

Military biggest winner in political conflict

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THE BIG WINNER from the political chaos of the last three years has been the Thai military. Possibly, the generals are now more powerful than at any time over the past twenty years. Under coup rule, they might seem more powerful but in truth are a little limited by being fully exposed. In present circumstances, they have a discrete cover. It is hard to recall the last change of government when the army chief played such a prominent role. The publicity-shy General Anupong has a higher profile in day-to-day news than his publicity-hogging predecessor General Sonthi a year ago.

The most spectacular evidence of the military's success is in the national budget. Over three budget cycles, the allocation for defence has almost doubled from Bt85 billion in 2006 to Bt167 billion in 2009. The allocation for internal security has also soared from Bt77 billion to Bt114 billion over the same period. No other segment of the budget has grown in the same way, and indeed most have been shaved down to accommodate this growth in security spending.

The scale of this budget boost has to be measured against what preceded it. The defence share of the budget had slumped steadily from 19 per cent in 1991 down to 6.3 per cent in 2006. It was no coincidence that this decline in the defence share coincided with the long period of parliamentary rule, and that the upturn (now back to 9.1 percent) has come after a coup. Buying weapons is back on the agenda. The navy wants to add submarines to park beside its aircraft carrier.

But the budget is only one sign of the military's recent success. The military also has three trophies from the frenzy of legislation in the dying days of the coup-appointed parliament.

The most important is the Internal Security Act. This legislation reconfirms the military's role in internal security, which seemed in peril after the Democrats reviewed the anti-communist law in the late 1990s. In the first, extremely ambitious draft of the law, the army head was to become head of the revived Isoc, and beholden to virtually nobody. The parliament amended this to make the prime minister the titular head of Isoc, but in effect the operational power remains with the army chief. The boundaries of internal security are not defined in the law and hence are open to wide interpretation. The act is the charter for the army to reclaim the guardianship role in Thai politics that it developed in the Cold War era and lost over the past two decades. This guardianship is not just about putting governments in power but extends down the administrative pyramid. The army policy document leaked a year ago stated that "kamnan, village heads, and local government bodies must be in our hands", and army personnel should take over duties such as suppressing drugs, controlling illegal migration, combating drought and flood, and alleviating poverty. The Isoc chief in each province is to spearhead this policy, mobilising help from reservists and former cadet school students.

The Broadcasting Act is another triumph. Ever since 1992, there has been public pressure for reform and liberalisation of the media. The 1997 Constitution mandated a new regulatory structure under which broadcasting frequencies would be treated as public goods. This structure was never implemented because of sabotage by old vested interests. The new Broadcasting Act is a brilliant pre-emptive move that puts all the intentions of the 1997 Constitution firmly in the past. The Act creates a new regulatory structure but offers absolutely no threat to the old system of broadcasting concessions. Thailand is probably the only purported democracy where the military owns two free-

to-air television channels, one directly managed, and many radio stations. These broadcast outlets are channels for propaganda and sources of non-transparent flows of income.

The Defence Ministry Act is a direct response to Thaksin's interventions in the military promotion lists. In the past the promotion lists were prepared by the service chiefs then passed to the defence minister and prime minister before submission for the royal signature. Generally any disagreements had to be resolved among the parties before the final submission. In 2005, Thaksin seems to have altered the final list, provoking a crisis. The new bill changes the system. The list is vetted by a committee made up of the three service chiefs, permanent secretary for defence, prime minister, and defence minister. Any dispute is to be decided by a vote. The service chiefs have a built-in majority. As long as they are united, the prime minister is out of it.

In July 2006, General Prem famously said, "soldiers belong to His Majesty the King, not to a government. A government is like a jockey. It supervises soldiers, but the real owners are the country, and the King." During the long stand-off between the PAD and the Samak-Somchai governments, General Anupong repeatedly insisted on remaining "independent" and being "on the side of the people", which essentially meant refusing to act as the security arm of the elected government. When a State of Emergency was declared, he mobilised troops but kept them inside the barracks. When the airports were seized, he stood aside. At one point Anupong stated, "I am not a soldier of the government. The army belongs to the Thai public. I can't channel it to serve as anybody's private army."

Under the Constitution, the monarch is the head of the armed forces. The working relationship between the executive and military has always been a matter of delicate negotiation. After 1992, the pendulum seemed to be swinging away from the generals. Parliament demanded more transparency in the budget. Chuan and Samak disrupted the "convention" that the defence minister should be a military man. Thaksin exerted influence on promotions. Now the pendulum has swung firmly back. The military is more a power unto itself. The prime minister seems to be a spokesman defending the military against accusations of abuse.

P.S.

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