

Thailand: Comparing the 6th October 1976 and 19th September 2006

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People like to say that “history repeats itself, but not in exactly the same way”. In some ways, and not others, the military coup of the 19th September 2006 was a repeat of the bloodbath and coup on 6th October 1976. Circumstances are different, some actors are different and some have changed sides. But there are interesting comparisons to make.

Both the 6th October and the 19th September were actions which destroyed Democracy because the conservative elites felt that “too much Democracy” would lead to “too much equality”. In 1976, students, intellectuals, workers and farmers were talking of socialism, redistribution of wealth and a Welfare State. In 2006, Taksin’s TRT government was providing village funds and had set up a universal health care system. His popularity as a result of these genuine pro-poor policies, threatened the conservatives. In both cases the conservatives claimed that welfare would make people lazy and that pro-poor policies were threatening to destroy the country.

The 19th September coup claimed legitimacy from the King, although it is very unlikely that the King ordered the coup. But following the coup he praised the soldiers. After the Democrats were manoeuvred into power by the Army, there was a regime of draconian censorship. Government opponents were persecuted, killed and put in prison, even though the number of deaths has been small compared to 1976. Events surrounding the 19th September coup coincided with the creation of semi-fascist armed gangs. First we had the PAD’s “guard”. They carried and used guns, knives, bombs and sticks in the streets and attacked Red Shirts and the police with impunity. Then the Democrats and Newin Chitchorp set up the paramilitary “Blue Shirts”. The pro-coup side had their own rabid media, ASTV, which continues to churn out lies about their opponents.

The conservative elites were a loose coalition between the Army, the PAD, conservative civil servants, academics, the Palace and the NGO movement. They agreed on the need for a coup but squabble over their own self-interests. PAD leader Sonti was shot by someone in the Army. The Blue Shirts were set up to counter the PAD. The squabbles continue.

The 6th October 1976 blood bath also claimed legitimacy from the King. The soldiers were too tainted with the Sarit and Tanom dictatorships and were totally lacking in legitimacy as a result of the successful 1973 uprising. So they used the paramilitary Border Patrol Police from Hua Hin, near the King’s palace, instead. These were the armed forces that attacked and killed the students inside Thammasart University. The King and Queen visited the ex-dictator Tanom at Wat Baworniwet, days before the blood bath. Outside the university, on the 6th October, the paramilitary and semi-fascist Village Scouts, Krating Daeng and Nawapon beat, hung and burnt students. The village Scouts were under Royal Patronage, the Krating Daeng were unemployed technical college students organised by the Army and the Nawapon were “the army of number 9”, out of uniform soldiers. It is believed that Chamlong Srimuang had a role in the killings at Thammasart. Later in 1992 he led an uprising against a military dictator. Now he is with the PAD.

The entire conservative elite were united in the need for a bloody crack down in 1976 against the socialists and all those who believed in Democracy. Yet they were divided in factions around key figures in the armed forces and key politicians such as Chartchai Choonhawan in the Chart Thai Party. Violence and intimidation, plus provocations, were organised in the run up to 1976 and three separate groups tried to stage a coup. Only one faction was successful, the one led by Admiral Sangat Chaloryu . The King blessed the new Prime Minister, Tanin Kraiwichien, giving it a Royal hue. His extreme right-wing government, with Samak Sundarawej as Interior Minister, set about using draconian censorship and burning books. By 2006 Samak was in with Taksin and Thai Rak Thai. A year after the 6th October coup, Tanin's government was overthrown by another coup. The soldiers felt his extremism was counter productive. So much for his Royal credentials!

In 1976, the conservatives had their rabid media: Dao Sayam newspaper and the Tank Corps radio station. They lied that the students had held a play with a mock hanging of the Crown Prince. A photo of the play was reproduced from the Bangkok Post. That paper, conservative as ever, did not refute the false allegation against the students. After the blood bath, the Crown Prince visited the Village Scouts at the Royal Plaza to thank them for their work.

Because no soldier, policeman or government official has ever been punished for the 6th October blood bath, other soldiers and politicians have been able to abuse human rights with impunity. Suchinda Kaprayoon and Surayut Chulanon are guilty of crimes against pro-democracy demonstrators in 1992. Taksin and the 4th Army Chief are guilty of crimes at Takbai. Taksin is also guilty of crimes in the War on Drugs. This war was also supported by Prem Tinsulanon and the King. There are other examples. But by repeating the claim that "no one knows what happened on 6th October", the mainstream Thai media reinforce the tradition of immunity from human rights abuses. There are no big secrets about what happened in 1976 and the entire ruling elite have blood on their hands. Even the Democrat Party, which was in government at the time, despite being powerless, failed to condemn or even raise any opposition to the blood bath. They were weak and indecisive, as always, but they agreed with the need to "deal with" the students and the Left.

The 6th October 1976 blood bath resulted in a civil war. Thousands joined the Communist Party of Thailand to fight against the elites. Thousands held the Monarchy in contempt. Yet the armed struggle and Maoism was a failure. The 19th September 2006 has stimulated the growth of the pro-Democracy Red Shirts. The Monarchy is once again being seriously questioned. But this time, we have a mass movement in the cities and in the countryside. It is led by ordinary people and is becoming increasingly politicised.