

From Victory to Democracy: The “Democracy” in Thailand’s Victory Monument

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Abstract

This paper discusses the symbolic transformation of Thailand’s Victory Monument in the Thai public memory, from embodying militarism to representing the complicated concept of Thai democracy. In the beginning, the monument had an indirect connection to democracy. However, due to the spatial agency, such as protest activities occupying this structure, it has turned into one of Bangkok’s democratic spaces. By looking at the stories of contentious politics and narratives surrounding this structure, this study reveals that the development of the Victory Monument’s meanings mirrors the democratic struggles of the Thai people. It also applies prevailing discourses on Thai democracy to elucidate the connection between the monument and democratic movements. This research provides an understanding of Thailand’s democratic struggles through a different lens, promotes historical awareness, and preserves public memory by emphasizing the role of public monuments in Thai history, society, and democracy.

Keywords

democracy – Thai democracy – victory monument – Anusawari Chai Samoraphum

1 Introduction

In addition to Bangkok's popular Democracy Monument as a symbol of Thai democracy, the Victory Monument or *Anusawari Chai Samoraphum*, a product of Plaek Phibunsongkhram's regime, also has a fascinating story associated with the development of democracy in Thailand.

Initially, the Victory Monument had nothing to do with Thai democracy. Due to spatial agency such as protest activities occupying this structure, though, this monument has become one of Bangkok's democratic spaces. Before it became an iconic landmark and democratic space for activists and student protesters, this structure once symbolized Plaek Phibunsongkhram's ideologies and programs. However, these were challenged after his regime and the symbolic transformation of the monument commenced. This article traces this transformation by discussing its construction, development of meaning, and connection to the democratic struggles of the Thai people, particularly the recent student movement.

This paper answers the following questions: How did the Victory Monument transform from embodying the military's victory to representing the complicated concept of "Thai democracy" and the democratic rights of the Thai people? How did the social movements for "democracy," such as the 2020 student movement, view and construct the ideals of democracy using this monument? By answering these questions, this paper contributes to Thai democracy discourse by analyzing the protests for "democracy" conducted in this monument. It also examines the symbols and meanings of the Victory Monument and how the interpretations have changed over time.

2 Symbols and Meanings of the Victory Monument

The Victory Monument is a roundabout situated along the busy roads of Bangkok. The monument is located at the junction of Phahonyothin Road, Phaya Thai Road, and Ratchawithi Road (see Figure 1). Plaek Phibunsongkhram's regime built this structure and inaugurated it on June 24, National Day. Its cornerstone was laid on June 24, 1941 and inaugurated the following year on June 24, 1942. Then, the same team responsible for constructing the Democracy Monument also assembled this monument. Pum Malagun designed it, and the sculpture decorations or hero figures were created by Silpha Bhirasri and his assistants, such as Sanan Silakorn (Wong 2000, 83–84; Noobanjong 2012, 58; Chua 2012, 355).



FIGURE 1 The Victory Monument in Bangkok.

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR, FEBRUARY 6, 2022.

Spatial structures, such as architectural and urban structures and built forms, construct meanings and frame everyday life within these spaces. They shape and determine people's actions, enabling humans to act relative to these structures (Sewell 2001, 54–55). They mediate, construct, and reproduce societal power relations because they are installed and designed based on specific interests. These interests are thereby embedded in people's everyday lives over time (Dovey 1999, 1–2). Following these arguments and theories, the Victory Monument, as a spatial structure and built form, provides a cognitive map for people to imagine and think about, while framing ideas through its symbols and meanings. In this case, the monument's features and characteristics embody elements of militarism, nationalism, and modernization. It is seen as a product of authoritarianism, and these ideologies have been implanted in the space since 1942.¹

¹ This article follows the operational definition of the following concepts: militarism, nationalism, modernization, and authoritarianism. Nationalism sees the nation, composed of naturally divided humankind, as the central principle of political organization and the only legitimate unit of political rule. One of its key features is patriotism, which involves an affective or emotional appeal toward nationalism (Heywood 2017, 452–456, 462–463). Nationalism also promotes unification and fosters love and reverence for one's country. Nationalism in Thailand is attributed to the essence of "Thainess" or *khwan pen thai*

