3. Dictatorship and democracy: Competing social imaginaries

In making a choice to move from their hometowns and villages to Bangkok and to take on factory work, the Bang Khen workers had already shifted outside their accepted traditional roles. Modernisation had made that choice available to them and they saw it as an opportunity for achieving a better life, principally for themselves as individuals but also in relation to the greater assistance they could provide for their families. Their new experiences were what expanded this understanding and forged the link for them between their desire for a good life and the broader need for a good society. Despite their relative distance from the immediacy of political upheavals, and an environment within the factory that drew on traditional relations and practices, their encounter with the emerging language of rights led them to a modest engagement with the political and legal reforms of the time. The establishment of their own labour union was based in a growing awareness of their place in a wider world and of the necessity of developing a good society in order to have a good life.

Dictatorship and the return to traditionalism

The events of 6 October 1976 constituted a fulcrum in Thailand’s faltering attempt to incorporate modernisation. On that day, it appeared that the conservatism of many elements of Thai society had triumphed in recasting modernisation, and the model of a good society, in terms of a social and political past. However, if the period 1973–76 can rightly be seen as a crisis of modernity, then the return of dictatorship in October 1976 compels an answer to the question of whose past was reinstated. There arises also the question about whose or what modernity we are referring to. For the student and farmer activists, their experience of the changing world allowed them to imagine a good society as a just society in which hierarchy no longer privileged an elite over the masses, and certainly one that demanded democratic participation and in which authoritarian military rule had no place. Their experience also led them to believe that, in the Thailand of the 1970s, this was possible.

They plundered the rhetoric of Marxism in order to express this vision, though it was in practice a socialist rather than a communist one. They also seized the opportunity to republish the banned radical text of one of the local heroes of the student movement, Jit Poumisak. The Real Face of Thai Feudalism [Saktina] Today was first published in 1957, and then banned under Field Marshall Sarit. Jit was imprisoned and kept without trial for eight years. Ten months later, he
was shot as an outlaw. The Real Face broke completely with the tradition of Thai historical writing and presented a graphic critique of Thai society, not as one of harmony, equilibrium and mutual respect, but as one of feudal domination and conflict.

They eat and sleep on that pile of silver
They take from the excess value of my labour.
My wife and children have nothing,
Who knows if they’ll starve.
The state’s not there to look after them
But rather to serve the capitalist pack…
The bunch of us will starve for sure
There’s no way out of this dark mess
As long as those greedy men
Reap profit by ploughing on our backs.¹

The Real Face was republished after 14 October 1973, ‘in another euphoric moment’, and became, along with the writings of Che Guevara and other Marxist revolutionaries, a regular text for the student movement. It was banned again after 6 October 1976.²

For farmers and agricultural workers, the changes after 1973 provided their first opportunity to make a collective challenge to growing levels of debt, tenancy and landlessness. There was also the critical issue of the falling price for paddy rice at the same time as the price of purchased rice was rising. These were for them the main impacts of modernisation. A contemporary economic study identified the ‘concern that agrarian conditions are deteriorating, and that fragmentation of holdings into smaller, less economic, units is occurring, together with increasing tenancy’, and that ‘peasants are losing their land to landowners’.³ A recent land boom had spawned a rich agribusiness, which operated wholly on wage labour. Associated with this was a new class of entrepreneurial small farmers whose position had been strengthened, not only by the acquisition of larger landholdings, but also by government-sponsored farmers’ groups.⁴ The interlocking of such projects with American strategic schemes was instanced by programs such as the Accelerated Rural Development (ARD) program, which was initiated in 1965 with large-scale US backing. The program was concentrated in the north-east, the focus of the insurgency, to which some 70 per cent of US

¹ To Labour. Written in the mid 1950s. Quoted in Morell and Chai-anan (1981: 181).
aid to Thailand was directed. Farmers demonstrated their resistance to these changes with the high number of petitions—10,999—received in its first month (June 1974) by the national committee set up to investigate grievances. These came from six provinces only. The committee found that most of these farmers had been cheated of their land. Over the next three months, the number of petitions averaged more than 14,000 per month, and by the end of September 1974, the number had reached 53,650. The farmers received support not only from students but, to the astonishment of all sectors, also from members of the Young Buddhist Monks group of Thailand. This was the first time that monks had ever participated publicly in a political process, though not, as the monks themselves pointed out, in public life. Their justification was that ‘monks should help people rather than serving the rich and powerful’.7

For workers in the growing industrial sector, too, the advent of democracy was full of the promise of urgent improvement in pay and conditions. They had some opportunity to assess these against international standards, as Thailand had continued its membership of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) over the period from 1958 and sent delegates to annual conventions. The ILO had equally regularly criticised Thailand for its refusal to allow a free labour movement.8 The explosion of strikes after October 1973 and the rapid growth of trade unions were indications of the frustration of workers and their desire for a better deal. They were given practical assistance in developing their unions by volunteer university staff. The staff set up weekend labour education programs at the three Bangkok universities, Chulalongkorn, Thammasat and Kasetsart.9 It was at one of these courses run by the Chulalongkorn Faculty of Economics in August 1976 that I was introduced to Khun Thongying, the deputy personnel manager of the Bang Khen factory. The meeting had been generously arranged by Supachai Manusphaibool as a way of breaking my impasse of locating a factory that would allow my research.

Even the anxiety of the reactionary opposition reflected a particular view of the meaning of modernity that grew out of nostalgia for the stability of the past. The trajectory of opposition to the introduction of democracy, with violence as its method, was propelled by the incantation of the three heavily mythologised pillars of Thai tradition and identity: Nation, Religion, King. But traditionalism, as Morris suggests, is itself a discourse, elaborated around the fear of tradition’s loss.10 Rather than being an alternative to modernity, it is in fact its effect. For the Village Scouts, the political good was defined by an authoritarian government

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5 ibid., p. 107.
6 Morell and Chai-anan (1981: 216).
7 ibid., pp. 220–1.
8 Mabry (1977: 934).
9 ibid., p. 941.
A Good Life: Human rights and encounters with modernity

that promised the old stability. Bowie reports a chant during a Scout initiation ritual in 1977, after the re-establishment of military rule, of ‘I will do good things, things that the government wants. Whoooooo’.  

The Bang Khen employees felt the effects of these external contests over the nature of the good society, though their experience of the democratic years was much less turbulent than that of many others, even in response to 6 October. With the suppression of details, and especially the banning of photographs, only those who happened to have been watching television during the day or thought to buy the afternoon’s edition of *Siam Rath* were exposed to the extent of the morning’s brutality. Those who did have an inkling saw it initially as one more episode in the series of violent political incidents that had been constantly reported, especially since 1973, and to which they had access through the media and through memory. Violence itself was a daily part of the image politics of media representation and unnervingly graphic images of violence were commonplace. In a country that, at that time, had one of the highest homicide rates in the world, and lethal road rage was often practised long before the invention of the term, violence was not of itself shocking or sensational. Klima argues that critical meanings can develop in the interstice between the politics of graphic sensationalism in the public sphere and reclusive Buddhist visualization of the body in death and decay... Like the image of the cadaver in the public sphere, this [Buddhist] work with images of death can be chaotic and dangerous, though not hopelessly so... What Buddhist meditation lacks in explicit political intent it gains in its unsettling and counterintuitive deconstruction of the human being through vision.

The employees were, therefore, very familiar with images of violence. Moreover, whatever their backgrounds, even the youngest had grown up under military dictatorships. Older employees remembered Sarit’s five spectacular years (1959–63). Some of them spoke admiringly of him, not because of his political reputation as a strong man, but with reference to the number and quality of his mistresses. Khun Phadungcit, the dormitory supervisor, explained that magazines of photographs of his more than 100 mistresses used to be available, in the same way as they were for beauty queens or movie stars, and were equally popular. She was also less interested in the corruption exposed after Sarit’s death than in the story of the fight over his wealth between his wife, his minor wives and mistresses, his brothers and the Government.

