THE 1976 THAI COUP AND REFLECTIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF RECENT COUPS.

KEVIN J. HEWISON.

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1. Introduction.

It is difficult to state with any great degree of conclusiveness the exact pre-conditions for coups. Coups are political and social events of great consequence and yet remain apart from academic analysis, primarily because the events of any coup are so difficult to sift through, separate the significant from the insignificant, and generalise. However, the recent experiences of Thailand in 1976 and Chile in 1973 have provided some indication of these pre-conditions.

As I see it, these recent coups indicate three broad categories of pre-conditions. Firstly, the coupmakers perception and construction of internal economic, social and political conditions. Secondly, the support derived from external sources, moral or material or both. And thirdly, the convergence, contrived or otherwise of these two sets of pre-conditions to produce the moment to move.

It is my intention to outline the events leading to the 1976 coup in Thailand and use the events of the 1973 Chilean coup for drawing brief comparative data about the nature of the pre-conditions of coups in general. The latter task is the minor exercise, in that I am primarily concerned with describing and analysing the Thai situation.

2. Background.

In September 1973, President Salvadore Allende and his government was overthrown by the Chilean Armed Forces in a bloody coup. Less than a month later and halfway around the world, the students and people of Bangkok drove the “tyrannical trio” of dictators, Thanom Kittikachorn, his son Narong and Prapas Charusathiara from the country. Allende had been in power for just over three years when he was killed. Similarly,
Thailand's "experiment" with parliamentary democracy ended just three years after it had begun, with the Armed Forces overthrowing the elected government of Seni Pramoj in October 1976.

To summarise the Thai situation first, the uprising against the three military leaders took place over ten dramatic and bloody days (October 6 - 16, 1973). Initially led by Bangkok's students, some 400,000 people joined the revolt. While up to ten percent of the population of Bangkok marched with the students, it would not be an exaggeration to state that a majority of Thais supported the overthrow of the trio of dictators. Many Thais had been appalled by the ruthlessness of the Military in attempting to crush the uprising, and this was given added weight when King Bhumiphol opened his palace gates to the demonstrators. This act indicated that the military dictatorship had ended.

The role of the King in Thai politics should be explained briefly here, as he will become important in a later section of this paper. It was the King who decided when the bloodshed of 1973 should end, and that the trio should be exiled - though a constitutional monarch, his political influence should not be underestimated. Heinze correctly points out that foreign observers fail to recognise that to Thais, the King is 'the manifestation of the country's moral power...'. In that sense he is still an autocratic ruler.

Externally it would also seem that the uprising was accepted non-committally, if not welcomed in some quarters. Significantly, little was said by the US Ambassador or other Embassy officials, indicating that the greatest power in the region was not opposed to a Thai attempt at parliamentary rule, despite the fact that it had actively supported the Thanom dictatorship.

In Chile, Allende came to power with 36 percent of the
presidential vote and the support of the Upper House. Allende could claim a constitutional mandate for himself and his coalition party, the Unidad Popular. So it can be said that Allende, like the students who led the uprising in Bangkok had popular support. Externally however, it must be noted that Allende lacked even the tacit support of powerful nations and companies. In a speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations Allende stated:

'From the very day of our electoral triumph ... we have felt the effects of a large-scale external pressure against us which tried to prevent the inauguration of a Government freely elected by the people, and has attempted to bring it down ever since...'.

It is a fact that the US Government and multinational companies attempted to oust Allende through illegal means.

In terms of internal and external support then, it would seem that the people of Thailand had, initially, a better chance of seeing their popular government survive than the Chileans. The Thais were moving towards "free" elections, had the support of the King, the military was split and in disgrace, and the US was keeping a low profile. The Chileans on the other hand had a popularly elected government and a military that was believed to be apolitical, but faced strong opposition from external forces. Despite this, both governments survived for only three years, before being overthrown by the military.

The remainder of this paper will outline the pre-conditions of the Thai coup, followed by some comparisons with the Chilean case.
Establishing the Pre-Conditions for the Coup.

Only a matter of months passed before doubts about the future of Thailand's parliamentary democracy began to emerge. Peagam⁸ for example stated that the change from military to civilian rule had brought few changes, and those that had occurred had been 'initiated under the former regime, mainly in response to changes in US foreign policy.' He went on to indicate his doubts when he made the point that Thailand was 'in the US orbit, for the moment.'⁹ This was an expression of a general feeling within Thai and foreign business circles only one year after the overthrow of Thanom, and before any elections had been held.

However, Thailand continued on its course, and the elections were held in January 1975. This election was feared by the right for the increase in political activity had been mistaken for a mobilisation of the left, but Race¹⁰, in his analysis of the election results indicates that right-wing parties gained a mammoth 75 percent of the vote, while the leftists received only 9.3 percent. In summary Race wrote that 'the people who should be happiest with the outcome of the election are thus the Thai military and bureaucracy, foreign and local investors, and Thailand's foreign allies, for ... [there is] ... no evidence of a shift to the left.'¹¹ In other words, there was little in this election result that could have given rise to a coup.

The Government of Seni Pramoj lasted for only a matter of days, to be replaced by a coalition led by his brother Kukrit. The period that followed saw the beginning of the events that were to lead to the coup two years later. Perhaps the first significant event was the wrangle over aircraft flown to Thailand by Vietnamese on the fall of Saigon. The US claimed
the aircraft, but the Thais refused to allow the Americans this point.

In retrospect it is this event that was an important stimulus to the potential coupmakers, as it brought many of the tensions that existed in Thailand at that time to the surface, and particularly the animosity that existed between the left-wing and right-wing. These tensions were heightened by the "Mayaguez incident". It was reported that Thailand had 'ordered the United States to remove 1100 US marines who were flown to the country secretly before dawn for possible action over the seized American container ship...'. The US ignored the order and launched an attack into Cambodia (Kampuchea) from Thai soil. This flagrant aggression, ignoring the Thai Government and Thai sovereignty incensed many Thais, and thousands marched on the US Embassy carrying placards that read 'Ford, you are a dirty pig', an effigy of Uncle Sam and other anti-American posters. At the same time the Thai Government insisted on the total withdrawal of all US service personnel, while a belated note of apology was sent by the US Government. Despite the fact that the US had admitted its guilt and aggression in this act, Thai rightists and foreign investors could not ignore the solidarity and activism shown by the students and leftists over this incident.

In fact, the right-wing had found a banner around which they could regroup. With the aid of sections of the media they lost no opportunity to press their claims that the students, under the leadership of the National Student Centre of Thailand (NSCT) was full of communists and traitors, as was the Government. The evidence for such assertions was the rift with the US while moving towards closer relations with neighbouring socialist countries.
The demonstrations against the Americans had provided a banner for the left also, as it was the first time since 1973 that they had had an opportunity to work together against a common enemy.\(^{13}\) The NSCT had not been particularly cohesive since the uprising\(^{14}\), but the students had been politicised. Prior to this, they had been more interested in status seeking than supporting political activities.\(^{15}\) Indeed, a closer examination of the NSCT shows that it was only formed initially to protest Japanese domination of the economy, rather than to demonstrate against the military dictatorship. However, with the active support of thousands of students the NSCT became increasingly political, and in part, radical.\(^{16}\)

Correspondingly, trade unions were becoming more militant and peasants more politically conscious. Girling\(^{17}\) summarised the situation accurately when he stated that

'student activists have been in the vanguard of those seeking to help the workers unite and, above all, to politicise the peasants - to make them aware of their rights, of the possibilities of action and the political power of organisation.'

Strikes and lockouts occurred with increasing regularity, with the former weapon proving valuable to the workers, as from 1973 to 1975, the minimum wage doubled.

It can thus be seen that the rightists had a great deal of "evidence" to support their actions against students, workers, peasants and left-wing political parties. A brief though not direct comparison may be made with Chile at this stage. Although Chile went through the stage of the mobilisation of the right only after external forces had operated, the success of the Unidad Popular in the 1971 municipal elections proved to be a rallying call for the right. They had been deeply disturbed by
the increased support for Allende after only five months in office, especially as they had waged a stridently anti-communist campaign. Allende had the support of peasants, workers and students throughout Chile, and as in Thailand, such a coalition was viewed as dangerous by the right-wing. Peasants were receiving expropriated land, wages increased, health services improved, multinationals were nationalised and the proletariat was becoming a class in itself and for itself.

So it was that the proletariat was increasing its power at the expense of the bourgeoisie and small middle class. This was at the core of the regrouping of the reactionary forces in Chile and Thailand. And, it should be noted that these regroupings were militant and determined to end what they saw as a dangerous situation. This can be seen as a most significant moment in the internal pre-conditions for a coup - that is, the opponents of the government perceive a common foe and unite to fight it.

The period from November 1975 until the coup can be seen as the most important in the approach to the coup in Thailand. It was after this date that the external and internal pre-conditions came together, meaning that the coupmakers had only to create or wait for the moment to move.

Thai newspapers of December 1975 provide an excellent insight into the machinations of the approach to a coup. The rightists were concerned with the events of the region, and while the liberation of Vietnam and Kampuchea were viewed as inevitable, the events in Laos were certainly not. Spasms of fear swept the Thai ruling class, on December 3, the Laotian King abdicated his throne in favour of the Revolutionary Council of Laos. The "fall" of Laos stimulated cries of "beware" from Thai rightists, and propaganda about "threats" to Thailand. The abdication struck at the very roots of the
class structure, as the 600 year old Laotian monarchy was comparable to that in Thailand. While one newspaper editor wrote that 'the abdication ... hardly comes as a surprise to those with even the most rudimentary history of that country', that was not the end of the matter as the same newspaper was to show. Two days later, three stories and an editorial indicated the connections between the events in Laos and the scenario emerging in Thailand. The editorial pointed out that the form of government chosen in Laos was entirely a domestic affair, but noted that 'militarists on both sides shouting insults to each other, can only lead to a situation of panic.' However, the leader of the United Socialist Front Party immediately recognised the political advantage to be gained by the right, and attempted to show that the people of Laos were still loyal to their King. But for the left, the damage had already been done, and the leader of the New Force Party put forward the common view when in the same article he was quoted as saying that 'Thais should learn from Laos to prevent the takeover from taking place here.... The Laotian monarch was deposed because Laotians are not loyal to him.'

Simultaneously another newspaper was reporting an increase in guerilla activity in the country. And, on the same day that Laos offered to resume normal diplomatic relations with Thailand, the National Security Council (NSC) reported that the greatest threat to Thais was insurgency. As if to add to the armour of the rightists and militarists, the NSC reported that this "problem" had two sources: first, the weapons left in Indochina by the defeated US, Thieu and Lon Nol forces; and second, the Communist Party of Thailand had 'taken advantage of the political atmosphere to foment ideological conflict amongst the people and create unrest.' From this time onwards
it was to be the coupmakers who would abuse the "political atmosphere".25

Another factor that became important at this stage was that of foreign investment. Prime Minister Kukrit stated that overseas investment had been curtailed because of strikes and labour unrest, and that 'investors are particularly scared of some groups which uncompromisingly oppose foreign investment.'26 He went on to say that he would do everything he could to encourage investment. In a situation similar to that which faced Chile in 1971, Thailand faced an investment strike. It was reported that investment projects in 1975 were down 75 percent compared with 1974, and forty projects had been cancelled due to the 'uncertainty over the political situation.' Total investment in 1975 was only 4,227 million baht (20 baht=$US1) compared to 18,021 million baht in the previous year.27 Then, in a carefully timed statement, the US Ambassador, Charles Whitehouse warned the Thai Government that it would have to do something concrete if investment was to return to pre-1974 levels. It must have gladdened the hearts of all Thai rightists to hear Whitehouse state: 'I am forced to admit that, as viewed from the United States, Thailand's investment climate has deteriorated during the last two years.'28 This was indeed true, but the Ambassador failed to state that the actions of his Government and US investors had created the situation. Whitehouse may well have said that the US preferred a return to military rule, for this was the implication of his statement. As experience in other "Third World" nations has shown, when the representatives of US corporate capitalism note that the investment climate is poor, it is a signal to reactionary forces to move against their governments.

Indeed, the signal was not missed by Thai reactionaries. The King, in a politically and symbolically significant move,
gave his approval to the coupmakers and helped prepare the people for a coup when he stated that 'Thailand had become the target of an enemy...'. This speech is so important, given my earlier statements about the power of the king that it deserves to be quoted at length. Speaking before the Royal Guard he went on to say:

'There have been various forms of sabotage against our Kingdom. This has developed to such a serious stage that it is direct aggression against our country.... Let all you soldiers decide on your own whether to continue protecting our country. If you think it's important to continue protecting this country, then beware of the danger which is coming close.... Our country has been able to preserve its sovereignty and freedom until this year because the Thais understand joint national interest and have united to perform their individual duties to fulfil the goal.... This has created an immense force which enables us to defend ourselves against various forms of danger which have threatened us.'

The King urged the Armed Forces to prepare themselves physically and psychologically for the struggle. Obviously, King Bhumiphol, the "champion" of all Thais, felt that his class interests, the interests of the bourgeoisie, were more important than the majority of his people - peasants and workers - for he supported the coupmakers.

It is clear that the "enemies" the King spoke of were the guerillas, but it seems that surprised by the fall of the Laotian monarchy, the King now saw enemies within the Thai more establishment structures within society. He was referring to an "aggression" that he believed was eroding the very base of Thai society, and this belief was shared by many of the
"old guard" of militarists and rightists. Not only were workers and peasants becoming active, but so were urban women. For example, the literate and wealthy women were being exposed to magazines that took a line on sexuality and other women's issues which, while not being feminist, was certainly radical within a patriarchal society like Thailand. In late 1975 it was possible to notice in Bangkok the very elements that the "old guard" found so disturbing. Compared to the same period in 1974, Bangkok and other cities seemed to be alive with new attitudes and ideas. Marxist pamphlets in both Thai and English could be purchased in almost any bookshop, as could posters and calendars carrying portraits of Marx, Mao and Guevara (hung next to those of the Royal Family). The universities also gave evidence of these trends, with bookstalls selling radical literature being set up, and displays of anti-imperialist materials being held. It is interesting to note that this erosion of traditional values conforms quite closely to the theory of social change outlined by Bell and Punyodyana.31

At the beginning of 1976, all of the indicators were that a coup was being prepared. The right-wing was organised, the left was still organised, but subject to fragmentation over minor issues, and the 'manifestation of the country's moral power', the King, had given the impression that he would not oppose a coup. All that remained to be done was to completely rehabilitate the military into political affairs, and select the moment to move so that the coup would be seen as "legitimate" by a large number of Thais.

1976 can therefore be seen as the final stage in the coupmakers' work, as they probed for the appropriate moment to move, often using none too subtle means. I do not intend to delve too deeply into these events, but rather I will outline the occurrences before drawing them together
through an analysis of the machinations of the coupmakers.

4. Towards the Moment to Move.

Again it is useful to analyse this period utilising a perspective similar to that of the coupmakers. Thus, as we have seen, their areas of greatest concern were, foreign investment, students, workers, peasants and guerillas. While I will discuss each separately, they are of course interconnected.

a. Foreign Investment.

The speech by Ambassador Whitehouse did seem to prod the Thai Government into attempting to attract foreign investment. Certainly, despite hostile opposition, Seni's budget was passed, and it was tinged with social welfare benefits aimed at making the lot of the peasant and worker a little better, and in an effort to balance the interests involved, military and police spending was high. The aim of the budget was to stifle criticism of the Government from both the right and the left, and to attract investors by indicating that the Government was in firm control of the situation. This strategy had little effect as the investors could see that their interests were being served by the right-wing within the country - foreign investment kept clear of Thailand.

At the same time, the continued withdrawal of US troops was being felt in certain sectors of the economy. US military spending had had a noticeable effect upon the Thai economy throughout the sixties and seventies. Between 1961 and 1971 output growth had been seven to eight percent per year, and much of the stimulus for this growth came directly and indirectly from the US military presence. Viksnins has provided figures that show how American expenditures were, with direct economic assistance averaging $20-30 million a year since 1965,
military assistance for the same period averaging $50-60 million and war expenditures on bases etc. ranging between $140 and $170 million. These figures do not include the substantial spending of service personnel. Thus the US withdrawal was, in economic terms, a serious blow to capitalist interests, especially when added to the investment strike. It goes almost without saying that in social terms the US military presence was questionable to say the least. Thailand had been underdeveloped through the presence of these troops, as was evidenced by growing prostitution, landlessness and crime.35

In summary, the right-wing could only view the staggering economy as a result of the work of the radicals and their fellow travellers.

b. Students.

1976 began with a crackdown on students by the Government. On December 16 1975 it was announced by the Deputy Interior Minister that he would "get tough" with those he termed "bogus students" who were supposedly receiving money and support from "foreigners", to instigate disunity amongst Thais.36

More significantly, while the NSCT still claimed to speak for all students, this was no longer the case unless the issue was "non-political" and major. Indeed a right-wing student's organisation, Red Gaur (Krathing Daeng) had formed amongst vocational students. These students had played a major role during the 1973 uprising, forming the "frontline troops", and therefore the formation of the Red Gaur represented a major rebuff to the NSCT. Also, leftist groups had formed within the NSCT and often acted independently, thus further weakening the political influence of the large student organisation.

Still, students generally represented some of the most progressive elements within Thai society. Sutham Saeng Prathum, the Secretary-general of the NSCT for example, stated that the
main efforts of his organisation were aimed at the 'fight to solve the problem of filling people's stomachs.' On Thai government and politics, Sutham described Thailand as 'a slightly developed fascist regime.' And, defending the guerillas he made the point that the Government should look at the roots of the problem, 'poverty and social injustice.' Statements such as these most certainly appeared "communistic" to the reactionaries.

To stage an effective coup, the rightists knew that they had to destroy the prestige attributed to the students by workers and peasants.

c. Workers.

The period after 1973 was one of sustained workers' action unparalleled in Thai history. The increased power of the workers was indicated in 1976 when they organised a mass strike against proposed increases in the price of rice, and were successful in forcing the Kukrit Government to heed their demands.

Activism continued through the first six months of the year, with workers striking for better wages and conditions, and cost of living and welfare allowances. To many observers these strikes were quite justified given the poor and often cruel conditions workers had been forced to labour under during the period of military rule. However, to the employers, their representatives, militarists and other right-wing groups, this "disruption" to industry was the cause of Thailand's economic ills, especially when it was considered that radical students were supporting if not "inciting" the workers. Such a situation had never existed previously, as individual workers had had to work with only meagre support from Government-run unions.
d. Peasants.

There was general consensus in the literature of Thai society and agriculture that the peasant farmer was a landowner, had few grievances, and therefore was not likely to support guerillas as his counterparts had done in other parts of Asia. For example, Wilson wrote less than twenty years ago that 'Marx has had little influence in Thailand', in part because 'cultivators were not dispossessed of their traditional tenures.' However in recent years this statement has become obsolete. Numerous articles have indicated that a large and increasing number of peasants are landless, and are becoming dissatisfied with their situation, to the point of taking up arms against the Bangkok Government. The main reasons for this change are, the growth of capitalist agribusiness, low prices, the influence of US bases and high population growth (3.2 percent per year). Combined, the situation produced was one that Richter and Edwards delicately described as causing "concern". They described a survey taken in 1968 in the Central region, taking in almost 500,000 farms, finding that only 59 percent of these holding were wholly owned by the occupiers, 16 percent were partly owned, and 25 percent wholly rented. These figures were a sharp reversal on previous notions about ownership, but even in the last six years the pattern has intensified. Seni Pramoj estimated that at least 50 percent of peasants were landless.

To the dismay of the bourgeoisie, Seni proposed a solution for these millions of landless peasants, saying that his Government would buy back the land, 'or failing that, ... expropriate.' To add insult to injury, Seni added that a restriction on land ownership would be introduced - 'one person to 50 rai, two and a half rai to an acre.'
Connected to this, and dangerous in the view of the right, peasants were active in local affairs, challenging the position of the minor bureaucrat, through the formation of organisations such as the Thai Farmer's Federation (TFF). Some saw the TFF as a leftist organisation, and right-wing terrorists in the form of police murdered 21 members in a warning to other peasants.43

Again it is clear that to the reactionaries, politicised peasants supported by radical students, demonstrating their needs to the Government, and being supported to the extent that Seni planned to expropriate land, was intolerable.  

e. Guerillas.

The activities of Marxist and Muslim guerillas throughout 1975 and the first months of 1976 proved not only to be a domestic problem for the Kukrit and Seni Governments, but also a diplomatic problem, straining relations with Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea and Malaysia.

Most serious of these rifts was that with Malaysia, Thailand's ASEAN ally. 1976 began with Kukrit travelling to the Southern provinces in an attempt to placate the Muslims who claimed that Government troops had murdered eighteen of their number. Kukrit's visit came two months after the first murders, and this delay further strengthened the local guerillas. Later, the Malaysians further inflamed the situation when their troops entered Thailand in what they called "hot pursuit" of guerillas. The people of the Thai town of Betong were used to the sight of Malaysian Border Police, but armoured cars in their streets was 'a sickening violation of Thai sovereignty.'44 The Thai Government protested to the Malaysians, but until the coup relations between the two countries remained cool.45

By May however the focus of guerilla activity had shifted to the Northern provinces, with both Government and guerilla forces suffering heavy losses. It became evident that the
guerillas were far stronger and had more support than was previously supposed, when in November 1976, they launched attacks in the Northern, Northeastern and Southern provinces. The Government estimated that it faced guerilla forces in almost all provinces, against 10 to 15,000 guerillas. Again, it is clear that from the anti-communist and reactionary point of view, such a situation was yet another reason for reverting to a military government. While the former military regime had also faced opposition from guerillas, it did not cultivate relations with those countries the right-wing believed were supporting the guerillas, like Vietnam and China.

Thus, throughout 1976 the situation in Thailand, viewed from the position of the right-wing had certainly deteriorated, with the specific areas mentioned above being seen as the main "problems". Certainly, the right had the "evidence" it needed, and all that remained to be done was a complete rehabilitation of the military and the creation of the moment to move.

6. The Rehabilitation of the Military.

There is no doubt that the military had suffered a severe blow to its integrity in 1973. Not only did the students and King turn against them, but they made the grave error of turning their guns on the people of Bangkok. In a Buddhist society, such an act is seen as being barbarous in the extreme.

It took the military only a short time to show that despite their defeat and humiliation, and the loss of substantial US support, it was still a force to be reckoned with in Thai politics. In fact, it had a "saviour" in General Kris Sivara who had the reputation of the 'father figure of democracy,' because he had opposed the use of force against the students in 1973. He reinforced this impression when he stated that
coups were obsolete in Thailand. Kris led the Armed Forces until his retirement in 1974, but his influence continued until his death in April 1976. He kept his forces under control through a policy of division - as one observer put it, 'the Army is too divided to think about a coup. The politicians will be allowed to go on with their politics.' This statement is insightful in that it indicates that the military was still the balance of power. Suthichai Yoon, a Thai columnist noted at the time of the death of Kris that the military was preparing to move. He wrote, 'Battle lines, political and military are clearly being formed. What I fear is those caught in the cross-fire will be ordinary citizens, whose high hopes for a smooth transition period [to civilian rule] for Thailand could be shattered.'

1976 was the year of the return of the military. In March they indicated their power when they went onto full alert without apparently consulting the civilian parliamentarians. General Boonchai Bamrungphong had replaced Kris as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and it was said that the alert was to forestall a coup planned by younger officers who were not pleased with his appointment and were also 'dismayed by the deterioration of law and order and ... a recent downturn in the flow of new investment.' Surprisingly little was made of the alert by the press or politicians, perhaps thankful that a coup had been avoided, and more confident as the Armed Forces had shown that they "supported" parliamentary democracy.

Earlier, the military had played a large part in forcing the Kukrit Government to an early poll 'in order to prevent an alternative, more reform minded government taking over.' In fact, the Government was defeated, and more significantly, Kukrit was defeated in his own military dominated seat. Seni again found himself leading a coalition of parties of military
and rightist persuasion. The extent to which the military had to be accommodated was indicated by the appointment of Kris as Minister for Defence. There was no other choice as there had already been rumblings amongst the officers of all Armed Forces. However, only weeks after his appointment, Kris died.

Kris had put his own men into the highest military posts, and after his death there was a minor reshuffle, but it seemed that his influence would remain despite the statements of highly placed men like Admiral Sangad Chalawyoo, who expressed some discontent at having to accept orders from "political" appointees.

Another important point to note in the rehabilitation of the military is the role played by the Royal Family. Their support came through three sources, the first being public statements like that quoted at length above. Secondly, the Crown Prince was receiving military training at the Royal Military College at Duntroon in Australia, and this afforded much publicity for the Thai military. Thirdly, the Royal Family gained even more publicity for the Armed Forces by their visits to the troops wounded in the guerilla actions. Such publicity rebuilt much of the prestige lost by the military less than three years earlier.

By August the Armed Forces were again a most powerful group in Thai society. They could easily influence the Government, and controlled many politicians, but still they were not satisfied that the country was being governed to their liking. They again wanted full control of the country. All that had to be done to realise this objective was to create the moment to move. And, this was a reasonably simple task given the control they already possessed. For example, they were able to provide such provocative situations as having Defence Minister Tavich na Ayuthaya sing the right-wing anthem Nak
Faen Din (Burden of the Land) on Armed Forces Radio. The "burden" was of course the communist and his fellow traveller - in the words of the song, those who instigate Thais to division, instigates the masses, causes confusion so that Thais fight Thais, has bad intentions, doesn't want Thai traditions, or believes in the thug ideology.  

The role of Kris can be seen as having been most important in the rehabilitation of the military, as even though he was opposed by the "old guard", his image as the "father of democracy" suited all sections of the forces as Kris was able to reinstate them as a "legitimate" political force.

7. The Moment to Move is Created.

From the outline of the events of 1973 to 1976 it becomes obvious that in a country such as Thailand, with a powerful and foreign supported Armed Forces who are used to political power and personal influence, and above all stridently anti-communist, the situation that had developed was intolerable. Certainly, if what they had witnessed was democracy, then they did not want it, and the "experiment" had to end before irreparable damage was done to their country, King and religion. By early 1976 the military was in a position where it could claim that to act against the Government was in the interests of the nation as a whole. They had the power to move, and if all went well they could create the situation when their proposed coup could be viewed as "legitimate".

Since the election campaign of February-April 1976 the right-wing had been on the offensive, scoring significant "victories" against the left. The assassination of Dr. Boonsanong Punyodyase on February 28 was but one example of the terror tactics pursued by the rightists. While Boonsanong was not a candidate in the election, he was an eloquent and popular
socialist, and his murder was a warning to other leftists that if they stood as candidates, they could expect harassment and a similar fate. As one member of the Red Gaur put it, anyone who 'caused trouble...' could expect to face rightist fanatics who would 'threaten them with real grenades.' If the left needed further convincing, this was provided by a savage attack in March. Four people were killed and dozens of others wounded when a grenade was thrown amongst demonstrators who were marching on the US Embassy.

As I have already mentioned, the April elections were a triumph for the reactionaries, for not only did they receive an electoral victory, but the left appeared beaten as a result of the violence they had been subjected. It seems however that the left was either materially unprepared to fight or unwilling to use violence, realising their rather tenuous public position and also being aware that the military needed such an excuse to launch a coup. At this stage mention should be made of the Red Gaur, the group that was to play a substantial role in weakening the NSCT and in creating the moment to move.

The split within the NSCT that led to the formation of the Red Gaur developed when the vocational students felt that they were not receiving their fair share of student funds. This was made worse by the fact that these students saw themselves as the heroes of the 1973 uprising. When Colonel Sudsai Thephasdin met ex-student Frapan Wongkhum, the former found an opportunity to exploit the rift that had developed within student ranks. Sudsai explained his motives in these terms: 'After October [1973] many leftist groups sprang up and mounted a campaign to steer the country into the socialist camp. Certain politicians gave them support - and that was no good.' Once organised the Red Gaur operated as strike breakers and as hired guards for road construction companies in the Northern provinces. Each guard
received 1200 to 1500 baht ($60-75) a month and a guarantee of compensation for his family if he was killed. It was through this work that the Red Gaur became well armed, as they were supplied with M-16 rifles and M-79 grenade launchers "hired" from the Army. It is worthy of note that many members of the Red Gaur had previously been members of the CIA-backed Thai force that had operated in Laos in previous years. This therefore was no ordinary right-wing group: backed by the military, financed by large companies, armed with heavy weapons, and trained in part by the CIA, it was a formidable paramilitary force.

The moment to move had been created, but the important legit­­­­imising factor was still absent. The first attempt to engineer this factor occurred with the return of Prapas.

In August, the most hated of the exiled trio of former military dictators returned to Thailand. Prapas was met at Don Muang airport by a military car and was taken to the Army-run television station in Bangkok, without passing through customs or immigration. Through its inaction, the Seni Government was shown to be weak and incapable of clear decision-making. Prapas and his supporters had their view of the civilian government reinforced. Seni at first stated that there was no evidence that Prapas had returned, but then retracted, claiming that the exile had returned 'for political purposes and with the backing of a certain group of people.' It was to become obvious that the 'certain group' was military dominated, with Seni stating that his Government could not control the Armed Forces. Despite the hatred indicated in demonstrations, and in the media, Prapas had shown that the military was still the most powerful and reactionary group in Thailand. The fact that the King and the Government had to plead with Prapas to leave indicated to many Thais, the inevitability of a return to power by the military. The military men who bade farewell to Prapas on
August 22, were no doubt, content in the knowledge that they could easily overthrow a discredited government, especially if that government was not about to heed their warnings about the state of the nation as they saw it.

At the same time, the military had seen how it could legitimise its return to power, as the NSCT had for the first time used violence against their right-wing attackers. 12,000 people had gathered to demonstrate against the return of Prapas, when the predictable Red Gaur attack took place. As busloads of NSCT supporters arrived at Thammasat University from Ramkamhaeng University, two M-26 fragmentation grenades exploded amongst them, killing one and wounding many more. Significantly, the police ducked for cover, allowing the Red Gaur to advance and retreat as they desired. As the fighting ceased, one more student was dead and the Red Gaur withdrew. While NSCT supporters had been armed with a few hand guns, the rightists had access to M-16 rifles and immunity to police or military action.

Following the violence, and in further preparation for the coup, Defence Minister Tavich resigned his post in favour of the Supreme Commander, Admiral Sangad. Only/three weeks after the departure of Prapas, Thanom returned to signal that the coup could proceed. His arrival was the catalyst for the overthrow of the Seni Government and the death or detention of thousands of Thai progressives, liberals, socialists and students.

Thanom flew from Singapore to Bangkok, into a tinder-dry political situation. Dressed in the robes of a Buddhist monk, he was the spark. The situation had been prepared for a confrontation on both the left and right, with provocative statements such as those of Deputy Interior Minister Samak, when he claimed that the students had been reinforced by 1000 Thais and dozens of 'foreign advisors' who had trained with the communists in Laos. Despite the fact that to attack the returning exile meant attacking the
the state religion, NSCT leader Sutham demanded that Thanom be forced to leave the country, or that he be sent to trial for the murder of the students killed in 1973.

Obviously the military had known of the plans for Thanom's return, as he was met at the airport by the chief of Civil Aviation and a senior Immigration official. Despite this, Seni again indicated the weakness of his Government by stating that efforts would be made to negotiate Thanom's departure if his presence led to violence. Significantly, only two days prior to the arrival of Thanom, there had been a major reshuffle within the upper ranks of the Armed Forces, a move that can be seen as a final preparation for the coup. This reshuffle and purge came at the conclusion of a power struggle that developed after the death of Kris. It seems that Kris had split the military into two factions, his own, and the "old guard" or Prapas faction. The Kris faction was dominant until his death, but a short time after began to fall apart. There were two reasons for this: firstly, Kris did not purge the Army of his enemies, and secondly he did not promote an understanding of the events of the 1973 Uprising that supported his position. The penalty for this was the return to power of the Prapas faction which attempted to show that the trio of dictators had been victims of a quest for power by Kris and his supporters, using the student movement to their advantage.

8. The Moment to Move.

Thanom had returned, and in a re-enactment of the demonstrations over the return of Prapas, the NSCT called for a rally which was attacked by the Red Gaur. Supported by the police and Armed Forces, the Red Gaur charged a far better prepared group of students. However, small arms bought in Bangkok gunshops were no match for heavy automatic weapons and grenade launchers. The events of the battle can only be described as brutal and disgusting, as members of right-wing groups looted the bodies of the dead and mutilated,
burnt and paraded the bodies. As was expected, Admiral Sangad and a group of high-ranking officers took over the Government, in the 'interests of the nation as a whole', as the Council for the Reform of National Administration, promising a return to "democracy" in twelve years.

At least 41 people had been killed and hundreds more injured, with thousands arrested in this bloody military coup. The coupmakers had performed their task well, for despite the outrages of violence and the loss of parliamentary rule, there was no immediate evidence of widespread reaction from Thai people. Eighteen months of careful preparation and propaganda had convinced significant numbers of Thais that the military had taken the correct action. It seemed clear to many that foreign investment had decreased markedly, strikes were rampant, communists had infiltrated the universities, and violence was on the increase. To the bourgeoisie it was obvious that the civilian administration was weak and influenced by leftists to the extent that some of their privileges seemed threatened. And, in the eyes of many of those who supported the students in 1973, the reported burning of an effigy that resembled the Royal Family, and therefore Buddhism, indicated that they no longer deserved support. The coup had its legitimacy.

9. Comparisons Drawn from the Chilean and Thai Coups.

The interpretations above of the events leading to the 1976 military coup in Thailand have been made in an attempt to both outline the events in Thailand and to allow for a brief comparative analysis with the Chilean military coup of 1973. In using the generalised headings of: the coupmakers' perception and construction of the internal social, economic and political conditions, the support derived from external sources, and the convergence of these to produce the moment to move, I have drawn a scenario for comparing coups from different cultural setting.
Writing of the coup in Chile, Wheelwright indicated that it had proved three statements correct: firstly, that power does grow out of the barrel of a gun; secondly, that the ruling class will not relinquish power and privilege without a struggle; and thirdly, that capitalism and democracy are exclusive of each other in Latin America. Wheelwright may well have been writing of Thailand in 1976, for it is now obvious that any progress towards democracy in Thailand must come through a socialist liberation movement.

Before proceeding with my analysis it is necessary to point out that there are significant differences between the two coups and societies, but in this paper I am more interested in generalising some of the processes that are common to each coup. This is done in the belief that such an analysis may prove useful in understanding the ideas, processes and outcomes of future coups.

To begin with, both countries had parliamentary forms of government at the time the respective military forces acted to establish fascist dictatorships. Chile's experience of parliamentary government had been far longer than Thailand's, and in fact the Chileans had elected a Marxist President. President Allende and his party, the Unidad Popular worked for socialism peacefully, through the electoral system, with the aim of creating a society free of privilege. In Thailand the governments of Kukrit and Seni Pramoj were reformist, attempting to improve the lot of the poor while maintaining a capitalist system. So it was that both nations were "experimenting" with social change (to different degrees and ends), and initially had the support of great numbers of people. It would also seem that in both countries the urban proletariat and landless peasants had a stake in their respective governments, as the election of Allende, and the 1973 revolt in Thailand were victories for them, and on the face of it, were the groups that stood to gain most from their governments.
Despite this support, both governments faced opposition from the outset - Allende's from US multinational companies and the CIA (i.e. primarily external forces), while the Thai governments faced primarily internal opposition in the form of the "old guard" of militarists and reactionaries.

Internally, the situations of Chile and Thailand indicate some striking similarities in terms of the pre-conditions for the coups. Wheelwright states that the 'military in South America is the praeorian guard of the bourgeoisie, a sort of political party with guns, usually equipped and trained by the North Americans.' As I have already shown, this was also the case in Thailand, except that the military had gone a step further and formed the core of the United Thai People's Party. After Tham was ousted, this party was dissolved to merge with new parties that also worked to protect the interests of the bourgeoisie. It is possible to go further than Wheelwright - it is clear that in both countries, the military commanders acted in the interests of their class, the bourgeoisie.

Another point made by Wheelwright is that the right in Chile did all they could to replace Allende, despite the fact that some sections of it had reservedly supported him on nationalist grounds. Again, the Thai situation was similar. In both countries the rightists used similar tactics to disrupt and fragment the left, such as utilizing paid thugs to assassinate influential leftists, disrupting rallies and meetings, lockouts, disseminating propaganda through sympathetic media, and corrupting politicians through bribes.

Similarly, when faced with powerful military opposition, both the Chilean and Thai governments attempted to incorporate some of their opponents into their decision-making process. In both cases the move proved to be worse than failures as the military benefited by being able to force through policies that strengthened their position. In retrospect, the wisdom of incorporating bourgeois
enemies must be questioned seriously be even mildly reformist governments.

Externally, the dimensions of opposition to the elected governments and support for the reactionaries seems, at this stage, to have been rather different. However both governments faced opposition from a common foe, in the form of multinational companies, and the imperial and neo-colonial ambitions of agencies of the US government.68 As was shown earlier, the support of US governmental and business groups was one crucial factor in the movement towards the Thai coup, and there is ample evidence of the US role in the overthrow of Allende. It appears that the US played a far greater role in Chile than in Thailand, but this is not to say that the US was not active in the latter. Evidence at this time suggests a capital "strike" from 1973 to 1976, extensive support for the armed forces (despite the withdrawal of US forces), and the training of members of right-wing gangs. Whether further evidence of US complicity emerges in the future is of little consequence, for the salient point is that in protecting their own interests, the military was also protecting American capitalism's colony in Thailand. In both countries, US strategic and business interests have been catered to since the respective coups.69

Wheelwright indicated the prime reasons for the Chilean coup when he quoted the junta's proclamation. Of concern was the 'grave social, political and economic crisis', and the 'inability of the government to end the state of chaos'. Finally, the armed forces and police felt that it was their duty to begin the 'historic and responsible mission to fight for the liberation of the fatherland from Marxism, and for the restoration of order and constitutional rule.'70 As we have seen, the Thai Armed Forces also explained their actions in similar terms. However, it is evident that at the time when the rightists in both countries decided to work towards their coups, these conditions of social, political or
economic "chaos" did not exist. In the first months of the "experiments" the bourgeoisie and armed forces of each country were divided, but managed to re-unite to protect their class interests and to manage the creation of the "chaos". In the Thai case, this was done using primarily through internal social, political and economic factors, while the Chilean coupmakers used external forces to create the internal pre-conditions for the coup.

Once the necessary internal and external pre-conditions had been created, it only remained for the coupmakers to seize power. This was completed in different ways in the two countries. In Chile there was an inept rehearsal in mid-1973, but only three months later the military struck, murdering Allende and hundreds of his comrades. The Thais also had a rehearsal with the return of Prapas, and moved again only weeks later, using the publicly non-military Red Gaur to initiate events and thus allowing the military to move in to "restore order", killing 41 people.

10. Conclusions and Summary.

From this short comparative analysis it is apparent that some tentative conclusions may be drawn about the nature of recent coups. It is clear that the categories I have used are overgeneralised, but it also seems that there are advantages in this broadness. Coups are brought about by the interconnections between the pre-conditions, internal and external, but these conditions are an aggregate of significant and insignificant events. By using the categories I have it is possible to sift through these events more carefully. That is, if one uses the categories of internal and external pre-conditions and the moment to move, it is possible to detach events and analyse their importance separately, while at the same time keeping a sequence that is related to the events as they occurred. Such an approach would appear to be more realistic than analysing a coup from a purely economic, social, political or
historical perspective. While these approaches have distinct advantages in that they allow for a more exhaustive analysis of specific aspects of the pre-coup conditions, they tend to gloss over the basic nature of coups such as those in Chile and Thailand, being the interconnections between seemingly unrelated events in all aspects of the social, political and economic life of the pre-coup nation.

Basically then, this paper has been an interpretation of the events preceding the October 1976 coup in Thailand and leading to the re-establishment of a military dictatorship. In completing this task I have attempted to view the events by utilising the approach outlined above. To indicate the generalisability of this approach, I have made brief references to the 1973 coup in Chile.

Finally, it is not possible to conclude this article without some brief statement about the future. Of the Chilean coup Wheelwright wrote that Allende 'and all he stands for has been murdered by Chilean fascism, aided and abetted by American imperialism', and he went on to make the point that 'we must mourn the temporary death of democracy in Chile, the end of a socialist experiment on the parliamentary road and the putting to death of a great Chilean leader.' The result as Wheelwright saw it would be urban and rural guerrilla warfare. Of the Thai coup, Martin Woolacott wrote that 'the right-wing has had its revenge and Thailand's brief and brave effort at parliamentary rule is over.' And, like their comrades in Chile, what remains of the Thai left has joined the guerrilla ranks. It is now obvious through bloody and bitter experience that peaceful attempts to create more democratic societies will fail. The power and privilege of the capitalist system negate the basic concepts of democracy.
FOOTNOTES


4. It should be noted that in the April 1971 municipal elections, the Unidad Popular received 51 percent of the vote. See Feinberg, *op. cit.* Chapt. 9.


6. The Communist Party was banned, but the left was represented by two socialist parties.
7. The Chilean Armed Forces were the largest in mainland Latin America, and had been involved in political affairs at irregular intervals throughout their history.
11. Ibid. p. 381.
16. See Frizzia and Sinsawasdi, op. cit. pp. 30-42. In fairness it should be emphasised that in the repressive atmosphere of military rule, it was difficult for any group to be overtly critical of the government.
20. Ibid. p. 8.
22. Ibid. p. 3.
23. The Voice of the Nation, 2 December 1975, pp. 1 and 12.
25. The right-wing had in fact been strengthened by the events in Indochina, as they convinced the Government that the guerillas were a major threat, and had to be fought by primarily military means. The extent of this policy can be seen in the report that the Border Patrol Police had been ordered to shoot refugees! It was felt that they may be guerillas in disguise. Reported in The Voice of the Nation, 11 December 1975, p. 1.


29. Reported in the Bangkok Post, 15 December 1975, p. 1. The speech was later broadcast over Radio Thailand.


32. Much of the information in this section has been drawn from Girling, op. cit., Asiaweek, Nos. 4-43, 1976, and the Far Eastern Economic Review, 1976 issues. I will only cite specific references where a direct quotation is used.

33. This can also be seen as an attempt to placate an increasingly restless military. Allende also attempted this, with little success.


40. It has been indicated that some of the major areas of guerilla activity are around US bases, as these bases alter the local economy greatly, creating artificial wealth and increasing the power of moneylenders, leading to landlessness amongst peasants who sell their crops as cash crops, and being forced to purchase food and other goods on a market that has artificially inflated prices.

41. Richter and Edwards, op. cit. p. 29.

42. Asiaweek, No. 41, 1976, p. 21.


44. Asiaweek, No. 20, 1976, p. 6.


49. Ibid. Emphasis added.

50. Ibid. p. 13.


52. Girling, op. cit. p. 18.

53. Asiaweek, No. 34, 1976, p. 11.


56. This information is from Asiaweek, No. 51/52, 1976, pp. 17-18. This is one of the few accounts of the Red Gaur available at this time.

57. Ibid. p. 17.


60. *Asiaweek*, No. 40, 1976, p. 11, reported that the Thai Embassy in Singapore had known of Thanom's plan to return, and advised him to enter the monkhood prior to his arrival in Bangkok.

61. It was reported in *Time*, September 24, 1973, p. 23, that this was the final preparation within the Chilean Armed Forces also.


63. It is interesting to note the restraints imposed upon Thai socialists. To criticise the bourgeoisie, is to criticise the King and Buddhism. The Royal Family and the Monasteries are the largest landowners in Thailand - thus the critic is suitably restrained for fear of open hostility from the Thai people who are both religious and royalist.

64. The only available accounts of the coup are in the newsweeklies and newspapers of the day, and *Anonymous, "Military Coup in Thailand"*, *J.C.A.* Vol. 6. (1976) No. 4. pp. 424-431.


66. I will use Wheelwright, *op. cit.* for comparative data. For those who desire more detailed information, see footnote 3.


68. For the Chilean situation, see Petras and Morley, *op. cit.*


73. Martin Woolacott, 'Brutal end to a brief and brave attempt at democracy', in *The Australian*, 8 October, 1976, p. 7.