### In Defence of the Thai Nation:

The Study of Massacre of October 6 From an Ethno-Symbolic Approach

On 6 October 1973, the government arrested 13 students after they distributed leaflets demanding a new constitution. In consequence, Thai students poured into the streets in Bangkok, protesting day after day against the military dictatorship that held power for almost two decades. The military regime accused that the movement was a plot of communism against the monarchy. Student leaders countered the accusation by holding national flags and portraits of King Bhumibol (King Rama IX) and Queen Sirikit in front of the march against the junta. The riot erupted in the morning of October 14. The police and army clashed with the demonstrators. In order to stop the violence, Bhumibol allied with an army faction forcing the "Three Tyrants"- Field Marshals Thanom Kittikachorn, Narong Kittikachorn and Praphas Charusathien- to leave the country. The King later announced on television directing the protestors to go home.<sup>1</sup>

The Uprising of October 1973 marked the beginning of political polarisation in the mid 1970s. Following the Marxist-Maoist ideology, university students started to present their campaign in a militant tone. By 1975, one of the student newspapers, *Atiphat*, published articles arguing that armed struggle was the only means to improve Thai society.<sup>2</sup> Alarmed by the domestic political unrest and the victory of communism in Indochina, the right wing began to devise organizations and form anti-communist movements. The Red Gaurs was a paramilitary organisation that composed of vocational students and ex-mercenaries. It was under the auspice of the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC). ISOC also took part in forming a group named *Nawaphon*, or "the ninth power" which had a symbolic reference to King Rama IX.<sup>3</sup> Main supporters of this second organisation were in the bureaucratic circle and business community. The last organisation was the Village Scouts. It was a product of the government's counterinsurgency strategy that granted royal patronage. At first, it mainly recruited members in rural areas, but between 1975-1976 the movement

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For an extensive study of The October Uprising see, Prajak Kongkirati, *Lae laew khwam khluan wai koprakot* [Thus, the Movement Emerges] (Bangkok, 2005).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 162.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, p. 238.

became an urban middle-class phenomenon under the control of the reactionary elites.<sup>4</sup>

The political turbulence culminated in the Massacre of October 6, 1976. The return of exiled Thanom was the last straw. It provoked student demonstrations. On 4 October 1976 at Thanmasat University, student re-enacted the garrotting of two activists who protested against Thanom's return. On the next day, the ultra-rightist newspaper, *Dao Siam*, pointed out the similarities between the actor playing the part of the hanged activist and the crown prince. It claimed that the students attempted to make a mockery of the royal family. In the name of the nation, religion (Buddhism) and king, the military radio began to mobilise the right wing forces against the students. In the morning of October 6, students were ferociously attacked. The police who surrounded Thammasat initiated the clash, and the right wing mob stormed onto the campus. The clash led to the coup and the re-imposition of martial law. The new government justified the brutal attack as protecting the monarchy from a communist revolution.<sup>5</sup>

The nationalist movements in the mid 1970s provoked conflicts amongst the Thai. The powerful popular attachment to the nation, religion and king led the reactionary forces to attack the students. My interest is to examine how these national symbols could create such a strong sentiment of patriotism. Most of the studies in the late 1970s and the early 1980s mainly focused on socioeconomic changes that led to political conflicts. These researches did not treat the rightist movements as nationalist movements per se; and since their prime movers were economics and politics, cultural elements that were redeployed to mobilise the mass were relegated.<sup>6</sup> Marxist scholars interpreted the event as a series of class struggles. For example, Peter F. Bell called the right wing organisations as "proto-fascist groups" that emerged to save "the capitalist social order". For him, the repression that culminated in the coup of 1976

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> For a study of the Village Scouts from an anthropological approach see, Katherine A. Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York, 1997).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> For the detailed account of the event of October 6 see, Puey Ungphakorn, 'Violence and Military Coup in Thailand', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 9, no. 3 (1977), pp. 4-12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Among the scholars who studied on the nationalist movement, they only focused on the Village Scouts. See, Thadeus Flood, 'Village Scouts: The King's Finest', *Indochina Chronicle* (1977), p. 19; Katherine A. Bowie, *Rituals of National*; Marjorie A. Muecke, 'The Village Scout of Thailand', *Asian Survey* 20, no. 4 (1980), pp. 407-427.

