



The Military and Politics in Thailand: A Revisited Study

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Abstract. This study aims to: 1) study the context of the military and Thai politics and 2) examine why the military is successful in Thai society. This study is qualitative research that relies on a documentary study. The document analysis was undertaken by reviewing or evaluating printed and electronic documents. The data were then categorized by using content analysis. The reliability and validity of data were obtained by implementing integrated verification strategies and self-correcting during the study. The results show that: 1) the Thai military and politics have been closely interwoven for a very long period. As a guardian of the throne, the military has adhered firmly to the royal institute as its core ideology to build unity until now. 2) as the protector of the Three Supremacy, the nation, religion, and the royal institution, the military always has its stand in the political arena in seeking righteousness by intervention.

Keywords: The Military · Politics · Thailand

1 Introduction

The Army is one of Thailand's most important and old organizations. It was articulated from the necessity of the community to protect life and property belonging to the community members. When the community expanded into a state with an increasing number of people together with its territory, the Army also developed the management of manpower, Army formation, war planning, conventional use of weapons, as well as warfare procedure beginning from the establishment of Sukhothai capital until Rattanakosin period. The Thai military has always been an important mission of the state. Since there were so many battles in history, every man had a duty to serve in the military. The military and civilians were not separated, especially during the warfare period. Based on ancient bureaucracy, with the Chancellor and Samuha PhraKrala home (Chief of Defense) as the highest public administration commanders, the military's personnel control and the use of force were not absolutely separated. The major military improvement took place in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), in which military management was declared in B.E. 2430 in conformity with the western style. Later in B.E. 2453, there was an establishment of the Ministry of Defence [1].

The Army has always played an important role in Thai politics since the revolution in B.E. 2475 up until the present. There were only three short-time periods in history after the said revolution that the military diminished its political roles during the years B.E. 2487–2490, 2516–2519, and 2535–2549, respectively. This is because there were other forces in the society in which they successfully intervened in the political arena, causing political turmoil where the soldiers got a chance for a comeback [2].

For the past 90 years, the Army has backed off politics for a few short periods. However, we could not confidently say that the military had nothing to do with politics, even in the relatively long period after the incident of May B.E. 2535, where the soldiers did not make a vivid appearance on the political stage. Many political observers have proclaimed that it is difficult for the military to seize political power from the civilian government. Nevertheless, it did not mean that the military had been cast out from politics or depoliticalization completely. Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand [3] admitted that the mentioned period was a period for an adjustment of the political status and position of the military. Moreover, finally, we could see the full-fledged return of the Royal Thai Armed Forces after the coup on September 19, B.E. 2549, and the succession of power to maintain the status and roles in Thai politics until now.

Thamrongsak Petchlertanan [4] claimed that many possible ways to study military's roles in politics exist. Many scholars tried to find answers about what factors and conditions determined the military's seizure of political power. Thamrongsak studied the argument regarding revolution/coup d'état and found that there were 9 repeatedly reasons used by the military in talking over the power as follows: 1) the government, 2) the ministers, 3) the king, 4) the constitution, 5) the stability, 6) the security, 7) the military, 8) the Army, and 9) the schism in the nation. However, those claimers did not explain much about why and when the military would move into politics when the Army might argue for any possible reason to create righteousness in seizing political power. Mainly, the Army took over the political power when there was cumbersome in the country, a conflict between military and civilians, a conflict among the military, and a desire to gain more power, or, simply put, they wanted to govern the country by themselves.

In summary, the military would seize power whenever they wanted with whatever conditions and factors. The coups in Thailand proved that no one could resist if the army leaders wished to take over the political power. Thai society has reached a turning point in an era of political tension and ideological conflict. While the military government has paved its way to maintaining power, a new pro-democracy movement is trying to regain rights and power in the people's hands [5].

Chambers [6] proposed a relationship between the military and the civilian based on an analytic conceptual framework regarding the control, decision, and determination of political direction, which he divided into 5 important areas 1) elite recruitment, 2) public policy, 3) internal security, 4) national defense, and 5) military organization where the military and the civilian exercised their power. From the said analytical framework, it could be applied to military's roles in Thai politics and explain the intensity of military roles.

