

What if Thailand's junta can't control the military?



With Thailand's elections approaching on 24 March, Prayuth Chan-ocha seems set to stabilise his political hold over the country by indirectly extending his power via the ballot box. His Phalang Pracharat party has thus far proven to be an able vehicle for National Council for Peace and Order's (NCPO) interests as it seeks to convert to the appearance of a civilian government. But parliamentary support notwithstanding, it is also in the military where Prayuth has to maintain loyal backing. And in 2019, Thailand's NCPO is militarily weaker than at the time of the 2014 coup.

The critical period for the junta's decline was October 2016, the month in which King Bhumibol Adulyadej died. Since October 2016, the junta has begun to lose a principal rationale for remaining in power: guarding an elderly, frail sovereign. Since October 2016, the junta has not had an army commander in place belonging to its own Buraphapayak faction. Since October 2016, the junta has had to contend with the intensifying efforts by up-and-coming officers not part of the junta's clique to ascend to the army's senior-most positions.

Finally, and most importantly, since October 2016 the sovereign lording over Thailand's traditional royal institution has appeared to favour a more direct form of control over the armed

forces. That approach involves personalising the selection of senior military officials and reorganising the military itself—both of which mean that the NCPO leaders will lose control over the military, unless they can find a convincing excuse for remaining relevant to the aristocracy.

With the junta leaders' network of power vis-à-vis the military withering (though still existing), the 24 March election's charade democracy represents the need for Prayuth to reinvent himself and establish a form of electoral legitimacy as a means of sustaining power for him and his aristocratic allies. But whether he extends his power following an election or remains as junta chief, his future may be limited. With most Thais exhausted with the NCPO in 2019, Prayuth is no paladin of popularity. What is more, history shows that Thailand is coup-prone. If Thailand's regal institution loses patience with him, the army—shorn of most junta loyalists in command positions—could easily become restless.

Note: It must be remembered that in Thailand the most powerful security service is the army, which enjoys the lion's share of the budget. In 2019 this has not changed. When this article mentions the military or armed forces, readers should remember that concentration is placed on the army.

Prayuth at his prime

The rise of the current junta leaders began back in 2004, when the hand-picked military leadership under then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was suddenly faced with the exacerbation of insurgency in Thailand's Deep South. Thaksin reluctantly promoted Privy Council Chair Prem Tinsulanond's choice of General Prawit Wongsuwan as army chief. In 2005, Prawit's pre-cadet academy class peer Sonthi Boonyaratklin succeeded Prawit. But the 2006 coup against Thaksin was carried out mostly by the army's First Army Region (in charge of Bangkok and central Thailand) under General Anupong Paochinda, not Sonthi.

When Sonthi retired in 2007, Anupong, with the backing of Prem, succeeded him. A disciple of Prawit, Anupong purged most of the senior army officials, substituting them with his own loyalists. Prawit and Anupong were both members of the Buraphapayak (Eastern Tigers) faction, the namesake of the Second Infantry Division. Within Buraphapayak is the Taharn Sua Rachanee (Queen's Tiger Guards), the factional nickname of the 21st Infantry Regiment of which Anupong and his deputy Prayuth belonged. From 2007 until his retirement in 2010, Anupong succeeded in consolidating his personal and factional power over the army given that, as an active-duty officer, he could constantly purge and appoint officers beneath him. Anupong was assisted by Prawit, who served as Defence Minister in 2009–11.

In 2010, Anupong's protégé Prayuth succeeded him. Prayuth continued to oversee the entrenchment of his faction's control over the army. Doing so necessitated that each year the army's "Five Tigers"—the commander (himself), deputy commander, chief of staff and the two assistant commander positions, as well as the leadership positions of the four regional commands—were constantly filled by officers sufficiently loyal to Prayuth. In addition, especially in

the First Army Region, it was often essential that deputy command postings were held by loyalists.

A strategy of sharing army authority was commonly used to co-opt other factions under Prayuth's command. Beginning in 2010, Prayuth's Buraphapayak/Taharn Sua Rachanee (B/TSR) faction began to allow Wongthewan (Divine Progeny), the army's then second-leading faction, to hold a certain number of key army slots, though the amount was less than B/TSR. In 2010–11, Wongthewan held the First Army Region Command. 2011–12 saw B/TSR return to control the position. 2012–13 was again Wongthewan. 2013–14 again was Wongthewan.

By 2014, B/TSR had dominated Thailand's army for seven years. Prayuth had himself served as army chief for four years. The last army commander to serve longer was General Praphas Charusatien, who held the post from 1964 to 1973. Suffice it to say that by 2014 Prayuth enjoyed rock solid military control, though his army entrenchment owed also to backing from Prawit Wongsuwan and more royalist military elements.

Junta Linkages with Senior Army Leadership (2013–19)

Junta Chief and PM	Deputy Junta Chief, Deputy PM, and Defense Minister	Army Chief
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