

## Unruly boots: military power and security sector reform efforts in Thailand

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Arbeitspapier / working paper

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Chambers, P. (2013). *Unruly boots: military power and security sector reform efforts in Thailand*. (PRIF Reports, 121). Frankfurt am Main: Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-349442>

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PRIF Report No. 121

# **Unruly Boots: Military Power and Security Sector Reform Efforts in Thailand**

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**ISBN 978-3-942532-54-9**

Euro 10,--

## Summary

This report scrutinizes the challenges and difficulties inherent to Thailand's civil-military relations as well as continuing obstacles in improving, let alone achieving, security sector reform (SSR) in Thailand. Though SSR involves services other than the armed forces (e.g. police), this report concentrates on the military since it has been the dominant security institution throughout Thai history. Security forces have long had tremendous clout in Thailand. Such influence derives from the military's position since its creation in 1887 as guardian of the kingdom. At that time, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) began to depend upon a permanent standing army to centralize his control over the entire kingdom. Thai nationalism rested on the pride of the kingdom's having never been colonized and, under Chulalongkorn's son Vajiravudh (Rama VI), the state began to increasingly imbue the armed forces' ideology with royalist nationalism. By the 1920s, the military had grown to become a powerful instrument of the monarchy which the latter was ultimately unable to dominate. In 1932, military officers led a coup against the absolute monarchy, ending its control over Thailand. The armed forces now came to monopolize control over the kingdom. Such control lasted initially until 1944.

From 1944 until 1947, there was a brief period of civilian control during which neither the military nor monarchy was influential. Since that time, Thailand has not witnessed such strong civilian supremacy. Royalists and the military overthrew Thailand's democracy in 1947 and together dominated Thai politics until 1951. In that year, while the king was abroad, the military abrogated the constitution and returned to monopolize all power, with the king left to being a mere figurehead. In 1957, a more pro-royalist military faction overthrew the Thai government. The new leadership elevated the role of King Bhumipol so that the monarch would help build public support for the new military regime. Upon the death of Dictator Gen. Sarit Thanarat in 1963, however, King Bhumipol was able to step into the political vacuum and vastly expand his power. Though the military continued to administer Thailand, its hold on power depended upon the legitimacy bestowed upon it by the palace. Thus a monarch-beholden bureaucratic polity controlled the country.

Despite a brief and superficial period of elected civilian rule from 1973 until 1976, power-sharing between the monarchy and military (with the latter as junior partner) continued until 1988. By this time, popular demands made it necessary to allow elected civilians to lead the government once and for all. However, in 1991 the monarch supported a military coup which toppled the elected regime. The new military government was quite unpopular and, in the aftermath of a massacre of civilian protestors by soldiers in May 1992, it resigned following intervention by the king. There followed 14 years of democracy in Thailand. After 1992, the military's image was tainted thanks to the negative image it had created for itself during the 1992 massacre of protestors. But during the 1990s, retired General Prem Tinsulanond, in his capacity as Chairman of Thailand's Privy Council (which advises the king), saw to it that his loyalists became senior officers in Thailand's armed forces. In 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra became Prime Minister. He challenged Prem by building up his own faction of influence within the security sector.

Thaksin also came to incur the dislike of the palace. Moreover, the military, as an institution, had, over the years, built up its own economic empire and it was becoming threatened by Thaksin. Ultimately, Thaksin was overthrown in a military coup in 2006, and the security sector came to exert much greater influence over the Thai polity. The military ceded power to a pro-Thaksin elected government in early 2008. However that government was eventually ousted by Thailand's judiciary and, in December that year, an anti-Thaksin government was cobbled together in the home of Thailand's army commander. This apparent "silent" coup exacerbated Thailand's political polarization between supporters and opponents of Thaksin, leading eventually to the military's bloody quelling of two pro-Thaksin demonstrations in 2009 and 2010. In 2011, a new pro-Thaksin political party called Puea Thai swept to office in a landslide election and Thaksin's sister Yingluck became Prime Minister. Thaksin himself, barred from office due to an earlier court conviction, remains in exile. Despite Puea Thai's landslide victory, Thailand's military leadership has remained adamantly opposed to Thaksin – and the Prime Minister has few means of controlling active-duty military opponents.

Today, in 2013, as with many young democracies throughout the world, Thailand has an oversized security sector which, in most matters, is not accountable to civilian authorities. Clearly, security sector reform would do much to demilitarize the country, diminish the military's grip on Thai politics, improve transparency and ultimately enhance democratic governance over Thailand's security sector. But powerful military intransigence will probably hinder any such reform, at least in the short term. Such intransigence derives from the armed forces' enormous clout today in Thai politics and society and such clout owes to five factors. First, the military has long been an entrenched, powerful actor in Thai society. Second, since 2004 the military has spearheaded efforts at fighting insurgency in Thailand's far South. Third, the 2006 coup which ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the military has, since then, enhanced its powers and privileges while beefing up its might in opposition to any perceived threat from Thaksin, his Puea Thai political party and his "Red Shirt" protest movement. Forth, since 2008 the military has directed security efforts along the Thai-Cambodian border in light of occasional Cambodian military incursions relating to a disputed area of territory. Fifth, the armed forces guarantee the security for the king (and its own interests) above any goals of protecting democracy. Indeed, the military has, since 1887, taken a leading role in safeguarding the Thai state.

In Thailand, the monarch, his Privy Council, and most of the security sector (though many police support Thaksin) are outside the purview of control by elected civilians. Prior to 2001, elected civilians were scattered amidst weakly-cohering political parties in parliament. After the election of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001, he was able to dominate the executive, legislative, and parts of the judicial branches of government until his ouster in the 2006 coup. Following the 2008 return to democracy, Thaksin indirectly dominated the executive and legislative branches. With the 2011 landslide election of the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party, Thaksin's forces (through his sister) once again came to hold sway – though this power is limited. Indeed, with Thaksin (and his sister Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra) dominating the executive and legislative branches, any-Thaksin royalists control most of the security sector. As such, the armed forces have been

insulated from civilian control. Despite the king's advanced age and ill health, his position continues to be quite strong. Moreover, the opposition of the king (and others in the palace) to Thaksin Shinawatra remains clear. In 2008 and 2010, members of the royal family on two occasions attended the funerals of those opposed to Thaksin. Meanwhile, the king has steadfastly refused to pardon Thaksin for a previous court conviction. The military leadership is extremely loyal to the king – not to Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

This report makes clear that since the attempted security sector reforms of the late 1990s, Thailand has been moving away from bringing the country towards any form of institutionalized civilian control over the military. Under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006), civilian control became merely institutionalized in the person of Thaksin. In the aftermath of the 2006 coup which ousted Thaksin, military powers were enhanced in several decision-making areas. Since the return to democracy in early 2008, though the military continues to appear as subordinate to the civilian Prime Minister, it is really only beholden to the king, Privy Council Chair or itself. Such military prowess exists formally, as a result of newly enshrined powers, or informally, notwithstanding the explicit powers of civilian leaders.

Attempts by international entities to initiate security sector reform in Thailand have thus far been fruitless. During the Cold War, US attempts at SSR in Thailand were stymied by greater priority in Washington towards building an alliance against communism. Since the end of the Cold War Thai soldiers have been willing to participate in security sector trainings, but have been less willing to inculcate security sector reform “values”. Since 2006, Thailand has increasingly diversified its sources of military supplies and trainings – especially turning to China. Moreover, China has not sought to mold Thailand towards having a more democratic security sector. Because of China's unconditional assistance, efforts at SSR in Thailand, most prominently pushed by the United States, but also encouraged by others in the international community, may become meaningless.

In the short-term, international entities (mostly Western states or international organizations such as the United Nations) must understand that any move towards massive reforms in Thailand's security sector will be difficult to achieve. This is because Thailand's current political situation is politically polarized and prone to potential chaos, given the schism in the country surrounding former Prime Minister Thaksin. Senior military personnel, aligned with autocratic royalists, oppose the democratically-elected forces of Thaksin. They are thus unwilling to accept security sector reforms which might enhance the power of current Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra (Thaksin's sister) over the armed forces (given their perception that she is a mere vehicle for Thaksin). In fact she has generally remained loyal and supportive of her brother's political agenda. Thaksin, however, has a loyal coterie of leading politicians (aside from Yingluck) who support his goals and regularly visit him abroad. Furthermore, though Thaksin remains in exile, he regularly skypes into Yingluck's cabinet meetings. As for the police, Thaksin continues to maintain personal control over much of them.

Only in the long term massive changes in security sector reform will be possible. Thailand will not be ready to seriously commence security sector reform until stability returns to the country, democracy becomes more advanced, and the security sector is no longer protected from reform because of its close association with the palace. Yet SSR in Thailand must be a domestic-led process: as during the 1990s, Thai military elites will insist upon and maintain “ownership” over any new SSR processes which transpire rather than allowing Western states which encourage SSR (e.g. the USA) to keep control over such reforms.

In sum, neither Thaksin nor his opponents seem to actually favor sweeping, institutionalized reforms in the security sector. Where royalists want to maintain a powerful, partisan security sector to protect them against Thaksin while Thaksin himself would seek to exert personalist rather than institutional control over the military, then there will not be any genuine moves in Thailand towards security sector reform soon. Ultimately, Thailand represents the case of a country where democratic civilian control over the security sector has thus far remained elusive. Indeed, before any specific security sector reform can come to Thailand, there needs to be an elite united and willing to push for and accept these reforms.

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## 1. Introduction

This report focuses upon the challenges Thailand faces in achieving civilian control over its military. In contemporary Thailand, civilian control is incomplete at best and abortive at worst. Especially since the personalized politicization of the security sector under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (beginning in 2002) and the military coup of 2006, serious moves towards security sector reform and professionalism have been shelved. With three conflicts occurring simultaneously at the national, border and ethnic/religious levels, a rationalization for reform at this time has fallen upon deaf ears. Nevertheless, international donors and domestic, epistemic communities have persisted in pushing for a streamlining of the country's security sector.

Thailand's military (and police) remain oversized, top-heavy in terms of the proportion of officers to enlisted personnel, and lacking in efficiency. Security sector reforms begun in the 1990s, which aimed towards making the military and police more professional, capable, and less corrupt, continue to be lost in transition. Corruption, other criminal activities, human rights violations, and legal impunity in high-risk situations remain endemic problems among the security services. Other obstacles include the small number of women in the security sector, militarism, political activism, and active resistance to democratic civilian control.

