

## **Thailand's military: perpetually political, forever factionalized, again ascendant**

[Dr. Paul Chambers is currently the Senior Research Fellow at the Politics Institute, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany. His research interests are civil-military relations, democratization, and Southeast Asian politics. His articles have appeared in the Journal of East Asian Studies, Contemporary Southeast Asia, and the Asian Journal of Political Science, among others.]

The Thai armed forces have been major players in Thai politics since the 1932 coup which terminated absolute monarchy. During the 1990s, some suggested that Thai soldiers were increasingly being by-passed by new societal forces, making the armed forces less relevant political players. [1] Others pointed to the disgrace suffered by the military following the 1992 Black May massacre as a watershed event finally compelling the armed forces back to the barracks. [2] This study agrees with McCargo and Ukrist (2005) that during the 1990s, the Thai military was never depoliticized. Instead, it was “willing to pretend to accept limits and controls, on condition that it remain unreformed...” [3] Yet there has also been a contention that a “re-politicization” of the Thai military did occur with the election of the Thaksin Shinawatra government in 2001 since Thaksin brought with him to office a large team of persons with senior military backgrounds. [4] Thereupon, he appointed relatives, cronies, and pre-cadet academy classmates to high positions of military power. But by placing responsibility for such re-politicization at the door of Thaksin, one can indirectly fault him for the 2006 coup—in which the armed forces once again took direct political power into their hands. Following this reasoning, Thaksin himself is ultimately to blame for the heightened role of the armed forces in contemporary Thai politics.

There is an alternative way to analyze the political role of the Thai armed forces: examining the competition for power and prestige among military cliques even after the retirement of faction leaders. The mandatory age of retirement at age 60 (with some exceptions) has often been viewed as the end of influence for a senior Thai military official given that his/her seniority as an active duty soldier terminates with retirement. And yet in Thailand we have witnessed retired armed forces personnel forming political parties, serving in cabinets (including Minister of Defense), and taking seats in Parliament. While in the military, these soldiers have often established close-knit clusters of personalist and class-based comradeship. Meanwhile, shared service experiences, where an older infantryman commanded a younger one, produces cohesive patron-client linkages. Such connections tend to survive beyond retirement age. Factional competition thus links among active duty soldiers with retired officers.

Examples of retired soldiers who have managed to exert enormous influence on the military corps beyond the age of retirement have included Gen.Praman Adireksan, Gen.Kriangsak Chamanand, Gen.Arthit Kamlang-ek, Gen.Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, and Gen.Prem Tinsulanond. Gen.Prem is a special case—he has long been recognized as being intimate with the palace. Not since the dictatorship of Gen.Sarit Thanarat (1958-63) has such a close relationship existed between a

military personage and Thai royalty. Prem's pull on Thai politics began in 1979 when he was elevated to the concurrent positions of Defense Minister and Army Commander. He ascended to the premiership in 1980 but was required to retire as a soldier in 1981. Retirement would have considerably diminished Prem's clout among active duty officers but it did not. This is because, when he served as PM (1980-88), "royal support...elevated Prem above the factional struggles and power games in the military." [5] After stepping down as PM, Prem was appointed to be a Privy Councillor and acting Council President, given that Chief Privy Councillor Sanya Dharmasakdi was, in his last few years, in extremely poor health. [6] In 1991, the military successfully carried out a coup against PM Chatchai Chunhavan. Prem did not negatively react to the takeover, possibly because PM Chatchai had initiated a policy of sharply reducing the power of the military in national politics. [7]

Fallout from Black May 1992 represented a massive discrediting of the armed forces in Thai society. Only two military personages and their entourages of supporters remained powerful. These were Gen.Prem Tinsulanond and Gen.Chavalit Yongchaiyud, both retired. Yet Chavalit had once served under Prem and was seen on many issues to be loyal to him. Moreover, Prem could trump Chavalit because Chavalit had called for a "presidium" form of government in the late 1980s, words which to many (apparently the palace included) smacked of communism. [8] Thus, the 1992 political vacuum of active-duty or retired military leaders allowed retired Gen.Prem Tinsulanond to fill the void.

