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## **NATIONAL POLICY PRIORITIES IN THAILAND**

1. Since October 1973 when the dictatorial regime was toppled, Thailand has been groping for the solution to three main problems: democracy, law and order, and foreign policy. The overall economic and financial problems (national economic growth, balance of payments etc.) appear to be of secondary importance. The boom in commodity prices in 1973-1974 to a large extent offset the petroleum crisis. The national economy remains sound; although price inflation was severe and unprecedented during the past two years, it has subsided to a manageable degree in 1975. This essay will therefore focus on the social, political and international affairs of Thailand.

2. The Sanya "care-taking" governments and the National Legislative Assembly (October 1973 - January 1975) managed to produce a constitution which in the main guarantees sufficient freedom and human rights at least on paper. The provision on parliamentary election resulted in forty-two political parties vying in the general election of January 1975, from which twenty-two parties succeeded in getting elected into the

House of Representatives of 269 seats. The largest party, the Democrats, obtained 72 seats. After frantic attempts to form a government, a coalition of two parties of some size, the Democrats failed to obtain a vote of confidence. In March, another coalition of some 17 parties succeeded with Kukrit Pramroj of the Social Action Party with 18 seats, as Prime Minister. At first this coalition appeared to be fragile; but it has gathered strength and solidity, through political skill, ingenuity, and, some would say, tricks. And although still an uneasy coalition, the government looks likely to stay its full four-year term.

3. The students' movement, so much extolled for its power to topple the dictatorial regime, has become somewhat weakened and split. A group of vocational students, apparently not very large, became detached from the main student movement, against whom they now fight in almost all issues. They call themselves the "Red Gaurs." Although not large in number, they resort to violent means of actions—bottle bombs, grenades, firearms. It is generally known that these Red Gaurs receive financial support and are trained by Army and Police officers bent on destroying the student power.

4. The University students (the NSCT = National Students Centre of Thailand) and other students, including the majority of vocational students, remain tolerably united. They have however also weakened in popular opinion through their own imprudence (espousing too many issues however trivial) and through slanders and lies created by their opponents (see paragraph 8). They evidently need new strategies and tactics if they want to remain a strong force in the national scene.

5. The allies of the students are the underdogs in the

social scale: town labourers and farmers. With the new freedom, these latter no longer tolerate the hard life and abominably low incomes that was their sort in the old regime. Strikes have become the wage-earners' weapons against proprietors and managers. Most of them, noisy and verbally violent, have remained peaceful, until the Red Guards and their associates recently joined in, on the side of capital and management. Farmers, after two years of drought and after long years of suppressed rice prices, have resorted to pressures and demonstrations. Many of them, having lost their land, have pressed the Government for some remedy. Other grievances, previously tolerated, now lead to massive gatherings and demonstrations and petitions. Again, recently, the Red Guards and other groups have emerged—or, shall we say, re-emerged—to discredit the farmers' movements with slanders, to assault and kill their leaders and to terrorize them into silence.

6. The Government, in order to pacify the farmers and presumably to win their votes, have authorized large amounts of money to be spent on farmers and the rural areas: lending to them on easy terms to redeem their debts, to build roads, wells, bridges, schools, etc. These actions, worthy in principle, are however mostly hasty, ill-conceived and ill-planned. But they achieve the short-run objective in most cases.

7. Meanwhile, the insurgents in some thirty provinces (out of the total 72) remain strong, despite huge amounts of money and personnel engaged in suppressing them. It is feared that with peace in the neighbouring countries and availability of arms in great number no longer needed elsewhere, the strength of the insurgents would considerably increase. Some of the insurgents are communistic in ideology; but the vast

majority of them are common bandits, villagers fighting against tyrannical local officials, and minority racial groups seeking more freedom.

8. The name of the organization used by the previous governments to fight insurgents has been changed from Communist Suppression Command to Internal Security Command; but the brutal, erratic indiscriminatory and oppressive methods remain essentially the same. The ISC, moreover, has acquired the partnership of the Red Guards; it has created a psychological warfare organization called the Nawapol group to spread likely falsehoods, rumours, and draw the allegiance of believers against the student movement, labourers, farmers and intellectuals; it also creates groups of violent citizens which called themselves 'the Protectors of Thailand' to wreck demonstrations and generally create chaotic conditions for which they blame on their opponents.

9. The fall of Saigon and Pnompenh and the changes in Laos intensified even further the nervousness among well-to-do Thais. The "Domino" theory must be true, according to their fear, unknown amounts of currency and capital must have been exported by the rich.

10. Attempts to normalize relations with Hanoi and Saigon have failed. Some advisors to the Government have been saying that from the point of view of Thailand, we must negotiate from a position of strength. That probably explains the dilatory characters of the talks. In July, however, the Prime Minister went to China, signed a joint declaration with Chou En-Lai, had an hours' conversation with Mao Tse-Tung, several banquets and sightseeings and returned in triumph. Taiwan diplomats quietly had previously left Bangkok.

11. Public opinion vis-à-vis the U.S. Government was at its lowest during the Magayez affairs. However, with the announcement of the intention to withdraw all American troops from Thailand during a period of twelve months, popular feelings became more pro-U.S. Thais, never extremely Xenophobic, in general have more trust in the U.S. people (perhaps not much in the US Government or the Pentagon) than in the Chinese people.

12. Taking all these three inter-linked main problems: democracy, law and order, and foreign affairs, as they exist now, Thailand has still a long way to go before real solutions could be found. Do we have enough time in which to find them? Are we using the right method? Are we still giving too much power to the wrong people? Are new outlook and radical changes in the administrative systems necessary? These and many other questions should receive our serious attention before we can star-gaze into the future of Thailand, and perhaps into the future of Southeast Asia.

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