

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Civilian Control of Those Close to the Palace: Making Sense of Thailand's October 2023 Military and Police Reshuffles

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*Military officials hold Thai flags during a ceremony commemorating King Maha Vajiralongkorn's birthday on 28 July 2023 in Bangkok, Thailand. (Photo by Lauren DeCicca/GETTY IMAGES ASIAPAC/Getty Images via AFP).*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thailand's annual military and police reshuffles, taking effect on 1 October 2023, have as usual involved political considerations, especially ties with the royal institution, pre-cadet class membership and other factionalisms.
- This year's appointments were formalised by former Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, a junta-leader-turned-elected-prime-minister, producing conservative appointees likely to clash with the newly-elected Pheu Thai Party-led government, though both sides oppose the reformist Move Forward Party (MFP).
- In the reshuffles, the influence of the palace has been greater than in recent years (especially in the police), perhaps owing partly to the schism between General Prayut Chan-o-cha and General Prawit Wongsuwan. Prayut led the 2014 coup which toppled an elected civilian Pheu Thai government and then served as elected prime minister during 2019-2023; Prawit, his mentor, became deputy junta leader and deputy prime minister, also serving until 2023.
- 2023 has seen a resurgence in Prayut's factional wing of *Burapha Phayak* or the Eastern Tigers, representing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, 1<sup>st</sup> Army Region, which dominated the army during 2007-2016.

## INTRODUCTION

Thailand's annual military and police reshuffles this year differed from those undertaken over the last ten years. Occurring on 1 October, these appointments were distinct because they marked a return to the divide between a civilian Pheu Thai-led government and the armed forces. The reshuffles also saw the resurrection of *Burapha Phayak* as an Army sub-faction, though under the helm of the *Kho Daeng* clique. Moreover, they took place in the weeks following the end of Prime Minister (General) Prayut Chan-o-cha's Palang Pracharath military proxy party caretaker government, which had selected the new appointees. Finally, there was clear evidence of an intensification of palace influence where the police were concerned.

This year's military reshuffle saw 762 promotions, including 28 females<sup>1</sup> (10 more than in 2022). There were appointments involving 514 generals, with 285 colonels or colonel-equivalent officers promoted to the rank of major general or its equivalent.<sup>2</sup> Thus, 2023 marked another year of top-heavy promotions to flag rank for the Thai military, though less so than in 2022 (587 generals).

## RESHUFFLE DETERMINANTS: FACTIONS, CLASS TIES, EXPERIENCES

Appointments and promotions in Thailand are based upon several factors, the most significant being demonstrated loyalty to the palace. That said, factions are quite important. Key cliques tend to be based around regiment or division, educational class, service unit, and shared experience in key combat postings. Pre-cadet class has become a crucial factional determinant because in Thailand since 1958 there has been only one pre-cadet academy—the Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School (AFAPS)—which serves all officer recruits aiming to enter the Army, Navy, Air Force and Police academies. It is thus in the AFAPS that young people preparing to be officers can make factional bonds across the spectrum of security services. Deposed Prime Minister (and former Police Lt. Colonel) Thaksin Shinawatra's AFAPS group faction was Class 10, while that of General Prayut Chan-o-cha was Class 12.

Regimental or division ties have also been important because, especially in a coup-prone country like Thailand, strategic units prevent or foment military putsches. The oldest and most strategic units have been the 1<sup>st</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments, created in the 1850s. These regiments, under the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division King's Guard (known as the "coup division"),<sup>3</sup> are stationed close to palaces and Government House in Bangkok. Service in these units makes one a member of the oldest military faction, *Wongthewan* or "Divine Progeny". *Wongthewan* dominated all other Army factions from 1870 until 1978, and also since the 2016 accession to power of King Vajiralongkorn, himself an honorary member of *Wongthewan*. Another important faction, the aforementioned *Burapha Phayak* or "Eastern Tigers", is that of officers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry (and Cavalry) Division. *Burapha Phayak*'s legitimacy centres around the 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, known as the *Thahan Suea Ratchini* or "Queen's Tiger Guards" since Queen Sirikit became its honorary commandant in 1959.<sup>4</sup> *Burapha Phayak*, of which Generals-turned-politicians Prayut, Prawit Wongsuwan and Anupong Paochinda are members, was the driving force behind the 2006 and 2014 coups, dominating the Army during 2007-2016, although only Prayut and Anupong are also members of *Thahan Suea Ratchinee*. Still another important faction is the *Muak Daeng* or Special Forces, whose members included Privy Council Chair General Surayut Chulanond and 2006 coup leader General Sonthi

