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Name of Officer

FROM: AmConsulate, Chiang Mai

DATE: December 1, 1972

SUBJECT: The Effects of the Abolition of Parliament on Political Grievance Communication and Provincial Administration

REF:

I. INTRODUCTION

This is one of a set of airgrams on this subject which are being prepared by the other Consulates in Thailand as well as by the Embassy. It follows the outline we received from the Political Section.

II. SUMMARY

In the North, there is little effective interest in national-level politics. Political grievances are almost wholly local in nature, not directed against "the system". These local grievances, however, are frequently expressed, often effectively, through a variety of channels: ex-MP's, the press, civic action units, government officials, municipal and provincial assemblies, and Colonel Narong's Committee. Of these channels, the press is now the most important, with Narong, at least by reputation, a close second.

There has been no change in the location of ex-MP's. About 40 percent spent almost all

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of their time in Bangkok before the coup and continue to do so; the rest are in their home provinces. Almost all have returned to their primary professions, which for 44 percent is business or commerce, and for 39 percent law. Some 62 percent continue to have significant influence in the local power structure, and 22 percent have maintained fairly close ties with the Bangkok national leadership. Thirty-one percent are members of municipal or provincial assemblies. Before the coup, 84 percent had a significant degree of political liaison with their constituents; this figure has now dropped to 47 percent.

There has been a slight improvement in the relationship between government officials and citizens, but this seems to be more a part of the general modernization process than specifically related to the coup or lack of Parliament. The NEC has given governors more authority over DOLA officials within their provinces, which is a useful step toward decentralization. However, the governors' lack of authority over officials and budgets of other ministries still greatly circumscribes their ability to deal with local problems at the local level. The tambon assemblies have very limited importance in local government as corporate bodies, but their members, as natural community leaders, play a vital role in the political grievance process. This role has not changed as a result of the abolition of Parliament. Overall, the consequences of Parliament's demise have not been of much direct importance to local administration.

Except insofar as it may have freed the central government's hands to devote more resources to CI, the abolition of Parliament has had no effect on insurgency in the North. Even in the broadest perspective, we doubt that the question of whether or not Thailand has a national Parliament has more than a peripheral relationship to the insurgency situation here.

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III. POLITICAL GRIEVANCES -- UPWARD COMMUNICATION

A. Extent Grievances Made Known. Although it is exceedingly difficult to document or reduce to statistics, our impression is that popular grievances and aspirations in North Thailand are made known to Government authorities to about the same extent as in other rural Asian societies. There have certainly been no dearth of complaints in any of the channels mentioned below. We see no signs that popular voices are repressed, except in certain sensitive areas such as pro-Communist activities or public criticism of the NEC or its policies. Such restrictions as these, moreover, are not really onerous for the vast majority of the people. The Communists have gained virtually no support thus far among the ethnic Thai of the North, and most people have only passing interest at most in national-level politics. As an ex-MP in Chiang Rai, Somsart Ratanasak, put it, "These are mostly rural people, and they only think about their families and about religion. As far as national politics is concerned, they respect the King; otherwise they have no opinions at all". Another ex-MP from Chiang Rai, In-lor Sapasree, commented, "The common people don't care who rules in Bangkok as long as they have the necessities of life and the prospect of an education for their children".

Popular "political" grievances, therefore, are almost wholly limited to strictly local issues -- the need for better educational or health facilities, requests for assistance in various agricultural matters, complaints against misbehavior or corruption on the part of local officials, etc. Even the intellectual and student elites show only scant interest in national and international politics (other than a small, leftist, semi-underground minority). Except for some participation in the recent anti-Japanese campaign, student activism has been limited to parochial administrative matters such as tuition, fees, and regulations.

In summary, national-level political grievances are not expressed in the North, mostly because they do not seem to exist. There are virtually no complaints against "the system". (The extent to which such complaints might rise were restrictions against them to be removed cannot be determined with certainty, but in the absence of a widespread subversive movement with

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political organization among the masses, we do not think they would greatly increase.) On the other hand, local grievances abound, and many of them are expressed and heard by someone in authority.

B. Channels of Grievance Communication. There are several channels of communication for local grievances which are currently in use:

1. Ex-Parliamentarians. The ex-MP's are still a significant channel of grievance communication, though to a considerably lesser extent than before the coup. For further discussion on this matter, see part IV below.

2. The Press. The press has been greatly strengthened since the coup in its role as vox populi. People come to journalists with their problems more often than in the past, and several observers have noted an increased sense of responsibility on the part of journalists to act on the popular behalf. The editors and reporters are clearly enjoying the increased importance and prestige their new role has brought them. Subjects of political grievances which have appeared in the local press run the gamut of typical local complaints--corruption, lack of compensation for land taken for road construction, water shortages, disputes over land use, and problems with local officials. Moreover, press stories usually evoke at least a hearing and some sort of response from the relevant authorities. In a recent example, a group of bus and truck drivers came to a Chiang Mai newspaper office with a complaint that ex-KMT refugees were collecting tolls on a public road. The resulting story brought a prompt police promise to investigate, a vigorous denial by a "KMT" spokesman that they were responsible, and, presumably, at least a temporary cessation of the practice.

