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Trends in Southeast Asia

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THAILAND'S
INTERNAL SECURITY OPERATIONS
COMMAND IN THE POST-COUNTER-
INSURGENCY PERIOD

PUANGTHONG R. PAWAKAPAN

ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK
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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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The Central Role of Thailand's Internal Security Operations Command in the Post-Counter-insurgency Period

By Puangthong R. Pawakapan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Thai military's Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) was in charge of a wide range of civil affairs projects during the country's struggle with the communist insurgency between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s.
- These projects — including rural development programmes, mass organizations and mobilization campaigns, and psychological operations — provided justification for the military to routinely penetrate the socio-political sphere.
- Since the Cold War drew to a close, little attention has been paid to ISOC's role and power within the state apparatus.
- Since the coups of September 2006 and May 2014 that toppled the elected governments, ISOC has been dangerously empowered and increasingly employed by the military regimes to dictate the country's political direction.
- The power of the Thai military is exerted not only through its use of force but also by means of its socio-political arms. ISOC represents a potent tool with which conservative elites can undermine and control electoral democracy and through which the military can maintain its power.

The Central Role of Thailand's Internal Security Operations Command in the Post-Counter-insurgency Period

By Puangthong R. Pawakapan¹

INTRODUCTION

Thailand's intransigent political crisis and polarization, marked by two military coups d'état and debilitating mass demonstrations since 2006, has been recognized as the orchestrated work of the anti-democratic alliance of the old powers against the rise of electoral politics. The alliance is conceptualized as "the network monarchy" by Duncan McCargo (2005), the "parallel state" by Paul Chambers (2015), and "the deep state" by Eugénie Mérieau (2016). Despite their differences in some aspects, these authors agree that the monarchy is the bedrock of the alliance while the military is its least popular component, especially after the violent crackdown of the popular uprising in May 1992 by the military government led by General Suchinda Khraprayun (7 April – 24 May 1992). The military's legitimacy comes from the claim that it is the major defender of the three pillars of Thailand — Nation, Religion and Monarchy. It lost much of its popularity following the May 1992 crackdown, however, and it had been perceived to have retreated to its barracks (Surachart 1998, p. 17). In other words, only putsches and military governments came to be considered political intervention on its part.

¹ Puangthong R. Pawakapan was Visiting Senior Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore in April–July 2017. She is Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University.

Eugénie Mériéau (2016) noted the significance of the ideological apparatus of the deep state, her works tended to focus though on the role of the Constitutional Court, the apparent tip of this deep state. A study of the Thai military's civil affairs programmes, however, holds better potential for improving our understanding of the phenomenon.

Despite warnings from Suchit Bunbongkarn (1987, p. 53) and Surachart Bamrungsuk (1998, pp. 76–77) about the military's involvement in civil affairs projects at the end of the counter-insurgency period, there has been no serious study on the matter. The Thai military's civil affairs programmes, especially in the post-counter-insurgency period, have drawn little attention from scholars, and studies of the Thai armed forces tend to focus on internal factionalism; conflict between elected civilian governments and military leaders; networks of cliques and classes; and personal ties between military leaders and the palace (Chambers and Napisa 2016; Surachart 1998, 2016; Yoshifumi 2008). At the same time, it is well known that since the toppling of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the Thai military has never restricted itself to an exclusively military role. It believes itself to be inherently the core institution to protect the Thai nation from internal and external threats, to keep peace and order, and to engage actively in national development. However, while military leaders may have despised civilian politicians and not accorded them a position of supremacy, denying the country's electoral democracy has become increasingly difficult to do since the 1980s.

The Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) is known as the nerve centre of the military's civil affairs projects. It has been involved in coordinating a wide range of programmes related to rural development, mass organizations, and mobilization and psychological operations (Chai-anan, Kusuma and Suchit 1990; Surachart 1998). While these activities have continued, even after the defeat of Thailand's communist insurgency, the plummeting political legitimacy of the military after 1992 was possibly the main reason behind the decline of academic interest in military affairs until the putsch in 2006.

This article tries to explain the origin, development, mission, and royal and legal justifications for ISOC's expansive role in civil affairs since the counter-insurgency period. I argue that the power of the Thai military lies not only in its use of force but also in its socio-political arms.

Even in normal times, ISOC's authority allows the military extensive power over various state agencies and citizens. On the one hand, this power allows the conservative elite to undermine and control electoral democracy, while on the other; it permits the military to consolidate its own political power.

WHY ISOC?

ISOC was the Thai Army's political, intelligence and psychological arm, using both violence and propaganda techniques during the counter-insurgency period against student, peasant and worker movements. The fight against communism in Thailand was intensified in the early 1960s under Prime Minister Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, and by the mid-1980s, the communist movement in Thailand was in disarray. The intervening two decades defined the country's counter-insurgency period.

ISOC was behind the anti-communist activities of the ultra-rightist groups, i.e., Nawaphon and the Red Gaurs. Both of these were involved in the attacks, killings and lynching of students and leftists on 6 October 1976 at Thammasat University. Other paramilitary groups that took part in the massacre were the Village Scouts and the Border Patrol Police (BPP). The BPP are the paramilitary force of the Royal Thai Police while the Village Scouts are organized under the BPP's umbrella. These have been under royal patronage (Morell and Chai-anan 1981, Ch. 9; Bowie 1997, pp. 55–56). ISOC officers were also involved in unlawful killings of thousands of suspected communists in a remote village in Phatthalung province in southern Thailand in 1972. No one was held accountable for the massacre (Haberhorn 2013, pp. 185–208). In 1975, members of the Village Scout movement peaked at 2 million or about 10 per cent of the country's adult population (Bowie 1997, p. 22). These were undeniably powerful movements. However, slow democratization since the early 1980s saw Nawaphon and the Red Gaurs gradually dissolve and disappear from the public scene, while the once powerful Village Scout movement faded away. The BPP remains active in the border areas alone, and the ISOC ceased to be active.

ISOC's activities became increasingly visible again from the mid-2000s, as the country became engulfed in the colour-coded politics.

Some of its activities are reminiscent of its role in the Cold War era, i.e., surveillance of political opposition, mass organizations and mobilization campaigns, and threats to and coercion of political opponents. Some of its activities appeared new, such as forcing people from forest reserve areas and narcotic suppression. Some examples of these activities are described below.

