

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 28 April 2021

Thailand's Military in 2021: Mid-Year Reshuffle, Continuing Factionalism and Rejected Reform

*Paul Chambers**



While reducing the number of generals in the Thai armed forces was a stated priority, the recent mid-year military reshuffle did not further that goal. In this photo, Royal Thai Navy soldiers take part in a training exercise at Chulaporn camp in Thailand's southern Narathiwat province on March 31, 2021. Photo: Madaree TOHLALA, AFP.

** Paul Chambers is Lecturer and Special Advisor for International Affairs, Center of ASEAN Community Studies, Naresuan University, Phitsanulok, Thailand, and, in March-May 2021, Visiting Fellow in the Thailand Studies Programme of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thailand's military in 2021 finds itself with several principal tasks: reinforcing the police against youthful anti-government protestors; solidifying monarchical control of the country; assisting the police in arresting those suspected of violating Thailand's *lèse majesté* law; conducting counterinsurgency warfare against Malay-Muslim insurgents in the country's Deep South; and securing the 2, 416-kilometer-long Thai-Myanmar border.
- While reducing the number of generals in the Thai armed forces is a stated priority, the recent mid-year military reshuffle did not further that goal.
- Partisanship influenced the reshuffle, exhibiting continued military factionalism rooted in military-academy-class and unit bonds, financial interests, family ties and personal loyalties.
- Wide-ranging proposals for military reform, covering such areas as conscription, soldiers' welfare, military landholding, civilian control, laws bearing on national security, and procurement have been made. But few if any changes have occurred.
- In 2021, the palace continues to dominate Thailand's military.

INTRODUCTION

2021 has thus far been an eventful year for Thailand's armed forces. Those forces have been principally tasked with reinforcing the police against youthful anti-government protestors. Soldiers have stood behind police lines and, wearing civvies, mingled with pro-government counter-demonstrators.¹ The armed forces have also laboured to solidify monarchical control of the country, assisting the police in arresting anyone suspected of violating Thailand's *lèse majesté* law. Further, the military is in its fifteenth year of counterinsurgency warfare against Malay-Muslim insurgents in the country's Deep South. Finally, it sought to secure the 2,416-kilometer-long Thai-Myanmar border to stem both the spread of COVID-19 and the flow of people fleeing persecution into Thailand.²

MID-YEAR RESHUFFLE

Meanwhile, Thailand's 1 April 2021 mid-year military reshuffle,³ which was supposed to reflect the Ministry of Defense's plan to cut the size of the military's top-heavy senior officer corps, failed to see that objective materialise.⁴ Indeed, in early 2021, the ministry estimated that there were 1,400 generals or their equivalents in the country's armed forces, with 400 flag officers serving in the Army, 250 in the Navy, 190 in the Air Force, 250 at the Royal Thai Armed Forces headquarters and 300 in the Office of the Permanent Secretary of Defense. Though the military has been seeking to cut the number of generals and other flag officers by 25 per cent by 2029, planners considered making cuts of only 5-10 per cent in 2021.⁵ The idea was to incrementally diminish the number of appointments of military "experts" or "specialists", each of whom receives monthly salaries (and are considered superfluous), and then to not replace military retirees—with some officers urged into early retirement. But the 2021 mid-year reshuffle, which involved 238 personnel, included approximately 124 generals and colonels to be appointed as military experts or specialists. If anything, this outcome implies that the plan to begin trimming Thailand's bloated cadre generals has stalled.

Nevertheless, the mid-year re-shuffle has brought a number of changes worth noting. First, Commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters General Chalermopol Srisawat has advanced the careers of soldiers whom he favours. Thus, General Wattana Polchan, a member of *muak daeng* or "red hat" unit or Special Forces faction and a pre-cadet academy Class 21 peer of General Chalermopol, as well as commander of the Counter-Terrorism Center, was elevated to become the chief of the Armed Forces Security Center, which handles intelligence. Succeeding Wattana as counter-terrorism chief is another Chalermopol associate, General Suwit Ketsiri, of pre-cadet academy Class 23. Suwit hails from the *Burapha phayak* faction of Prime Minister General (ret.) Prayut Chan-ocha and Deputy Prime Minister General (ret.) Prawit Wonguwan). Like Chalermopol, he previously served as deputy commander of the 2nd Cavalry Division, Royal Guard, and in the 904 Royal Guard Special Task Force. Suwit was also deputy command for the First Army Region. He is expected to succeed Chalermopol as commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters when the latter retires in 2023.⁶