Prem continued serving as the King's de facto Chief advisor until 1998, when he was appointed as Privy Council Chair. This final appointment cemented his penultimate ascendancy (save for the palace) over the Thai armed forces. In terms of factional struggles in the military, the early-mid 1990s reflected competition between promotions of soldiers closer to either Prem or Chavalit.

Some may have thought that Prem's retirement and advancing age would obstruct his influence in the military. Yet his immeasurable prowess as the king's top advisor, as an ex-military man having influence with reshuffles and not bound by retirement restrictions, helped to elevate the Privy Council to become an institution to be reckoned with. And Prem ensured that his clients were rewarded handsomely.

As for senior military reshuffles, Prem's loyalists have been very successful. His clique has included Gen. Wimol Wongwanich (Army Commander 1992-95), Mongkol Ampornpiset (Supreme Commander 1996-2000) and Surayud Chulanond (Army Commander 1998-2002, Supreme Commander 2002-03). The election of Gen.Chavalit Yongchaiyud as PM in 1995 allowed Big *Jiew* more leeway in the choice of senior military staff. For example, in Chavalit's capacity as both Minister of Defense and PM, he was able to elevate Gen.Chettha Thanajaro (a Chavalit loyalist to the post of Army Commander). However, the 1997 financial crisis put a dent in Chavalit's luster. By Fall 1997, his star had waned considerably and he was pressured to resign from office in November. It seemed now that there was no military personality or group which could challenge the dominance of Prem over the armed forces. But Prem seemed to face gargantuan challenges with

the election of popular PM Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin brought Chavalit back with him as Defense Minister and used Chavalit's own military support base to carve out a source of his own authority in the armed forces. [9] Thaksin saw to it that Chavalit-confidante Gen.Somdhat Attanand was reshuffled as Army Commander (2002-3) and then Supreme Commander (2003-04). Thereupon, Thaksin managed to position his minions (who were either relatives or pre-cadet school class 10 schoolmates) in top positions of power. Indeed, Thaksin's cousin Chaisit served as Army Commander (2003-04) and Supreme Commander (2004-05). It seemed as though Prem's monopoly of influence over the armed forces had all but vanished.

2004 saw the promotion of Gen.Prawit Wongsawan as Army Commander. Prawit had served in the 21<sup>st</sup> battalion of the Royal Guards (the Queen's Guard). Though he was loyal to Prime Minister Thaksin, he had long been an arch-royalist and was loyal to Prem. Prawit was from Pre-cadet Class 6 and Army Cadet School Class 17. His successor as Army Commander—Gen.Sonthi Boonyaratklin—hailed from these same classes. In 2005, Prem saw to it that Sonthi, who had previously served under Prem-loyalist Surayud, was appointed to become Army Commander (despite the wishes of Thaksin). [10] The two army generals who spearheaded the 2006 coup under Sonthi were Gen.Saprang Kallayamitr of the Third Army and Gen.Anupong Paochinda of the all-important First Army headquartered in Bangkok. Sonthi could count on their backing because Saprang had long criticized Thaksin publicly. On the other hand, Anupong, though he had graduated with Thaksin from pre-cadet Class 10, had served, like Prawit, in the Queen's Guard. There have been rumors that the coup was endorsed by Gen.Prem. [11] Though it is difficult to ascertain the certainty of such reports, what is true is that in the post-coup environment, Prem has returned to the apex of control over the military. Today, the pro-Prem Gen.Anupong Paochinda continues to serve as Army Commander while retired Gen.Prawit Wongsawat acts as Minister of Defense. Their control over the military reflects the continuing dominance of former Queen's Guard officers and, by implication, Prem. Ultimately, the Thai armed forces have never been de-politicized.

As such, the three-decade period of 1979 to 2009 represents the gradual assertion of political control by the Prem military faction over the armed forces. This era encompasses Prem's own retirement from the armed forces and ascension to the Privy Council. Indeed, patronage from the palace has been a crucial factor which has enabled Prem to monopolize authority even after the age of retirement. Though sub-factions within his network of military clientele abound, the group remains united only under Prem himself. The failure of Thaksin Shinawatra to effectively challenge Prem has represented the end of a final threat to the Privy Council Chair.

