

Memorializing Thai Democracy in the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial

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Abstract

The 1992 Black May, also known as Bloody May, refers to the series of protests against the military regime of Suchinda Kraprayoon, which resulted in military violence that killed and injured hundreds of people. To commemorate this significant chapter in the democratic history of Thailand and memorialize the fallen heroes of this movement, the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial ('Anusōṅ sathān pruessapa prachā tham), was constructed in Santiporn Park, and underwent a major development nearly three decades after the tragic event. This qualitative study delves into historical accounts, including multiple news articles, pertinent documents, social media posts, and a limited number of English-language references documenting the construction of the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial to explore the concept of democracy as portrayed in its structure. It also examines the annual commemoration of the May 1992 democratic movement and how people continuously reinforce democracy by commemorating and observing the uprising at the memorial. Drawing on Pierre Nora's concept of *les lieux de mémoire*, this paper argues that the structure, as a "site of memory," not only commemorates the heroes of democracy but also embodies the democratic struggles of the Thai people. It asserts the importance of the space in preserving the legacies of the May 1992 democratic



movement and its contribution to public memory and discourses on Thai democracy, including both traditional and Western school discourses. By unraveling the complexities of democracy within this structure, this work highlights the role of public monuments in remembering the past and shaping the future of democracy in Thailand. The deliberate efforts by the relatives of the fallen heroes and the activists of that time to memorialize the May 1992 event through the memorial's construction emphasize the structure's enduring relevance in Thai public memory and democracy.

Keywords: Thai Democracy, May 1992, Bloody May, Black May, memorial

Introduction

The 32nd anniversary of Black May is the first commemoration under a new government after the military regime of former Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. This event ushers in optimism for Thai democracy after years under a military junta and, at the same time, memorializes the relevance of the 1992 uprising to the present status of democracy in the country. The current political situation in Thailand also clamors for the return of a people-driven constitution, much like how the 1992 protesters fought for a democratic constitution, culminating in the creation of the 1997 People’s Constitution. Attended by politicians, academics, activists, and relatives of the protesters killed in 1992, the remembrance on May 17, 2024, at the May 1992 People’s Uprising Memorial (‘Anusōṇ sathān pruessapa prachā tham) highlighted the importance of a constitution free from military influence, and the contributions of the deceased protesters to Thailand’s democratic progress¹.

The May 1992 People’s Uprising (Pruessapa prachā tham) began as a response to the rise to power of a group of military officers who staged a coup on February 23, 1991. Following the coup, they established the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC, Khana raksā khwām sangop rīaprōi hæng chāt) which governed the country until March 1992. In April 1992, the coup leader, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, assumed the position of prime minister, triggering a series of public protests. Major General Chamlong Srimuang emerged as the leader of the pro-democracy groups, demanding Suchinda’s resignation. The demonstration held on May 17, 1992, at Sanam Luang pressured the parliament to revise the NPKC’s military-backed constitution. Woefully, the military responded with violence the next day, killing a large number of protesters. Despite the arrest of Chamlong and thousands of others, the protest continued until May 20. On May 23, the late King Bhumibol mediated the crisis between the factions of Suchinda and Chamlong, leading to Suchinda’s resignation as unelected prime minister and the granting of amnesty to both military and pro-democracy groups².

To remember the bloody event and honor the fallen heroes of democracy, collaborative efforts among various institutions and sectors led to the creation of the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial ('Anusōṅ sathān pruessapa prachā tham) in Santiporn Park (Sūan santi phōn, Peace Garden). However, the park and memorial faced significant challenges during their development. The Chuan Leekpai government approved the plan for a memorial park on May 11, 1993, but the plan was delayed for 16 years due to land management concerns³. Stone-laying ceremonies for the memorial took place twice, on May 17, 2005, and May 17, 2013, underscoring the difficulties in realizing the structure⁴. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and the May 1992 People's Uprising Foundation (Mūnnithi pruessapa prachā tham) finalized the memorial's plan in 2016. The construction reached a significant development on September 9, 2020, when the ashes of the fallen heroes were enshrined in the memorial structure⁵. Throughout these periods, financial and bureaucratic constraints, coupled with Thailand's changing political landscape, posed significant challenges. The memorial also struggled to solidify its place in Thai public memory and democratic discourse.

The 1992 protests propelled a democratic movement that inspired hope among the Thai people despite the bloody crackdown on the activists. This movement contributed to the creation of the 1997 People's Constitution and continued the struggle initiated by student activists in the 1970s. Unfortunately, this democratic phase was interrupted by the September 2006 coup and further undermined by the military regime of Prayut Chan-o-cha, which seized power in May 2014, echoing the actions of Suchinda in 1992.

Given the enduring impact of the 1992 uprising on Thailand's democratic campaign, it is noteworthy to examine how these events are remembered through the memorial. This paper seeks to unlock the connection between democracy and the memorial by answering the following questions: (1) How does the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial, as a site of memory, reflect the notion of democracy? Moreover, (2) How do the people reinforce and continue to memorialize the idea of democracy after its construction?

