

**OCTOBER 6, 1976**

**'Hard to remember, yet difficult to forget'**

**The bloody military crackdown on students 30 years ago remains 'a thorn in the side of Thai history'**

On the morning of October 6, exactly 30 years ago today, pro-democracy students staged a protest against the return of a military junta leader who had been overthrown by people power. Many would die on that day, lynched by right-wing pro-monarchist forces.

This evening, a new generation of student activists will stage its first major anti-coup protest at the very same spot where dozens of their parents' generation were killed.

While there's an appearance of political history repeating itself at Thammasat University (TU)'s Tha Phrachan campus, historians doubt whether many people remember what happened there three decades ago, and - even if they do remember - what their memories tell them.

What really happened on October 6, 1976?

Today, memories of the incident remain problematic. Historian Charnvit Kasetsiri, who was then vice rector of Thammasat, points out that oral history can only be partially relied upon because of its inconsistency.

Charnvit has his own version of the incident: On October 6, 1976, students from schools and universities led people to protest against the return of Field Marshal Thanom Kitikhachorn, the military junta leader who was ordained as a novice monk and returned from exile in Singapore.

The military group then staged a coup d'etat, seizing power from a civilian government and launching a bloody assault on the student protesters at Thammasat University, who they accused of being communists, aliens and of defaming the Crown Prince.

Officials reported that 41 people died in the crackdown and 3,154 protesters were arrested.

Charnvit said, however, that much cross-checking about the incident has found that people's memories are fleeting.

"No Thai historians took the responsibility of working on it," he said. "History needs historians [to write it]."

Charnvit said that, as a historian, he has already done his job by writing "The Status of the 6th October 1976 in History". It was written 10 years ago, on the 20th anniversary of the incident.

"I won't do anything more [about the history of the October 6 massacre] because it is too painful [a task]," he said.

A lost history for the losers

Thai society lives with [mainstream] history written by the winners [of the incidents], so there is no space left for the history of the losers, Charnvit said.

Moreover, historian Thanet Apornsuan believes any effort to make space for the October 6, 1976 incident in mainstream history may risk reducing the incident to a mere historical footnote. "Because it needs answers such as -who were the murderers? There were a lot of people from all social sectors who got involved in the massacres."

Thanet, who is director of the Southeast Asian studies programme at TU, said most mainstream history is created by later generations, after the key actors are dead.

"The difficult part about writing the history of October 6 is how the incident should be described. The history of October 6 alone

cannot be categorised as anything but a massacre," he said.

Another historian, Thongchai Winichakul said those who engaged in the orgy of killing claimed to be doing it for the country. How, he asked, could such an act be of benefit to Thailand? What could the country gain, or stand to lose, and who was seen as the country's enemy?

There are many questions that Thai society has been avoiding for the past 30 years, he said.

Thongchai witnessed the brutal scenes at first hand. He is now a professor in the history department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, but 30 years ago he was a student leader. He was arrested and detained for two years.

Ten years ago, at the 20th anniversary of the incident, Thongchai tried to create an opportunity for people of his generation to reconstruct the event. It didn't matter to him that many people considered it a history of losers.

This year, however, he has changed his mind, saying that if people cannot deal with it, the memories of October 6 should be left as a thorn in the side of Thai history.

"The power of the incident is not in making it a positive part of Thai history, its strength lies in its ability to raise questions. Why don't we simply leave it as a thorn in the side of history?" Thongchai asked.

An embarrassing past

If history is written by the winners, then why do members of the younger generation, like Phansat Jenraumjit, wonder who were the winners of October 6, 1976,

and who the losers? And why

do neither winners nor losers

want to recall that historical episode?

"Why don't [the winners] want to talk about it?" Phansat, who is a third-year student at TU's political science faculty, asks.

Many other questions have also lain without answers for three decades.

Thongchai offers this answer: "Because, for Thai society, the October 6 incident is murky and hard to swallow. It's a past that's hard to remember, yet difficult to forget."

Charnvit suggests that although the winners achieved their goal in seizing power, the repercussions went far beyond their anticipation. "The history of the Octobers, both 1973 and 1976, doesn't fit with conventional history that propagates harmony, stability and order," he said.

Although three decades have passed, the incident gets only a brief mention in history textbooks. The voices of the losers can still be heard on a website, <[www.2519.net](http://www.2519.net)>, created by a group of people calling themselves the "Tula-tham Group". They say the website is a "museum of information" for younger generations.

"Time and history are always cruel. And they are consistent. Human beings are supposed to be kind. But they are inconsistent. Being far away and far removed is probably a better way of remembering this blank page of the past," said Thongchai, a "loser" who has been working on the history of the incident. He has been organising meetings and interviewing many people who were involved in the "embarrassing past".

A history of violence

The return of military rule on the night of September 19 led to protests staged by a new generation of pro-democracy student activists. They gathered together in the name of the Anti-19 September Coup Network. Their struggle is a lonely one.

While some point to the coup as bloodless, and many former student activists have accepted it as the only solution to the country's political ills, the new protesters say that, discounting the lack of graphic physical violence, the coup is no different from those of the past.

But Chaiwat Satha-anan, an exponent of non-violence, remains optimistic.

"One group of people feels that the coup is like [the Star Wars movie] 'The Empire Strikes Back'. I think Thai society has changed. Many sectors are trying their best not to allow violence to occur. When the state answers by not resorting to violence, it is playing a game that it did not dictate, but was determined by society.

"Three decades ago, we learnt that Thai society has its dark side. The fact that the October 6 incident took place tells us that people in our society can hate one another and badly harm each other. So we must not throw away the history of October 6. We must try to make it part of our social consciousness so it will never happen again."

Chaiwat Satha-anan will be a keynote speaker at Thammasat University's October memorial lawn at 9.15am today. He will speak on "Time and Violence", to commemorate October 6, 1976.

Subhatra Bhumiprabhas

The Nation