2. Continuities and crisis

Each country, and each group within a country, has undergone its own experience of modernisation. In Thailand, the beginning of this process can be dated to the middle of the nineteenth century and the reign of King Mongkut, followed by that of his son, King Chulalongkorn. Despite turbulent political events over the subsequent century, including the end of constitutional monarchy in 1932 and the growing dominance of rule by the military, the resistance of the country to European colonisation resulted in a totalising discourse privileging continuity and tradition. At the heart of this interpretation were the Thai monarchy and Thai Buddhism.† Buddhism, the Buddhist concept of the good (bun), and traditional relations and practices, became the prism through which most ordinary Thai people saw their own lives and their society. These accepted views were challenged by the advent of the ‘democratic experiment’ in 1973 and its brutal end in 1976.

View from a Bangkok factory

At around lunchtime on Wednesday, 6 October 1976, I was sitting on the common verandah area of the women’s dormitory of a Bangkok factory, talking to Nopawan about her family, her growing up, and her school and work experiences in Korat before coming to Bangkok. It was the late monsoon season, still humid, and with the oncoming afternoon downpour remaining fairly predictable. The long verandah area, with the shop at one end, a common TV room at the other, and staircases going up to the sleeping areas on the two floors above, caught what breeze there was. Near us, other young women relaxed and chatted between shifts, prepared food or caught up on their laundry. Khun Phadungcit, the dormitory supervisor—the mee baan—came back and forth from discussing shop business with Lek, who ran it. This largely domestic scene was suddenly interrupted by Ratana, who came running out from the TV room, calling to everyone to come quickly. Something big was happening at Thammasat University.

As we looked at the black-and-white television images, it wasn’t clear that what we were seeing was part of a massacre. But it was more than apparent that what was happening was terrible. There were pictures of police with machine guns standing over dozens of students who were lying on the ground, stripped to the waist, with their hands behind their heads. Police were shouting, students

† The privileging of Buddhism as a key component of national identity ignored, and therefore excluded, non-Buddhists, especially those in the largely Muslim south.
were crying out, there was the sound of bullets in the background. Other cameras picked up an individual student being attacked by an angry mob in the Pramane Ground opposite the university. There was mention of other attacks and deaths. The commentary was along the lines that there must have been Vietnamese infiltrators among the students, because dog meat had been found. The commentary seemed to be offered as an excuse for the mob’s behaviour. The factory women watching did not appear to be persuaded, or at least did not indicate agreement, although my attention was not really on them but on what we were seeing.

In memory, that moment and those images are overlaid with later knowledge of the extent of the violence and cruelty of that day, and with other images that were smuggled out of the country before the military, yet again, took over the Government in the evening and suppressed all further reporting. As a result, only one afternoon newspaper, *Sayamrat*, managed to carry photos before they were banned: among others, of a crowd of spectators around several burning bodies; a dead man—later identified as student leader Jaruphong Thongsindhu—being dragged across the soccer field by a piece of cloth around his neck; rows of anonymous corpses. ‘It was a Wednesday morning in which the deaths by gunshot seemed to be the least painful and most civilised of murders’. Coverage of the day’s events on the evening television news gave no indication at all of the sadistic horror of what had actually occurred, beyond reporting that there had been ‘further’ incidents at Thammasat University. Nevertheless, as a result of these events, the new National Administrative Reform Council (NARC) had taken control in place of the elected government. Their reason was ‘in order to restore stability and law and order to the kingdom’.

At the factory, or among its workforce, there was no particular sense of instability or of disorder. The factory was part-owned by a Japanese parent company and run by a Japanese manager along largely Japanese organisational lines. The wages and conditions for its employees were significantly better than in wholly owned Thai factories. Its workforce had not felt the need to participate in any of the many strikes since the beginning of the ‘democratic experiment’ in October 1973. This included a major strike by workers in the textile industry of which they were a part. The factory’s location in the suburb of Bang Khen, away from the centre of Bangkok, was not a reason for this lack of involvement. Textile workers in other areas of Bangkok and in neighbouring provinces to the west and south were actively engaged in the labour movement. In Omnoy, an industrial area in Nakhon Pathom Province west of Bangkok, five unionists had been arrested and imprisoned in March 1976, along with two students and two young graduates. They were charged with being Communists, undermining

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2 Thongchai (2002: 244).
national security, and the illegal possession of firearms. The evidence was so slight that the Public Prosecutor had to keep deferring their trial, and they were still in jail at the time of the coup on 6 October.

There was none of this political drama at the Bang Khen factory. Many of the employees had chosen to leave provincial areas to take jobs in the factory. They made this choice because they preferred it to domestic or rural work. For them, becoming industrial workers under the particular conditions established at the factory was not an alienating experience, but one that offered them a better life than they thought was available at home. Nevertheless, this personal choice was made at a time in Thai history that brought starkly into question the relationship between a good life and a good society and challenged any assumption that one was possible without the other.

**Bang Khen workers and the brush with the new**

These chapters explore the essential connection but also the distinction between a good life and a good society. The employees’ experience with conditions in the Bang Khen factory provided them with many of the elements—social, cultural, religious, as well as material—that they saw as constituting a good life. Even work was not excluded from this view. For shopfloor operators in particular, the routine time spent in the repetitive interface with noisy machines was not of itself desirable. Nor was it repugnant. They saw it as a condition of their freedom because it was better than the alternatives, including equally monotonous and more arduous rural work or other work in the provinces. They valued the possibility—offered by modernity—of a freedom to choose something beyond the confines of family and family locality, even in contrast to the expressed wishes of their parents and the Buddhist norm of filial obedience.

At the same time, the experience of the workers illustrates the difficulties of maintaining or developing a good life without its being grounded in a good society. In the Thailand of the period under review, the processes of modernisation were giving rise to changing and contested meanings about what constitutes a good society. It is easy, and tempting, to dichotomise these differing views as either based in the past or oriented to the future. The experience of the factory workers suggests that this is not a dichotomy in people’s mundane experience. The employees drew meaning and legitimacy from both sources; more even from the past in terms of how they explained their lives. Nor did they see the two as in contradiction, but as ordinary. Their work was for them not a rupture with the past but a present that provided wider possibilities than had been available for their parents. The contradictions inherent in their position
as urban industrial workers in a partially modern society were buffered by the conditions provided by the factory. Although these conditions arose from principles based in Japanese rather than in Thai industrial experience, they allowed for—indeed encouraged—a sense of personal continuities.

Nevertheless, the factory and its workers were living through a pivotal moment in Thailand, in which the period from October 1973 to October 1976 constitutes Act One of an ongoing and not yet completed crisis in the process of Thai modernisation. The workers’ responses, muted though they were in comparison with others’, show that they, too, were brushed by the dilemmas of the new. Their responses need to be understood in the context of what was happening more broadly in Thailand at that critical time, but also in relation to the particular history of modernisation in the country.

Monarchy and modernisation: The Chakri kings and the building of a nation

Since the reign of the scholar-king Mongkut (Rama IV), from 1851 to 1868, a national discourse has developed around the Thai experience of modernisation that links a very particular set of concepts and gives these concepts meaning, and consequent value, in relation to each other. These are summarised by Thongchai as ‘continuity, homogeneity, and the persistence of traditions, especially Thai Buddhism and Thai monarchy’.  

History regards Siam’s struggles against European imperialism in the nineteenth century, as with those of other nations outside Europe, as the advent of the modern nation. Unlike others, however, Siam was never formally colonised, a distinctive phenomenon of which Thai people are always very proud. Therefore, Siam has been regarded as a traditional state that transformed itself into a modern nation, thanks to the intelligence of the monarchs who responded wisely and timely to the threats of the European powers by modernising the country in the right direction at the right time. Thus continuity, homogeneity, and the persistence of traditions, especially Thai Buddhism and the Thai monarchy, have been the distinct characteristics, or even the unique features, of modern Siam.

Mongkut and his son Chulalongkorn (Rama V), who reigned from 1868 to 1910, are central to this discourse as the historical heroes of the Chakri Dynasty and the kings who ‘wisely and timely’ resisted colonisation and chose the path of modernisation. Mongkut, who spent 27 years as a Buddhist monk before

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4 Mongkut remains revered in Thailand as scholar, religious leader and king. Hollywood did his image no favours when it made him the subject of the film The King and I.

