

Opinion

Thailand: The 6 October 1976 Massacre and the Present

Saturday 21 November 2020, by [Nidhi Eoseewong](#) (Date first published: 2 October 2020).

On 13 August 2020, historian Professor Nidhi Eoseewong released a written statement about the 6 October 1976 massacre to the public after a news agency incorrectly reported the views he shared during an interview. Prachatai disseminated the statement in Thai on the day it was released and here Prachatai English shares a translation as both the ongoing protests intensify and the 44th anniversary of the massacre approaches.

A well-intentioned warning given to those engaged in political activism today is to be careful and avoid actions that may lead to a massacre like 6 October 1976. The bearers of this warning include the news agency that just interviewed me, too. You can think or say whatever you like about 6 October because a great deal remains unclear and ambiguous. Even those who have researched the massacre acknowledge that many questions cannot be answered. But don't you dare take your ideas and words and stuff them in my mouth in your headline.

Whether you harbor good or ill intentions toward the protestors, my perspective (which may or may not be correct) is that this warning contains an erroneous understanding of 6 October.

The image lodged in the hearts of many people, an image that was lodged deep without careful consideration of whether or not it is in conflict with what else we know about 6 October, is that it arose spontaneously and instantly without any prior organization. The crowd was incited by the photograph of the "hanging" that they believed was intended to defame the then heir-apparent (it does not matter here whether or not the photograph was doctored). Those loyal to the monarchy were incensed and joined together to attack the demonstrators at Thammasat.

But people still remember well that Yan Kraw radio network [military radio broadcast] disseminated both the news and the ire. Someone arranged busses to bring a steady flow of Village Scouts from around the country into Bangkok. By 5 am on 6 October, Border Patrol Police (BPP) and paratroopers were ordered to travel from Hua Hin to Bangkok. Krathing Daeng and Nawaphon may have infiltrated to be the vanguard of the crowd, etc.

None of this could arise spontaneously or immediately as a reaction to the "hanging." There had to be organization over a period of many months or even in excess of a year. There had to be coordination among various units. This all necessitated a tremendous amount of money.

And then in the late afternoon of that day, the army took power. So they prepared, thought it over, and decided to do so in a few hours after the brutal crackdown at Thammasat? They secured capital, amassed forces, strategized their operations, prepared troop movements and prepare the political path after taking power in a mere 10-11 hours, with no prior planning at all? Is this even possible? It was a coup. Not a TikTok video.

I have no idea if those who were involved in creating a riot in the center of the city knew already that it was going to conclude with the seizure of power in the evening. Did Samak Sundaravej know? Did the Housewives Group who protested the formation of the Democrat government know? Did Utharn Sanitwong know? Did Uthit Naksawat know? Did Seni Pramroj know? But I am fairly certain that the Village Scouts who were brought in from all over the country did not know. The Nawaphon and the Krathing Daeng likely did not know. Do not make it out to be any other way. The majority of the BPP and paratroopers also likely did not know. They did whatever they were ordered to do. But the police and the politicians who made false reports at the Cabinet meeting likely knew.

Nevertheless, creating a riot in the heart of the city was inseparably related to the seizure of power because it was used as justification for it. This was necessary because less than three years prior the country had experienced the phenomenal toppling of dictatorship. Something had to be done in order to make the majority of those who were neither on the side of the students nor the side of the far right tacitly acquiesce to the seizure of power (meaning to accept the coup without complaint or comment whether or not they agreed with it).

Scholars who research 6 October have found that nearly all of the victims who were taken to be brutalized amidst the views of the mass (and the journalists), died before they were taken and hanged and beaten with a chair, burned in tires, had stakes driven through them, etc. They were able to deduce this after examining the testimony of those who were present and the autopsy results from the Police Hospital. The question is why did the crowd do it? The researchers cannot answer this question. But I think that the strategy of fomenting the riot and then seizing power is one that Thai soldiers learned from the United States. They learned to create shock and awe, or to create panic and extreme fear.

Who was this for? Unlikely that it was the students who were already surrounded and brutally suppressed inside Thammasat University. They already had no way to escape and survive. Instead it was to create fear, extreme fear, for those who were in the middle and comprised the majority of people in Thai society. They were completely stunned and tacitly accepted the seizure of power when it arrived in the evening.

The brutality on 6 October 1976 was therefore neither spontaneous nor natural.

