

The prospects for citizen Sonthi as a politician

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RETIRED GENERAL Sonthi Boonyaratglin, leader of the September 2006 coup, has finally announced that he will enter politics as head of the little-known Matubhum Party. This ends a long wait with nail-biting suspense. The first reports of his ambitions surfaced almost three years ago.

General Sonthi says the first task for him and the party is to solve the problem of the far South. Since he failed to make much headway on this mission in his two years as Army chief and one year as coup leader, we should probably take this avowed aim with a pinch of salt.

His goal is much broader. He is already talking about himself as the architect of national unity. He joins a long and not always distinguished list of former Army chiefs with coup experience who have the same self-image and ambition. On the evidence available, what can we expect of Citizen Sonthi as a politician?

First, he sees himself primarily as a soldier devoted to defending the monarchy, and he believes that electoral politics are being exploited by communists wishing to seize power, change the social order and overthrow the monarchy.

At his farewell as Army chief two years ago, he assembled a meeting of the Army hierarchy to entrust this mission to his successors. He told them a “war for the people” was in progress.

“It is our duty, as soldiers of the King, to understand these matters, to understand the war for the people, both in the era of the Cold War and the era of populism. All of us must contest with them [populist politicians] to win the grassroots back for the King.”

He seems to believe that Thailand is still engaged in the war against communism that he was involved in as a young soldier.

Second, Sonthi views society through the framework of control and direction. While coup leader, he applied the “principle of three grips” (lak sam ko thit), which he had originally developed in an attempt to impose order on the unruly far South. The principle is to “get a grip on the territory, get a grip on the people and get a grip on the enemies or opponents”.

As coup leader, he was very reluctant to lift martial law from large areas of the country, even during the general election restoring parliamentary democracy. During the drafting of the 2007 Constitution, he proposed that the Senate should be wholly appointive, and that political parties should be weakened by allowing MPs to move freely among them.

He has also suggested that local government bodies, especially tambon administrative organisations, should have less power.

Third, Sonthi has a strong belief in the ability to manipulate politics from above. After deciding against entering politics in 2007, he devoted himself to ensuring the defeat of the pro-Thaksin People Power Party by all means possible. He openly instructed Interior Ministry officials that it was their duty to prevent pro-Thaksin politicians being returned in the election. He has subsequently boasted that he brought politicians defecting from Thaksin together in the Phua Phaendin Party, and conceived the party's name himself. He issued instructions for all military and civilian officials to vote in favour of the new charter.

During the general election, Army unit commanders were discovered ordering their men to vote for anti-Thaksin parties, possibly acting on orders from above. When challenged about this practice, Sonthi claimed there was nothing wrong as long as the unit commander was not instructing his men to vote for his own relative.

On election day, the vote-monitoring NGO Anfrel noticed an unusually large turnout of people in uniform at polling booths across the country. A leading commentator estimated that "tens and hundreds of millions of baht" of public money were deployed in the attempt to engineer the 2007 election result.

Fourth, half of Sonthi's new party is the following of Vatana Asavahame, possibly the most corrupt Thai politician of the past generation. He certainly has the longest jail term. He has been convicted twice for grossly enriching himself at great cost to nation, people and environment. This association suggests something about Sonthi's judgement of people, and about Sonthi himself.

Fifth, Sonthi carried out a coup and ripped up Thailand's best-ever charter, suggesting he holds only contempt for democracy and the rule of law.

Sixth, he has no clear vision of society, no obvious mission for change, no outstanding message of hope for the future. It is hard to find evidence of him saying anything at all in public about the economy, education, social justice, human rights or any similar topic.

While coup leader, he emphasised several times that he was not knowledgeable or experienced in politics. While he was contemplating entering politics in early 2007, he convened a party for labour leaders at the Army Club and told them that he empathised with labour because he had sometimes had to work to support himself as a young man. On his first appearance as the Matubhum Party leader, he managed to answer all the questions without saying anything.

Perhaps Citizen Sonthi will surprise us, but all the pointers suggest that he belongs to the political past of military power, bureaucratic intrigue and pervasive corruption. His long-delayed decision to take the political plunge is perhaps further evidence of how far Thai politics has receded towards that past over the last three years.

What are his chances? Given the lack of any mission or passion, Sonthi is entering politics in the classic role as the knight on a white horse. On past evidence, some parts of the fickle electorate will support him precisely because they know almost nothing about him and that makes him seem better than other political leaders whom they know a lot about, most of it awful.

Reportedly there is a sizeable bloc of sitting MPs who have committed to joining Matubhum on condition that Sonthi becomes its leader

P.S.

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