This report scrutinizes the challenges and difficulties inherent to Thailand's civil-military relations as well as continuing obstacles in improving, let alone achieving, security sector reform in Thailand. International and domestic actors have sought to ensure democratic civilian supremacy over the security sector, improve capacity and cohesion, and finally alter the traditional Thai military role from being an instrument of repression ready to involve itself in politics towards becoming more apolitical, streamlined, and law-abiding. In line with such objectives, the theoretical tenets of SSR stress an adherence to transparency, good governance, rule of law, civilian monitoring, and building public trust and confidence in the security sector. As such, SSR can be seen as closely integrated with human security (OECD 2007: 11). Though such objectives seem worthy in theory, they are often in practice quite difficult to achieve – especially when security forces are called out to preserve order. And indeed, since the sudden heightening of insurgency in Thailand's far South in 2004, the coup in 2006, the outbreak of border violence with Cambodia in 2008, and large-scale anti-government demonstrations in 2010, there has been an escalation in the budgeting for and use of force by the security sector.

This use of force has paralleled a spiraling political divide in Thailand, whereby the military and police are perceived as being on opposing sides. Moreover, the failure of any prosecutions of army personnel and the fact that no security sector officials have ever been punished for human rights violations attests to the continuing legal impunity of members of the security sector. The perceived politicization and corruption of the security sector; its role in the 2006 coup; its growing budget; use of repression; and apparent insulation from civilian control have only helped to diminish civilian trust in the military as an effective protector of democracy and non-partisan guardian of the people.

Nevertheless, the military's 2011 role in responding to a national disaster has helped it regain some public support (Cole/Sciacchitano 2012).

This report proceeds in four parts. First, it examines the evolution of Thailand's military, explaining the historical basis for the current balance of power between civilians and the armed forces, and especially how the army has formed the backbone mechanism of the Thai security state. Second, the report examines how and in what areas military incursions in decision-making have undermined civilian control. Third, the report looks at past and present efforts at security sector reform, and what, if anything has stymied progress on this front. Fourth and finally, the analysis offers conclusions and policy recommendations in an effort to revitalize security sector reform. Thailand represents an anomaly given that it possesses a constitutional monarchy, where the monarch stands far above the polity, can exert both constitutional and extra-constitutional power, is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces (including the police); and is the entity to which the security sector gives its primary obedience, over the Prime Minister, constitution, and democracy. As such, understanding the power of Thailand's armed forces involves a comprehension of the cyclical political triangulation of power among elected civilians (particularly the Prime Minister); the military and police; and the monarch. This report argues that events in history, having produced strong and influential armed forces (and police), make a reversal of this situation difficult to achieve in the short run. For this very reason, it is perhaps essential that Thailand adopt a policy of security sector improvements – especially an adherence to civilian control over the military – sooner rather than later. However the security sector will most probably not be tamed until the current national conflict simmers down and the upcoming monarchical succession passes smoothly. Perhaps, only then will security sector streamlining begin to see some successes. Where donors are involved in security sector reform, there needs to be more balance in “local ownership” of donor-directed security sector reform programs so that both the international group and local (state) recipient of the aforementioned assistance are satisfied.

Though promoters of security sector reform inside and outside of Thailand have a noble mission in seeking to make Thailand's security sector more efficient, capable and mindful of democracy, such advocates will have to be patient, at least until this current period of political instability, uncertainty and regional insurgency in Thailand diminishes. Even then it might be unrealistic to assume that international and domestic efforts to transform the country's security sector will be successful. Regarding policy advice, donors seeking security sector reform in Thailand are aiming to keep a strategically-situated country in mainland Southeast Asia stable and orderly while making its security sector more efficient and much more beholden to democratic civilian control. In the years since the 2006 coup, such efforts have been illusory.

Regarding methodology, this report is based upon secondary literature and official documents. Some of these are in Thai and others in English. The report has its drawbacks. It does not utilize primary source materials such as interviews and concentrates upon security sector assistance from the United States.

Ultimately, Thailand represents the case of a country where democratic civilian control over the military has thus far remained elusive. In such a case, any drastic changes in the security sector itself may entail, at least to some extent, a decoupling of the military from the monarchy. The goal is to make the security sector much more apolitical and less beholden to only monarchical objectives. But such a goal is still a long way off. At this point in time, advocates for security sector reform in Thailand can only expect “baby steps” towards any real streamlining of the security sector.

## **2. Thailand’s Security Sector**

The security sector in Thailand today includes the royal Thai armed forces headquarters, the army, the navy (which also includes coast guards and marines), the air force, the police (which also includes border guards and customs authorities), state-directed paramilitaries (including reserve or local security units), militias, and royal guards. In addition, police and military officials each have their intelligence and secret services. These organizations are formally directed by the executive branch through the Ministry of Defense (for the armed forces), and the Office of the Prime Minister (for the police), with the National Security Council as an advisory board. In general, there have been incidents where officials within all parts of this security sector have engaged in human rights violations and corruption. Moreover, Thai security institutions have generally suffered from a lack of accountability and transparency. Reflecting this trend, in 2013, Transparency International reported that Thailand “is at high risk of corruption in the defence sector” (TI 2013).

Moreover, since 1932, senior brass in Thailand’s security sector have enjoyed relatively large budgets and presided over an enormous economic empire. Deriving from an early economic policy of state-dominated bureaucratic capitalism, military and police officers have taken leading roles in Thai state parastatals. These have included Thai Airways International, the Thai Port Authority, Thai Military Bank, Airports of Thailand, the Telephones Authority of Thailand, television channel five and other state enterprises. Senior military and police officials have also sat on the boards of directors of major private banks such as Bank of Ayutthaya and Bangkok Bank. Thanks to the military’s leading role in development, they also acquired major real estate holdings. Despite the apparent demilitarization in the 1990s, active-duty or retired senior military or police officials have maintained their presence on many boards of directors in the 1990s and 2000s. The 2006 coup helped to temporarily reassert military influence over the economy. In 2013, though civilians have penetrated into traditional investment centers of the security sector (e.g. Thai Military Bank), the latter continues to enjoy a heightened budget and multiplicity of economic dividends (Lopez 2007; Kharabi 2010: 27).

The predominant security institution in Thailand is the Royal Thai Army. Regarding budgeting, labor capacity, infrastructure/weaponry allocation, and simple tradition, the Royal Thai Army (RTA) is the largest and most powerful arm of Thailand’s security sector – which makes the army chief the most powerful security official. There is often overlap between the missions of the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters and the Royal Thai Army (e.g. both see their missions as including foreign peacekeeping). This

serves the purpose of further weakening the headquarters commander, given that infrastructure, resources, and tradition already favor the army commander.

As for the Royal Thai Police (RTP), it was once a part of the Ministry of the Interior. In the 1950s, it came to directly compete with the army in terms of size and firepower but afterwards, was weakened by army dictators. Moreover, since 1998 the police have operated directly under the Office of Prime Minister. In 2001 Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, himself a former police officer, began to resurrect the police budget, politicize it and cultivate a following among Thai police officers (Haanstad 2008: 77). In 2013, most RTP officers tend to favor Thaksin and his sister, current Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Though corruption, excessive use of force, torture, and cronyism have been endemic in all Thai security institutions, the RTP is most infamous for engaging in such behavior – surpassed only by the paramilitaries. Ultimately there exists in the RTP a history of “excess, malfeasance and resistance to change” (Lim 2010). Since this report focuses upon Thailand’s military, a more detailed examination of the Royal Thai Police will be provided in an upcoming PRIF Report.

Despite having relatively large army and police forces, Thailand has increasingly relied on paramilitary organizations to work alongside its more formal security sector (Ball/Mathieson 2007: 23). These paramilitaries are not independent militias but rather are directed by the state. The major paramilitaries today are the Tor Chor Dor (Border Patrol Police); Or Sor (Volunteer Defense Corps); the Thahan Prahan (Rangers); Chor Ror Bor (Self-Defense Volunteers); and Or Ror Bor (Village Protection Volunteers). To some degree, all of these forces have been involved in both Thailand’s 2003 drug war (which resulted in approximately 3000 people executed extra-judicially); and current counter-insurgency operations in the far South. The Border Patrol Police oversees the Self-Defense Volunteers, both of which are under the formal control of the Royal Thai Police. Nevertheless, both are under the operational control of the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters. Meanwhile, the Rangers and Village Protection Volunteers are directed by the army. Finally, the Village Protection Volunteers, though officially under the Ministry of Interior, are operationally controlled by the army. Paramilitaries have a worse record than other security forces when it comes to corruption, illegal behavior and human rights violations. It has been alleged that the Border Patrol Police has been responsible for at least 400 cases of human rights violations from 1988 until 2008 (Macan-Markar 2008). Volunteer Defense officials have been implicated in criminal activities; have demanded bribes from refugees in refugee camps; have allegedly engaged in rape of refugees and have been responsible for human rights violations (Ball/Mathieson 2007: 1-4, 187-188; ICG 2007: 14-15). Rangers have the worst human rights reputation and have also allegedly worked with provincial mafias (ICG 2007: 4-13). A more detailed examination of Thai paramilitaries and militias will be provided in an upcoming PRIF Report.

In practice, Thailand’s justice system offers little oversight of potential illegalities by security sector personnel. Criminal courts, courts of justice, and administrative courts are formally the venues where cases against security officials can be brought. Yet in Thailand’s history, only low-ranking soldiers or police officials have ever been indicted for crimes, and very few of these have ever been convicted. The military has its own judicial system as

well, but crimes allegedly committed against civilians have never been successfully prosecuted in military courts. Finally, the Department of Special Investigations and the Human Rights Commission have the power to forward cases against security officials to the judiciary. However, both institutions suffer from political manipulation and a reluctance to challenge the armed forces.

Since 1932, Thailand has had 18 different constitutions, often enacted by the rise of different military factions (with monarchical support). The military's role in the drafting of new constitutions has generally resulted in the insulation of the armed forces from civilian control – except where the king supports coercive sanctioning against military abuses by civilians. In addition, the Criminal Code, Martial Law Act, Emergency Decree, Internal Security Act and Defense Act have helped to rationalize and offer loopholes for security officials to violate human rights and political freedom with relative legal impunity (Waitookiat/Chambers 2013: 53-65).

### **3. History of Civil-Military Relations in Thailand**

#### **3.1 1887-1992**

##### *Before 1932*

Until 1932, Thailand, never colonized, was directly under monarchical absolutism. In the late nineteenth century, a long, self-reinforcing path of civil-military relations emerged in which the armed forces became a major entity for shaping the kingdom and ultimately exerting control over civilians. 1887 marked the starting point of this path. In that year, King Chulalongkorn established centralized permanent armed forces under a single military commander and established a Military Affairs Department with a cadet school (Royal Thai Army, 100 Years: 48). A strong security sector was necessary to guarantee the survival of the Thai monarchy in the face of enemy “otherness” on all of Thailand's frontiers (Winichagul 1994: 167). “Otherness” perceptions involved a fear of outsiders or even ideologies viewed as potentially destructive to the Thai Buddhist kingdom. The notion of Thai “We-ness” versus foreign “Otherness” was ensconced in both the military's self-identity and in the perception of most Thais that the armed forces were guardians of the kingdom (Winichagul 1994: 167). Such “otherness” perceptions can be seen with regard to feelings of loathing which many Thai elites have held towards the abortive Thai Communist Party, Thai Malay-Muslims, Cambodians, Burmese, Vietnamese and northern “hill-tribes”.

