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## THAILAND : ELECTIONS AND COALITION GOVERNMENT

### (Part II) \*

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#### ELECTIONS — 1975 : OLD POLITICIANS PLAY NEW POLITICS

The elections which took place in January 1975, were to be a significant departure from all previous attempts at parliamentary democracy in Thailand in that they were precipitated by a student-led civilian revolt. However, in the midst of the student and labor movements and increasing domestic trends toward socialism, it was the Phuu Ying Yai, "Old important people", that resumed control of the government. There was, of course, generally a more liberal trend with a plurality victory for the old "loyal opposition" (Democrat Party), and a surprising number of seats (15) for the new Socialist Party of Thailand. However, the military and industrialists re-emerged with significant influence in the new government as candidates associated with the old UTPP (United Thai People's Party) which was previously led by the deposed Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn, won over 100 seats under the banner of new party names. The four major parties backed by former UTPP members include the Social Justice Party which won 45 seats, Chart Thai with 28 seats, and the Social Agrarian and Social Nationalist parties which won 19 and 16 seats respectively.

These election results precipitated the inevitable — Thailand's first coalition government, which differed from the elections in 1969 in several ways.

The problem of "independents" which played a significant role in the 1969 elections and previous elections was solved by the 1974 constitution which banned independent candidacies. This new constitutional provision — and the absence of a government party — helped to generate the emergence of over 40 political parties, 21 of which won seats in the new Parliament. Moreover, the plethora of political parties produced Thailand's first coalition government — the viability of which became crucial to the success of the new Thai experiment with democracy.

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In 1969, the third largest party consisted of just seven members, while the 1975 elections resulted in nine parties with a least ten seats and seven parties with fifteen more seats. Another significant difference was the trend toward socialism, with socialist parties winning over 30 seats in the new parliament<sup>38</sup>. Even the Democrat Party, which won a plurality of 72 seats, advocated "mild-socialism" as the path to solve Thailand's economic crisis. Generally, the 1975 elections differed from all previous elections in that they were probably the "cleanest" elections ever held in Thailand. While money still played a role in securing votes, it did not guarantee victory. Tavich Klinpratun, of the Social Justice Party and a self-made millionaire, was upset in his bid for a seat even though he had spent millions of baht on his campaign.

After the 1975 elections, candidates accepted the results in much the same way as they had in past elections, with the usual accusations and counter-accusations<sup>39</sup>. However, the 1975 election results did produce a unique occurrence in the provincial capital of Ayutthaya, when another defeated candidate of the heavily financed Social Justice Party, Mr. Atinart Kuanpote was seen "streaking" in the streets the day after the election<sup>40</sup>.

Interestingly enough, the 1975 elections added a new dimension which has become popular in the U.S. — the pre-election survey. One much publicized survey of voters in Bangkok conducted by Datamat Computer Center, had the Democrat Party winning 14 seats, and Chart Thai five, with several of the other parties sharing the other seven seats. As Table II shows, the Democrat Party won 23 of the 26 seats in Bangkok. The Chart Thai Party won just two seats, while the popular Kukirt Pramroj, leader of the Social Action Party, barely defeated a Democrat Party candidate for the remaining seat.

Though Datamat did survey a rather large number of respondents (i.e., over 15,000), the representativeness of the sample had some of the same shortcomings that plagued the pre-election surveys of the Presidential elections in the U.S. in the 1930's. Most notable among the problems was

<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note that Dr. Boosanong Punyothayarn, Secretary-General of Thailand's new and most extreme socialist party (Sangkhom Niyom), was a former Senior-Specialist at the East-West Center in Honolulu.

<sup>39</sup> Tavich blamed his surprising defeat in the election on the Police Major Anant Senakant. In a special interview, Tavich accused Anant of engineering a "dirty plot" with other Chart Thai party members to defeat him. See *Bangkok World*, January 27, 1975, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> See *The Nation*, "Election Looser Streaks", Jan. 29, 1975; p. 1.

the extensive use of the telephone as a means for interviewing. Even in urban areas like Bangkok less than half of the population have telephones in their home.

The multitude of parties added confusion to the election process, even for the urban Thai in Bangkok. Although all 42 parties did not contest seats in all the provinces, the voter was confronted by more candidates and parties than ever before. A case in point is Ubon Province, where 95 candidates representing over 20 different parties ran for the nine available seats. Table I shows a profile of the 15 parties, and results of the election for just one of the three districts in Ubon Province<sup>41</sup>.

