

# THE ROLE OF THE ARMY TO THE THAI POLITICAL INTERVENTION AFTER THE 2006 COUP D'ÉTAT\*

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## Abstract

After the coup d'état by the group of army commander on September 2006, the Thai political conflicts have become much more complicated and turbulent than the previous ones that the decisiveness of the military coup can control and recover the peacefulness in the country. In addition, the political consciousness of each political mass much expands at the present time. This causes the ignorance to other different political thoughts and feelings and might lead to the political violence at last. Thus, some political groups beseeched the army leaders to do the coup d'état. However, the flow of the democratic process blooming in all level citizens not to accept the military coup combining with the using informal power of the military leaders to influence the government establishing in the late 2008 and the suppression of the political protest in 2010 caused the serious negative images from the international sight. This phenomenon makes the military leaders showing their intention not to intervene to this conflict as before. The academic circles and the public believe that the military coup cannot be occurred and the paradigm of the army leader to accept the civil government better improve than in the past. This article aims to study the role of the army to the Thai political intervention by studying the army's withdrawal conditions and the political role reduction. The research result found three important factors which are (1) the growth of the democracy, (2) the law to protect the soldier transfer from the politic, and (3) the independent organization under the 2007 constitution. These 3 factors make the army be able to reduce its role and not necessary to be a major player occurred in the previous Thai political history. Although, this role reduction and the limitation under the constitution, the military always still has strong influence to maintain the national and political safety.

**Keywords:** Army, Political Intervention, 2006 Coup d'état

## Introduction

The growth of the wave of the democracy around the world becomes the crucial constraint to several countries used to be under the military dictatorship have to change by reducing the army role and allowing to have the civil government through the election process or the citizen enthusiasm for their freedom as previous. The studies of the military role and the politics under the democracy era in case of the decreasing in the political influence can be shown as follow:

The study of "The Man on Horseback" of Finer S.E. provides the conditions to withdraw and reduce the military role in the politics which claim to the acceptance of the lead and transfer the administrative duties to the civil government. Finer explained that there are four withdrawal factors consisting of the withdrawal nature, social condition, incentives, and necessary condition demonstrating the reasons why the military allow the civil government

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having more power. This also includes the internal and external national factors which become the new challenging issues to the military leaders requesting them to be the professional soldiers under the democracy building. Additionally, sometimes, the army is forced to withdraw from the power unintentionally such as the suppression of the political protest causing several citizens injured and died or the economic change under the capitalism era, due to lacking of the economic and foreign investment skills; this forces the army to accept the role of the civil government unavoidably. (Boonprong, 2000: 54)

The study of Takukder Maniruzamman (1987: 19) encouraging the regression of the military back to its base suggests that the army should not involve in the politics to maintain to be the player of the national defense and also consent the policy determination of the civil government in the national defense and foreign affairs. The military leaders still have the advice role to the civil government for the national safety and support the policy to civil government leader.

The conceptual idea of the authorization and principal/agent of Peter Feaver (2003: 3) analyzed that the pattern of the relationship between the civilian and military should be the real power citizen but unable to implement some power by themselves such as national defense assign the civil government having the power to make a decision and using the power to the army. If the military leaders did not accept the order from the civil leader, they have to be punished or released.

Surachart Bamroongsuk (2008: 22-26) also supported the theory that military should under the civilian. He employed the concept of the good governance which is popular and influenced in the developing countries that are moving and strengthening the democracy in their countries. He also categorized the good governance into 2 parts. The first one is the public participation in the development and the government role in administration and services which can be classified to 5 sub categories: (1) the government righteousness, (2) be investigable, (3) the protection of human rights, (4) decentralization, and (5) military control by the civilian

The last part involves in the power relationship or condition making the army to accept the civil power and reduce its political role. He suggested the ways to control the army into 2 methods

1. Subjective Civilian Control is to increase the power of civilian side. The developed countries employ the law methods to support such as the constitution to determine the power of the military under the civil government

2. Objective Civilian Control is to make the military to be a professional soldier and becomes a government mechanism doing the assignment following the government objectives

This study aims to investigate the role of the army to the Thai political intervention after the 2006 coup d'état which comprises of several factors as follows:

## **The Flow of the Democracy Growth**

Since the military seized the power from the Pol.Lt.Col Thaksin Shinawatra including the suppression of the political protest "Red Shirt" on May 2008 causing several protestors died and injured, the military was criticized by both domestic and international (Thabchumpon and Mccargo, 2011: 993-994). After this situation, the military leaders carefully consider to make the political intervention in the future. As the political assembly of the People's Democratic Reform Committee or PDRC situation, they attempt to send the signals or supported messages to the army to resolve the national political conflict causing by the attempt of the Yingluck's government pushing the amnesty law leading to the dissatisfaction of a large number of people and request for the political reform. Nevertheless,

the military leader still ignore to this request (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2014: 407). In addition, the bad image in the world stage for the political intervention through the coup d'état by the Thai army has the highest statistic among the ASEAN members (ASEAN Journey, 2014). Also, the political realization not to interfere of the army may come from the 1997 Asian economic crisis which makes the army safety development is tied with the country's economic development<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, the Thai army has to adjust itself to be more professional. At least, an example of General Surayud Chulanont, the former commander in chief resigned from the senator which was from the assignment in 1998 (Regional Outlook, 1999: 19) including with the decreasing of the high ranking military troop suitable for the economic situation.

After the cold war toward the information war era, the establishing the civil service organization have been more important than the army unit which is used to be an organization to build the democratic process consistent with the national regime changing all the time. The civil organization developed and employed the military doctrine. Since the intervention from the army in the past to solve the political conflict was in the form of the "coup d'état" and when the country peacefulness went back, the coup transfer the power back to the citizen. However, this method generated much more conflict leading to loss of the citizen lives and created the bad attitude of the citizen to the military. Therefore, the military doctrine has been reorganized by allowing the military participate in building the conscious mind of the Thai society to have the democratic culture and ideal by providing the knowledge of the step and process of the democracy development including the public relation to support the activities encouraging the democratic form of government with the King as Head of State (Civil Doctrine, 2009: 51) except the national defense duty.

The obvious phenomenon was to give the freedom to the military troop in the army area be able to vote freely such that the commander cannot easily order or recruit them to support the candidates from the specific party as before.<sup>2</sup> Also, many high ranking soldiers in all armies have opportunities to study abroad and absorb the cultural experiences of the absolute civilian control from the country having strong democracy regime (Ubon, 2556: 32). Moreover, the using of the absolute power to overthrow the government from the election is unacceptable from the international. The experiences after coup d'état in 2006, the US army cut the grant budget of army development to the Thai army (Chambers, 2013: 25) because the government assigned from the power seizing committee lacked of the democracy. These become the political consciousness of the high ranking military officers in order to reduce their political role because of the impact assessment to their organization. Thus, the military leaders allow the political conflict solved by the law or political process in order to protect

<sup>1</sup> General Prajan Kansut, the former chief of army intelligence and the former assistant military attaché of Myanmar kindly gave an interview on April 5, 2014 and provided deeply information: the Thailand's economic crisis at that time came from the dissatisfaction of the US government to the Thai government (PM Chavalit Yongchayudh) in case of accepting the Myanmar to be an ASEAN member. Since the US government would like to continue the economic sanction to the Myanmar government. Also, PM Chavalit denied having the informal meeting with MS. Madeleine Albright, the secretary of state at that time during the ASEM meeting at Manila in the late 1996. Hence, the high ranking Thai army officers believed that the Thai Baht speculation may come from the conspiracy theory between the US government and George Soros, a Jew currency speculator who is the main support to the Burma Project of Soros's Open Society Foundation. Thus, the Thai military leaders begin to realize the military power use inconsistent with the global democracy trend and consent to decline their role to become more professional soldiers.

<sup>2</sup> Colonel Kajornsak Thaiprayoon, a lecturer of the command and general staff college interviewed on April 10, 2014 noticed that the election results in the fifth district of Bangkok (Dusit and Rajthevee Districts) on July 3, 2011 showing that the winner came from Pue Thai Party which has the negative images and conflict with the army throughout several years. However, the winning result in the army zone may be because the commander and the troops have their own political realization including the supporting the troops to learn more on the democratic way in the form of professional soldier.

the army is used to be a political method or target causing the bad image to the army. The army needed to commit the coup d'état on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2014 because the confrontation between the government's supporter and the other side. The situation almost brought about lost and chaos. In the past, the army would like the political institute solved the political impasse by themselves. In the meantime, the army has a main duty to promote unity among Thai people.

The army needed to broke through this political impasse. The objective is to end the conflict and lead the country to national reconciliation. It was clear that this coup d'état had not use any violent measure or punish the opposite political thinker which was different from the past coup d'état's way. Moreover, this coup d'état also maintain political neutrality (Alagappa, 2014:1-2). The chief of this coup d'état made a roadmap to show the next step to bring back the normal situation.

### **The Law to Protect the Senior Military Officers Transfer from the Political Side**

The organization of Ministry of Defense Act, 2008 was drafted after the 2006 coup d'état during the Gen.Surayud Chulanont was the prime minister in order to protect the intervention of the military commander assignment (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 2008:42) particularly in the commander-in-chief position. The article 25<sup>th</sup> in this act regulates to have the specific committee to consider the list of the army general. This committee consists of 7 members, 2 of them come from the political side which is the minister of defense and deputy minister of defense, the others comprise of three commander-in-chiefs, the chief of the defense forces, and the permanent secretary of defense. The proportion of military army is more than the political side to prevent the using of political influence toward the annual military commander movement (Chambers and Croissant, 2010b: 92). Since, the military used to face the harmony conflict within the army in case of the assignment of the military officers approved by the political side by ignoring the remonstration from the army leaders. In addition, some military commanders were suspicious by their attribute and qualifications or had the image close to the political side. The previous experiences of these kinds of intervention that the political side support the military leaders closed to them during 2001 - 2006 in the PM Thaksin Shinawatra government can be shown in the table below.

<b>List</b>	<b>Highest Rank/Year</b>	<b>Relation to the political side</b>	<b>Political position after retirement</b>
1. Gen.Sampant Bunyanunt	Permanent Secretary of Defense (2001- 2003)	Familiar with Former PM Thaksin Shinawatra	Minister of Defense
2. Air Chief Marshall (ACM) Kongsak Wantana	Commander-in-chief (Air Force), 2002- 2005	Wife is a close friend with Khunying Potjaman (Shinawatra) Damaphong	Minister of Interior
3. Gen. Chaiyasith Shinawatra	- Commander-in-chief (army), 2003 - 2004 - Chief of Defense Force (2004-2005)	Elder Cousin of Former PM. Thaksin Shinawatra	Advisor of the former PM Yingluck Shinawatra
4. Gen. Ruangroj Mahasaranont	Chief of Defense Force (2005-2006)	Fellow with Gen. Chaiyasith Shinawatra	Deputy Chief of the people power party

The information from the table above demonstrates the unity conflict in the army organization when the political side used the influence in the position movement and destroyed the army tradition. Therefore, the Ministry of Defense Act, 2008 becomes the immunity of the army from the political side unable to interfere or select the person to the top ranking military officer (Boonprong, 2011: 23-24). At most, the political side can only negotiate for some positions responsible for coordinating between the political side and the armed force such as the permanent secretary of defense whom the minister of defense has to work with. The military leaders often agreed this proposal because these positions are not related to the troop control. The table 2 shows the list of the permanent secretary during 2010 - 2014.

List	Ranking before being the permanent secretary of defense	The relationship with the political side
1. Gen. Kittipong kedkowit	Deputy Chief of Defense Force	Close relation with Gen.Prawit Wongsuwan
2. Gen Sathien Permthong-In	Chief of Staff of the Royal Thai Army	Wife has close relation with Pue Thai party
3. Gen. Thanongsak Apirakyothin	Assistant Commander-in-chief	Lineage with the key persons of the Thai Rak Thai party in the Northern part of Thailand
4. Gen. Nipat Thonglek	Deputy permanent secretary of Defense	Close relationship with Gen.Chetha Thanajaro, the head advisor of the Thai Rak Thai Party

The table above illustrates the relationship between the political side and the military leader receiving the trustfulness to be a permanent secretary of defense. This is found that each side step back together creating the negotiation image between the political side and the army committee. For example, ACM. Sukampon Suwanatat, the former ministry of defense (2012) supported Gen.Thanongsak Apirakyothin to be a permanent secretary of defense (Nanuam, 2012) which was the advantage for the military commanders movement allowing other commanders having the chance to receive the better position. Another example is the case of the former PM and the minister of defense Yingluck Shinawatra agreed to select the commander closely relate to the Thai Rak Thai Party executive officers (Nanuam, 2013) during the unusual political situation. The history of Thai politics also shows that one of the main reasons the military coup committee use to overthrow the civil government is the destruction of the military organization except the corruption and other major institution problems (Petchlertanan, 2007: 179), or the rumor of the army commander movement. Hence, the Ministry of Defense Act, 2008 will be the power method of the military leader and rightful area to let the organization mostly free from the political interfere. The need of the military in the politics will decline gradually.

### **The Independent Agencies of the Thai Government under 2007 Constitution**

After the military coup in 2006, the independent agencies of the Thai government have more roles such as the judiciary i.e. the constitutional court. This is a new phenomenon of the Thai politics to take responsibility to solve the political crisis replacing the army intervention as in the past. Also, the righteous image using the power of the judiciary to investigate other political institutions which is called “Judicial Review” has more roles and

receives more public trust than other organization (Bamroongsuk, 2014: 37). Furthermore, the power using of other independent agencies such as the election commission of Thailand which has the power to investigate the attributes of politicians and political parties against the present constitution and can point the guilty petition and summarize the investigation result to the regulated agencies such as the constitutional court to dissolve the political parties or temporarily ban the party's executive members from the politics; for instance, the dissolve of the Thai Rak Thai and People Power Party (Chambers and Croissant, 2010a: 25) or the identification of the attribute of the acting PM Yingluck Shinawatra out of the duty in case of the using power to transfer of the former secretary of the national security council unfairly (Chomchuen, 2014). Apart from two agencies mentioned above, there is another agency such as The National Counter-Corruption Commission of Thailand having the responsibility to investigate and receive the appeal of the politicians and high ranking officers who tend to have the corruption behaviors or have more unusual fortune (Mahakun, 2013: 2). It can also point the guilty petition such as the asset confiscation or criminal proceeding not only for the politicians, but also for the former military leaders i.e. the case of a former permanent secretary of defense was confiscated assets that were unable to identify their sources (Ongkulna, 2013). These are good examples for the military commanders to adjust themselves to be more professional soldiers and accept the investigation from the independent agencies systematically.

This illustrate that the independent agencies enter to share the political zones as well as the role reduction of the army in the politics such that the army is not necessary to involve solving the country problem as before. The army leaders agreed to accept the rules under the constitution because they believe that the citizens and the troop soldiers have more political consciousness.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The role of the political interfere from the military may be beyond our prediction during the unstable political situation. Since the military coup in 2006, the army received several lessons affecting to its image lacking the acceptance from both domestic and international. If the country enters to the crisis, the army may come to control the situation back to normal by focusing on the safety maintain and not to be a key player to solve the political problem by allowing the process following the democratic mechanism and doing under the constitution. The noninterference from the political side in the army business causes the army to better accept the power of the civil government. The 2014 coup d'état tried to solve political passé and to maintain the peace of the nation. Once the situation is back to normal, the army will reduce their own role from a political player to be an observer. Therefore, the political role of the military in future may be influenced in the Thai politics, but it is in the pattern of country's problem concern more than the previous influenced on

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