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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

6 November 1985

The Double Nine Coup: What Next for Thailand?

Summary

Prime Minister Prem's political position has been shaken by September's coup attempt, but we think he can succeed in putting the revolt behind him. Prem will be helped by his political rivals' lack of standing and his demonstrated ability to overcome political setbacks. In addition, Prem's military backers, Army Chief of Staff Chavalit and the senior officers from Class Five, are in an even stronger position since the annual military promotions took effect last month. [redacted]

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If Thailand's economic difficulties intensify over the next several months, however, Prem runs the risk of losing his military supporters--particularly if public disorder results from increased unemployment. Moreover, there is a good chance of a new effort to remove him before his term ends in 1987, in our judgment, if Prem attempts to tighten his control over the Army in the wake of the coup attempt. [redacted]

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Picking up the Pieces

Since mid-September, Prem has moved quickly to repair Thailand's international image. [redacted]

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[redacted] the Prime Minister went ahead with his trip to the United States and Western Europe to demonstrate his confidence in

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the stability of his government. Bangkok has also tried to ease embarrassment about the death of two Western newsmen during the coup by claiming that the shooting was accidental. [redacted]

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Prem has moved cautiously, however, to counteract the domestic effects of the coup attempt. US diplomats report that the Defense Ministry has begun to transfer junior and midlevel military officers out of units that participated in the coup, under cover of the annual promotion cycle in October. Prem has also quietly abolished the post of deputy supreme commander--a do-nothing office for senior representatives from each service--because the three incumbents have all been implicated to varying degrees in last month's revolt. In the Cabinet, Prem has done the minimum to demonstrate that he is in control--replacing only three Cabinet ministers from former Prime Minister Kriangsak's political party. [redacted]

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Meanwhile, Prem has been carrying through on his promise, made after the coup collapsed, of a complete investigation. By the end of October, about 40 people--including Kriangsak, and a deputy supreme commander--had been officially indicted on charges of sedition. (See the Appendix.) But the alleged mastermind behind the coup, former Colonel Manun, remains at large through official connivance--after an Air Force plane took him to Singapore, he flew on to West Germany. [redacted]

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### Winners and Losers

In reviewing the incident, government and senior military spokesmen have been repeatedly emphasizing that the Constitution, not a coup, offered the best means of solving national problems. The US Embassy suggests that such statements may boost the prestige of the parliamentary system. Some media commentaries have also argued that the length of time since the last successful coup--which took place eight years ago--means that the parliamentary system is beginning to put down roots. [redacted]

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[redacted]

We view the coup attempt in a far more ambiguous light. Parliament and civilian politicians were completely left out of the struggle between the two military groups. On the other hand, the revolt and its aftermath underscored the fragmentation within the officer corps that has hampered recent political activism by the military. Although the constitutional regime won this battle, we think that the form of the political system and the

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division of responsibility among the military and civilians will continue to be contested.\* [redacted]

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In our judgment, certain individuals emerged from the revolt with their positions substantially strengthened. Our list of big winners includes:

- Army Chief of Staff Chavalit--the mastermind behind the revolt's failure. Although he has avoided drawing public attention to his role during the coup attempt, we suspect Chavalit will privately use the additional political capital he has acquired to further his military and political aspirations. Chavalit may hope that his role in suppressing the revolt will earn King Bhumipol's favor. [redacted]

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- Officers from Class Five of the military academy, who helped Chavalit monitor the plotters and who contributed their backing to loyalist forces. These officers--who graduated in 1958--are the most powerful Army faction today, according to US diplomats. As a reward for their previous support of the Prime Minister in 1981, when they were instrumental in crushing the previous coup attempt, Class Five graduates have gained command of 11 (out of 13) Army combat divisions within the past two years.

- Retiring Deputy Army Commander Thianchai, who received public credit for putting down the coup. Thianchai is reportedly considering a political career, and his fame may stand him in good stead. [redacted]

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The first losers, in broad terms, are Bangkok's international image and the reputation of the Thai military. The negative attention focused on the revolt and the killing of the Western journalists undermines, at least for the time being, government efforts to portray Thailand as a maturing Third World nation. In addition, the coup exposed the opportunism of a number of current and former military officers. More important, in our view, there are disturbing implications for the military in the fissure between senior officers, who generally opposed the coup, and junior officers, some of whom apparently agreed to support Manun. The past two coup attempts suggest a breakdown of traditional patron-client relationships that have restricted junior and midlevel officers to a subordinate role in both coups and politics. In the most extreme case, the crumbling of these

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ties between senior and junior officers could lead to more violent power struggles within the officer corps. [redacted]

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A number of other individuals have cause to rue their behavior as well:

- First Army Commander Pichtr. It is widely believed in official and military circles that Pichtr was a coconspirator who backed out at the last minute.\*

[redacted]

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Whatever the extent of his involvement, Pichtr's standing has already suffered, and a whispering campaign against him--run possibly by his enemies from Class Five--is in full force in Bangkok.

