

# UNIT 18 THAILAND

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## 18.0 OBJECTIVES

Establishing a democratic political process has been a serious problem in Thailand, although masses have demonstrated their faith in a democratic set-up. After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- trace the history of Thai monarchy and that of various political developments
- discuss its military leadership
- comprehend the various democratic experiments
- understand Thailand's economic policy and
- evaluate its foreign policy.

## 18.1 INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Thailand lies in the centre of the Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia & Laos) Peninsula and the northern part of the Malay Peninsula. In the north and the northeast Thailand borders on Laos, in the east on Cambodia, in the West and northwest on Burma and in the South on Malaysia. The country was known till 1939 as Siam. Thailand occupies area of 514,000 sq. km. which is slightly higher than France. The country is geographically divided into four regions—Northern, Northeastern, Central Basin and Southern Peninsula. The economy of each region develops on the bases of the resources available in the concerning areas. According to the estimate of 1969 Thailand has a population of more than 34 millions. Thailand is a plural society consisting of nearly thirty sub-nationalities. Among them Thai (Siamese) and the Lao constitute about 85 per cent of the total population. Thai, a language originated from Sino-Tibetan group, is the national language. Buddhism which plays an important part in the life of the country, and is professed by nearly 90 per cent of the total population, has been the official religion since long.

Thailand had never experienced colonial rule and consequently did not follow the traditional pattern of civil military relations; i.e., military subordination to civilian authority. After the 1932 coup that ended the period of absolute monarchy, the military established its primacy in Thai politics. It extended its influence on vital institutions of government and rationalized participation on the basis of its tradition of leadership provided in times of crisis. The only civilian leader who had some popular support among the masses, Pridi Phanomyong and who was also an important leader of the coup of 1932, was branded a communist and not allowed by the military elites to establish his roots in Thai politics. Other civilian leaders did not have the required charisma and thus, the military entrenched itself in the country's politics. At the same time, the military leaders could not establish institutions and norms to facilitate transition of power in a peaceful manner. The net result has been a succession of military rulers in the past 60 years who

could assume power only through coups and counter-coups, making the Thai political system extremely volatile and unstable. There have been intermittent attempts at establishing a civilian government and nurturing democratic institutions, but they were thwarted by military coups or political manoeuvring on the ground that they were unable to protect the honour of the King, nation or religion, the three emotive issues in Thai politics. Recent events have, however, showed that while clockwork coups are a part of Thailand's old world they have no place in the modern age, where a growing middle class, especially in Bangkok, insists on making its own destiny. 'Mobile Phone Mob' or middle class demonstrators joined by a rainbow coalition from all walks of life insist that their politics be finally freed from an overdose of military involvement.

While the appointment of Chuan Leekpai as prime minister of Thailand following the recent national elections signifies a triumph for democratic forces, this victory can hardly be seen as ushering in a new political era. Although pro-democratic forces, comprising Chuan's *Democratic Party*, the *New Aspiration Party* (NAP), the *Palang Dharma Party* and *Solidarity* won the election, they did so with only a small margin of five seats. As a result one cannot expect anything except a fragile and shaky government despite their decision to bring in the pro-military *Social Action Party* to strengthen the coalition. Thailand is also bound to face political instability, mainly because of a lack of cohesion within the coalition. Bickering and clash of interests will become inevitable as the coalition partners seek to expand their base of support. Political corruption is another problem which may weaken the Chuan government, as short-term personal or group interests emerge. The new government's relationship with the military is also crucial. The 1991 coup against Chatichai Choonhavan's administration was triggered by a lack of mutual trust between the government and the military. Underlying the question of the military's reaction to its changed circumstances is the prevailing public mood of democratic awareness. The military's brutal suppression of the pro-democracy demonstrations in May'92 served to raise public political consciousness. Many Thais, particularly of the urban middle class, are now demanding a truly representative government that belongs to the people and not to small groups within the military elite. The economy's dramatic growth in recent years has strengthened the nonbureaucratic forces, including the business community, the media and other professional groups. These influential groups are now looking for an efficient, honest and elected government to move the country's economy forward. During 1978-1991 in forcing Vietnam to move out of Cambodia, Thailand provided strategic support to Cambodian rebels and that proved a crucial factor in Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia.

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## 18.2 LAND AND PEOPLE OF THAILAND

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Thailand, also known as Siam in the past, is strategically situated in the centre of Southeast Asian mainland and spread over 513,115 square kilometers. It was due to its strategic location that Japan occupied it first before advancing further in the rest of southeast Asia. Japan in fact used Thailand (during 1942-1945) as a spring-board to invade Burma, Java, Malaya and Singapore. It was again due to its location that it was chosen as the headquarters of Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Thai air bases at Udon Thani, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon, Nakhon Ratchasina, Takhli and U-Tapao and the naval base at Sattahip were developed by the United States in order to contain communism in the region. Thailand once again played a strategic role during 1978-1991 in deterring Vietnam from staying in Cambodia. Thailand provided strategic support to Cambodian rebels and this proved a crucial factor in Vietnam's eventual withdrawal from Cambodia.

