



The Military in Southeast Asian Politics: Playing or Controlling?

Robert Taylor

Former Fellow, CSEAS

In the early years of the Cold War, the role of the military in politics became a subject much discussed in the political science literature of the day. This was the result of several factors. One was the enormous growth of the military power of the victorious states, particularly the United States and the Soviet Union, as a result of the Second World War. A second factor was the spate of military coup d'états which led to the toppling of many fragile governments in post-colonial states in the 1950s and the 1960s. A third was the emergence of military regimes, particularly in Latin America and southern Europe, who were convinced they could govern more effectively than the allegedly corrupt civilian regimes that they replaced. Given the anti-Communist foreign policy proclivities of most liberal capitalist states at that time, and the rightist political stance of most armies, military governments were seen by many political scientists, particularly in the United States, as a good thing as long as they were not in the country where they lived.

The literature on military-civil relations at that time very much concentrated on how and why armies intervened in politics, from constitutionally legitimate persuasion of their civilian masters, through to various degrees of assuming control of the state apparatus, to the ultimate, a government run solely by the armed forces of a given country. These phenomena were all widely found in Southeast Asia. Burma experienced its first coup in 1958. That was in part at least semi-consensual, and the military kept to its promise to hand power back to a civilian government 18 months later, thus winning much praise for its maintenance of constitutional norms. However, two years later, the army under General Ne Win seized power

in its own name and remained in power, under various guises, until 2011. Thailand, on the other hand, has experienced a near cascade of coups and constitutions since 1932, at least 20 at last count, and is under military control today. The Indonesian army long played the role after independence of propping up civilian governments until it finally removed the nationalist leader Sukarno and then governed for many years, directly and then indirectly, until it ousted former General Suharto in 1998. The army in the Philippines, long held as a paragon of virtue for its strict adherence to the doctrine of civilian control, became politicized and highly factionalized during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos and subsequently attempted at least 13 coups, all of which failed.

Militaries in other Southeast Asian states have also been involved in politics but in different ways from those of the four states mentioned above. Before its defeat in 1975, the military controlled the government of the former South Vietnam and in neighboring Cambodia and Laos right-wing military forces were deeply involved in politics until their defeat at the hands of revolutionary nationalist and leftist forces. Under the current governments of these three countries, the army is clearly a major prop of the ruling party. In contrast, the armies of Singapore and Malaysia have apparently appeared to be without political ambitions. This perception merely obscures the reality that the military leadership is deeply embedded in the ruling parties of those countries as well as their dominant ethnic communities and civilian bureaucracies. And, of course, monarchical Brunei's armed forces are exclusively Malay, but the Sultan maintains a 2,000 man Gurkha unit for his own

protection.

After the end of the Cold War, the big research money was into the processes of so-called democratization as military governments fell out of favor to be replaced with civilian-led constitutional regimes. Reflecting back on the literature on civil-military relations in general and the specific situations in the various countries of Southeast Asia based on an examination of the most recent relevant academic literature, I have reached the conclusion that there is not much new to be learned about the political role of the military from what was known in 1962 when Samuel Finer published his path finding *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics*. Despite many excellent empirical studies of the political role of the military in Thailand, Myanmar, the Philippines and Indonesia, usually couched in terms of the goal of “democratization,” in conceptual terms, despite valiant efforts by some political scientists to launch into theoretical discussions about structure and agency, elaborate statistical models, or other ventures into jargon, comparative political studies have not much more to tell us about civil-military relations in Southeast Asia or elsewhere now than it did six decades back.

However, perhaps comparative historical studies might be more useful for elucidating the different kinds of civil-military relations we see in the region today. While reading round some of the literature on the role of the military in European history, I came across this quotation from Sir John Wheeler-Bennett’s masterful *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics 1918–1945*. Wheeler-Bennett wrote in his introduction that one of the purposes of his book was, among other things, to show how the German army “... when it was mistaken enough to come down into the arena and to play politics instead of controlling them, it began a descent which ended in abject defeat — militarily, politically and spiritually” ([1953] 2005, xxxii). What he was alluding to was the different relationships that senior German military officers had with the dominant civilian political figures of their day in the period between the ends of the First and Second World Wars.

After the First World War, in 1919, after Kaiser Wilhelm II had gone into exile in the Netherlands, and the German army was near collapse, Friedrich Ebert, the first president of the new Weimar republican government, was besieged in his offices in Berlin by Communists and other radical leftist political forces which threatened to overthrow the new Social Democratic Party regime almost before it could begin to govern. He turned for support against the mobs in the streets surrounding his office to General Wilhelm Groener who ordered the elite Freikorps to rescue

President Ebert and suppress the demonstrators. Groener and the army thus became a silent partner of successive civilian governments, holding various ministerial positions until Groener was forced out of the government in 1932 by General Kurt von Schleicher. Von Schleicher, like Groener, was not a democratic and sought to rebuild Germany’s military power and its army’s badly damaged prestige. However, rather than standing aloof from party politics, von Schleicher sought to do a deal with members of the Nazi Party in order to defeat what he perceived as its radical faction. Adolph Hitler, however, having promised to make the army with the Nazi Party twin pillars of the state, gradually brought the army under Nazi Party control, including in its oath of loyalty not only a pledge to defend the German state but also the army’s allegiance to Hitler as the Führer in his personal capacity. From then on, Hitler, who appointed himself commander-in-chief in 1941, led the German army to its destruction in a war many of the officer corps believed they could not win.

