Insults From an Absentee

There has always been one absolute taboo within the ranks of the Communist Party of Thailand during the whole of its fifteen years of so-called armed struggle: never has it attacked the Thai royal family in any way. Last week, however, a 20-minute broadcast over the clandestine Voice of the People of Thailand changed that, and Thailand's most sacred institution was contemptuously dismissed in a recorded interview with former activist student leader Thirayudh Boonmeey.

Commenting on what has become the national slogan — "Nation, Religion and Monarchy" — since the coup d'etat of last Oct. 6 brought the military-backed Thamn Kraivichien government to power, the voice of Thirayudh crackled: "Nation and religion don't really matter because everyone has his freedom of choice whether to participate or not. But as for the third institution, it is out of date. If the people want to destroy it, they will lose nothing by doing so."

It was likely that only a handful of Thais heard the late-night broadcast and, in some cases, outright horror. As one worker said: "We've never heard anything like this before, never. I just don't know what to think." While the statement by the 26-year-old engineering graduate of Chulalongkorn University appeared more 'an expression of contempt rather than a direct attack, it shattered widely-held official views that he was simply a zealous activist who had gone over to the communist side only because he felt he could not live under the new Administration.

Thirayudh had quickly disappeared after the bloody siege of the Thammasat University campus which culminated in the Oct. 6 takeover from the vacillating government of M.R. Seni Premoon. His words on the clandestine radio, which operates from the southern Chinese province of Yunan, were preceded by a rendition of the newly-composed C.P.T. song "Red Star Over the Puphan Mountains." This is a reference to the chain of jungle-covered hills which straddle the northeastern Thai provinces of Nakhon Phanom, Sakhon Nakon, Nong Khai and Udon Thani — long a base area for party cadres since they "went to the jungles" in 1962.

It was the first time Thirayudh’s voice had been heard over the airwaves.
but newsmen and observers in Thailand and other Asian points — who had either met the dean student or had heard him talk at the National Students Council of Thailand rallies of the past — were convinced it was him. One of the leaders of the bloody Oct. 14 (1973) uprising, why this week, came the announcement of the formation of a “united front” of revolutionary factions. Along with twelve others, he apparently drafted the statement. Insisting that a blood oath was taken, the event of Oct. 6, within a month his name was regarded as the Voice of the People radio station. In response, Chalard’s “death row” was in the first in a line of plotters meet death as a result. Chalard’s son Maj. Aswin Hiranyasiri, his guilt in his son Maj. Aswin Hiranyasiri, Samaphong Vichien of the Thanin Kraivichien relations. His four other plotters — Chalard’s son Maj. Aswin Hiranyasiri, Maj. Boonlert Kaewprasit, Maj. Visit Deerapat, retired police colonel. Among the conspirators at the Internal Security Operations Command building in tree-lined Sukhothai Road (ASIAWEEK, Apr. 8, 1973), was taking no chances; a full military alert got under way and crack Special Forces paratroopers threw up sand-bagged positions at key points throughout sprawling Bangkok. The questions everyone wanted answered were: If Arnon knew a coup was starting, why did he go to join the conspirators at the Internal Security Operations Command building in tree-lined Sukhothai Road (ASIAWEEK, Apr. 8, 1973). What was in their message which made it imperative for him to go personally? Did he refuse to go along with descredited commander Gen. Thirayudh was, indeed, carried on his leadership role among the young leftists who led the new administration. At one point in his speech he said: “Life in the forest is not as easy as life in the city. Most of us now carry our homes on our backs. In the forest life is materially very poor but, from a moral point of view, it is very high. Sometimes we walk long distances without water but everyone loves each other like brothers.” This was also said to be a communist underground newspaper called Militant Unity but if it is distributed in Bangkok it circulates out of view of all but the most hard-core supporters. Another name, which crops up with Thirayudh’s is that of Visa Kantab, 25, a law student who also took his love of poetry and revolution into the jungles after Oct. 6. This week it was too early to gauge whether Thirayudh’s snide reference to the royal family amounted to anything more than that or if the C.P.T. intended to follow its sentiments up in any way. However, over the past few days, has gradually negated the role of King Siam Savang Watthana and finally imprisoned him (ASIAWEEK, Mar. 25, 1977). Thais have few illusions about where monarchies stand in the current junta plan for Indo-China. As one Thai observer told ASIAWEEK: All Thais have succeeded in doing is telling us what we really knew all along. Still, & come as a bit of a shock to hear it actually being said — particularly from a Thai.” For the overwhelming majority of Thais as 66 people, King Bhumipol is without question the nation’s most singular unifying force — a revered figure who probably commands more genuine respect than any other monarch in the world today. Along with Sirikit, Crown Princess Vajiralongkorn and other members of the family, he spends most of each year outside the grounds of Bangkok’s Chitr Lada Palace, devoting much time to helping his subjects with rural development and education projects initiated and funded by himself. If any foreign visitor neglects to stand at attention when the Royal Anthem is played at the end of a cinema show, he is politely but firmly made to do so either by other patrons or an attendant. If a Thai neglects to show respect, he is almost certain to be led from the theatre to a police station to face a charge of lese majeste.

Damping Down

As grim-faced members of Thailand’s royal family and members of the military elite listened to eulogies for top soldier Gen. Arnon Thavathasin at his suburban Thon Buri home last week, they did so surrounded by alert and heavily-armed troops. Their cocked M-16 rifles and combat paraphernalia crystallized an undercurrent of intrigue which surrounds the 1st Army Division Commander’s murder during the pre-dawn start to the abortive coup d’état of Mar. 26; also, it reminded the high-ranking mourners that the episode’s sequel was not over just yet.

Though circumstances surrounding Arnon’s death remained vague Army Commander Gen. Serm Na Naakham was taking no chances; a full military alert got under way and crack Special Forces paratroopers threw up sand-bagged positions at key points throughout sprawling Bangkok. The questions everyone wanted answered were: If Arnon knew a coup was starting, why did he go to join the conspirators at the Internal Security Operations Command building in tree-lined Sukhothai Road (ASIAWEEK, Apr. 8, 1973). What was in their message which made it imperative for him to go personally? Did he refuse to go along with descredited commander Gen. Chalard Hiranasiri, and what made Chalard and his four henchmen so furious as to pump eight bullets from an M-16 and .45 pistol into him?

It certainly seemed a gross case of overkill which could only have been the outcome of an explosion of pressure-cooked emotions. Former deputy army commander Chalard, of course, has all the answers, but this week he had been transferred from suburban Bang Khen jail to the maximum security prison at Bang Kwang, where Thailand’s “death row” waits. If his guilt in the futile ten-hour drama is proven, Chalard could face execution, and he would be the first in a long line of plotters to meet death as a result.

The other key figure in the whole plot, Deputy Army Commander Gen. Prasert Thammasiri, remains cut off from outside contact in a bed at the military following the coup bid. The Thais have few illusions about where this military operation is headed. As one Thai observer told ASIAWEEK: All Thais have succeeded in doing is telling us what we really knew all along. Still, & come as a bit of a shock to hear it actually being said — particularly from a Thai.” For the overwhelming majority of Thais as 66 people, King Bhumipol is without question the nation’s most singular unifying force — a revered figure who probably commands more genuine respect than any other monarch in the world today. Along with Sirikit, Crown Princess Vajiralongkorn and other members of the family, he spends most of each year outside the grounds of Bangkok’s Chitr Lada Palace, devoting much time to helping his subjects with rural development and education projects initiated and funded by himself. If any foreign visitor neglects to stand at attention when the Royal Anthem is played at the end of a cinema show, he is politely but firmly made to do so either by other patrons or an attendant. If a Thai neglects to show respect, he is almost certain to be led from the theatre to a police station to face a charge of lese majeste.

Damping Down

As grim-faced members of Thailand’s royal family and members of the military elite listened to eulogies for top soldier Gen. Arnon Thavathasin at his suburban Thon Buri home last week, they did so surrounded by alert and heavily-armed troops. Their cocked M-16 rifles and combat paraphernalia crystallized an undercurrent of intrigue which surrounds the 1st Army Division Commander’s murder during the pre-dawn start to the abortive coup d’état of Mar. 26; also, it reminded the high-ranking mourners that the episode’s sequel was not over just yet.

Though circumstances surrounding Arnon’s death remained vague Army Commander Gen. Serm Na Naakham was taking no chances; a full military alert got under way and crack Special Forces paratroopers threw up sand-bagged positions at key points throughout sprawling Bangkok. The questions everyone wanted answered were: If Arnon knew a coup was starting, why did he go to join the conspirators at the Internal Security Operations Command building in tree-lined Sukhothai Road (ASIAWEEK, Apr. 8, 1973). What was in their message which made it imperative for him to go personally? Did he refuse to go along with descredited commander Gen. Chalard Hiranasiri, and what made Chalard and his four henchmen so furious as to pump eight bullets from an M-16 and .45 pistol into him?

It certainly seemed a gross case of overkill which could only have been the outcome of an explosion of pressure-cooked emotions. Former deputy army commander Chalard, of course, has all the answers, but this week he had been transferred from suburban Bang Khen jail to the maximum security prison at Bang Kwang, where Thailand’s “death row” waits. If his guilt in the futile ten-hour drama is proven, Chalard could face execution, and he would be the first in a long line of plotters to meet death as a result.

The other key figure in the whole plot, Deputy Army Commander Gen. Prasert Thammasiri, remains cut off from outside contact in a bed at the Phra Mongkut Klao Military Hospital. Observers felt eleven days after the coup that the stated reason for his hospitalisation — that he was exhausted after being held for ten hours without food by the rebels — was wearing a trifle thin.

Unlike many people thought, there has not yet been a major purge of the military following the coup bid. The man who holds the key to this may well be Gen. Kriangsak Chamanan, the secretary-general of the military backers who comprise the 23-man Advisory Council of the Thanin Kraivichien civilian government. At a series of news conferences he held in the days following Mar. 26, he played with reporters’ queries and left them to ponder the implications of one statement: that he had known of the coup attempt one week before it took place.

April 15, 1977