This study examines the annual commemoration of the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial to discuss the notion of democracy it represents. It also highlights the role of public participation in reinforcing the idea of democracy by commemorating the event and observing its contributions to Thai democracy. Beyond commemorating the heroes of democracy, this work argues that the memorial embodies the ongoing democratic struggles of Thailand and the aspirations of its people for a democratic future.

Research Framework

This qualitative historical paper uses historical accounts and a limited number of English-language references about this memorial, such as multiple news articles, pertinent documents, and social media posts documenting the construction of the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial and its yearly commemoration. It explains the notion of democracy attached to the structure and discusses the concept of democracy of the people as they commemorate the 1992 event and honor the fallen heroes.

This study follows the traditional and Western school discourses of Thai democracy to explain the democracy behind the memorial. Originating in the mid-nineteenth century with a group of thinkers connected to the royal court and the first generation of nobility influenced by Western ideas, the traditionalist school of thought of Thai democracy argues that democracy has long been part of Thai society through the existence of Thai kings. Under this school, democratic institutions in Thailand had traditionally existed before the 1932 revolution because of the consent given by the Thai political community to the kings⁶.

The concept can be traced back to the Sukhothai Kingdom's "father-child model," which illustrates how Thai kings ruled the people with the consent of the Thai political community. This idea was further developed during the Rattanakosin period through the Buddhist principle of *aneknikon samosonsommut*, which justified Thai monarchs' existence based on the political community's mutual consent. Subsequent monarchs built upon this notion, asserting that their rule was legitimized by the mutual consent of the political community they governed⁷.

The traditionalist school was fully established from the early 20th century until 1932. However, it faced significant challenges from the Western school of democracy following the 1932 revolution. Over time, it gradually adapted to the Thai system, which aligned well with the emergence of bureaucrats and militarists. Today, this school plays a significant role in shaping the behavior and discourse surrounding Thai democracy⁸.

On the other hand, the Western school of democracy highlights Western ideals, which started during the 1932 revolution or the "New Age of Hope" for the Siamese people. Originating in the mid-to-late 19th century, this kind of democracy is rooted in the principles of the People's Party (Khana Rātsadōn), which overthrew the absolute monarchy and installed constitutional rule in Thailand in 1932. Their principles adapted the French liberal teachings and humanity's universal rationality and progress, such as freedom, equality, fraternity, separation of powers, and constitutional laws⁹.

This school argues that the paternalism advocated by the traditionalist school does not constitute a true democracy and emphasizes the importance of constitutional laws in a democracy. This understanding emerged as a compromise between the Thai monarchy and the People's Party. Alongside the constitution, the discourse on Thai democracy also highlights the importance of parliament and political elections. During the time of Plaek Phibunsongkhram, commonly known as Phibun, he also included the concepts of nation and national independence into this discourse, aligning them with his nation-building policies¹⁰. This alignment prompted the construction of various monuments and architectural structures as part of his broader agenda.

These traditional and Western school discourses on Thai democracy are evident in the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial and the people commemorating the May 1992 uprising, particularly in how these agencies perceived and actively engaged with the democracy embodied by the memorial.

In addition to the discourse on Thai democracy, this study follows the literature on memory studies. Using Pierre Nora's concept of *les lieux de mémoire* or the "sites of memory," this work argues that the Black May 1992 Memorial contributes to shaping a collective memory of the 1992 People's Uprising.

Les lieux de mémoire or the sites of memory, are established to preserve and commemorate memory in an era where modern societies often neglect them due to the acceleration of history, highlighting the relationship between memory and history. These sites, encompassing gestures, images, and tangible objects, anchor collective memory across material, symbolic, and functional dimensions fostering remembrance. Additionally, these sites are subject to ongoing reinterpretation and transformation by historians who seek to preserve and interpret the past¹¹.

The Black May 1992 Memorial functions as a *lieux de mémoire* and a space for democracy discourse through the annual commemoration of the people and the democracy they attach to it. By looking at the people, the forces who contributed to constructing it, and the perspective this structure represents, this paper highlights the memory of the 1992 protests for democracy. The memorial's construction, driven by the relatives of the fallen heroes and the activists, underscores its role as a site of memory, maintaining its relevance in Thai public memory and democracy discourse.

Analysis, Discussion, and Results

The May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial

The May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial, commonly known as Black May 1992 Memorial, not only houses the ashes of the fallen heroes for democracy during the May 1992 protests but also embodies a complex narrative tied to collective memory and democracy, establishing it as a site of memory or *lieux de mémoire*.

Drawing upon the concepts articulated by Pierre Nora in his discussion of *les lieux de mémoire*, the memorial, situated at Santiporn Park along Chakrabongse Road and the end of Ratchadamnoen Klang Avenue, serves as a material site of the collective memory surrounding the May 1992 uprising and the broader narrative of Thailand's democratic history. Located near Khaosan Road and the Bang Lamphu area, this site is just an 8 to 13-minute walk from two other significant monuments: the 14th of October 1973 Memorial and the Democracy Monument (Fig. 1). Additionally, it is near Thammasat University where the memorial commemorating the October 6, 1976 Thammasat Massacre stands. This proximity of the May 1992 memorial highlights its connection to other critical moments in Thailand's democratic struggles.

