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Military Appointments as Guardian Tactic against Civilian Control: Comprehending Thailand’s 2024 Military Reshuffles

*Paul Chambers**



Troops march on parade during an oath-of-allegiance ceremony to mark Royal Thai Armed Forces Day on 18 January 2023 at the army’s Cavalry Centre in Saraburi. Some 2,846 soldiers took part in the parade. Bangkok Post photo/Nutthawat Wicheanbut (Photo by Nutthawat Wicheanbut/Bangkok Post/Bangkok Post via AFP).

** Paul Chambers is Visiting Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute and Lecturer at Naresuan University (Thailand).*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thailand's annual military reshuffles, which took effect on 1 October 2024, have once again involved ties with the royal institution, pre-cadet class membership, shared military unit factionalism, and connections with military or political personages.
- This year, Thailand's military appointments were formalised by incoming Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, daughter of "coup-ed" Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Her centrist Pheu Thai party is in a coalition government with conservative parties, a fact that has produced policy frictions. Yet all these parties oppose reformist People's Party (PP), as reincarnated from the Move Forward Party (MFP).
- In this year's reshuffles, the sway of the palace was apparent, albeit that retired *Wongthewan* Generals Apirat and Narongphan on one side, and *Burapha Phayak* Generals Prayut Chan-o-cha and (to some extent) Prawit on the other, were also influential.
- 2024 has seen a resurgence in the *Wongthewan* faction, judging by the elevation to the Army Commander post of a member of *Wongthewan*, General Pana Klaewplodthuk. Nevertheless, *Wongthewan* appears to be jousting with General Prayut Chan-o-cha's factional wing, *Burapha Phayak*. Meanwhile, although Prawit still has influence, his power has diminished.

INTRODUCTION

Thailand's 2024 annual military appointments were significant because they represented the first time in eleven years that a civilian government had presided over a full annual reshuffle of military officials (since October 2013). Occurring on 1 October 2024, these appointments were also interesting because they happened under a Pheu Thai-led coalition government – the same party that was ousted ten years earlier in a military coup. Moreover, the reshuffles saw the resurgence of the oldest army faction, *Wongthewan* (Divine Progeny), as a sub-faction under the cloak of the palace-created *Kho Daeng* (Red Rim) clique. Furthermore, while Thaksin's influence expanded over the elected government in August 2024 (when his daughter Paetongtarn became Prime Minister), the reshuffle indicated that the new military appointments were outside of his control.

This year's military reshuffle saw 808 promotions, including 23 females¹ (five less than in 2023). There were appointments involving 588 generals, with 321 colonels or colonel-equivalent officers promoted to the rank of major general or its equivalent.² Thus, 2024 marked another year of top-heavy promotions to flag rank for the Thai military, even more so than in 2023 (514 generals).

RESHUFFLE DETERMINANTS

While all military appointees must demonstrate extreme loyalty to the king, other factors also determine promotions. These include factional memberships and personal connections. In 2018, the current monarch established a faction meant to unify senior officers. This clique was called *Kho Daeng* or “Red Rim,” for the colour of the neck of the tee-shirts worn under uniforms—with all other officers known as *Kho Khiao* or “Green Rim”. Officers invited to become *Kho Daeng* must attend a gruelling, palace-endorsed, “904” military training course lasting three months. “904” was the code word assigned to the current monarch when he was crown prince. Only graduates of this course become eligible for the senior-most commands in the Army and Royal Armed Forces Headquarters.³

Other factions are based around shared educational class and service units, among other things. Pre-cadet class has become a crucial factional determinant because in Thailand, since 1958 there has been only one pre-cadet academy – the Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School (AFAPS) – which serves all officer recruits aiming to enter the Army, Navy, Air Force and Police academies. Thus, in AFAPS, young people preparing to be officers can form factional bonds across the spectrum of security services, though Army dominance is more prevalent within Thailand's military organisational culture. Deposed Prime Minister (and former Police Lt. Colonel) Thaksin Shinawatra's AFAPS group faction was Class 10, while that of General Prawit Wongsuwan and General Prayut Chan-o-cha were 6 and 12, respectively. Prayut led the 2014 coup which toppled an elected civilian Pheu Thai government, and he then served as elected prime minister in 2019-2023; Prawit, his mentor, became deputy junta leader and deputy prime minister, also serving until 2023. Each year, a different pre-cadet class dominates military reshuffles. Shared cadet school class and defence college class also create faction linkages, though these are more limited.