In 2009, during the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva, Jatuphon Phromphan, leader of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), known as the Red Shirts movement, accused the government of using ISOC to block its activities. In response to Jatuphon, Colonel Thanathip Sawangsaeng, ISOC's spokesperson, countered that the budget of 1,000 million baht (approximately US\$28.57 million) was aimed at promoting King Bhumibol's idea of sufficiency economy in the Red Shirt-dominated areas. He, nevertheless, admitted that ISOC was monitoring the activities of the Red Shirts in the Northern region (Chanel 3 News, 25 March 2009).

In April 2011, ISOC authorities shut down thirteen local radio stations belonging to Red Shirt groups, accusing them of insulting the monarchy (*Thairath* [daily] 28 April 2011). Apparently, the nationwide military apparatus was being used for surveillance of the activities and movements of the Red Shirts. So it is not surprising that immediately after the coup d'état that toppled the elected government led by Phuea Thai party on 22 May 2014, many Red Shirt leaders in the Northern and Northeastern provinces were detained, summoned and threatened by soldiers (*Prachatai* [online] 1 July 2014; BBC, 9 June 2014). The blacklisted local Red Shirt leaders had to request permission from the military chiefs in the provinces if they wanted to travel outside their provinces. Some of them took refuge in neighbouring countries. Many decided to leave their localities and to lie low in other provinces. Some are still afraid to return home almost three years after the coup (Interview Mr Wat).²

² Mr Wat (pseudo name) is the leader of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). The interview was conducted on 30 March 2017 in Bangkok.

Less than a month after the coup d'état mounted by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), its leader General Prayut Chanocha issued an order on 14 June 2014, regarding suppression and cessation of encroachment on and the destruction of forest resources. Several hundred people faced charges, and several thousand people were forcibly evicted from forest reserve land. Moreover, in August, the junta introduced a Master Plan to resolve the problems of forest destruction. ISOC, together with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, was entrusted with the task of determining and implementing a strategy. The principle objective of this effort is to increase the forest cover in Thailand from 31.57 per cent of the country's total area to 40 per cent within ten years (Puangthong 2015). It is intriguing that the management of natural resources has become one of the priorities of the military junta. The fact that it was able to introduce the Master Plan within a few months after the coup indicates that the military has been deeply involved in the management of forest reserves long before the coup of 2014. The question is, when and how did this begin.

After the coup of 2014, ISOC assumed authority over cyber surveillance. In 2015, the spokesperson of ISOC disclosed to the media that ISOC had discovered 143 websites, with 5,268 separate URLs, carrying content deemed insulting to the monarchy. It ordered the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to shut down 3,426 of these URLs (Manager Online, 7 September 2015). The action bypassed the authority of both the police and the judiciary, and ISOC did not explain its reasons to the public or to the administrators of the websites.

The demise of communism and the repeal of the 1952 Anti-Communist Act in 1992 had resulted in a decrease in paramilitary programmes. It was the emergence of the colour-coded political conflict since the middle of 1990s that evidently reinvigorated paramilitary groups under ISOC's command. The progress report of the National Defence Volunteers (NDV), one of ISOC's paramilitary organizations, indicates that the activities of NDV had been in decline since 1992 but were revived since 2006, the year the elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra was toppled by a military coup. The report, dated 2012,

quotes the order statement of General Prayut Chanocha, then Army commander and deputy director of ISOC, that the agency must speedily restore and establish a strong network of the NDV nationwide and link it with other mass organizations. With King Bhumibol's frail health and the worry over the royal succession looming in the background, Prayut emphasized that the foremost objective of the mass organizations was to "protect and honour the monarchy". Paramilitary members' duty was to keep their locality under surveillance and report suspicious activities to ISOC authorities. In addition they were to help expand the network, and each person must recruit ten new members to the organization. At the end of 2009, ISOC claimed that NDV had 488,993 members (ISOC 2012, pp. 6–7, 9–10).

In preparation for the referendum on the NCPO's draft constitution scheduled for 7 August 2016, ISOC's spokesperson claimed that its organized mass of over 500,000 people was ready to support the referendum campaign (Post Today [daily], 7 May 2016). On the contrary, activities of opponents of the draft constitution were prohibited and they were threatened with criminal charges.

In November 2016, social media in Thailand were heated up by a controversy sparked by a famous royalist speaker, Miss Oraphim Raksaphon, nicknamed Best. Her sensational speaking skill, particularly on the topic of the benevolence of King Bhumibol often drove audiences to tears. One of her famous lines, widely quoted in the social media, was "Even if one is reincarnated ten times, one won't be able to find a great monarch like King Bhumibol." The controversy began when people criticized one of her talks, posted on YouTube, that it had shamed people in the northeast for not loving the king enough even though he had done many great things for them. They accused her of being divisive and of insulting people in that region of the country. In fact, Oraphim has been a regular speaker for the ISOC, and the talk in question was organized by ISOC as part of the project of "Promoting the works of King Bhumibol and the royal members". Over 3,000 students from thirty-five schools and four vocational schools in Mahasarakham province were assembled. Despite the controversy, ISOC authorities insisted that Oraphim was a useful resource person for their programmes (*Manager Online* 16 November 2016; *The Nation*, 28 November 2016). The incident gave

the public insight into the activities of ISOC's modern mass organization and psychological operations.

These examples of ISOC's activities suggest that the military has been actively and widely involved in the divisive politics and served the objectives of conservative elites.

POLITICAL OFFENSIVE

Facing the communist movement in Thailand and in neighbouring countries in the 1960s and 1970s compelled Thai ruling elites to realize that the use of armed suppression alone was inadequate. The "Democratic Soldiers" within the Army's intelligence circles, with advice from the former communist strategist Prasoet Sapsunthon, thus pushed the new perception that the root cause of the armed conflict was socio-economic and political injustice. While military measures remained important, they must be carried out in tandem with political offensive measures, i.e., economic development, mass organization and psychological operations, in order to win the hearts and minds of the people, especially in rural areas. Security and development became the Thai military's bifurcated strategy from the mid-1960s onward (Saiyud, 1986; Chai-anan, Kusuma and Suchit 1990, pp. 9–10).

The integration of socio-politico-economic development into the counter-insurgency strategy of the Thai armed forces was influenced by the U.S. government. Thailand was an important component in the U.S.'s containment policy in Southeast Asia throughout the Cold War period and thus benefited from U.S. assistance for security and economic development. U.S. aid also served the vested interests of the Thai military leaders and strengthened the country's military regimes (Kusuma 1985, pp. 250–51). Being both the policymaker and the major institution combating the communists in poor and remote areas, the Army simply added the civil affairs programme to its mandate.