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The Bang Khen employees viewed the last years of the Thanom–Prapass regime, and the minimal easing of the Government’s anti-union policy in 1972, as workers in the industrial sector. As in most other places, they made no move to set up an association. For most, indeed, there was little interest in politics before 1973. The Generals had always been in charge, and the regime was not obviously repressive in ways that affected their ordinary lives. As the factory workers saw it, politics was a patchwork of inadequate government responses to rising prices, active government support for the United States in the Vietnam War, or occasional scandals, sexual and financial. The period after October 1973 was novel, and interesting, but potentially anomalous. Very few, if any, employees voted in the first general election in January 1975. This was consistent with the low voter turnout in Bangkok, where only 34 per cent of eligible voters went to the polls. The royal family was much admired for her beauty. The royal family was very visible and very popular, with constant and widely read and viewed reports of their activities. These reports were necessarily always very positive, with the criminal charge of lèse-majesté, with its heavy penalties, as an active reality. The reports covered travels inside and outside Thailand, participation in religious and secular ceremonies, and active involvement in welfare, charities and rural development projects. When I started regular visits to the factory, people were interested that I was from Australia because, apart from knowing that that was the home of kangaroos, they also knew that Australia was where Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn had been studying and doing military training (at the Royal Military College Duntroon). Exchanging gossip around the communal table on the women’s dormitory verandah, I was let into the public secret about the eldest daughter of the King and Queen, former Princess Ubol Ratana Rajakanya, and how she had given up her royal privileges for love. She had married an American whom she had met while studying in the United States and had gone to live there. She was no longer included in official reports about the royal family but the women remembered her with a touch of envy and romantic regret.

The daily routine of work and leisure activities enhanced this dislocation of politics from everyday life. So too did the annual cycle of festivals and commemorative events, cultural and religious, actively incorporated by the company into factory life. These effected a perception of continuity between

16 In 1998, the Princess and her husband were divorced. In 2001, she returned to Thailand with her children and began to act in a semi-official capacity. In 2004, her son was drowned in the 26 December tsunami.
the factory environment and that of Thai customary practices. At the same time, their mode of celebration also signified yet another transformation of traditional practices wrought by urbanisation and industrialisation.

The factory and continuities with the past

Loy Krathong, the Festival of Lights and Water, is one of the country’s most cherished, and most beautiful, festivals. The krathong is a small float, traditionally made of banana leaves, although now any material is used. It contains a candle, and often money as well. Its symbolism has differing interpretations. Nopawan explained that it is a gesture offered to the waters—klongs, streams and rivers—asking forgiveness for all the acts of pollution with which each person inevitably fouls them during the year. At the same time, the krathong carries all the sins of the individual out to sea, where they are lost, so that the person is left cleansed. She was happy with the grand celebrations at the factory but commented on the loss of meaning when a swimming pool became the medium of offerings. The moment of collective ritual purification was emptied of the very content of tradition that it sought to embody. Sacrament became show.

But it was a good show, and everyone had a good time. The Dormitory and Culture Committees had hired a band and the company provided plenty of food and drink, including beer and Mekhong whisky. Each section had spent weeks preparing its own krathong and these were judged by the phuu yaj, with a prize for the best. There were around 30 of them, from a peacock with a spray of candles for its tail to a tiered platform with a copy of the Emerald Buddha enthroned. A month after the 6 October coup, Dirake’s section braved an oblique political reference, with a model of the Democracy Monument. Its lights were very dim. When the array of krathong was floated, the Democracy Monument tilted and was in danger of catching alight; Wongkot and his mates joked about democracy going up in flames.

With the midnight curfew still in place a month after the coup, the band was not able to keep the party going until the usual small hours and my family and I had to leave in plenty of time to get home before midnight, but there was time for a beauty contest, with the prize decided for the best traditional Thai dress. Khomkaay had kept Nopawan very busy in the preceding weeks helping to make hers. Tradition was the note of the evening. Most of the other women wore simpler Thai dress and the wives of the Japanese staff came in kimono. Once the judging for the section krathong was over, other employees floated their own.

Songkran, the Thai New Year or Water Festival in April, was a less elaborate but nonetheless festive affair. The home of the most spectacular Songkran
celebrations is Chiang Mai, Khun Phadungcit’s family home. She organised a group of the women to prepare a *Khan Toke* feast, a traditional northern Thai meal served with sticky rice and accompanied with a deceptively potent rice wine. We sipped this tentatively, with much false bravado and giggling from the women. Enough food had been prepared to feed the hundreds of staff. Again, the setting was the swimming pool; again, there was a hired band and a beauty contest, with girls from different sections representing various styles of traditional dress.

Other annual events celebrated the monarchy. The Culture Committee looked after the design and preparation of the wreath for King Chulalongkorn Day. This contained a model of the mounted figure of Chulalongkorn, done in coins and outlined in flowers. Less than three weeks after the coup, as soon in the early morning as the curfew allowed, Somthuwin went with the rest of the Culture Committee to place the wreath by the King’s statue in the square outside the Throne Hall and the old parliament, not far from the Democracy Monument. Here it joined massed wreaths from other institutions.

After the coup, the factory carried on. On 8 October, two days after the coup, there was a holiday for the end of Buddhist Lent (*ook phansaa*). Two days after that, the factory formally participated in the *Kathin* ceremony at the neighbouring monastery: the presentation of new robes and gifts to the monks. A number of the workers joined in the festivities with other people from the surrounding district, and Mr Suzuka and Khun Adunsak presented a gift of 10 000 baht on behalf of the company and its staff. This was to go towards the building of a new pavilion (*saalaa*) and, since Mr Suzuka performed the act in his official capacity, merit was seen to accrue to all. On 5 December, two months after the coup, the Culture Committee monitored the lights and other ornaments used to decorate the main gates for the King’s birthday. Under Prime Minister Thanin and the NARC, the new government took advantage of the birthday to promote further their nationalist agenda of a beautiful Thailand. Their call was to celebrate the birthday by cleaning up the country. Mr Suzuka applied this to a clean-up day for the factory.

Religious rituals were woven into the secular world of work itself. Monks came to bless the dormitories at New Year. Morning almsgiving ceremonies (*kaan liang phra*) were held to mark a change in Khun Supachai’s section from three teams of shiftworkers to four, to celebrate the factory’s tenth birthday in January, and to launch the new company credit union. The company made time available to the men employees to enter the monkhood (*buat pen phra maj*) for a period of up to three months. Niroot and Dirake were part of the group of around half the men who thought they might do so. Thongkam was among the more than one-third who had already done so. Because he had worked at the factory for more than three years, he received 45 days’ pay for his three months in the monastery.
The value afforded to this religious practice for men was in contrast with the company’s maternity leave provisions. These consisted of one month’s leave on full pay and the possibility of a second month’s leave without pay. Further leave was at the discretion of the personnel section.

Focus in the factory, then, was obviously primarily on work and production. But it was also on reproducing as far as possible the social, cultural and religious habitus that anchored the life of the factory into a local community and into the broader communities from which its employees were drawn. The mundane routines of work and leisure, with study for some, and interspersed with sponsored regular special events both secular and religious, offer an image of a Thai branch grafted onto a Japanese stem, resulting in a peculiarly Thai hybrid of patronage by the company and employee satisfaction as both workers and clients. Parallel developments among the employees suggest that this hybrid had another branch located at a fork of what Bhabha calls domains of difference, where the intersubjective and collective experiences of cultural value are negotiated. These developments also indicate that the employees were negotiating their own place at this moment of historical rupture.

The factory and new directions: Development of the trade union

The employees responded in their own way to the social conditions in which they found themselves. They did not reject the traditional hierarchies of respect and reciprocity that they brought to the factory and that continued to link them with their own families and communities. But their move into an urban industrial environment altered the basis of those relationships and gave them a modest place in the secular world, which Said defines as the world of history as made by human beings. In the secular world, hierarchies are made, not preordained, and can be changed. Politics therefore shifts from the wings and plays a central, if not an all encompassing, role. The establishment of a trade union by the Bang Khen employees was a small but radical act that gave them a bit part in those larger events, which, whatever else the democratic experiment did or did not achieve, fractured irrevocably what Thongchai refers to as the master narrative of Thai history.

In February 1975, the Government announced the new Labour Relations Act, to be effective the following month. The law recognised the right of workers to

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17 Bhabha (1994: 2).
organise and bargain collectively. Union membership was to be either plant or industry based, meaning that any factory workforce could set up its own union. The law also provided for amalgamation and federation and the organisation of a national trade union congress. Unions had to be registered with the Director General of the Labour Department. The objectives of the unions were to be twofold: to maintain or advance the interests of members and to promote the peaceful settlement of industrial disputes. Management was required to recognise the representativeness of a union that had more than 20 per cent of employees as its members. Strikes were made legal, as long as the established procedures had been exhausted. The provisions of the new law did not change immediately the prevailing practices in industry but it provided legal avenues to address the concerns of workers. As a result, not only did the number of work stoppages drop by almost 30 per cent after the new law was in place; very few of those strikes that did take place occurred in registered unions in 1975–76 and none in early 1977.