5 Thongchai (1994: 13).
becoming king, is credited with a major reform of Buddhism and the Buddhist sangha (community or monastic order) as well as with the introduction of modern science into Siam. His foreign policy was directed towards the maintenance of Siamese sovereignty, no longer only against the incursions of neighbouring kingdoms such as Burma and Cambodia, but also against the imperial expansion of the British and the French. The process resulted in a forced delineation of Siam’s boundaries in order to satisfy the territorial demands of these two European colonial powers. It also resulted in the signing of a treaty with Great Britain in 1855, named for Queen Victoria’s representative, Sir John Bowring, who is quoted as having coined ‘the immortal axiom’: ‘Free trade is Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ is free trade’. The Bowring Treaty conceded effective control over the country’s foreign trade to Great Britain. By the end of the nineteenth century, some 90 per cent of the total value of Siamese trade was in British hands.

By the end of the nineteenth century also, the identity of the amorphous Kingdom of Siam had been transformed into that of a nation. Together with this transformation was an appropriation of Buddhism to the discourse of nationhood, providing the foundation for the enduringly powerful mantra: ‘Nation, Religion, King’ (chat, saatsanaa, phra mahaa kasat).

**Early twentieth-century stirrings of democracy and the failure of the Great Revolution of 1932**

The mantra was first coined by Chulalongkorn’s son, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910–25), and embodied in his redesigned national flag with its stripes of red for Nation, white for Religion, and blue for King. Buddhism thus gave the nation its moral dimension; the Buddhist concept of ‘good’ became the prism through which modernisation could be separated into identifiable components, each of which could then be assessed in terms of its suitability or otherwise for Siam. This was expressed as what was good or not good for the nation, allowing King Chulalongkorn to declare that ‘the concepts of political party and

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6 Rong (1973: 118).
8 ibid.
10 Bello et al. (1998: 1).
parliamentary system were not appropriate to the Siamese political tradition’. On the same basis, King Vajiravudh banned the first text on economics in Thai because apart from the monarch...Thai people were all equal under him. Thus economics might cause disunity or disruption because it concerns social strata of rich and poor. Instead, he proposed his own economic philosophy based on a Buddhist precept that one should be satisfied with what one has.

The central place of Buddhism within national discourse has made it available to be invoked by all subsequent political groups in their struggle to normalise their particular version of national identity.

At the same time, there has been a tension between democratic movements and the specific invocation of Buddhism as a source of legitimacy. The Democracy Monument in Bangkok, for example, is a secular memorial, built in 1939 to commemorate the Great Revolution of 1932, which marks the end of the absolute monarchy and the initiation of constitutional government. It involved civilians as well as the military and was the first major attempt to modernise the political system. A copy of the original constitution is enshrined in the Democracy Monument. Despite the practical failure to establish democracy, the potent symbolism of the Monument was made apparent when it became a key rallying point for the demonstrations in both 1973 and 1976; in 1992’s Black May, the time of a third protest and massacre; and again in 2010, the most recent in this quartet of popular uprisings against the continuing dominance of the military. Thammasat University, which played such a central role in 1973 and especially in 1976, is also linked directly, as well as spatially and symbolically, to the Democracy Monument and to the events of 1932; it was founded in 1934 by Dr Pridi Phanomyong, the leader of the civilian group in the People’s Party that staged the coup. He was also the drafter of the first constitution. He established the university, originally named the University of Moral and Political Sciences, as an institution, independent of government, to promote academic freedom and to foster the principles of democracy. He was its first rector.

The coup of 1932 was, in a sense, the ironic culmination of the efforts of the Chakri kings to modernise the state, but to do so without breaking with what they saw as traditional Siamese political culture and values. Instead, they created a system that resulted in limiting the power of the monarchy, while failing to establish the foundations for strong democratic institutions. Their failure continues to bedevil the state. In particular, by reforming and strengthening the military, they allowed it to grow into the powerful institution

15 ibid.
that effectively controlled government for most of the twentieth century and continues to influence events in the early twenty-first. The military thwarted the modernising and democratic energy of the Great Revolution and beyond.

Monarchy and military: The ascendancy of the Generals

The year 1932 was followed by two and a half decades (1932–57) that included 10 coups, nine elections and six constitutions.\textsuperscript{17} Even with elections, there were civilian prime ministers for a total of less than two and a half years of that period. The reference to politics was removed from the name of Pridi’s University of Moral and Political Sciences, which became the University of Moral Sciences or \textit{Thammasat}, ‘Wisdom of the [Buddhist] Dharma’. And in 1939, the name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand: \textit{muang thai} or ‘land of the free’. This was effected by Phibul Songkram, whose military government first (1938–44) took Thailand into active collaboration with Japan during the war years and after the war (1948–57), to atone for the country’s lapse from grace, into a fundamental change in the nature of Thailand’s treaties with the West. Before 1941, these had been confined mainly to the commercial sphere. The postwar era saw the first political and military agreements. With a military assistance agreement with the United States in 1950, and by joining the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) alliance in 1954, Thailand became officially aligned with the Western bloc, an alignment ratified by the establishment of the SEATO headquarters in Bangkok.

The ascendancy of the military after 1932 occurred in the face of the weakness of other balancing institutions, including the monarchy. The limitations set on the monarchy by the Constitution did not bring about a revolution in the modern political sense. Instead, the leadership of the People’s Party allowed the monarchy to ‘exercise sanctioning prerogatives of legitimisation. The constitution became not the work and toil of the people but a royal gift from a benevolent king.’\textsuperscript{18} At the same time, the role of ‘benevolent king’ was rapidly left vacant after the abdication of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) in 1935 and remained in the hands of Regents for 15 years. The new king, Prajadhipok’s nephew Ananda Mahidol, was a boy of ten and living in Switzerland. Apart from a brief visit in 1938, he did not return to Thailand until after the end of World War II in 1945. In 1946 he was found shot dead in his bedroom, in a mystery that has never been solved.\textsuperscript{19} He was succeeded by his brother, Bhumiphol Adulyadej, who did not himself

\textsuperscript{17} ibid., p. 266.
\textsuperscript{18} Thak (1979: xiii).
\textsuperscript{19} Kruger (2009); Rong (1973: 166, 178).
finally return to live in Thailand until 1950, when he was crowned as Rama IX. Bhumiphol’s reign has continued for 60 years, reinforcing the development of a ‘selective and elite narrative of security [that] asserts that the king is the pre-eminent site of virtuous and disinterested power’.  

The failure of political modernisation was matched over this period by a failure of economic modernisation. Outside the region of Greater Bangkok, Thailand remained an essentially rural economy. In 1960, of the total economically active population, more than 80 per cent was in the rural sector. The rural sector was not isolated from change, including the stirring of a Communist insurgency, mainly in the north-east, but in many ways it continued to operate within systems of traditional hierarchical relations. For the Thai Buddhist majority in this sector, this included different forms of patron–client relations. They were little affected by the constant political changes in Bangkok, which did not, in practice, lead to the development of repressive internal security or to instability. On the contrary, the military had achieved its own internal mechanisms for stability: coup, election, a semi-democratic government, internal coup. Nor did these processes usually produce violence, even in the case of failed coup attempts, such as that by naval officers against Phibul in 1951 (the Manhattan revolt). Perpetrators were imprisoned or forced into exile but rarely executed.

**Dictatorship of Field Marshall Sarit**

Much of this changed after the coup led by Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat in 1957. Sarit had been involved in an earlier successful coup against Pridi in 1947 but had arranged the reinstallation of Phibul as Prime Minister. Even after the 1957 coup, he did not immediately take on the role of prime minister but briefly installed first a civilian and then one of his coup cronies, General Thanom Kittikachorn, for nearly a year. At the end of that time, he executed a further internal coup, and seized power himself. In this sense, Sarit was Thailand’s first true military dictator. Although he was in power for less than five years, dying of cirrhosis of the liver at the end of 1963, his impact on Thai politics and development was extensive. He abolished the Constitution, banned all political parties and trade unions, suppressed the opposition, and censored the press. His autocratic personal style was demonstrated by his solution to the spate of fires that regularly broke out at Chinese New Year and which he saw as an insurance scam. It was popular belief that he acted personally on his declaration that he

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20 Walker (2010: 1).
22 Chai-anan (1992: 1).
would shoot the owner of the first building to burn down at the next New Year, regardless of the cause of the fire. It was also popular belief that the number of fires dropped dramatically subsequent to this execution.