Bonyaratklin. In 2018, the King Vajiralongkorn (Rama X) created a new faction called the *Kho Daeng* or “Red Rim”, for the colour of the neck of the tee-shirts worn under their uniforms — with all other officers known as *Kho Khiao* or “Green Rim”.<sup>5</sup> Officers are specifically invited into the *Kho Daeng* by monarchical advisors and attend a grueling, three-month-long, royal “904” military training course, during which they are carefully monitored. “904” was the codeword assigned to the monarch when he was crown prince. Only those who pass become eligible for the seniormost commands in the Army and the Royal Armed Forces Headquarters.

Overarching personalities, though less significant than that of King Vajiralongkorn, have also overshadowed military factionalism. Serving commanders of each security service, such as Army chief General Narongphan Jitkaewthae (2020-2023), always place their personal imprimatur on reshuffles. Also, in retirement, Prawit and Prayut have exerted influence over military appointments. Retired Army chief General Apirat Kongsompong’s personal influence has continued, given his accession to the posts of Vice-Chamberlain of the Royal Household Bureau and deputy director of the Crown Property Bureau. Personal influence is often helped by the sway of family elite status. Apirat’s father was an Armed Forces Supreme Commander and 1991 coup-leader. Meanwhile, Prawit’s brothers served as Police commander and Navy admiral respectively. Finally, for the highest military appointment (service commander), a prior strategic appointment is essential. Generally, any Army-commander-want-to-be must have already served as 1<sup>st</sup> Army Region commander.

## **PHEU THAI, THAKSIN AND THE VOTE FOR SRETTHA**

Thailand’s May 14, 2023, election, though won by the Move Forward Party (MFP), whose electoral platform included monarchical and military/police reforms, resulted months later in the September appointment of a civilian government headed by Pheu Thai, the same party which had helmed the government overthrown by the 2014 coup. Since 2021, there had been much talk about a growing personal schism between Prayut and Prawit. The two even competed against each other in rival military proxy parties—Prayut through United Thai Nation, and Prawit through Palang Pracharath. Though cooperating to ensure that MFP’s candidate for prime minister was not selected, they did not jointly support Pheu Thai’s moderate businessman candidate Srettha Thavisin. In an example of a clear clash between ex-military heavyweights, Prayut’s 36-MP party and Upper House faction of around 87 Senators voted for Srettha, while Prawit’s Upper House faction of 81 Senators voted against him. The backing of Prayut’s Senators was enough to carry Srettha over the 376 threshold of parliamentarians constitutionally needed to approve a new PM.<sup>6</sup> Prayut clearly trumped Prawit in the selection of Thailand’s new head of government.

Meanwhile, Thaksin Shinawatra, facing eight years in prison for corruption, voluntarily returned to Thailand on August 22, the same day that parliament approved Srettha as premier. He was whisked away to a hospital and given a partial pardon. A much-rumoured political bargain between Thaksin and his opponents (apparently involving Prayut) reportedly allowed for the former’s return to Thailand, for a pardon and/or parole, for the moderate Srettha’s becoming prime minister, and for Pheu Thai’s formation of a coalition with conservative parties against MFP.<sup>7</sup> In addition, and also on August 22, anti-Thaksin protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban was acquitted of corruption.<sup>8</sup> With Srettha in charge, Pheu Thai has now been

transformed into the voice of the centrist status quo allied with elites and the military against the MFP.

## WHAT'S NEW IN 2023?

Amidst these drawn-out political changes, Prayut was also able to effectuate a complete military reshuffle for 2023, though it was passed to the palace for endorsement earlier than usual—in August rather than September—before the next government could take office, ensuring that Pheu Thai could not meddle with it. The military appointments were well-targeted in that only arch-royalist officers are now entrenched in the top and second rungs of the armed forces.

