

# The three paths of Major-General Chamlong Srimuang\*

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## Who is Chamlong Srimuang?<sup>1</sup>

On the morning of 8 January 1990, the citizens of Bangkok awoke to the news that 'the voice of heaven' had spoken.<sup>2</sup> This was how Major-General Chamlong Srimuang described his landslide re-election victory for the post of Governor of Bangkok. Chamlong pledged that his second four-year term of office would be characterized by the same tenets of honesty and sacrifice which had typified his *modus operandi*, not only during his political career, but also throughout his time as a bright, if unconventional, army officer and leading 'Young Turk'. Sporting a military-style crew cut and a *morhom* collarless shirt, the devoutly Buddhist retired general adheres to a strict code of behaviour; in some respects, his way of life is more austere than that of most Thai monks. He eats only once a day, is a vegetarian, has taken a vow of celibacy, and donates his official salary to charity. The title of Chamlong's collected articles and speeches refers to the 'three paths' his life has taken: the army,

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<sup>1</sup> Title of a chapter in Roeng Ekkrat, *Ni lae Chamlong Srimuang* [This is Chamlong Srimuang]. Bangkok: Khlet Thai Publishing, 1989, pp. 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 8 January 1990.

politics, and religion.<sup>3</sup> Chamlong's outward *persona* as a clean-living, highly-disciplined leader is well-known. His three chosen paths, however, merit closer examination. Without building up a detailed understanding of leading figures such as Chamlong Srimuang, it is impossible to make sense of the day-to-day machinations of contemporary Thai politics.

Although Chamlong is ethnically Chinese, he speaks no Chinese and insists that he thinks of himself as Thai.<sup>4</sup> His mother was a street trader, and his father, who died when Chamlong was a baby, a fishmonger; his stepfather worked for the post office. The Governor's very ordinary background may account for his ability to strike a popular chord among working class and lower-middle class Bangkokians. He has written of his pride at being an alumnus of ordinary local schools rather than of famous private institutions.<sup>5</sup>

For poor boys in Thailand, the military and the monkhood offer two possible routes to a free, college-level education. Chamlong took the former, and received his bachelor's degree from the prestigious Chulachomklao Military Academy, which models itself on West Point. In 1959, he won his first ever election, when he was chosen to be the Academy's Chief Cadet. At the age of twenty-five, Chamlong graduated from Chulachomklao and joined the Signals Corps, knowing that by pursuing a technical discipline, he had far more chance of being sent abroad to study for extended periods. During the early 1960s, he was able to take electronics-related courses in New Jersey, Georgia, and Hawaii. He claims, somewhat disingenuously, that his main goals during this period were having fun, shopping, and saving money.<sup>6</sup> Between spells in

<sup>3</sup> Chamlong Srimuang, *Thang sam praeng* [The junction of three paths], vols. 1-3. Bangkok: Khlet Thai Publishing, 1990; first editions 1982 (vol. 1), 1983 (vol. 2) and 1986 (vol. 3).

<sup>4</sup> Chamlong Srimuang, *Chiwit Chamlong* [The life of Chamlong]. Bangkok: H.J.K. A.V. Publishing, 1990, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> Chai-Anan Samudavanija, *The Thai Young Turks*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982, p. 28.

the United States, Chamlong entered the monkhood for a period of three months, before marrying in 1964. His wife, Sirilak, is a graduate of Chulalongkorn University's School of Pharmacy.<sup>7</sup> She also served in the army; the couple have no children.

In 1966, Chamlong was abruptly ordered to Laos, where he was given command of a Special Combat Unit. He claims in his autobiography that the transfer was a mistake: another officer named Chamlong had been the intended recipient of the order.<sup>8</sup> After seeing action in Laos, he attended the Thai Army Staff College, graduated second in his class in 1970, then served as a desk officer in Vietnam. He was then awarded a scholarship to the US Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, where he gained a MSc degree in Administration. His thesis was on labour unrest in Thailand.

Chamlong has said that when he heard of the attempts being made by Thai university students in 1973 to oust the military regime of Thanom Kittikachorn, he sympathized so strongly that he sent them a donation of \$200 from Monterey.<sup>9</sup> But on his return to Bangkok and a post in military intelligence, Chamlong became alarmed at the strength of anti-military sentiment among the newly-emerging liberal forces. Chamlong joined the 'Young Military Officers' Group' (better known as the 'Young Turks'), a secretive association led by Chulachomklao Class 7 graduates, and dedicated to the creation of a 'professional' army.<sup>10</sup>

The role of the Young Turks in the October 1976 coup, which placed the civilian administration of Thanin Kraivichien in power, has yet to be fully explained. They were, however, instrumental in having Thanin replaced by General Kriangsak Chomanan a year later; and Chamlong himself has sometimes been credited with engineering the appointment of General Prem Tinsulanond to the premiership when Kriangsak was removed in

<sup>7</sup> Chamlong, *Chiwit Chamlong*, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 11 July 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Suchit Bunbongkarn, *The military in Thai politics 1981-86*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987, p. 11.

1980.<sup>11</sup> Chamlong was made Secretary-General to the Prime Minister for his services - thereby gaining valuable political experience - but resigned the following year, partly in protest over a proposed abortion bill. By this time Chamlong had become extremely religious, and, although technically still an army officer, was spending much of his energies on lay preaching tours of the provinces, giving addresses to villagers on such topics as the virtues of abstinence.<sup>12</sup> He also urged people to form their own political parties, and so help to create a genuine Thai democracy.<sup>13</sup> In 1983 he made his name as a democrat by initiating a campaign to oppose reactionary constitutional changes which had been strongly advocated by the Army Commander-in-Chief, General Arthit Kamlang-ek.<sup>14</sup>

In 1985, Chamlong stood as an independent candidate in the election for Governor of Bangkok. Although he began his campaign as an outsider, popular faith in his integrity, coupled with public dissatisfaction about corruption in the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA), quickly made him a front runner, especially after his campaign became widely supported by the press. Chamlong won almost half a million votes, twice as many as his nearest rival, and his victory sent shock waves through the established parties. As governor, Chamlong concentrated his greatest efforts on two 'cleanliness' issues: the physical appearance of the city, and the conduct and performance of BMA officials.

Immediately prior to the 1988 General Election, Chamlong formed his group of supporters into an official political party,

<sup>11</sup> See the anonymous article 'Phontri Chamlong Srimuang "yukprasri-ari" thang kanmu'ang thai' [Major-General Chamlong Srimuang: 'The era of Buddhist Utopia' in Thai politics] in the weekly news magazine *Su Anakhot*, 18-24 May 1988, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Peter A. Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation and conflict: the political functions of urban Thai Buddhism*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989, p. 183.

<sup>13</sup> Chamlong, *Thang sam praeng*, vol. 1, pp. 28-29.

<sup>14</sup> Paisal Sricharatchanya and Rodney Tasker, 'The liberals strike back', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 24 February 1983.

the Palang Dhamma (Moral Force) Party. The PDP contested 318 seats in the election - more than any other single party - but won only 14. Chamlong proved unable to inspire popular support for largely unknown candidates running under his party banner. The election outcome illustrated the problems faced by a new Bangkok-based party in dealing with well-established money-oriented parties, especially upcountry. But the poor results of the PDP also reflected two successful smear campaigns: one centred on allegations about Chamlong's role in the 6 October 1976 massacre of students at Thammasat University, another on his affiliation with a fundamentalist Buddhist sect known as *Santi Asoke*, widely seen as heretical.<sup>15</sup>

The new government, headed by Chatchai Choonavan, was more or less openly hostile to Chamlong. Chatchai's brother-in-law, Interior Minister Pramarn Adireksarn, waged what amounted to a personal war against the Bangkok Governor, exploiting legal ambiguities to maximize the Ministry's jurisdiction over the BMA.<sup>16</sup> But Chamlong's January 1990 election success amounted to an overwhelming vote of confidence in the Governor, whilst the strong showing of PDP candidates in the city and district council elections indicated that Chamlong's party was now a major force to be reckoned with. The *Bangkok Post* called it 'an election victory which could have an impact on national politics in the short and medium term'.<sup>17</sup>

### Chamlong Srimuang's 'three paths'

#### *One: the soldier*

Chamlong's military background contrasts with his image as a devout, non-violent Buddhist, as well as with his attempts to present himself as the champion of a democratic system, in

<sup>15</sup> Vithoon Amorn, "'Mr Clean' brushed aside', *Bangkok Post*, 26 July 1988, examines the possible reasons for the poor election showing by the PDP.

<sup>16</sup> Rodney Tasker, 'Mud against Mr Clean', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 December 1989.