TABLE I  
*A Profile of Ubon Parties and Candidates*  
(First District)

Party	Number of Candidates	Run Previously?	Elected Previously?	Seats Won 1975
1. Citizens Power Party	2	No	No	—
2. Labour Party	1	1	1	—
3. Social Nationalist Party	3	1	No	1
4. Democratic Party	3	1	No	—
5. Laemthong Party	1	No	No	—
6. Progressive Socialist Party	1	No	No	—
7. Social Democrat Party	1	No	No	—
8. Chat Thai Party	3	1	1	—
9. Economist Party	3	1	No	—
10. Social Justice Party	3	2	1	1
11. Social Action Party	3	2	No	1
12. Santichon Party	3	1	1	—
13. Palang Mai Party	1	No	No	—
14. Prachathipatai Party	2	1	No	—
15. Citizen's Party	1	No	No	—

While there were many new candidates, familiar faces associated with the military and industry still appealed to voters in the provinces. Overall, about 50% of those candidates elected had been closely associated with the old military establishment, while around 20% had won seats in previous elections under the former military party banner. As Table I shows, the

<sup>41</sup> Adapted from article in *Bangkok Post*, January 22, 1975, p. 8.

Social Justice Party candidate had previously won a seat in his district in the 1969 elections as a member of the old UTPP. This "new" alliance of old UTPP groups became especially important during the crucial week following the election.

Seni Pramroj, leader of the Democrat Party and new Prime Minister, was burdened with the responsibility of forming a government. As Seni struggled with the terms of alliances with the leaders of loosely structured parties, the old UTPP groups began forming a cohesive voting block. Even though the Democrat Party won the most seats (see Table II)<sup>42</sup>, and had the apparent support of the liberal New Force Party and the leftist Socialist Party of Thailand and the United Socialist Front, it was the old UTPP groups which emerged as the dominant force in the new parliament.

After the new National Assembly convened for the first time to elect the Speaker and Deputy Speaker it became apparent that the "Allied Parties" made up of several smaller parties and the Chart Thai, the Social Justice, Social Agrarian, and the Social Nationalist, were in control of the parliament. To the surprise of some, the Chart Thai and Social Justice parties orchestrated a complete sweep, as the Chart Thai nominee for Speaker, former Commerce Minister, Prasit Kanchanawat, easily won with 141 votes against the Democrat Party's candidate's 108. The Social Justice Party's nominee for Deputy Speaker also won by a wide margin, 144 to 103. Contrary to the initial post-election speculation of a left of center government and in view of the defeats of Democrats in the House, a right-wing coalition became more plausible.

Moreover, the Democrat — Chart Thai, Social Agrarian party coalition which appeared to be a generally acceptable option in forming the new government, also had problems. Negotiations broke down when the hard core military members of the Chart Thai demanded the Defense and Interior portfolios. If the Democrats had conceded these key ministries, the Chart Thai, though winning only 28 seats, would have had control over the armed forces, the police, and provincial administrations, thereby being responsible for organizing any new election.

After the defeat for both crucial positions in the House, it appeared that the Democrats would be forced once again to play the role of the opposition.

<sup>42</sup> See *Bangkok Post*, January 28, 1975, p. 1.

TABLE II  
*1975 Election Results*  
 (Final returns from the 71 provinces)

	B	P	T
Dem ... Prachatipat (Democrat)	23	49	72
SJ ... Dharama Sangkhom (Social Justice)	—	45	45
SN ... Sangkhom Chart Niyom (Social Nationalist)	—	16	16
CT ... Chart Thai (Thai National)	2	26	28
SAP ... Kit Sangkhom (Social Action)	1	17	18
SA ... Kaset Sangkhom (Social Agrarian)	—	19	19
PT ... Prachatipatai (Democracy)	—	2	2
SC ... Santichon (Peaceful People)	—	8	8
NF ... Plang Mai (New Force)	—	12	12
TP ... Thai	—	4	4
Ag ... Kasetkorn (Agriculturalist)	—	1	1
Sov ... Athipat (Sovereignty)	—	2	2
PC ... Phattana Changwat (Provincial Development)	—	1	1
SPT ... Sangkhom Niyom (Socialist Party of Thailand)	—	15	15
PJ ... Pracha Dharm (People's Justice)	—	6	6
FF ... Fuenfoo Chart Thai (National Revival)	—	3	3
USF ... Naew Ruam Sangkhom Niyom (United Socialist Front)	—	10	10
RN ... Raeng-Ngarn (Labour)	—	1	1
PDT ... Phaendin Thai (Thai Earth)	—	2	2
Econ ... Sethakorn (Economist)	—	1	1
PP ... Palang Prachachon (People's Force)	—	2	2
SC ... Seri Chon (Free People)	—	1	1
	26	243	269

