
Southeast Asia

Aborted coup: close call for Thailand

by Sophie Tanapura

Although the Sept. 9 abortive coup attempt was quickly squashed within 10 hours, the destabilization of Thailand is far from over. Political, military, and economic accounts still have to be settled.

As soon as the parliamentary session officially ended on Sept. 16, arrest warrants went out for 33 coup suspects, some of whom were parliamentarians. Among those arrested and charged with treason are former Prime Minister Gen. Kriangsak Chomanan, former Supreme Commander Gen. Serm Na Nakorn, ex-Deputy Army Chief Yos Thephassadin, ex-Deputy Supreme Commander Air Chief Marshal Krasae Intharathat, and current Supreme Commander Air Chief Marshal Arun Promdhep. Also arrested were five labor leaders: former Labor Congress of Thailand (LCT) President Ahmad Kamthestong, LCT adviser Sawad Lookdote, State Railway of Thailand (SRT) adviser Prathin Thamrongjoi, City Bus Union leader Somchai Srisunthornvoharn, and SRT labor union secretary Nun Suthipuak. Somphong Srakavee, a former student leader and Communist Party of Thailand member, and current editor of the *Monthly Diplomacy*, was also picked up.

With the exception of Acm Arun, who was an active military officer and thus will be tried in military court, other retired military officers are being detained and interrogated by the Thai Special Branch Police. Two coup suspects, Deputy Supreme Commander Gen. Bulrit Dardananda and Deputy Supreme Commander Acm Supha Kochaseni, were not arrested because of lack of evidence. Informed sources said that General Bulrit had given the police "useful testimony," and four or five other active colonels will be demoted or put into inactive posts in the annual reshuffle.

Three important figures implicated in the coup attempt are on the run. Colonel Manoon Roopkachorn is said to have fled from Singapore to Frankfurt, Germany, with the hope of returning to the United States. According to some, his broth-

er, Wing Commander Manas, has fled to the Thai-Burmese border with some 30 to 50 of his men. Also wanted is fugitive manager of the Chartered Interaction Chit Fund Company, Ekkayuth Anchanbutr, said to be one of the key financiers of the coup attempt. He was found apparently accompanying some labor leaders who took over the City Bus head office at Pratoonam, Bangkok. Ekkayuth is also wanted for swindling and violation of the anti-chit fund decree.

Review of the coup attempt

Colonel Manoon was pulled into the coup attempt from Los Angeles at the last minute, just as the coup was about to enter its final operational phase. He had arrived in Thailand only some three to five days before the coup, according to several sources. Colonel Manoon was an easy tool to mobilize, as he and the "young Turks" are radical hotheads with personal grievances against Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda, whom they had once tried to overthrow on April Fools' day in 1981. Saraburi-based fourth cavalry battalion personnel were asked to infiltrate Bangkok the night before the coup to procure tanks from their battalion base in the capital city. According to source accounts, a total of 112 tanks were on alert on the outskirts of Bangkok, but only 22 of them visibly deployed in the government-military sector of Bangkok metropolis.

Fear was rampant in the government house that, should the coup not be quashed before nightfall, not only would the Manoon forces have had more time to reorganize themselves, but also there would be the immediate danger that 2,000 LCT-led workers would use the additional time to incite the population at large against the government, causing more chaos and confusion and possibly more bloodshed. Three or four days before the coup attempt, labor union leaders of the LCT held meetings in some 22 hotels. Suspecting that something was definitely afoot, government officials had already monitored these labor gatherings very closely, and Prime Minister Prem left for Jakarta with full knowledge of these rumblings.

Earlier in August, LCT railway workers were already mobilized by Ahmad Kamthestong and Sawad Lookdote. At that time LCT president Ahmad took the initiative to contact foreign organizations and found that substantial help came readily from the Brussels-based International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, which is associated with the left wing of the West German Social Democratic Party (SPD) controlled by Willy Brandt, known for his sympathies with the Soviets.

The refusal of Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force Acm Praphan Dhupatemiya to deploy F-5 fighters in support of the Manoon tank deployment was key in defusing the coup attempt, which already had no infantry support. Had he approved, more bloodshed would have ensued. In a race against time, a deal was worked out with Manoon, and a plane was provided for him and his two men to go to Singapore.

Prior to the coup attempt, a lot of political pressure to shuffle out Finance Minister Sommai Hoontrakul was brought to bear on the Prem government from all sides—the parliament, the military, labor, etc.—due to the extremely unpopular devaluation and across-the-board tax policies inspired by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and implemented by Finance Minister Sommai and other technocrats. Certain foreign observers view the abortive coup as having nonetheless been successful in realizing its objective, namely, forcing Prem to reshuffle his cabinet.

With National Democratic Party leader Gen. Kriangsak Chomanan suspected and arrested on charges of treason, industry minister Ob Vasuratna—a strong voice of reason in the cabinet against the IMF-World Bank conditionalities—along with his two deputies from the same party, felt it necessary to hand in their resignations, creating immediately three vacancies which Prem had announced he would fill before going on tour to the United States and Europe.

Appearing to take indecent advantage of the political opening created by the attempted coup, Deputy Prime Minister and Democratic Party leader Bhichai Rattakul's strong insistence that charges be pressed against the alleged coup plotters has made front-page headlines, and can only contribute to aggravating the already tense situation. The arrest by civilian authorities of alleged coup leaders of the stature of former Prime Minister Kriangsak is unprecedented in Thailand.

In the present Bangkok by-elections to fill the vacancy created by the death of the Science and Technology Minister Damrong Lathapipat, the coup story is being ideologically exploited to the hilt by Democratic Party militants. In contrast, Prem himself has remained quite discreet, intending to let the investigation and interrogation follow their normal course, as sources say the powers-that-be have wisely advised.

American sources say that Bhichai has ambitions for becoming prime minister himself, and apparently enjoys the support of the Bangkok U.S. embassy. Other well-informed Thai sources say that funds from the West German Green Party have been channeled into the Democratic Party via the Bangkok-based Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. West German intelligence has publicly documented that the Green Party is heavily financed by the Soviets through East Germany.

Meanwhile, Deputy leader of the Chat Thai Party, Chatchai Choonhavan has resigned from his party post, allegedly to allow the party leader Gen. Pramarn Adireksarn to restructure the party. Saraburi member of parliament Pongpol Adireksarn charged that the latest move was an effort by party dissidents to join the government independently. However, this invitation has not yet been extended by Prem himself.

Important to note is the recent initiative taken by President Ferdinand Marcos to stabilize the situation in the Phil-

ippines. In a fight for survival, a military faction loyal only to President Marcos has formed a special force of at least 20 tanks and highly trained soldiers to crush any coup attempt against the government. Recently, the local paper *Business Day* quoted an *EIR* article revealing U.S. embassy involvement in on-the-ground operations for the overthrow of Marcos and support of acting Chief of Staff Fidel Ramos, who supposedly would come to power with a young officers' reform group called "We Belong," very similar in nature to the Thai young turks of Colonel Manoon.

General estimates are that the present Prem government can still tip the complicated power balance in its favor for perhaps another 6 to 10 months before encountering another obstacle. Should Prem remain blind to the necessity to stand firm against the IMF and the World Bank and remain blind to the necessity of urgently working out a serious effort to develop Thailand through great infrastructure and industrial projects, neither Prem nor any other government that might eventually replace it—military or civilian—would survive for long. Thus the country would be more open to social chaos and more destabilizations directed from abroad.

Did any government official take full note of the sympathetic tone of the Soviet TASS release, reporting almost regretfully that the coup had failed?

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