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# The buds of May

For all their claims that they have the freest press in Asia, Thailand's journalists became the whipping boys for a government under pressure

In May 1992, Thailand suffered its most serious political disturbances for 16 years. On 17 May, around 200,000 demonstrators gathered at the Sanam Luang, in the heart of historic Bangkok, to proclaim their opposition to the continuing premiership of General Suchinda Kraprayoon. The protests, which rapidly turned ugly following armed attacks on the crowd by government troops, lasted four days. As Army Commander-in-Chief, General Suchinda had led the February 1991 military coup, ousting the elected civilian government of General Chatchai Choonhavan. From the outset, Suchinda and his fellow members of the National Peace-Keeping Council (NPKC) claimed to have staged the coup solely in the public interest. Suchinda later gave an explicit televised promise that he would not accept the post of Prime Minister following the elections called for 22 March 1992. When he reneged on this pledge, he precipitated a wave of popular opposition — opposition which was galvanised after the controversial decision of Phalang Dharma Party leader Chamlong Srimuang to stage an anti-Suchinda hunger strike during the first week of May.

The crowds of protestors in Bangkok were not simply opposed to Suchinda Kraprayoon's becoming premier; they were objecting to a political order in which the military and the bureaucracy exerted tremendous influence. At the heart of this struggle between entrenched state power and the collective popular will in a rapidly-changing urban society was a battle for the control of information. Whilst the Thai press had historically enjoyed a relatively free rein, television and radio were subject to stringent state controls. Media coverage of the May events, in which scores — possibly hundreds — of civilians were shot dead by the Royal Thai Army, became an issue almost as large as the events themselves; public anger at the manifest factual distortions of the electronic media reached fever pitch. Following Suchinda's resignation on 25 May, and the subsequent formation of a second interim civilian administration under former diplomat and businessman Anand Panyarachun (who had also served as Prime Minister during the NPKC period), an

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intense public debate began concerning the future of the media.

One of the last important acts of the ill-fated 1988-91 Chatchai government was the abrogation of Decree 42, a draconian press law which had formed part of an anti-Communist backlash following the events of 6 October 1976 — a day which saw both the violent suppression of the student movement, and a military coup. Decree 42 had given Thai governments arbitrary powers to close down newspapers without providing any grounds for appeal. Although apologists for the pragmatic, corruption-tainted Chatchai government like to depict his 2½-year rule as a heyday of open political expression, Thai journalists remember that in 1990, during Chatchai's tenure, Decree 42 was used temporarily to close down *Naew Na* newspaper.

*Naew Na* (Front Line) had published a story about the murder of three Saudi Arabian diplomats, under a headline critical of the Saudis. The murder case had strained diplomatic relations to the point where the Saudi Arabian embassy refused to issue visas to Thai contract workers and cut off an important source of foreign exchange. Although few disputed that in this case *Naew Na* had broken the law, the episode was a disagreeable reminder of the constraints under which the Thai press operated, for all the commonplace assertions that Thailand's journalists were among the freest in Asia. A successful campaign was then mounted for the repeal of Decree 42.

## PRESS IN THE FIRING LINE

In 1992, there were more than a dozen Thai-language dailies, ranging from the mass-circulation *Thai Rath* (State of Thailand) and *Daily News* to the established 'quality' papers *Siam Rath* (State of Siam) and *Matichon* (Public Opinion). In addition, there were six Chinese-language and two English-language dailies, not to mention 10 or so weekly Thai-language magazines which functioned as clearing houses for political gossip. Since Thai newspapers were notoriously unwilling to submit to independent auditing, accurate circulation figures were impossible to obtain but, according to one informed estimate, *Thai Rath* sold around one million copies, the *Daily News* around 400,000, *Matichon* 120,000, and *Siam Rath* less than 30,000. Each copy of a

popular newspaper was likely to be read by several people.

Some politicians had direct financial stakes in particular newspapers, such as senior Chart Thai Party figure Banharn Silpaarcha, who owned *Ban Muang* (Country), and elder statesman MR Kukrit Pramoj, owner of *Siam Rath*. Others wrote regular columns: Samak Sundaravej in the *Daily Mirror*, Chamlong Srimuang in the Sunday editions of the *Daily News*. Members of Suchinda's Royal Military Academy Class 5 owned shares in *Matichon*. Given the proliferation of newspapers, there were too few 'scoops' to go round: many newspapers concentrated on salacious crime stories, often accompanied by gruesome photographs.