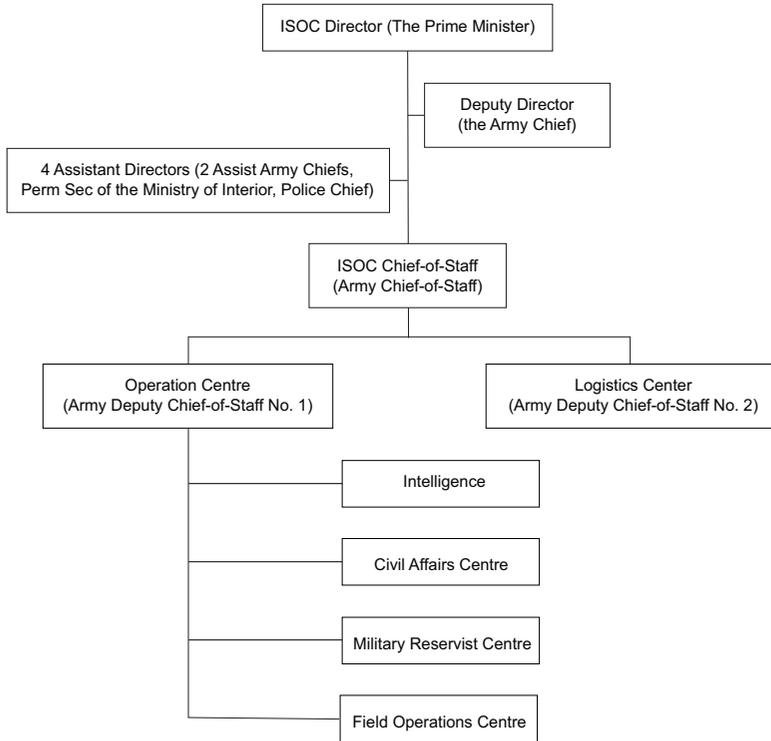
The organization originally in charge of suppressing the communist forces was the Central Security Command (CSC), set up in 1962 by the government of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1958–63). Its inefficiency led to a new decision by Deputy Prime Minister Field Marshal Prapat Jarusathien to establish the Communist Suppression Operations

Command (CSOC) in 1965; its name was changed to ISOC in 1974. The main responsibility of the new military entity remained the suppression of the communist movement. The political-cum-military offensive became its mantra. CSOC was empowered to plan, coordinate and command the police, civilian and military units involved in counter-insurgency operations (Saiyud 1986, pp. 28–30). Army-led development projects — such as road and bridge construction, small irrigation works, education, improvement of agricultural practices and vocational, political and ideological training — took shape along with various mass organizations in rural areas, particularly in the northern and northeastern regions of Thailand.

Since its founding in 1965, ISOC has always been dominated by the Army. Although it was officially under the prime minister's authority, most command positions have been held by military men. Besides, Thai prime ministers between the 1960s and 1988 came mostly from the Army. Most of ISOC's staff has also been drawn from the Army. The original command structure gave the directorship of ISOC to the Army commander; the deputy director was the deputy commander of the Army; four assistant director posts belonged to two assistant Army commanders, to the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Interior and the national police chief; and the position of ISOC chief of staff went to the Army chief of staff (see Figure 1). Then, in 1987, the prime minister replaced the commander of the Army as ISOC director, and the latter became the deputy director. This change took place under General Prem Tinnasulanon's government (1980–88). As Prem faced challenges from his once trusted Army chief General Athit Kamlang-ek, who had exploited the political apparatuses of ISOC and the Army to build up his own popularity and to advance his political ambitions (Suchit 1987, pp. 52, 57–62), Prem moved to tighten his grip over ISOC. However, the change did not affect ISOC's military-dominated character. The power of ISOC was further magnified after the coup toppling Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006.

As ISOC has been bestowed the coordinating power over other state agencies in the area of national security, the Local Administrative Department (LAD) of the Ministry of Interior has been the civilian agency most active in supporting the military's counter-insurgency

Figure 1: Command structure of ISOC before the introduction of the Internal Security Act of 2008.



operations. LAD’s territorial units, as well as its village heads and district heads throughout the country efficiently assisted the military, especially through paramilitary village organizations. LAD could be considered an administrative and civil wing of the military (Connors 2007, p. 111).

Another important institution deeply involved in the security-development strategy was the monarchy under the leadership of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (5 December 1927 – 13 October 2016). King Bhumibol’s role was essential for the success of United States-

sponsored anti-communist operations in Thailand. His tireless visits to the countryside, and the initiation and promotion of thousands of rural development projects were vital components of the image of *kasat nakphatthana* or the development monarch. In fact, the royal development projects were essential to the U.S.-initiated psychological operations against communism in Thailand. The United States had launched the royal institution as a symbol of Thainess against the alien invasion of communism since the government of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram (1948–57). The programme was further intensified by the royalist military governments of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1958–63) and Field Marshal Thanom Kittakhachon (1963–73) (Natthapon 2013, Ch. 8). King Bhumibol became the figure of the highest moral authority in Thai society, and his reputation restored and transformed the role and power of the monarchy after the end of absolute monarchy. The royal projects were often cited as evidence of the king's devotion to and sacrifice for the people of Thailand. Such seemingly apolitical development projects became emblematic of King Bhumibol's public image of the righteous king and of the essential basis of the hyper-royalist ideology in Thailand (Thongchai 2016, pp. 15–16).

The monarchy was both the active operator of the political offensive strategy and the most valuable legitimator of the military's role in civil affairs projects. The interdependency of the monarchy and the military, where the latter acted as the subordinate to the former, strengthened the political power of both (Thak 1979; Kobkua 2003, p. 168; Chambers and Napisa 2016, p. 426). The special relationship between the two most important institutions in the US containment policy in Thailand developed through their cooperative implementation of the political offensive strategy. The royal development projects spearheaded the Thai state's effort to fight the anti-communist war in remote rural and upland areas. Chanida Chitbandit has pointed out that the military played an active role in numerous royal development projects during the anti-communist period thanks to its well-organized manpower and equipment. Visiting military and police units and villages under the royal development projects in remote communist-infiltrated areas was an essential part of the royal projects. It was essential for the palace to offer care for the frontline fighters, who had pledged to protect the national institutions.

