

Cleansing democracy of socialism

Crushing the Thai Left on the 6th Oct 1976 and the consequences for present day politics

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Abstract

On the morning of 6th October 1976, Thai uniformed police, alongside armed semi-fascist thugs, crushed the student movement in Thailand. This brutal state crime was supported, either directly or indirectly, by all sections of the Thai ruling elite. Their aim was not so much the crushing of the young parliamentary democracy, which had arisen after the mass popular uprising three years earlier, but the destruction of the growing socialist movement throughout the country. This was achieved in the long term also by the subsequent collapse of the stalinist Communist Party of Thailand. This destruction of the left came not only in organisational form, but also in terms of the present collective historical memory about the Thai left. The results of “cleansing democracy of socialism” can be seen in the present corrupt and money dominated system of Thai parliamentary politics. Yet, the impact of the Asian Economic Crisis and a whole new generation of people with little knowledge of the 1970s, means that socialism may yet creep back into Thai democracy. The Populist policies of the new *Thai Ruk Thai* government may be an indication of social pressure from below and the re-emergence of class-based politics.

Crushing the Left in 1976

The received wisdom in Thai society states that “socialism is an alien creed, not popular with Thais”. Yet there was a time when a significant proportion of the population openly supported socialist ideas. In the General Elections of January 1975, three left-wing parties, The Socialist Party of Thailand, The Socialist Front and New Force Party won a total of two and a half

million votes or 14.4% of the total vote (Morrell & Samudavanija 1981; 265). In addition to this, the ideological influence of the illegal Communist Party of Thailand was particularly significant among young students, trade unionists and farmer-activists. In present day Thai politics all political parties are allied to capital and business and even the memory of 1970s radicalism seems to have been eradicated. How did this happen?

In the early hours of 6th October 1976, Thai uniformed police, stationed in the grounds of the National Museum, next door to Thammasat University, destroyed a peaceful gathering of students and working people on the university campus under a hail of relentless automatic fire ¹. At the same time a large gang of ultra-right-wing “informal forces”, known as the Village Scouts, Krating-Daeng and Nawapon, indulged in an orgy of violence and brutality towards anyone near the front entrance of the university. Students and their supporters were dragged out of the university and hung from the trees around Sanam Luang; others were burnt alive in front of the Ministry of “Justice” while the mob danced round the flames. Women and men, dead or alive, were subjected to the utmost degrading and violent behaviour. One woman had a piece of wood shoved up her vagina. Village Scouts dragged dead and dying students from the front of the campus and dumped them on the road, where they were finished-off. A young man plunged a sharp wooden spike into the corpses while a boy urinated over them. Not only did the state’s “forces of law and order” do nothing to halt this violence, some uniformed members of the police force were filmed cheering-on the crowd ².

From before dawn that morning, students had been prevented from leaving the campus by police who were stationed at each gate. The operation was what Thais call “slamming the door to beat the cat”. Inside the sealed university campus violence was carried out by heavily armed police from the Crime Suppression Division, the Border Patrol Police and the Special Forces Unit of the Metropolitan Police. Un-armed women and men students who had fled initial rounds of heavy gunfire to take refuge in the Commerce Faculty building were chased out at gun point and made to lie face down on the grass of the football field, without shirts. Uniformed police fired heavy machine guns over their heads. The hot spent shells burnt the skin on their bare backs as they lay on the field. Other students who tried to escape from campus buildings via the rear entrance to the university, were hunted down and shot without mercy. Wimolwan, a Mahidol University nursing student and volunteer member of “Nurses for the Masses” was shot dead in the Chaopraya river, at the back of Thammasat, while she and her friends tried to swim to safety. At least 5 medical and nursing students from Mahidol University who were volunteer members of Nurses for the Masses, were killed on that day (Friends of Mahidol 1997). The invading police showed no respect towards anyone found in the temporary field hospital in the basement of the Commerce Faculty. Some seriously wounded students who were lucky enough to make it to a single ambulance that had been called to the campus, had to wait for hours without proper medical help or even water, until the police allowed the ambulance to leave the campus. Volunteer student nurses tried to keep the wounded alive by feeding them their own saliva.

Examples of courage and the struggle for human dignity shone through the violence and brutality of that day. Auntie Mien, a middle-aged machine shop worker from Makasan Railway yard, was sheltering in the Commerce building along with many students. As a trade unionist she had opposed the military dictatorship of Thanom and Prapat since before it was

¹ This account is compiled from witness statements given to “The 6 October 1976 Fact-finding Committee” in September 2000 and from written accounts such as Puey Ungphakorn 1976 and Anderson 1977.

² “6 October 1976” video compiled from live television footage at the time.

overthrown during the 14th October 1973 uprising, 3 years previously. At that time she had encouraged her husband to also take an interest in politics. On the 14th October 1973 her husband was shot dead while protesting against the military dictatorship. Mien was in Thammasat on 6th October 1976 because she wanted to protest against the return of ex-dictator Field Marshal Thanom from exile in Singapore. It was Thanom whom she held responsible for her husband's death. In fact all those present on the university campus on the morning of 6th October were there as part of a protest against Thanom's return and the threat of a new dictatorship.