Wheeler-Bennett does not define what he meant by his dichotomy of controlling as opposed to playing politics but the account he gives of Groener’s 12 years of political success as opposed to von Schleicher’s and his successors’ failure to control a man they saw as an incompetent Austrian corporal makes clear his meaning, though one must concede that there is no clear line between one form of behavior and the other. So how does this help us understand the political role of the military in the four states noted above? On the basis of a number of indicators, both historical and contemporaneous, it is easy to argue that the Burmese and Indonesian armies have largely been controlling politics while the armies of Thailand and the Philippines have been playing politics.

The frequency of coups or coup attempts and the number of constitutions the respective states have experienced is one obvious indicator. Since independence, Myanmar has experienced two half coups, in 1958 and 1988, and one full coup, 1962, and three constitutions. Indonesia has experienced one coup, the ouster of Sukarno in the mid-1960s, and one withdrawal of support from the head of state, when General Wiranto refused the order of President Suharto to suppress student demonstrations in 1998. Suharto resigned the next day. In Thailand, on the other hand, the army has repeatedly intervened in politics, often in coalition with other political actors including the civilian bureaucracy, the Democratic Party, the judiciary, big business, and the monarchy, ousting governments which it felt were not governing in its interest. The frequency of these interventions suggests an army leadership which is very much

involved in the day-to-day management of the state, despite the perception on the part of most observers that coups were no longer feasible after the debacle of the 1991 coup.

Similarly, coup attempts in the Philippines following the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship have often been in collusion with other political actors, mainly members of the factionalized political elite which has dominated the country's politics since before independence. The ability of President Marcos to involve the army in his regime undermined its institutional autonomy and its distance from party politics. Though there have been no coup attempts in recent years, rumors of coups and discontent in the officer corps with the behavior of various presidents in recent years has had an unsettling effect on Philippine politics.

The Indonesian army no longer occupies the positions in government it held both before and after the 1960s. By the time that General Wiranto refused President Suharto's order in 1998, the army's position as a central pillar of the President's government had been undermined by Suharto's sultanistic government based on his family and business cronies. However, now in many ways, the army is stronger as an institution and as a political actor outside the government today, with its regional commands and economic interests in place, and its hold over foreign and defense policies, than in the final years of the Suharto era. Moreover, as the army has redefined its role in the Indonesian state, as Jun Honna (2003) and others have shown, it still maintains the ability to serve as a politically stabilizing force, controlling quietly from the shadows but with direct access to the President.

In Myanmar, the army, following more than two decades of direct rule, put in place a constitution which now allows Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) that she heads to govern the country. However, that constitution cannot be altered without the consent of the army; the army has a lock on political change. Most clearly, it controls politics and it maintains the position of being able to intervene in politics in the future should whatever civilian government comes to power threaten its interests or the country's political stability.

Today, on the other hand, the Thai army is in power

and has been so for the past four years. Its most recent coup was in coalition with the monarchy and the death of the popular King Bhumipol and his replacement with the unpopular Vajiralongkong, and the apparently continuing political popularity of politics of the kind exemplified by Thaksin Shinawatra, and his elected successors which the army ousted from power not once but twice, poses a great dilemma. Can the Thai army once more establish a constitutional order that will satisfy both the monarchy and the majority of the population? The way forward is far from clear.

So what can we conclude from this effort to examine the question of civil-military relations in Southeast Asia and elsewhere from Wheeler-Bennett's dichotomous example? Perhaps it is that armies, like kings of old, as central pillars of their respective states should learn the lesson that successful constitutional monarchies learned in order to ensure their longevity. As summarized by Lord Castlereagh in 1815:

Tyrants may poison or murder an obnoxious character, but the surest and only means a constitutional sovereign [or army] has to restrain such a character is to employ him ... the essence of a free state is to manage the party warfare, so to reconcile it with the safety of the sovereign ... to do this, the King [or army] must give contending parties facilities against each other, and not embark himself too deeply in any way. (Bew 2011, 397)

Playing politics or controlling politics may be a matter of degree as to "not embark ... too deeply" but that degree may spell success for both the army and the state it exists to serve and protect.

References

- Bew, John. 2011. *Castlereagh: Enlightenment, War and Tyranny*. London: Quercus.
- Finer, Samuel F. 1962. *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics*. London: Pall Mall.
- Honna, Jun. 2003. *Military Politics and Democratization in Indonesia*. London: Routledge Curzon.
- Wheeler-Bennett, John. [1953] 2005. *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918–1945*. 2nd ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan.