

The Downfall of the Thai

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Bangkok

"They were asking for it," the heavily jeweled dowager snapped, her face creasing into unbecoming harshness for just a moment. "They got what they deserved."

Then she flashed her brilliant smile, so well known in Bangkok's elite social circles, and slipped off to chat with another intimate group at her cocktail party about a more pleasant subject — Wednesday night's coup d'etat in Thailand.

Like most wealthy Thais, and apparently even more poorer residents of this brassy capital, the hostess was delighted with the military takeover. The left-wing Thammasat University students, 26 or more of whom were slaughtered in a brutal armed attack by police and a rightist mob hours before the coup took place, were of little interest. They'd flaunted authority and "they got what they deserved."

This coldly bitter indifference to the fate of the students and the warm reception given to the military takeover were not simply reflections of opportunism. Rather, these attitudes revealed the extent to which Thai society had been polarized into left and right camps in the country's three-year experiment with democratic government.

The left, as epitomized by the students, appears to have pushed too hard and too fast for "progressive" measures. The students succeeded only in angering the right — as epitomized by the military forces — evoking violent reaction, and alienating large numbers of ordinary, unpoliticized Thais.

In the end, the left was reduced to little more than the students, the 10,000 or so Communist guerillas fighting in the northeast and a relative handful of radical farmer-activists in the north. The great bulk of the population of 44 million joined the right-wing reaction.

By the time the police attacked the Thammasat campus, the students were virtually without sympathizers. When the survivors, stripped and humiliated, were hauled away in buses, they were

Leftists

stoned, spat upon and cursed. "Scum of the earth," was the shout from the mob that followed their route to an interrogation center.

By yesterday afternoon, the university had become a tourist curiosity. Hundreds of Thais, many of them with cameras slung from their necks, came to stare at damaged areas.

Police armed with combat rifles kept the crowds back. But an occasional well-wisher was allowed to present the guards with pieces of sugar cane or other symbolic gifts or gratitude.

A stocky man in his mid-30s, standing silently alongside his wife and their infant daughter, thought seriously for a moment before answering a reporter's question about where his sympathies lay.

"The students used to be good," he replied in time. "But since '73 they've become communists. They're against our king and our religion. The police did what had to be done."

As he suggested, it wasn't always



THANOM KITTIKACHORN
He was opposed by students

this way. Three years ago, the students were Thailand's undisputed heroes. They led a revolution through the streets of Bangkok that succeeded in toppling the three-man military dictatorship and opened the way to genuine parliamentary democracy for the first time in this ancient Buddhist kingdom's history.

But the public's adulation of the students was short-lived. There were some specific incidents. For instance, the students collected public contributions to help build a monument to the revolution's martyrs. The monument has yet to be built and the students were unable to account for much of the funds.

According to popular belief, some student organization leaders financed trips for themselves to Europe with the money. This rumor has been encouraged by groups of vocational-school students who, more conservative than the university students, aligned themselves with far right-wing groups in defense of the monarchy and Buddhism.

From time to time, the vocational and university students clashed with each other, causing deaths and injuries. Then came the final straw, a skit by striking Thammasat students Monday night that purportedly depicted Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn as being hanged.

Few foreign observers believe this was the student's intention. But it was the ideal situation for the armed forces and other rightist forces to exploit. They'd ruled the country in a succession of dictatorships for 35 years, and, it was said, they were looking for a way to resume power.

In three years of democracy, labor unions struck again and again. Violence and crime soared, not just in Bangkok but throughout the traditionally peaceful countryside. Governments came and went — three in three years — and proved incapable of meeting challenges.

Then, in a brilliant tactic last month, pro-royalists and other right-wingers engineered the return to Thailand of former dictator Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn. He has become a monk in a Buddhist temple where, he claims, he is "earning merit" in heaven for his aged and dying father.

Tom's presence, as the rightists

must have known, was more than the students could tolerate. So they took their bitterness into the streets, then staged the skit, and ultimately became the targets in Wednesday's violence.

Because afternoon newspapers were allowed to appear on the street before an overall ban on publishing was imposed Wednesday night, the public has some idea of how vicious the attack was. What isn't known, though, is that the students were virtually without arms of their own and, apparently, were little better off than fish in a barrel.

When the shooting subsided around noon Wednesday, this correspondent and another journalist entered the accountancy faculty building, where the leftist students had been staging a sit-in when the violence erupted.

For half an hour we searched the halls and classrooms, walking over shattered glass, blood-soaked clothing, scattered note books, and texts, toothbrushes and combs, cold, half-empty plates of food — all the signs of a student sit-in interrupted by unanticipated violence.

In a number of hallways, desks and chairs were turned on their sides, for use as shields. Most were pierced by dozens of bullet holes. Aluminum and steel window frames were shattered and torn by heavy rounds, including recoilless rifle shells and rocket-launched grenades. Several heavy trails of blood led along the hallways and down the concrete stairways.

But one sign of a genuine gunfight was missing: There were no spent cartridges anywhere in the accountancy faculty building. What this seems to indicate is that the students inside the building had no weapons and had nothing to protect themselves but desks and chairs.

Now that the press is to be censored by military authorities, there is little chance of the story of the grizzly killings at Thammasat being told here.

But that doesn't seem to matter much. The people of Thailand have learned that they're not yet ready to govern themselves, and there's little doubt left that they welcome the return to the security of military dictatorship.