



MOMENTS OF SILENCE



*The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976,
Massacre in Bangkok*

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When it comes to war, the basic dialectic of memory and amnesia is thus not only about remembering and forgetting certain events or people. . . . A just memory demands . . . a final step in the dialectics of ethical memory—not just the movement between an ethics of remembering one's own and remembering others, but also a shift toward an ethics of recognition, of seeing and remembering how inhuman inhabits the human. Any project of the humanities, . . . should thus also be a project of the inhumanities, of how civilizations are built on forgotten barbarism toward others, of how the heart of darkness beats within. No wonder, then, that . . . remembering is a *ghostly verb*. Memory is haunted, not just by ghostly others but by the horrors we have done, seen, and condoned. . . . The troubling weight of the past is especially evident when we speak of war and our limited ability to recall it. Haunted and haunting, human and inhuman, war remains with us and within us, impossible to forget but difficult to remember.³²

Chapter 2

THE MASSACRE AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

In the early hours of October 6, 1976, police and paramilitary groups surrounded Thammasat University, where four to five thousand people had gathered peacefully overnight to protest the return of a former dictator ousted by popular uprising three years earlier (see map). The morning was tense. Two weeks earlier, two activists had been hanged while putting up protest posters. Two days before, a student skit that reenacted the hanging of the activists had been targeted by the military propaganda machine, accused of mocking an effigy of the crown prince (figure 1). Students never had an opportunity to rebut the allegation.

At 5:30 a.m., a rocket-propelled bomb was fired into the crowd inside TU (map, #4). Four people were killed instantly. Dozens were injured. The massacre had begun. That bomb signaled the beginning of a nonstop barrage from military weapons that lasted several hours. A news photographer described it: "this was not a battle; it was the killing of defenseless people."¹ Neal Ulevich of the Associated Press, who had spent four years as a photographer in the Vietnam War, described the shooting as more bedlam than battle.² The protesters' security guards carried only personal weapons, suitable for protecting the demonstration from goons but not for fighting the police.³ Their weapons could slow down but not contend with the onslaught for long. After a bus smashed through a university gate at 7:30 a.m., the police led the paramilitary groups into the campus. Ulevich adds, "all the shooting was directed [at] the building in which the students sheltered."⁴ Most of the victims died from gunshot wounds or explosions



Figure 1a. The controversial hanging skit, allegedly mocking the crown prince at Thammasat on October 4, 1976. © Thammasat University Archives. Reproduced with permission.

inside the campus but some were lynched by the frenzied crowd that stormed onto campus after the gate was smashed (map, #2).

News clippings and dozens of photos showed incredibly barbaric lynchings both inside and outside the campus. Inside TU, a few dead bodies bearing the marks of gunfire and grenades were dragged along the soccer field by pieces of cloth wrapped around their necks. One was a friend of mine, Jaruphong Thongsin (figure 2). On the outside, a person was beaten before a group of men gleefully hanged him to death. Another was chased down, kicked, and punched. His dead body was hanged. In a 1977 Pulitzer prize-winning photo, a dead body hanging from a tree was beaten with a folding chair by an angry man (figure 3). Another man then took a turn. Altogether five bodies were hung from the trees encircling Sanamluang, the huge public space that connects TU with the Grand Palace, only a ten-minute walk away (map, #11, #12).⁵ Six corpses were laid out on the ground, after which a man nailed wooden stakes into their chests, as if it were some kind of satanic ritual in a foreign film. A female student was chased until she fell. It is not clear what happened to her next. The photos show her naked on the ground, a stake placed on



Figure 1b. Front page of *Dao sayam* in the afternoon of October 5, 1976 (the advanced edition of October 6, 1976 issue). © Fa Diaw Kan.



Figure 2. Jaruphong Thongsin's body was dragged on the ground. Photographer unknown.

her body. The crowd of onlookers did nothing to help and some appeared to enjoy the spectacle. In another photo, a young boy, probably ten years old, urinated on an unconscious body. On the street in front of the Ministry of Justice, on the other side of Sanamluang opposite TU, four bodies were piled up with tires, soaked with gasoline, and set afire (map, #13). These brutal murders and the desecration of bodies took place in full public view. Many spectators, including young boys, clearly enjoyed the display (see, for example, figure 3).

On that Wednesday morning, the shooting deaths may have been the least painful and most civilized of the murders. It is not certain when the shooting and the murderous spectacle ended, sometime between 9:30 to 11:00 a.m.⁶ The police rounded up the protesters who sought shelter inside the buildings, forcing them to run through two lines of policemen who kicked, punched, and beat them with their rifles. The police then ordered them, both males and females, to take off their shirts and lie face down on the ground, whereupon the goons were allowed to walk over their bodies.⁷ Afterward, all the arrested students were herded onto buses and taken into custody.

Meanwhile, at the Royal Equestrian Plaza, a few kilometers from TU, right-wing groups gathered. They demanded that the government take decisive action against the communists, both those at TU and allegedly within the government. The elected government, too, was a target of the turmoil. Although this gathering was not directly involved



Figure 3. Neal Ulevich's 1977 Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of the hanging outside Thammasat on October 6. © AP Images. Reprinted with permission.

in the massacre, it was undoubtedly part of the day's plan to oust the elected government and perhaps democracy as well. In the afternoon, the right-wing demonstrators marched to Government House. The government retreated, making an official statement at 2 p.m. that blamed the students for *lèse majesté* and the protesters for using heavy weapons and causing casualties among the police and people outside TU. The statement also announced that the students were already in custody. Prime Minister Seni Pramoj appeared in public for the first time since the turmoil, repeating the official statement almost verbatim.⁸ This responsive gesture had little effect. At 6 p.m., a military coup by the National Administrative Reform Council (NARC) was announced.⁹

According to the police, forty-six people died. Forty-one of them were on the "student and the accused" side. Five were on the "police" side—two police officers and three people who joined the attacks.¹⁰ Several hundred were wounded. The missing were not reported. The police rounded up more than three thousand and put them in jail. Even though the number of dead was small relative to many atrocities and massacres in the modern era, the brutality of the killings and the dehumanized desecration of the dead made the

October 6 massacre stand out as particularly heinous. Our minds and sense of moral decency reject the reality of the event, which remains incomprehensible to many. Despite repeated calls by civic groups over many decades, no official investigation has been undertaken into the incident to this day. Only the unfinished October 6 trial in 1977 and 1978 and a few efforts by academics and political activists have shed any light on the massacre.¹¹ Otherwise, unconfirmed and confusing facts, hearsay, and many questions about it remain.

CONTEXT OF THE MASSACRE

Thailand's absolute monarchy ended in 1932 in a revolution by the People's Party, a group of civilian and military commoners. That historic moment is considered by many the beginning of democracy. In fact, democracy has hardly taken root in the country today given the long history of authoritarian rule by various undemocratic forces since then, namely, the monarchists and the military.¹² In 1947, an army coup marked the end of the People's Party and the beginning of the military rule that lasted until 1973, broken by a few intervals of elected government (1949–1951, 1954–1957, and 1968–1971) that did not last long until another putsch and yet another military regime.

The monarchists, however, were undeterred. Over time, they rebuilt the revered monarchy to become the highest moral authority in the land, vested with enormous unofficial political power, unlike most constitutional monarchies in the world today. After a failed attempt to return to power between 1947 and 1951, the monarchy began to revive gradually in the 1960s, in tandem with the support from the United States, which saw the monarchy as an important anticommunist element in the country.¹³ The turning point was in 1973, when people's dissatisfaction with military rule over the years reached a breaking point. The student movement that had begun only a few years earlier turned to politics and demanded an end to military rule. The regime responded by arresting the student leaders, triggering a demonstration at TU that eventually led to a general uprising against military rule on October 14, 1973. The palace took the opportunity to assert itself as the promoter of democracy, forcing three leaders of the junta into exile and ending the violence after seventy-two people had died. The monarch then appointed the president of the Privy Council to be the interim prime minister. Thailand's democracy

began (again). It was a parliamentary democracy headed by the monarch as the supreme authority and the sole source of political legitimacy. In retrospect, the October 1973 uprising, regarded by experts and the public alike as one of the historic leaps forward in Thailand's democratization, was the beginning of the monarchy's political ascendancy as well.¹⁴

The 1973 uprising sparked a euphoria and energy for political freedom and social change. From 1973 to 1976, social movements for various causes erupted, demanding dramatic reforms in virtually all aspects of Thai society and undermining the power of some established institutions.¹⁵ For instance, in 1974–1975 labor strikes occurred, on average, twice a day.¹⁶ The thirst for new ideas was insatiable, especially for those that had been forbidden under military rule such as Marxism and Maoism. Many individuals and movements—of students, labor, and farmers—became radicalized. They demanded radical changes in democracy, land reform, worker's rights and welfare, education, capitalism, and so on. In the view of those in power, and increasingly of the general public too, these abrupt changes brought chaos and disorder. One crisis broke out after another, both within parliamentary politics and on the streets. Tensions intensified in almost every sector of society affecting people in all walks of life.

In 1975, communist revolutions took place in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Thailand was seen as the possible next domino in the regional stack to fall. The Thai state, particularly the monarchy and the army, was consumed by such anxieties. To them, the communist threat was not merely a factor of international geopolitics, but also an intense domestic battle. They had a great deal to lose. From mid-1975 forward, the student movement led by the National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT) was dominated by leftist radicals. In response to the growing radicalism, those in the establishment—the monarchy, the military, the state bureaucracy, and big businesses—organized anticommunist movements and paramilitary groups to counter the radicals.¹⁷

These groups embraced the right-wing (*fai khrua*) label to fight against the left-wing (*fai sai*) radicals. Ideologically, the right wingers propagated slogans of nation, religion, and monarchy, regarded as the sacred pillars of the country and which the communists were allegedly trying to destroy. Among the most notorious right-wing groups were the Red Gaur (Krating daeng), the Nawaphon, and the Village

Scouts. As discussed in chapter 9, the military agency for counterinsurgency—the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC)—organized, financed, and orchestrated the actions of the first two right-wing groups and a few others. The palace's patronage of the Village Scouts, a popular movement with ultraroyalist and anticommunist leanings, was never a secret to the Thai public.

The right-wing movements grew rapidly beginning around 1975. Political polarization intensified and tensions often turned violent. The Red Gauris in particular were notorious for their intimidations and skirmishes at almost every protest and demonstration. Their attacks became increasingly violent over time, sometimes resulting in fatalities. From mid-1975 to October 1976, almost a hundred leaders of radical civic groups and left-leaning political parties were assassinated.¹⁸ Not a single perpetrator of these crimes was ever found. Electoral politics became fragile, unable to cope with the acute situation. The public became weary of endless turmoil.

Throughout this time, the police and military took no action to stem the violence. Instead, they helped escalate the polarization. In addition to the ISOC operations, military propaganda forcefully targeted the radicals, labeling them “scum of the country” (*nak phaedin*), lackeys of the communist aliens (mainly of Vietnam), and the enemy of the nation, the religion, and the monarchy. The military also prepared to take advantage of the turmoil. When violent incidents with a few fatalities took place at demonstrations in March, June, July, and August 1976, rumors about a putsch swirled and they no longer seemed far-fetched. Yet despite such rumors and speculation, my recollection of the period is that a horrific massacre was still unthinkable. We were familiar with coups, which in practice were mostly intra-elite affairs. We had experience with an uprising, such as the one in October 1973. Still, the carnage of October 6 was unimaginable at that time.