B : Bangkok      P : Provinces      T : Total  
 135 seats are needed for an absolute majority

However, though the Democrats lost their bid for the Parliamentary President, Seni retained the Premiership in a clever maneuver which called for an open voting selection. Hence, the Democrats were given the opportunity once again to form a government with the Social Agrarian Party. As is usually the case in two-party coalition governments, the Deputy Prime Minister's position was filled by Social Agrarian member, Sawat Piampongsarn. Sawat filled another important cabinet position as he also became Minister of Finance. Sawat, had a long and respected career as an economist in previous governments.

Seni displayed a sense of political strategy when he avoided further inter-party conflict by appointing non-partisans to the crucial Ministries of Interior and Defense. Seni retained retired General Attasith Sithisunthorn as Minister of Interior. Attasith already had been generally accepted by most factions when he held that position with the Sanya cabinet of the temporary government until the week after the elections in 1975. Moreover, it was under Attasith's direction that the Ministry of Interior conducted the new elections in January 1975. The Ministry of Defense's three branches of the armed forces were represented by General Tawich Seniwong, Admiral Thavil Rayanamonda, and Air Marshal Usah Jayanama. The Ministry of Industry was filled by a career government official, Nitipat Jalichan, who had previously served as the Secretary-General of the National Energy Authority under the temporary government. Another highly respected career government official, Dr. Kaw Sawasdipanich, was made Minister of Education. Another educator, Dr. Kasem Suwannakul, was retained as Minister of State Universities. Dr. Kasem had also served in this position in the previous temporary government of Sanya Thammasak. The Minister of Communications' position was also filled by a non-partisan, Surat Osathanukroh. Surat, a former police captain, became a rich businessman after he left the police department and is generally considered a supporter of the Democrat Party. While the top post in these ministries went to non-partisans, the deputy and assistant level positions were filled by members of the Democrat and Social Agrarian Parties.

However, Seni wisely chose only Democrat Party members for both minister and deputy minister positions in the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs. Thiam Chaiyanant became the new Minister of Justice and Pichai Ratanakul became Thailand's New Foreign Minister. Democrat Somboon Sirithorn, who had lost his bid for Speaker of the House to Social Nationalist leader Rasit Kanchansuat, became the Minister of Health. As was expected, Sawat Kamprakob, a Social Agrarian Party member, became the Minister of Agriculture. Party leader Sawet, had long maintained that his party had to control the Ministry of Agriculture "because agricultural development is our main policy". However, even in this ministry, the two deputy minister positions were given to Democrat Party members. There was a general dispute surrounding the appointment of Minister of Agriculture when the Chart Thai Party tried to rejoin the government after negotiations had failed a week earlier. However, as one Democrat party member explained, the Chart Thai were "unreasonable" in wanting more Cabinet posts than the Social Agrarian Party because they (Chart Thai) had

more seats in the House. The Democrat Party member further explained that "they could not do this because the Social Agrarians have been with us since the beginning ... the Chart Thai came in at first, then went out, and came back... More important, the Chart Thai would like the Agriculture Ministry which we have given to the Social Agrarians. So, that's the end of the game"<sup>43</sup>.

As the new parliament readied itself to accept the new Seni Cabinet it seemed that the "game" had only begun. There was speculation that if the Chart Thai, in opposition, could not muster enough support for a no-confidence vote, then leaders of the left-of-center parties might be asked to join the new government. Dr. Pramroj, Secretary-General of the New Force Party, and Dr. Boonsanong, Secretary-General of the Socialist Party, were mentioned as likely candidates for a role in the new government. As in the past, it was expected that the smaller parties and individual members of the larger parties would join the government band-wagon as Seni's position became more secure.