Sarit was aggressively anti-Communist. His abolition of labour unions was for two main reasons: that they were, in his own words, the ‘main obstacles to economic development’ and ‘gateways for communism to enter Thailand’. As well as his support for the growing US involvement in South Vietnam, his establishment of the Department of Community Development in 1962 was in response to the threat of insurgency. At the same time, but not unrelated to his counter-insurgency policies, Sarit gave firm support to the monarchy, aligning himself with the King, reinforcing his own legitimacy and that of the military as protectors of the monarchy, and encouraging the revival of traditional symbols, especially the triad of the three pillars (lak): Nation (chaat), Religion (saatsanaa), King (phra mahaa kasat). For the first time, King Bhumiphol emerged from the shadow of the military and began to define his role as an active social participant in national life and not merely a figurehead and source of legitimacy for whatever government was currently in power. At the same time, this alliance can be seen as the beginning of a symbiotic relationship between the army and the monarchy that has not yet been severed.

Sarit’s approaches were hardly triumphs for modernisation, but he was also determined to encourage foreign investment in industry and achieve economic development. Indeed, his overriding national policy was national economic development and social improvement. He launched a first five-year National Development Program in 1961, reinforced by financial support from the United States and other foreign investment, such as Japanese. Industrialisation expanded rapidly, but in an environment still constrained by authoritarian rule.

**Sarit’s successors: The ‘three tyrants’—Thanom, Prapass and Narong—and the war on Communism**

Sarit’s policies were continued after his death by his successors, Field Marshalls Thanom Kittikachorn and Prapass Charusathira, together with Thanom’s son
and Prapass’s son-in-law, Lieutenant Colonel Narong Kittikachorn. Under their ongoing military regime, the encouragement of industrialisation and foreign investment was reinforced, leading to unprecedented economic growth throughout the 1960s. The mechanisms for counter-insurgency, financed largely by the United States, were strengthened, including the establishment in 1965 of the Communist Suppression Operations Command, renamed 10 years later the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). The fact that Thanom and Praphass succeeded to government at almost the exact time of US President Lyndon Johnson’s escalation of the Vietnam War added a practical intimacy to this alliance. Commitment to the ongoing role of the United States in Vietnam led to a massive increase in the number of US military in Thailand. Figures for the number of US servicemen increased over a three-year period, from 6500 in 1966 to 47,600 in 1969. These servicemen operated from at least eight major bases and from dozens of minor installations. The figures do not, moreover, include troops on rest and recreation—R&R—from Vietnam, who were estimated to number at least 5000 a month in the peak years of 1968–69. Anderson suggests that, over this period, Washington treated Thailand, and was encouraged to do so, as ‘a sort of gigantic immobile aircraft carrier’. At the same time, Thanom attempted to distance himself and his government from the scandals that followed the death of Sarit by reframing his own public image. His central message was that his government was an honest one, and that it was committed to the development of a good society. The official slogan became ‘Do good, do good, do good’. The popular uprising against him and his military colleagues in 1973 made clear that his government’s model for a good society was actively opposed by others.

The first decade of the Bang Khen factory spanned almost exactly the period of the Thanom–Prapass regime. The factory was established at the end of 1963, as a joint Thai–Japanese venture to produce nylon and polyester thread. It was part of the push to industrialisation under Sarit, with the 1960s seeing ‘extraordinarily rapid industrial expansion, particularly in the textile and food processing industries’. It began production in 1967 and was fully operational at the time of the 1973 overthrow of the Thanom–Prapass government and establishment of a civilian government. In accordance with the foreign investment laws of the period, the company had to be at least 51 per cent Thai owned. As it was part of a Japanese corporation, this meant that the company president was

30 Thak (1979: 342–3).
33 ibid., pp. 15, 26.
34 Anderson (1977: 15).
35 Thak (1979: 342).
president of the corporation and based in Japan. The vice-president was the Thai majority owner, referred to by the workers with the polite but not overly formal honorific of 'Khun' Iid. He shared full and final power with the Japanese factory manager, Mr Suzuka, in all matters concerning the factory. Khun Iid was not based at the factory but had an office in the company's Thai headquarters in the city. He was also on the board of a number of other Japanese companies in Thailand. Mr Suzuka dealt with all the day-to-day decision-making, the running of the factory and its production, the development of factory policies, and the maintenance of links with the Japanese parent corporation.

The Bang Khen factory world

Sarit's drive to industrialise may have resulted in a notable increase in the number of factories and urban workers, but it had done little to ensure adequate conditions for those workers. This was left to the discretion of the private owners and managers. In wholly Thai-owned enterprises in particular, conditions and pay were miserable, and often dangerous—a state of affairs that continued beyond the political changes of 1973. For that reason, such factories did not welcome external scrutiny. Even after approval by the National Research Council and accompanied by an official from the Labour Department, I needed some months and visits to a number of different factories before I found one where I could undertake long-term ethnography. When I was accepted as a researcher at the Bang Khen factory, it was clear that the company was satisfied that the conditions that it offered its employees would bear scrutiny. This was in addition to the reason stated by Mr Suzuka that the company valued education and was willing to encourage it.

This approach to education was reflected in the company's recruitment practices, which required that applicants undergo an examination as part of a selection process even for operator positions. In order to attract employees in its early years, the company undertook a recruiting drive through the Labour Department. Among other strategies, advertisements were broadcast from time to time over the wireless in provincial towns. Nopawan heard this in Korat (another name for Nakhon Ratchasima) in 1972. She had left her job at a hairdresser's when the owner, her friend, got married. She had been in this job for almost four years and earned good money. Most of this she had been able to save, as she lived at home. If she had to work late, she stayed overnight with her friend, as her parents did not want her out after dark. Sometimes she went home only at the end of the week, as there were many bars and clubs in Korat catering to the American soldiers, and the salon was constantly busy with its regular clientele of girls who worked in the bars and clubs. Many of these came to the salon every day to have their hair and nails done. They were mostly from
the poorer region of the north-east provinces that stretch beyond Korat to the border with Laos. They had come to Korat because, with the Americans there, there was work, even though it was work that they said they disliked. At the time of the company recruitment drive, Nopawan was living at home again, with her parents and the three youngest of her seven brothers and sisters. She was without regular work although she had done a dressmaking course and was often employed by the wives of Thai soldiers, friends of her mother’s, to sew for them. Before special occasions, this kept her very busy. She had looked for other work in Korat that would be like her previous work in the salon where she could live with her friend as well as work and be not like an employee but a friend. None of the jobs that she checked was like this. When she heard the Bang Khen advertisement, she hesitated because Bangkok was a long way away and she was reluctant to go so far. But she wanted work and wanted to see what it was like. First, she spoke to her mother and father. They were not willing for her to go but finally gave their permission for her to apply. Then things happened very quickly. She sat the exam in the morning and heard in the afternoon that she had passed. Two days later, the company sent a bus to bring the successful applicants to Bangkok. With Nopawan, there were altogether 20 from Korat on that trip: 14 men and six women. Nopawan was twenty-two years old.

The bus trip was down Highway 2—the Friendship Highway, built with US aid—dropping down through rocky hills from the Korat plateau to the central plains. They reached Bang Khen in the late afternoon. The group of young women was introduced to the mee baan, the women’s dormitory supervisor, Khun Phadungcit, who allocated them together to one of the dormitory rooms. That evening, they began to meet their co-workers. Most of these were also young and, since the dormitory was for single employees, all except for Khun Phadungcit were unmarried. The majority also came from or had been born in provincial areas. For Nopawan, the factory met her desire for a workplace that also offered companionable living arrangements. These were provided within the factory compound where more than half the employees lived as well as worked. Most were accommodated in dormitories within the walled factory compound, though separated from the work areas: for unmarried workers, a men’s dormitory, with a separate foremen’s wing, and a women’s dormitory. Many married salaried staff lived in an apartment building, with family quarters and an adjacent building with maids’ rooms.

Nopawan, like the other women employees, spent much of her spare time in and around the dormitory area, with her work mates becoming also her principal social circle. Friendships were expressed by choosing to go out together, to shop or go to a movie, in free time between shifts or on days off. Those who had come to the factory from the provinces had little occasion to meet other new people. Even for the minority with families in Bangkok, few lived close by, and visits
Continuities and crisis

home were infrequent, with the daunting combination of distance and Bangkok traffic. The men tended to spend less time in the dormitory area, making greater use of the sporting facilities, including the football field, and also leaving the factory more frequently between shifts to paj thiaw (go somewhere for a good time). Nevertheless, the dormitory provided their home base. Even the police regarded the dormitory areas as domestic space, refusing to intervene in cases where serious assault resulted from the frequent quarrels in the men’s dormitory. When a fight broke out in the early hours of the morning between Patana and Veera, Patana grabbed an iron pipe and hit Veera over the head with it, causing him extensive injuries. The police made no arrest on the grounds that ‘the dormitory is like home’. This view was not shared by the management, who immediately gave Patana the sack.