According to Sujit Boonbongkarn [7], a coup d'état was a political intervention that was widely used. It was the use of forces to take over the existing government. A Coup d'état might be a part of a revolution to change the political, economic, and social

structure or just a change from one government to another. Coup d'etat was considered an action with intention, impulse, definite aim, and planning. Since there were many coups in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, they became a political phenomenon that always happened and had a significant impact on politics in those countries. Political and social scientists have studied to find out the motivations for the military for the revolution. What kind of a situation did provoke the military to take action? What type of government after the revolution? What were the objectives of a revolution, whether they benefited from seeking, reformation, or temporarily maintaining the situation? Sujit further argued that the armed forces are stronger than civilians regarding weapons, finance, and mass media. Military professionalism has been developed far better than parliamentary institutes and political parties. Such a strength enabled the Army to infiltrate politics. However, with modernization, people are increasingly aware of politics and genuinely understand that the general election is a foundation of righteousness. This conception would make it much more difficult for the military to seize power and rule over the country.

The roles of the Army towards political development from various political experiences provide clear evidence concerning an ineffective public administration after the taking over of power. They could not obtain legitimacy over its administration. As a result, in any society where the Army is a government, it usually lacks effectiveness in administration, and there are pervasive corruption and deteriorating economic conditions. The major failure of military government comes from the preference for totalitarianism that withholds its absolute power. In this respect, modern scholars have become aware of the peril initiated by the political infiltration of the military. The military organization is among the important forces in society. However, it does not portray its role as a representative of development and social reformism as is expected. On the contrary, the Army, most of the time, acts as a restraint toward political development [8]. Based on Singkaew's observation, the Army exercised its roles through 4 major areas: violence, compliance with democracy, promotion of development, and political development.

Military actions always happen in a political context, and military advice, intentionally or not always, has political implications [9]. From the above rationale, the researcher is deeply interested in studying *The Military and Politics in Thailand: A Revisited study* in order to 1) find out the context of the military and Thai politics and 2) to find out why the military is successful in Thai society. The study's results would help academicians and interested persons better understand the military and the political development in Thailand, where the Army has continuously been politically influential up until now.

2 Research Objectives

The purpose of this research is first to study the context of the military and Thai politics. Second, examine why the military is successful in Thai society.

3 Research Methodology

This study is qualitative research. Qualitative research is a process of naturalistic inquiry that seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting. It focuses on the "why" rather than the "what" of social phenomena and relies on the

direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their everyday lives. Rather than by logical and statistical procedures, qualitative researchers use multiple inquiry systems to study human phenomena, including biography, case study, historical analysis, discourse analysis, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology [10].

This study relies on document analysis. Bowen [11] proposed that document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) documents. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. Documents containing text (words) and images have been recorded without a researcher's intervention. Coding or categorizing the data is the most important stage in qualitative data analysis [12]. Morse et al. [13] argued that the researcher should claim responsibility for reliability and validity by implementing integral verification strategies and self-correcting during the conduct of the inquiry itself.

4 Research Findings

The study "The Military and Politics in Thailand: A Revisited Study" show that 1) the context of the military and Thai politics are closely interwoven for a very long period. The modern Army was established in the reign of Rama V, with the ideology of protecting the monarchy as a core value in maintaining its unity. After the change of government in B.E. 2475, the armed forces changed their ideology to protect the motherland from the enemy who wished to conquer the country under colonialism. Since B.E. 2490 (A.D. 1947) until the end of the Cold War in B.E. 2534 (A.D. 1991), the military had been fighting with the Communists inside and outside the country. During these periods, the military had shifted its ideology back to Custodian to the Throne since the Communists were a real threat to the royal institution. And one more thing, the Royal Institute had successfully seized back the political arena with strong support from the armed forces during Sarit Thanarat. As a result, the soldiers have adhered to the royal institute as a core ideology to build unity until the present. There is no specification in any legislation, but the military in this contemporary period can use its superior power and influence to form a government. The civilian power in electing the leader into politics is decreasing, while the military's power in determining political leaders is overwhelming. The military can liberate itself from the civilian government's control that comes from the election. General Prawit Wongsuwan, the deputy prime minister, represents an army's agent in the government instead of being an agent of the civilian government to watch over the Army mandated by the people's intention like in any other democratic societies. General Prawit was a student of the Armed Forces Academics Preparatory School, Batch 6, and later of the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, Batch 17, a classmate of General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the former Army Commander, who took over power from Thaksin's government. General Prawit also once served in the Nawaminthrachini Regiment (translated as the Queen's Tiger Soldiers) and was a senior to and a former commander of a former Army Commander and a present Interior Minister, General Anupong Paochinda, and the former Chief of Staff of the Army, General Prayut Chan-ocha, respectively. Being the Queen's Tiger Soldiers, the military leaders, especially in

the Army, have a close relationship with the monarchy. With this kind of relationship, the military commanders have a certain influence on politics over the civilian government. With these connections and relationships, the military gets involved with politics in this manner for a long time since it is considered a perfect combination.

