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Thailand: Origins of Military Rule

David Elliott

**With foreword by
Malcolm Caldwell**



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This book is dedicated to the
peasants and workers of Thailand.



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This book has grown out of research done in 1974-75 at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. The resultant work, entitled 'Thailand: The Political Economy of Underdevelopment', was an attempt to provide an alternative to the conventional analyses of Thailand made by bourgeois academics. My original intent had been to present a study of the impact of the American military occupation forces upon the structure of Thai society and the research which I did in Thailand centred on this problem. But my research pointed ever more clearly to the larger issues of imperialism and the nature of the historical relations between Thailand and the more advanced capitalist countries. Lacking a satisfactory and adequately detailed analysis of the social and economic conditions in Thailand which preceded the American military occupation, and cognizant of the importance of these conditions, I redirected the focus of the study toward trying to understand Thai society as a whole from the historical materialist perspective.

With the coup d'état of October 1976, it became apparent that the publication of a radical study of Thailand and the resurgence of military rule there was necessary. This was particularly so because of the reactionary nature of the 1976 coup, because of the vicious attacks on socialists, workers and students which preceded and accompanied the coup, and because of profound changes in South-east Asia brought about by the liberation of the neighbouring peoples of Indochina. Consequently, my earlier work was extensively rewritten and I have added new material in an attempt to explain the class basis of military rule in Thailand. Since the present manuscript was completed, Thailand has undergone another coup. The information available to me indicates that the coup represents little more than window-dressing in light of the criticisms of the Thanin regime and his opposition to democracy and his suppression of basic human rights. It also represents a further consolidation of military rule.

Many of the data which entered into the present study were derived from secondary sources. I hope that this book will encourage Thai and other scholars with access to primary sources to produce more detailed and critical studies of the social structure of Thailand and of the connection of the Thai ruling class with imperialism.

Even more important, however, is the need for Thais and Americans — as well as concerned people of all countries — to become aware of the current situation in Thailand and to recognize the role of the U.S. in bolstering the present oppressive and reactionary military regime. This book, then, is published with the intent of providing the world-wide friends of the Thai peasants, workers, students and progressive elements

PREFACE

with an analysis of the historical conditions which have led to the situation in which they are mounting ever more effective class struggles against capitalism and imperialism in Thailand, and human rights are increasingly being violated by the military regime as it struggles to repress this growing guerilla war.

This book would not have been possible without the assistance and encouragement of others. My second year at The Hague, during which the first version of this work was written, was facilitated by a fellowship from the Netherlands Universities Foundation for International Co-operation. I would like to thank Ken Post, who was the first supervisor of my thesis during this period, for many helpful criticisms and suggestions with regard to the theoretical framing of my argument. Malcolm Caldwell of the London School of Oriental and African Studies was the second supervisor of my thesis and his knowledge of, and commitment to the class struggles of the peoples of South-east Asia have proved invaluable to me in preparing this manuscript and in facilitating its publication. He also has been kind enough to write the substantial introduction which appears here. This not only brings the book up to date with an account of the further military coup in late 1977 but more importantly puts the Thai social formation in its political and economic setting in the region of South-east Asia as a whole. Comments on my thesis were also provided by the reader for Zed Press and they challenged me to go beyond the original analysis to clarify several issues and to probe more deeply into various others. Many other people including my wife Eveline, and comrades with the collective that produces the journal, *Insurgent Sociologist*, have helped to provide an atmosphere which encouraged me to undertake the rewriting while I was a graduate student and teaching fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of Oregon. A number of other individuals who are best left unnamed have provided data and advice which entered into the present work. However, since only the copy-editors, Robert Molteno and Michael Pallis, have counselled me on the final draft and their attention has been directed more towards style and organization than substance, I must take responsibility for the analysis, its implications and any errors.

Finally, I must make clear for those readers who are not overly familiar with the concepts and lines of argument which Marxism — both classical and contemporary — uses to analyse social formations, I have included a theoretical addendum (Appendix A). This introduces the reader to the relevant terms and ideas which are relied upon in the body of the book. Some readers may indeed find it useful to start their reading of this book with the Appendix.

