

# The Implications of Political Killings in Modern-Day Thailand

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IN 1983, ONE OF THE BIGGEST BOX-office hits in Thailand was a remarkable film entitled *Mu Pun*. Advertisements in English translated this title as "The Gun man," but an alternative, and better, translation would be "The Gunmen." Therein, the director invited his audience to contemplate the contrast between two types of hired assassins, one working for private enterprise, the other for the state. We are shown in a flashback that the hero and the villain were once comrades in the 'secret' mercenary army hired by the CIA to fight in Laos. There they learned to become crack shots with handguns and highpowered automatic rifles and in one firefight, the hero was badly wounded and abandoned by his cowardly comrade.

The "story proper" of the film is set in contemporary Bangkok and describes the subsequent careers of the two men. The hero, one leg badly damaged, officially supports himself and his little son by working as a barber; but soon we are shown that he is secretly a highly-paid professional assassin. His paymasters are obviously wealthy businessmen with good political and/or bureaucratic connections — and so are his victims. The villain, on the other hand, has become the successful head of a highly-publicized SWAT team of the Bangkok police. He specializes in luring criminals into traps where he can accurately shoot them down. He is known to the media as *Mu Dam* because he ostentatiously wears a black glove on his gun hand when he is preparing to kill for his employer, the state. In another society he would be a natural leader of a "death squad".

has been abandoned by his wife and is left alone to care for his critically-ill baby son. Murder is his only means of raising the money needed for the best medical care. The villain however, kills to compensate for the memory of his earlier cowardice, to gain media attention, and to impress his alcoholic wife with whom his sexual relations are distinctly sadistic. He uses his position as a state-licensed killer to gratify a range of repellent private desires. But in case the audience should think that the villain is an "aberration", the director makes sure to provide him with a young police henchman who takes an even grimmer pleasure in assassination-for-the-state.

It is quite impossible to imagine a film of this kind being made, let alone shown, anywhere else in Southeast Asia. Nor, I think, would it have been possible in Thailand except in the 1980s. It is particularly interesting that the Thai police insisted on only two changes in the original print before the film's public release. The hero's paymaster could not be shown to be a moonlighting senior police officer; and the masked motorcycle gangsters gunned down by the villain could not be shown to be young women. On the other side, there is also something curious about the film's popularity with the public. One can readily understand why young audiences would enjoy the rare spectacle of villainous police. But a hero, even one played by top-star Soraphong, who kills "innocent people" for money? The answer, I suspect, is 'yes,' provided the victims are clearly middle-aged, male, and rich — in principle, *nai thun*. Provided, too, that there is some resonance between what is seen

on the screen and the contemporary realities of Thai society.

This reality, or rather the part of it with which this paper is concerned, is that in the 1980s, political murder in Thailand has assumed a completely unprecedented character. One that is, oddly enough, probably a positive omen for the future, insofar as it is tied to the consolidation of a stable bourgeois parliamentary political system. To get a sharper focus of the relationship between *Mu Pun* and the rapidly changing structures of Thai politics, it may be useful to sketch out the antecedent patterns of political murder in Thailand.

In the pre-Bowring era, the pattern of political murder was exactly what one would expect in a society where political participation was confined, most of the time, to a very small, largely endogamous, 'feudal' (*sakdina*) upper class. The victims were members of this class — princes, noblemen, courtiers, and high officials — and so, on the whole, were also their assassins. If commoner bodyguards or soldiers participated, it was never on their own behalf, but merely at the behest of their *sakdina* lords. Political murder was frequently an intra-family affair, pitting fathers against sons, uncles against nephews, half-brothers against half-brothers. Most killings took place in the royal capital itself, which after all, was the real arena of political competition. One could also argue that the state was still so frail and personalized in the sovereign himself that there was no sharp dividing line between execution and murder, between 'state' killing and 'private' killing.

