

'OCTOBERISTS' - 33 YEARS ON

A divided political ideology

On Wednesday came the last straw. Thirayuth Boonmi, arguably the apex of all "Octoberist" democracy fighters in Thailand in the past three decades, expressed confidence in the interim government installed by the military that staged the September 19 coup d'etat.

"Thirayuth was quick to change his colours, wasn't he?" a journalist exclaimed on hearing the former student leader's statement at his Wednesday press conference.

The recent coup has become the climax of a divided political ideology notably among the former student activists who led Thailand into the new dawn of democracy with their uprising against the military dictatorship on October 14, 1973 - exactly 33 years ago today.

The bloodbath started when Thirayuth and his 12 fellow students were put in jail for distributing leaflets demanding a democratic constitution.

Over the last year, a score of former student leaders who have remained enthusiastic about politics have vigorously fought one another over the highly divisive issues surrounding the leadership of Thaksin Shinawatra; the Constitution's Article 7 on royal prerogative and a royally appointed prime minister; juridical intervention in politics; and finally the September 19 coup and the legitimacy of the General Surayud Chulanont-led interim government.

To key Octoberist Dr Kasian Tejapira, now Thammasat University's professor of political science, it has taken the Octoberists' ideology more than three decades to finally exhaust itself. This is evident by the irreconcilable polarisation within the generation.

On the one side (pro-Thaksin and anti-coup) as listed by Kasian, there are Thaksin's aides, namely, Prommin Lertsuriyadej, Phumtham Vejyachai, Surapong Suebwonglee, Chaturon Chaisang, Sutham Saengprathum, Pinij Charusombat, Adisorn Piengkiet and Kriengkamol Laohapairote.

On the other side, led by Thirayuth, are Pibhob Thongchai, Prasarn Marukapitak, Chermesak Pinthong, Chaiwat Surawichai, Kaewsan Atibhodhi, Kamnoon Sithisamarn, Chatcharin Chaiwat, Tienchai Wongchaisuwan and Suwinai Poranawilai.

However, the deepest division, as Kasian pointed out in his recent article "The Shattering of October Ideologies", is the separation of the people in the urban middle class, who once fought for political and economic freedom, from those in the grassroots movement who struggled for social and economic justice more than three decades ago.

"It is a bitter historical joke that the middle class looks up to the military, bureaucrats, technocrats ... that these people will bring such freedom to them, while the grassroots masses rely on the capitalists to provide them with justice. It is rare that we see 'the double false consciousness' within one socio-political unit," Kasian wrote.

Some of the Octoberists have been recruited to serve the new legislative body appointed by the Council for National Security. They are Gothom Areeya, Surichai Wankao, Sombat Thamrongthanyawong, Pinij Charusombat and Kamnoon Sittisamarn.

As soon as their names were listed, questions loomed about whether they had changed their ideologies, especially those who stayed outside formal politics but remained involved in social activism, like Gothom and Surichai.

However, Gothom declined The Nation's request for an interview, saying that he is not ready to answer any questions now.

Without explanations, some observers have offered their own theories. Nithinand Yorsaengrat, an Octoberist and journalist, said nobody had changed.

"They all want power, believing that once they had power in their hands, they could change society according to their ideologies," she said. "Don't take me wrong, I'm not talking about power in a negative sense. It's not necessarily that way. And this is the reason why some Octoberists support or even worked for Thaksin. This also explains why others will work for the military-appointed national legislative assembly."

A young political scientist, Kanokrat Lertchoosakul of Chulalongkorn University has another theory. She said Thai society might have had a misconception about the Octoberists from the start. Many people simply look at those former student activists in a linear way, that they were progressive leftists.

"Thirayuth, for example, has never been a leftist, but a liberal thinker," she said. "It was political and security reasons that pushed him into the jungle to join the Communist Party of Thailand. Gothom and Surichai [who will be serving in the military-appointed legislative body] may feel that they live with the present political system and it's their job to help Thai society move forward. They are maybe adapting and finding a way to manage Thai politics."

Kanokrat is confident in her analysis as she is working on her PhD dissertation -the "Transformation of the Left Movement in Democratic Politics" - for the London School of Economics.

"Those [Octoberists] may believe that future politics cannot reject the power of the military and royal institution, but for my generation who grew up with the growth of people's politics, it is beyond imagination to accept these players - who are outside of democracy."

Nantiya Tangwisutijit,

Subhatra Bhumiprabhas

The Nation

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