<sup>17</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 8 January 1990.

which ordinary citizens would have the power to restrain the influence of soldiers and bureaucrats. One writer has attempted to explain this contradiction by claiming that Chamlong gradually lost interest in the army as a means to power, at the same time as his enthusiasm for ascetic Buddhist practices was increasing.<sup>18</sup> This interpretation, however, is over-simple. Chamlong is first and foremost an army officer by training, and he brings to religious and political matters the same discipline and the same black-and-white principles which he acquired as a military cadet. Among the well-wishers to visit him at City Hall immediately after his January 1990 re-election was a group of his old Chulachomklao Class 7 friends.<sup>19</sup> During Chamlong's first term as Governor, his Secretary and right-hand man was Lt-Col Vinai Sompong, a 1981 coup plotter;<sup>20</sup> four of the nine-man advisory committee he selected following his 1985 election were ex-Class 7 Young Turk colonels who had been dismissed in April 1981.<sup>21</sup> Chamlong's choice of aides illustrates two points: he finds it easiest to trust fellow-soldiers, and he wants to retain and strengthen his army connections. His military past continues to give him an influential status which no civilian politician could easily match.<sup>22</sup>

There are two main ways of looking at the Thai army in the 1970s and 1980s: as a privileged dinosaur, or as a fighting force in the painful throes of modernization. Benedict Anderson has argued that the absence of any serious external threat to Thailand in modern times has led to the evolution of an armed bureaucracy which never actually fights a war: 'a cluster of self-

<sup>18</sup> Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation and conflict*, p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 12 January 1990.

<sup>20</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 22 November 1985.

<sup>21</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 20 December 1985.

<sup>22</sup> See Khien Theeravit, 'The people's mandate', *Bangkok Post*, 20 November 1985. Khien argues that Chamlong has a 'dual personality', which combines military and civilian traits, and that he retains strong professional ties with the Army.

absorbed, status-conscious, privileged bureaucratic factions'.<sup>23</sup> Those Thai officers who fought in Indochina, however, felt that their hands-on battlefield experience gave them a real right to consider themselves soldiers, and to occupy a moral high ground from which their less-trained and less-tested superiors were excluded. Chamlong's Class 7 colleague, Col. Prajark Sawangjit, put it like this in a 1978 newspaper interview:

We are the class of 1960. At the outbreak of the war with Laos in 1961, we went to fight in Laos and (later on) in the jungle with the (Thai) communist terrorists. Our feelings while fighting in the jungle were that the city was decaying and degenerating because the mechanisms in the city were bad.<sup>24</sup>

The generation of officers to which Chamlong belonged believed that it had risen above the institutionalized self-absorption to which Anderson refers. Chai-Anan Samudavanija aptly sums up the paradox of their self-proclaimed selflessness by describing the Young Turks as 'a faction to defeat factionalism'.<sup>25</sup>

Chamlong's own attitude to the Thai Army is hard to pin down. He is capable of switching between Andersonian critique and Prajark-esque romanticism. His highly effective 1983 intervention to oppose Arthit's constitutional reforms (which were designed to strengthen the hand of the military, and would have made it easier for top army officers to enter politics) was a well-orchestrated attack on the ambitions of a general who wanted to be Prime Minister. In an interview he gave to the newspaper *Matichon* on 8 February 1983, Chamlong

<sup>23</sup> Benedict Anderson, 'Studies of the Thai state: the state of Thai studies', in Eliezer B. Ayal, ed., *The study of Thailand*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, Southeast Asia Series no. 54, 1978, p. 205.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Chai-Anan, *The Thai Young Turks*, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Chai-Anan, *The Thai Young Turks*, p. 47.

complained that army commanders were using the justification of 'national security' to conceal their dictatorial aspirations.<sup>26</sup> His remarks encouraged political parties to block the proposed amendments: the public scorn expressed by a serving army colonel for Arthit's 'national security' argument damaged its plausibility.

This episode may be contrasted with Chamlong's January 1986 response to criticism directed at him by Democrat Party leader Bhichai Rattakul. Bhichai alleged that Chamlong was intending to form a new 'Military Party', along with former Assistant Army Commander-in-Chief Manas Ratanakoses. Chamlong rebuked Bhichai for trying to drive a wedge between the military and civilians 'while the country is beset with economic and social problems *and with the Vietnamese on the doorstep*'<sup>27</sup> (my italics). Recourse to the stock 'national security' argument, for which Chamlong had criticized Arthit, proved a handy means of getting Bhichai to eat his words. Yet there was no conceivable connection between the possible formation of a new political party and this phantom external threat from Vietnam. Chamlong's move from insider critic of the army in 1983 to external 'defender' of it in 1986 was entirely political.

Nothing illustrates the problematic relationship between Chamlong the progressive city governor and Chamlong the ex-general more clearly than the controversy surrounding his role in the events of 6 October 1976. Chai-Anan's standard work on the Young Turks argues that, whilst the presence of Young Turk-commanded troops in Bangkok made the 6 October coup possible, members of the group did not participate in the massacre of student activists at Thammasat University.<sup>28</sup> Yet, in spite of the supposedly passive nature of the Young Turks'

<sup>26</sup> Chamlong, *Thang sam praeng*, vol. 2, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 28 January 1986.

<sup>28</sup> Chai-Anan, *The Thai Young Turks*, p. 33.



participation,<sup>29</sup> it is clear that the Class 7 officers, whatever their subsequent actions, were against the students, and so on the 'wrong' side in October 1976. By the mid-1980s, the 'democratic period' of 1973-76 had become a central text of Thai political mythology, and for Chamlong, now trying to present himself as a popular, elected leader rather than a member of a secretive and politically meddling military élite, his stance during that period was a potential liability.

This time-bomb exploded in the most unexpected fashion, when one of Chamlong's PDP candidates, a Mrs Chongkol Srikanha, told a July 1988 election rally that she had worked with Chamlong in a right-wing movement during the period immediately preceding the massacre.<sup>30</sup> She also claimed that Chamlong had gone in disguise to rallies of this movement, the *Klum Maeban*, or housewives' group, and had shared the platform with her, even handing her the microphone. Mrs Chongkol insisted that both she and Chamlong had been actively working for the overthrow of the (democratically elected) government, which they had held responsible for the prevailing political turmoil. Mrs Chongkol seems to have believed that her claims would increase support for Chamlong and the Palang Dhamma Party, but she was promptly gagged by the PDP's campaign organizers. Her outburst led to considerable disquiet, with at least one commentator beginning to discern 'the unacceptable face of Thai politics as usual'<sup>31</sup> behind Chamlong's somewhat forced smiles.

Although Chamlong's religious precepts forbid him from lying, many of his attempts to explain his role in 1976 'honestly' begged more questions than they answered; quizzed about the allegation that he had used disguises during the period, he said:

<sup>29</sup> Chai-Anan spoke out strongly in Chamlong's defence during the attacks upon the governor in July 1988, concerning his participation in the events of 6 October 1976 (see, for example, *Bangkok Post*, 13 July 1988).

<sup>30</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 3 July 1988.

<sup>31</sup> Harrison Morisot George, 'Politics as usual', *Bangkok Post*, 11 July 1988.

I occasionally disguised myself when contacting people, because the situation was confusing and we did not know who was who.<sup>32</sup>

With responses like this, it is little wonder that the issue became a major political embarrassment for the Governor. On 18 July 1988 he gave his most definitive speech on the matter, admitting that he had attended the 'housewives' rallies and meetings of the Village Scouts. To justify his actions, he fell back on the patriotism of the Thai army officer:

I admit that I am a conservative, with serious attachment to the nation, religion and the monarchy. When something struck me, I could not stay still.<sup>33</sup>

He added that in October 1976 he had not had a single armed man under his command, and insisted that he had played no part in the killing of the students. In support of his innocence, he cited his vegetarian beliefs and asked how a man who refrained from killing mosquitoes could have killed students. Yet how could a man who wouldn't harm a fly - literally - serve as an army officer at all, having adopted a set of Buddhist precepts which made him, in effect, a conscientious objector, a pacifist ?

A polemical pamphlet about Chamlong's role in the 6 October incident, published in Bangkok in 1989, disputes his claim that he became a vegetarian in 1974 after spending five days at Wat Suan Mok.<sup>34</sup> This temple, in the southern province of Surat Thani, is well known as the home of Buddhathat Bhikkhu, a famous and highly respected monk whose teachings have found favour amongst both radical and conservative Thais. But

<sup>32</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 3 July 1988.

<sup>33</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 19 July 1988.

<sup>34</sup> Samphan Yatwirachon (pseudonym), *Kaero'y phontri Chamlong karani 6 tula* [Major-General Chamlong and the case of 6 October]. Bangkok: Seriphap Publishing, 1988, p. 18.

Bhuddhathat does not advocate vegetarianism, and the pamphlet alleges that Chamlong became a strict vegetarian only in 1979, after meeting the controversial leader of the Santi Asoke sect, Phra Photirak. Chamlong, implies the pamphlet, tried to cloak his illiberal doings during the mid-1970s in the robes of a prominent monk, and further defended them with the standard, well-worn 'national security' argument so often advanced by military men. This said, the pamphlet contains no substantial evidence that Chamlong played an active part in the massacres; rather, it analyses circumstantial inconsistencies in his version of events on the fateful day. Chamlong's response to the charges becomes a larger issue than the charges themselves.

