



CRISIS IN THAILAND: POLITICS, DEVELOPMENT, AND AGONY OF INTELLECTUALS

Introduction, Dr. Robert Textor, Dept. of Anthro. & Educ.,
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October 6, 1976 was a crucial day in the history of modern Thailand. On that day the hopes of many people were dimmed. On that day, military power was once again asserted in the politics of Thailand. On that day, many young Thai students lost their lives on the campus of Thammasat University under circumstances that more extremely violated Buddhist ethics than any other single event in modern Thai history. Since that day, many Thais and friends of Thailand have wondered whether Thailand's post-1932 quest for freedom and order in a context of distributive development will endure. Thais and friends of Thailand can and do differ as to the interpretation that may be placed on the events of October 6th. But all of us will lament in human terms the brutality of that day. Certainly, all of us, as people who wish well to that troubled land, lament the passing of academic and civic freedom. These tragic events

did not happen in an international vacuum, and it might well behoove each American present to reflect upon the fact that American influence has been predominant among foreign influences in Thailand for more than twenty years. Moreover, it might be observed in passing that the report of the Thai scene in the American press has generally been limited and superficial.

Stanford University is honored to have as its guest today a man whose name has doubtless long since been known to every Thai in this room. For the benefit of the non-Thai in the audience, however, a word of introduction is required.

Were there to be a poll taken among a random sample of a hundred Thai intellectuals, in which the question was asked as to what five individuals have done the most to provide both intellectual and practical leadership in development and freedom in Thailand, I dare say the name of Dr. Puey Ungphakorn would be on almost every list.

Dr. Puey is an economist, educator, administrator and publicist. During World War II he was an officer in the Free Thai Movement and was parachuted into Thailand. He holds a Ph.D. from the London School of Economics, with First Class Honors. For many years he served as Governor of the Bank of Thailand, and then for some time as Director of the Bureau of the Budget, where he established a national reputation for incorruptability in a political and economic system where corruption is in some ways institutionalized. He has also served long years as Dean of Economics at Thammasat University. Later, he became Rector of that University, a post which he held until 10:00 a.m. on October 6th last. On the evening of that day, he was fortunate to escape from Thailand with his life.

Dr. Puey has received numerous international honors and

distinctions. He has served on the governing boards of, among other institutions, the Asian Institute of Technology, the International Council on Educational Development, The East-West Center, the International Food Policy Research Institute, and he has received the Ramon Magsaysay award for government service. Amidst all these top-level assignments, Dr. Puey has found time to write on such subjects as “a Buddhist approach to economic development,” and to produce a series of University textbooks, written or rewritten so as to address theoretical problems in a specifically Thai cultural context. He was also the founder of a youth development corps, a sort of Thai analogue to the American Peace Corps, which encouraged young Thai students and intellectuals to do development work at the village level. In addition to all of this, he somehow found time to serve stints as visiting professor at Princeton and visiting fellow at Cambridge. It is an honor for Stanford to welcome Dr. Puey who will now address us.

Lecture

My friends, Dr. Textor referred to the honor of Stanford University to welcome me tonight. I would rather say the opposite—it is an honor for me to have been invited by Stanford University to come and speak tonight. And if I may inject a personal note, I was pleasantly surprised to see a few old friends; a niece of mine whom I did not expect to see here, and, among the younger generation, some of my friends’ children are here, too. So it gives me great pleasure to be unexpectedly received in this way. I just learned this evening that the title of my talk will be “Crisis in Thailand: Politics, Development,

(and, moreover, this is the most difficult of all), the Agony of Intellectuals.” This unexpectedness of mine was in no way a reflection on the people responsible for this talk. It was my oversight not to ask them what they expected me to talk about. But, here goes. Let’s hope for the best.

Dr. Textor also referred to the events of October 6, 1976, and he said rightly, that there are so many versions and so many interpretations of that event. That is quite natural, because in any political event like that, a violent event like that, so many passions and so many of our, shall we say vices, shall come up and one should be able to distinguish between truth and untruth. Being in an academic circle here and coming from the academic circle myself, I shall endeavor not to mix passion with facts. In other words, I shall try to be as objective as possible. In politics, although one tries to be objective, it is very difficult, and it is undesirable, I think, myself, not to have a subjective evaluation of one’s values. And, with that, I would like to start the talk tonight.