Niroot talked about the setting up of the trade union at Bang Khen. A group of 15 men—five more than required under the Act—got together in the later months of 1975 to undertake the preliminary steps necessary under the new law. This involved approaching the Labour Department to apply for a certificate of registration and to undertake some basic training. Mongkolchai, Wongkot and Chingchai were the principal organisers. Importantly, they did this without seeking the approval of the factory management and, indeed, without their knowledge. By January 1976, they had met the legal requirements. On 28 January, the Labour Department registered the union. Only then did the organisers inform the management. They did this in order to set in place the union elections, which could not be held until three months after registration.

The process of organising a trade union redefined the relationships between the employees and the management. No longer was management solely the phuu yay nor was the interaction between the two groups primarily that of patron and client. These relations remained active and continued to call into operation the moral bonds of reciprocal obligation. But the fact of the trade union unsettled the comfortable legitimacy of bun khun, of the expectation by both employers and employees of employer benevolence as the underlying principle of their interaction. The establishment of the union in the factory community brought into play what Habermas identifies as one of the key criteria of modernity—that ‘modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; it has to create

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20 Supachai (1976: 18 ff.).
21 ibid., p. 17.
22 Mabry (1977: 942).
its normativity out of itself’. This, as Miller recognises, is an ambivalent achievement, requiring humanity ‘to forge for itself the criteria by which it will live’. Reliance on custom is inadequate.

At the same time, modernity’s ‘crushing burden’ of moral creativity is not usually how people experience their everyday lives. Certainly this was not the case for the Bang Khen employees. They retained a rich connection with the sources of customary morality, which continued to shape their attitudes and their actions. Nevertheless, they were willing to explore an alternative framework, in which the union rationalised moral obligation into legal obligation. Nopawan did not find the two frameworks to be in opposition and found it generally easy to operate with both. She, along with half the employees, joined the union as soon as it was available to do so. Having done so, she paid her monthly fees of 5 baht but did not attend meetings or engage in any other union activities. In practice, she combined the emerging language of rights with the old discourse of bun khun when discussing what she saw as appropriate standards for the employees. The men had had new dormitory quarters for some time, but the women had moved to a new building only a few months earlier. The women’s old dormitory had been adjacent to the work areas; this was bad in a number of ways, not least because proximity to the machines meant that washing always got dirty again. But it was also ‘wrong’ for the dormitory to be in the same area as the workplace and was against the labour law. It was necessary for the company to be ‘fair’; at the same time it was also their duty to ‘look after’ their workers. In return, the employees owed honesty (seusat), not loyalty (congrak phakdii), to the company. Loyalty was reserved for the King, the Lord of the Land (phra mahaa kasat).

Khun Phadungcit, a former teacher, was not altogether approving of the union, but was also a member. She saw the union as the recourse for any employee who did not get fair treatment from the company, thus acknowledging the possibility of this. She also saw it as involving the Labour Department directly with the factory to monitor that things were fair. At that moment, she did not need any help from the union, but some staff did and had been assisted. She too would ask for union help if she was treated badly by the company, for example, if she were to lose her job for no fault of her own and was not paid her six months’ severance pay.

Niroot, who was on the union committee, also employed the language of fairness: if there was a problem between an employee and the management, it was the responsibility of the union to ensure that its members received fair treatment. But the union’s role was broader than this: as well as taking good care of its members, its duty was to educate them about their rights.

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The establishment of the union hinted at the fault lines in the fusion of rights and *bun khun*. It forced management to move from its position as the gracious dispenser of benefits to one of entering into dialogue with the union. The company’s initial response was reluctant and designed to lessen the impact of the union on the other employees. Within days of being notified by the union committee of the union’s registration, management announced the establishment of an Employees Committee. The *Labour Relations Act* provided for such a committee to operate until more than half the employees were members of the union. Until it reached that level of membership, the union was not legally regarded as representing the workers and had very few rights, beyond the right to actually exist. The company presented the Employees Committee as an interim organisation, to give employees practice in negotiating while the union was developing experience. Management also argued that, while for the union no-one above the level of assistant section chief was eligible to be a member, the Employees Committee was open to all personnel, of whatever rank. All staff were automatically members of the Committee, without the requirement for any fees. In addition, the law did not set any interval between the announcement of an Employees’ Committee and its elections. While the union elections could not be held until April, elections for the Committee were held in February. The administration supported the elections with full publicity and about two-thirds of the total number of employees voted. Afterwards, Mr Suzuka personally donated 1000 baht towards the opening of the Committee’s office. The Committee used this for an almsgiving ceremony for the monks and for a modest party.

By the time of the union elections, the Employees Committee was firmly established. Fewer employees voted in the union elections but there was still a turnout of almost 50 per cent. Thereafter the two executives worked in conjunction. Boongsongsese was a member of both. Niroot made an unsuccessful attempt to become a Committee member, wanting to know for himself how the Employees Committee worked. He also wanted all the staff to understand the union’s purposes and how they worked, that if the union was strong, it would ‘stand forever’. He also commented that the factory did not accept the union and gave it a difficult time. The view around the verandah table in the women’s dormitory, put forward without rancour, was that the Employees Committee was on the side of the management. The only dissenting voices from this were from Khun Phadungcit and the members of the Committee itself.

Even though it remained nervous about the union, however, the company acknowledged both organisations. It made a room in the men’s dormitory available as a union office though there was no ceremony attached to its opening. Charat, one of the section heads and a *phuu yaj*, explained the management’s concerns: ‘At the beginning, the union committee was rebellious, like teenagers. The first union president worked in our section and I had troubles with the union. The
members were all very young and new, and wanted to exercise their rights too much’. In order to deal with the problem, Charat invited the president to come and talk things over with him. Since then, things had settled down, with the union establishing a schedule of two meetings a month. Nevertheless, the company kept a careful eye on the union and took an active role in managing its impact. For the union’s second monthly meeting, its executive and the Employees Committee met collectively with the administration, including Khun Iid’s brother, Khun Adunsak. Khun Iid personally attended the meetings, which were cancelled if he was not available. These meetings gave rise to a number of changes in the first year of the union’s operation. The employees saw the union as acting for them, despite the presence also of the Employees Committee. The first change was an increase in the monthly food allowance, from 160 to 250 baht. The second was a change from the use of food coupons to cash, allowing employees a choice of where to eat. The third was the establishment of a credit union. The company donated 200 000 baht to set it up. It started with more than half the employees as members and provided borrowing facilities with an interest rate of 10 per cent.

An important element in the company’s strategy to manage the union was the Workers Agreement. The *Labour Relations Act* provided for collective bargaining, with the onus on management to enter into negotiation with the union within three days of receiving written demands. At the factory, the company pre-empted this process; as soon as the Employees Committee was set up, management drafted an agreement, with the Committee as the official staff representative. In April, the draft was presented to the newly established union and signed three days later. The employees, including the union, were satisfied that it was a good agreement, incorporating as it did a further management initiative for significantly improved health benefits for the employees.

Over the following months, the union made progress in gaining acceptance as part of the overall functioning of the factory. They were also exploring the process of affiliation with one of the national labour federations. They had been approached by the Samut Sakon Textile Workers Union to join the Labour Coordination Centre of Thailand (LCCT), but were unsure about whether to align themselves with so radical an organisation. While they were still considering this option, they also requested information from the National Labour Council about possible membership and attended a couple of their meetings. Then, in September, the executive surprised everyone by resigning. They explained the reason as concern about the effective functioning of the executive, as well as their relationship with the rank-and-file members. Niroot complained that only three of them—he, Mongkolchai and Chingchai—ever turned up for meetings. They wanted to give the employees the opportunity to choose again, after having

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had some experience as trade union members. An election committee of five was set up, and a new election scheduled. The date for this event was to have been 14 October, to coincide with the anniversary of the 1973 uprising. The coup intervened on 6 October, forcing the deferral of the election and denuding it of its democratic symbolism.