Between 1850 and 1932 this pattern of upper class murder went into suspension, most probably because of the fear of European intervention in the political sense, and due to European intervention in the economic. The expanding economy of the last half of the 19th century less-

ened the ferocity of intra-elite competition; the contrast with the blood-drenched last years of the Burmese monarchy, deprived of more than half its revenue base after 1852, is revealing. These conditions remained sufficiently stable so that even when the old elite came under challenge from the 'new men' of Rama V's bequeathed bureaucracy, the conflict was handled without bloodshed.

Something rather like the pre-1850 pattern began to emerge in the later 1930s, during which serious attempts were made on the lives of Phahon and Phibun by members of their own circle, and violent retribution (by 'legal' execution) was exacted by a still largely personal state. By then, there was no real fear that such murders might precipitate external intervention. At the same time, the end of the absolute monarchy and the 20th century impossibility of starting a new [*Phibunsongkhram*] dynasty — meant in principle a new, much wider circle of participants in the struggle for political and economic ascendancy. The pattern became clearer in the late 1940s and early 1950s when violent conflict within the residual elements of the 1932 Coup Group and their followers sharpened. We may take as characteristic the assassination of the four ex-cabinet members from Isan by the *asawin* of General Phao Sriyanon. The four victims moved in the same social milieu as Phao and Phibun and were killed in the capital for reasons nothing to do with class or regional conflict in the wider sense. And as in the pre-1855 era, it is almost beside the point to ask whether the murders were committed by 'the state' or by private individuals belonging to the postwar power elite. Certainly no serious form of legal process was involved; but even if there had been, we know from the executions of innocent people in the regicide trials of the period that these legal mechanisms could be used for pri-



vate murder.

Political killing, as with so much else in modern Thai history, assumed a new character under the regime of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat. One could plausibly argue, for example, that under his rule the range of possible victims of political murder greatly expanded outwards and downwards, while the killer became, more definite than ever before, the state and its apparatus. The best early illustrations of this change are the executions of the Bangkok 'arsonists' and of Krong Chandawong. The victims were completely outside Sarit's elite circle — indeed he may never have met them. Krong, at least, was killed *outside* Bangkok. The publicly-acknowledged executioners were agents of the state and the reasons for the executions were purely political — to build Sarit's image of all-powerful strongman for a 'national audience' of newspaper-readers, radio-listeners, and potentially at least, voters. In other words, these murders were made, unlike most of the earlier ones, quite clearly in a spirit of public relations, mass media style. (Sarit's close associates understood this logic perfectly. Thanom attempted to replicate it by P.R. executions of his own after the coup of 1971).

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*"In the pre-Bouring era, the pattern of political murder was... confined to a very small upper class..."*

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The existence of a mass media 'audience' — as it were, a bastard concretization of the imagined national community — for which political killings needed to be staged, also meant that other political killings had to be 'kept secret'. The best examples of this tendency are the notorious Tang Daeng slayings in Patthalung province in 1971-72. These political killings, designed to terrorize the *local* population, were not acceptable to a national audience which even the authoritarian military regime of Sarit's successors had to respect. Similarly, adversaries of the regime were able to use the locally-public, nationally-secret incineration of Na Na Sai to undermine the state's political legitimacy. A gap was opened up between the state as law and the state as apparatus.

The other really big change in the era of Sarit, Thanom and Praphat was the emergence of two very important new types of participant in Thai politics. The first was the CPT, which took up an

increasingly successful armed struggle in the state's territorial periphery after 1965. The CPT leaders did not belong to the old capital-city political elite, nor did they attempt to participate directly in capital-city politics. They took very good care to remain completely out of the reach of the state's executioners as they carried on their struggle in remote rural areas which traditionally had negligible political significance, but now, in an age of territorially-defined nation-states, had become accepted by the state as a real political arena. Because the CPT was successful in mobilizing peasants and upland minorities in many rural areas (*i.e.* getting them to participate in a national power struggle), these people began to join the ranks of potential victims of political murder. In the early years of the state's counter-insurgency campaign, most violence (including murder) against rural populations remained the prerogative of the central state apparatus itself. But as the conflict deepened and widened, with the CPT successfully attacking not merely official emissaries of the state but its local private supporters as well, a significant 'private enterprise' sector emerged alongside the 'state sector' in the murder field. In Isan, the North, and the South, vigilante groups, village toughies, and moonlighting security personnel started to proliferate. The unprecedented availability of firearms — thanks to American aid to the Thai police and military, as well as to the American secret war in Laos —