There are many political ideals, and the complex of political ideals is difficult to explain. I think that we can simplify in this complex society, modern society, by stating, perhaps, that my own political aims would be classified twofold.

Number one goal is to live in an atmosphere of freedom. Freedom can be defined in various ways, but I would just leave it to you to define in accordance with international practice what the U.N. wanted to state as human rights: freedom, personal freedom, political freedom, freedom to express ourselves, and freedom for association. This aim of freedom may be regarded as “western,” but in fact it is not “western” —it is clearly ingrained in the word “Thailand.” The Thai are

free. The word “Thai” means “free,” and therefore, to be worthy of freedom is just a Thai virtue.

My second aim in the political life is to enjoy the right to participate in the affairs of the society, of the state in which we live. You will notice that I do not use such difficult words as “democracy” or other ones. But, I just say that I would like to have the right to participate in the affairs of my society. Whatever from it is, I don’t care. But the right is there; the right of each individual in the society is to be able to participate in the affairs of that society. I’m not asking more: in asking for this right, I’m not asking more than what is already implied in the Buddhist concept of *Sangha*. *Sangha* means the collective of the church people. And when the church people, in Buddhism, want to decide on something, then they call a meeting. And, when they call a meeting, each one can express his own opinion for the conduct of the church as he wishes. And, therefore, many people might say, well, the right for elections is a “western” concept—I would deny that. It is “western,” yes, but is also “eastern,” in the sense that it is a Buddhist right of any Buddhist man, or woman, for that matter. Now, I have stated my viewpoint regarding the political aim and future of every Thai and every American, I’m sure, every human being from South Africa to the North Pole, from Japan to the Latin American countries—I would say that this is just the innate responsibility of each person.

Now, let us look at the history of Thai politics. Let us not go too far—let us start with the year 1932 when in Thailand there was a change of system of government from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy.

The first ten years after 1932 was supposed to be a

transitional state to make people more politically aware and better educated so that they would be ready to exercise their rights and freedom. And, therefore, in 1932 in Thailand, we devised a system of a transitional state, a system that had been subsequently called "Guided Democracy." But that "Guided Democracy" system lasted until 1938 and 1939 when the Second World War was threatening and actually happened. Then we had a soldier who became Prime Minister of Thailand, Field Marshal Pibul Songkhram.

Field Marshal Pibul Songkhram lost his head over the power that he had and, therefore, he postponed the time by which the people could exercise freedom and rights—the rights that they have at this time—"until further notice," meaning indefinitely. Now, the Second World War came and at the end of the War, Field Marshal Pibul was duly ousted and a civilian government was put in its stead. This civilian government had tried and attempted to do without "Guided Democracy" and in the Constitution of 1946 we see, in letter, as in practice, that Thailand enjoyed a period when freedom prevailed and the right to participate in the affairs of the society was a reality. Unfortunately, in the next year, there was a military coup, again. And in 1947, this freedom and rights that I spoke of disappeared. Field Marshal Pibul duly returned to power and he governed for a long period, until 1959, when he was deposed by Field Marshal Sarit. Then, after the death of Field Marshal Sarit in 1963, he was succeeded by Field Marshal Thanom, with Field Marshal Praphas as Deputy Prime Minister. And then, Field Marshal Thanom exercised a revolution or coup d'état against his own government in 1971 and declared himself leader of the revolution, until in 1973, the popular demand for the return of

the rule of the law and for the right to vote, demand for a constitution that should be liberal enough, succeeded in amassing a gigantic crowd of more than 200,000 in the streets of Bangkok. And events then succeeded one another and together with luck, together with the intervention of His Majesty, and another factor was the double-crossing within the army ranks of one general against another, all this combined to put an end to the dictatorship in Thailand. Starting from October 1973, this was the period that again, we enjoyed freedom and the right to participate in the affairs of Thailand. But as referred by Prof. Textor, this brief period again ended on October 6, 1976, and then, and now, we have a government under military dictatorship.

