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Infiltrating Society: The Thai Military’s Internal Security Affairs

PUANGTHONG PAWAKAPAN

Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021.

All of the Thai rulers’ traditional rivals—Burmese, Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese—were demilitarized by being subjected to European colonialism. As a result, the “modern Thai” army (and navy) had no serious external defense function, and indeed virtually never fought except against “domestic” forces (compare Japan!). The Thai military was mainly a means for internal royalist consolidation; it was, in addition, an emblem of modernity for the outside world. (Anderson 1978, 202–204)

In his controversial account of Thai studies, titled “Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies,” Benedict Anderson (1978) pointed out why and how the modern Thai military’s deep penetration into the domestic political arena was understudied. Thanks to the scholars who heeded his critique, there gradually emerged studies focusing on the political role of the Thai military, particularly its role in the modernization and democratization processes in Thailand.

The importance and contribution that Puangthong Pawakapan’s *Infiltrating Society* makes to Thai studies should be understood in this context. Before the early 1980s, the Thai military’s political role and its active involvement in Thailand’s nation-building processes under the influence of the popular monarchy were rarely studied. In the “post-counterinsurgency” era from the 1980s, there was a brief uptick in studies on the political role of the Thai military. Yet, as the author astutely points out, most of these studies did not pay sufficient attention to the ways in which the Thai military, with substantial aid from the palace, strived to control civil society through its nebulous “civil affairs projects (*kitchakan phonlaruean*).” *Infiltrating Society*’s revelation of the deep permeation of the military in civil society in the cities and rural areas completes the puzzle,

something that many scholars in Thai studies have long awaited.

Infiltrating Society's main arguments on the role of the Thai military throughout the counterinsurgency (1960s–1980s) and post-counterinsurgency (1980s to present) can be summarized in the following three thematic statements. First, the US-led anticommunist counterinsurgency projects during the Cold War that modernized and expanded the role of the military in Thai politics and society and also endowed the monarchy with the role of political legitimizer prepared the ground for the military to continue playing the role of security force and leader of socioeconomic development in the post-Cold War period. An in-depth analysis of the background of Thailand's counterinsurgency operations led by the Thai monarchy, Thai military, and United States can be found in Chapter 2. This chapter also sets the context for how the concept of the “political offensive (*kanmueang nam kanthahan*)” enabled the military to expand its role in the sociopolitical sphere from the 1980s to the present day. The author stresses that the military's extended counterinsurgency operations helped to create an intimate relationship between the monarchy and the military that provided legitimacy for the latter, helping it to extend its control over the whole of civil society. The author notes that the military's engagement in socioeconomic development “benefitted the military and its traditional allies, allowing them to establish and expand political control over society” (p. 59).

Second, at every turning point in Thai political history, the military revamped and expanded its role as the guardian of the nation through its increased involvement in socioeconomic development projects and propagation of Thai-style democracy, where the monarch acted as the head of state. This is extensively discussed in Chapter 3, which begins with an elaborate explanation of how the “development for security (*yutthaphatthana*)” concept continued to be modified to further the cause of the military. In the discussion of the post-counterinsurgency “development for security” projects, the author delves into military-led projects like Isan Khiao (Green Isan), which began in 1987, and Mulnithi anurak pa roi to 5 changwat (the Five Provinces Bordering Forest Presentation Foundation) in 1992. The succeeding military regime led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha similarly devised a forest master plan after the 2014 coup, and its maltreatment of small-scale peasants continued.

It is noteworthy that this chapter points out that the evolving role of the monarch as the development king paralleled the expansion of the military's development programs in rural and urban areas: “The definition of development for security in the king's speech slipped from defeating communism to ‘a war on poverty’” (p. 70). From the Cold War era, the military and royalist elites relied on King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who garnered massive support and loyalty from the populace as their political legitimizer. King Bhumibol's concern for the Thai people's well-being, especially amid the economic crisis in 1997, gave birth to one of the most widely celebrated philosophies, “sufficiency economy (*setthakit phophiang*).” The author argues that the promotion of this philosophy by the military and the ruling elites was to demonstrate the highest moral authority of the

monarch in sharp contrast to “short-sighted policymakers and politicians” (p. 85), thereby undermining the “legitimacy of politicians and electoral politics” (p. 89). The military and ruling elites’ anxiety about the king’s declining health ultimately led them to make the security of the monarchy “the top priority of internal security policy” (p. 53).

