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Military Succession in Thailand: Mirage or Mirror of Hope?

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General Anupong Paochinda is set to take over as the new commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army on October 1. He will be facing increasing pressure to not only lead the country towards conducting a free and fair election but to also clamp down on the unabated militancy in the southern provinces of Thailand.

A PROFESSIONAL soldier with apparently no political ambitions, General Anupong Paochinda has been hailed by many as one of Thailand's best chances of having the military return to the barracks. General Anupong was a loyalist of former premier Thaksin Shinawatra until the coup of September 2006, in which he played a critical role in ousting the former premier. He was tremendously instrumental in clamping down on pro-Thaksin resistance from within the army and has reiterated that with regards to Thaksin, he would never be lenient.

Having had 10 coups since 1971 and now 18 constitutions in its entire history, there is still considerable uncertainty if the 18th Constitution of Thailand after the referendum on 19 August 2007 would herald a more democratically-styled government. General Anupong will have to balance the new apolitical role for the military with the long history of overt military involvement with national politics. The journey ahead appears to be one without a map. The task of ensuring the success of the election on 23 December falls squarely on the shoulders of General Anupong. Whilst he has acknowledged that there would be no political role for the army and that his men would remain professional soldiers, Thailand's history of numerous coups forms an unspoken precedence and a grey cloud against the silver lining of free and fair democratic elections to come.

The New Constitution

Political commentators have noted that the current constitution will implement more stringent checks and balances on the power of politicians through a senate that will be partly-appointed and partly-elected. This would be contrary to the previous constitution – the people's constitution of 1997 wherein both houses in parliament were democratically elected. On an institutional level, there is a real possibility that the election may result in the formation of a weak government with a narrow majority, and thus raising the prospect of military influence within the political process. The road towards the election on 23 December is riddled with obstacles. If the results of the recent referendum are anything to go by, there is much to be done.

According to the Electoral Commission of Thailand, 57.81 per cent voted in favour of the draft

constitution whilst 42.19 per cent rejected it. There was a total voter turnout of 57.61 per cent of approximately 45 million registered voters. Despite the massive publicity campaign launched by the government in the lead up to the referendum, the voter turnout was comparatively lower than that during the Thaksin era where between 65 per cent to 72 per cent of registered voters cast their vote. In the former Thaksin stronghold of the north-east region of Thailand, 62.8 per cent voted against the draft charter. In southern Thailand, 88.3 per cent voted in favour of the draft constitution. Like the rest of Thailand, the actual breakdown of voter demographics has not been released by the Electoral Commission. The large voter turnout in the south is an antithesis to the situation that had led up to the referendum. General Anupong's challenge would be to bridge the distinctive polarization of the voters as revealed by the referendum.

Southern Thai Militancy

Yet another potent challenge that General Anupong will face is the conundrum of having not only to clamp down on the unabated militancy in southern Thailand but to also win the hearts and minds of the southern Thais. The percentage of votes in favour of the draft charter was approximately 20 to 30 per cent higher than the national average. This may suggest support for peace efforts in the south, but as the details of the support are unknown, that position may be a stretch.

Referenda ideally provide a pedagogic function of gently easing the masses into processes of political education. In the lead up to the 19 August referendum, there were attempts to provide avenues through which voters could make informed decisions. Approximately 19 million copies of the 186-paged draft charter were delivered to households in Thailand; however none were printed in the Malay dialect that was the predominant language of the residents in southern Thailand. Many residents in southern Thailand do not speak fluent Thai. The high percentage of votes in favour of the referendum in southern Thailand is therefore indeed puzzling. There is insufficient data available to comprehensively determine if the southern Thai vote was indeed positive. The exact number and ethnic demography of the voters who had voted in the south are not available.

It is yet to be seen if the vote of acceptance of the charter in the south translates to an increase in participation towards the electoral process at the end of the year. The involvement of the southern Thais in the electoral process could perhaps pave the way for greater political participation and thereby ownership of their identity as Thais. Representation of the southern Thais in the electoral process could prove to be crucial in mitigating the ongoing militancy in the south. Having openly admitted that he was not familiar with the southern Thai situation, General Anupong will have to not only study the issue of the southern Thai militancy closely but to be able to come up with alternatives other than solely investing on more resources to mitigate the problem of militancy.

The Road Ahead: Getting to Peace and Stability

The referendum had surfaced political cleavages within Thai society. The lower than expected voter turnout casts a shadow not only on the credibility of the current government but on the willingness of the Thais to exercise their choice. Choice remains one of the primary requisites of democracy. The results of the referendum foreshadow the amount of work the current Thai government needs to do in order to win over the people. The path is riddled with obstacles and the first order of business in view of the low voter turnout would be for the current government to improve their standing with the masses. With a new commander-in-chief at the forefront, only history and time will tell if the 18th constitution would lay the foundations for greater democracy, peace and stability in Thailand.

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