Immediately after the 23 February 1991 coup, the NPKC attempted to impose systematic newspaper censorship, requesting that all editors submit their pages to a board of censors prior to publication. This proposal met with stiff resistance from the press and was swiftly dropped on the grounds that it was unworkable. Nevertheless, many Thai newspapers adopted an undeclared policy of self-censorship, refraining from open criticism of the coup-makers.

During its first few months, the *junta* was widely accepted by the public. But as 1991 wore on, the tone of political commentary by newspapers became gradually more acerbic, as journalists sought to test out the limits of the NPKC's tolerance. During the second half of 1991, there was considerable controversy over the proposed new Constitution which a committee of prominent figures was engaged in drafting. Using the Constitution debate as a cover, the press grew progressively more outspoken in attacking the shortcomings of the *junta*. Although no newspaper was actually closed down, the Air Force demonstrated its disapproval of *Naew Na* — a paper with a reputation for sensationalism, closely associated at the time with General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's New Aspiration Party — by banning it from distribution inside air bases, at Bangkok's Don Muang Airport, and on Thai International flights.

The most disturbing development during the NPKC period was the announcement of changes in the libel laws in February 1992. A new minimum penalty of four million *baht* (US\$150,000) was set for those convicted in

the civil courts of publishing or broadcasting defamatory material. Government spokesmen repeatedly, but unconvincingly, denied that the law was aimed at curbing criticism of the *junta*. Following a vociferous campaign against the new clauses by journalists and intellectuals, the issue became a serious source of embarrassment for Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, himself the son of a newspaper editor, who was normally seen as a liberal on press matters. Anand was obliged to fudge the issue by declining to have the new legislation promulgated in the *Royal Gazette*, effectively strangling it.

As in the Decree 42 debate, the media were able to mobilise public opinion and force the government to climb down. At no time did the Anand government attempt to bring out new legislation to control the press as Chatchai had intended to do. In spite of the previous year's military coup, Thailand's print media retained considerable influence, as the NPKC sought vainly to shore up its declining credibility. The press corps which confronted General Suchinda Kraprayoon when he 'reluctantly' accepted the premiership in the wake of the March 1992 election, were a confident and assertive bunch, united in an active professional body, the Reporters Association of Thailand (see box, p7).

### NOW FOR THE AIRWAVES

The electronic media were another matter entirely. Bangkok had five television channels. Of these, two were owned by the Army: Channel 5, operated by Pacific Intercommunications; and Channel 7, operated by Bangkok Broadcasting and TV, which had close military connections. Channels 3 and 9 belonged to the Mass Communications Organisation of Thailand (MCOT), a state enterprise under the control of the Prime Minister's office; Channel 3 was run by Bangkok Entertainment (in which the Bangkok Bank held a major stake). The minority 'educational' Channel 11 was operated by the Public Relations Department, part of the Prime Minister's office.

Directly or indirectly, all Thai television channels came under the jurisdiction of state agencies. The consequence was a well-established tradition of bland news reporting: exhaustive coverage of the activities of the revered royal family, but little attention paid to controversial issues which might present either the government or the military in an unfavourable light. As one anonymous Channel 3 reporter explained to a newspaper journalist during the May demonstrations, 'People normally have little trust in television news anyway. Even we think it is superficial.'

There were two notable exceptions to the general superficiality of Thai television current affairs coverage: the Channel 11 panel discussion *Mong Tang Mum* (Diverse Views), hosted by Dr Chermesak Pinthong (see box, p5), and the topical interview programmes conducted by Suthichai Yoon on

Channel 9.

Before the large-scale protests against Suchinda's premiership began in early May 1992, censorship of television news had already intensified. Whereas, prior to the March elections, Channel 5 news had typically prepared around 16 items for its main evening news broadcast, by May this had increased to 20 or more. The additional material, all of it supportive or uncritical of the Suchinda administration, was supplied by military journalists. The regular civilian reporters continued to produce clips on stories critical of the new premier — but knew perfectly well that the programme's editors would use 'extra', Army-supplied footage in place of their own.