The third schematic statement is that despite the military’s attempts at controlling and suppressing civil society’s challenges to authoritarian rule, its innate limitations of reliance on royal charisma and nonprofessionalism in development policies resulted in civil society’s profound distrust toward the Thai military. Detailed accounts of mass organizations mobilized by the military and its political arm, Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), in Chapters 4 and 5 elucidate the goal and impacts of the military-led political offensives during and after the counterinsurgency era. Based on these analyses, the author questions the widely accepted interpretation of Prime Ministerial Orders No. 66/2523 in 1980 and 65/2525 in 1982. According to the author, the “state victory of the CPT [Communist Party of Thailand]” (p. 15) is not only misleading but also deceiving. There is “no proof that the army was successful in enforcing its political offensive at the ground level at all” (p. 112). Yet, the success of the two orders has been propagated to legitimize “the military’s role in the socio-political arena in the post-counterinsurgency period” (p. 112).

The author’s reassessment of the two orders highlights the limited impact, if not failure, of the Thai military’s “political offensive.” Signs of failure were evident from the beginning of the counterinsurgency era, as the lack of knowledge and enthusiasm to pursue political means among armed circles caused concern for the military architects themselves (p. 107). As it turned out, the military leaders did not trust Thai citizens despite their own emphasis on “people participation” in their political offensive strategies. Citizens were portrayed “as being too ignorant and easily misled by dangerous organizations or self-serving politicians” (p. 116). The most salient example of the military’s misuse of the counterinsurgency strategy is its violent crackdown on civilian protesters and students at Thammasat University on October 6, 1976.

Through its response to the overextension of military rule and its conceptualization of the Thai military’s role in society, *Infiltrating Society* demonstrates both the scholarly vigors and personal courage and, more important, undying desire for the democratization of Thailand, which this reviewer admires greatly. This reviewer would like to express her deepest gratitude for the author’s detailed, carefully thought out, and sharp critique of the relationship between the Thai military and monarchy. The reviewer would go so far as to say that it will be difficult to find another such bold account by a Thai scholar on Thai military politics in the near future.

Impressed by the author’s insights, this reviewer became more curious about the author’s perception of the origin and nature of the so-called Thai counterinsurgency era and the Thai military’s perception of it. Among Thai scholars, especially in security studies, it has been assumed that the historical event that marks the beginning of the so-called Thai counterinsurgency era is the “Gun Firing Day (*wan siang puen tek*)” on August 7, 1965, when an armed group of Communists

attacked the police station in Nakhon Phanom Province. The year 1965 was indeed a turning point, and the establishment of ISOC in that year clearly shows the military's increased interest in pursuing anticommunist counterinsurgency strategies. If we trace the history further, signs of increased Communist activities in the Thai border areas of the North and Northeast were found from the early 1960s, and the Thai military and monarchy certainly did not take too lightly the intelligence on subversive activities from Thai and US security organizations. In particular, when the International Agreement on the Neutrality of Laos was declared in July 1962, the Viet Minh's involvement in Lao affairs increased visibly, alongside that of the US government, which came to weigh in more on covert operations. These evolving regional and international developments prompted the Thai military to become keener on a "political offensive," which was in essence the "civilian counterinsurgency" strategies exemplified through building strategic hamlets in South Vietnam. Is it possible to find an earlier historical event that could be considered the beginning of the Thai counterinsurgency era?

Defining the "counterinsurgency era" also demands additional research on how the meaning and role of "counterinsurgency" have been understood and put into use by the Thai military. For instance, Saiyud Kerdpol, the founder of the civilian-police-military (CPM) concept, was exposed to different types of wars from the 1940s until he attended the US Army Infantry Advanced Course at Fort Benning in the mid-1950s and was involved in a clandestine US-backed operation in Laos in the 1960s. All these experiences should have had a considerable influence on architecting the CPM. At the same time, it is noteworthy that Saiyud's concept of counterinsurgency was not always welcomed by the Thai military, as discussed in the book, leading the reader to wonder what other concepts of counterinsurgency circulated within the military. This reviewer believes that supplementary accounts of the meaning and role of counterinsurgency as perceived by the Thai military will not only enhance the reader's understanding of the counterinsurgency era and its continuation in the post-Cold War era but also invite more critical scholarship on the "internal security affairs" that have been dominated by the Thai military and its allies for over half a century.

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