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New Trends in Thai Politics:  
The Rise of Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang

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Dear Peter,

"Last year, I won the 400 meter race at the National Stadium. I'm not 35, I'm 53. Why did I win?...because I eat soybeans everyday. When I was in Egypt, I climbed to the top of the pyramids. I don't eat meat, I eat only one meal a day ...But my meat-eating Egyptian guides were afraid to follow me because they might not have made it back down....Call me an advertisement for soybeans...."

For 45 minutes, the speaker, wearing sandals, a simple, peasant's shirt, and a broad smile, enthralled an audience of 400 people with his jokes and praise for soybeans and vegetarianism. Throughout the speech, he kept his audience laughing and nodding in agreement.

Chamlong Srimuang doesn't sell soybeans or snake oil, though he could. The Governor of Metropolitan Bangkok is, according to public opinion polls, Thailand's most popular politician. Many believe that Chamlong may eventually succeed Prem Tinsulanonda as Prime Minister. "If the Bangkok people could elect the Prime Minister," says Dr. Kusuma Snitwongse, a noted political scientist at Chulalongkorn University, "they would elect Chamlong."

The spectacular rise of Chamlong Srimuang, a retired Army major general, reflects three recent developments in Thai politics. First, there is a growing desire, especially among the urban middle class, for a "clean" political leader. Chamlong's devoutly Buddhist life-style satisfies this sentiment. Running a low-budget, longshot campaign for Governor in 1985, Chamlong promised clean government and won by a two-to-one margin against the established political parties. Currently, his newly-launched Phalang Dharma (Moral Force) party is attracting new adherents as it prepares for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Second, and related to this, a small but significant number

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of politically-oriented people seek a party that promises meaningful participation in politics. The mainstream political parties, increasingly viewed as incapable of transcending their squabbling over spoils, have failed to respond to this demand for a party that has a platform, or at least represents some values. Chamlong's Phalang Dharma party may provide a viable alternative. Chamlong and his party's still inchoate ideology of "democracy" and "clean politics" has attracted a respectable mass-base of religious activists, civic-minded professionals, and some defectors from the traditional parties.

Third, the route to the Prime Minister's office appears to be changing in a fundamental way. Some observers believe that the days of an Army chief moving directly into the top position may be coming to an end. After Gen. Prem leaves Thai politics, no single Army officer is seen as having the authority and power to move to the top without having first won some sort of electoral office. Maj. Gen. Chamlong's rise to prominence through elections may encourage more officers to follow suit.

The conjunction and intensification of these three trends may propel the energetic vegetarian toward higher office. Or, they may merely provoke more chaos and wild speculation about the shape of Thai politics.

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Chamlong is charismatic, as Weber meant it. His ascetic, Buddhist life-style has attracted his close followers while eliciting respect from many others. The media and word of mouth have made his private life his public persona. Newspapers and TV duely record Chamlong's vegetarianism; how he lives in an old garment factory with little furniture and sleeps on a mat; and how he and his wife observe the eight Buddhist precepts, which enjoin abstinence from liquor and any sexual relations. Says Dr. Kusuma, "because of his personality and his life-style, people trust him."

Chamlong's trademarks are his smile and his Mohom (a collarless dark-blue, shirt traditionally worn by peasants). Chamlong uses his smile to evade prodding questions by reporters. He explained in an interview why he wears a Mohom. "I try to wear a Mohom everywhere, almost everyday because it warns me that our country is not rich. I think that wearing a shirt like this (he points to my shirt and tie) is more beautiful than wearing a Mohom. So, I have to control myself to overcome my desire."

Sincerity is at the heart of Chamlong's appeal. The slogan of Chamlong's group of supporters, originally called Ruam Phalang (United Force) back in 1985 but registered this week as the Phalang Dharma party, is cingcang-cingcay (lit. serious sincerity). Chamlong's critics claim that he has consciously created his image. Although Chamlong is not bashful about discussing his personal life-style, it is not something he's assumed overnight. Chamlong has been a vegetarian for about 15 years. A longtime acquaintance described the gradual evolution in Chamlong's strict diet, which would point to considerations of substance rather than style. Asked whether his fasting

at formal meals makes others feel uncomfortable, Chamlong laughed, saying that it gives him an advantage: "I have more time to talk to them because I don't eat."