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## 18.3 HOW THAILAND ESCAPED COLONIAL RULE

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Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia to have escaped colonial rule. The enlightened monarchy of Thailand was solely responsible for maintaining the independence of the country. The conduct of diplomacy and foreign relations, particularly under the leadership of King Mongkut (1851-68) and Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), was very realistic. Thai kings had a clear perception of the security environment of the region and had the capabilities to tackle France and Great Britain vis-a-vis colonial ambitions over Thailand. They had the necessary command over English language as well as the

sophistication needed to solve the emerging problems. They were polite and respectful while dealing with Western emissaries and tried to accommodate their demands in a suitable manner. The British emissary, Sir John Bowring was so happy with the behaviour and hospitality of the then King Mongkut that he wrote a famous memoir, "The Kingdom and People of Siam, with a Narrative of the Mission in 1855". He was a great advocate of Thai interests in Great Britain.

Thailand had evolved effective instruments to conduct its foreign policy. It had introduced foreign advisors for framing suitable policies vis-a-vis Western powers. Thus there was a British advisor to suggest policies concerning Great Britain, a French advisor to deal with France and a Dutch to deal with Netherlands and so on.

For a proper understanding of the society and politics of Western powers and for enlisting their cooperation, King Chulalongkorn astutely established a personal rapport with some monarchs in the West. He sent some of his sons for education under the care of prominent European monarchs of the time. This also helped him to build a team of indigenous experts for handling diplomacy with competence and sophistication. Indeed, King Chulalongkorn's attempts to get international recognition were remarkable.

As a result of proper conduct of Thai diplomacy, an understanding developed between Great Britain and France for maintaining a buffer state between British Burma and French Indochina. Historical records testify that in 1889, M. Waddington, the French Ambassador in London, called on the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, with the suggestion that it would be advantageous for both countries to declare Thailand a buffer state between their respective empires. The response of the British prime minister was positive and thereafter both the countries evolved a strategy to treat Thailand as a buffer area.

This is not to suggest that these colonial powers did not create any difficulties for the sovereignty of Thailand. In 1893 French gunboats came up to Menam Chao Phraya to press their claims over Laos. France looked for the natural border line for demarcating the boundary between Thailand and the Union of Indochina and it pressed its claims on the areas situated on the left bank of the Mekong River. Thai rulers, after some reservations, conceded the French demands and vacated the territories known as Laos today. Thereafter, France looked for the natural border line to demarcate Thai-Cambodian border also and chose Cardamom mountain ranges for the same. Thus, France subsequently pressurized Thailand to forsake its claims over Battambang, Siemrip and Sisophon. Thailand knew its strategic weaknesses in relation to France and therefore, instead of a confrontation chose to hand over disputed areas to the latter in 1907. These developments had their impact on the attitude of Great Britain also. It also wished to extend its colonial areas on the Malayan frontier. In 1909 Britain demanded the jurisdiction over Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Trengganu and Thailand agreed to do so. Thailand maintained its balance even in the face of great provocation from Western powers and thus manage to protect its sovereignty.

### 18.3.1 The Institution of Monarchy

When Thais defeated the Khmer government at Sukhothai under the leadership of King Indradya in 1253 A.D., they laid the foundation of the Kingdom of Thailand. Indradya's successor King Ramakhamheng the great (1270-1317) was a great warrior and statesman. He fought to combine several principalities into his Kingdom. His jurisdiction spread from Mekong River in the north to Malayan peninsula in the south and from Burma in the west to Cambodia in the east. He established tributary relations with the Han emperors in China and received their support for subduing the Khmer and Annamite rulers in the region. Thailand with its capital at Sukhothai, under the stewardship of Ramakhamheng, became the most powerful state in the Southeast Asian region. His successors were also powerful and fought several wars against the Burmese, Khmer and Vietnamese rulers.

The security and geo-political environment of the Southeast Asian region became disturbed in the 19th century. There was an imperialist race amongst European countries and the various Southeast Asian states began to succumb to colonial rule. The Dutch had already consolidated their rule over Indonesia. The French empire had entrenched itself in Indochina. Great Britain was consolidating its hold over Burma and Malaya. The colonial powers were focussing their attention now on Thailand. In the situation Thai rulers displayed tremendous understanding and searched avenues to escape colonial yoke.