Men living in the foremen’s wing either had their own room or shared with no more than two others. In the men’s and women’s dormitories, the rooms were built to be shared by eight people, though there were often only six or seven in each. For new groups, as with the Korat group when Nopawan first arrived, the dormitory supervisors decided the allocation. Once people had been there for some time, they were allowed to choose their room and with whom they would share it. This was normally once people had established friendships and was then approved by the dormitory supervisor. There were occasional exceptions. One concerned Vicien and Nipaphorn, a gay couple who were in the same room for some time. Because they quarrelled a lot, and loudly, no-one else was prepared to share with them. Khun Phadungcit therefore separated them, a decision that was supported by the respective heads of the two rooms. In one sense, of which this incident is an example, the factory shared some of the characteristics of a total institution for those who lived in the dormitories, with the factory operating as an institution ‘purportedly established the better to pursue some worklike tasks and justifying themselves only on these instrumental grounds’. Goffman’s examples include army barracks, ships, boarding schools and work camps. The factory, however, lacked the collective regimentation that Goffman identifies as one of the characteristics of a total institution. Outside the shift arrangements, employees were free to pursue their own activities, as long as they stayed within the limits, legal and social, set for behaviour. Men were not allowed to go into the women’s rooms, nor women into the men’s, though they could visit each other in the open dormitory areas.

All employees had access to sports facilities within the factory compound: a football ground, a swimming pool, a golf practice area, and a volleyball and ta-kraw court (ta-kraw being a kind of foot volleyball, in which the players are not allowed to touch the ball with their forearms or their hands). Between shifts, or on their days off, workers relaxed in the television rooms provided in each

dormitory and made use of the basic cooking and laundry facilities. Many of the women used the sewing-room from time to time, with its number of sewing machines provided by the management. Both men and women regularly used the shop to buy toiletries, washing powders and other small items provided by the company at cost price. For meals, they sometimes used the company food coupons to eat at the factory canteen, though they also took advantage of food stalls set up outside the factory. Here they mingled with workers from the next-door factory.

In addition, the employees saw themselves as much better off financially in the Bang Khen factory than workers in many other factories. Workers who began in 1972, like Nopawan and the group from Korat, started on a base wage of 17 baht a day, with a day measured as one eight-hour shift out of three. After six months, this went up to 18.50 baht, and 20 baht after one year. At the same time, the average wage for comparable workers in other factories, particularly in the textile industry, was only 10–12 baht for a day of up to 18 hours, with no official minimum wage and no provision for increments. In 1976, when a legal minimum wage had been set at 25 baht a day, the lowest starting wage for workers at the Bang Khen factory was 36 baht a day. With the Bang Khen company also covering many daily living costs, Nopawan and others were able to send money back to their families, often for the education of younger siblings, and still save a little each month. Niroot, a foreman, supported his younger sister for three years through university and, after she graduated, did the same for a younger brother. The employees were also given opportunities to study, to improve their position within the factory but also more generally. Nopawan had been studying for 18 months, with another six months to go for her to be eligible to sit the exam for a further promotion. During the time that I was there, I was asked if I would give English classes; these were attended by junior as well as senior employees.

As a result of these conditions, the factory enjoyed a relatively stable workforce, with a majority of employees having been there between three and six years. At the celebrations for the factory’s tenth anniversary in 1977, bonuses were given on the basis of the number of consecutive years of full attendance. Sixty-nine employees received the bonus for three years, 31 for four, and 17 for five. A number of the original group from Korat were still working at the factory in 1977. Nopawan’s view was that she might leave in another two years when her younger siblings had finished studying, but she had made no definite decision.

The work itself was not attractive but was not a cause of special complaint. Onsaeng pointed out that she preferred it to getting up at three in the morning to tap rubber trees: work that she hated and which is what she would have

been doing if she had stayed with her family in the south. Even Nopawan’s experience in the salon in Korat made the factory job preferable. In the salon, she had to wake up really early and did not get home—on the nights that she went home—till eight or nine o’clock. As well, she would often be standing all day. In comparison, her job at the factory meant that she had much more time to herself; ‘it’s more important to have time to yourself than to have interesting work’.

At the same time, routine practices in the factory to some extent cushioned the shift from a rural social world with its focus on family and traditional relations and obligations to instrumental work relationships. Rather than regarding the factory as a total institution, the employees used familiar family terms to address many of the people with whom they worked: Khun as the impersonal honorific of courtesy but phii, older brother or sister, for respectful familiarity towards those older or more senior. Nopawan addressed and referred to Khun Phadungcit as Phii Dung, and to her popular section chief as Phii Supachai. She retained Khun for more senior Thai management and the Thai version of the Japanese san for Mr Suzuki. In turn, she was referred to as phii by the younger women in the dormitory. Niroot addressed his dormitory supervisor to whom he was very close as Lung, uncle. To some extent, these practices reflect the voluntary character of kin relationships in Thai society generally, which individuals can activate for particular purposes at particular times while leaving others dormant.39 It also reflects the broadly asymmetrical character of Thai social relationships in general between the phuu yaj, the superordinate senior generation, and the phuu nooj, the subordinate junior generation.40 In the expression of these asymmetrical relationships, respect is the most significant element.

In the factory, the meaning invested in these practices varied from person to person and individuals exercised choice about how they referred to different people, though all agreed that the management constituted phuu yaj. The wedding of Khun Supachai, Nopawan’s section chief, illustrated the extent to which these naming practices operated as a network of personal, kinship-like bonds, reflecting the asymmetrical character of relationships in a context of both respect and reciprocity. The wedding took place in the bride’s home. I had been invited to attend with a group of the phuu yaj from the factory. We arrived about mid-morning. A saffron line of monks was coming across the verandah and down the shallow front steps, having completed their chanting to bless the couple. Some family and guests waited respectfully in the garden. The bridal couple was in the front room of the house, kneeling on prie-dieux in front of a decorated altar. We filed past them, sprinkling lustral water as we did

so over the hands of each, first the bride and then the groom. Khun Supachai’s assistant section chief acted as master of ceremonies and stayed for the party afterwards. Several days after this ceremony, Khun Supachai and his wife put on a party especially for the factory personnel. The company provided buses to take employees to the hotel. Nopawan and almost all the staff of Supachai’s own section joined several hundred other workers. This was their opportunity as individuals to express their own feelings, and many did so by giving a personal gift in addition to the group offerings. I cannot describe these gifts, as it is impolite in Thailand to open a gift in the presence of the giver; the fact of the gift is sufficient. This kind of party, given by a phuu yaj for the people from his workplace for an occasion such as his wedding, was not unusual. On this occasion, the workers enjoyed it as a special event, and one that expressed the nature of their relationship with Phii Supachai in a peculiarly appropriate way.

At one level, these practices and relationships are no more than a personalising of the workplace, the establishment through communication of a shared sense of meaning and value and a combining of labour and language that Habermas suggests is fundamental to being human. They allowed the employees to invest the mundane world of work and domesticity with moral as well as rational and emotional meaning. At another level, their practices were profoundly cultural, providing continuity between the industrial present and the rural past by expressing and enhancing a moral order, grounded in traditional Thai social and religious discourse, of reciprocal relations between the self and the other. This discourse integrated notions of merit (bun), obligations, gratitude and doing good. The same discourse was to infuse the events leading up to 6 October 1976 and to be invoked by the main protagonists.

For the Bang Khen employees, it was a taken-for-granted way of framing their world even though they recognised that they paid it little active attention. Niroot certainly saw his contributions to the education of his younger siblings as his obligation as an elder brother with a job. It was something he had done since he completed his own studies. As he saw it, his father had helped him and his brother with everything they needed while they were studying; in return they had to help the younger ones. He did not give it a religious meaning or relate it to the making of merit. Nor did he think that because you did good things in a previous life that you would do well in this life, though he acknowledged that other people did believe this. He thought that things had changed for the younger generation and that only old people thought like that any more. Dirake believed in bun when he was young, as he also believed in ghosts. That, he said, was before he learnt to reason. When he went to school, he learnt about science and since then he had applied reason to these things. As far as he was

concerned, believing in ghosts was for children. But both Niroot and Dirake considered the possibility of taking the time allowed by the factory for men employees to become monks for a short period, to make merit for their parents.