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substantially intensified the violence of rural politics. Of particular interest were the very sizeable numbers of rural and small town Thai enrolled in paramilitary security units of the state *while the American money lasted*, but who were later demobilized when this money ran out. Demobilization meant they were no longer in the employ of the state, but they took back to 'private life' militarized attitudes and terroristic skills which in the mid-1970s were acquiring real commercial value. The final point to note in this context is that the "secret army" recruited by the CIA was a *mercenary* army, fully understood as such by its recruits. In this way, one could say that the profession of "hired gunman" — a pro-



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fession rather new to Thailand — derived directly from the American prosecution of its Indochina war and thus, was political from the start.

The second new participant in Thai politics can be broadly described as an extra-bureaucratic middle class. Its true origins lie in the Sino-Thai bourgeoisie of Bangkok, Chonburi, Paknam and a few towns in the prosperous South. In the 1940s and 1950s their numbers were still fairly small, their wealth rather limited, and their political influence almost negligible (not least because in many instances the process of assimilation was not yet complete). But by the early 1960s a generation of fully-assimilated Sino-Thai were reaching high school and college age, just at the point when the great Vietnam War boom got underway. They arrived just in time to take advantage of the enormous expansion of tertiary education in the 1960s and then of the huge expansion and diversification of the employment market made

possible by the boom.

Never in its history had Thailand been so deluged with external economic resources that were the result not only of the massive American capital investments in military bases and infrastructural projects but also of direct U.S. aid to the Thai government, and the very large Japanese and American regular business investments in an essentially ‘union-free’ society. In my view, there were three especially notable consequences of the deluge. First, it was by no means wholly concentrated in the metropolitan region, but had a major impact, direct and indirect, in many parts of the North, Northeast, and South. Second, it encouraged the emergence of a kind of businessman who was far less sharply counterposed to the modern bureaucrat than had been the old Sino-Thai *phokha*. I am thinking here of the proprietors and managers of good hotels, shopping malls, automobile franchises, insurance companies, and, of course, banks. These were people who dressed like bureaucrats, lived in *muban* alongside bureaucrats, and dined, partied, shopped, and travelled in the same places as the bureaucrats. Increasingly, in the 1960s, they came out of a single common institution — the university. Third, it meshed very nicely with the spectacular rise of the Sino-Thai banking-system, and indeed probably was the major factor, ultimately, in this rise. The key thing to note is that the Sino-Thai banks were not elbowed aside by American and Japanese giants. Surely helped by the difficulties foreigners faced in mastering the Thai and Chinese languages, as well as their formidable orthographies, these banks moved quickly to develop the domestic capital market. They quickly discovered that in the age of the great boom, there were very substantial profits to be made by elaborating their provincial operations. In the early 1960s, the most imposing building in provincial towns was the *sala*, symbol of bureaucratic domination of Thai social and political life. A decade later, many of these Edwardian-looking *sala* had been completely eclipsed by spectacular modern edifices housing local branches of the great Bangkok banks.

One needs therefore to look at the rise of the extra-bureaucratic middle class from two angles. The one we are most familiar with is the one that stresses the appearance of a very large number of educated youths, a portion of whom made the NSCT the briefly formidable political force that it was in the early 1970s. In the late 1960s, their numbers were such that they could not be absorbed into the bureaucracy as earlier university cohorts had been. But they were generally aware that they were in institutions which had traditionally prepared the new generation of the ruling class for its tasks. Thus, they had, as it were, a *right* to participate politically. Insofar as many of them came from the provinces, and graduated from the new universities there, they

expected to practice that right not merely in Bangkok but wherever they later ended up. Hence, for the first time in Thai history, there was the real possibility of non-bureaucratic mini-intelligentsias in the regions. The less familiar angle is one that stresses the strengthening of small town entrepreneurs (some independent, many others operating as extensions of metropolitan giants) on the basis of bank credit and the overall rapid commercialization of provincial life. In most provincial towns, people of this type quickly developed their incomes, lifestyles and then status-pretensions that were competitive with those of the locally-stationed officials. Furthermore, unlike these officials, they were not subject to regular transfer to other locales. In this way, they rapidly developed strong local roots, social as well as commercial. For these roots to become local power it was only necessary that the unity and authority of the central state apparatus, standing behind local officialdom, be substantially compromised.