Fig. 1

Map of May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial and Ratchadamnoen avenue



Fig 1

The site of the memorial symbolizes the political uncertainty in Thailand, reflecting the changes and the contentious politics and narratives among various stakeholders over time. The Revenue Department and the Public Relations Department of Thailand, both burned down by protesters during the May 1992 demonstration for misinforming the public in support of the military regime, originally occupied the site where the memorial now stands¹². Then, the Government Lottery Office (GLO) also occupied this space before the management was entirely given to the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and the May 1992 People’s Uprising Foundation¹³.



Fig 2

Fig. 2
The details of the May 1992 People’s Uprising Memorial



Aside from being a material site, the memorial also serves as a symbolic and functional site for commemorating the May 1992 protests and Thai democracy. The wave-shaped sculpture, designed by the late Sompot Upa-in, pays tribute to the fallen heroes and pro-democracy protesters of the May 1992 uprising. It signifies Thailand's significant democratic progress, achieved through the mass rally along Ratchadamnoen Avenue against the military leadership of General Suchinda Kraprayoon¹⁴. The slits at the sides of the trapezoidal structure made of black granite symbolize the bloodshed for democracy. At the top, a golden dove breaking through a cubic cage symbolizes the liberation of thought and spirit, soaring toward freedom and peace. The memorial base inscribes the names of the pro-democracy heroes who died and disappeared in the May 1992 uprising (Fig. 2). In addition to the inscribed names, the monument also honors the unidentified missing persons lost during the bloody military crackdown. The memorial also houses the remains of the fallen heroes, which were relocated to their current site in 2020¹⁵.

The memorial went through a long, complicated process before it reached its current design, reflecting how democratic struggles and memories of protests in Thailand have evolved over time. The proposal to establish a memorial for the heroes of democracy officially started on May 11, 1993, through a Cabinet resolution of the Chuan Leekpai administration. The memorial project aims to honor the heroism of the people of May 1992, remind future generations to protect the constitution, democracy, and social justice with a spirit of sacrifice, serve as a source of learning about history and democracy, and foster a better understanding and harmony among all stakeholders and the public. The project envisions the memorial park as a space for laying wreaths and garlands, displaying the names of the fallen heroes, and hosting exhibitions, public announcements, and activities that promote a democratic system with a constitutional monarchy¹⁶.

The Treasury Department of Thailand provided the land to the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and the May 1992 People's Uprising Foundation for use in the May 1992 Memorial project. As appointed caretakers of the memorial park, the two entities are responsible for managing the structure in alignment with the master plan for Ratchadamnoen Road and its surrounding areas. The supreme patriarch at the time named the proposed memorial park the Peace Garden to commemorate those who sacrificed themselves for democracy. The total budget allocated for establishing the May 1992 Memorial, encompassing all its components, was 25 million baht, covering all aspects of the project, including equipment, design costs, and miscellaneous expenses¹⁷.

Similar to how the student movements in the 1970s continued their fight for democracy in the 1990s, the Black May 1992 Memorial is not an isolation structure but part of a network of memorials commemorating Thailand's social movements. The May 1992 protests and the decision to construct a memorial for its fallen heroes revived the delayed construction plan of another memorial, dedicated to the October 14, 1973, student demonstration. Labeled as the memorial project for the "martyrs of democracy," the Cabinet, before the May 11 resolution, initially approved the construction of a memorial to commemorate both 1973 and 1992 events¹⁸.

In Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, he acknowledges that sites of memory can face opposition due to dominant narrative sharpened by national authorities, which often create competing versions of history¹⁹. In the case of the 1973 and 1992 memorials, the pro-democracy groups and government leaders, after the success of the May 1992 demonstration in toppling the military regime of Suchinda, pushed for a democratic narrative that was against militarism and tried to attach this paradigm to the construction of the two memorials. Despite government approval, the proposed memorial for the 1973 and 1992 heroes faced opposition from the military, certain right-wing politicians, and a notorious ultra-right group. They argued that constructing the monument would be divisive

for society²⁰. Despite the opposition, the memorial's construction managed to push through. However, the national authority's effort to control the narrative through a site of memory contributed to the delays in the structure's completion, influenced by the political landscape and the ruling leaders' priorities. They both experienced roadblocks, particularly in dealing with the administration and institutions.

Due to the obstacles faced by the 14th of October 1973 Memorial at its venue, the site of the May 1992 Memorial today was designated as the venue for the memorial for both the October 1973 and May 1992 events. However, the 14th of October 1973 Memorial returned to its designated space at the corner of the Khok Wua intersection, alongside Ratchadamnoen Klang Avenue and Tanao Road (Fig. 1) after Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun and 1973 uprising leader Thirayuth Boonmee obtained permission from the Crown Property Bureau in 1998. This led to its official inauguration on October 14, 2001. Despite receiving permission to use the land, the installation faced several challenges²¹.

