

Post 1932 Politics: the rise and fall of Khana-ratsadorn

Topics

- Phibul's military nationalism
- Pridi's social revolution
- The rise of Sarit Thanarat

9.1 Phibul's military nationalism

The rise of military

The events of 1932-3 (1932 revolution and 1933 Baworadet rebellion) revealed the critical importance of the Bangkok garrisons. The control of military units in Bangkok became crucial to the control over the Siamese state.

Occupying the center of power, the military consolidated and extended its power. From 1933-1937, military budget accounted to around 26% of national budget. In 3 years after 1932, military personnel almost doubled. Military set up its own radio stations, using them to broadcast its new political ideas: "Your country is your house, the army is its fence".

The rise in military power was not held back by the core group in the government, Khana-Ratsadorn, who wanted to remain the guiding force in post 1932 politics. 1933 Constitution only had half of the representatives assembly elected, and the election was indirect. Political parties were forbidden. The government could control the assembly through appointed portion. Latter changes in 1937 and 1940, both toward expanding the roles of direct elections and the parliament, were resisted.

For almost a decade after 1932, Khanarat, who swore to be together, effectively controlled political power. The reformists who supported 1932 also hoped to participate. Businessmen who eventually formed Chamber of Commerce.

Labour leaders, journalists, progressive Buddhist Sangha. But a more open political system and radical social changes did not arrived. Reformist in fact were neglected or suppressed under Phibul's military nationalism.

Phibun who emerged as the political leader of the military government after taking a leading role in crushing Boworadet rebel. Phibul rose the position of Minister of Defense. He developed the ideology of the military as the central institution of Slam. Phibun consolidated his power over the army, and subsequently assumed the power of the PM. He concentrated the army power in Bangkok, and having his allies controlling the key positions. Raise military budget and refused to reveal details. Phibul's power eventually led him to neglect other fractions of Khanarat.

Military nationalism

The rise of military power brought with it the ideology of military nationalism. Military-bureaucrats portrayed as those who bring progress to the nation. The core of military nationalist ideas combined Fascism and absolutist nationalism. These ideas include, for example; the importance of fighting for territories, economic nationalism, and Ratthaniyom culture.

Luang-Wichit Wathakarn had a crucial role as a chief ideologist of Phibun. His ideas were borrowed from Fascists in Europe and Japan (Bushido), combined with Thai nationalism built under absolutism. Military as expression of popular will, promotion of anti-Chinese sentiment

Luang-wichit tried to justify military dictatorship arguing that the Thai nation needed strong leadership to oppose internal and external threats. There was a requirement for people's complete subjection to power.

Thais as fundamentally militaristic people. Luang-wichit composed songs and plays to spread this idea.

Economic nationalism was promoted. The idea supported gov't intervention in the economy to promote prosperity and self-reliance. Government intervention was poised against the role of Chinese in Thai economy. Gov't promoted to control trade, distribution, industries. Jobs were reserved for Thais.

The idea of "lost territories" was used to arouse nationalism. Khmer, Mon, Shan, became parts of the "golden peninsula". Based on Hitler's model, Phibun promoted the idea of "Maha-anachak-Thai", and put the Thais among the big races in the world. Military campaign to recover lost territories from France, invasion of Burma and Chinese to reclaim Shan territories.

Another core of Phibun's nationalist ideologies is "Ratthaiyom". This idea came as Phibun promoted his role as "the leader", also gaining power to pass laws and having power over press and unlimited arrests. At the height of his power, Phibun set out to undermine Royalism and old order. He abolished royal titles, and against the Royal privileges of Thammayut.

Phibun promoted the cultural project of "Ratthaniyom", redefining Thailand as a modern nation. He prescribed Western standard for dress, discouraging local habits. He supplanted conventions of royal courts, created national events in place of many royal-focused festivities.

9.2 Pridi's social revolution

Phibun's reign was interrupted by the invasion of Japan. This came after his power had also faced challenges, especially from groups who aspired to reform Siam in pre 2475 time including the merchants, leaders of labour, urban intellectuals, and provincial notables. Against Phibun, they galvanized under Pridi Banomyong.

Pridi's ideology differed from Phibun. He envisioned the overthrow of absolutism as opening up participation in economic progress and politics. Against exploitation of absolutism, Pridi's vision intended to give "freedom, equality, and security to all". Promote economic development and provide "the greatest education possible".

Pridi's economic plan envisioned a complete restructuring of the economy. The plan aimed at socialisation of agricultural land (sale of land back to the state, voluntary?), creation of inheritance taxes. This went direct against the core of royalty and aristocrats wealth. Pridi also set up Thammasat as alternative to Chulalongkorn. Thammasat as the institution educating modern bureaucrats (in contrast to bureaucrats who served the Crowns.)

Pridi's alliances

Pridi eventually (re)built alliances with merchants. Initially neglected the urban entrepreneurs who supported 1932, Pridi moved closer to them after the failure of his economic plan. He played crucial roles in renegotiating unequal treaties, eventually allowing import tariffs to be raised. He also supported joint government-business ventures. Pridi's political faction eventually relied on business enterprises to provide supports.