A surprise visit to Chamlong's house at 4 A.M. confirmed that he does live in an old garment factory without any servants or guards. Almost everybody who is anybody in Thailand will have a retinue of servants, guards, and drivers. But in the predawn stillness at his residence, two boys and a girl were slicing mushrooms for a curry that would be distributed to vegetarian restaurants later in the morning.

Governor Chamlong and the people living with him in the garment factory are members of Santi Asoke, a strict Buddhist sect founded a dozen years ago by the monk Phra Photirak. Many of the original members of the Phalang Dharma party, as well as a few of Chamlong's close aides in City Hall, come from the ranks of Santi Asoke's 10,000 followers. Through Santi Asoke, Chamlong has what no other politician has: a core of dedicated volunteers and organizers that can quickly swell to incorporate newcomers during an election campaign. "With other (political) parties, people come together for the money," says Dr. Kusuma. "With (Phalang Dharma), people join because the people believe in Chamlong."

In contrast to his cenobitic, "half-man half-monk" identity, Chamlong has another side, that of the soldier. Coming from a family of modest means, Maj. Gen. Chamlong worked his way through high school to later graduate from Chulachomklao Military Academy near the top of his class. (The role of his classmates in the 1981 April Fool's Day coup will be covered below.) After serving with the Special Forces in Laos and the Army planning division in Vietnam, Chamlong moved to the Armed Forces Supreme Command where he was part of the "working group" that helped formulate Thailand's counter-insurgency strategy.

Like many other officers, Chamlong received training in the U.S. He notes that he was one of only two officers from the Supreme Command to receive an MS in Management from the U.S. Naval Post-Graduate School in Monterey, California. Following his appointment to the Senate (all members of the upper house are appointed), Chamlong served from 1980 to 1981 as the Secretary-General to Prime Minister Prem. It is considered one of the most important offices in government, yet by all accounts he resigned as a matter of principle to oppose, and defeat, a pro-abortion bill. Three days after he was promoted to major general, Chamlong retired to run for Governor of Bangkok in the November, 1985 election. (Thailand's 72 other Governors are appointed by the central government.)

Chamlong describes the different aspects of his life-- religion, the Army, politics--as Thang Sam Phraeng (lit. a three-forked path). The first two aspects undoubtedly are seen by many Thais as a potent combination: the force and action of the soldier tempered by the reflection and self-restraint of the monk. (The third aspect--the politician--is not highly regarded by Thai society.) A senior official in the Education Ministry, a distant but astute observer, describes Chamlong

as "a mix of two personalities. One is moral, more like a Puritan. But, administratively he's been very aggressive to tackle things and get things done." The official notes, "Some people say that he's a born politician, shrewd and calculating. But at the same time, he's a good man, sincere."

In an interview shortly before the snap dissolution of Parliament that set the July 24 parliamentary elections, Chamlong explained why he entered electoral politics in 1985. "I wanted to make politics better. You know, before my election, the runners at all levels had to spend quite a bit of money. That is something that destroys democracy. So, I think that it is my business to stop that."

Yesterday's headlines: "Democrats Offer Truce to Chamlong," refer to Thailand's largest political party, which wants to avoid going head-on against Chamlong. The Democrats and other parties are looking back at the lessons from Chamlong's stunning victory in the 1985 gubernatorial election.

Few had expected that Chamlong would win against his main opponent, Chana Rungsaeng (lit. Mr. Victory), a well-funded, veteran politician from the Democrat party. (One of the two parties that dominate Bangkok, the Democrat party, with its slightly liberal image, is sometimes at odds with the Army.) Chamlong's strategy depended upon a corps of volunteers to mobilize what the campaign called the "silent majority"--those voters disillusioned with politics. A high voter turnout in the off-year election (35%), plus an unsolicited attack by the Army radio station against unscrupulous politicians (i.e. the Democrat party), swept Chamlong to a two-to-one margin over Mr. Victory. Chamlong also pulled along 8 of 19 of his supporters who ran for City Council.