was the collaboration between the reactionary elites and the US imperialist in defence of their economic interest. While Bell tried to link the internal political turbulence in Thailand with the class conflict on a global scale, Marian Mallet focused on domestic confrontation. Mallet pointed out that the withdrawal of US troop from Thailand "horrified the military leaders for it meant a loss in substantial earnings". The right got more support since the Royal Family<sup>7</sup> identified with the armed forces; and because of the economic recession in 1975, the bourgeoisie began to ally with the reactionary forces.<sup>8</sup>

Marxist analyses reduced the 6 October incident as a mere capitalist episode, and failed to grasp cultural conflicts in Thai society. The other study by David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija gave a more detail analysis of internal conflicts in Thailand from a liberal perspective. Morell and Chai-anan interpreted the event of 1973-1976 in terms of "the continuing conflicts in Thailand between the forces of reform, reaction, and revolution". They wrote that "the forces of modernisation clashed with inescapable impact on traditional Thai society". The civilian governments were weak. The students failed to "ally themselves with the royal institution, nationalism, or even religion". The monarchy "clearly rejoined the armed forces as the preferable alternative to continuing chaos and instability". 9 Morell and Chai-anan pointed out that the monarchy and Buddhism played a decisive role in unifying Thai nationhood, but both institutions failed to function in the mid 1970s. 10 However, what they did not show was how the reactionary elites embroiled the plot of nationalism with religious belief and the monarchy. Furthermore, how the plot of nationalism "struck a chord" among the different strata of the mass that the reactionary elites seek to mobilise.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See the influence of Bhumibol on the right wing organisations in, Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven, 2006), pp. 214-237.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Peter F. Bell, "Cycle' of Class Struggle in Thailand', in Andrew Turton, Jonathan Fast and Malcolm Caldwell (eds.), *Thailand: Roots of Conflict* (Nottingham, 1978), pp. 51-79; Marian Mallet, 'Causes and Consequences of the October '76 Coup', in Andrew Turton, Jonathan Fast and Malcolm Caldwell (eds.), *Thailand: Roots of Conflict*, pp. 80-103.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> See the impacts of the monarchy and Buddhism in Thai national politics in, S. J. Tambiah, 'Sangha and Polity in Modern Thailand: An Overview', in Bardwell L. Smith (ed.), *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma*, pp. 111-133.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (London and New York, 2009), p. 19.

The study by Benedict Anderson on the 6 October incident was widely received among Thai scholars. <sup>12</sup> Although Anderson's work could be perceived as one of Marxist varieties, his analysis shed light on sociocultural factors that alienated the leftist movement. In contrast with neighbouring countries, Thailand escaped direct colonial control in the nineteenth century. Anderson argued that:

the heroes in Thai children's schoolbooks have not been journalists, union leaders, teachers and politicians who spent years in colonial jails, but above all the "great king" of the ruling house.<sup>13</sup>

Since the prevailing rhetoric in Thai society had "typically been conservative, conformist and royalist", the left was "anxious to defend its nationalist credentials". Any leftist idea was always equated with "un-Thai" or "anti-monarchy". <sup>14</sup> Anderson was right when he pointed out that the symbolic role of the monarchy served to demarcate Thai community from "an alien" leftist movement. Yet, he did not emphasise how the reactionary elites shaped and coloured the "rhetoric of royalist".

Drawing on Anthony D. Smith, I propose to analyse the Massacre of October 6 from an "ethno-symbolic approach". In my dissertation, I will focus on the interplay between elite and majority responses. <sup>15</sup> I will show how the popular beliefs in the monarchy and Buddhism influenced the view and actions of the reactionary elites. On the other hand, how the elites "reappropriated" these pre-existing symbols to mobilise the nationalist movement. The rightist movement was not created out of thin air. The challenge from the leftist ideology provoked the reactionary elites to hark back to heroic exempla in Thai history; and then, calling for sacrifice on behalf of Thai community. According to Smith, nationalism can be seen as "the religion of people", because its power lies in sacred symbols. The nationalist movement can create resonance among the mass because it draws on many of traditional beliefs and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Charnvit Kasetsiri, '6 tula kub sathana tang prawatisart karnmueng' [October 6 and Its status in Political History], in *20 pi 6 tula* [20 Years After October 6] (Bangkok, 1996), pp. 59-66.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Anderson, B., 'Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 9, no. 3 (1977), p. 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 21. For studies of the leftist movement in Thailand see, Flood, T., 'The Thai Left Wing in Historical Context', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (1975), pp. 55-67; Kasian Tejapira, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927-1958* (Kyoto and Melbourne, 2001); Somsak Jeamteerasakul, 'The Communist Movement in Thailand' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Monash University, 1991).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism*, p. 31-33.

rituals.<sup>16</sup> In order to understand why people attuned to the rightist propaganda, first, I will trace the concept of Thai kingship and Buddhist worldview that were the distinctive cultural features readying for the reactionary elites to manipulate. In subsequence, I will focus on stirring songs that were used by the elites to infuse patriotic sentiment with an imaginative vision of the "foreign" communist threat.