Aside from the struggles of the 14th of October 1973 Memorial, King Bhumibol's plan proposed to alleviate traffic congestion around Suan Santiporn and the location's history of designating it for the monuments of the glorious historical kings contributed to the separation of the two memorials. The plan for the Peace Garden was modified, leading to the return of the October 1973 memorial to its old site²².

Creating a physical space like the Black May 1992 memorial and its tribute to fallen heroes asserts its importance to Thai public memory and democracy. As a site of memory, this structure reinforces the historical consciousness and collective memory of the Thai people. The persistent demand for the construction of the memorial and its annual commemoration helps avert a crisis of memory, especially in Thailand's volatile political context, where narratives are often distorted or neglected due to frequent leadership changes. The families of the democracy heroes along with activists, and pro-democracy groups, understandably pushed for the memorial despite numerous obstacles.

Initially, when plans for the 1973 and 1992 memorials were under discussion, pro-democracy groups proposed a 24-foot-high hexagonal structure inscribed with the names of those killed or missing in the two uprisings, with a red line at the base symbolizing the blood spilled by the demonstrators²³. This design was revised after a decade. In 2003 design competition organized by the May 1992 People's Uprising Foundation, a memorial designed by former Silpakorn University architectural students Pinai Sirikiatikul, Satta Panyakaew and Pimonwan Niyomsub, was selected as the winning design. They were awarded 30,000 baht for their winning design, which was judged by Thai National Artists Dr. Sumet Jumsai na Ayudhya, Dr. Prawet Limparangsri, and landscape architecture expert Professor Decha Boonkham. However, their winning design was not directly implemented. Instead, it underwent frequent adjustments due to various factors and considerations²⁴.

The winning design of the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial project features a Peace Pagoda (*Santiporn Chedi*) and a memorial park imbued with rich symbolisms, honoring the heroes who died in the May 1992 event and commemorating the historic demonstration. The design optimizes the space to evoke memories of the 1992 protest site, including the Democracy Monument and Sanam Luang. The layout emphasizes the intersection of Ratchadamnoen Klang Avenue, leading to the Democracy Monument, and Ratchadamnoen Nai Avenue, which connects to Sanam Luang²⁵. The pagoda, divided vertically into two sections, symbolizes the loss of life during the May uprising. Beyond its location, the design incorporates light, shadow, and time to honor the fallen heroes. Sunlit crystals display the names of the deceased along a pathway leading into the pagoda. A wall engraved with poetry guides visitor's attention toward the Peace Pagoda, symbolizing the end of conflict and the beginning of social harmony. This feature fosters a connection between visitors and the victims of Black May. The project also incorporates an open-air amphitheater accommodating up to 1,000 people, a small public park for relaxation, and green spaces²⁶.

On May 17, 2005, the memorial committee, established 12 years prior, held the official stone-laying ceremony at the Peace Garden. Following former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's term, the May 1992 Memorial project was ignored by his successors until Thaksin Shinawatra assumed office. Although the foundation stone was laid during the 13th anniversary of the May demonstration, details of the construction remained scarce²⁷.

Since 2005, the families of the victims and activists have advocated for the completion of the construction of the memorial and the proper allocation of the 25-million-baht budget pledged by the Thaksin administration²⁸. In 2007, Bangkok Governor Apirak Kosayodhin approved funding for the memorial's construction during the May 17 commemoration day²⁹. However, obstacles to completing the structure persisted, particularly regarding funding. This prompted the May 1992 People's Uprising Foundation to take charge of fundraising due to bureaucratic delays and slow allocation of the government's pledge. Despite the government's official announcement of the 25-million-baht budget, the funds have not yet been allocated. The Committee of May 1992 Heroes' Relatives and the May 1992 Foundation have repeatedly campaigned for this funding, asserting that it represents a crucial symbolic acknowledgment by the government, including the military, of the injustices during the May 1992 protests.

Land management issues with the government lottery vendors also delayed progress on the memorial project. The land designated for the May 1992 memorial was initially rented by the lottery vendors through the Government Lottery Office (GLO). Because the site was adjacent to the GLO before its relocation to Nonthaburi, lottery vendors began occupying the space. The GLO was unable to reclaim land-use rights because of an existing contract with the vendors. When the contract expired in 2009, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and GLO officials gained the authority to relocate the vendors, allowing the May 1992 Foundation and the Committee of May 1992 Heroes' Relatives to proceed with the memorial project. However, relocating the vendors was delayed by bureaucratic hurdles and political factors³⁰.

Despite these setbacks, the memorial project made progress during the 21st anniversary of the May 1992 demonstration. On May 17, 2013, a stone-laying ceremony was held at the Peace Garden on May 17, 2013³¹. Unfortunately, as with the 2005 foundation-laying ceremony in 2005, further delays occurred due to objections from the Rattanakosin Island Committee regarding the layout plan and budget constraints³².

