



Under threat in different ways: beleaguered premier Prem Tinsulanond; and Salak Sivaraksa (right) facing lèse majesté charges.

THAILAND

Knights, pawns...and kings

In Thailand, a crisis is brewing and arrests are made as the dominant military group makes trouble for Prem's government. But, as Gareth McKinley shows, the generals are less free to act these days. Both the middle class and the Palace must be reckoned with.

After many months of relative calm, a new power game has started in Bangkok. The military, who have effectively controlled the government of the day since absolute monarchy ended in 1932, have once again split into factions—some clustered around the government of General Prem Tinsulanond with others seeking to undermine it. The present hostilities are confined chiefly to cautious diplomatic moves, veiled threats and an elaborate political drama of symbolic acts; but Thais know that these manoeuvres are often the prelude to a brisk movement of forces that decides who will rule the country. As some people see it, it is only a question of time.

Speculation that something was afoot started on 3rd July, when in a number of simultaneous dawn raids sixteen people were arrested as alleged communists by members of the *Santibhau* (Special Branch police) and the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), a specialist army intelligence and psychological warfare organization. Three more suspects were picked up on the next day.

All but one were detained for interrogation under the extraordinary powers of the Suppression of Communist Activities Act, which allow suspects to be held for up to 480 days

without charge. And although the authorities have held them now for several months without charging them, it has not stopped officials from painting a detailed and lurid picture of their captives. They were described as hardened communist militants who had slipped back into Bangkok to set up an urban network. They were also said to have reached out beyond the traditional links of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) with China, seeking aid from Vietnam and sending a representative to meet the IRA in London for advice on urban terrorism and assassination. The allegations were sensational stuff, and the press, who dubbed the event 'The Big City Swoop', went to town on it.

Top communists?

Apart from the wilder allegations, the government's story seemed plausible. After all, the haul had included Pirun Chatvanichkul, a former student leader who at 36 had become the youngest member of the CPT's Central Committee, and his wife Chontira Satyawatana, a well-known university lecturer and writer who caused a stir when she went to the jungle in 1976. Pirun had been so bold as to give an interview with the weekly

magazine *Arthit Kiedlab* in which he denied government suggestions that top communists were going to turn themselves in. He and Chontira, he said, were not guilty of anything and had no reason to surrender. The CPT was changing, he said, and would prefer to struggle non-violently, even in parliament, if the Suppression of Communist Activities Act were abolished and the Party made legal. But he had added that no one could expect the CPT to turn its back on the option of armed struggle, given the risk of a more repressive government in the future.

There were further surprises however when, barely a week later, the police dragnet caught two very public figures—Dr Preecha Picmongsant of Chulalongkorn University, and Chatcharin Chaiwat, editor of the *Matuphum* newspaper and an advisor to the magazine which published the interview with Pirun. Both were accused of working with the communists—Preecha was said to have established links with the Vietnamese while on a visit to Vietnam with fellow-economist Kraisak Chunhawan. (The charges against Preecha were dropped on 17 October.)

This produced a vocal public outcry. Students, academics and politicians condemned the arrests: the Deputy Prime Minister, Pichai Rattakul, said he didn't believe Preecha and Chatcharin were communists, and the Speaker of Parliament, Uthai Phimjaichon said it was time that the Suppression of Communist Activities Act was scrapped. 'The Act is too wide,' he said. 'One who only smiles with a communist may be accused of being a communist'.

The arrests jangled many nerves—more for the changes of policy which they seemed to herald than for any revelations about communist activity. After all, many former communist guerrillas, leaders and intellectual sympathizers have been trickling back from the jungles as the CPT disintegrated. Indeed, encouraging this inward migration has been a central part of Thailand's counterinsurgency strategy. The government has exploited the Party's internal rifts and tensions and the willingness of former CPT allies like Laos and China to make deals with Thailand for their own political or economic ends (thus depriving the CPT of supplies, cross-border bases and a radio station in Kunming). Defectors from the CPT have found support from ISOC in airing their views on 'problems of communism', and, just when military pressure on the CPT's strongholds was increasing, a much more liberal and welcoming climate has been created in Bangkok. The CPT, dominated by old hardliners and slow to adopt to the new situation, has begun to fall apart.

Liberal strategy

The most famous part of this counterinsurgency strategy is known as the '66/23' policy, as it was announced in the 66th Prime Ministerial Order of the Buddhist year 2523 (1980). It promises immunity from prosecution to guerrillas and to supporters of the CPT who surrender to the government and take an oath of allegiance. Thousands have already taken advantage of this amnesty—in some cases groups of several hundreds have surrendered together, turning in their weapons.