3. Civic Action Units. Civic action and psywar elements of military and para-military organizations (e.g., BPP school-teachers, MDU's, RTA units in certain operations) sometimes serve as channels of grievance communication. However, they only reach relatively small (though sometimes militarily important) segments of the population. Moreover, their

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performance has been spotty at best. This grievance channel does not seem to have been affected one way or another by the coup and consequent lack of a Parliament.

4. Government Officials. All ranking Government officials, by the nature of their jobs, must have a considerable amount of contact with the people under them. However, whether or not such contact results in meaningful communications of popular views depends primarily on the individual official involved; and only a minority of officials use their offices aggressively to seek out and act on popular grievances. This channel of political expression seems to be only slightly more important now than it was before the coup. For further discussion, see Part V below.

5. Municipal and Provincial Assemblies. The abolition of Parliament may have enhanced somewhat the political function of municipal and provincial assemblies. Some assembly members took their role as popular representative more seriously, such as Chiang Mai Municipal Councilor Suntorn Sivilai who began to hold weekly meetings in wats (made "non-political" by having a sermon from a monk) to hear problems and answer questions. However, this is mostly due to the fact that he is relatively young and has ambitions for higher political office. The coup may have discouraged many other assemblymen about their future political prospects and led them to decrease their contacts with the people. Most have probably continued along the same lines they had in the past. In any event, new assemblymen will be appointed in December and January (rather than elected as in the past), and this will probably diminish their status as representatives of the people and as channels of grievance communication.

6. Colonel Narong. Colonel Narong's Committee for the Suppression of Undesirable Elements has rapidly become an important channel for grievance communications. There is a widespread belief, at least among urban newspaper-readers, that the Committee cuts red tape and gets quick results. However, for the North, Colonel Narong and his group are more important in reputation than in fact. The Committee has

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no permanent representative in this area, though one of its members has made visits on particular cases. Nonetheless, even at this distance, Narong has given many people the impression that they can get a hearing in high places for their problems. In the future, this could become an even more important channel of grievance communication.

IV. ACTIVITIES OF EX-MP'S.*

A. Activities and Locations. We know the current locations of 30 of the North's 36 former MP's. Of these, 12 (40%) spend all or almost all of their time in Bangkok. They are the same ones who did so before the coup. The rest are in their home provinces. Again, they are the same ones who spent most of their time at home (with the exception of Parliamentary sessions) before the coup. Thus there has been little change in this regard. We have information on the professions of all 36 MP's. The vast majority are either in business and commerce (44%) or are lawyers (39%). Of the rest, two are working as journalists, two are doctors, and two are municipal officials. Generally speaking, after the coup, the MP's returned to their primary profession, whatever it may have been.

B. Position in Power Structure. With regard to the current relationship of the former MP's to local Government officials and the informal power structure, we have sufficient information to make a judgment on 21 of the 36: six (29%) are very influential in their communities; seven (33%) have considerable influence; and eight (38%) are without apparent local political significance. Also, we believe that eight of the former Northern MP's have maintained close or fairly close ties to the NEC (e.g. Preeda Phatanatabut of Chiang Rai, Sant Thepmani of Lamphun, Serm Lokluang and Bu nyong Watanapong of Uttaradit, Suchon Champoonot of Phitsanuloke, Udon Tantisuntorn

* The statistics in Section A are based on known facts or readily available information, and are therefore fairly firm. The figures in Sections B and C, are based mostly on observations and judgments by the reporting officers. They should be considered illustrative and general rather than statistically accurate.

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of Tak, and Suphot Tangtrakul of Phetchabun). Some of these are locally active and influential, and some are not. Finally, eight of the former MP's are provincial assemblymen and three are municipal assemblymen (31% of total), which sometimes gives tham a position of political significance in the local power structure.

C. Political Liaison with Constituents. We have enough information on 30 of the former MP's to make judgments on their relations with their constituents. Before the coup, 11 (37%) had active liaison with their constituents; 14 (47%) had some liaison; and five (17%) had little or none. After the coup, eight (27%) continued close contact with constituents; six (20%) maintained some; and 16 (53%) had little or none.

As these figures indicate, most of the MP's who had close relationships with their constituents before the coup have maintained them. However, most of them who previously had more limited political contact with the people now maintain little or none at all. Therefore, there has been a significant reduction, though by no means total elimination, of this channel of political grievance communication.

V. CHANGES IN PROVINCIAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

A. Relations with Citizenry. The traditional popular view of Government officials in the North is not that they are representatives or servants of the people, but rather masters sent from afar to rule. For the most part, this view still prevails, especially among the rural people, but also among many if not the majority of officials. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Government officials have not been a widely used channel of political grievance communication.