This, of course, is precisely the historic meaning of October 14, 1973. It is true that the Thanom-Prapath regime would not have fallen had it not been for factional interventions at the highest level by the palace and General Kris Sivara. But the fact that Kris 'came to power' not by a coup d'etat, but by encouraging the activism of students and intellectuals, and eventually the popular masses (including, of course, the middle and lower middle class), signalled his own recognition that the old form of 'legitimate' politics was no longer viable. Events between 1973 and 1977 showed that even though ultra-conservative forces remained strong, this recognition was becoming widespread within the apparatus, which was thus incapable of acting with its earlier unity of purpose.

What was emerging was that characteristic middle class (bourgeois) political format that we call parliamentary democracy — the style of political regime with which all ambitious, self-confident bourgeoisie feel most comfortable, precisely because it maximizes their power and minimizes those of their competitors. If one thinks of 1973 as Thailand's "1789," then it seems to make sense to view the entire subsequent period (1973 to the present) within a single optic — that of the struggle of the bourgeoisie to develop and sustain their new political power, intricately tied to parliamentary forms for reasons to be discussed below, against threats from a whole variety of quarters, left and right, mass-popular as well as bureaucratic. The patterns of political murder over these 15 years provides, I believe, a neat indication that this optic makes good sense.

We might think about dividing the period into two: 1973-1978 and 1978-1987. In the first period, one of great instability and uncertainty, the bourgeoisie, feeling its way, was in an openly

contradictory position. On the one hand, it needed the support of the popular sectors, channelled ideally through electoral mechanisms, to strengthen its legitimacy and power vis-a-vis the military and the apparatus in general; "democracy" was a domestically powerful and internationally respectable symbolic weapon in the struggle. On the other hand, it also felt the need for the support of the repressive hierarchies of the state apparatus to contain 'popular excesses' in urban areas, as well as to fight the CPT, and, given the collapse of the American position in Indochina, to defend the autonomy of the nation. In the second period, with the CPT defeated and the popular sectors cowed by the repressions of 1975-77, the self-confidence of the bourgeoisie greatly increased, thereby diminishing the early need to depend on the state security apparatus. Indeed in this



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period, one could argue that the main problem of the bourgeoisie was how to fend off threats from the "right", opportunistic elements in the security bureaucracy who have been seeking to regain dominant power by exploiting largely imaginary external threats and sham-populist rhetoric. In this successful struggle, one cannot underestimate the importance of the popular press, above all *Thai Rat*, which with its huge, nationwide readership, represents another kind of imagined national community, alongside those conjured up by parliament or *chatsasana-kasat* rhetoric. Most of this press has been, if not openly antagonistic to military-bureaucratic pretensions (let alone coups), at the very least, sceptical. If we remind ourselves that successful newspapers are large business enterprises, and that they succeed because to some extent they voice their readers' aspirations, then we can read the role of the press in this period as that of a staunch supporter of the new bourgeois-political ascendancy. But what is still more interesting is that in this second period, the bourgeoisie has become so confident of its own power, and so certain of the value of the parliamentary system for the articulation of its interest that it has proved quite willing to permit violent internal competition among its own ranks. Thus in recent years, we have the extraordinary spectacle of MPs being assassinated, not by Communists or by military dictators, but by other MPs or would-be MPs.

