

COMMENTARY Memories are the first victim of 'happiness' Published: 4 Oct 2014 at 06.00 | Viewed: 3,938 | Comments: 1 Newspaper section: News Writer: Kong Rithee October is here. Along...

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COMMENTARY

Memories are the first victim of 'happiness'

- Published: [4/10/2014](#) at 06:00 AM
- Newspaper section: [News](#)

October is here. Along with the monsoon and beclouded mood, the month has always been marked by the political remembrance whose toxic vapour still leaves a nasty taste in the mouth even of those who didn't live through it.

Every year, the events of Oct 14, 1973 and Oct 6, 1976 — the first a transient victory, the latter a pure horror movie — are dusted off and memorialised. The mood is often solemn, the number of deaths questioned (certainly more than one student died in 1976, as opposed to what the late Samak Sundaravej insisted on CNN), and catchy axioms such as "those who forget history are condemned to repeat it" or "remember your history or someone rewrites it for you" are tossed about in seminars — they sound banal, but banality contains truth, and truth, after four decades, is still vaporous, ethereal, or swept under the rug like dead cockroaches. The tranquiliser of forgetting is more soothing than the hard drug of remembering.

Will Oct 14, 1973 and Oct 6, 1976 be commemorated this year? And in what fashion? Can university students and scholars organise seminars to talk about what happened and what we can learn from it? Will the rotting legacy of dictatorship be discussed? Will the most horrific chapter in our modern history — not because of the number of deaths, but because of the way hatred was institutionalised by the state to the extent that people laughed at mutilated corpses, as they did in the late morning after the massacre of students at Thammasat University on Oct 6, 1976 — be a reminder of odious fascism, black propaganda, Cold War senselessness, and worst of all, the corruption of humanity?

It seems any commemoration of the two October incidents will be low-profile. This is the October of happiness, and happiness is a painkiller whose first victim is memory. Naturally, it's hard to discuss the atrocities committed by the state and the labyrinthine politics that led to Oct 6 — the more heartbreaking of the two events — when the generals ruled and universities cowed at their feet, and when nationalism was prescribed in textbooks and morning recitals. The junta's

command that all university seminars must be approved first by the authorities still echoes like gunfire. If that's the case, the second victim of enforced happiness is history.

I was too young in 1976, and what I learned about it years later didn't come from school. The teacher didn't show me the picture of a corpse being brutalised by a chair in that macabre theatre where the audience laughed. What I know about it I learned from alternative books and discussions, as I believe to be the case with most people. Today we may bemoan that the Prayut Chan-o-cha government has tightened its fist, but actually no previous government of the past four decades, elected or hijacked, civilian or uniformed, ever tried to explain the October uprisings and killings in a substantial, meaningful way. In the official mindset, we prefer the comfort of a fog to the glare of clarity. And that can be said about many other incidents since 1932 as well.

The force-fed happiness will only make things worse. If the memory of our bloodied October is getting vague and thin — if my generation had to actively seek out the details of what happened because no teachers would discuss it openly — it's likely that the episodes will evaporate and crumble like non-existent dust in the next generation. Or maybe it already has; just ask any university student today. Now that Thai youngsters may not have a chance to join any Oct 6 seminar, they might have to look at Hong Kong for an example of youthful idealism and courage to stand up against what they see as a violation of their rights and to demand a say in their own destiny. The third victim of the happy painkiller is hope, because apathy is so seductive and relaxing.

But no, not everyone has forgotten. I recently saw a new documentary *Unheard/Memories* (by a project called "Hearing the Historical Voices: Oral History of Political Violence in Southeast Asia Region") that interviews two parents who lost their children on Oct 6, 1976. One of them, a father in his 70s, had clung on to the belief that his son made it out of Thammasat alive — since his body was never found — and only came to terms with the undeniable fact 10 years ago. The other is an old woman whose teeth have fallen out but who still speaks with burning anger and sorrow. "When I went to claim the body they wanted to give me a free coffin for my son. I told them I'll find my own coffin," she said. "I raised him for 22 years, and one bullet took him away. It hurts. It still hurts." Come October, she remembers, and so should we.

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