Neither did Nopawan give much thought to any relationship between her present life and either a past or a future one, about which she was agnostic. Although she used to go to the temple regularly when she was younger, in Bangkok she had little time to do so, but thought that she would go again often when she was old, as her mother did. In her current circumstances, she thought about work, ‘work only, not about merit. They’re two different things’. Making merit was not about any future life, but about feeling good. ‘Making merit gives happiness. Sometimes if I’m not happy, I make merit and that makes me happy’. Occasionally, if she felt unhappy and unsure about things, she went to see her uncle who was a monk in a Bangkok temple, and from time to time she would go to the temple near the factory. When she gave alms to monks (saj baat), she did it for her relatives who had died, so that the merit could go to them. ‘This is part of Buddhist religion; not a matter of being useful but a belief, a custom of Buddhist religion.’ As for others being wealthy, she saw that not as the result of having made merit in a previous life but as a matter of luck (chok dii).

The exception to this way of thinking for the employees was Khun Iid, the Thai majority owner and vice-president of the company. I had not met him when I was negotiating permission to carry out my research, but I encountered him frequently on my own visits to the factory. This happened both on routine workdays and at times for particular festivals and celebrations organised by the factory. While I always addressed him as Khun, all the employees spoke and referred to him as Phiit, a practice that he had himself initiated. When they talked about him, it was with warmth as well as respect. As a foreman, Niroot was sometimes part of a group that played golf with him; afterwards they had the chance to talk. Niroot’s comment was that ‘Phiit Iid is a very good and kind person. He likes helping staff and always understands’. He added that it was also Phiit Iid’s duty to help staff.

Employees’ respect for Khun Iid was not confined to words. When a few years previously news spread at the factory that his wife was ill with cancer and needed a blood transfusion, a number of the employees donated blood. This was a gesture of gratitude, ‘because Phiit Iid has always been very kind and very helpful to the workers’. It was also a gift steeped in morality, as Mauss suggests,42 with the giving providing an opportunity for the employees to reciprocate the largesse received from Khun Iid, reinforcing the moral bond created between them that drew its meaning from a traditional patron–client relationship.

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Thai anthropologist Prudisan defines the patron–client relationship as a more or less personalised and reciprocal relationship between actors or sets of actors, commanding unequal resources, and involving mutually beneficial transactions that have ramifications beyond the immediate sphere of dyadic relationships.

In the absence of either formal kin groups or traditional formal groups of any kind, van Roy identifies patron–client ties as the institutional base of Thai life in the lowlands. Hanks links the asymmetrical character of Thai society with the Buddhist doctrine of merit (bun), in which the onus is on the superior to aid those below him in the hierarchy in order to increase his own merit. In so doing, he acts as a patron, utilising his greater resources in favour of his inferior, who reciprocates out of gratitude with such services as are at his disposal. The patron bestows favour (bun khun), which demands reciprocity (katanyuu and kataweethii). The gift from the patron is also laden with power, constituting as clients those who receive the gift and those related to them by family or other ties. The gift from the client, as in the donations of blood to Khun Iid’s wife, acknowledges the power—personal, practical, social, moral—of the bond. In the social world established by the factory, Khun Iid acted as the practical and symbolic expression of the moral dimension of the principle of reciprocity.

This moral bond, and the asymmetrical reciprocity that it entailed, was reinforced in many other ways. Somthuwin, a member of the Culture Committee, was enthusiastic about the preparations for the party they would give Phii Iid, as they did each year, on the evening of his birthday. She was also involved with the rest of the Culture Committee and the Staff Committee in helping to organise a special event to assist a rural school in a tiny outlying village in a neighbouring province. Viboon’s father was the school principal and his mother was also a teacher there. Viboon approached Mr Suzuka to ask for help in the building of a reading room. After consultation with Khun Iid, it was agreed that the factory would give a donation of 20 000 baht. Khun Iid added a personal—and powerful—donation of 20 000 baht. To celebrate the occasion, everyone was invited to the school for an overnight party, and the committees organised participation in a monastery benefit (thoot phaa paa) being held for the monks at the temple adjoining the school. About 100 people set out on the Saturday afternoon, first in buses provided by the factory, and then in long-tailed boats along the khoong (canal) that was the school’s easiest access. The factory band played into the small hours of Sunday morning while people ate, drank, sang and danced. On Sunday morning, the monks came to the school to accept the phaa paa tree—with gifts of money and goods attached—that the employees

43 Prudisan (1973: 2).
45 van Roy (1971: 114).
46 Hanks (1975: 198 ff.).
had prepared for them. Not all the partygoers made it to the ceremony, but Khun Iid did. He was accompanied by his brother, Khun Adunsak, a retired major who held the position of assistant manager in the administration section of the factory, and was addressed and referred to by most workers as Khun, not Phii. After the ceremony, Khun Iid invited my husband and me, with our baby daughter, to join the other official guests for refreshments in a separate room. There we exchanged courtesies and general pleasantries about the school and its work until we returned to the rest of the employees for yet more music and dancing before the regular afternoon downpour and the khloong trip back to the buses and home. Viboon and his parents waved us all off from the school’s landing stage.

Unknown until a few days later, Chuusak, one of the workers, was killed in a motorbike accident that same day. Because his family was poor, the company played a leading role in his cremation, with unforeseen consequences that I will discuss in the next chapter. The school party and thoot phaa paa also took place in the final few days before the 6 October massacre. Although the events that precipitated the massacre had been the major news items for weeks—since the return to the country of, first, Field Marshall Prapass and then Field Marshall Thanom—there had been no reference to them among the official reception guests. Politics was not an appropriate or seemly topic for discussion at a celebration designed to demonstrate the ongoing vitality of the patron–client relationship operating between Khun Iid and the factory employees.

Nevertheless, events outside the factory formed the background to all these activities, and employees had access to the full range of media available in Bangkok. As well as radio, and television in the dormitories, each section had daily deliveries of two newspapers, Thai Rath and Dao Siam. Like most of the Thai newspapers, they were sensationalist rather than informative, with their main focus on crime and scandals. The presence in Thailand in 1974 of Roger Moore and his co-stars for the filming of the latest James Bond film, The Man with the Golden Gun, received as much coverage as the emergence of a swathe of recently permitted political parties in preparation for the first general elections scheduled for January 1975. Even with that tendency, the media was provided with enough sensation by political events from late 1972 to ensure ongoing and sweeping coverage. University students figured very prominently in those reports.
Monarchy and democracy: The uprising of 14 October 1973 and the beginning of the ‘democratic experiment’

Students had not been politically active during the Sarit regime or in the early years of the Thanom–Prapass period. In 1965, they founded the National Student Centre of Thailand (NSCT), mainly to make contact with foreign university students. In 1969, they transformed their desultory activities in relation to foreign exchange programs into fledgling political activity at home. In November 1972, they organised an anti-Japanese goods campaign over 10 days. Their strongly nationalistic protests received maximum, and largely approving, coverage in newspapers and on television. After that, students remained in the news and student activities continued to be reported, as did their critique of the increasingly aggressive actions of the third member of the Thanom–Prapass triumvirate, Colonel Narong Kittikachorn. Narong was Thanom’s son and Prapass’s son-in-law and extremely unpopular. Then came the massive anti-government demonstrations from 6 October to 14 October 1973. They involved university and vocational students, workers and farmers. Bang Khen employees watching TV between shifts over the whole week, or reading newspapers, saw images of up to 500,000 demonstrators filling the whole area around the Democracy Monument and surrounding streets, carrying pictures of the King and Queen and waving Thai flags. On 13 October, the images turned violent; the Government had ordered the military to suppress the demonstrations. In the subsequent clashes on that and the next day, demonstrators burnt down a number of government buildings, including the police headquarters, but a number were killed: at least 70, with some estimates much higher. Unlike the Thammasat massacre three years later, these pictures of police killings of unarmed demonstrators were not censored in the press. On 14 October, the King intervened publicly, an act that was unprecedented, and announced the resignation of the Thanom government. That night, the ‘three tyrants’—Thanom, Prapass and Narong—went into exile. The King appointed the Rector of Thammasat University, Professor Sanya Thammasugdi, as provisional Prime Minister. It appeared that the rule of the Generals had ended.