The king often wore a military uniform during such visits. He even initiated a project of small arms improvement for soldiers to fight the insurgents (Chanida 2011, Ch. 3). The hierarchical working relationship between the monarchy and the military not only continued after the end of the Cold War but expanded into new areas, such as protection of forest reserve areas, combatting the illicit drug trade and addressing the problem of flooding in Bangkok. The rationale and political impact of this post-counter insurgency relationship warrants an essay of its own.

Mass organization and mobilization have been one of the major political offensive measures under ISOC's charge. The primary purpose was to gain cooperation and loyalty from villagers in fighting communism (Saiyud 1986, p. 73). It was, therefore, another area where the special cooperation between the monarchy and the army took place. Mass organizations pledged loyalty to the monarchy and received royal patronage and support in return. Royal patronage was a licence to draw state approval, budget and cooperation from both government agencies and private firms (Bowie 1997 pp. 81–87; Chanida 2011, pp. 131–32). King Bhumibol's speeches often emphasized the necessity of the involvement of the armed forces in the national development programme (Usani 1999, p. 32), thus justifying the military's expansive role in civil affairs.

The military's mass organizations embody political offensive measures. Development projects, intelligence and psychological operations were the integral parts of major organizations during the counter-insurgency period. Some groups received military training and weapons. Arming the people was not only aimed at building a defensive barrier at the local level but also at strengthening their political ties with and loyalty to the state (Moore 2013, pp. 84–129). The case of the royal project of the Khok River basin in Khao Kho district, Phetchabun province, illustrates well how ISOC's mass organizations integrated rural development projects, military and psychological operations. The mountainous Khao Kho area, situated on the frontiers of three provinces in the north, was well known as one of the strongholds of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), the one most difficult for the Army to reclaim. Many soldiers lost their lives in the fighting there, particularly in a six-week battle in 1976. Though the Army was able to seize the area in 1976,

King Bhumibol saw that military measures alone were insufficient to consolidate the Thai state's control over the area. He advised the Third Regional Army to set up a strategic development village (*muban yutthasat phatthana*) endowed with the king's donation. A year later, the army put the landless members of the Military Reservists for National Security and the National Defence Volunteers, two of ISOC's mass organizations, in the new village. The villagers were awarded land, arms training and a royal-nationalist indoctrination programme. The army often refers to the Khek River royal project as a model for its development programmes (Usani 1999, p. 92; Chanida 2011. p. 129).

Before 1978, there were over twenty paramilitary groups under various government agencies. Due to ineffectiveness and overlapping duties of some groups and chronic bureaucratic rivalries, many were dismantled or collapsed into the major groups. The existing active groups under ISOC's command and coordination include the National Defence Volunteers organization (NDV or *thai asa pongkan chat*), the Volunteer Development and Self-Defence Villages (VDSV or *asa phatthana lae muban pongkan ton eng*), the Military Reservists for National Security (MRNV or *kong nun phuea khwammankong haeng chat*), the Volunteer Defence Corps (VDC or *kong asa raksa dindaen, o. so.*), Civil Defence Volunteer (CDV or *asasamak pongkan phai fai phonlaruean*), Village Scouts, Village Protection Unit (VPU or *chut raksa khwamplodphai muban*) (Suchit 1987, pp. 53–56; Ball and Mathieson 2007 p. 35; *Manager Online*, 4 February 2011). Evidently, these groups have been reinvigorated especially since the coup in 2006 (ISOC 2012, pp. 6–7, 9–10). Moreover, the current ISOC website shows that the agency has set up several new groups composed of city people. Besides, the originally rural-based groups have expanded their activities to the city areas [Office of the Masses Affair and General Information, ISOC's website; *Thairath* 21 March 2016]. Creating the force of compliant royalist citizen is the foremost objective that the royalist elite cannot afford to abandon. While politicians claim their political legitimacy from ballots, the military and its conservative allies can claim to have overwhelming support from the royalist core. Examination of the military's mass organizations and mobilization is, however, beyond the scope of the present essay.

LEGAL LEGITIMACY DURING THE COUNTER-INSURGENCY PERIOD

The toppling of the military regime of Thanom Kittikachorn and Prapat Jarusathien by a student-led popular uprising on 14 October 1973 brought sudden political change to Thailand. It released previously suppressed social forces onto the streets. Ideals of democracy, human rights and freedom were exercised by students, peasants and workers to an unprecedented degree, to the point of being a threat to the established social order and the power of the establishment. The military, especially ISOC, was criticized harshly for its authoritarian and oppressive actions in remote areas. The students called for the dissolution of ISOC on the ground that its oppressive behaviour was socially divisive and pushed people to join the communist movement (Chai-anan, Kusuma and Suchit 1990, p. 103). Meanwhile, the number of CPT armed attacks on the government sites in rural areas had increased and the three Indochinese countries fell under communist regimes in 1975. The student movement, led by the National Student Center of Thailand, was increasingly radicalized towards Maoist-Marxist ideology. The establishment, including the monarchy, the military, the bureaucracy and the business sector increasingly viewed the student movement as an enemy of the state. The post-October 1973 circumstances set in motion an attempt by the ruling elites to counteract the new social movements. Several right-wing mass movements with support from the palace and the military expanded immensely. Left-wing activists increasingly faced attacks by right-wing thugs and state propaganda apparatuses. Some were assassinated (Morell and Chai-anan 1981). Meanwhile, the attempt to legitimize and to firmly establish the military's socio-political arms through ISOC, was underway during the experimental democracy period.

The first step was to provide constitutional legitimacy to the military's expansion into internal security and development affairs. According to the Constitution of 1932 (with amendment in 1952), the role of the armed forces was limited to protection of national independence and interest. But in 1974, the National Legislative Assembly passed a constitution, of which section 70 stipulated five duties for the armed forces: (1) engaging

in war; (2) protection of the monarchy; (3) suppression of rebellions and riots; (4) protection of state security; and (5) national development.

The first duty was conventional to armed forces worldwide. But the second to the fifth missions simply paved the way for the military's role in other socio-political-economic affairs. Protection of the monarchy has continued to be the sacred duty of the Thai military till the present day. The law on *lèse majesté* was used widely after the coup in 2006 to silence and threaten critics of the monarchy and the ruling elites (Streckfuss 2014). Regarding mission two, defending the royal institution from the communist threat has always been a rationale for military coups, i.e., by the National Reform Committee in 1976 (Order of the National Reform Committee 6 October 1976), the Council for National Security in 2006 and the National Council for Peace and Order in 2014 (*Manager Online*, 20 Sept 2006 and 2 June 2014).

