

## REVOLUTION

It was on October 13, 1973 that Elder Peckham and I learned that Spiro Agnew was no longer Richard M. Nixon's vice president and that a new vice president of the United States had been named. While it did not seem to directly affect our lives in any particular way, Elder Peckham and I felt compelled to walk down to the newsstand at the docks in Thonburi to read about our new vice president. As we approached the newsstand at the docks, I observed approximately the same number of people who always frequented the area hustling and bustling back and forth, trading fresh fruits and fish, and soliciting riders for their taxis and buyers for their sundries. I could not help but also note that there seemed to be an edge to the people on this particular day. They were not quite as relaxed and friendly as they normally were.

Elder Peckham and I jointly put down our three baht (fifteen cents) and began to read in the Bangkok Post (an English-language newspaper) about Vice President Gerald Ford. I had never heard of him. While we were engrossed in our reading, I became aware of a particularly striking popping sound coming from across the Chao Phraya River and asked Elder Peckham if he heard the same thing.

"I do," he responded. "It sounds like fireworks. They must be celebrating some holiday."

I listened a while longer as the popping sounds began to grow and observed, "The sounds of the firecrackers and barrel bombs that I remember firing off would never have carried all the way across the Chao Phraya River from the Bangkok side at Thammasat (TUM-ah-saht) University to the Thonburi side. It sounds more like gunfire."

We then continued reading about Gerald Ford and his background as a football player and congressman. I wondered how being a football player had prepared him to be a congressman and now vice president. The importance of Gerald Ford's appointment to the vice presidency held our interest for only the few minutes it took to read the article about him. Elder Peckham and I finished reading, looked at each other, and shrugged as if the changing of the guard from Spiro Agnew to Gerald Ford was really far less interesting than we had initially supposed.

As I tucked the Bangkok Post under my arm, I looked around and observed a great deal of commotion. The Thais on the docks had become highly agitated. I looked beyond the docks and out onto the river. A veritable armada of boats was headed right at us from across the river at Thammasat University. This event seemed far more intriguing than the news of America's new vice president. Elder Peckham and I walked down onto the docks to await the approaching boats. The ferries and needle boats and even some junks were approaching as fast as I had ever seen any of them travel in the past. Elder Peckham and I had no clue what was going on. As the boats got closer, I observed that they were crowded with

people, and that as they finally came alongside the docks, the people on the boats were frightened. They were shouting, "It has begun! The revolution has begun!"

The dock quickly filled with people and Elder Peckham exclaimed, "We'd better get out of here; this does not sound good! "

I stood there fascinated. I had not heard of any revolution or any potential for one. The popping sounds we heard coming from across the river were actually the sounds of automatic weapons fire. That sound continued, but seemed far more alive now that I understood what it was. I had stumbled upon a real live revolution. The sounds steadily grew toward a fever pitch. The people around us were panicked. Several began to tell us we should go home since the soldiers would be coming shortly.

While the whole event was very exciting-I mean it is not every day that you get to observe the beginnings of a revolution-I began to get the sense that Elder Peckham, and those several Thais around us who were advising us to go home, were right and that we should leave. Elder Peckham and I finally turned away from the river to head home, but the path had already become blocked. Thousands of people had streamed onto the streets, yelling and screaming at the tops of their lungs. The air was absolutely charged. People continued to go out of their way to warn, "This is not your fight; get home before you are hurt!"

Elder Peckham and I inched our way up the docks and toward the street so that we could get home. Progress through the crowd was virtually impossible. I remember one mother in particular crying for her son who was at Thammasat University across the river. She was sure he had already been killed. Several students were trying to get down to the boats to cross back over the river to join their comrades, but there were no boat captains willing to return to the Bangkok side of the river.

After fifteen or twenty minutes of trying to push our way through the crowd, we finally arrived at the front of Sirirat Hospital, which was only a block or so from the docks. I watched as an olive-drab Volkswagen bus tried to force its way through the crowd and into the hospital. As that vehicle passed in front of me I witnessed bodies stacked on top of each other inside the van and could only hope that the driver could negotiate his way onto the hospital grounds in time to save some of those people. I could see the back of the van and I realized that there was not much hope for those stacked inside. Blood was literally running down the back side of the van and onto the street. It was a sight I will always carry with me in my memory.

The utter chaos of this situation brought out my more selfish side. The sight of that Volkswagen van triggered my adrenal glands into action. I became a rather strong individual, capable of moving several people at a time out of my way so that I could get out of the crowd and back to my house. Elder Peckham was no more than a step or two behind me.

Once at home, we immediately wondered to each other what was really going on. The other two missionaries in our home had never left that day, and we filled them in on what was happening.