Though the elections of December 2007 appeared to revitalize Thailand's process of democratization, 2008 marked a grim watershed for democracy in Thailand. The post-2006 coup military leadership was clearly unhappy with the electoral results—which brought a pro-Thaksin government back to office. But they did not dare stage the conventional coup d'etat. The coup and military government that followed it had been mostly unpopular both domestically and internationally. At the same time, damaging events which occurred under the CNS regime (it failed

to solve any political or economic problems) caused the armed forces to be seen in an increasingly negative light. Thus, as Thitinan Ponsudhirak says, the 2006 coup was a “botched” coup. [12] The military’s alternative to outright takeover in January 2008 was thus to take a back seat to those opposed to Samak Sundaravej and indirectly influence the dis-assembling of the People’s Power party administration. This it did in on three occasions. First, the armed forces put little effort into protecting Samak’s government (and later that of PM Somchai Wongsawat) from unruly crowds which took over Government House, attempted to capture Parliament, and hijacked two international airports. In essence, the Army under Gen. Anupong Paochinda was refusing to protect Thailand’s chief of government—the Prime Minister, though the Army Commander also refused to launch a coup against the government.

Secondly, the military at least twice called on PM Somchai to resign. This happened once on October 16, when Gen. Anupong, at the head of a contingent of Thailand’s top brass, appeared on Thai television to call for PM Somchai Wongsawat’s resignation to take responsibility for bloodshed on October 7. [13] In late November Anupong again called on Somchai to either dissolve the Lower House or resign to avert the political storm, rather than face down the PAD demonstrators. Though the Constitution Court managed to finish off the Somchai government, forcing the dissolution of Palang Prachachon, pro-Thaksin MPs clearly had the numbers to reconstitute a new ruling coalition. Here the armed forces again entered the fray.

Thirdly, in mid-December 2008, the military indirectly helped to usher in the anti-Thaksin coalition government of Democrat Abhisit Vechachiwa. A troika of pro-Prem soldiers was apparently instrumental in this oblique intervention: Army Chief Anupong Paochinda, retired Gen. Prawit Wongsawat, and Army Chief of Staff Gen. Prayuth Chanucha. These three “Queen’s Musketeers” had served together in the 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment of the Royal Guards—the Queen’s Guards. In early December, on the heels of the court verdict, talks began between these soldiers and members of several political parties, including the Democrat, Chart Thai, Puea Paendin, Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana, as well as several members of the new pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party to set up an anti-Thaksin ruling coalition. The three soldiers also contacted apparent Thaksin loyalist and long-time politico Newin Chidchob—who proved to be less than loyal to his erstwhile patron. [14]

Newin’s support was crucial for a coalitional realignment to transpire. Born in Buriram province, in northeastern Thailand, he could perhaps carve into Thaksin’s assumed Isaan constituency. His father Chai served as Parliament President while Interim PM Chaovarat Chanvirakul, a key member of Newin’s faction, was caretaker Prime Minister. The two men could ensure that dissolution of parliament would never occur—and they did. [15] Meanwhile, Newin could sway scores of former Palang Prachachon MPs to defect to the anti-Thaksin ruling coalition—something which the Buriram bigwig proved he could easily accomplish.

Meanwhile, the importance of the military was not lost on Thai politicians. Against the recent backdrop of the Army’s refusal to protect ex-PM Somchai, MPs were keenly aware of the armed forces’ resurgent relevance to coalition formation and longevity. As such, “the troika of the 21<sup>st</sup>”

was perceived as central to a new ruling coalition. In this way, Thailand's military became the indirect arbiter in the formation of a new civilian government.

The Democrats' Secretary-General Suthep Thaugsuban was the key civilian go-between between his party and Thailand's armed forces. In an interview, he discussed how these conversations bore fruit for the formation of a Democrat-led coalition:

I had good ties with senior figures in the Military and I particularly admired Gen.Prawit [Wongsawan]. He could be reliable and was respected by younger military officers. So I got in touch with him. He said the military was ready to follow orders if they were lawful and legitimate...He wished me good luck. [After meeting potential coalition partners], I told them that I had someone apart from me who could give them assurances. [16]

The military triumvirate's success in ousting Thaksin's elected nominee government from office without resorting to a coup and then building an anti-Thaksin civilian government has clearly resurrected its clout vis-??-vis civilians. However these events have triggered broad repercussions regarding Thailand's entire process of democratization. After all, since 1992, the country had followed a trajectory toward greater pluralism and political space. Though it is true that Thaksin stifled parts of the rule of law, the 2006 coup put an end to democratization (except at the local level). The election of December 2007 seemed to breathe new life into pluralism but democratic roots proved shallow. 2008 witnessed a military willing and able to involve itself in unconventional, indirect political intrusions—to the point of re-stacking the coalition.