Another noteworthy element of the reshuffle was the demotion of General Rachit Arunrungsi, Army Welfare director, to the post of deputy director, Integration and Practice Office of the Internal Security Mission. In March 2020, it was publicly revealed that Rachit had allowed a boxing match to proceed at a stadium run by the Army Welfare Department despite the cabinet's ban on state agencies holding crowded events to stanch the spread of COVID-19.

Over 200 people, including Rachit, contracted COVID-19 as a result of the event.⁷ Although he was initially dismissed from the stadium's board, Rachit's demotion came only a full year later. Rachit's replacement as Welfare Department director is General Fuengwit Laohasurayothin, a pre-cadet Class 22 classmate and friend of Army Commander General Narongphan Jitkaewthae. Two other classmates of Narongphan have also gained in the reshuffle. General Noppadon Srichansuk, deputy director of the Royal Thai Army Ordnance Department, was appointed as the department's director, while General Thitichai Preecha became the director of the Coordination Center 5, Army Office of Internal Security.

Yet another key appointment was that of General Dechapol Suwan. From director of the Department of Information Technology and Space Defense, he has become special adviser to the Office of the Permanent Secretary of Defense. Though his is an advisory position, Dechapol's appointment signifies the growing importance to the Thai military of the space domain. In August 2019, Thailand launched a space operations centre tasked with consolidating Thai national security in outer space. The centre is to be the foundation for "space operations, outer space patrols, satellite communications and international engagement" in space.⁸ Dechapol is a peer and pre-cadet Class 20 classmate of the former Army chief, current Deputy Secretary of the Royal Household General Apirat Kongsompong.

RAMPANT MILITARY FACTIONALISM

This latest reshuffle illustrates the push-and-pull of the factionalism that persists at different levels of Thailand's armed forces: principally among powerful extra-military personalities, units and pre-cadet and service academy classes, but to a lesser degree involving the families and personalities of active-duty commanders. Indeed, the military has lacked factional cohesion since 2001, and such fission has intensified since the beginning of the current monarch's reign. Today, the conflict between military extra-military personalities principally pits King Vajiralongkorn against Prawit, with less involvement from Prayut and Interior Minister General Anupong Paochinda. Prawit, Prayut and Anupong dominated military promotions from 2007 until 2016. In 2018, the king established a three-month Royal 904 military training course, whose graduates obtain a certificate and the right to wear a *kho daeng* or red-collared T-shirt under their uniforms. Senior officers completing the course could also be better assured of promotion. The king was at the same time creating a new faction which could encompass soldiers of diverse factional origins, including the leading factions rooted on units: the traditional *Wongthewan* or Royal Progeny faction, representing the 1st Division (Kings Guard), within which the king began his own military career, and the *Burapha phayak* or Eastern Tigers faction, representing the 2nd Division (Queen's Guard). Prayut, Prawit and Anupong belonged to that latter faction.⁹

In the event, the monarch's attempt to bring senior *kho daeng* officers cohesively under his sway has only succeeded in intensifying sub-factions. Thus, palace-preferred senior officers today tend to be not only *kho daeng* but also previously *Wongthewan*. In 2021, while this group dominates the military, as in the case of Army Commander General Narongphan, a lesser number of others favoured by Prawit, such as First Army Region Commander General Jaroenchai Hintao, remain prominent as well.

Besides extra-military personalities, a second variant of factions has been shared military units. These are the strongest types of factions because they are less limited in numbers of members,

involving generations of active-duty and retired officers across time. Besides *Wongthewan* and *Burapha phayak*, other leading unit factions include the *Sura dam* or Black Panthers, the *Muak daeng* and the *Tahan ma* or Cavalry. Current Privy Council Chair General (ret) Surayud Chulanond belongs to the *Muak daeng* faction while his predecessor the late General Prem Tinsulanond was from the Cavalry. The aforementioned Suwit Ketsiri is a member of both the *Burapha phayak* and Cavalry *Ma* factions.

