

Thailand: 'Digestible' methods commemorate 6 October 1976 Massacre

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Chulalongkorn University's commemoration of the 6 October Massacre explored new methods to connect younger generations with the political tragedy, recognising that concepts of human rights and democracy have yet to be firmly established in Thai society.

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Every 6 October, commemorative events are held to remind society about the massacre of student activists at Thammasat University in 1976. Generally, stories of the massacre are recalled by academics, historians and those who experienced or lost loved ones from the bloody incident.

This year, the event "The 40 Years of 6 Oct: The New Generation Commemoration" hosted by Chulalongkorn University's (CU) Faculty of Political Science, introduced a new method of commemoration. Speakers at this event were popular columnists, celebrities and writers who actively engage in political issues. They represented younger generations who never experienced the 1976 massacre directly since most had not been born yet.

This novel approach to commemoration targeted younger generations to spread knowledge of what happened on 6 October, in the face of attempts by mainstream history to erase the bloody incident.

Digestible political contents

Commemorative events in previous years have aimed usually to remind society about impunity culture, the spirit of democracy and the power of political activism. But these ideas have never taken root in Thai society in the first place, where the education system has been designed to strengthen nationalistic establishment ideas.

While western students debate current political issues in their classrooms, Thai students have to memorise the names of Thai monarchs from 200 years ago, as well as the "12 National Core Values" created by the ruling junta. This system is far from the ideal of "civic education" where students embrace liberal democratic values.

When pro-democracy activists or political experts start talking about political polarisation, impunity culture and political intolerance — key factors leading to the massacre in 1976 — audiences tend to close their minds as they do not see the implications of these ideas.

Complex political theory was for these reasons scarcely mentioned in the Chulalongkorn event. Since the speakers were neither political experts nor victims of the event, they talked in "ordinary"

language digestible for younger generations.

“I researched [the massacre] a lot over the past week. When I see pictures [of the massacre victims], I feel deeply disgraceful. I have a child and I wonder how the parents of the guy who was hung on the tree felt. Have they received justice? And how can their pain be remedied if they never receive justice?” asked Winyu Wongsurawat, an actor, entertainer and speaker of the event.

Winyu also delivered a strong message on Thailand’s culture of impunity, a main cause of political violence in Thailand.

“The one word that Thailand needs the most is ‘justice.’... There must be justice and someone must be accountable [for the killings]. But I’ve never seen a fair justice system. An incident similar to [the 6 October] might happen again if people haven’t yet received justice and are not treated with the same standard,” stated Winyu, meeting a big applause from audience.

Winyu’s point was supported by Jessada Denduangboripant, a famous anti-supernatural scientist. Although he is too young to remember the massacre in 1976, he believes such political violence might easily happen again due to Thailand’s lack of archives and records of the event.

“Even though I’m interested in 6 Oct, it’s very difficult to reach its stories. In the past 40 years, it has not become a lesson. We might have to wait another 40 years until it becomes a lesson for all of society, just as the Nanjing Massacre has now become a great lesson for all Japanese,” said Jessada.

Feedback from younger generations

CU’s commemorative event attracted young people who’ve never, or who have only infrequently, participated in political seminars, especially CU students who are generally perceived as politically passive and conservative.

Some attendees told Prachatai the event helped them feel more connected to politics, citing the digestible format of the event as the main reason.

Supitsara Pattarasinmano, a 19-year-old sophomore student at CU, said she had never been interested in the 6 Oct Massacre since Thailand’s education system barely talks about it. The commemorative event, however, caught her attention since it not only talked about the past but also speculated on the future. She added the seminar has reshaped her perception about the massacre.

“I personally think (the seminar) was a good chance to makes younger generations more interested in politics,” said Supitsara. “I feel that [the massacre] is connected to me more than I previously thought. It makes me want to do more research so I can understand what the politics of my country really is and what I should do in the future.”

Like Supitsara, Chakariya Cheewatara, a 21-year-old junior student at CU, told Prachatai that the commemorative event recovered her interest in politics after it had been long absent since the 2014 coup. The seminar made her aware that another bloody incident might happen in the near future if Thai society does not learn from the 6 Oct Massacre.

“I feel angry at the actions of the state on 6 Oct. I question how long Thai politics will be like this,” Chakariya told Prachatai. “The event make me feel more connected [to politics]. I could see a clearer picture that such violence is going to happen again. Can we stop it? Or do we just have to let it occur again and again”

Wanput Teerapongpaiboon, a 19-year-old second year student from CU, revealed to Prachatai that she has never participated in a political discussions or commemorations for 6 Oct Massacre before because speakers are usually lecturers and academics who make her bored and are difficult to understand. But she enjoyed this event comprised of younger guest speakers.

Even though her perception about 6 Oct has not changed much after attending the event, Wanput said that the event helped her to become more enthusiastic when talking about politics.

“I liked Winyu’s speech about how people should be brave enough to show their political opinions without fear of other people’s comments. Nowadays, those who talk about politics are seen as abnormal or radical,” Wanput stated. “If we keep thinking this way, no one will express their opinions. How can this country develop?”

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* Prachatai. Mon, 10/10/2016 - 14:56:
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