Death and the medium

Death also intruded into these mundane arrangements. On 10 October, the police informed management of a motorbike accident that had happened the previous Sunday, on the day of *thoot phaa paa* for Vibun’s father’s school. The dead man was Chuusak, one of the factory workers. He had been knocked off his motorbike by a car. Identification of the body had been slow, as Chuusak was carrying no personal papers. He was eighteen and had been at the factory for only a year. His older brother had been an employee for three years. Their mother was dead and their father lived up-country. The company offered to take responsibility for the funeral arrangements and for the cremation. In assuming this responsibility, the company was not so much acting in the place of Chuusak’s family as fulfilling the role of the householder of high rank who customarily should give generously to his subordinates and dependants. The employees contributed 5 baht each, in their turn meeting the expectation that the donation by individuals is small when the funeral ceremonies (*ngaan*) are sponsored by their superiors.\(^{26}\)

Chuusak’s funeral ceremonies made clear that the rites surrounding death and cremation are, on the whole, simpler and more standardised in modern Bangkok than in rural areas. It also demonstrated the ongoing power of traditional rituals. Mortuary rituals are amongst the most elaborate of Buddhist ceremonies.\(^{27}\) In rural areas, there is a marked difference between the treatment accorded to the corpse of a person who has died of natural causes in the fullness of time and that meted out to the victim of an accident or other violent or sudden death. Although customs are changing, even in rural areas, a common practice still is for the corpse of a person who has died of natural causes to be brought home and kept there from the time of death until cremation. The family quickly brings others to join in a funeral wake, so that the dead person will not be lonely.\(^{28}\)

In contrast, the victim of sudden or violent death is traditionally buried with great haste, and often with little ceremony, the religious rites being performed only

\(^{26}\) Bunnag (1973: 164).
\(^{27}\) Klima (2002); Tambiah (1968: 88).
after burial (not necessarily cremation) has taken place.\footnote{29} The body, moreover, is not kept at home, even for the short time before burial, since it is believed that the spirit of the dead person may become a malevolent ghost (\textit{phii}) and haunt or harm the living. According to Tambiah, this fear arises from the belief that such spirits hover on earth because of an attachment to worldly interests, from which they have been untimely snatched. This also partly explains the element of haste; although another aspect to this is that, by releasing the spirit of the deceased without delay, it may be reborn as quickly as possible, thus allowing it the opportunity to compensate for the time so rudely denied it in this life.

Some of the abiding grief attached to the massacre of the Thammasat demonstrators was the non-performance of funeral rites for the murdered. In October 1974, a year after the 1973 uprising, the King and Queen had presided in a state ceremony over the cremations of the ‘October 14 martyrs’ and their families were publicly honoured. In 1976, of the 43 deaths officially recorded, and taking no count of the many more unrecorded, only half a dozen corpses were claimed by their families for cremations.\footnote{30} Thongchai, now an academic staff member at the Center for South-East Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, was himself one of the student leaders of that day and was imprisoned for two years afterwards. He points out that the rest of those murdered on 6 October had never received any kind of cremation and still nobody knows what happened to their remains.

On the anniversary morning of 6 October 1996, as ‘the most memorable activity’ of the first ever series of commemorations for the 1976 event, a symbolic cremation was held at the soccer field where the massacre had taken place. It was performed by Buddhist monks and spiritual leaders of other religions. ‘Twenty years later, in my opinion, former radicals of the 1970s had accomplished one of the most important missions in their lives: to publicly cremate and say farewell to friends who had forfeited their lives in the event that shaped thousands of lives of their whole generation forever.’\footnote{31} Twenty years later, those former radicals reclaimed the past, engaging in a reflective dialogue between what had been local events and what had become history.\footnote{32}

In the death of Chuusak, coinciding as it did with the massacre and its aftermath, the Company ensured that proper mortuary rites were carried out. A fortnight after the death, they organised for the corpse to be brought to the neighbouring monastery, which acted in this instance, as in many others, as the local temple for the factory. Here the monks prepared the body and set up an altar in the \textit{saalaa} where the ceremonies prior to the burning (\textit{phaw}) were to be held. Three

\footnote{29} Kaufman (1960: 157); Kingshill (1960: 164–5); Tambiah (1968: 98).
\footnote{30} Thongchai (2002: 266, 275).
\footnote{31} ibid., pp. 275–6.
\footnote{32} I am indebted to Professor Howard Morphy for this comment.
nights of chanting followed, each night with its own host, a role that was a rich source of merit: the factory administration on the first night, the trade union and Employees Committee on the second, and Chuusak’s work section on the third. The chanting preceded a wake which, on the second night, produced ‘a community of gamblers [and drinkers] for the sake of the dead’.33 It was not the elaborate funeral casino of Klima’s description, and participants had to conform to the curfew, but it did constitute a similar illicit act. Gambling was then, and remained, illegal, though the police tended to turn a blind eye for funerals, even one so soon after the imposition of martial law.

On the morning of the burning, there was an almsgiving ceremony of the family and close friends. In the afternoon, I went with Khun Phadungcit and a group of other women to the crematorium. We were among several hundred employees and a number of the phuu yaj, including Khun Adunsak, Khun Iid’s brother. Khun Iid did not attend, though this was not unusual for a cremation where the patron who has given generously to the ceremonies is not required to attend in person.34 The chanting of the monks combined with the soberly dressed mourners to produce an emotional solemnity around the open oven. Because Chuusak’s corpse was already starting to decompose, it was not on display for these urban participants. His brother gave a short eulogy, lamenting the sudden and early death, and distributed to each of us a small memento from the family, a symbolic but eminently practical Vicks inhaler, with thanks for our attendance. Once the fire was lit, and the monks and family had filed past the oven’s open door, we each cast in our own gifts to the dead: an incense stick, a candle and a flower. Some of the mourners added coins as an additional offering of merit for the dead boy. Khun Phadungcit also explained that attending the burning was an opportunity to settle any outstanding personal accounts, both offering forgiveness to and seeking forgiveness of the dead.

The unsettling potency of death extended beyond the funeral ceremonies. On the way back from the cremation, Khun Phadungcit invited me to go with her and a small group of the other mourners to access the power of a local spirit medium. We entered a world eerily distinct from the formal Buddhist rituals to which I had become accustomed at the factory. The opaque darkness that absorbed us as we walked from the lighted compound of the monastery into the semi-rural surroundings of the medium’s house signalled more than a movement in space. Together with the spirit possession of the medium herself, it signified a repossession of urban modernity by village atavism. The sense of descent into a different world was reinforced by the disembodied sounds of night creatures as we crossed the provisional and not very reassuring planks sunk into the swampy approach to the house.

33 Klima (2002: 251).
34 Bunnag (1973: 164).
In contrast, the room where the medium sat enthroned was comfortingly familiar. There was an altar crowded with flowers and ornaments and with a Buddha image presiding. The smoke from burning incense sticks was thick and stifling. The electric candles threw shadows across the stuffy room where already around a dozen visitors sat at the medium’s feet. We had missed the beginning of the session but were permitted to interrupt to place money in the box on the altar before retiring to sit in an empty floor space. The questions, including ours, were banal: if my birth date and time was this, what did my future hold? Would I be happy? Would I have good luck? Would my son/daughter succeed? The medium had answers, with occasional supplementary clarifying questions, to all. She was not disconcerted to find a foreigner in her audience and replied to the questions that I was urged by Khun Phadungcit to pose. As I did not know the time of my birth, and had to make it up, I was not able to put much faith in her answers, but that could be attributed as much to my false information as to her insights. My friends were satisfied that she had predicted more children, wealth, and a happy future for me. As we once more navigated our way across the planks, we heard, but did not feel, a loud rush of wind. Khun Phadungcit identified it as the spirit leaving its medium.

In her study of mediums in northern Thailand, Morris argues that spirit possession is less a return to the past than ‘part of a heroically translational effort to mobilize the manifold possibilities of being in the place of origins’, where ‘place’ connotes both location and relationship. She also suggests that the varying manifestations of mediumship are an outcome of, as well as a response to, modernity. With no more than one short exposure to a Bangkok medium, I cannot confirm her analysis in relation to the medium herself. But it does throw light on the way in which the women employees approached the medium. Drawn mostly from rural backgrounds, they paid occasional visits to her in moments of uncertainty. The visit on the night of Chuusak’s cremation expressed the unarticulated anomalies produced by their position at a point of juncture between a remembered past and an undefined future. It helped to close the uncertain space that his death had opened up between the domains of the supernatural and the mundane, literally embodying in the person of the medium the inseparable intertwining of the one with the other.

The funeral rites for Chuusak also produced repercussions in the wholly secular domain, revealing the tensions between the reciprocal and the contractual.

