

Ten years of the Internal Security Act in Thailand: democracy as a danger to security

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In the 10 years of the 2008 Internal Security Act, an important legacy of the 2006 coup d'état, Prachatai's Kritsada Subpawanthanakun talked with political scientist Puangthong Pawakapan who argues that ISOC has changed its status to a permanent agency which continues to build the legitimacy of the armed forces in various ways, beginning with its involvement in the judicial process, monitoring of civilians and seeing democracy as a danger to security.

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In the Cold War era, the Internal Security Operations Command, or ISOC, was an agency with an important role in countering communism. When the Communist Party collapsed, and the Cold War ended together with the fall of the Berlin Wall, ISOC should have ended its role and been dissolved in keeping with the times, but it wasn't like that. Today, ISOC still exists and became a permanent agency within the state as of 27 February 2008, with the enactment of the 2008 Internal Security Act. In the past 10 years, ISOC has been the means for the armed forces to spread its influence, infiltrate, organise and build legitimacy for the armed forces.

What's more, the junta issued an order to amend the Internal Security Act on in November 2017 — when read in detail, you find that there are unprecedented efforts to get involved in the judicial process.

In the 10 years of the 2008 Internal Security Act, an important legacy of the 2006 coup d'état, Prachatai's Kritsada Subpawanthanakun talked with political scientist Puangthong Pawakapan who argues that ISOC has changed its status to a permanent agency which continues to build the legitimacy of the armed forces in various ways, beginning with its involvement in the judicial process, monitoring of civilians and seeing democracy as a danger to security. The political scientist from Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University also argued that the armed forces sees democracy, parliament and the people with the right to vote as security problems for Thailand and is one of the reasons why ISOC was made permanent.

The legacy of the Cold War

When the Thai state in the Cold War faced the threat of communism and realized that a war with weapons alone was not the path to victory, the strategy and tactics were therefore adjusted from viewing communists as an external danger driving Thailand to become the next domino, to viewing that the grassroots development of the communist parties in various countries came from economic, political and social justice problems which drive people to take up arms to fight. If the danger of communism was to be completely eliminated, these problems had to be eradicated. A footnote to this is that the change in view of the Thai state came from the influence of the US intelligence agency or CIA.

ISOC is thought to have originated for this reason and operated alongside the military, which had not lost any importance. It merely added the mission of winning the hearts of the people through economic and political means. The changes were many development projects during the Cold War and Royal Projects which also had the target of defeating the danger of communism.

“Both had the same concept. It is merely that when talking about them, there was a tendency always to talk of them as distinct. The agency that had the important role of supporting the Royal Projects was the military because it had its own manpower in sites all over the country.

“ISOC was one part of the strategy and plan to use politics and economics in the struggle. The important point is that these development projects began to appear in those areas where communist infiltration was highly influential or where communist forces had been able to seize territory. So these areas had to use military mechanisms alongside development. What happened was that when the armed forces were able to seize territory from the communists, they set up villages and relocated various groups of people there. The people who went there were given land and training in loving the nation, religions and monarchy. At the same time, these people helped the eyes, reporting communist movements and who had links to the communists.”

Policies 66/2523 and 65/2525 were another concrete form of political compromise that the armed forces used to deal with the conflict, changing comrades into partners in Thai national development. Puangthong explains that Policy 66/2523 was not the beginning point of politics led by the military because in fact, the military never abandoned the warpath or suppression of the people, and both policies were the result of the armed forces thinking that to achieve a sustainable victory in the war against the people, it was necessary to use a parallel political approach as a target of success and as the correct approach. Even when the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) was defeated, this strategy continued to be used, although ISOC's role should have disappeared.

The armed forces have never valued parliamentary democracy

Puangthong explains further that at the end of the era of semi-democracy of Gen Prem Tinsulanonda, there were calls for an elected prime minister without any need for a senate totally selected by the prime minister and with powers equal to those of the house of representatives. During that period the elite began to see that these demands by the urban middle class who wanted full parliamentary democracy were growing.

Puangthong poses the question of whether the armed forces will accept relinquishing power and the complete end of their political role.

“When you look back, you will see that they were trying to preserve the power of the military by

political means through ISOC, such as by setting up mass organisations which still operate in many sectors, and expanding the role of the military in other dimensions which are not to do with war. If you look at the strategy of the army and ISOC, you will see that the mission and the definition of Thai security problems expanded to include drugs, the environment, human trafficking and terrorism. In development issues, they still have an undiminished role by saying that they themselves support Royal Projects and no one can argue with or oppose this kind of talk."

After Gen Prem stepped down from power, the armed forces still of a mind that they themselves were an important factor in maintaining national security, with the greatest danger to national security, in the opinion of the armed forces, being an internal danger.

"The armed forces have their own idea of the form of democratic rule. They have never appreciated parliamentary democracy based on the principle of majority rule and have never trusted politicians from time immemorial. Since the Cold War, Gen Prem was clear that he never trusted political parties at all. Important positions during the Prem era were not held by elected MPs but by people he chose himself, who were mostly technocrats. So this mistrust has led to the structural design that gives the armed forces a role in various matters. These roles may not have clear political outcomes but are effective in building legitimacy and building a good image of the armed forces in the people's eyes to show that the Thai military does many things. In floods, they bring help; in droughts they bring water; they build roads; they dig canals.

"Even when the popularity of the armed forces fell to its lowest after May 1992, the military turned to development work, on the one hand, so that they could say that the armed forces were not meddling in politics, but the armed forces were still beneficial to Thai society. This may be seen as not political, but for me, this was very political."

This makes the armed forces look like no special danger, but whenever they interfere directly in politics, the mechanisms that they have will be mobilized to build legitimacy for the armed forces or to destroy the legitimacy of others. For example, during the referendum, the masses were mobilized to support the constitution. In the case of the protests against the coal-fired power plant at Thepha which the villagers are protesting today, the next day a mob that is connected to ISOC comes out to oppose the anti-coal villagers. It is claimed there are 67 groups of 50,000 supporters who can go to submit a letter at a military camp very easily, which reflects that there must be very good management. If there was no pre-existing basic structure, there is no way this could be done so quickly.

During the Cold War, communism was the main enemy. After the Cold War ended, who or what would be the enemy for ISOC to do battle with?

"After the Cold War, the problems that caused instability in Thai society in the military's view were politicians. There were only politicians who were corrupt and bought votes. The villagers readily sold their voting rights and were ignorant, poor and sick. This view later extended to the villagers as well. The armed forces viewed politicians as the cause of instability. Parliamentary democracy in which people have the right to choose who they want is what the armed forces dislike because they do not believe in the choice of the people. The armed forces still recite this and say that the people vote because of vote-buying, or they vote in exchange for minor benefits to themselves to the ruin of the nation overall, even though there has been much research that asserts that villagers vote more because of party policies. It is normal in the democratic system for the people to choose political parties that can respond to their needs and improve the lives of the people. But Thai society distorts everything and turns it on its head."

2008 Internal Security Act

The 2008 Internal Security Act was pushed forward during the Surayud Chulanont government. I consider it an important legacy of the Surayud government. The 2006 coup makers promised that there would be an election in 1 year. At that time, the armed forces may not have seen the power of the red shirts, because they did not yet exist. At the same time, to stage an election in one year necessitated some rules and systems to ensure that the power of the armed forces would be maintained in politics, hence the 2008 Internal Security Act, whose name, in fact, could be changed to the Internal Security Operations Command Act because the content is all about ISOC. It is a law that gives power to ISOC above all civilian agencies, particularly during national emergencies.”

Originally there was no specific law governing ISOC. It was established under the 1952 Prevention of Communism Act, which was abrogated in 2000 during the Chuan Leekpai government. ISOC, however, did not end its role but continued under the authority of the 1991 Government Administration Act and Prime Minister’s Order No. 157/2542 issued during the Chuan government and later Prime Minister’s Order No. 158/2545 issued during the Thaksin government.

But in the Surayud era, ISOC became a permanent agency with even more power even though it was not under the Ministry of Defence, but under the Prime Minister’s Office. Its structure was almost completely military which meant that those who proposed issues and set strategies were most likely to be military and it was dominated by the military.

“In the past 10 years, ISOC was called upon a lot, particularly by Gen Surayud and Gen Prayut. In Gen Prayut’s time, both the National Reform Council and the National Reconciliation Commission have delegated ISOC to supervise, coordinate and prepare drafts.”

One important point about the 2008 Internal Security Act is to amend an issue that former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had already amended.

Puangthong says during the last two years of the Thaksin government, attempts were made to reform the armed forces and ISOC, but with only limited results, partly because the government lost legitimacy from the appointment of Thaksin’s own relative as the army commander-in-chief. It was seen that reform of the armed forces was for Thaksin’s benefit. What Thaksin tried to do was restructure ISOC provincial units with the governors as directors, coming under the central ISOC director, i.e. the Prime Minister. Originally they came under the ISOC regions supervised by the army’s regional commanders.

“ISOC is a way of placing of civilians under military control and now we have a military government at the national level, at the regional level and at the provincial level. The deputy provincial ISOC directors are soldiers. Every provincial office will have an ISOC office where ISOC officials sit to coordinate with the Ministry of Interior. You can see they dominate every agency at every level. Once the 2008 Internal Security Act came out, everything that Thaksin had changed went back to what it was before, with ISOC directors under the army as before.”

And what happened after the 2006 coup was that the military turned back to devoting its efforts to setting up even more mass organisations. Puangthong cites an armed forces study that states that since 2006, there have been orders to investigate the numbers in mass organisations, calling on them to mobilise more and hold lots of activities. In the past, the organisations that ISOC established were under the Ministry of Interior and located in communist infiltrated areas. But in the past 10 years, ISOC has set up organisations in every province nationwide. This shows that the efforts of the armed forces to maintain power through the Internal Security Act began in 2006, and the 2014 coup continued to use this mechanism even more strongly.

Are the armed forces extending their power into the judiciary?

For Puangthong, the point that attracts attention in Order 51/2560 is the establishment of internal security operations committees at the regional level, which clearly states that directors of the ISOC regions, i.e. army area commanders, and that the most senior director-general of the regional public prosecution offices in each area become members of the regional internal security operations committees. Other agencies are long-standing ISOC affiliates.