The Kings of Thailand provided worthwhile leadership in an endeavour to deter Western powers from indulging in gunboats diplomacy against it. King Mongkut introduced reforms in domestic policies and adopted a liberal outlook towards the Western world. He stopped paying tributes to China and began to attach importance to Great Britain from 1851 onwards. In 1855, he signed a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce with Great Britain and conceded some trade benefits. He also offered extraterritorial rights to British subjects residing in Thailand to enable them to pursue trade interests in Thailand. Such a policy suited the Britishers interested mainly in business and commerce. Thus, Britain sought friendly relations with Thailand and never challenged its sovereignty. Though Britain was in a position to create problems for Thailand because one, it was controlling Malaya, Burma and the Indian sub-continent and second, it had geo-political compulsions to check French expansion in the region, yet it desisted from doing so.

The successor of King Mongkut was Chulalongkorn the great, who was popular with his subjects. He was more liberal and shrewd than his predecessor. He searched avenues for establishing personal rapport with monarchs in the European continent with a view to enhance Thailand's national interests. The successors of King Chulalongkorn however were not so capable and strong to handle the domestic situation. King Vajiralongkorn (1910-1925) and King Prajadhipok (1925-1935) were educated and trained in Great Britain and were impressed with the British model of government and polity. They were liberal in their outlook and this made a section of the Sakdina class (aristocracy), unhappy. There were some misunderstandings about the character of King Prajadhipok. Under the circumstances, a group of civil and military men led by Pridi Phanomyong and General Phibun Songgram hastily formed a group that supported a coup in the name of Peoples Party for overthrowing the system of absolute monarchy.

The promoters of the coup surrounded the capital on 24 June 1932 on all sides and presented an ultimatum to King Prajadhipok. The coup leaders demanded that the King either accept the position of a constitutional head, resign or face for bloodshed. The King was thus faced with a delicate situation. He abhorred bloodshed and thought that any delay on his part would result in unnecessary bloodshed. So he agreed to constitutional monarchy.

### 18.3.2 Constitutional Monarchy

Several constitutions have been framed since 1932 to suit the needs of the changing political order and subsequently abandoned for a new one. But there is a factor common to all the constitutions is that they regard monarchy as a revered institution. The King is the ceremonial head of the state and of the armed forces. The sovereignty, technically, rests with the people and the King exercises those powers only which are in conformity with the provisions of the constitution. The person of the king is sacred and cannot be violated, accused or sued in any way. He leads the nation on ceremonial occasions and is revered by the people of Thailand. He is the symbol of Thai nationalism and people are still loyal to him.

The present King Bhumibol Aduldej is very influential. He has helped the leaders of different political parties with sincere advice for resolving conflicts and crisis. Thus, in the wake of students' revolution in October 1973, he advised Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn to resign. This diffused the tension and paved the way for democratic experiments. The King once again displayed his great diplomatic skill in 1992 when he advised General Suchinda Kraprayoon to hand over power to his successor in view of the civil unrest against his leadership.

#### Check Your Progress I

- Note:**
- Use the space below for your answer.
  - Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

- Briefly explain the diplomatic manoeuvres of ruling elite in maintenance of Thai independence.

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- 2) Briefly discuss the political developments that led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Thailand.

- 3) List the important features of the constitutional monarchy in Thailand.

## 18.5. MILITARY LEADERSHIP

Thailand has had a tradition of military leadership right since the end of absolute monarchy. The military established its primacy in Thai politics immediately after 1932 coup d'état. It extended its influence on vital institutions of government and pleaded justification for its presence. The civilian leader, Pridi Phanomyon, who had some popular support, was projected as a communist. Though Pridi became the Prime Minister of the country, he failed to lay the foundations of civilian rule. When he came out with his idealistic proposals to introduce radical changes in the socio-economic structure, it was disliked and opposed by the political elite. His proposal was to nationalize all agricultural lands for better distribution and production. While nationalizing, he did not propose to pay compensation immediately. The acquisition of lands were to be through the issue of bonds and not by cash. He also advocated evolving a public distribution system of rice and other essential commodities and elimination of the role of middlemen in business. His proposals won him more enemies than friends and he was portrayed as an enemy of the prevailing political system. His political career was really doomed when in 1946, King Anand Mahidol was assassinated in mysterious circumstances. Pridi was somehow implicated in the case. The situation became so bad for Pridi that he had to leave the country and stay in exile for years in France.

Thus, the most important civilian leader of 1932 coup was eliminated. Other civilian leaders did not have the required charisma and the military eventually entrenched itself in Thai politics.

There has been a succession of military rulers in Thailand in the past 60 years. General Phraya Pahol ruled Thailand from 1933 to 1938, Field Marshal Phibun Songgram from 1938 to 1944 and then from 1947 to 1957, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat from 1957 to 1963, Field Marshal Thanom Kikkikachorn from 1963 to 1973, Admiral Sangad Choloryu from 1976 to 1977, General Kriengsak Chomanan from 1977 to 1980, General Prem Tilsulanand from 1980 to 1988 and General Chatchai Choonhavan from 1988 to 1991. The last two military leaders came into power through democratic elections but the present prime minister, General Sunthorn Kongsompong came into power after a coup d'état in February, 1991.

