

A Different *Coup d'État*?

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ABSTRACT *The 2006 coup d'état was far more than a simple case of military seizure of power. Rather, the 19 September 2006 coup is connected intimately with the monarchy in various respects. The "royalist military" legitimated the coup by using the royalist discourse that was generated by the anti-Thaksin movement and the massive celebrations of the king's 60th year on the throne. Having succeeded in overthrowing prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the coup makers thought they could secure the throne by ensuring loyal succession to the position of Army Commander-in-Chief in the medium term. To enhance military influence the "royal military" are also revitalising a Cold War relic, the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). In line with this political regression, it appears that military want to return Thailand to the years of "semi-democracy," when the military and bureaucracy had significant power over elected politicians.*

KEY WORDS: *Coup d'état*, monarchy, military, business groups, democracy

The conventional perception of military *coups d'état* is of a military faction or individual seizing power for selfish, often anti-democratic reasons. A *coup*, in its general sense refers to political conflict between the military and a government resulting in a military takeover. The Thai *coups d'état* of 1991 and 2006, which overthrew the democratically elected governments of Chatichai Choonhavan and Thaksin Shinawatra, respectively, were staged for ostensibly similar reasons: allegations that there was rampant corruption, the emergence of deep divisions in society, attacks on the military and threats to the institution of the monarchy (Council for Democratic Reform, 2006; National Peace Keeping Council, 1991).

This article analyses the nature of the military *coup* that brought down the Thaksin government in September 2006. It seeks to demonstrate how the *coup* group was able to draw on the rising royalist sentiment of 2005-06 in order to legitimate their illegal actions against the elected government. In part, the nature of the 2006 *coup* leadership is specified by the contrast with the *coup* group of 1991. The article offers some provisional observations relating to the political economy of the *coup* – how Thaksin's economic rise was perceived as a threat by some other capitalist groupings. Finally, it moves to an analysis of the likely post-*coup* political structure.

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Contrasting Coups: 1991 and 2006

Though similar in nature, the 1991 and 2006 *coups* differ when viewed from three vantage points. First, it is widely accepted that the 1991 military takeover was, in part, a result of friction between graduates of various classes of the Chulachomkiao Military Academy beginning in 1980, which finally culminated in a major rift between the military and the government.¹ The 2006 *coup*, on the other hand, was staged by military officers claiming deep loyalty to the monarchy, with the main objective of overthrowing a prime minister accused of having treated the king disrespectfully.² The Council for Democratic Reform under the Constitutional Monarchy (CDR) royalist rationale for the *coup* in 2006 resembles that of the *coup* in 1947, when the civilian government was held responsible for the mysterious death of King Rama 8 (see Suthachai, 2007: 223). Subsequent military rule, be it in the 1940s and 1950s under Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram, or the late 1950s to early 1970s, under Field Marshals Sarit Thanarat, Thanom Kittikachorn and Prapas Charusathien, was justified on the basis of anti-communism. Thus, the intensifying royalist sentiment formed during the five years of the Thaksin government, and its expression during the *coup* led by the CDR, is unique and requires close analysis.³

Secondly, the 2006 *coup* resulted from efforts to *mobilise* royalist sentiment to oust a government perceived by various groups and individuals to be a direct threat to the institution of the monarchy. Included in these opponents were media owner Sondhi Limthongkul, Privy Councilor members, some military leaders, as well as various politicians, academics, members of the media and elements of various civil society organisations. This mobilisation was dramatically different from 1991, when allegations of an assassination attempt on Queen Sirikit were made against a member of Class 7, and failed to gain the military much increased support (Tasker, 2006).

Thirdly, in terms of naked political ambition, the 1991 *coup* group, the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) was led by the Class 5 controlled core military units.⁴ Class 5 leaders had concrete political ideas and ambitions. *Coup* leader General Suchinda Kraprayoon's brief prime ministership in 1992 is testament to this ambition, however misplaced. The political ambition of the 2006 *coup* group is not yet clear, other than their already achieved objective of overthrowing Thaksin while claiming to protect the monarchy.

The 1991 and 2006 *coup* makers' political ideology, experience and role differs significantly. In terms of the 1991 *coup* group, Class 5 was led by General Suchinda Kraprayoon, and was in direct political competition with Class 7, led by Major General Chamlong Srimuang. Class 5 were antagonised by the higher political and military influence of Class 7 over them. Class 7 was an important force in the overthrow of General Kriengsak Chomanand and the rise of General Prem Tinsulanonda as the new prime minister in 1980. Their political reward was higher military and political positions and control of all core military units (Chai-Anan, 1982: 23-4). The leaders of Class 7 had substantial experience in confrontation with communism, both in Thailand and in the Indochina war. By contrast, Class 5 had connections with various business leaders such as stock exchange traders, arms trading and big real estate companies (Handley, 1997: 108-9). They had relationships with many political and business leaders who invested a lot in the stock market and

mega infrastructure projects during the period around the time that Chatichai Choonhavan was prime minister and which saw an economic boom. They had linkages with influential politicians, such as Newin Chidchob (Deputy Minister of Finance) and Suchart Taunchaleon (Deputy Minister of Interior) and the real estate-based Ban Chang Group's Pairoi Piamphongsan. Their connection provided fruitful insider information, special-personal credit lines from the Bangkok Bank of Commerce and allowed speculation on real estate and land trading (Handley, 1997: 108-9). Their money was utilised for both business and politics. Paul Handley (1997: 107) noted that the 1991 junta was reasonably attuned to investment and the stock exchange, both as individuals and as a group. General Suchinda, in particular, had his own investment managers, and the military used intelligence sources for market research.