PRETEXT OF THE MASSACRE

The pretext began on September 19, 1976, with the return of General Thanom Kittikachon, the dictator who had ruled the country from 1963 to October 14, 1973, the day he was forced into exile. Thanom returned in the robe of a Buddhist monk, pleading to the public that he merely wanted to return to make merit for his dying father. He went straight from the airport to the Bowornniwet Royal Monastery

under the full protection of a military motorcade. This well-orchestrated return was undoubtedly intended to provoke the public and the student movement, thus intensifying political conflict and destabilizing the elected government. Even though it was in crisis from factional infighting, the government realized that Thanom's return threatened its survival and the young democracy that had begun only three years earlier. The radical movement, too, was aware of this tense situation and tried to prevent a coup. The NSCT carefully organized a few demonstrations at various places around the country. Then, on September 29, two labor activists were found hanging in a public space with marks of police handcuffs on their wrists.¹⁹ Despite assassinations and violent attacks during the previous three years of confrontations, public hanging was unprecedented. The public was horrified. A few days later, the NSCT called for a major demonstration in the afternoon of October 4 at Sanamluang, a huge public ground outside TU (see map, #11, #12), to protest Thanom's return and the hanging. They demanded that the government of Seni Pramoj take decisive actions to end the attempt to restore the military rule.

October 4, 1976, at noon, student groups at TU performed a public skit to protest the hanging and to encourage students to join the demonstration later that day. The skit included a mock hanging that ended without controversy (see figure 1a). The gathering in the afternoon went as planned until dark, when the NSCT decided to continue the protest until its demands were met. The gathering, however, was moved from Sanamluang to the soccer field inside the TU campus because, as the thinking went, buildings around the field could protect the demonstrators from any attack by right-wing goons using small firearms and explosives (see map). A gathering on a campus with a few entrances was safer and easier to manage. But choosing to do so suggested that the NSCT did not anticipate the entrapment. Even though a coup might be foreseeable, a massacre by the state's armed forces was still beyond anticipation.

The demonstration continued to the next day without major trouble. Then, in the late afternoon of October 5, a right-wing royalist newspaper, *Dao sayam*, headlined that the student protest had included a mock hanging of Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn (now king). A photo from the October 4 student skit accompanied the article to show that the face of the hanged actor indeed resembled the crown prince (see figure 1b). Meanwhile, the military broadcast network, which controlled the radio airwaves across the entire country, began

its propaganda, accusing the NSCT of lèse majesté. Within a short time that afternoon, the photo had shifted political focus from Thanom's return to the mock hanging. In the anticommunist fervor of the time, the alleged mock hanging reaffirmed the belief that the students were communists who planned to overthrow the monarchy. About 9 p.m., the government ordered the arrests of those involved in the hanging skit, possibly trying to curb the rapidly rising pressure from right-wing royalists and to rein in the protest movement at the same time. The NSCT was alarmed. Yet they, and I as well, believed that they could explain ourselves to the public given that the accusation was baseless. At 9:30 p.m., the NSCT held a press conference denying the allegation and introducing the actors to the public. Unfortunately, the NSCT's explanation to counter the military's propaganda was too late; the earliest this information could have reached the public would have been the next morning.

The situation at TU was extremely tense throughout the evening and night. At Sanamluang, the angry crowd of agitators, including the paramilitary groups, gathered in increasing numbers as the hours went by. At midnight, the university's security post at the main entrance went up in flames (see map, #2). The police appeared with heavy weapons outside the campus around 2 or 3 a.m. A few hours afterward, they began firing into TU campus. The NSCT scrambled to obtain the government's guarantee of safety but succeeded only in getting an agreement for their leaders to bring the students who had performed in the skit to meet with Prime Minister Seni at his residence in the morning. As the government prepared for the students to turn themselves in, the NSCT leaders sought a safe conclusion to the demonstration. When they eventually left, after 6 a.m., the NSCT party did not realize that during those morning hours the government had been losing power. When they arrived at Seni's residence, instead of meeting with the prime minister, the police took them into custody.²⁰

At Thammasat, the carnage began at 5:30 a.m.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Putting aside several absurd allegations, such as that the demonstrators were Vietnamese rather than Thai, or that there was a secret tunnel in TU to stockpile heavy weapons, many questions about the

massacre remain unanswered and perhaps will not be.²¹ These mysteries have contributed in various ways to the ambivalent memories and silence about the massacre over the decades that followed. Here I discuss only thirteen significant ones.

First, was the violent suppression of the radicals prepared in advance or an unanticipated opportunity for the right-wing factions? Given the fear of communism and the intensified and violent political polarization, months before the massacre the leader of a conservative political party suggested that the right wing should eliminate the left (*khwa phikhat sai*—literally, the right kills the left).²² A Buddhist monk claimed that the killing of communists was not considered a serious religious sin (*kha communit mai bap*) because it was akin to killing the Evil One in a Buddhist fable.²³ Notorious songs, such as *Nak Phaendin*, which characterized the radicals as scum of the country, could be heard from many broadcasts everywhere and every day.²⁴ A poster reading "All Socialists are Communists" (*sangkham-niyom thukchanit khu kommunit*) appeared across the country in early 1976. The intense anticommunist atmosphere definitely contributed to the rage of the crowd and the heinous acts during the massacre. Despite all of this, the question remains whether the massacre was planned or anticipated by the establishment or whether the situation got out of control.

Nevertheless, evidence exists that the idea for a coup had been hatched in February 1976, though, in the words of the US ambassador to Thailand a week after the massacre, "it was not until last week that the elements essential to a final decision were brought together."²⁵ Kukrit Pramoj, a former prime minister, made a similar observation to David Cole, the British ambassador to Bangkok at the time: "It was the coup they planned against me last February; they just took it out of the cupboard again."²⁶ In February 1976, King Bhumibol was informed about the plot for a coup, both ambassadors reported, but he opposed it. An elder statesman confirmed this information, that Admiral Sa-ngad Chaloryu, the supreme commander of the armed forces at the time, had had an audience with the king. Sa-ngad raised the possibility of a coup as the king listened attentively. Sa-ngad told the king that he could not find a candidate for the prime minister afterward. The king then named a staunch anticommunist judge, Thanin Kraivixian.²⁷ On October 6, 1976, Sa-ngad was the head of the coup group (the NARC). A few days later, Thanin was appointed prime minister. The king, in the words of the American ambassador,

“apparently approved” the coup.²⁸ “It is inconceivable that this latest [coup] could have gone ahead without at least the knowledge of the king’s acquiescence,” the British ambassador observed.²⁹ Scholars David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija state that “the fusion of royal legitimacy and military power had [allowed] the army to act once more in national interest.”³⁰ When did this fusion begin? Given that the plot of a coup was prepared many months in advance, was the massacre in the morning part of the plan for the coup in the evening or it was an unanticipated opportunity?

