



Thai Civil-Military Relations from 2001 – 2022

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Abstract

This paper investigates civil-military relations in two decades, employing qualitative methodology in which data were collected from document research and in-depth interviews with ten key informants obtained through purposive sampling. The objectives of the study were to investigate: 1) to examine the problems that arose in civil-military relations between 2001 and 2022 and 2) to explore the concepts and ideas of civil-military relations that are appropriate for Thai society. The results revealed that the dynamics of liberalism and sense of democracy became increasingly apparent in Thai society. The military which is still powerful over the society has transformed itself from the political dictatorship to be the creator of political ecology to achieve equilibrium, accepting civil politics as to avoid conflicts with the civil society. This can result in it playing both political and social roles more appropriately.

Keywords: *Civil-military relations, Military professionalism, Politics*

1. Introduction

Due to the victory of the civilian government in the 2001 General Election, the military started to become more optimistic about civilian supremacy. Yet, the victory seemed to be a warning of the worsening relationship between the government and the military. The administrative structure controlled by the conservatives felt as if they were being challenged by the new power. Having expressed his confidence in the exercise of his administrative power and the implementation of his populism policies, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra finally won the people's hearts in the early phase of his government. He confidently reorganized the armed forces as a result of his belief that military support could lead to government stability. His interference in the military finally resulted in the dismissal of the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army Surayud Chulanont. That was the last straw since this rank was the most powerful in Thai political system and Surayud Chulanont was the representative of the conservatives who was a military professional (Nelson, 2007).

The conflict intensified continuously when the political side increasingly interfered in the military as evidenced by the consecutive dismissal of three commanders-in-chief; each of them was in his term for one year before being appointed to the Supreme Commander which was considered as an overshadowed rank, resulting in so massive dissatisfaction among individuals in the military that the government was questioned about transparency and good governance in its administration. Such action against the military caused a crisis of faith and the decline in popularity of the government. It also weakened the conservatives supporting the military, leading to two coups d'état, one in 2006 and the other in 2014.

The two coups d'état revealed some strategies the military implemented to upgrade the prevention of government interference in military appointments and reshuffles. For instance, in 2006-2007, the military government issued a law in which all commanders-in-chief were required to be the members of committee for screening the nominated military candidates for appointments. The screening was joined by the political side consisting of civilians. However, when compared with the number of commanders-in-chief, the number of civilian members was smaller (Boonprong & Buala, 2021) and the implementation of preventive strategies became more noticeable after the coup d'état in 2014.

Despite criticism by the global society, the military government decided to play a democratic role to reduce the public pressure and maintain the status of "The Democratic Coup d'état" (Varol, 2012). Moreover, the military government issued some regulations that allowed them to retain its power righteously under the Constitution promulgated at that time. The government was said to practice "Stealth Authoritarianism," the use of the Constitution as a tool for retaining its power. For instance, the military

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government appointed 250 senators who had close relationship with the military. Together with the members of parliament, the appointed senators were granted power to select the prime minister who was the leader of the coup d'état (Boonprong, 2022). Consequently, civilians' political parties became weaker, and some independent organizations were always pro the government leaders and applied double standards in their operation, leading to lack of trust in justice.

In comparison with other countries having experienced hegemony, it was found that, during the past two decades, there were some interesting countries of which the military could adjust itself to changes in the global context. Turkey is the first interesting case. Hoping that the country would finally be accepted to join the EU, the country kept strengthening its democracy by overshadowing political leaders and political parties to strengthen and stabilize citizen politics with strong sense of democracy.

Noticeably, the attempted coup d'état in 2016 was unsuccessful and those taking part in the attempted coup were later investigated (Satana., 2022). On the contrary, Turkey needed to pass the challenging test by the European Union's members deeply concerned about the violation of the rights of the minorities in the country which remained unsolved. That is, the military still played its role in controlling the national security. In addition, different from other European countries of which the majority of the population were Christians, Turkey is a Muslim country and announces itself as a secular state that treats all its citizens equally regardless of religion. These two matters may be obstacles that prevent the country from being an EU member. Therefore, Turkish civil-military relations must be closely watched.

The other case is Indonesia which is different from Turkey. The Indonesian military was greatly reformed after the Fall of Suharto which ended the military power in the political system. The civilian government's increasing power was the result of its strength and transparency. For example, the president was required to nominate military leaders to the parliament for approval prior to official appointments.

In addition, the military defined its role as an intermediary in the political system, aiming to professionalize the national armed forces. New security ideologies – e.g., the provision of national security and defense – were also established. The awareness of new threats or proxy wars as forms of cooperation was also promoted since these might put Indonesia under pressure which probably caused the country to implement some international policies that might negatively affected each national security. Moreover, the military was one issue in Indonesia's Vision enacted in 2014 by President Joko Widodo who eagerly wished Indonesia to be a Global Maritime Fulcrum (Muhamad Haripin, Priamarizki, & Marzuki, 2021). Meanwhile, people's politics which became stronger did not allow the military to interfere or have power over the national politics like what it did in the past.

Looking back at Thai civil-military relations, it can be said that, despite unstoppable change in social, political, and economic contexts, the armed forces' mindset has never changed. They only adjust themselves to political situations. After the reign of King Rama IV, the military tends to play a conservative role in line with its ideology, "The King's Soldiers," rather than being overshadowed by civilian supremacy. In many historical events, the military acted as a political arbitrator to resolve a crisis, provide national defense, and promote national development (Chambers, P., 2020). This is considered to be the social cost that reflects the close relationship of the three pillars of the country: nation, religion, and monarchy. When compared to the political side, the military is more accepted. However, the new generation has come up with more strategic proposals. That is, the military must be investigated and must not interfere in the national politics.

Many theorists of civil-military relations in the 21st century proposed a compromise. That is, the military deserves a place in democracy but is assigned to play a different role or have specific duties. Also, it should be encouraged to join with civilians appropriately. It is impossible for a country to measure its democracy according to the standard of powerful countries like the U.S. since each country differs in terms of historical and social contexts. Therefore, success should be determined by the country's democratic strength and stability (Barany, 2012).

According to the concordance theory, the three pillars of a nation consisting of leaders, armed forces, and civilians are stakeholders who share mutual power in make decisions on the implementation of the public policies of the nation (Schiff, 2009). Likewise, the concept of civil-military partnership (Siddiqi,



2017) stated that they depend on each other; the administrative side needs to convince the military to take part in the determination of security budget and policy or the promotion of the armed forces' income by establishing a private company. This may cause the military not to get involved in the national politics (Ruengrattanakorn, A., 2020). On the contrary, according to the theory of 'principal-servant' in which 'principal' represents the government and 'servant' represents the military, the government has righteous power granted by the public and assigns the military duties in security policies. The military, hence, must be willing to complete those duties. Failing or refusing to complete those duties, they may be penalized or dismissed by the political side (Feaver, 2003).

This research then aimed to investigate causes of problems in civil-military relations which were not much in line with the main concepts and principles of democracy and to seek appropriate approaches for the development of the identity of Thai civil-military relations. Specifically, the upper class and the middle class willingly accepted military's political role and the 2006 and 2014 coups. This seems unusual in the global society which is approaching to democratic society. Meanwhile, civilians with political power recognize the military power over the national politics, knowing well that it can interfere and change the national politics whenever the national politics comes to a dead end or lacks stability. The researcher, then, attempted to figure out an approach for the management of civil-military relations so that the Thai civil-military relations are unique and different from what western thoughts define. However, the new approach proposed by this research must be internationally accepted.

2. Objectives

- 1) To explore problems in Thai civil-military relations from 2001-2022
- 2) To investigate concepts and ideas of civil-military relations appropriate for Thai military and government in the future

3. Materials and Methods

This qualitative research employed document research and in-depth interviews with 10 key informants obtained through purposive sampling. The researcher recruited key informants on his own, having evaluated that they were knowledgeable and able to provide the researcher with useful information. The key informants were divided into:

- 1) Five former commission officers whose ranks were General:
 - 1.1 Former Chairman of Advisory Board, Ministry of Defense
 - 1.2 Former Director-General, Office of Defense Budget
 - 1.3 Former Deputy Director of Joint Civil Affairs
 - 1.4 Former Commander of RTAF Security Forces command
 - 1.5 Former Deputy Commanding General of National Defense Studies Institute
- 2) Five civilians:
 - 2.1 Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Former Ambassador of Thailand to Japan
 - 2.2 Dean from a social science faculty, Rangsit University
 - 2.3 A full-time lecturer of Social Science Department, Mahidol University
 - 2.4 Policy and planning analyst and Internal Security Operations Commander
 - 2.5 Former Deputy Leader of Future Forward Party

Data obtained from the key informants were somehow limited as the researcher could not obtain confidential data that might affect their jobs. Since the researcher realized the significance of research ethics, each key informant was numbered 1-10. After each of the interviews, the researcher repeated all the words given in the interview to the key informants for the validity of data. In addition, the researcher mainly reviewed literature about civil-military relations after 2000.

4. Results and Discussion

The researcher allowed ten key informants to take their time analyzing the development of cracks in civil-military relations from the period of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001) to the period of



Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha (2022). After that, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with the key informants, asking them open-ended questions about Thai civil-military relations during the past two decades. The findings are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 Problems in Thai civil-military relations during the past two decades

Problems	Key Informant No.
1) The armed forces believed that they could better protect national interests than politicians.	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
2) Some Thai people believed that a coup could solve political crises.	1,3,4,6,7,9,10
3) The armed forces believed that they were the key political pillar.	1,2,3,4,7,8,9
4) Thai people believed that a coup could occur any time in the future; the current one was not the last.	1,4,6,7,8,10
5) The elected government and the military mistrust each other.	1,4,5,6,7,8

According to Table 1, eight key informants mutually agreed that the problem was rooted from the armed forces' belief that they loved the country more than politicians who were always stereotyped as those seeking to do corruption. In addition, for Thai people, the military has been believed to be a powerful institution (hegemony) for so long that it is recognized as a political culture that the leaders as well as some in the middle class are satisfied with. These people welcome a coup if it can resolve political crises or expel the corrupt government. This is consistent with the belief, "The armed forces are the national pillar and terminator of conflicts," mutually agreed by seven key informants explained that many Thai people truly believed that the military can solve national problems more effectively than politicians.

Six key informants' analyses revealed that the majority of Thai people were familiar with coups and deeply concerned that there would be more coups in the future if the nation was in chaos. Moreover, a climate of mistrust destroys the Thai political system. Leaders of the former elected governments always interfered in military appointments; those having close relationships with the governments were appointed to high positions with power that could support the governments, and there were many times when the nominated individuals were rejected by the governments. Interference could also be found in the military's planning budget, sometimes resulting in budget cut. Such interference caused the military to have negative attitudes towards the civilian governments. If the military played an antagonistic role, conflicts between the military and the government would probably arise. Moreover, if the government corrupted or failed to administer the nation effectively, the people would be in uproar which might lead to protests and national chaos. After that, a coup would be seen as a fair and righteous resolution, and the military would return to its roles in the political system.

However, in the era of globalization, the popularity of democracy is growing in many countries. As a result, new perspectives have been proposed to request the military to adjust itself or listen to civilians. In addition, proposed approaches for the management of Thai civil-military relations are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 Approaches for the management of Thai civil-military relations

Approaches	Key Informant No.
1) The military should be responsible for national defense only.	2,3,6,9,10
2) The military should aim at organizing activities that promote international security, e.g., peacekeeping force.	1,3,5,7,9
3) The Constitution must be amended, requiring the military to play an intermediary role in the political system.	1,3,5,7
4) The military must consent to be investigated by citizens.	All key informants
5) The military still maintains political power but needs to participate in the national development.	All key informants

Table 2 presents approaches proposed by the key informants viewing that no matter how political situations or the global trends in democracy are, the military remains powerful over the Thai political system



due to its manpower readiness. The military is a co-player with the government, supporting the government's national missions, e.g., disaster prevention and mitigation, poverty reduction, etc. However, to ensure its transparency, it needs to be investigated by the public and willing to receive comments or useful proposals. For example, its budget for the purchase of weapons must be clearly and transparently planned.