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But before turning to look more closely at the patterns of political killing in the two periods, it is valuable to remind ourselves of the reasons why the parliamentary system is so attractive to new middle classes of the current Thai type (cf. current tendencies in the Philippines, South Korea, even perhaps Indonesia). In the first place, vis-a-vis bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes, it markedly opens up channels to political power along both the vertical and horizontal dimensions. To be elected to parliament, one does not need to have a university degree, or to have entered to the low rungs of a hierarchy in early youth. Femaleness is no longer an enormous political disadvantage; nor is sheer seniority. Hence an enormous, at least theoretical,

increase in the possibility of vertical social and political mobility. At the same time, in a territorially-based electoral system, being a provincial is no special handicap. One can be based on Nakhon Phanom and still be a Cabinet Minister; indeed it may be that *only* by being based on Nakhon Phanom can one become a Cabinet Minister. Parliament, in fact, gives provincial elites the opportunity to shortcircuit the "Ministry of the Interior" territorial hierarchy, and to make themselves felt, on their own terms, in the home-base of the bureaucracy itself — Krung Thep Maha Nakhon. In more general terms, electorally-based parliaments serve to reduce the power-gap between the provinces and the metropolis, more than almost any other imaginable system, and this is, of course, why they are so especially attractive to provincial notables. (At the same time, the bourgeoisie in the metropolis needs provincial allies in its competition with the state apparatus.) Secondly, reduction in the power of the bureaucracy also tends to mean a decline in the regime of bureaucratically-administered and protected monopolies, which always subordinate the bourgeoisie to the state apparatus. While particular individual businessmen, of course, benefit from such monopolies, they are against the general interest of the class. Thirdly, electoral politics favors bourgeois interests in the more narrow, "technical", ways. Money is crucial for sustained electoral success, and this is precisely the resource with which the bourgeoisie is most endowed. Articulatness, solid social standing, and strong local roots are comparably advantageous resources. On the other hand, the prestige of electoral politics, if it can be solidly entrenched, serves to undermine the legitimacy of "extra-parliamentary" political activity, especially strikes, demonstrations, and popular movements which the bourgeoisie is much less likely to be able to control and may indeed profoundly fear. Finally, it is clear that in developing countries like Thailand, where feudal/hierarchical residues are still strong, especially in rural areas, the position of MP has possibilities of being more powerful and more lucrative locally, than in industrial societies. Thus, it is no accident that the consolidation of the parliamentary system has coincided with the rise of the so-called *chao pho*.

We may now usefully turn back to the question of patterns of political killings. In the period from late 1974 to October 6, 1976, the typical victims of such killings were middle-class student activists associated with the NSCT, leaders of peasant organizations, trade unionists and journalists. We have to think carefully about why such people were murdered and who carried out such murders in order to understand the general implications of the violence. It is likely that the murders fell into two broad groups: "local killings" and "national killings". The victims of

*"The emergence of the CPT and the extra-bureaucratic middle class changed this pattern of murders."*

"local killings" include peasant leaders, trade unionists, and journalists who for various reasons were felt to have threatened the power or profits of provincial notables, including businessmen and landowners, as well as certain village officials. Most of these killings were "private enterprise" murders, with the killers — *mu pun* — recruited by these local notables from the Vietnam-era pool of professionals, ex-security guards, moonlighting policemen, petty gangsters, etc. Most of these murders were done in small towns and rural areas, and the random pattern of their geographical distribution underscores the absence of the state in the violence. The best example of "national killings" is the assassination of SPT leader Boonsanong Punyodana. The killings of some students, and above all, the Thammasat mass murders on October 6, itself also fall into the same category. The victims threatened no particular private interests; rather they were regarded as enemies of the state, or were cynically depicted as such for other Macchiavellian purposes (e.g. to create the atmosphere in which the apparatus could plausibly 'roll back' the parliamentary tide). Hence, the killers were more or less direct emissaries or agents of the state apparatus (ISOC, Luk Sua Chaø Baon, Krathing Daeng, etc.). The massacre of the students at Thammasat is especially instructive in showing the difference between category 1 and category 2 murder. For the victims were, if you like, the elite children of the bourgeoisie itself (one has only to look at the Sino-Thai faces inside the gates of Thammasat and the Thai-Thai faces outside — any day of the week — to realize this). There is very little reason to think that the Thai bourgeoisie wished for these killings (one good indication being that they were replicated nowhere outside Bangkok) and we know how popular with this bourgeoisie was the amnesty policy of General Kriangsak in 1978 — as they welcomed their erring children home.