This structure symbolizes militarism and the contribution of the military to Thailand. The Victory Monument was built to honor the 59 Thais who lost their lives in the war and the victory of Thailand over France during the 1940 Franco-Thai War. It houses the ashes of the heroes who died in the war and commemorates them with marble plaques on which their names are engraved. The monument's distinctive 50-meter-tall obelisk and masculine design epitomizes militarism (see Figure 2). The entire structure is patterned after a bayonet and is made from concrete and other materials manufactured in Thailand. The hero figures of the monument (a soldier, an airman, a sailor, a policeman, and a civilian) measure twice the size of an average person and were made of bronze. These figures are positioned on each side of the pentagonal pedestal of the monument, clearly showcasing the idea of militarism and legitimizing military rule to the public (Wong 2000, 83–84; Chua 2012, 355; Noobanjong 2012, 60).

Aside from the militaristic design, Phibunsongkhram, also known as “Phibun”, maximized this structure to flex his military power. In this way, the Victory Monument, like the Democracy Monument, served as a propaganda tool. The military presence and march during the cornerstone-laying ceremony and succeeding celebrations emphasized the strong image it wanted to portray to the Thai people (see Figure 3). He also showed empathy and support for the military by adding the names of dead soldiers from World War II and the Korean War on the monument years after its inauguration. These actions towards the soldiers and the monument during his regime solidified his military leadership, highlighted his notion of militarism, and placed value on the role of the armed forces in Thai society (Wong 2000, 84; Noobanjong 2012, 60–63, 66; Peleggi 2017, 141).

anchored to the three pillars of nation, religion, and monarchy. It also includes the spirit of the Thai nation based on values, national arts, Buddhist religion, Thai language, and Thai culture (Traijakvanich and Rojjanaprapayon 2020, 420–421). Nationalism, more specifically, expansionist nationalism, can be aggressive, with militarism as one of its key features. Militarism is the achievement of ends by military means or extending military ideas, values, and practices to civilian society. This belief was dominant during the late 19th century when the European powers linked national prestige to expansionism (Heywood 2017, 500–502). The focus of authoritarian regimes is on emphasizing their authority over the individual and suppressing them by excluding them from politics regardless of popular consent (Heywood 2013, 269, 277). They have a strong central power, and the people's freedom is limited (Traijakvanich and Rojjanaprapayon 2020, 420). Such regimes are usually associated with military rule, dictatorship, and absolute monarchy (Heywood 2013, 269, 277). Lastly, modernization in this research focuses on the encompassing process of massive social changes affecting the domains of life, from socio-economic activities to political institutions. It emphasizes change, innovation, and human progress (Welzel and Ronald 2007, 3071).



FIGURE 2 Hero figures of the Victory Monument in Bangkok.
PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR, FEBRUARY 6,
2022.

As part of Phibun's nation-building program and development projects, the Victory Monument symbolizes the development of Thai nationalism. Phibun's concept of the Thai nation was evident in the cornerstone laying and inauguration, both of which were conducted during the June 24 National Day celebration. The structure represented the nationalist and anti-colonial agenda of Phibun because it commemorated the victory of Thailand over the colonial power France and the reclaiming of its territories from the neighboring countries in mainland Southeast Asia (Wong 2000, 84; Noobanjong 2012, 60–63, 66; Peleggi 2017, 141). In addition, the monument also convinced the Thai people of their greatness as a nation and the importance of the 1940 Franco-Thai War in claiming their lost territories. The structure represented Phibun's concept of Thainess or *khwaam pen thai*, which was far from the three pillar values of nation, religion, and monarchy. Instead, it promoted Thainess or Thai nationalism based on the principles of the People's Party or *Khana Ratsadon*, his cultural mandates, and the notion of militarism (Noobanjong 2012, 62–63).



FIGURE 3 Thai and Japanese military officers at the unveiling ceremony of the Victory Monument in 1942.
RETRIEVED FROM (KHAOSOD ENGLISH 2018).