The purpose of the new permanent military was to consolidate monarchical power within the kingdom, guaranteeing “internal security” (Isarakpakdi 1989: 67). In seeking to quell domestic resistance to centralized control, the palace quintupled the budget for this new military. From these inauspicious beginnings as a mechanism of the absolute monarchy with no external security functions, the armed forces would later advance “to dominate the domestic political process” (Chaloemtiarana 2007: 5). As such, 1887-1932 saw the evolution of an asymmetrical power-sharing relationship between the monarchy and military, with the latter as junior partner (Phongpaichit/Baker 1995: 230).

Under King Vajiravudh (1910-1925), the state created the Council of National Defense, which “put military affairs on a governmental footing approximately equal to all civil affairs combined” (Wilson 1962: 170). Perhaps to build his support among soldiers and heighten Siam’s military clout, Vajiravudh granted even more budgetary funding “to build up a strong war machine” though this starved funding for “economic reform” (Graham 1924: 317-318). Despite his nurturing of military might, Vajiravudh’s reign was shaken by at least two military coup plots (Baker/Phongpaichit 2005: 106). His successor King Prajadhipok (1925-1935), continued his brother’s policy of increasing military prerogatives, a phenomenon, which, in the 1920s, witnessed a growing functional division between civilians and soldiers. Yet royal relatives still held top armed forces postings, forcing a glass ceiling upon ambitious officers seeking career advancement. By 1930, Thailand was confronted with a sudden downturn in the global economy. The depression led to enormous budget cuts, including at the Ministry of Defense (Wilson 1962: 173). Amidst the economic crisis, the state ushered in higher taxes on civil servants, including soldiers (Barme 1993: 66). By 1932, with intensifying domestic discontent, the absolute monarchy found itself ever more reliant on its powerful military to maintain order.

In 1932 a military coup group overthrew monarchical absolutism, facilitating the enactment of the country’s first constitution and the holding of its first general elections. Yet the transition did not rupture the pre-existing evolution of escalating armed forces authority (Wilson 1962: 171). Thus, 1932 offered Thailand its first opportunity at a critical juncture to achieve civilian control, but instead the military monopolized power. Though a superficial democracy functioned until 1938 (followed by the 1938-1944 martial law years), the 1932 fall of the absolute monarchy offered the military unbridled “increasing returns” – enhancing its power without monarchical or civilian supervision. Indeed, post-1932 elected government amounted to a mere formality as power was informally concentrated in the military alone. Military factionalism intensified, giving way to three coup attempts, but power was eventually centered in the clique of Gen. Phibul Songkram. During this time, all aspects of decision-making were effectively decided by active-duty senior military officers holding the position of Prime Minister simultaneously. Moreover, military expenditures reached 33 percent of the national budget, the highest amount ever attained (Samudavanija 1982: 12). Meanwhile, active-duty soldiers were given an ever-higher number of civilian administrative positions. In the cabinet the number of military officers holding portfolios rose from 7 out of 15 or 46.6% to 16 out of 26 or 61.5% (Chambers 2009: 26-27). Ultimately, the period 1932-1944 entrenched a factionalized military as an essential authoritarian actor in society while the monarchy became a very feeble institution.

#### *1944-1947*

In 1944, four events occurred which severely weakened the armed forces. First, 1944 witnessed worsening military fortunes for Japan (with whom Thailand was allied during World War II). Second, Thailand’s economy was deteriorating, creating domestic unrest and disorder. Third, in July 1944, pro-Axis military Prime Minister Phibul Songkram was forced to resign. Fourth, the anti-Axis civilian Pridi Panomyong gained indirect control of Thai politics. Pridi, leading other civilian elite politicians, worked to shore up civilian supremacy. As Prime Minister in 1946, he forcibly retired any officers thought to be pro-

Phibul while increasing numbers of pro-Pridi officers in mid-ranking military positions (Bamrungsuk 1988: 86). He furthermore moved to severely reduce the military's budget (particularly that of the Army). Moreover, he cut short any parades or military glamour which the Army had enjoyed under Phibul (Venkataramani 1992: 258). Finally, Pridi ensured the enactment of a constitution which prevented active-duty soldiers from serving in civilian posts. In this way, Pridi enhanced civilian political influence while the military and monarchy were quite weak (the monarchy still lacked a king who had come of age). Yet by mid-1946, royalists and civilian oligarchs had become suspicious as to whether Pridi might be attempting to consolidate his personal control. In May, he was indirectly implicated in the sudden death of King Ananda. With civilian elites increasingly divided and soldiers increasingly united against Pridi, political instability intensified. Pridi soon left the country but his political party continued to dominate the government. However, a 1947 military coup – encouraged by the palace – voided the 1946 constitution and eliminated Thailand's brief experiment with civilian control (Handley 2006: 88).

#### 1947-1957

The 1947 military *putsch* shattered civilian supremacy and re-established the power-sharing arrangement between the monarchy and a particular military faction.<sup>1</sup> Other than force of arms and support from the palace, the coup group solidified its control thanks partly to acquiescence from the United States, which, amidst an emerging Cold War in 1947, had become worried about political instability in Southeast Asia. The Coup Group's strong anti-Communist stance upon coming to power had legitimated its control in the eyes of Washington (Venkataramani 1992: 267-270). Moreover, after 1947, enhanced US backing was essential in entrenching the armed forces as a dominant political actor (Fineman 1997: 3). US military assistance to the Thai armed forces skyrocketed from \$4.5 million in 1951 to \$55.8 million in 1953, a figure 2.46 times higher than the Thai defense budget. US military assistance and grant aid remained high until 1976 (Bamrungsuk 1988: 195). After Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia, US military aid again poured into Thailand and such assistance remained high until 1987, amidst moves towards regional stability (Hagelin 1988: 481).

The prolonged deliveries of such aid contributed to the US becoming a sort of second patron for the military – after the palace. Only with the end of the Cold War in 1991 did such patronage begin to diminish.

The palace-military power-sharing arrangement which re-emerged after 1947 was mostly dominated by the monarch but sometimes by the military. Thus, from 1947 to 1951, the monarchy was the dominant actor in this equation. Yet following another coup, from 1951 to 1957, the armed forces, under the army faction *Soi Rajakru*, again became the principal actor.

1 During this time, a weak half-elected legislature was allowed to exist and superficial elections were intermittently held.



### *1957-1973*

Following a 1957 coup, again incited by the king, another military faction led by Gen. Sarit Thanarat came to overshadow the armed forces. Sarit elevated the power of the monarchy (Chaloemtiarana 2007: 51-54, 181). The 1963 death of Sarit facilitated the rise of Sarit's lieutenants Gen. Thanom Kittikachorn and Gen. Praphas Charusatien, who together became the dominant military faction, though the monarchy towered over them in political influence (Handley 2006: 156-157).

In 1969, following mostly sham elections, Thanom was appointed Prime Minister. By 1973, increasing military disunity as well as intensified pressures for political change from students seeking to revitalize the civilian control of 1944-1947 led to greater political turmoil. In October 1973, though the military's killings of student protests ostensibly set the scene, military disunity as well as the King's decision to support Army Commander Gen. Krit Sivara against Thanom/Praphas effectively forced the latter from power (Morrell/Samudavanija 1981: 141).

### *1973-1976*

From 1973-76, the palace and military continued to share power, though there were three changes. First, a new faction – the Krit Sivara clique – dominated the armed forces. Second, in post-1973 Thailand, the monarch became more influential than ever before: neither soldiers nor civilians could trump his clout (Morrell/Samudavanija 1981: 68, 148). Indeed, from 1973 to 1975, the king appointed a palace loyalist as Prime Minister. Third, although from 1975 to 1976 elected civilians administered Thailand; informal power remained with the monarch and the military. Yet the death of Krit in April 1976 and retirement of Krit's successor (a Krit loyalist) as Army Commander in October 1976 weakened the influence of the Krit faction. This facilitated a palace-backed 1976 military coup which halted Thai democracy (Wright 1991: 250-252).

### *1976-1988*

1976 saw the reestablishment of direct control by the monarch and military. Military factionalism thereupon reasserted itself, precipitating a coup in 1977. In 1980, the king supported the appointment of arch-royalist Gen. Prem Tinsulanond as Thailand's new unelected Prime Minister and Army Commander concurrently.

From 1980 to 1988 Prem and his loose clique dominated the armed forces while a weakly-institutionalized, civilian Lower House was permitted to exist (Neher 1992: 594).

### *1988-1991*

In 1988, civilian elites became increasingly united in favor of an elected Prime Minister and the military was facing diminished security concerns. With the king supporting regime change, Prem stood aside and allowed an elected Prime Minister (ret. Gen. Chatchai Chuhavan) to assume the premiership, a post which he held for three years.

Meanwhile, Prem joined the King's Privy Council in 1988 but continued to exercise influence over the military. During this time, united armed forces and the king were increasingly suspicious of the new premier. In addition the Senate continued to be composed of mostly-military appointees. Moreover, the military enjoyed virtual autonomy in the area of internal security. Quarreling between Chatchai and Army Commander Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon over weapons purchases and military perceptions of civilian interference in its domain eventually led to a palace-supported coup on February 21, 1991 (Phongpaichit/Baker 1995: 354). Thus ended the fourth attempt at a critical juncture aimed at establishing long-term civilian control.

### *1991-1992*

Suchinda's 1991 coup group worked to cement its power over Thai politics, building its own political party and competing in March 1992 elections. The elections resulted in Suchinda himself being elevated to the post of Prime Minister and it appeared certain that the military would further extend its power. However, mass civilian protests commenced in May 1992 aimed at forcing Suchinda from office. As the armed forces sought to repress the demonstrations, soldiers killed numerous protestors and the king intervened to ease Suchinda out of office and his faction out of power (Maisirikrod 1992: 32-33). The army's repression of demonstrators became carved into the memory of Thais as "Black May".

Ultimately, modern civil-military relations in Thailand emerged out of the 1887-1992 period. This era witnessed the absolute monarchy's creation of the armed forces in 1887; the latter's rise to become a pliant power-sharing partner of monarchical supremacy; the military's 1932 monopolization of political power; the 1947 re-emergence of palace-military power-sharing; and finally the ascendance of the monarchy as the dominant actor over both soldiers and civilians.