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A clash of old and new

It was perhaps the permissive environment of the second night’s wake coupled with copious tumblers of whisky that enticed Chingchai, the union secretary, to go beyond the trade union role of host for the evening and to stray into unwise comments about Chuusak’s death. He was discussing with his friends the fact that the driver of the car that killed Chuusak was a doctor—dokter, an academic, not medical, title—and a friend of one of the senior staff members who worked in the head office. According to Chingchai, rumour had it that the ‘doctor’ had made use of his company contact, and that there would be no prosecution. He went on to accuse the company of being on the side of the doctor, and not on the side of the workers. This ill-fated statement, made only in conversation with friends, was overheard by Khun Adunsak, who subsequently reported it to Khun Iid. Not surprisingly, Khun Iid was furious. Next morning, he called a meeting of the union, the Employees Committee and the section chiefs. With such short notice, and no indication of the purpose of the meeting, not everyone came. It was not reported whether Chingchai was present. Kovit, the president of the Employees Committee, was not present. At the meeting, Khun Iid was reported to have done all the talking—no-one else ‘dared’ (klaa) to speak. At the end, without consultation with Mr Suzuka, he took on himself the total decision and responsibility and gave Chingchai the sack on the spot.

Given that Chingchai’s comments were not related to any contractual obligation, Khun Iid’s anger suggests that his remarks offended the practice of bun khun and breached the relationship of client to patron. It also suggests that, in the eyes of Khun Iid at least, this was the basis of relations operating in the factory. His power rested in his position as majority owner and vice-president of the company, but his authority arose from his active role as patron for the employees. An accusation that he had betrayed those obligations was, in his view, unforgivable. This was not the view taken by the Committee of Labour Relations, to whom Chingchai and the remaining union executive appealed. After interviewing all the parties to the dispute and considering the case for several months, the Committee found that Chingchai had not breached any regulation. The company was ordered to pay him three months’ severance pay, though not to reinstate him.

Death, then, disrupted the practical harmony that generally prevailed in the factory between the moral discourse of reciprocity and the emerging moral discourse of rights. In a sense, Chingchai’s unwitting challenge forced the two into a confrontation in which the discourse of reciprocity continued to prevail. He himself became a direct casualty of the clash. But its ripples affected others as well. Vibun had been a close friend of Chingchai. He was also on the Employees
Committee and Chingchai and others blamed him for Chingchai’s dismissal. This got to a point over the following weeks where Vibun avoided leaving the factory by himself at night for fear of being attacked.

Niroot was one of the union executive who supported Chingchai in his appeal to the Committee of Labour Relations. Even Khun Phadungcit thought that the company had been too severe in their treatment of Chingchai, though she qualified this view on the basis that she hadn’t been there and therefore didn’t know. Nopawan put the incident in its broader context of the reintroduction of martial law. In the hotbed of rumours that followed the coup, she had overheard friends of Chingchai saying that, before his sacking, Chingchai as secretary of the union had received a letter from the NARC, calling him to come and report on the union.

The situation was certainly complicated by its happening so soon after the coup and the imposition of martial law.

**In the shadow of the coup**

Despite the employees’ caution in getting directly involved in the politics of the three-year democratic period, there were repercussions of the coup in the factory. One was the curfew, when no-one was allowed in the streets between midnight and 6 am without official permission. There were others. A few days after the coup, a box was placed in each of the dormitories labelled ‘Receptacle for Communist literature’. The box in the women’s dormitory remained empty. The one in the men’s dormitory scored a large pile of copies of *Prachachat*, one of the two liberal newspapers that were suppressed after the coup and whose editors were arrested. These ‘subversive’ materials were brought down in the middle of the night by those who felt they could be compromised by keeping them. The materials were subsequently taken away by the management and burnt. Relatives of the employees were no longer permitted to come freely to the dormitories but had to report to the office first. Nopawan pointed out that people did not like this but had to obey (*cheua fang, tham taan*). Two weeks before the coup, I had received permission from management to employ a translator, a Thammasat student, to assist me in my research. This permission was withdrawn after the coup.

The day after the coup, with a caretaker committee in charge of the union after the resignation of the executive, Wongkot, the original president, and Chingchai, the secretary, went to the Labour Department to clarify the situation concerning the proposed election. At that stage, there were 20 candidates for
15 positions. They were told that the election would have to be postponed. As well, no further union meetings could for the present be held although routine business could be attended to.

The new government did not repeal the *Labour Relations Act*, although it did suspend the right to strike and placed a temporary ban on political meetings of more than five people. As a result of the ban on meetings, even a scheduled meeting of the Family Planning Organisation of Thailand for factory staff was cancelled. Nevertheless, under these conditions, and because of the fact that it was registered, the trade union could legally continue. Five weeks after Wongkot and Chingchai’s visit to the Labour Department, with permission from the Labour Department and the local police, the union elections were held. Representatives from other unions were invited to come as observers. A member of the Railway Union was there as the official representative of the Committee of Labour Relations, representatives came from two other textile unions, and two more. Others had been invited, but were unable to come.

Of the original 20 candidates, 17 had renominated; 307 of the 531 union members voted. This was even higher than the number who had voted under the more auspicious conditions of the first election. Of the new executive, one was also on the Employees Committee. After the coup, however, this link became of no significance as the Employees Committee, while remaining notionally active, effectively collapsed. None of the employees expressed any upset at its demise.

In contrast, the union resumed their regular meetings as soon as the government ban on meetings was lifted. This was a cause of some anxiety to Khun Thongying, who was not informed that members of the executive were meeting the Government’s requirement of monthly reporting to the Labour Department and therefore worried that they were not doing so. As a result, he advised me not to attend union meetings in case there was a police raid, as I would have to accept the consequences if I were present. Niroot assured me that he, Mongolchai and Boongsongse took it in turns to report to the department, so I was not constrained to follow Khun Thongying’s advice.

At the same time, the company accepted the continuing legitimacy of the union. In October it had accepted an application for leave from Mongolchai to attend a seminar in Manila of the World Council of Labour, a third-world organisation, and the Brotherhood of Asian Trade Unions (BATU). In December, Niroot requested permission, on behalf of the union, to organise training in labour issues for the employees. The company gave approval and five courses were held over the next few months. One was a three-week course on the labour law and labour relations, held at the factory and attended each evening by about 30 employees. Another, running over a fortnight, was on trade unions. Other Labour Department courses included a week’s course on safety, and a fortnight
on credit unions for which departmental representatives were invited by the union. The company also funded two factory representatives to go away for a weekend to a course on family planning, organised annually by the Labour Department under the auspices of the International Labour Organisation. When preparations were under way for the factory's tenth birthday celebrations in January, Khun Iid made the suggestion that the union invite the teachers from the seminars and this was done.

Jackson argues that Thailand is a society ‘whose status as modern is at best ambiguous’ and proposes a fundamental difference between Thai and Western forms of power and knowledge. On that basis, he suggests that the diverse crises of Thai modernity are productive not of a cultural convergence with the West but of novel forms of cultural difference and differences of understanding and meaning.³⁶ The factory was itself a hybrid, translating the experience of Western forms of industrialisation through Japanese practices. In the factory’s first decade, it was this conjunction of Japanese and Western forms with Thai cultural understandings and practices that developed new ways for the employees to produce their own meanings and make their own moral choices in the novelty of their situation as urban industrial workers. They had available to them the moral discourses of *bun khun*, merit, and rights and drew on all of them. They also had available the practical conditions provided by the factory that satisfied many of their mundane material and social desires for a good life. On a day-to-day basis, they merged the diverse discourses into a practical routine of work and leisure activities. Their actions placed them in an agnostic but not rejecting position in relation to the Buddhist doctrine of *tham* or *dharma*, which teaches that social position is the consequence of merit. This agnosticism extended even to any recognition that the relationship of social position to merit is not rigidly predetermined, since merit itself is a matter of choice rather than an accident of birth.³⁷ In their practical view, the notion of merit from a past life had been transformed into luck in this one. Niroot thought that Khun Iid’s children were lucky because their father was rich and that one could be rich by working very hard and spending one’s money in the right way. In a similar way, employees saw their factory job as indicative of the possibility of choices that were not available in previous generations; their choice to work in the factory constituted them as agents in achieving a better life.