Unit factions (based upon shared regimental or division) have also been important because key military leaders often come from key units. “Growing up” in the oldest and most strategic 1st Infantry Division King’s Guard (known as the “coup division”),⁴ makes one a member of the oldest military faction, *Wongthewan* or “Divine Progeny”. *Wongthewan* dominated all other Army factions from 1870 until 1978. Since his 2016 accession to the crown, King Vajiralongkorn has been an honorary member of *Wongthewan*.

Another important faction, the aforementioned *Burapha Phayak* or “Eastern Tigers”, is that of officers from the 2nd Infantry (and Cavalry) Division. Within *Burapha Phayak* is the sub-faction of the 21st Infantry Regiment, known as the *Thahan Suea Ratchini* or “Queen’s Tiger Guards” since ex-Queen Sirikit became its honorary commandant in 1959. General Prawit is a member of *Burapha Phayak* since he previously commanded the 2nd Infantry Division, but not the 21st regiment.⁵ *Prayut* is a member of *Burapha Phayak* and Queen’s Tiger Guards since he previously commanded the 21st regiment as well as the 2nd Infantry Division. Yet another important faction is the *Muak Daeng* or Special Forces, whose members include Privy Council Chair General Surayut Chulanond and 2006 coup leader General Sonthi Bonyaratklin. A final prominent clique is *Sua Dam* or Black Panthers, today centred at the 9th Infantry Division headquarters.

With the advent of the Red Rim faction in 2018, these unit factions have become sub-factions. They are still informally important as affiliations distinguishing one officer from another. One could contend that with so many senior military officials becoming Red Rims, especially in 2024, this royal faction might be losing its significance because the supply of permitted Red Rim affiliations has increased exponentially. Thus, officers with the most valuable affiliations are Red Rims who belong to *Wongthewan* or *Burapha Phayak* rather than Red Rims who belong to lesser unit groups.

Finally, linkages to oversized military personalities also determine factional affiliations, beyond red/green rim, pre-cadet class, and unit factions. This does not include King Vajiralongkorn who naturally overshadows all others. Active-duty security service commanders such as outgoing Army chief General Jaroenchai Hintao (2023-2024) always place their personal imprimatur on military reshuffles. Also, in retirement, Prawit and Prayut (who in 2023 joined the King’s Privy Council) have exerted influence over military appointments, especially those for their favoured group, *Burapha Phayak*. Thus, one reason for the persistence of *Burapha Phayak*’s influence has been the patronage of these two retired military strongmen. Retired Army chief General Apirat Kongsompong has also had influence over reshuffles, given his 2020-2024 job as Vice-Chamberlain of the Royal Household Bureau. However, his future influence is unclear since, in September 2024, he was said to have resigned for health reasons from special royal military duties.⁶ Some officers linked to oversized personalities include those connected to Thaksin in the past. Indeed, his cousin Chaisit served as Army Commander in 2004-2005.

POLITICIANS AND SECURITY SERVICES

Since the 2023 election, five political parties have sought to influence or boost linkages with the military and police. First, Move Forward, which was dissolved by the Constitutional Court and then reincarnated as People's Party in August 2024, sought to legislate military reform through the Lower House, though with little success.⁷

Second, Pheu Thai, as influenced by Thaksin, formed a government in August 2023 and appointed civilian Suthin Klangsaeng as Defense Minister. Suthin, using a modest approach, sought to partly pare down the defence budget and slightly diminish military conscription. Pheu Thai also tried to influence the October 2024 annual reshuffle, attempting to place Assistant Army Commander General Ukrit Buntanon in the Army Commander slot. Furthermore, Pheu Thai sought to rein in military procurement. Finally, the government attempted to take charge (from the army) of two policy areas: the Deep South counterinsurgency and the Thai-Myanmar border.

