



Political players: Army Commander in Chief Sonthi Boonyaratklun, left, greets General Surayud Chulanont, right, shortly after the latter's appointment as Prime Minister in October 2006.

Soldiers of political fortune

DESMOND BALL AND
NICHOLAS FARRELLY

IN THE lead-up to Thailand's July 2011 election the tough-talking army chief, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, weighed into the political debate, insisting that voters should defend the king and elect 'good people'. General Prayuth hoped, no doubt, that his efforts to sway popular sentiment would lead to a victory for the embattled Democrat Party.

But when Thais went to the polls they passed a very different judgment, determining that Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his Democrat-led coalition government deserved electoral oblivion.

The election of Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of deposed former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, to the nation's highest political office would have come as a shock. General

Prayuth may, at least for a day or two, have wondered whether a coup would be a reasonable response.

Despite persistent claims to the contrary, Thailand's army is still in the coup-making business and, since toppling Thaksin Shinawatra in September 2006, has shown a dogged commitment to political intervention.

This reality contradicts the army's stated goals. Over the past two decades the army has sought to professionalise its image and develop a leaner, better-educated and more technologically proficient force—and professional soldiers will theoretically avoid political entanglements. Better training and non-partisan indoctrination will encourage them to 'stay in their barracks', leaving politicians to take care of political matters.

But Thailand's increasingly professional army is yet to disentangle

itself from politics: it remains a potent political force and has proved willing to make abrupt interventions to protect its role.

What explains this situation?

A big part of the answer lies in the relationship between the palace and the army. Even in 2011, Thai generals still ostentatiously prostrate themselves in front of King Bhumibol Adulyadej and claim a supreme role in the defence of the royal institution.

The monarch—who carries the title 'great warrior' (*phramahakasat*) and who still regularly wears his military uniforms—has reigned since 1946 with the reciprocal consent of generations of army commanders. His inner circle is dominated, even today, by some of Thailand's most famous military men, including privy councillors and former prime ministers like General Prem Tinsulanonda and General Surayud Chulanont. These senior generals

are keepers of the army influence that works in tandem with palace prerogatives. The professionalisation of Thailand's armed forces is also one of their long-term preoccupations.

Observers agree that in many respects Thailand's army has become more professional over the past two decades. It has more resources than ever before, with consistent access to overseas training, especially at prestigious institutions like West Point, the Virginia Military Institute and the Australian Defence Force Academy. It also enjoys grand investments in cutting-edge technologies and is now one of the best-equipped armies in Southeast Asia, arguably second only to high-tech Singapore. Thai army units that were deployed to East Timor for the United Nations peacekeeping mission demonstrated respectable standards and were well regarded by other foreign forces.

Yet there is little sign that this investment in professionalism is reflected in the army's organisation or many of its operations.

One reason for this is that the best-endowed and most influential army units are still based in Bangkok and its surrounding provinces. The 1st Division (King's Guard), 21st Regiment (Queen's Guard) and the 9th Division, which are all based in or near the capital, are the key units for political contingencies. Both General Prayuth and his predecessor as army chief, General Anupong Paochinda, are former commanders of the Queen's Guard Regiment. The 9th Division's mission, for example, includes explicit responsibility for Thailand's 'internal security'.

This means that for recent operations in the restive southern provinces and along the Cambodia and Burma borders, the army has relied

not on these elite divisions but on paramilitary *taharn phran* (rangers) and a smorgasbord of quasi-civilian security forces. These are the least professional of Thailand's security elements and have been implicated in a wide range of criminal and political activities.

At the same time, the increasingly professional cadre of technologically competent and foreign-trained officers is still largely captured by the culture which has consistently dragged the Thai army into the heart of national politics.

Why is this situation allowed to persist?

T HERE are three reasons why greater investment has not created an entirely depoliticised and professional army.

First is the army's role in the uncertain palace transition when 84-year-old King Bhumibol dies. The army still considers itself the primary defender of palace prestige and position, and it will be looking to provide leadership in the aftermath of the king's passing. The army will prove crucial to whatever happens next and, in the meantime, will not surrender any of its hard-earned status or resources. Army commanders feel, perhaps with a certain justification, that they must be ready for anything.

Second, Thailand continues to allow professional officers to take on explicitly political roles, both before and after retirement. Part of the attraction is certainly financial, but the trend is also born of a culture that sees no problem with army involvement in national politics.

Third, civil society and the media are not currently forcing the army into ever-greater professionalisation, since the latter is adept at hiding its political activities; it has seemingly mastered

the dark arts of public-relations spin. As a result, opposition is relatively meek by historical standards, and even in the wake of the army-led crackdown on popular protests in April–May 2010 there was, all things considered, surprisingly little critical attention of the army's role. Official efforts to investigate the crackdown have also stalled.

Thailand's new professional soldiers have become very adept at old political games, but in an era when most major military operations are necessarily joint (army, navy, air force, police) there are operational implications that must be considered. Thailand's stated ambitions to deploy drones or use cyber-warfare capabilities will remain unconsummated until there is a concerted effort to develop joint-headquarters structures that have real capacity. Politics often gets in the way of being truly ready to fight.

For now, what matters most for the senior army leadership is that at the end of the current king's reign the army is inexorably tied to the palace transition and the defence of the dynasty. This means attention will remain focused on the central region and priority will go to the Bangkok-based units which guarantee dynastic control. In this context, serious security threats—such as the border disputes with Burma, Cambodia and Malaysia—are relegated to lesser importance.

General Prayuth and other senior army officers are entrusted with the sacred protection of the royal family. They want to control a political future where the roles of the royal family and the army are secure beyond doubt, so they will continue to play a political role for as long as required. Professional soldiers are, in Thailand, still defined by political fortune. 