However, according to the key informants' opinion, the military should have military professionalism. Six out of them proposed that it should focus mainly on national defense. This proposal is not consistent with their opinion given in the interview that the military still maintains its political power for national development. The military should enhance its military professionalism. The military manpower in international security and defense operations should be upscaled, acting as a peacekeeping force and joining with allied countries in providing humanitarian aid as well as monitoring and preventing civil conflicts and wars in third world countries. These helps promote the image of Thai military internationally. In addition, a constitutional amendment can change the image of the military positively from a stakeholder that hinders democracy to an intermediary in the political system. That is, a key player can be removed from the political system and relocated to an appropriate place.

Regarding objective 1, it was found that, over the past two decades, the military had believed that it was the national institution that it was better to protect the interests of the nation than politicians, viewing that they would seek interests by committing corruption. In addition, the military's attitude that civilian politicians were supported by the conservative side who viewed that the military had close relationship with the three pillars: nation, religion, and monarchs, having been respected by Thai people for a long time. Therefore, the military was granted legitimacy compared to an invitation card that invited the military to interfere political power exercised by civilian politicians any time. However, people's politics has been growing stronger, resulting in the weakening of the military power over the national politics. Therefore, the military may encounter more political challenges if it does not change its role which may result in political conflicts in the future.

However, an appropriate form of civil-military relations which is consistent with objective 2 probably considering the political contexts, the concept proposed by Schiff (2009) is the most appropriate for the management of Thai civil-military relations. The concept of three pillars of a nation including leaders, armed forces, and civilians, is to establish peace negotiations. There is a challenging case in Thai society in which progressive parties have proposed the ending of military conscription. Agreeing with the proposal, the armed forces then decided to recruit regular troops via voluntary applications instead of conscription, and they received positive feedback. On the contrary, Siddiq (2017) proposed that the military and the civilian government should be strategic or tactical partners or share power if they have mutual benefits. This is not appropriate for a developing country as it may lead to conspiracy or abuse of power due to lack of effective justice. The concept of principal-servant by Feaver (2003) then is more appropriate for Thai society in some cases where the government leader is a former commander. In this situation, the military leaders, of course, have close relationship with the government and comply with the orders given by the government without limitations. On the contrary, if the government is elected and seeks to reorganize the armed forces, the leaders of the armed forces may ignore the government's policies which can lead to cracks in their relationships or conflicts. Therefore, it is possible that the military power will never disappear but will be 'concealed' due to the dynamics of political liberalism. Uncovering its power in political activities is then considered to be a strict prohibition. In conclusion, lessons learned for the development of military professionalism are essential for the armed forces in Thailand.

5. Conclusion

Despite the stability of Thai civil-military relations, the present government leader, former Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army, who led the 2014 Thai coup d'état, still has maintained his power granted by the current constitution and national bureaucracy for almost a decade. In the future, if the political system is disrupted and the disruption affects the benefits of the armed forces, what will Thai civil-military be like? The results of this study revealed that Thai armed forces still play their roles in the political system. They are stepping forward together with civil politics. When political parties become



stronger, it is not easy for the armed forces to conveniently interfere in politics as they have done in the past. Moreover, the dynamic change and development in Thai society have made it less feasible for the military to use coups as a tool for solving political problems and crises. This will lead to paradigm shifts for future military leaders. The military will not be so powerful as it used to be. If the military continues to play a political role, it will turn to a 'villain' in people's politics, especially in the eyes of the new generation who have no fear of criticizing the military's political role, security policy, and others in which the military takes part. Hence, playing no political roles is considered the best solution that helps maintain good civil-military relations.

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