As Auntie Mien was rudely herded out of the Commerce building at gun-point, she refused to allow police to steal her hand bag and all its belongings. She had previously seen men in uniform systematically kick and rob the youngsters as they left the building. She also refused to bow her head down as ordered; she felt that she had done nothing wrong.

Pachern and his wife risked their lives to conceal wounded students from the police by covering them with a board and then lying on top of it. When the police found Pachern they beat him with their guns and kicked and punched him. Sixteen years later Pachern's wife and fourteen year old son were killed by the military in the bloody May uprising of 1992.

Many of those who died on that day gave up their lives to save others. The student security force, which was set up by necessity to protect peaceful student demonstrations from violent attacks, took heavy casualties. This force was necessarily armed because on previous occasions right-wing goon squads had shot at, and thrown bombs into, unarmed student gatherings causing many deaths. For example, in March 1975, at Siam Square, four people died and 24 were injured after a bomb was thrown into a demonstration against U.S. military bases. Socialists, and prominent leaders of student, worker and farmer organisation were systematically murdered in that period. On each occasion, the police did nothing to stop such violence. In fact there is evidence that organisations linked to the security forces helped to organise such attacks³. Only one minute after the Siam Square incident, the Tank Corps radio station announced news of the bomb attack, as though it had helped to plan it and Krating-Daeng thugs were seen using police radios (Morell & Samudavanija, 1981;167).

On the morning of 6th October 1976 the brave members of the student guard fired their meagre collection of small hand guns in a last minute attempt to delay the invading hordes, while thousands of their friends escaped out through the back of the university towards the river. Their task had always been to fight off the Krating-Daeng and other groups of thugs, not take on the armed might of the state. They were heavily out gunned and most of them eventually died.

Apart from the student guard, student leaders like Thongchai Winichakul, Somsak Jeamteerasakul and Chavalit Winichakul, also risked their lives to save others. As the football field at the centre of the Thammasat campus came under sustained heavy fire from the police, they continued to give speeches from the makeshift open-air platform, erected at one end of the field. Since the police could not see all the football ground at this time, the aim was to draw police fire towards the open-air assembly area while people took refuge in the Commerce and Journalism buildings. Towards the end, Thongchai had to continue his speech

³ Witness No. 54, Songchit, at "The 6 October 1976 Fact-finding Committee" in September 2000, stated that while listening to police radio communications in March 1975, he heard police give direction to the bombers at Siam Square.

while lying on the ground as the stage itself came under heavy fire. There, he repeatedly asked the police to stop shooting. He was ignored.

Shopkeepers and ordinary house-holders around the back entrance of Thammasat tried to hide students from the police as they escaped via the river. One Chinese shopkeeper, in his 60s, saved half a dozen students from arrest by pulling them off the streets to hide in his shop. On many occasions the police threatened to open fire on shops and houses which sheltered students. The students were not kicked-out by these good people; they left so as not to bring trouble to their hosts. Other examples of acts of courage included the volunteer medical students from Sirirat Hospital, who came across the river by boat to tend the wounded in Thammasat University under fire.

The director of Channel 9 state-owned TV station, Sampasiri Wirayasiri, observed what was happening at first hand that morning. *“It was our sons and daughters that were being murdered. How could they do such things? I didn’t have a gun. My only way to fight this injustice was to film what was happening, so everyone could see the truth”* (I.T.V. 1999a). Sampasiri was sacked from his job immediately afterwards.

Such are the lengths to which the ruling class are prepared to go to cling on to power. Such are the lengths to which many brave Thais are prepared to go to fight for freedom and justice. That morning thousands of students were arrested in Thammasat while many more escaped. Their friends, relatives and supporters watched the scenes of brutality on Thai TV screens in horror before they were blanked-out by government censors. Even some low-ranking police officers, especially ones from the local Chanasongkram police station, were shocked. These officers initially tried to help the students escape from the campus before their units were replaced by hardened units of the Border Patrol Police.

Understanding the brutality of the 6 October 1976

The actions of the police and right-wing mobs on 6th October were the culmination of attempts by the ruling class to stop the further development of a socialist movement in Thailand. The events at Thammasat University were followed by a military coup which brought to power one of the most right-wing governments Thailand has ever known. In the days that followed, offices and houses of organisations and individuals were raided. Trade unionists were arrested and trade union rights were curtailed, centre-left and left-wing newspapers were closed and their offices ransacked, political parties, student unions and farmer organisations were banned. The new military regime released a list of 204 banned books ⁴. University libraries were searched and books were confiscated and publicly burnt. Over 100,000 books were burnt when Sulak Sivaraksa’s book shop and warehouse was ransacked (Bowie, 1997; 30). Apart from obvious “Communists” like Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao or Jit Pumisak, authors such as Pridi Panomyong, Maxim Gorky, Julius Nyerere, Saneh Chamarik, Chai-anan Samudavanija, Charnvit Kasetsiri and Rangsan Tanapornpan appeared on the list of banned books (Satian & Suebwong 1984 and Rachakitchanubegsa 94).

The Thai ruling class’ desire to destroy the further development of the socialist movement, especially in urban areas, can be understood by exploring the political climate at the time. Three years earlier, on 14th October 1973, a mass popular movement for democracy, led by

⁴ A Thai language copy of Lenin’s “State and Revolution” was successfully hidden in a library cupboard at the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, until it was rediscovered by a graduate student in 1997.

students, had overthrown the military, which had been in power since 1957. This mass movement was the peak of a wave of protests against social injustice that gradually accumulated over the period. It was preceded by strikes and demonstrations over a whole range of issues like the cost of living, rural poverty, the price of petrol, U.S. and Japanese imperialism, abuse of power by the military and the destruction of the environment. However, the establishment of parliamentary democracy on its own did not begin to solve these deep-rooted social problems. Therefore the protests, strikes and factory occupations intensified. At the same time the U.S.A. was losing the war in Vietnam. By 1975 Communist governments were in power in Lao, Vietnam and Cambodia and in Thailand rural insurgency by the Communist Party of Thailand (C.P.T.) was on the increase. The events of the 6th October and the subsequent coup were not a simple return to military rule. They were an attempt to crush the popular movement for social justice. They were an attempt to eradicate the Left and strengthen the position of the elite.

However, a mere 3 years after the military had been thrown out of power by a popular uprising, the ruling class could not simply stage another coup. The memory of the 14th October 1973 was still too fresh. The military lacked legitimacy for any blunt political interventions. Simple military means were not enough. This explains the importance of using the police at Thammasat on 6th October and also the creation and use of the various “informal forces”.

In his analysis of Fascism in Germany, written in the early 1930s as Hitler rose to power, Leon Trotsky wrote ... *“At the moment that the ‘normal’ police and military resources of the bourgeois dictatorship, together with their parliamentary screens, no longer suffice to hold society in a state of equilibrium - the turn of the fascist regime arrives.”* (Trotsky 1989; 87) Although the military regime that came to power on 6th October was not actually a fascist regime, there are many similarities between the methods used by the Thai ruling class to destroy the left, previous to the coup, and methods used by European fascists in the pre-war period.

In Europe, fascism obtained its mass support from the disenchanted middle classes and the urban unemployed. As Trotsky put it: *“Through the fascist agency, capitalism sets in motion the masses of the crazed petty bourgeoisie, and bands of the declassed and demoralised lumpen proletariat ...”*. Similarly, in Thailand in 1975 and 1976 the middle classes and the urban unemployed became the base of support for ultra-right-wing forces (Anderson 1977 ; 18).

Unlike fascism in Germany, which arose from outside the ruling class, but later became a tool of that class, it was the Thai ruling class which created the three main organisations with which to deal with the Left, although in an uncoordinated fashion. The largest right-wing organisation was the Village Scouts. At the peak of its existence, 20% of the Thai adult population were members, numbering over 3 million scouts (Bowie 1997; 83, 298). Initially this movement was a rural movement initiated by the Border Patrol Police in order to counter C.P.T. influence in the villages (Bowie 1997; 22). Since the state could deny any involvement with the right-wing groups, any mass disturbances resulting from their actions, such as the brutality of 6th October, could be used as an excuse to stage a coup “to restore order”.

The use of such informal right-wing groups created a great deal of fear among left-wing activists because their actions were never constrained by the legal system. This climate of

fear grew to its peak after the brutal pictures of burnings and hangings on the 6th October were broadcast throughout the country. Among some, the fear is still present to this day.

The role of the Thai ruling class in 6th October

It would be wrong to think that there was a tightly coordinated plan, by the entire Thai ruling class, which led to the 6th October events. Conversely, it would also be wrong to suggest that only one or two individuals or groups were behind the crushing of the Left. Over-emphasis on the role of the military, the monarchy or a particular political party would show a misunderstanding of the period. What happened on the 6th October was a result of a consensus among the entire ruling class that an open democratic system was allowing too much freedom for the Left. However, it is likely that there were both areas of agreement and disagreement within ruling circles on exactly how to act and who should act. The general view that “extra-parliamentary methods” would have to be used led to the uncoordinated establishment of various right-wing groups. The activities of these groups were not tightly controlled or coordinated by one single power centre and this became a problem for the Thanin government after the 1976 coup (Bowie 1997; 114).

The turn of events leading up to the 6th October contained both planned and unplanned elements. One group who made special plans to crush the left and stage a coup came from a coalition of Chart Thai Party and right-wing Democrat Party politicians. The role of the monarchy has been discussed by many writers. Bowie’s survey of the literature illustrates that there has been much debate on this issue. Some observers believe that the monarchy supported a coup, hoping to stop the swing to the left, but also in order to prevent power falling into the hands of unpredictable ultra-right-wing forces. Others believe that the monarchy’s plans for a coup were thwarted by the group who actually took power. What most have agreed on though, is that the monarchy helped to pave the way for a coup, in a broad sense, by showing open support for the right-wing (Bowie, 1997; 128). There is clear evidence that the monarchy openly supported and encouraged the Village Scout movement. In addition, the monarchy was close to the Border Patrol Police who established the Village Scouts and also took part in the killing at Thammasat. Finally the monarchy supported the return of ex-dictator Thanom by paying him a visit soon after he arrived back in Thailand (Anderson 1977; 134, Morell & Samudavanija 1981; 271, Morell & Morell 1977, 337, Girling 1981; 156, 213-215, Winichakul 2001).