Rebellions and riots in Thailand tend to be caused by domestic strife rather than external threat. Suppressing them should have been the duty of the police rather than that of the armed forces, which have no training in crowd control. As for protection of state security, the Thai state tends to make a broad interpretation of the term, such as in the case of the *lèse majesté* law. Insulting and threatening the King, the Queen, the Heir and the Regent are considered a threat to national security. The fact that the number of people being charged with the law skyrocketed after the coup of 2006 indicates how national security has been exploited for political objectives. ISOC's current conception of national security under its charge has expanded to cover the affairs of minorities and illegal migrants, drug trafficking, cyber crimes, terrorism, deforestation and conflict over natural resources, "influential people" and mafia gangs, and even natural disasters (ISOC n.d *a* and *b*). Under the military regime, critical comments about General Prayut were considered a crime of sedition (Human Rights Watch, 18 April 2017). Last but not the least, the military role in "national development" encompassed a wide range of socio-economic and political affairs. The 1974 Constitution became a precedent for a similar clause in Thailand's later constitutions. The more power the military holds, the more broadly and arbitrarily these terms are interpreted.

In 1975, the elected government of Prime Minister Kukrit Pramot approved the change of name of CSOC to Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) because it wanted to make it sound less suppressive and more concerned with socio-economic problems rather than oppression (Saiyud 1986, pp. 14–15). Based on the 1974 Constitution, the army issued Order No. 298/2519 in June 1976, specifying that the objectives of ISOC's programmes were to provide support to the government's community development and to supplement other government agencies' development work; to ensure the people's friendly attitude towards soldiers and their support for the armed forces' operations; to monitor intelligence and to promote national security; and to support the Army's plan for communist suppression (Suchit 1996, pp. 7, 57; Suchit 1987, pp. 49–50).

Furthermore, in 1975 Kukrit's government had made national security the primary objective of national planning. The fourth National Economic and Social Development Plan, 1977–81, stipulated a guideline for government agencies to pursue "development for security" so that the plan could be an effective tool to contain the communist threat (Chanida 2011, p. 125). The armed forces' publications often quoted the clause in the 1974 Constitution and the policy statement of Kukrit, pledging to support the military's role in the national development appropriately so that the people would have a positive attitude towards the military (Usani 1999, pp. 35–38). This period saw the growth spurt of the military-dominated mass organizations.³

³ For example, *kong asa raksa dindaen* (Defence Volunteer Corps), *ratsadon asasamak* (Citizen Volunteer Unit), *tatsadon raksa khwamsangop lae phatthana muban* (Citizens for peace keeping and village development ge), *chut patibatkan chuailuea prachachon* (Rescue mission unit), *thai asa pongkan ton eng* (Self-defence unit), *asa samak pongkan fai phonlaruean* (Civil defence volunteers), *ratsadon asasamak phatthana thongthin lae pongkan prapram atchayakam* (Volunteers for local development and crime prevention and suppression), *kong kamlang tit awut* (Armed unit), *klum siang chaoban* (Voice of villagers), *klum bangrachan* (People of Bangrachan), etc. (Santi 1990, p. 28).

Despite the army's violent crackdowns of the popular uprising of October 1973, which had harmed its political legitimacy and popularity severely, the entrenchment of ISOC's civic duties and legal legitimacy, ironically, began under the civilian government. This was because of the fear of the spread of communism domestically and regionally which was deeply instilled among the Thai elites. Besides, all three civilian prime ministers after October 1973 — Sanya Thammasak, Seni Pramot and Kukrit Pramot — were in fact conservative royalists.

Then, the newborn democracy was ended with a massacre at Thammasat University on 6 October 1976, followed by a coup d'état on the same day. The military junta, led by Admiral Sa-ngat Chaloyu, appointed the ultra-royalist judge, Thanin Kraivichian, as prime minister. The violence and the oppressive regime of Thanin ended the movements of students, workers and peasants but strengthened the CPT. Several thousand of them fled to join the CPT in the hills. Thanin pursued a policy of hostility towards the communist regimes in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Even the junta leaders began to see the danger of the ultra-rightist regime of Thanin. Another coup, led by Admiral Sa-ngat and General Kriangsak Chamanan thus ousted Thanin on 20 October 1977. King Bhumibol, however, welcomed Thanin to his advisory team, the Privy Council.

EXPANSION IN THE SEMI-DEMOCRATIC PERIOD

The new administration of General Kriangsak (1977–80) began a reconciliation policy by pushing forward the amnesty law in September 1978 for students arrested in connection with the October 1976 massacre. Earlier, two amnesty laws had been passed to benefit the 1976 massacre (Haberkorn 2015). Meanwhile, the armed forces began to hail their success in counter-insurgency efforts. In a secret meeting held in September 1978, the armed forces concluded that political offensive measures within the counter-insurgency strategy yielded increasing popular cooperation with the government in the communist-infiltrated areas, at the expense of the CPT (Chai-anan, Kusuma and Suchit 1990, pp. 68–69). The change of tide boosted the confidence of military leaders

in expanding socio-economic-politico means along with the military one. The military's civil affairs programme and ISOC's role expanded significantly during the administration of General Prem Tinnasulanond (1980–88). Though the parliamentary system was restored in April 1979, the military remained a dominant power over political parties in both administration and legislation; Thailand was thus a semi-democracy.

The expansion of the civil affairs programme and ISOC's power were pronounced in two landmark orders of the Prime Ministerial Orders No. 66/2523, dated 1980, and No. 65/2525, dated 1982; each the work of the Democratic Soldiers faction of the Army (Chai-anan, Kusuma and Suchit 1990, pp. 127–63). These two executive orders provided ISOC legal ground and power to extend military control over civil affairs to a new level.

Less than two months after Prem replaced Kriangsak as prime minister, he issued Prime Ministerial Order 66/2523, titled "Policy to Win over Communism". Order 66/2523 proclaimed the government's top priority and national policy, which all state agencies of all levels must carry out. Though military measures were still necessary, the order stressed the importance of the political offensive as a decisive factor to protect the three national pillars and the democratic regime, with the king as the head of the state. Political measures included instilling a sense of belonging and loyalty to the Thai nation into every Thai, eliminating injustice and corruption in state agencies at all levels, promoting popular participation in politics and democratic movement, treating communist defectors as fellow countrymen, fighting the communist movement infiltrating the urban areas, enhancing information operations, and pushing the psychological programme. ISOC was bestowed with greater power to coordinate civilian, police and military agencies at all levels and to consider reward or punishment for those under ISOC's command (Prime Ministerial Order No. 66/2523).