The move to establish an autonomous trade union grew out of an emerging recognition that achieving a better life was a collective as well as an individual project, that a good life was actively linked to the achievement of a good society. In this way, the employees forged their own links to the broader movement for change being undertaken after October 1973. Both movements demonstrated a

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³⁶ Jackson (2004: 351, 357).
fundamental shift arising out of modernising processes, from acquiescence in the status quo to varying but active participation in changing it. Both the activists more broadly and the factory employees in their own situation understood in different ways that social change was not something just happening to them, but that they themselves could be actors in shaping the process. This in itself was a transformation wrought by modernity. The union was not in its inception a necessary opposition to the patron–client relationships operating in the factory, but a novel move to redefine those traditional forms to suit a modern environment. It reflected the conditions produced after October 1973. The union represented a new interpretation and practice by the employees of the intersection of power, culture and meaning.38 Despite incidents like Chingchai’s sacking, when these new understandings clashed with the interpretation and practices arising from the past, the union did not come to grief in the same way that the radical movement did; even Chingchai had recourse to an appeals tribunal that required legal accountability by the company. Nor was the union dissolved as a result of the coup. It continued operating after the coup with ongoing support from its workforce. In this, too, it maintained links with the broader union movement in the country.

And the aftermath

The NARC was not gentle with the labour movement. As well as banning strikes and political meetings, they organised raids on union offices and arrested a number of labour activists under martial law Order 22 as ‘persons dangerous to society’. Other union leaders disappeared; some joined the students who fled to the jungle to join the communist insurgency. The National Labour Council, which it turned out was not registered with the Labour Department, was dissolved. Nevertheless, the NARC acted on advice from ISOC that the only way to neutralise labour was to affirm the labour law rather than abolish it. As a result, they invited its former president, Paisal Thavatchainant, to talks with them.39 In the first weeks after the coup, Paisal and General Kriangsak, NARC Secretary-General, signed a three-point agreement. On 18 October, Admiral Sa-ngad, NARC Chairman, and General Kriangsak reaffirmed the NARC policy of upholding workers’ rights to organise and bargain collectively, while suspending their right to strike.40

Kriangsak proved to be a critical player in the post-coup period. Despite the rhetoric of a return to stability, and the rigid enforcement of reactionary policies under Prime Minister Thanin, military factionalism remained an internally

38 Jackson (2004: 342).
40 Morell and Chai-anan (1981: 201).
destabilising element. In October 1977, after a year of ‘the Dark Ages of modern Thai politics’, Sa-ngad and Kriangsak led a further internal coup. Kriangsak, installed as the new Prime Minister, expressed a program of moderation and a policy of reconciliation. He promised to hold new elections within a year; opened channels of communication with labour unions; invited such men as former New Force party leader Dr Krasae Chanawongse to advise him; ended Bangkok’s curfew; and allowed more open expression of views in the press and on university campuses (though by no means endorsing freedom of speech).  

In 1978, he instigated the promulgation of a new constitution and over the next year gave an amnesty to those who had gone into the jungle after 6 October. In February 1980, Kriangsak unwillingly but voluntarily resigned as Prime Minister and was replaced by General Prem Tinsulanonda, whose leadership provided the conditions for a period of political stability and economic growth. Despite two further attempted coups, Prem remained in power until 1988, through two elections and with the support of a range of civilian groups including that of former Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj. He is generally credited as the person mainly responsible for defusing, if not resolving, the political tensions of the 1970s.

The period of General Prem’s prime ministership is one of those defined by Chai-anan Samudavanija as a semi-democratic one, favouring a strong executive over the legislative branch. The 1978 Constitution remained effective and Prem represented a moderately liberal regime, with student, labour and farmer groups allowed to organise on a restricted basis. Early in his prime ministership, in 1980, his government formalised the amnesty for those who had joined the communists. Keyes points out that ‘this amnesty became the foundation for a resurgence of democratic elements in Thai society’.

But the promise of conditions that would allow a return to fully democratic government proved to be premature. On 23 February 1991, General Suchinda Kraprayoon led a further military coup. When he installed himself as Prime Minister in April 1992, he provoked a level of popular protest that had not been repeated since the return of Thanom in 1976. The crisis that resulted led to a similar outcome: a massacre of unarmed demonstrators in what has become known as Black May. The area around the Democracy Monument was the scene of demonstrations, as it had been in 1973 and 1976. The site of the massacre was different: not Thammasat University but the Royal Hotel. The perpetrators were

41 ibid., p. 278.
42 ibid., pp. 279, 303.
43 Chai-anan (1992: 1).
46 A date that resonates not only in Thailand, but also, as we shall see, in Spain.
unarguably military troops supported by the Border Patrol Police. At 46 dead, the official number of those killed was demonstrably lower than the estimates of medical practitioners and others who helped the injured and dying and observed the dead. The reaction of the King recalled 1973 rather than 1976: in a poorly produced but unforgettable television appearance, the King publicly chastised both Suchinda and his highest-profile political opponent, General Chamlong Srimuang, and subsequently appointed a civilian prime minister.

The victims of the 1992 massacre have joined those of 1973 as publicly honoured heroes of democracy. Those of 1976 have remained anomalous in the national memory, and even in the memory of its protagonists. Thongchai Winichakul casts judgement on himself as well as on the events: ‘Unlike the martyrdom at Tienanmin Square in China, or the 1988 event in Burma, which will be remembered because the ideals of those struggles remained unfulfilled, Thai radicalism has already proved to be a failure’. 47 He applies another writer’s description of the 1965 bloodshed in Indonesia: ‘the monument unbuilt, the story unspoken, is no more than an invisible inscription along history’s silent edge, marking an official limit placed upon the past by the present’. 48 Others have argued that 6 October continues to be the source of a persistent crisis of authority of which Black May was the next symptom, 49 and that continues, with its most recent eruption in the 2006 coup and subsequent social and political upheavals.

However interpreted, 6 October 1976 cannot be seen in isolation from its counterparts of 1973 and 1992, and now the period leading up to and culminating in the violence of 2010, although it continues to stand apart, both in its shocking brutality and in the consequent shattering of faith, however misplaced that may have been, in a gentle and serene Thai identity. Shame led to silence and to a lingering reluctance to confront the meaning of 6 October.

Black May can itself be seen as an inevitable result of the national failure to address the fact of 1976 and to design institutions adequate for a modern industrial democracy. All three events represent an ongoing process of cultural politics, a ‘struggle against ways of appealing to culture and history’ that is used to legitimate relations of inequality. 50 In 1976, after their first tantalising taste of the possibilities of democracy, the demonstrators expressed resistance to a reappropriation of historical and cultural meaning by the military and other reactionary groups and to an authoritarian definition of a good society. They were savagely punished for their efforts.

48 Steedly, quoted in ibid., p. 264.
For the factory employees, on the other hand, the novelty of political and social change generated by the ‘democratic experiment’ allowed them to produce their own notion of the good. This was both their response and their contribution to a developing modernity that was not achieved but was, at their historical moment, in a process of becoming.

Postscript

The turbulent events from 2006 to 2010 make electrifyingly clear that the processes of modernisation and democratisation in Thailand remain incomplete, and that the events of 1973, 1976 and 1992 are precursor acts in an ongoing drama on which the curtain has yet to fall. They also illustrate that the idea of democracy remains both a compelling and an elusive social imaginary for many Thais.

I have not returned to Thailand since 1990, but the accounts of the political upheavals since 2006 resonate all too strongly with those of the 1970s and identify them as the next acts in the crisis of modernity. I am indebted to subsequent analyses by contemporary scholars of the region to tease out both the continuities as well as the changes. To understand these, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the context for further violence and killings in 2009 and especially in 2010.

Background to the emergence of the yellow shirts and red shirts: Politics, 1992–2010

The protests in Black May 1992 were triggered by yet another military coup, in 1991, and the military-dominated elections in March 1992. After the crisis, elections were held in September of the same year and returned a civilian government, though the military continued to dominate the Senate, and to play an active role in politics. Change rather than stability, and constant allegations of corruption, remained as characteristics of government. Neither the 1992 government nor its successor after further elections in 1995 served its full term. The administration of General Chavalit Yongchaiyut, having formed government after elections in 1996 from a coalition of multiple parties was, like its predecessors replaced in 1997 by a reconfigured coalition as part of the fallout from Thailand’s economic collapse.

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51 Pasuk and Baker (2010) describe Thailand’s 2007 poll specifically in terms of khon or mask-play, which is a traditional Thai form of dance-drama.
52 Suchit (2004).
Perhaps surprisingly, it was under this government that the 1997 Constitution, known as the people’s constitution, came into force. It was intended to bring political corruption to an end by creating the processes for a stable parliamentary democracy with a strong, elected executive.  