The experience of civilian and later democratic government that followed the 1973 uprising—the ‘democratic experiment’—was new for everyone in the country, including the Bang Khen employees. In the weeks and months following 14 October, the students continued to provide the media with plenty of material. Still in October, there was a successful student demonstration in the north, from where Niroot and many of the other Bang Khen employees...
came. Students in Lamphun Province accused the Governor of corruption in administering funds allocated for local school projects. They demanded and obtained his resignation. In November, they forced the resignation of the Dean and Rector of the School of Public Administration at the National Institute of Development Administration. The Dean had been an advisor to the National Executive Council of the Thanom–Prapass government. Also in November, the independent Chulalongkorn Student Group launched a city-wide protest against the newly appointed US Ambassador, William R. Kintner, a former US Army colonel who had also worked for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Newspapers carried anti-CIA editorials and cartoons. By January 1974, this campaign, assisted by the accidental exposure of CIA clandestine activity in the north-east, culminated in a public apology to the Thai Government by the Ambassador, and a statement from the embassy that the CIA would be told to close its field posts in Thailand. In the same month, the Japanese Prime Minister, Kakuei Tanaka, visited Bangkok and was met with large, hostile demonstrations.\(^49\)

In spite of the new freedom in reporting, the students did not spare the press itself in these early days:

During the months following the student revolt, a major student protest was also launched against Thailand’s most influential Thai language newspaper, *Siam Rath*, because of a letter critical of King Bhumiphol. At a student rally the newspaper was publicly burned as a symbol of the students’ discontent with the letter and determination to censor the editor from further publication. Shortly thereafter, the Thai police suspended the editor’s license indefinitely for publishing the article by two Thais in Sweden criticising the King for not controlling troops and police during the student revolt in October, 1973. The newspaper’s editor, Nopporn Boonyarit, hopelessly attempted to defend himself by asserting that the paper was simply trying to expose attempts to undermine the monarchy.\(^50\)

Student activities were not the only topic for news reports. Two other sectors also became a major focus: labour and farmers. The 14 October uprising and subsequent killings had included workers as well as students. Without unions or other official forms of labour organisation, worker involvement in these events had been haphazard. Their response to the situation was, nevertheless, seen as newsworthy. Strikes had occurred previously, even under the Sarit regime, but unions had remained banned. Legislation in 1972 provided for employees’ associations to be formed; with workers deeply suspicious of government and


\(^{50}\) ibid., pp. 161–2.
of potential repercussions, this had led to only some 15 such associations being registered up to June 1972.\textsuperscript{51} In the period 1963 to 1972 of the Thanom–Prapass government, the average number of strikes per year was 16, with the lowest number being two in 1967 and the highest number, 34, in 1972. In 1973, there were 501 strikes.\textsuperscript{52}

This situation was exacerbated in 1974 with the impact of the 1973 international oil crisis being felt in many Thai industries. The impact was particularly strong in the textile industry. Like the Bang Khen factory, most textile factories were jointly owned with Japanese or Taiwanese companies. The Bang Khen factory had only just begun processing its own industrial chips, which it had previously bought from Japan and Singapore. With the rise in the price of oil, the price of chemicals necessary for production also rose, and the company ran into temporary difficulties. A general response from employers across the sector was to announce production cutbacks, wage reductions and worker lay-offs.\textsuperscript{53} In response, workers from about 600 factories went on strike in June 1974. The strike was led by the newly formed Samut Sakon Textile Workers Union and supported by the National Students Centre.

Again, the Bang Khen workers did not participate. Contrary to the general response from other employers, the Bang Khen management did not impose redundancies. Instead, they indirectly invoked the patron–client relationship that was focused in the person of Khun Iid but was also fostered by management. Without making any direct reference to gratitude or obligation, they asked the single shift workers to volunteer to take up to a month’s leave, during which they would receive 70 per cent of their normal wages. Niroot stopped working for 15 days and went back to Chiang Mai. Nopawan stopped work for a month and also took the opportunity to go home. They agreed that many of the other employees accepted the proposal, pointing out that all those involved were young and unmarried. Some who did not take advantage of the time to go home took casual work. They ended up with more pay for that period than they would have had if they had stayed working at the factory. Still others saw it as an opportunity to \textit{paj thiaw}. The general attitude was that, with the problem of rising unemployment, they valued their jobs, and were glad to receive less money for a month rather than be laid off like so many other workers. Normal shifts resumed after three months. Niroot commented that the factory had been good (\textit{bun khun}) to him and to the other employees. He was grateful and felt positive towards the company. At the same time, his attitude reflected the impact of the modernisation process in which he was participating and the increasingly

\textsuperscript{51} Mabry (1977: 935).
\textsuperscript{52} Supachai (1976: Appendix II).
\textsuperscript{53} Morell and Chai-anan (1981: 189).
conscious discourse of student and labour activists. He did not feel that he owed *bun khun* to the factory, because he worked for them and was paid in return; in his own words, ‘I exchange my labour for money’.

**The move to democratic labour and agricultural worker institutions**

Despite the increasing profile being given to strikes and labour disputes, this basically conservative attitude among the Bang Khen workers was not atypical of the labour sector in general. In some ways, it was more representative of the pragmatic rather than ideological approach taken by the leaders of the main labour organisation that emerged in early 1976.  

This was the Federation of Labour Unions of Thailand, reorganised after May 1976 as the National Labour Council. Its foundation was in response to the rapid growth of labour organisations after 14 October 1973. From some 15 associations in June 1973, these had increased to about 80 in late 1974 and to 153 in July 1976. Almost 90 per cent of these were found in the Greater Bangkok region and most were located in manufacturing. About 25 of these were located in foreign-owned firms; 23 were in textiles and clothing.

In 1975, the newly formed coalition government of the remarkable Kukrit Pramoj passed the *Labour Relations Act*. Supachai Manusphaibool, the Chulalongkorn political scientist best known for his study of the Thai industrial relations system, suggested before the coup in 1976 that the *Labour Relations Act 1975* became ‘the most important impetus to the development of [a] modern industrial relations system in Thailand’. Although it was amended in significant ways after the coup—most importantly in removing the right to strike—the Act itself was not abrogated. It provided for the formation and registration of trade unions and for the amalgamation and federation of a national trade union congress.

The National Labour Council grew initially out of the public utilities sector, where unions had been government endorsed since the 1972 legislation had permitted the formation of labour associations. It was led by Paisal Thavatchainant, President of the Metropolitan Electricity Authority Workers Union. By October 1976, the Council’s membership had reached around 300 000 workers, 200 000 in public utility enterprises and around 100 000 in other sectors. The Council deliberately chose to develop an image of conservative

54 Mabry (1977: 935).
55 ibid., pp. 935–8.
56 Supachai (1976: 17).
57 ibid., p. 18.
58 Morell and Chai-anan (1981: 201).
responsibility, discouraging its members from identifying with the radical student movement or more radical labour groups. I first met with the acting president and secretary of the Council in June 1976, soon after the Council’s formation and while working to establish my research. My project nearly came to an abrupt end when I made the mistake of assuming their support for student collaboration with the labour movement and telling them about my involvement with a group of student activists and factory workers at Thammasat. Their displeasure, and my mistake, was exacerbated when I mentioned the factory to which one of the workers had asked me to go; its union was not a member of the Council and had worked actively with students in a strike and confrontation with the Prime Minister earlier in the year. Fortunately for my research, I did not go so far as to tell them that, a week later, I was due to accompany a group of the Thammasat students and workers on a visit to the Lard Yao prison to see the unionists from the Omnoy textile factory and the students who had been arrested on charges of Communism.

The caution of the National Labour Council was understandable in the context of the long suppression of unions and freedom of association in Thailand, but also in view of the eruption of labour disputes and strikes after October 1973. Of the 501 strikes in 1973, 73 per cent occurred after the October uprising. This dropped to 357 in 1974 but included some spectacularly newsworthy ones, such as the June textile workers’ strike and one by the hotel employees at the five-star Dusit Thani, then one of the best-known hotels in Bangkok. In 1975, the number of strikes dropped again, to 241; and in the first year after the introduction of the Labour Relations Act 1975, and before the coup, the number of work stoppages dropped by almost 30 per cent; however, by 1976 both the labour and the student movements had fragmented.

The June 1974 textile workers’ strike had led the Government to increase the minimum wage for all industrial workers in the Bangkok and surrounding industrial areas to 20 baht a day. This was the second rise in the minimum wage by the new Government. It did not affect the majority of the Bang Khen workers, who were already receiving this amount or higher. The Government also agreed that all textile workers should be paid for the week during which they were out on strike. More significantly in the longer term, however, the strike led to a split in the labour movement between the more moderate and broadly representative National Labour Council and politically radical leaders such as those in the Samut Sakon Textile Workers Union. As a result, the latter

63 ibid., p. 27.
64 Morell and Chai-anan (1981: 190).
groups joined to form the well-organised but short-lived Labour Coordination Centre of Thailand (LCCT) as an organisation distinct from the National Labour Council. The imprisoned Omnoy unionists were affiliated with the LCCT. An important part of the LCCT approach was ongoing cooperative action with student activists and with the recently mobilised farmer groups.

