

# Thais Ask If They're Next

By William Tuohy  
Los Angeles Times

Bangkok.

A prominent Thai editor-in-chief surveying the confused reaction in his country after the Communist takeover of South Vietnam asked plaintively in print:

"The question seems to be — what do we do now?"

It is a question vital to the future of Thailand and its 40 million people and one with which government officials and political commentators have been wrestling.

But as yet there has been no cogent answer, and no strong policy formulated by the new government.

In this soft, lush, rich land of elephants and dancing girls, there is deep worry and concern as to whether Thailand will become the next "domino" falling in the path of the steady march southward of Asian communism.

Gone are the balmy days when the massive U.S. military presence here served as a deterrent against any Communist intrusion. Seventy-five hundred of the remaining 27,000 U.S. servicemen are scheduled to depart by the end of next month.

Some wealthy citizens have been seeking exit visas and entry permits into other countries. Government officials reportedly are moving their fortunes out of Thailand. And American businessmen express concern over the future of their en-

terprises here.

You have just come from Saigon, asks a hotel employee of the visitor, "How long do we have — five years? Six months?"

Probably only the leaders in Hanoi can answer that kind of question, but the near-panic runs through a broad sector of Bangkok society.

"The people are really worried," says one Western diplomat who speaks Thai.

"They have a right to be. All you have to do is look at a map to see that Thailand is virtually surrounded by Communist or Socialist states.

"And with the United States phasing out its personnel and bases, Thailand no longer looks like the military bastion it appeared to be."

Each day, government officials issue statements on negotiations with Hanoi and Peking on the removal of U.S. troops, but they are often contradictory — adding to the general confusion.

The astute diplomats in the Thai foreign ministry are quietly seeking accommodation with Hanoi and Peking and calling for the

return of South Vietnamese aircraft to Saigon.

Meanwhile, Defense Minister Promain Adireksarn takes an opposite hard line declaring: "North Vietnamese threats to Thailand are just too much. We should not take these threats lying down."

Traditionally, Thailand has, like the bamboo, bent to the prevailing winds, and eventually this is what is expected to happen here. But for the moment, many politicians appear to have wet fingers in the air trying to determine which way the winds are blowing.

"Thailand took a staunch anti-Communist stance for 25 years," explains one diplomat. "And now almost overnight everything has changed. The Thais are emotionally, ideologically and institutionally unprepared for the change. And this creates a good deal of confusion."

Further, Thailand is faced with a Communist insurgency within its own borders which has been slowly gaining strength for the past decade. And the leaders appear no closer to finding solutions for—or even identifying—the root causes of the problems than they were ten years ago.

"The handwriting is on the wall," says one irreverent counterinsurgency expert here. "But these politicians won't get out of the massage parlours long enough to find out what's going on out in the countryside."

In any kind of military showdown, Thailand's army of some 200,000 would be readily outclassed by the battle-tested troops of Hanoi who number 600,000 — not including the southern Viet Cong.

As of now, few analysts here believe Hanoi has any present plans for an outright military confrontation with Thailand.

But Hanoi is deeply bitter at the Thais for sending 12,-



000 soldiers to South Vietnam and permitting U.S. jets to use Thai air bases to bomb North Vietnam.

However, Hanoi may well decide to step up the tempo of the Communist insurgency inside Thailand by increasing supplies of arms and trained cadres. And that could spell much trouble.

The rebellion is directed by the Communist Party of Thailand which, with soldiers trained by the North Vietnamese has been stepping up operations year by year.

Their stated aim is "to seize state power in order to establish a social Democratic system in the country as a preliminary and to establish a Communist regime as the ultimate goal."

But the really serious enemies of Thailand, says one irreverent Western analyst here, are alive and well and living in Bangkok, and more than likely driving big Mercedes cars. "These are the corrupt government officials and businessmen who have never cared about the people in the countryside but only how well they were able to live in the capital."

Basically, says a diplomat, this insurgency is not so much an external problem as an internal one. It could be retarded by a dedicated administration in Bangkok which showed true concern for the problems of the people in the affected areas.

"But it is dismaying to see the inability of the central government to provide these things, and I am pessimistic now. The Communists here are not strong yet. But they will get stronger by perhaps 10 per cent to 20 per cent a year.

"The insurgency is bound to grow. And in three years or six years, who knows?"

The total phaseout of U.S. troops has been greeted with mixed emotions among the Thais, since the U.S. presence once totaled 55,500

troops, and \$700 million in military aid over a decade.

And in view of the American experience in Vietnam, some perceptive Thai commentators suggest that it is about time that their countrymen cease relying on American support — since it may give them a false picture of their security if a Communist crunch should come.

Other Thais, more con-

---

servative perhaps, fear that a total U.S. military pullout would not only leave them vulnerable to Communist aggression but actually encourage the process.

Whatever, the case, Thailand is obviously disengaging from the United States. Whether it will become a victim of the Communist dominoes remains to be seen.

Classically, the Thais have been fond of talking about a special "Thai solution" to problems, which has meant simply muddling through.

But this time, the Thais may have to do more than merely muddle through in order to bend with the wind and accommodate successfully to the new political realities in Southeast Asia.

As the noted political scientist Prudhisana Jumbala puts it: "There is no doubt that the turn of events in Indochina is having a debilitating effect on the Thai people generally.

"This has raised doubts in my mind as to whether we will still retain our past ability to find a way through a dilemma."

---