Chamlong's highly visible and energetic style as Governor has made Bangkok his political base. A chain of charity thrift shops and vegetarian restaurants run by his followers constantly attracts media attention. But it is his administration of Bangkok that has cemented his political support in this city of almost six million.

The three top goals of his administration are, says Chamlong, flood control, cleanliness, and increasing city revenue. During Chamlong's first year in office the city embarked on a major 952 million bhat (almost \$40 million) flood prevention program that involved unclogging sewers and maintaining Bangkok's massive water-pumping stations. Yet, that year a sudden rainstorm paralyzed the city for three days, leaving eight dead. Chamlong called it the heaviest rains in 500 years; the weather department called it the worst in 30 years. In one area of the city, over one-third of the water pumps were out of order, jammed with garbage. Yet, the weather department was blamed for failing to predict the storm. Chamlong caught little criticism. "If it had been someone else" as Governor, says Dr. Kusuma of Chulalongkorn University, "the people would have raised hell."

In addressing problems created by people, however, Chamlong has had greater success. His well-publicized anti-litter

campaign is credited with cleaning up Bangkok's filthy streets. It's not hard to find praise from middle-income people. But what impressed a farmer from Khorat province, who drives a cab in the off-season, was that Chamlong showed the way by taking up a street sweeper's broom. "There's no other Governor that would go out, put on a street sweeper's hat and sweep the streets."

The anti-litter campaign is central to Chamlong's belief that if people learn not to be selfish in little things, they will also learn to sacrifice for the good of society in larger ways. Chamlong said that during his term as Secretary-General to Prime Minister Prem, "I thought that we couldn't solve the problem because we are lacking experts. But no. The thing we are lacking is people who think about the problem, [instead of] themselves. We have so many selfish men....If I have garbage in my hand and I throw it right here it means that I am selfish. But if I walk ten or twenty more steps and put it in the garbage bin, it means that I am thinking of the people, that I am going to devote myself to the public."

The cleanliness campaign has rubbed some sore spots, however. As part of the cleanup program, the city requires street vendors to remove their stands from crowded thoroughfares and to spend Wednesdays cleaning up their areas instead of hawking their goods. Chamlong says this is part of his philosophy that everyone must sacrifice a little to make Bangkok better. Some street vendors think otherwise, holding small demonstrations and, in one notable case, beating back police who attempted to confiscate their wares. Not a few observers say this is one instance where Chamlong's strict adherence to principle bumps up against reality. One of his associates admitted that for those vendors who don't have much, it's hard to sacrifice one day's income.

Chamlong has also gained a reputation for cleaning up City Hall, which ties in with his third goal of raising revenue. Sukhumphand Paribatra (mentioned in ERG-11), who didn't expect that Chamlong would be an effective Governor, compares Chamlong's anti-corruption drive with Prem's. "Prem has not touched the main people, whereas Chamlong has aimed at the top. You can't go much higher than the city clerk."

Last fall, Chamlong stunned Bangkok by suspending Samerjai Poompuang, the city's most powerful appointed official and a Southerner who many believed was close to his region-mate--Prime Minister Prem. Chamlong skillfully used the media and a clear-cut irregularity by Samerjai to suspend him and advance removal proceedings. An aide to Chamlong predicts that Samerjai will be out by mid-year, but also notes how difficult it is to shake up Bangkok's bureaucracy.

Under Chamlong, the city has slightly cut expenditures (but not services) by about 390 million bhat (\$15.6 million) each year. Acharn Phisit, a close aide to Chamlong in City Hall, won't say for the record how expenditures were cut, but some attribute it to less corruption. At the same time, revenue collection appears to have improved. According to figures cited by Phisit, revenue collection has increased by 10% in the last two years.