This background differs markedly from the CDR leadership that have, for the most part, no clearly stated political ideas or experience. The key figures are from a range of classes at the military academy and appear not to have developed any clear programme that benefits each class's membership. Among *coup* leaders, General Sonthi Boonyaratklin and General Winai Pattiyakul are from Class 17, General Saprang Kalayanamitr from Class 18 and General Anuphong Phaochinda from Class 21 (*The Nation*, 21 July, 2006). Air Chief Marshal Chalit Pukphasuk (Commander of the Royal Thai Air Force), Admiral Sathiraphan Keyanon (Commander of the Royal Thai Navy) and Police-General Kowit Wattana all belong to Class 17 but none of them seem very attached to their class. The junta also gained support of members of Class 20 led by General Montri Sangkhasap. With but a couple of exceptions, it is fair to say that most of these officers had never expressed any particular interest in politics. Interestingly, few of them demonstrated a strong sense of unity as a class in the same way as their predecessors in Classes 5 or 7.

General Sonthi and General Winai, from Class 17, were outside Thaksin's military inner circle. Before becoming Army Commander-in-Chief, Sonthi was not a particularly well-known public figure. He served in the elite Special Warfare Command based in Lopburi, a unit that has produced top military leaders. In 2004 he became Deputy Army Commander-in-Chief. He assumed the rank of Army Commander-in-Chief in 2005 as a compromise candidate. Bargaining for his elevation, supported by Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, to the top post was partly based on his assumed ability to play a special role in problem solving in the south of Thailand, given his Muslim background (see *Bangkok Post*, 4 July 2006; *Irrawaddy Online*, 20 September 2006). His close friend, General Winai – a quiet man – worked as head of the National Security Council during Thaksin's rule, a post that had no military unit command. General Saprang, the strong-headed and outspoken Third Army Commander and First Army Commander General Anuphong, were the two key military operations commanders for the *coup*. Initially, they had no clear political ideas, experience or demands other than the overthrow of Thaksin. Both assumed their leadership roles just one year before the *coup*.

A partial exception to this characterisation of relative political inexperience is the case of General Winai. He has had a long connection with Suwat Liptapanlop, a prominent politician from Nakorn Rachachima. They were classmates at St Gabriel's School and political and business partners. In 1982 General Winai served as a military aide for General Arthit Kamlang-ek, former Army-in-Chief

(Anon., 2006). He met and worked with Suwat from the late 1980s when Suwat formed the Thai People (Poungchonchaethai) Party with General Arthit, who became deputy defence minister under the Chatichai government. Later General Winai was a member at the prime minister's office staff under prime minister Chatichai. Interestingly, General Winai has also shown an interest in business, and is currently an executive board member for Chiratiwatra family's Big C Supercenter department store company and Thai Life Insurance controlled by the Chaiwan family (Anon., 2006).

This relative lack of political and business experience of core *coup* members would suggest that there had been no long-term planning for the expansion of this *coup* group's political role. It may be suggested that they were driven by events, rather than conspiring to use events to realise long-held ambitions. However, now in power, political and business ambitions have blossomed, both within the core *coup* group and the military as a whole, and this development is likely to influence the shape of democracy in the near future (*Matichon*, 10 November 2006; 28 December 2006).

These three differences suggest that the 2006 *coup* was far more than a simple case of military seizure of power. Rather, the 2006 *coup* is connected intimately with the future of monarchy.

The Rise of a Royalist Military

The 2006 *coup* came more than 15 years after the military last played such an overt political and interventionist role in 1991. The military retreat from politics occurred after the backfiring of their move to install General Suchinda as prime minister in 1992. Massive protests ended with a military clamp-down following a violent confrontation on Ratchadamnoen Avenue, where at least fifty protestors were killed – although some insist that hundreds may have been killed. After that, the military returned to their barracks and remained in a low-profile political position.

During the period of Thaksin's government, from 2001 to 2006, a new political phenomenon emerged when members of Class 10 of the Armed Forces Academy Preparatory School (AFAPS) or Class 21 of Chulachomklao Military Academy, who had been classmates of Thaksin, rose to enjoy unprecedented prominence in the Thai armed forces.⁵ With the administration's determination to create its own military support base, several officers, ostensibly strong Thaksin supporters, were promoted from the rank of colonel to that of general in only a year and a half. Many also took control of key positions such as Army Commanding General of 1st, 2nd and 4th army regions, Army Chief-of-Staff and Army Assistant Chief as well as commander of the 1st Infantry Division and the King's Guards (see McCargo and Ukrist, 2005: 121-65). These rapid promotions meant that, for the first time, a civilian government was building a network of support from top military commanders. These moves caused considerable consternation amongst those being passed over and shunted aside. It also challenged the so-called network monarchy (McCargo, 2005).

The turning point that eventually culminated in the *coup* was the sixtieth anniversary of the king's accession to the throne and conflicts that occurred during the period of the annual military reshuffle. It is worth noting that there had been criticism of Thaksin and his government for their dictatorial ways, violation of

human rights and alleged corruption since Thaksin's first year in power. It was the escalation of these complaints into very large public protests from February 2006 and the resort to a "Royal Power" discourse beginning at the end of 2005 that saw an escalation of anti-Thaksin sentiment.

Despite a limited truce between Thaksin and his opponents during the celebrations of the king's Diamond Jubilee, the royalist discourse reached its zenith on 9 June 2006 when hundreds of thousands of people donned yellow shirts and took part in the anniversary day festivities around the Royal Plaza.⁶ The hearts and minds of many Thai people were riveted by the various celebrations, televised live, while souvenir photographs of the events were sold and widely distributed. When the king underwent surgery and was confined to hospital from 20 July to 4 August, his fortunes were keenly followed and hundreds of people clad in yellow shirts gathered at the hospital. Television showed royal family members visiting the king twice a day, together with other prominent figures, such as Privy Council members. Despite these celebrations, public concern for the king's health and displays of loyalty to the monarch, Thaksin – facing pressure to leave office – made a speech on 29 June 2006 before high-ranking government officials, stating: "...there is chaos in society because charismatic people and some organisations outside those sanctioned by the Constitution are trying to overthrow the government, rules and laws, Constitution and democracy" (INN Editorial Board, 2006: 21). This was widely understood as a reference to Privy Council president Prem Tinsulanonda and the palace.⁷

The Thaksin government was also criticised for attempting to take a high profile in the organising of royal ceremonies and the welcoming of royal guests from abroad. However, it was chastised for neglecting to pay much interest to the government's exhibition celebrating the king's reign at Impact Arena in Muangthong Thani. Opponents opined that this exhibition was too small, had a meagre budget and, with Cabinet Spokesman Suraphong Suewonglee in charge, not sufficient attention to rank. Opponents claimed, despite massive television advertising, that the event was poorly publicised and that it was only word of mouth that had people flocking to see it. In the end, the exhibition was extended to accommodate escalating royalist sentiment. Some critics interpreted these events as showing Thaksin's disrespect to the monarchy.

