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1/1/68

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4/16/96 167

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ANALYSIS BRANCH

TO : Department of State

FROM : Amembassy BANGKOK

DATE: April 16, 1968

SUBJECT : Kukrit Takes Another Look at the Farang

REF :

Action Assigned to TB noted

M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, the controversial editor of Siam Rath, addressed a group of approximately 120 Americans in the International Church April 7 on the subject of "The Farang As Seen Through Thai Eyes." His talk was one of a series of lectures given each Sunday during Lent by various individuals to a church study group on the general topic of relationships between Eastern and Western cultures in Thailand.

Kukrit began his speech with a brief oral sketch of historical contacts between Thailand and the West. By the end of the 19th century, he said, the farang (Westerner) had come to represent a new standard of values for the Thai people. A facade of westernization was imposed upon Thai society under King Chulalongkorn and various Thai customs were abolished to avoid giving offense to farangs. For example, he said, the custom of prostrating oneself before the King and crawling on all fours in his presence was stopped because farangs found it objectionable. However, he added, "we Thai still proudly practice this custom when there are no farangs around to observe it." Polygamy was also given up just to please the foreigners, said Kukrit, pointing out that the Thai people saw nothing wrong with this custom themselves.

Kukrit stated that during this time the French were generally disliked by the Thai but the British were greatly admired in spite of their imperialist policies. This is still true today, because the Thai find the British quite similar to themselves in one respect: they are personal isolationists and periodically need to get away from foreign cultures and

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Drafted by: POL:ACMurphy:jb 4-12-68

Contents and Classification Approved by: POL:WCHamilton

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steep themselves in their own. This is different from the Americans, he said, who often try to participate too fully in Thai life. The Thai people, said Kukrit, are embarrassed by Americans trying to act just like Thai and do not enjoy seeing Americans attempt to play Thai instruments, dance Thai dances or even speak the Thai language unless they are among the very few who can speak it correctly. Often, he said, the Thai like to get away by themselves and do things in the Thai way without having some American come around trying to find out what they are up to.

Kukrit stated that the Thai people often do various things only because, if they did not, "what would the farangs say?" Most Thai, he said, would be very embarrassed if a farang should come to their house unannounced, and would rush about to tidy up the house and put on Western clothes before receiving the visitor. He pointed out that the Thai experience a feeling of shame and fear in their contacts with farangs because they consider themselves to be "poor relations." These feelings, he said, are expressed personally by smiles and giggles and in a general way by constantly striving to change features of their society which might cause the farangs to look down on them. Even such projects as cleaning up stagnant klongs (canals) are undertaken to avoid farang criticism rather than to satisfy the desires of the Thai residents of the city. This feeling of shame, said Kukrit, is a serious obstacle to true friendship between the Thai and the farangs. "I often wish we had been the colony of some nation in the past", said Kukrit, "so that by now we could have overcome these feelings and would no longer feel like poor relations."

Many years ago, said Kukrit, the United States used to be considered as a disinterested friend who could be trusted and Americans were assumed to be men of high moral values. This view, he said, was strengthened when at the end of World War II the United States helped Thailand through her difficulties with the British over war reparations. Since then, however, many Thai have visited the United States and have come back quite disillusioned. In addition, he said, Americans have come here to live in great numbers and clashes between Americans and Thais have occurred frequently. Kukrit stated that many Thai feel that the Americans have somehow failed to achieve a satisfactory relationship in their dealings with the Thais but they are unable to explain where the Americans have made their mistakes. The main problem, he said, is that American society is affluent and permissive whereas the Thai society is poor and prohibitive in nature. The Thai are at first envious of Americans and then begin to feel defensive and increasingly nationalistic. The large influx of American GI's has complicated this problem, he said, pointing out that the GI's are by nature a far cry from the first Americans, primarily missionaries, who came to Thailand. Another adverse factor, said Kukrit, is the great number of American advisers in Thailand, adding that Thai officials say privately that many U.S. advisers are not as qualified in their fields as their Thai counterparts. Another irritant, he said, was the fact that U.S.

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foreign policy in Southeast Asia depends from year to year on elections in the United States. Thus, he said, the Thai are kept in suspense because their fate is periodically being decided by happenings thousands of miles away.

Referring to his December 26 editorial in Siam Rath, in which he castigated Americans as "slaves" and "beasts", Kukrit stated that his purpose in writing such an editorial was to speak for all of the Thai people in reacting to U.S. press criticisms of Thailand. In our society, he said, no one dares to reply to such criticisms openly for fear that the government will accuse them of being communists who are trying to poison Thailand's relations with her allies. Kukrit stated that since no one could possibly accuse him of being communist he was the only one in a position to speak freely. Admitting that he himself did not believe many of the statements he made in that editorial, Kukrit claimed that he spoke for many thousands of Thai who were able to blow off steam vicariously through his editorial and who nowwere able to feel free with Americans once again. "Having relieved these tensions as I did", he said laughingly, "I believe that it would not be inappropriate if I should receive a medal from the United States Congress." Goodwill, he said, will eventually overcome all our difficulties. Kukrit went on to state that the challenge of the massive U.S. presence in Thailand will in the long run unify the Thai people, who will rally around the figure of the present King to preserve and maintain the Thai way of life.

Asked by a member of the audience if he thought that the new constitution would have a positive influence on Thai society, Kukrit replied that the constitution is only a facade of modern liberalism and that it is not considered a serious instrument of government by RTG leaders. "Just as all new nations feel they must have their own airline", he said, "we must now have a constitution; otherwise what would the farangs say?"

COMMENT: Kukrit's explanation of his December 26 outburst may have been designed primarily to placate his farang audience, but it is undoubtedly true that thousands of Thai newspaper readers at that time enjoyed the rare spectacle of a Thai editor blasting the Americans, even if they felt he may have been overly harsh in his denunciations of the American character and far from good taste in his language. Kukrit is virtually the only editor in Thailand who can make such remarks with impunity (beyond the reprimand he is reported to have received from the Palace).

Kukrit's assessment of Thai attitudes is generally corroborated by the observations and experiences of American personnel in Thailand, although his claim that stagnant klongs are cleaned up only to please the farangs may be stretching things a bit. His comments on the constitution are obviously colored by his dislike of the present regime, especially its military members, and he has in fact been advocating in his editorials and columns the rapid promulgation of the constitution as a means of improving the domestic political climate.

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