In the tables below, the 2023 leadership changes have been organised into six groups: 1) all security services, 2) the police, 3) the Armed Forces Headquarters, 4) the Army, 5) the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Region, and 6) additional crucial Army postings. The tables demonstrate that the year's appointments have either tended to go to palace favorites or followed the preferences of *Burapha Phayak*. *Burapha Phayak* officers in turn are either close to Prawit and/or Prayut. Officers from Pre-Cadet Class 23, the dominant class of senior military officers in 2023, have figured prominently in these appointments. Other classes whose members have received key posts in 2022 are Pre-Cadet Classes 24-26. Pre-Cadet Class 26 in particular looks set to lead Thailand's military in the near future.

### *The Security Services as a Whole*

The data in Table 1 indicate that in 2023 the seniormost positions in Thailand's security services have been bestowed upon senior officials trusted by the palace. General Songwit Nunpakdee, General Jaroenchai Hintao, Admiral Adung Phan-iam, US F-35 enthusiast Air Chief Marshall (ACM) Panpakdee Pattanakul, and Police General Torsak Sukwimol are all officers with very close connections to the royal institution. An important bond for these officers is the close collegial connections between Pre-Cadet Classes 23 and 24—of which they are, except for Torsak, all members).

Yet frictions between these officers and elected civilians could perhaps grow in future because the new Srettha-led Pheu Thai government appointed pro-Thaksin “Red Shirt” activist Suthin Klangsaeng as Defence Minister. Thaksin's brother and nephew were initially named Suthin's advisor and secretary respectively,<sup>9</sup> though Suthin never signed the order, and Suthin himself implied that he might take advice from Thaksin in his ministerial responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> However, after probable pressure, Suthin appointed two Prayut loyalists to help helm the Ministry of Defence: General Nattapol Nakpanit as the Ministry's secretary-general and General Somsak Rungsita as one of the minister's advisors.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the Permanent Secretary of the Minister of Defence is General Sanitchanonok Sangkachantra, a confidant of Prawit and Prayut.

**Table 1: Key figures in the Security Services, 2023-2024.** (Asterisks indicate new appointments.)

Position	Name	Faction	Pre-Cadet Class	Retirement Date
Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence	General Sanitchanok Sangkachantra	<i>Burapha Phayak</i>	24	2025
Commander, Armed Forces	General Songwit Nunpakdee*	<i>Wongthewan/ Kho Daeng</i>	None (early on attended Class 24 but moved to Virginia Military Institute)	2025
Commander, Royal Thai Army	General Jaroenchai Hintao*	<i>Burapha Phayak/ Kho Daeng /</i>	23	2024
Commander, Royal Thai Navy	Admiral Adung Phan-iam*	Royal Family Security; attache to Australia	23	2024
Commander, Royal Thai Air Force	Air Chief Marshal Panpakdee Pattanakul*	Western-oriented clique (US F-16, Swedish Gripen, Squadron 403, Wing 4, Attache, UK England, led Thai efforts to acquire US F-35s) <sup>12</sup>	24	2025
Commander, Royal Thai Police	Torsak Sukwimol*	Royal Guard 904 (police academy class 51)	None	2024

### *The Police*

In 2023, police appointments were extremely significant because they came on the heels of the enactment of the 2022 National Police Act. Under Section 78 (1) of that new law, the prime minister has complete power to nominate a new Police Commander, subject to endorsement by