The political game then shifted to the military reshuffle that took place in mid-July 2006 when Thaksin urged military commanders to hasten their submission of the lists of military personnel to be transferred. When then Minister of Defence General Thammarak Isarangkun determined a 27 July deadline, this was met with considerable opposition from those opposed to the government (*Matichon*, 14 July 2006). For example, General Saprang, commander of the army's Third Region emerged to criticise this move, citing that it would create conflict and lead to a schism in society (*Khom Chat Luek*, 14 July 2006).

The most forceful demonstration of opposition to the Thaksin administration's military reshuffle which was also a sign for the emergence of a "royal military" was General Prem's actions on 14 July 2006. Dressed in military uniform, Prem gave a speech at the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy asserting that "the soldiers belong to His Majesty the King, not to a government. A government is like a jockey. It supervises soldiers, but the real owners are the country, and the King" (cited in *Bangkok Post*, 15 July 2006). He gave a similar talk at the Naval Academy where the

topic focused on the ethics expected from politicians, claiming that "... it is OK if a rich person acquires his wealth through righteous means but if he acquires his wealth through dishonest means then we should not pay our respects to them with a traditional Thai *wai*" (*Matichon*, 1 September 2006). Similarly, he also addressed an audience at the Air Force Academy cautioning that "the nation is sacred and that anybody who dares even to think of appropriating it for himself will ultimately meet with destruction" (*Matichon*, 1 September 2006).

The ideological support rendered by General Prem, who was also a well-respected figure in military circles, provided anti-government military figures the morale boost necessary to launch action against the government. A week after Prem's speech Army Commander General Sonthi accepted a reshuffle list submitted by the Commanders-in-Chief of the four regions. This included the reposting of 129 middle-ranked military officers, including 38 battalion commanders, many of them considered sympathetic to Thaksin. Because of their membership of Class 10 of the Preparatory Military Academy School, these men were considered Thaksin loyalists and so were re-appointed to positions with no control over military fighting units. As Wassana noted (2006: 10) the immediate transfer outside the normal season included the transfer of various perceived pro-Thaksin supporters:

Lt-Col Kosit Chinwasant, commander of the 4th cavalry battalion of the Royal Guards which, in the past, played a crucial role in coup attempts – he is the son-in-law of Major-Gen Sanit Prommas, commander of the 2nd cavalry division of the Royal Guards and a member of Class 10; Lt-Col Wechasakdi Khantha-ubon, commander of the 1st infantry battalion of the first regiment; Lt-Col Anuparb Sirimonthon, commander of the 3rd infantry battalion of the first regiment.

In addition, key Class 10 member Major General Proen, who had once called for anti-Thaksin political moves to cease and who was Commander of the 1st Infantry Division (known as the Royal Guards) was punished. His troops were transferred to inactive posts and were replaced by Lt General Anuphong's troops who took control of the key positions in Bangkok (*Naew Na*, 20 July 2006).

In 2005, Thaksin had attempted to shore up his position by transferring generals who were perceived as being from the anti-government camp, such as Anuphong, Saprang and Sonthi, but he was unsuccessful. Disputes between anti- and pro-Thaksin groups within the military led to an unprecedented two-week delay in the king's endorsement of the 2005 annual military reshuffle (*The Nation*, 13 December 2005). Even so, Thaksin continued to try and remove these key figures. During the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) demonstrations in March 2006, Thaksin reportedly urged General Sonthi to declare a state of emergency and employ force in cracking down on the demonstrators. Sonthi apparently refused to do so (*The Nation*, 23 March 2006). In post-coup reflections, Sonthi said that he realised that if he did Thaksin would use the resulting popular outcry to dismiss him (*The Nation*, 27 October 2006).⁸

When the *coup* was carried out, it was clear that it was a *coup* by royalists in the military. The *coup* group followed Prem, relied on his moral support and agreed that the military owed their allegiance to the king. They demonstrated their royalism by

attaching yellow ribbons to their sleeves and their weapons. Soon after the *coup*, in a highly symbolic act, they went to “apologise” to the statue of King Chulalongkorn at Army Headquarters, stating that they did not intend to disrespect the long-dead king when they made their *coup*. Given this background, it may be argued that the September *coup* occurred as a result of a power struggle led by the faction in the armed forces staunchly loyal to the king and bent on putting an end to a government that they considered anti-royalist.

The *coup* may have also served to reassure royalists in the military that the political *status quo* could be maintained even after the eventual demise of the ageing General Prem and an ailing king, both octogenarians. In much the same way the palace will be reassured that it has a guaranteed loyalist armed force to provide it with their undying support; military leaders Sonthi, Saprang and Anuphong are very likely, collectively, to keep the position of Commander-in-Chief in their hands for at least three consecutive years (Sonthi’s retirement year is in 2007, Saprang’s in 2008 and Anuphong’s in 2009).

Given their limited political power base and their apparent lack of political ideas and ambition, it was certainly daunting for this group of royalist military to confront Thaksin, who at that time had strong control of parliament, the media, the bureaucracy, provincial governors, police, significant sections of the military, and the solid support of the masses, especially in rural areas. Yet the emergence of the royalist military was possible with the support of a royalist ideology that maintained a stronghold throughout the anti-Thaksin campaigns from the end of 2005.