A third faction type is the comradery shared among members of the same graduating class — both of the pre-cadet school, officially the Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School, and of service academies including the Army's Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy. The former institution is more important in the emergence of factions because its students include individuals who go on to serve in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Police. (Thai coups and the juntas that they put into power have often been led by soldiers from the same class faction, as was the case in both the 1991 and 2006 coups). Thai service branch commanders also prefer to place classmates in strategic leadership positions to maximise trustworthiness.¹⁰

The final variant of factions oscillates around the persona of active-duty commanders. The basis of the linkages in question may be family, financial or commercial pursuits, or *barami* (charisma). Such cliques are small and difficult to sustain over time because they tend to be limited by kinship, financial success, social skills and time on active duty. Only commanders with relatives in the military and long postings are able to build these connections. A rare example was General Prayut, who was Army commander for four years and whose brother Preecha became permanent secretary of the Ministry of Defense.

THE STATE OF MILITARY REFORM EFFORTS

The current upswing in military factionalism in Thailand has paralleled revelations in civil society about problems endemic to the armed forces: an excessive budget, corruption, impunity and insufficient accountability and transparency. Following the March 2019 general elections, every major party in the country's lower house of parliament save the junta's proxy Phalang Pracharat insisted on military and police reform of one kind or another. With the coalition dominated by the Phalang Pracharat party—itsself beholden to 2014-2019 junta leaders Prayut, Prawit and Anupong—and the Senate appointed by the junta, most reform proposals met a quick end in Parliament. Nevertheless, the parties continued to push for security sector reform and streamlining, with the loudest calls coming from the Future Forward Party, which morphed into the Move Forward Party after its dissolution in early 2020. That latter party has continued to advocate military reforms originally called for by Future Forward.

There have been generally eight proposed reforms. The first concerns the defence budget. Future Forward sought to reduce the budget by US\$1.6 billion, while the Thaksinite Phuea Thai Party advocated diverting 10 per cent of the budget, or US\$638.9 million, to assist new businesspeople. The Seri Ruam Thai Party supports transferring parts of the military budget to spending on welfare, while the Democrat Party supports cutting all unnecessary budgetary expenses.¹¹

A second proposal has been to reduce the number of armed forces personnel. Future Forward supported reducing Thailand's 330,000 troops to 170,000, decreasing the number of generals and other flag grade officers from 1,600 to 400, and abolishing the Thai Reserve Officer Training Corps. Seri Ruam Thai has called for reducing the number of generals, advisors and

experts in the military and abolishing brigades as well as the Armed Forces Headquarters. The Democrats have proposed reducing military personnel to 60-70 thousand troops. Phuea Thai has also supported personnel reductions, though it has been ambiguous about the scale of cuts that it favours.

A third proposal has been to abolish conscription. Phuea Thai, Seri Ruam Thai and the Democrats and the dissolved Future Forward have all supported this reform. They take this position because, since Thailand is not at war with any country, the country should limit itself to an all-volunteer military. In addition, some conscripts have been abused. General Pongsakorn Rodchompu, formerly of Future Forward, has specifically proposed that Thailand establish a corps of “voluntary smart soldiers” who possess a military-subsidised “professional education” that includes a curriculum on democracy, civil rights and civilian control of the military. At the same time, soldiers must be promoted based upon merit, rather than factional connections. Finally, in his view, there must be determined, civilian-led, enforceable investigations of conscripts’ deaths at the hands of other soldiers.

A fourth proposal involves reforming military landownership. The Thai military is the largest landowner in Thailand. The Future Forward Party called for utilising military land to build public housing. Phuea Thai also wants to put military land to greater social use. Seri Ruam Thai wants to use military land to build schools, hospitals, housing and public parks.

