

ROVING REPORT

Pridi Through A Looking Glass

By ANTHONY PAUL IN PARIS

The house at No. 173 Aristide Briand is a two-storey cream-stucco-and-red-brick structure, typical of residences in this sleepy Parisian suburb of Antony. Opposite the villa is a vast sports stadium for transport workers. From nearby Orly airport, the roar of jets may sometimes be heard.

Nearby, also, is a row of small shops. In one of these, a showroom for fishing and hunting gear, a jolly, middle-aged French proprietor flourishes a list of sporting weapons which includes seven kinds of Colt .45 automatic pistols, the prices ranging from 2,000 to 4,000 francs, "depending on age and attachments."

The neighbourhood and the house at 173 are thus comfortable and commonplace enough. But the resident on whom I recently called — Pridi Bonomyong, Thailand's onetime Regent and Prime Minister — is neither. Pridi, principal leader of Thailand's 1932 Revolution, has been in exile, here and in China, for 32 years.

The Royal Thai jets which occasionally fly eastwards from Orly are, I fear, never likely to take this ailing 79-year-old back to his beloved Bangkok — and the Colts available at that nearby store are a curious echo of the reason. On June 9, 1946, a bullet from one such weapon killed Ananta Mahidol, 20-year-old King of Thailand. And Pridi, one of the most striking and controversial political leaders in 20th Century Asia, was named as an accomplice in the King's alleged assassination.

Though nearing its end, now, in the drowsiness of Antony, Pridi's life has often been crowded, tumultuous. He was born into a rice-merchant family near Ayudhaya, the former capital just north of Bangkok, on May 5, 1900. Very bright at primary and secondary school, he scored top marks in Comparative Law in Paris. Returning home in 1925, he quickly became a leader in the movement to modernize Thailand.

When the absolute monarch, King Prajadhipok, appeared to be resisting the new political winds, Pridi became a civilian leader of the People's Party, an organisation of young military officers and civil servants who demanded that the throne be moved above politics. On June 24, 1932, this group of just 114 people staged modern Thailand's first coup. With the help of Prajadhipok — who, as the present King Bhumibol has sometimes done, surprised the youthful faction with his liberalism — Pridi and his colleagues presided

over the country's transition to constitutional monarchy.

The first governments organised under the new constitution were obliged to tackle the

Depression's effects on the Thai economy. Appointed Finance Minister, Pridi sought to resolve Thailand's crisis with an economic plan which included proposals for nationalising all agriculture and commerce. In the uproar which followed, the cabinet split, Pridi resigned. After a brief exile in France, he returned to face an inquiry into his alleged communism. He was exonerated and, shortly after, as the new Interior Minister, he introduced a law banning communism.

One of the People's Party's young military co-conspirators, Major Pibul Songgram, had been Pridi's fellow-student and close friend in Paris. Over the years which followed the coup, the two took separate political tacks: Pibul towards Mussolini-like fascism, Pridi towards what he calls "scientific democratic socialism." The former friendship turned into a deep and reciprocated enmity.

In March 1947, Pibul (who had been in disgrace because of his closeness to Thailand's Japanese occupiers during World War II) returned to politics at the head of the Right Party. Six months later, in the wake of a coup which overthrew Pridi's government, he became Armed Forces Commander. Accused of complicity in King Mahidol's death and fearing for his life, Pridi fled — first, to a long exile in China, then in 1970 to Paris.

It was here that I recently spoke with him, in his living room at 173 Aristide Briand, beside a fireplace decorated with France's recognition of his contribution to the century: the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour. Excerpts from our two-hour talk (on the transcript of which Pridi later wrote some lengthy additions):

How would you characterise the current political situation in Thailand? In your view, what are the main political forces at work?

The principal force, as everyone should admit, is the people. But the people, as you know, are divided into several classes and sub-classes. Then there are forces which received the majority of votes in the National Assembly. But beside that we have to consider forces which are outside the sphere of parliament. As you know, in our country there are extra-parliamentary forces which have to be taken into account: survivals of feudalism, survivals of Thai Nazism, social-ethnocentrists, socialists and communists of various tendencies, bourgeois or western-style democrats, military democrats, et cetera.