In addition, all these elections continued to show the dominance that had emerged over previous decades of what Surin has dubbed ‘a two-track politics [with] Bangkok on the one hand and the rural areas on the other’. He goes on to say, ‘the political significance of Bangkok is that in the past it set the direction of the political wind’. This was reflected in the historical importance of the Democrat Party in Bangkok, but it began to change in the elections of 2001 and 2005.

In 2001, on the institutional processes created by the 1997 Constitution, the Thai Rak Thai party led by Thaksin Shinawatra won a massive victory, with only two seats short of an absolute majority. In 2005, with an unprecedented 75 per cent turnout of voters, the party won 377 of 500 seats in the House of Representatives, becoming the first party ever to form a government alone. Thaksin became the first prime minister ever to win a second term. His support came overwhelmingly from rural areas in the north and north-east and from urban workers. Thaksin himself came from the north, from Chiang Mai. ‘Villagers felt that for the first time they had greater influence than the urban middle class or the military in determining the shape of government.’

It was not to last. Accusations of corruption; a badly handled anti-drug campaign and repressive response to a Muslim insurgency in the south; the sale of the Shinawatra family’s majority shares in Shin Corporation, a leading Thai telecommunications company, to a Singapore company, without any payment of capital gains tax on the massive profits; Thaksin’s ‘somewhat equivocal’ relationship to Buddhism and tenuous relationship with the King were all factors that undermined his moral legitimacy. In 2005, Chamlong Srimuang, who had been a popular leader in the 1992 protests and had originally backed the Thaksin government, had an open break with Thaksin. In February 2006, he joined the leadership of the anti-Thaksin People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD).

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54 Reynolds (2010: 1).
56 ibid., p. 46.
57 Pasuk and Baker (2010: 15).
60 ibid., pp. 21, 23. Reynolds (2010: 1) makes a stronger statement about Thaksin’s attitude to the monarchy: ‘He was the first prime minister since the 1930s to challenge the monarchy openly, which he did by verbal and symbolic means that smacked of republicanism in the eyes of many Thai people.’
The PAD was formally established in early 2006 after Thaksin’s sale of Shin Corporation, but it had developed informally from the media broadcasts of Sondhi Limthongkul. Sondhi, like Thaksin, had powerful media interests and had initially been an ally. Disenchanted, he became the public voice of criticism of the Government and leader of the PAD, or ‘yellow shirts’, whose supporters ‘wear yellow, the colour for Monday, the day on which the present king was born’. The yellow-shirt, anti-government demonstrations in late 2005 and especially in 2006 seriously destabilised the Government. In response, Thaksin announced the dissolution of Parliament in February 2006, and Thai Rak Thai again won a decisive victory in elections in April. The Constitutional, Supreme and Administrative courts nullified these results in the same month.

In the hiatus after the 2006 election, Thaksin agreed to remain as Prime Minister in a caretaker role until new elections could be held, but yellow-shirt protests continued. In September 2006, while Thaksin was out of the country, the army, led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, staged yet another successful coup.

In May 2007, the Thai Rak Thai party was dissolved by the Constitutional Tribunal for malpractice at the nullified 2006 election and all members of the party’s executive board were banned from politics for five years. Thaksin remained abroad, from where he continued to be very active. In July, key figures from Thai Rak Thai took over the People Power Party, which won the next election in December 2007. The yellow shirts again took to the streets in protest, their most spectacular achievements being the seizure of Government House in May 2008, a blockade of the parliament complex in October that forced the Prime Minister and several others to climb over a fence to get out, and the takeover and shutting down for more than a week of Bangkok’s two international airports, Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang, in November.

Thaksin supporters also mobilised. Loosely formed as the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), they transformed into the ‘red shirts’. After sporadic confrontations with the yellow shirts in Bangkok, but also in the regions, red-shirt rallies in Bangkok in April 2009 also turned into confrontations with the military. The subsequent violence was an ominous precursor of the events a year later, when red-shirt demonstrations resulted in another day that has become described as ‘black’: Black Saturday, on 10 April 2010, when 25 of those demonstrating near and around the Democracy Monument were killed and more than 800 were injured. As well as red shirts, the dying and injured

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62 Reynolds (2010: 1).
63 This was not as decisive a victory as that in 2005, as the Democrats boycotted the election.
64 Keyes (2006: 24).
65 ibid., p. 25.
66 Pasuk and Baker (2010: 12).
67 Sian Powell, Police shot as Thai protest traps MPs, The Australian, 8 October 2008.
included four senior officers: a major general and three colonels. Among the dead was a Japanese journalist, Hiro Muramoto, who worked for Reuters news agency.

The Democracy Monument was not the only site of major protest. Red-shirt demonstrations were also taking place in other parts of Bangkok, the most newsworthy being at Ratchaprasong in the heart of the city’s commercial district where the protesters maintained their camp for nearly two months. What had started as an irritation, even if a significant one, ended in May with the military moving in, more dead, hundreds more injured, and Thailand’s biggest shopping mall and other buildings in flames.

Thailand’s democratic crisis did not end with the routing of the red shirts. Support for Thaksin, or at least for the popular will that he represents, remains strong. The divide between Bangkok and the north and north-east has deepened. In the elections in 2001, 2005, 2006, and even in 2007 after the coup, pro-Thaksin voters in the upper north and north-east ‘were not only the less well-off but all ranks of society’, indicating that the historical cultural identities of these areas, only incorporated into ‘the Bangkok-focused Thai state in the nineteenth century’, continue to matter.

The ‘unfairness’ of the current social order remains:

The red shirt movement draws on deeply-held feelings that the current social order is unfair. In a society that official figures show is highly unequal in terms of income, wealth, land ownership and opportunity, the red shirts have increasingly proclaimed Thai society to be unfair, unequal and unjust…This makes for a movement that is detested and feared by an essentially Bangkok-based establishment.

In his absence, Thaksin was found guilty of corruption by the courts, but his ‘brand of populism and of upward mobility for the neglected masses’ remains potent. ‘The reds have increasingly transcended Thaksin, and even eclipsed the UDD organisers in their commitment to political change and for the opportunities they glimpsed during the Thaksin years in 2001–2006.’

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71 Thitinan (2010: 13).
Some commentators suggest that the most serious consequence of his ousting is a loss of faith in electoral democracy.\(^{73}\) It is too early to judge whether or not that is true, or whether the events of 2010 represent one more act in an ongoing drama, or an end game.

**Connections between the acts**

Some of the connections between these and earlier events are striking, not least the ongoing failure of the country to change ‘a social and political order that has long been hierarchical and repressive’\(^{74}\) and, as in the 1970s, to reconcile conflicting notions of a good society as a just society.

Reynolds highlights the symbolic significance of the Democracy Monument in this unfinished saga of periodic uprisings. Built to commemorate the first eruption in 1932, not of democracy but at least of the introduction of ‘some democratic norms and practices’\(^{75}\) and the end of the absolute monarchy, the Democracy Monument that has been at the heart of every subsequent rebellion is ‘an unfinished monument built by a military government commemorating a constitution that has been written too often to remember in celebration of a democracy that was not yet in existence, let alone secure’.\(^{76}\)

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Democracy Monument continues to represent a deep desire for democracy, not just in Bangkok but also in the provinces, a desire further strengthened by each fleeting democratic experience.

To date, however, democracy remains in flux in the face of the power and influence that continue to be exercised by the military, specifically by the Royal Thai Army, and its stubborn commitment to acting as the guardian of the three traditional pillars of Thai society: Nation, Religion, King. It has also, since 1976, taken on itself the role of guardian of what it sees as an acceptable, that is, limited, democracy. As in the first ‘democratic experiment’ between 1973 and 1976, and despite the innovations of the 1997 People’s Constitution, the Thaksin government ignored the need to establish strong democratic institutions that could be effective in the face of military hostility. The coup of 2006 was all too easy for the military to achieve.

The monarchy, too, continues to be invoked as central to stability and to the maintenance of traditional values. The yellow shirts of the People’s Alliance for Democracy aligned them visibly with the values that its supporters see the monarchy as representing. Even though the King, now in his eighties

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\(^{73}\) Walker and Farrelly (2010).

\(^{74}\) Hewison (2010: 14).

\(^{75}\) Suchit (2004).

