

Murder on the Mekong: why exiled Thai dissidents are abducted and killed

Tuesday 19 March 2019, by [ELLIS-PETERSEN Hannah](#) (Date first published: 17 March 2019).

The Thai leadership is accused of the deaths and disappearances of activists in run-up to first elections in eight years

In the early evening of 12 December last year, in an area of Laos thick with jungle, Surachai Danwattananusorn sat down for sticky rice dessert with the gardener. For the previous two years, this remote spot is where Surachai – Thailand’s most outspoken political exile, with a 10m baht (£240,000) bounty on his head – had lived, in hiding from the Thai authorities.

At 78, Surachai still remained as much of a firebrand activist as when he was among the dozens of Thai republicans and anti-military activists who fled to Laos in the aftermath of the 2014 military coup.

Formerly the head of the Thai communists who led guerrilla warfare in the 1970s and 1980s, Surachai is Thailand’s most notorious dissident. He was a political prisoner until 1996 and later became a leader in Thailand’s pro-democracy Red Shirt movement, before being jailed again under Thailand’s notoriously draconian lèse-majesté law, which prevents any criticism of the monarchy, and carries a 15-year prison sentence. He was eventually pardoned and finally freed in 2013.

But less than a year later, as democracy collapsed in Thailand and the military took over, Surachai was labelled an enemy of the state and fled to safety in Laos. It is here that he had stayed ever since, moving around every year or so to avoid discovery, and living off donations from supporters.

“Surachai lived for politics and believed in sacrificing everything for your beliefs, even dying for them,” said Somyot Pruksakasemsuk, a close friend he met while they were both serving time as political prisoners.

Every Tuesday, from the safety of his hideout in Laos just 30km from the Thai border, Surachai would broadcast videos on his YouTube channel to his thousands of followers. These were incendiary in the eyes of the military regime, filled with ragingly anti-military and anti-monarchy sentiment, and were often a call-to-arms for revolution and the overthrow of the junta. From time to time, the two other Thai dissidents who lived with Surachai in exile – Chatcharn Buppawan, 56 (known as Puchana) and (Kraidej Luelert, 46, known as Kasalong) – would also appear in these activist videos, all equally outspoken in their mutual loathing of the military regime.

On this particular December evening, after eating, Surachai headed into his small wooden house at 5pm. It would be the last time anyone saw him. A few hours later, at the unusually late hour of 2:31am, he read a message on his phone, though he did not reply. By the time morning broke, Surachai, Puchana and Kasalong had vanished without a trace.

Some 13 days later, 300km away in a small Thai village on the banks of the Mekong river, which divides Thailand and Laos, fisherman Denchai Sornsai went down to check his nets. Caught among

them was a large mass, wrapped in coarse rice bags and tied up with rope. This was not, as Denchai thought at first, discarded rubbish. This was a decaying human body, the first of two corpses that washed up on the Thai side of the Mekong, in Nakhom Phanom province, in late December.

DNA tests carried out in January confirmed that the bodies belonged to dissidents Puchana and Kasalong. Their deaths had been brutal and deliberate; the bodies found disemboweled and stuffed with concrete posts, their legs broken and their hands handcuffed, as well as tied with rope at the neck, waist and knees and wrapped in several thick bags. While the results of an official autopsy have yet to be released to the relatives, and the length of time their mutilated bodies were degrading in the river makes cause of death difficult to determine, a doctor told Kasalong's son, Montri Leulert, that there was no sign of struggle, bruising or strangulation on the bodies so they may have been drugged before they were killed.

Yet, while evidence suggests that the three men were abducted from their Laos hideout together – the windows and doors of their houses left open, their belongings untouched, Surachai's heart and diabetes medicines on the table, and the car they shared still at the property – Surachai's body, so far, remains missing.

"It is not surprising that they were killed," said Kuekkong Bupphawan, son of murdered exile Puchana of his father and comrades.

"All of them were very aggressive in their criticism of the military government and of the king. In my view, this was a warning message – before the election and the coronation – to threaten all the Red Shirts, the critics of the monarchy and the military, to tell them that there is no place for them in Thailand."

Indeed, the cross-border trail of death down the Mekong is one that has exposed the dangers still faced by those republican and anti-junta exiles who are hiding out in Laos in their dozens. The timing of the deaths, in the lead up to both Thailand's first election in eight years being held on 24 March, and the coronation of the new King Vajiralongkorn in May, has not gone unnoticed by those still in hiding.

The junta, whose five years in unelected government has been defined by authoritarian rule and the oppression of critics, is hoping to hold on to power through the creation of a pro-military political party, and has put forward the head of the military government, Prayut Chan-ocha, as its nominee for prime minister. With the new Thai constitution, which was drawn up and passed by the junta, so heavily skewed in favour of the military, it is unlikely that its hold on power will be relinquished after the election.

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Dissident Yammy Faiyen

The military has denied all culpability in the case, now being handled by one of the country's most senior police officers. "This group of people live outside of our area of responsibility, we could not do anything," Lt Gen Tharakorn Thamwinthorn, Second Army Region commander, told reporters in January.