Consider the preparations again. A portion of the supporting funds came from the secret budget of the security agencies, especially the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). But money alone was not enough. Coordination among state units was necessary for various forces to be able to act. In addition, success did not only arise from the secret actions of state agencies, but benefitted from coterminous economic and social reasons.

Let me raise one example: the Village Scout movement.

I do not believe that that the psychological training of the BPP and the ISOC alone were sufficient to transform the masses from around the country into a major power. There were economic and social factors behind this success as well.

In that period, Thais had changed a great deal from the Economic Development Plan of the preceding 10-15 years. While their economic status improved, Thais became individuals without connections to social groups. The prior kinds of social groups, such as those connected to relatives, temple patrons and disciples of monks, agricultural networks, local merit-making activities, etc., had loosened and dissolved out of the lives of people. Joining a Village Scout training was a way to join and create a social group in this changed period, and to be connected to the "state" through the royally-bestowed flag and scarf. The Village Scouts shifted the relationships between the members

and the “local state” (including the village headman to the sub-district agricultural and forestry officers up to the district officer), at least in consciousness, if not entirely in reality.

Ordinary people, including those in urban areas, therefore welcomed the Village Scout trainings, because they had slipped out of old social groups even more than those in the countryside.

But the Village Scouts were not only comprised of villagers. There were also descendants from families of merchants in the “market” who applied to enter each class. They were often chosen to be the head of the class because they had the resources to support Village Scout activities. After sustained economic development of 10-15 years, these merchant families had greatly improved their economic status. But they remained the despised Chinese who were without any prestige. They remained fit to be extorted by state power, from the traffic policeman up to the village headman. Therefore patronage of fellow Village Scouts in their class turned into a form of negotiating access to power. This guaranteed them a measure of prestige to be treated more respectably by state power. The district officer, at least, would be deferential to them. In those days, every newspaper would devote a whole page to reporting the social news of the Village Scouts. But none of those who showed up in the news were “villagers.” The majority were members of this group.

Many people I knew used these relationships to later become local politicians.

It is not at all surprising that there were vehicles that transported the Village Scouts to Bangkok from 5 October just as they had previously for the ceremony to receive the royally-bestowed flag at the sports stadium.

6 October was a specific event that arose in a specific context. It was not a natural reaction such as a person crying out when he is kicked.

Therefore, I do not believe that the political activism this time will lead to a second 6 October massacre. There is not enough time for the security apparatus to create and organize a bloc.

When I gave the interview to the news agency that put words into my mouth and used it as a headline, I surmised that it would take at least 6 months to create and organize a bloc to foment violence or a riot. But I subsequently reconsidered and concluded that it could take longer. Even if they were given a year, they might fail. Let me illustrate just one of the obstacles.

The Thai bureaucracy is known for never actually being able to work together. They will not acquiesce to shared coordination because they are afraid that they will lose the power they possess. But during 1975-1976, there was a clear direction and clear compensation that facilitated the establishment and coordination of an organization (even though many acted outside the orders they were given, as indicated in the subsequent interviews with those who were involved). My view is that it would be difficult or impossible for such conditions to arise in the present. Even Prayuth and Prawit are unable to give that kind of direction anymore. It therefore seems as though it will be impossible to give birth to a zombie mob that has the power to stop the movement.

But that does not mean that no violence at all will arise. The case is the opposite. The conservatives have few options left other than violence. The chance of violence is therefore significant. It is simply that the conservatives will have to bear direct, visible responsibility for it this time. They will have to be responsible in the face of reports in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, Le Monde, etc., as the economy continues to fall apart.

I do not support violence at all. But we should not forget that both the rulers and the ruled in Thailand excel at the use of violence. You recall the incidents of Krue Se and Tak Bai, [violent incidents in the deep south Thailand where civilians and alleged insurgents were brutally treated or

killed] right? Simultaneously, remember the large number of people who were arrested and locked up for years because they were accused of violating Articles 112, 116, arson, and being a danger to national security, plus those who fled to other countries and were followed and assassinated. And this is without turning to structural violence, such as the hardship faced by many people with economic problems who are abandoned with no way out. Within this context, there is nothing peculiar about saying that this may all end in violence.

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P.S.

- Prachathai. Submitted on Fri, 2 Oct 2020 - 02:20 PM:
<https://prachatai.com/english/node/8823>
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