However, the Chart Thai and various other oppositional forces managed to secure a "no-confidence" of Seni's minority coalition. Interestingly enough, the major issue was the continued role of "foreigners" (i.e., primarily the U.S. and Japan) in the politics and economy of Thailand. Apparently U.S. presence was still very much an issue after the 1975 elections. Some Thais claimed that the CIA had a hand in the demise of Seni's feeble coalition government. While there is of yet no proof to substantiate this claim, there were a series of policy statements just prior to the no-confidence vote which were construed by some Thai political observers to suggest an irresistible inference implicating the CIA as a "third hand" in deciding the final outcome.

In attempting to seek a compromise within the House of Representatives, Seni was at first pressured by his leftist supporters to make a policy commitment of U.S. withdrawal from Thailand. The first policy statement to the public was that withdrawal would take place "as soon as possible". The next day, after much alarm expressed by supporters of the U.S. defense

<sup>43</sup> *Bangkok Post* (February 19, 1975) p. 3. The reason why negotiations had failed with the Chart Thai and other members of the coalition was that the Chart Thai, in addition to the crucial ministries mentioned previously, also expressed an interest in the Ministry of Agriculture. A dispute then arose between the Social Agrarian Party and the Chart Thai over the control of this ministry. The Social Agrarian Party was assured control of this ministry when the Democrats decided to form the government without the Chart Thai.

programs, this statement was changed to "withdrawl in 18 months time". When reporters pressed Seni for an explanation to the sudden policy change, none was given. Thereafter, when Seni presented his government's policy package to the Parliament, a "no-confidence" vote was requested by the opposition. The result was a 151-111 verdict which ended the brief tenure of the left-of-center coalition government. It is noteworthy that the heated debate which took place just before the crucial vote of "no-confidence" centered around Seni's pledge in his policy manifesto, that all foreign troops would be withdrawn in 18 months.

There was considerable apprehension on the part of many Thais in Bangkok that the fall of Seni government would provide an opportunity for the military to stage a coup. However, the members of the House of Representatives in an orderly manner, elected M. P. Kukrit Pramoj, leader of the Kit Sakom (Social Action), as Prime Minister to head the new government.

There was something very characteristically Thai in making this selection. Kukrit, cousin of the King and Seni's "nong chai" (younger brother), seemed to be a wise and "safe" choice. Kukrit, though an outspoken critic of the military government for many years was also very critical of socialist-oriented policies. He had already effectively served as Speaker of the House under Sanya's temporary government. As speaker he played a significant role in the drafting of the new constitution and the rules which guide the new parliament. As leader of an aristocratic party supported primarily by bankers, Kukrit posed no serious threat to those of the upper and middle-class who support a capitalistic economy. As leader of the Social Action Party which secured only 18 seats in the election, he posed no real threat to the military backed parties. It was no surprise when the military backed parties joined in a coalition with the Social Action Party. Kukrit, unlike Seni, was not committed to a socialistic program of reforms, and according to one report in a Thai newspaper, "even the CIA would not object to Kukrit as Prime Minister"<sup>44</sup>.

Before Kukrit's selection, there was speculation that Chartichai or some other military backed candidate would emerge as the Prime Minister. However, it was apparent that many M. P.'s were still wary of military rule of Thailand — either directly by coup or indirectly by co-opting the

<sup>44</sup> *Ban Muang* (Thai Language Newspaper) May 21, 1974 ; Statement appeared in an editorial about Kukrit when he first formed the Kit Sakom Party.

parliamentary process. Although Kukrit's coalition government had to meet the challenge of the new Communist governments in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, as well as the internal problems of growing violence between new groups of militant rightist and leftist, he somehow managed to survive as Prime Minister until he was pressured to resign in early 1976.

#### THE 1976 ELECTIONS — CHOOSING THE MIDDLE PATH

The campaign violence which was primarily directed against socialist-oriented parties and candidates by various right-wing groups (e.g., NAVAPON, Red Gaurs, etc.) did have an affect on the election results. Left-wing parties such as the SPT, United Socialist Front, and the New-Force, which together had captured 37 seats in 1975, won only 7 seats in 1976<sup>45</sup>. Some parties on the right such as the Chart Thai doubled their 1975 seat total (28 to 56). This gain was mainly at the expense of their right-wing rivals, the Social Justice Party, which seat total decreased from 45 to 28 and the Social Nationalist Party which went from 16 seats in 1975 to 8 in 1976. Kukrit's own party increased its seat total from 18 in 1975 to 45 in 1976, but Kukrit lost his bid for a seat and any chance to lead the new coalition government. The biggest winner of 1976 was the Democrat Party which captured a surprising 115 seats in new parliament, 43 more than the 72 they had won in 1975. The Democrats large plurality was the result of a sweep of the 28 seats in Bangkok and strong support in the North, South and Northeast regions of the country. The Democrat Party captured seats in traditional socialist strongholds in the Northeast as well as right-wing party strongholds in the North and South.