A fifth proposal is the improving of the welfare of individual military soldiers. Future Forward advocated providing scholarships for soldiers and their children, offering larger pensions as well as loans, and making available accident and family insurance. Phuea Thai has suggested providing more military education, focusing on technology, to soldiers.

A sixth proposal for reform of the Thai military is to enhance elected civilians’ control over the military. Future Forward proposed that the commanders of the service branches and of the armed forces’ headquarters be put under the Ministry of Defense. Seri Ruam Thai wants to ensure that elected prime ministers can remove members of the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters’ Personnel Management Committee and better combat military corruption. The Democrat Party seeks to bring greater public transparency to the military, including the establishment of more centres at which soldiers can lodge complaints.

A seventh proposal is the reform of laws relating to national security. This proposal applies to the Martial Law Act (1914), the Emergency Decree Law (2008) and the Internal Security Act (2008). Future Forward sought to forbid the military from trying civilians in military courts. It also tried to revise Article 6 of the Martial Law Act, which allows military personnel to overrule civilian authorities. Seri Ruam Thai has called for abolishing all military courts and amending the Ministry of Defense Organization Act so that elected civilian prime ministers must endorse military reshuffle decisions—which currently involve only armed forces commanders and the king. Phuea Thai has sought to diminish the number of days that the Emergency Decree Law allows the military to detain people; the current limit is 37 days. It has also supported placing the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) under the authority of civilian agencies.

An eighth proposal regards defence procurement. Thailand’s military procurement process has traditionally been close to opaque—with no elected civilian oversight. The Future Forward Party sought to reform the process, proposing effective oversight on the part of Parliament as well as academics, other civilian groups and journalists that would see them participate in every

stage of the weapons-buying process.¹² Indeed, there should be more parliamentary oversight, with civil society input, to address kickbacks that senior military and police officers receive during the procurement process.

Meanwhile, following a February 2020 massacre by a deranged Thai soldier in Nakhon Ratchasima and revelations that he had been drawn into a shady military business scheme, then-Army Commander Apirat promised immediate reforms. These included the following:

1. Eliminating arrangements whereby Army officers receive commissions for leasing military land to businesspeople.
2. Increasing transparency regarding public real estate assets and Army-owned businesses, to channel income to the Army's welfare fund. The Army signed a memorandum of understanding with the Treasury Department of the Ministry of Finance, providing for the transfer of Army-owned land and businesses to the ministry.
3. Requiring retired Army officers to move out of Army-owned houses.¹³
4. Ending the rights of soldiers to personally own various types of weapons.
5. Launching a complaint hotline for soldiers to allege Army irregularities such as corruption.

By the time Apirat retired in September 2020, these reforms had yet to materialize. The payment of commissions for leasing of property has continued. The MOU with the Treasury Department has only led to a few military-administered companies and properties being handed over to the department, and even those remain heavily influenced by the armed forces. Apirat did eventually dismiss the members of the Army board overseeing Lumpini Boxing Stadium events because of the March 2020 COVID-19 outbreak there, but the Army continues to run the stadium. Regarding welfare housing, the Army made so many exceptions to its new policy that a long list of more than 100 retired generals has remained in rent-free, Army-administered housing on the rationale that they are "contributing to society". The complaint hotline is not anonymous. After an Army sergeant used it to reveal an allegation of army corruption, he was fired and never reinstated. The hotline programme faded away.¹⁴

Military reform is necessary in other areas as well. For example, there should be more transparency and elected civilians' monitoring of military detention areas to reduce potential military torture and enforced disappearances. In addition, postings of military and police officers to the boards of corporations should be abolished. At the same time, there is no reason why the military should hold shares in private-sector firms—the TMB Bank, for example. Moreover, soldiers engaging in illegal activities should be vigorously prosecuted. Also, the military should not be allowed to use criminal defamation suits against civil society organizations which voice dissent against potential military abuses. Furthermore, organisations promoting development, such as the Five Provinces Forest Preservation Foundation (FPFPF), should not be dominated by the military. Indeed, of the 25 members on FPFPF's board, 18 are military officials. Finally, there should a reduction in the number of tasks assigned to the military which are also already performed by civilian agencies. Duplicated responsibilities include disaster relief, teaching farmers how to farm and others.¹⁵