The Anti-Thaksin and Royalist Movement

Like the 2006 *coup*, the 1991 *putsch* initially enjoyed considerable public support. The 1991 *coup*-group focused initially on the alleged corruption of the so-called buffet cabinet of the Chatichai government. Royalist and nationalist ideology was also used to legitimate the 1991 *coup*, but not very successfully. As mentioned above, this centred on an alleged plot to assassinate Queen Sirikit, allegedly linked to Colonel Manoon Roopkachorn from Class 7. The plot was publicised in a videotaped confession by Class 7 members. Widely believed to be fake to implicate Class 7 and to strengthen the position of Class 5, the videotapes were withdrawn from circulation and public broadcast. In 1991, royalism was deployed only in the intra-military struggle of class groupings, it was not used to create a royalist military or to mobilise a mass movement as was to be the case in 2006.

Turning now to the movement to oust Thaksin, as Pye and Schaffar (2008) observe, it was composed of various groups, including some who were academics, social activists, politicians, business figures, aristocrats, the middle class, the media, Buddhist monks, Privy Council members and military leaders. The movement began with Sondhi Limthongkul, founder and owner of The Manager group of companies and newspaper, taking up media criticisms against government policies and the benefits enjoyed by Thaksin and his family. The movement was later expanded to be led principally by academics, social activists and political figures. Sondhi, a former friend and sometime business rival of Thaksin, was once involved in the telecommunications business that Thaksin came to dominate (*The Nation*, 28 November 2005).⁹ The 1997 economic crisis had far less of a detrimental impact on

Thaksin's businesses than other large conglomerates; Sondhi's Manager Group ended up being saddled with massive debts following the economic crisis (*The Nation*, 29 November 2005).

When Thaksin came to power, Sondhi's company benefited from the government-owned Krung Thai Bank which reduced its debts from 1.8 billion baht to 200 million baht (*The Nation*, 30 November 2005). His business experienced a swift recovery and Sondhi entrusted his son, Chittanart Limthongkul, to establish Thailand Dot Com Co. that invested in concessions it received from the Public Relations Department for radio and television programmes on MCOT's Channel 9. Sondhi hailed Thaksin as the best prime minister the country had ever had and fiercely attacked the opposition Democrat party for selling out Thailand's debt-ravaged companies to foreign-owned companies (*The Nation*, 30 November 2005).

The falling out between Sondhi and the Thaksin government came when Viroj Nualkhair, who had been instrumental in helping Sondhi salvage his business, was asked by Bank of Thailand governor Pridiyathorn Devakula to resign from his post as president of the Krung Thai Bank (*The Nation*, 30 November 2005). In the meantime, as Sondhi used his television programme "Thailand Weekly" on the government's Channel 9, the programme was soon removed. Sondhi then aired his criticisms of the Thaksin administration at venues such as the Thammasat University auditorium and open-air forums in Lumpini Park, claiming that his still-small movement was meant to "Save the Nation."

Sondhi's attacks against Thaksin soon came to centre on Thaksin's alleged disrespect of Thailand's ideological "holy trinity," nation, religion and the monarchy. Sondhi cited examples of disrespect including a merit-making ceremony at the royal Temple of the Emerald Buddha presided over by Thaksin Shinawatra, and the appointment of an interim Supreme Patriarch of the Buddhist sangha. Sondhi then began to use slogans such as "We will fight for the King." He took to wearing the now symbolic yellow shirt. People who joined him at his rallies were also encouraged to don yellow shirts. Sondhi tapped into conservative royalist discourse by capitalising on the popularity of the book, *Royal Powers* written and published in mid-2005 by disgruntled Thai Rak Thai party member Pramuan Ruchanaseree (2005). In early September 2005 at a public forum featuring Sondhi, Pramuan and Senator Kaewsan Atibodhi, Pramuan declared:

there are two paths for our country to follow, one is to be a kingdom where prosperity of the country is measured not only by economic prosperity but through the improvement of the people's quality of life according to the advice given by His Majesty the King. The second path is to see to it that our nation turns into Thailand Company Limited where money is everything and everything is money (cited in *The Nation*, 7 September 2005).

This "Royal Powers" discourse soon transformed itself from an idea in a book to the basis for the formation of anti-Thaksin movements and was popularised by Sondhi in his *Phujatkan* newspaper and on his cable television network, ASTV. Close Sondhi associate and influential academic Chai-Anan Samudvanija then switched sides. From being a Thaksin loyalist rewarded with the chairmanship of the board of Thai Airways International and the Electricity General Authority of Thailand,

Chai-Anan publicly joined Sondhi at the end of November 2005. As a *Phujatkan* columnist, Chai-Anan's (2005) first *Phujatkan* column in late November warned Thaksin to prepare to save his political life, because the maverick Sondhi was braver and more willing to take risks. Chai-Anan's columns helped revitalise the anti-Thaksin campaign. He was also instrumental in gathering signatures for a petition to the king requesting that he replace Thaksin with a new prime minister (*Phujatkan*, 6 March 2006). One other notable intellectual who joined Sondhi and his moves to return power to the king was the royalist Pramote Nakhonthap, yet another academic-turned-columnist for *Phujatkan* newspaper. It was Pramote who sought to demonstrate similarities with the British system claiming that the Queen of England frequently made interventions in her nation's pressing political issues and controversies (Pramote, 2006).

The use of the monarchy as a point of attack, revelations of graft and corruption, and exposés of the government's attempts to silence the media served to increase pressure on Thaksin. The prime minister would, however, counter the allegations that he was anti-royal by a series of threats and law suits. For example, he had military leaders denounce any use of the monarchy to criticise the government, having loyal aide's under Major General Proen Suwannathat deliver a letter to Sondhi at Manager Group headquarters asking Sondhi to cease using the monarchy to attack Thaksin (*The Nation*, 19 November 2005).