Here it will be appropriate to mention the role of Phibun Songgram in earmarking the strategies aimed at establishing the fact that military leaders are indispensable for bringing



stability and progress to Thailand. Phibun Songgram dominated Thai politics from 1932 to 1957 and was able to lay solid foundations for the primacy of military in Thai political system. Besides Pridi, he was supporter of democracy for his country but when he became the Prime Minister, he supported only a semblance of it. There was a unicameral legislature and provisions for elected representatives throughout his tenure, but all the powers of the government were concentrated in the hands of the centre. Concerning foreign policy, he was flexible. Till the end of the Second World War, Phibun was a close ally of Japan, but when he came back to power in 1947, he supported the policy of alignment with the United States. The friendship with Japan was used to recover territories lost to France in 1907 and to Britain in 1909. This pleased his people immensely and he received their backing.

Phibun also campaigned for "Asia for the Asians" and actually declared war against Western colonial powers. He backed up independence movements in the region and provided bases to Indian National Army of Subhas Chandra Bose among others. But after 1947 his priorities changed. He perceived a threat from China and the emerging communist movement in Vietnam. Thus, he joined the crusade against communism and became an ally of the United States in this regard. At the domestic level, Phibun tried to introduce socio-economic reforms to reduce the hold of the overseas Chinese on the Thai economic system. He tried to evolve such ventures as textile, paper, sugar, tobacco and distillery industries under the state, which was being run by military men and this strengthened their economic power. He astutely encouraged the military to take interests in business and trade. He extended all the necessary facilities and built canals and roads and means of communications. This way he was able to secure popular support for the military leadership.

The successors of Phibun tried to strengthen their support base and were eventually able to establish their presence in the socio-economic structure. As a result the military has emerged as the major agent of social change and political engineering in contemporary Thailand. They are key leaders of major political parties and cannot be marginalized even in democratic experiments.

An assessment of Thai politics suggest that no government can be stable in Thailand without the backing and participation of military elites. A soldier in Thai armed forces thinks that it is his bounden duty not only to defend the country, but also to provide leadership. They are greatly respected by the common people. Talented people in Thailand are attracted to defence services because they are lucrative and prestigious. However, there has been some decline in the role of military in the country's polity ever since the rise of Chuan Leekpai to power.

### Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** i) Use the space below for your answer.  
ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Discuss the role of Phibun Songgram's leadership in the Thai political system.

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## 18.5 DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENTS

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There have been intermittent attempts at establishing civilian government and nurturing democratic institutions in Thailand ever since 1932. Popular civilian leaders like Pridi Panomyong (1930s), Seni Pramoj (1940s), Sanya Thammasak and Kukrit Pramoj (1970s) tried to eliminate military elements and establish civilian democracy but could not

succeed. They were either removed through military coup d'état or on the alleged ground that they were unable to protect the honour of the King, the nation or religion, the three emotive issues. In October 1973 a student led revolution ousted the military dictatorship and established civilian rule. Dr. Sanya Thammasak, the new prime minister was immensely popular. Under his stewardship a new constitution was adopted and elections were held. But the coalition government, which emerged thereafter was not stable and thus the coup of October 1976 took place. The military once again emerged as the most powerful force. A new constitution was adopted in December 1978 but it became null and void in February 1991 after a coup d'état. However, there have been some landmark developments in Thailand during 1991-92 which have weakened the hold of military in power politics of the country and brightened the prospects for democracy. In order to have a proper understanding of the prospects for democracy, a brief appraisal of the current developments will be in order.

There was a coup d'état led by General Sunthorn and General Suchinda Kraprayoon on 23 February 1991 to oust the popularly elected government of General Chatichai Choonhavan. This ushered in an era of military dictatorship in Thailand. The military sought legitimacy for the coup by stating that the Chatichai government was corrupt and that they were willing to restore democracy and a clean government to Thailand. They installed a civilian leader, Anand Panyar Chun as interim prime minister and promised to hold elections as early as possible.

However, as is well known General Chatichai was ousted because of his strained relationship with the top leadership in the armed forces. Chatichai tried to induct the former army chief General Arthit Kamlang Ek in the defence ministry for neutralising the military's influence in politics. The military moved in on the eve of the swearing in of General Arthit and thus there was a bloodless coup. Now the military tried to neutralize the influence of Chatichai and his colleagues. It instituted Assets Verification Committee (AVC) to prove corruption charges against Chatichai and his former cabinet colleagues. The AVC started investigations in right earnest and some of the ministers in Chatichai cabinet were declared "unusually rich". But by the end of 1991 strange developments took place whereby Chatichai and his Thai Party was included into the pro-military coalition. When the elections were held on 22 March 1992, the pro-military coalition got a majority. In this election most of the so-called corrupt colleagues of Chatichai became victorious on a pro-military platform. General Suchinda Kraprayoon who emerged the unelected Prime Minister, selected 11 such ministers whom the AVC had declared corrupt. This development was disliked by the people. This also exposed the fact that corruption which was a basic charge against General Chatichai was concocted. Thus, the popular legitimacy that the military had gained from the 1991 coup was diluted. This created a feeling of revulsion against the government and caused civil unrest.