The military coup which was actually staged at 18.30 on the afternoon of 6th October was not in fact staged by Chart Thai and right-wing Democrat factions and their military allies. Instead, the “National Administrative Reform Council” under Adm. Sangad Chaloryu, which took power and subsequently appointed Prime Minister Thanin Kraivichien, did so in order to prevent the first group from staging a coup (Bowie 1997; 131, Morell & Samudavanija 1981; 276). The N.A.R.C. was supported by those factions in the military opposed to Thanom and Prapat. Thus as George McArthur of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote: “*Only a facade of unity under 60-year-old Adm. Sangad Chaloryu hides the discontent of several senior army generals*” (*Los Angeles Times* 12 Oct 1976;12).

The general picture of the ruling class that emerges during 1976 is therefore one of a degree of unity on the need to crush the Left, but disunity on how to do so and, much more importantly, how to proceed after the crack-down. This had important consequences on the evolution of the dictatorship post-1976. Within one year, the extreme right-wing government of Thanin Kraivichien was removed from power. Three years later, the government decreed an “amnesty” for those who had left to fight alongside the communists, and by 1988 Thailand

had returned to a full parliamentary democracy. Those gaining the upper hand within the ruling class were convinced, not only that the nature of the 6th October crackdown, but also the way the Thanin government was conducting itself, was creating even greater divisions and instability within society and helping the Communist Party of Thailand to grow. Not surprisingly, those army officers who advocated a more liberal line were those actually involved in front-line fighting against the C.P.T. They understood, like so many military personnel in this position, that the struggle against the Left must involve some kind of political settlement in addition to the use of force. As General Prem Tinsulanon, Prime Minister from 1980-1988, observed: "*The students joined the Communists because they were brutally suppressed. The way to undermine the Communists was to establish justice in society*" (I.T.V. 1999b).

The Thai Left between 1973 and 1976

Although in the minds of many right-wingers, there was little distinction between the student movement and the Left, it was not true that the students were all left-wing or that the Left was only made up of the student movement. Not surprisingly, there was an entire spectrum of opinion throughout the student movement at the time. Nevertheless, a combination of external and internal events, such as the post-1968 growth of the Left, world-wide, the defeat of the U.S.A. in the Vietnam war and the failure of post-1973 parliamentary politics in Thailand to address social ills, had resulted in a significant shift to the left among students. A number of student parties, such as Palang Tum, Chula Prachachon, Neaw Pracha, Sachatum, Yoong-tong etc. won elections to student bodies in various universities. These parties were Left-leaning, being in favour of democracy and social justice and against imperialism and conservative student traditions (such as the S.O.T.U.S. seniority system).

Students had played an important role in leading the overthrow of the military on the 14th October 1973. After 1973, they continued to play a leading role in progressive politics. They involved themselves in labour disputes and farmers' movements and they led protests against U.S. military bases and the destruction of the environment.

Outside the campuses, the general shift to the left was reflected in the influence of left-wing ideas among the growing trade union movement and the movement of peasants. Left-wing political parties won 37 seats in the 1975 General Election. Outside the arena of legal politics, the Communist Party of Thailand was increasing its influence, both by the spread of "Communist" ideas through books and publications, and via its radio station: *The Voice of the People of Thailand*. The Party recruited student, worker and peasant activists and at this time the C.P.T. was also engaged in armed struggle against the Thai government in remote rural areas.

The left-wing ideas circulating among Thai society in the early 1970s were a mixture of old and new, East and West. Since the 1917 Russian Revolution there had been an intermittent presence, at various times, of Communist organisers in Bangkok and other Thai towns. Both the Chinese Communist Party and the Malay Communist Party worked among the urban working class in Bangkok in the 1930s and 1940s (Jeamteerasakul 1991; 53). Due to initial labour shortages during the infancy of Thailand's capitalist system, significant numbers of workers in Bangkok were of Chinese origin. This does not indicate in anyway that Communism was somehow "alien" to Thailand. The early forms of Communist organisation were a matter of urbanisation, not of "Chineseness". During the colonial period many Communists and anti-colonialists from neighbouring countries sheltered in Thailand

from the colonial authorities. Tan Malaca, an activist from the Indonesian Communist Party visited Thailand on a number of occasions and Ho Chi Minh spent some time sheltering from the French.

Before and after the Second World War Communist ideas from the West began to take root among urban workers and some intellectuals, such as Supa Sirimanon and Gulab Saipradit. Pridi Panomyong, leader of the 1932 revolution that overthrew the absolute monarchy, was also significantly influenced by socialist ideas when he studied in France, especially the ideas of the cooperative movement.

The victory of the Chinese Communist Party and the rise of Mao brought a second wave of left-wing ideas to Thailand in the shape of Maoism and the orientation upon the peasantry . By the 1970s the C.P.T. had adopted Maoism in totality. Where the student movement was concerned, the influence of the C.P.T. should be judged not by numbers of members, but by the acceptance of the left-wing ideas it promoted well beyond its ranks. However, there was also an important “Western” influence upon the Thai Left at the time, which came from the 1968 revolt in Europe and the United States. This influence was significant among the student movement, especially among art students who played a very important role in political agitation in the 1970s. Kamol Tasananchli, an art student who graduated from the United States did much to influence the thinking and work of the younger generation at Po-Chang art college before 1973. (Sinsawat 1994; 15). Western socialist ideas contained a whole mix of ideas generated by the 1968 revolt and among these were both Stalinist and anti-Stalinist currents. It is this mixture of ideas that the students carried with them when they went to the jungle to join the C.P.T. after the 6th October blood bath.