Based on Chamlong's reputation for incorruptibility, his Phalang Dharma party appears well-positioned to tap the electorate's desire for clean politicians in the July 24 parliamentary elections. The strength of this sentiment is difficult to gauge. Some Western-educated Thais say, hopefully, that it is growing. One sign is, of course, Chamlong's landslide victory and continuing popularity. The nicknames given to politicians are another sign. For example, Banharn Silpa-archa, Minister of Communications and Secretary-General of the Chart Thai party, is called ATM Khluen Thi (the mobile Automatic Teller Machine) after his method of convincing fellow MPs to vote the government's line. (The five largest parties ranked by their number of seats out of the total of 347 seats in the 1986 election are: Democrat-100, Chart Thai-63, Social Action-51, United Democratic-38, Prachakorn Thai-24.)

By building on this discontent with politics as usual, Phalang Dharma, with its spirit of volunteerism and grass roots campaigning, offers many civic-minded people a vehicle for self-fulfilling political activity. A stop by the temporary campaign headquarters, located in a privately-run kindergarden, showed that the party is attracting many political newcomers: teachers, doctors, and other professionals. It is also gaining defectors from the other parties. Suthep Atthakorn, a former Senator, legal advisor to Prem, and member of the Social Action party's central committee, is running for a relatively obscure post on the Bangkok City Council. Disillusioned by the "lack of ideology" among the major parties, Suthep says he is running because "I want to prove to the other people that good people can be good politicians without money."

Although Phalang Dharma may be, as Suthep claims, "more ideological" than the major parties, its ideology is still rather nebulous. A close associate of Chamlong's says that members of Phalang Dharma all agree that they want "clean politics" and "democracy," but are not in complete agreement on how to get there. Perhaps the central idea behind Phalang Dharma is that the quality of the people is more important than the formal rules of the system. This moralistic ideology may make Chamlong appear more "liberal" than many Army officers, but he is certainly no political extremist and reportedly remains close to Prem.

As of now, Phalang Dharma's platform is that all of its candidates must agree to three conditions. They must accept only "legitimate" support, cannot buy votes, and will not fight for Cabinet positions--sources of power and patronage. Chamlong has proposed a constitutional amendment to prohibit all MPs from holding Cabinet portfolios. He says that this will reduce corruption and the frequent reshuffling of Cabinets. It's not clear how firmly the party will stick to this position. Some members are uncertain about its merits and the campaign manager told me they won't rule out Cabinet posts if they are offered.

Kukrit Pramote, former Prime Minister and now loquacious doyen of Thai politics, says that Chamlong's proposal shows that the general hasn't lost his military mindset. In an interview, Kukrit said that denying Cabinet portfolios to political parties would weaken them while strengthening the power of

the executive and the military. (It should be noted that Chamlong does not support the military's proposal to reorganize electoral districts, which many claim would fragment the power of the larger parties.)

For Chamlong and the Phalang Dharma party, making the transition from Bangkok politics to national politics will be difficult. Party leaders have announced that they expect to win over half of the 37 seats in Bangkok, plus a few more in the provinces for a total of 60 seats. With nine major parties competing for 357 seats, this would probably make Phalang Dharma the third largest party. Although Phalang Dharma is likely to become a significant parliamentary force, 60 seats is an optimistic assessment.

A week before the election was called (and Phalang Dharma registered as a political party), Acharn Phisit from City Hall told me that he believed they were not ready to launch a party, needing more members and financial support. He said only about 100 people formed the "core" of Chamlong's supporters, not the 500 cited by others. Phisit noted that to set up a low-budget party "we need nine to ten million bhat and we don't have one million yet." (There are 25 bhat to the dollar.)

Kukrit, who now opposes Prem (and by extension Chamlong), also warns that Chamlong will have a tough time. "People are willing to try General Chamlong. But they are not going to vote for every John, Jack, and Peter who are his disciples." He says that members of Phalang Dharma "haven't been through this kind of politics at all. They've been working in a kind of religious movement, which isn't the same as Thai politics."