Second, who conspired for Thanom’s return and for what particular goal? A journalist concluded a week after the massacre that the conspiracy turned out to be the single stone that killed two birds, namely, the end of the radical student movement and the fall of the elected government.³¹ The eventual outcome did not, however, necessarily mean that the conspiracy was designed for those outcomes. The unfolding situation and public reactions involved many factors that were probably unanticipated and beyond anyone’s control or plan. But it was not beyond the ability of those who prepared for the coup to take advantage of it and to turn it to serve their scheme.

Thanom had attempted a return once before, in December 1974. It sparked swift and widespread protests, causing him to head back to Boston, Massachusetts, only a few days later. Then, in August 1976, General Prapat Jarusathian, another dictator who was forced into exile at the same time as Thanom, returned to the country as well. The NSCT protested and clashed with the Red Gaur, prompting the government to take swift action forcing Prapat out. Prapat left the country only after he went to the palace, although the role the palace played in this incident was unclear. Nevertheless, Prapat’s return took place only a month before Thanom’s. Was the former a test run for the latter? To this day, we know some more about the massacre but not much about these pretext events.

Third, the Boworniwet temple that took in Thanom was among the top royal monasteries in the country. It is also the headquarters of the Thammayut sect, which was founded by a monarch of this dynasty about 1830, and thus every monarch of this dynasty was a patron of this sect and this temple. Bhumibol himself was ordained here in 1956. In fact, the partner and personal facilitator for the king when he was a monk, Phra Yannasangvara, was the abbot who ordained Thanom in 1976. Yannasangvara later became the supreme patriarch of the Thai sangha, which position he held from 1989 to 2013. The

monk who was the facilitator for Thanom in 1976 was the abbot’s secretary. He was later an outspoken leader of an ultraconservative Buddhist group, Pariantham Samakhom. Was it by chance that Thanom was ordained at this temple and facilitated by these monks? To what extent (if any) were the palace, this revered monk, and the sangha establishment part of the plan for Thanom’s return in a monk’s robe? (Thanom quit the robe only a few months after the massacre, and his father did not die until 1980.)

Fourth, the biggest elephant in the room and the most troubling question for Thai society was the role of the palace in the right-wing movement, in Thanom’s return, and in the massacre. King Bhumibol was often cited with high praise for his mediation to end the political violence in 1973 and 1992. The 1976 massacre is conspicuously unmentioned in most biographies of him.³² No evidence indicates that the king even tried to intervene to end the massacre. Evidence to the contrary, however, is ample. In the words of British ambassador Cole on November 5, 1976, “The King... has been involved in recent events to a very deep extent. ... [However] the actual events of 6 October had taken everybody by surprise.”³³ Paul Handley makes a detailed implication of the palace in the buildup of the right-wing movement and in the situation that led to the massacre and the coup, although their involvement in the killing on that day was not clear.³⁴ The king’s silence that day was conspicuous, and he has remained silent ever since.

Despite the general misperception that the Thai monarchy is above politics, it was in fact active in politics throughout Bhumibol’s reign (1946–2016).³⁵ The monarchy has played a significant role in the counterinsurgency since the 1960s, thanks to the support by the United States and the royalist junta at the time.³⁶ In regard to the right-wing movement, given the anxiety after the communist revolutions in Indochina in 1975, every member of the royal family was active in the mobilization of the Village Scouts in 1975 and 1976.³⁷ Bhumibol, writes Katherine Bowie, “was clearly the single most important personage fostering the movement’s expansion. Royal patronage facilitated support from both the government and the private sector.”³⁸ The British ambassador wrote, “[As] I have remarked before on the Queen’s Marie-Antoinette complex... her obsession... with security and anti-communism... she has become closely, even too closely, associated with the right-wing organizations.... The last conversation I had with her... centered

obsessively on the right-wing Village Scouts as the salvation of the country.”³⁹ Around that time, the politico-cultural condition that I have called “hyper-royalism” had just begun as part of the anticommunist atmosphere.⁴⁰ A number of anticommunist songs composed by the king filled the airwaves of military propaganda and became theme songs of the right-wing movement.⁴¹ On October 6, 1976, the active crowd at Sanamluang and at the Equestrian Plaza was mostly the Village Scouts.⁴²

As to Thanom’s return as a monk, the question might be whether this farce would have been a laughing matter had his ordination and residence not been at the Bowornniwet temple by the abbot who was very close to Bhumibol. Did it take place without the king’s knowledge? Two days after Thanom returned, the king and queen made an unscheduled visit to the temple.⁴³ The lady in waiting to the queen emphasized in her press conference that they came to meet the abbot (that is, not Thanom). Nevertheless, she relayed the queen’s concern that vicious people were attempting to burn down the temple and to destroy Buddhism, thus the queen urged people to help protect the temple, and thereby Buddhism as well.⁴⁴ She did not name the enemy, but perhaps there was no need to do so.

During the massacre, one of the main police forces that stormed into TU with heavy weapons was the Border Patrol Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU). It had been created in the early 1950s by the United States as a special force for counterinsurgency operations. The king and the queen had had a long association with the Border Patrol Police (BPP) and the PARU since then, thanks in part to the proximity of a palace and the PARU headquarters, and in part to US efforts to increase the monarchy’s role in anticommunism. Since the 1960s, the entire BPP had been brought under the royal patronage of the royal family, especially the princess mother of King Bhumibol.⁴⁵ Although the BPP is officially part of the police command, it enjoys relative autonomy, thanks to its special relationship with the palace. On October 6, the PARU got the order around 2 a.m. to move from their base more than two hundred kilometers away to arrive at TU around 6 a.m.⁴⁶ At 2 a.m., heavy shooting at TU had not yet begun. Was the order to enter TU made with the advance knowledge of what was going to happen in four hours? Why use a force from a distance instead of a unit in Bangkok? Why the PARU, given that Bangkok is not at the border, nor did the operation at TU need an aerial unit? Or was it the most trusted unit by and under

command of whoever made the order? Who gave the order? To be fair, no concrete evidence pointed to the palace. In fact, who ordered the PARU at 2 a.m. to go into TU remains a mystery.⁴⁷