On 21 April, an enterprising Channel 5 journalist managed to slip his piece on an anti-Suchinda demonstration into a pile of tapes for early morning transmission. His editor was subsequently summoned before the Army officer in charge of the station and given a coded reprimand. As of 23 April, all tapes for broadcasting required the signature of the station chief. Channel 5's example was closely followed by Channel 7. The remaining channels were believed to have received strongly-worded memos from the Public Relations Department, urging them not to rock the boat. Ironically, the censorship measures being adopted during April 1992 were far more stringent than those of the NPKC era, in spite of the fact that Thailand had meanwhile reverted to elected government.

Radio was under similar official control: although there were 496 radio stations in Thailand, none was privately-owned and many were directly run by the military. On 17 April, Suthichai Yoon, the outspoken publisher of the English-language newspaper *The Nation*, was abruptly cut off whilst discussing anti-Suchinda protests during his daily Radio Thailand programme *Direct Line From the Newsroom*. Suthichai had previously declined requests to submit the programme to censorship an hour before transmission and to refrain from criticising the government. Vandals subsequently entered his garden during the night and damaged his car. This was one of many similar episodes of intimidation suffered by journalists who failed to toe the official line.

As the protests against Suchinda intensified, the gap between reporting and reality strained viewers' credulity beyond breaking-point. On 4 May, one of Thailand's most popular politicians, Phalang Dharma Party leader Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, made the dramatic announcement that he would fast unto death unless General Suchinda resigned from office. This story, which made the headlines in every newspaper the following day, went entirely unreported on the evening television news bulletins. For the next 2½ weeks, no politically conscious Bangkokian paid any serious attention to

the news on his or her television screen. Outside the capital, and especially in rural areas where newspaper distribution was less effective, many Thais had little idea about the momentous events taking place in their own country. In Bangkok, improvised networks of communication based on mobile telephones, computer bulletin boards and fax machines were established to provide updates on the information available from the newspapers. People also began to tune in to news broadcasts from abroad, notably the BBC World Service. On 7 May, in an attempt to curtail this news traffic, the Thai government moved to halt all satellite feeds used by foreign television organisations such as CNN, TV Asahi, and Visnews; the following day, Deputy Army Chief Viroj Saengsnit held a meeting with the directors of all Thailand's television stations at which he asked them to be 'careful' in covering current events.

Also on 8 May, Interior Minister Air Chief Marshal Anan Kalinta met editors and representatives of around 20 newspapers, telling them that the government had displayed tolerance thus far by refraining from taking action against the press, even when 'distorted' information — such as excessive estimates of protestor numbers — had appeared. Although described by press participants as 'friendly', the meeting clearly represented a less than subtle attempt to cajole the newspapers into toning down their critical coverage.

### FINALLY — VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Demonstrators interviewed at the protest site were almost unanimous in denouncing the distorted portrayal of events by the broadcast media. Many explained that they had joined the protests as a direct result of their frustration with the television news coverage; far from curtailing dissent, government censorship had increased it.

One protestor was quoted in the *Bangkok Post* as saying, 'I think the news blackout makes more people want to see the demonstration. If they let the TV report the news, people would just sit and watch the event back home. Thai people are usually lazy. But once they come, they become sort of addicted because of the excitement. And they bring along other people.'

Beleaguered television crews, frustrated by their inability to report properly on the demonstration, became the objects of public derision; following attacks on cars belonging to Channels 3 and 5, Channel 7's news teams removed identifying stickers from their vehicles. Ironically, when television news reported on 9 May that Chamlong Srimuang had abruptly halted his hunger strike, many Bangkokians simply didn't believe it; thousands descended upon the Sanam Luang to check the story for themselves.

## Breaking the mould

Although Thai television in general had a poor track record in encouraging political awareness and promoting free expression, one particular programme stood out from the rest before, during and after the May 1992 events. *Mong Tang Mum* (Diverse Views), a weekly panel discussion broadcast on Channel 11 and hosted by Dr Chermasak Pinthong, an associate professor of economics at Bangkok's Thammasat University, first went out in July 1991, in the middle of the NPCK period.

Modelled on the BBC television programme *Question Time*, *Mong Tang Mum* was the brainchild of three anglophile Thais: Chermasak himself, leading journalist Peter Mytri Ungphakorn, and Abhisit Vejajiva, a young Thammasat economics lecturer who subsequently became an MP for the Democrat Party. The programme was produced by a team of academics under the auspices of the Creative Media Foundation. Though never confrontational in his manner, Chermasak ensured that participants were not allowed to dodge the issues raised. This represented a radical departure from the traditional norms of Thai political television in which a politician was able to use the medium as a personal platform.

