

The Thai Military

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Despite the fact that millions of Thais believe that the centre of power among the conservative elites today is the Monarchy or the Privy Council, the real centre of power, lurking behind the Throne, is the military. The military has intervened in politics and society since the 1932 revolution against the Absolute Monarchy. This is because the Peoples Party led by Pridi Panomyong relied too much on the military rather than building a mass party to stage the revolution. Yet it is also a cliché to just state the number of military coups that have taken place. The power of the military is not unlimited.

At important moments in history, the power of the military has been significantly reduced or kept at bay by social movements and popular uprisings. The post 1973 and 1992 periods are good examples. It would be more accurate to state that the military is an important centre of power among many. Other elite centres include big business, political bosses and high ranking bureaucrats. What is unique about the army, however, is its weaponry and decisive ability to topple governments through coup d'états. The military has a monopoly on the means of violent coercion and it has been prepared to gun-down unarmed protestors in the streets. The latest example was in April and May 2010 when over 90 people died.

The primary role of the Thai military is to police and repress Thai citizens on behalf of the ruling class. The only other additional role is as a wealth generating machine for the generals. The Thai military would be totally ineffective in the very unlikely event of a war with any neighbouring ASEAN countries. It failed to stand up to the Japanese invasion during the Second World War and it could not possibly resist a serious invasion by any super power. Unlike the victorious militaries of Vietnam or Indonesia, it has never fought a war of independence. The Thai army owns tanks purely for the purpose of intimidating pro-democracy demonstrators and for staging coups.

On two occasions in the last 50 years the military has been engaged in internal civil-wars. The first case was the war with the Communist Party of Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s. The second case is the civil war against Malay Muslim rebels in the South. Neither of these cases had or has a military solution and the military has been incapable of achieving victory. Such rebellions are caused by deep rooted injustices which fuel support for the rebels. Most of the time the brutality of the military merely acts to refuel the rebellions. Only a political solution can bring peace. This was the lesson from the war with the Communists.

The military may be powerful, but there are three factors which limit its power: (1) the power of social movements, (2) the power of other sections of the elite which hold economic and political power, and (3) the fact that the military is divided by factionalism. The military also has to repeatedly obtain legitimacy by claiming to protect the Monarchy. This is because of its obvious weakness in claiming democratic credentials.

The military never had absolute power, even in the 1950s and 1960s and always had to take into account the views of social movements, technocrats, powerful politicians and big business. This is even more the case today after decades of economic development and social movement struggles. The 2006 coup could never have been successful if the royalist PAD and most of the NGOs had not given the green light to such actions. The lack of organisation among Taksin's TRT supporters in 2006 also helped. There was no Red Shirt movement at the time of the coup. When the Red Shirts were actually formed, the military had to use behind the scenes actions to get rid of the elected PPP

Government. One important thing which the military did in 2008 was to refuse orders from the elected PPP Government to re-open the international airports which had been blockaded by the PAD mobs.

The military is split into squabbling factions which are often a law unto themselves. Those who engage in military watching are often over-obsessed by the various factions and their leaders, forgetting the actions of other societal players. The military factions are purely about self-interest with little ideological differences. They are also linked to various retired soldiers, businessmen and politicians. When so-called "Water Mellon soldiers" (green on the outside and red at heart) launched a deadly attack on the military commander in charge of suppressing the Red Shirts at Rajdamnern Avenue in early April 2010, they acted out of a factional interest. They were unhappy with the temporary monopoly of power in the army by the "Eastern Fighters" (Burapapayak) from the 2nd Infantry based in Prachinburi. Water Melon Soldiers are a law unto themselves, not controlled by the Red Shirts and they have been shown to be useless in defending the demonstrators when they were killed later in May. They are not known for their ideological commitment to Democracy either.

No one is allowed to hold on to top military positions for long. For historical reasons, the army is the most powerful section of the armed forces. The navy sided with factions of the elite that were on the losing side, for example, siding with Pridi Panomyong, and the air force has been under developed. The police were powerful for a brief period under Police General Pao Siyanon in the 1950s, but they were soon despatched to forth rank in the uniformed pecking order. The Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces is a purely ceremonial position. Real power lies in the hands of the army chief who can mobilise soldiers and tanks on the ground to suppress demonstrators and to stage coups. The position of chief of the army is rotated to ensure an equal distribution of opportunities. Since the death of Field Marshal Sarit, there has been no single military strong man. Generals must take their turn at the feeding trough. The military has extremely lucrative commercial interests in the media and in the state enterprises. Profits line the pockets of generals. This, and the rampant corruption connected to military purchases, drug dealing, illegal logging and cross-border smuggling, all add up to a strong incentive for the military to try to retain political influence so that they can continue their activities. The wealth of the military also helps in turn to maintaining power.

Violent coercion is never enough to maintain political power. Legitimacy must also be built through socialisation and the use of ideology. "Democracy" as an ideology is extremely powerful in Thai society and has been so for decades. That is why past military dictatorships have never been able to claim that they were good "dictatorships". They always tried to say that they were "democratic" or "temporary regimes in the process of developing Democracy". Despite the high number of coups in Thai history, there has not been a stable and long lasting military junta since 1973. The Democracy Monument, in the centre of Bangkok, built by an anti-Monarchy military dictator, General Pibun, in the 1930s, has come to symbolise the popular ideology of Democracy and it means that the army could never pull it down, even in the 1960s and 1970s.

The military has always had a problem with trying to legitimise its actions by quoting "Democracy". Therefore, it has relied heavily upon using the Monarchy to shore-up its legitimacy. The military always claim that they are "protecting the Monarchy" and that "they are the servants of the King and Queen". We see the generals in photo poses, supposedly taking orders from royalty. Yet it is the generals who are really in charge of the Palace. The Palace willingly cooperates in this arrangement, gaining much wealth and prestige. Claiming legitimacy from the Monarchy is a way to make the population afraid of criticising the army and the draconian lèse majesté law is in place to back this up.

"Nation, Religion and Monarchy" are the three pillars of the elite's conservative ideology. Since the 1992 uprising against the military, they have sometimes reluctantly added "the People" as a forth

afterthought. However, the most important element in the three pillars ideology, as far as the army is concerned, is the Monarchy. "Religion" is difficult to use as a coercive force due to the fact that not all Thais are Buddhist and the version of Buddhism, designed by the elites in the past, does not give any political power to the clergy. "Nation" might seem to be a powerful symbol, and it is. Yet, ever since the 1930s there has been an underlying tension between "Nation" and "Monarchy" because the former implies a more collective idea, with collective interests, where as the latter is concentrated in one single individual. "Nation", in a more egalitarian concept, was also the ideology of the Peoples Party in 1932, the Maoist Communist Party and many of the social movements. That is why "Monarchy" best serves the narrow and elitist interests of the army.

We need to cut down the military's influence in society, reform the judiciary and the police and to expand freedom and Democracy from the Red Shirts grass-roots movement. And we need to abolish the Monarchy too. For in the minds of millions, the Monarchy has now become an obstacle to freedom and human dignity. Thais need to create a culture of citizenship rather than being merely "royal subjects".

The Redshirts have learnt through struggle since the 19th September 2006 coup, that "Real Democracy" will not just be achieved by mass demonstrations or by winning repeated elections. Demonstrations have been put down by bloody repression and election results have been repeatedly overturned by unconstitutional means. The pro-democracy movement has come to realise that our aims are being blocked by powerful and entrenched interests which have to be resisted by strengthening the mass movement. This can be done by expanding the movement into the organised working class and by political agitation among the conscripts who make up the lower ranks of the military.

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