

October 6, 1976 - Unforgettable, Unrememberable: The Thammasat Massacre in Thailand

Saturday 21 November 2020, by [Suchada Chakpisuth](#) (Date first published: 15 July 2018).

ON THE MORNING OF October 6, 1976, Thai state forces and civilians carried out a massacre of unarmed students at Thammasat University in Bangkok. Although the right wing had been gaining power for months, the immediate catalyst for the massacre was an accusation that a student drama group had staged a mock hanging of the crown prince, thus committing the grave crime of lèse-majesté. In fact, however, the play was a critique of the hanging of Chumporn Thummai and Wichai Ketsriphongsa, two electricians-cum-labor activists, several weeks earlier. The counterinsurgent right feared that the monarchy would be destroyed if Thailand permitted such activism, which they saw as the prelude to a transition to communism.

The massacre began on the evening of October 5, as royalist-nationalist forces beat, sexually assaulted, and lynched student protesters. The official count states that 46 people were killed and 3,100 arrested, but unofficial estimates run much higher. By the afternoon of October 6, the seventh coup since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 returned the country to dictatorship after three years of democracy, begun when the prior dictators were ousted on October 14, 1973, by a peoples' movement. Twelve years passed before halting, uneven progress toward democracy resumed; this unevenness is best represented by the current military regime of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), which came to power in the 12th coup on May 22, 2014.

Even today, asking pointed questions about who was behind the massacre remains difficult due to the possible involvement or complicity of the monarchy, as well as the accusation of lèse-majesté that raising such questions would invite. Despite these difficulties, and within the constrained context of the NCPO regime, a group of academics and activists founded a new documentation project in 2016 [1], the 40th anniversary of the massacre, in order to collect and disseminate primary source documents, testimonies, and other analyses. On the 41st anniversary of the massacre, they launched an online archive and released Song Phinong (Two Brothers) [2], a short film about the murder of the two labor activists.

The essay below was written by Suchada Chakpisuth, a longtime journalist and public intellectual who founded Sarakadee magazine and Thai Civil Rights and Investigative Journalism [3]. In 1976, as a first-year Thammasat student, she was part of the drama group that staged the play. Her essay is an account of the play, of the ensuing massacre, of her escape from inside the university and her flight to the jungle to join the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Her account was initially published in Thai on the massacre's 40th anniversary [4]. When the author mentions people talking about "October 16," she is referring to a phenomenon in which speakers confuse the October 14, 1973, movement, which led to the end of dictatorship, with the October 6, 1976, massacre, which heralded its return; the term thus refers to both events simultaneously. This confusion reflects the Thai people's lack of understanding of their own political history, highlighting the urgency of expanding knowledge of the broader histories of democratic struggle and repression of which they are a part.

Several short explanatory notes in brackets in the main text and longer explanatory footnotes have been added to provide clarity for English-language readers. Parenthetical notes are the original author's.

During the seminar on “Knowns and Unknowns About 6 October,” [5] held on September 30, 2016, at Chulalongkorn University, a professor of Political Science, Surachart Bamrungsuk, called for members of the October 6 generation to provide accounts of their memories of the massacre. These accounts would be collected to serve as an archive of knowledge and information. Even if the information collected was incomplete and fragmentary, the event would not become known as October 16 out of ignorance!

His demand penetrated my consciousness and brought me to tears. We meet every year when October 6 comes around. On these anniversaries, an inexplicable sadness takes hold of my psyche. This feeling has grown even more devastating since the May 22, 2014, coup, with the arrest and detention of activists and those who oppose the dictatorship.

Forty years have passed since October 6, 1976! I am now 61. But my nieces, nephews, and other relatives have never heard any part of my account of October 6. Perhaps this was a self-protection mechanism on my part, because I did not want to endure the lump of darkness that lodges in my throat every time I think of October 6. Perhaps this is the condition that Thongchai Winichakul [6], a Thai student leader who is now professor emeritus of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, defines as “unforgettable (but) unrememberable.” Actually, I don’t understand for certain what happened. My memory of October 6 remains an uncomfortable one whose core is comprised of the unknown. Is it possible for us to heal such a memory after so much time has passed?