While the programme received strong personal support from another anglophile, Cambridge-educated premier Anand Panyarachun, others in the establishment were less sympathetic. It was not long before right-wingers, soldiers and bureaucrats began to claim that the programme was biased against them. Those making *Mong Tang Mum* disputed this charge, arguing that conservatives were welcome to advance their views on the programme. But the values of *Mong Tang Mum* were clearly those of Western-educated, liberal intellectuals. For the Thai viewer, the sight of ordinary members of the public questioning senior figures — and challenging their replies — was a novel experience. *Mong Tang Mum* quickly developed a 'cult' following.

The programme experienced its first serious crisis in November 1991, at the height of the uproar over the new Constitution. On 26 November, Channel 11 director Wichit Wuthi-ampol announced that transmission of *Mong Tang Mum* would be stopped 'for improvements to be made'.

Wichit was clearly acting under pressure from above. Deputy Prime Minister Pow Sarasin, in his capacity as head of the

Broadcasting Directing Board, had earlier issued 'advice' to all television stations, asking them to be careful not to invite party politicians to appear on programmes since an election was not far off (though elections were not in fact held for another four months). In the event, *Mong Tang Mum* went back on the air after an interval of a couple of weeks, by which time the new Constitution had been successfully promulgated.

At the end of his first administration, Anand admitted that some people had wanted to ban the programme, but insisted that they were not members of his Cabinet. At any rate, the ban on *Mong Tang Mum* produced an immediate clamour of popular opposition, testifying to the programme's success in promoting a climate of public debate.

When General Suchinda Kraprayoon succeeded Anand as Prime Minister in April 1992, *Mong Tang Mum* experienced a second crisis. It was abundantly clear that certain members of Suchinda's administration were extremely hostile to the programme. According to Chermasak, one prospective minister was threatening to have the show banned even before he had been officially appointed. On 20 April, Prime Minister's Office Minister Piyanat Watcharaporn declared that 'adjustments' would have to be made to *Mong Tang Mum* in order to make it 'more balanced'. On 1 May, Chermasak was reported as having said that the programme had been under the scrutiny of a censor for the past two weeks. Nevertheless, *Mong Tang Mum* continued to appear in its usual format throughout the May crisis. On 24 May, however, the production team decided not to broadcast a new programme, screening a repeat instead.

During the run-up to the September general election, various special editions of *Mong Tang Mum* were broadcast, including one from inside the parliamentary chamber and another the following day which featured ex-premier Chatchai Choonavan, incumbent premier Anand, and would-be premiers Chamlong Srimuang, Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh, and Chuan Leekpai. The programmes helped increase popular interest in the electoral process and were the subject of considerable press discussion in the days that followed.

During the session broadcast from Parliament, some members of the audience jeered at the comments of one pro-military politician. Chermasak

immediately cut in, telling the audience that democracy entailed allowing those with differing views to be heard. The underlying didactic purpose of *Mong Tang Mum* was made abundantly plain.

For all its strengths, *Mong Tang Mum* had certain failings. Most notable was the frequent inability of Chermasak to encourage the participants to argue with each other, a striking difference from the BBC's *Question Time*. Even the pre-election clash of the prime ministerial titans was mostly rather dull television because of the evasiveness of the participants and their reluctance openly to disagree. There was a fundamental discrepancy between the liberal premises of the programme makers and the prevailing Thai political culture. Dr Chaiwat Satha-anand, a political scientist and member of the *Mong Tang Mum* production team, argued that a time might come when the programme would have outlived its usefulness: there was a danger of simply repeating a tired discussion of similar issues in the same old way.

*Mong Tang Mum* was not the only new television current affairs programme. During 1992, there were two series of *Countdown to the General Election* discussion programmes, hosted on Channel 9 by *Nation* publisher Suthichai Yoon. Unlike Chermasak, Suthichai was an abrasive, confrontational interviewer who liked to indulge in verbal sparring with leading politicians. Veteran Thai television orators, such as the populist Prachakorn Thai leader Samak Sundaravej, were distinctly ill at ease with Suthichai's format: after one particularly bruising encounter, Samak declined to face Suthichai again. Some viewers complained that Suthichai's manner was rude or even 'un-Thai', but the programmes were enjoyed by millions.