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FOREWORD

BY MALCOLM CALDWELL

There are two compelling reasons for taking particular interest in Thailand from among the scores of third world countries. The first consists in the singular non-colonial form of articulation with imperialism that it has experienced since the mid-nineteenth century. The second, quite simply, is that Thailand is now the front line in the long, implacable war to the death between the forces of Asian liberation and regeneration and an ageing but still vicious, arrogant, obdurate, devious and dangerous imperialist enemy. Thailand's idiosyncratic historical experience provides us with a wealth of comparative material and a readymade yardstick by which the better to evaluate the true impact of colonial rule upon Thailand's neighbours. By the same token we may assume that the pre-capitalist, pre-imperialist, socio-economic structure of Thailand, comparatively better preserved over a longer time, must have left and continues to leave more relatively unsullied traces lending themselves to scrutiny in the search for clues to the elucidation of problematic areas in the theory of development, and more particularly the Marxist branch of it. It is in this area that David Elliott makes his principal contribution — and it is an important one. However, in this brief foreword I wish to concentrate upon the second of the two justifications for studying Thailand I gave above — its conjunctural promotion to the forefront of international strategic concerns.

The two aspects are, of course, related. Had it not been for the historical diffusion and indirectness of imperialist dominance over Thailand, Washington would have experienced much greater difficulty in asserting its post-Second World War ascendancy over the country. Once it had become virtually the HQ of United States activity in the South-east Asian region, it was inevitable that Thailand would sooner or later emerge as a vulnerable salient, exposed by erosion of the imperialist position elsewhere. The readiness of the Thai elite to accept the risks and opprobrium of identifying with and serving American purposes regionally and domestically can, again, be explained at least in part by its own peculiar genealogy and genesis. It is upon these interlocking strands of the Thai experience that I enlarge in what follows.

THAILAND AND THE INTER-WAR CRISIS

Before the First World War, Britain had been slowly losing ground to foreign competition in the field of international trade. However, two factors put a brake upon the process and indeed tended to postpone serious consideration of its long-term implications on the part of the British public. The first of these was continuing British supremacy in the complex world of shipping, foreign investment, insurance, the money market, and — in short — all those mysterious activities which earned her sufficient 'invisible' earnings to balance the national books. The second was British success — for the time being — in promoting sales of her traditional exports in new markets as older ones themselves industrialised or were captured by one or other of the newer manufacturing nations. Thailand played a direct role in relation to this second factor. Between 1870 and 1913, while the British share of the world's export trade in manufacturing fell from two-fifths to barely a quarter, the value of cotton imports into Thailand — the bulk of them originating in Britain — multiplied sevenfold. It was thus that the position of *primus inter pares* London acquired in Thailand as a result of the diplomatic manoeuvring both before and after the Bowring Treaty (1855) paid off.

But the scope for such coups was rapidly declining in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the First World War, it had in effect disappeared, and henceforward fluctuations of economic fortune among the industrialised countries were to be marked by intra-imperialist transfers, and since these — understandably — were not effected without rancour and violence, it was the weary, irresolute and defensive, such as Britain, which had to give ground while the vigorous, ambitious and aggressive, such as the United States and Japan, made the gains. The position in Thailand was no exception in this respect. The mid-nineteenth century unequal treaties had deprived the country of fiscal autonomy — an essential attribute of at least economic sovereignty. The low tariffs thus foisted upon Thailand had brought greatest benefit to Britain. Not surprisingly, then, it was Britain that put up the fiercest resistance to any re-negotiation of the terms, and while the United States went ahead with a new treaty which recognized the full fiscal autonomy of Thailand in 1920, London fought a stubborn rearguard action until 1926, and even then succeeded in limiting the new tariff on cotton goods, iron and steel manufactures, and machinery (the major imports from the U.K.) to 5% *ad valorem* for a further ten years.

Nevertheless, the writing was on the wall. With Britain preoccupied elsewhere after 1938-39, Japan and the United States were nicely poised to haul in the slack: whereas hitherto almost all tin and rubber from Thailand had been exported to British Malaya for processing and re-export, now more and more was exported directly to the two Pacific rivals. And it was the British-American Tobacco Company (the very same firm which

had so lucratively converted the Chinese into a nation of cigarette smokers) which cashed in on the Thai tariff on manufactured tobacco imports, bringing in Virginia leaf and seeds to establish an industry largely in American control and bringing welcome trade to the American tobacco states.