The "national" murders, performed by agents of the state, were thus "anti-middle class" and were intended to return the political order to what it had been pre-October 14. The "local" murders, performed by private mercenaries,

were "pro-middle class" and intended to intimidate members of the subordinate classes and their self-appointed tribunes.

It has been argued variously that Thai parliamentary democracy, and/or the Thai middle classes benefitted from an extraordinary, unexpected stroke of luck in the collapse of the CPT's powerful rural insurgency as a result of the Vietnam-Cambodia-China triangular war that opened in December 1978. It is obviously true that the party was gravely damaged by its leadership's decision to toe Peking's line, thereby losing most of its secure base areas in Cambodia and Laos, its powerful broadcasting transmitter in Yunnan and much else. It was certainly shrewdly outmaneuvered by Prime Minister Kriangsak who understood very well that a firm tactical alliance with the Chinese was both possible and highly beneficial. But one can also argue that the damage was especially severe because the Party was already struggling with the problem of what to do with the hundreds of youthful middle-class activists who fled to the jungle in the wake of October 6, 1976. From an entirely different generation, articulate and well-read, from comfortable homes, with some real experience in national politics, these activists from the start found it hard to accept the CPT line automatically, and the crisis of 1978-79 made it impossible. Once again, Kriangsak was shrewd enough to offer a general amnesty and the middle-class activists were able to come home. It is significant that the CPT made no real effort to stop them, even though the picture of "massive defections" compounded the political damage it had suffered. All in all, there can be no doubt that the CPT's collapse, caused not by the Thai military's bat-



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field successes, but by international politics and its own internal haemorrhage, redounded principally to the benefit of the Thai bourgeoisie. After 1978, it faced no serious internal threat from the Left or from below. It was not very alarmed by the presence of Vietnamese troops on the eastern border, though the military repeatedly tried to make it so; it fully recognized the limits of Vietnamese power, and Thailand's advantages in having China, Japan, and the US all ranged behind it.

But the Indochina tragedy opened well *after* the collapse of the Thanin Kravixian regime, and it is Thanin's fall that is really instructive for understanding the dynamics of Thai politics in the bourgeois era.

The initial appointment of the Thanin-Samak government itself, after a rather long period of backstage maneuvering, was a sign of the real fragmentation of power in the post-1973 era. Thanin, an extremist judge with no self-evident political base, and Samak, popular largely with a Bangkok lower class excluded from politics by the October 6 coup (if not before), represented no substantial social group or institution. Their appointments reflected conflicts between the Palace and the generals, who were incapable of uniting behind a single Sarit-like figure (not least because such a figure by now seemed obsolete). Ridiculous in its rhetoric, so that it quickly became referred to as the Rattanban Hoi, it still managed to do something absolutely unprecedented in modern Thai politics: *i.e.* to

sentence to death a top General for coup activities *and* have him executed. To be sure, General Chalard had managed to kill General Arun in the course of his failed coup; but I think it unlikely that he would have been executed if the government had been a military junta. It is possible that some senior generals were not unhappy that he was thus disposed of, but the fact remains that a civilian prime minister had set the precedent of executing a top military politician. It is also striking that when the successful anti-Thanin coup came, it was "advertised" — very curiously given the modern Thai political tradition — as a "moderating" coup, and one foreshadowing the reinstatement of parliamentary government. There is no question that the audience for this advertising was not merely the United States, but also, above all, the Thai bourgeoisie. General Kriangsak became the first Thai coup leader who "acted bourgeois" in public. (Recall the celebrated photos of him cooking noodles for the Bangkok 18). The point here is that even before the CPT collapse and the debacles in Indochina, the rise and fall of the Thanin regime show the continuing consolidation of middle class power.