Another reason for the unrest was the selection of the unelected prime minister. *Samakhi Tham Party* which was the largest partner of the pro-military coalition was led by Narong Wongwan. He became controversial immediately after his name was proposed for the post of prime minister. The pro-democracy parties argued that he was corrupt. On 25 March 1992, the *New Aspiration Party*, *Palang Dharma*, *Ekkaparb* and *Democrats* addressed a joint press conference and called into question the credibility of Narong in the light of the US State Department allegation that he had been denied a visa to the US in mid-1991, because of his suspected ties with drug trafficking. The following day the US State Department spokeswoman Ms Margaret Tutwiler confirmed that it had in July 1991 denied a visa to Narong because of suspicions over his role in heroin trading. The impact of such a revelation was disastrous. The military thus withdrew their support in favour of Narong. The next powerful contender was Air Chief Marshal Samboon Rahong of *Chat Thai*. He too did not have a clean image and was accused of dubious duty free business deals. He was afraid about the public outcry and refused to be considered for the post. Under the circumstances, the candidature of General Suchinda who had not fought the elections on the plea that he was not willing to be the Prime Minister, was proposed. The pro-military coalition accepted his leadership and the King approved the appointment. Suchinda while accepting the post of prime minister said, "I pledge that I will be loyal to the King and provide protection to your majesty and the royal family with my life, and will carry out my responsibilities with honesty for the national and public interest without any regard for the special interests of individuals or certain groups."

But subsequent events were traumatic for Suchinda. He became the target of demonstrations as soon as he stepped into power. On 20 April 1992, thousands of protestors staged demonstrations opposite Parliament House and the Supreme Commander headquarters. The number of demonstrators started growing and the protest picked up momentum. When parliament was convened on 23 April, the opposition members of parliament wore black to mourn the demise of democracy. Outside a *Palang Dharma* Party leader sat on hunger strike, who was subsequently joined by 40 others. Chamlong Srimuang led the protestors with enthusiasm and spirits. By the end of April the situation began to deteriorate. In the beginning of May 1992, thousands of demonstrators sat down in central Bangkok surrounded by riot police. On 9 May, more than 150,000 people poured into the streets with a demand to force Suchinda to quit. They filled a park and spilled over into surrounding streets. Thus, the anti-Suchinda protest climaxed. The display of enthusiasm and spirits were similar to that witnessed in October 1973, when the Thanom Prapas clique was forced to quit making way for democratic experiments. The protestors demanded the resignation of the unelected premier and suitable amendments in the constitution so that there was no recurrence of the unelected prime minister in Thailand. They were unwilling to disperse unless their demands were accepted. Though efforts were made to assure the pro-democracy leaders about suitable amendments in the constitution, but it was not successful. The protestors continued to demonstrate and the military rulers lost their patience. They decided to tackle the demonstrators by force. The army crackdown started on 17 May and an emergency was declared the following day. About 50 people died as a result of the crackdown and hundreds were injured. The leader of the protest movements, Major General Chamlong Sirmuang was handcuffed and arrested and thus the streets were cleared.

The backlash of the police action was devastating. Premier Suchinda and his supreme army commander, Issarapong Noonpakdi were held responsible for the bloodshed. This was not liked even by other leaders of the pro-military coalition. The opposition to Suchinda was being felt by his supporters. Thus, there was a rumour of another coup in the offing. At this juncture the King Bhumibol Aduldej intervened to solve the constitutional crisis. He advised General Suchinda to resign in view of the mounting pressure from the public and factions in the military. Thus Suchinda resigned on 24 May 1992. He was succeeded by the interim Prime Minister, Anand Panyarachun. This time Anand was entrusted the task of introducing necessary reforms in the constitution for making the system more democratic and ready for another election.

Anand's ascendance as a premier provided a healing touch to the people who suffered loss of lives and casualties in the May bloodshed. It neutralised the antipathy that Suchinda had masterminded. Anand's government tried to convince people that it would do justice to them and also try to punish culprits of the May bloodshed. The House of Representatives Committee was established to pin responsibility for the May bloodshed. Suchinda supported the constitutional amendments for more democracy. The parliament approved four important amendments to the constitution and on 10 June 1992 they were incorporated. They had great implications for the Thai political system. The amendments were as follows:

- a) The prime minister must be an elected member of parliament
- b) The power of the senate be limited to scrutinizing and passing laws
- c) Open debates be allowed in the second annual parliamentary session and
- d) The House Speaker be made president of the parliament.