Disagreements with the Rattanakosin Island Committee, a government body responsible for the preservation and development of Bangkok's Rattanakosin area and other old and historic sites, further delayed the project. For example, Rattanakosin Island regulations required that the structure harmonize with its surroundings³³. During this time, the memorial's designers, collaborated with Atchaphon Dusitnanon, former President of the Association of Siamese Architects under Royal Patronage, to refine and improve the plan. They followed Sompot Upa-in's design of the memorial. A one-meter-tall replica of the new May 1992 Memorial design was initially installed in the parking lot next to the Government Lottery Office. After Sompot Upa-in's passing in 2014, another sculptor scaled up his design at a foundry in Nakhon Pathom Province.

This memorial, located in the inner section of the Peace Garden, became the resting place for the remains of the fallen heroes. In early 2016, Bangkok Governor Sukhumbhand Paribatra and the May 1992 People's Uprising Foundation relocated the memorial closer to the road at the intersection of Ratchadamnoen Klang Avenue and the Ratchadamnoen Nai Avenue just before the May 17, 2016 commemoration. As part of the relocation, the monument's height was increased to 17 meters for better visibility, and the base was redesigned to measure 5 by 5 meters, symbolizing May 17. Pinai Sirikiatikul still used the finial from the original and extended the design by making it taller, as advised by Atchaphon Dusitnanon to ensure visibility from both roads in Ratchadamnoen. High-quality, extra-thick granite slabs were used to emphasize the significance of the sacrifice made during the May 1992 event. During the 2016 event, 17 trees were planted by representatives of the Committee of May 1992 Heroes' Relatives, the May Foundation, political figures such as Anand Panyarachun and Chuan Leekpai, and members of the architectural team³⁴.

In 2020, during the 28th commemoration of the May 1992 protests, the remains of the fallen heroes were removed from the original memorial designed by Sompot Upa-in, temporarily transferred to Wat Chana Songkhram temple, and finally placed in the extended and improved memorial on September 9, 2020³⁵. After 28 years, the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial has finally had a major development, and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) is currently improving and renovating the park³⁶. Aside from the BMA and May 1992 Foundation, the students and faculty of Thammasat University are also contributing to improving the May 1992 Memorial Park project³⁷. However, it is essential to note that the BMA's upgrades and the involvement of Thammasat University students were their own initiatives, without the architects' consent, and not in accordance with the original competition results.

As the Black May 1992 Memorial commemorates the May 1992 event and its fallen heroes, it also honors the activists' fight for democracy. The long and arduous process of completing the Black May 1992 memorial reflects Thailand's enduring struggle for democracy. The uncertainties surrounding land management, bureaucratic design concerns, the shifting political landscape, and budget constraints demonstrate that memorializing democracy through the Black May 1992 Memorial has often been a low priority. Much like democracy in Thailand, the memorial faced numerous obstacles despite receiving land-use permission and construct approval, constantly needing to assert its place in Thai public space.

The design process, initially opened to the public through a competition but later stalled by bureaucracy delays and the need to comply with statist and royalist layout of the Ratchadamnoen Avenue, reflects the complex nature of democracy in Thailand. While the memorial's design does not feature direct symbols associated with the monarchy, its alignment with royal guidelines aimed at preserving the cultural heritage of Ratchadamnoen Avenue can be viewed as a form of democratic expression operating within the framework of a constitutional monarchy.

The volatility of democracy in the Thai context, shaped by the changing political landscape and military influence, mirrored the uncertainty surrounding the completion of the May 1992 Memorial. Following the 1992 protests, demands for democratic reforms led to the creation of the 1997 People's Constitution, which reduced military influence in the government. Thaksin's ties to former activists helped facilitate the realization of structures related to democratic movements. However, these structures faced significant challenges as military coups gradually regained control. Despite attempts to advance the project, the memorial's foundation stone-laying ceremonies became merely symbolic and superficial, overshadowed by the government's lack of political will to allocate a construction budget and the pressing need to finish the project.

Despite the long delays, the memorial's significant development in 2020 as a site of memory continues to keep the story of the May 1992 People's Uprising alive. The triumph in completing the memorial can also be attributed to the collective action and cooperation of the victims' relatives (May Heroes Relatives Group and May 1992 Foundation), former activists, student groups, pro-democracy groups, and political parties, the Bangkok administration, and the government, which is the fundamental essence of a democratic society. The construction of a memorial for the fallen democratic heroes enables recognition of their sacrifices, condemnation of military atrocities, and acknowledgement of the May 1992's event contributions to Thai history, society, and democracy.

However, as a *lieux de mémoire*, the memorial possesses the potential for transformation, subject to ongoing reinterpretations of its significance and the unpredictable expansion of its implications. Its meaning can remain contested depending on the group of people and particular period's interpretation and dominant narrative. Therefore, it is essential to examine the primary message the May 1992 memorial wants to convey to the public and the notion of democracy it embodies. Additionally, understanding how people deliberately commemorate the May 1992 event and animate its message every year is vital to preserving the memory of the fallen heroes' efforts.