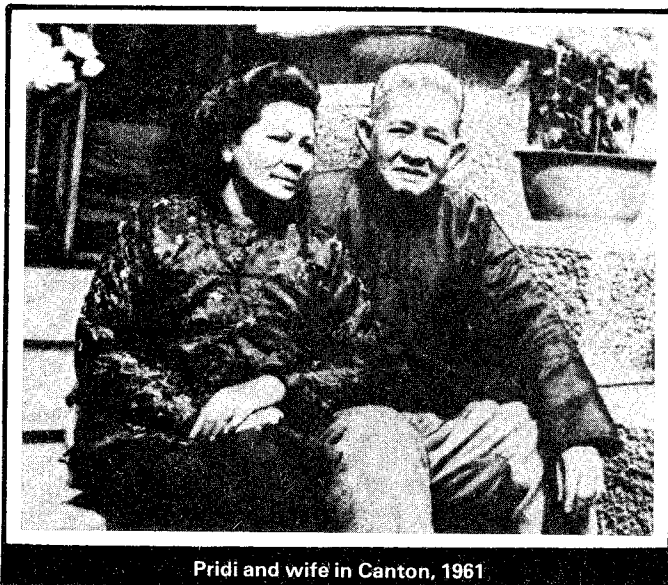
Do you think that the present Constitution copes adequately with this situation?

The Constitution prohibits the freedom of certain ideologies to struggle in a parliamentary way.

Would you advocate, then, involvement of the communists in the parliamentary process?

I think it's better for everyone to discuss things openly and legally in parliament. Just as in England, in France, and in Western Europe, where the communists are free... I think that's better. Of course, there are several kinds of communists and they have different views on this matter.

The communists of real Marxist-Leninist tendency follow the teaching of Lenin on "Partisan Warfare" written in October 1906, and keep in mind Lenin's critiques of the



Pridi and wife in Canton, 1961

self-styled communists in his book entitled "Left wing Communism. An Infantile Disorder!" written in 1920. Especially, Lenin advised his disciples in many countries under a parliamentary system to utilise parliamentary struggle. His advice to British communists was categorical and unequivocal: "The communists in Great Britain should constantly, unremittingly and undeviatingly utilise parliamentary elections." But there are some formalistic Marxist-Leninists who omit the real teaching of their great teacher.

What do you think would be the result in Thailand if communists stood for parliament?

It depends on the strategy and tactics used by each kind of communists to get people's support for its cause. As you know, the Italian and the French communist parties could obtain more than 20% of popular vote in parliamentary elections in their respective countries, while communist parties in some other countries have totally lost in the elections because the people are not ready to accept them, or because of the parties' own shortcomings.

In the current Parliament in Bangkok, there are many different political parties, of course. With which of the current political party programmes do you find yourself the most compatible?

I don't belong to any party, so I would like to refrain from commenting.

Could you characterise in one phrase your political philosophy?

My philosophy is scientific democratic socialism. Because democracy and socialism should base on science. Even in parliament. Parliamentary struggle is one way of struggle, too. We must judge the choice of struggle according to time, condition and place. Perhaps parliamentary struggle is good for some times, some circumstances. We should not reject outright parliamentary struggle.

Let's move to regional developments. Vietnamese troops from an army much bigger than Thailand's are active near Thailand's borders with Kampuchea and Laos. What do you think are Vietnam's ultimate goals in these two countries? And do you think Hanoi is likely to extend the fighting to Thailand?

These questions are indeed very delicate. So as a sincere patriot who has sacrificed my life for my beloved country, I will not let myself to be under the influence of either side in regional conflicts. I shall answer your questions from my patriotic standpoint of scientific democratic socialism's five principles, namely national independence, national sovereignty, peace, neutrality, and people's prosperity, together with democracy. Not only my many Thai compatriots agree to the five principles, but Chairman Mao Tse-tung, Chou En-lai, and President Ho Chi Minh told me that my five principles were suitable and proper for Thailand.

Regarding the comparison between military forces of Vietnam and Thailand, I should like to ask you to be careful of the propagandists who, to frighten the innocent population of Thailand, spread alarming rumours that the Vietnamese army is much bigger than that of Thailand. If the propagandists' allegations are true, the Thai government should submit to parliament a new fiscal law imposing multiplied taxes and duties on the Thai people in order to increase many fold the present military budget up to a level sufficient for confronting the Vietnamese army. But the Thai Premier, General Kriangsak, and some other senior Thai generals have repeatedly assured our fellow countrymen that Thailand has enough men and weapons to resist an invasion from

Vietnam. General Kriangsak has rightly said that Thailand has 48 million people. The propagandists' military experts know or ought to know that the population of North Vietnam was 23,787,375 at the census of 1 April 1974, and the population of South Vietnam was 20 million according to the official estimate in 1976.

I have to mention also that since 1917 Thailand has had a compulsory military service system modelled on German, Russian and French systems. So in case of war or emergency, Thailand can mobilise several million reservists of many classes.