“The new affiliates are the regional public prosecution offices. Does this mean that the armed forces are extending their power into the judicial mechanisms?”

Puangthong elaborated further that the 2008 Internal Security Act is the law that gives tremendous power to ISOC to call on other agencies to serve the strategies ISOC has laid down, including those in the justice system. This had never before been clearly stated. This order is likely to make it more convenient for ISOC to call on government agencies to work in coordination with it, whereas earlier, there was still some wariness between the army and the judiciary.

“We need to keep watch on what form of cooperation between the army and the regional public prosecution offices emerges. This should be an important issue because public prosecutors have the duty to file cases in court. In the past, we can see that the armed forces sued many who opposed the coup. They may be worried that one day if they are no longer in power, they may be in trouble and may get sued. Having the prosecution offices collaborating with them may be in self-defence. This is the best and most charitable view. At worst, they may be interfering in the process of the prosecutors’ work.

“In the past, there was talk about the Thai courts’ problem of double standards and is subject to political interference. But I don’t think this kind of thing happens through direct orders; it follows political trends. If there have been cases of direct orders, there has never been any evidence. We do not know. But when they are drawn into working more closely together, the influence of the armed forces will become clearer.”

ISOC doing political work for the armed forces

ISOC has an important role in conducting political work for the armed forces, including obtaining the political outcomes that the NCPO wants, such as organising local mass groups, intercepting opposing masses, and assessing NCPO popularity at the local level. At the same time, ISOC works with the Ministry of Interior at the levels of village heads, subdistrict heads, district officers and the provinces, where ISOC has the authority to give commands. Since the past onward, the most active agencies have belonged to the Ministry of Interior.

But in the last three years, ISOC has made more use of the Ministry of Education, training schoolteachers and organising campaigns. Motivational speaker Best, Orapim Raksapon, who caused dissatisfaction among Issan people when giving a talk to over 3,000 students, was a case of ISOC enlisting an audience from 5 provinces. This is a Ministry of Education mechanism that ISOC conveniently made use of. In the next election, all these mechanisms will be used in the same way as in the referendum.

“But elections are different from referendums. The outcome may not be as nice as the referendum. At that time, many people misunderstood that with a constitution, there would quickly be an election. They may not have understood the content of the constitution. But with an election, people

clearly know what each party is about. You don't need to tell them what to do; they will already have their choice made out. Elections are more difficult to control than referendums."

Abolition of ISOC is necessary if you want armed forces reform.

From the conversation above, we asked Puangthong whether, if we want to reform the armed forces so that they come under elected government control, it is necessary to abolish the 2008 Internal Security Act and dissolve ISOC.

"Yes, we must take activities that do not involve combat and territorial defence out of the hands of the armed forces, including internal security matters, which should not be in the hands of the military because they see the people as a security problem. And this is something many countries have done. Indonesia did it in the post-Suharto era. There needs to be legislation that the military must not hold political positions, that criminalises coups d'état and removes all civilian affairs currently in the hands of the armed forces.

"To be able to abrogate the law, it must be through the will of an elected government which must declare that it is time for reform of the armed forces, for them to come under civilian authority. This does not mean that if floods and disasters happen, we cannot use the armed forces to do this work. We can, but they must work under orders of civilians elected by the people. They cannot come out themselves. Right now, the armed forces have their own power, can do things themselves and can even order civilians to do things. It's the opposite."

Puangthong concluded that as long as the armed forces are in power, even if the NCPO is no more, if there no attempt to reform the armed forces, the conservative wing that opposes parliamentary politics that comes to power will continue to use ISOC as a tool to resist parliamentary democratic politics.

"What happened to the Thepha villagers will happen more often, causing difficulties for people's movements. Right now, when officials threaten people, the pictures appear in the news, and the officials are disgraced. But if you walk along and one group attacks another group, the officials will say that the people are attacking each other and what can they do if they are not happy with what you do. You can see that having their own mass organizations is important. It means they don't have to rely on the Democrats or the PDRC (People's Democratic Reform Committee) for every job as before.

"Certainly if they want a mass of hundreds of thousands or millions, they would need to rely on them. But for many events, they won't need that many. Just 500 or 1000 people to oppose anti-government groups are enough. ... 50,000 signatures in advance would really be enough. The armed forces don't like social movements because they see them as the type that wants to create power to bargain with the state. But they themselves are the ones who have wanted to build mass organisations since the Cold War period.

At the end of the conversation, Puangthong emphasised the importance of armed forces reform and the end of ISOC's role, both of which must be carried out at the same time.

"We cannot reform the armed forces if the armed forces have not lost their political legitimacy. If key groups of Thais, particularly the mainstream media and the middle class, do not see the problems caused by the armed forces and arrive at a consensus that it is time to remove the military from politics, then you cannot touch the armed forces. And if there is a chance to reform the armed forces, ISOC has to be dealt with."

Kritsada Subpawanthanakun interviews Puangthong Pawakapan

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* Prachatai, 26/03/2018 - 12:23:

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