CABINET COLLAPSE
HERALDS MOVE TO RIGHT

Thailand's political revolving door has gone around again. On March 4 the eight members of former Prime Minister Kukrit Pramonyj's Social Action Party (SAP) in the cabinet resigned, forcing Prime Minister Gen. Prem Tinsulanond to form a new government. The new 38-member lineup a little over a week later appears to be the least militarily-dominated since 1975. It contains 11 military men, two less than the previous cabinet. More significantly, it includes, in addition to the existing militarily-oriented and conservative chart Thai and more or less liberal Democrat Parties, three other parties apparently in an attempt to "ensure a broad base of support within the lower house of parliament." Unfortunately, two of the three, Mass Line and United, particularly the former, are openly proud of their extremely right-wing and quite often violent calibre and extralegal mode of operation. The Mass Line and United parties were both formed late last year by such notorious figures as "Red Gaur Godfather" Maj. Gen. Sudsai Hasadin and Gen. Prachuab Suntrangkul. Both men have been Gen. Prem's close associates, and they made it clear from the beginning that their parties will always support the Prime Minister. Furthermore, it also includes nonpartisan technocrats for certain key economic posts with the Prime Minister's expectation that conflict of economic interests, which brought down his first cabinet, be avoided. For all intents and purposes Thailand's traditional military-bureaucratic elite, for

ATTEMPTED COUP FAILS

An attempted coup led by Gen. Sant Chit - Patima failed in its second day. At 2 A.M. (Bangkok time) on April 1, a group of field commanders, called "young turks" headed by Gen. Sant Chit Patima took control of Bangkok and announced that Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, the prime minister, was ousted. This attempted coup was

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Gen. SANT CHITPATIMA

Thai Army Col. Prachak Sawangchit marched off after unsuccessful coup

AP photo
the moment, has triumphed over Bangkok's modern "enlightened" bourgeoisie.

Ostensibly, it has been a contest of personalities, pitting Deputy Prime Minister Boonchu against Industry Minister Chartist Choonhavan, one of the powerful Chart Thai party's leaders. Although the issues have been presented as purely economic, but they reveal both the deep rifts within Thailand's ruling class and the limits of the development model which the Thai government, during Boonchu's tenure, has been trying to implement with assistance mainly from the World Bank.

Boonchu's program, "Thailand Inc." (PEER, May 23, 1980), centered on bringing large-scale foreign investment to Thailand so that foreign capital could speed up the country's growth by building industry and infrastructure. His efforts to rationalize the Thai economy and make it attractive and accessible to multinational capital, however, brought him into direct conflict with the military-bureaucratic elite. Most immediately, his program aimed at reducing—or even eliminating—state monopoly enterprises, long the watering trough for well-placed members of the military. Hence, when the generals objected to Boonchu's attack on their sources of wealth, they were able to arouse popular support by blaming Boonchu and his economic team for the economic ills and their inability to correct the situation within the time frame they promised. Prime Minister Prem, while basically supporting the Boonchu plan, is apparently unable or unwilling to face down the military interests and those of the traditional elite presented by the Chart Thai party.

In each of the major conflicts between SAP and Chart Thai parties since the early days of Gen. Prem's first cabinet—from the dispute over the construction site of a mammoth soda ash plant strongly pushed by the Chart Thai party to the latest embarrassing oil deal with Saudi Arabia (PEER, March 6, 1981), the real issue was who would control the allocation of resources. As the details of the latest showdown between the two rivalries over the oil deal and other related incidents are emerging all over the Thai press, it is becoming clear that such powerful Chart Thai party figures as Gen. Praman Adireksan (party leader) and Maj. Gen. Chartist, representing the traditional military-bureaucratic interests, threatened direct action, as they actually carried out during the October 6, 1976 events, unless the SAP and Boonchu were removed from their posts. This explains why the SAP team resigned over a rebuke even though most substantive decisions regarding the conflicts have gone in its favor. Chart Thai's attack, through Maj. Gen. Sudsai and his gangsters, on former Commerce Minister Tamchali Kamphato (SAP) illustrates the forces at work and their mode of operation.