I think the Vietnamese government knows very well the Thai military system. That's why I have not heard Premier Pham Van Dong nor any Vietnamese senior general boasting that their army is much bigger than that of Thailand.

On Vietnam's ultimate goals in Kampuchea and Laos, I have no concrete evidence to counter the Vietnamese official statement about its goals. However, if some government has discovered convincing proof to the contrary, it will be better for such government to ask the U.N. to discuss this matter seriously and thoroughly, instead of wasting time and money creating hatred among peoples in the region.

As to whether Vietnam would want to extend the fighting to Thailand, there are two ways of thinking. Firstly, the visionary perception that Vietnam has a great ambition to dominate all countries in Southeast Asia, so it would risk

committing aggressive war against Thailand et cetera merely for its idealistic satisfaction, without evaluating the correct percentage of possibility to win the war. Secondly, there is the materialistic or realist way of thinking [by which Vietnam would] evaluate correctly its percentage of success before committing aggressive war against Thailand.

I think Pham Van Dong and his general staff are mentally healthy. So I expect they use the second way of thinking. As most of them were educated in French schools, they know the elementary rule of warfare formulated by Napoleon: "Soldiers march on by their stomachs". Soldiers of a famous army may be strong-minded enough to go without food for a few days, but if lack of food continues too long, they naturally would not have the strength to fight.

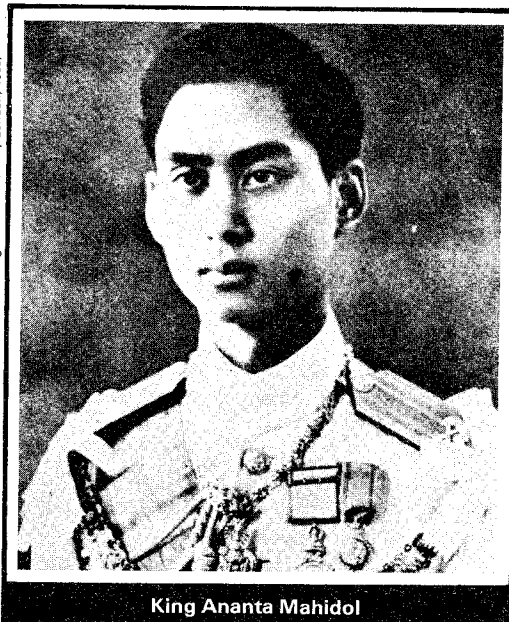
You know very well that there are shortages of food in Vietnam and Kampuchea. Therefore, I don't see any realist reason why the present leaders of

Vietnam would commit aggressive war against Thailand.

Vietnam is confronting many problems. Inside Vietnam, the economic problem. In Kampuchea, many problems. And as you know Vietnam has hostilities with China. When you have so many problems to your rear, you don't want to have more problems all around you.

But there exist international warmongers who are not content with localisation of the war to Indochina's area; they want to extend the war as far as possible by pushing Thailand and Vietnam into armed conflicts. You can observe from some pressure group's publications and war provocations in and outside Thailand that warmongers' agents have already extended the international cold war of their respective masters into Thailand, by malicious and vociferous [statements intended] to excite anger and mistrust between the Thai and Vietnamese peoples. About 3 to 4 months ago, these agents expected to cooperate with Kriangsak to go to war against Vietnam. But recently, when Kriangsak agreed with Pham Van Dong to settle peacefully their differences, the agents strongly attacked Kriangsak in the hope of replacing him with another Thai government leaning to the warmongers.

If events show that Vietnam does have designs on



King Ananta Mahidol

LORDS OF LIFE by Prince Chula Chakrabongse (Avin Redman, London, 1962)

Thailand, is there any step you believe Thailand should take?

Before events can show what you suppose, there should appear some symptoms that Pham Van Dong and his general staff are beginning to lose their normal mental function contrary to my expectation. Then the Thai government might consider some first steps which warmongers' propagandists could not oppose because their propaganda implicitly requires them:

- Proclamation of a state of emergency together with martial law [and] preparation for mobilisation of reservists. Then, since Kriangsak has accepted Pham Van Dong's invitation to go to Hanoi for a friendly return visit, so the Prime Minister should take this opportunity to see for himself whether Pham Van Dong and his general staff have [developed] mental deficiency or not.

- If Kriangsak has seen that the Vietnamese leaders and generals would risk their nation to satisfy their great ambition to dominate Thailand, then after his return to Bangkok, Kriangsak must accelerate the mobilisation of reservists as quick as possible, and put Thailand's civil administration, agriculture, commerce, industries, finance and economics on war footing.

