

Title	<Review Articles>The Rise and the Fall of the Thai Young Turks A Review of Chai-Anan Samudavanija's, The Thai Young Turks
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Citation	東南アジア研究 (1983), 21(1): 130-135
Issue Date	1983-06
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2433/56132
Right	
Type	Journal Article
Textversion	publisher



The Rise and the Fall of the Thai Young Turks

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A Review of Chai-Anan Samudavanija's

*The Thai Young Turks***

The Thai Young Turks is the work of a prominent young Thai political scientist. Chai-Anan Samudavanija is the first of his generation to achieve the rank of professor at a major Thai university. Like many of his colleagues, he has recently increased his efforts to publish in the English language. His research on the role of middle ranking officers of the Royal Thai Army is indeed an important and welcome addition to the literature on modern Thai politics.

Although the military has always been central to the Thai political system, authoritative works on the subject have not been readily forthcoming. David Wilson's article in John J. Johnson's edited volume [Johnson 1962] is perhaps the first of its kind to examine systematically, and critically, the role of the Thai military. There is also the often quoted dissertation of Jin

Vibhatakarasa [1966] which unfortunately was never revised nor published as a text. The most recent attempts to grapple with this subject were rather unsatisfactory [Elliot 1978; Lissak 1976; Welch and Smith 1974].¹⁾

Published works on the military written by Thais have also been rather scarce. Books of note are Thawat Mokarapong's study of the 1932 Revolution, Suchin Tantikun's coverage of the 1947 coup d'état,²⁾ and perhaps my own work on the Sarit regime. In 1978, there was an attempt to generate interest in the study of the military in Thai politics. Young political scientists and students met at Chulalongkorn University to listen to and discuss six papers which were presented over the

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** 1982. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 120pp.

1) These works relied on secondary sources which proved to be their major weakness. Also, their fascination with neat theoretical frameworks overshadowed meaningful insights into reality.

2) See Suchin Tantikun, *Rattaprahan Ph. S. 2490* [The 1947 Coup], Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, 1972.

course of several weeks. These meetings were well attended. The papers were subsequently published [*Journal of Social Science* 1978].

It is worth noting that this series of lectures was held a year and a half after the 1976 blood-letting at Thammasat, and at a time when the so-called young turks were actively on the prowl. From the papers, one of which was Chai-Anan's, it was apparent to all present that few concrete facts were known of the Thai military. Thai scholars were as much in the dark as their foreign colleagues. While it was easy to discuss and debate the hypotheses of Huntington, Janowitz, Finer, and Nordlinger, it is a different matter to try to use those conceptual tools to analyze Thai politics. Too many gaps and questions are still left unanswered.

Chai-Anan presented another paper on the military at a conference held in New Delhi in February 1979. Soon after his return, he was appointed political adviser to the new prime minister, General Prem Tinsulanon. As it has now become exceedingly clear, Prem's rise can be attributed to the lobbying and maneuvering of the young turks. It is also clear that the NIDA connection brought together the uneasy coalition of General Sant Chitpatima, the young turks, and several members of the Thai intelligentsia. Chai-Anan was a member of this group and thus was able to become acquainted with these officers. Also, he was able to observe first hand the in-fighting and political chicaneries that were endemic at those rarefied levels of politics.

The book itself is somewhat concise, although ambitiously divided into six chapters. Chai-Anan provides the reader with hard-to-find information on the structural organization of the Thai Army, lists of key army officers from 1974 to 1981, the names and commands of the young turks, and a handy list of Army commanders-in-chief from 1932 to 1981. The appendices, charts and figures reflect Chai-Anan's meticulous scholarship, which is appreciated by this reader. My only criticism regards his failure to update and illustrate the changes and modern implications of the Soi Rajakru and Sisao Deves cliques first outlined by Riggs [1966].³⁾

Chai-Anan's first two chapters cover the historical background of Thai politics and the involvement of the military, in particular, the army. While these chapters may appear perfunctory, Chai-Anan does bring out important cultural variables that affect Thai political behavior. Concepts such as *barami*, *thi phung*, *greng jai*, *kan muang*, *kan borihan*, *plong tok* are covered. While I am sure that they are not developed to the satisfaction of many readers, Chai-Anan's attempt to incorporate these concepts is a step in the right direction.⁴⁾

In hindsight, the coup of April 1, 1981 appeared rather foolhardy. Given the nature

3) Several years ago, while still associated with the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, Ho Kwan Ping studied these two cliques in some detail. Perhaps Chai-Anan should have used these studies to up-date his information.

4) In this respect, Chai-Anan and his colleague Sombat Chantornwong are the appropriate authors to propagate what should be studied as the fundamentals of Thai political phi-

of Thai politics and the lessons of history, certain conditions are usually met before a coup can be successful and lasting. It has been generally observed that most coups had a strong leader who had captured the fancy, or had direct control, of strategic troops, particularly the First Division. More importantly perhaps, is the reliance on the monarchy as legitimizer of newly acquired power.

Chai-Anan's coverage of the coup and its aftermath discusses these two requisites openly. In the past, the political role of the monarchy has been discussed in sacrosanct and cosmological terms. *De facto* influence and involvement were ignored, in fact, forfeited to the *de jure* concept of national palladium—magical, and above politics. The April 1, 1981 coup in effect normalized the anomaly between theory and practice. It deflated the institution of the monarchy to the level of mundane secular politics. The throne was no longer merely a ceremonial legitimizer of power. It had become a prominent actor in the schema of political succession.

Despite the young turks' rhetoric of democratic representation, socio-economic justice, legal rights, and order, the general public was sluggish to embrace these underlying principles as adequate bases for governance. There had been too many coups—14 since 1932. Thais have be-

losophy since they had jointly published *Khwamkid thang kanmuang lae sangkhom thai* [Thai Political Philosophy and Society], Bangkok: Banakit Press, 1980. I agree with them that basic conceptualization is still very much in need in the study of political behavior in Thai society.

come skeptical and cynical about the goals and aspirations of military coup groups. Anticipation of the event is exciting. The prediction of imminent coups is also a favourite national past-time. But in most instances, broadcasted coup rationale is seen as merely *ex post facto* justification for its staging and execution.

Interestingly, Chai-Anan reveals that the young turks controlled 42 key army battalions and regiments. Most of those officers were combat veterans who had fought insurgents and communists. Even the assessment of the least biased of observers will concede that the young turks held preponderant firepower within the army. Yet they failed in the crunch.

The weak spot in their armor was their failure to anticipate the actions of members of the royal family. They underestimated the antagonism that the royalty had against General Sant, the coup's titular leader. It is also clear that middle-ranking officers did not have direct access to the monarchy. The young turk's socialization had been one of ritualistic obedience to the throne, and their perception of the monarchy was based on the sense of duty and historical purity, not political pragmatism.

It is ironic that the young turks did not openly criticize members of the royalty for politicizing the monarchy. Instead, they admonished and protested Generals Prem and Athit's monopoly of loyalty to the throne. Their decision not to resist the Prem countercoup was predicated upon the realization that if they had won the battle, they would *ipso facto* destroy the prestige and thus the sanctity of the

throne. Their actions confirmed the dictum that political power in Thailand remains with those who have the backing of the army and king.

Finally, the incident inaugurated a new phase of Thai politics. It openly legitimized the political role of the throne and members of the royal family. It hinted at the possibility of a prismatic segmentation of various political groups backed by factions within the army and factions within the royal family and its entourage. As the Chalard coup of 1976 highlighted the importance of controlling the major broadcasting networks, the young turks' coup brought up lessons that one invariably learns in the game of chess—the king is important, but in many gambits, it is the queen that must receive particular attention.

Theoretically, middle level officers are important to a coup d'état. However, they are seldom central actors.⁵⁾ The young turks' episode confirms this. It is nevertheless important that we should study and learn more about them as a pressure group.

Chai-Anan noted that there were several factors common to the leadership of the group. The seven leaders were in the same cadet class at the Thai Military

5) Chai-Anan contends that there have been few studies on the middle-ranking officers. This is substantiated by a review of what has appeared in the journal *Armed Forces and Society*, 1974-present. Of course, exceptions are studies of young armies emerging from a colonial past. One of the best is Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian Military*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.

Academy. This provided the initial link and basis for group cohesion. Furthermore, they were head cadets and leaders since Academy days. They came from middle-class backgrounds. They were all from the Central region. They attended the Army Staff College. They all served in Vietnam. Colonel Chamlong and Colonel Manoon, the two *primi inter pares*, had advanced education in the United States. It was also noted that 11 members of this class—Class 7—were senators. Several held influential positions in the Prem government.

While the author has succeeded in tantalizing us with the preceding information, he does not develop these leads much further. For example, we get glimpses of the significance of the common Vietnam experience, the shared middle-class beginnings, but yet we seem to fail to understand fully how these contributed to their collective philosophy and vision.

One would hope to find that the American experience for Chamlong had a more lasting effect than the *pai thiew/joyride*. Also, the significance of the Vietnam experience seems pregnant with information which may explain the group's emotional and political character. Perhaps this reviewer is asking for something that is not there, and in fact, the young turks are merely officers with good intentions, but have yet to fully develop their political acumen.

The latter may be closer to the truth. Chapter 5 entitled "In Search of a Better Society" is rather revealing. Although they insisted that they were professional

soldiers, in fact the young turks were not different in kind from their seniors whom they despised. It is impossible to defend the army's corporate interests, which was the group's goal, in the milieu of politics of scarce resources without dirtying their hands. The allocation of society's values and resources are determined through authoritative political action. For example, the counterexhibition of captured communist weapons, while students at Thammasat were immersed in Red China week, is by nature political. It also seems unrealistic for a professional soldier to sit in parliament and not be involved in politics.

Not only were they confused about their own professionalism, their expressed ideology was rather sterile. Perhaps Chai-Anan had given too much credit to the formulation of the young turks' ideology. Major Sanchai's slim volume on *Why do Soldiers Stage Coups?* [Thahan Dek 1978] in essence summarized the theories of Janowitz and Huntington. In fact, infatuation with the Huntingtonian reformist zeal is not new.

What came out of it was essentially a bid for conservative revolution. Analytically, it can even be depicted as neo-Marxist, as the group's plan for national salvation stipulates that initial attention should be focussed upon socio-economic reforms. The group believes that political equality will be stable as it will be based on a developed and correct economic and social substructure.

As long as the young turks acted as a pressure group within the army they were able to bide their time as king-makers.

However, I seriously doubt whether they were equipped, or had the foresight, to govern and spearhead reform and development. A conservative revolution seems destined to fail from the start as the thrust of the group's ideology contained internal weaknesses and contradictions. They failed to understand that it is impossible (except conceptually) to compartmentalize the social, the economic, and the political, to change one and keep the others on hold. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether the nature of capitalism and free enterprise was fully understood by the young turks.⁶⁾

On final balance, however, Chai-Anan's efforts should be roundly applauded. It took courage and foresight on his part to prepare this volume. Chai-Anan has indeed raised relevant and important issues, issues that are now perhaps easier to tackle as the young turks had inadvertently let the royal cat out of the bag.

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6) Chai-Anan concedes that "they did not understand the market mechanisms of the free enterprise system," p. 61. On top of this ideological confusion, we get very little sense of how far the young turks will go on economic and bureaucratic reform. In fact, they talk about having the magical "sword", but we do not get any sense how it would be wielded and how deep a cut was intended. Reminiscent of the movie "Z" and pronouncements of Sarit, societal ills were seen as cancerous and must be drastically and violently expurgated. This would ask: "Are the young turks *det khat* (unrelentlessly decisive) enough?"

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