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Abstract

Extract:

After a period of unprecedented power, Thailand's absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932. That was supposed to destroy the authority and influence of Thai monarchs and begin a new era for Thailand as a constitutionally-established democracy. Sixty-two years later, the King's influence and his support amongst the people is as strong as ever. However, Thailand's status as a political democracy seems far from certain.

Keywords

politics, military influence

Background Briefing :

Thai Politics

by John Hirschfeld

Introduction

After a period of unprecedented power, Thailand's absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932. That was supposed to destroy the authority and influence of Thai monarchs and begin a new era for Thailand as a constitutionally-established democracy. Sixty-two years later, the King's influence and his support amongst the people is as strong as ever. However, Thailand's status as a political democracy seems far from certain. Since 1932, there have been twenty-one coups (Suchit, 1993, p. 124), the latest in 1991, and over forty changes of government.

This background briefing will discuss what has prevented a genuine constitutional democracy from developing during most of those sixty-two years. It will also investigate the current political situation, the main protagonists in Thai politics, and the future prospects.

Historical Background

At the turn of the century, partly in response to the threat of expanding Western colonial empires, and partly to consolidate its own hold on Siamese society, the Siamese monarchy introduced reforms designed to centralise administrative power in Bangkok. Whilst this concentrated authority in the monarchy throughout the Siamese empire, it also made it far easier for small numbers of army and government officials to seize and retain power over the empire. That is precisely what happened in 1932.

The bureaucrats who had seized power wanted to introduce a system of constitutional democracy, but lacked mainstream popular support. They were also unwilling to share their recently gained authority with the Thai people or with each other. This was the beginning of the so called 'bureaucratic polity' (Riggs cit. Somrudee, 1993, p. 167) in Thai politics. Bureaucrats dominated Thai politics and there was very little input from people or organisations outside the bureaucracy.

Academics argue that this lack of interest in the political process can be explained by the lack of a nationalist mass movement (Thailand was never colonised). Also, the majority of businessmen were Chinese, and 'faced with popular resentment and governmental discrimination, [they] kept a low political profile' (Mackerras, 1993, p. 422).

Thai politics therefore became a struggle between the various branches of the bureaucracy. The Thai army, as the best organised and most cohesive element of the government, nearly always won the struggle.

This pattern, neatly described by Chai-Anan Samudavanija, as a 'vicious cycle of politics' (1982, p. 1), continued until the student's uprising of 1973. At the beginning of the cycle, military leaders seized power. Between 1932 and 1973, they did this 11 times (Sukhumbhand, 1993, p. 881). The military then abolished the constitution, and after a period of stabilisation, re-introduced democratic institutions (i.e. parliament and political parties). As soon as these institutions threatened to disobey their military masters, a coup was staged to 'avert a political

crisis, real, imagined, or simply contrived in order to safeguard the nation's security' (Chai-Anan & Sukhumbhand, 1993, p. 125).

'To safeguard the nation's security' is a crucial phrase, because that was precisely how the military saw its role; as guardian of the national security. This responsibility not only justified the brutal suppression of any opposition, but also allowed the military to take advantage of any economic opportunities that arose. According to this view, the military dismissed politics as a 'game played only by politicians that potentially could bring instability, disorder and obstructions to progress and consequently endanger the society at large' (Sukhumbhand, 1993, p. 881).

The student uprising of 1973 marked the end of the military's absolute dominance in Thai politics. After the uprising and subsequent reactionary coups, the military remained powerful, but was unable (except by force) to impose its narrow and anachronistic view of how Thailand should develop on an increasingly literate middle class and politically conscious society.

In 1978, after several turbulent years, a new constitution was drafted, which many Western observers thought would be the start of yet another 'vicious cycle'. Several times during the next thirteen years, their pessimism almost proved correct. In 1978 and 1979 there were communist insurgencies and in the 1980s, there were several attempts at intervention by the military. In spite of these challenges the constitutional system survived, and even began to prosper.

None of this would have come as any surprise to a student of Thai demographics. During a twenty year period between the 1960s and the 1980s, there was a 650% increase in the number of Thais with higher education and a 550% increase in the middle class (Source: *Thailand National Economic and Social Development Board*). These people demanded far greater participation in the process of governing the country. Whilst there were dramatic improvements in personal and political freedom, Western style democracy did not develop. What evolved was 'liberalization without democracy' (Chai-Anan and Sukhumbhand, 1993, p. 119).