Between them, Suthichai Yoon and Chermasak Pinthong had whetted the appetites of the Thai public for high-quality television which would do justice to serious political and social issues. Many hopes were pinned on the proposed private franchises for the new UHF channels. At the same time, the privately-operated Channel 3 and Channel 7 had failed to produce quality current affairs programmes to match those of the state-run Channels 9 and 11. It might well be argued, given the success of *Mong Tang Mum*, that there was considerable potential for intelligent television programming within the existing ownership structure. DM

## THAILAND

That night, *Jor Sor 100*, a popular, Army owned radio station well known for its traffic updates, suddenly began to broadcast a phone-in programme about the political crisis. Parts of the programme were hosted by the head of franchise holder Pacific Intercommunications, Piya Malakul. Listeners were outraged by Piya's obviously biased treatment of callers: he consistently cut off those opposed to Suchinda's premiership while encouraging Suchinda supporters to criticise the demonstrators. Worse still, Piya's fellow presenter was the one-time doyen of Thai newscasters, the highly respected Dr Somkiat Onwimol. It later transpired that Piya and Somkiat had called on Suchinda that evening to obtain his personal approval for the special phone-in.

The highlight of Saturday's broadcast was a live link-up with opposition MP Thinnawat Marukapitak, speaking direct from the protest stage. Somkiat misrepresented Thinnawat's comments by claiming that the demonstrators were already dispersing; in fact, the Sanam Luang remained packed with protestors waiting for hard evidence to support government promises of a compromise with their demands. The episode virtually ruined Somkiat's journalistic reputation, apparently illustrating a distasteful complicity between politicians and newsmen.

On Sunday 10 May, protest leaders resolved to give the government a week's grace to honour its pledges. The protestors were to reassemble on 17 May if the government had failed to act on its promises. A hastily formed 'Centre to Promote Participation in Democracy' set up a 24-hour telephone hotline to provide information: one of its main roles was to inform people that the renewed protest would definitely go ahead. Chulalongkorn University radio agreed to provide round-the-clock news coverage of the protest; a five-member working party on press freedom — which comprised Reporters Association of Thailand president Banyat Tasaniyavej, *Nation* publisher Suthichai Yoon, *Thai Rath* editor Manit Sook-somchit, plus two academics, was established following a panel discussion at Chulalongkorn University. On 16 May, the group petitioned the government to allow equal broadcast time for both pro- and anti-Suchinda views.

Its request was not met. When soldiers opened fire on unarmed demonstrators on the night of 17 May and stormed the Royal Hotel early the following morning, at least 50 civilians were killed — possibly hundreds. These fatalities went unreported on the main broadcast media, which depicted the demonstrators as disruptive trouble-makers. Troops, on the other hand, were praised for their 'extreme discipline and restraint'.

Martial law was proclaimed late on Sunday evening and newspapers were ordered not to publish any material which might inflame the unrest. By that time, however, most Thai-language papers were already



King Bhumiphol hears the reports on the riots.

going to press. But at the English-language *Bangkok Post*, editor Paisal Sricharatchanya decided to blank out several news stories, as well as his own editorial, to avoid the risk of closure. His staff were divided over the decision, some arguing that the *Post* should 'publish and be damned'. When its more liberal rival *The Nation* appeared the next morning with full coverage of the previous day's events, the *Bangkok Post* was widely thought to have capitulated too readily to government pressure. Significantly, there were no white spaces in the *Post* on 19 May.

By 18 May, Thailand's civil disturbances were the lead story in news broadcasts throughout the developed world. Expatriate Thais were phoning their friends and relatives at home to tell them of the shooting. The arrest of Chamlong Srimuang and other pro-democracy leaders that afternoon failed to quell the protests. In defiance of earlier orders to deny foreign television companies access to satellite links, staff at Channels 7 and 9 facilitated the transmission abroad of uncensored footage of the violent suppression of the demonstrations. Thais with access to

## PRESSING FOR CHANGE

For Mrs Banyat Tasaniyavej, *Bangkok Post* journalist and second-term president of the Reporters Association of Thailand (RAT), the violence of 'Black May' marked a turning-point in public awareness of the relationship between politics and the media. 'In sharp contrast to the comprehensive coverage of the pro-democracy demonstrations provided by the newspapers, the broadcast media were systematically distorting events. During the height of the protests, from 17 to 21 May, hundreds of people were phoning their newspaper offices, complaining about the inaccuracy of the television news broadcasts.'

Mrs Banyat believes that the print media were widely seen to be taking the side of the people, joining in their struggle for political freedom. The Reporters Association of Thailand (RAT), which has over 700 members and is the largest of the country's three press associations, was at the forefront of the clash between free expression and crude state censorship. In all, 33 journalists received injuries during the clashes; many others were harassed, most commonly receiving threatening telephone calls. RAT subsequently put out an illustrated book about the May events in magazine format, a compilation of eyewitness accounts by its members.

The first intimations that the Suchinda administration would prove to be a dark age for press freedom in Thailand came two days before General Suchinda took office. On 5 April, a Thai employee of Visnews was accosted in front of a military building and grilled for information in a dark corner. His four interrogators demanded the home address of Suthin Wannabovorn, a Reuters reporter who was known to have asked pointed questions of various leading pro-military politicians concerning the possibility that they might name an 'outsider' (that is, Suchinda) to the premiership. The men gave the distinct impression that they intended to harm Suthin. Subsequently, Banyat led a RAT delegation to the new Prime Minister, asking him to ensure that reporters were not intimidated, since this would have an adverse effect, not only upon personal liberty, but upon the country as a whole.

The warning, however, went unheeded: Suchinda persisted in adopting a heavy-handed approach to his dealings with journalists, declining to answer their questions at public gatherings. On 16 April, he hosted a dinner for government MPs at Bangkok's Central Plaza Hotel. Instead of the customary half-a-dozen bodyguards, he was surrounded by around 20 henchmen as he made his way into the

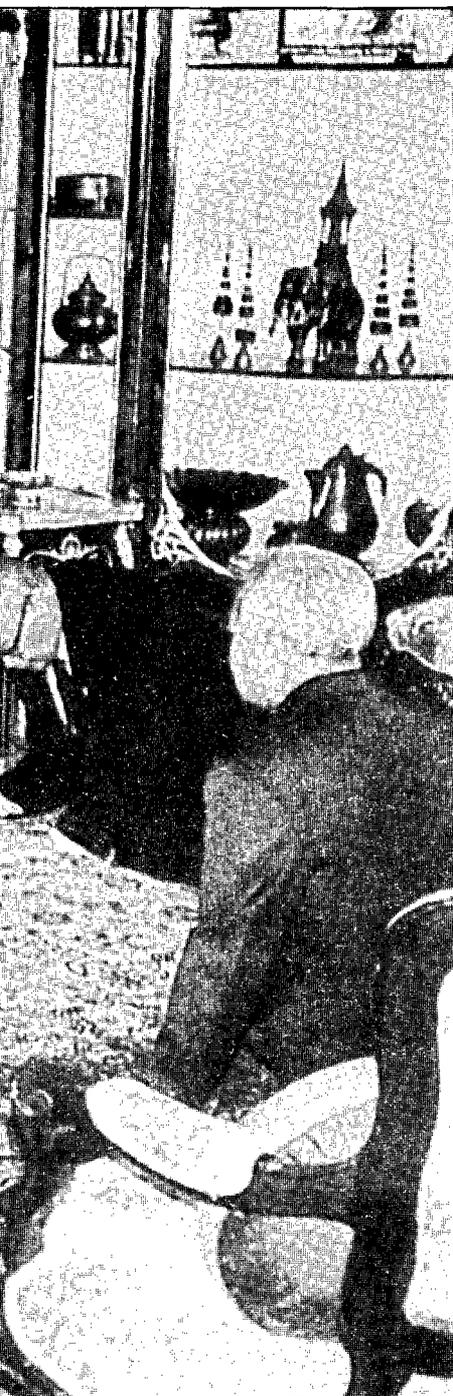
dining room. His aides swore at waiting reporters, telling them to get out the way. One woman reporter had her arm cut by a sharp object; another was elbowed in the stomach. All 68 reporters present signed a letter of protest which was taken in to the premier. Suchinda had made a serious miscalculation, turning the entire Thai press corps against him at a stroke. RAT sent a formal complaint to the Prime Minister's office. By acting in concert to defend their professional and personal rights, Thai journalists were able to sustain their morale during the 48 dark days of Suchinda Kraprayoon's tenure.

Although General Suchinda pledged in his first parliamentary statement on government policy that he would promote press freedom, he told reporters on a visit to the provinces on 2 May that he wanted to see Thai newspapers practise self-censorship 'to ensure law and order and help the country's economy'. Suchinda claimed that 'most Thai people and the press do not want disorder. I would like to ask the press to help'. Far from helping, many Thai reporters did their utmost to undermine the Suchinda government, writing detailed blow-by-blow accounts of every development in the protest movement.