By the early 1980s, the CPT was in severe disarray. The conflict between students and the Chinese-dominated CPT leaders ended with the former's departure from the revolutionary movement. Order 66/2523 facilitated the mass defection and thus weakened the CPT militarily and politically. Students were allowed to return home and resume their studies. ISOC was able to report to the government that all major

strongholds of the insurgents had been destroyed, and by 1983, the military declared a total victory over the CPT (Ball and Mathieson 2007, p. 101), crediting it to its political offensive. The standing of the two administrative orders was thus enhanced. As a result, military leaders since the 1980s have often referred to the orders as the principal framework for their political plans. The latest reference was made in January 2017 by the military government of General Prayut Chanocha, when it imposed a reconciliation plan on political parties (*ThaiPBS News* [online] 24 January 2017).

As the demise of the communists became increasingly clear, the rationale for the military's civil affairs mission slowly shifted. Order 66/2523 remained in force but was now accompanied by Prem's Prime Ministerial Order 65/2525, titled "Plan for Political Offensive to Win over the Communists". The new Order claimed that to win the final war over communism and all forms of authoritarianism, it was essential for the military to play a crucial political role. The task had two parts: promoting faith and understanding among various interest groups that sovereignty rests with the people, and promoting individual freedom (Prime Ministerial Order 65/2525).

To further supplement Orders 66/2623 and 65/2525, Prem issued Prime Ministerial Order 83/2526 in 1983. This stipulated that the civilian-police-military agencies as well as all mass organizations involved in joint operations to defeat communism were under ISOC's command and coordination. This included mass organizations that had been sorted under other ministries. For example, the Volunteer Defence Corps (*kong asaraksa dindaen*), which was officially under the Ministry of Interior, was now under ISOC's authority (Ball and Mathieson 2007, p. 101). Again, in March 1986, Order 47/2529, signed by Prem, reiterated that all government agencies should fully participate in democratization as stipulated in Orders of 66/2523 and 65/2525. The programmes started under the orders received the highest priority (Suchit, 1987, pp. 68, 75, 100–104). In essence, the power of the ISOC was significantly augmented at the outset of the CPT's downfall. In other words, the military was responding to the changing situation and was trying to maintain its dominant power in politics and society. The scope of its mission went beyond counter-insurgency to encompass democratization and to

interpret national security concerns most widely. The agency received the green light to involve itself in the state's military and civil affairs. Such power has continued until the present day.

The military's adaptation was due to that fact that by the 1980s, it was increasingly difficult for the Thai establishment to deny electoral democracy completely or to return to a full military regime. The growing awareness among Thai citizens after the 14 October 1973 uprising about their right to participate in politics compelled the military junta to promulgate the Constitution of 1978. The charter restored the electoral system but protected the dominant power of the military and the bureaucracy, for example by giving the appointed Senate the same power as that enjoyed by the House of Representatives, and allowing non-MPs and active-duty bureaucrats and military officers to hold political positions, including the premiership. The design of the semi-democratic regime was derived from the refusal of the Thai military to be subordinate to the civilian government (Chai-anan, Kusuma and Suchit, p. 182). What the semi-democratic regime of Prem did was to grant legal legitimacy and material support to ISOC in the post-insurgency period.

The Prem regime ended in 1988, but the military managed to retain legal support for its non-combatant role. As mentioned earlier, the Constitution of 1974 had bestowed on the armed forces the constitutional right to engage in national development, and similar clauses were included in the constitutions of 1978 (section 56), 1991 (section 61), 1997 (section 72), 2007 (section 77) and 2016 (section 52). Despite the Army's violent crackdowns on popular uprisings in 1973 and 1992, there was no effort or plan among political parties, elected governments or civil society to reform the armed forces. Even under the Constitution of 1997, whose drafting process was widely open to the participation of civil society and academics, the role of the armed forces in civil affairs remained unscathed. The drafters possibly paid little attention to or lacked knowledge of the military's civil affairs projects. The military thus often refers to constitutional legitimacy and support from elected civilian leaders for its role in civil affairs (Usani 1999, pp. 35–38).

Furthermore, national security became the primary objective of Thailand's social and economic development plans. As mentioned earlier, the inscription of national security into the national development

plan began in 1975 under the civilian government of Kukrit, and the framework was continually adopted in the post-counterinsurgency period. “Development for security” became a policy in the Fifth Plan (1982–86). The Sixth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1987–91) reiterated that socio-economic development must consider and support security and military policies (NESDB, 1987–1991). Military leaders and Dr Sumet Tantiwetchakun, who was then an economist at the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), and later one of the key persons in the royal development projects, played important roles in incorporating security objectives into national development plans (Chanida 2011, pp. 128–29). Such legitimacy is often cited in military publications (for examples, Panya 1988, pp. 89–97; Sumet 1988, pp. 113–17).

Interestingly, the period after the downfall of communism and the bloody suppression of protesters in May 1992 saw the Thai military’s role in the non-military sphere broadened even more by elected governments. In his inaugural address to Parliament, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai (November 1997 – February 2001) emphasized that his government would support the military’s participation in economic development, public health provision, disaster relief operations, protection of natural resources and solving environmental problems (Biznews, 21 November 1997). Then, on 1 April 2000, Chuan’s cabinet repealed the Anti-Communist Act. Instead of dismantling ISOC, it granted to it instead the role of policy coordination for counter-narcotics operations (Ball and Mathieson, p. 101). On one hand, Chuan’s government possibly thought that redirecting the armed forces’ mission to socio-economic areas would lessen their interference in politics. Though the military was seen to be retreating to their barracks after the violent crackdown in May 1992, it remained a threat to elected governments by virtue of its armed force alone. It could not simply be ignored. Yoshifumi (2008, pp. 72–109) has demonstrated that the focus of the civilian governments’ annual military reshuffle in the post-1992 era was to decrease the possibility of coups. On the other hand, it reflected how civilian governments underestimated the political implications of ISOC’s civil affairs projects. Since the May 1992 violence resulted in its popularity plummeting, the military certainly welcome the expansion of its role through other means. With the public

calls for the military to return to the barracks and reform itself to fit in with democratization and globalization, civil affairs projects assigned to it by elected governments provided it with an excellent rationale to say that its troops remained contributive to society. Furthermore, the new socio-economic areas went along well with the introduction of the new concept of “non-traditional security threat” propagated within global security studies at this time. The term encompasses terrorism, drugs trafficking, human trafficking, migrations, disease and environmental problems, etc. In Thailand, interest in the concept among security experts appears to have begun around the end of 1990s (for example, Surachart 2000, 2002). Evidently, the military was quick and happy to adopt the new security threats into its missions. Academics too possibly saw no danger in its involvement in these new areas.