<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that the results of interviews conducted by the author (week to 10 days after the election) revealed that the general opinion among New Force Party candidates, members and supporters was that their party's poor showing at the poll was because "they played it straight" (rough translation). Many New Force Party members attributed their losses to their own naivety in not anticipating, nor developing a strategy to deal with, the "clever tactics" and "dirty tricks" of the Democrat Party and the violent attacks by ultra-right wing groups. However, as many New Force members pointed out, the election results was a loss only in "parliamentary terms", since their primary base of support among intellectuals, students, workers, and farmers was perceived as still substantial and growing. Moreover, it was pointed out that New Force Party members were concentrating their efforts on increasing their power in the bureaucracy in Bangkok and other important areas of provincial administration. To this end, New Force Party supporters had already succeeded in gaining control of many of the top positions of major universities and even the National Institute of Development (N.I.D.A.). Among the notable New Force Party supporters is Dr. Puay Ungprakorn, who is presently the Rector of Thammasat University.

The campaign violence perpetuated largely by the right, and the flood of Laotian, Cambodian, Vietnamese refugees who carried lurid stories of communist rule to the villages and towns of Northeastern Thailand, were apparently important factors in the Democrat's victory. Voters seemed to be more inclined to reject both extremes and opt for a return to the middle path. Table III shows the specific results for the various parties and the numerical shifts in seat totals which took place from 1975 to 1976.

TABLE III

*A Comparison of the Results of the 1975 and 1976 Elections*

	B	P	T	E
Prachathipat (Democrat)	28	87	115	72
Chart Thai (Thai Nation)	—	57	56	28
KitSangkhom (Social Action)	—	45	45	18
Dharma Sangkhom (Social Justice)	—	28	28	45
Sangkorn Chart Niyom (Social Nationalist)	—	8	8	15
Kaset Sangkom (Social Agrarian)	—	8	8	19
Palang Mai (New Force)	—	3	3	12
Palang Prachachon (Populist)	—	3	3	—
Sangkorn Niyom (Socialist Party of Thailand)	—	2	2	15
Patthana Changwad (People Development)	—	2	2	1
Prachathippatai (Democracy)	—	1	1	2
Naewruam Sangkom Niyom (United Socialist Front)	—	1	1	10
Pithakthai (Protect Thai)	—	1	1	—
Thai Sangkom (Thai Social)	—	1	1	—
Dharmathippatai (Merit Is Right)	—	1	1	—
Sangkorn Kaona (Progressive Social)	—	1	1	—
Siam Mai (New Siam)	—	1	1	—
Naewruam Prachathippatai (United Democracy Front)	—	1	1	—
Rang-ngarn (Labour Party)	—	1	1	1
	28	251	279	

B : Bangkok

P : Province

T : Total

E : Last Election (75)

## PRE-ELECTION POLLS

Pre-election polls, a new dimension to campaign strategy in 1975, became even more prevalent in 1976. In 1976 most of the comprehensive and best publicized pre-election polls were conducted by research institutes

at the major universities in Bangkok. This approach was a departure from the 1975 polling which was done primarily by research consultant firms. The results of the surveys for both election years were curiously similar in their overall inaccuracy. However, there were interesting differences in the mode of the predictions. Polls conducted by private firms in 1975 consistently had right-wing parties leading at the expense of the Democrat Party and various left-wing parties (e.g., New Force Party, SPT, etc.), while polls conducted by university institutes in 1976, consistently showed the New Force Party gaining at the expense of the Democrat Party and various right-wing parties (Chart-Thai). A case in point was the much publicized poll conducted by a group of university lecturers at N.I.D.A. (National Institute of Development), which predicted that the New Force Party would win at least 8 to 10 seats in Bangkok, and approximately 50 seats overall. Moreover, the N.I.D.A. poll predicted that Kukrit Pramoj was the "most popular person for premier" and showed elder brother Seni placing a distant second. In fact, the New Force Party won no seats in Bangkok and only 3 overall (see Table III), while Kukrit lost miserably, placing a distant fourth in his own Dusit constituency in Bangkok.