Of all these efforts, the government achieved only partial success in two areas. Specifically, Pheu Thai could successfully lead in the formulation of foreign and/or defence policy, but could not compel the army to fully implement its preferred policy. Before becoming Prime Minister, Paethongtarn Shinawatra, Thaksin's daughter, was already an advisory board member of a National Defence College mini-course which includes 50 colonels and senior police.⁸

Third, Bhumjaithai, under party leader Anutin Charnvirakul, enjoys close relations with some senior military officers, both active-duty and retired. These include former 4th Army Region Commander General Kriangkrai Srirak, who became an advisor to Anutin before being selected as Senator in 2024, and then assuming the post of 1st Senate Vice President.⁹ Meanwhile, Anutin, though a civilian, was classmate in National Defence College Class 61 with Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence General Sanitchanok Sankhachan, 2023-2024 Army Commander General Charoenchai Hintao, and Vice Admiral Suwin Jaengyodsuk, Deputy Commander of the Royal Thai Navy.¹⁰

Fourth, Palang Pracharat party, led by 2014-2019 deputy junta leader, Ret. General Prawit Wongsuwan, also a leader of the *Burapha Phayak* army faction, alongside his brother Ret. Police General Patcharawat, enjoys close linkages with – and has been patron to – many senior security officials, both active-duty and retired, including Permanent Secretary to the Minister of Defense General Sanitchanok.¹¹ Captain Thammanat Prompow, a disaffected Palang Pracharat politician, though not a member of *Burapha Phayak*, also commands some loyalty within the military.

Fifth and finally, Ruam Thai Sang Chart party, which is close to Prayut, naturally appeals to many senior military officers. This is because it was Prayut who promoted most of them when he was Prime Minister (2014-2023). A prime example is the current Deputy Defence Minister, General Nattapol Nakpanich.¹² Certain power figures close to the military and palace are now trying to reinvigorate this party before the next general election.

Should a military coup sweep Pheu Thai from office, its leaders would assuredly find a highly supportive reception from Bhumjaithai, Palang Pracharat, and Ruam Thai Sang Chart.

WHAT'S NEW IN 2024?

Pheu Thai's Phumthai Wechayachai replaced Suthin as Defence Minister in September. Yet, despite the Pheu Thai government's control over the Minister of Defence portfolio, the military reshuffle of 2024 has proved that the armed forces have succeeded once again in effectuating its own preferred choices over possible opposition from Pheu Thai. Indeed, the various military factions, despite their differences, could at least unite on the preference to keep Pheu Thai influence out. The security service heads could pass their preferences, which were also the preferences of the palace, on to the king for his endorsement, ensuring that Pheu Thai could not meddle with them. The new military appointments for 2024 show a hierarchy of posts held by officers almost all from the palace-favoured *Kho Daeng*, also predominantly from *Wongthewan* and *Burapha Phayak* factions, and with a lion's share from Pre-Cadet Classes 26-28.¹³ The reshuffles were well-planned to ensure that only arch-royalist officers continue to be entrenched in the top and second rungs of the armed forces. In this way, royalism remains a key cohering part of the Thai military. Royalism legitimises the military to society as a whole as guardian of the palace while also making the military pivotal in maintaining regime security for the kingdom.

In the tables below, the 2024 leadership changes are organised into five groups: 1) all security services, 2) the Armed Forces Headquarters, 3) the Army, 4) the 1st Army Region, and 5) additional crucial Army postings. The tables demonstrate that the year's military appointments tended either to go to palace favourites or followed the preferences of *Wongthewan* or *Burapha Phayak* officers favoured by the king, Prayut, or Prawit. Officers from Pre-Cadet Class 26, the dominant class of senior military officers in 2024, have figured prominently in these appointments. The tables also show that Pre-Cadet Class 28 has a bright future.

THE SECURITY SERVICES AS A WHOLE

With the 2024 reshuffle, the five "tigers" of the security services (Table 1) are all highly trusted by the palace. Despite holding a relatively ceremonial post, the Commander of the Armed Forces continues to be General Songwit Nunpakdi, who is informally connected to pre-cadet Class 25, while the new commander of the all-powerful Army is General Pana Klaewplaudtuk, the leader of pre-cadet Class 26. Both are *Wongthewan* and Red Rim officers close to the palace. Songwit has one more year before retirement in October 2025 while the more powerful Pana has three. Pana's retirement time is significant because he will still be holding the slot until the next general election in July 2027 (he retires in October that year).

The three remaining "tigers" also deserve mention. The new Navy Commander, Admiral Jirapol Wongwit, was a classmate of outgoing army commander General Jaroenchai Hintao. The choice of Jirapol was a surprise because he moved from the post of Special Advisor to becoming Commander in Chief (C-in-C) of the navy (appointees have almost always first been deputy or assistant commanders). Moreover, Jirapol, like Songwit, received his undergraduate degree abroad, an achievement which almost always deprives officers of the highest promotion. Nevertheless, both officers have close connections to the palace. Perhaps because of this, Jirapol now becomes the first Navy Commander to receive his Bachelor's degree abroad.