As part of the Boonchu's economic team, Tamchali was responsible for announcing the end of price controls on some consumer products. He also presided over last summer's sugar crisis, in which official actions led to hoarding and a near doubling of the price of sugar. As a result of which, who is far less powerful but more obvious a target than Boonchu, became a particularly vulnerable point of attack on grounds that he was incompetent and that his mismanagement and possible corruption were making daily life extremely difficult for ordinary Thais.

Masterminded by Chartist and Praman, the attack which began the second half of last year on Tamchali took the form of popular protests against his inflationary actions. Directed by Maj. Gen. Sudsai, who was notorious for carrying out plans laid by Chartist and Praman in October 1976, a group of right-wing Red Gours demonstrated against Tamchali in November. In an insult considered unbearable in Thailand, they released three excrement-eating lizards on the Commerce Ministry premise to drive their point and to mobilize popular opinion against Tamchali and the whole Boonchu team. Tamchali resigned in late January this year.

In many ways, the crisis of the past year has been a mini-replay of the struggles of 1973-1976, albeit on a far narrower stage, since the left is now excluded from direct competition in the legal political process. The modern reformers want to develop Thailand by turning many of its resources over to foreign exploitation in the pattern now sanctioned as "export-oriented industrialization" by the World Bank and other institutions of international capital. But, at least for the moment, they cannot break the old military-bureaucratic elites stranglehold on political power.

Equally important the rationalizers realize they cannot assure the stability and order required by the international free enterprise system unless there is some degree of social justice for all Thais. In contrast to Prime Minister Prem, who declares the country's number-one enemy to be the Communist Party of Thailand, Boonchu insisted all along that the real enemy is the wealthy class which insists on holding on to the bulk of the country's resources while the suffering of the majority is becoming more and more manifest. Yet for all their recognition of ultimate necessities, Boonchu and his colleagues do not dare open the way to genuine people's demands for a drastically different way of making fundamental national decisions.

The current round in the struggle will
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lead to a cabinet more firmly based on vested military and traditional elite's interests -- and unable to even recognize what it will take to bring genuine development to the country. Most likely, its inability to deal with fundamental problems will set the revolving door swinging again before too long. Meanwhile, the right-wing and representatives of the old military-bureaucratic ruling elite have once again come home to roost.

ATTEMPTED COUP FAILS continued from page 1

aborted when Gen. Prem who fled the capital to the Northeast with the entire royal family sent his troops into Bangkok to seize the army and government headquarters, the airport and radio and television stations. Some "misguided commanders" including Col. Prachuk Sawangchit were arrested stated Prem's forces, although there was no battle, two people were killed and five were injured in brief incidents.

The coup apparently began falling apart the night before. The head of the national police force, Gen. Montchai Pumpongchuen, defected from the rebels to the prime minister's side. The naval chief of staff denied that he was part of the conspiracy. King Bhumibol Adulyadej openly intervened on the side of Gen. Prem in an unprecedented political move, and this probably saved the Prem government. Observers question whether the king made a serious mistake. "It's bad luck for the king to get mixed up in politics," a Thai newspaper said. "But the king can't have it both ways," a Western diplomat said. "He is either above politics or he isn't, and he has shown that he isn't."

Los Angeles Times Saturday, April 4, 1981

By KEYES BEECH, Times Staff Writer

BANGKOK, Thailand—Wednesday's attempted military coup was a thing of the past on Friday. Most of the rebel soldiers were under arrest and the only question still to be resolved was whether the king had made a serious mistake.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej fled the capital Wednesday night and flew to Korat, 133 miles northeast of here, where he joined Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda, whose government was the target of the insurgents' actions.

The king's actions drew mixed reviews hours after loyal troops had regained control of Bangkok.

