

THE FALL OF THE PHIBUN GOVERNMENT, 1944

by

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Although it occurred only thirty years ago, the change of government that took place in Bangkok in the summer of 1944 remains an obscure episode. This is but a particular instance of a more general proposition—the war years as a whole are something of a blank in modern Thai history. Relatively little news filtered out of the country, and internally the amount of material published was limited. Most government publications were suspended, and much of the press, either voluntarily or by government fiat, ceased publication. Only one English-language paper continued to publish, the Chinese-language press virtually disappeared, and the number of Thai-language papers was cut substantially. (A Japanese-language paper appeared, but its circulation was limited almost entirely to the Japanese community, very few of whom were permanent or long time residents.) Of the small number of books published during the period most are now difficult if not impossible to find. And there are problems in using some of the materials that have survived, both because of the poor quality of the paper and printing in the last several years of the war, and because most of the Thai-language materials were published in a government-sponsored ‘modernized Thai’ that was used only during the period 1942-44. Of works dealing with the wartime period published subsequently the great bulk have dealt with the activities of the anti-Japanese resistance, both in Thailand and abroad. With a few exceptions, those associated with governments allied to Japan have had little to say about the period. Other than the activities of the resistance, most aspects of life in Bangkok—to say nothing of the countryside—have remained enveloped in silence.¹

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The war years, and particularly the government of Field Marshal Luang Phibun Songkhram, must be seen against the background of an assertive Thai nationalism that had its roots in the 1920's and reached

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1) The most prolific author on the war years in English has been the British jurist Gerald Sparrow, who in a series of semi-autobiographical works (*The Golden Orchid*, *Land of the Moonflower*, *Not Wisely But Too Well*, *The Star Sapphires*,

its full force in the late 1930's and early 1940's. This nationalist movement was a curious blend of East and West. Its models were clearly Western and its major promoters all Western-educated members of the Thai elite, but on the other hand it looked to the Thai past and took its ideology in part from the writings of King Vajiravudh (reigned 1910-1925), who while a strong proponent of technical modernization had also stressed 'Thainess' and the dangers of blind copying from the West. The mixture of elements from East and West was often rather incongruous: while non-Buddhist, and particularly Christian, Thai were being pressured to convert to Buddhism, all Thai were being told that only Western dress, including hats for both sexes and gloves for women, was civilized. When strong public opposition developed to the various government decrees regulating dress, Phibun defended his use of coercion by appealing to the examples of such historic 'modernizers' as King Ram Khamhaeng (thirteenth century) and King Chulalongkorn (reigned 1868-1910), whom he said had also had to force the Thai people to abandon

Lawyer at Large, Opium Venture) has given a set of vivid sketches of the last years of the absolute monarchy, the Siam of the 1930's, and the period of Japanese ascendancy, which he spent as a prisoner in Bangkok. While these works are valuable for the atmosphere of the times, their usefulness to the historian is limited by the author's strong biases on many subjects, notably Japan and the Japanese, and by the fact that in addition to a number of errors the works are not even internally consistent, the same episode appearing in completely different form in different works.

There is also a brief but interesting description of life in Bangkok during the Allied air raids in Princess Rudivoravan's *The Treasured One* (London, 1958).

Some of the relatively few works in Thai on the war years will be mentioned in the course of this paper. In view of the usual reluctance of most Thai writers to deal with aspects of the period other than the resistance, it is worth noting that last year 'Khu Kam' ('คู่กรรม'; The Destined Couple), a featurelength Thai film taken from a novel and set entirely in the war years, was well received in Bangkok. Particularly surprising was the relatively sympathetic treatment of the Japanese in the film; while there was some criticism, the Thai heroine eventually married and fell in love with (in that order) a kind and cultured Japanese officer, to the disappointment of her Thai childhood sweetheart, who after years in the West had just parachuted into Thailand to join the anti-Japanese underground.

old ways.² The change of New Year's Day from the old April 1 to the Western January 1 was justified by a dubious argument purporting to show that the ancient Thai year had begun on (or about) January 1. And *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, who in the late 1930's was Director-General of the Department of Fine Arts and the moving spirit behind many of the nationalist programs, argued that King Ram Khamhaeng had favored the 'walking Buddha' style of Sukhothai image to encourage his people to lead a more active and energetic life, which *Luang Wichit* saw as a good example for modern Thai.³