It is interesting to note that most of the lecturers conducting the N.I.D.A. poll were either volunteered New Force Party supporters or members. On the other hand, some private research firms which often predicted victory for wealthy right-wing parties were usually paid lavishly for their services.

In view of the apparent overriding subjectivity associated with the polling practices in 1975 and 1976, it seems that pre-election surveys will continue to play a dubious role in Thai politics.

#### CAMPAIGN STRATEGY AND TACTICS

The often violent 1976 campaign represented a significant departure from all previous campaigns in Thai history. Candidates employed every possible tactic to insure victory. As the campaign developed it became apparent that the Democrat Party, the oldest in Thailand after the outlawed Communist Party of Thailand, was the most adept and experienced in chiding the opposition with various non-violent political ploys. Some right-wing party candidates on the other hand often encouraged and indirectly supported the violent attacks against left-wing candidates by various ultra-right youth groups (e.g., Red Guards).

Some of the milder tactics used by the Democrat Party candidates campaigning in the politically sensitive areas of the Northeast, included printing

leaflets and giving speeches which emphasized "that any party with the word 'social' (*nii yom*) in their party name were communists". Ironically, the "*nii yom*" group included wealthy and elitists candidates of the right-wing Social Justice Party and Social Nationalist Party. Other Democrat candidates cleverly played on the Buddhist theme in attacking the candidates of the SPT and New Force Party, by distributing posters and leaflets throughout the North and Northeast depicting Buddhist monks being forced to work alongside women in the rice fields in Communist-controlled Laos. The message was always the same, "If you do *not* like this practice (which is strictly taboo in Thai culture) then vote for . . . . .". One candidate of the Democrat Party even openly accused New Force Party candidate Pramroj of receiving campaign money from the People's Republic of China. Rumor, which has been traditionally a powerful weapon in Thai politics, also linked Pramroj and various other members of the New Force Party and SPT, with numerous accounts of infidelity, corruption, and even homosexuality. Other tactics employed included the case of a wealthy candidate of the Chart Thai Party campaigning in a remote northern district, who reportedly relocated hundreds of hill tribe refugees from Laos, obtained necessary naturalization and voting credentials for them, and subsequently won the election.

#### COALITION GOVERNMENT RE-VISITED

The overall election results (as shown in Table III) meant Thailand would have its second coalition government in barely more than a year. While the Democrat Party had won a convincing plurality of the vote, its 115 seat total was still 25 short of the majority needed to form a government. Thus the game of negotiations and compromise began once again, as various scenarios on possible groupings of parties were proposed.

The general feeling among most political observers was that the resulting coalition might be unstable, but would be "more stable" than the preceding Kukrit coalition government, if for no other reason than the fact that fewer parties (4) had any real bargaining party. It was generally surmised at the time that unless parties holding less than 10 seats in the new Parliament formed an effective coalition, three of the four major parties (i.e., Democrat, Chart Thai, Social Justice, and Social Action) would most likely form a solid majority. However, the "Under Ten" coalition drive was a failure, and most of the candidates of these parties were forced to join in a loosely organized opposition with Kukrit's Social Action Party.

After a week of negotiation, Seni Pramoj, as leader of the Democrat Party formed a coalition government with the Chart Thai (55 seats), the Social Justice Party (28 seats), and the Social Nationalists (8 seats), which represented a solid 206 of the 279 seats in the parliament.

As Seni began negotiations to allocate ministerial positions, it soon became apparent that the Democrat Party would attempt to neutralize the power of their coalition partners. Seni immediately invited non-partisan retired General Kris Sivara to lead the important Ministry of Defense, and then chose General Tavich Seniwong of his own Democrat Party as Deputy Defense Minister. Thus Seni passed over Chart Thai leader Major General Pramarn Adireksarn and Social Justice leader Air Chief Marshall Dawee Chullasapya. Instead, Pramarn and Dawee were chosen to share the Deputy-Prime Minister's post with Democrat Party member Sawet Piem-pongsam. Pramarn was also chosen as Minister of Agriculture.

