

PERSPECTIVE

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Why are the Border Patrol Police in Bangkok now?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thailand's Border Patrol Police (BPP) have been deployed at key protest sites in Bangkok since September.
- The BPP had been called in to operate in Bangkok on two previous occasions: on 6 October 1976, during demonstrations at Thammasat University, and in January-May 2010, during Red Shirt unrest.
- The current mobilization of the BPP in Bangkok invokes traumatic memories of the 6 October 1976 massacre.
- The BPP have been Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's right-hand force since the early 1980s, and their civic action work has been closely tied to her royal projects. In contrast, the current monarch has limited influence over this police organization.
- Significantly, the ongoing pro-democracy protests led by the young activists are an endeavor to overcome Thailand's traumatic past.

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INTRODUCTION

On 21 June 2020, a noose was found in a garage used by Bubba Wallace, the only black driver in NASCAR's top racing series. The discovery came days after the driver had posted a "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) message and congratulated NASCAR for its ban on displays of the Confederate battle flag. Both NASCAR and the FBI investigated the incident, and just two days later the FBI concluded that the incident was not a hate crime. It stated that "the garage door pull rope fashioned like a noose had been positioned there since as early as last fall."¹ The rope fashioned like a noose may not have been evidence of hate crime, and Bubba Wallace had to fight battle charges that he was overreacting to the discovery of the noose. Nevertheless, many agreed that a noose represented a nerve-racking reminder of violence for him and other BLM protesters for their resistance to systemic racism.

The presence of Thailand's Border Patrol Police (BPP) at protest sites in Bangkok has the same impact that the noose in Bubba Wallace's garage had on black Americans. The Border Patrol Police, as the name of the force suggests, are meant to operate in border areas. Indeed, except for a few hundred administrative staff at the Border Patrol Police General Headquarters on Phaya Thai Road in Bangkok, most active BPP forces are in the provinces.

The BPP have now operated in central Bangkok on three distinct occasions in Thailand's history: as part of the "anti-riot" operation at Thammasat University on 6 October 1976, in suppression of Red Shirt demonstrations in the Ratchaprasong-Siam Square area in the first half of 2010, and now to control the ongoing protests in the city that began early this year. On all three occasions, the BPP have been the emblematic frontline force guarding the ideological, if not physical, border of the royalist Thai nation. The reason that today's protesters are particularly attentive to the presence of the BPP is that the violence that this force committed in October 1976 has been neither publicly recognized by the state nor openly resolved by the perpetrators and victims. The Thai state is bringing up this past as it needs to remind the Thai people of the risks involved in challenging the monarchy or the royalist network.

Even before the violent suppression carried out by the police on 16 October beneath the Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS) sky-train station at Pathumwan Intersection, people had posted on social media pictures of BPP officers setting up barbed wire barricades in the streets. What made the student protests this year distinctive is the outright demand for the reform of monarchy. The 6 October 1976 massacre, which the publication of a fabricated photograph showing the hanging of someone resembling then Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn triggered, taught a lesson: whenever the monarchy is threatened, the BPP will be mobilized to act on its behalf. In other words, if the BPP are present, then the monarchy is somehow involved. If the monarchy is involved, then things can get ugly.

WHY THEY ARE THERE

To be sure, this assumption demands more details if we are to comprehend what the BPP's current deployment in Bangkok stands for in indicating the state's response to ongoing protests there. The BPP's involvement in the 6 October massacre is a well-known but still understudied subject. We still do not know who ordered the BPP, or more precisely the BPP's Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU) stationed in Hua Hin, to attack the protesters at Thammasat on that day, although their presence clearly informs us that in some

way the monarchy was involved. The PARU force was the unit specifically assigned to protect the royal family and was ready for deployment anywhere in Thailand within four hours of receiving an order.

