

Interview

On the culture of impunity and the Thai ruling class - The 40th anniversary of 6 October 1976

Tuesday 18 October 2016, by [Puangthong Pawakapan](#) (Date first published: 3 October 2016).

Contents

- [The perpetrators remain at \(...\)](#)
- [The deeply-ingrained culture](#)
- [Networks of the Thai ruling](#)
- [A lesson to learn before \(...\)](#)

Puangthong Pawakapan, a scholar in the Faculty of Political Science at Chulalongkorn University and member of the organizing committee for the “40th anniversary of 6 October: ‘We do not forget’” events gave an interview to Prachatai about the deeply-embedded culture of impunity in Thai society. In her view, the 6 October 1976 massacre is a profound wound and a primary metaphor of this culture, which is nourished by the connections woven across the ruling class. Even after four decades, the families of those killed on 6 October continue to live in fear while the ruling class does not comprehend the anger that continues to drive the people into the streets.

The 6 October 1976 massacre has been made to be indistinct and forgotten in Thai society. Puangthong noted that many people still think that the photograph of a man raising a chair to beat the lifeless body of a student hanged on Sanam Luang while a crowd gathers to watch is merely a scene from a movie.

The memory of the events of 14 October 1973 are more prevalent in Thai society than that of 6 October 1976. This is because the event signifies the victory of the students and people in driving out the long-standing dictatorship of Thanom Kittikhachorn, Narong Kittikhachorn, and Praphat Jarusathien. The form of the memorials to both events contain and illustrate the difference between them. The 14 October 1973 memorial was built in a visible location at Kok Wua intersection on Ratchadamnoen Avenue, but the 6 October 1976 memorial is instead a sculpture inside the walls of Thammasat University. Puangthong described the location of the memorial as being “hidden next to the gate by the Thammasat auditorium.”



Puangthong Pawakapan (file Photo)

“Some say that the massacre is a traumatic history for those who experienced it, which includes students as well as their family and friends. This is true. But there may be a fair number of people who do not feel that it is a traumatic history. For them, the massacre does not need to be remembered or information unearthed. I may be wrong, but I do not believe that every person who calls themselves an Octobrist [those who participated politically between 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976] still feels anguish from 6 October or that it is a wound embedded in their psyche. There is no one perspective on 6 October among the Octobrists, but diverse thoughts and views. This differs from 14 October, which was a victory for the side of democracy. Students were the victors who led the country to democracy. No one among the Octobrists hesitates to define themselves as part of 14 October.”

“They [the families of those killed] have not forgotten, but they live with fear. This fear indicates that 6 October remains a forbidden issue. This is a history that no one has wanted to speak about for 20 years. The massacre led them to suffer losses – they lost their loved ones, who remain stigmatized. They cannot be remembered as heroes like those who were killed during 14 October.”

An enduring fear

Different from 14 October 1973, the 6 October 1976 massacre is an instance in which the democratic movement was suppressed and those killed were accused of being outsiders and communists who wanted to topple the primary institutions of the country. The powerful groups involved with the violence of 6 October still have a grip on power. In Puangthong’s opinion, these are some of the constraints that cause a reluctance and lack of daring to unearth, dust off, and reveal clarity about the past.

“My colleague and I are making a documentary film to honor those who were killed on 6 October. The theme is simple: to let people learn about their identities that existed before their lives were brutally suspended. We are doing this because we realized that after 40 years, we still know very little about their individual lives. We spoke with the grandchildren in some families. They clearly stated that they did not dare to ask their parents or grandparents about this issue. They know it is a wound and that no one wants to talk about it in their families. This is especially the case for those whose relatives were brutally killed. So, the trauma of the relatives is related to the manner in which the victims lost their lives. With other families who were willing to grant interviews, we barely talked about present-day politics. We wanted to let them talk about the personality of the person who died and how they were connected to others in the family. Relatives and siblings of those who were killed were willing to grant interviews. But then they called several days later and said that they were afraid because we are currently living under a military government. They asked if their names could be changed and their faces not shown. Simultaneously, many other families did not want to talk about the massacre.”

The perpetrators remain at large

What causes fear to endure? Puangthong’s analysis is this fear is an effect of the poisonous effect of the culture of impunity in Thai society that has operated to produce a complete lack of attempts to trace, find, and punish the perpetrators for 40 years.

“This issue has completely disappeared in Thai society. No one talks about it, at all. Those who wish to see justice feel as though it is impossible. Many people say that the issue should not be dredged up. All of this is a clear indication that the perpetrators have been allowed to get away with their actions. This is because they still hold power. Second, fear [of discussing 6 October] is even sharper because we are living under a military government. People feel that soldiers were one of the

powerful groups that had a role in suppressing students on 6 October.”

“Those who were involved with the violence of 6 October have never had to fear that they will be punished. This is the clear culture of impunity in Thai society. Viewed from the perspective of the families who lost their loved ones, this lack of accountability and the culture of impunity is the second time that they are punished. They were victimized the first time when they lost the people they loved. They must suffer in silence for the second time. They continue to live in fear up until the present. Is this just? My view is that this is not just. But no one wants to talk about it. The majority call for silence. The majority say that the issue should not be dredged up.”

When a society allows the culture of impunity to continue undisturbed, the opportunity for the state to use violence against the people remains an inevitable possibility. Thai society has already learned this lesson: once in May 1992 and again in April-May 2010.