After these amendments, general elections were held for the second time in Thailand on 13 September 1992. There were two important coalitions vying for power. The pro-democracy coalition was projected as "Angels" and the pro-military one as "devils" by the media. The pro-democracy parties became victorious and under the leadership of Chuan Leekpai a new government was established. The pro-military parties are demoralised at the moment while the new government has shown interest in strengthening democratic structures.

### 18.5.1 Religion and Politics

Religion is one of the most important and emotive issues in Thai society. The state religion of Thailand is Buddhism. The interactions between political elites and the Buddhist Sangha over the years have been influencing the political system of Thailand deeply. The



different social and ethnic groups view amongst each other to attract the support of the Sangha without which they cannot claim proper legitimacy. There is a wide spectrum of religio-political phenomenon, i.e., the interaction of Buddhism and modern political ideologies, the use of religion in the politics of democracy or dictatorship, the efforts of some ambitious politicians in promoting religious revival and the use of Buddhism in fighting against communism and separatism in Thailand. All these underscore the importance of religion in government and polity.

It is a historical reality that in order to promote the causes of Thai nationalism, King Ramakhamhang in the 13th century, King Mongkut in the 19th century and his successors in the 20th century, considered Buddhism an important vehicle of this goal. Rama VIth had introduced Buddhist prayers in various public institutions, government schools, police forces and the army on the eve of the First World War. The prime minister, Field Marshal Phibun Songgram, provided special significance to religious aspects during the Second World War era with a view to promote the cause of nationalism.

The operation and role of the Buddhist Sangha, however, is different from its Islamic counterparts. It believes in discourses, persuasion and in arousing moral virtues. It has tried to reconcile differences amongst different social and ethnic groups and has paved the path for national integration and assimilation.

### Check Your Progress 3

- Note:** i) Use the space below for your answer.  
 ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Critically examine the success and failure of democracy in Thailand.

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- 2) Briefly explain the importance of religion in Thai society and polity.

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## 18.6 ECONOMIC POLICY

Thailand has been pursuing a liberal economic policy and has been a champion of free enterprise in the region. Though Field Marshal Phibun Songgram had brought some industries under the public sector, not much should be read into it as these endeavours were purely expedient. His successors always gave priorities for the development of the private sector, but it was under the stewardship of prime minister Prem Tilsuanand (1980-1988) that the private sector was really given incentives and required facilities. This boosted the production of agricultural and industrial outputs and presently, the GNP per capita is \$1,418.

General Prem found innovative avenues to earn foreign exchange for the country and thus, modern technologies were acquired for promoting fishing, gems, textiles and tourist industries. These efforts were successful and indeed the rise of these sectors has been largely responsible for the phenomenal rise of Thailand's economy in the past few years, if the present rate of growth continues. Thailand will be at par with the NICs, i.e., Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

It is relevant to point out here that Thailand was an ally of the United States. From the signing of the economic assistance agreement to the end of Vietnam war in 1975, American influence on Thailand's economic management continued. A large number of American advisors were posted in Thailand. A great bulk of American loans, grants and direct investments flowed into Thailand to finance infrastructures with strategic implications. The US poured enormous economic and military assistance to Thailand for its role in containment of communism in the region. From 1963 to 1978, Baht (Thai currency) was tied to the US dollar.

However, the strategic importance of Thailand for the United States was reduced with the end of the Vietnam war in 1975. Thailand was facing a grim economic situation as well as unstable regimes from 1973 to 1978. When the political order got restored, the rulers tried to improve economic management. It was felt that the spread of communism could be contained only with acceleration of economic growth. They, thus, began to review the functioning of various instruments of economic policy. Thus, the apex body of economic planning, National Economic Development Board (NEDB) began inviting fresh ideas to accelerate development. NEDB founded initially in 1959 endeavoured to coordinate and stimulate development, took charge of economic reforms and formulated "five year plans" accordingly.

The NEDB came out with fresh ideas during the presentation of the Sixth Five Year Plan (1986-1991). Before 1986 the NEDB accorded priorities to rural development and communication schemes. It took measures for raising the productivity and income of the farmers. Thus, the emphasis was on construction of roads, dams, irrigation canals, health schemes etc. But during the sixth plan period, it gave urgent priorities to develop private sectors. The private sector was projected as the prime engine for pulling the growth locomotive. As a result, the role of public sectors was transformed from one of regulating and controlling to supporting and promoting private business. The NEDB evolved liberal policies to attract foreign enterprises and promised incentives to them to invest in Thailand. Subsequently foreign owned enterprises were exempted from restrictions on repatriating profits and capital, and on foreign ownership of land, import duties and taxes on equipment.

The Thai government gave guarantees against nationalisation or competition from state enterprises. As a result about 1,037 companies started operations during 1987-1990. The largest foreign investors were Japan (27.4 per cent), followed by Taiwan (11.2 per cent) and the United States (10.9 per cent). The promotional programmes are giving emphasis on industries for export priorities, i.e., biotechnology, computer software, solar cells and microwave insulators.