During this stretch of years that we have been speaking about, there were two brief periods of democracy, if you like, in 1946-1947 and again in 1973-1974. As you can see, our Prime Ministers always have to have the title of Field Marshal, even the Deputy Prime Minister was Field Marshal. So, that means that the military, the armed forces, have been in the habit of governing all along with the exception of these two periods, one, one year and a half, and the other, about three years.

As I said, the present government is a government working under military rule. It is a civilian government. It is headed by a former judge by the name of Thanin Kraivichien. And Mr. Thanin, at the beginning of his premiership, announced that he was for "social democracy," but the social democracy must be evolved in stages: four stages in all, making each stage four years, making in all, sixteen years, and then we will reach Thanin's utopia, in sixteen years. In the meantime, arrests have been made. The killing, although not the responsibility of the Thanin government, that is true, but the killing at Thammasat University happened in the

morning and the coup d'état happened in the evening. And the Thanin government had been at pains to point this out, that the killing was not the responsibility of the government. But then one might as well ask, if it's not the government's responsibility, then why does not the government release all the political prisoners that had been arrested during the morning? One would have thought that the government would have done just that. And one might as well ask why further arrests have been made in subsequent days and months. The last arrest was made on Thursday, the 13th of January, as near as that, and thirty-three more people have been arrested, making, in all, the people under bars, behind the bars in my country, 5,000 in all. Some of them may be in isolation, kept in isolation, many of them are kept in the Police Hospital because they have been attacked and tortured while prisoners. On the whole, the brutality of the 6th of October had not been repeated, that was a thankful reflection. But for those who are in danger of their lives, in danger of being arrested, that is not an excuse at all. Moreover, what Thanin promised to us is sixteen years of imprisonment. Consider that we shall not be free until the end of sixteen years, we shall not be able to exercise our rights to vote or to associate ourselves together, we shall not be able to participate in Thailand's affairs until the end of sixteen years. That means that Thailand is in fact a virtual prison, gigantic prison. Sixteen years is a chunk of our lives, particularly a chunk of the younger generation's lives. So, in all, according to Thanin's dream, we are condemned to sixteen years' lack of freedom. But a question might arise: will this sixteen years produce the result that Thanin foresees? This is very doubtful, because, at the end of the sixteen years, or even before, a postponement, (assuming that Thanin is still there), a postponement

might be inevitable. But even if we begin this sixteen years and hoping for the result, will this plan last?

Already in Bangkok, quite a lot of people are dissatisfied with the present government. Everybody, I said, is dissatisfied with Thanin's government. Although the military does hold power through the civilian government, they are not quite satisfied, because they want to govern by themselves. They want to govern the country by themselves. The military recently has become more and more impatient and rumors have it in Bangkok that there will be a second coup.

Then, from the 9th of January, 1977, a second dictator, former dictator, arrived back in Thailand. Field Marshal Thanom, the former Prime Minister, arrived in September and that caused the coup. Field Marshal Praphas arrived on the 9th of January, after the government had declared that neither Thanom nor Praphas was responsible for the killing in 1973. So Praphas arrived. And a few days later, he went on the t.v. and declared that if the country wants him, he is ready to serve.

In Bangkok, astrologers have been very busy. In December, before Praphas arrived, the astrologers predicted that there will be a second coup, some say in February and some say in March. After Field Marshal Praphas arrived back in Bangkok, the astrologers changed their schedule, and predicted that the coup may happen in January or in February, now. I'm not referring to astrologers lightly. There is some reason to believe the astrologers, because the generals, when they want to stage a coup, usually go and ask the astrologers, "What is the appropriate time, propitious time... to do something?" Well, the astrologers can guess what that "something" is. And the astrologers, no less than any other Thai, are quite talkative, and so

the rumors spread out. And this is why I refer to them in this context, because you cannot take it very lightly. But, of course, they can change their minds about the time later on, too. So, I think that Thanin's sixteen year scheme might not last very long. There may be a second coup, and, on the government side, we never know when the military dictatorship will end.