The Democracy in the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial

The May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial serves as a *lieux de mémoire*, embodying a material, symbolic, and functional site for Thai democracy, encompassing various elements and schools of thought. Based on the design and intended meanings of the structure, the memorial symbolizes Abraham Lincoln's basic concept of democracy, which is "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." The memorial favors the notion of people's power while condemning a military-backed government. Through the names inscribed, the slits at the sides, and the remains housed within the monument, the democracy in this structure honors the pro-democracy protesters who lost their lives or went missing during the 1992 military crackdown. It also denounces violence and promotes a democracy anchored to freedom and peace symbolized by the cubic cage and dove imagery.

The May 1992 memorial also represents a democracy associated with the monarchy's influence in bringing peace to Thai society. As one may recall, the events of May 1992 culminated on May 23 with an extraordinary television broadcast showing Suchinda Kraprayoon and Chamlong Srimuang kneeling before King Bhumibol. The late King had summoned the two leaders to the palace, where he reminded them of their obligations toward the nation and reprimanded them of their stubbornness, which had endangered the country. In this humiliating yet pivotal moment witnessed by the entire Thai nation, it was agreed that Suchinda would resign in exchange for an amnesty for all involved. This scene solidified King Bhumibol's role as the final arbiter during times of conflict, bringing peace and order to Thai society. This imagery from 1992 remains etched in collective memories and continued to be referenced as a testament to the monarchy's role in Thailand³⁸.

Ending the political crisis in May 1992 was not the first time King Bhumibol played a pivotal role in resolving national conflict. The 14th of October 1973 student demonstration marked the first occasion where he publicly inserted himself into a tense confrontation, positioning himself as a democratic monarch. During that crisis, he demonstrated his capability to restore the constitution and democracy for the good of the people. Doing this again in 1992 strengthened his image as a bringer of peace and affirmed the “Thai-style democracy” or “Democracy with the King as the Head State.” This explains that sovereign power belongs to the Thai people but with the King serving as head of the state³⁹.

This imagery of the monarchy’s role in Thai democracy was also attached to the Black May 1992 memorial through one of the objectives of constructing this structure, which is to be a space for activities supporting a democratic system with a constitutional monarchy. Aside from this, the annual commemoration of the May 1992 protests in the memorial always includes a representation of the monarchy and pays respect to the king. Every year, people retell the story of how the crisis ended, and this memorial serves as a reminder of this story. It can be interpreted that the May 1992 People’s Uprising Memorial epitomizes a democracy associated with the traditionalist school and highlights the importance of the monarchy in democracy.

However, it is essential to note that the memorial’s design was not intended to reflect any royal sentiment. Although some royalists advocated for the monument to acknowledge King Bhumibol’s intervention that resulted in Suchinda’s resignation, the architects chose not to include this concept. This only shows that the memorial as a *lieux de mémoire* holds the potential for evolving imagery due to the ongoing contention and reinterpretation of its significance by the public who engage with it.

Aside from remembering history and the heroes of democracy, the May 1992 memorial has also become a space for democratic expression, as demonstrated by the protests held here. The conservative perspective on Thai democracy attached to the May 1992 memorial was observed in 2021 when Jatuporn Prompan, a prominent Red Shirt leader, organized a rally after a decade of political inactivity. On April 4, 2021, he launched a protest movement named *People's Unity for Thailand*, composed of Red Shirts from the provinces and royalist Yellow Shirts from Bangkok, aimed at pressuring former Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to resign⁴⁰. During the protest, Jatuporn emphasized that their goal was to force Prayut's resignation and not to call for reforms to the monarchy. At the rally, he referred to the events of May 1992 event, expressing a desire to replicate the spirit of that movement to oust Prayut, drawing inspiration from King Bhumibol's role as a peacemaker⁴¹. His selection of the 1992 memorial as the venue, his reference to the May 1992 events, and his invocation of the King's role in resolving the conflict prove the symbolism constructed among the activists, a democracy anchored on the traditional school.

However, it must also be noted that the Ratsadon group was present in the demonstration led by Jatuporn. It was observed that during the playing of the national anthem, several Ratsadon members flashed their symbolic three-finger salute at Santiporn Park, where the May 1992 memorial is located⁴². The protest leaders on stage, including Jatuporn, stood still while singing the national anthem and did not make the gesture, as they were far from pleased with the action of the Ratsadon members⁴³.

Formed in October 2020 during the third phase of the re-emergence of the Thai student movement, the Ratsadon group is a network of young activists advocating for societal changes in Thailand. It drew inspiration from the People's Party, which launched the democratic revolution in 1932, overthrew the absolute monarchy, and installed constitutional rule in Thailand. The new Ratsadon group became an umbrella movement for all anti-establishment movements calling for political reforms in Thailand, particularly the contentious demand for monarchy reform⁴⁴.