[redacted]

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In addition, press reports indicate that Army Commander-in-Chief Arthit has taken command of tanks formerly under Pichtr's control.

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[redacted] lingering suspicions about Pichtr may prejudice his chances of becoming Army commander in chief in the future. [redacted]

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- Commander-in-Chief Arthit. He has emerged as one of the biggest losers from this affair. The coup attempt reinforces the impression that Arthit is unaware of what is going on inside the Army and that he is unable to control his officers.\*\* Moreover, a recent Army publication attempting to highlight Arthit's role in putting down the coup is not likely to improve his image, according to US diplomats. Despite his public relations

\*Pichtr's behavior does appear suspicious: he had tried to get Manun and several other officers from a faction known as the Young Turks reinstated into the Army. [redacted]

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[redacted] he openly helped Manun leave the country after the coup failed. Our own view is that, at the least, Pichtr delayed rallying to the loyalist side until he was sure that the rebels would fail. [redacted]

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\*\*One rumor currently circulating in Bangkok is that Arthit planned the coup to replace Prem as prime minister. There is no evidence to support this. [redacted]

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campaign, Arthit has twice been junketing abroad when he should have been minding military matters at home--last spring, when heavy fighting occurred along the Thai-Cambodian border

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-- [Redacted]

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What Now for Prem?

Prem has shown a capacity to recover from political setbacks, and we think he will probably do so again. On the one hand, Prem has safely come through two revolts aimed at ousting him--a record for Thai prime ministers--and has developed a reputation as a political survivor. In addition, US diplomats believe that key political actors still view Prem as the most acceptable leader available. Despite frustration with Prem's faults, his rivals in the parties and the military lack his stature, and in our judgment have yet to establish the political base necessary to supplant him.

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Prem himself appears to be guardedly optimistic about his chances, and may even be considering a third term as prime minister after 1987

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Moreover, the US Embassy reports that the annual military promotions list, which took effect at the beginning of October, enhanced the power of the military coalition that blocked the coup attempt. Chavalit's promotion to Army Chief of Staff makes him the second most powerful officer in the Army, and Class Five officers retained command of most of the Army combat divisions. In our opinion, these developments will tend to intimidate opponents of the Prime Minister.

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Despite these positive factors, the coup attempt landed the Prime Minister in an vulnerable position, and we believe the next

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several months will be the most difficult Prem has faced since the April Fools' rebellion in 1981:

- Prosecution of some of the conspirators could force Prem to make tough decisions about how to handle allegations against senior officers.
- Prem's ruling coalition--which has lasted for a record two years--is looking a bit shaky following the coup, according to the Embassy. The largest party in the coalition, the Social Action Party (SAP), is attempting to shift blame for economic difficulties to Finance Minister Sommai--an apolitical technocrat--to shield SAP politicians who hold the agriculture and commerce portfolios.

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[Redacted]

- The government is also under fire to protect Thai exporters against possible US import restrictions, including the Jenkins textile bill.\* [Redacted]

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Prem's well-established political style is generally to stay aloof from controversy, but we think that he must take some steps within the next several weeks to retain the support of his military and political backers.

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[Redacted]

[Redacted] we believe Prem will not realign his ruling coalition or drastically alter his economic policies. There is a slight chance that Prem will promote Finance Minister Sommai to deputy prime minister to make him less visible and shield him from criticism. Prem's support for Sommai over the past year has been so marked, however, that we believe Sommai would remain the chief economic policy maker in any case.

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\*Thailand's textile and clothing industry, a major export earner, is heavily dependent on the US market, and Bangkok is trying to win an exclusion from the bill or increase the proposed quotas.

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[Redacted]

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Prem will, however, try to give the economic team a new look. We believe he may drop several ministers whose poor performance has been the subject of public comment for many months.

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The Prime Minister is also likely, in our opinion, to replace the SAP Minister of Agriculture to divert attention from problems in the agricultural sector.

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Prem's public statements since early September also suggest that he and his advisers will try to make his economic policy more palatable by mounting a public relations campaign and by taking some very limited measures to bolster the economy. For example, Prem's speeches indicate that he will reduce spending on major industrial developments that depend on imports from abroad in order to shift funds to projects that stimulate the rural economy. The government may also reduce interest rates, a step that it has been urging on private banks for several months. We believe, however, that the government will continue to give priority to dealing with Thailand's mounting foreign debt service ratio--which is expected to reach a record 27 percent this year, according to US diplomats. Concerns about paying off previous borrowing and limiting new borrowing thus will severely limit Prem's ability to earmark additional funds for economic stimulation.

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#### Dealing With the Plotters

Despite his promises, Prem probably realizes that it would be dangerous to take strong measures against the conspirators. We believe legal action against senior active-duty officers would be highly embarrassing to the Army, because it would draw public attention to divisions within the officer corps and because more accusations against senior officers might surface. It might also provoke a sympathetic backlash from officers who believed that Prem was unfairly making an example of those who were unlucky enough to be caught after Manun was allowed to escape. Police officials are already nervous about getting involved in quarrels within the Army, and a senior police official told US diplomats that the investigators feel caught between one military group that wants the plotters tried and punished and another group that does not.

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As a result, the government will be extremely selective in choosing which active-duty officers to punish. We strongly doubt, for example, that Prem will take legal action against Pichtr or Air Force Commander Praphan, who claims he was kidnaped by the coup plotters. Midlevel officers suspected of involvement are unlikely to face disciplinary action beyond transfers to less favorable posts.

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The fate of the former senior officers, such as Kriangsak, and those officers caught in flagrante during the revolt is another story. We believe the government will probably use these officers as scapegoats, and thus portray the whole affair as a half-baked plot by former officers. Although Manun is almost certain to escape prosecution

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Prem appears to have decided that the retired officers, including Kriangsak, should be tried to give the government's handling of the case more credibility. We believe, however, that eventual punishment, if it occurs, will probably be light. According to the US Embassy, the government could stretch out the legal process until public and international interest fades, and then arrange for light sentences. A slightly different option would be to exile the conspirators or to seek a royal pardon for the plotters at some stage of the judicial process.

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Risks Abound

US diplomats report concern in official circles that unknown backers of the coup attempt will strike again within the next several months to try to overthrow Prem. The rumors appear based on the assumption that damning evidence against Pichtr will surface, prompting him to try to oust the government rather than face disciplinary action. Some observers also suggest that Queen Sirikit, who has favored Pichtr in the past, would support a coup attempt by him. We believe the chances of this outcome are slim. Prem would probably not punish Pichtr even if proof of his involvement turned up. Furthermore, although Queen Sirikit may remain sympathetic to Pichtr, we believe her ability to support a coup would be limited by the King's decision to back Prem right now.

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Nevertheless, Prem's dependence on Chavalit, Class Five senior officers, and the King means that a shift of their support would finish him politically. Although the behavior of Chavalit and Class Five during and after the coup indicates that they oppose any move to oust Prem right now, Prem knows that his predecessor Kriangsak was forced to resign when key military commanders in the capital would no longer back him. He thus will consult with these groups to win their approval of any action he might take against the conspirators.

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Our analysis of Prem's chances would be much more pessimistic if:

- The Prime Minister took no action to deal with the economy, the plotters, and his sagging public image.

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- [REDACTED]
- Economic performance deteriorated sharply over the next several months, possibly because of the enactment of US import restrictions on Thai goods. If increased unemployment prompted widespread demonstrations against the government or public disorder, we believe prospects for military intervention would be strong.
  - Prem attempted to tighten his control over the Army as a result of the revolt or if he tried to punish powerful officers such as Pichtr. [REDACTED]

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Appendix

The Labyrinth of Conspiracy and Failure

We do not believe that a group of senior officers joined the plotters only to betray them at the last minute, as some observers have suggested.

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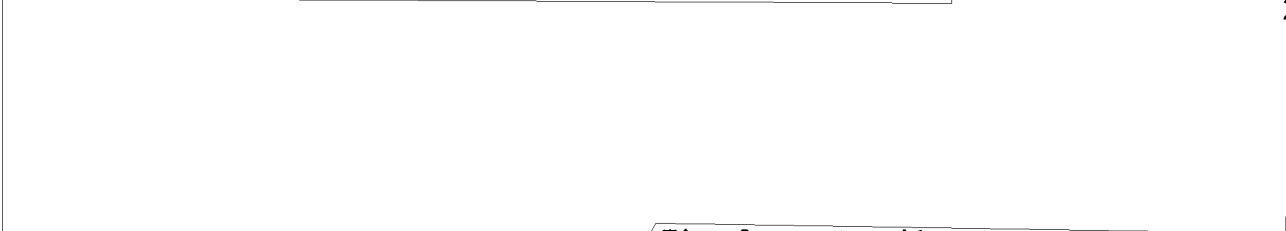


The main conspirators--Manun, Kriangsak, Soem, and Yot--were apparently motivated by a desire to restore their standing after several years of political decline. According to the US Embassy, Kriangsak and Yot also wanted to recoup their losses in the so-called "chit funds," Ponzi-like investment schemes outlawed by the government last year. Opportunism or loyalty to Manun, or to his brother, who is an Air Force officer, also drew in a number of participants, particularly troops from Manun's former unit and a number of officers who had served under him. After the coup was launched, the rebels apparently believed that desire for a change of government was strong enough to draw in additional units.

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The venture was a rapid and abject failure.

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The low standing of those involved in the plot, in fact, led wags in Bangkok to dub the coup group "the Turks and the turkeys."

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