Out of this era, seven lasting legacies developed which had an enormous impact upon Thai civil-military relations in the post-1992 era: a monarchy with deeply-ingrained power over Thai society; a traditionally-authoritarian military subservient to the monarchy<sup>2</sup> which concentrated on internal security; no colonial history; a perceived need for security to guard against enemy "otherness", a very weak and intermittent history of democracy dominated by civilian elites; a socio-economic divide between rich and poor;<sup>3</sup>

2 Evidence of the King's complicity in helping to sponsor successful coups can be found in the regime changes of 1947, 1957, 1973, 1976, 1980, 1991, 1992, 2006 and the military's involvement in the government changes of 1997 and 2008. See Handley 2006: 136, 138, 278, 338, 356; Chaiching 2010: 166, 171; Kulick/Wilson 1992: 22-23; McCargo 2005: 510-511; Hewison 2007: 204; Political Prisoners 2013 (1); Political Prisoners 2013 (2).

3 Rapid economic growth initially widened the disparity between rich and poor, aggravated social tensions, made the Communist Party of Thailand more popular and rationalized greater armed forces clout for purposes of internal security. More recently, the impoverished found a champion in Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who, following his accession to office, instituted policies to benefit poor people. As Walker has argued, the impoverished are not as desperately poor as before. Rural incomes have grown and rural folk have demanded not "basic subsistence" but more "political inclusion" (Walker 2010). The fact that Thaksin delivered on his populist promises and gave the poor a sense of empowerment helped

and finally, beginning in 1947, a close alliance with the United States, which provided much military assistance and guaranteed external security, while the Thai military concentrated on internal security. Together, these legacies ensured that Thai military influence would persevere thanks to its close ties with the palace and the United States, especially during the Cold War, and that civilian control would be slow to emerge.

In sum, “otherness”, World War II, the Cold War and counter-insurgency helped to rationalize and cement the role of the armed forces and police as crucial players on the Thai political stage. But their power increasingly depended upon the legitimacy bestowed upon them by the monarch. Ultimately, after 1963, there came to be an asymmetrical alliance between king, military and police with the former acting as senior partner which dominated Thailand.

### 3.2 1992 to the Present

However, in the aftermath of “Black May”, the public image of the armed forces was significantly tarnished, which helped to weaken it as a political actor. Indeed, it even seemed to become de-politicized, though this was not the case. In fact, the discrediting helped to prevent any strong active-duty military leader from emerging for the next 14 years. Though active duty military factions lost much political influence, in their stead the Privy Council under ret. Gen. (and former Prime Minister) Prem Tinsulanond gained much sway over the armed forces. As such, during the 1990s, Prem was referred to as Thailand’s surrogate strongman (Samudavanija 1997: 56). Officers close to Prem or who earned his trust ascended to leading military positions. This included Army Commanders Gens. Wimol Wongwanich (1992-95), and Surayud Chulanond (1998-2002). During this time, former Army Commander (ret. Gen.) Chavalit Yonchaiyudh also exercised substantial though lesser influence over the military. He served as Prime Minister (1996-1997). But Chavalit’s influence rapidly diminished in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, during which he resigned as Prime Minister amidst the collapse of his coalition.

Moreover, Privy Council Prem – with active support from the king – interfered in parliamentary politics in November 1997 by influencing 12 members of the Prajakorn Thai party to defect from the ruling coalition and join the opposition, thus enabling the Democrat Party to form a coalition government (McCargo 2005: 510). Democrat Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai now also served as Defense Minister. In 1998, with the pro-Prem Surayudh Chulanondh appointed as Army Commander, Prem and his faction of both retired and active-duty military officers were able to exercise more authority than ever over Thailand’s armed forces. Yet this Prem-Surayudh pull over the security sector lasted only until the rise of (police lieutenant colonel) Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001. As Prime Minister from 2001 until 2006, Thaksin succeeded in personalizing control over the Royal

him turn a voting majority into a powerful, loyal constituency in elections (Laothamatas 2006). Yet his populism alienated urban, middle class Thais. Eventually, Thaksin’s move towards personalized, populist authoritarianism saw a spiraling of divisions between mostly rural lower classes and mostly urban middle and upper classes, a phenomenon which contributed to the latter’s encouragement of a military coup against him (Phongpaichit/Baker 2008: 62, 81).

Thai Police and carving out a large swathe of influence across the armed forces. Moreover, as a telecommunications tycoon, Thaksin was in many ways a modern-day oligarch, whose economic empire could challenge that of the state, and whose economic clout could almost compete with that of the royal family. However, his sway was not only felt across the security sector. In the executive, legislative and judicial branches, Thaksin's influence was clearly growing.

By 2005, Thailand's society and security sector was deeply divided over Thaksin. Thaksin's social policies – a form of welfare capitalism – were unprecedented and extremely popular with Thailand's impoverished majority. The popularity of these policies helped to create a voting constituency which handed Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party another landslide election in 2005. Late 2005 saw thousands of anti-Thaksin protestors begin to demonstrate across Bangkok. In early 2006, a group of them even met with Army Commander Sonthi, seeking his backing for a coup (Pathmanand 2008: 132). Simultaneously, relevant political parties (aside from Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai) refused to participate in elections. Ultimately, intra-civilian fissures over the propriety of Thaksin's continued rule provided cover and legitimacy for elites to direct his overthrow.

The Prime Minister eventually lost support from the palace. After his 2001 landslide election victory, the palace appeared angered when it sometimes seemed that Thaksin was seeking to steal the King's spotlight. Thus it was argued that the "coup was nothing short of Thaksin versus the King" (McGeown 2006). Moreover, the palace apparently did not want Thaksin in power as the royal succession was drawing near (Handley 2006). A coup finally overthrew Thaksin on September 19, 2006. The putsch represented a victory for Privy Council Chair ret. Gen. Prem Tinsulanond as forces loyal to him seized power. Thaksin and Prem had vied for control over the military and influence with the palace since 2001. In addition to Prem, elements of the military had reason to depose Thaksin. First, as mentioned above, Thaksin exerted pressure to install his personal favorites in top military slots. Though his attempts had been less successful following an upswing in the southern insurgency in 2004, they continued. Second, Thaksin had diminished the size of the defense budget during his years as PM, a policy not popular with the military. Third, the Prime Minister had sought to privatize enterprises under the supervision of the Thai military (e.g. army-controlled channel five television station) (Rowley 2010). Fourth, at times, Thaksin had given the Royal Thai police more authority in areas traditionally reserved for the military (e.g. policy in the deep South) (Thayer 2007: 13). Fifth, senior military officers vehemently opposed Thaksin's counter-insurgency policy in the far South (Pongsudhirak 2006). Sixth, given that anti-Thaksin military officers had become increasingly influential after 2004, the 2006 coup helped to alleviate fears among them that royalists would remain dominant even after the death of the elderly king and Prem (Pathmanand 2008: 130). Seventh, Army Commander Sonthi Boonyaratklin, an arch-royalist with political ambitions, was personally swayed to lead the coup. In the end, a coup was indirectly authorized by Queen Sirikit and Prem while, in its aftermath, the king appeared relieved of its success (see Cable 1 2006; Cable 2 2007).

The military junta which toppled Thaksin held power until December 2007 elections, after which a newly-elected government assumed office in January, 2008. Yet democracy only returned following four alterations.

Enactment of a military-endorsed constitution, which weakened political parties, facilitated the censuring of governments, gerrymandered the electoral system, and instituted a half-elected, half-appointed Senate.

- (1) Judicial decisions, including the 2008 conviction of Thaksin and the dissolution of his Thai Rak Thai party, compelling him to abandon direct participation in Thai politics.
- (2) Assertion of control over the armed forces by the arch-royalist “Eastern Tigers” (and “Queen’s Guards”) military faction as symbolized by Gen. Anupong Paochinda’s appointment as Army Commander in 2007.
- (3) Resurgence in influence for the Thai military back to levels approximating the pre-1992 period.

Throughout most of 2008, a pro-Thaksin elected governing coalition held office. Yet by the end of that year, massive anti-Thaksin demonstrations, the refusal of the military to protect the government from the protestors, and court cases against the ruling party had taken their toll. In December, the Constitution Court forced the coalition from power and, with military help, an anti-Thaksin coalition assumed office (Rojanapruk 2008; Nanuam 2008). The new Democrat Party-led government held power for three years. During that time anti-government (and mostly pro-Thaksin) “Red Shirt” demonstrators held numerous protests. These culminated in a March-May 2010 mega-demonstration which was ultimately repressed by the army, leaving 93 dead. In August 2011, a pro-Thaksin government led by his sister Yingluck was elected to office. As of 2013, it remains in power, though it has been able to exert little power over the armed forces, which themselves have become mostly insulated from civilian directives.

#### **4. Efforts at Security Sector Reform (1992-2006)**

The first real homegrown efforts at any modern sense of security sector reform commenced in 1992. By 1992, the rationale for a strong Thai military was beginning to fade. By 1991, the Cold War was over. In 1985 the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) had negotiated a final accord with the Thai government. Amidst these changes, the military found less and less reasons to maintain a national security state. Meanwhile, Thai civilians were growing in power and they wanted greater political involvement – including a more democratic constitution. The military’s repression of civilian demonstrators in May 1992 (Black May), caused its image in society to become severely tainted. As a result, civilians became increasingly united against armed forces power, the military itself became disunited, and more democratic and open security sector reforms suddenly became possible.

Such factors allowed for a Thai government to push for security sector reform. After Black May, Prime Ministers Anand Panyarachun (1992); Chuan Leekpai (1992-1995);

1998-2001) gave SSR a high priority. Army Commander Gen. Wimol Wongwanich (1992-1995) offered lukewarm support for these reforms while Army Commander Surayudh Chulanond (1998-2002) was more steadfast in pushing them. Surayud in particular commenced a broad-based security sector reform which included the military's downsizing, streamlining and prosecution of allegedly corrupt officers. Such efforts did bear some fruit. In other ways, however, they were insufficient and ultimately unsuccessful. In the end, they proved to be limited and largely symbolic. Telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra's 2001 landslide electoral victory not only changed Thailand's political landscape but marked a sea change in civil-military relations. The new Prime Minister began to craft his own set of military allies as a means to build his own clique within the armed forces and expand his personalist influence across Thailand's security sector. His changes continued until the military ousted him in 2006.

The security sector reforms implemented from 1992 until 2006 included changes involving specific areas of decision-making over which elected civilians have increasingly clashed with military bureaucrats. These areas were the dimensions of elite recruitment (the extent which the military controls political leadership), military organization, budgeting and control over security policy. Changes in these areas are examined below.

#### *Elite Recruitment*

First, after 1992, the military seemed to step back from the political stage. The King pressured military Prime Minister Suchinda to resign and appointed Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun as his caretaker successor. With the King's support, Anand was able to dismiss three key army officers loyal to Suchinda from positions of power (Murray 1996: 190-194). Second, two army commanders during the 1990s (Gen. Wimol Wongwanich and Gen. Surayudh Chulanond) directed the military to undergo reforms and a restructuring. Actually, both Wimol and Surayud were close to Gen. Prem Tinsulanond, who was appointed to the Privy Council in 1988 and became its chair in 1998 (McCargo/Pathmanand 2004: 133). Moreover, Chuan in his second term (1997-2001) took the post of Defense Minister as well as PM, pushing the military towards various reforms.

In terms of reserved representation for soldiers, the 1992-2000 period saw a growth in political space for civilians (Bamrungsuk 2002: 77). In the Senate, the informal military reserved domain for military appointees diminished from 154 or 55.2% out of 270 senators (1992-96) to 48 or 18.4% out of 260 (1996-2000) (Chambers 2009). The Prime Minister and members of the Lower House were by law required to be elected civilians. As for the Council of Ministers, the four governments between 1992 and 2000 allowed between two and eight cabinet positions (out of approximately 50 slots) to be held by ex-military officials (Chambers 2009).

Meanwhile, military interference in elections appeared to diminish during the mid-1990s. However, at least in the 1996 general election, reports surfaced that armed forces personnel were involving themselves in elections. For example, Gen. Akraej Sasiprapa, in assisting the New Aspiration Party of his patron Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, threatened Democrat party vote canvassers while campaigning for New Aspiration candidates (Bangkok Post 1999, August 5). In a much more direct example of

manipulation, it was rumored that Privy Council Chair ret. Gen. Prem interfered in parliamentary politics on November 6, 1997 by influencing 12 members Prajakorn Thai party to defect from the ruling coalition and join the opposition, thus enabling the Democrat Party to form a coalition government (McCargo/Pathmanand 2005: 133).

Regarding military veto power over the forming and dissolving of governments, this was not extant during the period at hand. There were no rules allowing such a military monopoly over elected governance. Nor were any instances in which the military informally took a tutelary role to either form governments or bring about their dissolution.

Following enactment of the 1997 constitution, the security sector lost more power in the area of elite recruitment. That constitution established that henceforth senatorial candidates could only become part of that body through election. In the 2000-06 Senate, for the first time, all members (200) were elected. Meanwhile, only 2 per cent of these were retired military officers. Meanwhile the Senate which was elected in 2006 had no quota of retired military officers (Chambers 2009: 9). On January 6, 2001, telecommunications tycoon and ex-police colonel Thaksin Shinawatra, together with his political party Thai Rak Thai, won the general election by a landslide and he formed a coalition government which was to last an entire four-year term, something which had never occurred in Thailand. In February 2001, his government cobbled together a 40-person cabinet. Other than Thaksin himself, only two retired security officials sat on the cabinet, former PM Gen. Chavalit Yongchiayudh (Minister of Defense) and his close associate Yuthasak Sasiprapha (Deputy Minister of Defense) (McCargo/Pathmanand 2005: 134-135). Thaksin was re-elected by an even greater landslide in 2005, and he maintained the quota of two former military personnel other than himself.

During this period, the armed forces possessed very little authority over procedures of political competition. Gone were the days when they could sit on the Senate or dominate the executive branch. Indeed, if anyone was manipulating the procedures of political competition it was Thaksin, the elected civilian. Thaksin's clout in 2001 was such that he was able to exert overriding authority throughout parliament, courts, and even compete with Gen. Prem in terms of political influence. Thaksin saw to it that a great many top seats on the state monitoring agencies (e.g. Constitutional Court, Election Commission) were filled by his own loyalists. As for the military, Thaksin used a policy of appeasement. This he did by appointing 55 army generals to be advisors to the Prime Minister. 30 more were later added (McCargo/Pathmanand 2005: 151). At the same time, Thaksin used Chavalit and the latter's close supporters to establish a wedge against Prem until the PM could maneuver his own cousin Chaisit Shinawatra in to the post of Army Chief (McCargo/Pathmanand 2005: 137). Ultimately, whatever power the military had over procedures of political competition derived from its association with Thaksin.

As in the past, active duty military officers were generally forbidden to hold public office. Nor did the armed forces exert informal tutelage over Thaksin's government. Thaksin's success in co-opting Chavalit and other retired military officers into his Thai Rak Thai Party helped to ensure that none of them would informally score political points without some association with him. Meanwhile, Gen. Manoonkrit Rupkachorn, a Thaksin critic, served as Senator and Senate President.

The military as an institution did not, during 2000-06 possess any veto power over forming and dissolving of governments. There were neither formal rules nor informal tutelary rights which allowed for armed forces' breaches in civilian control during this time.

Given the implementation of the 1997 constitution and the 2001-06 dominance of civilian strongman Thaksin across Thailand, civilian control of the military perhaps grew to its highest levels in Thai history. Thaksin made use of the new constitution which buttressed the powers of political parties and Prime Ministers against non-democratic forces. He also utilized his enormous financial resources to market himself or buy off potential enemies. His landslide electoral victories, enormous popularity among the masses, and ability to successfully joust against Gen. Prem allowed Thaksin to monopolize the political space once dominated by the armed forces and other political parties.

### *Organization*

Until the early 1990s, Thailand's armed forces was a large, non-transparent force which lacked proper training, equipment, and whose decision-making structure often lacked unity and ability to adequately coordinate. As the Cold War receded in the late 1980s, questions began to arise as to the future force size and structure of the armed forces. Policies aimed at downsizing the armed forces began during the Chatchai Choonhavan administration when Chatchai began balking at certain military weapons requests and reducing parts of Prem's "national security state" (Handley 2008: 15). Even after the 1991 coup, PM Anand Panyarachun announced that "military might is no longer a guarantee of national security". In late November, the army proclaimed that it would cut its force levels by 25 percent in the next 10 years (Murray 1996: 10). Black May 1992 (which placed the military in disrepute) as well as the 1997 financial crisis added impetus to the drive towards a reordered and restructured military. These events forced the armed forces to reluctantly shift out of its preferred political role to a greater emphasis on restructuring and professionalism. The 1994 Defense White Paper stressed the military's streamlined defense policy, including the following clause:

Restructure the Armed Forces so that it is more compact and has professional personnel with modern weapons and equipment so that it can guarantee the independence, sovereignty, and national interests of the nation (Ministry of Defense 1994: 58).

The trend of such professional commitments continued through the 1990s. Indeed, the Chavalit Yongchaiyudh government (1996-7) initiated proposals aimed at restructuring the armed forces and improving public oversight of the military. The incoming Chuan Leekpai government (1997-2001) took up these recommendations (through the Ministry of Defense or MOD) and, in October 1999, with the necessary cooperation of reformist Army Commander Surayud Chulanond, approved a plan to reform the MOD and restructure the military. The goal was to build a smaller, credible, professional, more efficient, more capable, and more transparent armed forces over the following 10 years (Bangkok Post 1999, November 19). There was also to be a "reallocation of military spending from personnel to procurement and training" (Hänggi 2009: 11). Ultimately, the military downsizing involved transforming the armed forces which had become top-heavy in terms of excess high-ranking officers by encouraging early retirements by many of these officials. The entire downsizing plan involved a total reduction of 72,000



personnel posts as well as a more unified structural command among the three services (army, navy, air force), the Defense Permanent Secretary, and the Supreme Command to improve coordination and facilitate control from the Office of the Prime Minister. Yet the plan was hindered by disagreements over whether the Defense Permanent Secretary or the Supreme Commander should have more authority. The advent of the Thaksin administration temporarily put the reforms on hold. From 2002 to 2004, the reforms were reviewed but the political crisis (beginning in 2005) prevented the government from seriously taking up the armed forces reform. As such, the aforementioned reforms appear to have been put on ice in all but name. The 2006 coup – and heightened role of the military in Thai politics today – could mean that any military restructuring will have to come through the initiative of the military itself.

### *Budgeting*

In the aftermath of the 1992 Black May massacre, the military under Army Commander Gen. Wimol Wongwanich, facing massive negative perceptions by the public, media, and parliament, reluctantly agreed to a defense budget reduction for fiscal year 1993-94. The general mid-1990s decline in military appropriations continued, owing partly to the 1997 Asian financial crisis as well as to the growing supremacy of “civilianization” in Thai politics: the “people’s” constitution was adopted in 1997.<sup>4</sup> Stated bluntly, the 1997 financial crisis gave the military less of a reason to compete for a higher budget given the country’s economic hard times. At the same time, parliamentary scrutiny of military appropriations now grew even more intense and the result was a decline in armed forces funding. This loss in revenue led many soldiers to increasingly expand their commercial interests as well as rely on sometimes-shady business activities (Hänggi 2009: 10-11). To rein in illegal military activities and limit armed forces economic autonomy, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai and then-Army Commander Surayudh Chulanond, ordered crackdowns military-related “narcotics trafficking, extortion rackets, illegal bookmaking, unsecured loans from Thai Military Bank, and corruption in the conscription process” (Ockey 201: 201). The Chuan government also sought to centralize weapons procurement, in order to establish greater government control over armed forces funding. But confronted with intense military resistance, this proposal was eventually shelved (McCargo/Pathmanand 2005: 132).

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-06) established a new method for gaining control of military spending: personalizing control over the military. This he did by ensuring that military allocation requests would have to pass through himself (McCargo/Pathmanand 2005: 137). This he did in four ways. First, he drew former PM Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh closer to his Thai Rak Thai party (Chavalit’s New Aspiration Party merged with TRT in 2002). Chavalit was made Defense Minister. Second, Chavalit’s close aide Gen. Yuthasak Sasiprapha was elevated to the post of Deputy Minister of Defense. Third, Yuthasak’s brother-in-law Gen. Somdhat Attanand was made Army

4 In 1997 the Thai defense budget was reduced by 25 percent, the highest decline in years. See Bureau of the Budget, Office of the Prime Minister (Thailand) for statistics.

Commander. Somdhat was close to Thai Rak Thai and cooperated with Thaksin. Fourth, the PM elevated Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School Class 10 graduates (former classmates of Thaksin) to various military positions. Finally, he saw to it that his cousin Gen. Chaisit Shinawatra was made Army Commander in 2002. In this way, Thaksin was at last able to guarantee that he would personally control the Thai military budget. From 2001 to 2006, it declined by 0.4 percent of the GDP (see table below) as the government transferred greater moneys into alternative budget projects. Ultimately, under Thaksin, civilian control stood at its greatest apex over military spending. Yet this form of civilian control was personalized, rather than institutionalized. As such, Thaksin the civilian could act arbitrarily, as a mafia boss over his fief.