The same day, October 6, the king and the crown prince went to visit the abbot of the Bowornniwet temple again. A newspaper also showed a picture of them among the Village Scouts at the Grand Palace.⁴⁸ At 5 p.m., shortly before the coup, the king advised the governor of Bangkok, who was a leader of the Village Scouts who gathered at the Government House, to end the demonstration. The crown prince was present at the gathering, telling the Scouts to end their demonstration.⁴⁹ On the following day, Princess Sirindhorn and her sister went to visit the injured police officers at the hospital, praising them for their sacrifice to the country. On October 20, the two princesses presided over the funeral of a Village Scout who had died in the incident, honoring him as an example whom other Village Scouts should follow.⁵⁰ As we see in chapter 9, this scout was active in a paramilitary group created by ISOC.

These facts about actions (and inaction) by the royal family raise the question of what exactly was “a very deep extent,” as the British ambassador put it. Were they part of the atrocity? Did they know in advance? What did they think after it had taken place? Did the absence of the royal intervention to stop the killing reflect their inability or complicity? Unfortunately, the subject of the palace and the massacre remains taboo in Thailand. Most Thais are either ignorant about it, or are willing to turn a blind eye to the elephant in the room.

Fifth, who ordered the siege at TU? The government of Thanin Kraivixian said that the Seni government ordered the arrests of students (and is thereby responsible for the massacre). Seni issued a formal statement clarifying that his government ordered only the arrests of those involved in the alleged mocking-the-crown-prince skit. It did not order the arrests or suppression of the demonstration.⁵¹ To this day, it is unclear who ordered the operation at TU in the middle of the night. Neither is it clear by whose order the six students who went to meet Seni at his residence were taken into custody. Had they met, would it have been possible to stop the carnage?

Sixth, why did the Seni government take no action throughout the morning? Did they know the actual situation at TU? Were they in fact still in power when the shooting began? One thing was clear about the government that morning: it was scrambling for its survival. According to the memoir of a cabinet member of the Seni

government, the prime minister called for a special meeting that morning to declare a state of emergency. The goal was to disperse the right-wing gathering at the Equestrian Plaza. The cabinet members who opposed the emergency were the right-wing politicians, Chatichai Choonhavan (later prime minister from 1988 to 1991) and Praman Adireksan (deputy prime minister in numerous governments from 1975 to 1987). Chatichai brought in Charoenrit Chamratomran, deputy chief of the BPP and cofounder of the Village Scouts, to support his argument. Another police general, Chumphon Lohachala, reported to the cabinet in tears that students were heavily armed, resulting in heavy casualties among the police. Charoenrit and Praman urged that it was an opportunity to eradicate radical students. The national police chief, on the other hand, apparently not being part of the conspiracy, reported to the cabinet that no police were dead and only a few were injured. The cabinet also learned that police found only three light pistols among the demonstrators.⁵² In the end, the cabinet could not agree to a state of emergency.⁵³ Throughout the day, the government did nothing except issue a statement over Radio Thailand at 2 p.m., blaming the students for the violence in the morning. According to the statement, it appears that the government even accepted the hearsay about the arms stockpiles in TU despite knowing it was untrue. This showed either how far those in government would go to save themselves or how powerless they really were. Thus they did absolutely nothing.

Seventh, apart from the police and the PARU, who were the perpetrators, especially those who committed the heinous acts? Their identities remain formulaic and generic. Two specific issues that merit attention are, first, the presumption that the state's forces that morning were the army and the police, and, second, the formulaic mention of the triplet paramilitary groups in the massacre: "the Red Gaur, Nawaphon, and the Village Scouts."

On the first point, the army's propaganda was definitely responsible for the false accusation regarding the skit and the anti-communist hysteria. The ISOC was behind the deadly right-wing groups. However, army personnel did not actually participate in firing at the demonstrators. The armed force that morning was the police.⁵⁴ According to the top police commander that day, about four hundred police were deployed at TU.⁵⁵ They came from four main branches, the local police from various districts in Bangkok, the Crime Suppression Command, the Special Operation Command

(the so-called Riot Suppression Police), and the PARU.⁵⁶ Given political confusion and possibly several coup plots under way during those hours, it is unclear whether these police forces were coordinated or represented various contesting political opportunists and coup plotters.

For the paramilitary groups, almost every writing about the October 6 incident mentions the triplet—Red Gaur, Nawaphon, and Village Scout—as the perpetrators. Among them, it was not clear who did what during the massacre. Because the Red Gaur were already notorious, crediting them with the brutality was convenient. However, as we see in chapter 9, they denied it with a legitimate alibi. My research found that the deadliest perpetrators were the fringe groups of goons who were much less known and mentioned only in passing in writings about the massacre.⁵⁷ Except for the Village Scouts, to this day we know very little about these right-wing groups, let alone the goons.

Further, many accounts of the right-wing groups seem to be recycled, that is, circulation of the same information from only a few original sources. The case of Nawaphon, allegedly the "biggest and most influential right-wing organization" at the time, is a good example.⁵⁸ Nawaphon features prominently as a major right-wing group in every writing about the massacre. Yet the descriptions of Nawaphon in most of them are similar.⁵⁹ Founded in 1974 and funded by ISOC, it is said to be a huge anticommunist civic group with more than a million members across the country, including officials and business people in provincial cities who provided more funding.⁶⁰ Its prominent members included a privy councillor, a few army and police generals, two TU professors, and a notorious Buddhist monk. A political operator named Watthana Khiewimol was the group's public face. Most accounts say Nawaphon focused on psychological warfare with activities such as meetings, several large gatherings, and setting up the local anticommunist cells and networks across the country. Some said it had assassination units as well.⁶¹ Morell and Chai-anan provide Watthana's background based on an interview with him. They tell us about a gathering of Nawaphon as well, though it does not mention the source other than Watthana.⁶² Handley describes a rudimentary structure (upper and lower levels) of the group.⁶³ Despite its intimidating image and Watthana's boastful press conferences, news was scant and photos few about Nawaphon's activities at the time. Its large gatherings were not known, except the highly publicized meeting of fifteen thousand local

leaders in January 1976 that was repeatedly mentioned. Other public gatherings that Watthana boasted about and claimed as Nawaphon's were the ones in which the right-wing crowd was mixed and indistinguishable.⁶⁴ The only different image of Nawaphon is from a recent book, which says the US agencies at the time suspected Watthana's credentials, and described the influence of "shadowy" group as "minimal," "light-weight," and "opportunistic."⁶⁵