The Khana Ratsadon, from which the new group drew inspiration, favored the Western style of democracy, which focused on French liberal teachings. This group of Western-educated Thai students rejected the traditionalist school of democracy and believed in humanity's universal rationality and progress, such as freedom, equality, fraternity, separation of powers, and constitutional laws⁴⁵.

The presence of the Ratsadon group and the three-finger salute at the May 1992 memorial demonstrates resistance to the dominant narrative of the traditional school of democracy attached to the structure. By making the gesture at the May 1992 memorial, the group emphasized the Western school of democracy while at the periphery and attempted to claim a space in Thai public discourse and memory, maximizing the structure as a site of memory.

True to the name of its location, the Peace Garden, the May 1992 memorial also witnessed attempts by different groups to turn the memorial structure and park into a space for peace and reconciliation. However, this attempt resulted in awkward displays and paradoxes reflective of Thai democracy.

In 2012, the memorial became a venue for tension between Jatuporn and Chamlong when they both attended the 20th commemoration of the Black May 1992. Chamlong moved his seat to the back row when he noticed Jatuporn's presence and quietly left the function when Jatuporn took the podium for a commemorative speech. It was because of Chamlong's defamation suit against Jatuporn, who had accused the "Yellow Shirts," or the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), of inciting nationalistic fervor to generate protests over Cambodian ownership of the Preah Vihear temple. The court dismissed the case, ruling Jatuporn's verbal onslaught was an expression of political opinion⁴⁶.

Despite being a space that reminded people of the military coup of 1991 against a democratic government, which led to violence during the May 1992 protests, the memorial witnessed some ironies of democracy - and even moments of unity. One such moment occurred in 2015 when

the military-backed government of Prayut Chan-o-cha commemorated the Black May 1992 event for the first time. Representatives of the military junta-appointed agencies, known as the “Five Rivers,” participated in the commemoration⁴⁷. Aside from the junta, the memorial was also visited by the representatives of the “Red Shirts,” the “Yellow Shirts,” and the Democrat Party⁴⁸. These groups shared some complicated stories since 2006, when Thaksin Shinawatra was ousted as prime minister, making their gathering at the May 1992 Memorial in 2015 particularly intriguing.

Although he was invited by a group of activists and the Committee of May 1992 Heroes’ Relatives led by Adul Kiewboriboon, former Prime Minister and junta leader Prayut Chan-o-cha declined the invitation to attend the May 1992 commemoration in 2015 and sent government representatives instead. Adul invited Prayut because he perceived the prime minister as a leader capable of promoting reconciliation and harmony to help the country progress despite toppling an elected government in a coup in 2014, just like Suchinda in 1991⁴⁹.

If Prayut was invited in 2015, it was Prawit Wongsuwan whom Adul asked to join the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of Black May in 2022. To foster reconciliation efforts, Adul also invited the Royal Thai Army (RTA) commander, Abhisit Vejjajiva, Cholnan Srikaew of the Pheu Thai Party, and several other individuals involved in the May 1992 event. Figures from across the political spectrums were invited, including members of government and opposition parties as well as police and army officers⁵⁰.

These invitations from the organizing committee did not sit well with everyone, especially for the People’s Network for Democracy (PNP), an ad-hoc gathering of civil society and academic groups, and the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration (UFTD), a student activist group from Thammasat University. They argued that the reconciliation efforts were misplaced and that the commemoration should focus on honoring the victims of the Black May 1992. They also encouraged the people to

boycott the commemoration because the invited attendees included leaders of anti-democratic movements and perpetrators of the deadly 2010 crackdown on “Red Shirts,” which led to the military junta of Prayut Chan-o-cha to overthrow Yingluck Shinawatra’s elected government in 2014⁵¹.

As a *lieux de mémoire*, the deliberate annual remembrance of the Black May 1992 at the memorial strengthens the intended meanings of the structure while simultaneously symbolizing the Thai people’s complex and ongoing struggle for full democracy. The people who utilize this memorial as a site memory can also construct additional layers of meaning for the structure based on their interpretations and actions. With the invitation from different political spectrums, the May 1992 memorial becomes a democratic space for political differences. Although the intention of reconciliation and moving forward is commendable, it must first be recognized that learning from history, acknowledging past mistakes, and taking concrete actions, such as prioritizing human rights and valuing democracy and the constitution are essential steps toward progress. These efforts must not be limited to the gathering of personalities and individuals during commemorations. In this way, the May 1992 event, through its memorial, will be remembered by the Thai people for the sacrifices of the fallen heroes and their contribution to democracy, not because for efforts by various parties to forgive and forget quickly — a process that risks historical distortion or amnesia.

The May 1992 memorial also serves as a space for annual routines and performative activities conducted by organizing bodies such as the Committee of May 1992 Heroes’ Relatives and the May 1992 Foundation. Every year, key figures such as the relatives of those killed or missing, academics, human rights activists, and government representatives attend the commemoration to pay respect to the fallen heroes. It becomes an avenue to remind the government and the people of vital issues, including the quest for the disappeared bodies, the completion of the memorial park, calls for amendments to the current constitution, and the campaign for full democracy. Activities includes merit-making rituals and wreath-laying for the fallen democracy heroes, seminars on democracy,

human rights, constitution, and Thai politics, as well as community services such as blood donation.