The 66/23 policy was drafted by Lt. Gen. Chaowalit Yongchaiyut, the Army's deputy chief of staff, with help from a former communist, Prasert Sapsuntorn, who now works with ISOC. (Chaowalit and Prasert are also said to have co-operated in setting up a 'pacifist, pro-Soviet' communist party mysteriously immune from prosecution, to further confuse the issue!) The success of the 66/23 policy has enhanced Chaowalit's prestige. The stability which it has brought to the country, and the undoubted freedoms, have won international respect for Prem's government. So why go back on it now?

Of course, there is a large coalition of interests which favours a more liberal political environment and/or a more modest internal role for the army. For a start, it seems to have largely demobilized the CPT. The larger business interests would also prefer a freer market economy with less bureaucratic intervention; they also resent the strains being imposed on the foreign exchange reserves by the military's rather expensive tastes in foreign hardware, such as F-16 fighters.

But there are many in the Army command who distrust civilian politicians and would not like to see Prem (who is, at least, an ex-Supreme Commander) succeeded as Prime Minister by a total civilian. They already think Prem has conceded too much to liberalism, feel that the 66/23 policy has allowed com-

munist to infiltrate everywhere, and want a stronger, more resolute government which 'understands' (ie, is controlled by) the Army.

Favoured General

These soldiers pin their hopes on General Arthit Kamlang-Ek—the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces who is concurrently Commander-in-Chief of the Army. Arthit rose to prominence when he helped Prem to suppress a coup attempt in April 1981 by a group of colonel-rank officers known as the 'Young Turks'. He was rapidly promoted, and when Prem retired and thereby became a *civilian* Prime Minister, Arthit got the top Army job. As the 'Young Turks' were suspected of republican sympathies, Arthit also earned himself Palace approval, and has now become a very powerful figure. Recently he has taken every opportunity to be seen in public, making almost daily pronouncements on matters of national policy and security. An observer could be forgiven for mistaking him for the Prime Minister—and indeed, he is thought to want the job. But there is a problem. Arthit may be powerful now, especially with the recent promotion to key commands of many of his supporters—Maj. Gen. Pichit Kullavanich, for instance, controls the First Army in and around Bangkok, which is the key to any coup or counter-coup. But Arthit is due to retire next year, whereas Prem can stay on as premier till 1987. Even if Prem could be prematurely 'pushed', Arthit could not just walk into the job. Thailand's current constitution debars government officers from being ministers, so that unless and until the Constitution changes, Arthit would have to forgo his power base in the Army to become Prime Minister. But would he have enough control over his successor to avoid being stabbed in the back? And who would that successor be?

The two contenders are, politically, poles apart. One is the wily 'dove' Lt. Gen. Chaowalit—the other, the 'hawk' Maj. Gen. Pichit, has on various occasions said that if the politicians can't make things work, then the Army will again have to put the tanks on the streets. Pichit and Chaowalit are the same age. Pichit's military position is stronger, as he holds a key command post, while Chaowalit has a non-command post but more civilian support. What may decide the issue is rank seniority; Chaowalit is one star more senior and therefore the natural successor. It will take time—and a careful political campaign—to push Pichit past Chaowalit to become Commander-in-Chief.

The relationship between Arthit and Pichit seems close, but is not without its problems. Pichit looks to Arthit to support his advancement; in exchange, Pichit has twice acted as the public front in campaigns that would strengthen Arthit's position. In April 1983 he played a role in the attempt to persuade Parliament to amend the Constitution so that a person could be simultaneously an active soldier and a minister (ideally, Commander-in-Chief

and Prime Minister). And in recent months, it was Pichit who led the campaign to leave Arthit's term as Army Commander extended.

Perhaps the deal is that if Arthit can stay on until 1987, giving time for Pichit to be promoted past Chaowalit, then when Arthit becomes a 'civilian', he can move on to take the Prime Minister's job with Pichit behind him as Commander-in-Chief. On the other hand, maybe he can't trust Pichit, and indeed Arthit has been careful to cultivate his links with Chaowalit too, playing one off against the other.

In this context, the recent arrests have helped both Arthit and Pichit by creating a 'red scare', which supports the case for Arthit's promotion in many people's eyes and would also discredit the 66/23 policy and Chaowalit. As for who actually ordered the arrests, it is still not clear. There are rumours that in mid-June there was a move to arrest CPT sympathizers which was blocked by Chaowalit; then leaflets appeared which attacked Chaowalit as a 'communist'. Two weeks later, the arrest took place. One theory is that Chaowalit felt obliged at this stage to order the arrests to pre-empt criticism.