### **Post-Script**

Of late, the Abhisit government has quietly eased Patcharawat Wongsawan out of active office, pressuring him to take a leave of absence until retirement in August 2009. In Patcharawat's stead stands acting Police Chief Gen. Wichien Potposri, who appears to be more amenable to working under an anti-Thaksin government as well as perhaps pliable by the military. However Wichien failed to impress the Police Commission in terms of being selected as the next national police chief—perhaps because he lacked seniority and experience. Chairman of the Board PM Abhisit nominated Pol.Gen.Prateep Tanprasert, a favorite of the PAD and a few pro-PAD army elements. But a majority of the 11-member body preferred Pol.Gen.Chumpol Manmai, seen as close to Patcharawat, Prawit, the Bhumjai Thai Party, and pro-Prawit military officers. The meeting ended inconclusively, though Abhisit promised to renominate Prateep. The struggle, however, could represent an attempt by the PAD and certain Democrats (including Abhisit) to wrest control of the chief's position from the current military/police leadership in order to achieve greater control over a police force seen as being generally pro-Thaksin in orientation. [17]

As for Prawit, the government would most probably like to dismiss him from the post of Defense Minister altogether. This is possibly because of government fears of Prawit's military influence,

given the state's decision to indirectly sack his brother Patcharawat. At the same time, Prawit seems more loyal to Newin Chidchob's Bhumjai Thai party than to the Democrats.

But Abhisit and Suthep must be careful. The quartet of Prawit, Patcharawat, Anupong, and Prayuth has undergirded the Abhisit administration's survival. Still, should Prawit depart from the post of Defense Minister, the position may go to one of Prawit's pre-cadet and cadet school classmates (perhaps either Gen. Sonthi or Gen.Boonsrang Niampradit) or possibly confirmed anti-Thaksinista Gen.Saprang Kallayamitr. If any of these men take the post, we will be witnessing the perpetuation of the 2006 coup group in positions of post-coup power and Thailand's military game will continue to endure. [18] At the same time, if Saprang assumes the Defense posting, there could be possible conflict within Thailand's military establishment. Saprang is supported by Sondhi Limthongkul and the PAD who have hurled criticisms upon Anupong over the last six months and continue to do so.

Anupong himself is working to secure a stable future for those closest to him. On June 17, 2009, Anupong transferred/promoted 75 mid-level officers as a reward for their involvement in the 2006 coup. One of these, Lt. Col.Pattanachai Jintakanont (former Commander of the strategically key 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Battalion in Bangkok) was promoted to colonel and appointed to be the Army Chief's Aide. His replacement was Lt. Col.Chinsorn Ruengsuk, an aide to Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan. [19] With regard to October 2009 military reshuffles, this includes Gen.Prayuth (AFAPS Class 12, Army Cadet School Class 23), who Anupong is keeping on as Army Chief of Staff, in line to be take Anupong's own position in 2010. At the same time, Anupong will promote another Class 10 army chum, Gen.Teerawat Boonyapradap to become deputy Army Chief. [20] In Teerawat's place, Anupong is set to appoint Gen. Piroon Phaeopolsong, deputy Army Chief of Staff, as assistant Army Chief. Piroon graduated with Anupong in pre-cadet school Class 10. Finally, Gen.Wit Thephasadin na Ayutthaya (Class 11) is to be promoted to be another assistant Army Chief. [21] The promotions further clinch the ascendancy of Pre-Cadet Class 10 and 12 as well as Army Cadet School Classes 21 and 23 over Thailand's Armed Forces. At the same time, at least until 2010 the personal supremacy of Generals Anupong and Prayuth is assured.