Because Thailand was not colonised, Frank E. Reynolds pointed out that it provided "an opportunity for the established dynasty to play a positive role in the process of modernisation". 17 Although the Western science supplied a new way of thinking, the old cosmological worldview was not abandoned. The roles of the monarchy and Buddhism were downplayed after the 1932 Revolution, but they were restored under the military regime since the late 1950s. 18 In order to enhance the political authority, Thai leaders continually supported Buddhism. The concept of leadership was intertwined with the religious belief. The notion of charisma was embodied at the heart of Thai society. Charisma, or "barami" in Thai, was the source of authoritative power. Morell and Chai-anan pointed out that barami "is believed to be vested in a person who has accumulated much merit". <sup>19</sup> In the religious myth, the monarch was seen as embodying an extraordinary amount of merit. Until the 1970s, Christine Gray argued that many Thai people still believed that the monarch was "sommuttithep" or a virtual deity. 20 The law of karma was pervaded in popular beliefs. The culmination of karma garnered through past lives as well as present one could explain all statuses in Thai social hierarchy.<sup>21</sup> Thai modern nation was not secular in all aspects, since political legitimacy derived from divinity as much as from populations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 74-79.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Frank E. Reynolds, 'Sacral Kingship and National Development: The Case of Thailand', in Bardwell L. Smith (ed.), *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma* (Chambersberg, 1978), p. 105.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> S. J. Tambiah, 'Sangha and Polity in Modern Thailand: An Overview'. See the revival of the monarchy since the late 1950s in, Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: the Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, rev. edn. (Ithaca, 2007).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavaniia, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, p. 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Christine E. Gray, 'Thailand: The Soteriological State in the 1970s' (Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Chicago, 1986), pp. 479-480.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Thomas A. Kirsch, 'Complexity in the Thai Religions System: An Interpretation', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 36, no. 2 (1977), p. 246.

According to Stanley J. Tambiah, Buddhist tenets relate to the concerns of politico-social order, "whose cornerstone was a "righteous" monarch who would promote a prosperous society and religion". <sup>22</sup> Like Anderson's remark, the great kings were heroes in Thai official history. But, their roles were not merely secular, since they were guardians of Buddhism and Buddhist kingdom. Heroic deeds of Thai kings who were defenders of both faith and the kingdom conferred blessing on the land. The homeland was "sacred" in a sense that it was a place of reverence and awe, where its aura of sanctity lied in the role of heroic kings who bestowed the last resting-places for Thai kin. <sup>23</sup> The master plot of Thai official history was the struggle for independence against external threat; for example, the continual struggle with the Burmese in Sukhothai and Ayudhya period, and the wrestle with European colonialism in the second half of the nineteenth century. In each turbulent time, the role of the kings in fighting back to restore the country was highlighted. <sup>24</sup>

The theme of heroic kings was exploited in the mid 1970s. The myth of King Naresuan- Thai king in the late sixteenth century who had been victorious against the Burmese- was redeployed to counter the leftist movement. It was recounted in the Village Scouts' initial rites to remind the golden age of Thai past and the role of ancestors who sacrifice themselves in order to protect the nation.<sup>25</sup> The tale of the sacrifice was also narrated through a stirring song entitled *the Soldiers of King Naresuan*. This heroic myth of battle could be seen as a source of inspiration for the younger generation to emulate their ancestors. The conjuring trick of the reactionary elites was to link Thai heroic exempla with the everlasting commitment in defense of the sacred community.

