without any prior summons warrant and immediately transferred to Narathiwat Province, where the charge was filed.

May had her fingerprints recorded at Narathiwat Police Station on 28 July 2016 (Photo from [Matichon Online](#))

Thanks again to support from media and civil society, her lawsuit has been strictly monitored by both domestic and international human right organisations. She has even decided to file charges against the police officers who enforced the arrest and lawsuit against her for violating due process.

'My uncle's life must not be valueless'

May felt disheartened many times throughout her five-year fight. When she initiated her protest against torture, she was a sophomore at Thammasat University's Faculty of Social Administration. She often had to miss class in order to proceed the lawsuit.

'One day, I came back to the class. I looked at the blackboard and had no idea what the teacher was talking about because I had missed so much class. I don't usually cry in public, as I would rather do it in my private room. But on that day, I wept in the lecture room shortly after the teacher walked out. I just couldn't help myself. I asked myself why didn't I take the money? What's the point of doing this? Because there was no glimpse of justice at that time.'

The one reason that kept her fighting was that 'her uncle's life must not be valueless'.

May filed charge against the police officers on 24 November 2016 (Photo from May's Facebook)

Now, Wichain's legacy has significantly shaken the authoritarian culture behind military camps. Recently, the supervisor responsible for the death of Songtham Mutmat, a conscript who was beaten to death for allegedly disciplinary offences, was dismissed after just three months.

Wichian was not the first individual tortured to death during his training. Amnesty International's report 'Make Him Speak By Tomorrow' shows that between 2014 and 2015, there were at least 74 cases of torture and other ill-treatment by Thai authorities. The victims vary from conscripts, insurgent suspects, illegal migrants to suspected drug dealers.

While most victims accept compensation, and leave justice forgotten, May decided to fight with her hands. Her actions have forced the military to be more responsive to torture allegations, especially when it happens to a conscript. The military now has a strict policy to deter torture and ill-treatment that includes more CCTVs around military camps and the prohibition of superiors from having physical contact with their juniors.

May is now a regular speaker in public seminars on topics related to impunity culture, torture and ill-treatment. She is looking forwards to working more closely with the military to solve the problem of torture from the inside and to improve the wellbeing of conscripts nationwide.

'I've seen that the military tries to find a solution, not an excuse, so I want to help them solve the problem and improve conscripts' wellbeing. Military camps nationwide must have the same standards and accountability systems. Cases like my uncle's must not happen again.'

May (second from the right) has been invited to speak in public forum since she was a student. Now she is working at Department of Children and Youth, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (Photo from May's Facebook account)

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