A symbolic culmination to the nationalist program came in the change of name from 'Siam' to 'Thailand' in the summer of 1939. In a speech before the National Assembly advocating the change, Phibun argued that internally the name 'Thailand' would make clear that the country belonged to the Thai (a reference presumably aimed primarily at the large Chinese minority, and to a lesser degree at Western economic domination), while others noted that externally it would advertise Thailand as the natural home of all the Thai peoples, giving expression to a nascent Pan-Thai movement that envisioned uniting the Thai of Thailand with various Thai peoples of Laos, the Shan States of northern Burma, and adjacent areas, in a single Thai state.⁴ The change in name was accompanied by a series of regulations restricting the activities of Chinese and other minorities and by the beginning of a campaign to press for a revision of the border between Thailand and French Indochina. This originally envisioned only a minor adjustment involving some islands in the Mekong River and navigation rights, but both sides took an increasingly hard line and, following the defeat of France in Europe in the summer of 1940, hostilities broke out between Thailand and the Vichy French regime in Indochina, in which the Thai had some success

- 2) M.C. Song Wutthichai, *Kantaeng Kai Samai Sang Chat* (การแต่งกายสมัยสร้างชาติ; Dress in the Era of Nation Building), Bangkok, 1941, pp. 127-141.
- 3) *Bangkok Times*, February, 20, 1940, August 2, 1940; March 22, 1940. During the war years *Luang Wichit* held a variety of positions, including Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to Japan.
- 4) The text of Phibun's speech is in *Rai-ngan Kanprachum Sapha Phuthaen Ratsadon* (รายงานการประชุมสภาผู้แทนราษฎร; Proceedings of the National Assembly), August 26, 1939.

on land and the French at sea. With Japanese mediation a treaty was concluded that made the Mekong the boundary line from the Burmese border to the Cambodian border, thus transferring to Thailand two areas on the west bank of the Mekong opposite Luang Phrabang and Pakse, and that also gave Thailand a large area in northern and western Cambodia.⁵ It should be noted that although by 1940 the Thai leadership was to a degree split into two factions, one favoring the continuation of Thailand's traditionally close economic and political ties with the West and the other a more independent and nationalist policy, tending to look toward Japan as the emerging dominant power in Asia and an ally with whose aid Western influence in Thailand could be reduced, there was virtually unanimous agreement on the justice of the Thai claims and a willingness to use all measures, including force if necessary, to secure a revision of the frontier. Thus Thai of various political persuasions supported the policy of the Phibun government in the fall of 1940, members of the National Assembly usually critical of the government toured the front, and Khuang Aphaiwong, a civilian moderate not closely identified

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- 5) All of the areas involved, with the exception of a strip in northern Cambodia, had been ceded to France by Siam in the early twentieth century. It is rather ironic that although most of the Thai propaganda had centered on the injustices of 1893, when a French naval display at Bangkok forced the cession of Laos east of the Mekong, none of the 'recovered' territories, nor even any of those claimed until rather late in the affair, had been involved in the 1893 dispute. The final settlement, involving less territory than many Thai felt their historic claims and military victories deserved (few were aware of the magnitude of the losses incurred in the naval action against the French in the Gulf of Siam in January 1941), the payment by Thailand to France of a substantial sum in the guise of compensation for French capital improvements in the returned areas, and a demilitarized zone on the Thai side of the new border, was accepted by the Thai with reluctance and only after strong pressure from the Japanese, which resulted in a temporary but marked setback to the developing Japanese-Thai entente. For criticism of the settlement in the National Assembly, and the government defence of the treaty as the best obtainable, see *Rai-ngan Kanprachum Sapha Phuthaen Ratsadon*, June 9, 1941 (pp. 4-29).

with the Phibun military faction, headed the Thai delegation to take possession of the former Thai territories in western Cambodia.⁶

Following settlement of the Indochina frontier question, Thai dissatisfaction with Japan's role in the negotiations and concern over the Japanese advance in French Indochina led to a period of somewhat improved relations with Britain and the United States, and to attempts to secure promises of support for Thailand in the event of war between those two countries and Japan. In the end there were no concrete results, and when confronted with overwhelming Japanese force on December 8, 1941, the Thai government ordered an end to a brief armed resistance and free passage for Japanese forces to attack Western colonial possessions in Southeast Asia. The arrival of the Japanese in force in Bangkok was followed by a series of successively closer treaties of aid and alliance between Thailand and Japan—one even being signed in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha—culminating in the Thai declaration of

- 6) Most of the opposition members in the National Assembly were from the Northeast, where the loss of the Lao and Cambodian territories to France was particularly strongly felt.