Indeed, he also has a royal connection: Jirapol studied at Marineschule Murwik, close to Munich near where the current king has one of his many abodes.¹⁴ As such, one anonymous source in the know told this author that Jirapol’s appointment resulted from palace preference. Another possible reason for the appointment of the Germany-connected Jirapol is to convince Berlin to provide an engine for the submarine now being built in China for Thailand.¹⁵

Then there is the palace-connected Air Chief Marshal (ACM) Panpakdee Pattanakul. In 2024, Panpakdee, who, as a representative of powerful interests close to the palace, has been a champion of Thailand buying US F-35 aircraft (unsuccessfully), thereupon playing a major role in shepherding through the Thailand’s purchase of Swedish Gripen combat aircraft. As for the police, palace-connected-commander Torsak retired, making way for Police General Kittirat Phanpet to succeed him while the Police Commission makes its decisions on other police appointments sometime in October. Kittirat himself has linkages to the palace.¹⁶

Post-September 2024, the security forces are supposedly monitored by a pro-Thaksin and Pheu Thai member, Phumtham, who succeeded Suthin as Defence Minister. Advising Phumtham are some pre-cadet class 10 (class of Thaksin) ex-officers, including General Traisak Intharathamee, Admiral Chaiwat Pukkarat, and General Wut Wimuktalop, once part of the defence team of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra under then-Defence Minister Air Chief Marshal Sukampol Suwanatat.¹⁷ However, partly to alleviate hostility from the army, the Pheu Thai government appointed Prayut-loyalist retired General Nattapol Nakpanit as Deputy Defence Minister. Meanwhile, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence will remain General Sanitchanok Sangkachantra, a confidant of Prawit and Prayut. Sanitchanok also has ties with the conservative Bhumjaithai party. Sanitchanok’s new Deputy (who will likely succeed Sanitchanok in 2025) is former Army Assistant Commander General Tharapong Malakam, also a Prawit man. The presence of Nattapol, Sanitchanok, and Tharapong in the Defence Ministry allows the military to monitor Phumtham.

Table 1: Key figures in the Security Services, 2024-2025. (Asterisks indicate new appointments.)

Position	Name	Faction	Pre-Cadet Class	Retirement Date
Defence Minister	Pumtham Wechayachai	Thaksin	civilian	---
Deputy Defence Minister	General Nattapol Nakpanich	Wongthewan/Apirat /Prayuth	20/Apirat/ Prayuth	Retired
Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence	General Sanitchanok Sangkachantra	<i>Burapha Phayak</i> (close to Prawit, Anutin, Newin)	24	2025
Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence	General Tharapong Malakam	Regiment 2/Prawit/ <i>Burapha Phayak/Kho Daeng</i>	24	2026

Commander, Royal Armed Forces Headquarters	General Songwit Nunpakdi	<i>Wongthewan/Kho Daeng</i>	Early on attended Class 24 but graduated from Virginia Military Institute	2025
Commander, Royal Thai Army	General Pana Klaewplaudt uk*	<i>Wongthewan/Kho Daeng/Apirat/ Narongphan</i>	26	2027
Commander, Royal Thai Navy	Admiral Jirapol Wongwit	Royal Family Security/Munich faction/	23 and later graduated from Marineschule Murwik in Germany	2025
Commander, Royal Thai Air Force	Air Chief Marshal Panpakdee Pattanakul*	Western-oriented clique (US F-16, Swedish Gripen, Squadron 403, Wing 4, Attache, UK England, led Thai efforts to acquire US F-35s) [12]	24	2025
Commander, Royal Thai Police	Police General Kittirat Phanpet	Palace, Suwat Jaengyodsuk, Patcharawat Wongsuwan and Captain Thamanat Prompow	25/41	2027

ARMED FORCES HEADQUARTERS

Armed Forces Headquarters, the weakest and least-budgeted of Thai security services, heads defence diplomacy and areas such as military technological research. As seen in Table 2, palace-favourite Songwit Nunpakdee continues from last year as Commander; he retires in 2025. Songwit has begun a tradition of scholarly supreme commanders. Songwit's incoming deputy, Ukrit, the Headquarters' only Green Rim officer (and thus not favoured by the palace) but a proven administrator, was favoured by Thaksin to be the new Army Commander despite Ukrit's lack of charisma. The reasoning goes that Thaksin favoured a colourless army leader such as Ukrit in the hope that he would be weak and thus malleable. Hence, in reaction, the military leadership shifted Ukrit away from the powerful Army to Headquarters where he might succeed Songwit as another scholarly commander to serve until his retirement in 2026.¹⁸