Shortly thereafter, we received a telephone call from President Morris who advised us that the students at Thammasat University, in conjunction with other political elements in Bangkok, had begun a revolution against the military regime and that we were essentially smack dab in the middle of the fighting. He then told us to stay in the house until the fighting died down.

In the next hour or two, the four of us sat in our living room, entranced by the sound of continuing automatic weapons fire. Not much was said except maybe a few quiet and private prayers. As evening approached and the sun took its daily position between two tall palm trees in the front of our property, a knock came at our front door. It was rare in those days that anyone would come to see the missionaries, and therefore the knock was a bit unnerving. Upon opening the front door, I was greeted in a rather abrupt manner by a Brother Chayrod (Chai-ROAD). We had first met Brother Chayrod at one of our street meetings, and he was a current investigator with whom we were meeting on a weekly basis. He invited himself in, sat down on the couch for a moment, and then stood back up and paced nervously back and forth across the living room floor. His eyes were wide open and he looked as if he had seen a ghost.

He began, "I am glad you are all here. The revolution has begun and you will not be safe outside for some time to come! "

Brother Chayrod was a student of political science at Thammasat University at the time and apparently was an active participant in the revolution. He explained that he and several of his classmates were protesting the existence of the current military government when they were attacked by the military and the police. He described watching several of his friends being shot and killed. He then forcefully told us that the students had retaliated by burning down the police headquarters.

Over the next few days, Brother Chayrod would come to our home every evening and report to us the events of the day. His tales of bravery and heroism (or lunacy and ignorance, depending upon which side you took) were heartrending and at the same time riveting. When the police headquarters was attacked, the students had to cross a small bridge. Brother Chayrod left several of his friends dead on that bridge, along with many others, before the revolutionaries were successful in finally crossing the bridge and overtaking police headquarters. He related instances where female students stood between the revolutionaries and military and their police allies, trying to stop the violence. Their reward was death.

We feared for Brother Chayrod, his friends, and all the members we knew and contacts we had made in Thonburi.

In those ensuing days while tanks passed near our house, we could not help but wonder how many of our brothers and sisters in the church had perished in the fighting.

Three or four days passed, and it was over. I never heard much in the way of tank fire or heavy artillery fire. It was as if the military and the police both were not willing to annihilate their own people in this revolution. Instead, the military regime simply announced that they were ready and willing, after this

clear showing of a specific desire for democracy, to allow the great experiment of democracy to proceed. The fighting was at once over and a great sense of relief could be felt everywhere.

Brother Chayrod survived, as did everyone we had become acquainted with in Thonburi. But as we ventured out of the house and into the streets, we realized that not everyone was as fortunate as we were. In front of the Sirirat Hospital stood a large billboard shrouded in black. As best as we could make out, the billboard contained the names of those who had died at the hospital. I did not stop to count how many names there were on that large yellow billboard with black handwriting, but it easily exceeded one hundred. I wondered how many more dead and missing there really were. The news reports in town pegged the total at about a thousand.

Interestingly, a week or so later, my weekly review of an international news magazine turned up a brief, one-column report of the revolution saying that only sixty-seven or so people had died. My trust in news reporting was never the same after that.

I cannot remember the excuse we gave each other for needing to go into Bangkok right after the revolution, but our curiosity was insatiable. We told the taxi driver to simply drive us around and show us what had happened. Burned-out cars and buildings were everywhere. We had him take us to police headquarters, where we drove over the bridge that had been described to us by Brother Chayrod as the path used by the students to lay siege on the police headquarters. Charred vehicles, blood stains, and chip marks in the concrete where bullets had glanced off the walls were all that remained to provide evidence of the fighting that had gone on just days before, except of course for the burned-out remains of the police headquarters.

Life got back to normal in Thonburi within a few days for us, but the people did not seem to recover so quickly. Brother Chayrod was probably the best example. His keen interest in things religious had abruptly disappeared. He seemed completely immersed in the massiveness of his experience in the revolution. He was no more than a boy, eighteen or nineteen years old, who had at once been required to experience life as even mature adults should never have to. There was a distance in his eyes and a hollowness in his voice. I am not sure that Brother Chayrod ever really recovered from those few eventful days, even though he had fought on the prevailing side and was physically unscathed. While the cause may have gone forward, I could not decide whether Brother Chayrod had really won or lost.

In the days following the revolution, normalcy was problematic. There was no more fighting to be sure, but the police had all disappeared and for a while there was no real government. Instead, young Boy Scouts could be seen out directing traffic. This clearly was an exercise in utter futility; even when the police were around, traffic was an absolute nightmare.

I noticed that the thousands of fireflies hovering around the trees at our house were going about their usual activities as if nothing had ever happened. Not long after that, I did get the sense that life was returning to its pre-revolutionary state.