The choice of Khuang was a bit of symbolic propaganda. Khuang was the son of *Chao Paya* Aphaiphubet (Chum Aphaiwong), the last Bangkok-appointed governor of Battambang (the urban center of the western Cambodian territories returned to Thailand), and as a boy had moved with his family to Thai territory when the French took over Battambang. (There is a firsthand account in English of the Thai withdrawal by Eric Seidenfaden in the *Bangkok Times*, July 29, 1932.)

One prominent government leader who took no important part in the Indochina affair was Pridi Phanomyong, the leader of the civilian faction of the 1932 *coup* group. And at the height of the agitation for recovering the 'lost' territories, Pridi wrote a fable in English (also made into a film), *The King of the White Elephant* (Bangkok, 1941), a fictionalized account of a sixteenth century Thai-Burmese war which could be read as an allegory condemning militaristic adventures. In the preface, dated 11 May 1940, Pridi wrote approvingly of "Nations that to-day, with the enlightenment bestowed on them by the Lord Buddha, have realized the follies, of their forefathers, and, forgiving and forgetting, have, aggressed and aggressor, victor and vanquished alike, joined hands in brotherly love to work for the commonweal of Mankind . . . to Peace this story is dedicated, for 'Peace hath her victories no less renowned than war.' "

war on Great Britain and the United States on January 25, 1942.⁷ The reasons behind this action, as for so many other things in wartime Thailand, have been a matter of controversy. Phibun has argued that the government had no choice, while critics have claimed that it was an opportunistic act taken in the belief that Japan would win the war, and that reportedly even the Japanese were surprised by the Thai declaration. Government announcements at the time explicitly denied either that the declaration was the result of Japanese pressure or that it was made in the hope of sharing in Japan's victories, citing instead the past history of Western, and particularly British, imperialist oppression of the Thai and more specifically Allied air raids on 'neutral' Thailand subsequent to the arrival of the Japanese forces.⁸

- 7) There is a detailed account, based largely on Japanese sources, of the background of these events in Thadeus Flood, "Japan's Relations with Thailand: 1928-41" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Washington, 1967).

It would seem that very little Japanese writing on Thailand during the war years has appeared in English. One example is Masanobu Tsuji's *Underground Escape* (Tokyo, 1952), the first three chapters of which relate the experiences of a Japanese staff officer in Thailand in the latter part of the war and his escape in disguise through Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam after the Japanese surrender. There is an excerpt from this work, set partly in Bangkok in the summer and fall of 1945, in Jay Gluck, editor, *Ukiyo: Stories of 'The Floating World' of Postwar Japan* (New York, 1963). This collection also includes several stories dealing with other areas of Southeast Asia. Other well-known Japanese works on the region available in English include Michio Takeyama's *Harp of Burma* and Shohei Ooka's *Fires on the Plain* (set in the Philippines), both depicting the last phases of the war.

- 8) Official explanations are given in the *Bangkok Times*, January 26, 1942, and Sang Phatthanothai, *Suk Thai nai Roi Pi* (2385-2485) (สฤทไทยในร้อยปี (2385-2485); 100 Years of Thai Battles, 1842-1942), Bangkok, 1944, pp. 235-238, quoting a 17 February 1942 government radio broadcast replying to charges made on British radio. This book is in the simplified Thai spelling used from 1942 to 1944. See also the conflicting accounts of M.R. Seni Pramoj and *Thanphuying* La-iad Phibun Songkhram in Jayanta K. Ray, *Portraits of Thai Politics* (New Delhi, 1972), pp. 160 and 203. (This work contains the political memoirs of Thawee Bunyakert, Seni, and *Thanphuying* La-iad.) Seni writes that the Phibun government "went too far" and that the declaration of war was "somewhat unnecessary, and there were rumours that even the Japanese were surprised by this."