The modernist design of the Victory Monument signifies Thai nationalism without symbolic reference to and, thereby, representation of the monarchy (Noobanjong 2012, 62–63). In addition, the intellectual leader influential in the anti-monarchical architectural plans of the Phibun government led construction of the monument.

Luang Wichit Wathakan, who actively promoted the constitution in the early years after the 1932 revolution, helped Phibun materialize his nationalist agenda by constructing architectural structures using the government's Fine Arts Department. Examples of these structures were the monuments, such as the Democracy Monument in Bangkok and the Constitution Monuments in the provinces (Barne 1989, 90, 93). His leadership in the Fine Arts Department from 1934 to 1942 paved the way for the construction of monuments not just related to the kings and monarchy as the focus of veneration. He and the

People's Party began to install structures showcasing abstract symbolic forms and the commoner's body connected to the ideals of nationalism, democracy, constitution, and equality (Chua 2021, 148).

Aside from the construction of these kinds of monuments, Wichit also planned a structure that would celebrate Thai sovereignty, democracy, and progress while recognizing Thai history and values. Under his leadership, the department drew plans for the Thai Monument, or *Anusawari Thai*. They planned to build it at Pak Nam at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River on the Gulf of Siam. His envisaged an important monument for Thailand and the world that blended modern design and materials with Thai religion and values. The structure would also serve as his own critique against the traditional regime and monarchy by commenting on the construction of the famous Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall or *Phra Thinang Anantasamakhom* in the Dusit Palace, which was commissioned by King Chulalongkorn in 1908 but completed only in 1915. Unfortunately for Wichit, his Thai Monument never materialized because of budget concerns and material shortages due to the Second World War. Even though he was not successful in constructing this monument, he was still able to help concretize Phibun's nationalist agenda through architecture by creating other monuments such as the Victory Monument (Chua 2021, 141–146).

The re-annexation of Laotian and Cambodian territories further strengthened the popularity and strong image of Phibun and, at the same time, contributed to the development of national pride among the Thai people. Luang Wichit headed this re-annexation plan and justified the country's territorial claim. He even mobilized the people to demonstrate their loyalty to the nation in support his ideals (Chua 2021, 146–147). The Thai people, including students, supported this campaign after having been exposed to the extensive anti-French propaganda campaign and nationalistic policy of the Phibun government after the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe and the defeat of France by Germany in 1940 (Prizzia and Sinsawasdi 1974, 21).

The first incident of student activism after the 1932 revolution was related to this campaign. In November 1940, students of Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University participated in anti-French and nationalist protests demanding the lost territories in the east be regained. Students gathered at their respective campuses, marched to the Pramane Grounds, today known as Sanam Luang, and supported the Thai government in reclaiming the said territories (Prizzia and Sinsawasdi 1974, 21).

Building the Victory Monument to commemorate the victory in claiming the lost territories during the 1940 Franco-Thai War represented the development

of Thai nationalism and the construction of a Thai nation-state not dependent on the monarchical institution.

Aside from the ideal of the modern nation-state, modernization in terms of architectural style was also evident in the monument. Like the Democracy Monument, the construction of the Victory Monument was a milestone in Thai architecture because it distanced itself from the traditional regime and served as an antithesis of architectural structures associated with the monarchy. The style combined the body of the commoner with imagery invoking the political power during this period, created a strange combination of modern elements of realism through the bronze hero statues, and formed an abstract image through the obelisk design (Wong 2000, 84–85; Chua 2021, 149). The structure is also an amalgam of various early 20th-century stylistic movements and Western conventions in architecture. It can be seen in the monument's elevated radial platforms, central obelisk, military memorials, cannons, and lanterns (Noobanjong 2012, 60).

Despite the intricacies and glorification of the monument's symbols and intended meanings, it eventually failed to deliver its message to the public. Silpha Bhirasri, who was in charge of the hero sculptures of the monument, later called this structure a “victory of embarrassment” because the territories that Thailand re-claimed after the Franco-Thai War were ceded back to the French after World War II (Wong 2000, 84; Chua 2012, 355–356).