Surachai, Puchana and Kasalong are also not the first exiles in Laos to mysteriously disappear. In June 2016, Ittipon Sukpaen, known as DJ Sunho, who had been charged with violation of lèse-majesté in Thailand and was hiding out in the outskirts of Vientiane, where he continued to broadcast anti-monarchy YouTube videos, disappeared without a trace. Then, in 2017, the host of an

anti-monarchist radio show and lèse-majesté exile Wuthipong Kachathamakul, known as Ko Tee, was abducted at his Vientiane home after police in Thailand had arrested a friend and threatened to charge his family with possession of illegal weapons if they did not give up Ko Tee's location in Laos.

An anti-monarchy dissident currently exiled in Laos who goes by the alias Yammy Faiyen said: "I am certain this order came from Thailand, with help on the Laos side. I have no doubts the Thai government are now hunting us down one by one. I am very scared that we are next." Yammy has moved seven times in the past three years for her own protection.

Pranee Danwattananusorn, Surachai's wife, also blames those acting on behalf of the military junta for abducting and possibly murdering her husband and his fellow exiles, and this month even filed a report to Nakhon Phanom police stating as much.

"Surachai knew the military was still looking for him, and he had no enemies except the military government," said Pranee. "I am very sad about Surachai because he never did anything wrong - he just had different politics to the government. It is too cruel that this was done to him."

Suspicion and misinformation have shrouded the discovery of Puchana and Kasalong's bodies. In the noticeable absence of Surachai's corpse, there was a pervasive narrative among supporters and in the press that in fact three bodies had washed up, and that one, allegedly Surachai's body, had mysteriously been disappeared by police to avoid inflaming his ardent supporters in Thailand.

Yet interviews with local fisherman, the marine unit who tied up the body, local police and the village chief of Ban Tha Champa village, as well as analysed images of the bodies seen by the Observer, point to this not being the case. They affirm instead that the first body that washed up on 26 December was indeed just left tied up in the river by the village chief, never reported to the police, and then untied out of complacency rather than conspiracy, where it washed up again some 40km downstream on 29 December, with the marine unit's rope still attached. For now, Surachai's body remains an absent piece of the provocative puzzle.

"I spoke to Surachai on 10 November and told him I wanted to cross the border to come visit him but he told me 'now is not good because I think we are being watched and it could be dangerous, so I am not sure it is safe'," said his friend Somyot. On 12 December, Kuekkong spoke to his father for the last time when Puchana called to say he would be going into hiding for two or three days for safety after they had received a warning from the Laos police officer who looked after them.

Far from being a safe haven, Laos has increasingly become almost as dangerous for Thai political exiles as Thailand itself. In a visit to Bangkok in April last year, Lt Gen Souvone Leuangbounmy, chief-of-staff of the Lao People's Armed Forces, pledged to the Thai government that his troops would help track down Thai activists hiding out in Laos.

All evidence points to the three men going missing on the 13 December, the same day that Thai prime minister and leader of the military government Prayut Chan-o-cha arrived in Laos for a bilateral meeting, where he requested assistance bringing back lèse-majesté exiles. While it is purely circumstantial, it has only fuelled the paranoia by those still living in exile and their family members that the military government is linked to the murders and disappearances.

Yammy is among those who have evaded capture since she ran away to Laos in 2016, but she is not sure how long it will last. She is one of six members of provocative music group Faiyen, who produce songs protesting at lèse-majesté, who are living together in hiding. Usually active on their YouTube channel, they have moved again and went underground after the disappearance of Surachai. "I have been shown the unofficial warrant with the names the Thai government wants to track down," she

said. “Ko Tee was at the top and he got abducted. Now there are three groups in left Laos that the Thai government are hunting: the Surachai group, Uncle Sanam Luang [another lèse-majesté exile] and Faiyen. No one knows where Uncle Sanam Luang is, we all know that the Surachai group has been murdered, so now it’s only Faiyen left.”

On 11 December, Faiyen received the same warning as Surachai’s group, from a police officer who looks after the exiles in Laos, telling them to go into hiding while Prayut was visiting the country. “We have connections with some influential people in Thailand, and it is they who ordered this police officer to take care of us,” explained Yammy. “We only communicate with them over the phone, they don’t come to where we live. He will give us warnings and news and inform us when Thai officers come to the area searching.”

She was in regular contact with Surachai and, following the warning, they had all planned to move away together for a few days, but on the evening of 12 December, Yammy could not get hold of Surachai or Kasalong. On hearing the news of a body discovered in the Mekong two weeks later, she burst into tears. “It was all our worst fears come true.”

Despite everything, in the months before his disappearance, Surachai had not given up hope of returning to Thailand. According to Pranee and Yammy, he firmly believed that either the March election or the coronation in May would offer him a pathway back home, be it through the restoration of democracy or a royal pardon from the king.

“Surachai really believed that after the election we could go back to Thailand,” said Yammy. “Before he disappeared he told me: ‘Yammy be ready to go home soon.’ I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to destroy his hope in his late life. But now we know how wrong he was.”

Hannah Ellis-Petersen

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