Political songs were part of the cultural warfare in Thailand. While the students played songs that telling revolutionary stories<sup>26</sup>, the right reacted by composing stirring songs. Despites of its banal lyrics, stirring songs expressed love of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> S. J. Tambiah, 'Sangha and Polity in Modern Thailand: An Overview', p. 132. For an extensive account on the concept of Thai kingship see, Christine E. Gray, 'Thailand: The Soteriological State in the 1970s'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu, 1994), pp. 140-163.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Katherine A. Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty*, p. 200.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Pamela A. Myers-Moro, 'Songs For Life: Leftist Thai Popular Music in the 1970s', *Journal of Popular Culture* 20, no. 3 (1986), pp. 93-113

the nation, and its object of scorn in a tangible form. The most popular one was *Scum* of the Earth. It usually played daily on radio and television, and its record was distributed to schools all over the country.<sup>27</sup> Its lyrics denoted natural ties to the country, and connoted an attachment to Thai nationhood. On the other hand, the vocabularies of kinship and that of home served to alienate the leftist movement. The students were portrayed as those who "appearance is Thai" but "selling their nation, insulting and demeaning the Thai race": they are "a weight upon the face of the earth".

The communist movement in Thailand was identified with the external threat. In the Cold War propaganda, communism was normally equated with countries such as Russia, China, and North Vietnam.<sup>28</sup> Most of the time, the leftist students were labeled as those who were deceived by the communist evils. For the right, communists were identical with "imperialist powers" that attempted to colonised Thailand. The plot of nationalism was embroiled by the reactionary elites in the language of self-defence.<sup>29</sup> To fight the communism was to strengthen the bonds of political solidarity. In the mid of the political turmoil, Bhumibol played a role of the messianic leader. He supported all the rightist organisations. He also composed one stirring song, *We Fight*. The lyrics was fused with the imagination that Thailand would cease to exist if Thai patriots did not fight the communists. This royal composition was used in the rightist campaign to mobilise the mass as if the king was the one who called for the fight. Religious belief was also manipulated by the elites. Kittivuddho, a monk who was a prominent figure of *Nawaphon*, said that killing the communist is not sinful, because:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, p. 252.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, p. 171.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Tanin Kraivixien, one of members of *Nawaphon* who was named prime minister by the palace after the incident of October 6, played a crucial part in this propaganda. I will clarify his role in my dissertation. See, Tanin Kraivixian, *Lathi lae witikarn khong communist* [Communism and Its Doctrine] (Bangkok, 1973); Tanin Kraivixian, *Phramahakasat thai nai rabob prachathipatai* [On Constitutional Monarchy] (Bangkok, 1976)

whoever destroys the nation, the religion, or the monarchy, such bestial types (*man*) are not complete persons. Thus, we must intend not to kill people but to kill the Devil (*Mara*); this is the duty of all Thai.<sup>30</sup>

For the right, Thai nation was sacred, but communism was foreign profane. Fighting the communists was a hallowed act because it linked the living generation with a mythic and symbolic consequence for the national destiny. The cultural product of nationalism can inspire self-sacrifice love because it conjures up the image of the messianic movement. The rightist nationalism struck a chord among the mass since sacred symbols were redeployed to grapple with the current conflict. The violence clash in Thailand during the mid 1970s was not only the outer world conflict of power politics and social interests, but also the inner world conflict of cultural values.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Quoted in David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, p. 247. See the role of Kittivuddho in manipulating Buddhist concept to mobilise the right wing forces in, Charles F. Keyes, 'Political Crisis and Militant Buddhism in Contemporary Thailand', in Bardwell L. Smith (ed.), *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma* (Chambersberg, 1978), pp. 147-164.

# **Appendix: Stirring Songs**

# Nak paen din [Scum of the Earth]

There are those who use the name Thai, and their appearance is Thai, and they live on the land, from the land; but in their hearts they would destroy it. Selling themselves, selling their nation, insulting and demeaning the Thai race, they depend upon Thailand, gain sustenance from it, yet hate their countrymen.

They are a weight upon the face of the earth, scum on the face of Thailand.

## Rao sue [We Fight]

The Ancestors of the Thai since ancient times Have defended the nation and the motherland They have sacrificed their blood and their lives Our duty is to keep that heirloom forever Our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and their offspring will have a land to live on The future map must show the Land of the Thai We will not allow anyone to destroy it Unmoved by any threat of annihilation We will fight without any thought of flight We will fight here in this place, fight to death Let it be known, to the last man it shall be This land of ours is in our keeping Come any destroyer, we will fight Our honor and dignity are ought to maintain We will fight without backing even one step.

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#### Songs

Tahan pra Naresuan [The Soldiers of King Naresuan]

Nak paen din [Scum of the Earth]

Rao sue [We Fight]

*Nok see lueang* [The Yellow Bird]

Jit Poumisak

Sutham lae puen [Sutham and Friends]

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Wake Up, Thai People

We Fight

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