- [However], if Kriangsak has observed that the Vietnamese leaders and generals are still mentally healthy and are using the materialist or realist way of thinking as I have previously outlined, then, after his return to Bangkok, Kriangsak should continue to maintain Thailand's strict neutrality and uproot warmongers' agents in order to save Thailand from adventurous war.

So you approve of Kriangsak's government?

Please don't use the word "approve" or "disapprove" because I am outside of the government. If I say something it may influence the other parties because there are many parties.

But as far as you are concerned the government is following a policy of strict neutrality?

I say that Kriangsak tries to maintain strict neutrality. That's all of my answer.

What role, if any, does the United States still have in maintaining Thailand's security? Can Bangkok depend upon its defence understandings with Washington?

Well, you know, if the government of Thailand tries to maintain strict neutrality, I think the United States will respect that. One may say that the United States does not want to get involved again in Southeast Asia. The Americans have had enough lessons there. Now they have many of their own economic problems inside the U.S.A., conflicts with Iran, commitments in Europe and in other continents, confrontation with U.S.S.R., et cetera.

And what of China's role? Is China currently a threat or a prop to the established order in Thailand?

China, you know, has no common border with Thailand. There is one buffer state between Thailand and China.

But do you think China is a menace or a friend?

I think the Chinese people in general are friends of Thailand, except a small number of Chinese who still uphold the ideology of "Greater Hanism" contrary to the real teaching of Mao Tse-tung.

The allegation is often made in certain Bangkok circles that you have in the past aided the insurgency in Thailand. Do you have any comment on such charges?

There are many rumours. Some are worse. There's one that I killed the king. Many rumours. Since I left China, there are from time to time articles and rumours and slander about me and I have to sue those people in the courts. And that's why I prefer not to answer rumour. You understand?

Could you tell me which case you've most recently won?

The most recent case on the king's death was a libel suit I won in Bangkok several months ago. Somebody accused me of having killed the king. A journalist had written that in the Thai press. And I won against [former Prime Minister]

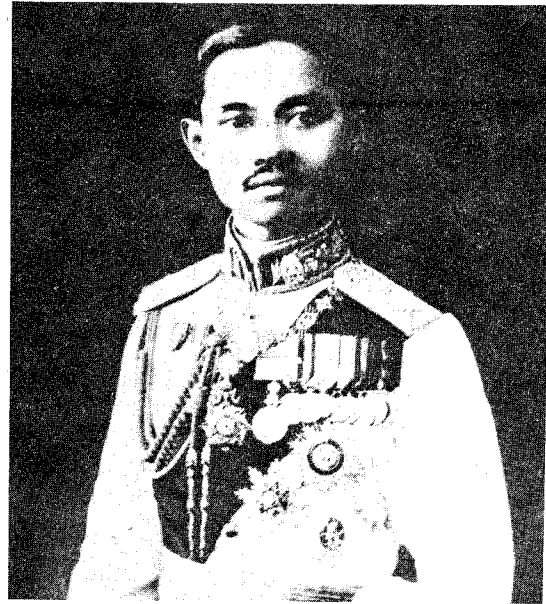
Kukrit [Pramoj] also after I had arrived here in 1970. From time to time my enemies try to revive the case against me and that's why I have to sue them.

And you always win?

Always.

At a press conference in Hongkong in April 1978 I asked Prime Minister Kriangsak why he did not invite Pridi to return to Thailand. And the P.M. replied that you are welcome to return at any time. Your former aide, Lt. Vacharachai, who was also implicated in the alleged assassination, returned and was not, so far as I know, harmed in anyway. Why don't you go back?

In general, the circumstances are not yet suitable for



LORDS OF LIFE by Prince Chula Chakrabongse (Alvin Redman, London, 1980)

me to go back. Second thing, you know, I'm innocent about the king's death. And if I return to my country because the period of time fixed by the statute of limitations has already expired the people would say, "Hah! He's covered by the statute of limitations on his crime and now he's coming back." Therefore, people would say he wasn't all that innocent since he waited until he was covered by the statute. It is a question of honour and equity not a legal question! I can go now, as Kriangsak has said.

You'll never go back?

I did not say that. I'm waiting for the circumstances.

What circumstances?

Oh, many circumstances. When the majority of the people understand that I am innocent.

Do you think most people think you're guilty?

No, it's not at all that clear-cut. The majority of people are in a shady zone. They probably don't know or it doesn't trouble them that much but I'm bothered by the idea that people could think that I'm returning because I'm covered by the statute of limitation. I'm in no hurry.

This is a very delicate question in the context of the Thai situation. Have you ever had, either directly or indirectly, any communication from King Bhumibol?

No. No, no.

Would that be sufficient reason to go back — if you were invited back by the King?