The deeply-ingrained culture of impunity

Puangthong further explained that the 6 October 1976 massacre is a grave instance of impunity. This incident is surrounded by anger and unfairness. The faces of those who used violence against the students and people on that day can clearly be seen in photographs and videos. But no one asks the question of how those who used violence are going to be charged under the law. Moreover, nearly two years after the massacre, an amnesty law was passed.

“The people who were criminally prosecuted after the 6 October massacre were 19 student leaders. There was no prosecution of any of those who used violence. During the examination of the case, the information that was revealed indicated that the defendants were solely victims. In the end, there was an amnesty and political compromise. The ruling class realized that if they continued to use hawkish tactics, it was going to create greater rupture in Thai society because the Communist Party of Thailand expanded a great deal after the massacre. In truth, those who benefitted the most from the amnesty were those who used violence because it covered soldiers, police and every group that was involved with the 6 October massacre.”

“This was an instance in which we can clearly see those who carried out criminal acts [in photographs and video footage]. We can see the faces of those who were involved. This included those who may not have been state officials, such as the person who used the chair to beat the person who was hanged, the Village Scouts who beat the person who was hanged with wooden bats, others in the mob, and also state officials. But we have not asked any questions, any questions at all, about whether or not those in the pictures broke the law or if we should go in search of them. We have not asked any questions about whether or not the amnesty law was just.”

The legacy of the culture of impunity for later generations is that it is apparent that if one has power in society – if one has a network and supporters – then one does not have to be held to account. Thai society has acquired (bad, incorrect) knowledge that one must build a network and connections to serve as a protective armor from the law and being held to account. This operates from the level of ordinary life up to politics on the national stage.

Networks of the Thai ruling class

“Connections are important in the sense that if one is going to climb up the ladder, you have to have the right connections. If you do something illegal, these connections will help protect you from your crimes. Therefore, one gift from the culture of impunity to every level of Thai society is the notion

that we do not have to take principles into consideration. Connections are what matter. This shapes how Thai people act when they wish to express an opinion or do something, because they must be careful in case it will affect their connections.

But in Puangthong's view, what is particularly painful is that even some of those who work for peace and human rights do not fully call for justice. She explained that some among this group do not go beyond demanding the release [of those wrongly arrested] or providing compensation for those affected. Once these demands are accomplished, this group goes silent. They are mum on the issue of how perpetrators should be punished and how justice will be restored for victims. This silence of peace and human rights activists is a specifically Thai characteristic that endures until the present.

"Not too long ago, a peace activist said that he did not understand why there were calls to prosecute those who held power who used violence to suppress the people, such as in the case of the attempt to locate and prosecute the Nazis for what they did to the Jews during the Holocaust. This is a struggle that remains ongoing even after 40-50 years."

"But for Thais, it is enough to help those who face trouble by releasing them [from prison] or providing compensation. Once that is done, do not think about implicating those who hold power. They may give the explanation that if one goes after those who hold power, it may result in even greater conflict. Those who hold power may retaliate. Any opportunities to build reconciliation or harmony, or develop democracy, will be stopped short."

For certain, Puangthong does not agree with this kind of thinking. Her explanation of its origin is that peace and human rights activists are of the same stripe as the ruling class in Thai society. We have to expand the frame through which we view the ruling class, which does not only include politicians and businesspeople, but also includes academics, social activists, nongovernmental organization workers, etc.

"The ruling class in Thai society is very narrow. The number is limited and they all know each other. The ruling class is marked by friendship, continuity, and the experience of having helped and supported one other. These connections eclipse taking a stand to restore justice. Therefore, the reason we do not see some peace and human rights activists demand the implication of those involved in violence is because that in the end, they know those who are involved."

"I would like you to view the ruling class as insular and constituted by connections founded on a patronage system and mutually-beneficial relationships. These connections drive Thai politics — sometimes in a positive direction, but sometimes in a negative direction or in a manner that attempts to safeguard the culture of impunity. The culture of impunity is itself within the system of networks and connections of the narrow Thai ruling class."

A lesson to learn before it is too late

6 October is a wound that should also serve as a lesson. In truth, it seems to be the former more than the latter. The latter has not happened ... at least it has not happened yet. The creation of hatred of those who think differently than the dominant view in society is no different from the past in which the Yan Kraw [military radio] or Dao Sayam [right-wing newspaper] led the charge. The difference is that in the present, anyone is able to disseminate hatred via social media.

"In the case of 2010, many in Bangkok did not mourn the loss of the lives of nearly one hundred people. They felt greater sorrow about the burning down of the Siam Square movie theater. At present, we see broad and extensive use of hate speech. Those who use this speech will not listen to

warnings. Is there an opportunity for violence to occur once again? Violence just took place in 2010. Can violence occur again? Of course it can.”

“At present, groups who hold power attempt to close their eyes or choose not to notice that a large number of people, I would dare to say the majority of those in the country, feel resentment. The majority are not satisfied that their political voices have been silenced using various means.”

Puangthong noted that the constitution passed during the 7 August referendum may be a catalyst for future violence because it contains mechanisms designed to thwart the political voices of a large number of people. The political needs communicated via voting will be brushed aside. The government may not be able to advance policy. When the political apparatus fails to work, the people are not able to resolve political problems via democratic mechanisms. They will inevitably be pushed into the streets.

P.S.

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