An article which appeared in the Thai weekly news magazine *Su Anakhot*, several weeks before the 6 October 'scandal' broke, contains this interesting passage:

The Young Turks had a role from the time of 14 October 1973, and had considerable stability and progressively increasing bargaining power up until the time of 6 October 1976. It is said that this group was not happy with the ultra-left-wing faction at the end of this period, but didn't expect the atrocious and violent culmination which occurred; and it was this event that caused Major-General Chamlong to start obeying the precepts.<sup>35</sup>

If Chamlong's decision to become a strict Buddhist was made after the 1976 massacre, it is much easier to make sense of the sequence of events. In the period leading up to the massacre, Chamlong was wearing disguises, playing at politics. The enormity of the massacre might have shocked him, leading him to look to Buddhism for answers. From an original interest in the rationalist teachings of Bhuddhathat, Chamlong became increasingly drawn to highly disciplined systems of Buddhist practice. The *Su Anakhot* piece implies that Chamlong, shocked and guilty after the violent excesses of 6 October 1976, may

<sup>35</sup> *Su Anakhot*, 18-24 May 1988.

have sought out a new kind of ordered regimen, this time a religious rather than a military one. Although it must be emphasized that this scenario remains unproven, it does appear outwardly plausible.

There were a number of military factions during the period from October 1973 to April 1981 which espoused high-sounding collective aims: the most prominent of these factions was the Young Turks. The group was dominated by a core of Class 7 colonels, most of whom were battalion commanders. Chai-Anan has identified three main reasons for the dissatisfaction of these men with the condition of the Thai Army: they were disturbed by the failure of military chiefs to stand up against the hostile actions of civilian politicians during the years 1973-76, they felt that the so-called 'three tyrants' (Thanom, Praphat, and Narong) had damaged the image of the Army, and they were unhappy with the continual infighting among generals, which the Young Turks believed to be symptomatic of a neglect of the Army's basic fighting units.<sup>36</sup> A speech given by Colonel Manoon Rupekajorn to new members of the Group in June 1980 is a vintage example of Young Turk thinking:

The Young Military Officers' Group was born and became actively involved in politics amidst the 14 October 1973 crisis. Since then, especially in the past three years of confusion and disorder in Thai society in the era of blossoming democracy, we were forced to be involved in politics. For we could not let national security remain in the hands of those dirty politicians or even senior officers in the Army who are irresponsible to the Nation and allowed themselves to be subservient to the rotten political system just to live happily with the benefits handed to them by those politicians.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Chai-Anan, *The Thai Young Turks*, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted by Chai-Anan, *The Thai Young Turks*, p. 31.

There is no mistaking the tone of self-righteousness in Manoon's words, the crusading spirit of a man dedicated to the glories of the holy coup. He is profoundly distrustful of 'dirty' civilian politicians and those soldiers who co-operate with them. National security is avowedly his first concern. In this respect, the Young Turks shared the belief of earlier military rulers (such as Field Marshals Phibun Songkram and Sarit Thanarat) that, in the words of Chai-Anan and Morell, 'representative government was a luxury only to be granted under certain ideal conditions'.<sup>38</sup> In spite of their lofty maxim: 'We will risk our lives for the Nation and the Throne without hope of reaping any personal benefits', it is clear that the Young Turks themselves were important beneficiaries of the coups in 1976 and 1977. In the wake of these coups, the group became the kingdom's *de facto* Prime Minister-maker. While scorning military officers who had used their positions for personal *financial* benefit, the Young Turks did not hesitate to seek personal political power. Although they apparently considered General Prem to be a man of 'unique virtue and goodness',<sup>39</sup> leaders of the group consistently sought to control his government themselves. When their April 1981 coup attempt failed (after Prem received open backing from the royal family), thirty-seven of the Young Turks were dismissed from the army, and another twenty-one junior members of the Group were transferred to desk jobs. In spite of this apparently crushing defeat, ex-Colonel Manoon Rupekajorn did not give up, and on 9 September 1985 staged a fresh attempt to oust Prem, with the support of a few hundred soldiers. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* commented on the resulting fiasco: 'Manoon's personal ambition appears to have been the driving force'.<sup>40</sup> In spite of their lofty rhetoric, especially at the time of the April 1981 coup attempt, the Young Turks appear to

<sup>38</sup> David Morell and Chai-Anan Samudavanija, *Political conflict in Thailand*. Cambridge, Mass.: Oelgeschlager, Gunn and Hain, 1981, p. 77.

<sup>39</sup> Chai-Anan, *The Thai Young Turks*, p. 37.

<sup>40</sup> John McBeth and Paisal Sricharatchanya, 'Manoon's wild gamble', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19 September 1985.

have been a group of men firmly and mistakenly convinced that their own political advancement was synonymous with the moral regeneration of the nation.

After April 1981, the Young Turks *per se* were a spent force politically. However, one of their number, Chamlong Srimuang, not only survived, but continued to flourish. For Chamlong had conveniently 'left' the Group shortly before the 1981 coup attempt, later saying that he had done so because of ideological differences with other members.<sup>41</sup> The clear implication of Chamlong's claims was that he felt his fellow Young Turks to have abandoned high-minded principles in favour of opportunism. It is probable that, as Prem's Secretary-General, Chamlong was not fully trusted by his fellow Young Turks, who decided not to keep him informed of their coup plans. Whatever the cause of the rift between Chamlong and his Young Turk colleagues, it worked to his advantage in the long term.

Chamlong's 1985 election campaign for the position of Bangkok Governor was supported in its closing stages by broadcasts on the army-operated radio network. These broadcasts took up familiar themes, accusing civilian political parties of self-interest and insincerity, and concluding that 'only the Army has never abandoned the people and is sincere towards the people'.<sup>42</sup> Opinion among political commentators at the time was divided as to whether these broadcasts helped or hindered Chamlong's campaign. Yet the fact that the Royal Thai Army, still headed by General Arthit, would act in support of a former officer who had indirectly challenged Arthit's 'dictatorial'<sup>43</sup> aspirations only two and a half years earlier, illustrates the strong sense of camaraderie that exists among the military *vis-à-vis* civilian politicians: blood proved thicker than water,

<sup>41</sup> John McBeth, "'Mr Clean' wins an upset victory in Bangkok poll', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 November 1985.

<sup>42</sup> John McBeth and Paisal Srucharatchanya, 'The coup mentality', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 November 1985.

<sup>43</sup> Chamlong, *Thang sam praeng*, vol. 2, p. 36.

especially in view of General Arthit's feud with the Democrat Party, Chamlong's main rivals in 1985.

On election day, the *Bangkok Post* interviewed a number of soldiers about their voting behaviour:

All the soldiers questioned by the *Post* reporters said they voted for Major-General Chamlong. They admitted having been ordered to vote for the independent candidate, but said they would have voted for him anyway. 'It's the Army's policy to promote democracy and we adhere to that', their commander said.<sup>44</sup>

Nominations for the 1985 election had opened on 1 October, but Chamlong delayed submitting his candidature until 3 October. The reason was simple: on 1 October 1985, Chamlong was promoted from Colonel to Major-General, and in order to lay claim to this higher rank he did not hand in his resignation from the Army until two days later, whereupon he immediately registered as a candidate in the election (serving officers cannot stand for elected office).<sup>45</sup> To this day, Chamlong is always known as 'Major-General Chamlong': as a politician, he is well aware of the value of military rank. Not only those voters who are currently enlisted favour ex-military candidates. At least one article has suggested that many veterans are more likely to cast their votes for such candidates,<sup>46</sup> and the same almost certainly holds true of reservists and members of the three Army-run 'mass organizations', the largest of which numbered 600,000 men in 1985.<sup>47</sup> Although he was undoubtedly, in the words of Khien Theeravit, 'a peculiar military officer',<sup>48</sup> Chamlong's

<sup>44</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 15 November 1985.

<sup>45</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 3 October 1985.

<sup>46</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 25 July 1988.

<sup>47</sup> Suchit, *Military in Thai politics*, p. 56.

<sup>48</sup> Khien Theeravit, 'The people's mandate', *Bangkok Post*, 20 November 1985.

Major-General's epaulettes may be worth many thousands of votes, especially if his opponent is a mere civilian.

Whilst recent studies by Western scholars have tended to see Chamlong primarily as a Buddhist politician,<sup>49</sup> there were some Thai commentators in the early days of his first governorship who saw him as the latest in a long line of generals to have achieved civilian office. Surin Pitsuwan wrote in April 1986:

Governor Chamlong Srimuang has provided a model for other military leaders who wish to climb the political ladder. The people are ready for military figures who could provide them with a disciplined leadership with a democratic touch... We hope there will be many more Chamlongs coming out of the military establishment.<sup>50</sup>

Surin even refers nostalgically to the Sarit era, though hastily adding that the Field Marshal's methods were 'too crude' for today's politics. It is tempting to dismiss such comments out of hand. But the possibility that Chamlong is as concerned with the need for disciplined leadership as with providing a touch of *dhammic* democracy is a very real one. Chamlong Srimuang's formative experiences as a Thai army officer have undoubtedly shaped his political career.

### *Two: the monk*

Even more conspicuously than he displays his rank as a Major-General, Chamlong Srimuang promotes the austerity of his

<sup>49</sup> Charles F. Keyes, 'Buddhist politics and their revolutionary origins in Thailand', *International Political Science Review*, 10, 2, 1989, p. 135, argues that Chamlong's combination of worldliness and other-worldliness allows him to offer the prospect of an alternative to military rule; J. L. Taylor, 'New Buddhist movements in Thailand: an "individualistic revolution", reform and political dissonance', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 21, 1, 1990, pp. 145-50, makes only passing reference to Chamlong's military background; Peter Jackson's view that Chamlong lost interest in the Army has been cited above.

<sup>50</sup> Surin Pitsuwan, 'There came a voice in the Bangkok wilderness', *Bangkok Post*, 7 April 1986.



lifestyle for electoral advantage. In spite of its low-budget, back-to-basics methods, Chamlong's campaigning is calculated to appeal to the average Thai voter, who is used to an emphasis on leaders' personalities rather than on proposed policies. During his time in the late 1970s as a wandering preacher, Chamlong acquired the nickname 'Maha', a monastic title sometimes colloquially given to exceptionally pious and venerable laymen, and a nickname which supported the popular myth that he was 'half-man, half-monk'.<sup>51</sup> In a 1981 interview broadcast on an Army-run television channel, Chamlong denied that he was a 'Maha', since he had never been a serious student of the *dhamma*;<sup>52</sup> yet the cover of the volume in which he published the text of that interview proclaims him 'the holder of the honorary title of "Maha"'.<sup>53</sup> It is noticeable that Maha Chamlong rarely passes up an opportunity to point out just how moral, how virtuous, and how devout a Buddhist he really is.

The anthropologist Stanley Tambiah has discussed the 'symbiosis between generals and monks'<sup>54</sup> in contemporary Thailand, and analysed the way in which some members of the Thai élite seek to sanctify their own power and influence by lionizing ascetic, forest-dwelling monks who are hailed as *arahant*, living Buddhist saints. The more pure the monk, the greater the number of worldly businessmen and bureaucrats who seek to have him bless their doings by association.<sup>55</sup> But Chamlong Srimuang, who unifies the secular and the sacred in a single personage, already possesses the kind of spiritual 'credibility' which many other prominent figures in Thailand so conspicuously lack.

51 Chamlong, *Thang sam praeng*, vol. 1, p. 37.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 38. Compare with preface to the same volume, p. 3.

53 Front covers of Chamlong, *Thang sam praeng*, vols. 1-3, 1990 edition.

54 Stanley J. Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 400. For discussion of this 'symbiosis,' see pp. 397-400.

55 Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 274.

Maha Chamlong has persistently denounced the traditional Thai idea that 'politics is a dirty business',<sup>56</sup> something to be treated warily by decent people, and certainly not allowed to sully the purity of the *dhamma*. Chamlong argues that religion and politics are one and the same, citing the views of a number of leading Thai monk-intellectuals, among them Buddhathat Bhikkhu, in support of his position.<sup>57</sup> The essence of their 'reformist' stance is an opposition to popular *khammic* Buddhism.<sup>58</sup> These monks instead lay stress upon the doctrinal, *nibbanic* elements of Buddhism. Chamlong rejects the fatalistic overtones of popular Buddhism, and the low level of political participation which results from a widespread, resigned acceptance of *khamma*. In response to an interviewer who asked him why such a religious man sought political office, Chamlong retorted that if all the good people entered monasteries, the running of the country would be left to evil-doers.<sup>59</sup> The establishment-promoted fiction that religion and politics are entirely separate concerns has provided a means of curtailing political participation in Thailand, and has therefore served the interests of the élite - not to mention the immoral.

It is difficult to be sure of the precise political model envisaged by Chamlong's monk-mentors. The most distinguished of them, Buddhathat, has written approvingly of what he calls '*dhammic* socialism', a political theory which seems to aim at a Buddhistic compromise between the opposing notions of democracy and authoritarianism. In one essay,

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of this idea, see Somboon Suksamran, *Buddhism and politics in Thailand*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982, p. 1 and p. 165.

<sup>57</sup> Chamlong's most detailed 'position paper' on this issue is published under the title 'Sasana kap kanmu'ang' [Religion and politics] as chapter 3 of *Thang sam praeng*, vol. 1, pp. 20-30.

<sup>58</sup> Peter Jackson devotes chapter 6 of *Buddhism, legitimation and conflict* (pp. 115-58) to the subject of 'reformist monks' in contemporary Thai Buddhism; his use of the term is questioned by Suwanna Satha-anand in her review of Jackson's book, *Crossroads*, 5, 1, 1990.

<sup>59</sup> Chamlong, *Thang sam praeng*, vol. 1, p. 49.

entitled 'A dictatorial dhammic socialism', he argues for a system of government which rests upon an enlightened dictator, a moral leader who follows the *dasarajadhamma*, or ten Buddhist principles of moral leadership.<sup>60</sup> Bhuddhathat's precise views are difficult to pin down, as his various writings oscillate between different political perspectives, but his emphasis is on the need for virtuous rule, rather than on the superiority of any particular political system.<sup>61</sup> Another prominent monk closely associated with Bhuddhathat Bhikkhu, Phra Panyanantha (of Wat Chonprathanrangsit in Nonthaburi, just outside Bangkok) has been far less equivocal in opposing authoritarianism and supporting the creation of genuine participatory democracy in Thailand.<sup>62</sup> On New Year's Eve 1989, Panyanantha made a controversial speech which many saw as an election address in support of Chamlong's candidacy for the Bangkok governorship.<sup>63</sup> Chamlong has been influenced by both Bhuddhathat and Panyanantha, and his own speeches, writings, and interviews emphasize both the importance of moral leadership, and the need to promote democracy.

Monks such as Bhuddhathat Bhikkhu have promoted an activist interpretation of the *dhamma* which implies serious criticisms of the existing *sangha* order, yet they have remained within the established hierarchy. Not so the more outspoken Photirak, founder of the Santi Asoke ('Peaceful Happiness') Buddhist sect, of which Chamlong is the most prominent lay member. Most of Chamlong's religious ideas derive from the teachings of Photirak: Chamlong and Photirak are spiritual 'brothers', deeply committed to the same aim of cleansing a corrupt establishment. Both men are social outsiders, from

<sup>60</sup> Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Dhammic socialism* [translated and edited by Donald K. Swearer]. Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, 1986, pp. 77-100. The essence of the relevant argument is summarized on p. 97.

<sup>61</sup> Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation and conflict*, pp. 133-34.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>63</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 3 January 1990.

ordinary backgrounds. Both men have undergone changes of vocation in response to apparent midlife crises. Both have had paradoxical careers, Chamlong as a pacifist general, Photirak as a flamboyant ascetic. Most importantly, perhaps, both men combine claims of selflessness with an extraordinary degree of self-assurance, a self-assurance which they themselves equate with inner virtue, but which can also appear to suggest an innate sense of superiority to others.

Photirak, born Rak Rakphong, comes from Srisaket, a province in the Northeast.<sup>64</sup> His family was poor, but after studying at a Bangkok art college, Rak made large sums of money working as a television game show host and composer of popular songs. In 1970, however, abruptly disillusioned with his materialistic way of life, he became both a monk and a vegetarian. Right from the outset of his monastic career, Phra Photirak was the cause of considerable debate and division, since he did not hesitate openly to criticize what he saw as the *kilesa* (moral blemishes) of his fellow monks, particularly their meat-eating.<sup>65</sup> In 1973, Photirak left his monastery and set up his own *samnak* (religious centre) in Nakhorn Pathom province; in August 1975 he made a unilateral declaration of independence from the orthodox Thai *sangha*. The parallels between Photirak's indictment of the *sangha* in that announcement, and the Young Turks' criticisms of the military and political establishment, are immediately apparent:

I was not ordained in order to relax and enjoy a life of ease and convenience that undermines the national economy, and which leads to the decay of religious values through seeking personal benefit from people's ignorance by using various rituals to suppress and oppress the people.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> For an excellent 'potted biography' of Photirak, see 'From TV personality to controversial monk', *The Nation*, 28 May 1989.

<sup>65</sup> Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation and conflict*, pp. 160-61.

<sup>66</sup> Quotation and translation are from *ibid.*, p. 162.

From 1975 to 1988, the Santi Asoke movement continued to expand, more or less unchecked. By 1989 Photirak had some two thousand lay devotees and seventy-nine 'monks', many of whom he had ordained himself, and was running four *samnak*. Santi Asoke monks follow the *vinaya*, the 227 traditional rules of monkly conduct, plus ten additional 'observances' formulated by Photirak. These include: not eating meat, eating only one meal per day, not sleeping in the day, having no money or possessions (not even bags or umbrellas), and refraining from superstitious practices such as the use of holy water, the making of amulets, and the use of fire in ceremonies. Behind these observances lie two complementary objectives: the demystification of the *dhamma*, and the rigorous imposition of monastic discipline. An article on the 'squeaky-clean' sect in *Asiaweek* quoted one observer as saying that Santi Asoke 'points a finger right at the *sangha's* heart.'<sup>67</sup> So long as Photirak can define the terms of the controversy which surrounds him, projecting it as a black-and-white clash between a corrupt religious establishment and a pristine reformist movement, he is on relatively firm ground. Two *sangha*-related scandals in the late 1980s strengthened Photirak's case: one concerned the issue by prominent monks of bogus royal decorations in exchange for hefty cash donations,<sup>68</sup> another the questionable activities of a monk known as Acharn Suan, of Phanom Sarakhan in Chachoengsao Province, who gave out phallic *lingum* charms to his followers.<sup>69</sup>

However, whilst disciplinary abuses certainly exist in the orthodox *sangha*, there are also many monks whose practices are irreproachable. As well as being outstandingly strict, the Santi Asoke sect is exceptionally self-righteous. That a Buddhist monk has attained a high level of spiritual attainment should be evident to others, but a matter of no visible consequence to

<sup>67</sup> 'The sangha's showdown', *Asiaweek*, 30 June 1989.

<sup>68</sup> Paisal Sricharatchanya, 'A fight for the heart of Buddhism in Thailand', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 September 1988.

<sup>69</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 27 May 1989.

himself. Yet, on a number of occasions, Photirak has spoken publicly of the personal spiritual accomplishment which is the basis of his religious authority.<sup>70</sup> The same boundless self-confidence which once allowed Photirak to enjoy a successful career in television now aids him in his more recent vocation, enabling him to make an energetic challenge to the existing order - but one founded on a dangerous hubris.

The 1988 General Election saw a distinct change in the climate of opposition to Photirak. Action against Santi Asoke had been under discussion since 1975,<sup>71</sup> but, in spite of a public campaign against the sect, Photirak's activities had not been challenged by the authorities. The Prem governments were generally inclined to avoid confrontation, and Photirak's support, much of it middle class and Bangkok-based, extended far beyond his immediate circle of followers. Chamlong Srimuang had met Photirak in 1979 and become one of his adherents; by 1985, Chamlong had his own *ashram* at the Santi Asoke *samnak* in Nakhorn Pathom, and was reported to be spending half his time there.<sup>72</sup> Chamlong's influence with Prem may have helped protect the sect. But with Chamlong's formation of the Palang Dhamma Party in May 1988, the political dimension of Santi Asoke became very evident. Nearly half of the 319 PDP candidates in the July 1988 general election were Santi Asoke followers;<sup>73</sup> Photirak came out openly in support of the new party. An early action of the new Chatchai Choonavan government was to reopen the file on Santi Asoke.<sup>74</sup> The following May, the Supreme Council of the *sangha* decided

<sup>70</sup> See the interviews quoted by Taylor, 'New Buddhist movements', pp. 144-45.

<sup>71</sup> For a blow-by-blow account of these discussions, see Bunruam Tiamchanon, *Khadi santi asok* [The Santi Asoke case]. Bangkok: Saengdaw Publishing, 1989, pp. 15-17.

<sup>72</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 15 November 1985. By June 1988, he was able to spend only one or two nights a week at this retreat - according to Kim Gooi, 'Letter from Bangkok', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 9 June 1988.

<sup>73</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 16 June 1988.

<sup>74</sup> Bunruam, *Khadi santi asok*, p. 17.

unanimously that Photirak should be defrocked. Although some of the complaints made against him were fairly minor ones concerning the validity of the ordinations he had carried out, and the registration of his *samnak*, the causes of the expulsion went much deeper.

On 9 June 1989, Photirak agreed to change his robes from brown to white, and to refrain from calling himself a monk. He declined, however, to undergo a formal defrocking ceremony. Although in a slightly modified form, the sect continues to operate rather as before. Photirak and his fellow 'monks' still face civil charges brought against them by the Chatchai government, and the prominent human rights lawyer Thongpai Thongbao has agreed to defend them. In a vain attempt to prevent the affair from becoming a *cause célèbre*, the Thai Interior Ministry issued a decree on 19 June 1989, banning television news programmes from covering Photirak's arrest.<sup>75</sup> The Union of Civil Liberties publicly censured the Thai government for its 'dictatorial' handling of the affair, to little effect.<sup>76</sup>

Thai responses to the Santi Asoke case have been mixed. Unsurprisingly, the most vehement attack on Photirak came from the newly-appointed Supreme Patriarch, the head of the Thai *sangha*. In a vitriolic address to the Supreme Sangha Council, he declared that Photirak and his 'monks'

cannot be Thai people. They should not live in Thailand. They should not be Thai people. If you are Thai, you have to accept the things accepted by the Thai nation. That is the important fundamental point.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Rodney Tasker, 'Troublesome priests', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 July 1989. See also *Index on Censorship*, October 1989.

<sup>76</sup> See *Khadi Photirak* [The Photirak case] (various authors). Bangkok: Khlet Thai Publishing, 1989, p. 213.

<sup>77</sup> Bunruam, *Khadi santi asok*, p. 88.

According to Thailand's most senior monk, Photirak's beliefs are not only heretical in Buddhist terms, but constitute an attack on the Thai 'nation': to challenge the *sangha* is to question the legitimacy of Thailand itself. Even monks, it seems, are preoccupied with the problem of national security.

The hostile response of the respected social critic Sulak Sivaraksa, whose own work is profoundly influenced by Buddhathat, is more difficult for Santi Asoke sympathizers to repudiate. In a 1989 journal article, Sulak describes Chamlong as 'a wonderful man', but argues that the emphasis which Chamlong and Santi Asoke place upon renunciation produces a narrow, fundamentalist outlook, rather than encouraging greater loving-kindness.<sup>78</sup> Former Prime Minister M.R. Kukrit Pramoj has denounced Santi Asoke as a *hia* (a monitor lizard which is said to bring bad luck; a term of abuse in Thai) which should not be allowed into the compound of any orthodox monastery.<sup>79</sup> Although both Sulak and Kukrit hold conservative attitudes towards Buddhism, many liberals, whilst objecting to the way in which he has been treated by the authorities, also find most of Photirak's religious views too dogmatic to be palatable.

Chamlong had begun to distance himself from Photirak during the 1988 election campaign, with a carefully worded letter to the Sangha Council (via the Religious Affairs Department) in which he denied giving political protection to Santi Asoke. In this letter, he effectively threw down the gauntlet to the authorities:

I think that if a temple violates the law, legal action should be taken against that temple, and not to criticise me [*sic*] as certain groups of people are doing at the moment.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa, 'The path of the Buddha in Siam', *Solidarity*, July-September 1989, p. 143.

<sup>79</sup> *Khadi Photirak*, p. 23.

<sup>80</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 22 June 1988.



By 'certain groups' Chamlong plainly meant Sangwian Pharuhong's Parian Dhamma Association, which had published a number of pamphlets critical of Chamlong. The credibility of this 'conservative scholarly' <sup>81</sup> body was seriously undermined by claims that it received funding from Samak Sundaravej's Prachakorn Thai Party, the PDP's arch-rival in Bangkok. Yet, in spite of a widespread feeling that the Santi Asoke affair was being exploited by Chamlong's opponents, public disquiet helped account for Palang Dhamma's poor showing in the 1988 general election. The Santi Asoke devotees who stood as PDP parliamentary candidates in that election proved unpopular with voters.

Photirak and his Santi Asoke movement continue to represent a threat to the Thai *sangha*, and to the Thai 'nation', as it is conceived by the establishment. This description of Phra Photirak, by the prominent scholar-monk Phra Thepweithi (another key figure in the anti-Santi Asoke campaign), perhaps really refers to Chamlong:

He may have political aspirations. Some people may be important in the government, and when they are important they will use political methods to promote their own interests. I do not know whether or not they will use strong methods in the long term when they have considerable political power.<sup>82</sup>

Chamlong's strongest aspiration is probably his determination to survive politically, with or without Santi Asoke. The close association between Chamlong and Photirak was an important factor in provoking the authorities to act against the sect; in the long term, Chamlong needs to dissociate himself from Santi Asoke, at least in public. His image as a devout Buddhist, however, remains an asset - so long as the half-monk, Chamlong, is not linked to the semi-defrocked monk, Photirak.

<sup>81</sup> Taylor, 'New Buddhist movements in Thailand', p. 147.

<sup>82</sup> Quotation and translation are from Jackson, *Buddhism, legitimation and conflict*, p. 188.

