

THAILAND: THE “OCTOBER MOVEMENT” AND THE TRANSFORMATION TO DEMOCRACY

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In the 1960s, following years of military dictatorship in Thailand, the country’s connection with the United States, which it viewed as a protector from the communist revolutions sweeping neighboring states, prompted broad swathes of society to discuss Western values with their reformist impetus. With the beginning of the Vietnam War in 1964, massive amounts of military and economic assistance flowed into the country, supplemented by the presence of American military units.

By 1968, there were 50,000 American soldiers in Thailand. Conversely, numerous young Thai officials, scientists, and scholars received scholarships to study the United States. The rising surge of modernization and continuing economic growth enlarged the middle class, as well as the number of young people studying at universities. The close relationship to the US brought not only classical liberal values to Thailand but also the alternative lifestyles of American youth, such as the hippie movement.

The longing for democracy, freedom, and the rule of law grew. At the same time, despite being drawn to the liberal values of American culture, students vehemently criticized American racism—embodied for them in the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. (1968). They also criticized developments in America’s involvement in Vietnam, particularly the “My Lai Massacre” of March 1968, in which hundreds of unarmed South Vietnamese citizens, including children and the elderly, were mercilessly slaughtered. Countering official anti-communist propaganda, students now started to call the American government the “White Peril.” Gradually, sympathy for socialist values spread, inspired, in particular, by the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Although military dictator Thanom Kittikachorn ruled Thailand from 1963 to 1973, Thailand briefly became a constitutional state in 1968. Still, Kittikachorn appointed himself prime minister after elections in 1969, and then, in 1971, revoked the constitution with a staged inside putsch in 1971, supposedly to purge communist infiltration. Protests now swept campuses, particularly at

Thammasat University in Bangkok, where student organizations demonstratively set a black wreath at the monument to democracy. This event laid the symbolic foundation stone of the student protest movement.

October Movement and social change in Thailand

A clear transformation of values began in Thailand at this time, such that voices of protest became louder and more numerous, demanding democratic structures and an end to corruption. This transformation sparked a shift in social and political consciousness that has endured to the present.

Between 1971 and 1973, violent clashes erupted at many universities. When the military government issued a decree to place the independent judiciary under its control, students organized an ongoing protest until the decree was revoked. When nine students at Ramkhamhaeng University were expelled in 1973 for criticizing members of the government for their illegal conduct at a hunt in a nature reserve, students at several universities took to the streets. This spurred the nullification of the expulsions and the resignation of the pro-military government director of the university.

A Thai soldier in a gas mask orders protesting students away from tanks as a massive demonstration turns to riot in Bangkok on Oct. 15, 1973.

In October 1973, however, the spirit of protest peaked with a violent three-day uprising that ended Kittikachorn's military rule. Students and intellectuals publicly demanded a new constitution. When the



demonstrators were arrested, students at Thammasat University called for a mass protest against the military government. The student protest soon widened into a national revolt: on October 13, more than 500,000 people peacefully demonstrated in Bangkok, demanding the immediate release of the arrested protesters and the completion of

a constitution within six months. The next day, October 14, the police and the military broke up the demonstration in a bloody clash. Resistance nevertheless continued until Prime Minister Kittikachorn and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces resigned all their offices and went into exile.

A euphoric wave of democratization and liberalization then swept across Thailand. The general population called for political safeguards of social justice. On the left margin of society, socialist and communist ideals enjoyed considerable popularity among students and intellectuals.

Established institutions react

To be sure, not all were happy with this “spirit of change.” The old elite and some segments of the general population alike felt threatened by this revolt against traditional values. To counteract these changes and maintain their established positions of power after 1973, some of the old elite mobilized, ready to use their connections to groups that would even use violence against the student movement.

Then, the circumstances changed, turning a much greater portion of the population, including the lower and middle classes, against the student protest movement: the oil crisis triggered inflation, American troops retreated from Southeast Asia, and communists took over in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, exacerbating fears. Feeling insecure, broad swathes of the population blamed the student protest movement for all the problems.

At the beginning of October 1976, the situation reached a head. Kittikachorn had returned to Thailand as a novice monk, and outraged student protestors had mobilized. Eventually, on October 5, when a newspaper ran a photo of a mock hanging by protestors that had been doctored to look like the crown prince, the student protestors were accused of *lèse majesté*. A massacre at Thammasat University, wherein hundreds of protestors were killed, and a military putsch ensued on October 6, returning the country to military rule and eradicating the student movement. Most students returned to everyday life or left the country to study in Europe or America. Several hundred members of the active core of the movement fled to the communists in the jungle. However, only a few years later, they would return to be respected politicians or professors at Thammasat University when they were granted amnesty and returned to mainstream society.

In sum, it may be said that the events of October 6, 1976, slowed down the “spirit of change” but did not put a halt to it. Although the student movement was eradicated, the “spirit of change” survived. It could no longer be banned from public and intellectual discussion. Nearly twenty years later, in 1992, when representatives of the generation of 1973 had become part of the academic avant-garde and had assumed influential positions in public media, administration, and the economy, the movement for democracy began again, renewing resistance against a military government. Since then, the political situation in Thailand has shifted many times, but one thing has remained constant: the spirit of liberal-democratic development entered directly into the Thai constitution of 1997 and continues to be an integral component of the contemporary discussion of law, politics, and society.

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