Beyond the intended meanings of this structure, the monument also embodies the concept of authoritarianism by being a product of Phibun's policies. Bhirasri's above statement can be seen as justified because the monument was constructed on a whim of Phibun's in an effort to further his propaganda and political interests, and by extension, his authoritarian rule. The settlement between France and Thailand was signed in May 1941, and the laying of the monument's foundation occurred promptly in June of the same year. The artists involved had limited license in creating it due to the inadequate time frame as well as other factors, such as the domination of the Phibun administration in the construction process and the immense number of construction projects planned during his time (Wong 2000, 84–85). The public was not involved in creating this structure, and the working committee only followed the instructions of Phibun and his swift decision to erect this monument for the sake of propaganda.

These perceptions allowed the monument to be further challenged by the monarchical and military institutions and for various activities to be conducted in this structure. For example, the symbols of remembrance in this monument have evolved significantly through time. From being purely militarist and nationalistic, a new layer was added after Phibun's term. The symbolic presence

of the monarchical institution appeared in the monument. Royal festivities started to occur in this monument, and royal decorations, such as images, emblems, and flags of royalty, were placed. A new sense of nationalism under the royal authority, together with the military, was generated and emphasized in this structure, and the representation of Thainess in this monument reverted to the values of nation, religion, and monarchy (Noobanjong 2012, 60–63, 66).

During the time of Phibun's successors, Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn, the Victory Monument became a reminder to the people of the significant role of the Siamese royal elite in defending the kingdom by giving up land to prevent Western colonial aggression and of military supremacy in claiming back the lost territories. In addition, the government used the structure to stir patriotic feelings among the masses and gather public support against communism by honoring the heroism of the military during the Franco-Thai War and commemorating the February 4 Thai Veteran's Day at the monument (Noobanjong 2012, 66–68).

The Victory Monument nevertheless became a military memorial despite the new layer added to its meaning. However, its spotlight was diverted to other public monuments, particularly those glorifying the traditional heroes of Thailand. Sarit Thanarat developed a new image of militarism to separate him from Phibun. As a traditionalist military man, he sought an indigenous symbol of power to memorialize, and he chose the figure of King Naresuan. Under his leadership, they installed the Dual Monuments of King Naresuan in Don Chedi, Suphanburi, in 1958 to honor the King's heroism against the Burmese forces in 1592. After this historical construction, countless memorials of King Naresuan of Ayutthaya were built throughout Thailand, overshadowing the Victory Monument, once a prominent symbol of Thai militarism and nationalism (Wong 2000, 121–124).

Due to the area's development and rapid urbanization in Bangkok, the monument eventually transformed into an urban center and transportation hub. Government offices, hospitals, residential areas, shopping centers, and other commercial facilities were erected nearby. The skytrain and improved van and bus stations near the monument followed. From becoming the symbol of Thai militarism, the Victory Monument became one of Bangkok's busiest traffic roundabouts (Wong 2000, 84; Noobanjong 2012, 64). In 2018, plans for redevelopment of the area and renovation of the monument were laid. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) was expected to spend about 40 million baht on an underground walkway to make the memorial accessible and safer for visitors. They also wanted to develop the landscape of the roundabout. However, a design is yet to be unveiled, and no caretaker for the monument has been found. In fact, it was recently found that no government agency is

claiming ownership of the monument, which only proves that it is neglected and not prioritized by the institution, adding to its vulnerability (Charuvastra 2018; *Who's responsible for Bangkok's monuments?* 2018; *Hunt on for monument caretaker* 2018).

3 The “Democracy” in the Victory Monument

The nationalism that the Victory Monument has symbolized since its construction did not emphasize the significance of democracy and the constitution. Rather, the monument promoted nationalism anchored to militarism and, later, on to the monarchy. Its association with democracy and the constitution only emerged when spatial agencies such as the Thai protesters occupied this structure.

Spatial structures, such as monuments, are not just passive warehouses of memories and symbols. People can continuously construct and reconstruct their meanings, and through spatial agency, transform these structures into political and social platforms. Instances of spatial agency, such as Thailand's protests and social movements, converts these spaces, the Victory Monument included, into a platform from which to voice grievances (Sewell 2001, 55–56).

