

Who pulled the strings in the attempted coup in Thailand?

by Linda de Hoyos

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund finally reaped the fruits of the harsh austerity program they have imposed on Thailand since the November 1984 devaluation of the baht, when a group of young military officers attempted a coup in Bangkok Sept. 9 against the government of Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond. The events of the coup were briefly as follows:

The coup began at 3:00 a.m. on the morning of Sept. 9, when rebel troops from the 4th Calvary Regiment of the First Army (the army controlling Bangkok) and the Royal Thai Air Force security force entered the Muan Airport and disarmed Air Force troops there. The call to action for the coup came from Col. Manoon Roopkachorn, leader of the "Young Turks" faction of the military, which staged a coup against the Prem government on April 1, 1981, which also failed. The 4th Calvary Regiment was formerly under his command. Also leading the coup action was Manoon's younger brother, Wing Commander Manas, former battalion chief of the RTAF security force.

Between 3:00 and 4:00 a.m., following the action at the airport, the rebel troops proceeded to force former Supreme Commander Gen. Sern na Nakhon from his home.

At 4:00 a.m., the rebels appeared on the streets of Bangkok with tanks and seized the broadcasting station of the Supreme Command headquarters.

At 7:30 a.m., General Sern, serving as the coup's spokesman, issued the first radio announcement of the coup over Radio Thailand. The statement declared that the "situation is now under the control of the Revolutionary Party. . . . The seizure of power is aimed at overcoming problems facing the country, particularly the aggravating economic woes, and to preserve the constitutional monarchy. HM the King and all members of the Royal Family are now safe and escorted by the Revolutionary Party."

At 8:00 a.m., General Sern announced that the Revolutionary Party had terminated the Constitution B.E.2521, and dissolved the Parliament and Cabinet.

Simultaneously, Deputy Army Commander-in-Chief Gen. Thienchai Sirisamphon broadcast from Radio 01 of the Air Force that all rebel troops were to return to their units on order of the government.

At 9:35 a.m., a firefight ensued as rebel tanks pounded the radio station of the First Army Division. Other rebel tanks seized control of the Mass Communications Organization and commandeered its mobile transmission bus. By 10:25 a.m., other rebel forces had taken control of the Police Headquarters at Paru Sakawan Palace. At 11:30 a.m., fighting erupted in the vicinity of the Central Security Command and the First Division, lasting 15 minutes. But by 12:50 p.m., the government had recaptured Radio Thailand, and the rebels' broadcasting ceased.

Fighting continued, however, around the Central Security Command.

At 2:00 p.m., the government issued a surrender-or-die ultimatum, and ordered Special Warfare Units from Log Buri to proceed toward Bangkok.

At this point, it became clear that other elements had joined the coup. Pathin Thamrongjoi, a member of the State Railways of Thailand Labor Union, and other labor leaders, were encouraging rebel tanks to proceed to re-attack the First Division.

Other senior officers, it also became clear, were in the Supreme Command headquarters with the coup leadership. These were: Gen. Yos Thephasdin Na Ayudhya (ret.); Air Force Commander-in-Chief ACM Praphan Dhupatemiya, whom rebels had reportedly also seized at gunpoint; former prime minister, Gen. Kriangsak Chamonan; and Gen. Bunrit Tantanond.

At 2:00 p.m., and General Yos had fled, or surrendered, to the government side.

Negotiations for full surrender by the coup leaders were reportedly carried out by First Army Regional Commander Lt. Gen. Pichitr Kullavanijaya, and General Yos.

At 3:00 p.m., the coup was officially declared over, as government troops entered the Supreme Command headquarters, the last outpost of the rebels. Colonel Manoon and Colonel Manas were permitted, as per the surrender agreement, to leave the country—Manoon to Singapore and Manas to Burma.

General Yos, General Kriangsak, and ACM Praphan were escorted to their homes by army officers.

Three questions

The sequence of events of the coup raises some immediate questions, which cannot be answered, or only in part. However, they serve as useful guide posts in evaluating the shape of policy conflict in the next days.

First Question: To what extent did the "Young Turks" have the backing of senior or retired senior officers in the armed forces?

Although it would appear that Supreme Commander Arthit Kamlangek, who was in Western Europe on the morning of the coup, and First Army Regional Commander Pichitr, who negotiated the Young Turks' surrender, were not involved, this is in fact highly unlikely.