Despite growing dissatisfaction with Thaksin, Sondhi's fight only reached its most intense point with the sale by the Shinawatra family of shares of Shin Corporation on 23 January 2006 to Singapore's Temasek Holding for \$US1.8 billion, at the time being assessed as not being liable for taxation (Ukrist, 2006: 1-2). What ensued was public outrage – particularly among members of the upper and middle classes – and the consolidation of the anti-Thaksin movement. Sondhi's rally at the Royal Plaza on 4 February was attended by tens of thousands of people (Suthachai, 2007: 218). At that gathering Sondhi initially pursued an aggressive strategy of presenting a petition to General Prem asking for power to be returned to the king (see Connors, 2008). He also sought a meeting with General Sonthi. General Prem was not in his residence and assigned an aide to receive the petition while General Sonthi, who met the group, claimed that he granted the meeting so as to avoid political chaos (Supalak, 2006: 176).

Sondhi Limthongkul's protest base expanded further and was transformed into the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), with the Campaign for Popular Democracy calling for 40 non-governmental organisations (NGO) to join in the protest against Thaksin (*Thai Post*, 6 February 2006). PAD prepared for a huge demonstration on 11 February at the Royal Plaza (*The Nation*, 12 February 2006).

Considering the composition of PAD's leadership, comprising Sondhi Limthongkul, former Thaksin supporter and Bangkok Governor Major General Chamlong Srimuang, the academic Somkiat Phongpaiboon, retired union leader Somsak Kosaisuk and NGO leader Phipob Thongchai, it is evident that Sondhi played the leading role. It was he who footed the bill of 800,000 to one million baht for each rally to cover the cost of the stage, electricity, projector screens, VTR mobile units (Supalak, 2006: 178-9) Meanwhile, Somkiat, Phipob and Somsak had only a small following and were devoid of financial means. For this reason, Sondhi and Chamlong were able to press for royal intervention to install a new prime minister

through the use of the Constitution's Article 7, despite the fact that their PAD co-leaders disagreed with this approach. However, they seemed unwilling to withdraw their support (Supalak, 2006: 179-80).

On 25 April 2006 the king, in an audience to the nation's judges claimed that:

Article 7 does not empower the King to make a unilateral decision. It talks about the constitutional monarchy but does not give the King power to do anything he wishes. If the King did so, he would overstep his duty. I have never overstepped this duty. Doing so would be undemocratic (Bhumibol, 2006).¹⁰

While this effectively undermined the movement for a royally appointed prime minister, the king's intervention also paved the way for annulling the elections Thaksin had called in April and which TRT had won (see Hewison, 2008). Nevertheless, the royalist ideology was manifested powerfully in June, during the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the current monarch's reign. The image of loyal subjects numbering hundreds of thousands all in yellow shirts filling up the royal plaza and shouting in unison "Long Live the King" was a reflection of the royalist ideology that the PAD – in particular, Sondhi Limthongkul – had sought to mobilize for their own political ends.

The royalist ideology conveniently coincided with Sondhi's idea to "fight for the king and return royal power." In the end, this call would provide the basis for the royalist elements of the armed forces to stage the 2006 *coup* and legitimate it in terms of the monarchy. Ostensibly, the main objective for the 2006 *coup* was to rid the political arena of Thaksin since the royalists claimed to have seen from the start that Thaksin posed a more perilous threat to democracy and the monarchy than any other political figure in Thailand.

The Thaksin Challenge – the Challenge from Capital

Any analysis of the 2006 *coup* must also take into account the tensions within Thai capitalist groupings. Given the contemporary nature of events, the shadowy politicking of various capitalist groups, and the oftentimes highly personalised nature of business dealings, this analysis is necessarily preliminary. One point of departure is to recognise significant economic rivalry among domestic capitalist groups, and especially between the Shinawatra business group and, despite some significant linkages, the monarchy's investment arm the Crown Property Bureau (CPB) (also see Hewison, 2008; Porphant, 2008). Tensions were not limited to these two. Thaksin alienated a number of other business groups, so that by the time of the political crisis of 2005-06, there had emerged a loose alliance of some capitalists who had come to support moves to throw Thaksin out of office. Indeed, Thaksin's aggrandising tendencies led some disaffected capitalist groupings to mobilise against him (Connors, 2005; 2006).

During Thaksin's tenure as prime minister the Shin Corporation Group grew exponentially, amassing a total profit of 9723 million baht in 2003 and holding assets of 60,153 million baht with a market capitalisation of 113,888 million baht. In the same year, another Shinawatra family company, AIS Co. Ltd., had a profit of 18,529

million baht with assets of 124,944 million baht and 249,775 million baht in market capitalisation (Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 206).

Due to its rapid growth during the 2001-03 period, the Shin Corporation's subsequent move was to further expand its business from telecommunications to companies such as Thai Air Asia, a low cost airline, and Capital OK, a personal credit company, established in conjunction with the state-owned Development Bank of Singapore (*Bangkok Post*, 11 December 2003). The Shinawatra family also expanded investments in real estate and health care. SC Asset is the family's real estate business flagship company, while ownership of the Rama IX Hospital and the attempted takeover of the Paolo Memorial group's hospitals indicates its expanding interests in health care.