From being a monument to military victory, this structure has transformed into an instrumental space for democracy and against military dictatorship. The Victory Monument has witnessed protests from various groups and sectors since 2009, as, in addition to the Democracy Monument, it has emerged as one of Bangkok's democratic spaces. More specifically, the monument has become an alternative space for contentious politics due to its greater accessibility compared to the Democracy Monument, which is situated on Ratchadamnoen Avenue and surrounded by institutional edifices. Proximity to the residential areas of the Ratchathewi district and a lack of availability of other public spaces, such as Sanam Luang, contribute to the emergence of the Victory Monument as a democratic space.²

2 Sanam Luang is a public urban space in Bangkok occupying approximately 29.6 acres. Various buildings, universities, and institutions surround it. It is also a space for public activities, such as royal rites and ceremonies. This public space already existed in 1782 and was initially named Pramane Grounds before it was changed to Sanam Luang, or Royal Grounds, in 1855. After the June 1932 revolution, the supervision of Sanam Luang was transferred to the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). This transfer allowed public activities on grounds other than royal rites and ceremonies. One of these activities was political rallies. Aside from the football grounds and open spaces in the respective universities, students were allowed to use this space as one of their demonstration venues.

The structure commemorating military greatness has turned into a space for demonstrations condemning the military takeover of the government. As a turning point, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) protesters, supporters of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, occupied the monument on April 9, 2009 (see Figure 4). Due to Thailand's political instability, they aimed to remove Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who, in December 2008, became the head of a newly instated, unelected government. They demanded the resignation of the president of the Privy Council—due to accusations that he was the mastermind behind the 2006 military coup



FIGURE 4 Red Shirt protest at the Victory Monument on April 9, 2009.
RETRIEVED FROM (ADAPTOR-PLUG 2009).

It was an accessible and convenient location from which the student protesters could mobilize their demonstrations, particularly the students of Thammasat University which is often the center of student activism due to the university's location near Sanam Luang (Prizzia and Sinsawasdi 1974, 16–21; Piromruen 2012, 12–13). However, in recent years, this open space is no longer as convenient and accessible for protesters due to the restrictions imposed by the authorities. On September 20, 2020, the student movement conducted a notable protest on the site in which student protesters from the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration (UFTD) installed a round brass plaque commemorating the 1932 Revolution at Sanam Luang. The inscription on the plaque emphasized that Thailand belonged to the people, not the monarchy. They next changed the name “Sanam Luang” to “Sanam Ratsadon” (The People's Grounds or Commoners' Field) to emphasize that the people owned the grounds (*Protesters ready to declare 'New People's Party' 2020; Protesters' new democracy plaque removed overnight 2020*).

that ousted Shinawatra—as well as the revocation of the 2007 constitution. The UDD protesters, or Red Shirts, blocked the major intersection at the monument. About a hundred taxi drivers and a crowd of motorcycle taxi drivers participated in the protest. They parked their vehicles around the area to block and control the roads (*Protesters block traffic in Bangkok during mass rally 2009*) (Noobanjong 2012, 71; Sopranzetti 2012, 23–24).

In May 2014, the monument became a democratic space for the anti-coup protesters, as one of Bangkok's public spaces occupied by protesters. The activists claimed the spot even though the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) had prohibited political gatherings of more than five people. Despite military and police personnel presence in the vicinity, they gathered and expressed their resistance against military control of the government (*Troop invasion heads off Victory Monument protest 2014; Photos: Anti-Coup Protest at Victory Monument 2014*).

The demonstrations benefited from the monument because it gave protesters a means of effortlessly getting the public's attention, blocking traffic, and paralyzing the city. Given the location, the protests were able to halt the flow of this urban area, which is considered the core of modern capitalism. The working class, or the people who are supposed to facilitate the economy, forwarded their demands and sent their messages to the public by blocking the thoroughfares (Sopranzetti 2012, 24). Being a central transportation hub, protest at the monument was more of a strategic location than a symbolic representation of their demands (Noobanjong 2012, 71). The vulnerability of this monument paved the way for political groups and activists to contest the message it portrays to the public. Despite not being a symbolic representation of the protests, using this monument based on its strategic convenience and advantage also subconsciously produces a new layer of meaning and contributes to its transformation.