The participation of different political figures, and even the representation of the monarchy, in the annual commemoration shapes the dynamics at the memorial and influences a more comprehensive understanding of the May 1992 uprising through the imagery it portrays to the general public and media. As a site of memory, the activists involved in the May 1992 protests have become an integral part of the democratic history and narrative of the Thai people due to the recognition and presence of political figures in the annual commemorations. For instance, the participation of political parties in laying wreaths at the memorial serves as a political act, engaging political leaders and activists in the democratic dialogue and in the construction and maintenance of public memory. Simultaneously, it provides activists and victims' families a platform to voice their concerns through these symbolic gestures.

Although annual commemorations and performative functions are fundamental for sites of memory because they keep history alive, it is also important to highlight that preserving history extends beyond merit-making and wreath-laying rituals. Sites of memory offer opportunities for people to remember the past, sparking memories and emotions that can ensure the lessons from history continue to influence the present. In the case of the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial, this structure provides a suitable venue for the Thai people to learn from the past and continue the fight for democracy. Unfortunately, hours after the recent commemoration of the Black May, the memorial reverted to being an unrecognizable structure surrounded by homeless people, barbed wires, barricades, trees, garbage bags, and cars. The laid wreaths were already piled up at the sides, waiting to be thrown away. The Peace Garden returned to being a peaceful space for vehicles and a dumping ground for the neighborhood's garbage (Fig. 3). This shows that democracy must not remain merely a performative concept. It must be deliberative, with the government and the people actively engaged in building a fully democratic society — just as the May 1992 memorial should be managed and protected.



Fig 3



Fig. 3

The May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial after the 32nd commemoration of Black May

Conclusion

As a site of memory, the May 1992 People's Uprising Memorial is a material, symbolic, and functional site for Thai democracy, encompassing various elements and schools of thought. It commemorates a democracy aligned with Abraham Lincoln's famous definition: "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Aside from the power of the people, the structure also embodies the elements of democracy, such as the democratic constitution, human rights, freedom, and peace. While it honors the sacrifices of the fallen heroes, the memorial also emphasizes undemocratic practices, including violence and militarism.

The Black May 1992 memorial also represents the democratic struggles of the Thai people, reflecting the complexities encountered during its construction — uncertainties in land management, bureaucratic concerns

regarding the design, shifting political landscape, and budget constraints. The structure also represents a traditional school of democracy due to its association with the influence of monarchy in bringing peace to Thai society. This imagery of the monarchy's role in Thai democracy is attached to the Black May 1992 memorial, symbolizing traditional democracy. However, this is despite the fact that the memorial's design was not intended to reflect royal sentiment, illustrating its potential for transformation through ongoing contention and reinterpretation.

Beyond the intended symbols and meanings associated with democracy, the people commemorating the May 1992 event also memorialize a democracy tied to reconciliation and unity amidst political differences. By serving as a space for democracy, the memorial attempts to unify different political spectrums, including groups adhering to the Western school of democracy, which focuses on French liberal teachings and reforms in Thai society. The memorial also serves as a space for annual routines and performative activities commemorating Black May 1992 and its heroes.

This study can be further developed by examining the memorial's development once the entire park project has been completed. Additionally, it would be valuable to compare the commemorations of the May 1992 memorial with those of other monuments, such as the 14th of October 1973 Memorial and the October 6, 1976 Thammasat Massacre memorial.

Attaining democracy is a continuous process, and like the construction of the May 1992 memorial, it is not yet complete. The commemoration of the May 1992 event in this structure must be continued and accompanied by concrete and deliberate actions from both the government and the people. Understanding the complex democracy in this structure and living the legacies of the fallen democracy heroes contribute to remembering the past and shaping the future of democracy in Thailand. It is now in the hands of the Thai social movement to actively maximize the democratic space so that the stories and lessons of the May 1992 uprising will continuously be shared in public memory and passed on to the next generation.

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Notes

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- It should also mention, though this paper does not cover it, the space of the October 6, 1976 Thammasat Massacre in the narrative of memorial construction in Thailand. Compared to the memorials of October 14, 1973, and May 17, 1992, the October 6, 1976 event seems to have a void or partial silence in Thai public memory. Despite having a memorial at the main entrance of the Thammasat University to commemorate the fallen heroes of the 1976 student movement, its construction, location, and story also embodies how the 1976 massacre is being viewed and remembered by Thai society. Thongchai Winichakul, **Moments of Silence: the Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok**, 220–225.
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- 25 The Democracy Monument stands as a symbol of democracy for the Thai people due to various democratic protests that have taken place at this site, including the protests of May 1992. In addition to the monument, Sanam Luang—a public urban area adjacent to Thammasat University and the Grand Palace—serves as another vital venue for political rallies and demonstrations. However, in recent years, the accessibility of this open space for protesters has diminished due to restrictions imposed by the authorities.
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Illustration Sources

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