Finally, I would like to turn to the very recent past and to the implied subject matter of the film *Mu Pun*. Readers of the Thai press after 1978 have been struck by the constant reference to *chao pho* and *phu mi ithipon*, as well as by the dangerousness of political life for provincial politicians. While there are few cases as spectacular as the assassination of Sia Jaew, the *chao pho* of Chonburi who was ambushed military-style by men in armored cars and armed with machineguns, stories of MPs being shot by unknown gunmen have become commonplace. Next to MPs, judges, local tycoons, casino-owners, and so on, are the popular victims. These people appear to have taken the place of peasant leaders and student activists — who are now virtually never the objects of attack. There is, however, good reason to think that the killers are more or less the same people, or at least the

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same kind of people, as the earlier murderers of peasants and students: *mu pun*, provincial guns for hire. Their paymasters seem to be almost invariably the victims' fellow-bourgeois political and business competitors. Again, the random territorial distribution of the deaths suggests little or no involvement by the state apparatus-qua-state apparatus.

What these killings most interestingly suggest is that in the 1980s, the institution of *so, so* has achieved substantial market-value. In other words, not only does being a *so, so* offer substantial opportunities for money and power, but it will continue to do so for the indefinite future. It may thus be well worthwhile murdering one's



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competitor — something I think that would have seemed incredible in the 1940s or 1950s, when the power of parliament and its likely longevity were cheaply regarded.

What we are seeing is, I think, a consolidation of the economic and political circuits created during the "American Era." The great Bangkok banks are in a position to funnel undreamed-of monies into the provinces, monies which are available for politics and gangsterism as well as productive business activities. Competition between the banks, at all levels, means that each has its own interest in developing local and metropolitan political agents and allies. As the financial backers of the MPs, the banks can be confident of their trustworthiness as a group, not least because of the necessary dispersal of power in a parliament numbering several

hundred members. The banks can "dictate" to parliament in a way that would be difficult under a centralized authoritarian military regime. And what the MPs, or rather parliament as a whole, bring the bank is the legitimacy of popular, electoral support. This is a very real and valuable asset. One can thus suggest that most of the various echelons of the bourgeoisie — from the self-made millionaire bankers of Bangkok to the ambitious small *pho kha* of minor provincial towns — have decided that the parliamentary system is the system most advantageous to them; and that they now have the confidence to think that they can maintain this system against any possible enemies. These enemies still exist in the army and in the bureaucracy above all, but they seem to be in a long term decline. For all the grumblings about *itthipon mut*, propaganda designed to suggest that the bureaucrats are the only possessors of clean and justifiable *itthipon*, they are slowly making their own accommodations to the new system.

It is in this context that the "parliamentary" murders by *mu pun* can be taken as a favorable portent. Parliamentary democracy has no trouble getting the support of liberal intelligentsias, but they are not sufficient to sustain it; for that, what is required is the willingness to invest in it

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*"In sum, today's political killings in Thailand reflect a confidence in the future of the parliamentary system..."*

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a large number of ruthless, wealthy, energetic, and competitive people from all parts of the country. If such people want to be MPs, badly enough to kill each other in the process, then something quite new is in place in Thailand.

The film *Mu Pun* reflects this new situation. It refuses to side with state murder over private enterprise murder; and the state is not in a position to change its mind. It reassures its audience that the new bourgeois world is stable: if *nai thun* are being murdered, the killers aren't leftists or radicals, or agents of a police state, but other *nai thun*. And there is surely a wholly intended subtext for the viewing masses as well as left-leaning intellectuals. At least, some *nai thun* are being killed, and by an impoverished victim of society. A sort of dream revenge for October 1976.

