

“What if...”

Student 15:

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Between the Bullets and the Banners

Last summer, Laura, my family’s Luxembourgish friend, came to visit us in Bangkok. In true Thai hospitality, we took her on a late-night drive to see the city – its vibrant streets, its lights, its heart – before stopping at the historical Bantadthong Road, known for its cheap street food stalls. It’s a city that never sleeps.

Yet, along that drive toward Bantadthong Road, we passed temples, palaces, and monuments: a reminder that despite the high-rise apartments, rooftop bars, and futuristic shopping malls that seem to dominate the city, many historical sites remain the backbone of the city. They shine golden throughout the night: you’d know what I mean if you’ve been there. The incongruence in the landscape feels just like home: old townhouses, skyscrapers, and even Portuguese-style buildings – built not because we were colonized, but because the aristocracy back then loved it enough to hire Portuguese architects. The cacophony of old diesel buses, motorcycles, and street vendors going about their business filled the air.

We took Laura through the Phra Nakhon district, the historical heart of Bangkok: The Grand Palace, a myriad of temples, all next to the Chao Phraya River, where royal boat rehearsals take place against the sunset. It was a pleasant drive, but an awkwardness filled the air when we drove past four towering white slabs of concrete, shaped like palm leaves. Laura marveled at the monument, but my mother and I remained silent – it was the Democracy Monument, built in 1939, to celebrate a so-called democracy marred by violence, massacres, and state-repression.

Just around the corner, barely noticeable, is a black marble slab that appeared like any other entrance sign to a building or location; but this one marks the site of the Thammasat University Massacre – when hundreds of students were gunned down by the military and lynched by fellow citizens during the protest of a military coup in 1976. Those who called for democracy paid with their lives. The massacre of a student, led by the military and their civilian complicators, all in the vicinity of a temple, and of a monument to democracy. *How could a fellow citizen beat up a student's lynched corpse with a chair like that? How could such brutality happen in a place where we are taught to avoid conflict at all costs?*

It’s a harrowing thought. In a country so very Buddhist, where monks chant daily to undo



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even the tiniest karmic slip of accidentally stepping on an ant during a walk, or where we hold “sandcastle competitions” at temples to return grains of sand we unknowingly carried away on our shoes, it’s hard to fathom how someone could beat a student’s corpse to a pulp. Just for speaking up for democracy?

Events like this feel violently at odds with a culture that I grew up with. Most Thais, and even foreigners who’ve spent time here, would agree that Thai culture is deeply averse to confrontation. We’re raised to avoid conflict, to let others live and let live. Despite being a religious society, we’re known for our tolerance, with a vibrant LGBT+ community that feels safer than most places I’ve been. And yet, this contradiction lives on in our history. It reminded me of the strange mix of liberty and pain I felt while researching the Thammasat Massacre back in the US, where, for the first time, I was able to study the event, its material culture, and its memorialization without fear. At home, doing the same could have gotten me arrested.

Back when I was home during the “Covid gap year,” I joined the anti-military dictatorship protests. My parents, rarely outspoken about politics, immediately tried to shop me. They knew exactly what I was planning: I was equipped with a black t-shirt, mask, and umbrella. They tried to prevent me from leaving home, and feared for my life, fearing the same bullets that the military had used in their time to silence them when they were students. I understood their fear: they lived through days where political tensions were high and free speech landed you in a grave. My father was a university student at the time, and I cannot imagine the trauma he carries. My mother had seen her share of violence too. Her friend, who had participated in the 2006 “Red Shirt” protests against yet another coup, was diagnosed with cancer shortly after she was caught up in a mysterious gas used by the military at that protest.

I was not safe from my own family either. My sister’s husband, a military official, was part of the team tasked with controlling the protests. I recall how he asked me if I knew anything about upcoming protests. I avoided talking to him in that period, since the military was often tasked with shooting, arresting, or harassing protesters – even if they were students.

My parents’ fears were palpable, but I was determined to show them that my generation would not let their fear define us. We will carry their legacy of protest but will no longer let state violence become the tool of silence. A real democracy is built on the voices of the people, not military juntas “electing” their candidates or jailing pro-democracy leaders when they do win an election. Not mysterious power cuts at voting centers, specifically on just voting centers, on that very specific day, at multiple locations across the country. It was our right to speak, to protest, to be heard.



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Despite their concerns, my parents offered to drive me to the protest. Honestly, my parents are not the affectionate type, but this was a kind of solidarity that I never thought my parents would offer. Even in their reluctance, I saw their yearning – to stand up, to fight back, to reclaim the voice they lost in their youth to a regime of terror.

There are many times where I wish I could interview my parents, or others from their generation, about the Thammasat University Massacre, and collect oral evidence on some secret tape. But, I’m not willing to risk their safety given the way the politics at home are right now. At the same time, they are the very generation that witnessed the brutality firsthand, and their voices would be invaluable towards our fight for democracy, and in ensuring that this event isn’t erased from our collective memory. Their stories need to be told, not just for history’s sake, but for the future we are still fighting for.

It's a bit of a fragmented story, and very much a stream of consciousness. But if there's one thing I've learned from them, it's this: even in the face of fear, there's strength.

In the silence between bullets and banners, we will find our voice.



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