Western diplomats tended to liken Bhumibol to Spain's King Juan Carlos I, who recently blocked a military takeover in Madrid. But Thais saw it differently.

"It's bad luck for the king to get mixed up in politics," a Thai newspaper said, echoing the sentiments of many of his countrymen.

Thailand's king is by far the most influential personage in the country because of his semidivine status. "But the king can't have it both ways," a Western diplomat said. "He is either above politics or he isn't, and he has shown that he isn't."

Prem was quoted as saying that Lt. Gen. Sant Chitpaisima, the principal coup leader, had been allowed to leave Thailand by helicopter for a third country, believed to be neighboring Burma.

The officers who organized the coup were placed under arrest. One of them, Col. Prachuk Sawangchit, was spotted by a Ranger unit near the Royal Thai Turf Club waiting for a traffic light.

Some observers of the Thai political scene said Friday that the king's intervention could have disastrous consequences. It was not the first time, however, that Bhumibol has taken such an action.

In 1973 the king appeared to have thrown his weight behind a student uprising to avert additional bloodshed and end a military dictatorship. Three years later, another student riot, he stepped in to name a personal choice for prime minister.

But Wednesday's move was more direct, exposing the monarch directly to the rough and tumble of Thai politics. "He could have remained in Bangkok," one diplomatic observer said. "But it would have been interpreted as giving tacit approval to the coup, and that he was determined not to do."

By tradition, the Thai monarchy has been above politics. Under the Thai constitution, the king is the head of state, with three basic prerogatives—he may be consulted, give advice and offer encouragement.

"That is the sort of mandate that can be interpreted by the king to mean just about anything he wants it to mean," a Thai political scientist said.

Bhumibol has been king since 1946, when, at the age of 18, he succeeded his brother, who died violently in what is still an official mystery.
NEWS BRIEFS

60% OF THAI CHILDREN SUFFER FROM MALNUTRITION

The Nutritional Research Institute at Mahidol University conducted a nutrition survey among Thai children and found that over 55,000 children under age five die from malnutrition and its consequences annually. A survey conducted by the National Security Council said that at present there were approximately 300,000 drug addicts with 300,000 in Bangkok alone. More than half of these drug addicts are young children between the ages of 16 and 24. Prasong has expressed his concern that the number of drug addicts will increase by more than 6,000 a year and that it is necessary to try to prevent and eliminate the drug traffic. This year, however, said Prasong, the opium crop was very good and it will yield 250 tons of raw product which in turn will yield 25 tons of heroine, that is, the output for this year will be able to satisfy the world’s needs.

SOURCE: OFFICE OF THE INFORMATION ATTACHE ROYAL THAI EMBASSY, WASHINGTON, D.C.

STUDENT LEADER SURRENDERS TO THE GOVERNMENT

Tirayuth Boonmee, a former student leader surrendered to the government under a 1978 amnesty extended to all activists who sought refuge in guerrilla camps after the October 1976 shootings of students at Thammasat University. He was among the best and the brightest. He finished first in the nation in high school examinations, went to Chulalongkorn University, became a student activist, helped topple the country’s military dictatorship in 1973, and in 1976 was driven into the jungle to join the guerrillas along with three thousand other students, journalists, union officials, teachers, and literal politicians. Tirayuth is now in Bangkok recuperating from malaria.

THAI GOVERNMENT PROTESTS BORDER CLASHES

Deputy Foreign Minister Arun Panupong gave Laotian Ambassador Kamphan Simmalavong an aide memoire demanding that Laos immediately stop violating Thai territory and holding Laos responsible for numerous shooting incidents in February.

The note said that Thailand held the Laotian Government responsible for damage and casualties in the cross border shelling of villages in Phom Pisal District of Nong Khai.

Laos in its first reaction to fighting across the Mekong river said that the tension was the fault of local Thai officials in Nong Khai Province and demanded the Bangkok Government put an immediate stop to the battles.

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