An attempt to place the armed forces under civilian control took place after Thaksin Shinawatra became prime minister (February 2001 – September 2006). His cousin and other associates had been appointed to the armed forces’ top positions, which was condemned by his opponents as cronyism and self-serving reform (Chambers and Napisa 2016, p. 431). Further, Thaksin issued Prime Ministerial Order No. 158/2545, dated 29 May 2002, regarding the mission, the role and the responsibility of the ISOC, which was now under the Office of Prime Minister. Its ex-officio director was the prime minister, who could appoint his or her deputy prime minister as director and anyone to be deputy directors and assistant directors. The Army chief of staff was its secretary general. Thaksin appointed the supreme commander of the armed forces, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Interior and another civilian as its deputy directors while five Assistant Directors were the commanders of the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Police and director general of the Department of Provincial Administration. The restructuring did not reduce ISOC’s military domination significantly. The important change, however, appeared to be at the local level. Directors of ISOC’s provincial branches were now under the direct command of ISOC headquarters in Bangkok or the civilian prime minister. The order also emphasized the necessity of reducing the size and increasing the efficiency of ISOC (Prime Ministerial Order No. 158/2545). This was in line with Thaksin’s policy of restructuring the bureaucracy. Thus, in

2006, the military budget was cut from 20 per cent to 6.7 per cent of the national budget. In addition, Thaksin's government enacted a new security decree, titled the "Executive Decree on Public Administration in an Emergency Situation", which made the prime minister the head of any agency set up to oversee an emergency (Chambers 2015, p. 21). After a failed plot to assassinate Thaksin with a car bomb was disclosed in August 2006, Thaksin was reportedly planning to revamp ISOC again. He believed that ISOC's deputy director, General Phanlop Pinmanee and three other ISOC military officers were behind the assassination plot (The Nation [daily], 25 August 2006). Thaksin was toppled by a coup on 19 September 2006, before his plans to reform the military could be implemented.

ISOC IN ANTI-ELECTORAL POLITICS

The military junta that took power in the 2006 coup, the Council for National Security led by Army commander General Sonthi Bunyaratkalin appointed General Surayut Chulanon, a retired Army Commander and a member of King Bhumibol's Privy Council, as prime minister. Apparently, one of Surayut's top priorities was to restore, increase and institutionalize ISOC's power more than ever so that the agency would be able to serve the main objectives of the Thai establishment. That was to undermine the power and legitimacy of the Thaksin group, political parties and electoral democracy. This objective has continued after the 2014 coup and is prevalent in the Constitution of 2017 (Puangthong 2015).

ISOC's new power is based on the Internal Security Act of 2008, the first draft of which received approval from Surayut's cabinet in June 2007. The final version was passed by the junta-appointed National Legislative Assembly on 20 December 2007, only three days prior to the general elections, in which the Thaksinite Phalang Prachachon Party won a majority of seats. The act came into force on 28 February 2008.

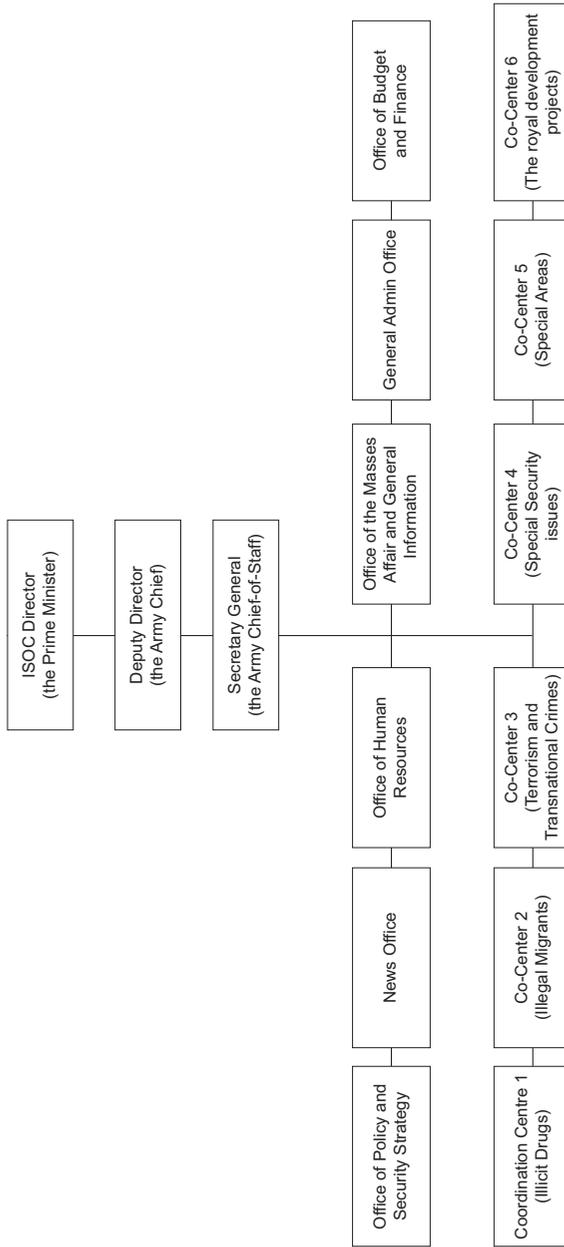
ISOC remains under the Office of the Prime Minister, and the prime minister is still its ex-officio director. But unlike Thaksin's Prime Ministerial Order No. 158/2545, the Army commander must be its deputy director and the Army chief of staff its secretary-general. If the

prime minister is unable to perform his duties, he can delegate his duty and powers to the deputy director only. The new law apparently limits civilian involvement in internal security matters. Military domination over ISOC is thus definite — particularly after the coup in 2014, when junta leader General Prayut appointed himself prime minister and thus director of ISOC. A comparison of ISOC's command structure in 1983 and as it is stipulated in the Internal Security Act of 2008 (see Figure 2) should be highly informative.