### *Security Policy*

The military has traditionally dominated most aspects of security policy, including border and foreign policy. During the 1990s, border policy continued to be a bastion of control for soldiers and generally remains so to this day. Foreign policy, on the other hand, came to be dominated by civilians. Moreover, in 1998, seven years since the end of the Cold War, a year after the 1997 financial crisis and amidst efforts to restructure the armed forces, Prime Minister Chuan and then-Army Commander Surayud attempted to reshape military objectives. They thus added a new role for the military in Thai foreign policy: participation in United Nations peace-keeping missions. Such missions would keep the army busy in the post-Cold War environment and perhaps provide it with income. As such, the Chuan government “donated” troops for use by the United Nations (UN), in the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET), from 1999 to 2002 (UNTAET website). The Thai military also participated in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan (2001-2002), and the Multinational force in Iraq (MNF-I), offering 423 personnel from 2003 to 2004. The armed forces moreover continued to work in rural development projects. By the early 2000s, the military appeared to have become more professional, apolitical, and a force for peace. Still, in terms of foreign and border policy the armed forces continued to follow its own policy, playing a crucial though slightly reduced role in relations with Cambodia, Laos, and Burma because of shared boundaries (Ockey 2001: 203).

The 2001-2006 Thaksin government represented the nadir of military influence over Thai public policy. Perhaps the only occasion where the military successfully influenced Thaksin involved the decision by the Thai government in October 2001 to reverse itself and give full support to the US against Al Qaeda in the aftermath of 9/11.<sup>5</sup> Under Thaksin, foreign policy became more closely aligned with the United States. Indeed, elements of the Thai military were sent in support of US forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Though the Thai armed forces took a back seat to Thaksin during this time, they generally supported the PM’s pro-US tilt.

At the same time, since the 1990s, the National Security Council (NSC) has come to represent an uncommon area where civilians have managed to exert more control than

5 See Chambers 2004: US-Thai Relations After 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?, in: *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 26: 3, 460-479.

military officers. Given that only two NSC members are active duty soldiers (the NSC Secretary-General and the Supreme Commander (now called the Chief of Defense Forces)), the prime minister has been able to dominate “the workings of the council” (Ministry of Defense (Thailand) website).

## 5. The Post-2006 Balance of Power between the Security and Civilian Sector

The September 19, 2006 military putsch against Thaksin put an end to most security sector reforms linked with democratic governance. Moreover, since 2006, the balance of decision-making power between the security (particularly the military) and civilian sectors has shifted decidedly in favor of the former. This increase in the authority of the security sector has been both formal (enshrined powers) and informal (unwritten authority), cutting across certain decision-making areas from among the dimensions of elite recruitment (leadership selection), public policy, national defense, internal security and military organization (Croissant/Kuehn 2010: 959-975).

First, in the area of elite recruitment, where before the coup, the Senate was entirely elected, it was now half-appointed. And indeed, among the appointed Senators in the 150-member Upper House, Thailand’s military was allowed to nominate a certain portion of them (appointed senators were to have 3-year terms). As a result, in the post-2008 Senate, among the 74 appointed Senators, 14 were ex-soldiers for a 9.3% military reserved domain. In 2011, the number of appointed Senators who were retired security officials grew to 16 out of 150 or 10.6%.<sup>6</sup> Most of the Senators selected in 2011, called “demon babies” by the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party, had links to the forces behind the 2006 coup (Butrsripoom et al. 2011).

There have also been attempts by the armed forces to shape the ascension of civilian governments by both influencing electoral outcomes as well as coalition formation. Just before the 2007 and 2011 elections, the military was accused of backing and financially assisting parties opposed to pro-Thaksin parties, with the Army Commander and Defense Minister allegedly directing soldiers to support certain parties aligned against Thaksin.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, prior to the 2011 election, Task Force 315 (of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC)) was allegedly formed to monitor Red Shirts and sway votes against Puea Thai – allegations which the military denied (The Nation 2011, May 30). Meanwhile, ISOC officials traveled the Northeast – heart of the Red Shirts – in weeks prior to the election, championing the works of King Bhumipol, with the implication that northeastern voters should choose electoral candidates with proven loyalty to the crown – something which Thaksin was deemed not to possess (O’Brien 2011).

6 Author’s calculations, based upon: Senate, Thailand, Elected Senators 2008, [www.senate.go.th/th\\_senate/English/members\\_biodata.pdf](http://www.senate.go.th/th_senate/English/members_biodata.pdf) (3.7.2013).

7 See Nanuam 2009; Nanuam 2007; Thiewangan 2011; Bangkok Post 2011, July 15.

Alleged election-tampering aside, senior brass had even helped to form governments. On December 2, 2008, following the resignation of a pro-Thaksin Prime Minister, military elements (including the Army Commander) met with a Democrat party bigwig and an ex-loyalist of Thaksin to cobble together a coalition government under Democrat Abhisit Vechachiwa which would exclude the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party (Nanuam 2008; Rojanaphruk 2008). There were even allegations that the army had financed the defections of politicians from the pro-Thaksin ruling coalition to the opposition (Cable 3 2008). This oblique intrusion into civilian political competition indicated that despite the return to ostensible civilian rule in 2008, the military would continue to play a pivotal role.

#### THAI PROTEST GROUPS

In 2013 Thailand, there are several protest groups which either oppose or support Thaksin Shinawatra. These are listed in order of their chronological establishment:

- (1) People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD): Formed in late 2005, this ironic alliance of civil libertarians and royalists opposed the Thaksin government (2005-2006), and two successor pro-Thaksin governments (2008). After several occupations and demonstrations, it helped to bring down the pro-Thaksin government in late 2008. It has received sympathy or support from the military and the palace. Pro-PAD election candidates ran in the 2011 election under the umbrella of the PAD-created New Politics Party ([www.antithaksin.com/SiteMap.php](http://www.antithaksin.com/SiteMap.php), 11.6.2013).
- (2) United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD): Formed in 2006, the members of this well-coordinated protest group generally belong to the rural, lower classes and, in terms of policy, they support greater state attention to the problems of the poor. The UDD has generally supported Thaksin Shinawatra and it is allied with the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party (<http://thairedshirts.org/>, 11.6.2013).
- (2a) Red Siam: Formed in 2009, this faction within the UDD supports a republic with a more socialistic form of government and economic system.
- (3) Thai Patriots Network: Formed in 2009, this splinter of the PAD is focused upon issues concerning threats by foreigners to Thai borders, especially with regard to the Preah Vihear temple and border policy by pro-Thaksin governments. Two of its leading members have been jailed in Cambodia for trespassing.
- (4) Network of Citizen Volunteers Protecting the Land (Multicolored Shirts): Formed in 2010, this small protest group is opposed to all aspects of the UDD. Its leader is Dr. Tul Sithisomwong, a member of the Bangkok upper class.
- (5) Green Politics Group: Formed in 2011, this pressure group leans towards the PAD but has also sought negotiations with the pro-Thaksin Phuea Thai Party.
- (6) Siam Rescue: Formed in 2012, this small, virulently anti-Thaksin group has called for a military coup against the Yingluck government, is closely connected to army leaders, but has had only mild turnout at its demonstrations.

New Politics Party Secretary-General Suriyasai Katasila has unveiled the newly-formed Green Politics group, which will work in parallel with the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) on scrutinizing the Government's work.

Mr. Suriyasai announced that he had established the Green Politics group with an aim to spearhead political movements of the civil sector and coordinate with the PAD on probing the Phuea Thai-led government's operations. Initially, the group plans to seek talks with the Government to demand that it refrains from giving amnesty to ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra, plotting against the monarchy and amending the Constitution.

The Green Politics coordinator also insisted that the Government should show its sincerity by halting the red-shirt group from causing more social disturbances and intervening in the media. He recommended that lessons from the past be learned and the current opportunity be used for correcting previous mistakes.

As for internal security, a new military-endorsed Internal Security Act (ISA) took effect in 2008. It shifted the civil-military equilibrium back towards the armed forces, establishing the army as the principal unit safeguarding internal security (Ministry of Defense 2008: 35). The ISA revised the structure of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) so that, though the Prime Minister was Director, military/military-leaning bureaucrats outnumbered civilian members on the ISOC board. Moreover, under this board, there are four regional branches of ISOC commanded by military officers who are not accountable to civilians (Internal Security Act, Study 1, Section 11). Many are concerned that by establishing the army chief as ISOC deputy director and regional commanders as regional ISOC heads, this “would place the military at the heart of a future civilian government at all levels” (Human Rights Watch 2007).

In 2008, Army Commander Anupong refused to offer security to two pro-Thaksin governments (e.g. Samak, Somchai). Moreover, in late October, as Yellow Shirt protests in Bangkok continued unabated, Army Chief Anupong went on national television to call for the resignation of Somchai or dissolution of the Lower House although the PM refused to do so (The Nation 2008, October 17).

Such behavior demonstrated a military refusal to maintain internal security for elected governments in Thailand. Yet, following the ascension to power of an anti-Thaksin civilian government at the end of 2008, the “Eastern Tigers”-dominated military now found a need to ensure its protection and survival. Thereupon, Anupong’s ISOC moved from evading responsibility for internal security to guaranteeing it (The Nation 2009, March 25).

During March-May 2010, when the pro-Thaksin “Red Shirts” occupied parts of Bangkok, the military applied another law called the “Emergency Decree on Government Administration in States of Emergency” of 2005 (Szep/Petty 2010). The Emergency Decree law is more draconian than the ISA and gives the military even greater autonomy from civilian control (ICJ 2010: 4).

Turning to public policy, in border policy, the post-2007 military has become more autonomous of civilian authorities, as exemplified by the fact that the military has refused to go along with 1) diplomatic negotiations to resolve a boundary dispute with Cambodia; and 2) a decision by the government to allow China to lead patrols in parts of the Mekong River bordering Thailand (Bangkok Post 2011, December 1). Meanwhile, in terms of policy relating to the media, the armed forces continue to exert much control over telecommunications. Currently the army controls television channels 5 and 7 and 245 out of 524 radio stations in 2008 (United States State Department 2011). A Broadcasting Act was implemented which continued to grant broadcasting concessions to military vested interests (Noi 2009).

Only the National Security Council has continued to be dominated by civilians. Since the return to democracy in Thailand in early 2008, there have been far more civilian NSC members than active duty security officials. This has occurred despite the fact that there have been many more security officers acting as NSC secretary generals. In July 2009, civilian power vis-à-vis the NSC increased even more with PM Abhisit Vechachiwa’s

appointment of Thawil Pliensri as NSC Secretary-General. This occurred despite intense lobbying by Army Commander Anupong Paochinda for a replacement with an army background. In 2011, under Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, security officials returned to act lead the NSC. By 2013, the NSC had had 16 secretary-generals, with only three of them civilians (Nanuam, Bangkok Post 2009, July 2). Nevertheless, its board members were dominated by civilians. Nevertheless, the Council continues to be dominated by civilians. In 2013, the NSC is leading efforts to negotiate with Malay-Muslim insurgents in Thailand's deep South (Bangkok Post 2013, February 16).

