



# Thailand's Crooked Army

*A bloated force with 1,400 generals now will seek to run the country*

Written by Our Correspondent



Multiply by 1,500 equals US\$30 million

In 2010, Thailand's military was warned that bomb detection devices their soldiers were using were fraudulently sold by a discredited British company whose owner was jailed in London. Despite a warning from the US Embassy that the devices were "like a toy," the military bought 1,576 of them at a cost of US\$30 million.

The devices were nothing more than cartons with what amounted to dowsing rods sticking out the front of them. Then-Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said at the time that tests showed the devices had worked only four times in 20 field tests, a frequency even below random chance. Critics said the use of the devices could subject the users to the possibility of being blown up if the operator failed to detect a detonated explosive.

However, two years later, the devices were still in use, threatening the lives of hundreds of soldiers using them in the country's deep south to combat explosives laid by Muslim separatists. They were apparently bought by a Thai general who is said to have profited enormously on the deal.

The fact is that the Thai army, according to a wide range of reports, is one of the most deeply corrupt militaries in Asia. And whether or not Prayuth Chan-ocha, the leader of the coup that took over the country on May 22 is personally honest, the same military is now going to be in charge of the economy. Prayuth is going to have a mess to clean up.

But he is going to have a hard time. The Counter Corruption Commission has conveniently said the incoming junta members do not have to declare the assets they amassed before and after holding office. That is in contradiction to the policy for elected officials before the coup. It is also going to be convenient for new executive boards for state-owned enterprises, whose new members are largely drawn from the military.

On July 29, the military approved a US\$75 billion master plan to upgrade the country's transport infrastructure over the next eight years. On Aug. 18, the new National Legislative Assembly, more than half of whose members are either retired or serving military, approved a fiscal budget worth Bt2.57 trillion (US\$80.4 billion) without a dissenting vote. There were three abstentions.

Given the military's historic role in procurement scandals, it has to be asked who will be the watchdogs keeping an eye on that enormous amount of money, not to mention all the other places where the

military is inserting itself into Thai life. Bangkok's formerly freewheeling and generally competent press has been muzzled. Other institutions have been scared underground.

With the vast number of areas where military control is a growing phenomenon, as *Asia Sentinel* reported on Aug. 17, the chances for generals or lesser officers to take backhanders is inevitably going to grow. The military's checkered history depressingly raises the possibility that past may be prologue to even wider problems. A recent report by the Business Anti-Corruption Portal points out that "the armed forces are bloated (with an estimated 1,400 generals) and of doubtful professional competence." That is 400 more generals than the US Army has for a force three times as big.

The bomb detector scandal was not an aberration. It was business as usual. Freedom House, in a 2011 report, stated that the bomb detectors "turned out to be little more than empty plastic boxes. To date, no dismissals or prosecutions of military officers involved have taken place."

It is just one of a long string of depressing procurement scandals that the Thai military has endured for decades, going clear back to the time in the 1980s and before when the army bought hundreds of armored personnel carriers from the Chinese that were so substandard that light showed through the welds holding the armor plate on, exposing the soldiers inside to the potential of death in the event they were hit by rocket fire. The wife of one of the army's then-top generals was the agent for Chinese weapons dealers. At one point the Thai air force bought Chinese jets with engines so substandard that the planes had to be towed to the flight line for takeoff and towed back on landing, because the engine life was so short, measured in hours.

More recently, Anapong Poachinda, the previous army commander in chief, and Prayuth, his then-deputy, signed off on a Bt350 million purchase of an advanced zeppelin which the military named "Sky Dragon," to be used as a sky-based surveillance station from a US-based company called Arial International Cooperation. It has since turned into a major embarrassment. Air apparently seeps out of the seams. It initially cost Bt2.8 million to inflate and Bt280,000 a month to keep inflated. It remains in a hangar, according to the website Political Prisoners in Thailand. It has long been obsolete, with tiny drones taking over for surveillance in the US military and many other places.

In April, Reuters journalists Jason Szep and Andrew R.C. Marshall, won a Pulitzer Prize for a year-long series of stories on Rohingya refugees that among other things detailed the smuggling of refugees for profit on the part of Royal Thai Navy personnel. A naval officer promptly filed a criminal complaint against Reuters, Szep and another Reuters journalist, Stuart Grudgings, alleging violations of the Computer Crimes Act. Reuters apparently was not charged. The news agency said it stands by its reporting. Other local reporters were convicted of defamation for writing the same stories.

This is the military that is going to be in charge of Thailand's economy.

