

11. Politics of Sarit's Era

Topics

- Thailand in the Cold War
- Businessmen and generals
- The restoration of the monarchy

11.1 Thailand and the Cold War

Cold War in SE Asia

Between 1945 and 1950, South-East Asia emerged as one of the key arenas of the cold war. US initially wanted to use the old colonial power to reoccupy the region, with Thailand and Philippines as their base of influences. March 1947, President Truman proclaimed US intention to block communism at all cost, and announce supports for any country resisting the expansion of communism

The initial attempt by Thai military to press for aid was refused by the US. But as communism won in China and gained strength in Vietnam and Malaysia, the US changed their strategy. "Domino Theory" became their concern. US intervened in Vietnam to prevent the dominos falling, and Thailand became US's front-line state.

US supports to the army and police

Korean War provided Thailand with the opportunity to show support to the US. Thailand quickly sent personnel and food support to the war, and the US quickly provided support to the Thai army in return

From 1950, US started supplying arms and equipment to Thailand. US military advisory set up in Bangkok to provide training. US military aids rose to 2.5 times the Thai military budget. The CIA also became the main supporter of the Thai police, supplying arms and training. As KMT army unit fled to the border in the North of Thailand, CIA trained them as a counter-move against Chinese Communist Party. CIA trained paramilitary unit and Border Patrol Police to provide border security

With the defeat of French in Vietnam, US became even more involved in wars in Indo-China. Thailand grew as the base for US military operation. US increased their aids and supply of weapons, help building roads to the Northeast region. Civil war in Laos led to the start of US stationing of their troops in Thailand. As Laos and Cambodia fell under the influence of Vietnam, Thailand became the base for US air-strikes. The number of US personnel and hardware in Thailand escalated from 1964.

The US also increased its support to the Thai police to fight the spread of communism into Thailand. In response to the spread of communism in remote forests of North, South, and N-E regions. From 1962, US provided arms, ammunition, vehicles, and aircrafts to the Border Patrol Police, supports were provided to paramilitary and provincial units. Between 1965-1968, Thai police force increased from 51,000 to 80,000. 50% of US economic aid estimated to be channeled to the police

The two decades with US support and resources flowing to the Thai army and police made them highly powerful. The more US involvement in Indo-China, the more that Thai military can bargain from US. From 1951-1972, US military assistance were more than 50% of Thai military budget. Additional aid

provided to Thai police and through USAID. Thai military domestic defense budget increased from US\$20million per year in early 1950s to US\$250million per year in early 1970s.

11.2 Businessmen and Generals

During the 1930s and 1940s, the businessmen and generals were on opposing sides. But in 1950s, as the generals abandoned state capitalism; they turned to share profits with the businessmen.

The new alignment paved way for the reorientation of economic policies under Sarit, which swung the power of the state behind the private enterprises. The US oversaw the change, but the basis of change also came from the growth of private capitals.

The generals used the state power to amass their private fortunes and political funds. Generals sat on the board, made money from directors' fees, patronage contracts, and various illicit techniques. Post 1947 Coup saw the increase in the number of state enterprises, with the board of these enterprises were filled with military men and politicians. These state enterprises already showed sign of inefficiency.

The Generals' Businesses

The military squeezed profits out from gov't expenditure. They took commission from contracts or concessions.

Sarit took control of the Lottery Bureau, using it as his political fund. Sarit and Phao set up companies to conduct business with gov't departments. The most attractive source was gov't construction contracts. Companies owned by them simply secured contracts to sub-contract to other companies. Their other source income were mining and mineral concessions, purchases of arms, and the recreational services provided to the US military.

The military leaders involved in illegal activities, most notably the opium trade. In the late 1940s, the "golden triangle" became the World's major opium producing area. Thailand became the main exporting point of opium. Sarit and Phao competed in trafficking opium.