Flood says that according to a Japanese source Phibun, at a December 9 meeting with Japanese officials at which he was the only Thai present, told the Japanese that he was ready to declare war on the Allies any time Japan wanted, but that he would need some time to prepare the Thai public for such a step. ("Japan's Relations with Thailand," pp. 716-720, 735.)

For the first year and a half of the war it appeared that the decision of the Phibun government had been an astute one. Japanese forces were victorious from the borders of India to the Aleutians, and Thai forces conducted a small but successful campaign in the Shan States.⁹ In July 1943 Japanese premier Tojo visited Bangkok and announced that two Shan States and four Malay states in the south would be transferred to Thai administration. In November Prince Wan led a Thai delegation to the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere conference in Tokyo.¹⁰ In Bangkok and the countryside, despite occasional Allied air raids, life went on much as usual. One indication of the prevailing calm was the return to Thailand of Prince Damrong, the elder Thai statesman and scholar, from Penang (now also in the Japanese sphere) where he had lived since 1933. He died in Bangkok in December 1943 at the age of 81.

But even as the policies of the Phibun government were seeming to enjoy a considerable degree of success and popularity difficulties were developing. In the fall of 1942 the worst floods in decades occurred, and it was noted that the last great floods had been in 1917, immediately after Siam's entry into the First World War. With supplies from Europe and the United States cut off, there were shortages of many goods, prices skyrocketed, and when the government tried to enforce controls black markets appeared. Some types of goods could be replaced with Japanese products, but as the war turned against Japan, Japanese shipping was driven from the seas. Thus Thailand was cut off from its only remaining source of most manufactured goods, while at the same time unable to export its traditional surpluses of rice, rubber, tin, and teak except by

9) There is a contemporary account of this little known campaign in *Suk Thai nai Roi Pi*, Chapter 7, and a later but more accessible account in *Prawat lae Phon-ngan khong Chomphon Sarit Thanarat* (ประวัติและผลงานของจอมพลสฤษดิ์ ธนะรัชต์; Life and Work of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat), Bangkok, 1964, pp. 31-40.

10) The Japanese were disappointed that Phibun, unlike the heads of other 'friendly' states in Asia, did not attend in person. Various reasons given have included health, Thai domestic politics, and Phibun's desire to assert Thai sovereignty and independence. (Phibun, who had been Prime Minister since 1938, was the only one of the heads of government who had not come to power with the support of Japanese force.)

land, primarily to Indochina, Malaya, and Singapore.¹¹ In addition, Japanese demands on the Thai economy, which included large loans and the establishment of an artificial rate of exchange between the baht and the yen which amounted to a substantial devaluation of the baht, were highly inflationary. Figures prepared by the government in 1944 to use in arguing against Japanese demands for further inflationary credits showed that taking 1938 as the base year (=100) the cost of living index for Bangkok had risen as follows:¹²

	1941	132.00
	1942	176.99
	1943	291.56
January	1944	301.12
February	1944	327.46
March	1944	409.07

On top of the economic difficulties, there was public resistance to many of the 'state conventions' (*ratthaniyom*), decrees regulating dress, language and culture.

After the early Japanese successes, the news from the war fronts turned steadily worse. A great deal of news from Allied sources circulated clandestinely in Bangkok, but it was not necessary to have access to these illegal sources to judge the true situation. All war news in the

- 11) In 1941, when the war in Europe had already had an adverse effect on shipping, 406 ships with cargo arrived at the port of Bangkok and 533 departed. The figures for 1944 were 51 and 72 respectively. The value of goods imported through Bangkok in 1941 was 151.8 million baht and the value exported 238.8 million baht, while the 1944 figures were 57.7 million baht and 43.5 million baht respectively, although the decline in imports was partially offset by an increase in imports through other ports of entry. Thailand, *Statistical Year Book, B.E. 2482 (1939-40) to 2487 (1944)* (Bangkok, 1950), pp. 156, 295, 304.
- 12) Direk Chaiyanam, *Thai kap Songkhram Lok Khwang Thi 2* (ไทยกับสงครามโลกครั้งที่ 2; Thailand and the Second World War), Bangkok, 1966, vol 1, p. 303. Direk was Foreign Minister when Japanese troops entered Thailand, but known for his pro-Western sympathies he was soon removed. He was then sent to Tokyo as Ambassador—whether to watch the Japanese or to have the Japanese watch him is unclear. In the fall of 1943 he returned to Thailand and once again became Foreign Minister, serving until the fall of the Phibun government in July of 1944. (See also note 68.)