Pridi's another crucial group of allies was the politicians from the North-eastern region. The Isan MPs resented the centralisation of power and wealth in Bangkok, the treatment of North-east and Laotian as inferior, the neglect of North-east, and the portrayal of Isan as poor region. Isan MPs requested for equal treatment of Isan people, diversion of funds to Isan provinces. They also protested against Phibun's control of press and his military spending.

Seri-Thai

Pridi's opportunities to build resistive force against Phibun came under the special circumstance of Japan's invasion.

"Seri-Thai" became opposition to Phibun's alignment with Japan. Seri-Thai consisted of 2 fractions; 1) Seni Pramoj's international fraction; 2) Pridi's domestic fraction

Pridi's Seri-Thai fraction (domestic operation) combined different forces who came together with varied reasons, such as Pridi's civilian group, some naval officers, Isan MPs, some Bangkok-Chinese. The Isan MPs, for example, envisioned the independence of Laos or gaining back of Laos territories.

9.3 The end of Khanarat and the rise of Sarit Thanarat

As WWII ended, political conflict and debate broadened. The contest between Pridi and Phibun was absorbed to a wider contest, sparked by the revival of royalism. The central debate became: "socialism VS royalist restoration". Pridi was pulled to his radical alliances, while Phibun was dragged to the army alignment with royal causes.

Pridi's enjoyed only a brief leadership after WWII, as he was propelled to power to negotiate favorable peace deal. Pridi took the opportunity to also limit the military's power. He appointed Seri-Thai to key position in the military. He also made assembly and senate completely elective.

The influence from Russia led to the repellent of anti-communist law. CPT entered election, found supports among students, labour, and had its own newspaper. Labour leaders expanded roles and carried out strikes, while Isan MPs supported Indo-Chinese nationalist groups.

The re-emergence of Royalism

Following their Seri-Thai cooperation, the Royalists and Pridi initially cooperated. Pridi released royals imprisoned by Phibun, and invited those in exile back. The royalists had opportunities to re-expanded their ideas that the "King" is the core institution of Thailand. King was presented as righteous and representing the whole Thais. Royalist groups, led by Khuang Aphaiwong, Seni and Kukrit Pramoj, formed the Democrat Party.

But the royalist quickly ended their cooperation with Pridi. They shifted their alliance to the army. Fraction in the army, especially those sent to reclaimed lost territories in Shan states, was still angered by the neglect they received from Pridi's government. The alliance between the army and the royalists was alarmed by the victory of the Communist Party in China. Growing urban disorder seen as prelude to the rise of communism in Thailand was linked to Pridi. Pridi's political future ended with the mysterious death of King Ananda Mahidol.

The return of Phibun

As US pledge to support gov't that opposed communism, Phibun returned to power with 1947 Coup that overthrew Pro-Pridi government. But Phibun was no longer the leader with full power. He required supports from various fractions.

Khuang, Kat Katsongkram, Phin Choonhavan, Phao Sriyanond, an Sarit Thanarat. Royalists gained their influences over this new Pro-Phibun alliance.

Phibun's return to power in the 2nd time was marked with different ideology. The group who conducted 1947 Coup provided the rationale that they wanted to uphold the honour of army, resolve the question of royal assassination, get rid of communism plot, restore efficient administration. And most importantly, to install the gov't that respect "nation, religion, and King". Phibun had to reject his earlier political position. The military assumed new role of the guardian to the King.

The military-aristocrat alliance designed constitution to limit the power of the elected assembly. They reintroduced appointed senate, and increased the King's power. Control of military power became control of the government.

The return of Phibun saw the use of military power to destroy all oppositions.

Suppressing Oppositions

Pridi's failed attempts to return to power (Palace Coup, and Manhattan Rebel) led to his exile for the rest of his life. The navy was stripped of its power and resources. The leading Isan MPs were arrested and killed. To end their power, Phibun finally conducted another Coup to suspend cabinet, constitution, assembly, and political parties.

Phibun's purge of Pridi's allies expanded. Seri-Thai associates of Pridi, including Tieng Sirikan, were assassinated. Dissent from far south was crushed. Enforced assimilation against Islamic in the South. Captured and assassination of Haji Sulong Tomina. Suppression extended to labour leaders, Chinese community leaders, and intellectuals.

The rise of Sarit

As Pro-Phibun group consolidated their power, the real power actually belonged to two groups: (1) the police led by Phao Sriyanonda, and (2) the army led by Sarit Thanarat

Phao's police force played a crucial role in destroying Phibun's oppositions. They received US support, and had weapons and capacity equivalent to the army. Sarit Thanarat consolidated control of the army under the "First Division". Also expanding his force through US military aid.

Phibun's final attempt to hold on to power was through holding election and positioned himself as populist leaders. But his time in Thailand ended with Sarit's coup in 1957. Sarit consolidated all power under the army. He took control of the police, purging air-force, navy. He dissolved the parliament, suspended the constitution. Sarit assumed position of Prime Minister, Supreme Commander, Commander in Chief of the Army. Thanom Kittikachorn became the Ministry of Defence. Praphas Charusathien became the Ministry of Interior. He continued the violent oppression of the resistance from the far south and Isan. The accusation of communism continued to be used as his political tool.

Reading

- Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2002). *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, KL: Oxford University Press. (Chapter 8)