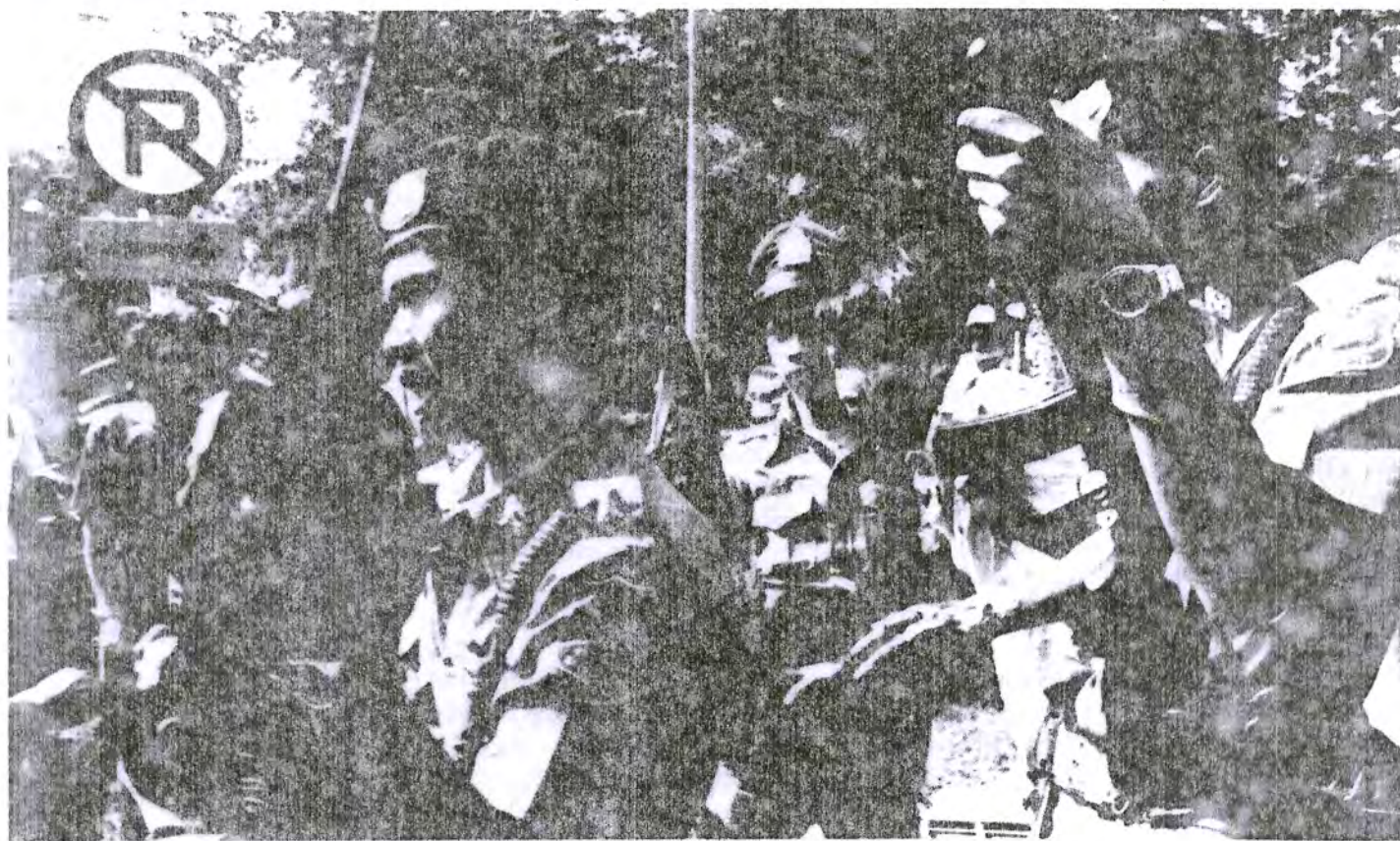
The case of Sulak

More arrests followed in August, but with a changed emphasis. Now the alleged offense was *lèse majesté*—publishing derogatory references to the monarchy. The most prominent of those arrested is Sulak Sivaraksa, a prolific writer and a sharp-tongued social critic who has played an important role in promoting the development of independent voluntary community work in Thailand. For this, and for his work in bringing Buddhists and Christians together in dialogue, he has acquired an international reputation, especially in religious and NGO circles.