Finally, regarding military organization, in 2008 a new law was promulgated which requires that reshuffles of high-ranking officers (the rank of brigadier general and higher) be vetted by a committee, whose members include the army commander, navy commander, air force commander, supreme commander, and permanent defense secretary (a military official) as well as the civilian defense minister and (optionally) deputy defense minister. Previously, the defense and prime minister had the ultimate say on appointments (though these were to be endorsed by the king). In future, if any dispute occurs as to an appointment, a simple committee vote settles the dispute given that unelected military members of the committee account for five votes as opposed to two for civilians, the new arrangement should heighten military prowess at the expense of the authority of civilians with regard to reshuffles (OMD 2008).

As for budgeting, the military has increasingly had its way. The 2007 constitution included a new charter clause (Section 77) which required the state to provide the armed forces with a sufficient (though unspecified) amount of money to guarantee national security. Since 2007, the military has managed to informally pressure civilian governments for continued increases in defense allocations. Indeed, the defense budget rose from US\$3.3 billion in 2007 to US\$5.6 in 2011 (2007-2010 derived from IISS 2011; 2011 data derived from Moss 2011).

Finally, accountability within Thailand's security sector as an organization is insufficient and there is evidence of corruption. The army has a secret budget which is not monitored by outsiders. Also, according to Transparency International, "There is also evidence of illicit private enterprise by individual military men in industries such as Thai boxing [while] whistle-blowing" about corruption is hindered by the Military Personnel Act of 1933, which discourages "disunity" in the armed forces (TI 2012). Ultimately, Transparency International lists Thailand as a country "with inadequate safeguards against graft in defence and weapons deals" (TI 2013).

## **6. Current State of Civilian Control**

Civilian control today is weak while military prerogatives, privileges and autonomy from civilian oversight are robust. Civilians who are concerned with potential threats from the military generally comprise elected politicians and the civilians they appoint. It is interesting that in an emerging democracy such as Thailand where coups have been common, there has been little civil society participation in seeking local ownership over

security sector reforms. However, Thailand's history of highly-verticalized political power and frail democracy has prevented the emergence of a strong civil society which prioritizes elected civilian control as a major objective. Though civilian protestors (mostly university students) have sometimes protested against the army, such demonstrations have been occasional. Only the UDD Red Shirts – which are partisan in support of Thaksin Shinawatra – have protested against the military given that they view senior military leaders as opposed to Thaksin.

Ultimately then, civil-military relations today involve dealings between institutionalized civilian leaders and leading military officers. With the senior brass ostensibly taking orders from these elected civilian leaders, the apparent hierarchy conceals a limit to armed forces subservience. After all, the military serves the palace, not the Prime Minister with elected civilian leaders being temporarily tolerated. “A government supervises soldiers but the real owners are the country and the King” (Privy Council Chair ret. Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, quoted in Sutichai 2006).

After the military's 2008 “silent coup”, two large-scale, pro-Thaksin “Red Shirt” demonstrations occupied parts of Bangkok (April 2009; March-May 2010) in attempts at disrupting the administration of the Democrat-led government. Especially in the second case, the protestors' goal was to force new elections but such re-democratization efforts failed when the army repressed the demonstrations, leaving scores of protestors dead (Horn 2011).

Since 2011, the newly-elected Puea Thai government of Yingluck Shinawatra has pushed for greater civilian control over the military but so far with little success. A pro-Thaksin retired general was appointed Defense Minister while others became informal defense advisors (Bangkok Post 2011, December 1). Nevertheless, in the October 2011 annual military reshuffle, the senior military appointments vetting board gave the service leaders a voting advantage over the two representatives representing Yingluck, and the government was unable to veto the nominees of the “Eastern Tigers”-dominated military. In the end, only the Defense Permanent Secretary position went to an officer favored by Puea Thai (Cole/Sciaccitano 2011).

Though Puea Thai has threatened to amend the Defense Administration Act to scrap the vetting committee, this will not be easy. Indeed, any amendment passed by the Lower House must also be approved by the Senate. Yet the Upper House – with its seats half-filled with appointed Senators (including a quota chosen by the armed forces) might refuse to pass the bill (Komchadleuk 2012). In another blow to Yingluck, Thailand's Council of State, in September 2011, refused to allow anyone except the Prime Minister to act as Director of ISOC. Yingluck had sought to have a pro-Thaksin retired military advisor act as director (Bangkok Post 2011, November 20). Meanwhile, the Puea Thai government has increasingly used police (considered to be more pro-Thaksin), rather than the military, for security objectives. Indeed police are playing an enhanced role in this government's southern counter-insurgency policy (The Nation 2011, September 23). Moreover, a new board of eleven commissioners assumed office at the National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission, six of whom were persons with military or police backgrounds and aligned with Yingluck (Chetchotiros 2011).

Meanwhile, civilian groups bent on maintaining or promoting democratic space have generally continued to persevere. Anti-Thaksin civil society groups (e.g. Yellow Shirts; Multi-Colored Shirts) as well as the Democrat Party are spearheading any efforts by the government against a re-imposition of Thaksin's populist authoritarianism and a state-proposed royal pardon for Thaksin (currently a fugitive) (Bangkok Post 2011, November 20). More pertinent to this study, the Red Shirts and prominent Puea Thai party members have sought to pressure Yingluck to prosecute military officials responsible for the May 2010 repression and also amend the 2008 Defense Act so that the Prime Minister can exert more control over senior military reshuffles (Nanuam/Laohong 2012; Bangkok Pundit 2011). Yet at this point in time, there is little evidence that any civil society group will succeed in diluting Thai military clout in the near future, especially with soldiers continuing to receive enormous patronage from the palace.

## **7. International Contributions to Security Sector Reform**

Security sector modification in Thailand has always been a domestic-led process using insights, advice and assistance from other countries. This owes to three factors. First, Thai elites, exuding a nationalistic pride given that Thailand was never colonized, have always wanted to maintain "ownership" over any security sector reforms. Second, military elites generally do not want to be placed under elected civilian control. Third, as mentioned above, there has been a long-entrenched suspicion among Thais of "otherness" – or perceptions of foreign encroachment – upon Thailand's heavily guarded symbol of unity – Buddhist kingship. Such a perception has generated a suspicion among Thais of any attempt by foreigners to meddle with the king, loyal Thai subjects to the king, and the kingdom itself. Despite such suspicions, though Thais have been fearful of external interference in their affairs, they have welcomed external aid. Indeed, the evolution of Thailand's security sector – as a domestic-led phenomenon with assistance from abroad – can be seen throughout Thai history. In the late 1800s, Siam's absolute monarchy established a permanent standing army and police force, modeling them on England's security sector and using advisors and trainers from mostly England and Italy. After the 1932 overthrow of absolute monarchy, Thailand's security sector became influenced by France. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, as Thailand aligned itself with fascist Germany and Japan, there was a reconfiguration in security sector organization which mirrored structures in these countries. Finally, since 1946, Thailand's security sector has reflected administrative and institutional methods akin to the United States (Bumroongsook 1991: 264-265). Moreover, from 1951 until the late 1990s, the US was Thailand's aid patron. As such, the United States, more than any other foreign entity, has been most capable of affecting security sector reform in Thailand. Yet if this was truly a US objective, Washington clearly failed in achieving it.

Today the United States is the principal supplier for Thailand's security sector though the country is increasingly diversifying its weapons acquisitions, trainings and other military assistance towards China, Sweden and other countries. Nevertheless Washington has been and remains quite influential with the country's armed forces. In light of the



United States' long cooperation with Thailand in providing assistance to the country's security sector, to what extent has the United States sought to shape Thai security sector reform? This section addresses this question.

Perhaps the most important US program in Thailand relating to security sector reform has been the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. IMET is a relatively low-cost program which provides funding for US trainings of foreign military personnel. IMET's objectives are:

Further the goal of regional stability through effective, mutually beneficial military to military relations that culminate in increased understanding and defense cooperation between the United States and foreign countries; provide training that augments the capabilities of participant nations' military forces to support combined operations and interoperability with US forces; and increase the ability of foreign military and civilian personnel to instill and maintain democratic values and protect internationally recognized human rights in their own government and military (US State Department).

The trainings are partly meant to expose students to US-approved notions of military professionalism and civilian control over the military. The program introduces participants to "institutions and elements of U.S. democracy such as the judicial system, legislative oversight, free speech, equality issues, and commitment to human rights" (United States State Department).

The Expanded IMET (a subset of IMET) particularly focuses upon civilian control of the military by exposing students to American military justice systems and by highlighting how in the US the military works with civilian bureaucrats and legislators. Yet another part of IMET, the US Field Studies Program, exposes students to American civic culture: the importance of democratic values, human rights, and belief in rule of law (United States State Department (1)).

Since 1952, thousands of Thai military officers have received such training, though it was only formalized as IMET in 1976. Many of these Thai officers, such as current Privy Council Chair (ret. Gen.) Prem Tinsulanonda, have attained top military and civilian leadership positions. It is disconcerting that former IMET students (such as Prem) either engineered or supported coups against elected governments. Indeed, 7 out of 13 leading army officers when the 1991-1992 military junta was in power (including Army Commander Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon himself) received IMET training in the United States (Taw 1994: 26). Senior military officials who were part of the 2006-2008 military junta (e.g. Gen. Boonsrang Niumpradit) also studied in the United States through IMET. Ultimately, a large percentage of Thai army, navy, air force, supreme command and defense ministry officials have been trained in the United States. Despite the fact that IMET trainings have focused upon issues such as civilian control over the military, several of these Thai officers went on to participate in or lead military coups against elected Thai governments. Another disconcerting fact about IMET is that Thailand receives a relatively high amount of IMET funding (in comparison to other countries), and yet Thailand arguably has been and remains one of the most coup-prone countries in the world. Indeed, it is interesting that Thailand, with over 20 coups since 1932, has received

over US\$1 million in IMET appropriations per year (2008-2011). What is curious is that the US granted Thailand an even higher amount (US\$2.3 million) in IMET funding in 2006 – the very year of the last coup (see Table 1). The putsch resulted in a cancellation of US IMET aid until the return to democracy in early 2008. When elected governance did return, however, the military had heightened powers than before the 2006 coup. Surprisingly, US IMET aid had now been cut in half. The increased military sway in Thailand does not seem to justify such vastly decreased IMET funding. Moreover, the US IMET program receives fewer appropriations in comparison to most other disbursements to Thailand, a fact which reveals the relative hypocrisy in US IMET financing.