But it is to the battle around the commodity restriction schemes of the inter-war era that we must look to gain an insight into the formation of American thinking about a more acceptable international economic order. The First World War had put an abrupt end to the golden years of Britain's financial supremacy and ability to guarantee a supply of international liquidity adequate to lubricate the smooth movement and exchange of a secularly rising volume of production. Desperately though they tried, Whitehall and the City could not put the Gold Standard egg together again. America, for its part, was not yet ready — ideologically or institutionally — to accept the role Britain could no longer adequately perform. All was well as long as boom conditions prevailed in the U.S.A. itself, but with the crash of 1929 it was increasingly a question of *sauve qui peut*. The extreme precariousness of the American position was now borne in upon their businessmen and statesmen with a vengeance. In the first place, despite the tremendous productive power and wealth at their disposal, they found themselves impotent to influence decisively the direction of great global economic events. In the second place, they discovered that the old colonial powers, for all their despised degeneracy, could still tweak the mighty American tail almost with impunity. We shall look at how Washington tackled the former in a moment, but a word or two here about the latter.

It was in the inter-war years that the United States became a net importer of industrially vital raw materials. For some of these, her dependence upon overseas sources was almost complete, and — by chance, production of two of them (rubber and tin) was concentrated in South-east Asia. Moreover, two European colonial powers, Britain and Holland, commanded a sufficiently great share between them of total production to be able unilaterally to influence output, export level, and (to some extent) price. American opinion was outraged by the steps that were taken in the Depression to just those ends, vehemently expressing the view that U.S. business was being 'held to ransom'. Nor was that the end of the matter, for the old colonial powers also could — and did — act to safeguard their own industrial interests by restricting commercial access to their colonies. This Britain did by adopting a generalised system of Imperial Preference in 1932. Washington now felt threatened by progressive exclusion from world trade, and indeed there was a fall in the American share of the shrinking volume of international transactions in the 1930s. These tendencies greatly exercised the thoughts of American leaders at this time, the more so since the threat of approaching war could not realistically be separated out from the sharpening actuality of trade war, particularly in

the Pacific.

Thailand was unavoidably caught up in all this. Although it latterly joined both the tin and the rubber restriction schemes elaborated by Anglo-Dutch imperialism, it exacted as the price for doing so quotas generous enough to permit virtually unhampered expansion of domestic production — a circumstance naturally welcome to both America and Japan. Much more significantly, though, Washington and Tokyo each recognised that whichever power were to wrest strategic control over Thailand and Indochina from the weakening grip of a palsied Anglo-French imperialism would have the opulent, fecund, much-prized heartland of South-east Asia — Malaya and Indonesia — at its mercy. It was contention over this issue — not the fate of China — which made the Pacific War inevitable. American economic interests in China were relatively insignificant compared with the value of her economic ties with Japan; Washington was, therefore, prepared to tolerate in practice — with suitable rhetorical gestures of protest — Japanese encroachments in China. But when Japan moved into Cochin-china (Southern Vietnam) and, later, Thailand in 1941, war became unavoidable, because American leaders had already identified South-east Asia as a region vital to the prosperity of the United States.

Once war had broken out, Washington did not make the mistake of burning all bridges to the Thai elite simply because it had gone over to the Axis fold and had, moreover, nakedly pursued expansionist self-interest in doing so (by occupying, with Japanese blessing, parts of Burma, Malaya, Cambodia and Laos). On the contrary, the Americans, by divers means, strove to keep their options for the future open, since it was acknowledged that command of the crucial Malay crescent (Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines) required command of Thailand.

SHAPING THE POST-WAR WORLD

Even before war broke out in Europe, thus incontrovertibly signalling the end of the precarious and profoundly unsatisfactory international economic order of the 1920s and 1930s, the American ruling class had begun to mobilise its very considerable resources for a project of astounding magnitude: to draw up a detailed blueprint for the post-war world — a blueprint that unchallengeable American economic and military power could transform into imperial reality worldwide as and when peace came. A key place in this planning was played by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a private but powerful New York-based organisation which brought together a group of elite businessmen, scholars, journalists, lawyers and bureaucrats and put them into close day-to-day working collaboration with top government figures. They soon concluded that an acceptable post-war world was unobtainable without an American

commitment to imperialist expansionism.

For Washington, there were two transcendent imperatives: first, to avoid slipping back into the trough of recession; and, second, to establish guaranteed access to a steadily expanding flow of industrial raw material inputs in order to fuel the hoped-for long secular boom in business activity. The former required that the by now incurably inadequate level of spontaneous investment in the private sector be supplemented by massive state intervention, while the latter pointed to the establishment of 'equal access', in other words an end to the traditional colonial privileges formerly enjoyed by the West European powers. Both were to have major repercussions for South-east Asia, for while one meant greatly increased U.S. foreign investment facilitated by government 'aid' programmes and — parallel to this — post-war remilitarization, the other pointed to the supersession of colonialism — not by true independence, however, but by a new form of economic domination (neo-colonialism) under American hegemony.