the King.<sup>13</sup> But Prime Minister Prayut passed off on appointing a new police chief, kicking the ball to his successor Srettha. Following a month-long delay, Srettha made the decision on September 27. Among principal competitors for police commander were the aristocratic Police General Torsak and the popular Prawit-backed Police General Surachate Hakpan. The two remaining contenders were less well-connected: seniormost Police General Roy Ingkhapairoj and low-profile Police General Kittirat Phunphet. In the end, Torsak triumphed. No surprise there because Torsak was not just another guy: he is the younger brother of Air Chief Marshal Satitpong Sukvimol, the Private Secretary to the King, Chamberlain of the King's Royal Household Bureau and the Director of the Crown Property Bureau. Despite never having attended the Police Academy, Torsak in 2018 became the first commander of the King's Royal Police Headquarters Rajawanlop Royal Guard 904. (The unit's name was later changed to the Special Operations Division.) And his ascent in the police was made "exempt from criteria".<sup>14</sup> He likes to use proactive Buddhism in his police work and has been nicknamed "Dharma Buster" and "Robocop of Merit".<sup>15</sup> Torsak's closest rival Surachate had recently investigated a friend of Torsak's—and the friend ended up committing suicide. Then, on September 25, two days before the police appointments, police publicly raided properties belonging to Surachate, and he was implicitly implicated in illegal online gambling. Police Lt. General Trairong Phewphan, who led the raid, is close to Prayut while also a relative of a pre-cadet academy classmate of the current Agriculture Minister, Captain Thamanat Prompow.<sup>16</sup> The incident tainted Surachate as a police officer, and Srettha was compelled to open an investigation into the affair. Moreover, the Pheu Thai-led government, despite its powerful police factions of 1) Pheu Thai's Shinawatra/Damapong family, 2) Police General Patcharawat Wongsuwan (Palang Pracharath Party), and 3) the Bhumjai Thai Party's Police General Permpoom Chidchob, was unable to push for the now-blighted Surachate as the new Police Chief. However, Srettha's appointment of the palace-favoured Torsak could be an attempt to placate the palace, given the occasional past frictions between the royal institution and the Pheu Thai Party.

His ascent to the top police post notwithstanding, Torsak will have to retire in 2024, and the senior line-up is still dominated by police officials that Prawit and his brother, former Police Commander Police General Patcharawat who dominated the police during 2008-2009 and 2014-2023, installed during the Prayut government. It is likely that Police General Kittirat, who appears to be linked to both the Wongsuwan brothers and to Kittirat's military classmate Captain Thamanat, could succeed Torsak. Upon Kittirat's own retirement in 2026, another peer of the palace, rising star Police General Jirapop Puridej, currently the commander of the Central Investigation Bureau, will likely succeed him unless Surachate makes a come-back. Jirapop could serve for as long as 10 years as police commander since his retirement is due only in 2036!

**Table 2: The seven seniormost Police officers, 2023-2024.** (Asterisks indicate new appointments.)

<b>Position</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Faction</b>	<b>Pre-Cadet Class/Police Academy Class</b>	<b>Retirement Date</b>
Police Commander	Torsak Sukwimol*	Palace/Royal Guard 904/Sukwimol	None/(equivalent to Class 51)	2024
Deputy Commander 1	Police General Kittirat Phunphet	Prawit and Patcharawat Wongsuwan and Captain Thamanat Prompow	25/41	2026
Deputy Commander 2	Police General Surachate Hakpan	Prawit and Police General Patcharawat Wongsuwan	31/47	2031
Deputy Commander 3	Pol. Lt. Gen. Kraiboon Thuatsong	---	23/39	2025
Deputy Commander 4	Pol. Lt. Gen. Sarawut Karnphanich	Prawit and Patcharawat Wongsuwan	24/42	2026
Deputy Commander 5	Pol. Lt. Gen. Thana Chuwong	Prawit and Patcharawat Wongsuwan	26/42	2026
Commander, Central Investigations Bureau	Police General Jirabhop Bhuridej	Palace/Royal Guard 904/Bhuridej	34/50	2036

### *Armed Forces Headquarters*

In Table 3 five new topmost appointments went to senior officers considered close to the palace. This is understandable because, although the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters is the weakest security service, it represents the public face of the Thai military and heads all defence diplomacy. Interestingly, the new Deputy Commander (Air Force) is a champion of US F-16 fighter aircraft, indicating a tilt toward more such procurement. Deputy Commanders play important roles supportive of the Commander of the Armed Forces Headquarters for each security service.



