

# The Thai Experiment

BANGKOK — When outsiders look at Thailand and sometimes when Thais look at themselves, they are inclined to shake their heads over prospects for overcoming the problems pressing in on this kingdom in transition.

Thailand is going ahead with a shaky experiment in democratic government just when Communist forces have taken control of neighboring Laos and Cambodia, and North Vietnam is threatening to support Communist-led Thai insurgents.

But a closer look at trends in recent Thai history—and at how the Thai leadership is tackling its current problems—inspires more confidence.

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Democracy, with many of the faults it stumbles over in any society confident enough to try it, has worked in the nearly two years since a short-sighted military dictatorship was overthrown by students with the blessing of King Bhumipol Adulyadej. Even more important at the moment, the government of Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj has committed itself to rapid if too-long-delayed economic development of Thailand's rural heartland.

In the view of informed, sensitive, calm Thais, the new thrust to bring farmers who have consistently produced food surpluses into the nation's mainstream is as unstoppable as the drive to make constitutional, popular democracy succeed. Sanoh Unakul, governor of the Bank of Thailand, put it simply: "It's a matter of survival."

Thailand's survival is not assured in the rough sea-change rocking non-Communist Southeast Asian nations after the end of the Indochina war. Groups linked with elements in the Thai military establishment are actively trying to undermine democratic processes and block fairer distribution of economic benefits.

Moreover, intelligence quarters here expect what has been a chronic but limited, low-level insurgent movement in border areas to be stepped up with North Vietnamese military support after the rainy season ends in October or November.

But whether or not this nation with its 44 million people and rich natural resources can be likened to a domino, it is not falling over like one. In a sense, the abrupt end of fighting

in Vietnam and Cambodia and even more the Pathet Lao's capture of Laos were healthy shocks to Thailand. In Dr. Sanoh's words: "We have a chance because we have some headway—but the question is time."

It is virtually undisputed here and elsewhere in Asia that the next year or two will be critical for Thailand's future, and that Thailand's future has become crucial not only in Southeast Asia but in the broader Asian scene. If Thailand does eventually fall like a domino to a cresting Communist wave, the nations beyond — Malaysia

first, then Singapore and even the huge prize of Indochina—would be widely expected to fall more quickly.

So Thailand's "headway" — often unheeded by Western observers who apply their own misleading standards—is of primary importance, in breaking the Communist wave before it becomes overwhelming. If a comparison must be made with an Asian country more familiar to Westerners, Thailand has much more going for it than South Vietnam ever did in the two decades following the Communist victory in North Vietnam.

It is the only Southeast Asian nation never to succumb to Western colonialism and has none of the hang-ups associated with a colonial past. It has a symbol of national authority in a monarchy going back two centuries and enjoying universal reverence although its absolute power ended in 1932.

Therefore Thailand has its own institutions, deliberately influenced but never dominated by *farangs*, or foreigners. It has its own lifestyle, a joyous approach to human existence that is often mistaken by Westerners for frivolousness. It has a largely homogeneous population dedicated to its own version of Buddhism. It has enjoyed land reform since the turn of

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the century, and its small farmers produce more than enough rice and other

agricultural commodities, even without having experienced the Green Revolution. Indeed, Thailand has weathered the world recession well partly because Thai farmers have not needed fertilizer whose cost has skyrocketed along with that of oil.

But there are drawbacks as well as headway in Thai society. In recent years, partly due to the Vietnam war, Bangkok has grown economically apart from and often at the expense of the countryside. Another serious gap exists between poor workers and peasants and rich, often corrupt merchants and—at least during military rule—officials. Much of the value of land reform has been lost in recent years because poor farmers have been done out of their land by crass moneylenders. And Thailand's population is growing too fast for comfort—at the current rate of about 3 per cent a year it will reach 100 million by the year 2000.

What is happening now in Thailand, at a rapid pace that was further speeded up by the collapse in Indochina, can be seen as an earnest attempt at least to bridge these problems by drawing on natural, built-in strengths. For this Kukrit, a journalist close to the palace who was not always taken seriously when he was editor of

Thailand's leading newspaper, is proving an effective leader.

"Only a strong prime minister can survive," said a well-informed, once skeptical Thai, "and Kukrit is proving a strong prime minister."

He has set a deadline of next March for the United States to leave the Thai airbases from which Indochina was bombed. Four bases, 225 planes, electronic facilities and 19,500 U.S. personnel are still in Thailand. Kukrit has not barred contingent U.S. use of Thai bases after March if the "situation in Southeast Asia" so requires. But he is trying to establish workable relations with the Communist regime in Hanoi, Saigon, Phnom Penh and Vientiane, relying partly on the needs of Laos and Cambodia for trade with Thailand.

His most important diplomatic move was to go to Peking last June and establish diplomatic relations. In doing this, most Thais agree, he bought time at the least and protection at the most from the nearest big power, which is believed to oppose further North Vietnamese expansion. Moreover, Kukrit's popularity boomed at home with his China trip, enabling him to take a firm grip on his ruling coalition of small, mostly conservative

parties.

This has not only increased political stability in Bangkok but has allowed Kukrit to begin pushing through his progressive economic program. While many Thais expected his budget incorporating the new emphasis on rural development to be held up in Parliament, possibly precipitating a new election just months after the one last January, it sailed through. In fact the conservative coalition is doing what the more liberal opposition parties, mainly the Democrats led by Kukrit's older brother Seni Pramoj, advocate.

Bands of young toughs calling themselves Red Gaurs—for a Thai buffalo that is violent when aroused—and financed by army and police sources have taken to breaking up student, farmer and labor union demonstrations. But Kukrit has publicly served notice on the top police brass that violence, such as shooting of farmer leaders, will have to be dealt with, even as he has made clear that students breaking the law in the cause of social reform will have to stand trial.

In treading his delicate path, Kukrit is cleverly mobilizing public opinion, which has grown as a potent force faster than anything else in Thailand. Military officers who might have been tempted in an earlier period to stage a coup plainly recognize this. Kukrit is not only trying to bring law and order into an Asian brand of democracy but is trying to persuade public opinion that being for the poor involves some redistribution of wealth from Bangkok to the countryside from whence it originally came.

His government has distributed \$125 million to village and district authorities to build what community projects they want. In the second year this fund will increase to \$175 million. The program is admittedly patchwork and political at first. But it is deliberately aimed at raising expectations among the rural population. By the beginning of Thailand's fourth five-year plan in 1977, it is hoped that a comprehensive rural development scheme will be working, involving marketing cooperatives for landless farmers and widespread agricultural credit for greater and more diversified production.

This would feed the growing population, bring in foreign exchange from continued export of rice and other food and build a more equitable society for individualistic Thais. It would also fight Communist-led insurgency.

There are some 8,500 Thai insurgents, mostly in the hilly North and vulnerable Northeast, to which the North Vietnamese have built roads across the southern panhandle of Laos. The 10-year-old movement is still in the recruiting stage and while guerrillas are well armed, they have made little headway among the rural population. When the government's rural development program begins to work, it is expected that Communist insurgents will be faced with a choice of trying to destroy projects benefitting the people or to take credit for them.

Either way, said a U.S. official who admitted past U.S. mistakes in advising the Thais on counter-insurgency, "The answer to insurgency can only be economic development."