Seni's strategy to neutralize the power of his coalition partners was provided an impetus by the unexpected vacancy left by General Kris. Kris died of a heart attack less than two weeks after he was named as Minister of Defense. Although many Thai officials and most Thai newspapers predicted that Pramarn would have to replace Kris, Seni filled the vacancy by naming Tavich as Defense Minister. In the face of much opposition by Chart Thai leaders and public criticism from Pramarn, Seni cleverly justified his decision by stating that Pramarn already held two positions, and Tavich became the logical choice since he was already Deputy-Minister of Defense. Seni also placed leading members of the Democrat Party to head the coveted Ministry of Interior and other important ministries such as Foreign Affairs, Justice and Commerce. When tension of the negotiations had finally subsided, it was apparent that Seni's strategy had been extremely successful. The Democrat Party held the top position in all the major ministries and had control of 9 out of the 12 ministries overall. Moreover, 80% of the deputy minister positions were also held by members of the Democrat Party.

The first real test of the strength of Seni's new coalition government was the election of Speaker of the House. The new parliament surprised some critics by choosing 35 year old Uthai Pimchaichon, a member of the Democrat Party who was jailed for treason by the former military government. Uthai, the youngest speaker in history of Parliament, was imprisoned in 1972 for criticizing the military government of Thanom Kittikachorn. He was released with other political prisoners only after the ousting of the Thanom military clique by the student-led uprising in October 1973.

In the balloting for speaker, Uthai defeated Mana Pitayaporn of the opposition Social Action party 210 to 62. The popular Uthai even managed to receive the support of several socialist-oriented MP's of the opposition in parliament. Leftist-party support for Uthai was not without motive. Uthai and leftist party members did agree on one crucial issue — the status of U.S. troops in Thailand.

### THE ISSUE OF U.S. TROOPS

Interestingly enough, the status of U.S. troops, which was a factor in the demise of Seni's feeble coalition government in 1975, again became the major source of controversy surrounding Seni's 1976, coalition government. There was much speculation that Seni would reverse the order handed down by the previous government of Kukrit, which demanded that all American troops except 270 advisers leave Thailand by July 20, 1976. Prior to the 1976 elections military leaders and various right-wing groups had demonstrated in support of a policy which kept at least 4,000 U.S. troops in Thailand, while students and various left-wing groups held a series of anti-American protests to get all U.S. troops out of the country. Some expected that Seni would at least modify the policy on U.S. troop withdrawals to approach a compromise between the forces on the right, some of which were part of his new coalition government, and those on the left. Instead, Seni held firm to the policy put forth by younger brother Kukrit. Announcing his official decision in a formal address to the public, Seni emphasized that "the total withdrawal of American forces will be the right thing and a good thing in the furthering of peace in Southeast Asia". Moreover, Seni stated that removal of U.S. troops was in keeping "with the trend of the times" and this action did not necessarily mean that other powers would fill the vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal.

When Kukrit was asked to comment on Seni's surprising policy statement, as well as his own poor showing in the elections, the ever-witty former Prime Minister simply stated that he "wasn't surprised" by Seni's statement nor was he worried by his own election defeat because "after all, it's all in the family".

### PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

The Pramoj family arrangement notwithstanding, the Seni coalition government still faces critical social and economic problems which were left

unresolved by the previous Kukrit government. Moreover, there is even a remote chance that the military may again resort to the coup, if the demonstrations, riots, bombings, assassinations and strikes which continued virtually unabated throughout Kukrit's tenure as Prime Minister become more violent or directed against the present military leaders. While Seni's government appears to be more stable than Kukrit's there are still serious questions which linger on unanswered.

As the Thai borders become more insecure, and the domestic upheavals among the workers, farmers, and students continue, will the Thai Kingdom be able to adjust and float like a lotus flower in the sea of Socialism and Communist offensives?... Or will the U.S. supported Thai military elite opt for another coup and take the risk of a bloodbath with the Socialist forces?... Or will Thailand just become another "domino" in the growing communist revolution in Asia? These are some of the general alternatives that face the Seni coalition government which will ultimately affect the permanence of parliamentary democracy in Thailand and the future of the entire Southeast Asian region. The specific answers lie in the ambitions of those leading the old forces of militarism on the one hand and those leading the new forces of socialist reform and revolution on the other. To a lesser degree, the spokesmen of the moderating forces of the educated aristocracy, the Thai middle class, and the tempering influence of the King, may play a role in promoting a compromise of the two extremes, if one is to take place.