This monument, just like the Democracy Monument, has been contended by various protests, including the Thai student movement. By the 1973 student movement, it was not yet a democratic space. The only narrative connected to this memorial was that it served as a shortcut for a group of students going to the palace on October 14, 1973, resulting in a violent encounter with the police guarding the road. They passed through Ratchawithi Road on their way to Victory Monument and faced the violent measures of the authorities. It was reported that several students died or were injured in this incident (Palanupap 1973). However, with the 2014 protests, then the 2020 student movement, the monument was resurrected and became one of the rally sites of the student groups.

The 2020 student movement is an example of how the narratives of the monuments can be challenged through protest activities. The re-emergence of the Thai student movement in 2020 presented another layer of meaning for this monument previously introduced by anti-coup demonstrators in 2009.

Democratic notions are not concretely apparent in its symbols and meanings. Rather, these emerged when it was claimed by the people, who transformed it into a platform for social movements because of its strategic location. From symbolizing the military victory, an additional layer of meaning was constructed, representing the concept of democracy and the democratic rights of the Thai people. In this way, the Victory Monument has been transformed from a spatial structure mediating Phibun's ideals of militarism, authoritarianism, modernization, and nationalism to a democratic space due to the spatial agency, particularly the demonstrations held here. The Victory Monument is no longer about the importance of the military. It has become a democratic symbol of the working class and students, next to the Democracy Monument.

Aside from the transformation of the monument into a democratic symbol, it must also be noted that the construction of the Victory Monument, as well as the Democracy Monument, signified the influence of the military in Thai politics and its participation in the development of democracy in Thailand. The connection is evidenced in the association of the military with the construction of the monument. From the Democracy Monument romanticizing the military through its symbols to the Victory Monument commemorating the military victory during the Franco-Thai war, these structures greatly underlined the military's essential role in Thailand's political landscape.

However, the military challenged the narrative and perspective on democracy when power shifted from Phibun to Sarit and eventually Thanom. The shift in military leadership also reflected a transformation in meaning of the monuments and their significance within Thai society. It can be seen how the presence and importance of the monument have been both neglected and contested through the years. From following the Western school of democracy based on the military leadership of Phibun and the ideals of *Khana Ratsadon*, the narrative and perspective have returned to the traditional school of democracy which emphasizes the significance of the monarchy in Thai politics and signaling the union of the military and the monarchy in contextualizing the concept of Thai democracy.³

3 There are two political discourses on Thai democracy. The first is the "Traditionalist School of Thought," while the second is the "Western School of Thought." The "Traditionalist School of Thought" argues that democracy has long been part of Thai society through the

The case of the Victory Monument demonstrates how spatial structures such as military monuments contributed to the strong image of the military and emphasized their role in society as nation-builders. On the other hand, it also underscored how spatial agency and institutions can also use these structures to their advantage, like how the military and monarchical institutions treated the Victory Monument and changed the narrative and perspective concerning its significance.

This imagery of the military and monarchy attached to the Victory Monument, and at the same time to the traditional school of Thai democracy, was later challenged by the student movements through their occupation and performative actions in this space, adherence to the Western ideals of democracy, opposition to military dictatorship, and push for reform of the monarchy.

4 The 2020 Student Movement

The events of Thailand's political history after the 1976 Thammasat Massacre resulted in several impediments to the development of Thai democracy. Despite the success of the October 1973 revolution, the student movement was dealt a fatal blow after 1976, though it eventually re-emerged in 2020. At that time, in addition to the Democracy Monument, the Victory Monument became instrumental for Thai democracy as a protest venue.