October 5, 1976. I was a first-year student at Thammasat University and a member of the Dance and Theatre Arts Club. At that time, Anupong (Noi) Phongsuwan was the club’s president. I was older than other frosh by about three years because I was from a poor Chinese family and started my compulsory education late.

The club met to plan a response to the hanging of two electricians who had distributed flyers in Nakhon Phanom against Thanom Kittikachorn’s return to the country. [7] The hanging took place within a context of mounting tension that began with demonstrations protesting Thanom’s return. Prior to this, a bomb had been set off during a demonstration held on the soccer field at Thammasat, resulting in injuries. We were aware of the tense circumstances and the dangers involved, but we decided against remaining passive. We would mount a play indicting the hanging of our two friends in order to jolt other Thammasat students into joining the protests. We planned to perform the play at Lan Pho in front of the Faculty of Arts on October 5, which was the first day of exams for all first-year students. [8] There were 1,000 first years, all of them admitted as Faculty of Arts students, who studied the same foundational courses before selecting their majors.

Our play started before 1:00 p.m. The plot was simple, beginning with a scene of four or five students distributing flyers to the people around Lan Pho. If I remember correctly, the flyer called for our fellow students to join together to protest the return of Thanom, demand justice for our friends who were hanged and killed, and insist that the government prosecute and punish the perpetrators. The next scene involved *Phi Tod* — Adisorn Phuangchompoo, now the owner of the “Tang Mo” clothing production company — dressed like a monk, in bright red cloth and with a mock bald head. [9] The scene also included Pramoj, a tall first-year student, and Boonchart, whose family

name I cannot remember but who, because he was older and had a shaved head, we suspected of being a *santiban* officer who had infiltrated the club; dressed as soldiers in heavy boots and carrying fake guns, they walked behind *Phi Tod-cum-Phra* Thanom. [10] Stomping their boots, Pramoj and Boonchart chased, hit, and fired their fake guns at the protestors and other people assembled. I played the role of a doctor who provided first aid and scolded the soldiers.

We then arrived at the central scene of the play. Moj and Chart brought on the actor, Hia (Wiroj Tangwanij), lifting him up to be hanged from a large branch of a tree. Two people played the part of the hanging man — Chiab (Apinan Buahaphakdee) as well as Hia — because we found, when we rehearsed the performance, that an actor could not bear his own weight for very long. The method of hanging was to take a *pha khao ma*, tie it around the actor's body, and then conceal the knot inside his clothing. [11] Then, we took a large rope and coiled and twisted it into a lasso, which we hung loosely around his neck. At a superficial glance, it looked like a real hanging. In addition, Goi (a singer in the band "Khon Khiaw") and Tom (Chonticha), used makeup to make Hia's and Chiab's faces look bruised, as if they had been beaten beforehand.

The play had a butterfly effect. The first flutter was that someone — who knows whom — used lime to fill the locks of all of the exam rooms in the Faculty of Arts. This made it impossible for students to enter, so a number of them came down to congregate around Lan Pho. By default, they became the audience for the play and joined the protest. At the end of the performance, we felt energized, thinking the play had achieved a modicum of success. After the performance, I went to my home, which was a shop in the Thewet neighborhood. That day, a *santiban* officer appeared on my usual Thai Pradit bus route. [12] Sitting down next to me, he threatened me with interrogation and said that my parents would be interrogated as well. I jumped off the bus before my stop and ran home by weaving among the sois until I reached the shop's back door. [13]

It was late afternoon, and I was still in my university student uniform. I turned on the radio as usual, to listen to music as I lulled my six-month-old niece to sleep in a canvas chair behind the shop. But things were not as usual. A live broadcast from Yan Kraw radio station came on, during which the Department of Public Relations announced that Thammasat University students had performed a play lynching the Crown Prince. [14] The broadcast said that the students were communists who harbored evil intentions to destroy the nation and topple the monarchy. I suddenly leapt up and spoke back [to the radio] in my heart: "Not true. You are lying. It is you who harbor evil intentions to destroy the nation." My parents were working in the front of the shop, so I left through the back gate and returned to the university.