Chai-Anan Samudavanija and Sukhumbhand Paribatra list five major expressions of this liberalization (1993, pp. 119-142). General elections were held (four of them), more or less peacefully. Political parties began to develop and they were able to exert more influence in all areas of government, notably in foreign policy and national security. Previously, this had been the sole domain of 'military officers and civilian bureaucrats to the exclusion of political parties and politicians' (Sukhumbhand, 1993, p. 863).

Other manifestations of this liberalization were the 'expanding role of private sector and non governmental organisation' (NGOs) and the 'high degree of intellectual and media freedom' (Sukhumbhand, 1993 p. 883). NGOs tackled the difficult problems of drugs, child labour, prostitution, AIDS and the destruction of the environment. The media was free to discuss any subject, apart from the royal family.

Finally, the army itself, became more liberal. The newer generations of officers, having been exposed to a broader range of outside influences than their predecessors, were far more attuned and sympathetic to the need for greater popular participation in Thai politics.

Despite this tide of liberalism, full Western-style democracy did not develop. The political parties failed to develop 'grass roots' and the power of the bureaucracies, especially the military, continued. These two factors hindered the democratization process and created the preconditions for the coup of 1991.

In early 1991, the government of Chatichai Choonhavan was widely regarded as corrupt by Thai society. The military, exploiting the public discontent and 'emphasizing its age-old right of forceful intervention in order to protect the nation's institutions and interests' (Sukhumbhand, 1993, p. 888), overthrew the government.

The military junta led by army Commander General Suchinda Kraproyoon, appointed businessman Anand Panyarachun as caretaker Prime Minister. His government 'was much praised by businessmen' (*The Economist*, 20 November 1993, p. 27), in the leadup to the March 1992 election.

After the election, General Suchinda (as second choice of the victorious coalition) accepted an invitation to become Prime Minister, despite previous assurances to the contrary (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 21 May 1992, p. 10). This provoked almost immediate protest. Whilst Thais were prepared to accept the intervention of the army in order to oust a government regarded as corrupt, they would not tolerate a return to the pre-1973 days of military domination.

The protest gathered steam, when the former governor of Bangkok Chamlong Srimuang announced, on 4 May 1992, he would fast until Suchinda resigned. Chamlong's actions were supported by almost 150 000 Thais who demonstrated in Bangkok's government district.

On 10 May, normality seemed to have been restored when the government agreed to constitutional amendments 'requiring all future prime ministers to be elected MPs' (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 May 1992, p. 10) and to reform of the Senate, which had been stacked with military appointees.

A day later, the government appeared to renege on these promises, and more mass demonstrations were planned. In the evening of 17 May, another 150 000 people attended a rally at Sanam Luang parade ground in central Bangkok. The subsequent march down Ratchadamnoen Avenue disintegrated into what the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, called 'the worst violence seen in Bangkok for more than 20 years' (28 May 1992, p. 10).

After two days of rioting, the destruction of millions of dollars of property and the death of over a hundred protesters (the exact number of deaths is still uncertain), it was only the intervention of King on 20 May which ended the violence and secured the resignation of Suchinda. Another interim period of government followed and after the elections of September 13, a coalition, led by Democrat Party president Chuan Leekpai, emerged victorious.

The Major Political Players

Sukhumbhand Paribatra suggests that three factors allowed the constitutional system to last as long as it did, thirteen years, between 1978 and 1991: the influence of the King, factionalism within the armed forces, and the ability of individual politicians (1993, p. 886). These people or groups of people continue to play crucial roles in Thai politics. It is necessary to examine their present activities in order to speculate about the future of Thai politics.

The Monarchy

Sixty-five year old King Bhumipol Adulyadej is undoubtedly the most respected person in Thai politics. Whilst strict penalties make criticism of the monarchy a dangerous pastime, few Thais would even dream of saying a bad word about the King; such is his popularity.

He ascended to the throne in 1946, but his mass popularity and the resultant influence did not develop until the 1950s. In that decade, Thai leader Marshal Sarit 'moved to revive the dignity and public role of the monarchy' (Mackerras, 1993, p. 426), in order to legitimise his regime. This was the catalyst, but much of the enormous respect for King Bhumipol and Queen Sirikit stemmed from their own good works. They travelled widely, often to poor or dangerous areas, to discuss people's problems and implemented thousands of development projects. Within a decade, their *barami* (charisma) had captivated most of the Thai population.

In 1973, in the midst of massive anti-government protests, the King persuaded the military to relinquish control of the country and cemented his place in the hearts and minds of ordinary Thais. At least four times in the 1980's, he prevented moves by the military to overthrow the

constitutional system (Sukhumbhand, 1993, p. 887). On occasions, a mere gesture was enough to preclude military intervention. During the 'Young Turks' coup of 1981, the news that the King had met with the then Prime Minister Prem was enough to end the coup attempt (*Asiaweek*, 27 October 1993, p. 39).