The scheme which finally evolved was a frankly imperialist one. Having carefully mapped the location, production of, and trade in, all important commodities and manufactured goods, CFR experts concluded that — at a minimum — America would need a territory co-extensive with the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific Area (including the empires of all the old colonial powers). But this was merely a core area; it was hoped ultimately to integrate the entire world economically under American auspices. But 'auspices' is really too mild and kindly a word, for Washington proposed to exert 'unquestioned power' in supervising implementation of the project, and it was for this reason that a post-war network of American military bases right round the world was proposed. Finally, in order to provide the essential liquidity, to stabilize currencies, and to generate capital for construction of infrastructure on a scale commensurate with the expansion in economic activity envisaged, it would be necessary to fashion appropriate institutions; these — the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development among them — were duly forthcoming.

Putting such an ambitious enterprise in place could hardly be accomplished without hitches. Nor was it. Russian reluctance to be co-opted on U.S. terms determined the configuration of the Cold War blocs. 'Loss' of China (to the world capitalist system) dictated drawing the imperial frontier through Korea, Taiwan and Indochina. While this naturally heightened the strategic significance of Thailand, American planners had already, appreciating its importance, moved decisively in the immediate post-war years to secure the allegiance of its elites and their compliance with U.S. economic and military designs by pardoning their Axis alignment and waiving the reparations righteously demanded by the British and the French. The latter were not in a position to deter the reconciliation, for both needed American assistance to restore their

home economies and to re-assert themselves in their South-east Asian colonies. Besides, Thailand was destined to become a nest of U.S. bases backing up imperialist aggression in Indochina while at the same time it was vital to the security of Malaya (crucial to British post-war recovery) and of the Straits of Malacca (essential to the recovery of Japan). Indeed, it is impossible to isolate out the separate pieces of the complex *gestalt* that resulted from American manoeuvring for an acceptable post-war Pacific rim. One thing is, however, certain: Thailand had to be integrated securely into the whole.

There had been an anti-Japanese guerrilla movement in Thailand during the war. Influenced by radical ideas, it appealed to the poor and disinherited in the country. After the war, the social movement that had crystallized round this resistance posed a challenge to the collaborationist Thai elite and to American purposes. It had, therefore, to be broken up. It was — with a calculation and ruthlessness which foreshadowed later and better documented regional ‘counter-insurgency’ programmes. The way was cleared for consolidation of a pliant and dependable rightist military clique.

FROM SEATO TO TET

Incorporation of Thailand as a vital component of the ‘containment’ perimeter of the ‘free world’ was given formal recognition by its adhesion to SEATO — the South East Asian Treaty Organisation — in 1954. SEATO arose out of the French debacle in Vietnam and U.S. determination to enlist as many allies as possible in an anti-communist military pact ostensibly designed to limit communist gains to those conceded (unwisely, according to Washington) at Geneva; in point of fact, its architect, John Foster Dulles, cherished the delusion that a militarized puppet ‘state’ of South Vietnam, in U.S. hands, and a Thailand bristling with U.S. military bases would eventually serve as launching pads for ‘freeing’ North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam — D.R.V.) and thus securing South-east Asia in its entirety for inclusion in the American Empire. How disastrously he — and his successors — miscalculated is now a matter of history.

The years between the formation of SEATO and final proof of the invincibility of the Vietnamese in the Tet offensive of 1968, a proof sufficiently conclusive to make American withdrawal merely a matter of time, must count as among the most infamous and shameful in Thai history. Day after day U.S. war planes took off from their Thai bases to rain bombs, rockets, napalm, chemicals and mines upon the land and people of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Thai mercenaries fought side by side with the Americans against the Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians. Thai leaders were willing accessories to every crime against their Indochinese neighbours the Americans sought their complicity in: from participation

in 'secret war' against the people of Laos and in actual invasion of Cambodia to maintaining and training mercenary traitors from all three Indo-chinese countries and facilitating their treachery. Thailand's honour was only salvaged by steady growth in the rural areas of a revolutionary resistance which was to consolidate in the 1960s around the Thai Communist Party (and which proved its ability to co-ordinate its activities with the liberation forces in Indochina), and by the great courage shown by those — students, intellectuals, workers — prepared to defy savage official repression by openly protesting against American and Thai crimes in Vietnam.

The scale of U.S. escalation in Indochina and Thailand was in itself the strongest possible indication of how highly ruling class America prized retention of South-east Asia in the sphere of neo-colonial economic activities. By 1968, U.S. and Japanese investments in the area had grown enormously as compared with the pre-war period. The raw materials of South-east Asia had steadily appreciated in value and attractiveness to the capitalist world as business had subjected world resource availability to increasingly close and careful scrutiny.

Just prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War, American oil companies took advantage of the latitude reluctantly conceded to them (under pressure from the American government) by the Dutch to subject Indonesia to more thorough prospecting than had ever before been undertaken anywhere. The results were exciting, but the war interrupted development. Afterwards, with the elimination of Dutch influence and the granting of independence (again with American pressure on Holland), Stanvac and Caltex, U.S. oil companies, began opening up production and export of Indonesian petroleum.

Meantime, the technology of off-shore oil extraction was maturing apace (Shell pioneering off Brunei in North Borneo). It was widely felt in oil circles that South-east Asia — a maze of bays, inlets, peninsulas and archipelagos — would prove highly rewarding in terms of recoverable off-shore petroleum. Co-ordinated scientific substantiation was under way by the second half of the 1960s. Two developments threatened peaceful exploitation of the fields being established: the successes of the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam (whose off-shore fields were highly considered), and the nationalist turn of President Sukarno's policies in Indonesia, policies which, by 1964/65 seemed to endanger the future of Stanvac and Caltex. American responses were swift. The war in Vietnam was rapidly escalated, and Sukarno was overthrown and replaced (1965/66) by an amenable military dictator who allowed U.S. advisers to draft new legislation converting Indonesia back into a foreign investors' paradise. South-east Asian oil had, for the moment, been secured.

ASEAN TAKES UP THE RUNNING

The ill-fated SEATO always proved a grave disappointment to its American architects. No application of cosmetics, however lavish, could conceal its imperialist features; only two South-east Asian countries adhered to it (Thailand and the Philippines) — they were the most abjectly dependent and responsive of American neo-colonial clients for both were subsequently to send troops to Vietnam. The other signatories were the U.S.A., the U.K., France, Australia, New Zealand and Pakistan. Furthermore, its military prowess was restricted to the occasional exercise.

Nonetheless, the task for which it had been conceived — an important and demanding one — remained: namely, to halt social revolution on the South-east Asian periphery and thus preserve the fruits of the region for the plucking of rich industrialised countries elsewhere. Bending their energies to the problem, American mandarins came up in the early 1960s with the ASEAN conception. ASEAN (the Association of South East Asian Nations) was formally to consist only of regional powers (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines), but all of them possessed of impeccable reactionary credentials and tied to the West and to Japan by a web of official and unofficial bonds. In order further to distance it from a discredited SEATO, ASEAN was at first to restrict itself ostentatiously to comparatively harmless cultural and economic concerns. Finally, its U.S. parentage and patronage were to be concealed by entrusting the public baptism to then Indonesian foreign minister, Adam Malik, who was even indulgently permitted to take the credit for fathering it.

ASEAN was launched in 1967, none too soon, as the Tet offensive rudely underlined. The regional corollary of 'Vietnamisation' was 'ASEANisation'. While Washington hurried to implement its own new naval-island strategy, tailored round garrisoning remote impregnable bases and acquiring the ability to transport enormous loads of men and war material at great speed to mainland 'trouble spots', it simultaneously hastened expansion of the military in the ASEAN countries and standardisation of their training, equipment, field drills, and codes (with U.S. instruction, supply and advice) in order to weld them into a co-ordinated five-nation counter-insurgency force.

But the first steps along the way were cautiously taken. Mindful of the peaceful image ASEAN cultivated, early essays in military collaboration were bilateral, *ad hoc*, or undertaken more in the spirit of manoeuvres than of actual combat. Events would not await planning convenience, though. The Communist Party of Malaya (MCP) started sending guerilla parties South into peninsular Malaya from their secure fastnesses in Southern Thailand in 1968. It was impossible for counter-measures to be taken without close co-operation between Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur. This included, by an agreement that faltered in 1976 but was revived the