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DATE: April 12, 1972

SUBJECT : Puey Ungphakon and Student Dissent

REF :

SUMMARY. Dr. Puey Ungphakon became the rallying point for student and intellectual dissent against the National Executive Council (NEC) by writing an open letter to Thanom calling for a quick return to constitutional government. The letter received wide play in the local press, mainly in columns and editorials, mostly criticizing Puey for his act but publicizing it effectively by so doing. There are indications that His Majesty the King is moving to some extent to offset Puey, whose links with Pridi Panomyong (which we do not believe involve political support of the latter) make Puey less than fully trusted by the Monarchy and its supporters. END SUMMARY.

Since the widespread circulation of his open letter to Thanom in mid-February (Enclosure 1), Dr. Puey Ungphakon, former Governor of the Bank of Thailand and presently Dean of the Thammasat Economics Faculty, has been the rallying point for student and intellectual dissent against the NEC -- still nascent but nonetheless of concern to the NEC.

Puey has for many years been a potential leader of student dissent. As Dean of the Economics Faculty at Thammasat University he has long been regarded as a leader by the younger, reformist elements, and developed a faculty of instructors who keenly

Enclosure:
1. Dr. Puey's Open Letter to Thanom.

GROUP 3 - Downgraded at 12-year intervals, not automatically declassified.

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support his views. As Governor of the Bank of Thailand, a position he resigned from last year, he was looked upon by many technocrats and intellectuals generally as possessing the combination of brains, ability, honesty and courage needed to operate successfully within the context of "Thai-style democracy" or "Thai-style military rule" in which the technocrats have traditionally played a vital role. As president of the inter-university Social Science Association, Puey has had a wide (and moderating) influence over some of the more diverse and active elements of the academic community.

The thinly-disguised, allegorical message from "villager Khem Yen-ying" (Puey) to "headman Thamnu" (Thanom) called for a quick return to constitutional government, and an end to rule by threat and suppression. The letter, copies of which spread quickly through Thammasat campus and to other universities in Bangkok, also found its way into the newspapers, and engendered considerable comment by columnists and editorialists who were only too anxious to seize upon the issue. Since the early warnings by the NEC against public criticism directed toward the group in power, journalists have to some extent circumvented the ban by recording their correct and proper criticism of any statement or action made against the NEC, thereby bringing it to public attention. Dr. Puey's letter, therefore, was greeted in the press with a largely negative reaction, with Puey being accused of using the students as a front for his own political gain.

An exception to this type of coverage we believe is that of Kukrit Pramoj, influential publisher of the leading Thai daily. In his March 9 Siam Rath column, Kukrit took Puey to task for glorifying constitutional government for its own sake, and glossing over the serious weaknesses of the 1968 Constitution. Kukrit pointed out that the King's March 4 speech to Thammasat students "on building democracy" was by far a better approach to the problem, focusing on really substantive preparation for participation in democracy rather than on the forms of constitutionalism.

Kukrit's approach, which has found support in other editorials, is interesting due to Kukrit's close support of the King. This is in contrast to Puey, who as a supporter and confidante of Pridi Panomyong, is regarded with some suspicion by His Majesty. Puey's links with Pridi are those of a former student and follower during Pridi's leadership of the underground movement, and we do not believe Puey favors Pridi's return to a political role in Thailand. However, the fact that Pridi was Prime Minister at the time of the death of Rama VIII, the present King's brother, and was adjudged guilty of complicity by the Thai courts, makes any link with Pridi an implicit threat to the Monarchy. Kukrit, then, may be opposing Puey on behalf of the King, as well as on his own behalf. Monarchists may well feel that a Puey-led student movement might develop the anti-monarchist tones of the early revolutionary period.

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