To conclude with a brief comparison of the Thai situation with that of Indonesia and the Philippines. Since early 1966, political murder in

Indonesia has been a very exclusive state monopoly. Real "private enterprise" *mu pun* scarcely exist, not least because the distribution of firearms is strictly controlled by the state, and Indonesia never "benefitted" from the huge post-Vietnam war surplus market like Thailand. The state monopoly of murder (it has in recent years killed several thousands of candidate *mu pun* — the so-called *gali2*) reflects both the

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*"...while in the Philippines, they indicate exactly the opposite."*

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immense preponderance of military-bureaucratic power over all competition, and the weakness of the country's bourgeoisie. This non-bureaucratic bourgeoisie remains profoundly split between a very wealthy Chinese entrepreneurial group wholly denied any overt political role, and an economically feeble "Indonesian" middle class which, though technically participant politically, is in practice almost wholly marginalized. There are no Indonesian banks comparable to the Bangkok Bank. And no one would for one minute think it worth a handful of dollars to murder a member of the Indonesian parliament; for it is an institution wholly without political weight, and its members have no (even malign) political significance. Nor is there any broad, flat spread of bourgeois groups across the small towns of Indonesia that in any way compares with Siam's experience.

The Philippines is perhaps a more interesting comparison. Between roughly 1946 and 1972, a powerfully institutionalized "parliamentary" (in the broad sense) regime was in place. The financial and political value of seats in the Filipino bicameral legislature was high from the start and merely became higher as time passed. As in Thailand, parliamentary institutions cemented the circuits between local and metropolitan political and economic power. Similarly also, in due course the life of the legislator became a dangerous one, such that by the later sixties, many employed bodyguards or even so-called private armies to defend themselves against their competitors. But here the obvious similarities end.

American imperialism had from the inception of its presence in the Philippines worked hard to secure the collaboration of the wealthy, landed, Chinese-mestizo upper class. The means are well-known: incorporation of the Philippine economy within the American tariff wall, sale of the friar lands, rapid Filipinization of the very weak American-style colonial state, and sharp restriction of suffrage for a powerful legislature. The colonial legislature was, to the end, com-

pletely dominated by provincial sugar barons and hacenderos, together with their lawyers. Moreover, after 1900, these provincial oligarchs began inter-marrying and sending their children to the same schools in Manila and the United States, such that by the end of the colonial period a genuine "national oligarchy" was in powerful place. Oligarchic control of electoral mechanisms began to be contested by a small urban middle class, mainly in Manila, only in the 1960s. But the real challenge to the agrarian-based oligarchy came from a radicalized peasantry, which during the Japanese Occupation was, at least in many parts of Luzon, led by communist and socialist intellectuals. Many oligarchs were sufficiently alarmed to flee to Manila for the duration of the war. It was in the struggle to regain control over the rural economy of Luzon after 1945 that the magnates felt it necessary to recruit "private armies" of *mu pun* to intimidate and/or assassinate the leaders of peasant resistance. With considerable help from the Americans, the "Hukbalahap" insurrection was defeated by 1953, but it proved impossible for the oligarchy to restore the "quasi-feudal" agrarian order of the colonial period. With national independence, the suffrage had to be expanded, and "feudal methods" proved inadequate to control the widened electorate. Elections became increasingly violent and corrupt as the "price" of votes rose. The huge sums needed to bribe voters and to pay for the private armies, now used to corral rural support and to frighten electoral rivals, led to an ever-deepening plundering of the economy. In the presidential election of 1967, for example, Marcos so bankrupted the treasury that prices rose almost 20% during the campaign, and he was compelled to ask the Americans for a large "advance payment" of rent for the Clark and Subic bases.

Thus the pattern of political murder in the Philippines prior to the onset of martial law reflected the decline of the "parliamentary system" and its monopoly control by the agrarian magnates. The more they struggled to maintain their grip, the more bitterly they fought each other for control of the lootable national treasury, the greater the violence — not only against each other, as in the case of Thailand's *chao pho*, but against opposition from all sources. The pattern is El Salvador and Guatemala, not Thailand. And behind everything lay the degeneration of the Filipino economy from a leading position in Southeast Asia in the early 1950s to its current near "basket-case" status. Contrast Thailand, very "backward" in the early 1950s, but today arguably the most successful economy in the region (if one excludes the microstates of Singapore and Brunei). In sum, today's political killings in Thailand reflect a confidence in the future of the parliamentary system, while in the Philippines they indicate exactly the opposite.