controlled press in Bangkok was from Japanese or, to a lesser extent, German sources. The Japanese reporting on the European war made little or no attempt to conceal German reverses (the Japanese-German alliance having always been more symbol than substance) and in June and July of 1944 the Allied invasion of France and advance toward Paris were reported in detail in the Bangkok press. Japanese coverage of the Pacific theatre was much more slanted, but as the Japanese despatches from 1943 onward reported an unending series of 'victories' moving ever nearer the Japanese home islands it required only a little knowledge of geography, or a map, to see the likely outcome. Simultaneously, Allied air raids on Thailand increased in intensity. Italy had left the war in 1943, and on July 18, 1944, the Tojo government resigned. While this was presented as only a matter of Japanese internal politics, its relation to Japan's declining military fortunes was evident. Two days later came the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life.

Even the divisions within the Thai elite were publicized in the Bangkok press. As early as August 1942, Phibun himself had publicly discussed the Free Thai movement led by M.R. Seni Pramoj, the Thai Minister in Washington who had refused to deliver his government's declaration of war on the United States.¹³ In April 1944 a Thai paper reported the capture of Thai agents parachuted in by the Allies, while denying that Thai inside the country were in contact with the "so-called"

13) *Bangkok Times*, August 18, 1942. Also similar references in *Bangkok Times*, September 28, 1942; *Bangkok Chronicle*, October 24, 1942. In January of 1942 handbills had criticized the government's pro-Japanese policy, and a 'Thai Issara' party (also meaning 'Free Thai', though using a different Thai word from the 'Seri Thai' Free Thai of Seni) was mentioned. (*Bangkok Times*, January 9 and 20, 1942.) Seni, in an article "Thailand and Japan", *Far Eastern Survey*, October 20, 1943, pp. 204-208, cited Bangkok radio broadcasts of June 1942 and March 1943 alluding to internal opposition to Phibun's policies.

The British-oriented *Bangkok Times* was put under new management following the arrival of the Japanese and was finally closed down September 30, 1942. The *Bangkok Times* had published for 55 years, a record in Thai journalism. Its demise left the Thai-language *Sri Krung* (ศรีกรุง) as the doyen of the Bangkok press, and the newer *Bangkok Chronicle*, which continued to publish throughout the war, as the country's only English-language newspaper.

Free Thai movement.¹⁴ In March of 1944 Wanit Pananon, a close adviser of Phibun generally acknowledged as the most pro-Japanese figure in the government, was charged in connection with a gold profiteering scandal, and in May it was reported that he had committed suicide.¹⁵ In June, government commentators pointedly insisted that, despite war-time inconveniences, the Thai people were not anxious for a change in the government.¹⁶ But dissatisfaction with the Phibun regime was obviously widespread, and the fall of the Japanese government in July appeared to remove its major external support and thus make its position even more precarious.

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The immediate issue over which the Phibun government resigned on July 24, 1944, six days after the fall of the government in Tokyo, was the refusal of the National Assembly to accept two government bills concerning the government plans to build a new national capital at Phetchabun and a huge Buddhist city near Saraburi. Speculation about possible transfer of the capital had gone on for a number of years. As early as 1939 a French writer had reported that the capital would be moved to Lopburi, where Phibun as Minister of Defence had constructed a large military complex.¹⁷ In 1942 the government announced plans for a new capital at Saraburi, but in November of 1943 it was reported that the site would be Phetchabun instead.¹⁸ The government had already been working to modernize Phetchabun and now construction was started on an even larger scale, including a temple designed to house the

14) *Suphab Satri* (สุภาพสตรีย์), cited in the *Bangkok Chronicle*, April 12, 1944. At the end of 1943 Free Thai sources estimated that four members of the cabinet and "the overwhelming majority of the National Assembly, civil servants, military personnel, and businessmen were either active members of the Underground or sympathizers". (James V. Martin, Jr., "Thai-American Relations in World War II", *Journal of Asian Studies* (August 1963, p. 463.)