Nevertheless, some of the more energetic and forward-looking officials have sought out popular grievances and aspirations as a means of getting "feedback", to check and improve Government administration. A few officials have even persisted in this effort, overcome inherent popular suspicions, and produced results to the extent they have become something of a father-figure to the people under their jurisdiction. While

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such cases are rare, we believe there has been some overall improvement over the past two years in the relationship between officials and citizens. However, we detected no upsurge in this following the coup, or resulting from Bangkok orders for officials to help replace MP's in an ombudsman function. Rather, such improvement as there has been seems to be part of a longer-term trend brought about by better education and training of officials and modernizing attitudes on both sides.

Traditionally, most Governors have maintained a "petition box" or file with a subordinate designated to be in charge of it. This is normally used for anonymous letters accusing officials of corruption or misconduct; it is rarely used for more generalized political grievances or aspirations. Nonetheless, it has provided a check on some of the more blatant abuses. This system has continued to function much the same after the coup as before it.

B. Governor's Relationship to Bangkok. Recent NEC rulings have given the Governors considerably more authority than they had in dealing with and transferring their DOLA subordinates. Previously, almost every significant move had to be approved by Bangkok. This is a useful step toward decentralization and it somewhat enhances the governors' ability to be responsive to local needs and demands. However, the governors' authority, or rather lack of it, over non-DOLA officials in the provinces has not changed. As the Governor of Chiang Rai commented recently, "I can only request the cooperation of those officials (of other ministries). If they give it, it's a blessing!"

Thus the governors' ability to deal with local problems on the local level remains highly circumscribed. For almost anything involving either money or other Ministries, approval must come from Bangkok--at best a time-consuming process involving a great deal of red tape; often it appears to be more trouble than it is worth. This is another important factor which makes Government officials less important than they otherwise might be as a channel of political grievance communication.

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With the exception of Colonel Narong's Committee, discussed above, we are not aware of any new channels for upward grievance communication which have been opened up as a result of the coup or of a year of NEC rule.

C. Municipal, Provincial, Tambon Assemblies. For comments on Municipal and Provincial Councils, see III B above and our recent airgram on this subject. The new assemblies, which will be appointed rather than elected, will undoubtedly have a different role than the present ones, and they will probably be less effective in terms of political liaison with their constituents.

Our information on Tambon Assemblies, which consist of the kamnan, puujaibans*, and their assistants, is rather limited. We have the impression that they have become more active during the past year, at least in terms of the holding of a number of DOLA-sponsored seminars and conferences. The tambon assemblymen are closer to the common people than any other identifiable "political" group. As corporate bodies, however, lacking real power of their own, they do not seem to have a great deal of influence on local government, except in those relatively unusual cases where a District Officer actively seeks and listens to their advice. On the other hand, the individual kamnans and puujaibans very often serve as the immediate representatives of the people in presenting grievances to the government officials, journalists, former MP's or whatever channel may be available. In this sense, they form a vital link in the political grievance process. However, they perform this function in the role of natural community leaders, not as someone on the "outside" to whom appeals are made. In this sense, they should more properly be viewed as part of the citizenry, rather than as part of the political system to which the people make known their problems. Their part in the political process does not seem to have changed as a result of the abolition of Parliament.

D. Comment on Part V. We do not believe that Parliament was a significant impediment to the effective functioning of local government in the North, except insofar as it may have

* A tambon is an administrative grouping of several small villages. The kamnan is chief of the tambon, and puujaibans are village chiefs.

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hindered the effective functioning of national government, on which effective local government highly depends. Neither, however, was Parliament a very important aid to local administrators. Its abolition, however, served to widen somewhat the gap between local officials and the people; and to close what was in some cases a useful channel of communication between the local and central government levels. The forthcoming elimination of elected municipal and provincial assemblies may have similar effects on the political system. Overall, however, the consequences of Parliament's elimination have not been very serious for local government, and have been offset by the somewhat improved performance and responsiveness of the central government under the NEC.

VI. COUNTER-INSURGENCY IMPLICATIONS.

In the immediate sense, the abolition of Parliament had no effect on insurgency in the North, except insofar as it may have freed the central government's hands to devote more resources to CI, which it has done. MP's rarely if ever had anything to do with insurgency matters on the local level. Moreover, since Parliament was never particularly popular, its demise did not even give the Communists useful propaganda material.

In a broader perspective, looking over the longer term, we also find it hard to visualize any important impact Parliament's abolition will have on the insurgency. As we have reported in other contexts, what is important to the vast majority of people in the North is not the form of government or whether or not is has a Cabinet or a Parliament; they are only concerned about the government's performance in providing social services, economic advancement, security, and stability. Of course an important prerequisite of any enlightened political system is a method for expressing grievances and getting "feedback" from the people to the rulers. A Parliament is one method for doing this, but it is not necessarily the only method nor necessarily the best one for Thailand. The past

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Parliament was only marginally useful in this role; it has not been greatly missed; and there is no particular reason to believe any further national representative assembly would be much better. Therefore, in terms of Thailand's long-term ability to withstand the Communist insurgent threat, the question of a Parliament is largely peripheral.

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