

## Southeast Asia by Sophie Tanapura

### Prem's 'Phase Two'?

*The firing of the Army Commander-in-Chief coincides with one of the dirtiest election campaigns ever in Thailand.*

In the thick of coup rumors, Prime Minister Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, by way of royal decree, has dismissed Gen. Arthit Kamlang-ek from the post of Army Commander-in-Chief on May 27 while allowing him to retain his Supreme Commander post. This was allegedly done to preempt a coup by General Arthit. General Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh, known for his shrewdness and his loyalty to Prem, was nominated the new Army Commander-in-Chief.

Political analysts suspect that this is the second phase of Prem's plan to remain prime minister for at least another year and a half in order to enjoy the honor of presiding over the royal celebration of the 60th anniversary of His Majesty King Bhumipol Adulyadej on Dec. 5, 1987. It is believed that in order for Prem to be sure of his seat, he might move to implement "the third phase" of his plan—canceling the upcoming general elections, justified by "rumblings of another coup" and appoint a government of "national salvation" headed, of course, by himself. The first phase was Prem's move—also with royal decree in hand—to dissolve the parliament on May 1, after a majority of parliamentarians led by former Deputy Prime Minister Boontheng Thongsawasdi, at the time a Social Action Party member of parliament, voted down a government decree which would have raised taxes on diesel and LNG-fueled engines.

As the election campaign proceeded, it became increasingly clear that parties, politicians, and the military

establishment were lining up behind either Prem or Arthit. The "military" Rassadorn Party headed by Gen. Tienchai Sirisamphan, who made a name for himself when he quashed the Sept. 9 coup attempt last year, is in support of Prem. The dubious Mualchon Party of police Gen. Banteung Kampanatsaengyakorn, daringly put up huge electoral signboards saying: If you want Prem as prime minister, vote Democrat. But if you don't want Prem anymore, then vote Mualchon. The Democratic party headed by Bichai Rattakul, however, is split between the southerners who expect to win some 30 to 40 seats and bring back Prem while others in the party are not so sure they want Prem back.

As for the Social Action Party (SAP), headed by Prem's own planted mole, Foreign Minister ACM Siddhi Savetsila, it has dwindled so much in size by now that it cannot be counted on to swing anything significant.

It is possible that Prem assesses his chances of being called back as prime minister to be very slim, which may have pushed him to preempt an "Arthit alternative." A recent popularity poll run by the national statistics office placed Arthit ahead of Prem and M. R. Kukrit Pramoj, the other potential candidate for prime minister.

From the word "go," the July 27 general elections has promised to be one of the dirtiest campaigns ever held in Thailand. All observers of the Thai political situation speak of heavy foreign intervention into the election: extravagant payoffs, backstabbing, harassment, threats, etc. Within only the

two weeks since May 10, a half-a-million baht bank robbery took place, a bomb exploded at Don Maung Airport (Bangkok), and a SAP member of parliament, the local favorite of Udom Thani (Northeast), was shot dead. Some of the dirt is just beginning to float to the surface.

Sources report that investigations are already underway to answer two questions; 1) Where did the 200 million baht come from that was reportedly used to pay off members of parliament to bring down the Prem government? 2) How has the military secret-operations fund been utilized?

Whatever the outcome of this dangerous power play, dangerous because it concerns the fate of a nation, the threat of coup d'état is not yet dissipated. But a "political" or a "military" coup by whom? The new up-front factor on the political scene is Gen. Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh, who still has five and a half years of active service left in the army. Prem in general has the support of the U.S. embassy. Under Prem's administration, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, operating on behalf of the big Western banks, have been able to impose a harsh austerity on the country, sending the economy reeling downwards. General Arthit has been an outspoken opponent of the 1984 baht devaluation imposed on the economy, but has offered no programmatic alternative. If Chaovalit is not able to set the economy on a different course, then Thailand's internal instability will continue at an escalating pace. From the standpoint of the U.S. embassy and others, who are out to loot the Thai economy, instability is an advantage, by minimally paralyzing the Thai leadership in internecine battles. It is also to the advantage of the Soviets, who are waiting for one more ASEAN "domino" to fall.