An old murder plot raises political controversy

Phantom of the past

By Rodney Tasker in Bangkok

The ghost of an alleged assassination plot stretching back to 1982 has made a dramatic return to haunt the administration of Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan. It has become such a politically charged issue that some observers say it may bring down the government, or lead to an even more drastic political scenario.

The newly revived investigation into the plot has all the ingredients of a head-on clash between the Chatichai government and the powerful military leadership. And the fact that one of the alleged targets of the assassins was "a prominent figure in high places" — whom only former Thai prime minister Kukrit Pramoj so far has had the courage to identify publicly as a member of the revered royal family — has raised the political stakes even higher.

Prospects of a deepening hostility between Chatichai and the military chiefs grew with the controversial announcement on 20 February that the prime minister had appointed former army commander Arthit Kamlang-ek as deputy defence minister. Arthit, who with former prime minister Prem Tinsulandon was one of the other targets of the alleged plot, was previously a deputy prime minister. His appointment to the Defence Ministry, was widely viewed as a political check to the current military commanders, who are known to be suspicious of the ex-army chief.

A political source, who was well-acquainted with details of the alleged plot, said military officers of Chulachomklao Military Academy’s Class 7 were prime suspects in the 1982 plot. One member of this class, known as the "Young Turks," is Ma-
noon Roopkiachom, credited as the mastermind behind two failed coups, in 1981 and 1985. Apart from the power motive, the Young Turks had a rather puzzling ideology, including nationalising banks and cracking down on Thai-Chinese business.

After being cashiered with several of his classmates after the first coup, and then forced into exile after the second, Manoon was allowed to return home in early 1990. He was pardoned and reinstated in the army, promoted from colonel to major-general and appointed by Chatichai to the Defence Ministry which the prime minister concurrently heads.

Other suspects, according to the source, astonishingly were senior members of the outlawed Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and certain academics. In the current rising political temperature over the case, anonymous leaflets were circulated accusing Chatichai’s son and close adviser, Krissak Choonhavan, and Manoon of involvement in the plot. Both Krissak, who was a student at the time of the alleged plot, and Manoon have made an official complaint to the police about the leaflets.

Despite the top-level personalities purportedly targeted by the plotters, the investigation into the case, which started in July 1982, has been dormant until recently. While a few soldiers were earlier sentenced in connection with the case — one to 25 years’ jail — no senior officers or prominent figures have been arrested. That, according to one source, was because of "political and military" reasons at the time.

But now the wraps on the case are substantially off, apparently for equally strong political motives. The case surfaced again shortly before national police chief Gen. Sawaeng Thirasawat was suddenly removed in late January. More significantly, police Lieut.-Gen. Boonchu Wangkanon was transferred from the post of head of the central investigation bureau to the more senior but less influential position of assistant police director-general.

Boonchu had been in charge of the assassination plot case, amassing a lot of evidence. Boonchu is a member of Chulachomklao’s Class 5, and his classmates include powerful Army Commander Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon and others in the most prominent posts in the military hierarchy. It is an open secret that Suchinda and his colleagues are still highly critical of Chatichai, despite recent public appearances together, mainly because they feel the prime minister has not honoured his word to them politically.

"Suchinda will never be friendly with Chatichai; he is very angry that [Chatichai] deceived him so many times," commented one of Suchinda’s friends. Another, possibly more pointed, reason for Suchinda’s stand-off is that Chatichai not only employs Manoon, but uses him as an important intelligence operative. The army commander and his classmates are daggers-drawn with Class 7 graduates in general and Manoon in particular.

Inevitably, there was strong suspicion that Chatichai had ordered the police to shuffle to prise the assassination case away from Boonchu and place it out of harm’s way in other officers’ hands. "As long as..."
Boonchu remained in charge of the case, he was dangerous,” one source claimed. Chatichai strongly denied that this was a motive and ordered the police, through the Interior Ministry, to expedite the case.

Whether or not the prime minister was less than sincere in his order, a tug-of-war over the case documents ensued, involving senior military and police officers. Boonchu refused to hand over most of the documents to the police officer designated to take over the case, criminal suppression division chief Maj.-Gen. Seri Temiyavej. Seri is considered an honest, no-nonsense officer, more loyal to the Chatichai government than rival Boonchu.

The military leadership had already become involved in the affair, with Suchinda calling for a speedy conclusion to the case, and the arrest of the main culprits. Supreme Commander Gen. Sunthon Kongsompong, in his capacity as director of internal security, was typically more outspoken, warning against any attempt to distort the evidence. In a statement, Sunthon said: “If the directorate of internal security finds any distortion of the facts, it will take drastic action against the ill-intentioned people in accordance with its legal powers.”

Sutth song was quoted as saying those involved in a plot to assassinate a figure in high places “should all be decapitated.” In defiance of new police chief Gen. Sawat Amornvivat’s reprimand to Boonchu for apparently disobeying orders to hand the case over to Seri, Sunthon reportedly appointed Boonchu as a military representative to be involved in investigating the case.

At the same time, opposition MPs joined the fray by urging the parliamentary committee on local administration to summon all parties linked to the case to testify publicly. In his weekly newspaper column Kukut, a respected elder statesman, threatened to expose what he knew about the case if the Chatichai government was “still concealing what should not have been concealed.”

According to well-placed sources the assassination plot investigation was first ordered by then prime minister Prem after an attempt on his life in July 1982. The move came after two rocket-propelled grenades were fired at his motorcade as he inspected the Thai army’s artillery centre at Lopburi, north of Bangkok. One grenade failed to explode, and the other missed Prem’s car.

Investigators, including Boonchu, who was then a police superintendent in Lopburi, arrested three soldiers, one of who was a subordinate of a Maj. Prajai Poithreksawong. Prajai was thought to be close to cashiered Class 7 colonel Praja Suanangchit, one of the Young Turk officers involved in the coup attempt the previous year. When Prajai’s Bangkok home was surrounded by police, the army officer killed himself.

During this period in 1982, according to the sources, there were at least two other attempts to strike at Prem, and eight to assassinate Arthit. In April 1981 Arthit was then second army region command was mainly responsible for putting down the Young Turks’ coup attempt against Prem. According to military sources he ruthlessly purged Class 7 officers subsequently.

Investigators at the time said the alleged plotters, including several Young Turk officers, five CPT members, and academics held at least three meetings in northeast Thailand and in the resort town of Pattaya. The CPT members were reportedly chosen as the hitters. The most spectacular plan to assassinate both Prem and Arthit and the “prominent figure” centred on a national football match — the Queen’s Cup tournament — in Bangkok in October 1982.

At one time during the year, Prajai and another Class 7 officer were held by police in Bangkok, but were released after troops of the 11th Infantry Regiment were sent to the police station by then 1st Division command Gen. Pichit Kullavatchorn, now deputy supreme commander. At the time, according to military sources, Pichit was a prime mover in trying to rehabilitate the Young Turk officers.

As the investigation continued, arrest warrants for 43 suspects were issued in September 1984. Among the suspects were six Young Turk colonels. But the arrests were never carried out, and Young Turks, including Manoon, were actively involved in the brief attempted coup, again against Prem in September 1985.

Some political sources think Chatichai is trying to use him as a counter-force to the Class 5 military jujument. And in the current heightened stand-off between Chatichai and the military, that spells potential danger.
Manoon gives himself up to contest plot charges

NAY, 27, 1992

MANOON Roopkachorn, the alleged mastermind of the assassination plot against a member of the Royal Family and national leaders, surrendered on November 17 to fight charges in court.

The charges, numbering six, include conspiracy to assassinate Her Majesty the Queen, a premeditated attempt to commit murder, possession of explosives without permission and organised crime.

The alleged plot by Manoon, a Class 7 graduate of the Chula Chomklao Military Academy, was cited as a justification by the now-defunct National Peace-keeping Council for staging the February 23 coup against the Chatichai Choonhavan government last year.

Manoon was stripped of his rank of major-general following the coup and could face a death sentence if found guilty. He fled the country after February 23.

The former leader of the Young Turk military officers was accompanied by Col Prachak Sawangsichai, a fellow Class 7 graduate, human rights lawyer Thongbai Chonnsawat and 10 aides when he turned up at the office of the Police Director-General at about 7 a.m. on November 17 to surrender.

He was questioned by Central Investigation Bureau commissioner Pol Lt-Gen Thanu Homhual, who heads a team of police investigators handling the assassination case, for about three hours before being taken to the Office of the Supreme Attorney-General.

From there he was then taken to the Criminal Court where judge Tamchit Sothitam read out a 13-page lawsuit containing the charges against him.

Manoon denied all the charges and said he would formally submit a statement to counter them later.

The court set November 25 for cross-examination of the prosecution’s witnesses. The trial will be held in camera.

Manoon was then freed on bail after his wife, Mrs Montha, put up as warranty a land title deed worth about 3.5 million baht.

A smiling Manoon did not reveal how he returned to Thailand. He only said that he came back several days ago but had not yet contacted former prime minister Chatichai who reinstated him in military service shortly before his government was ousted from power. He apologised to Gen Chatichai for “being the reason” behind the coup.

The former major-general also said he held no grudge against his friend, Col Bulak Phucharoen, who switched sides to become a key NPAC witness in the case. Col Bulak, in a televised statement after the NPAC takeover, accused Manoon of being the mastermind of the assassination plot.

The case against Manoon was used as a pretext by the NPAC to stage the coup.

Col Prachak said he would do everything he can to help his friend. “Please convey my message to Col Bulak that if he still understands the word ‘friend’ he should withdraw his statement,” he said.

According to the lawsuit read in court, from February to October 30, 1982, Manoon and 44 other accomplices laid down a plan to assassinate Her Majesty the Queen, former prime minister Prem Tinsulanonda and the then army chief Gen Arbhit Ramluang-ek while the three attended the opening of the 12th Queen’s Cup football tournament at the National Stadium on October 20, 1982.

The plan was not executed because the plotters were reportedly afraid the many other people in the stadium could be killed or hurt by the ensuing stampede. Besides, they did not exactly know in which car Her Majesty would be leaving the stadium.

Manoon has once before surrendered to police. It was on September 19, 1983. Then, too, he was released on bail. No action was taken against Manoon. The matter rested there quietly until the NPAC revived the case shortly before the coup.

Asked for comment, Group Captain Manus Roopkachorn, Manoon’s younger brother, only said that he knew his brother had returned from Germany but knew nothing about the case.

CIB chief Pol Lt-Gen Thanu said following investigation that police had proposed charges against 25 suspects. The prosecution, however, decided to drop the charges against 20 of them, including Col Prachak. As a result only five, including Manoon, have been prosecuted.

He said three other suspects were still at large. They are Triwat, Songpol and Channan Ruangpichai. There are 199 witnesses in the case but only a few of them have been questioned. Manoon’s lawyer Thongbai Thongpao said he had also defended witnesses to testify in the Manoon case.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai said the Government has no right to interfere in the judicial process.

The assassination case will proceed according to the law, Mr Chuan said.
Witnesses' no-show forces adjournment of Manoon trial

THE Criminal Court on January 28 adjourned the in camera trial into the role played by former "Young Turk" leader Manoon Roopkachorn in an alleged assassination plot against national figures after three key witnesses failed to appear in court.

Mr. Manoon's counsel, Thongbun Thongprao, said it was a pity the three witnesses had not shown up as he feared this may delay the trial.

He said 134 people had been listed as witnesses and he wanted to request them to help speed up the investigation by attending the hearings.

The three eyewitnesses who failed to turn up on January 28 were Capt. Pijarn Jieanpradab, Sgt. Praveet Pumpueng and Sgt. Supat Thongsukpong.