**Annual IMET Disbursement 2006-2011** (figures in millions of US\$)

2006 Actual	2007 Actual	2008 Actual	2009 Actual	2010 Estimate	2011 Requested
2,369	No US aid	1,202	1,459	1,500	1,500

Source: US State Department: International Military Education and Training Account Summary, [www.state.gov/t/pm/ppa/sat/c14562.htm](http://www.state.gov/t/pm/ppa/sat/c14562.htm) (5.6.2013).

All in all, IMET does not appear to have succeeded in politically socializing Thai military personnel to be enamored with principles of democracy and civilian control. However, Thai military officers do value the IMET trainings, seeing them as necessary for advancement to senior military postings and also perhaps mandatory in order to later gain access to US high-technology weapons systems (Taw 1994: 22).

Meanwhile, among the objectives of US Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to Thailand are the following:

- (1) Improve the military capabilities of key friendly countries to contribute to international crisis response operations, including peacekeeping and humanitarian crises.
- (2) Maintain support for democratically-elected governments that share values similar to the United States for democracy, human rights, and regional stability (United States Department of State (2)).

These goals sound lofty indeed. One wonders how Washington has sufficient levers within FMF to ensure that militaries remain geared towards “peacekeeping”, being “humanitarian” or supporting democracy and human rights. Washington has helped Bangkok to decrease the size of Thai defense spending: during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when Bangkok was looking to make defense cuts, the US released Thailand from an earlier contract to buy F-18 warplanes (Beeson/Bellamy 2008: 114). The US has also cancelled FNF aid to Thailand twice: shortly after the 1991 and 2006 coups until elections were again held. Beginning principally under Thaksin Shinawatra, however, Thailand sought to diversify its weapons acquisitions. Indeed, it has purchased arms from Sweden, and China, among other countries. In 2006, following Washington’s legally mandated cancellation of \$24 million in US military assistance, the Chinese offered \$49 million in military assistance, offered to increase the number of Thai exchange students at Chinese

military schools, and increased joint special forces exercises (Lohman 2011). Eventually, though American FMF resumed in 2008, Washington is now facing steep competition from China, which offers no conditions for its aid. Nevertheless, many Thai military officers view Chinese security supplies as inferior to that of the US and the European Union. Regardless, as alternatives to US military hardware continue to open up, FMF may become an even weaker tool if the US is seeking to use it to promote security sector reform in Thailand.

All in all, United States security sector programs in Thailand have generally proved useless in promoting a form of security sector reform in Thailand which is geared towards greater democratic governance. This failure owes first to what was mentioned at the beginning of this section: security sector reform in Thailand has been a domestic-led process. Elites are not willing to be led towards SSR by foreigners. Second, despite US rhetoric in favor of security sector reforms and moves towards civilian control over the military, other US goals more often than not compromised SSR. For example, though IMET sought to inculcate Thai soldiers to appreciate democracy, during the Cold War Washington tended to give greater relevance to trainings in countering Communist insurgency. Third, any foreign-directed SSR has tended to be heavily impeded given that international stakeholders, who tend to interpret SSR as a method of moving towards greater democratic governance, must grapple with the fact that in Thailand, monarchy remains above and unhindered by any form of democracy. Fourth, the United States and other countries which might want to push for SSR in Thailand are today confronted with acrimonious political polarization among Thais. To support a more democratic security sector means greater support for Thaksin Shinawatra and his forces given that Thaksin and his allies have won every national election since 2001. Moreover, efforts at SSR which would make the security sector less answerable to a nonelected monarch readily fall on deaf ears in Thailand, a country which reveres its king. For the United States and other countries which criticized the 2006 coup and Thailand's laws which punish people who are convicted of insulting the Thai king, any efforts at successfully affecting moves towards security sector reform in Thailand will be difficult indeed. What is more likely is that Thailand's armed forces and police will continue taking as many weapons, trainings and assistance from the security relationship with Western countries as they can, without becoming inculcated into any US or European form of "democratic" security sector reform. At the same time, Thailand will continue to diversify military assistance in favor of China.

## **8. Conclusion: What Can Be Done**

Security sector reform seeks to help countries better satisfy security needs “within their societies in a manner consistent with democratic norms and sound principles of governance and the rule of law” (OECD DAC 2007). Civilian control, meanwhile, “is a relative condition”, in which civilian supremacy can be “strong”, “weak”, “encompassing” or “limited” (Croissant/Kuehn 2010: 27). This report has discussed the obstacles to civilian control as well as the weak efforts of security sector reform in Thailand which, especially after 2006, proved unsustainable. It highlights the major political role played by the armed forces since 1887 and especially since 1932, after which senior military commanders either monopolized power themselves or held enormous count in a power partnership with the king. During the time in which democracies have existed in Thailand, democratic civilian control has been relatively frail with militaries more often than not succeeding in wresting control over decision-making areas which might be assumed to be under the control of civilians.

In addition, the existence of several generally non-transparent security bureaucracies has made security sector reform an even more difficult process to accomplish. The armed forces headquarters, the army, navy, air force, police and paramilitaries often possess overlapping jurisdictions, have been mired in cases of opaque corruption and most security officials have become ensconced in the national political split relating to ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The security sector finds rationales to continue its high profile role in Thailand. These are engaging in counter-insurgency in Thailand’s deep South; guarding boundaries which Thailand shares with Cambodia, Lao PDR and Thailand; and preserving order in the midst of potential threats by Thaksin and his followers to the constitutional monarchy.

For a short time (1992-2001) Thailand’s civilian and military elite embarked on a security sector reform which diminished the defense budget, scaled down the size of the armed forces, and sought to place the military increasingly under the control of the elected Prime Minister. These reforms were meant to institutionalize civilian supremacy in Thailand. Yet they met much opposition among security bureaucrats and were never fully implemented. Then, during the 2001-2006 administration of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, civilian control finally did begin to take root. However such control was personalized under Thaksin himself. Since the 2006 coup, enactment of the 2007 constitution, and return to civilian rule in early 2008, Thailand’s security sector (particularly the armed forces) have enhanced their powers vis-a-vis the elected government. To some extent, Thaksin has succeeded in influencing much of the Royal Thai Police.

Regardless, since 2006, an arch-royalist military has succeeded in remaining insulated from control by Thaksin or elected civilians. At the same time, though the police have tended to back Thaksin, they must remain loyal to the king. As a result, Thaksin and his forces in 2013 have managed to control only the Lower House of parliament and the ruling cabinet (the members of which are chosen by the leading party). Yet the armed forces (and theoretically the police as well) are beholden to the king – a nondemocratic yet beloved figure for Thai people.

International efforts at security sector reform have been miniscule and perhaps even half-hearted. The longest lasting one – the IMET program of the United States – has proven itself to be ineffective especially since many Thai officers participating in IMET (to inculcate values of civilian control) later went on to lead or participate in military coups.

Security sector reform will not come to Thailand until greater democracy comes to Thailand. The security sector needs to be accountable to democratically-elected politicians rather than the palace alone. As such, there must be a fully-elected Senate in which military appointees are unable to sit in the Upper House. At the same time, the armed forces and police must be shorn of their economic holdings and military/police budgets must be made much more transparent so that defense/police appropriations do not wind up being used for partisan purposes. Moreover, border and other related security objectives must not be under jurisdiction of the military alone. Civilian authorities must be able to exercise control over armed forces activities. In terms of senior military reshuffles, these should be decided by the Prime Minister and Defense Minister, rather than by a board of officials, the majority of which are active duty military officers. Furthermore, media and censoring should not be under the control of armed forces personnel but rather monitored only by civilian agencies. Finally military and police corruption – made easy by the secrecy within the security sector – can best be resolved by having civilian agencies conduct regular audits of military accounts. Such security sector deficiencies in Thailand point to the need for some form of urgent security sector reform. However, such reforms will not be made under current political circumstances. Until Thailand passes through the dark tunnel of current political turbulence and reaches a higher stage of stable, democratic equilibrium, than any sizeable security sector reforms will remain unattainable.

At present, the forces of entrenched arch-royalists continue to acrimoniously square off against the forces of Thaksin. Both sides continue to leverage for power in anticipation of the impending end of King Bhumipol Adulyadej's reign. The king, who is beloved by almost all Thais, is an ailing octogenarian. There will be no change in the Thaksin-royalist equilibrium while Bhumipol continues to live. Likewise, there will be no diminishing of the power of the anti-Thaksin military. Only after the royal succession there might be an alteration in the balance of power – though a transition to elected civilian supremacy is no certainty (the military could actually increase its power). Following the royal succession, any potential successes in security sector reform – demilitarization – depend upon the ability and will of civilian prime ministers (e.g. Thaksin) to carry this out.

This does not mean that a return to the years of Thaksin Shinawatra is desirable. As noted above, Thaksin did manage to achieve some control over the security sector when he was Prime Minister. However, his variant of control was personalized supremacy rather than institutionalized control. As with the case of President Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, such subjective control has tended to be partisan and only lasting as long as the charismatic patron remains in office.

Ultimately, in terms of seriously implementing democracy-based security sector reforms as proposed by international entities, it will take several more years before Thailand is willing, ready and able to embark on this journey. Yet under Thailand's

current circumstances as a young democracy with a powerful military which is simultaneously experiencing instability, then only security sector reforms of a very modest nature can be affected. For example, efforts to root out corruption and enhance transparency may be the only goals possible. Any more meaningful reforms are unlikely to be realized given present political conditions. Only when stability returns to Thailand, there are no longer extremely powerful vested interests hovering over the country and democracy has become more embedded it will be possible to return to the security sector reforms which were vigorously practiced under the 1997-2001 Chuan Leekpai administration. Such reforms sought to institutionalize civilian control and it is thus such reforms which Thailand must return to implement and enforce. Yet any renewed effort at modifications of this type can only be initiated by Thailand itself with international actors offering assistance. Yet for at least the near future, observers will have to expect any SSR in Thailand to be a plodding, incremental and timely process.

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## **Abbreviations**

CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
FMF	(US) Foreign Military Financing
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICJ	International Commission of Jurists
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
IMET	International Military Education and Training
INTERFET	International Force for East Timor
ISA	Internal Security Act
ISOC	Internal Security Operations Command
MNF-I	Multi-National Force-Iraq
NSC	National Security Council
PAD	People's Alliance for Democracy
PM	Prime Minister
RTA	Royal Thai Army
RTP	Royal Thai Police
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TRT	Thai Rak Thai (party)
UDD	United front for Democracy against Dictatorship
UN	United Nations
UNTAET	United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor