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Author(s)	Tamada, Yoshifumi
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## **Coups in Thailand, 1980–1991: Classmates, Internal Conflicts and Relations with the Government of the Military \***

Yoshifumi TAMADA \*\*

### **I Introduction**

The military has played an important role in Thai politics and has been involved in ten successful coups since 1932. Unsuccessful coups have also not been rare, while rumors of an impending coup have frequently circulated.

This essay deals with three coups which occurred between the start of the Prem Tinsulanon administration in March 1980 and the downfall of the Chatchai Chunchawan government in February 1991. There are two reasons why this period is selected. First, it was a period of gradual democratization of Thai politics. The Kriengsak Chamanan government (November 1977–March 1980) had started to liberalize the least democratic policies of the Thanin Kraiwichien government (October 1976–November 1977). The Prem government (March 1980–August 1988) tried to establish a rule of parliamentary politics and his successor, Chatchai, was a leader of a political party. Second, the 1978 constitution was in effect during this period. This constitution was rather long-lived in the Thai political setting [Murashima 1987b] and prohibited active military officers from becoming cabinet ministers. However, a coup in 1991 abolished the elected parliament and the 1978 constitution, thus bringing to an end the period of gradual democratization since 1977. In this sense, the years from 1976 to 1991 mark one period in Thai political history.

Thai politics during this period featured three significant political forces: the military, the monarch and political parties [Murashima 1987a]. Expectations rose that another coup would not occur or would fail even if it was attempted because gradual democratization was observed and two coups in the 1980s had failed [Suchit 1990]. The decreasing possibility of a successful coup meant less political power for the military, whose most vital source of political power had since 1932 lain in its ability to stage a successful coup. This is why the political role of the military will be analyzed by focusing upon coups.

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\* This essay is a summarized translation of a Japanese version written in 1991 and does not mention political events after 1992.

\*\* 玉田芳史, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

This essay is an attempt to answer several important questions concerning coups. Why did the military stage coups? What factors affected the success or failure of attempted coups? Were there any factors that deterred the military from staging coups?

Judging from the fact that coups were attempted repeatedly and rumors of expected coups were heard frequently, it might be thought that military leaders could stage a coup whenever they wanted to do. However, military leaders were not always planning a coup. They could not necessarily stage one even if they planned it. They could not always succeed even if they dared to run the risk. Certain conditions were requisite for them to stage a coup. Hence, it is possible roughly to indicate under what circumstances the probability of a coup is strong.

When was a coup attempted? It would be useful to review briefly the causes of the coups since 1932. It seems that, with an exception of the 1932 coup, where the political ideal to overthrow the absolute monarchy was significant, there have been four major causes.

First, serious political turbulence tended to induce many people to turn to the military for a solution. Just after every coup, the military issued a statement explaining why it had to resort to the coup. Poor economy, political instability or turbulence, changing international situations and the threat to national security were recurring themes. They often were only pretenses. If there were objectively justifiable reasons, the military never failed to include them in the statement, even if they were not true causes of the coup, because they would solicit the support or sympathy of the populace for the coup or, at least, mitigate the opposition against the coup. When there was mountainous discontent against the previous government among the populace, the statement of the military was persuasive. Coups in 1947, 1957 and 1977 were cases in point.

Second, worsening relations between the military and the government gave rise to the high possibility of a coup. The 1933 coup was a typical case. But serious conflict between the two was rare. The government, recognizing well the political strength of the military, including its ability to carry out coups and to control the mass media (TV and radio stations), made efforts to avoid such conflict as much as possible. The military, for its part, rarely made unreasonable claims on the government, since it had to pay attention to its own reputation.

Third, internal conflict between factions within the military could be the cause of a coup, when one faction tried to do away with a rival faction by this means. Internal conflict leading to a possible coup has been restricted to within the army since the 1950s and been closely interrelated with struggles for prominent positions.<sup>1)</sup>

Fourth, there were several coups the military government staged against itself in

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1) While the air force was junior to the army from the start, the army defeated the navy in 1951 and the police in 1957, thus establishing indisputably its pre-eminence among the military and the police.

order to strengthen the governing power by abolishing the constitution and the elected parliament. Coups of this type occurred when the government enjoyed full support of the military. Coups in 1951, 1958 and 1971 were among them.

In practice, coups were motivated not by a single cause but by some combination of these four causes. Moreover, needless to say, there must be prospects of success for the military to stage a coup.

In analyzing the three coups after 1981 chronologically, this essay pays special attention to the reasons of the second and third types, as those of the first and fourth types can be discerned rather easily. Before proceeding to the analysis, it would be convenient to explain in brief some important but not well-known features of the internal struggle related to the personnel management of the army.

The authority for personnel changes resides in the minister of defense for generals, the army chief for field officers, and division commanders for ranks from captain to second lieutenant [Kalahom 1962: 161-162].<sup>2)</sup> Personnel changes above the rank of general are usually carried out on 1 October every year. A list of personnel changes of generals is drafted by the commander-in-chief, checked by the supreme commander and defense minister, and submitted through the prime minister to the king for sanction. The supreme commander rarely changes the list because his real power is limited, and the army chief often holds the post concurrently. Whether the defense minister will change the list or not depends upon his personal relations with the armed forces. In contrast with Chatchai, who rarely intervened in personnel changes, Prem had his say because he had his own supporting base in the army even after his retirement. However, even Prem paid regard to the will of the army chief, and if he intervened it was usually at the stage of drafting the list. This is because the revision of the list after its submission to the defense minister engenders strong opposition from the armed forces.

Therefore, the army chief can generally have his way in the personnel change of generals and field officers. This does not mean, however, that he can manage personnel affairs arbitrarily. His authority is limited by some factors. First, as mentioned above, the defense minister may intervene. Second, seniority is highly valued: promotion with skipping of ranks is impossible. Among officers of the same rank, the one who attained the rank earlier has priority. Promotion violating this rule of seniority causes discontent in the army. Third, he must pay regard to the balance of power so as not to intensify internal conflict in the army. There are various factions competing for important posts. If army chief favors some factions excessively at the expense of others, the disfavored will become discontent and internal conflict will intensify. The armed forces make much of unity (*khwamsamakhi*) and the commander-in-chief must be discreet in making personnel changes. Fourth, mandatory retirement at age 60 is strictly

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2) It is notable that all but 1 of 26 ministers of defense from the 1932 coup to the 1991 coup were active or retired military officers.

observed.<sup>3)</sup> Exceptional extension of tenure engenders strong opposition among the officers. These rules governing personnel changes make it difficult for an army chief to centralize his power highly.

Among army posts, most importance is attached to those commanding fighting units (*fai kamlang*), especially those stationed in Bangkok and the surrounding area. The 1st army region (stationed in Bangkok) and the special warfare unit (Lopburi) are preferred at the level of regional command; the 1st, 2nd and 9th infantry divisions (Bangkok, Prajinburi and Kanjanaburi, respectively), the 1st special warfare, artillery (both in Lopburi), anti-aircraft artillery and the 2nd cavalry (both in Bangkok) divisions at the division level; and the 1st, 11th (both in Bangkok), 21st infantry (Chonburi) and the 4th cavalry (Saraburi) regiments at the regiment level. On the contrary, posts in the supreme command and the office of permanent undersecretary, and inactive posts attached to commands or commanders, are unpopular even if appointment to them is accompanied by a rise in rank and salary, because these posts are devoid of substantial duty or commanding authority.