***Three: the politician***

Chamlong's campaign rhetoric, especially his strong anti-corruption platform, aroused considerable interest among Bangkok voters. But whilst the January 1990 election gave the city governor an overwhelming victory, there was a consensus among commentators, including those sympathetic to Chamlong, that his tangible achievements in office were few. This 'Letter from Thailand', a column in the newsletter for expatriate Thais living in London, *Siang Thai*, gives a fairly typical view:

In truth, Major-General Chamlong hasn't done anything outstanding other than take care of cleanliness and make things a bit greener. The traffic jams have got worse. You can practically say that there is no planning to control the expansion of the city.<sup>83</sup>

In fairness to Chamlong, it must be recognized that the powers of the BMA to deal with such matters as traffic are quite limited. The authority has, for example, no control over policing or public transport. Central government agencies and state enterprises control at least 85% of government budgetary allocations for Bangkok, leaving the BMA with around one-seventh of the total budget. One Thai academic has argued that the BMA is 'no more than an appendage' of the Interior Ministry.<sup>84</sup> Although the BMA does have the power to withhold construction permission from new building projects in Bangkok, to do so on a large scale would be to declare outright war on the city's wealthy and immensely powerful business interests. There

<sup>83</sup> *Siang Thai*, February 1990.

<sup>84</sup> Suchitra Punyaratabandhu-Bhakdi, 'Structural problems in the governance of Bangkok', *Crossroads*, 2, 2, 1985, p. 115. Suchitra's essay provides invaluable background information for an understanding of Chamlong's Bangkok governor-ship.

are limits to what any Governor, however well-intentioned, could have accomplished in a single term, given the prevailing *laissez-faire* climate characterized by corruption and kickbacks.

The scale of the difficulties Chamlong has faced was illustrated by the Governor in an April 1986 interview with the *Bangkok Post*. He alleged that, prior to his election, all building contractors working for the BMA had to allocate 4% of construction costs as a personal 'commission' to the Governor, 3% for the City Clerk, 3% to the appropriate bureau chief and a further 3% to the district chief. Even routine maintenance contracts, such as the one for canal dredging, were inflated by a cartel operated by rival contractors: the BMA was paying them twenty million baht (around £500,000) for work worth only eight million baht; the six contractors concerned shared out the difference. When asked what he would do about those officials who had been pocketing vast bribes for so many years, Chamlong was realistic in his reply:

We will pay attention to what we are now doing and what we will do in the future, otherwise we will have no time to work and will become investigators.<sup>85</sup>

During the latter part of Chamlong's first term, one particular issue brought into focus the problems associated with fighting corruption. Bangkok has a serious rubbish problem, and there is an urgent need for a rubbish disposal plant. But the construction of such a plant offers enormous scope for kickbacks and contract inflation, and so Chamlong repeatedly rejected tenders which he believed to be suspect. The former monk and ex-police officer Anan Senakhan, himself known as an anti-corruption activist, was active in campaigning against both Chamlong and Santi Asoke until his untimely death in 1991. In 1988, Anan applied to stand as a PDP parliamentary candidate, and was rejected by Chamlong; by 1990 he was standing against the incumbent governor, as an independent. Anan argued that

<sup>85</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 7 April 1986.

Chamlong was reluctant to spend money for the benefit of the people of Bangkok, and that this made him an unsuitable city governor, since capital projects are urgently needed in order to make Bangkok decently habitable. On the rubbish plant issue, Anan declared:

Chamlong does not understand the mechanisms of administering money. If you keep the money then the price of goods will just continue to increase. If we have to spend more money to get rid of garbage we should do it; it is better than not doing anything at all and allowing the garbage to remain.<sup>86</sup>

Although declining the role of investigator, Chamlong may have become a crime prevention officer, his personal 'cleanliness' actually impeding the efficient cleaning-up that Bangkok needs so badly.

Anan was also critical of the BMA's 'outdated' reliance upon street-sweepers to perform the bulk of the street-cleaning in Bangkok. Chamlong's personal support of the street-sweepers suits his popular image as a hands-on administrator. The city governor normally rises at 3.00 am, and has been known to join the street-sweepers for a pre-dawn session. He has also allocated his entire entertainment budget of 20,000 baht a month for the provision of so-called 'tiffin breakfasts' for city street-sweepers, which the governor and his top aides distribute themselves.<sup>87</sup> To Chamlong's detractors, such antics are public relations exercises, attempts to divert attention from the need to invest in a fleet of modern cleansing vehicles. Anan claims that Chamlong's deep-seated 'reluctance to spend money' lies behind his failure to instigate a whole range of urgently needed public programmes, including slum clearance, public health, and free school lunches - in short, a welfare 'safety net' for the city's

<sup>86</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 9 December 1989.

<sup>87</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 19 April 1986.

poor.<sup>88</sup> Chamlong's paternalistic strategy for fighting dirt and corruption, with the aid of chosen groups such as the street-sweepers, suggests that his priorities for the administration of Bangkok are moral priorities rather than economic or social ones.

When Chamlong announced his original candidature for the governorship in October 1985, he cited his ability to limit expenditure as one of his main qualifications for the job:

The governor should be able to restrict expenditure to within income. On a personal basis, I have been able to establish control over myself, eating as little as possible, working as hard as possible. Thus I have cut down on selfish desires. A person who is able to cut down on selfish desires will be able to solve national problems.<sup>89</sup>

Clearly, Chamlong sees a direct analogy between his own choice of an ascetic lifestyle, and his attempt to curtail BMA spending. There is no mention of redistributing resources - money saved in one area is not spent in another. A strong belief in the virtue of making economies for their own sake underpins his fiscal policy. Chamlong is putting into practice ideas which he set out in a 1981 television interview, when he claimed:

Society will improve - once we can get rid of them (our selfish desires), the national economy will improve, and the government won't always have the headache of trying to get people to be more frugal with this and that.<sup>90</sup>

Since his 1985 election, Chamlong has moderated his public utterances slightly. It would seem, however, that he is not aiming at a city administration which will provide the widest possible range of services for Bangkok's inhabitants. Rather, he

<sup>88</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 9 December 1989.

<sup>89</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 3 October 1985.

<sup>90</sup> Chamlong, *Thang sam praeng*, vol. 1, p. 44.

is aiming to curtail the demand for services of all kinds. His vision is of a clean city inhabited by people who lead contented lives at subsistence level. It is a vision quite different from the welfare-oriented administration proposed by Anan. What is more, it is a vision entirely at odds with the realities of the modern Thai economy, which is committed to supplying the ever-increasing consumer demands of the very same urban population among which Chamlong has most of his support.

A recurrent theme in Chamlong's speeches and interviews is a horror of debt. When he announced his original candidature for the Bangkok governorship, he cited Thailand's external debt as his main reason for standing.<sup>91</sup> Presenting the PDP's manifesto for the 1988 general election, he again claimed that the most urgent problem confronting the Thai nation was the external debt: according to Chamlong, every Thai owed the equivalent of 12,000 baht at birth (a novel notion of 'original debt,' rather like 'original sin'). The PDP would, according to its leader, 'adjust the trade balance and economise'.<sup>92</sup> Chamlong ignores the fact that these amounts compare favourably with the debts of neighbouring countries. His financial precepts reflect the puritan instincts of a man who once criticized women who wear lipstick, on the grounds that concern with such vanities harms the economy.<sup>93</sup> Avoiding debt, like saving money, is an administrative policy based upon moral imperatives.

The lack of clarity apparent in Chamlong's economic outlook reflects incongruities in his political identity. Likhit Diravegin, writing just before the 1985 gubernatorial election, expressed the point succinctly:

Major-General Chamlong Srimuang somehow represents the image of a person whom the alienated souls of Bangkok residents are looking for. He represents a combination of

<sup>91</sup> *Phontri Chamlong Srimuang sampat piset'* [Major-General Chamlong Srimuang: special interview], *Su Anakhot*, 17-23 October 1985, p. 14.

<sup>92</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 6 July 1988.

<sup>93</sup> Chamlong, *Thang sam praeng*, vol. 1, p. 44.

*dhamma* and politics, two elements which can hardly mix well - but they are substitutes for ideology and politics, the pair which is absent from the Thai political context.<sup>94</sup>

In relative terms, it is difficult to criticize Chamlong for a lack of ideological rectitude: Chamlong clearly believes in something, which is more than can be said for a great many of his political opponents. It is clear, with the benefit of hindsight, that many observers of the Thai political scene seriously underestimated the political acumen of the new Bangkok governor, seeing the whirlwind of popular faith which he inspired during the 1985 election campaign as a transient phenomenon, and Chamlong himself as a naïve and unworldly figure.<sup>95</sup> In reality, he has always sought to combine *dhamma* and politics so as to achieve idealistic ends by very pragmatic means. When asked by an interviewer in 1985 whether he thought that many Buddhists would vote for him, there was no monkly modesty in his reply:

As far as practitioners of Buddhism are concerned, irrespective of their temple, whatever candidate is known to have set himself to practise the *dhamma* to solve social problems and has first tried to solve his own problems, in order to reduce evil and allow society to improve, will be supported. There are ten candidates, but there is only one such practitioner of the *dhamma* standing. I wonder who they will vote for.<sup>96</sup>

Chamlong's powerful invocation of his religious credentials for elected office constituted a well-calculated campaign ploy which helped to win him what by 1990 was an immensely strong Bangkok power base. Yet unlike systemic ideologies

<sup>94</sup> Likhit Dhiravegin, 'A shift in the political mood of Bangkokians', *Bangkok Post*, 12 November 1985.

<sup>95</sup> Khien Theeravit, for example, argued along much these lines in 'The people's mandate', *Bangkok Post*, 20 November 1985.

<sup>96</sup> *Su Anakhot*, 17-23 October 1985, p. 16.

(such as the Burmese version of socialism), Chamlong's politicized Buddhism lacks a distinct policy programme. Chamlong appeals to the religious idealism of his followers rather than their practical interests. He preaches high-sounding objectives without spelling out their implications.

An example of the potential pitfalls of this approach can be seen in an early blunder by the newly-elected governor. During his first weeks in office, Chamlong toured the various operations of the BMA. To his horror, he discovered that the city dog pound was rounding up stray dogs and then destroying the unclaimed ones at the rate of 150 per day. As Governor, the devout Buddhist was ultimately responsible for this taking of canine life, a position he found morally intolerable. He immediately appealed to the public to adopt the stray dogs, and even proposed that the dogs be housed in kennels at the city's expense.<sup>97</sup> In February 1986, Chamlong formed an unlikely alliance with a certain Chaiwat Luang-amorn-lert, an entrepreneur who wanted to build a dog-racing track on a piece of vacant land he owned. Chamlong backed the proposal, on condition that Chaiwat donate part of the land to the BMA for the purpose of housing strays. The profits from the dog-racing track would be used to subsidize the dogs' refuge. Chamlong added that the proposed track would be run purely as a tourist attraction, with no gambling - a claim which must have stretched the credulity of even his most loyal supporters.<sup>98</sup> Plainly, Chamlong hoped that the plan would enable him to avoid the sin of taking life, and may even have been willing to turn a blind eye to the lesser matter of illegal gambling at the track. Chaiwat clearly hoped that the support of the Governor would enable him to slip his proposal past the watchful eye of the Interior Ministry. In the event, Interior Minister Sitthi Jiraote made it clear that he would use his powers to forbid the development.<sup>99</sup> But the whole incident well illustrates that the combination of

<sup>97</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 22 January 1986.

<sup>98</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 18 February 1986.

<sup>99</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 24 February 1986.



*dhamma* and politics practised by Chamlong entails a highly pragmatic mixture of idealism and wheeler-dealing. Chamlong has such faith in the end he seeks that he may be willing to use unorthodox means to achieve it.

When he announced his candidature for the Bangkok governorship in 1985, Chamlong insisted that he had 'come alone' - that he was an independent with no backing from any existing political party or from the military. At the time of that first election, this claim was rather implausible. Not only did the Army use its radio station to support Chamlong, but he himself admitted that he had been approached by Kukrit's Social Action Party, which had originally asked him to stand as its candidate. Kukrit later put a banner up outside his house, saying 'This house supports Major-General Chamlong Srimuang', but the wily elder statesman told the press that this was purely a personal decision:

So if he (Chamlong) is elected and later makes mistakes, don't blame the Social Action Party. Blame me.<sup>100</sup>

However, when Chamlong decided to form his own political party in May 1988, Kukrit showed little inclination to take the blame for the rise in Chamlong's political fortunes which was now having unforeseen consequences for the old pattern of coalition politics. In an interview with the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Kukrit described the Bangkok governor as 'too sanctimonious' and 'a little boy scout'.<sup>101</sup> Men like Kukrit, who had seen Chamlong in 1985 as a compromise candidate whose independence would help preserve the balance between the four main factions in Prem's fourth coalition cabinet, were dismayed at the extent of Chamlong's personal popularity. The larger-than-life presence of the Bangkok governor overshadowed the seedy machinations of the cabinet. Chamlong

<sup>100</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 9 November 1985.

<sup>101</sup> Rodney Tasker, 'Preacher politics', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19 May 1988.

was not playing the game, not working within the old factions, but, just as he had done in the army during the 1970s, forming a new faction to defeat factionalism. Kukrit declared that Chamlong had been 'very clever', since his entry into national politics was well-timed to coincide with the 'money-grabbing, position-grabbing, and sharing your bed with anyone at all' which took place during the election period. To the annoyance of the other parties, the PDP claimed the moral high ground by announcing its determination not to join any new coalition government.<sup>102</sup> The party would consider every political issue on its own merits before deciding how to vote. Chamlong was keen to dispel the idea that his former closeness to General Prem would lead him to give unconditional support to a new Prem-led coalition. Chamlong wanted more freedom of manoeuvre; by then, eight long years of 'Premocracy' were beginning to take their toll, and the prospect of a further term for a man who seemed to stand beatifically above the very government he was supposed to lead did not inspire much popular enthusiasm. Just as he was later to distance himself from Photirak, Chamlong was attempting in May 1988 to dissociate himself, at least publicly, from General Prem. Even as he began setting up his own political party, Chamlong was still presenting himself as a man who had come alone.

Given that no man is an island in Thai politics, who are Chamlong's supporters? The question has often been answered by the governor himself. He claims that his supporters are 'the silent majority' or 'the silent middle class',<sup>103</sup> who are deeply unhappy with traditional politicians and their record of mismanaging Bangkok and Thailand. The point was well illustrated by a crucial episode during the 1985 gubernatorial election campaign. Bhichai Rattakul, leader of the Democrat Party, taunted Chamlong with resembling a street trader touting goods which bore no guarantee. His party's candidate, by contrast, was like a department store whose goods were fully

<sup>102</sup> See, for example, *Bangkok Post*, 9 June 1988.

<sup>103</sup> See, for example, *Bangkok Post*, 6 January 1990.

warranted. The analogy backfired on Bhichai when street traders protested that his remarks had slandered their good name,<sup>104</sup> whilst Chamlong was quick to identify with the interests of the street traders, pointing out that his mother had been such a trader. The Democrats, by implication, were aligned with the interests of big business, against those of the silent majority. It was a major turning-point for Chamlong, a huge public relations coup caused by an opponent's gaffe.<sup>105</sup> He already had the sympathy of soldiers and devout Buddhists: now he enlisted support from pavement vendors and small businessmen. Again, though, he was encouraging people to vote for an idealized sentiment rather than for their immediate interests. His drive to clean up the city included a big purge on street traders, and by March 1986, many vendors were reported to be regretting having voted for him.<sup>106</sup>

Whilst detailed evidence is hard to come by, the generally-held view is that Chamlong receives the great bulk of his support from those who lose out through the unequal distribution of the city's wealth; people who lack power and influence in Thai society as it is presently organized. It was partly with these people in mind that Pichai Cheunsuksawadi wrote on the eve of the 1988 general election:

With the current state of politics, we have nothing to lose by giving the Palang Dhamma a chance to prove whether they can deliver the promises they are making.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup> 'Chana-Chamlong ching dam kaoi phuwa rachakan krungthep,' [Chana, Chamlong vie for the post of Bangkok Governor], *Su Anakhot*, 31 October-6 November 1985, pp. 14-15.

<sup>105</sup> For the view that the 'vendors business' was a major turning-point in the campaign, see Likhit Dhiravegin, 'A shift in the political mood of Bangkokians', *Bangkok Post*, 12 November 1985.

<sup>106</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 5 March 1986.

<sup>107</sup> Pichai Cheunsuksawadi, 'Great expectations', *Bangkok Post*, 23 July 1988.

Just as buying tickets in the twice-monthly lottery offers the economically disenfranchised of Bangkok their only hope of achieving riches, so voting for Chamlong appears to be the only means by which the powerless may try to bring about political change.<sup>108</sup>

Chamlong Srimuang's mother may have been a street vendor: and he himself runs a chain of vegetarian curry and rice stalls in his spare time.<sup>109</sup> But although not an establishment insider in the traditional sense, Chamlong can no longer present himself as a common man of the people. One of the most intriguing sources on Chamlong's network of connections, and the nature of the political future he envisages for Thailand, is a long article which appeared in the Thai news magazine *Su Anakhot* in May 1988, under the title 'Major-General Chamlong Srimuang: the era of Buddhist Utopia in Thai politics.'<sup>110</sup> The article claims that Chamlong knew of Prem's plans to dissolve Parliament on 29 April 1988, long before they were officially announced. Chamlong had been tipped off by Prasong Sunsiri, the then holder of his own old job as Secretary-General to the Prime Minister. The article (which claims to be based on a number of anonymous sources close to Chamlong) says that although Prem and Chamlong seemed to go their separate ways in October 1981, there was 'continual support' for one another by the two men thereafter, with Prasong functioning as a go-between. During his period in Prem's office, Chamlong had caused difficulties by attempting to influence the notoriously non-committal Prem in various ways. Yet both men retained the same basic aspiration: ridding government and political circles of 'evil people' who were bent on serving their own financial interests. Chamlong, Prasong, and Prem constituted part of a new political

<sup>108</sup> Chamlong himself has compared Thai elections with gambling in 'Sasana kap kanmu'ang' [Religion and politics], *Thang sam praeng*, vol. 1. p. 27. The analogy is especially pertinent because Thai election campaigns always highlight the ballot paper numbers of the rival candidates concerned.

