
THAILAND

The coup attempt had regional target

by Ramtanu Maitra

On April 1, Thai Deputy Chief of Staff Gen. Sant Chitpatima and a group of younger army officers tried to oust the Premier Prem Tinsulanond. The attempted coup failed but it helped further immerse Thailand in chaos and instability. Since early March, when the Thai cabinet was reshuffled following an oil-related scandal, the political situation in Thailand had remained volatile. While no one in Thailand was certain that the new cabinet had the parliamentary majority in order to function, U.S. State Department Acting Assistant Secretary of State Michael Armacost appeared before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on March 23 requesting \$80 million in foreign military sales to Thailand—an increase of \$30 million over fiscal 1980. Armacost presented the case as the “U.S. willingness to provide tangible evidence of the U.S. concern for the security and stability of Thailand, ASEAN’s ‘frontline state.’ ”

On the same day, a Thai expert, Princeton Professor David Morell, repeatedly pointed out before the committee the unstable condition that exists in Thailand. Morell requested the committee to rule out any more military assistance to the Thais because “the Thai army is fundamentally not a military institution; no wonder it is so weak militarily.” He added, “The Thai army leaders—indeed, its officers at all ranks from lieutenants to generals—are enmeshed in an incredibly complex web of political corruption.” Morell’s realistic characterization of the Thai situation proved to be quite different from the situation depicted by the State Department.

Diplomatic moves

While the U.S. House of Representatives was deliberating on rearming Thailand, Indonesian President Suharto arrived in Bangkok on March 25 to meet with Premier Prem. Suharto and Prem talked in private for two hours; neither foreign ministry officials nor senior diplomats were allowed to sit in. On apparent request from Suharto, no notes were taken of the meeting.

What became evident from the recent developments, however, was that Indonesia was getting increasingly concerned at the recent turn of events concerning Kampuchea, including Thai enthusiasm over a Sihanouk-led united front against Kampuchea. Foreign Min-

ister Mochtar of Indonesia met twice with the U.N. Secretary General in New York in March before persuading Waldheim to send his envoy to Hanoi while he was in Southeast Asia. According to the March 27 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, one U.S. official maintained that “Vietnamese efforts to play off Indonesia and Malaysia against the other ASEAN members should be resisted, and Thailand should be given a chance to negotiate a solution with Vietnam that best protects its own security.”

Prior to President Suharto’s trip to Bangkok, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific John Negroponte, an old friend of Henry Kissinger, was in Jakarta talking to Indonesian officials. Negroponte openly expressed his dismay at the “signs of Indonesian impatience with Thailand” and tried to impress upon them that on the Kampuchean issue, “it is Thailand’s head that is on the chopping block.”

The putsches

After President Suharto left Bangkok, a destabilization of his government took place when an Indonesian plane was hijacked on March 29 with 52 passengers aboard. As the hijacked plane landed at Bangkok, the Thai army was put on alert while Prem and Suharto started working out a way to free the hostages. The hijackers belonged to a group of fanatic Muslims called Kommando Jihad who were previously involved in anti-government activities in Indonesia. Finally, on March 31, Indonesian commandos raided the plane and freed the hostages. Indonesian officials hailed the event as a “triumph for ASEAN cooperation.”

Then, in the early morning hours of April 1, Thai General Sant, an active leader in the CIA-backed Navapol—a right-wing military group created in the 1960s—directed the Thai coup attempt. Prem called his bluff, gathered support around the Thai king, and overthrew the coup leaders on April 2.

The exact relationship of these events and the forces behind the attempted coup are not clear. But those forces who favor a more moderate political solution to the conflicts in the region were clearly upset at the first news of the coup. Both Indonesian President Suharto and Malaysian Premier Hussein Onn expressed their “shock” and “disbelief” at the coup news.

On the other hand, backers of a hardline Thai policy toward Indochina responded differently. Within hours, Japanese Foreign Minister Ito stated before parliament that Japan would quickly establish contact with the “new government.” French press reports noted that Peking printed news of the coup in the *People’s Daily* without the usual cautious wait. Sources in the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency with ties to anti-coup Thai army circles complained that General Sant had assurances of “quick recognition” from the United States.