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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

4 February 1976


MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Brent Scowcroft
Assistant to the President
(National Security Affairs)

SUBJECT : The Thai Election and Its Implications for the US

1. The attached Interagency Intelligence Memorandum contains the intelligence community's assessment of how the present election campaign in Thailand will affect Thai-US relations and prospects for retention of a residual US military presence in Thailand.

2. As the memorandum indicates, there is a strong possibility that the Thai military may assume control of the government at some point before elections are held, or soon thereafter. Within the Thai military establishment, there is considerable nervousness, plus a growing disenchantment with Thailand's experiment with parliamentary government. Moreover, there are rivalries and crosscurrents within the military establishment which could result in one or another clique's attempting a preemptive coup against the presumed plans of some other group. In short, the situation in Thailand is fluid and subject to quick and dramatic change.

3. We gave serious consideration to issuing the attached study as an "Alert Memorandum." Our decision not to use that particular art form should not be misconstrued as a sign of complacency about the state of affairs in Thailand. We will, of course, keep a close eye on this situation and alert you promptly to any new developments giving further grounds for concern.


for George Bush

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Attachment

cc: The Secretary of State
The Secretary of Defense
The Chairman, The Joint Chiefs of Staff

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**Interagency
Intelligence
Memorandum**

*The Thai Election and
Its Implications for the US*

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February 4, 1976

INTERAGENCY INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM*

SUBJECT: The Thai Election and Its Implications for the US

KEY POINTS

With elections scheduled for April, Thailand is experiencing a growing sense of malaise concerning the country's experiment with parliamentary democracy.

- This sentiment is expressed by King Phumiphon, the military, and many prominent civilian figures.

In these circumstances, there is a strong possibility that the military might decide to assume control. For the moment, the King appears to be against such a course, and many military leaders would be loathe to act against the King's wishes. The situation is fragile, however, and subject to quick change.

Other developments which would increase the likelihood of a coup are:

- a sharp deterioration of the security situation.
- a breakdown in public order caused by widespread strikes or anti-government disorders.
- the prospect of a left-of-center coalition coming to power which would threaten the vested interests of the military and conservative elements in Thailand.

* This memorandum has been prepared jointly by the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the Department of State.

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Short of a coup, there is also a possibility that the elections may be postponed, leaving Khukrit, the present caretaker prime minister, to rule through emergency decree.

- Khukrit, the military, and the King may well come to prefer this alternative over going through with the elections.

Implications for the US during the election campaign

- By the 20 March deadline on removal of US combat forces, the US will probably be able to complete the negotiations now in train with the Khukrit government regarding the residual US military presence.
- But there is no assurance that an agreement signed by Khukrit will be honored by a new government.
- The election campaign probably will complicate Thai-US relations. The US presence is likely to become an issue in the campaign, and campaign pressures may force some candidates to insist on a total US military withdrawal.

Implications for the US after an election

- If an election is held, it would be likely to bring another centrist-conservative government into power.
- Such a government would probably be as fragmented and contentious as the present government, but it would keep Thai policy toward the US more or less along present lines.
- A less likely possibility is either a coalition based exclusively on rightist elements, or one which included the Socialists.
- A rightist government would be cooperative with US interests, but would still be restrained by political considerations on how far it could go, or appear to go, in accommodating the US.

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- A government in which the Socialists had a strong voice would make it difficult, if not impossible, for the US to maintain any military presence in Thailand. Such a government, however, could prompt the military either to force the government to resign or to overthrow it.

In the event of a military takeover, the resultant government would be sympathetic to US interests.

- It would be unlikely, however, to reverse the long term trend toward a more non-aligned Thai foreign policy. Nevertheless, a military government might call for a substantial increase in US assistance if faced with a greatly expanded insurgency or a breakdown of civil order in the country.

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THE DETAILS

1. Thailand is scheduled to hold a general election early in April, its second in little more than a year. This is an election that few Thai want and that many believe will do little to strengthen Thailand's nascent parliamentary process. In the interim, Prime Minister Khukrit will continue to head a weak caretaker government amidst a growing disenchantment with the parliamentary system that runs particularly deep within the military but also extends to the King and, to some degree, the public at large.

2. The Thai, with a long history of authoritarian government, have no deep commitment to Western style "democratic" government. Parliamentary institutions and practices have only recently entered a period of testing and adjustment under the still new constitution. With its parliamentary system lacking roots in Thai political culture, the unwieldy coalition Khukrit had put together and the compromises he had made with student, labor, and other "leftist" interest groups have been seen by many Thai as signs of weakness and "instability" rather than the normal political rough and tumble of an open parliamentary system.

Rumbling on the Right

3. In recent months, King Phumiphon Adunyadet, who played a key role in the toppling of the former military regime in 1973 and who remains closely identified with Thailand's new democratic constitution, has added to the conservatives' malaise by stressing his own dissatisfaction -- in delphic fashion -- with the political status quo. Although he remains aloof from day-to-day involvement in politics, he recently issued a public warning against the communist threat to Thailand, calling for a campaign of national unity. Clearly, the collapse of the Laotian monarchy, combined with Thailand's own internal economic and political problems, have alarmed the King and dampened his enthusiasm for the Khukrit government.

Probably by design, the King has given no clear indication of the extent of his dissatisfaction, the concrete steps he would endorse to alleviate its causes, or those he would consider too extreme in the present situation.

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The Military

7. We nevertheless believe that there is a threshold for military action against the political system. Any one or a combination of the following circumstances would likely galvanize the military into action against the civilian government:

- a sharp and sustained deterioration of the security situation either within Thailand or along Thailand's borders with Laos or Cambodia;
- a breakdown in public order caused by widespread strikes or anti-government demonstrations;

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- the prospect of a left-of-center coalition coming to power that would threaten the privileged position of the Thai military or the substantial economic interests of its leadership. In this respect, the October 1973 "Revolution" has yet to produce a revolutionary Thai government. The Thai politicians that have managed the government since parliament was first seated in 1974 have prudently refrained from encroaching on Thai military equities.

The Next Two Months

8. All factors considered, the present situation would seem to weight the odds against a blatant military move to scrap the parliamentary system between now and the general elections scheduled for April 4. There still appears to be considerable support among the Thai power elite for continuing Thailand's parliamentary experiment in the hope that the elections will produce a more stable and effective government.

10. Another possibility is that the military, perhaps seconded by the King, will decide that elections at this time are not likely to produce an acceptable government. There is growing conservative pressure for Khukrit to move his government toward a more authoritarian and stable footing. There is also growing sentiment within the armed forces for the postponement of the elections and the replacement of the present unwieldy coalition cabinet with a new civilian team that would rule through the emergency powers of the present constitution. At the moment, such a shift toward a more authoritarian posture within the present constitutional framework appears more likely than an outright military takeover in defiance of constitutional procedures.

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11. Khukrit, himself, could come to see some advantages in moving toward greater authoritarianism within the existing constitutional system. Aside from possibly ensuring the military's continued acquiescence in a parliamentary system, such a move could help him deal more effectively with a number of difficult domestic problems that could damage his own and his party's chances of retaining political power.

12. We believe the King would probably go along with an agreement between Khukrit and the military leadership to postpone the elections and rule through emergency decree, although the King would expect Khukrit and the military to take the lead in working out such a consensus. The King's acquiescence in this move would be even more likely in the event of a crisis or in a situation where he believed that a military takeover was the only other alternative.

13. But except under extreme circumstances such as the prospect of a left-wing government coming to power -- which he would consider a direct threat to the crown -- we do not believe the King is prepared to scrap the constitution he was so instrumental in creating and lend his support to a restoration of military rule. Furthermore, agitation on the part of Praman and other critics of the present government within the military could ultimately force the King to take a more positive position regarding his support for the parliamentary system. This in itself might substantially lessen political tension in Bangkok between now and the elections.

14. A complicating factor is the political ambition of former army strongman Krit Siwara, [REDACTED]

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15. Krit's claim that he will not run in the coming election comes as a surprise to most observers, since he is considered by many a leading candidate for prime minister. Krit may fear that the next government may not last any longer than the present one,

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and he may also fear that charges of corruption will be aired against him in the campaign. If he does remain out of the race, he will almost certainly provide financial support to various parties and candidates on the political right, and he will be a factor in the negotiations to form the next government.

16. Another complicating factor is Khukrit's uncertain health. A sustained period of severe stress could force him to step down, possibly even before the election. Praman, in his capacity as deputy prime minister, would be the logical successor. Should this occur, it is possible that Praman would attempt to manufacture a pretext for postponing the elections, at least for several months, in order to strengthen his political base.

Implications for the US

17. During the Election Period. At present it appears the United States will be able to complete its ongoing negotiations regarding the residual US military presence with Khukrit's caretaker government.* Several factors, however, may undermine any agreement arrived at prior to March 20.

- As the election campaign begins to pick up momentum, it probably will generate new pressures for a further loosening of Thai relations with the US, as happened in last year's campaign. At some point in the campaign, Socialist and Democrat Party politicians may force Khukrit to acknowledge that his government in March 1975 formally called for the withdrawal of all foreign military personnel and not just combat troops.
- Both North Vietnam and Laos are insisting that removal of the American military presence in its entirety is essential to the establishment of normal diplomatic relations. The sentiments of those

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who feel an accommodation with its communist neighbors is essential to Thai security could be roused during the campaign so that they insist on a total US withdrawal.