Oh, no. No, no. I don't expect an invitation from His Majesty.

Do you maintain contact with the Thai embassy here?

Yes.

Are you aware of any kind of surveillance by the Thai authorities?

No.

They don't watch you?

[*Chuckle.*] It's very difficult, you know. Now, there are several methods of watching. It's not important to watch all day. You know, last October 5 the ambassador called my wife saying that he had received instructions from his ministry that I was planning to go back to Thailand that day and asking if this was true or not. If it was true, then they would give me protection after arrival. My wife replied that I had been in hospital for heart disease.

Do you keep in touch with Thai students or Thai residents in France?

Yes, I see students. Because some students want to study history, they come to see me from time to time to talk about my past experiences.

A writer once paid you a compliment: "Pridi, without ever having been young, has never been old." I'd like to explore your reflections on the early part of your life and those of your long exile. Firstly, your youth. When you were a student in Paris in the 1920s, you must have had a vision of the kind of society which should prevail in Thailand, the kind that you as a young man wanted to help build. Could you summarise that vision for us?

As you know, I studied law in the French Faculty of Law (*Faculté de Droit*). The programme of studies in those days was extensive, for we had to learn not only private and public law but also political economy. That's why I understand that economics is the foundation of society. Laws and institutions are a kind of superstructure. My revolutionary ideas were based on economics.

Would you describe your view as Marxist, neo-Marxist?

On, no, no. I have already said that my philosophy is scientific democratic socialism. Even if Marx said this or that, I have to consider if it is true or not according to scientific democratic socialism. There are several kinds of socialism. Even Marxism has different kinds: Marxism, Marxism-Leninism, Trotskyism and so on. I am free to choose any kind of theory on the condition that it conforms to our five principles as I have already mentioned.

We cannot in one jump arrive at the supreme stage of scientific democratic socialism. We have to go step by step, as one gets better and better. As you can see in my country, even after the Revolution of 1932, when they wanted to go too fast usually they failed.

In your idea of a democratic society, what were your priorities? Education? Full literacy?

Economics first. Economics first.

What was the premise of your economic theory? You thought that government should direct the economy?

Well, you know, at first [when a country starts out] the government cannot do everything. We must give a role to private interests. It's not [time for] nationalisation. No, no. If we do that, it's bankruptcy. If a nation wants to nationalise immediately, that's contrary to scientific democratic socialism.

You've had many years now to reflect on the period between the 1920s and the 1940s, when you were an active participant in Thai politics. Which of your contributions to Thailand during those years gives you now the greatest satisfaction?

The change from absolute monarchy into constitutional, democratic monarchy in 1932 and my service with my "Free Thais" comrades during World War II to fight the Japanese invaders and to regain full national independence and sovereignty after the war.

Is Thailand now as constitutional and democratic as you would like it to be?

Well, I think I must add, you know, democratic. If we say constitutional monarchy... well, constitutional monarchy is something different. There are many kinds of constitutions. Even the Kingdom of Italy under Mussolini's fascist regime had a constitution. That's why I prefer the term "constitutional democratic monarchy." I think you understand.

What do you feel might have been your greatest mistake? If you had the power to return and correct just one part of your life, which decision or action would you most like to change?

If you're asking what I would do if I returned as Prime Minister... well, I have no interest in entering politics again. I'm too old now. But I can reply to you about my past mistakes.

In 1925, when we began to organise the nucleus of a revolutionary party in Paris I was only 25 years old. Very young. Too young. Inexperienced. Although I obtained my degree. I had top marks, but there is nothing more theoretical [than comparative law]. I had no experience. Without experience, I applied theory sometimes dogmatically, I did not take into account the realities in our



Anthony Paul

country. I did not make enough contact with the people. All my knowledge was book knowledge. I did not take into account human elements as much as I should have. In 1932, I was 32 years old. We had a revolution but I was inexperienced. When I had power, I had no experience and when I had more experience, I had no power.

Any other mistakes?

Yes, my incorrect way of presenting my economic plan. I proposed an economic plan, but I should have spent more time explaining it to the people. At that time, few people, even among the old generation, members of former governments whom we invited to participate in running the country, understood my economic plan. They interpreted it differently. They did not understand it. I should have tried harder to explain to them what it all meant.

But also, it was not a proper economic plan, you know. I proposed not exactly a final economic plan. Rather, it was a preparatory project. Many people took it for the plan itself, not for the outline or proposition on which a plan should be based. There was a conflict between the old and new, you understand, in the society. And the old were so afraid of something socialist. They did not understand what socialism, what communism was. They took everything contrary to private enterprise to be communism. □