In May 1983 Sulak was interviewed about the history of Thai education for a book published by Udonthani Teachers' College. The interview included the passage:

Mr Scott, former Director General of the Royal Mines Department, said King Rama V had done so much good for his country but he had also damaged the country tremendously which covered all his virtues, ie, the King had sent students to be educated abroad when they were so young. Hence when they returned home they did not understand their country yet they thought they did. For example, Rama VI thought he understood his country. How could he, as he was always surrounded by courtiers? He could not really understand. The same is true of the present King. He would not understand. If we say he does not understand, people will get angry with us. Especially when he goes up-country, a lot of people come to see him, he thinks he understands.

The controversial interview was republished by Sulak in a book entitled *Interviews with S. Sivaraksa: Unmasking Thai Society* which was being printed in June and July 1984 while Sulak was on a tour of Tibet and Japan. He was still in Japan when he heard that thousands of copies of the book had been



There are fears of a repeat of the events of October 1976, when hundreds died in a bloody military coup.

seized by the police. Nevertheless he returned to Thailand—after all, he hadn't been arrested when the interview was first published.

Coup fears

On 31st July, on arriving to give a talk at Thammasat University, he heard that the *Santhaban* had called at his house with a warrant for his arrest. After giving his lecture, he told the audience that he was going to be arrested and warned them not to give the military any excuse for a coup.

I pleaded with them that they should remain calm and they should pass my message to every university that on no account should the students organize any demonstration on my behalf. I felt that some of the powers-that-be wanted clashes between the right wing mobs and those they called left wing 'students'.

Fearing a coup, Sulak did not give himself up; but he was arrested on 5th August. Chitrakorn Tangkasemsukh (Sulak's interviewer) and Kitti Siddhichindaehoke (who printed the Udonthani College book) had already been arrested. Now Sulak finds himself charged with 5 counts of *lèse majesté*, facing a military court and a minimum goal sentence of 15 years if found guilty. There have been other arrests too—another *lèse majesté* case in Chiangmai, and six people in the North East accused of plotting to assassinate Prem. All add to the crisis atmosphere. And most observers agree that the arrests are significant not so much in themselves, but because they serve to discredit one or other army faction. Each arrest means

something to somebody; but what it means, and to whom, is more and more difficult to interpret as the political scene becomes increasingly peculiar.

Economy in crisis

Arthit's name is also linked with an extraordinary crisis which has now beleaguered the economy. When the Prem government introduced harsh restrictions on credit creation to rein in inflation, and the Bangkok Bank for its own reasons cut back on credit, many small and medium-size businesses were bankrupted. This paved the way for the mysterious business of Mae Chamoy's 'oil shares'. A woman in Bangkok running a 'share' scheme (by which the Thais mean an informal deposit-and-credit club), is paying out 7% per month to people who invest in her 'oil shares' fund. Already over £300 million has been pulled out of the banks and put into her hands—and the banks, even the powerful Bangkok Bank, are worried about the consequences. Is it a pyramid fund? Is the investment in something illegal? Or is the money being re-loaned at exorbitant rates of interest to businesses refused credit by the banks? Mae Chamoy's empire stumbled once, when investors lost their nerve and besieged her house—but Arthit and other top brass played a key role in backing Mae Chamoy and restoring public confidence in her operation.

If this is indeed part of a strategy to discredit and dislodge Prem, it is a risky one. The economic genie is particularly difficult to persuade back into the bottle. Thai leaders prefer

to govern by consent; and if Prem's government falls prematurely—indeed his recent poor health gives cause for concern—his successor may have to scramble for power in a most unseemly fashion, inheriting a host of economic problems. This will not go down well with Thailand's increasingly large and increasingly sophisticated middle class.

Royal power

In the past the ruling group in the Army were relatively free to do as they liked. Today they need to be far more circumspect. It is not only the business community which must be reckoned with—that most unanalysed of Thai political institutions, the monarchy, has grown much stronger. The King and Queen are now able to shape political events as never before since the coup of 1932 ended absolute monarchy. The revival of the power of the monarchy is largely due to Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, who governed Thailand from 1957 to 1963; the young King and Queen were encouraged to travel abroad and up-country, while the government fostered an ideology of Thai nationalism identified with love of the King and religion. Since then, each successive military regime has built up the authority, even the sanctity, of the monarchy—being Thai, being Buddhist, being loyal to the King have fused into a single authoritarian concept inculcated in Thais from before school age.