Mr. Manoon, who was stripped of his military rank of major-general after the now-defunct National Peace-keeping Council seized power in the February 23, 1991, coup, was accompanied to the court by many of his former Class 7 colleagues including Col. Prajak Sawangjitr, Maj.-Gen. Pallop Pinmanee and Col. Sakorn Kijviriya.

"We come to give him our moral support as he has been unfairly treated since the NPJC staged the coup against the Gen. Chatichai (Choonhavan) administration," said Maj.-Gen. Pallop.

Maj.-Gen. Pallop said he had also been accused of masterminding the assassination plot.

"But it was strange the prosecutor dropped the charge against me," he said.

Col. Bulsak Pocharoen, who is under army protection, is one key witness which Mr. Manoon's lawyers expected to appear in court on January 28.

Col. Bulsak, a former close associate of Mr. Manoon, accused him after the coup almost two years ago of plotting to assassinate key national figures, including Her Majesty the Queen.

This, he said, was in contradiction to a statement seven years earlier when Col. Bulsak said Mr. Manoon was a faithful subject to members of the Royal Family. He reversed that statement in a controversial videotape.

Mr. Thongbun said key witnesses were usually urged to testify first and he hoped Col. Bulsak would be asked to give his testimony soon.

"He is the only person who has claimed to have witnessed the assassination plot and made charges against Khun Manoon," he said.

Mr. Thongbun said he told the court on January 14 he was strongly opposed to prosecutors calling Pol. Col. Santhan Kongkamnerd for questioning during the hearing.

"Khun Santhan is one of the police investigation team which questioned witnesses. The judge heeded our complaint and did not hear his testimony," Mr. Thongbun said he was still hopeful the judge might agree to his call for the hearing to be opened to the public.

Mr. Manoon also says he would like to have an open trial.

Former Army "Young Turk" officer Manoon Roopkachorn emerges from the Criminal Court following an adjournment in the hearing of his case on January 28.
CENTRAL Investigation Bureau Assistant Commissioner Seri Temiyavej said yesterday that he would consult his superiors in the Police Department on whether to take legal action against a number of senior police officers who had distorted facts during investigation of the alleged assassination plot against key national figures in 1982.

Pol Maj-Gen Seri, who is a former Crime Suppression Division commander, said during a Channel 11 TV debate on the alleged assassination attempt last night that a group of police officers who had conducted the investigation in 1985 had misled the public to believe that Manoon Roopkachorn had masterminded the assassination plot against Her Majesty the Queen in 1982.

"The allegation was totally groundless. There was no such plan and a group of people used the allegation as a pretext to seize power from the government of former prime minister Chatichai Choonhavan," said the police officer, adding that even former prime minister M.R. Kukrit Pramoij was misled by their false accusations.

... 11:37 --soc.culture.thai-- 23 MORE --help:?--Top 45%--

* sunarc

Former assistant police chief Pol Gen Boonchu Wangkanond, a member of Chulachomklao Military Academy Class 5 led by former premier Gen Suchinda Kraprayoon, was directly responsible for the interrogation in 1985.

Surprisingly, Pol Maj-Gen Seri said, the police officers who had distorted the facts during the probe were later promoted by the Police Department.

During the hour-long programme, Pol Maj-Gen Seri backed up his claim by showing a videotape that had recorded the distorted facts in the midst of the 1985 interrogation.

He said during the 1985 interrogation Col Bulsak Pohcharooen denied that his colleague Mr Manoon had a plan to assassinate a member of the Royal Family. But, he said, the interrogators later stated in an interrogation report that Mr Manoon had such a plan.

"What they did in the course of the interrogation caused a lot of damage to the country," said the police officer.

He said he was waiting for an official statement from the court acquitting Mr Manoon so that he can study whether legal action could be taken against the rogue police interrogators.

Asked whether lese majeste charges could be filed against those police officers since the alleged assassination plan actually did not exist, Pol Maj-Gen Seri said he was not in a position to comment at present as he had still to read the official court verdict.

... 11:37 --soc.culture.thai-- 23 MORE --help:?--Bot--