In my view, Nawaphon was probably a phantom organization intended to inflate the image of the right-wing movement as a popular movement and to intimidate the radicals. Its "mass base" and local cells were the same people that the ISOC had organized around the country for years as part of its counterinsurgency operation.⁶⁶ They could show up as Nawaphon's people for seminars and photo-ops if the ISOC ordered them to. The assassinations, if true, could be the dirty work of any anticommunist group, especially military personnel under the ISOC, only giving credit to Nawaphon. In other words, Nawaphon was probably only the public face of the anticommunist functionaries who operated as the deep state, independent of the fragile elected government. Apart from the ISOC, Nawaphon did not have its own mass base or organization. No million members and no assassins. Only Watthana and his mouth.⁶⁷

Eighth, did the United States play any role in the massacre? Did the American government know about it beforehand, provide assistance, endorse it, or help cover it up? Given US support for many dictatorial regimes throughout the world during that period, including deadly ones in Southeast Asia and Central and Latin America, these questions are legitimate.

Judging from the evidence, especially the cables between the embassy in Bangkok and Washington, DC, the United States followed the critical situation closely at every step but seemed content to stay on the sidelines. It might have anticipated a coup, as most keen observers had, but not a massacre. It only analyzed and explained after the fact, as most observers did. It did not intervene in any way and did not condemn the atrocity. In mid-1977, the US Congress held a hearing on the situation in Thailand within the regional context of the communist advance in Southeast Asia.

The explanation for US inaction in 1976 despite concerns about the communists in Southeast Asia is beyond the scope of this book. The US retreat from Southeast Asia began even before the Indochina revolutions in 1975 and sped up after that. It quickly scaled down the

number of personnel and began to leave its bases in Thailand as well. The region, Thailand in particular, suddenly became a lower priority for both the US government and academic inquiry, as it is today.

Nevertheless, the indirect US role in the massacre should not be overlooked. Almost all the deadly functionaries of the state that operated on October 6, 1976, were the products of the US counterinsurgency—namely, the ISOC, the BPP, the Thai military, and so on. Even the monarchy, which had been crippled by the end of its absolute era in 1932, was revived and promoted to power by the United States in the 1960s.⁶⁸

Ninth, one of the most intriguing conspiracy theories is about the skit that triggered the royalist rage. What explains the resemblance between the student actor in the photo and the crown prince (see figures 1a and 1b)? Some suggest that either the skit or the photo, perhaps both, were part of the plot for the massacre and the coup.⁶⁹ On the other hand, a few observed that the massacre was a blessing in disguise for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), raising a theory that the skit might have been the work of the CPT.⁷⁰ People who were involved with the skit categorically denied these theories.⁷¹ These suspicions are retrospective speculations based on the consequences of the photo. To this day no evidence supports any of them.⁷²

Let us lay out and consider the facts. The skit was produced by TU's drama club. The NSCT did not know about it and was not involved in any way. It was performed in public on October 4 to an audience of a few hundred people. Two actors, not one, took turns playing the hanged victim. The skit did not mention the royals. No one in the audience suggested that any actor resembled the crown prince. After it ended, the skit was not mentioned at the ensuing demonstration until the controversy broke out a day later. The black and white photo of the skit was published on the front page of several newspapers in the morning of October 5, including *Athipat* (the NSCT's newspaper) and the *Bangkok Post*. None of them had a caption that related to the royals, or a hint at *lèse majesté*. In the early afternoon that day, however, a woman filed a charge against the NSCT based on the picture she saw in the *Bangkok Post*. The army broadcast then spread the allegation that the NSCT had staged a mock hanging of the crown prince. The allegation spread like wild fire. That afternoon, *Dao sayam* printed a large photo of the alleged mock hanging on its front page with the headline, "Crown Prince Hanged in Effigy. The Country Erupted. The NSCT Crushed the Hearts of All

Thais" (*Khwaen kho hun muan chao fa chai. Phaendin duat. Sun yip huachai thai thang chat*) (figure 1b).

Right-wing royalists undoubtedly believed the allegation. Their opponents tended to believe that the photo was doctored.⁷³ So did Seni Pramoj.⁷⁴ In 1988, twelve years later, the *Bangkok Post* issued a clarification for the first time denying all allegations. It said that after the publication on October 5, 1976, the Special Branch Police (Santiban) came to confiscate the negatives and the prints.⁷⁵ In the issue on October 7, 1996, twenty years after the massacre, a longer clarification appeared on its front page.

Apart from a clarification issued in 1988, we have chosen to remain silent, not wishing to revive this painful episode . . . hoping that the accusation will fade with passing time. . . . Silence has been interpreted as admitting [the allegation].

The photo in question was not in any way doctored. The negative was not tampered with. . . . [This has been verified by the police.] The film was developed in our dark room. Prints were made in the same room. When they were presented at the news conference, none of us saw that the actor in the mock hanging looked like a member of the Royal Family. The decision to use the photo was straightforward: it was the best of the day.

Those of us responsible for making the decision about the presentation of news and photos feel deep sorrow about the carnage. . . . But we were never part of [the killing] deliberately or otherwise.⁷⁶

After the publication, the editorial continues, the *Bangkok Post* received several threats from right-wing elements. The paper insisted that there was no collaboration whatsoever between the *Post* and *Dao sayam*. In 2000, I interviewed several people at the *Post* office who were involved with the publication of the photo and the reporting of events in 1976. They insisted that they did not see the resemblance of the actor and crown prince, either on the scene at TU or in the photo. Nor did they see it at the editorial meeting when they chose the photo for the front page of the October 5 issue. Had they seen it, they argued, they would definitely not have published the photo because they could have been charged with lese majesté.⁷⁷ A *Dao sayam* journalist also denied the suspicion that the film or the photo were doctored.⁷⁸ Ji Ungphakorn and Suthachai Yimprasert considered the original photos that the police collected from the *Bangkok Post*

and *Dao sayam* and also conclude that neither the film nor the photo were doctored.