The most crucial aspect of the 2008 act is the broad power that it bestows on ISOC in maintaining internal security. The act has two main parts. Part One indicates ISOC's broad powers in normal situations. It is the leading authority to monitor, examine and assess situations and propose plans and guidance for actions to the cabinet for approval. All state agencies must abide by those approved plans and guidance under ISOC's supervision and cooperation. Another crucial authority of ISOC, emphasized in section 7(4), is to strengthen (1) public awareness of its duty to defend the nation, religion and monarchy, and (2) public participation in solving problems affecting national security and social order. This section certainly points to ISOC's mass organization activities.

When the country's security is in a crisis, the cabinet may invoke Part Two of the Internal Security Act section 16(10), which gives ISOC the broad responsibility and power to “prevent, suppress, suspend, inhibit, mitigate and solve” the situation. The problem is that these terms are not defined and thus allow for arbitrary interpretation as has happened under the military regime of General Prayut Chanocha. “To prevent” can mean to detain and charge political opponents and stop their peaceful activities completely. With approval from the cabinet, ISOC's director has the power to issue a wide range of orders to the public, i.e., to stop people entering or leaving any locations, to impose a curfew, to block transportation, and to inhibit people by using electronic devices. According to section 16(1 and 2), ISOC officers have the authority to monitor, pursue, coordinate and expedite relevant state agencies. If the conduct of any state authorities, even of different agencies, obstructs the operations, ISOC can order them to leave the determined area and report this to his or her superior, who will then remove that person from

Figure 2: Command structure of ISOC according to the Internal Security Act of 2008.



his or her office or duty. Worse, section 19 provides ISOC officers and anyone designated by its director the power to participate in criminal investigations.

Furthermore, threats to national security under ISOC's mission are extensive, as stipulated in its strategic plans of 2012–16 and 2017–21. They include offences against the monarchy, ideological differences and conflict among Thai people, the southern border provinces, cyber threats, natural disasters, illegal workers and migrants, terrorism and transnational crimes, illicit drugs and natural resources and environmental problems (ISOC, n.d. (*a* and *b*). Several of its actions simply bypass the authority of the police and judiciary. This is the new legitimacy and the reason why ISOC became involved in various non-military activities.

Another important aspect of the Internal Security Act is the return to ISOC of operational power over other civilian state agencies. ISOC has branched out to all 77 provincial units, including Bangkok, and four regional units. The ex-officio directors of the provincial ISOC are the provincial governors, who are under the Ministry of Interior, while the ex-officio directors of the regional ISOC are the regional Army commanders. There are five regional units: the First Army in charge of twenty-six provinces in the central, eastern, western regions and in Bangkok; the Second Army in charge of twenty provinces in the northeastern region; the Third Army in charge of seventeen provinces in the northern region; and the Fourth Army in charge of fourteen provinces in the southern region. As Prime Ministerial Orders 66/2523 and 65/2525 bestowed on ISOC the power to command and coordinate state agencies at all levels against national security threats; directors of the provincial ISOC are under the command of the regional ISOC directors. Thaksin placed ISOC's provincial offices under the direct command of its headquarters in Bangkok, meaning the prime minister. The 2008 Internal Security Act restored the previous structure, however, and placed civilian officials under the military.

Under the military regime of Prayut Chanocha, who is also ISOC's ex-officio director, the agency's role moved up one notch. Soon after the 2014 coup, while arrests and detentions of opponents of the coup were ongoing intensively, Prayut ordered ISOC to use its provincial apparatuses to set up reconciliation centres in every province (Reuters,

30 May 2014). In January 2017, the idea emerged again when the junta revealed a plan to mitigate conflict and promote national reconciliation. ISOC continued in this important role. Ironically, the press reported that at the public hearings, ISOC officers prohibited people from taking notes on the hearings in order to prevent people from reporting it to the public later (Prachatai [online], 7 March 2017). ISOC was further given responsibility for drafting a national plan to achieve a comprehensive national reform and the twenty-year national strategic plan (2017–36) (*Matichon*, 6 February 2017).

CONCLUSION

Since its creation, ISOC has functioned as both suppressive and ideological state apparatuses. While both duties are equally important to the agency, scholars have often overlooked the ideological function. The original objective of the military's civil affairs projects was to fight the insurgency, but political offensive measures cannot be considered separately from the military role in socio-political development. The synergic relationship between the military and the monarchy did not only benefited the two politically but also provided legitimacy for the military's penetration of Thai society. ISOC, the major political arms of the military, obtained security, legal, constitutional and royal legitimacy for its functioning. In fact, the power of the military and royalist ideology kept expanding into civil society discourses during the counter-insurgency period. When the demise of the CPT was in sight, the military leaders devised a new strategy with legal support to continue the military's role in politics. Promotion of "the democratic regime with the king as head of the state" and combatting new security threats were added to the duties of the armed forces.

Unfortunately, this aspect of the military's power gained little attention from civilian governments, who continued to support the military's civil affairs projects. Sometimes they even relied on ISOC's suppressive apparatus to quell their political opponents, as in the case of the Abhisit government's actions against the Red Shirts in 2009 and 2011. Even the reform of the armed forces under Thaksin was limited. Therefore, when the alliance of the old powers was able to derail democracy through the

coups of 2006 and 2014 that toppled elected governments led by political parties loyal to Thaksin Shinawatra, ISOC was dangerously empowered and increasingly employed by the military regimes to dictate political direction. ISOC remains the old powers' repressive and ideological apparatus to undermine, control, and threaten democratic forces in Thai society. Its activities are a major obstacle to Thailand's democratization. Any security reform in the future must take ISOC's role in civil affairs into serious consideration.

Although ISOC's role shifted from counter-insurgency to counter-democracy, what remains the same is that its main targets have always been fellow Thai citizens, whose ideologies and political aspirations are different from those of the establishment. ISOC's existence confirms the main function and duty of the Thai military, which is to wage war against internal rather than external threats.

Last but not least, the lack of interest in the military's extensive role in the socio-political arena is reflected in most recommendations for security sector reform in Thailand. They have tended to follow the standard guidelines for professional militaries, i.e., reducing size and budget, increasing capacity and technological know-how, adapting to the dynamics of globalization and new security threats, and strengthening civilian control over the armed forces (Surachart 1999; Chambers 2015, p. 9). Though calls for the military to return to their barracks, enhancing democratic governance and civilian control over the military are often made by civic groups and scholars, none of them suggests the removal of the military's political and ideological apparatuses.

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