The qualitative changes in the policies of the government towards private sectors have activated the Joint Public-Private Consultative Committee (JPPCC) which had been established in 1981 for the sole purpose of conducting dialogue between government and business representatives. JPPCC is playing the role of a think tank to promote business interests and to effectively lobby for private business ever since 1986.

JPPCC is also credited with influencing the decision makers in giving due importance to export-oriented economic strategy. The business representatives in the national JPPCC point out obstacles in production and marketization of several goods. Tourism and gem exports, two well known items of earning foreign exchange in recent years, were promoted due to the tireless efforts of the JPPCC. In the past both the government and the public viewed tourism and gems as luxuries for a handful of rich people but now that image is changed. These sectors were heavily taxed in the past, but now they understand the export value of such items. The government reduced utility rates, cut down sales tax for hotels and gave facilities for the import of precious gems resulting in tariff, customs and tax concessions. This helped the gem merchants of Thailand to be the leading gem exporters in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, there was better management of hotels and transportation system. This attracted the foreign tourists to Thailand and currently, the average arrival of tourists are around 2.4 million every year. Tourism has thus become the largest source of foreign exchange.

The performance of other export-oriented industries notably textiles and garments, processed food, jewellery and light manufactures are remarkable. Since 1986, fish exports

increased in volume by 35 per cent. Again tinned and frozen sea food represented 8.3 per cent of export earnings. The textiles contributed 13.5 per cent of export earnings, thereby superseding rice as the largest item for the same. The manufacturing sectors as a whole increased its share of GDP from 6.8 per cent in 1960 to 23.0 per cent in 1986 and subsequently showed buoyant trends.

Thailand is the second largest rice exporter of the world after the United States. It produces about 20.6 million tonnes of rice every year. It also produces about 5 million tonnes of Maize, 19.3 million tonnes of cassava roots and 2.3 million tonnes of fish. It has timber, sugar, rubber, teak and other potentials.

It is producing cement on a commercial level (7.9 million tonnes), half of which is purchased by Malaysia. It is also producing automobile assembly, integrated circuits and such other items for exports.

#### Check Your Progress 4

**Note:** i) Use the space below for your answer.  
 ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit

1) Identify some of the specific features of Thailand's economic developments

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## 18.7 THAI FOREIGN POLICY

The makers of Thai foreign policy have generally been flexible in their approach to various issues always taking care to meet the everchanging demands of international diplomacy. From its birth in the 13th century to the end of the opium war in the 19th century, it cultivated friendship of the Han emperors of China. In return China helped Thai rulers to consolidate their powers and grab a vast area of Southeast Asia under their control. When Britain's power increased substantially in 19th century Southeast Asia, Thailand shifted over its emphasis and gave priority to cultivating relations with Britain. It provided trade facilities and extra-territorial rights to Britain and thereby, placed British subjects beyond the purview of Thai courts. In return Britain respected the sovereignty of Thailand deterring France from creating troubles for Thailand. During the Second World War Thailand sided with Japan and in return Japan helped Thailand to regain the territories lost during the colonial period. But after the War, the US emerged as the most influential country in the region and Thailand true to its tradition moved fast to forge closer relations with the Americans. Thailand agreed to co-operate with US in pursuing the policy of containment of communism and adopted an anti-China anti-Vietnam stand. Thailand joined the military pact of SEATO in 1954 and agreed to offer its bases as a springboard for anti-Communist operations. Thailand was in fact the headquarter of SEATO and a major base for the American forces during the Vietnam war. In return, the US gave enormous economic and military aids. It helped in the construction of roads, dams and bridges. It also strengthened the security postures of Thailand vis-a-vis its neighbours.

With the end of the Vietnam war in 1975, the strategic environment of Southeast Asia changed. China was eager to strengthen its relations with ASEAN countries. Thailand took the initiative to forge closer relations with China. Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj paid a visit to China in 1975 to break the ice and the endeavour was fruitful. Thailand received oil from China on friendly terms. China paid a higher price for Thai rice in order to strengthen the latter's economy. Thus, Sino-Thai relations improved rapidly and were consolidated after Vietnam's military intervention in Cambodia in December 1978. Thailand became a conduit for the supply of Chinese arms to Cambodian rebels. Thailand provided sanctuaries to Khmer Rouge which was backed by China. It also provided shelter to KPNLF and Funcinpec guerrilla forces. The Cambodian rebels raised their guerrilla forces in Thailand and were supplied arms and ammunitions from China, the US and other

sources via Thailand. China was very happy with Thailand for cooperating in the endeavour to isolate Vietnam.

Thailand, thus, was projected as a frontline state to deter Vietnamese expansion in the region. However, with the signing of the Cambodian Peace Accord in Paris in October 1991 and the dismantlement of the communist bloc, the situation has drastically changed.