Could the resemblance be a happenstance, a truly tragic one that was unanticipated even by right-wing groups, *Dao sayam*, or the coup plotters?⁷⁹ Could the resemblance be the result of the power of suggestion, similar to the mental trick that makes us see a rabbit on the moon every time we look at it simply because we are told to see the moon that way? So many conspiracy theories about the skit and the photo exist because it is difficult to accept that such a deadly coincidence or human fallacy could have caused such a tragedy, but it cannot be explained any other way. Somsak Jeamteerasakul reaches the same conclusion, that the photo was not doctored, and *Dao sayam* did not suspect anything about the photo before the allegation spread in the afternoon of October 5.⁸⁰ *Dao sayam*, the right-wing movement, and the military seized the opportunity only to deal the NSCT a knock-out blow.⁸¹

Despite its repeated denial, the allegations about the *Bangkok Post* will be hard to dislodge because it is difficult to accept that a tragedy of such magnitude could be triggered by happenstance. When a controversy erupted again in 2000, a political activist and *The Nation*, the rival English daily, alleged that the *Post* was part of the conspiracy that led to the carnage.⁸² The doubts will probably remain forever.

Tenth, why did the NSCT not end the demonstration on the night of October 5? In retrospect, this question is valid. But only in retrospect.⁸³ It was a common belief at the time that a demonstration should not end late at night for safety concerns, given the lack of public transportation and potential problems with right-wing goons. Remaining on a compact campus with a few entrances, such as TU's, was deemed safer. Of course, we (here I speak as one of the former leadership collective) did not foresee being trapped.⁸⁴ In fact, the situation was tense but no more so than anticipated before the police surrounded the campus. To end the demonstration after midnight without transportation could have triggered disorder. The heavy firing began about 4 a.m., at which point dispersing the crowd without safe passage could also have led to bloodshed. This was why NSCT leaders tried to secure the government's promise of safety before ending the demonstration. This explanation might be unconvincing to some. But it was truly our thinking and reasoning at the time. The truth was also that we had no experience of a siege or a massacre.

Our response to the immediate problem that arose was always a step too late.⁸⁵

Eleventh, after the massacre, two thousand to three thousand students joined the CPT in its armed struggle against the Thai state.⁸⁶ That the CPT grew the most and the most quickly during the few years after the massacre prompted some to wonder whether it had anticipated the massacre but willingly let it happen to induce students to join the armed struggle in the jungles. Moreover, it was revealed later that, before the massacre, the CPT had withdrawn a number of its operators from Bangkok to its strongholds in the jungles. This revelation raised doubts about whether the CPT knew in advance what was going to happen, yet tacitly blocked the effort to end the demonstration.⁸⁷ But if the CPT had an inkling of the massive suppression to come, why was the radical leadership of the student movement, who were either in contact with or under the influence of the CPT, caught completely off guard?

the CPT had infiltrated the [student movement] leadership and chose to employ such an incident to engender just the kind of emotional reaction from the right that did occur on October 6. Party leaders could have reasoned that massive violence against the students rallying at Thammasat was exactly what was required to induce a sizable number of potential student cadres finally to reject parliamentary reform and join the party's revolution in the hills. This was indeed the result, though it need not imply that the hanging incident had been consciously staged by the CPT as a calculated move to anger the rightists.⁸⁸

This allegation led to further rumors and allegations—that the mock hanging was a conspiracy by the CPT, or that the extremist faction among the students refused to end the demonstration while the moderate faction tried to ease the situation by negotiation with the government.⁸⁹ It also cast doubt on me personally. According to one allegation, I was part of the CPT's plot to not end the demonstration in order to let the massacre take place and result in the student exodus to jungles.⁹⁰ I can only categorically deny this.⁹¹ Besides, in my opinion, the accusation assumes an extraordinary ability of the CPT to manipulate every step of the situation and to foresee or control the outcomes as well: first, the skit that did not cause any suspicion of *lèse majesté* until the photo was published in several newspapers and the allegation was fanned by the military broadcast and by a

right-wing newspaper; second, the siege by the angry crowd and the police, the deployment of the PARU, and the inaction by the government; third, the unprecedented level of brutality; and, fourth, the decisions of so many individual students to seek vengeance by joining the armed struggle. The allegation gives too much credit to the CPT to foresee precisely how events would unfold.

The CPT certainly played a crucial role in the increasing radicalism of the student movement and contributed to how the student leadership thought and made decisions in crucial situations. In those days, as far as I can say, none of the student leaders could foresee a massacre in concrete terms. It remained theoretical to us, because we learned from reading about the experiences of other student movements. Any talk of a massacre before that day was abstract. By the time it took place, we could only react to the immediate situation at hand. We were unable to think a step ahead, let alone three steps to boost the CPT's armed struggles.

Twelfth, even today, we do not know much about the victims of the massacre—who they and their families were or how they died. Their families deserve to know more about the deaths of their loved ones and deserve recognition for the silent suffering they endured given public sensitivities about the massacre in Thailand. But a thorough investigation is unlikely any time soon, perhaps forever.⁹²

For years after the massacre, it was not clear how many people had been killed, who they were, how they died, how many were injured, and how many missing. Many believed that more than a hundred died.⁹³ Reliable information was limited because all media were either shut down or strictly controlled for months afterward. Instead, hearsay about rapes, drownings, and tortures spread widely. Subsequently, during the period of silence, the dead, known only vaguely and collectively—not as individuals with names, faces, families and personal lives—were overlooked. Even former radicals remembered them collectively as tragic martyrs rather than as individuals. More reliable information came to light only after my assistant and I found the autopsy reports in 2000.⁹⁴ Yet a number of unanswered questions about the deaths remain to this day.

The autopsy reports are helpful, but they are not entirely reliable. Many pages of the reports are misplaced, causing confusion due to the mismatches of the photos and the medical examiners' records of several individuals. This problem took me years to solve, but it was not among the most difficult puzzles, such as the six "unidentified Thai

males" (*chai thai mai sap chue*). Three have been identified since then. Three remained unknown despite photographs and descriptions of their bodies.

Next, most people who know about the October 6 massacre have seen only one hanging victim, the person in Ulevich's photo. Autopsy reports report two, thus I had thought for years that there were two.⁹⁵ In 2016, after careful research based on the autopsy reports, photos, and news clippings, the research team for the digital archives of the incident, the Documentation of the October 6 (Doct6) project, confirmed four hangings, plus one unconfirmed. Of these, we can identify three of them. The remaining unidentified hanging victim is the person in Ulevich's 1977 photo whom people have seen the most (figure 3).⁹⁶ More than forty years later, despite the photo's worldwide distribution, we still do not know the identities of the two protagonists in the photo: the man with the chair, whom I would call the Chair Guy, and the victim.

To this day, we do not know the identities of the four bodies that were burned. Was the remaining unknown hanging victim among them? If not, his body disappeared. Even if he was one of the four, who were the three others? Will these remaining unidentified victims ever be known?

The final question, the thirteenth, why such brutality? The answer to it would not help solve any unknown about the massacre. But the answer is probably more meaningful than any of the previous ones. A brutal massacre can occur when opponents are seen as less than human. My Lai, Rwanda, and many war-time atrocities took place after hatred and fear had brewed for some time, making the opponents less or nonhuman. This first stage of dehumanization is common to all atrocities. So it was to the October 6 massacre.

Some of the heinous actions on that day were to kill or to torture victims to death; but most were the desecration of dead bodies, as if the victims were animals, devils, witches, or satanic creatures, namely pounding a stake into the chest, hanging and burning, dragging a victim along the ground, and urinating on the bodies. Based on the autopsies and photos, only one of the four or five hanging victims was hung to death. The rest died by gunshots and explosives before their bodies were hung. Only one of the four burning victims might have been burned alive. The bodies impaled through their chests were dead ones. My friend Jaruphong died before his body was dragged along the ground.⁹⁷

For Watcharee Petchsun, who was left naked on the ground with a stake on her dead body, the autopsy report states that she died from a gunshot wound with no trace of rape or a stake piercing any part of her body before her death. If the report is accurate, the removal of her clothes and the placing of a stake on her naked body near her private parts were acts staged for public spectacle. It was the cruelest of acts because it not only degraded her humanity but also humiliated and destroyed her femininity to the utmost degree. As the photos show, the abusers and the onlookers were all men and boys. No male victims were sexually mutilated either. Although both male and female protesters were ordered to take off their shirts after the arrests, the television commentators made fun of the shirtless females with sexual innuendos that females could have hidden weapons under their shirts (see chapter 3). They did not make fun of the shirtless males. The dehumanization was gendered.

The third stage of dehumanization was the evident pleasure participants and bystanders took in committing those acts and in participating in the spectacle, as if they were at a communal festival or a ritual performance.⁹⁸ How could people stage the raping of a dead woman or enjoy watching it? An artist reflects on the Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of a hanging:

It is not just the bloodied victim hanging from the tree, and not just the madness in the face of the man in safari suit who is gleefully slamming [the] lifeless body with a metal chair. . . . what has haunted me is the crowd of spectators at the scene. Herein lies the horror: their faces, some of them mere boys, some smiling, some laughing, many seeming to cheer on the lynching, some fearful, some hysterical.⁹⁹

It was the pleasure of conquest. The barbaric acts not only were justified because the victims were subhuman or nonhuman, animals, or devils, but also induced pleasure because they were the ritualistic performance of the conqueror, like a victory parade with the victim's head displayed as a trophy. The performance had to be public for the spectators to enjoy the communal triumph, and it served to terrorize the enemies at the same time. The conquest over femininity was, literally and figuratively, the ultimate conquering performance for male satisfaction.

Was this third stage of dehumanization the inevitable outcome of extreme hatred, anticommunist hysteria, and ultraroyalist fever?

What do the acts of public desecration tell us about Thailand, its people, culture, and politics? What do they tell us about humanity?

Who was Chair Guy who repeatedly slammed a folding chair against a hanging body, who added more newspapers to fuel the fire burning a pile of corpses, who then sat on the naked body of the dead woman? Was he a trained agent provocateur who was assigned to incite the crowd by committing those acts, or was he an ordinary person turned into a desecrator by events of that morning? As time went by, as decades passed, did he regret his acts? Did he brag about them? How did he remember what he did? I wish I could track him down. I would like to meet him, to ask him those questions, without vengeance and with the promise not to interrupt his answer. In a similar vein, did those men and boys still enjoy the spectacle the day after? As time went by, did they regret being part of the spectacle? I wish I could meet them. I wish to learn how they remember that Wednesday morning of October 6, 1976.

Chapter 3

THE BEGINNING OF MEMORIES

Even before the shooting ended at Thammasat University, the airwaves began to echo the jubilation among the perpetrators of the massacre. The broadcast that day not only misinformed the public but also justified the atrocity, just as standard propaganda would. Perhaps unbeknownst to the perpetrators, it also established a narrative of the massacre, a collective memory that framed many individual ones and the public discourse of the massacre for years to come. Perhaps like the big bang theory of the universe, the initial moment was tremendously important because it was the beginning of memory and would have a lasting impact on the perpetrators and the public alike, regardless of its falsehood and unreason. The victims and their sympathizers and the opponents of the state belonged to communities of different collective memories that were suppressed after the incident. Their silence in the public sphere, however, did not mean that their memories had been wiped out. Rather, most of them found alternative spheres beyond the state's control and surveillance, namely, the underground, the jungles, and within the limited spheres of families and friends. For the radicals, their bitter memories led them to embrace the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT)'s armed struggles against the government in Bangkok. But the radicals' and CPT's memories were not the only alternative. Many other victims found different communities of shared memories, and those who could not live on in silence. The post-massacre period provided the conditions for the beginnings of these memories.