After Suchinda's resignation, the popular interest in political news did not diminish. According to Mrs Banyat, 'People were hungry for news. They wanted to follow up the protests. Don't forget that there were protests in large towns and cities throughout Thailand, quite apart from the demonstrations in Bangkok. There is now a new generation of newspapers in fierce competition with each other. This is leading to an improvement in the quality of reporting. In the past, most newspapers concentrated on reporting crime stories; now these are declining in favour of political news.'

Direct state interference, however, is not the only threat to journalistic integrity in Thailand. Although difficult to substantiate, there have been persistent allegations that some Thai journalists — including well-known columnists — take bribes or accept 'favours' from politicians and influential figures. In 1990, RAT took action over claims that Interior Minister Banharn Silpa-archa had been paying 'expenses' for certain reporters to accompany him on trips to the provinces. In this case, RAT resolved to reimburse Banharn in full.

As Mrs Banyat puts it, 'The future of press freedom in Thailand lies partly in the hands of reporters themselves. It is essential that the new generation has higher standards.' DM



cable and satellite television were able to see some of this coverage, especially that of BBC World Service TV, which the authorities never succeeded in blacking out.

By the evening of 19 May, Channel 9 had begun to screen footage of the Army's attempts to put down the demonstrations for domestic consumption. The following day, around 100 soldiers arrived at the television station and set up 'protective' barricades around it; they did not, however, succeed in altering the new, anti-Suchinda editorial line taken by Channel 9. The

government was beginning to lose both its grip on events and its power to control even the usually tame electronic media.

On 21 May, the authorities made a desperate attempt to bring Thailand's newspapers to heel. Sawat Amornwiwat, the Director-General of Police, signed orders for the closure of three dailies — *The Nation*, *Naew Na*, and *Phujatkarn* (Manager) — each for a period of three days, on the grounds that their reports were 'affecting national security and creating confusion among the public'. The action, however, came too late. That evening, King Bhumiphol of Thailand appeared on television to deliver an extraordinary public admonition to Generals Suchinda and Chamlong, telling them to 'desist from confrontation and to embrace conciliation'. From then, Suchinda's resignation appeared inevitable. The beginning of the end of the crisis had been reached. Sawat revoked the closure orders within hours of having issued them.

**A NEW DISPENSATION?**

The fall of the Suchinda government cleared the way for a renewed public debate about the future of broadcasting in Thailand. Adding fuel to the fire were the hot selling pirate videotapes of the May events which appeared on the streets almost at once. Most of the videos were based on CNN and BBC footage of the demonstrations, though others were locally produced. Millions of Thais were soon able to see for themselves the bloody scenes which had never appeared on domestic television news. Even during the crackdown, pro-democracy groups had been screening similar videos at rallies held at provincial universities across Thailand. The crudity of news censorship by the state was plain for all to see.

Anand Panyarachun, temporarily re-appointed to the premiership on 10 June, soon found himself embroiled in the media debate. In July, he announced that he intended to do away with Decree 17, a measure which stated that all television news programmes had to appear at the same time, and to abolish the so-called 'TV pool' which supplied news coverage to all television stations. Still more important, his government intended to approve the establishment of five new UHF television channels, channels for which the private sector would be given the opportunity to bid. This proposal generated enormous interest; many newspaper groups (including *Manager*, *The Nation*, *Bangkok Post* and *Thai Rath*) expressed interest in submitting bids.

In the weeks that followed, however, it became apparent that Anand had not thought through his television liberalisation plan in sufficient detail. It was clear that there were two main categories of would-be franchisees: companies that hoped to provide popular, lucrative entertainment channels, and companies that wanted to create a new

style of high-quality, current affairs-based programming. Anand's proposals raised the hackles of those with a vested interest in the *status quo*. They argued that if a giant media organisation such as the *Thai Rath* group could gain control of a television channel, its 'monopolistic power' might threaten democratic debate. Many progressive supporters of 'quality television' found themselves wondering whether slick and possibly unscrupulous commercial manipulation of public perceptions would be any improvement

Minister's office lacked the power to compel the PR Department to give up Channel 11. Entrenched bureaucratic privilege of this kind lay at the heart of the obstacles to thorough reform of Thailand's electronic media. Anand left office following the 13 September 1992 general election without having settled the issue of ownership of the new channels, bequeathing the problem to his successor, Democrat Party leader Chuan Leekpai.