**Table 3: The six senior-most Armed Forces Headquarters Officers, 2023-2024.** (Asterisks indicate new appointments.)

Position	Name	Faction	Pre-Cadet Class	Retirement Date
Commander, Armed Forces	General Songwit Nunpakdee*	Palace/ <i>Wongthewan/ Kho Daeng</i>	None (equivalent of 24)/Virginia Military Institute	2025
Deputy Commander (Army)	General Anusorn Kumaksorn*	<i>Kho Daeng</i>	23	2024
Deputy Commander (Army)	General Komsak Kamsaisaeng*	<i>Kho Daeng</i>	24	2025
Deputy Commander (Navy)	Admiral Monthat Phalin*	Naval Civil Affairs Department (royal projects)	23	2024
Deputy Commander (Air Force)	ACM Chanon Mungtanna*	US F-16, Squadron 403, air force attache in Sweden, commander of the Directorate of Operations <sup>17</sup>	23	2023
Chief of Staff	General Thitichai Tienthong	Prawit Wongsuwan/Sanoh Thienthong	24	2025

### *The Army*

Table 4 represents the victory of caretaker Prayut in manipulating the most important reshuffles—i.e., those in the Army, Thailand’s largest security service—before Pheu Thai could come to office and tilt the appointments towards its own partisan interests. General Jaroenchai, the leader of pre-cadet class 23, a confidant of both Prayut and General Apirat and a member of *Burapha Phayak/Thahan Suea Ratchinee*, was selected in August as Army chief, succeeding outgoing *Wongthewan* faction member General Narongphan. Prayut’s success in securing the appointment of Jaroenchai was also a triumph in the former prime minister’s post-2020 rivalry with Prawit. For Army chief, Prawit had favoured General Suksan Nongbualang, who hailed from Prawit’s own Regiment 2 faction. Finally, Jaroenchai’s selection was interesting because he, like Prayut and Prawit, is originally from *Burapha Phayak*, and not *Wongthewan*, as his two predecessors had been.

Thus, Jaroenchai’s ascent represents the return of *Burapha Phayak*. Though Suksan must retire as Deputy Army Commander in 2024, the weakness of Jaroenchai is that he too must retire that same year. He can technically be succeeded by one of the other three “tigers” or top officers:

General Ukrist Butanon, General Tharapong Malakam, or General Pana Klaewplaudtuk. However, only Tharapong and Pana, a gruff officer in the mold of Prayut and the leader of Pre-Cadet Class 26, belong to the king’s *Kho Daeng* faction, which makes it highly unlikely that Ukrist will succeed Jaroenchai, even though Pheu Thai might favour Ukrist. Meanwhile, most Army commanders have previously commanded the strategic First Army Region. Pana, rather than Tharapong or Ukrist, has checked this box. Finally, Pana, from the *Wongthewan/Kho Daeng* faction, has reportedly been favoured by Apirat, Prayut, and the royal institution.<sup>18</sup> Unless Pheu Thai can somehow thwart his appointment, Pana will likely serve as Army chief during 2024-2027.

**Table 4: The five seniormost Army officers, 2023-2024.** (Asterisks indicate new appointments.)

Position	Name	Faction	Pre-Cadet Class	Retirement Date
Commander,	General Jaroenchai Hintao*	Regiment 21/Prayut/ <i>Burapha Phayak/ Kho Daeng</i>	23	2024
Deputy Commander	General Suksan Nongbualang*	Regiment 2/Prawit/ <i>Burapha Phayak/ Kho Daeng</i>	23	2024
Assistant Commander 1	General Ukrist Buntanon*	Army Operations Department	24	2025
Assistant Commander 2	General Tharapong Malakam*	Regiment 2/Prawit/ <i>Burapha Phayak/ Kho Daeng</i>	24	2026
Chief of Staff	General Pana Klaewplaudtuk*	<i>Wongthewan/ Kho Daeng /Apirat/ Narongphan</i>	26	2027

*The 1st Army Region*

The data in Table 5, which focuses on the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Region, are important because any coups or prevention of coups depends upon this large unit, which is responsible for security in Bangkok and Central Thailand. The new Commander of the region is General Chitsanupong Raudsiri, a pro-Prayut *Burapha Phayak/Kho Daeng*,<sup>19</sup> Pre-Cadet 26 classmate and friend of the aforementioned General Pana. And like Pana, Chitsanupong retires in 2027. The five other senior officials in this Army Region are all from the *Kho Daeng* clique, though two are connected to the *Burapha Phayak/Thahan Suea Ratchini*. Prawit’s influence has been erased from the First Army Region. As can be seen from Table 5, Pre-Cadet Classes 26 and 28 will be the next powerful important cliques in the Army. The presence of *Kho Daeng* officers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Region certainly represents extremely strong royal influence in this unit.