The armed forces have learned from many changes throughout the many years that the direct public administration by dominantly standing in front of the political arena is an inefficacious effort because the Army and the military commanders would become a target of attack from other forces in society in which they are flourishing with the democratization in the passing years. The feeble civilian government comes and goes; the military can intervene at any time to protect the country.

2) Why is the military successful in Thai society? The research revealed that the military, coup, and Thai society have been together for a long time. Even though one tries to deny this, one cannot escape the fact. The democratic regime has been in Thailand for almost 90 years but is still struggling. This sentence might be fallible from the beginning since Thai society was not married to democracy and has lived together happily ever after. There were many periods of separation and divorce. Thai society is a patronage society. It is not convinced about the equality concept. Thai culture is unique in its characters, while democracy is alien in its every nature. Some critics said that the wide economic gap makes it difficult for the democratic system to flourish in Thailand. With its special and privileged characteristics, Thailand must have its exclusive regime. When the coup was over, the first thing the military government would do was tear up the old constitution and draft a new one. At any rate, the constitution is always a mechanism used by the military in order to gain acceptance from international communities. Thailand never becomes a closed society; the government (including the military) prefers continuously interaction with the rest of the world since the country cannot turn back to relying on the subsistence economy where there is no international trade. In order to create righteousness, the military must demonstrate that its government is not barbaric, cruel, and indulgent but governs according to the law. When there is political turmoil, the military will intervene as the sole protector of the Supreme Three, meaning the nation, religion, and monarchy. As the protector of the Supreme Three, the military is automatically legitimate to govern. Thai people perceive that the military government represents peace, stability, structure, and predictable. But the military is unpredictable since the relationship in a military circle is deeply and strongly founded on seniority and cronyism system. Since there was so many political chaoses, it was no surprise that many people were longing for peace in society which was a selling point of the military. The military can survive for a few reasons. First, it is the strongest organization within the country with its own forces. Second, it wields its absolute power based on fear which is the most fundamental basis, but it is also the most unsustainable since there is no one likes to be suppressed forever. If the military government plans to stay for a long period of time, the third mechanism is the most profound mechanism, that is the control of political ideology. If the military can control people's thoughts and make them see that the military is the only best answer for the country and that there is no other alternative. If everyone in the country has been brainwashed to think in the same way, there is no one different, and that thought is matched with that of the state, there will be no more what is called politics. The only thing left is the government, where people are tamed like robots.

5 Research Discussion

The research on “The Military and Politics in Thailand: A Revisited Study” found that 1) the context of the military and Thai politics are closely interwoven for a very long period. The modern Army was established in the reign of Rama V, with the ideology of protecting the monarchy as a core value in maintaining its unity. After the change of government in B.E. 2475, the armed forces changed its ideology to protect the motherland from the enemy who wished to conquer the country under the colonialism. Since B.E. 2490 (A.D. 1947) until the end of the Cold War in B.E. 2534 (A.D. 1991), the military had been fighting with the Communists inside and outside the country.