Thai rulers are presently evolving a policy to convert Indochina from a battleground to a market place. Thailand is planning big investments in other Indochinese countries. It is eager to take their keep in the Mekong River Development Project and on the other hand, it is trying to revive rail links from Bangkok to Ho Chi Minh city via Phnom Penh.

Thailand is a leading campaigner for regional cooperation in the region. It took active interest in the formation of ASEAN, which comprised Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. ASEAN cooperation embraces varied fields, i.e. industry and commerce, tourism, finance, food production and supply, fisheries, shipping, communications, air traffic services, meteorology, transportation, telecommunication, science and technologies etc. The ASEAN is also cooperating in strategic and political matters and has presently seven "dialogue partners", i.e., Japan, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and ECC.

Thailand has successfully mediated in resolving some of the intricate disputes in Southeast Asia. In 1966, Thailand was the venue for talks between the foreign ministers of Malaysia and Indonesia for termination of the "Crush Malaysia Plan". Thailand also arranged a meeting amongst Malaysia and the Philippines to end the conflict over Sabah. Again Thailand, through ASEAN, deterred Vietnamese penetration in Cambodia.

Thailand today is one of the few countries to maintain good relations with military regime in Burma. It does not encourage Burmese refugees to come towards Thailand. Thai businessmen have taken contracts to cut teak woods in the Shan and Karen areas and there is a close commercial relationship between the two regimes.

Finally, it can be said that the Thai foreign policy has proved successful in achieving its goals. To summarise the developments of the past four decades, it can be said that strategic considerations guided its policies in the past but now side by side business interests are getting priorities. Thai government enlists the cooperation of businessmen at all levels of decision making, particularly in the realm of foreign policy and thus its business interests are promoted.

### Check Your Progress 5

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Identify the main characteristics of Thai foreign policy.

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## 18.8 LET US SUM UP

To summarize, it can be stated that the Thai political system has four important pillars, i.e., the nation, its religion, the King and the army. Any arrangement for a new political order cannot be successful without attaching due importance to them. For survival of a leader, it is essential that he establishes a balance amongst these pillars.

In the realm of external relations, dynamism and flexibility have been the hallmark. Thais say that "like a bamboo, we bend with the wind". This aptly explains their behaviour and attitudes while determining foreign policy and diplomacy.

## 18.9 KEY WORDS

<b>Sakdima Class</b>	: aristocracy
<b>Colony</b>	: country or territory deprived of independence and ruled by a foreign state
<b>Communism</b>	: the social and economic structure (social system) based on public ownership of means of production coming up to replace capitalism.
<b>Democracy</b>	: government by the people; a political system under which methods and forms of democracy and civil freedom and equities are secured and laws guaranteed and implemented
<b>Baht</b>	: Thai currency

## 18.10 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

- Elliott, David, 1978, *Thailand: Origins of Military Rule*, Zed Press, 1978.
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- Wyatt, D.K., 1984, *Thailand: A Short History*, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1984.
- Xuto, Somsakdi, ed., 1987, *Government and Politics of Thailand*, Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 1987.

## 18.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) i) Appointment of Western advisors for framing suitable policies vis-a-vis Western powers.  
 ii) Sincere urge for understanding the society and politics of West. King established personal rapport with western monarchs.  
 iii) Thailand became a buffer between the British in Burma and the French in Indochina.  
 iv) Thailand avoided confrontation with the Western powers by fulfilling their demands.
- 2) i) Successive monarchs of the 20th century with Western education and were imbibed with liberal ideas.  
 ii) Civil-military coup of 1932.
- 3) i) Parliament is not supreme.  
 ii) Monarchy has always been revered.  
 iii) Monarch generally does not violate the constitution.  
 iv) Monarch is the symbol of Thai nationalism.  
 v) King plays successfully the role of friend, philosopher and guide to politicians.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) i) Laid the foundation for the primacy of military in Thai politics.  
 ii) Concentrated the powers in the centre.



- iii) Followed the policy of alignment with the powerful states—Japan, the USA, etc.
- iv) Anti-communist.
- v) Modernised Thai economy.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) i) Weakness in the political parties.  
ii) Dominance of the military in the politics.
- 2) i) Religion-Buddhism served as vehicle for creating national feelings in the people.  
ii) Political parties use religion to raise support base.  
iii) Religion is used to fight communism.  
iv) Religion helped integrate the different social and ethnic groups.

### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) i) Free enterprise  
ii) Dominance of private sector  
iii) Agrobased economy  
iv) Emphasize on rural development  
v) Higher allocation for infrastructural development  
vi) Several incentives are given to foreign companies to invest in Thailand.

### Check Your Progress 5

- 1) i) Flexible in approach  
ii) Reliance on Western Bloc in general and on the USA in particular  
iii) Added emphasize on the regional cooperation  
iv) Strategic considerations guided its policies in the past but now side by side business interests are getting priorities.