In late August 2009, rumors of a military coup were again resonating. It was said that the supposed takeover would be instigated by Generals Prawit, Anupong, Prayuth, as well as politician Newin Chidchob. The gossip coincided with an August 17 attempt by red-shirts to petition Thailand's king to pardon Thaksin Shinawatra during which potential violence might provide the necessary springboard for military intervention. [22] The rumor has not come to pass but it underlines the continuing popular perception of an extreme lack of civilian control over Thailand's military. Such tittle-tattle is not idle chitchat in a country where the army has proved time and again that it can and will continue its role as political umpire where it—and the Privy Council—see fit.

The military triumvirate's success in building a civilian government military succeeded in ousting Thaksin's elected nominee government from office without resorting to a coup. However it triggered broad repercussions regarding Thailand's entire process of democratization. Since 1992, the country had followed a trajectory toward greater pluralism and political space. Though it is true

that Thaksin stifled parts of the rule of law, the 2006 coup put an end to democratization (except at the local level). The election of December 2007 seemed to breathe new life into pluralism but democratic roots proved shallow. 2008 witnessed a military willing and able to involve itself in unconventional, indirect political intrusions—to the point of re-stacking the coalition.

## NOTES

1. Chai-anan Samudavanija, "The Military, Bureaucracy, and Globalization," In Hewison, Kevin, editor, *Political Change in Thailand*, London: Routledge, pp.54-55.
2. Surachart Bamrungsuk, "Thailand: Military Professionalism at the Crossroads," p.77.
3. McCargo, Duncan, Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005, p.129.
4. McCargo, Duncan, Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2005, p.134.
5. Pasuk Pongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p.346.
6. Handley, Paul, "Princes, Politicians, Generals: The Evolution of the Privy Council Under the Constitutional Monarchy. Paper presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies, Thammasat University, Thailand, 9-11 January 2008, p.15.
7. Handley, Paul, "Princes, Politicians, Generals: The Evolution of the Privy Council Under the Constitutional Monarchy. Paper presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies, Thammasat University, Thailand, 9-11 January 2008, p.15.
8. Handley, Paul, *The King Never Smiles*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p.470.
9. See McCargo, Duncan, Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2004, p.137.
10. Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Where Will Sonthi Lead "Army of the Land?" *The Nation*, March 24, 2006, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com>.
11. Interview with Jakrapop Penkair, March 3, 2009.
12. Thitinan Pongsudhirak, Paper Presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies, Thammasat University, Thailand, 9- 11 January 2008.

13. Wassana Nanuam, ???“The Coup that Never Was“ *Bangkok Post*, October 31, 2008, <http://www.bangkokpost.com>.
14. Wassana Nanuam, “Government Hopefuls Rendezvous with Anupong, ‘the Manager,’” *Bangkok Post*, December 11, 2008, <http://www.bangkokpost.com>.
15. Chai’s occupying the post of Parliament President also gave him the power to call a Special Session of Parliament to officially select a new Prime Minister (which he did on December 15) following Abhisit’s apparent success in garnering enough votes to become Prime Minister.
16. How Suthep Installed a Democrat-led Government,“ *The Nation*, May 26, 2009, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com>.
17. Manop Thip-osod, “Scramble to be the Next Top Cop,” *Bangkok Post*, August 11, 2009, <http://www.bangkokpost.com>; Pradit Ruangdit, Manop Thip-osod, “Abhisit Loses Police Vote,” *Bangkok Post*, August 21, 2009, <http://www.bangkokpost.com>.
18. Wassana Nanuam, ???Prawit Fears Meddling in Lists, *Bangkok Post*, August 6, 2009, <http://www.bangkokpost.com>.
19. Wassana Nanuam, “Anupong Rewards his Coup Allies,” *Bangkok Post*, June 19, 2009, <http://www.bangkokpost.com>.
20. Wassana Nanuam, ???Prawit Urged to Prevent Meddling in Reshuffle,” *Bangkok Post*, August 7, 2009, <http://www.bangkokpost.com>.
21. Wassana Nanuam, “Source Says Prayuth to Stay as Chief-of-Staff,” *Bangkok Post*, August 18, 2009, <http://www.bangkokpost.com>.
22. “Puea Thai Blows Whistle on Silent Coup Plot,” *The Nation*, August 17, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com>.