During these periods, the military had shifted its ideology back to Custodian to the Throne since the Communists were a real threat to the royal institution. And one more thing, the Royal Institute had successfully seized back the political arena with strong support from the armed forces during the time of Sarit Thanarat. As a result, the soldiers have adhered to the royal institute as a core ideology to build up unity until the present. It is certain that there is no specification in any legislation, but the military in this contemporary period can use its eminent power and influence to form a government in reality. The civilian power in electing the leader into politics is decreasing, while the military’s power in determining political leaders is overwhelming. The military is able to liberate itself from the control of a civilian government that comes from the election. General Prawit Wongsuwan, the deputy prime minister, represents an army agent in the government instead of being an agent of the civilian government to watch over the Army mandated by the people’s intention like in any other democratic societies. General Prawit was a student of the Armed Forces Academics Preparatory School, Batch 6, and later of the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, Batch 17, a classmate of General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the former Army Commander, who took over power from Thaksin’s government. General Prawit also once served in the Nawaminthrachini Regiment (translated as the Queen’s Tiger Soldiers) and was a senior to and a former commander of a former Army Commander and a present Interior Minister, General Anupong Paochinda, and the former Chief of Staff of the Army, General Prayut Chan-ocha, respectively. Being the Queen’s Tiger Soldiers, the military leaders, especially in the Army, have a close relationship with the monarchy. With this relationship, the military commanders have a certain influence on politics over that of the civilian government. With these connections and relationships, the military will get involved with politics in this manner for a long period since it is considered a perfect combination. This argument is in the same direction as work being done by Narajaya Tanjapatkul [14] on “The Army Reformation: Dismantlement of Various Dimensions of Power of the Army in Thai Society” that Thai politics had gone through 13 coups in which it was a signal that the military always be a main character in Thai politics. The military has had an important role in politics as well as economics for the past 89 years on democratic road. However, the coup is not the only way for the Army to take control over Thai society, and the attempt to send the armed forces back to the camp is rather complicated.

The Thai Royal Army always explains its mission, duty, and roles that the Army is the fence of the nation, having a duty to protect the country from the enemy and cope with security threats that come from outside of Thailand’s border line. The book called *Infiltrating Society: The Thai Military’s Internal Security Affairs*, written by Puangthong

Pawakapan proposed a main image in the attempt to understand the influence and role of the Army in Thai society that the main mission of the Army involved internal security activities more than coping with the external security threats. This is another way to say that internal security affairs are the main reason for existence (*raison d'être*). The research on "Military and Politics in Thailand" undertaken by Suthinan Suwunwijitr and Worawit Klinsuk [15] also concluded that, in history, the soldiers and the civilian are not separated from each other. The modern Western form of the Thai armed forces was established in the reign of Rama the V in B.E. 2430. A few years later, in B.E. 2435, the Ministry of Defense was established. Right then, the military had been playing a dominant role in Thai politics due to its institutional readiness, together with the strength of ideology and concept.

However, the military is still fighting for the succession of power, which reflects the weakness and instability of the Army's institution. Moreover, the research on "Circuit Breaker Coup D'Etat" undertaken by Thitapat Serirangsan [1] also claimed that the study of roles performed by various institutions concerning the revolution in Thailand would depend on the introduction of condition and historical context, including environmental factors of the country in each particular period for careful consideration. These conditions, were necessary and indispensable otherwise we might misunderstand the roles of various institutions in the prevention of revolution that might occur again in Thai society. This contrasts with the professional military discussed by Huntington [16, 17] that the professional military would stay out of politics since professionalism would keep the Army out from political intervention.

2) For the reason why the military is successful in Thai society, the research revealed that the military, coup, and Thai society had been together for a long time. Even though one tries to deny this, one cannot escape the fact. The democratic regime has been in Thailand for almost 90 years but is still struggling. This sentence might be fallible from the beginning since Thai society was not married to democracy and has lived together happily ever after. There were many periods of separation and divorce. Thai society is a patronage society. It is not convinced about the equality concept. Thai culture is unique in its characters, while democracy is alien. Some critics said that the wide economic gap makes it difficult for the democratic system to flourish in Thailand. With its special and privileged characteristics, Thailand needs to have its own exclusive regime. When the coup was over, the military government would first tear up the old constitution and draft a new one. At any rate, the constitution is always a mechanism used by the military in order to gain acceptance from international communities. Thailand never becomes a closed society; the government (including the military) prefers continuous interaction with the rest of the world since the country cannot rely on the subsistence economy without international trade. In order to create righteousness, the military must demonstrate that its government is not barbaric, cruel, and indulgent but governs according to the law. When there is political turmoil, the military will intervene as the sole protector of the Supreme Three, namely the nation, religion, and monarchy. As the protector of the Supreme Three, the military is automatically legitimate to govern. Thai people perceive that the military government represents peace, stability, structure, and predictability. Nevertheless, the military is unpredictable since the relationship in a military circle is deeply and strongly founded on seniority and the cronyism system. Since there was so