Chuan quickly found himself embroiled in a variety of difficulties, ranging from an economic downturn to a foreign policy crisis over Cambodia. Anand was criticised for acting with excessive haste over the television channel question; Chuan, a lawyer with a penchant for compromise, has adopted a typically low-risk strategy by placing the issue on the back-burner. Talk of new TV stations has now died down.

There is more movement on the radio front: two national radio networks have been proposed, both of which should soon be on air. One is run by Suthichai Yoon using the 97 FM Public Relations Department frequency, the other by the Media Plus Company, which is already operating three regional networks under the name Radio Smile.

The picture is considerably brighter so far as the print media is concerned. A number of new titles appeared after May: *Siam Post*, a Thai-language *Nation* weekend news magazine, and a weekly version of *Naew Na*, to name but three.

The marketing of the media has also become increasingly sophisticated; for example, forward-thinking media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul has cut a deal with IBC cable television to supply his *Phujatkarn* daily newspaper to all subscribers, free of charge.

The continuing financial and professional vitality of its press is probably Thailand's best insurance policy against the return of May-style government attempts to restrict the freedom of information. With Decree 42 gone, no Thai Prime Minister can close newspapers with impunity and, for the time being at least, few politicians would dare attempt to introduce a new Press Bill.

It would be premature and simplistic, however, to see the events of May 1992 as part of a progressive transition from dictatorship to democracy. Much of the power vacuum resulting from a decline in the authority of Thailand's soldiers and bureaucrats is likely to be filled by businessmen, especially those in the media business. Many Thai journalists, editors and newspaper owners are known to have close connections with particular politicians, parties and interest groups. Although the recent period of heavy-handed government interference in the media might appear to be over, other threats to the emergence of a more open 'information society' remain alive and well in today's Thailand. ■



**Statement from President of Reporters'  
Association of Thailand**

**O**n the long winding road toward democracy, journalists have sacrificed their blood, sweat and tears together with the masses fighting against the return of totalitarianism. Although the pro-democratic demonstration, dubbed "the May Bloodshed," began on 17-20 May, prior to the unfortunate event journalists had already been watching and reporting on the development closely in a concerted effort to warn the power wielders of the imminent repercussions that the abuse of absolute power would have on the country's image and economic performance.

Journalists' honesty in reporting the news created numerous instances of friction with military leaders, particularly during the transitional period from the 1991 coup under the National Peace Keeping Council. The council misinterpreted the setting up of new political parties to serve their interest and perpetuate the military leaders' power, leading the drafting of a new constitution including playing a key role in forming the disgraced government after the March election.

Throughout the most trying period, many journalists were threatened and some of them were even assaulted. On their behalf, the Reporters' Association of Thailand issued statements after statements condemning these heinous acts.

During the May incident, a huge number of journalists were at the front line reporting on the pro-democracy movement. They worked alongside the peaceful demonstrators. Yes, they fell victims to the military's brutality. A total of 33 journalists were injured, some seriously. The Reporters' Association of Thailand has already provided assistance to these victims, both in terms of financial and moral support.

The May incident was a historic event, which demonstrated the people's power protecting the rule of constitutionalism and the struggle for democracy. It also showed the brutality of the powers - that - be. To remind the public of the event, the Reporters' Association has published this special edition "Journalists' record : "Rajadarnern Hanfiefeld" which put together eye-witness' accounts of journalists and their photographs.

The Reporters' Association of Thailand hopes this book will prove useful to readers as a reminder of what had occurred in the country during those four fateful days.

**'On the long winding road toward democracy, journalists have sacrificed their blood, sweat and tears'**

on old-fashioned state control.

By mid-August, new proposals had emerged for the future of Thai television: two of the five new stations would be run by private consortia, consortia in which no single company (for which read 'newspaper group') would have more than a 10% financial stake. One channel was to be semi-private, half-owned by a consortium and half by the existing Channel 11, which would be required to subsidise it.

The revised formula made nonsense of the idea of liberalising the electronic media. It was almost inconceivable that cut-throat rival newspaper companies would agree to pool their financial and other resources, not to mention their editorial viewpoints. Asked at a panel discussion why the existing Channel 11 could not be given an independent charter, government spokesman Montri Chenvidyakarn explained that the Public Relations Department had refused to relinquish control of the station. Even the Prime