Like the labour movement, farmers and agricultural workers had mobilised rapidly after October 1973 and had been actively encouraged and supported by student groups. Debt had long been a serious problem for Thai farmers. As early as 1931, rural debt had been estimated at 143 million baht, with the most critical problems around Chiang Mai and the Central Plains. In the following four decades, not only debt but also rural tenancy and landlessness in those regions rose to around 50 per cent. After October 1973 it was possible to articulate these grievances publicly for the first time. The first large farmers’ protest was held in March 1974 to demand higher paddy-rice prices. In May, hundreds more demonstrated to protest the dispossession of their lands by moneylenders. In June, more than 2000 staged a week-long sit-in in Bangkok, with Thammasat students providing temporary lodging for them. In the same month, some 20 000 farmers were reported to have marched on Bangkok in sympathy with the textile workers’ strike. June also saw the Government respond to farmers’ protests with the establishment of a committee empowered to investigate grievances. In the first month of its operations, the committee received 10 999 petitions from six provinces. In December, the National Assembly passed the Land Rent Control Act. In the same month, the Farmers Federation of Thailand was established. Its headquarters in Chiang Mai were organised under its Vice-President, Intha Sribunruang, former village headman, farmer and storekeeper from that province. It was the first farmers’ organisation to be independent of government supervision and grew rapidly, setting up provincial branches in all of the northern and upper central provinces. One estimate was that by mid 1975, 100 000 farm families in Chiang Mai Province alone had joined the Federation.

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65 ibid., pp. 208–9.  
66 ibid., p. 214.  
71 ibid., p. 222.  
73 Morell and Chai-anan (1981: 222, 225).
The hardening of positions and the challenges to democracy

By early 1975, therefore, the labour movement and issues were centred in Bangkok, the farmers’ movement in Chiang Mai, and students remained active in both. Thammasat students provided a busy office, Room 426, at the university, where workers came and went freely, using facilities, meeting and planning. Students from all the Bangkok universities continued their program of political education and activities in rural areas. But by early 1975 also, divisions between moderates and radicals within each of these movements were becoming clearly demarcated. At the same time, although the rhetoric and methods of each of the movements increasingly differed, their principal objectives remained the same: that is, improvement in conditions for both urban and rural workers. Unfortunately, radical methods and rhetoric are newsworthy. The media focus throughout this period was on strikes, demonstrations and increasingly extreme statements. The media also made much of the proliferation of political parties in the lead-up to the elections of January 1975.

Once a government had been settled under the prime ministership of Kukrit Pramoj, media focus was on the fragile stability of the Government, with its difficult and shifting coalition of eight parties. Reporting about Kukrit himself reflected the general respect for his eminent reputation and many previous achievements. Among these were his founding of Thailand’s first political party, the Progress Party, in 1945–46, his establishment of the paper Siam Rath, to which he contributed for many years, and his many other literary and artistic accomplishments. Not least among these in popular esteem was his appearance in 1963 with Marlon Brando in The Ugly American as Prime Minister Kwen Sai, a role perilously close to his actual prime ministership in 1975–76.

Over these two years, the general perception of barely contained chaos and potential disaster was exacerbated by ongoing coverage also of the war in neighbouring Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and the continuing Communist insurgency in the north-east and in other border areas. External events combined to inflame this perception. In March 1975, in the midst of a high-profile anti-United States campaign and massive demonstrations in Bangkok orchestrated by student leaders, Prime Minister Kukrit implemented one of his election promises and requested the withdrawal of US troops. In April, the Vietnam War came to an end with the capture of Saigon by North Vietnamese troops, and the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot declared the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea. Rumours began to circulate almost immediately in Bangkok about executions and the forced removal and hard labour imposed by the Khmer Rouge on the people of the new Democratic Republic. In July, Kukrit led a Thai delegation to Beijing and established diplomatic relations with the communist Chinese
Government. In December, the new communist Lao Government abolished the Lao monarchy. On 11 January 1976, with alarm at these developments and in the face of growing instability in the government coalition, a number of military leaders called on Kukrit in order to deliver an ultimatum. The Prime Minister should either dissolve the House of Representatives and call new elections or allow the military to return to the administration of the country.\(^{74}\) Faced also with a no-confidence vote in his government scheduled for 14 January, Kukrit dissolved the parliament and set an election date for 14 April 1976.

The election campaign was defined by violence. More than 30 people were killed and dozens more injured. Grenades were thrown into crowds gathered to listen to political speeches.\(^{75}\) The violence was perpetrated almost exclusively against socialist or leftist candidates or organisations. The most prominent assassination was that of Dr Boonsanong Punyodyana, Secretary-General of the Socialist Party, who was shot in his car near his home on the night of 28 February. Boonsanong was a well-known and popular former lecturer in sociology at Thammasat University. Another party identified as left-wing because of its social reform policies was the New Force (Palang Maj) party, led by the urbane and highly respected medical practitioner Dr Krasae Chanawongse. Dr Krasae was the holder of the Magsaysay Award for his long-term medical work in rural areas of the north-east and had represented his north-east electorate of Khon Kaen since 1973. During the election campaign, the party’s headquarters in Bangkok were attacked with firebombs and partially burned down, and a New Force Member of Parliament from Lopburi was assassinated.\(^{76}\) On 21 March, 10 people died when a grenade was thrown into a New Force party rally in Chainat Province.\(^{77}\)

The violence and intimidation enacted during the election campaign were just another step in the ubiquitous violence of the previous two years, most notably against members of the Farmers Federation. Guns and other weapons were plentiful as a result of US aid to the military and police and its secret war in Laos.\(^{78}\) Between March 1974 and August 1975, at least 21 Farmers Federation leaders were assassinated. These included the Chiang Mai leader, Intha, who was shot in front of his house in August 1975.\(^{79}\) In Bangkok, there had been a number of incidents of serious injury and death as a result of grenades being thrown into demonstrations. This violence was no longer carried out by the military, as it had been in October 1973, but by increasingly radical right-wing organisations. These professed to be civilian organisations but were in fact supported by and closely related to sections of the military and the police.

\(^{74}\) ibid., p. 262.
\(^{75}\) ibid., pp. 262–3.
\(^{76}\) ibid., p. 263.
\(^{77}\) Tienchai (1993: 263).
\(^{79}\) Morell and Chai-anan (1981: 225).
The three most visible groups were the Red Gaurs (*Krathin Daeng*), Nawaphol, and the Village Scouts. The Red Gaurs, confined primarily to the Bangkok area, quickly became notorious and were responsible for much of the violence leading up to the 1976 massacre, including strikebreaking. They were a combination of former mercenaries, unemployed young men, petty criminals and disaffected vocational students who, having played a significant role with university students in the 1973 uprising, saw themselves as excluded from any subsequent benefits. The organisation was set up by a leader in the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), Colonel Sudsai Hasadin, and maintained its direct links with that section of the military. Nawaphol—referring to the ‘ninth power’ or ‘nine strengths’—was set up as an ultra-nationalist organisation to operate mainly in provincial and district towns rather than in villages. It was supported, though indirectly, by ISOC and provided with a form of legitimacy by the endorsement of the well-known anti-Communist Buddhist monk Kittiwutho Bhikku, who stated publicly that to kill a Communist was not an act of demerit (*baap*), Nawaphol’s program to preserve Thai nationalism contained nine themes. Its rallies were whipped into a fever by challenges of ‘Do you love your king? Do you love Thailand? Do you hate communism?’ The Village Scouts were established in 1971 specifically as part of the Thai counterinsurgency strategy. Their founder was Major-General Somkhuan Harikul, an officer of the Border Patrol Police, itself a paramilitary organisation developed as an internal security force in the 1950s with support from the CIA. Although technically located within the Thai National Police Department, the Border Patrol Police maintained direct links with the military. Its main area of activities was, as its name suggests, along the borders with Laos and Cambodia, covering both Thai village areas and hill-tribe settlements. The Village Scouts, modelled on the Boy Scouts, was designed specifically to involve villagers as an active element in the Government’s anti-Communist strategy. Critically, they enjoyed royal patronage and became closely identified with the royal family. One comment made in retrospect was that 1973 and 1974 were ‘the years of the students, workers, and farmers’, whereas 1975 and 1976 were ‘the years of the Village Scouts’.