<sup>109</sup> See Chamlong, 'Khay khaw kaeng' [Selling curry and rice], in *Thang sam praeng*, vol. 3, pp. 111-18.

<sup>110</sup> *Su Anakhot*, 24-31 May 1988.

grouping, the *khon di* or 'good men'. This secretive group had pledged to work together with the objective of changing the ground rules of Thai politics. Key aims were the effective separation of the legislative and administrative branches of government (that is, the break-up of the old 'bureaucratic polity' and the creation of an effective parliamentary system) and the establishment of a directly elected premiership (which would undermine money-based coalition politics).<sup>111</sup>

Whilst taking Chamlong's challenge very seriously indeed, his political opponents were keen to portray him as an opportunist, a tactician rather than a strategist. The disappointing outcome of the 1988 general election for Chamlong and the PDP surely showed that Kukrit was wrong: Chamlong suffered a tactical set-back, partly because of the excessive haste with which he tried to assemble a political party and field over 300 candidates. Furthermore, the problems of funding a political party and fielding large numbers of candidates risk compromising the moral independence which Chamlong claims for the PDP. Once again, tactical needs conflict with strategic ones.

The *Su Anakhot* piece contains an alternative view of Chamlong's intentions in forming a political party in May 1988:

Chamlong does not expect to gain anything from this election, other than some indication of the change in the political landscape and change amongst voters. But this action will be very important when the conditions of a serious political crisis occur, and all hell breaks loose. This policy which Chamlong is following, this mobilization of Chamlong's 'Good Men,' is a matter of working to redeem the nation, not a short-term aim, but a long-term strategy.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>111</sup> A number of opinion polls have suggested that Bangkok voters favour Major-General Chamlong for the premiership: see, for example, *Bangkok Post*, 21 July 1988.

<sup>112</sup> *Su Anakhot*, 24-31 May 1988, p. 26.

In other words, May 1988 saw Chamlong, not poised for a political coup, but mobilizing his forces in the hope of making his own rise to power a *fait accompli* in the event of a major political crisis.

Those who worked with Chamlong in the Army, or during his period as Secretary-General to the Prime Minister, generally hold his abilities in high regard. But, according to the article, two important themes emerge from their observations. The first is that Chamlong ought not to be underestimated: his seeming innocence is a cover for an extremely skilful and politically adept operator. On the other hand, Chamlong suffers from a dangerous over-confidence. His faith in his own abilities was greatly enhanced by the fact that he was able to finish his Master's degree at the well-respected US Naval Postgraduate School at Monterey, California. When asked his opinion of the rival candidates in an interview prior to the 1985 gubernatorial election, Chamlong brought up the subject of his postgraduate studies:

I studied exactly the right subject. As I've made known, there aren't any other governors who have relevant Master's degrees in Administration.<sup>113</sup>

Chamlong's rise has been a single-minded one. Some would call it narrow-minded; one of his former colleagues noted that Chamlong is excessively attached to his own point of view and that this severely constrains his outlook.<sup>114</sup> He may be guilty of attempting to impose his own values and beliefs upon the people he serves, rather than studying their needs and formulating policies to fit them. In the end, Chamlong Srimuang is not a

<sup>113</sup> Roeng, *Ni lae Chamlong Srimuang*, p. 26.

<sup>114</sup> *Su Anakhot*, 24-31 May 1988, p. 27. This view was confirmed by a serving, middle-ranking BMA official, who told me that he and many of his colleagues are uneasy about Chamlong's autocratic way of running the Authority. He alleged that Chamlong tends to give out military-style orders without consulting his staff, even when they are experts in the relevant field. Informal interview, 16 September 1990.

social reformer who emphasizes the transformation of institutions. His objective is the radical one of transforming the people themselves.

The *Su Anakhot* article offers two possible models for Chamlong to emulate. One is the model of Gandhi (to whom Chamlong sometimes refers),<sup>115</sup> a man who disdained the political establishment and threw himself whole-heartedly into mass politics. The other is General Prem, who never held elected office, but achieved the premiership when he became useful to the established political parties, and had the backing of both the monarch and the military. Chamlong may not be firmly wedded to either of these models: whilst he owes his present position to mass popular support, he cherishes the hope that he will be recognized by the Thai establishment as a saviour who can redeem it from evil and restore its political legitimacy.<sup>116</sup> This view remains a compelling one: Chamlong is waiting for the crisis which could give him the premiership, but while he waits he is building up his party in readiness for the next general election - and the one after that. The Bangkok governorship gives him a prominent power base, independent from parliament, and yet at the heart of political events.

Palang Dhamma policies in 1988 were vague. As *Su Anakhot* put it: 'Once the "Good Men" get together, they hope "good policies" will follow'.<sup>117</sup> So what kind of Thailand does Chamlong Srimuang want to create? Probably one with no foreign debt, and with various wasteful fripperies axed. Corrupt officials would doubtless be purged. Chamlong has banned the use of Bangkok's public parks for the annual celebration of the traditional (though not exactly Buddhist) *l'oi krathong* water

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, the interview in the *Bangkok Post*, 7 November 1985, in which Chamlong mentions Gandhi in support of his view that religion and politics are inseparable. Kim Gooi quotes Chamlong as acknowledging 'similarities' between himself and Gandhi, but denying that he is emulating the Indian leader. 'Letter from Bangkok', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 9 June 1988.

<sup>116</sup> *Su Anakhot*, 24-31 May 1988, p. 27.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

festival, ostensibly on 'cleanliness' grounds,<sup>118</sup> and such attempts at moral and cultural rectification might be carried out on a national scale. Having attained power, Chamlong might not be eager to relinquish it. Bhuddhathat has argued that the best form of government for Thailand would be the benign dictatorship of a man who possesses all the ten royal virtues:<sup>119</sup> whether or not Chamlong actually fits this definition, he may well believe himself to do so. As if to symbolize the extent to which Chamlong Srimuang has attained 'royal' status in the eyes of his followers, his Secretary-General, Lt.-Col. Vinai Sompong, gave a speech in December 1989 in which he described Chamlong as a *ming kwan* (beloved) figure.<sup>120</sup> These two words are often used with reference to the royal family, and this slip of the tongue was seized upon by Chamlong's opponents as a danger signal. Some commentators have expressed the fear that, given the right circumstances, Chamlong could become some sort of Buddhist Ayatollah Khomeini<sup>121</sup>: on balance, however, this seems far-fetched. But the fears of many influential sections of Thai society concerning Chamlong's future plans have not yet been dispelled.

Chamlong is probably the most honest politician in Thailand today. Many of his ideas - stamping out corruption, curtailing the excesses of Thai capitalism - may have a sound and rational basis. However, Chamlong's economic and political thought is often unsystematic, or downright simplistic. Ever since Chamlong formed the Palang Dhamma Party in May 1988, his political opponents appear to have been united in their desire to exclude him from high political office. Their crude attempts to smear and harass him have seriously backfired; the challenge remains. Chamlong Srimuang's Buddhist Utopia may never

<sup>118</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 19 December 1989.

<sup>119</sup> Buddhadasa, *Dhammic socialism*, pp. 97-100.

<sup>120</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 18 December 1989.

<sup>121</sup> See, for example, Kim Gooi, 'Letter from Bangkok', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 9 June 1988.



come about, but it represents a provocative and disturbing antithesis of contemporary Thailand.

A close study of the three paths which Chamlong Srimuang has followed over the past thirty-five years reveals something of the way in which the Bangkok Governor has arrived at an idiosyncratic vision of a disciplined Buddhist society in Thailand. Yet it does not explain the puzzle of his autobiography's final sentence:

'I have no future.'<sup>122</sup>

Dhammic wisdom or false modesty? Perhaps only Khun Chamlong himself knows.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Chamlong, *Chiwit Chamlong*, p. 135.

<sup>123</sup> Following the 23 February 1991 military coup and subsequent dissolution of parliament, Chamlong found himself the only major elected figure in Thailand. As the military junta began to lose public support, he campaigned strongly against the promulgation of an 'undemocratic' new constitution. On 14 January 1992, Chamlong Srimuang announced that he was about to step down from the Bangkok governorship, in order to run in the general election which was scheduled for 22 March. Under Chamlong's leadership, Palang Dhamma won 32 of Bangkok's 35 parliamentary seats, and a total of 41 seats nationwide. Chamlong became a key figure in the opposition, protesting strongly against the appointment of Army Chief and non-MP General Suchinda Kraprayoon to the premiership in April 1992.