On the other side, as you know, we always have had since 1964, insurgents, communist insurgents, fighting the government troops. At first, the communists confined themselves to the Northeast. And then the government appropriated money for the army to combat them. The army was so successful in combatting Communism that it spread all over, to the South and to the North, at present. In the end, at this moment of time, I think at least 35 of the 73 provinces of the Kingdom have been declared "sensitive areas" where there are communist insurgents. Now, the Communists gathered strength very slowly; they were joined by bandits, whom the authorities, the police and the army authorities condemned as "Communists" as well, although they were not. They were joined, normally, by villagers, who have been, perhaps, demanding money and refusing to give to the officials, who perhaps want to refuse any kind of surrender of daughter or niece to the soldiers and police, and then had to join with insurgents in the forest. But this is the process of strength-gathering of the Communists during the previous period.

But since October the 6th, many of the students, many of the intellectual academics, many of the trade unionist laborers and farmers consider themselves hopeless. Previously, they were willing to fight for their rights and freedom, through peaceful means. But now, they came to the conclusion, after the brutality and atrocities of the 6th of October, that armed struggle is the only

thing left to them. And, therefore, they went into Laos and came back through the jungle, or they went to the South and joined the Communists, straight away, and some of them have declared a common front with the Communists. So, the events of October the 6th have helped the people in the jungle very much and very rapidly. I got word from a friend of mine who decided to go into the jungle himself, and said that the jungle people were pleasantly surprised that so many intellectuals and Thai educated people had joined them. To a certain extent, they told the people about to go, that they should go a bit slower, because the jungle cannot support so many people, so quickly. But the result is that the jungle has been reinforced. And, already, three or four months after October, we see that the guerilla warfare, waged by the communist insurgents, has been intensified. The army and the police of the government, on the other hand, have intensified their fight. The latest news that I have, was that after an interval of several years, the government had begun to drop napalm bombs in the South.

So, what is the result of all this? I fear that there will be civil war. It will, the struggle will, reach the size of a civil war, with its suffering not by the combatants, principally, but by the men and the women in the field, in the battlefield. If my analysis is right, then we might expect a period of civil war, similar to what happened in Vietnam. The question is, which side will win? The question is, will there be intervention by any big power on either side? The question is how long, before there will be a result? But, in my mind, whichever side will win in the end, my political aspirations, and my friends' political aspirations, that is to say, freedom and the right to participate in the affairs of society, will not, be fulfilled. Whether it's going to be a communist victory, we know that the

Communists have restrictions on political freedom. If it is going to be the government, the dictatorial government, then we will go on having a right-wing dictatorship.

In this a dilemma between Communism and Military Fascism, is there a third way? Is there a means of stopping, without too much armed struggling, without, ideally, any armed struggling at all, is it possible, is it then possible, at the end of the road, at some stage, to attain a situation where the freedom and the right of citizens will prevail? This I do not know. I cannot say. I do not know whether we can do it, we can achieve it. But whether we can or we cannot achieve it, we *must* achieve it. I think, for myself and for my friends, this is the *only* way of society, that we want to live. We do not live in any other kind of society. And if we set our aim in this way; we *must* enjoy freedom, we *must* have the right to participate then, even if it is difficult, even if it is failure after failure, we *must* bear that in mind and *try* to achieve it. I repeat, I do not know whether we can do it, we have only the *will*. We must study the way to achieve our aim; we must talk together, we must discuss together, because if every one of us said, "It is difficult, I am not going to do it, I'm not going to do anything," then, we will never attain this end in any way.

I will refer briefly to the second subtitle of my talk, development. In Thailand, in the 1950's and in the 1960's, we have been able, as a country, to develop fairly well. And I emphasize, *as a country*. Our gross national income, for the whole country had gone up steadily: some years 6% (that is a bad year), some years 10% (that is a very good year), and some years even 15% or 16%. We have been among the best in the list of the developing countries. What did we do, in this way?