While there were credible economic rivals to Shin Corporation by 2004, including the beer and whisky tycoon Charoen Sirivadhanabhakdi and the CPB, no single business group possessed Thaksin's economic power *and* his strong hold over state power.¹¹ One of the strongest Thaksin opponents was Prachai Leophairatana of the TPI group, the country's largest petroleum and chemicals firm. TPI had long-standing debt problems, and Prachai had opposed all governments since the economic crisis. Thaksin's government had vigorously pursued the restructuring of TPI and had allowed legal moves by creditors to gain control of TPI and saw Prachai lose his executive position in May 2006 (*The Nation*, 3 May 2006). These defeats saw Prachai providing considerable support to the anti-Thaksin movement. Some media reported that then Finance minister Somkid Jatusripitak had obstructed executives of Chinese state enterprise CITIC from providing \$US2700 million in financial aid to bail TPI out of its debts (*Phujatkan [Manager]*, 22 November 2006: 18). This was one of the reasons behind TPI's decision to advertise in *Phujatkan* newspaper and support its political stance against Thaksin.¹²

Moreover, the whisky tycoon Charoen, one of Thailand's richest men, had planned to list his Thai Beverage company on the stock exchange in 2005. This move, which would have given Thai Beverage more than 300 million baht in market capitalization, was, however, blocked (*The Nation*, 10 January 2006). Charoen has close ties with the palace and the military, with General Prem serving as honorary chairman of New Imperial Hotel Group owned by Charoen (Chai-Anan, 1997). However, Charoen was still unable to protect his interests. What was interesting about this was that the people obstructing Charoen were Thaksin's close associates such as Thanong Bidaya, the minister of Finance as Chairman of the Stock Exchange of Thailand and Anant Asavabhokin, president and CEO of Land and Houses as well as the member of the Securities and Exchange Commission (*The Nation*, 10 January, 2006). Anant had earlier been a major donor to Chamlong Srimuang's Palang Dharma party and the Dharma Forces Foundation (*Nechan Sutsapda [Nation Weekly]*, 19 January 2006). Thanong and Anant consistently opposed the Thai Beverage listing.

One of the main obstacles in this case was Chamlong who, as head of the Palang Dharma party, had been responsible for bringing Thaksin into politics in 1995. While still allied to Thaksin, in January 2006, Chamlong led a mass protest against Thai Beverage's listing, bringing together 172 organisations in an anti-alcohol network demonstration outside the Stock Exchange. The government's obstructionism regarding the Thai Beverage listing may be interpreted in two ways: as a fear of

upsetting Chamlong, a strong moral campaigner who has a proven record of mobilising against governments on moral issues; or as hiding behind the moral campaign against the listing in order to frustrate a Thaksin business rival. Charoen later turned to the Stock Exchange of Singapore for his listing (*Matichon Sutsapda* [*Matichon Weekly*], 13-19 January 2006). While Thaksin continued to have the support of many business leaders, these two examples illustrate the nature of a growing business disenchantment with Thaksin's use of political power to frustrate potential business rivals.

We now come to the most contentious and difficult capital relation of all: that between Thaksin and the CPB. The CPB was hard-hit by the economic crisis of 1997 (see Porphant, 2008). Paul Handley (2006a: 410) suggested that the crisis wiped out palace income. Dividends stopped flowing and many tenants stopped paying rent. The impact on the CPB was so hard that for a time it lost its controlling shareholding in its flagship bank, the Siam Commercial Bank (Porphant, 2006: 120-6; 2008). At the same time, the CPB's industrial flagship, the Siam Cement Group (SCG) was weakened and forced into a massive sell-off of subsidiaries. While the SCG strategy soon returned the group to profitability and saw it investing overseas (Siam Cement Group, 2005), there had been considerable damage done.

While the CPB remained the country's most valuable business group, in some sectors, it remained under threat from the prime minister's expanding Shin group. Thaksin did two things. First, he is said to have utilised his own money, showing his superiority over the CPB. At the end of the 1990s many well-informed Bangkokians talked of Thaksin having taken on many of the profligate crown prince's larger expenditures, including the refurbishment of the old palace of Rama VII, where the prince wanted to reside (Handley, 2006a: 424). This suggested that Thaksin was not beholden to the palace and may have even had an ally in the palace (see *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 January 2002). Thaksin was also perceived as crass in his government's dealings with royal finances; always secretive, direct discussion on royal finances is rare in Thailand. When, on 9 June 2006, Thaksin told the media that his government had approved a 500 million baht budget to finish a new building in the Grand Palace where all the king's guests dine together, many royalists were apparently flabbergasted and saw Thaksin as challenging the palace (Thaksin, 2006).

Given the above, the coming together of some key business groupings to back the overthrow of Thaksin is not surprising. TPI's Prachai joined the crusade by providing financial support to Sondhi Limthongkul, including placing rolling advertisements in the latter's *Phujatkan* newspaper. Charoen, who failed in his endeavour to enlist Thai Beverage in the Stock Exchange of Thailand, lent his support to Pramuan Ruchanaseree by offering his Ratchapruet Club as the venue for the launching of Pramuan's *Royal Powers* in late July 2005. The affair was eventually cancelled due to pressure from members of the Thaksin administration (Anon., 2005).

In a dramatic movement, in February 2006 Thaksin's old friend and mentor Chamlong led several thousand members of the Dharma Forces Foundation and joined forces with Sondhi Limthongkul. There is speculation that Chamlong's opposition to Thaksin became explicit after a figure close to the palace, presumed to be Prem, asked why "his son" (meaning Chamlong) had not joined the protests; Chamlong had been Prem's secretary in 1980s. Charoen also had ties with Prem and was able to challenge Thaksin's money power. Chamlong was the most militant

strategic leader, and when he join with Sondhi Limthongkul, Thaksin's fortunes plummeted. Sondhi's anti-Thaksin efforts had been continuous and these efforts gathered considerable momentum once these individuals allied themselves with him. The combined pressure of all these forces finally led Thaksin to dissolve parliament in February 2006 in an effort to break the political impasse that had developed.

The rise of the anti-Thaksin forces marked a significant merging of capital, middle class and aristocratic elements, politicians, media and royalist forces and would form the basis of a movement that would pave the way for the military take over on 19 September.

After the *Coup*: Military, Monarchy and Democracy

The 2006 *coup* raises several issues regarding the likely re-emergence of semi-democracy and strong military leaders.