much political chaos, it was no surprise that many people longed for peace in society which was a selling point of the military. The military can survive for a few reasons. First, it is the strongest organization within the country with its forces. Second, it wields its absolute power based on fear, which is the most fundamental basis but also the most unsustainable since no one likes to be suppressed forever. If the military government plans to stay for an extended period, the third mechanism is the most profound, the control of political ideology. If the military can control people's thoughts and make them see that the military is the only best answer for the country, there is no other alternative. If everyone in the country has been brainwashed to think in the same way, there is no one different, and that thought is matched with that of the state, there will be no more what is called politics. The only thing left is the government, where people are tamed like robots. The conclusion is in the same direction as the research work of Wachirawachr Ngamlamom [18] titled "Coup D'Etat: Role of Military and Politics in Thailand," in which it proposed that the military must demonstrate a political role in political crises in two cases, 1) to perform a duty in the maintenance and protection of the independence, security, political unrest or political crisis, Royal Institution, democratic form of government with the King as Head of State, and 2) to find a resolution when there is a political crisis. The reasons for a revolution were 1) the civilian government has an excessive intervention in the military's affairs, 2) the political intervention into the military's affairs, 3) conflict within the armed forces, 4) the military's integrity and role are violated, and 5) the government cannot govern the country. This research also made suggestions that 1) to create a political culture that facilitates the development of democracy, 2) to encourage the military to become professional, 3) to be aware of the economic condition by controlling the military's budget, and 4) to promote people's political participation. It is also in congruence with the work of Nattapon Boonyapipat [19] on "Soldiers and Thai Politics (1932- Present)," which discusses problems and obstacles in Thai politics in terms of lack of people's political participation, constitutional problem, the monopoly of politics by the elite people, lack of good leadership, election problems, lack of intellectuals, terrorism, including external threats. Last but not least, Haiden [20] and his work known as "Can the Military Stay Out of Politics" suggested that there are various areas where the governments can, and should, rely on the army's resources, expertise, and managerial excellence. Such cooperation creates net positives for the country. However, it must happen within the larger normative and legal framework of civilian supremacy.

6 Conclusion and Suggestion

The revolution in B.E. 2475 (Siamese revolution or Siamese coup d'etat of 1932), Khana Ratsadon (the People's Party) had no political or military power base. The Ahiwat (meaning prosperously beautiful) B.E. 2475 was successful because of the royal consent from Rama the VII, who did not want to shed the blood of the Thai people and was on the same page of changing government with a constitution. The impetuses towards the military's roles are 1) nationalistic ideology from the military's perspective, 2) the military's interests, and 3) the interests of the military commanders. The returns of the armed forces in B.E. 2549 and 2557 coups showed low resistance from people since most

Thai culture is based on conservatism, nationalism, and pragmatism. Here, conservatism does not mean that it never changes. It prefers a gradual change and, at the same time, maintains the old major institutions. In this respect, the military has a reforming role in constructing righteousness in a democratic regime. The reformation of the Army will happen based on political intention. This begins with democratic politics in which people are the true owners of sovereignty. It takes a certain amount of courage and determination from the political side to push the reformation in which the proposal must come from people's crystallization in society with an instruction of what kind of role the military should have in the future. The empirical evidence of the victorious army reform in various countries has confirmed that it will take a long time together with constant pushing.

The military roles and politics are a political change that denotes the relationship between the Army and politics. The infiltration of the Army into politics impacts political development and circle in the Thai social context. The stimulus is seen in a conducive environment in response to the need of people and national interests to seek legitimate reason and support from people. These incidents are caused by the failure of civilian government together with the political chaos in which the legitimacy of civilian government is palliated, and the reason for an intervention by the military supersedes.

It is a challenging and, at the same time, an interesting effort that there will be a serious attempt in a broader academic circle and every possible stakeholder to seek out various measures to demilitarize the attitude of the Army and to instill the civilian concept. This may mean that the soldiers would be inculcated with civilian thought and welcome the idea of the highest power that belongs to the people. The military must pay full attention to stepping out of power and returning to the professional soldier. If the Army is, in fact, serious about reshaping its image, it will need to undertake specific reforms, which could verifiably indicate that it has turned a page. It would help the Army restore its image. Those reforms and measures can be listed and prioritized but require a different and fuller treatment.

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