Well, in brief, Thailand's administration had been rather archaic. The budget account had been in a mess after the Second World War. The rice trade and other trades are subject to chaotic uncertainties. Exchange rates were multiple exchange rates and the statistics of trade, international trade, statistics of government spending or taxation was rather belatedly got five years after the event—in other words, we were more strong in history than in current affairs. And, in 1950, we changed all this, in the late 1950's, with some big steps that the government had taken, and with the aid of some United States' personnel, giving aid, technical assistance, on these matters.

Then we started building the infrastructure of our country; when trade had become easier and more certain, when the government income and expenditure had been subject to big reform, then we started building roads, rails, the ports, the communications, irrigation canals, and so on. This is what I call, or we call, infrastructure-building. And the result is that with the orderly transformation of the system, the country could grow. There was diversification of crops. In my young days, it was enough to memorize four products in Thailand: rice, timber, tin, and rubber. Nowadays, we have twenty, thirty main products. As I said, the national income went up by leaps and bounds. Our balance of payments year after year was favorable. Our reserves of gold and dollars grew. And, therefore, as a whole, in the country, we had nothing to reprove ourselves.

But, it has its reverse side. The other side of the coin is that the countryside had not benefitted from this growth. Somehow it is rather the reverse. In many rural areas, life had become even more difficult than before—due partly to the rapid growth in the population. In Bangkok, on the other hand, where the rich, where

the more educated people reside, where the bankers and industrialists reside. Bangkok had grown. Until now it is a monstrosity, a monstrous city. The canals are gone from Bangkok, the trees have gone, and also we are left with ugly cement and concrete, reminiscent of Calcutta, perhaps New York. Well, but in Bangkok, you live as luxuriously as in San Francisco, or Stanford—and you have big buildings with air conditioning, you have bowling alleys in great number—you can, you can do almost everything that Americans in search of pleasure could do, and perhaps a little more...

In the countryside, we are left high and dry. This is the situation again that breeds poverty, and poverty breeds discontent, and discontent breeds communism.

Someone has said to me today, that the right kind of development is the development of people. I believe that is true, perfectly true. And the development of people means the development of the grassroots. In order to correct all this, I mean, I say “correct” because I think that the infrastructure development is all very well, it was essential to achieve the kind of development that was necessary, but it was not sufficient. We have got to develop the grassroots, in other words, we have to take certain measures in order to enable development to reach the lowest level of the society. We must have several reforms done by the government: educational reform, land reform where it’s necessary, fiscal reform, welfare measures, social measures, and in all this, I did not spell out in detail. But, except to say that in the period of 1973 to 1976, we have been attempting to begin all these reforms. Some are, were in blueprints, some have been started, some are still in discussion, but the situation was reversed in 1976. And the indication is that the generals, or the civilian

government under the generals, at this moment, will revert to the practice before 1973. In other words, the consequence will be that Bangkok will become even bigger than now, and the countryside will be neglected. So, even on the criterion of development, as well as in the criterion of politics, this seizure of power on the 6th of October, 1976 was really a detriment to my country.

I would like to sum up my talk by saying that intellectuals now, well, at any rate, perhaps one intellectual, has to choose between dictatorship of the right—if he chooses dictatorship of the right, he of course, will bow to totalitarian rule. Secondly, he can choose dictatorship on the left. That has yet to gain power. Again, he will have to bow to the victors, eventual victors. Or, he may have a third choice: the third choice is the difficult choice—difficult to achieve, and difficult to do. It is the difficulty of the political ideal and the economic ideal: the issue of freedom, of the right to participate in the affairs of the society, of doing development properly. It is going to be difficult, if not impossible. And in the process of trying again and again to attain this objective, the intellectual may be bloodied, but he will never bow. Thank you.

25 January 1977

Dr. Puey gave similar lectures in the UK, Europe, USA, New Zealand and Australia from October 1976 to September 1977 when he suddenly fell seriously ill on the eve of his departure to the USA once again. He also planned to visit Japan later on that year. All these and his scheduled Visiting Professorship at Bristol University had to be cancelled ever since.