Previously, in Bangkok and other urban areas, students and intellectuals had been free to read and discuss a whole range of left-wing ideas. Some, of course, did not have much time to read, since they spent their days engulfed in activity. However, when they arrived in the jungle strongholds of the C.P.T., they found that they could only read and discuss the works of Mao ⁵. They found also that debates and arguments were not encouraged. Initially both these factors were not a problem. Faced with the brutality of the 6th October, the stature of the C.P.T. was enormous. The C.P.T. controlled areas where government troops could not enter. It was a well-organised political organisation of decent and committed activists that could fight the government and exact revenge for the blood bath in Thammasat. In the first few years after 1976 the upsurge in support for the C.P.T. from urbanites looked like it might result in a defeat for the government. Nevertheless, as time went on, the urban intellectuals and students became increasingly disenchanted by the narrowness and authoritarianism of the C.P.T.’s Stalinist politics. This was one significant factor in the internal collapse of the party in the early 1980s.

The destruction of the Left

In 1976 the impact of the Thai Left in urban areas was much more of a threat to the Thai ruling class than the C.P.T.’s armed struggle in remote rural regions. The urban Left were located right in the heart of the beast. They were part of a mass movement which had previously overthrown a military government. This is why it was the Bangkok based urban movement that the ruling class chose to crush. Initially the result of the blood bath

⁵ Based on interviews with a number of student activists that went into the jungle after 1976 in different regions of Thailand.

strengthened support for the C.P.T. This was one of the pressures on the extreme right-wing government of Thanin Kraivichien. A whole generation of the best students had fled to the jungle. Their families and friends who remained in Bangkok sympathised with them. This was not the way to bring about a defeat of the Left. The point here is that it was not simply a total defeat for the urban Left. The continued resistance of intellectuals and students in the jungle pressurised the Bangkok regime into making concessions. These concessions involved a significant liberalisation of the political system culminating in full parliamentary democracy by 1988.

Many of the urban students and intellectuals who joined the Communists “in the jungle” after the 6th October were eventually rehabilitated back into mainstream society. Their names can be seen among lists of successful businessmen, government ministers, lawyers and academics. For those who have achieved the most success, this process involved the rejection of any previously held ideas of socialism. Examples of ex-“Communist” intellectuals and academics are Thirayut Bunmee, Seksan Prasertkul and Anek Laothamathas, who are now advocating liberalism (Thirayut 1998, Seksan 1994, Anek 1993a), Sangsit Piriyaarangsarn, who recently worked closely with the Ministry of Interior on local community projects (Sangsit 1998), and Narong Petprasert and Yook Si-areeya who have become ‘pure’ nationalists who also embrace market capitalism (Narong 2000a, 2000b, Yook 1998).

Understanding Post-May 1992 political reform in the light of the 6th October massacre

If we now shift our analysis to consider the upheavals and reforms of the 1990s, we can see that these events were influenced by the tumultuous changes of the 1970s. A military coup against a fully elected government in 1991 and the subsequent popular uprising in May 1992, which overthrew this military regime, convinced many sections of the Thai elite that further political reform was long over-due. Yet calls for reform in this period came from two conflicting “class” factions.

(1) The real push for serious reform came from the pro-democracy activists who had taken part in the May 1992 overthrow of the military, most of whom represented, in one way or another, the interests of the working class, the peasantry and poor in general. Reform became possible because of this mass popular uprising. The main theoretical guide for these groups in their demands for reform was no longer the socialism of the 1970s, but the idea of strengthening “Civil Society” in order to reduce the power of the bureaucratic state. They aimed to rewrite the constitution in order to achieve decentralisation of political power to “the people” and an increase in basic human rights. Another important objective was the setting up of what was perceived as “independent” scrutinising bodies such as an Anti-Corruption Commission, a Human Rights Commission and an Election Commission etc. Although the term “independent” was meant to mean independence from the government and political bias, how exactly this would be achieved was never clearly spelt-out.

(2) The second faction which called for political reform did so mainly *after* the May 1992 events and it was this faction which later managed to control the actual drafting of the new reforming constitution by appointing itself to the drafting committee. This class faction was an alliance of modernist business leaders, politicians, bureaucrats and intellectuals who hoped

that the reformed state power could more effectively match the complex legal and social requirements of a modern globalised economy (Connors 1999; 202). They called for “Good Governance”, emphasising transparency, accountability and popular participation in order to reduce the more blatant corruption, patronage and vote-buying in the political and economic system (Thirayut 1998). However, despite making noises about increased human rights and local participation in politics, the central aim of reform for this “liberal” section of the ruling elite was to achieve reliable executive control (Connors 1999; 203). Meechai Ruechupan, a long-standing conservative politician and former senator, stated that “*The main aim of the new constitution came from the need for stability, honesty and efficiency in Thai politics*” (Matichon 9/1/2001). For this reason one of the key points of the 1997 constitution was to increase the power of the Prime Minister and the stability of the government. This was done by re-jigging the electoral system to include a section of MPs which would be elected from “party lists”, on a proportional representation method, with the intention that this would favour larger parties and reduce the likelihood of unstable coalition governments. Another measure was to force cabinet ministers to resign their seats in parliament before becoming ministers so that they were less likely to withdraw from the government in any dispute with the Prime Minister.