Behind the Young Turks' action is widespread discontent within the military with the Prem government. This discontent erupted into the public eye with the November 1984 devaluation of the baht. General Arthit, who was in Washington when the surprise devaluation was announced, returned to Bangkok to go on national television to denounce the measure as endangering Thailand's national security, to demand an immediate revaluation, and to call for a reshuffle of the government, with his unnamed but primary target being Finance Minister Sommai Hoontrakul, who is also known to oppose the army's acquisition of 12 F-16A jetfighters.

In addition, senior officers signed a petition expressing strong disapproval of the devaluation.

The firm stance of the Prem government forced Arthit and the military to draw back. However, the discontent around this issue could not have abated. In the 10 months since the devaluation, the Thai economy has gone through a convulsion of collapse, a condition that has caused labor and farmer unrest, and created mass unemployment among university graduates, a highly volatile section of the population. The military itself was hard hit by the devaluation—the measure effectively decreased the military budget by 17%, given that the military must rely largely on imported equipment. The devaluation also hit two months before a Vietnamese dry-season offensive which produced the highest level of fighting—involving Thai troops—since Hanoi's 1979 invasion of Kampuchea.

In a subsidiary blow to the military, Sommai's finance ministry declared war on Thailand's chit funds, or chain-letter-type speculation operations, in which much of the military, especially officers of the Air Force, is known to have its holdings.

There is no reason to believe that the discontent within the military against the Prem government has at all died down since 1974.

The likelihood of high-level involvement is even greater in the case of Lieutenant-General Pichitr. His position as Commander of the First Army is one of the most powerful in the Thai military. As it is the First Army which controls

Bangkok, its commander exerts considerable influence over the course of the military intervention into Thai politics. It is highly unlikely that any forces in the First army would have moved without the nod from General Pichitr, especially since those named for involvement in the coup, forced or otherwise, were all retired officers. Without Pichitr's green light, the Young Turks would have known that they would be doomed to fail again.

Pichitr, along with Arthit, was also instrumental in forcing through the reinstatement in early 1983 of many Young Turk officers who had been dismissed after the abortive coup of 1981. And as recently as last summer, when Colonel Manoon was arrested on the charge of attempting to assassinate high government officials, it was Pichitr who personally arranged for his release.

A dramatic move by Pichitr was also not unexpected. In the first week of September, it was announced that Pichitr's arch-rival, Deputy Army Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Chaovalit Yongchaiyuth had been promoted to army chief of staff, and that Pichitr would not be upgraded, in the annual military reshuffle, approved by Prem and the king. The new positions take effect Oct. 1.

Lastly, the events of the coup itself raise the issue of involvement of the highest echelons of the military. In its first announcement at 7:30 a.m., the Revolutionary Party reported that the king and queen, who were at their summer home in southern Thailand, were being "escorted by the Revolutionary Party." The king's security, carried out by the Internal Peacekeeping Forces, under the command of General Arthit, does not, however, ever appear to have changed hands. Therefore, either the Revolutionary Party was bluffing in order to win the population to the coup, or the Internal Peacekeeping Forces were also *initially* involved in the coup and later withdrew support. If it is the latter, then the question is why. King Bhumibol himself may have ordered a halt to the coup, or there may have been other factors, including disagreements over the distribution of power in a new government.

Second Question: Was there a Soviet factor in the attempted coup?

It has been noted in the Thai press that TASS, the news agency of the Soviet Union, changed its tone of coverage of the coup midstream. TASS first reported the coup in a sympathetic light, stating: "The Revolutionary Party has assumed power with a view to solving numerous problems facing the country, including in the economic field." A report datelined Bangkok later called the Revolutionary Party "conspirators" with little support in the population, adding, "The 'party' offered nothing concrete but merely announced the abrogation of the Constitution and the dissolution of the Parliament."

In fact, in its few hours of existence, the Revolutionary Party had broadcast a detailed listing of what measures it

would take as government, leading with a declaration on labor policy. The program followed the outlines of the Young Turks' anti-corruption, anti-big-business ideology, including calls for social security reform, bringing the unions into co-management of state-sector industries, and increasing labor protection. The program also called for restrictions on big business, immediate land reform, and issued a stern warning against "hoarding and profiteering." On foreign policy, its major point of difference with the Prem government was its emphasis on taking action "to urgently end the conflict in Indochina."

