

# Meaning and implications of general's rise

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The promotion of General Prayuth Chan-ocha as Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army marks the logical outcome of the military coup from four years ago, and ushers in a crucial stage in Thailand's ongoing endgame.

On taking over as army chief, Gen Prayuth has stated that his two-fold mandate will be to maintain Thailand's sovereignty and to protect the monarchy. This pledge is now set to determine political direction in Thailand because of its external and internal security implications.

While he is eligible to serve at the top of the high command for the next four years before mandatory retirement, Gen Prayuth's rise has been meteoric. He has set a record in modern Thai military annals for moving up from a deputy commandership of an army region to army chief within the space of merely four years.

When the military coup transpired in September 2006, Gen Prayuth was a two-star major-general and deputy to then-commander of the First Army Region, Gen Anupong Paojinda. After the coup, Gen Prayuth became First Army Region commander before being catapulted onto the fast track to the top.

His unprecedented promotion bears far-reaching implications and reveals the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring in Thai politics. The source of Gen Prayuth's fast-track rise is the location and character of his unit, namely the 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division based in Prachin Buri, on the Thai-Cambodian border in the Lower Northeast region.

This division, broadly referred to as the "Eastern Tigers" comprises the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> regiments, the latter also famously known in military parlance as the Queen's Guard.

While the Eastern Tigers are now ascendant and assertive in the army's nexus of command positions, the Queen's Guard regiment is its vortex. Gen Prayuth is a through-and-through embodiment and personification of this regiment, whose select officers have undergone specialised training that includes classroom academic curriculum over the past two decades. They now dominate the army and, in turn, Thai politics.

Not since two decades ago has the army's command structure been so dominated by a fast-track cohort of this sort. More often than not, the army's commander-in-chief hailed from the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. Typically, the army's high command in the past was spread out among different units and class lines, rarely concentrated under one.

For much of the 1947-73 period, power within the army, which determined political power in the body politic, alternated between two rivals, a clan under the Choonhavan family and a patron-client group under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat. The former dominated the first 10 years, located at the Ratchakru neighbourhood on Phahol Yothin Road. The latter reigned during 1957-73, based at the Si Sao Theves ex officio residence of the army chief.

The next period of concentrated army control belonged to the "Young Turks," who were mostly battalion commanders from Class Seven of the Chulachomklao Military Academy. They were

instrumental in the formation of the Gen Kriengsak Chomanan government in 1977 and the rise of Gen Prem Tinsulanonda as prime minister during 1980-88.

These Class Seven cohorts - a few still visible in politics such as Maj-Gen Chamlong Srimuang, Gen Panlop Pinmanee and Maj-Gen Manoonkrit Roopkachorn - lost a power struggle in the attempted April 1981 coup. This putsch failed even though it had the support of more than 50 battalion commanders who posed together for a famous pre-coup photograph as a show of force.

The fall of Class Seven gave rise to Class Five military officers who became dominant in the late 1980s partly because they had helped crush the "Young Turks" challenge. Class Five cohorts staged a successful coup in February 1991. Classmates of Class Five were all-powerful at the time, with firm command of all of the armed forces and the police. They tried to convert and institutionalise their power in electoral politics by taking office behind a political party.

The Bangkok-based uprising by the largely middle-class types put down the Class Five supremacy.

Power and positions in the military have been dispersed and allocated across cohort classes, command lines and unit bases since.

Gen Prayuth's ascendancy has changed all that. He now presides over a high command unusually filled by either former 21<sup>st</sup> Regiment standouts or his classmates from the Armed Forces Military Preparatory School, Class 12.

When such a concentrated command structure took place in the past, as with Class Seven and Class Five or the Ratchakru clan and Si Sao Theves group, it invariably led to political trouble. Army commanders felt emboldened to assert politically. Politicians and their routine corruption and cronyism were marginalised while the military's own graft and nepotism became salient.

Moreover, concentrated power sources in the military also led to attempted or successful coups by rival cohorts and disgruntled officers.

It is still early days for Gen Prayuth, but past experience with so much military power in the body politic does not bode well. The past has shown that powerful military cohorts do not return to the barracks voluntarily. A catharsis of crisis and clash between the military and civilians was always required, while challenges from within the military were not uncommon. That Gen Prayuth has stacked the high command with his regimental and Prep School Class 12 cohorts does not bode well.

Yet his ascendancy is unsurprising. Gen Prayuth spearheads the coalition of interests and individuals who lined up behind the Sept 19, 2006 putsch that deposed a regime which was seen as corrupt and violent, headed by Thaksin Shinawatra. The first half of the past decade was underpinned by the Thaksin regime that was laden with blatant conflicts of interest and gross human rights violations, notwithstanding the policy innovations and responsiveness that still enabled it to play a large political role. Except for two short-lived post-election spells in government in 2008, Thaksin's forces have been kept at bay.

The latter half of this past decade, harking back to the anti-Thaksin protests which reached critical mass in late 2005, has been dominated by Thaksin's opponents. His shortcomings and flaws were on display then. Those of his opponents are in full view now.

Gen Prayuth's intended maintenance of sovereignty is to be expected. It presumably alludes to territorial integrity in reference to the Malay-Muslim insurgency in the deep South as well as overlapping claims and simmering tensions with border neighbours. His other goal of protecting the monarchy merits observation for its internal rather than external security implications. That the new

army chief has brought up the monarchy appears to indicate internal challenges that he has not elaborated. And by doing so, Gen Prayuth, like many of his backers, may have unnecessarily drawn a line in the sand and defined the fault line of Thai politics around the monarchy.

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