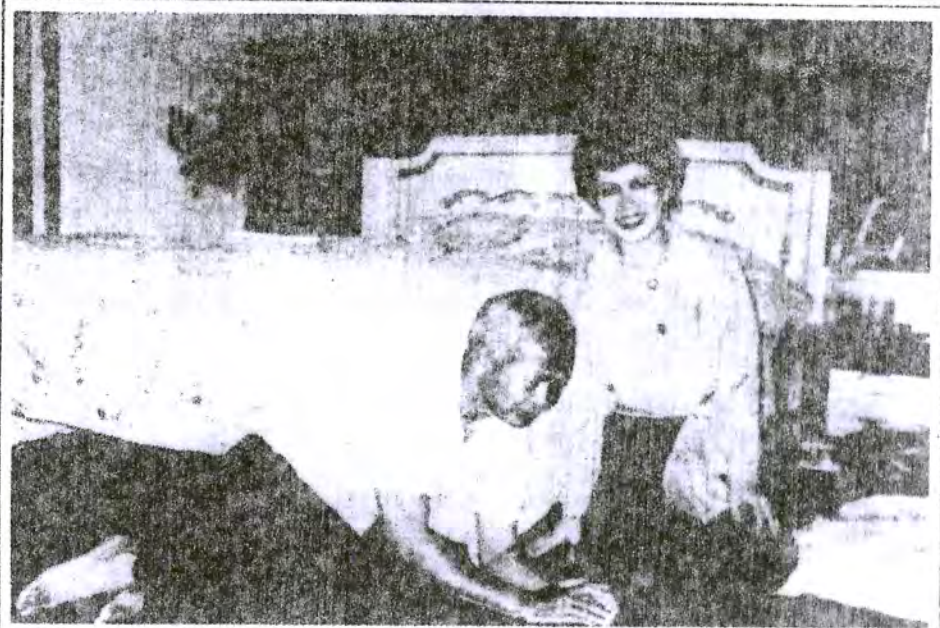
Reflection on the current persecution of Sulak and others illustrates this trend. Prosecutions for *lèse majesté* have become more frequent, and on flimsier instances. In the

1930's, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) criticized those who believed the King to be infallible; King Vachirawudh (Rama VI) replied to critical newspaper articles under a pseudonym. In contrast, Sulak is in hot water for criticisms which Thais are making more and more often in private, but now dare not say in public. Many dare not defend him.

The King and Queen have outlived numerous governments and have been closely informed about their work. This experience, together with their growing influence, have given the Royal Family tremendous power as discreet actors in the factional struggles in Bangkok, especially since the Army is so faction-ridden and each group desires its own 'Palace connection'.

Indeed, Arthit himself may have now fallen foul of the royal power, while trying to broaden his base in the Army. The Young Turks, the 38 officers who were expelled from the Army after their involvement in the April 1981 coup, can still count on a considerable degree of support, especially in the armoured divisions. They have been seeking some degree of reinstatement—if only to be allowed to collect their pensions. They have backed the extension of Arthit's term, although they were once enemies of his, because 'he has the guts', because they hate Prem even more, and because they have a better chance on his side. Arthit, for his part, welcomed the prospect of having the Young Turks behind him and publicly greeted them at the 97th anniversary celebrations of the Chulachomklhao Military Academy. It was the first time since they were sacked that the Young Turks had been invited to the celebrations, and Prem stayed away, perhaps in disapproval.

Unfortunately for Arthit, the Palace does not like the Young Turks. A rapid turnabout in royal support was the result. Arthit seems to have made a desperate attempt to hold on to Palace support and have the best of both worlds—for instance organizing a massive sponsored walk for the Queen's charitable foundation. But the Queen has made several personal visits to Prem's sickbed (he suffered recently from pleurisy and a blood clot). The



Royal support for Prem was signalled by Queen Sirikit's much publicized visit during his convalescence.

photographs of Prem and the Queen were widely published in Thailand, and were taken as a sign from the Palace that they were backing Prem.

Succession

As the different factions reach out to build alliances, politics in Thailand in coming months will undoubtedly get more complicated. And on top of the speculation about who will succeed Prem and who will succeed Arthit, the powerful role of the Palace at the moment raises an even more delicate succession issue: who will succeed the King? Whether it is true or not, such speculation has been fuelled by the rumour that the King would like to retire, perhaps in 1987 when he will be aged sixty.

By tradition the next monarch should be Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn; but in an interview with the American press which was

reprinted in the *Bangkok Post*, the Queen has conceded that the Prince was not necessarily a popular choice because of his colourful private life. His sister Princess Sirinthorn has made history by being raised to a rank never before accorded to a woman, from which she could now succeed to the throne. Given the power which has accrued to the monarchy, the choice could make a real political difference.

What difference? People in army circles sometimes describe the difference by saying that the Prince is a soldier, the Princess an intellectual.

All in all, it seems that Thailand will be faced with important choices in the next few years. It also seems clear that ordinary Thai people will not have much say in any of them. And some of them, like Sulak, will suffer as pawns in the great game.