A section of the Thai trade union movement was brought in behind the coup, and labor sources suggest that this action had been planned at least three weeks before Sept. 9. At mid-day, 2,000 trade unionists of the Railways Union, currently locked in a bitter battle with the Prem government, formed a human shield around the rebel tanks on Royal Plaza. The labor action was led by Sawat Lookdote, a former member of the Communist Party of Thailand, and Pratin Thamrongchoi. These leaders have remained in the orbit around the CPT, and according to reliable sources in both labor and government, Soviet funds have been pouring into the union.

These leftist labor leaders, who argue for political trade unionism, also coordinate their activities with the burgeoning peace movement in Thailand, which is directed and funded by the World Council of Churches, a front for the Soviet KGB.

According to some sources, it was the unexpected, "mystery" involvement of the Soviet-backed Railways Union in the coup which was the reason for the pullback by the senior military officers. The surprised military leaders recoiled in fear that they had set off a process they would not be able to control.

Third Question: Was there U.S. State Department involvement in the coup?

The coup occurred one week after U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Vernon Walters left Bangkok. Walters spent nearly two weeks in Thailand, as part of an Aug. 1-Sept. 1, evidently private trip to Asia, that took him to China, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Pakistan. As a former deputy director of the CIA and associate of Henry Kissinger, Walters has a long record of producing upsets in allied governments. Walters met with many Thai leaders during his trip to Bangkok. His major public theme was an attack on Vietnam and the idea of normalization of relations between Washington and Hanoi. Walters also laid down a vitriolic attack on the non-aligned nations, claiming that their votes at the U.N. show them to be "Soviet-aligned." Walters threatened U.S. withdrawal of aid from such governments in retribution.

If the higher echelons of the military were involved in the coup, it is likely that Walters had conveyed U.S. condoning of the action—despite official State Department support for

the Prem government. Such approval for a coup action does not necessarily signify a U.S. vote of confidence in the coup plotters; it could also signify, have demonstrated toward the Philippines, a decision for the destabilization of Thailand.

The State Department is also expected to grant Colonel Manoon's request from Thailand for a visa. Manoon has a home in California, which was his base of operations, until he quietly slipped back into Thailand two months ago.

Cui bono?

The attempted coup on Sept. 9 has shattered the stability of Thailand. Four days later, the state of emergency in Bangkok has not yet been lifted, and Interior Minister Sitthi Jirarote told the press that "the state of emergency cannot be lifted soon if the atmosphere does not improve." Tanks have been wheeled out by the government to guard the Royal Plaza. The repulsing of the coup has resolved none of the key issues behind it, either of personal power or of Thailand's economic collapse. With four people dead, including two non-Thais, and 59 others wounded, the coup also points to the danger of Thailand's reverting to the 1973-76 period, when right-left polarization brought the country to the brink of civil war.

Who benefits from this instability in Thailand? One beneficiary is Thailand's powerful neighbor to the north, the People's Republic of China, whose influence over Thailand has been strengthened by the U.S. strategic withdrawal from the region. The second beneficiary is the Soviet Union, whose military preponderance is growing exponentially in the region with the destabilization of the ASEAN countries. Thailand, and ASEAN, are the losers.

Unless U.S. policy toward its allies rapidly changes, and the United States withdraws its support for the International Monetary Fund, the attempted coup in Thailand may be only the beginning of what is slated for the Southeast Asian countries. On Sept. 12-13, Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Paul Wolfowitz, met with Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Kapitsa on issues of "mutual concern" in Asia, including the Korean peninsula and Indochina. Initial reports from their Sept. 12 meeting indicate that Wolfowitz is engaging in preliminary negotiations with Moscow for a non-intervention agreement in Asia between the two superpowers. This is to guard against miscalculation, as the Soviets and the oligarchy of the West, the powers that stand behind the International Monetary Fund, get down to the business of destroying the sovereignty of the nations in the region through local proxy wars and orchestrated economic collapse.

Such Kissingerian crisis-management agreements have already proven their worth in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. For ASEAN, the concurrence of the Kapitsa-Wolfowitz meeting with an attempted coup in Thailand is an ominous signal of what could lie ahead.