When I reached Thammasat, things were in complete and utter uproar and confusion. Students were meeting in groups in the basement of the activities building. Seniors in the Dance and Theatre Arts Club summoned me to help them destroy documents. I did not understand at all. Why? The documents were merely articles about Thai society. Only a few books had clearly socialist titles. The majority of the documents were our own — Xeroxed reports, Xeroxed textbooks. ... I listened to the meeting as I sat and tore up the documents. Every one of the seniors wore a serious expression. They told us that we had to alternate between sleeping and guarding the club's room. Anupong, the president, and Hia and Chiab had gone to a meeting in the Thammasat University Student Union room. It was evening, and I had not eaten yet. It seemed as though no one in the club had eaten dinner either, so we shared snacks from Khon Khiaw. The remaining seniors, who were probably Sukhum Laophunrangsri and Phi Tiu (deceased), said that Krathing Daeng and the police had blockaded Thammasat and would not let anyone in or out. [15]

In the late evening, around 9:00 or 10:00 p.m., we began to hear sporadic gunfire. The shots sounded like pistols. The yelling and cursing of the Krathing Daeng was loud enough to reach the activities building. We could make out the message that the students were communists who had

insulted the king. We were still alternating sleeping and sitting inside the Dance and Theatre Arts Club room. Since the wall behind the activities building abuts the National Museum, I also observed some of what was taking place there. Many men wearing grass-green clothes and white helmets that made their heads look like ping-pong balls were gathering. Later I learned that they were called the "Commando Unit." They were doing something at the base of the wall, as if trying to dig under or smash it.

Sleepy, I was startled into wakefulness by a booming sound that shook the building. I was very frightened. There were loud sounds of screams and people yelling for us to run. Confusion and chaos ensued. It was dawn then and light began to fill the sky. Someone yelled for me to run to the top floor of the building. We crowded into the stairs going up. I hid myself next to a filing cabinet and listened to intermittent bursts of automatic weapons mixed with the sound of windows breaking all around. Then, the seniors told us that the police were shooting from helicopters, so we should run back downstairs and find our way to the bank of the Chao Phraya River. They suggested that we run along the edges of the building and make our way to the river by crossing the campus through the Dome Building. At that moment, I heard a voice yelling over and over through a megaphone: "Stop shooting! Stop shooting. We are unarmed. We don't have anything, older brother soldiers. Older brother policemen, please let us leave..." The voice was hoarse and trembling, and the pressure crushing my heart mounted.

My instinct led me to crouch and run. My feet carried me automatically. I did not think at all about the fact that I could not swim, not one bit. By that time, many people were looking for ways to climb into the high windows of the Dome Building. I noticed a young girl clad in a secondary school uniform who was covering her face and sobbing loudly at the corner of the building. I ran and embraced the younger sister and we cried together. Then the older brothers reached us and helped lift the women through the windows of the Dome Building so that we could run through to cross to the edge of the water safely. The sounds of gunfire and helicopters flying overhead thundered and reverberated without end.

A group of male students were waiting when I reached the edge of the river. They helped us down into the river and told us where to go. They yelled, "Stick to the river bank and go up at Tha Prajan. Quickly!" As soon as my feet touched the surface of the water, I was overcome with fear because I realized I could not swim. And the level of water nearly covered my head! I struggled to cling to the bank and follow other people. Sharp edges of concrete grazed the flesh on my arms. I was scraped over and over again. When we reached Ran Chua [a restaurant at Tha Prajan], the friends in front of me were lifted up one by one by the armed soldiers who were crowded onto the pier to collect us. I had no choice. I could only cling to the bank and queue, then let them lift me out of the water.

Once they had dragged me out, a dark slender soldier swung the end of his gun over his shoulder to indicate that I should stay put. I was unable to feel anything. Chaos again ensued, and the pier wobbled back and forth. I saw one female university student carried down to the landing. Blood covered the lower half of her body. Several male students were attempting to summon one of the boats floating in the middle of the river to come to the pier. "Come pick up the injured, pick up the injured and take them to Siriraj." I could still see two or three people, I am not sure whether they were men or women, swimming in the middle of the river. Perhaps they aimed to cross to the other side, to Siriraj Hospital ...

Suddenly, there was gunfire mixed with loud cries. Someone yelled, "Get off! The landing is sinking." A commotion ensued amid sounds of crashing. Someone, I don't know who, pulled me up, and in that moment I lost consciousness. Perhaps it was due to hunger. Perhaps it was due to fatigue. Or perhaps it was due to the panic and fear that I felt when I saw people who were swimming drown after being shot in front of my eyes!

I regained consciousness once again as two men lifted my crumpled body and carried me through the *soi* with the amulet stalls, which was called Soi Klang. I was unable to catch sight of their faces so that I could remember the kindness of these two unknown heroes. They took me to a hairdressing salon in the middle of a row of shops in Soi Klang. The aunty who owned the shop quickly called me to enter. My two unknown heroes then ran back to the pier again. (Allow me to offer respect from the bottom of my heart to you both here. I hope that you are still alive and that you have always remained on the side of those who love justice.)

I hid in the hairdressing shop. Upstairs were many sewing machines; this appeared to be a place where clothing was mass-produced. I counted 10 other secondary and university students, the majority of whom were female, already in hiding on the second floor. Tears flowing, the aunty said, "On October 14, they killed students. This time, I will not stand for it." The aunty gave us the sarongs and clothes of the workers to wear. She told us to destroy our university student cards and told me to put away my glasses. If the soldiers came in to search, the aunty was going to say that we were textile workers.

We looked at each others' faces without uttering a word. All we could do was listen carefully to the sounds coming from outside. Time passed; it was almost noon. We heard the goose-stepping sound of a large number of soldiers. We heard women screaming. We heard someone climbing up the awning. And we heard the sound of gunfire, along with something loud falling. The aunty said that the house three doors down was that of Thongchai Winichakul, one of the student leaders. The soldiers would search his house for certain. Some people began to express concern that they might search this house, too. The aunty was undaunted. She assured us that we did not have to be afraid because she would not let the soldiers do so.

I do not know why the soldiers did not search the house where I was hidden. The aunty herself was surprised and said that we were protected by the sacred items present.

No one dared to leave their hiding places until late afternoon. There was a phenomenal rain. The aunty said that she suspected they had seeded the clouds in order to wash away the blood stains ... At around 2:00 p.m., I decided to leave the house. I was dizzy with hunger, and all I could think about was that I ought to go home, I ought to eat. When I went outside, armed soldiers were still stationed around the gate to Thammasat at Tha Prajan. Trash was spread all over the wet road. A knot of tears was stuck in my throat as I walked in search of a telephone booth. I called my aunt's house (because our home did not have a telephone), and my cousin told me that my father had left instructions for me not to go home. Instead, I should go into the jungle and find a safe place!

My recollection of subsequent events is not clear. I am not sure if my older brother took me to stay at a friend's house in Prapadaeng, or something else happened. All I remember is that I did not sleep at all on the night of October 6 or the next few nights either. Every time I closed my eyes, my tears flowed. They were not tears of fright, of that I was sure. But I could not tell myself why I was crying. Were the images on the television and the stories of my seniors real? Did all of this really happen? Why?

For many years, until I left the jungle, I harbored anger that the media, in particular the newspapers *Dao Sayam* and the *Bangkok Post*, had printed news on the front page accusing students of performing a play in which the crown prince was hanged. The facts later showed that the images included with the stories had been retouched. But responsibility disappeared on the breeze. Such is the power of media that serves authority and colludes to produce deceptive news that causes people to rise up and brutally kill others. This kind of biased and intolerant media never dies, as can be seen from the Krue Se mosque killings in the south in 2004. [16] After the killings, one national newspaper retouched a photograph of the Muslim Thais who were shot and placed machetes in their

hands. When protests ensued, the newspaper simply offered the excuse that the photographer had retouched the photograph himself [and the newspaper did not know]! This is the Thai media. This is also the primary reason why I chose to study in the newspaper department of the Faculty of Journalism when I went back to Thammasat. I was determined to work in the media and go face-to-face with them!

The years pass by. Every fall, I am reminded that, hmm, it's October again ... If in a given year there is a memorial activity or a related seminar that appears in the news, I comfort myself by saying that real life after October 6 was brutal and painful too. Sometimes, some years, I would have an odd feeling, as if alienated from myself. Did the October 6, 1976, massacre really take place at Thammasat? Did I really experience it? All those years in the forest and the eight months in Cambodia when I was close to death, did that really happen? But at the same time, I would feel angry when I heard later generations talking about October 16. What they said was incorrect, a complete distortion. I have never examined the images of the October 6 massacre, especially the images of the person who was hanged and then beaten with a chair, the woman who was violated with a piece of wood until she was dead, and those who were burned in tires. The images made me retch until I wanted to vomit. I did not care to read articles or go to seminars except for those by Thongchai Winichakul.

Twenty years passed after the massacre. A committee of people connected to October 6, chaired by Chonthira Sattayawattana, organized a fact-finding investigation into the massacre. The committee interviewed people involved, especially former students who were arrested. I immediately thought of details about the night of October 5 that I included at the beginning of this article, such as that, between 9:00 and 10:00 p.m., a Commando Unit did something at the wall next to the National Museum. Remember that I said the wall abutted the Thammasat student activities building. Thus, if someone shot a gun from the wall of the National Museum, and if one was watching from in front of the university or from Sanam Luang, it may have seemed as if there was shooting from Thammasat. But I am not sure if my interpretation is correct or not because I have never heard any student leaders or others make this observation.

This is the record of my incomplete and fragmented memories. I have written from my consciousness, out of shame that 40 years have passed and I can only "not forget, not remember." My deepest gratitude goes to everyone who helped light a match to drive out the darkness and fear. Thank you for making me ready to face the scenes of an event that is unforgettable and unrememberable, and to do so with knowledge and feelings that differ from my original thoughts and feelings. Thank you making me able to be a part of truly assessing and searching for the truth. We do not forget October 6!

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P.S.

• Los Angeles Review of Books. JULY 15, 2018:
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/unforgettable-unrememberable-the-thammasat-massacre-in-thailand/>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://doct6.com/>

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbQ9817ZZII>

[3] <https://www.tcijthai.com/news/>

[4] <https://www.tcijthai.com/news/2016/10/article/6448>

[5] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKZpuSF6hew>

[6] <https://wisc.academia.edu/ThongchaiWinichakul>

[7] Thanom Kittikachorn, along with Narong Kittikachorn and Praphat Jarusathien, was one of the dictators ousted following the October 14, 1973, movement. The three men left the country, but Thanom returned in late September 1976, prompting concerns among activists that another coup or a return to dictatorship might be imminent.

[8] Lan Pho, or the Bodhi Court, refers to the area surrounding a very large bodhi tree in front of the Faculty of Arts building on the Tha Prajan campus of Thammasat University.

[9] *Phi* is a Thai term of address that means older brother/sister.

[10] The *santiban* is the Special Branch Police, or intelligence police. *Phra* is a Thai term of address for monks.

[11] A *pha khao ma* is a length of woven cotton checkered cloth worn and used by men variously as a sarong, towel, or blanket.

[12] Thai Pradit was one of the many private companies operating bus routes in Bangkok at that time.

[13] A *soi* is a small lane.

[14] Yan Kraw is the Royal Thai Army's radio station.

[15] The Krathing Daeng, or Red Guards, were one of the right-wing paramilitary groups involved in the October 6, 1976, massacre, as well as the violence that preceded it. The membership was primarily comprised of vocational students and other youth.

[16] On April 28, 2004, clashes resulted in the deaths of 106 Muslim men and five members of the state forces. While the militants did launch initial attacks in some locations, they were out-

numbered and out-armed. Many of the militants were armed only with machetes, while the soldiers were well equipped with automatic weapons, grenades, and other military hardware. Although the clashes took place at various locations throughout the three southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, the largest number of people were killed at the Krue Se mosque in Pattani. As a result, the event is generally referred to as the Krue Se mosque killings.