After the 6 October massacre, the BPP were placed directly under the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters to participate in military operations. But because of the infamous reputation that it had gained following the massacre, the force remained quiet for many years. The second time that the BPP made an appearance in Bangkok was during the Red Shirt demonstrations in the first five months of 2010. Both domestic and international media showed BPP forces with their plastic shields bearing the abbreviation *to cho do* –for *tamruat trawen chaidae*n or Border Patrol Police—as they guarded the gate to parliament or pushed protesters to the corner in Siam Square. The BPP was also seen in other interesting spots at that time – in front of the Democrat Party’s headquarters and of party member Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva’s house off Sukhumvit Road. When Red Shirt protesters poured bottles and bags of Thai people’s blood at these sites in March 2010, the BPP were there.²

Between 2009 and 2011, when conducting fieldwork at the BPP headquarters and in camps, this author asked officers at the General Headquarters why BPP forces from the provinces had been called into Bangkok, one man said “because the police do not kill people. The military kills people.” At first, Abhisit’s government did not want to mobilize the military to suppress the protesters, as events might turn ugly and violence against the protest would confirm to the world that the Thai Democrats were undemocratic. Of course, the military did in the end roll in to take centerstage and the killing started in April 2010.

So far this year, we have not seen the military on the streets of the Thai capital. But police forces have filled the narrow *sois* and back alleys of the city.³ On 16 October, BPP forces with their shields stood before the Korean-made water cannon vehicles that were deployed. Protesters appealed for the chance to retreat peacefully, but the vehicles soon sprayed blue-tinted, chemical-laced water on them. As if the protests had been expected, the Royal Thai Police purchased at least four water cannon vehicles from Korea early this year.⁴

Not only just the presence of the BPP but also the location of its deployment has been noteworthy. The BPP do not have “areas of responsibility” in Bangkok. BPP forces, like other provincial police, are called from the regional headquarters and from other camps to aid the Metropolitan Police. Usually, the regional BPP forces called into Bangkok stay at the General Headquarters in Phaya Thai Road. This may explain why the BPP most often appeared in the Rama I Road-Siam Square area during the 2010 and 2020 protests. That area adjoins Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn’s residence, Sa Pathum Palace. As the Border Patrol Police’s civic action work is mostly connected to Princess Sirindhorn’s royal projects, and as female PARU officers in particular are assigned to provide security for the princess, the BPP’s defense of Siam Square from any instability makes sense. Presumably, the BPP rarely mobilize forces from the South or Region 4, as units there are still tied down dealing with insurgents. In that sense, seeing a police bus from the Southern subdivision around the German embassy, where the protesters gathered on 26 October to submit a letter to the ambassador concerning the king’s residence in his country, was noteworthy. Usually, BPP forces mobilized in Bangkok are from Region 1, Central Thailand, and they were also spotted in front of the German embassy on that day. Border Patrol Police Region 1 Headquarters in Pathum Thani were utilized to detain the protest leaders in 2020, as in 2010.⁵ The camp is not officially a prison, but the use of the BPP camp as a detention centre is an intimidating signal to protesters. The BPP lacks the power to investigate and arrest.

Even if BPP officers arrest a suspect, they must transfer the person to the provincial police or to other police units. For the protesters and their leaders in a Border Patrol Police camp is therefore no different from the case of a war prisoner being captured in a military camp, waiting for transfer.

Beyond the flood of information in social media, we also need to pay close attention to the boundaries that the BPP has drawn in Bangkok. The BPP are a small organization that cannot afford to have thousands of its forces away from their regular duties for an extended period of time. Therefore, the tendency is for only small numbers of BPP forces in military fatigues to be deployed to strategic or symbolic locations where their presence can be clearly noted and can attract public attention. It is therefore puzzling that the BPP have been placed mainly at Siam Square and not at the Grand Palace.⁶

As mentioned earlier, the BPP have been closely associated with Princess Sirindhorn and her royal projects since the early 1980s. It is common knowledge that, compared to the unpopular King Vajiralongkorn, Princess Sirindhorn has enjoyed public affection for the similarity between her activities and those of her father, the late king Bhumibol Adulyadej. The BPP, whose existence is intimately tied to the monarchy, has already become Princess Sirindhorn's right-hand force, and the unit's deployment, despite the fact that it receives order from the Royal Thai Police, cannot be entirely up to the police alone. In other words, the BPP are mobilized by the order of the Royal Thai Police but the unit cannot be freely mobilized to any arbitrary spot.