Another source of revenue was timber. Military's logging businesses assisted by the construction of dam and highways. The construction of highways also allowed military leaders to gained ownership of land along the newly constructed roads. Lands along Mittaphap road, for example, were shared among the military leaders

Generals New Roles in Capitalism

With all the sources of income, in 1950s, the generals have turned to play a more sophisticated role in Thailand's capitalism. Following the path of Pridi, they took ownership of banks and the Thai Rice Company. They developed partnership with bankers. They sat on board of banks, while bankers helped them run their enterprises. The growing orientation of Thai military rulers toward private sector provided the basis for the subsequent change in economy strategy toward the promotion of market and growth, supported by the US.

11.3 The Restoration of the Monarchy

From 1935-1950, when Rama IX ascended to the throne, Thailand had been without resident monarch. There remain a strong royalist element within the bureaucracy, especially among the old bureaucratic families. From late 1940s, the bureaucrats and the generals allied to form a new social force with a net set of ideas.

Apart from Phibun, the leaders of the 1947 Coup had a close relationship with the royalists. They returned to the idea of defending "Nation, Religion, King". They increased the formal powers of the King in constitution. And they handed back to the monarch the control over the royal property. Crown Property Bureau grew in wealth from their land holding in BKK and investment in numerous businesses.

Sarit's special relations

Sarit had a special relationship with the palace. In 1957 Coup, he was made "Defender of the Capital". Under Sarit leadership, the monarch was restated as the symbolic head of the nation. National day was changed to the King's Birthday. Rak-na-kwan ceremony restored. The King and Queen made the tour of the rural area, especially in the Northeast. They also made visits to foreign countries. The government promoted the display of these events.

The Restoration of the Monarchy

The royal family quickly increased their visibility throughout the country. There were 4 times increase in the number of ceremonies, functions, and audiences attended by the King. The monarchy re-established ceremonial relationships numerous groups including business communities, middle-class, and army. They played part in fund-raising for those in the countryside. Royal sponsorship for marriages of top families. Royal presence in degree ceremonies. Royal family was projected as modern family who excelled in all aspects.

The importance of royal family to the military and Buddhism was restored. King and Queen were asked to be the honorary commanders. Royal flags ceremony was staged and Sarit talked of the army as "the army of the King".

The King's role as the patron of Buddhism was promoted. Royal Kathin ceremony was revived. The importance of Thammayut Sect was restored. Sarit supported monks to travel to rural and hill areas to spread Buddhism, and also to promote gov't idea of rural development. Sangha encouraged to play a part in preventing the spread of communism.

New Political Ideology

Under Sarit, the role of chief ideologist still belong to Luang Wichit. But the ideology in support of the military dictatorship was transformed. Military and its leader no longer projected as the sole power carrying the will of the martial nation. Army transformed into the "army of the King", deriving its power from above.

A concept of Thai state under absolutism was restored. Thainess as relating to the key importance of the monarchy.

But the difference was the summit was no longer the King but the "government headed by the King".

The army played a key role in the gov't, carrying responsibility for controlling politics and governance. The army is portrayed as being distinguished by special, semi-religious form of merit. The army is portrayed as brave, clean hearts, worthy of honours, and therefore suitable to be the leaders.

The political ideology made by Sarit left no room for civilian politicians. Military officers became "Rattaburut (Statesman)" and not Nak-Karnmuang. "Politicians think of elections, while the statesman think about the future of the nation".

The new political ideology promoted the theme that bureaucrats and soldiers were more suited to rule the country as they lack personal interests, which characterised politicians.

The concept of "Thai Style Democracy" was invented. Farang democracy, emphasizing on "representatives", have been misguidedly promoted in Thailand since 1932. The assembly full of military appointees was justified by stressing the importance of honesty and scholastic competence, without the influence from political party or the desire to win elections.

The traditional ideological role of the King was divided. The Crown assumed passive role of spiritual and moral leadership, while the military dictator took active role in governing the polity.

The military turned justification of its rule to fighting internal threats. That internal threat was summed up as "Communism". Communism became a shorthand for any dissent against the military and its view of the Thai polity.

Reading

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