The reforming 1997 constitution was passed by parliament in September 1997, overcoming opposition from conservative politicians and government officials. This victory for political reform was achieved, in the words of Connors, “*by packaging political reform as both a conservative measure to enhance government stability and as a radical expansion of opportunity for political participation*” (Connors 1999; 209). Yet, in drafting the constitution, the ideas proposed by the N.G.O.s and labour groups were only taken up when this fitted into the general blueprint already determined by the liberals (Connors 1999; 217).

How could it be that the “People’s faction” was willing to support the final form of the constitution after allowing the “liberal business faction” to make all the running during the drafting stage? The answer lies in the legacy of the struggles from the 1970s. Today the “People’s faction” are no longer seeking a fundamental change in Thai society. They reluctantly accept capitalism, although not necessarily in the form of Neoliberalism, and no longer seek to overthrow the state. Instead of a class analysis of society, they have adopted a pluralist view: the right-wing theory of “Civil Society”.

For many student activists who entered the jungle and fought along side the Communist Party of Thailand, they have been “wounded twice” (Winichakul 2001). Firstly they were brutally attacked by the Thai state in 1976. Then they became disillusioned by the Stalinist politics of the Communist Party. It is this generation of activists that took a leading role in the N.G.O. movement. This has meant that in such circles there is an extreme reluctance to re-establish political parties of the left. Instead of this, a “Civil Society” struggle to create a “political space” for various interest groups is preferred. This is the main current of thought within the Assembly of the Poor.

The weakness of “Civil Society” theory, which is at the heart of N.G.O. political analysis, is that it overlooks the issue of class power, both in terms of the state and the control over the means of production. Civil Society theory pre-supposes that the main area of political conflict is between the state and non-state groups in society at large. For this reason it is blind to conflicting class interests and unable to shed light on the class-based proposals put forward by the liberal business faction. Civil Society theory’s obsession with reducing the role of the state also dovetails nicely with Neoliberalism and free-market ideology. Finally, N.G.O.

thinking borrowed, in a rather structuralist and mechanical manner, the Pluralist idea that all social groups can be equally represented in a reformed, just, and fair political system. This explains how a united front in favour of the new constitution was built between two different class factions favouring political reform. Yet, without political parties of the peasantry and the working class, little economic or political reform to create a more just society will ever take place.

Disillusionment and self-censorship on the part of the “October Generation” Left

The bloody 6th October crack-down did not result in the destruction of the Left merely by force. The ideological legacy of the crack-down, when considered along side the disillusionment of the Left, brought about by the experiences of working with the C.P.T. and the international collapse of Stalinism, are even more important.

A dominant theme in the collective social memory of the 6th October is the claim that the Left were to blame for the massacre themselves. The argument runs that students and workers were right to overthrow the military back in 1973, but they just did not know when to stop; all those demonstrations and strikes alienated the students and the Left from the rest of society (Iamtham 1987, Pitaya 1998, Morell & Samudavanija 1981; 172). This is not a uniquely “Thai” issue. After the brutal crackdown and destruction of the democratically elected Allende government in Chile, many ex-radicals, including those in the Communist Party of Chile, came to the conclusion that the left ‘had gone too far and provoked the right-wing backlash’. This idea was used as a way to justify the new alliance which the Communist Party was making with the Christian Democrat politicians in Chile. The stupidity of this argument can be seen in the case of Indonesia, in 1965, where the P.K.I. had spent the last remaining years under the Sukarno regime telling workers to restrain themselves and make sacrifices for the good of the nation. The P.K.I. did this because it did not want to “alienate” itself from the Sukarno government. Yet this policy did not in any way save the P.K.I. from total destruction in 1965. In fact, it could be argued that by demobilising workers the P.K.I. threw away the only power in Indonesian society that could have defended the Party. Why should students, workers and peasants not have the right to be “Communists” and to demand social justice without being murdered? The mainstream social memory in Thailand explains that they were murdered because “socialism is an alien creed, not popular with Thais”. This is a circular argument based upon selective amnesia about the popularity of socialist ideas in the 1970s.

How did the students and the Left supposedly “go too far” in 1976? They organised protests on political issues, such as opposing dictatorship or calling for the removal of U.S. military bases, they were interested in social and economic issues, such as the rising price of petrol and bus fares and they supported workers and peasants in their struggles for social justice. Workers disputes over this period included strikes for union recognition, demands for a decent level of minimum wage and strikes against poor working conditions. Peasants protested against the level of debt, landlessness and indiscriminate methods used by the police and army in the suppression of rural rebels. The comfortably well-off reactionaries argue that all these protests “were unjustified” and what is more, they alienated the left from Thai society, especially from the urban middle class. But the urban middle class did not react to protests in a simple and unified manner. Some sided with the Left, while others sided with the establishment.