Another incoming deputy is Thitichai Tienthong, who brings the influence of Prawit Wongsuwan into Headquarters. Thitichai retires in 2025. Two more new deputies will also retire in 2025. The first, ACM Nonotree Intornsalee, is a promoter of air combat technology. The second, Admiral Suwin Jaengyodsuk, has indirect ties to the palace and police, given that his brother Suwat previously commanded the Rachawallop Police Retainers, King's Guard

904, and was also previously a police commander. But that did not help Suwin obtain the Navy Commander post – his consolation slot is this new appointment. Chief of Staff Manas Jandee, representing the army cavalry faction, will also retire in 2025.

Table 2: The six senior-most Armed Forces Headquarters Officers, 2024-2025. (Asterisks indicate new appointments.)

Position	Name	Faction	Pre-Cadet Class	Retirement Date
Commander, Armed Forces Headquarters	General Songwit Nunpakdee	Palace/ <i>Wongthewan/ Kho Daeng</i>	Early on attended Class 24 but graduated from Virginia Military Institute	2025
Deputy Commander, Armed Forces Headquarters	Gen. Ukrit Boontanon*	<i>Kho Kieow</i> (Green Rim)/Army Operations Department	24	2026
Deputy Commander, Armed Forces Headquarters	General Thitichai Tienthong*	Prawit Wongsuwan	24	2025
Deputy Commander, Armed Forces Headquarters	Admiral Suwin Jaengyodsuk*	Palace/Police/brother is ex-police chief Pol.Gen.Suwat Jaengyodsuk	25	2025
Deputy Commander, Armed Forces Headquarters	Air Chief Marshal Nonotree Intornsalee*	Information and Communication Technology	25	2025
Chief of Staff, Armed Forces Headquarters	General Manas Jandee*	Cavalry	24	2025

THE ARMY

Table 3 represents a hierarchy of factions dominant across the “five tigers” postings in the Army. Each of the five is from a different unit faction though their pre-cadet academy class cliques range from 24 to 26. Ascending to the most powerful military post of army commander is General Pana Klaewplaudtuk. Pana was elevated from the posting of Chief of Staff, making him the second officer in Thai history to move from that position to Army Chief, after Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. Pana, rumoured to be favoured by the palace, hails from the *Wongthewan* faction and is a Red Rim officer. He is close to previous army chiefs, Apirat and Narongphan.¹⁹ The leader of pre-cadet class 26, Pana previously commanded the strategic 1st Army Region which guards Bangkok, is well-respected in the army, and will retire in 2027 – a

long stretch for modern Thai army commanders. Pana bested two other candidates: Army Assistant Commanders General Ukrit Butanon and General Tharapong Malakam, both from pre-cadet class 24. Ukrit was rumoured to have been favoured by Thaksin, while Tharapong was closer to Prawit. Each was instead transferred out of the army. Pana’s appointment represents a hardening of army leadership as the aristocracy confronts potential trouble from Thaksin and continued calls from progressives for monarchical and military reform.

Meanwhile, incoming Deputy Army Commander Nattawut Nakanakorn is from the Special Forces faction of King’s Privy Council Chair, General Surayud Chulanond. He will keep his plum posting until retirement in 2025. Then there is incoming Assistant Commander General Chitsanupong Rotsiri, a confidante and classmate of Pana who, though originally part of the *Burapha Phayak* faction has evolved to become a *Kho Daeng* officer close to Apirat and Pana. Since Chitsanupong retires in 2027, he will likely never serve as army commander but could eventually become commander of the armed forces headquarters, bypassing Ukrit because of Chitsanupong’s stronger factional and personal linkages. The other assistant, General Wasu Chiamsuk, a loyal ex-aide of Prayut, nonetheless has a limited military future because he retires in 2026. Finally, there is General Thongchai Rotyoi, a member of the *Sua Dam* faction, but also close to Pana, who assumes the post of Army Chief of Staff, tasked with managing the Internal Security Operations Command.

Table 3: The five senior-most Army officers, 2024-2025. (Asterisks indicate new appointments.)