\(^{76}\) Reynolds (2010: 3).
and ill, has refused to take part in recent events, the monarchy as symbol remains potent and it appears that the Queen remains a powerful influence. In particular, the ties between the monarchy and the military continue: General Prem Tinsulanond is the Chairman of the Privy Council, the body set up to advise the King. Reports suggest that he is in strong alliance with the Queen. Thaksin, during his caretaker premiership in 2006, engaged in a ‘very public contention’ with General Prem. General Anupong Paochinda, who took over as Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army in 2007, is also reported to be closely connected to the Queen.

More directly, the military’s approach to Thaksin and his supporters provides a direct link to the events leading up to the coup in 1976. According to Pasuk and Baker, and based on internal documents: ‘The coup leaders believed Thaksin’s populist politics represented a bid to seize the state and overthrow the monarchy—analogous to the communist insurgency of thirty years earlier—and hence the generals had a right and duty to deploy public money and public resources in opposition.’ They go on to cite a leaked document that held the transcript of a meeting held inside army headquarters on 21 September 2007 for General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who had led the 2006 coup, to deliver a farewell speech:

Sonthi was preceded on the podium by the commander of the First Army who spoke about the abolition of the monarchy in the French and Russian revolutions, alluded to the Maoists’ intention to remove the monarchy in Nepal, and reminded the audience of the army’s success in defeating the Thai communists twenty years earlier…Populism, he went on, was simply a way to win over the people. Ordinary people who had been duped by populism were a ‘red zone’, the term for communist-dominated areas during the insurgency by the Communist Party.

The adoption of red shirts by Thaksin supporters, and their concentration in the north and north-east, very visually articulated these connections and intensified the dual image of a ‘red zone’. As in the earlier anti-communist strategy, this time the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) targeted these regions and ‘in the very last days of the government, the coup-appointed

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77 In December 2008, the King for the first time did not give his traditional birthday speech. This was at the height of yellow-shirt protests and there had been anxious anticipation for him to give guidance and reassurance as he had in earlier times of turmoil. Nor did he give the birthday speech in 2009.
78 Freelander (2010).
80 Freelander (2010).
81 Pasuk and Baker (2010: 4).
82 ibid., p. 5.
parliament passed an Internal Security Act which clarified the powers of ISOC and created an ISOC structure reaching down into the provinces’. The tactics used were very similar to those that had been used by the Village Scouts.

Contrasts between the acts

Despite the deep roots of the most recent struggle, many things have changed since 1973 and continue to change. Economically, by the 1990s, Thailand ‘achieved the transition from a poor, heavily rural backwater to a middle-income, semi-industrialised and globalised economy’. Rural transformations have led to the emergence of middle-income peasants. Globalisation has had an impact, most notably in the economic arena, including the 1997 economic crash and its subsequent recovery. It assisted Thaksin that this recovery picked up speed during the period of his first government.

The experience of a fully democratically elected government under Thaksin and the Thai Rak Thai party and its successors from 2001 points to ‘a major deepening of participation in electoral politics among the mass of the population’. Despite the coup, Thaksin’s exile, and the dissolution of the Thai Rak Thai party, the results of the 2007 election gave a solid majority to its successor, the People Power Party, which everyone understood to be a Thaksin vehicle. This was at a level similar to that of Thai Rak Thai in 2001 and only narrowly short of an absolute majority. In July 2011, the first general election held after the confrontations of 2010 was one of the most peaceful since the 1970s. The new Prime Minister was Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin’s youngest sister. With a 75 per cent voter turnout—the highest in history—her Pheu Thai (For Thais) party gained an absolute majority, winning 265 of 500 seats. This outcome reflected the continuing popular support for Thaksin, who has not returned from exile but continues to be a significant political influence. So too is the ‘tiny but powerful royal–military–bureaucratic alliance’, which still desires ‘to return the country to an old model of “semi-democracy”, in which the bureaucracy and military dominate politics under the auspices of the monarchy’.

These dramas have taken place against the background of the King’s illness and the looming succession. Holding the wealth of symbolic capital in his actual person, King Bhumipol’s successor might have inherited at least some of it, but

83 ibid., p. 6.
84 Warr (2011: 4).
85 Walker (2012: 5).
86 Pasuk and Baker (2010: 33).
87 ibid., pp. 4, 33.
89 ibid., p. 8.
91 Prajak (2011: 10).
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will not. His successor will be his son, Vajiralongkorn, who is held in little esteem in the country, even in the face of the draconian lèse-majesté laws. These have not eased since the press’s imposition of the Crown Prince’s face in the mock student hangings at Thammasat University in 1976 sparked that coup. More immediately, Thaksin has publicly indicated that he sees Vajiralongkorn as good for democracy. In November 2009, he spoke from Cambodia of a shining new age after the era of the ailing King…His remarks…suggest that he is placing hope in the man likely to accede to the throne, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn. ‘He’s not the king yet. He may not be shining (now)…But after he becomes the king, I’m confident that he can be shining…it’s not his time yet. But when the time comes, I think he will be able to perform…The Crown Prince may not be as popular as His Majesty the King…[but] he had education abroad and he’s young—I think he understands the modern world.’

Walker writes:

Thaksin’s comments highlighted anxiety that a symbolically weak king will open up spaces in Thai political life where alternative forms of political authority can be asserted. For this reason I think that King Vajiralongkorn will be good for Thai democracy. Given his very limited stock of symbolic power he will be incapable of occupying a dominant position at the centre of the Thai polity. If he was younger, there may be potential for another long round of royal myth-making, but there are real questions about Vajiralongkorn’s physical, intellectual or political capacity for that enterprise…The defence of the monarchy as a pre- eminent national institution is going through its death throes in Thailand.

There is also a question now as to how far the military might be prepared to go in defence of the monarchy. The evidence of a change of approach, and even of a ‘deep rift’, within the army and its officer corps is tenuous at best and, as in the 1970s, the army has had previous experiences of ‘young Turks’ within its ranks. But it may be indicative that no coup followed the upheavals in 2010 or the election of the Yingluck government in 2011. Many of those in the leadership who were involved in the events of the 1970s and even in the 2006 coup are ageing or retired. Prem, like the King, is in his eighties. Sonthi, who led the 2006 coup, has been replaced. Personal support by the Queen continues to influence promotions. But this, too, is likely to change with the succession

92 Thaksin reform call stirs comeback fears, The Australian, 10 November 2009.
93 Walker (2010).
94 Freelander (2010).
to the King. Reynolds suggests that ‘the conclusion seems inescapable that the Thai political system cannot be seriously reformed until the knot tying the army and the monarchy together is cut’. It remains to be seen how that will play out.

**The future**

With so much still in the balance, it would be foolhardy to attempt to predict the future direction of Thai politics or of its modernisation. There has been more recent acknowledgment, at least by scholars, of the ongoing reverberations of the 1976 coup and the failure of Thailand to heal those wounds or remedy the situations that gave rise to the protests. The fact that a fully democratically elected government can still be overthrown by the military in the twenty-first century demonstrates clearly that the country’s democratic processes and institutions remain weak. The Bangkok establishment continues to hold economic and political power and to resist any attempt to share that. The monarchy remains the touchstone for ‘deeply conservative conceptions of order, authority and morals’. And bribery, corruption and violence continue to operate as a normal part of political activities.

Nevertheless—and it is a powerful nevertheless—the resilience of the red-shirt movement reinforced the potency of their rhetoric of fairness, equality and justice. They demand a just society:

Even if their rebellion is short-lived or defeated, the red shirts will not have contested the power of the establishment in vain. Their campaigns and protests have re-embedded ideas about fairness, equality and justice in the Thai political milieu in a manner that ensures that the ruling elite and, indeed, the monarchy can never again believe that Thailand is exclusively theirs.

Unlike the attempts of groups like the Farmers Federation after 1973 to gain the constructive attention and support of Bangkok for provincial regions, the red shirts made very clear that the provinces will no longer be silent and, as demonstrated in the 2011 election, that they have both the will and the right to participate in the benefits of modernisation. Like the Bang Khen factory workers in the 1970s, but very much more so, they have become politically aware and active in pursuing what they imagine as a good society and a good life. It is not possible to know whether they will now try to achieve this through violent or peaceful means. Thailand’s crisis of modernity is as yet not over. We can only await the next act.

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95 Reynolds (2010: 5).
96 Hewison (2010: 15).
97 ibid., p. 17.