

Thai Reversal; Firm Decisions

New Regime Seems Able To Tackle Its Problems

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Special to The New York Times

BANGKOK, Thailand, Oct. 10—"The problem with Thailand for the past three years is that you never could get a decision," a long-time American businessman remarked here the other night, two days after Thailand's military authorities over-

threw the civilian Government. "Now maybe we'll get some decisions," he said. It would appear, from the early hours of Thailand's new military Government, that many decisions are being made.

There was the decision first to ban then to allow, with strict supervision, the publication of the nation's newspapers. There were the decisions to arrest thousands of left-wing students and intellectuals, to seize a million books, to raid hotels believed to house the politically undesirable. There were decisions to make no major changes in foreign policy, to appoint a clearly pro-American adviser on foreign affairs, to seize all unregistered firearms and to clamp down on violent crime in Bangkok, which had one of the highest murder rates in the world.

There have been 15 decrees since 6 P.M. last Wednesday when the 24-member Administrative Review Committee, or military junta, headed by Adm. Sa-ngad Chaloryu, seized power from the civilian Government of Prime Minister Seni Pramoj.

Former Regime Enacted Only 2 Bills

There have been more decisions in the last five days of military rule than in the five months of the deposed democratic Government, which managed to push through the National Assembly, with the greatest of difficulty, only two bills—a measure providing for equality of the sexes and a 1977 budget bill.

Indecision was at the heart of the Seni Government as well as its two predecessors, formed by three elections in two years. Clearly a firm hand—or several of them, depending on the structure of the junta, still changing daily, and the civilian regime it announced on Friday—is now on the tiller.

But whether that will be enough for Thailand's many problems is still very much an open question, and many Thais are adopting a wait-and-see attitude.

Supporters of the regime, and there are many at all levels of society, believe that the end of the large demonstrations—they were a weekly and sometimes a daily occurrence—and a halt to the rising crime rate will help redirect the energies of the country into more productive areas.

Corruption Was Pervasive

There is no evidence, however, that any of the corruption that survived the transition from militarism to democracy is on the way out. What is most likely is that the corruption will again be channeled in a more orderly manner that business can count on, and so long as it is not carried on openly as it was in the last years of the military period under Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, it can remain a manageable liability.

A return to even this sort of normality, so the theory goes, should attract back the foreign investment lost in the years of chaos and democratic bickering that occurred here as Communism was gaining the upper hand in Thailand's Indochinese neighbors. Its return should provide new jobs for the growing numbers of unemployed, discourage the flight of capital and slow the rise in the price of rice, which is a major cause of domestic discontent.

The new military government, or even a military-backed civilian government headed by Prime Minister Thanin Kraivichien, is expected to woo back some of the friends—particularly the United States—that had been driven off at least to arm's length by the civilian governments.

Vietnam has already taken notice of this likely development in a series of editorials and broadcasts beamed at Thailand beginning on the morning after the coup. The coup, according to the official Hanoi daily Nhan Dan, will "prompt the peoples of the region to step up their struggle against all such maneuvers of U.S. neocolonialism and of those forces on the imperialist payroll."

Political Discussions Curtailed

Where all this leaves the average Thai is not clear. The traditional reluctance to talk politics openly—a characteristic of the Thanom years—has returned with the military directive that bans any assembly of more than five persons. An exemption from this ban was announced tonight by the Interior Ministry for the ultra-right-wing Village Scout Movement.

Pan American World Airways and some other airlines ordered their planes to bypass Bangkok on the night of the coup, but by the next morning commercial flights were back on schedule. And after some hasty calls for reassurance had been received from worried tour operators abroad, the flow of tourists has continued uninterrupted, so hotel workers and taxi drivers are happy.

The newspapers are less lively and there are still armed soldiers with fixed bayonets and barbed wire barriers guarding some of the major public buildings and the universities.

Large numbers of students and left-wing intellectuals and politicians have left Bangkok for the provinces or abroad, to wait and see what will happen here.

In the final analysis, the success of the new order is likely to depend on what happens to consumer prices, and particularly the rice price, the attitude of the military and of its agents at the street level.

"It was the attitude of the field marshals of the old time—their big flashy cars, their many houses, their dozens of mistresses and their disdain for us little people that finally brought them down," said one taxi driver as he threaded his way through the unchanged traffic jam. "Maybe this group is different."

The New York Times

Published: October 11, 1976

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