In the competition for good posts, personal connections are important as well as ability and performance. Traditionally, personal relations with senior officers and the type of affiliated corps (infantry, artillery, cavalry and so forth) have been significant as such connections. However, being classmates of the army cadet academy, which was founded in 1887 and reorganized after the Second World War, has become most important since the late 1970s. The first graduates, in 1954, of the newly reorganized academy were counted as Class 1. The increasing significance of being classmates was mainly due to the remarkable success of Class 7. Each class came to unite as a pressure group for the purpose of promotion of classmates.<sup>4)</sup> In addition to the army cadet academy, officers of the three forces have opportunities to learn at the staff college of the armed forces and the national defense college. This has given birth to classmates across the boundaries of the three forces.

## II The Coup of 1 April 1981

### 1. *The Rise of Class 7*<sup>5)</sup>

Prem, who had been in the Northeast from 1968 to 1977, became prime minister in March

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3) Those who have reached sixty years of age by 30 September must retire on that date. Thus officers born in the same year retire in different years depending on whether they were born before or after this date. Moreover it is quite common that even the most powerful officers lose power and authority completely on retirement. This is why several army-chiefs in the past have tried to extend their retirement age.

4) The strength of unity differs from class to class. Usually, even the most united class includes an anti-mainstream group. And the number of classmates differs from class to class. The numbers of freshmen of the army cadet academy were, for example, 28 for Class 1, 148 for Class 5, 136 for Class 7, and 168 for Class 12 [JPR 1972: 203-245].

5) As there are excellent studies on Class 7 by Chaianan [1982a; 1982b], this essay does not refer to the class in detail.

1980 with strong support from a group of field officers who called themselves *thahan num* ("Young Turks"). This group was formed in 1973 by Class 7, who graduated the army cadet academy in 1960 [Chaianan 1982a: 86-87]. Leading officers of the group included Manun Rupkhajon, Prajak Sawangjit, and Jamlong Simuang. The group joined the 1976 and 1977 coups as a significant force and helped Kriengsak become prime minister. When Kriengsak became unpopular, they forced him to resign and backed Prem. The group augmented its power and influence because it played a decisive role in important political events and was a supporter of the highest leaders of the military and politics. Neither Kriengsak nor Prem had a strong supporting base among the army units in the capital, and both needed the support of the group. The group got important commanding posts of regiments and battalions in the capital and the surrounding area in reward for its support.<sup>6)</sup>

There were many officers who felt unhappy with the greater prominence of Class 7. Generals were uneasy about the powerful field officers. Even field officers were discontent with the fact that their juniors enjoyed faster promotion and were arrogant. Knowing that too much dependence on Class 7 was dangerous, Prem started gradually to search for supporters other than Class 7 among his classmates and former subordinates in the 2nd army region.

## 2. *The Coup of 1 April 1981*

On the night of 31 March, leading members of Class 7 visited Prem to ask him to lead a coup the next day. But Prem stubbornly refused. Athit Kamlangek, a deputy commander of the 2nd army region, became aware of the planned coup and telephoned the queen. The queen ordered the coup group to let Prem come to the royal palace [Athit 1981: 81-82]. Early in the morning of 1 April, a group calling itself "Revolutionary Council" staged a coup with San Jitpathima, deputy commander-in-chief of the army as leader instead of Prem.

The group, of which the secretary-general was Manun, proclaimed the success of the coup and explained the reasons for it as follows. As selfish politicians were struggling for gains under the guise of democracy, this weak and unstable administration would compromise the survival and safety of the country. The government had not taken decisive measure to solve the economic problems in spite of the worsening conditions of national finance and economic life of most of the people. Social justice and traditional good culture were disappearing, everybody was becoming selfish, laws were not respected and crimes were increasing. The government had not tried to cope with these imminent problems and had neglected internal conflicts within the government. The council had to stage a coup because the solution of these problems was of urgent necessity and was impossible through parliamentary means [Thairat 1981: 77-80].

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6) The group controlled 42 battalions in April 1981 [Chaianan 1982a: 97, 113].

Prem went to Suranari base of the 2nd army region in Khorat with the royal family in the morning of 1 April and set up counter-coup headquarters with Athit's energetic assistance. The presence of the royal family at the base was decisive for Prem to get the support of the second, third and fourth regional armies, the navy, and the air force. After the battle over the control of broadcasting, the 21st infantry regiment secretly entered Bangkok early in the morning of 3 April and arrested leading officers of the coup forces.

Coup forces consisted of elite troops and surpassed the government forces in military strength [Chaianan 1982a: 65]. Nevertheless, the coup was defeated. One reason was that the coup leaders, having too much confidence in their military strength, did not have a carefully worked-out plan [Prachamit 1981: 8-9]. Secondly, Prem had managed to go to Khorat. And, most significantly, the government forces had the king over them. The last factor was decisive because, first, many officers who, judging from precedents, should have been neutral joined the government side and, second, the coup forces could not join battle with the king's forces and were forced to give up without fighting.

The coup group originally tried to have Prem as their leader, which means that the group did not plan to overthrow the Prem government but to consolidate it. From the group's point of view, the Prem government could be strengthened if Prem listened to the group's advice. However, Prem did not always have to listen to them, because he had supporters other than Class 7, especially anti-Class 7 forces in the army. For example, officers from Classes 1 to 8 excluding Class 7 had held a gathering on 20 March 1981 [Pisan 1988: 71]. But for these supporters, Prem could not have repeatedly rejected the advice of the very powerful Class 7. Moreover, there was some talk that members of Class 7 would be demoted to insignificant positions [*ibid.*: 71]. Therefore, Class 7 intended to get rid of such anti-Class 7 officers and to win back Prem. In fact, the revolutionary council had prepared a decree to demote many anti-Class 7 officers to insignificant positions [Thairat 1981: 93-94]. In other words, the major enemies of the group consisted of rival forces within the army. In this sense, this unsuccessful coup resulted from internal conflict within the army.

Finally, the coup had a profound effect upon the army. First of all, it highlighted the king as a check on coups. The defeat of the militarily successful coup made it more difficult to stage a coup which had little prospect of royal sanction. Second, the remarkable rise of Class 7 before the coup proved the importance of the solidarity of classmates. The other classes imitated Class 7. At the same time, top brass became more concerned with the groupings of field officers. Third, Class 7, leading officers of which were dismissed, lost power and other factions became more powerful.

### III The Coup of 9 September 1985

#### 1. *The Rise of Athit and the Problem of Succession*

The suppression of the 1981 coup made Athit a hero. He was promoted rapidly to

commander of the 1st army region in April 1981, assistant army chief in October of the same year, and army chief in October 1982. Moreover, he came to serve concurrently as supreme commander of the armed forces in October 1983. His exceptionally rapid promotion owed heavily to the fact that he had been a supporter of Prem since the 1970s, played a significant role in the suppression of the coup, and gained the confidence of the royal family.

Athit gradually promoted classmates of Preparatory Class 5 (P-Class 5, hereafter) to top brass (see Table 1).<sup>7)</sup> Army leadership regained the unity which had been lost since the 1970s. His consolidation of power in the army contributed to the stability of the government. Athit replaced Class 7 as the most powerful supporter of Prem.

However, discord between Prem and Athit began to surface from 1983. Athit came to be regarded as a successor to Prem, and Athit himself started to disclose his political ambition. It was most convenient for Athit to use his power as army chief to become prime minister. When the transitional clauses of the 1978 constitution lapsed on 21 April 1983, active officers became unable to assume political positions [Murashima 1987b: 163-164]. On 10 January 1983, Athit urged members of parliament to revise the constitution. On 12 January, Phijit Kunlawanit, commander of the 1st division, suggested the possibility of a coup by stating that "if nothing is done and chaos results, threatening security, the military will have to conduct exercises" [*Bangkok Post*, 13 January 1983]. On 11 February, several MPs submitted an amendment law. The military criticized the opposition to the proposed amendment through broadcasts and Chawalit Yongjaiyut, assistant chief of staff of the army, appealed the legitimacy of the amendment [Athit 1983: 25-55]. However the amendment law was rejected on 16 March [Pisan 1988: 46-56]. In the midst of stormy rumors of a coup, the army forced Prem to dissolve the parliament on 19 March.

Prem was elected prime minister after the general election. Athit kept on supporting Prem while continuing to consolidate power in the army. Athit's supporting base consisted mainly of P-Class 5, Classes 1, 2, 5, 8 and the group of field officers calling themselves *chang luang* ("Royal Elephant"). Leaders of Classes 1 and 2 were Chawalit and Phijit respectively. Chawalit was promoted to the rank of major general as aide-de-camp of Defense Minister Prem in 1979. He was director of operations in 1980, assistant chief of staff in 1982 with the rank of lieutenant general, and deputy chief of staff in 1983. He was one of the most brilliant officers of the army, serving both Prem and Athit as a staff and a liaison officer between both. He was a mastermind of the Order of the Prime Minister's Office 66/2523 issued in 1980, which made more of political than military measures in implementing counterinsurgency policy [Tamada 1988]. In contrast, Phijit became famous for his fierce battle with the Communist Party of Thailand in the North and was promoted from deputy commander of the 4th infantry division to commander of the

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7) The army preparatory school was founded in 1940 and had only seven classes. P-Class 7 was followed by Class 1.



Table 1 Army Leadership and Their Classes, 1980-1991

Position	Date	1 Oct. 1980	1 Oct. 1981	1 Oct. 1982	1 Oct. 1983	1 Oct. 1984	1 Oct. 1985	1 Oct. 1986
<b>Generals</b>								
Army chief		Prem (38)[81*]	Prayut (P1)	Athit (P5)	Athit (P5)	Athit (P5)	Athit (P5)[86*]	Chawalit (C1)
Deputy army chief		San C.(39)[81]	Sak (39)[82]	Sup (P3)[84]	Sup (P3)	Thienchai (P5)	Juthai (P5)[86]	Phisit (P6)[87]
General staff		Prayut (P1)[82]	Pamot (P3)[83]	Pamot (P3)	Banjop (P6)[86]	Banjop (P6)	Chawalit (C1)[92]	Wanchai R.(C1)[92]
Assistant army chief		Amnat (P1)[83]	Athit (P5)[85]	Thienchai (P5)[85]	Thienchai (P5)	Mana (P5)[85]	Suraphon (P5)[86]	Phijit (C2)[92]
		Pin (39)[81]	Phaijit (39)[82]	Pathom (P4)[84]	Pathom (P4)	Ongat (P5)[85]	Akkhaphon (P5)[86]	Sunthon (C1)[91]
<b>Lt. Generals</b>								
Deputy general staff		Chamnan (P5)	Sup (P3)	Prayun (P5)	Mana (P5)	Juthai (P5)	Wanchai R.(C1)	Jaruai (C1)
		Chaloem (P1)	Pathom (P4)	Banjop (P6)	Chawalit (C1)	Chawalit (C1)	Jarat (P7)	Sujinda (C5)
Regional commanders								
1st army region		Wasin (P3)	Athit (P5)	Phat (P4)	Phat (P4)	Phijit (C2)	Phijit (C2)	Watthanachai (C4)
2nd army region		Lak (39)	Phak (P5)	Phak (P5)	Phak (P5)	Phisit (P6)	Phisit (P6)	Itsaraphong (C5)
3rd army region		Sima (P1)	Phrom (P1)	Phrom (P1)	Thiap (P5)	Thiap (P5)	Thiap (P5)	Chaichana (C1)
4th army region		Juan (P1)	Han L.(P5)	Han L.(P5)	Wanchai J.(P5)	Wanchai J.(P5)	Wanchai J.(P5)	Wisit (C2)
Special warfare unit		-	-	-	Anek (P4)	Sunthon (C1)	Sunthon (C1)	Wimon (C5)
<b>Maj. Generals</b>								
Division commanders								
1st infantry		Suchin (P5)	Phijit (C2)	Phijit (C2)	Phijit (C2)	Itsaraphong (C5)	Wimon (C5)	San S.(C5)
2nd infantry		Aram (P6)	Prachum (P7)	Prachum (P7)	Prachum (P7)	San S.(C5)	San S.(C5)	Manat (C8)
9th infantry		Sing (P5)	Somkhith (C1)	Somkhith (C1)	Somkhith (C1)	Choetchai (C5)	Choetchai (C5)	Mongkhon (C9)
2nd cavalry		Chaichana (C1)	Wichat (C2)	Wichat (C2)	Wichat (C2)	Ariya (C5)	Ariya (C5)	Ariya (C5)
Antiaircraft artillery		Prasat (P4)	Prasat (P4)	Watthanachai (C4)	Watthanachai (C4)	Wirot (C5)	Wirot (C5)	Wirot (C5)
Artillery		-	-	-	Wirot (C5)	Phuchong (C5)	Phuchong (C5)	Phuchong (C5)
3rd infantry		Suwan (P4)	Bunchai (P7)	Bunchai (P7)	Bunchai (P7)	Somphon (C5)	Somphon (C5)	Bunthaen (C6)
6th infantry		Phisit (P6)	Phisit (P6)	Itsaraphong (C5)	Itsaraphong (C5)	Bunthaen (C6)	Bunthaen (C6)	Banthaen (C8)
4th infantry		Phrom (P1)	Ruamsak (P7)	Siri (C4)	Siri (C4)	Siri (C4)	Joe (C5)	Joe (C5)
1st cavalry		Prayat (P6)	Chaichana (C1)	Chaichana (C1)	Sathon (C4)	Sathon (C4)	Phairot (C5)	Phairot (C5)
5th infantry		Pricha (P5)	Panya (C1)	Panya (C1)	Jap (C2)	Jap (C2)	Kitti (C8)	Kitti (C8)
1st special warfare		-	-	Wimon (C5)	Wimon (C5)	Wimon (C5)	Wattana S.(C8)	Wattana S.(C8)
2nd special warfare		-	-	-	Khajon (C5)	Khajon (C5)	Kajon (C5)	Oraphan (C8)

Position	Date	1 Oct. 1987	1 Oct. 1988	1 Oct. 1989	1 Apr. 1990	1 Oct. 1990	1 Apr. 1991	1 Oct. 1991
<b>Generals</b>								
Army chief		Chawalit (C1)	Chawalit (C1)	Chawalit (C1)	Sujinda (C5)	Sujinda (C5)	Sujinda (C5)	Sujinda (C5)
Deputy army chief		Wanchai R.(C1)	Wanchai R.(C1)	Sujinda (C5)	Itsaraphong (C5)	Itsaraphong (C5)	Itsaraphong (C5)	Itsaraphong (C5)
General staff		Jaruai (C1)[90]	Jaruai (C1)	Jaruai (C1)	Wirot (C5)[96]	Wirot (C5)	Wirot (C5)	Wirot (C5)
Assistant army chief		Phijit (C2)	Phijit (C2)	Itsaraphong (C5)[94]	Arun (C3)	Arun (C3)	Chatchom (C5)[93]	Chatchom (C5)
		Sujinda (C5)[93]	Sujinda (C5)	Arun (C3)[92]	Wimon (C5)[95]	Wimon (C5)	Wimon (C5)	San S.(C5)[94]
<b>Lt. Generals</b>								
Deputy general staff		Ngamphon (C1)	Arun (C3)	Wirot (C5)	Pramon (C6)	Pramon (C6)	Pramon (C6)	Pramon (C6)
		Kasem (C1)	Saphrang (C1)	Chatchom (C5)	Chatchom (C5)	Thawon (C5)	Choetchai (C5)	Choetchai (C5)
Regional commanders								
1st army region		Watthanachai (C4)	Watthanachai (C4)	San S.(C5)	San S.(C5)	San S.(C5)	San S.(C5)	Phaibun (C5)
2nd army region		Itsaraphong (C5)	Itsaraphong (C5)	Wimon (C5)	Phaibun (C5)	Phaibun (C5)	Phaibun (C5)	Ariya (C5)
3rd army region		Siri (C4)	Siri (C4)	Siri (C4)	Siri (C4)	Phairot (C5)	Phairot (C5)	Phairot (C5)
4th army region		Wisit (C2)	Wisit (C2)	Yutthana (C4)	Yutthana (C4)	Yutthana (C4)	Kitti (C8)	Kitti (C8)
Special warfare unit		Wimon (C5)	Wimon (C5)	Khajon (C5)	Khajon (C5)	Khajon (C5)	Khajon (C5)	Khajon (C5)
<b>Maj. Generals</b>								
Division commanders								
1st infantry		San S.(C5)	Mongkhon (C9)	Watthana S.(C8)	Watthana S.(C8)	Chainarong (C11)	Chainarong (C11)	Thitiphong (C11)
2nd infantry		Manat (C8)	Manat (C8)	Chainarong (C11)	Chainarong (C11)	Thitiphong (C11)	Thitiphong (C11)	Phanom (C11)
9th infantry		Mongkhon (C9)	Watthana S.(C8)	Watthana B.(C8)	Watthana B.(C8)	Watthana B.(C8)	Watthana B.(C8)	Suwainai (C11)
2nd cavalry		Ariya (C5)	Thotsaphon (C6)	Thotsaphon (C6)	Thotsaphon (C6)	Thotsaphon (C6)	Thotsaphon (C6)	Yutthaphan (C5)
Antiaircraft artillery		Phaeo (C5)	Phaeo (C5)	Phaeo (C5)	Phaeo (C5)	Samphao (C12)	Samphao (C12)	Samphao (C12)
Artillery		Phuchong (C5)	Suwit (C6)	Suwit (C6)	Suwit (C6)	Suwit (C6)	Suwit (C6)	Udom (C12)
3rd infantry		Bunthaen (C6)	Banthao (C8)	Banthao (C8)	Banthao (C8)	Somphan (C10)	Somphan (C10)	Somphan (C10)
6th infantry		Banthao (C8)	Chettha (C9)	Chettha (C9)	Chettha (C9)	Prasoet (C11)	Prasoet (C11)	Prasoet (C11)
4th infantry		Joe (C5)	Somchet (C9)	Pantheop (C9)	Pantheop (C9)	Pantheop (C9)	Winit (C9)	Winit (C9)
1st cavalry		Phairot (C5)	Lithai (C8)	Lithai (C8)	Lithai (C8)	Lithai (C8)	Lithai (C8)	Kamon (C9)
5th infantry		Kitti (C8)	Jamkat (C8)	Jamkat (C8)	Jamkat (C8)	Somma (C11)	Somma (C11)	Somma (C11)
1st special warfare		Oraphan (C8)	Oraphan (C8)	Surayut (C12)	Surayut (C12)	Somsak (C12)	Somsak (C12)	Somsak (C12)
2nd special warfare		Surachet (C8)	Surachet (C8)	Han P.(C11)	Han P.(C11)	Han P.(C11)	Han P.(C11)	Han P.(C11)

Notes: 1) Surnames are omitted. Those with same first name are distinguished by the initial of their surnames.

2) Figures in ( ) show classes of army cadet school. P1 means preparatory class 1 and C1 class 1. For those who entered the school in or before 1939, the year is given.

3) Figures in [ ], given only to generals, show the year of mandatory retirement. Figures marked \* indicate the extension of retirement age.

1st division with the rank of major general just after the 1981 coup. He served concurrently as commander of the 1st army region with the rank of lieutenant general in 1983. The former was a dove and the latter a hawk.

Members of Class 5, who had long been enemies with Class 7, were promoted to commanders of strategic regiments after the 1981 coup in order to nullify the influence of Class 7. As Class 5 began to be promoted to division commanders from 1982, Class 8 were picked up as regiment commanders in their place. The Royal Elephant group was organized by Lt. Colonel Phiraphon Sanphakphisut (Class 17), who was a commander of the 1st engineer battalion stationed in the Thonburi area of Bangkok and a close aide of Athit, since the latter was in the Northeast. He recruited members to the group from officers of Classes 16-18 and fostered friendship between members through sports. This group was intended to organize Athit's supporters among battalion commanders.<sup>8)</sup>

Internal friction within this faction of Athit's became increasingly visible. One reason was worsening relations between Prem and Athit. More important, however, was the race to be Athit's successor. Most of the army top brass, dominated by P-Class 5, would reach retirement age in 1985 and 1986 (see Table 1). Chawalit and Phijit, due to retire in 1992, were strong candidates for the post of army chief. The one who got the rank of full general earlier would have an advantage over the other. There was a possibility that Chawalit would be promoted to the rank of general in October 1984.

In this situation, there occurred various events relating to the race in July and August, when the list of personnel changes was under consideration. The police arrested 22 persons including former members of the Communist Party of Thailand in July 1984. Chawalit was blamed for objecting to the arrests on the grounds that Communists who surrendered should be pardoned according to Order 66/2523. Then, Sulak Siwarak, a famous social critic, was charged with *lèse mājesty* and arrested as the result of pressure from Village Scout, a rightist organization. Moreover, some members of Class 7 who had been dismissed from the army after the 1981 coup expressed support for the extension of tenure of Athit on 5 August, expecting the reward of reinstatement. Phijit submitted signatures of military officers to Prem asking for a two-year extension of Athit's tenure. These movements were intended to help Phijit's promotion by discrediting Chawalit, elicit rewards by supporting the extension of tenure, and augment Athit's faction by incorporating Class 7. Major actors behind this series of events included Phiraphon of the Royal Elephant group and Lt. Colonel Bandit Malaiarisun (Class 8), a close aide of Phijit and a commander of the 1st infantry regiment. It was reported that they had planned to resort to a coup if protests against the arrests had engendered political turbulence [*Matichon Sutsapda*, 26 August, 2 September 1984].

Diversionsary activities of Athit's faction increased tensions between Prem and the

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8) The group consisted mainly of supporters of Athit and Phijit, but included supporters of Prem, which was a weak point of the group.

army. The tensions were lessened at once when the battalion commanders behind the plot visited Prem to celebrate his birthday on 26 August. But the tensions were renewed again on September 15 when the police arrested Manun Rupkhajon and Bunlasak Phojaroen of Class 7 on charges of attempted assassination of Prem, Athit and the queen. The attempts were made in 1982, and Prem had ordered two officers of Class 5, Police Colonel Bunchu Wangkanon and Colonel Phuchong Ninkham, to inquire into the cases. According to weekly magazines, Prajak, another member of Class 7, made contact with Phijit and Phiraphon to help his two classmates. Both were released with the help of the queen and the crown prince [*Su Anakhot*, 27 September 1984; *Wiwat*, 22 September 1984]. After this event, Prajak denounced the conflict between Athit-Phijit faction and Prem-Chawalit faction in the army and claimed that the arrests were caused by Class 5 in retaliation against Class 7. Indeed, the list of personnel change sanctioned by the king on 3 September reflected such a conflict (see Table 1). First, Phijit lost the post of commander of the 1st division and continued to serve only as the commander of the 1st army region. Second, Sunthon Khongsomphong, Chawalit's classmate, was promoted to commander of the special warfare unit to hold the balance of power against Phijit. Third, posts as commanders of divisions in Bangkok and the surrounding area were monopolized by Class 5. Sujinda Khlaprayun, the leader of Class 5, was a close aide of Chawalit and brother-in-law of Itsaraphong Nunphakdi, another powerful member of Class 5. Many of Class 5 did not agree with the extension of Athit's tenure and strongly objected to the reinstatement of Class 7. Class 5's promotion to division commanders was a check against Phijit and Class 8, who were powerful in the 1st army region.

Athit who, had still publicly expressed his support for Prem in the midst of the series of events after July, criticized the government harshly when it announced the devaluation of baht on 2 November 1984. Athit, who was abroad then, ordered top military officers to submit a letter of objection to Prem on 6 November, and criticized the devaluation over two TV stations under the control of the army on his return [*Pisan* 1988: 60-68]. Athit's faction planned a coup because it was impossible for the government to withdraw the policy [*Chat Athipatai*, 28 June 1985]. This conflict was subdued only after Athit issued a statement supporting the devaluation policy on 12 November and Prem displayed the support of the king by spending ten days with the royal family at a palace in Sakonnakhon from 16 to 25 November [*Matichon Sutsapda*, 2 December 1984]. Prem announced on 15 April 1985 that Athit's tenure would be extended to the latter's birthday (31 August) of 1986.

The season of personnel changes came again in July 1985. Three generals of P-Class 5 were due to retire, leaving three vacancies. Those who would be promoted to the rank of general and retire after Athit were natural candidates for army chief. The race for successor was fiercer than the previous year. Although there was no open event, rumors of a coup spread in July and August.

2. *The Coup on 9 September 1985*

Early in the morning of 9 September, a coup was staged. About 500 soldiers from the 4th cavalry battalion led by Manun Rupkhajon and the ground forces of the air force led by Wing Commander Manat, a junior brother of Manun, occupied strategic locations. They arrested the commander-in-chief of the air force at his home and took into custody the three deputy supreme commanders of the armed forces who came to the supreme command in the morning. They broadcast that the Revolutionary Council headed by General Soem Na Nakhon, a former supreme commander of the armed forces and a former army chief, had seized the reins of government. General Kriengsak, a former prime minister, and General Yot Thephatsadin Na Ayutthaya, a former deputy army chief, joined the coup forces.

This coup was staged when the king was at a palace in the South, Prem in Indonesia, and Athit in Sweden. However, the government side swiftly set up a counter-coup headquarters in the 11th infantry regiment by as early as at 6:00 a.m. The leader of the government side was General Thienchai Sirisamphan, a deputy army chief. The government side ordered some army units to move and urged the coup forces to surrender through the radio station of the first division which was left unoccupied by the coup forces. Leaders of the coup forces, convinced of defeat, started to negotiate with the government side and agreed to surrender in the afternoon of the same day, on condition that Manun and Manat would be allowed to flee the country [Anan 1986: 11-14].

The Revolutionary Council explained the reasons for the coup as follows. First, farmers were suffering from economic hardship, many companies had gone into bankruptcy, and university graduates could not find jobs. Prices of commodities had risen due to the devaluation of the baht. To make matters worse, the government had increased taxes. Second, the government was composed of four coalition parties and could not make a decisive decisions because of the lack of unity. Party politicians were seeking personal benefit at the expense of national interests. If nothing were done, the people would lose confidence in democracy [GPI 1985: 37-41].

The failure of economic policy and weak leadership of Prem were the alleged reasons. However, economic recession in the 1980s was experienced not only by Thailand but almost all countries, and few blamed the Prem administration, which tried to find some way out of the difficulty by utilizing technocrats. Moreover, the economic difficulties could not be resolved even if the Prem administration was overthrown. Regarding the weak leadership, there seemed to be no one who was more suitable for the premiership and could exert stronger leadership than Prem. To sum up, the reasons alleged by the coup forces were not persuasive and seemed to be nothing more than quibbles.

If the masterminds of the coup were several retired officers, as was the official view of the army [Kongthap 1985: 5], their action was tantamount to suicide. It is quite absurd to assume that Manun, Soem, Kriengsak and Yot believed that they could succeed in the attempt with only 500 soldiers. They must have had prospects of success when they staged the coup. To succeed, they must have expected to be joined by larger forces of the

army. As the coup aimed to overthrow the government, the expected forces would have come from the anti-Prem faction. At least some of the Athit-Phijit faction must have promised to join the attempt. And they, not soldiers led by the Rupkajons, constituted the main body of the coup forces. Therefore, it can be concluded that this coup occurred and was defeated due to internal conflict within the army.

#### IV The End of the Prem Administration

##### 1. *Dismissal of Athit*

As there were few personnel changes after the coup, no tensions arose between the government and the military. However, the conflict between Prem's faction and Athit's faction did not disappear and the former became dominant after the personnel changes of 1985 (see Table 1). Chawalit was promoted to chief of staff with the rank of general, which meant that he certainly would succeed Athit as army chief. Class 5, the supporting base of Prem's faction, got more posts of division commanders and became the most united group within the army.

The topic of extension of Athit's tenure was raised again in 1986. General Juthai Saengthawip, a deputy army chief and P-Class 5, proposed another year's extension of Athit's tenure at the meeting of Defense Council on 30 January. Some 70 officers of Class 10 on 10 March and some 60 of Class 8 on 20 March visited Athit to express support for the extension. Juthai held a news conference to express his support on 22 March. Moreover, Phijit held a party celebrating Athit's honorary doctorate on 23 March. In spite of these pressures, Prem announced the rejection of the extension as early as 24 March to prevent further pressure from the army. While rumor of a coup was circulating, Colonel Phiraphon, a close aide of Athit, who served concurrently as commander of the 1st engineer battalion and deputy commander of the 1st engineer regiment, was suddenly dismissed as commander of the 1st engineer battalion, which meant he was transferred from Bangkok to Ratburi on 9 April, immediately after a bomb blast at the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok where Prem and United States Defense Secretary Weinberger were due to have a dinner on that day [*Bangkok Post*, 12 April 1986]. The rejection of the extension of Athit's tenure and the transfer of his close aide reflected the power relations between Prem and Athit.

However, the defeat of a government bill on 1 May forced Prem to dissolve parliament and schedule general elections for 17 July. The government's defeat was brought about by rebels of the Social Action Party, one of the government parties. Rebels formed a new party and vowed to support Athit to be the new prime minister after the election. Athit was suspected of being the mastermind of the bill's defeat and the creation of the new party, which increased tensions between the government and the military [Suchit 1987: 45]. At this juncture, Sunthon led about 70 officers from the special warfare unit on 13 May and Chaichana Tharichat led about 50 officers of the 3rd army region on 15 May to

visit Prem to demonstrate the strength of Prem's faction, despite knowing well that such an action would incur Athit's displeasure. Both Sunthon and Chaichana were Class 1. Prem went to his house in the Suranari base and was guarded by soldiers of the 2nd army region on 26 May. On the next day he announced the dismissal of Athit as army chief and appointed Chawalit as the new army chief.

## 2. Prem's Resignation

Chawalit was 54 years old when he was appointed army chief, being the youngest army chief since the 1970s. On assuming the post, he declared that he would resign within two years although voluntary resignation before the age limit was quite rare among Thai senior officers. This was partly because he intended to play politics after retirement and wished to open the way to politics by fully supporting Prem, in contrast with Athit who challenged the premier. In addition, he had to consolidate his supporting base in the army in preparation for political life. It was better for him to give way to one of his juniors, and thus prevent their discontent, than to stay until the age of 60. For example, Sujinda, the leader of Class 5, was only one year junior to him.

Chawalit, who concurrently assumed the post of supreme commander in October 1986, paid attention to the creation and widening of his supporting base in the army through the annual personnel changes. Then, in 1987, a crisis occurred. Chawalit tried to appoint Sunthon as deputy army chief, Jaruai Wongsayan as assistant army chief, Wanchai Ruangtrakun as chief of staff of the armed forces, all of whom were Class 1, and Wijit Sukmak, who belonged to Class 2 and was trusted by Prem, as chief of staff of the army. However Prem, who had resigned as defense minister in August 1986, revised the submitted list. Sunthon was promoted to chief of staff of the armed forces, Wanchai to deputy army chief, Jaruai to chief of staff of the army, and Sujinda to assistant army chief (see Table 1). Moreover, Prem rejected the appointment of Kaset Rotjananin as air chief against the will of the retiring air chief [*Lak Thai*, 24 September 1987]. Chawalit was perplexed at this intervention, especially at the fact that Wanchai was promoted to deputy army chief, the post of the most promising successor. Although Wanchai was Class 1, he was close to Athit and, therefore, not a favored successor. The most favored candidate, Sunthon, was transferred to the supreme command, Jaruai was not equal to the post of army chief in terms of leadership, and it was premature for Sujinda to assume the post.<sup>9)</sup> Thus it became difficult for Chawalit to resign in 1988. However, since Chawalit did not reveal his discontent, the expected tensions were avoided.

In April 1988, all 16 ministers of the Democrat Party resigned from the government after rebels of the party voted against the government bill. Prem dissolved the parliament and scheduled general elections for 24 July. Chawalit tendered his resignation to Prem on

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9) Once transferred to the supreme command, it has been quite difficult to return to the army in a significant post. Thus Sunthon virtually ceased to be successor.

1 May but it was not accepted on the grounds that the military still needed him. Chawalit continued to support Prem and ordered officers to demonstrate their support for Prem in the middle of the month. In addition to the military, major political parties also expressed support for Prem. Everybody anticipated that Prem would take the task of prime minister again after the election.

On 27 May, 99 academics and intellectuals petitioned the king to stop supporting Prem. They insisted that Prem should be neutral, but leaned upon the king and ordered the military to demonstrate support for him in order to retain the premiership. Such action would cause divisions among soldiers, civil servants and the people and distrust for the parliamentary democracy. And they begged the king to make Prem remain politically neutral [*Su Anakhot*, 1, 8 June 1988]. They knew well that the Prem government would not collapse as long as either the king or the military continued to support Prem, unless Prem himself decided to retire. This petition could be regarded as one important reason why Prem suddenly announced that he would not accept the premiership on 27 July. Prem consulted with Chawalit to choose Chatchai, the leader of the Chat Thai Party, which got most seats in the election, to be the new prime minister.

## V The Coup of 23 February 1991

### 1. *The Rise of Class 5*

While the relations between the military and Chatchai were generally good, tensions within the army were gradually rising. One reason was the expected retirement of Chawalit, who submitted a resignation letter to Chatchai in May 1989 which was not accepted. Everybody was concerned with his resignation because it would affect the army. Second, Chawalit continued to carry out balanced personnel changes, paying attention to every faction in order to keep the unity of the army. To accomplish this purpose, he had to increase people's chances of promotion. Many new positions were created, personnel changes came to be made twice a year, in April and October, and two lists came to be made at once. Third, Class 5 augmented their power increasingly. On assuming the post of assistant army chief, Sujinda became the heir apparent to Chawalit and Class 5 came to bring pressure on Chawalit to resign.

The best way to lessen tensions was for Chawalit to resign. He declared publicly for the first time in December 1989 that Sujinda was his successor. As Chatchai welcomed Chawalit to his cabinet, Chawalit resigned as army chief-cum-supreme commander on 28 March 1990 and joined the government as deputy prime minister and minister of defense. Sunthon became supreme commander and Sujinda army chief. Class 5 under the leadership of Sujinda, the new army chief, consolidated their power increasingly through personnel changes in April and October in the same year. Class 11 was promoted to division commanders in place of Classes 8 and 9. It was the coming of age of Class 5. The extent to which Class 5 monopolized important posts in the army was unprecedented (see Table 1).



Not less significant was the top brass of the navy and air force, because officers who graduated cadet academies in 1958, the same year as Class 5, got power as well. In the air force, Kaset became air chief in October 1989 in place of Woranat Aphijari, who had been in the post since 1987. Kaset was on very good terms with Sujinda and they organized "0143 Club."<sup>10)</sup> This was a gathering of officers who graduated military cadet academies in 1958 and held periodical convivial meetings from April 1988. In the navy also, it became certain that a member of the club would assume the post of navy chief in October 1991. It was quite rare for officers across the three armed forces to boast such unity, and this unity enabled them to control the military as a whole.

Chawalit, who had long criticized the corruption of politicians, did not stop his criticism after joining the cabinet. He criticized Chalodem Yubamrung, a minister to the Office of Prime Minister, for his being convicted by the Counter Corruption Commission in May 1990. Chalodem countered that Chawalit should reflect on himself before criticizing others, and jeered at Chawalit's wife as a "walking jewelry box." Chawalit submitted his resignation in the morning of 11 June. It was the day when Chatchai was to have left for the United States.

Top brass visited Chawalit early in the morning of the day to try to persuade him not to resign. Then they called on the prime minister to ask him to dismiss Chalodem. Various units of the army held a gathering for "the dignity of soldiers." Top brass called Chatchai late at night to talk about the matter again. Although Sujinda promised that there would be no coup while the premier was abroad, a rumor circulated of a coup after 11 June and Chalodem ordered the trailer-mounted radio station belonging to the Mass Communication Organization in fear of a coup on June 17.<sup>11)</sup> On 19 June, Chawalit had lunch with many senior officers from all over the country at the Army Golf Course and demonstrated his close relations with the army [*Lak Thai*, 25 June 1990]. On returning to the country, Chatchai asked Chawalit to rejoin the government but was rejected. On 22 June, Sunthon confiscated the mobile radio station on the ground that it disturbed the military radio.

Flaming tensions seemed to be calmed down when Chatchai promised to cope with Chalodem's problem properly and himself assumed the vacant post of defense minister, rejecting the suggestion to appoint Athit, now the leader of an opposition party. However, tensions were revived by the cabinet reshuffle in August. Chalodem was retained as a minister and Athit's party joined the government. Although Chatchai rejected Athit's claim for the defense portfolio, his joining the government itself was a check against the military dominated by an anti-Athit faction.

Chalodem made a counterargument against the military over the case of the mobile radio station for 30 minutes on TV on 4 November. The military, which repeatedly had

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10) "01" means B. E. 2501 (A.D. 1958), "3" means three forces of the army, navy and air force, and "4" means the three forces and the police.

11) This radio truck was purchased by Prem in order to counteract a coup.

requested his dismissal, raged at this. Sujinda warned Chatchai that the premier must either resign himself or dismiss Chaloem if he wished to enjoy the confidence of the military. The next day, military leaders asked Chatchai to dismiss Chaloem at the breakfast meeting which had been held weekly at the premier's house since the start of his administration. Chatchai at last decided to dismiss Chaloem, and promised to do so before flying to Japan on 8 November. Chatchai returned home on 17 November and began to talk about a cabinet reshuffle with leaders of the government parties. He called on the king at Sakonnakhon to report about the reshuffle on 21 November. However, he kept Chaloem in the cabinet as deputy minister of education on the grounds that some party leaders had objected to his dismissal. This was not persuasive at all, because the reshuffle in August was made even without consultation with leaders of the Chat Thai Party. Athit added oil to the fire by saying at the meeting of government leaders that there would be no problem with the military even if Chaloem was not dismissed.

November 21 was the watershed of relations between the government and the military. A rumor circulated that Chatchai planned to dismiss Sujinda and Sunthon at an audience with the king on that day [*Lak Thai*, 26 November 1990]. Although its authenticity was not ascertained, it might be true judging from the strong reactions of the military. First, top brass canceled all the weekly breakfast meetings with the premier from that day. Second, Sujinda himself was given an audience with the king in the afternoon of the same day. This audience seemed to come about abruptly, despite the military's insistence that it had been scheduled in advance. Third, division commanders of the army held a gathering and expressed their discontent against the premier on the same day. Maj. General Samphao Chusi, commander of the antiaircraft artillery division, suggested the possibility of a coup at the gathering by stating, "How can the army chief be dismissed when he has committed no fault? . . . We will take action without issuing notice in advance hereafter" [*Matichon Sutsapda*, 2 December 1990]. Soldiers felt that Chatchai's breaking his word made a mockery of the military and injured its dignity. On 23 November, military radio broadcast that the military had lost confidence in the premier.

Voices were also raised among government parties that they would not go down with Chaloem. At last, Chatchai reshuffled his cabinet on December 14 and ousted Chaloem. But the military did not soften its attitude. It next targeted Manun Rupkhajon, who had been reinstated in 1989 and served as Chatchai's close aide in coping with the military since February 1990 [*Matichon Sutsapda*, 21 February, 25 November 1990]. The military asked Pol. Lt. General Bunchu, a member of Class 5 and commander of the police central investigation bureau, to resume its inquiry into the attempted murder case, which had been brought to a halt since 1984. Moreover, currency was given to a rumor that not only Manun but also Kraisaak, Chatchai's son, was involved in the case. Kraisaak was a key person in the premier's advisory body, called "*Ban Phitsanulok*," which was suspected of being behind the premier's strong attitudes against the military.

In addition to canceling the breakfast meetings, the military leaders expressed their

lack of confidence in Chatchai by not paying him a New Year's visit, but at the same time visiting Prem and Chawalit. To break the deadlock, Chatchai asked Sunthon to hold a luncheon for top brass and cabinet ministers on 15 January as symbolic gesture of reconciliation. However, a rumor circulated that Sunthon's tenure would be extended. As such a move would arouse discontent against Sunthon within the military, the extension was not expedient for him at all and the rumor stirred military's wrath against the premier's maneuvers. However, Chatchai was not daunted and on 20 January he suddenly dismissed the police chief even though there was no clear fault with him. This dismissal had two meanings. One was to intimidate the military leadership. As rumors about the dismissal of military leadership gained increasing currency, this added substance to them. Another was to promote Bunchu from commander of the central investigation bureau to assistant director of the police department and, thus, deprive him of the authority to look into the attempted murder case. This increased the tension between the military and the premier. On 13 February, Sunthon ordered that documents of the case should not be handed over to the new commander. Chatchai, who wished to wrest away the initiative of the inquiries into the case from Class 5 and the military, got angry and on 20 February appointed Athit as the new deputy minister of defense. Unable to accept the appointment, on 22 February field officers called on Chatchai to reconsider it, but their appeal was rejected. There was a rumor of a coup on the same day and the premier ordered policemen from the crime suppression division to guard his house. Relieved that there was no coup, Chatchai fled to Chiangmai with Athit to witness the inauguration of Athit to his post from Donmuang air base the next morning.

## 2. *The Coup of 23 February 1991*

Chatchai and Athit were arrested by men of the air force before taking off, and a coup started. This attempt was joined by top brass of the three armed forces who formed a National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) headed by Sunthon. Soldiers from the 1st division and anti-aircraft artillery division occupied strategic locations in the afternoon and Sunthon declared a success of the coup.

NPKC noted five reasons for the coup. First, politicians were selfish and corrupt. The premier had put forth a counterargument that receipts as evidence should be presented if there should be grafters. Second, cabinet ministers arbitrarily intervened in personnel changes of government officials in order to make them submissive. Third, the prime minister and his close associates constructed an image of democratic government. But, in fact, the premier, ministers and MPs centralized power and got rid of opposing forces, seeking giant profits for themselves. This was a parliamentary dictatorship and very dangerous to a democratic regime. Fourth, "only the military held out against the political influence of politicians and political parties." The government tried every means to destroy the unity and solidarity of the military. The military could not tolerate this. Fifth, the prime minister made much of Manun, who was the mastermind of two unsuccessful coups

and involved in attempted murder cases. Especially regarding the attempted murder of the queen, the premier tried to conceal the fact and shift the guilt to others, which could not be permitted by the people [Khanabannathikan 1991: 5].

This coup attempt received royal sanction with ease. Anan Panyarachun, a former permanent undersecretary of the ministry of foreign affairs and now a leading businessman, was appointed as the new prime minister on 2 March. He formed a cabinet comprised mainly of technocrats and businessmen. Most people appreciated the reasons given by the military and consented to the coup. However, it would be rash to think that all five reasons cited were true causes of the coup. The first, second and third reasons were most persuasive for the people in general. However, they did not relate directly to the interests of the military. Even if the military was discontent with these, they were not necessarily sufficient cause for it to run the risk of staging a coup. Moreover, they do not explain why the coup was staged on 23 February. The fifth reason would remain forgotten unless the military made an issue of it.

The fourth reason, on the other hand, was an expression of the mounting conflict between the military and the premier since June, especially since November 1990. There is ample reason to believe that NPKC staged the coup just to prevent Chatchai's audience with the king. First, Sunthon and Kaset were abroad on 22 February. If the coup had been planned carefully, the leadership would not have gone abroad just beforehand. Second, the coup started not with the usual occupation of strategic locations but with the arrest of the premier. Third, several hours lapsed after the arrest of Chatchai until Sunthon declared the seizure of power over TV, and he was ill-prepared for the declaration. Thus, we may well think that the coup was intended to prevent Chatchai's audience with the throne. The audience was officially scheduled to confirm Athit in the defense portfolio.

But the military seemed to suspect strongly that the premier would submit proposals for dismissal of military leadership. If Chatchai had planned the dismissal of the commander, it was quite natural that the military should react strongly against it. Praman Adireksan, brother-in-law of Chatchai and former leader of the Chat Thai Party, stated after the coup, "considering various factors, the true causes of the coup lay in the fact that Chatchai planned the dismissal of military leadership and appointed Athit as deputy minister of defense" [*Matichon Sutsapda*, 9 June 1991]. In sum, the conflict between the military and the government, which had developed to the extent that the premier considered the dismissal of the military leadership, was the real cause of the successful coup.

We can also not overlook the long-term decrease of the military's political power since the 1970s. The military's source of political power consists in its ability to stage a coup. As there had been no successful coup since 1977, it was inevitable that its political power should have decreased gradually. The government did not have to be afraid of a coup if it should not occur. Chatchai seemed to have taken a strong stance against the military because he believed that there would be no coup anymore. His attitudes towards the

military impressed people with the weakened power of the military. The military lost patience at being thus slighted.

## VI Conclusion: Impediments to Coups

We have considered the causes of the three coups since 1981. The 1981 coup resulted from the conflict between Class 7 and anti-Class 7 factions, and the 1985 coup from the conflict centered around the struggle for succession to the post of army chief. In contrast, the 1991 coup was engendered by a conflict between the military and the government.

In addition, it was at time of internal conflict in the military or conflict between the military and the government that rumors of a coup gained currency, for example, in March 1983, July, August and November 1984, April 1986, June 1990 and so forth. Thus we may conclude that the possibility of a coup became higher when internal conflict intensified or relations with the government worsened.

However, intensified internal conflict or worsened relations with the government do not always engender a coup. There are impediments to a coup. Generally, there are thought to be three such factors. Economic development since the 1960s is the first of them. A coup would damage the country's economy and reputation severely, leading to a decrease of foreign investment and tourism, and economic sanction against an undemocratic practice. It is widely thought that even if the military succeeded in a coup, it could not manage the economy, which has become complicated. Second, politics has been democratized gradually since the 1970s. Political parties have grown in force with support from businessmen. Chatchai was the first leader of a political party to become prime minister since 1976. In addition to these domestic changes, advanced countries, especially the United States, have come to advocate democratization. It is thought that not even the Thai military could resist "the third wave of democratization" [Huntington 1991] since the middle of the 1970s. Third, the king, who has the authority to sanction a coup, has augmented his power and prestige gradually since the Sarit regime (1958-63). His role as an impediment came to the fore in defeating the 1981 coup. It is widely believed that there can be no successful coup, and that the military would not dare to resort to a coup, insofar as the king withholds his sanction.

It is certain that these factors function as impediments to a coup to some extent. However, there seem to be differences in the effectiveness of each factor. Regarding the economic development and democratization, the military claimed that it would solve economic problems and democratize politics in the coups of 1981 and 1985. However, in the 1991 coup, the military had to adapt to the new situation of remarkable economic growth since the second half of the 1980s. The military no longer claimed to offer solutions to economic problems but, rather, had to try to minimize the damage to the economy as far as possible. In order to win the confidence of domestic and foreign businessmen in its economic policy, the military formed a government consisting of

esteemed technocrats and businessmen and entrusted to it the management of the economy. Most domestic businessmen, discontent with the Chatchai administration, which had extended special favor only to those businessmen with good connections with government parties, welcomed the Anan administration, which seemed to be more impartial. Therefore, damage to the economy was kept to a minimum. Moreover, the damage was mixed with that brought by the Persian Gulf War. On the other hand, regarding democratization, political parties still lacked the broad supporting base of the people and were far from able to prevent a coup [Tamada 1988]. Although the Chatchai government was democratic in that most of ministers including the premier were MPs, the major government parties were little different from those of the Prem government. Nevertheless, ministers of the Chatchai government often claimed it to be more democratic in character, and they pursued selfish interests far more straightforwardly than under Prem, who kept a sharp watch on corruption. NPKC did not fail to capitalize on this weakness and mobilized the support of the people by promising a cleanup of politics and general elections before March 1992. Moreover, criticism from the United States increased anti-US sentiments, which had arisen from trade problems since the 1980s, and adversely increased support for the coup. To wit, even the remarkable economic development was not enough to prevent the coup and parliamentary politics still had many crucial weak points.

In contrast, the throne has played an important role of an impediment to a coup. Due to the king's decisive role in defeating the 1981 coup, the 1985 coup had to be attempted while he was not in Bangkok. Athit could not resort to a coup openly, despite his full political ambition, partly because the throne supported Prem. The king was reported to support the democratization of Thai politics and objected to coups [*Time*, 14 January 1991]. However, even the king could not withhold his sanction of the 1991 coup, which was staged by the military as a whole and left no countervailing forces within the military. All that the throne could do was to urge the military to transfer power to a civilian government as early as possible.

This shows the crucial nature of the existence of countervailing or rival factions in the military and suggests a fourth factor, that is, the internal situation of the military, which can act as an impediment to a coup. The coups in 1981 and 1985 derived from the factional conflict within the army and, thus, there were anti-coup factions. In contrast, there was no such countervailing faction within the military in the 1991 coup.

Regarding this point, it should be remembered that the army has been faced with the chronic problems of a lack of strong leadership and internal conflict since the 1970s. Class 7 gathered strength just because of the internal conflict among the army leadership. Their attempted coup failed mainly because of the role of the throne, but the existence of an opposing faction within the army also was decisive. This internal conflict since the 1970s was eased temporarily by the rise of a strong leader, Athit. But when he began to challenge Prem, the Prem-Chawalit faction rose to countervail Athit's faction. The balance of power between two such factions functions, on the one hand, as a trigger of a coup, but on the

other hand, as impediment to it. This is because the existence of such a countervailing faction increases the possibility of failure of a coup attempt and, thus, makes it difficult to stage a coup. Athit could not resort to a coup largely because of this. The 1985 coup, which was staged in just such a situation, resulted in betrayal and failure. Thus, internal conflict or the balance of power within the army is a significant factor in preventing a coup attempt or defeating such an attempt.

However, such conflict disappeared under Chawalit's leadership and with the rise of Class 5. Class 5 succeeded the Prem-Chawalit faction and consolidated their power to become the strongest group in the 1980s. Moreover, they formed the 0143 Club and established a unity across the army, navy, air force and police. Thus the impediment to a coup within the military was lost. As even Prem, who had a stable supporting base within the military, was most careful to avoid irritating the military, Chatchai, devoid of such a supporting base, should have paid more attention. But he enraged the military since with his handling of Chaloe's problem. He bet the democratic legitimacy of his government. If he could have weathered the conflict with the military, the political power of the military, which had witnessed a gradual decrease since the latter half of the 1970s, would have decreased further. But the basis of party politics was too fragile to fight this battle, because the people were dissatisfied with the corrupt practices of the democratic government and relieved by its fall. It should be added, however, that what the people welcomed was not the resurgence of the military government but the downfall of the corrupt one.

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