First, it is hard to envisage an end to military involvement in politics and economy. On the first day of the *coup*, leader General Sonthi assured the Thai people that the CDR had no intention of becoming political leaders of the country and would return administrative powers to the people as soon as possible (Council for Democratic Reform, 2006). Three months later General Sonthi again echoed those exact sentiments stating, "We affirm hereby that we do not wish to continue to maintain power..." (*Matichon*, 20 December 2006). However, the history of the Thai military shows that the lure of power and its benefits remain potent and addictive. Despite the avowed intention not to seek continued power, the experience of office, the power that comes from it and the benefits that flow from power lead to a reluctance to let go. The *coup* has already brought about numerous political and economic pay offs for *coup* leaders and *coup* supporters; it seems certain that military officers are not going to fade away easily.

A number of armed forces personnel were appointed by the CDR to the National Legislative Council, formed in late 2006 (Table 1). Given the predominance of state officials and the military, the appointed Council that has emerged from the *coup*

Table 1. CDR-appointed National Legislative Assembly, 2006

Position at appointment	No.	%
Retired government officials	43	17.8
Military officers	35	14.5
Business	30	12.4
Media and artists	20	8.3
Permanent secretaries of various ministries	17	7.0
Judiciary	12	5.0
Academics	11	4.5
State enterprise officials	8	3.3
Police	7	2.9
Legal experts	7	2.9
Bankers	6	2.5
Other	46	19.0

n=242. Source: *The Nation*, 14 October 2006.

seems like a throwback to the 1950s and 1960s – the heyday of benefits and pay offs. As many as 11 generals from the army and two from the police are now board members of some 13 state enterprise agencies (Table 2).

The military has also revived the long-gone tradition of once again receiving the lion's share of the national budget. The new government's budget for security proposed by CDR-appointed prime minister General Surayud Chulanont for the Ministry of Defence to the National Legislative Council was an unprecedented 115 billion baht. The proposed budget did not suffer any cuts, with the reasoning being that the Defence Ministry's budget had been in continual decline since 1997. The committee also added that while the defence budget of Thailand's neighbouring countries amounts to more than 4% of their GDP, in comparison, the Thai Ministry of Defence has utilised less than 2% (*Thairath*, 12 December 2006). Even so, the budget allocations to the Ministry of Defence account for 28% of the total budget, the highest single allocation, followed by the Ministry of Education at 25% and Ministry of Finance at 19.8% (*Matichon*, 17 November 2006).

The military has a range of sources of funding that it can draw on. For example, on the day of the *coup*, a total of one billion baht was withdrawn from the military's "secret funds" (*Matichon*, 28 December 2006). In late 2006 the military requested a budget to set up a new security agency and was granted 555.96 million baht for the CNS Special Operations Center, comprising 13,625 personnel from all four sectors

Table 2. Military and police appointments to state agencies and enterprises

Name	Board Membership
General Saprang Kalayanamitr Assistant Commander of the Royal Thai Army	Chairman of the Airports Authority of Thailand Chairman, TOT Co. Ltd
Air Chief Marshall Chalit Phukphasuk Commander of the Royal Air Force	Thai Airways International
General Pairoj Panichsamai Deputy Supreme Commander-in-Chief	Thai Airways International
Admiral Sathiraphan Keyanon Navy Commander-in-Chief	Chairman, Ports Authority of Thailand
General Montri Sangkhasap Army Chief-of-Staff	Executive Chairman, Communications Authority of Thailand
Lt General Somchai Maranetra Director of Joint Communication, Department of Military Communications	Chairman, Thai Post Company
Police Lt General Chanwut Watcharapuk Assistant Police Commissioner	Expressway and Rapid Transit Authority of Thailand
General Athikhom Tanlert Advisor, Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence	Chairman, Mass Transit Authority of Thailand
Air Chief Marshall Sommai Dabpetch Air Force Chief-of-Staff	Aeronautical Radio of Thailand

Source: *Matichon*, 10 November 2006; *Matichon Weekly*, 15-21 December 2006; *Siamrath Weekly*, 20-6 October 2006; Aeronautical Radio of Thailand, 2006; Thai Airways, 2006; Ports Authority of Thailand, 2006; Communications Authority of Thailand, 2006; Thai Post, 2007; Expressway and Rapid Transit Authority of Thailand Board, 2006.

of the armed forces, with a term in office until September 2007 (*Matichon*, 28 December 2006). Commanding this new special operations force, whose task is to quell activities and protests by various political factions before the general elections take place, is none other than the ubiquitous General Saprang. The problem with this budget allocation is not just that it drains funds from other sectors, but it is a direct political intervention since any action can be interpreted by the military as a national security threat.

Aside from this special unit the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC) is another agency recently revitalised. As head of the National Security Operation Command (in his capacity as the commander and Army Chief-of-Staff), General Sonthi explained that ISOC was the equivalent of the US Department of Homeland Security (*The Nation Online*, 12 December 2006). Such a potentially great and powerful agency will dominate whichever government eventually emerges after general elections take place, scheduled for late 2007. The military appears to be immensely proud of their newly installed ISOC, yet from a critical perspective it has been pointed out that this agency has been previously responsible for creating problems that have escalated into significant political problems. Some examples whereby ISOC personnel have been accused or suspected of involvement are insurgencies in southern Thailand (from 2004); the alleged car bomb assassination attempt on Thaksin in August 2006, and the New Year's eve explosions at nine locations around Bangkok on 31 December 2006. It can be anticipated that increasing ISOC's power will be a grave threat to any democratically elected government in the future.