In Bangkok, Chamlong poses a major threat to the capital-based Prachakorn Thai party of Samak Sundaravej. Running a political machine oiled from his days as a Cabinet Minister, Samak is considered one of Thailand's toughest politicians. Says Kukrit, "Khun Samak will be in an all-out fight against him [Chamlong], and that will not be good for General Chamlong."

In the rough world of Thai national politics, the Army is an important player. The Army chief has called for strict neutrality in the elections, but in the past this has not always been observed by the Army's TV and radio stations.

Years ago, Maj. Gen. Chamlong was a leader of a group of young, dynamic officers called the "Young Turks" who held key command positions in the Army and elsewhere. "In early 1981," write Drs. Chai-ana Samudavanija and Suchit Bunbongkarn (mentioned in previous newsletters), "the Young Military Officers' Group [the Young Turks] was more or less in control of the major political resources in the Thai political process."

"Chamlong enjoys the honor and glory of Class 7 [the Young Turks] without the tarnish," says Sukhumphand. For, on April Fool's Day 1981, the Young Turks overplayed their hand, staging an almost successful coup against Prime Minister Prem. In the aftermath of the coup, the leaders were discharged from the Army, shattering the strength of Class 7, and reportedly forcing some officers to find employment as tour guides. Chamlong, then Secretary-General to Prem, was not involved

in the coup attempt. With the diaspora of Class 7, Chamlong lacks a traditional-style support base in the Army.

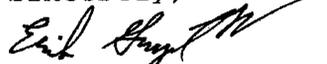
Yet, Chamlong appears to enjoy broad, though perhaps not deep, favor in military circles. According to Sukhumphand and Western military analysts, Chamlong is greatly respected by the younger officers, including those in Class 12 and 13 who are reaching key command positions. In keeping with his soldier identity, when Chamlong attended the 100th anniversary of Chulachomklao Military Academy, he didn't wear his trademark, the humble Mohom, but his starched, white general's uniform. Despite these bows to martial traditions, one Western military analyst says that some senior generals are slightly uneasy with Chamlong's strict moral stance. Chamlong's campaign will test the depth of his support in the Army.

While Maj. Gen. Chamlong's long-term advancement in national politics will, in some form or another, ultimately depend on his support in the Army, his current progress may now influence certain developments in the Army. Chamlong's rise to prominence through elections may encourage more generals to follow the same route. Present trends in Thai politics are compelling military officers to enter politics through elections rather than more direct means. First, factionalism in the Army prevents any one officer from commanding total support. In addition, public sentiment (last expressed in the 1986 parliamentary election) suggests that after Prem, the next Prime Minister will need an elected office on his resume. Finally, the fate of Gen. Arthit Kamlang-ek, the previous Army commander who tried to throw his weight around and was sacked, still serves as a warning. The strength of these trends is uncertain. Sukhumphand believes that the next Prime Minister after Prem leaves will have to hold some sort of electoral office. Dr. Kusuma calls the trend toward the electoral route "incipient."

How Chamlong's Phalang Dharma party fares on July 24 will suggest the direction of several trends: whether there is growing sentiment for "clean" politics; whether a moralistic political party can do well, yet maintain its integrity and principles as the ambitious clamber on its bandwagon; whether Army officers are interested in the electoral route to office; and whether Governor Chamlong will continue his ascent.

Whatever the results, the general is breaking some of the established rules. Although Chamlong has good relations with the Royal Family and is in the political center, the unease with which some senior generals view him is probably shared by certain segments of the Thai civilian elite. In a hierarchical society where the servants of a university professor or a Governor approach the dinner table crouched over or on their knees, a Governor who doesn't keep servants and sweeps the streets can be unsettling. Chamlong is breaking some rules, but as Sukhumphand says of the Governor: "He is a phenomenon. Someone who is a phenomenon can change the rules."

Sincerely,



Erik Guyot