It may be a stretch, but the BPP's absence from the area near the Grand Palace area also allows us to view the king's unprecedented public exposure there from a different angle, and to understand the influence that the current king has over Thai political elites and administrators. On 1 November, CNN's Jonathan Miller briefly interviewed the king during his and the queen's meeting with their supporters in front of the palace. The scene was unexpected. People in yellow shirts were freely taking pictures and videos of the king and queen. As one *Khaosod* photographer pointed out, it has been the norm for the royal family's public exposure to be strictly controlled and censored, and personal cameras and phones banned in its presence. The king said in the interview with that "Thailand is the land of compromise." He then had a brief conversation with his daughter Princess Sirivannavari, who ran up to the CNN reporter to confirm that they "love Thai people, no matter what." The *Khaosod* photographer commented that the palace had eased "its regulations to allow for closer royal interaction with members of the public and the media."⁷ For many who have been closely observing the royal family's public exposure, one can reasonably question whether the exposure was deliberately uncontrolled for closer royal interaction with the public or was simply remained uncontrolled because there were no procedures prepared for the current king. The "awkwardness" in public displayed by the current king is nothing new, but what Princess Sirivannavari did that night showed unexpected unprofessionalism on the part of the Thai royal palace. Although several politicians and influential figures were visible on the scene, none assisted the royal family with chores, such as instructing foreign journalists on what they should write about the king.

CONCLUSION

These observations suggest at least three conclusions.

First, the current Thai king seems not to have been involved in calling BPP forces to Bangkok. It is likely that the BPP have been deployed to protest sites by order of the Royal Thai Police, which had in turn received the order from the military or the government. The king's limited influence over, or connection with, the BPP supports this assumption. Since their formation in the early 1950s, the Border Patrol Police have enjoyed a close relationship with the royal family. The mother of the late king, Her Royal Highness Princess Sinakharintra, initiated a formal working relationship with the Border Patrol Police force early in the 1960s. King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit launched their official royal projects (*khroongkan phraratchadamri*) with help from the Princess Mother and her beloved BPP. Princess Sirindhorn replaced the Princess Mother as the patron of the BPP in the early 1980s when her grandmother's health waned. Princess Chulabhorn Walailak inherited the Princess Mother's Medical Volunteer Foundation, one of the first rural development projects that the Princess Mother had initiated with the BPP, when her aunt Princess Galyani passed away. The close working relationship between royal family members and the BPP is the reason that some in Thailand suspected the palace's involvement in the 6 October massacre. Unlike his parents and siblings, the current king has not directly engaged in royal projects with the BPP, losing the close connection to and influence over the unit. The latest activities that King Vajiralongkorn had with the BPP was with the Village Scouts, another institutional perpetrator of the 6 October 1976 massacre and a powerful public medium connecting the palace and the Thai populace at the time. King Vajiralongkorn attended Village Scout initiations to bestow royally-sponsored Village Scout flags in the 1990s and between 2010-2011. But as with his mother Queen Sirikit who curtailed public meetings with the organization after 2010, so did the current king in recent years.

Second, Prayut's government is very likely to have ordered the BPP to be present at protest sites in Bangkok, both to reduce people's suspicion of the military's role in quelling the protests and to remind the people what the unit did at Thammasat University 44 years ago. Clearly, Prayut's government is aware of the "noose impact" in having the BPP at selected protest sites. The BPP's military fatigues, berets and purple Naresuan badges would send a nerve-racking signal to the protesters about the possibility of looming violence. The Thai military politicians are using the old tactic of the politics of fear, hoping that the protesters will read the signs correctly. The protesters are in fact by all accounts reading the signals correctly. However, the reason that they are protesting, is to tell the government: "Stop enslaving us with past traumas." The protesters are stepping forward and calling the traumatic past into the public space again. The Thai youths want to resolve the traumatic past after 44 years of "unforgetting."⁸