Despite its history as a symbol of the Phibun regime and the ideals of militarism, nationalism, modernization, and authoritarianism, the significance of this structure was contested. It became a popular and strategic space for democratic movements. Student protesters started occupying the Victory Monument as one of their rally sites in October 2020, notably after the government announced a severe state of emergency in Bangkok that prohibited gatherings of five or more people.

idea of the “father-child model” or “father rules the child” (*rabop bpokkhrong luk*) by which the Thai kings have ruled over the people by ascending the throne with consent from the Thai political community. In this way, democratic institutions are seen to have traditionally existed in Thai society before the 1932 revolution (Mektrairat 2020, 64–93). The other perspective regarding the discourse on Thai democracy is the “Western School of Thought” which highlights the Western democratic ideals that emerged in Thailand during the 1932 revolution during which the *Khana Ratsadon*, or People's Party, overthrew the absolute monarchy and installed constitutional rule. They favored the Western style of democracy, with a focus on French liberal teachings, and believed in humanity's universal rationality and progress, including the ideals of freedom, equality, fraternity, separation of powers, constitutional law, etc. (Mektrairat 2020, 64–93).

The students occupied the Victory Monument on October 18, halting traffic through the area (see Figure 5). The government closed the BTS and MRT subway stations where the demonstrations were located and declared the walkways or skywalks off-limits because of the rally. From time to time, thousands of students and protesters flashed their three-finger salute at the monument. They also sang the national anthem and filled the roundabout with light from their mobile phones. The demonstrators wore black and brought out their umbrellas and rain jackets because of the intermittent rain and possible use of water cannons with dyed water from the government forces. The activists also prepared makeshift barricades to protect themselves and prevent a repeat of the violent dispersal that happened on October 16 (*Mass protests end peacefully at Victory Monument, Asok* 2020; Khaosod English Twitter 2020; *LIVE from anti-government protest at the Victory Monument | LIVE from the Victory Monument, where protesters announced as their venue for today's anti-government rally* 2020; *Protesters in Thailand Carry On Despite Police Warning* 2020; Promchertchoo 2020).

On October 21, the student protesters occupied the monument once again and marched from the Victory Monument to the Government House, where they issued an ultimatum for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth. The following day, the government repealed the severe state of emergency and started to ease the situation (*#WhatsHappeningInThailand: Government*



FIGURE 5 Pro-democracy protest at Victory Monument on October 18, 2020.
RETRIEVED FROM (KHAOSOD ENGLISH 2020).

crackdown on the right to protest 2020; Protesters head to Government House after gathering at Victory Monument 2020).

The student occupation, like demonstrations in previous years at the Victory Monument, challenged the militarism and authoritarianism associated with this structure, while the structure, which commemorated military greatness, continued to become a space for demonstrations condemning military power and influence on the government. The challenge from the students can be seen in the demands of the students during the October 2020 protests, where they highlighted their criticisms against the military leadership of Prime Minister Prayuth. The movement stressed the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth, democratic amendments to the constitution, and reforms to the monarchy. These were emphasized through protesters' chants, speeches, and slogans, for example, "Free our friends!" "Reform the monarchy!" "Prayuth, get out!" and "Dissolve the parliament." They also shouted, "slave of the dictator!" whenever they saw the Thai police or military in the protest venue (*Mass protests end peacefully at Victory Monument, Asok 2020; Khaosod English Twitter 2020; LIVE from anti-government protest at the Victory Monument | LIVE from the Victory Monument, where protesters announced as their venue for today's anti-government rally 2020; Protesters in Thailand Carry On Despite Police Warning 2020; Promchertchoo 2020*).

The student protesters redefined the meaning of nationalism attached to this monument. They expressed their love and respect for the Thai nation by standing for the national anthem and singing it during their demonstrations (Wongngamdee 2020). This practice was evident in the different protests of the students. For example, singing the national anthem had already been a staple performative action by the student movement. However, during the October 18 protest at the Victory Monument, the student protesters not only sang the national anthem but symbolically flashed their three fingers and raised their mobile phones.

The nationalism that is usually affixed to "Thainess" and loyalty to the three pillars have been redefined by the students and protesters in their demonstrations at public monuments, such as the Victory Monument. The *Ratsadon* group, too, challenged this concept and added its own layer of meaning by incorporating "humanness" with nationalism because Thainess was often seen as an opposition to democracy (Wongngamdee 2020). The students contested the traditional school of Thai democracy by including and emphasizing Western liberal values in nationalism.

