

Thai Military Looms over July Polls

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Thailand's powerful army chief, Gen Prayuth Chan-ocha, appears determined to carve out a dominant role for the military in the coming weeks, as political parties seek to woo an estimated 45 million voters ahead of the general election on July 3.

But the recent orders issued by the hawkish commander has only one political constituency in its crosshairs: the tens of thousands known as the 'Red Shirts' who have rallied behind an anti-government protest movement and who are expected to vote for the opposition party, Pheu Thai.

Two days after the parliament was dissolved, Prayuth ordered a military reshuffle dispatching dispatch hard-line officers to take over the command in the northern provinces which, together with the northeast, are opposition strongholds.

"Gen Prayuth Chan-ocha signed the 99/2554 order on May 11 for the reshuffle of 157 colonels and lieutenant colonels," reported the Bangkok Post, an English-language daily that broke the story.

The order followed a blow to the Phue Thai the same week, when charismatic Red Shirts leader and parliamentarian Jatuporn Promphan was jailed after a Bangkok court found him guilty of violating his bail conditions. The army chief had a hand in this turn of events: he had ordered a complaint filed against Jatuporn for a speech containing comments alleged to have insulted the Thai monarchy.

By then, the military's muscle had also been flexed elsewhere: 13 community radio stations in and around the Thai capital had been raided by a team that had included military officers. These pro-Red Shirt stations were accused in late April of broadcasting Jatuporn's Apr. 10 speech, consequently violating the law of lese majeste. The law, a draconian form of censorship, condemns violators to a 15- year jail sentence if they are deemed to have damaged the royal family's image.

Such brazen acts have confirmed the suspicions that the military has set its sights on retaining a prominent role on the stage of national affairs. "The army's intention to call the shots before and after the polls is blatant," says Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a political scientist at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University. "Gen. Prayuth is everywhere. He is hawkish and he doesn't hide his hard line attitude." The military is more focused on propping up the (ruling) Democrat Party-led coalition," he explained to IPS. "The rules are being stacked up in favor of (incumbent Prime Minister) Abhisit (Vejjajiva's) coalition."

It is an alliance that holds no surprises, given the role the military played in stitching a backroom deal to enable Abhisit's Democrat Party to receive parliament's backing to form a coalition government in December 2008. Abhisit's military-backed government stepped into the political void left by the ruling People Power Party (PPP), which had won at the general election the year before but was banned by a controversial court ruling.

The PPP triumphed at the country's last poll, in December 2007, despite the hurdles placed in its way by the military. At the time of that election - the first since the country's 18th military coup in September 2006 - more than 30 of Thailand's 76 provinces, many of them in the north and north-east, were under harsh emergency laws.

The military had also used other measures—dispatching teams of psychological operation specialists—to “intimidate” and “harass” PPP candidates in the rice-growing north and northeastern provinces, government sources close to the military confirmed at the time.

The military viewed the PPP - and its successor, Pheu Thai (For Thai)—with suspicion due to its overt links with fugitive former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin has been living in exile to avoid a jail term for corruption that was slapped on him after he was forced from power in the 2006 putsch. A billionaire telecommunications tycoon, Thaksin led his Thai Rak Thai (TRT—Thais Love Thai) party to two successive election victories in 2001 and 2005.

The TRT, which was banned in 2007 by a military-appointed tribunal, had wide support among the country’s rural and urban working class due to a raft of pro-poor policies it implemented while in government.

These voters form the core of the widely expanding Red Shirts protest movement, a political force that has made its presence felt since 2008. The Red Shirts have expressed rage at being disenfranchised twice after parties it voted into office lost power to the anti-democratic bloc of the military, aristocracy and the conservative bureaucratic and political elite.

Last year saw a bloody showdown when 91 people, mostly civilians, were killed in mid-April and mid-May during a crackdown that ended two months of anti-government protests by the Red Shirts in Bangkok.

Both the military and mysterious armed elements among the tens of thousands of Red Shirt protesters have been blamed for the deaths.

But the prospect of the July election helping Thailand enter a more democratic phase appears unlikely, warns Chaturon Chaiseng, a former cabinet minister in the Thaksin administration. “Whatever outcome of the election, there could still be conflict, turmoil and instability.” The elites want a government that serves the elites and the military, “Chaturon, one of nearly 150 parliamentarians banned from politics after their parties were dissolved since the 2006 coup, told IPS.” The current constitution (drafted by a military-appointed body) and the judicial system have been influenced by the elite. “It explains why, even now, rumors of an impending coup are splashed across the headlines, underscoring worries that the military wants to directly intervene in politics. April was awash with such rumors.” There is no reason to believe the coup rumors, “Col. Sansern Kaewkamnerd, army spokesman, told IPS at a recent press conference.” The army is a mechanism of the state and will follow government policy.”

P.S.

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