Position	Name	Faction	Pre-cadet Class	Retirement Date
Commander	General Pana Klaewplaudtuk*	<i>Wongthewan/ Kho Daeng /Apirat/</i>	26	2027
Deputy Commander	Gen. Nattawut Nakanakorn*	Special Warfare Command /Surayud	24	2025
Assistant commander 1	General Chitsanupong Rotsiri*	<i>Burapha Phayak/Kho Daeng/Apirat/Pana</i>	26	2027
Assistant commander 2	General Wasu Chiamsuk*	former aide to Prayut	25	2026
Chief of Staff	General Thongchai Rotyoi*	<i>Sua Dam</i> (close to Pana)	25	2026

THE 1ST ARMY REGION

The data in Table 4, which focuses on the 1st Army Region, are significant because any coups or prevention of coups depends upon this large unit, which is responsible for security in Bangkok and Central Thailand. Given the strategic importance of the 1st Army Region for Bangkok’s safety (in terms of national security as well as preventing or fomenting coups), leading military cliques *Wongthewan* and *Burapha Phayak* have, in 2024, as in other years, competed fiercely for leadership appointments here. Outgoing army commander, General Jaroenchai sought to build up *Burapha Phayak* clout in this area before his retirement – though

Wongthewan remains powerful here. The new Commander of the region is General Amrit Bunsuya, a Pre-Cadet academy class 27 graduate who, having commanded the 21st infantry regiment, then the second infantry division, is a member of the *Taharn Sua Rachini*, *Burapha Phayak*, and *Kho Daeng* factions respectively. He is also considered the military “son” of Prayut.²⁰ The fact that Amrit retires in 2029 means that he could succeed Pana when the latter retires in 2027. The five senior officers under Amrit are all *Kho Daeng* (the faction created by the palace), but are equally divided between the *Wongthewan* and *Burapha Phayak* cliques. Based on army traditions, the future army commander will likely come out of 1st Army Region. But depending on what the palace eventually decides, Amrit could face competition from Lt. General Worayot Leungsuwan who hails from the king’s guard *Wongthewan* faction – Worayot retires in 2030. Also, Worayot is from the powerful faction 28, in which half of the 1st Army Region leadership are members.²¹

Table 4: The six senior-most 1st Army Region officers, 2022-2023. (Asterisks indicate new appointments.)

Position	Name	Faction	Pre-cadet Class	Retirement Date
1st Army Region Commander	General. Amrit Bunsuya*	<i>Burapha Phayak/Thahan Suea Ratchinee/Kho Daeng</i>	27	2029
Cohort Commander	Lt. General Worayot Leungsuwan*	<i>Wongthewan/Kho Daeng</i>	28	2030
Deputy Cohort Commander	Maj. General Sitipol Julanon*	<i>Wongthewan/Kho Daeng</i>	30	2032
Deputy 1st Army Region Commander	Lt. General Sarawut Chaisit	<i>Burapha Phayak/Thahan Suea Ratchini/Kho Daeng</i>	28	2030
Deputy 1st Army Region Commander	Lt. General Natadej Jansang*	<i>Wongthewan/Kho Daeng</i>	28	2029
Deputy 1st Army Region Commander	Lt. General Ajin Patamachit	<i>Burapha Phayak/2nd Cavalry Division</i>	28	2031

MISCELLANEOUS MATTERS

In Table 5, several remaining important security positions are shown. The commanders of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Army Regions – responsible for Northeastern, Northern, and Southern Thailand, respectively – as well as the Chief of Special Forces, appear to have been selected based upon their connections with factions or personages. Incoming 2nd Army Region Commander, Gen. Bunsin Padglang, like his predecessor, and new Special Forces Commander, General Narongrit Kampira, are members of Pre-Cadet Class 26 faction, making them class peers of incoming Army Chief General Pana. Incoming 3rd Army Region Commander, General Kittipong Jaemsuwan is a class peer of 2022-2023 army commander General Jaroenchai Hintao. New 4th army commander General Paisan Nu-sang, who must steer Southern counterinsurgency efforts, hails from the same class (class 25) as his predecessor General Santi Sakuntanak. Paisan is however known as a hawkish, hard-line commander who assumes his post at a time when Thailand’s elected government has sought to prioritise dialogue. Perhaps Paisan’s appointment is owed to the military’s (and government’s) decision to increasingly fight “fire” with “fire”. Such an appointment and hard-line policy, however, could simply intensify Thailand’s Deep South violence.