Conservatives commonly branded the student protesters as "non-Thai" and "nation haters" because of their activism. They are frequently asked, "Are you

Thai?” as a form of political intimidation and discrimination. In response, the *Ratsadon* group asked in their protests, “Are you still human?” to assert their new definition of the nation. They emphasized the importance of human rights and a more inclusive ideology rather than simply protecting “Thainess.” Popular hashtags and protest slogans encapsulated this demand from the protest groups, such as “Decrease Thainess, Increase Humanness” or *lot kwaam bpen tai hai noi long perm kwaam bpen kon hai maak keun* and “The nation is the people” or *chaat keu bprachaachon*. These phrases refer to people, not only as Thais, but as citizens and humans and encompasses any culture and ethnicity (Wongngamdee 2020).

Humanness as a way of showing nationalism can be seen in their demands, including those for the reform of the monarchy. The *Ratsadon* group also accommodated different protest groups in their movement, such as student groups, feminists, former Red Shirts, sex workers, LGBTQIA+ people, and people from the provinces who all fight for democracy. This accommodation of different groups demonstrates the humanness that the network movement would like to emphasize (Wongngamdee 2020).

The construction of public monuments such as the Democracy and Victory Monuments was part of the modernization plan of the Phibun regime. During his term, Thailand witnessed the amalgamation of foreign influences and Thai culture in arts and architecture. Although the context of modernization when these structures were built is different from the present times, this research emphasizes that the demands of the students contributed to the transformation of traditional aspects of Thai society into contemporary ones using foreign influences, globalization, and modern technologies. Following this approach, these facets of modernization can be considered evident in the 2020 student movement, particularly in their occupation of public monuments such as the Victory Monument. It was apparent in the liberal ideas manifested in the student protests, particularly individual rights and other democratic values such as freedom and human rights. The monument also became a space for their demand for reform of the monarchy.

5 Conclusion

Monuments portray stories, ideologies, and a variety of symbols and meanings that represent a significant portion of one's history and culture. These structures serve as a political tool to assert power and influence over the people and, on the other hand, instil values and remind them of their identity. Monuments

also contribute to people's everyday lives and public memory. These points are all applicable in the context of the Victory Monument in Thailand.

The Victory Monument, with its imagery of militarism and nationalism and its ties to the ideologies and nation-building program of Phibun, had nothing to do with Thai democracy when it was constructed. However, due to spatial agency such as protest activities claiming this structure, the Victory Monument has become one of Bangkok's democratic spaces. Though the democratic notions are absent in the monument's symbols and meanings, by occupying this space because of its strategic location, the people have transformed it into a platform for social movement. From symbolizing the victory of the military, an additional layer of meaning has been constructed, representing the concept of democracy and the democratic rights of the Thai people.

When the 2020 student movement emerged, the monument was resurrected from the demonstration scene after 2014, and it became one of the rally sites of the student groups. From being a product of Phibun's militarism and authoritarianism, this structure was contested and became a popular and strategic space for democratic movements. The militarism symbols and meanings evident in the monument were neglected by the democratic protests, including the 2020 student protests. They challenged them with their demands and performative actions against authoritarianism and military leadership.

With the visibility of the student movement in recent memory, this imagery of democracy in the spatial structures, such as the Victory Monument, from the previous decades has now been contested by the 2020 student movement and replaced with Western ideals of democracy. Their presence in the news headlines locally and internationally and their manner of claiming this monument produced an additional layer of meaning. The Victory Monument now embodies Western democracy, despite its original architectural design, because of the active construction of the social movement in these structures in recent times.

Fighting for and defending democracy is a continuous process, and spatial agency plays a significant role in this endeavor. Democracy in Thailand has always been defined from the statist perspective. In a country where it is difficult for a democracy to prosper because of the existing political infrastructures and institutions, spatial agency can maximize public monuments, such as the Victory Monument, to instill and preserve in the minds of the Thai people the significance of democracy in society. It is now in the hands of this young generation to decide which narrative of democracy they would like to continue for Thailand and how they will preserve and protect these public monuments related to democracy.

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