

Southeast Asia by Sophie Tanapura

A 'Prem V' government in Thailand

After disappointing elections on July 27, the country is threatened with more instability than ever.

For many Thai citizens, the result of the recent July 27 general elections was a tremendous disappointment, but not unexpected. Though the general popular sentiment is anti-Prem, the newly elected Members of Parliament still chose Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda as prime minister to form the Prem V government. The Prem IV government's monetarist policies were contested by the Parliament last April, leading to a parliamentary censure of the government. Prem retaliated by calling for the dissolution of Parliament and early elections.

As of this writing, Prem has yet to negotiate the allocation of ministries with his coalition partners, made up of four parties: the Democratic Party of Bichai Rattakul, the Chat Thai Party of General Chatchai Choonhavan, the military Rassadorn Party of General Tienchai Sirisamphan, and the Social Action Party (SAP) of Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila. Prem is expected to keep the Defense Ministry for himself and allocate the Finance and Interior portfolios to trusted persons of his group, a move which is being blocked by his major coalition partner, the Democrats, who have been vying for control over Finance and Interior.

The general elections gave the Democratic Party 100 seats, the Chat Thai Party 63 seats, the Rassadorn Party 18 seats, and the whittled-down SAP 51 seats. The Prem V government, therefore, controls a two-thirds majority in the Parliament, making any future parliamentary censure of the government virtually impossible.

At the outset of the campaign, knowing that Prem's popularity had dropped to rock-bottom, parties refused to endorse him. However, toward the end, it became clear that almost every party was ready to pay tribute to Prem, if that was all that was needed to become a government coalition partner.

At the opening of the new parliamentary session, Army Commander-in-Chief Chavalit Yongchaiyudh—long Prem's grey eminence—was asked to gather support for Prem from as many parties as possible. All the major parties signed the support letter with the hope of being part of the government coalition. Each party wants to have its share of ministerial posts, but for other than reasons of national interest.

Because self-interest has become the key motivation, the Prem V government is unlikely to succeed in doing a better job than Prem IV, especially in the crucial domain of economics and finance. Such a domestic political and economic situation is going to lead to chaos: 1) because the world economic situation will worsen and be increasingly felt by a larger and larger number of people, and 2) because criticism of the government's policies cannot be vented through a parliamentary opposition, leaving street actions as the only alternative.

Already, around 20,000 students and 200 professors of the Ramkhamhaeng University, a Bangkok free university, have handed a protest petition to Prem. Various anti-Prem rallies were answered by pro-Prem rallies or-

ganized and paid for by Prem's backers. The scenario is complicated by a series of bombings. A bomb blew up by accident in the hands of its carrier who happened to be a soldier under the orders of the Young Turk Col. Manoon Roopkachorn, now in exile in West Germany after the aborted Sept. 9 coup last year. Reportedly Manoon made a trip to the Soviet Union in May, sponsored by the Green Party.

What is becoming more and more evident is the role Chavalit is playing behind the scenes. A shrewd and ambitious man, General Chavalit is doing everything possible to pave the way for an elected prime minister—himself. But what kind of alternative is Chavalit?

Chavalit's shrewdness has made him think that he can use the "old" network of the Communist Party of Thailand as his operatives. He has more than trusted a Communist old-timer of Soviet obedience, Prasert Sapsunthorn. Prasert is the architect of the 66/23 law issued in 1980 which granted amnesty to Communist Party members who gave themselves up to the authorities. The 66/23 law, however, had the consequence of creating the legal basis for Communist Party members to continue operating in urban areas, namely in metropolitan Bangkok. In the recent general elections, a total of 260 "former Communist Party" members ran under other political party banners. It is also known that 14 of 20 parties are financed to varying degrees by Soviet sources. Two "former CP members," Klaew Norapati and Somkid Srisangkom, were elected to the Parliament under the aegis of Community Action Party of Boonchu Rojanastien and the Labor Democratic Party of Prasert Sapsunthorn respectively. Soviet penetration into Thai political life is tremendous, and we are just seeing the tip of the iceberg.