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POL-15-2
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A-346 | CONFIDENTIAL | HANDLING INDICATOR

RECEIVED
DEPARTMENT OF STATE
JUN 26 1 03 PM 1970
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ANALYSIS BRANCH

TO : Department of State

June Ed response no one person assigned production

Action assigned to
Action Taken

FROM : Amembassy BANGKOK

DATE: June 22, 1970

SUBJECT : Thoughts on the Reopening of Parliament

Date of Action
Action Office Symbol
Name of Officer

REF :

SUMMARY. With the June 20th ceremonial reopening of Parliament by the King rapidly approaching, a decision reportedly taken by the Cabinet at its meeting on June 16th serves as a reminder that this second session of the new Parliament will undoubtedly also have its moments of stress and tension and that the process of adjustment to constitutional institutions will be a continuing one. It seems unlikely, however, that the stresses will be sufficient to threaten the existence of Parliament. END SUMMARY.

According to the Bangkok Post, the Cabinet decided on June 16 to reject all proposals for amendment of the constitution. This Cabinet action was simply a formal ratification of a position the government has long been known to hold. Two of the proposed amendments pertained very directly to the role of the legislature vis-a-vis the executive: one provided for Members of Parliament to be eligible for appointment as Cabinet ministers without having to resign as members of Parliament, as they now must; the other provided for a vote of confidence to be taken following the Cabinet's presentation of its policy to Parliament. The draft amendments had wide backing among MP's, including most of the government party MP's. Most of the latter, however, backtracked after, as Spokesman Prasit Choopinit reported, Prime Minister Thanom made it clear there were to be no amendments.

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Drafted by: POL:PHValdes:bb 6/18/70
Contents and Classification Approved by: POL:William C. Hamilton
Clearances: EA/JPMorgan (in draft)

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The Government faces the new session with a party that has grown during the past year to 114 members, giving it more than a bare majority. Moreover, it managed during the course of the last session of Parliament to establish firmer voting discipline in the SPT. The Government is, therefore, in a stronger position as the new session commences than it was when Parliament opened last year. The constitutional amendment issue, however, is a reminder that its difficulties are not over.

The SPT is a not yet stable mixture of two disparate component groups -- on the one hand RTG leaders, who brought the new constitution into existence and are prepared to see Parliament perform its functions as carefully prescribed in the constitution, but are not prepared to concede to it very much of their own power, and on the other hand the SPT MP's, who are prepared to follow and support the party line, but want to have a share in fashioning the line and want greater powers for Parliament, at the expense of the executive. They have now been beaten down on the question of amending the constitution, but as far as they are concerned the issue is not dead, and they will revive it when they see the chance. The SPT MP's, however, are, as a body, very conscious of the realities of power in Thailand today, and they are very aware of the last eleven years without Parliament. They are, therefore, very sensitive to the necessity of being very cautious and not pushing the generals too far. The RTG leaders, in turn, would find it most awkward to have to resort to another coup, and they are, moreover, finding some positive advantages in having a Parliament.

One additional stress within the SPT appears to have been considerably eased. Both before the February 1969 elections and well into Parliament's first session there was considerable strain between the two major factions, that organized by Lt.General Sawaeng Senanarong and Maj.General Sanga Kittikachorn in the Prime Minister's name, and that organized largely by Sen. Prasit Kanchanawat in behalf of General Praphat. All evidence indicates that Praphat was not trying to exploit his group to undercut Prime Minister Thanom, but jealousies arose among members of the two factions and this affected the stability of the party. In the past eight or nine months, however, Sawaeng's position in the party has become somewhat weakened and therefore less controversial, and more recently there have been a number of gestures of solidarity between Thanom and Praphat. One issue which appeared to come between Praphat and Thanom was recently resolved in a manner that should be most pleasing to both -- former Budget Director Renoo, a favorite of Thanom's, was removed to the great satisfaction of Praphat, then placed in a prestigious and useful job where he would, nevertheless, be less of a nuisance to Praphat, and he was replaced at the Budget by Thanom's first choice, a man Praphat is known not to like particularly, but who would give Praphat fewer difficulties. With the two leaders clearly firmly committed to support each other conflicts at the lower levels between their supporters have eased.

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This is not to say there is peace and harmony in the ranks of the SFT. Police General Prasert has been attempting to build a personal following and has come into conflict with Praphat in the process. There have been a number of indications of this. A bill on police investigatory powers was initiated with Praphat's support to reduce the powers of the police, and was fought to the end, unsuccessfully, by Prasert and his followers. In the course of the outcry against the draft press bill, Praphat deflected criticism away from himself and his Interior Ministry officials directly onto Prasert. Finally, the two appear to have come into direct conflict in the Roi Et by-election. Praphat's choice was named as the official SFT candidate. The Liberal Party, basically a Praphat group, then faced the dilemma of either supporting the SFT candidate and risking the charge of being a ghost party, or putting up their own candidate who would compete with their protector's choice. After considerable hesitation the party opted not to run a candidate. Several of its members, however, have come out strongly in support of a candidate who has been reported to be heavily supported and encouraged by Prasert. The Praphat-Prasert difficulties are reflected within the SFT. It is, however, a fairly uneven contest -- Praphat being considerably more powerful than Prasert -- and its repercussions within the party are likely to be considerably less serious than when Thanom supporters and Praphat supporters were vying against each other.

The SFT can take considerable comfort from the fact that all other parties in Parliament are having equal if not greater internal difficulties. The conflict within the Liberal Party as it has erupted in connection with the Roi Et election has been mentioned, though this is not really of assistance to the government, since the party is generally pro-government. The Democrats, however, are suffering serious dissension and party leaders have expressed extremely gloomy prognostications to us. The long-standing issue of what to do about the Bangkok municipality and Lord Mayor Chalit has become mixed with an apparent conflict between party leader Seni Pramoj and Secretary General Yai Switcharta, as well as a long-standing desire on the part of the "Young Turks" in the party to rejuvenate the leadership. As for the other parties, the Democratic Front has virtually ceased to exist, its leader Dr. Phaitoon being its only remaining member in Parliament. The seven MP's who defected from the party have as yet not decided whether to remain as independents or try to form a new party.

In summary, the next session of Parliament promises to provide its share of cliff-hangers, as the various factors touched on above have their effect on problems that arise (sharply critical opposition speeches, bills that distress the government leadership, possible delays over the budget, etc.). Fundamentally, however, the situation appears more stable than it did last year, and we would expect that the slow and sometimes difficult process of adjustment to the new institutions will progress.

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