Finally, as a historian, I am reminded of what British historian Edward H. Carr once said: "History is an unending dialogue between the present and the past." In the digital age when young Thais send their support to students in Hong Kong and Belarus and receive support from the so-called Milk Tea Alliance in return, the pro-democracy protesters in Thailand cannot be considered in isolation the way the victims of the 6 October massacre in Thammasat University were. Thai military dictators can no longer ignore international responses to the way in which they treat the Thai people. The king sending his daughter to reassure the foreign journalist that he loved Thai people "all the same" showed an understanding of this change. Of course, this does not mean that the Thai government has

been constrained from exercising violence against political dissidents, as we have seen in the case of the abduction of Thai human rights activist Wanchalearm Satsaksit from Cambodia several months ago and in the killing of other exiled political activists in Laos last year. The Thai government is now trying to remind citizens of what happened in 1976, hinting to the young pro-democracy protesters that they could be the next victims. When the student speakers called in the streets for reform of the monarchy in September, many observers might have feared the same ending – massacre by the Thai government.

However, the young Thai protesters have not become slaves to historical trauma.⁹ On the contrary, they are initiating a dialogue with the nation's traumatic past. They are not calling for reconciliation, but for repentance on the part of those who have tried to enslave and control the Thai people by using events of the past. The singing of the song from *Les Misérables*, "Do you hear the people sing", because "it is the music of a people who will not be slaves again", gains further poignancy when viewed that way.

¹ Tom Lutz, "FBI concludes that Bubba Wallace not victim of hate crime over noose incident", *The Guardian*, 23 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/jun/23/fbi-investigation-bubba-wallace-noose-nascar> (accessed 7 November 2020).

² Chaiwat Subprasom, "Gallery: Thailand", *Vancouver Sun*, 16 March 2010, <http://www.vancouversun.com/Gallery+THAILAND/2689719/story.html> (accessed 7 November 2020).

³ "Cops out in force for mass protest", *Bangkok Post*, 11 October 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1999987/cops-out-in-force-for-mass-protest> (accessed 7 November 2020).

⁴ Author's phone conversation with staff at Jino Motors, 20 October 2020. The company exported at least four water cannon vehicles to Thailand early this year.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Descent into Chaos: Thailand's 2010 Red Shirt Protests and the Government Crackdown", May 2011, p. 121; <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/05/03/descent-chaos/thailands-2010-red-shirt-protests-and-government-crackdown> (accessed 7 November 2020).

⁶ On 8 November 2020, BPP forces were deployed to Sanam Luang together with other provincial police forces.

⁷ Khaosod English, "Local Media Puzzled by CNN's Impromptu King Interview", 2 November 2020, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2020/11/02/local-media-puzzled-at-cnns-impromptu-king-interview/> (accessed 7 November 2020).

⁸ Thongchai Winichakul, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976 Massacre in Bangkok* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020).

⁹ On 14 November 2020, King Vajiralongkorn and Queen Suthida attended the inauguration of the Metropolitan Rapid Transit (MRT) Blue Line at the Sanam Chai-Lak Song MRT station in Bangkok. The pictures of the king and queen sitting on padded cushions inside the train while all others are sitting on the floor have caused a flood of memes concerning traditional slavery to appear on social media. See the photos of the king and queen's visit to the event from Lydia Catling and Joe Davies, "Groveling room only: Thai king's flunkies kneel on the floor as the monarch and his queen open new subway station while pro-democracy protests continue", *Daily Mail*, 16 November 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8952373/Thai-king-Maha-Vajiralongkorn-queen-Suthida-Tube-open-new-subway-station.html> (accessed 18 November 2020).

2020). See also Thongchai Winichakul, “Thailand’s kingdom of enslavement”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 16 October 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Thailand-s-kingdom-of-enslavement> (accessed 18 November 2020).

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