**Table 5: The six senior-most 1<sup>st</sup> Army Region officers, 2022-2023.** (Asterisks indicate new appointments.)

Position	Name	Faction	Pre-Cadet Class	Retirement Date
1st Army Region Commander	General Chitsanupong Raudsiri*	<i>Burapha Phayak/Kho Daeng</i>	26	2027
Cohort Commander	Lt. General. Amrit Bunsuya*	<i>Burapha Phayak/Thahan Suea Ratchinee/Kho Daeng</i>	27	2029
Deputy Cohort Commander	Lt. General Natadej Jansang*	<i>Wongthewan/Kho Daeng</i>	28	2029
Deputy 1st Army Region Commander	General Worayot Luangsuwan	<i>Wongthewan/Kho Daeng</i>	28	2029
Deputy 1st Army Region Commander	Lt. General Sarawut Chaisit*	<i>Burapha Phayak/Thahan Suea Ratchini/Kho Daeng</i>	28	2030
Deputy 1st Army Region Commander	Lt. Ajin Patomjit*	<i>Wongthewan/Kho Daeng/Cavalry</i>	28	2030

### *Miscellaneous Matters*

In Table 6, the remaining important security positions are shown. In an apparent triumph for civilian control, the new National Security Advisor Chatchai Bangchuat is technically non-military, though he did attend Thailand's Air Force Academy. He is close to former National Security Advisor General Supoj Malaniyom, a chum of outgoing Army chief Narongphan). The new Srettha government has shown no desire to dismiss this new advisor.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, the commanders of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Army Regions—responsible for Northeastern, Northern, and Southern Thailand, respectively—were selected by Prayut. 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Region Commander Adul Buntamjaroen, a member of the Pre-Cadet Class 26 faction, is a class peer of the quickly rising General Pana. 4<sup>th</sup> Army Chief Santi Sakuntanak, who is steering Southern counterinsurgency efforts, is a Pre-Cadet 25 classmate of Agriculture Minister Captain Thamanat, the secretary-general of Prawit's Palang Pracharath Party.

While the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division has long been centred on fealty to Queen Sirikit, it has also become a centre of influence for Prawit and Prayut, especially the latter. Commanders of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Divisions, stationed close to Bangkok, are palace favorites. Within the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, centred in the heart of the capital, the seven battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> regiments, were in 2019 placed under the direct control of the royal palace as a new Royal Security Command.<sup>21</sup> This command was previously managed by royal favourite Deputy Royal Security Commander General Jakrapop Bhuridej, a member of Pre-Cadet Class 28 and the brother of Police General

Jirabhop.<sup>22</sup> Upon his September 2023 retirement, Army chief General Narongphan became commander of the Office of Special Operations Officers under His Majesty the King, the Royal Guard’s Safety and Protection Command.

**Table 6: Additional important Army positions, 2023-2024.** (Asterisks designate new appointments.)

<b>Position</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Faction</b>	<b>Pre-cadet Class</b>	<b>Retirement Date</b>
National Security Council Secretary-General	Chatchai Bangchuat*	(civilian) worked under Prayut	None	none
Commander, Second Army Region	General Adul Buntamjaroen*	2 <sup>nd</sup> Army Region (6 <sup>th</sup> Division)	26	2027
Commander, Third Army Region	General Prasan Saengsirirak*	3 <sup>rd</sup> Army Region (4 <sup>th</sup> Division)	24	2025
Commander, Fourth Army Region	General Santi Sakuntanak	4 <sup>th</sup> Army Region (25 <sup>th</sup> Division)	25	2026
Commander, Special Forces Warfare Center	General Wattana Chatratanaeng*	Special Forces	24	2025
Commander, 1 <sup>st</sup> Infantry Division	Colonel Sitiporn Julapana	<i>Wongthewan/Kho Daeng</i>	30	2031
Commander, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division (“Eastern Tigers”)	General Tepitak Nimit	<i>Burapha Phayak</i>	31	2032
Commander, 9 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Division	General Wuthaya Chantamath	9 <sup>th</sup> infantry regiment “Black Tigers”	28	2029
Commander, 11 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Division	General Ekawnan Mahbuthan	<i>Wongthewan/Kho Daeng</i>	30	2031