In recent years, the monarch has been more direct in his intervention. In 1992, after several days of demonstrations against the military-backed government and dozens of deaths, the King was able to prevent further bloodshed and restore calm. In a televised meeting, he asked the kneeling Prime Minister General Suchinda and protest leader Chamlong to resolve their differences. The violence ended almost immediately and Suchinda resigned within days.

Last year, the King reprimanded cabinet ministers squabbling over the choicer ministries, saying, they 'should not argue over who should get which position' and should concentrate on performing their duties (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 October 1993, p. 21). Both the King and Queen have discussed Bangkok's traffic problems and suggested improvements (*Asiaweek*, 27 October 1993, p. 39). They continue to visit dangerous areas, for example, the regions in the south hit by separatist terrorist attacks, and to implement development programs. These currently number over 1000 (Sukhumbhand, 1993, p. 887).

The monarchy's popularity, and role as a moderating influence in Thai politics, appears set to continue. Just how long is open to question - the King is nearly sixty-six. What the Thais are therefore attempting to do is to fortify their democratic institutions to the point where they are able to resolve political conflicts in the manner that the King has done for much of his reign.

The Army

Sine 1992, the army has attempted to stay out of politics. Its latest catch-cry is 'professionalisation' and current army chief General Wimol Wongwanich has been described as a 'soldier's soldier'. He has been at the forefront of moves to reduce the army's involvement in politics, and even assisted in the suppression of the 1981 coup.

Wimol has introduced many reforms to 'professionalise' the army: The older, politically-active generals have been replaced by younger and more professional generals. Most of the 1991 coup leaders have resigned, retired or were moved sideways in the military hierarchy. Military leaders have also been forced to resign from the boards of state enterprises, which were traditionally considered as crucial to state security (although recently these resignations have slowed somewhat). These enterprises included The Telephone Organisation, The Communications Authority, The State Railway and Thai International.

Historically, the military has also played a significant role in foreign politics, especially in relations with the Burmese government and the Cambodian factions operating along the Thai border, particularly the Khmer Rouge. Officially, according to army Director of Intelligence, Teerawat Putamanonda, the army 'has agreed with the foreign ministry that the ministry should take the lead and we should play a supporting role' (cit. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 May 1993, p. 18). Continuing protests from the Cambodian government about Thai military support for the Khmer Rouge, however, must cause concern about whether the Thai army units along the border have paid much attention to this edict.

Whilst it seems that the military's influence in Thai politics is dwindling, it is difficult to discount future military intervention, given Thai history. Eight of Thailand's twenty prime ministers are graduates of the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy. Many of the protagonists of 1990s politics studied together in Class Five at this academy - the Prime Minister (before the 1991 coup) - Chatchai Choonhavan, coup leader - Suchinda, protest leader - Chamlong, current army chief - Wimol and powerful Interior Minister - Chavalit Yongchaiyut.

Despite the power of Class Five members, the prevailing mood in Thai politics makes a coup unlikely. Last year, Prime Minister Chuan said that 'the current military leadership and the Thai people are not willing to accept any extra-constitutional changes' (cit. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 May 1993, p. 19). Army chief Wimol added, 'I have declared again and again that the army will not interfere in politics' (cit. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 May 1993, p. 22). Although military leaders have recently expressed dissatisfaction with the government, notably in the area of national security, 'most analysts still think a coup unlikely' (*The Economist*, 9 April 1994, p. 31).

Politics

The five-party coalition led by Prime Minister Chuan continues in power, but the government is beset by differences between the individual parties and the tactics of a hostile opposition. Little progress has been made on issues such as Bangkok's traffic, environmental protection and assistance to the rural poor.

Late last year, allegations of corruption were made against some of the government's ministers (*The Economist*, 20 November 1993, p. 27). In April, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that the 'coalition regime [has] been tested as never before' (14 April 1994, p.16). Should the government continue to make slow progress or if the corruption allegations are proved, its mandate may be terminated. That will more than likely be accomplished through the ballot box, rather than by the guns of the Thai army.

Conclusion

Current evidence suggests that, for the present, the Thai army will not interfere in the process of government. It is also likely that the Thai middle class, a body which demands a say in the process of government and is unreceptive to political interference by the army, will continue to increase dramatically in number, as long as economic growth is maintained at its current rate.

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