- The recent appointment of Anan Panyarachun, former ambassador to the US, as the Foreign Ministry's Undersecretary, adds another element of uncertainty to Thai/US relations. Anan, who takes office at a time when Foreign Minister Chatchai will be concentrating most of his attention on the election, may try to take advantage of the situation to give Thai foreign policy a more neutralist cast.

- Finally, given the personalized character of Thai politics, there is no assurance that any agreement signed by the Khukrit caretaker government will be honored by a new government.

18. After the Election. No parliamentary party dominates the field of contenders in the present election campaign and even the Thai cannot predict its outcome. It is possible, moreover, that the shape of the eventual government will not become immediately apparent even after the returns are in. Prolonged inter-party negotiations may be required to form a coalition. Three outcomes are more likely than other theoretically possible permutations -- a centrist-conservative coalition government; a conservative-socialist coalition; or a rightist coalition.

19. We believe that the most likely outcome of an election is for another fragmented and contentious centrist-conservative based coalition not unlike the last Khukrit government. Such a government would probably keep Thai/US policy more or less along

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present lines. The majority of likely candidates for parliament are conservative businessmen or former government or military officials who favor close relations with the US. Their views are affected, however, by the prevalent assumption that the US is no longer prepared to accept major responsibility for Southeast Asian security affairs and that the US cannot be depended on to come to Thailand's aid in the face of an increased communist threat. For example, Democrat Party leader Seni Pramot, arguing that Thailand should have a non-aligned foreign policy, has already gone on record against the continued presence of US military "advisers."

20. The conservatives, and particularly senior military officers, recognize that Thai military forces remain dependent on US material aid. Although there is now growing concern over the implications of this dependency relationship and its impact on the effectiveness of the Thai military, the conservatives believe that Thailand must continue to maintain good relations with the US in order to keep necessary aid flowing. In addition, Prime Minister Khukrit and other senior government officials seem genuinely convinced of the value of maintaining US security facilities in Thailand. Unless he radically changes his position in his attempt to expand political support, a new Khukrit government would pose few problems for the US. Given Thai concern over its material dependency on the US, however, it can be expected that a new Khukrit government would pressure the US for greater assistance in developing their own military production facilities.

21. The next prime minister, however, could have difficulty putting together an exclusively conservative coalition, considering the strong rivalries and animosities among some conservative parties and factions. This could lead to an effort to include socialist representation in a political marriage of convenience. If, for example, Seni's Democrat Party wins the largest number of seats, and its prospects appear fairly good, Seni would probably try to form a coalition with other centrist or rightist elements.

22. If he fails in this effort, Seni would probably turn to the Socialist Party, as he has in the past. The Socialists would demand a voice in Thai foreign policy, and pressure for the removal of the US residual presence and termination of US military

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aid would increase. In their most recent policy pronouncement, the Socialist bloc called for the elimination of all "imperialist influences," (including foreign investment), the repudiation of all existing treaties and secret agreements, and the introduction of a "non-aligned" foreign policy -- all measures to reduce or eliminate US security ties with Thailand. A strong Socialist voice in the coalition would make it difficult, if not impossible, for the US to maintain any military presence in Thailand. This situation, however, could create the political climate in which the military would preempt any precipitous change in Thai foreign policy either by forcing the government to resign or by overthrowing it.

23. A third possibility is a rightist parliamentary coalition. Such a government would be cooperative with US interests, but political considerations are likely to limit how far any rightist government can go in working with the US. Praman, for example, is likely to do or say whatever he believes will strengthen his political position and would not support US interests if he believed it would cost him much political support. He has gone on record, however, in opposition to any broad effort to weaken Bangkok's security relationship with the US, and has made it clear that he places a high value on the continued flow of US military aid.

24. If Praman, Krit or some other rightist figure comes to power through a military backed overthrow of the parliamentary government, their inclination to cooperate closely with the US would probably prevail initially over any attempts by the Foreign Ministry to steer a more neutral foreign policy course. The Thai military leadership, however, has drawn generally the same conclusions from the end of the Indochina war and the withdrawal of US military from the region as have other Thai politicians. Although a Thai military based government would seek to maintain a residual US military presence.

it is unlikely that such a government could reverse the long term trend toward a more non-aligned Thai foreign policy. On the other hand, a greatly expanded insurgency or a general breakdown of civil order could create the kind of situation whereby a Thai military government would call for a substantial increase in US assistance.

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