## CONCLUSION

The September 2023 ascension to office of the elected Pheu Thai government has paralleled the appointment of a military/police leadership close to the palace and to outgoing caretaker Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha—the same person who overthrew the earlier Pheu

Thai government in 2014. Despite incoming Defense Minister Suthin's effort to adopt appearances of cooperation between an elected civilian government and the military, cooperation between Pheu Thai and Thailand's security leaders might prove difficult, especially since Suthin has, as a Red Shirt leader, in the past adamantly demanded a smaller, leaner military. Such a clash could also happen following recent comments by the new government that it might amend the junta-enacted 2017 constitution and/or the 2008 Defence Administration Act, in order to scrap a committee of military leaders which has vetted all senior military appointments.<sup>23</sup>

The palace and Prayut appear to have strongly influenced 2023's military and police reshuffles, ensuring that arch-royalist security officials remain in top leadership positions.

Their initiative appears particularly clear in 1) the promotion of *Thahan Suea Rachini/Kho Daeng* Army Commander General Jaroenchai; 2) the appointment of *Wongthewan/Kho Daeng* Army officers to the posts of Royal Thai Armed Forces Commander and 1<sup>st</sup> Army Region commander; 3) the appointment of palace-favourite Police General Torsak as Police Commander; 4) the promotion of arch-royalist officers Admiral Adung and Air Chief Marshal Panpakdee to serve as Navy and Air Force commanders; and 5) the appointment of the palace-connected General Pana as Army Chief of Staff in preparation for his likely promotion to command the Army in 2024.

Jaroenchai's appointment reflects the resurgence of the *Burapha Phayak* clique, as a sub-faction within the palace-favoured *Kho Daeng* army leadership. It also demonstrates Prayut's vanquishing of Prawit. But the 2024 end of Jaroenchai's term as Army chief will mark the end of Prayut's own sway. Therefore, the power of both Prawit and Prayut over appointments will draw to a close, allowing the palace to further dominate reshuffles—via Apirat over the military or via Torsak and Jirabhop in the police.

Looking ahead, the Pheu Thai government will likely push for General Ukrist or even Prawitminion General Tharapong as future Army Commander, though, without royal support, either would be a long shot. However, the government does have powerful influence over the police in the form of Thaksin himself, Thaksin's wife Pojaman Damapong (from a police family), Deputy Prime Minister Police General Patcharawat Wongsuwan, and Education Minister Police General Permpoom Chidchob. It is thus likely that the police chief in 2024 will be a compromise choice between these factions and the palace.

The fact that Prayut was able to appoint his loyalists to top military positions does not augur well for civil-military relations since the newly-elected Pheu Thai government has had a long history of friction with the armed forces—though Pheu Thai, conservative parties supporting its coalition, and the military, do all oppose the opposition MFP.

For the future, the regal institution and its associated elites will likely continue intervening in the military/police reshuffle to ensure the stability of effective, loyal, arch-royalist security forces. Sustaining strong security forces is useful in, first, repressing any potential reform-minded street protests; second, ensuring effective counterinsurgency against Malay-Muslim separatists in Thailand's Deep South; and third, carrying out a military coup against any civilian

government—led by Pheu Thai or MFP—which goes too far in attempting to implement monarchical and/or military reforms.

Thailand’s 2023 military/police reshuffles reflect a continuing post-1980 pattern of civil-military relations whereby Thai security forces are not accountable to elected civilians but answer only to peers or the palace.

## ENDNOTES

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