As for the 2nd Infantry Division, the centre of the *Burapha Phayak* faction, its new commander is close to Prayut, not Prawit – both of whom hail from the faction. Regarding the 1st and 11th Divisions, which are units in Bangkok, the commanders of each are palace favourites. Within the 1st Division, the 1st and 11th regiments were transferred in 2017 to be directly administered by the palace through the monarchy-created Royal Security Command (RSC). The RSC has been managed by a royal favourite and Deputy Royal Security Commander, General Jakrapop Bhuridej, a member of Pre-Cadet Class 28 and brother of Police General Jirabhop. In September 2024, former Army Commander General Narongphan Jitkaewthae was transferred from the post of Commander of the Office of Special Royal Operations Officers to become another deputy commander of the RSC.²² Narongphan’s new posting enhances his legitimacy as a trusted military acolyte for the monarch.

Table 5: Additional important Army positions, 2023-2024. (Asterisks designate new appointments.)

Position	Name	Faction	Pre-cadet Class	Retirement Date
Commander, Second Army Region	Gen. Bunsin Padglang	Close to Pana	26	2027
Commander, Third Army Region	Gen. Kittipong Jaemsuwan	Close to Jaroenchai Hintao	23	2025
Commander, Fourth Army Region	Gen. Paisan Nu-sang	Close to Prayut	25	2026
Commander, Special Forces Warfare Center	Gen. Narongrit Kampira	Special Forces/ Surayud	26	2027

Commander, 1 st Infantry Division	Col. Intanon Ratanaga	<i>Wongthewan/ Kho Daeng</i>	31	2032
Commander, 2 nd Infantry Division (Buraphapayak or “Eastern Tigers”)	Col. Benjapol Dechadiwong na Ayutthaya	<i>Burapha Phayak/ Queen’s Guard/Prayut</i>	32	2033
Commander, 9 th Infantry Division	Col. Asdawut Panyarachun	<i>Sua Dam</i>	29	2030
Commander, 11 th Infantry Division	Col. Yuttana Meejaroen	<i>Wongthewan</i>	30	2031

CONCLUSION

The August 2024 ascension to office of the Paetongtarn-headed, civilian Pheu Thai government came only two months before the appointment of a military leadership which was endorsed by elements in the palace but with prominent appointees close to either Privy Counselor General Prayut or retiring Royal Household Deputy Head General Apirat Kongsompong. Defence Minister Phumtham is seeking to contain any military adventurism and thus retain civilian control. But in fact, civilians have no history of controlling the military in Thailand. And Phumtham, a major figure in the Pheu Thai government, has multiple duties besides overseeing the Ministry of Defence.

Judging by the military’s ability to get around Phumtham’s predecessor as Defence Minister (Suthin), as well as parliamentary committees on a variety of issues, civilian control appears to be highly unlikely in Thailand. The Pheu Thai government seems willing to live with this situation, if only to guarantee military cooperation and no potential coup.

The patterns of appointments and promotions discussed above reveal an often-unstable balance of power among military factions and military personalities, even though they all obey the king. Nevertheless, each year there is a leading faction in each security service. In 2024, pre-cadet academy officials from classes 26, 27, and 28 are prominent. Any coup would be led by officers from these classes. Also, in a change from 2023, *Wongthewan* and *Burapha Phayak*, in that order, retain dominance across the army, the leading institution of security forces. Because the king is so influential in Thailand, the chronology of traditional factional ties has evolved such that the most prominent are those most favoured by the monarch. Hence, only Red Rim officers can assume leading army posts. Although Red Rim factional membership has become the necessary requirement for a leading army official, older, traditional factional allegiances (*Wongthewan* versus *Burapha Phayak*) have retained importance as sub-factions. The palace’s attempt to increase its influence across traditional military factions means that the future of monarchy-military relations is one that is thoroughly a “monarchised military”. Of course, under the king, powerful active-duty and retired officers and even politicians such as Thaksin can enjoy enormous pull over pre-cadet classes and shared unit factions. Security chiefs, such

as the army, navy, and air force commanders promote officers from their class and/or unit faction to maintain cohesive loyalty under themselves, with the endorsement of the king. Such is how factions influence promotions. Where military factions are unable to durably coalesce under a strong military leader, such a situation offers potential political space to civilians seeking to control the military and, by extension, construct a thriving democracy. But where the military can unite under a kingship, it will be able to check attempts at stronger civilian control.