According to one commentator, “(After 1973)...*All this improvement (land reform measures etc.) ... was accompanied by disturbance. How else could you negotiate with reluctant employers if you did not strike? How else do you push government to intervene in your favour against a mining company without some rally and demonstration? Looking back, I think we were all short-sighted when we complained about the disturbances.*”⁶

Sutham Saengprathum, one of the student leaders who was arrested on the morning of the 6th October and who is now a cabinet minister, explained that the student movement became a red-hot chimney for funneling all the grievances of society. “*The farmers went to government officials to complain about their problems, but no one was interested. Who else could they turn to but the students?*” (I.T.V. 1999a) The reactionaries are suggesting that the students should have turned a deaf ear to the plight of the farmers.

Self-censorship and disillusionment among the Left of the “October Generation” (from the 1970s) means that any attempt to suggest that economic inequality can be redressed through even mild proposals for a welfare state and progressive taxation of the rich, is today often met with derision. The 6th October established “as fact” that the poor will always be poor and the rich will live in luxury and rule over the rest of us. The supremacy of free market mechanisms under capitalism are also taken for granted. In fact this is written into a specific article contained within the new 1997 constitution. Article 87 states that “*the state must support a free-market economic system....*”.

Electoral reform and the problem of “money politics”

An important claim by the supporters of the new constitution was that the reforming constitution would abolish, or at least reduce, vote-buying and the influence of money politics. It was argued that a number of important measures would contribute to this (Bowonsak 1998). Firstly, there was the establishment of an “independent” Election Commission, based on the Philippines model, with strong powers to disqualify candidates who were found to be vote-buying. Secondly, changes in election methods would make it more difficult to buy votes. The abolition of multiple MP constituencies was meant to bring MPs closer to their constituents and reduce the need to use large amounts of money for campaigning. The “party list” system was meant to encourage people to vote for “good” parties on a national level rather than “corrupt” local individuals, with the hope that important party list MPs would become cabinet ministers. What made the latter more likely to become ministers was that party list MPs who became ministers would automatically be replaced in parliament by another candidate lower down on the party list, whereas if an MP from a constituency seat became a minister it would result in a risky by-election. Finally the method of counting votes was changed so that votes for a constituency would be counted centrally, thus making it more difficult for vote-buyers to assess which village had voted for which candidate. How effective was the 1997 constitution in preventing or reducing vote-buying?

The Senate elections in early 2000 were riddled with charges of vote-buying and repeated rounds of fresh elections were held in constituencies where the Election Commission disqualified the winning candidates. However, the real test for the effectiveness of the new constitution was the parliamentary elections in January 2001. The first obvious change during the election campaign was the faces on the election posters for constituency seats. Instead of the usual old guard of experienced politicians, fresh faced young graduates, film stars and beauty queens decorated the streets. This was because most of the “old guard” were standing

⁶ Puey Ungphakorn 15th February 1977 speech at George Town University, Washington, U.S.A..

as party list candidates. The substance of election posters, however, was little changed and mainly consisted in telling the electorate that the candidate had a university degree and was willing to serve the country. A pretty face helped the voters to remember the candidate number beside which they were to place their cross.

On the morning of the election for parliament The *Bangkok Post* reported that “*The night of the howling dogs returned to haunt city voters last night as unscrupulous election workers made house calls to hand out cash for votes*” (*Bangkok Post* 6/1/2001). The People’s Network for Elections declared that it had solid evidence of election fraud in 84 out of 400 constituencies (*Bangkok Post* 15/1/2001) and by late January the Election Commission had called for fresh polls in 62 seats (*Bangkok Post* 24/1/2001). Clearly the new constitution has failed to stop vote-buying. In fact, it is widely believed that the 6 January 2001 elections involved even more cash for vote-buying than previous elections. In addition to this, the make-up of the new cabinet was less than spotless. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, in announcing his new cabinet, stated that it was “impossible” to nominate only fresh faces as ministers (*Bangkok Post* 18/2/2001). Earlier, Thirayuth Boonmee, academic and former student leader from 1973, had warned that vote-buying patterns would merely be changed in order to attempt to avoid detection by the Election Commission (*Bangkok Post* 27/11/2000). His prediction seems to have been correct.

Popular participation in bringing the workings of government to account

Despite claims to the contrary, the constitution itself is hardly a recipe for popular participation. Firstly, no one without a university degree is allowed to stand for parliament or the senate. This immediately rules out the vast majority of the population from taking part in self-government, and especially those at the ‘bottom’ of society. Secondly, voting is compulsory, yet labour movement calls for a system which included automatic voter registration at the place of work were turned down by the constitution drafting committee. This has two effects. It means that working class votes are reduced and diluted in constituencies where there are large numbers of factory workers because many factory workers are on household registers in the countryside. It also means that when the farce of repeat elections takes place, many workers cannot afford the time or the money to return home to vote. Failing to vote, can in some circumstances, then result in a loss of certain political rights.

The much-feted introduction of elected local governing bodies at regional and village level does provide more say for local people, but the kind of local people who get elected to these bodies are those connected to local influence networks. These are the very same influence networks through which vote buying has traditionally been channeled. Added to this, recent measures which are wrapped-up as local management and financing of schools or hospitals are in fact changes brought about according to free-market dogma which aim to reduce government spending on education and health. This hardly increases participation by the poor in various important social activities.

The effects of the constitution in other areas of popular participation are mixed and contradictory. New measures which allow the collection of 50,000 signatures to push for the impeachment of politicians and officials or for the submission of “People’s Bills”, when put into practice, have come up against various bureaucratic obstacles such as the need to produce vast documentation to verify signatures. Similarly, public hearings on large scale building projects have turned out to be sham consultation processes which carry little weight (a problem not uncommon to the West). Yet at the same time the mere act of creating a

political movement around a political issue in order to collect signatures can be enough to put immense pressure on corrupt individuals to resign. A good example of this was the corruption scandal in the Ministry of Health. N.G.O. activists blew the whistle on a vast web of over-pricing of drugs and hospital supplies involving officials in the Ministry of Health. The mere act of collecting signatures calling for the impeachment of these officials was enough to force at least one to resign. Similarly, the signature campaign to submit a “People’s Bill” for a universal health care system is having some effect on government policy. Finally, large demonstrations at public hearings, such as the one held recently over the Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline and the power station at Prachuapkirikan, can concentrate the minds of policy makers.

Problems with the structuralist approach to political reform

The central weakness in the effectiveness of the new constitution lies with the narrow structuralist approach to cleaning-up Thai politics. This involves a belief in the possibility of drawing up a new constitution and associated election laws to “outlaw” money politics. Yet, it never goes to the heart of the problem. Vote-buying is a common phenomenon associated with an electoral system where there is a monopoly of parties from the capitalist class and this can often result in patron-client relationships between politicians and the electorate. If all the main political parties are those of rich businessmen and influential people, the only way to make a choice at election time is through money and favours. Similarly, the United States election system is dominated by money politics, although the actual methods of using money differ from the Thai case. As Thammasat academic Anek Laothamatas, now a Democrat party list MP, explains “*Thai politics is a matter of commerce because it makes no difference in terms of policies towards any of the interest groups whichever party wins*” (Anek 1993b; 23).

The key to reducing the role of money politics is to increase participation by political parties from other social classes. It was the activities of working class organisations, such as the London Corresponding Society or the Chartists and the rise of the Labour Party, a party based upon the trade union movement, that destroyed the old “Rotten Borough” system of money politics in Britain. This brings us full circle back to the issue of the destruction of the Left on 6th October 1976. Back in the mid 1970s, the Socialist Party of Thailand won seats, not by going into the villages and handing out cash through local networks of influential people, but by holding mass public meetings in villages where well-known leaders like Boonsanong Punyodyana would outline left-wing policies such as land reform and progressive taxation to build a welfare state (Trocki 1977).

Contradictions within *Thai Ruk Thai* government policy

The “October Generation” may be disillusioned and no longer willing to seek fundamental changes in society, but a huge new generation of people have grown up knowing little about the “October” events of the 1970s. The impact of the Asian Economic Crisis has meant that young people are beginning to question the capitalist free-market system. This has even had a resonance among many of the older generation. In addition to this, a large proportion of the population have become dissatisfied with the way in which the poor have been made to bail-out the rich after the crisis broke. Large amounts of public money were used to prop-up private debt in the financial system, while almost nothing was done to alleviate poverty. This goes some way to explain the landslide victory for the *Thai Ruk Thai* party in the January 2001 General Election.

The fundamental contradiction of the *Thai Ruk Thai* landslide election victory was that this capitalist party, headed by Thaksin, a multi-billionaire, won the election on the basis of both money politics and a sensitivity towards demands from below. The amount of money used by *Thai Ruk Thai* for advertising, persuading politicians with local bases to defect from other parties and for buying votes in the run up to the election was probably unprecedented. Yet at the same time its election victory was partly due to 3 promises made to the electorate. These were (1) a promise to introduce a low cost health care scheme for all citizens, (2) a promise to provide a 1 million baht loan to each village in order to stimulate economic activity and (3) a promise to introduce a debt moratorium for poor peasants. Some of the ex-Communists who are now members of the party, and who hold cabinet positions, were moved to comment that “*we’ve seized state power without having to eat taro and sweet potatoes*”(an allusion to the diet of Communist fighters in the jungle).

The three policies outlined above are undoubtedly beneficial to the poor and show that even Thai governments run by parties of the elite can be susceptible to pressure from below. The fact that the public perception of the previous Democrat Party administration was that it had spent all its time in office bailing out the rich with government money, while beating the poor with riot police, meant that they lost the election. Yet there is a serious problem with the *Thai Ruk Thai* proposals. This is because the party has promised benefits to all sectors of society, including tax cuts for the rich. No long term benefits for the poor can be achieved without a progressive tax policy which places the burden on the rich to pay for such benefits. *Thai Ruk Thai*’s lack of any progressive tax policy, together with the fact that Thaksin himself stands accused of falsifying assets reports in order to avoid tax, mean that serious problems could lie ahead.

Conclusion

The 6th October 1976 massacre was a successful attempt to destroy the Left in Thai politics. The ruling elite, who were behind this massacre, have no long term objection to parliamentary democracy on one condition: that it is cleansed of all ideas of socialism. This explains why the political system did not remain as a military dictatorship for long after 1976. More than this, it explains the very nature of the Thai parliamentary system today, which was shaped by the events of the 1970s and differs markedly from the parliamentary democracy of that period. Today, the impact of the Asian Economic Crisis and a whole new generation of people with little knowledge of the 1970s, means that socialism may yet creep back into Thai democracy. The Populist policies of the new *Thai Ruk Thai* government may be an indication of social pressure from below and the reentry of class struggle into parliamentary politics.

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