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81 ibid., p. 319 n. 42.
82 Morell and Chai-anan (1981: 252 fn. 7).
83 ibid., pp. 238–40.
85 ibid., pp. 81 ff. Bowie highlights the role of the royal family in the success of the Village Scouts (p. 82): ‘The ambiguity in the symbolic meaning of the royal family is a crucial factor in explaining the dramatic success of the Village Scout movement in the mid-1970s. To the extent that the king symbolized hope among his poorer subjects, his involvement with the Village Scouts attracted the lower classes to the movement. To the extent that the king was transformed into a symbol of conservative reaction against progressive reform, he catalysed the financial contributions of the upper classes and conservative elements in the middle classes. Thus the king played an important role in the expansion of the Village Scouts, initially as a powerful symbol of unity and later as a multivocal political symbol motivating an intricate fusion of class fractions and state factions.’
Together, the three organisations of the Red Gaurs, Nawaphol and the Village Scouts covered all the main population centres of Thailand: Bangkok, provincial and district towns, and villages. All three took as their principal slogan the mantra of ‘Nation, Religion, King’. All three—Nawaphol and the Village Scouts ideologically and the Red Gaurs pragmatically—were passionately opposed to Communism. In the volatile politics of the region, as well as in the country in the three years of the ‘democratic experiment’, these factors merged into an explosive mixture. The victory of Communism in the neighbouring countries in 1975 was the element that provided the trigger for the explosion.

The destabilising of democracy: Return of the Generals

The fuse was set by the return to Bangkok of the previous dictators. Their return to the country from exile, having been ousted by the uprising in 1973, was seen as a direct challenge to Thailand’s fledgling democracy. Field Marshall Prapass arrived first, on 15 August 1976. Field Marshall Thanom came secretly into the country a month later, on 19 September. Prapass’s return was short-lived, with the National Student Centre threatening mass demonstrations. During his fortnight in the country, however, he was granted an audience with the King, a public gesture of recognition from the King that signalled a withdrawal of the monarchy from its support for a democratic system.

The King, without consultation with the Government, also gave personal approval to the return of Thanom, who was taken immediately on his arrival to Wat Boworniwet, the principal royal monastery, not far from Thammasat University. There he was ordained as a Buddhist monk. The King, as well as the Crown Prince who had returned from his military studies in Australia just a few days earlier on 1 October, paid him visits, providing a further provocative legitimacy to a potential overturning of the Government. Others were quick to declare political support. Nawaphol leaders went publicly to pay Thanom their respects, and Red Gaur members were posted in the temple grounds to ensure his safety. When the Government tried to persuade him to leave the country and the students again threatened demonstrations to force him to go, Thanom refused on the grounds that he was following tradition in making merit for his father who was old and ill. This claim made it difficult for his opponents to sustain their demand for his expulsion. It also threw the Government—again a coalition, this time once more led by Kukrit’s older brother, Seni Pramoj—into crisis, reflecting the sense of impending crisis that gripped the country.

87 ibid., pp. 270–3.
Despite the fissuring of support, however, major non-violent protests were held. Even some 40 affiliates of the moderate National Labour Council called for a protest general strike for 12 October. In Nakhon Pathom Province, where the Omnoy unionists and students were still in prison and 18 more key LCCT members had been recently arrested, two activists—Chumporn Thommai and Vichai Ketsripongsan—were murdered by police while they were distributing anti-Thanom posters. On 5 October, Prime Minister Seni announced his new Cabinet, but they had still to be sworn in, a ceremony that never took place.

On the same day, photos appeared in the press of a mock hanging of the two Nakhon Pathom students, staged on the previous day by student protestors at Thammasat. The English-language daily, the Bangkok Post, published the photo over the caption:

It was just a mock hanging but the effect was such that it created an eerie atmosphere at the Thammasat University campus to kick off another anti-Thanom protest...A student acting as one of the two garrotted victims was ‘hanged’ from a tree in front of the Dome while another student dressed in robes and carrying a gun, depicting Phra [Monk] Thanom, walked around. Nearby several dozen students lay ‘dead’ on the ground.

The photo adjoined the front-page main headline, ‘Srisuk admits police behind garrottings’. As I read the paper over breakfast on a humid morning, the relevance of the dramatised hanging to the Nakhom Pathom killings seemed clear. It was not until I got to the factory a couple of hours later and saw the same photo as published in Dao Siam that I could make sense of the outrage that was being expressed. The Dao Siam photo—and its reproduction the same day in some other Thai-language newspapers such as Banmuang—made the hanged student, Apinant Buahapakdi, look very much like the Crown Prince. This was the spark that ignited the madness and grief of 6 October.

Marked with blood: The forgotten coup of 6 October 1976

It was established later that the main perpetrators of the violence on that day were neither the army nor the police, though there may have been some involvement, but rather the civilian Red Gours and the Village Scouts, with support from Nawaphol and the Border Patrol Police. No-one was ever charged with the killings or assaults. Apart from the students who were killed, and

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88 Mabry (1977: 940).
89 Tienchai (1993: 264).
no longer just playing ‘dead’, around 1300 others were arrested at Thammasat and taken away in buses. Another 1700 people were arrested elsewhere in the city.\textsuperscript{90} In the aftermath of the massacre, many fled to the jungle and joined the Communist insurgency. Despite a number of attempts, I was never able to find out what happened to Nittaya Maphungphong from Thammasat, Prudhisan Tumbala from Chulalongkorn, or the other students with whom I had been working over the previous months, or what became of their idealism and energy. Thammasat, along with all the other universities, was closed down for some time. It reopened with a striking symbolic statement about the powerful re-emergence of tradition in opposition to modernity; those students who returned wore, for the first time, the uniform that was common to other Thai universities.

On the night of 6 October, the rule of the Generals returned in the guise of the National Administrative Reform Council (NARC). The constitution, parliament, and all political parties were banned.\textsuperscript{91} Martial law was proclaimed, with political gatherings made illegal and a nightly curfew imposed. The establishment of press censorship was immediate, newspapers suspended for several days, and liberal magazines such as \textit{Prachachat} that had flourished in the democratic period were closed down and its editor arrested. When newspapers were permitted to resume publication on Saturday, 9 October, the \textit{Bangkok Post} reported the appointment by the King of Supreme Court Judge Thanin Kraivichien as Prime Minister. The \textit{Post} also reported that the NARC had had ‘a one-and-a-half hour audience with His Majesty the King’ and that

\begin{quote}
in its Announcement No. 3, the public was asked to place their reliance and trust in the NARC which will do its best to maintain peace and order. The NARC assured the public that it will not seize control of anything more than is necessary for the welfare of the country.
\end{quote}

Announcement No. 3 identified clearly that what had been at stake over the period 1973–76 were contested notions about what constituted ‘the welfare of the country’; in other words, contested notions about what constitutes a good society. The notions were played out against the background of a war in Vietnam, and in neighbouring Laos and Cambodia, which itself crystallised conflicting ideologies about what constitutes a good society. The predominance of the military over four decades, together with the push to rapid industrialisation under the dictatorship of Field Marshall Sarit, left Thailand with a limited range of possibilities.

The uprising of October 1973 had been an expression of desire for a differently imagined possibility, that of a socially just response to modernisation, including land reform and increased wages, and a strong democratic participation of all

\textsuperscript{90} Morell and Chai-anan (1981: 275).
\textsuperscript{91} ibid., p. 275.
sectors in society in order to achieve it. Time and deep vested interests did not allow that to be achieved. The institutions established in the wake of October 1973 were too weak and were not given time to strengthen. Without the superlative political skills of Kukrit Pramoj and his own richly imagined vision of the meeting of the old and the new in a modern Thailand, the ‘democratic experiment’ would have been terminated even more abruptly. Under the historical circumstances, not even a Kukrit could defy the power of the past. The decision of the newly formed and necessarily inexperienced progressive parties, like the Socialist and New Force parties, not to join with him in the coalition government in January 1975 betrayed the possibility of implementing their policies both for him and for them. They forced the response to modernisation into an opposition between the past and present without addressing the question about whose past was being privileged. The result was the terrible bloodletting, both metaphorical and actual, that was played out in increasingly stark and violent ways between 1973 and 1976: exactly three years bracketed by two late rainy seasons but increasingly marked by blood. There was a seasonal downpour on the afternoon of 6 October. The areas in and around Thammasat literally ran with blood.