Some might wonder why the Shinawatra family has been unable to shake up the system such that, with a Pheu Thai government in office since 2023, pro-Thaksin or reformist senior security officials could now take the top security posts. The reason is that since 2008, all senior military reshuffle decisions have been made by a selection board dominated by the arch-royalist military itself. If the Pheu Thai government were to upset the applecart of this system, it would face heavy opposition from the military and perhaps also the palace. The result might eventually be a coup.

Thus, when it comes to military appointments, Thaksin is mostly invisible. Instead, the palace (in the form of Generals Apirat and Narongphan) as well as Prayut appear to have strongly influenced 2024's military reshuffles, ensuring that arch-royalist security officials remain in top leadership positions.

Their initiative appears particularly clear in 1) the promotion to the post of Army Commander of Wongthewan/Kho Daeng/ Army Commander Pana; 2) the continued appointment of a *Wongthewan/Kho Daeng* Army officer to the post of Royal Thai Armed Forces Commander and three such officers to the 1st Army Region; 3) the appointment of palace-favourite Police General Kittirat as Police Commander; 4) the promotion of arch-royalist officer Admiral Jirapol and continuation of Air Chief Marshal Panpakdee as Navy and Air Force commanders respectively; and 5) the appointment of the palace-approved General Chitsanupong Rotsiri as Assistant Commander, from when he could later become Royal Thai Armed Forces Commander.

The factional hierarchy in which *Wongthewan* holds a small advantage over *Burapha Phayak* in appointees illustrates that *Wongthewan's* Apirat and Narongphan (as supported by the palace) hold enormous influence, even though *Burapha Phayak's* Prayut (and to a lesser extent Prawit) still maintain some influence. It is still unclear to what extent Apirat's retirement has diminished his power over reshuffles or whether Narongphan has become the principal *Wongthewan* retired officer. Also unclear is whether Apirat's retirement might permit Privy Councilor Prayut to enhance his clout over Apirat and Narongphan in terms of reshuffles. Indeed, it might be that Apirat will increasingly work behind the scenes: it has been rumoured that he is collaborating with ex-Police Commander General Chaktip Chaijinda to establish a new arch-royalist political party or, alternatively, work to build up either or both Ruam Thai Sang Chart and Palang Pracharat, which would mean that he is collaborating with Prayut, Chaktip, and Prawit against Thaksin in preparation for the next election.²³ Regardless, the ascension of Pana as Army Chief might reflect the continued power of *Wongthewan* – especially since, with Army Chief Jaroenchai's retirement, there will be no pro-Prayut *Burapha Phayak* officer able to dominate the army until after Pana retires.

Looking ahead, General Ukrit could become Commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters in 2025, serving for one year (because he retires in 2026). However, Ukrit's promotion to that position is not certain, given Chitsanupong's stronger ties with crucial

personalities in the Thai military and royal establishment. Meanwhile, General Tharapong will likely become Permanent Defence Secretary in 2025, also serving for one year (because he also retires in 2026). In the Royal Thai police, newly appointed Pol. General Kittirat will serve until 2027, retaining arch-royalist influence within the posting.

Currently, there are no pro-Pheu Thai senior military officials. At the same time, if the government tries to meddle with military reshuffles, it might only serve to antagonise the armed forces again. The military is much closer to the smaller, more conservative political parties (Bhumjaithai, Palang Pracharat, Ruam Thai Sang Chart) in the governing coalition than to Pheu Thai. Presently, military officers recognise that Thaksin could be a powerful nemesis—perhaps more powerful than People’s Party. Indeed, they are counting on the likelihood that the judiciary will prevent the People’s Party from ever leading the government in Thailand.

Thailand’s 2024 military reshuffles maintain the generational leadership changes of the armed forces as a palace guardian which benefits from the legitimacy of palace endorsement. It is only natural that such a narrative guarantees that the military is not – and never will be – accountable to elected civilians.

ENDNOTES

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¹⁴ *Siam Rath*, “ส่องประวัติ ‘แมว เมอร์วิก’ ว่าที่ ผบ.ทร. ของ ‘บิ๊กตู่’ ผู้แหวกผ่านประเพณี ทร.สำเร็จ [“Take a look at the history of ‘Maew Merwick’, the future Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Navy of ‘Big Dung’ who successfully broke the curtain of the Royal Thai Navy tradition”],” September 4, 2024,

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