

Southeast Asia by Sophie Tanapura

On the brink in Thailand

Hopes for general elections are dim as it becomes clear that to govern another year, Prem might pull a "coup" on himself.

Only two weeks after the dissolution of parliament, coup rumors are rampant as never before in Bangkok.

Most sources report that friction is mounting between Supreme Commander and Commander-in-Chief of the Army Gen. Arthit Kamlang-ek and Prime Minister Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda. No sooner had General Arthit issued a six-point guideline for military neutrality in the general elections scheduled for July 27, than some 70 combat unit commanders led by special warfare commander Lt.-Gen. Sunthorn Khongsompong called on General Prem on May 13 unexpectedly, in what was interpreted by many as a show of support for the caretaker government.

The gesture of the special warfare forces was seen as defiance of General Arthit's orders. Given Lt.-Gen. Sunthorn's long friendship with Army Chief of Staff Gen. Chaovalit Yongchaiyuth, both being graduates of Chullachomkhalo Royal Academy class one, it is suspected that General Chaovalit, a close aide to General Prem, was, in fact, behind the show of force.

Two days after the show of support for Chaovalit, Third Army Region Deputy Commander Lt.-Gen. Chaichana Thareechat led another group of army combat unit commanders to "boost Prem's morale." Meanwhile, General Chaovalit canceled his birthday party for fear that such a gathering of top military officers would aggravate already rising tensions. However, a group of senior officers May 15 visited General Chaovalit to celebrate anyway.

The constitutional crisis was

sparked in Thailand soon after Prime Minister Prem denied an extension of Arthit's tenure in the armed forces, thereby setting the stage for Chaovalit to take over as Supreme Commander. This crisis within the military overlaps the country's economic crisis; annual debt service is now inching towards 30% of export earnings or South American levels. Prem's inability to cope with the economy has earned him not only the enmity of many in the military, but also of those politicians with power bases in the farm sector, which has been hit by falling rice prices.

Hopes for general elections, according to certain observers, are dwindling as it becomes increasingly clear that to govern another year, Prem might have to launch phase two of his political survival plan, phase one being the dissolution of the parliament. A top cabinet official candidly commented privately: "What elections? There won't be any elections."

If one were to lend credence to the rumors, General Arthit and his men could be orchestrating a coup tomorrow. However, funnily enough, all coup rumors can be traced back to Prem himself, be it a military, media, or embassy channel of information. A scapegoat and a pretext had to be found and "a coup by Arthit" was convenient.

Calculated guesses of political insiders are that it would be in the interest of Prem to make a political preemptive move, which could be a coup against himself. With so much political fluctuation, with existing parties disintegrating and new ones being formed, it is conceivable that

Prem may decide to set up a "national salvation government" with an appointed national assembly. Amid the coup rumors, it is plausible that such a phase two could be implemented and even publicly accepted as a "legitimate" effort by Prem to stabilize a volatile political situation.

Any person who has been in power for a certain period can become too accustomed to that position to leave without wishing to linger on a little longer. Actually, it is of lesser import whether Prem politically survives or not. The fact is that there is international interest in maintaining the Prem government—not because of Prem—but because this is likely to ensure the continuation of the status quo of pro-International Monetary Fund economic policies of debt repayment, free trade, and other economic measures to loot the already bankrupt economy of Thailand. To support this "democratic process of stability" is also present U.S. State Department policy.

If Prem succeeds and stays on for one more year or so before scheduled general elections next year, then the questions to be asked are: 1) Does Prem realize that his eventual momentary political success would be severely hit by the looming world economic depression? 2) Does Prem realize that further kowtowing to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank will compromise not only his own government but will eventually bring down the vital institutions that hold the country together? 3) Does Prem realize that, in the meantime, Moscow is playing a carrot-and-stick game with Thailand by offering to buy Thai rice, tapioca, and textiles at a giveaway price, while at the same time building up amphibious landing capabilities in Kompong Som, a major port in Kampuchea, four to five hours by car to Bangkok?