Ultimately, amidst Thailand's 2021 mid-year armed forces reshuffle, the military finds itself highly factionalised, with enormous tasks at hand, and in need of reforms. While it is promoting its own *kho daeng* faction, the palace otherwise seeks to balance military factions in order to enhance its influence over the armed forces. Except perhaps for force modernisation, there is little likelihood of any military reforms sticking. No elected civilians possess the clout to compel reform, while internally-driven military reform has never been successful in Thailand. For the future, Thailand's bloated, divided and politicised military looks likely to endure. The armed forces themselves need to more ardently push for reform, if only to improve their effectiveness in carrying out their mission.

¹ *Bangkok Post*, "Army Chief: No Chance at all of Coup", 9 November 2020

(<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2016723/army-chief-no-chance-at-all-of-coup>).

² Kotcha Olarn and Helen Regan, "Thailand pushes back thousands fleeing Myanmar as death toll surpasses 500", *CNN*, 30 March 2021

(<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/30/asia/thailand-myanmar-refugees-intl-hnk/index.html>).

³ Kingdom of Thailand, Office of the Prime Minister, "ให้นายทหารรับราชการ" [Announcement of Military Reshuffle], *Royal Gazette*,

Volume 138, Special Section 55 ง, 11 March 2021

(http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2564/E/055/T_0001.PDF).

⁴ *Thai rat*, "ครันหลงย้าย 236 นายทหารกลางปี 'มิกแก้ว-มิกบี' จัดทัพ วางตัว ลดนายพล" [The Aftermath of Moving 236 Officers Mid-Year: "Big Kaew-Big Bee" Organising an Army with Fewer Generals], 17 March 2021 (<https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/2052161>).

⁵ Wassana Nanuam, "Generals Face Job Cuts", *Bangkok Post*, 8 March 2021

(<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2079775/generals-face-job-cuts>).

⁶ *Than setthakit*, "'ผบ.ทสส.' ยกเครื่องงานข่าวส่ง 'พล.ท.วัฒน์' คม ศรีภ." [PBTSS Makes News Promoting Wattana to Head the Security Center], 11 March 2021

(<https://www.thansettakij.com/content/politics/471800>).

⁷ *Thai PBS World*, "Lumpini boxing stadium's board fired over cluster of COVID-19 infections", 5 June 2020 (<https://www.thaipbsworld.com/lumpini-boxing-stadiums-board-fired-over-cluster-of-covid-19-infections/>).

⁸ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Thailand Launches Military Space Unit", *The Diplomat*, 19 September 2019 (<https://ipdefenseforum.com/2019/09/thailand-launches-military-space-unit/>).

⁹ Prime Minister Prayut and Interior Minister General Anupong Paochinda are also members of the Queen's Tiger Guard faction of the Thai Army; each formerly commanded the 21st Infantry Division. In contrast, Deputy Prime Minister Prawit never commanded that unit.

¹⁰ Paul Chambers, "Cleaved Clout: Factionalism and Fissures in Thailand's Military Today and Implications for Stability and Democratization", unpublished manuscript, 2011.

¹¹ Based upon information collected by the author from the political parties.

¹² Author's interview with General Pongsakorn Rodchompoo, former deputy leader of the Future Forward Party, Bangkok, 2 December 2021.

¹³ *Khaosod English*, "Retired Soldiers Ordered to Vacate Army Residences — Except for Prayuth", 14 February 2020 (<https://khaosodenglish-big.staging.matichon.co.th/politics/2020/02/14/retired-soldiers-ordered-to-vacate-army-residences-except-prayuth/>).

¹⁴ *Khaosod English*, "Apirat's Departure Leaves a Contended Legacy on 'Army Reform'", 1 October 2020

(<https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2020/10/01/apirats-departure-leaves-a-contended-legacy-on-army-reform/>).

¹⁵ *Prachatai*, "10 Ways to Revolutionize the Thai Military: Exposing the Junta's Blind Spot", 13 November 2015

(<https://prachatai.com/english/node/5611>).

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	---