The lack of foresight and planning by the military junta that staged the *coup* has become evident, with its claim to protect the monarchy. It is not clear that the emerging security framework can provide the assurances required by the monarchy, even though the royalist military led by Generals Sonthi, Saprang and Anuphong will remain influential into the near future. These three generals are not the only ones with power; and other forces within the military can also avail themselves of the power and benefits that come from the military's new position, including the increased power associated with a revamped ISOC. There is no assurance that, upon the eventual death of General Prem, the monarchy will be protected. There is no assurance that when the new elections have taken place the new government, which may be formed through a coalition, will readily accede to the wishes of these three generals without heeding the voice of other groups. These other factions will be expecting to reap the benefits of the increased budget for the armed forces, military organisations, positions and appointments in parliament, state enterprises or even economic pay backs from politicians and business interest groups. It must be said that the narrow-mindedness and shortsightedness of this junta directly affects the unity of the military and creates the condition for new conflict and disintegration as different factions fight to secure posts.

The junta's focus on ensuring who will be the next army commander-in-chief is also a rather narrow objective. They seem to think that a royal succession can be peaceful as long as they secure the army (Handley, 2006b; Tasker, 2006). However, this transition period will depend more on the personality of the present king because, in fact, the monarchy in Thailand is not institutionalised; it has been built up around the personal charisma that has been created for the incumbent king. In

this context, post-*coup* politics remains insecure, even though General Prem's men took over many key political posts. General Surayud, a close aide to Prem during the early 1980s and a fellow member of the Privy Council was chosen as interim prime minister. Meechai Ruchuphan, a law specialist for Prem in the early 1980s, was chosen to be National Legislation Assembly chair.

The *coup* has also made democracy in Thailand increasingly fragile and precarious, despite the fact that the junta promises to return democracy to the people. The question is how democratic is this going to be? Current indications are that the political direction is rather "retro." There is evidence for this in the deliberations around the drafting of a new constitution: should senators be elected or appointed? Should the prime minister be appointed? It is possible that whatever the shape of the new constitution, Thailand's democracy may well revert to a period of semi-democracy, a form of democracy that characterised the rule of General Prem in the 1980s.

The main reason why we can anticipate the re-emergence of semi-democracy stems from the fact that the drafting of this new constitution seeks to prevent the re-emergence of a powerful and threatening government such as that which proved so alarming under Thaksin. Inherent in this approach is a distaste for elected politicians as a whole and the design of a political system that reduces their control and power. This process is resulting in the re-design of a semi-democracy, where the bureaucracy is at the helm and where there is little participation on the part of political parties and the public. This would result in a diminished role for political parties. This form of democracy would be based upon the principle that it is the military who play the role of nurturing the government much in the same way that they did when General Prem was prime minister. The problem for the junta is that the political and economic context has altered dramatically and there probably isn't any military figure as powerful as Prem, who was able to convince the armed forces to support weak semi-democratic governments. The push for some kind of semi-democratic solution remodels the golden years of the Prem era but fails to provide an adequate new economic and political context for a Thailand that has changed politically and has a different location in global production than it occupied in the 1980s.

The 2006 military *coup* by royalist armed forces was staged with the immediate aim of eradicating Thaksin and protecting the monarchy. In the short term, it might have been successful, yet undoubtedly Thailand will suffer from long-term repercussions. The soldiers are unlikely to hasten back to their barracks since they have now created a gigantic agency dealing with security – ISOC – that will support their continued political role. The junta's key members may not have evidenced any political plan for Thailand, yet it is apparent that this group is pushing for a semi-democracy to make a come-back after two decades. This is evidence of the political ignorance of the military and does not augur well for the fortunes of Thai democracy, for it is likely that such a winding back of the political clock will result in continuing political conflict and bloodshed.

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Notes

- ¹ Conflict between the classes started in 1980 with the failed *coup* of April 1980. Tensions continued throughout the 1980s and finally led to the intervention that brought down the Chatchai government (Tamada, 1995: 49). For an analysis of the 1991 *coup* from a broader perspective, which suggests growing conflict between bureaucratic/military and capitalist elements, see Hewison (1993).
- ² Other stated reasons for the *coup* included: the Thaksin government's creation of an unprecedented rift in society, corruption, nepotism, interference in independent agencies, and insults to the king (see Council for Democratic Reform, 2006).
- ³ For an alternative perspective on the role of royalists and royal sentiment in *coups*, see Hewison (2008, this issue).
- ⁴ Military cliques are often grouped by year of entry – their class number – into the academy.
- ⁵ The AFAPS is two-year preparatory school after which attendees then divide into the army, navy, air force or police and attend separate academies.
- ⁶ Yellow is the king's birth colour and has become a symbol of loyalty to the monarch. It is also a colour associated with Thai Buddhism.
- ⁷ Prem had been a former military commander, became prime minister in 1980 and remained in that position until 1988 when political pressure forced him to abandon hopes of a longer tenure. Always loyal to the king, he was made a member of the Privy Council.
- ⁸ While no evidence has been produced, following the *coup*, Sondhi claimed that the orders for Sonthi's dismissal and replacing him with General Ruangroj Mahasarakand were in Thaksin's hands for some months, waiting only for him to put a date on it. He is said to have finally signed the orders in New York on the day of the *coup* when it was too late. Sondhi would later allege that in June 2006 Thaksin had asked whether he would stage a *coup* and the General answered in the affirmative (Sonthi, 2006).
- ⁹ Thaksin would emerge as the owner of AIS, Thailand's largest mobile telephone operator, while Sondhi once owned IEC. Thaksin's company launched Thai Com satellite and subsequently IP Star while Sondhi's company oversaw Lao Star Co. in the People's Democratic of Laos.
- ¹⁰ Earlier birthday speeches by the king had also criticised Thaksin – see Thongchai (2008, this issue).
- ¹¹ On Charoen, see *Forbes* (28 March 2005) at http://www.forbes.com/free_forbes/2005/0328/028a.html (downloaded 6 July 2007); on the CPB, see Porphant (2008, this issue).
- ¹² Prachai was reported to have close contacts with both PAD leaders and some of the leaders of the *coup*. On Prachai, see "Prachai_Leophai-ratana," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prachai_Leophai-ratana and "Saprang_Kalayanamitr," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saprang_Kalayanamitr, both downloaded 6 July 2007.

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