15) *Bangkok Chronicle*, March 10, April 18, and May 23, 1944.

16) *Bangkok Chronicle*, June 15, 1944.

17) L. Chorin, *Dans le Haut Siam* (Bangkok, 1940), p. 18.

18) *Bangkok Times*, July 3, 1942; *Bangkok Chronicle*, November 17, 1943.

Emerald Buddha image, the palladium of the kingdom.¹⁹ The plan for a Buddhist city at Saraburi had been announced in July of 1943.²⁰ In 1944 in the last week of May and the first week of June, while the National Assembly was not in session, the government issued two emergency decrees providing for the reorganization and upgrading of the administration of Phetchabun and for the construction of the Buddhist center at Saraburi.²¹ After the Assembly began its regular session on National Day, June 24, the government, as required by the Constitution, submitted bills requesting the Assembly's acceptance of the two emergency decrees. It was the defeat of these two bills on July 20 and July 22 which precipitated the resignation of the Phibun government.

The motives of the government in proposing these two major projects in the midst of war and economic crisis have been variously described. At the time the government cited Allied air raids, which had made Bangkok increasingly dangerous, and the desire to demonstrate Buddhist piety; critics suspected another example of the expensive extravagance that characterized what they saw as Phibun's visions of grandeur.²² Since the war Phibun and his supporters have maintained

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- 19) *Bangkok Chronicle*, November 11, 1943; April 10, April 26, May 29, 1944. Phibun's 1945 account says that the image was actually transferred from Bangkok to Phetchabun. 'Withetsakorani', *Thai kap Sathanakan Songkhram Lok Khrang Thi 2* (ไทยกับสถานการณ์สงครามโลกครั้งที่ 2; The Thai and World War II), Bangkok, 1972, p. 471.
 - 20) *Bangkok Chronicle*, July 29, 1943; June 8, 1944. The government plans envisioned a world religious center, a Buddhist equivalent to Rome or Mecca.
 - 21) Complete texts of the two emergency decrees are given in Prida Dantrakun, *Nai Khuang kap Maethap Yipun* (นายควงกับแม่ทัพญี่ปุ่น; Khuang and the Japanese Generals), Bangkok, 1949, pp. 127-130 and 167-171. This detailed account of the situation in Bangkok in 1944-45 was written by a journalist who was present at some of the events he describes.
 - 22) Khuang adds that in addition to planning to move the capital, Phibun planned to reintroduce titles of nobility, giving himself the rank of 'Somdet Chao Phya' (and extremely high title rarely used in Thai history), that official historians were at work trying to show that Phibun was descended from the sixteenth century hero King Naresuan, and that various other semi-royal trappings for 'The Leader' (as Phibun was known during the war years) were introduced or contemplated. Khuang Aphaiwong, *Kan To Su khong Khapa Chao* (การต่อสู้ของข้าพเจ้า; My Struggle), Bangkok, 1958, Chapters 5 and 6. See also the *Bangkok Times*, October 22, 1941.

that both projects were part of a grand scheme for a planned uprising against the Japanese. In Phetchabun, several hundred miles north of Bangkok and in a relatively inaccessible valley ringed by mountains, the government and national treasures such as the Emerald Buddha would be safe from seizure by the Japanese. And the Buddhist city at Saraburi would serve the dual purpose of forestalling a planned Japanese military move into the area, which would have limited the effectiveness of nearby Thai military units, and providing a sanctuary for Thai civilians once fighting broke out between the Thai and Japanese forces.²³

The National Assembly debate on the Phetchabun bill took place on July 20, the attack on the government being made primarily by representatives from the Northeast. The main point stressed was the suffering of laborers conscripted throughout the country for the construction at

- 23) Phibun's 1945 testimony in defence of his wartime policies has recently been republished in *Thai kap Sathanakan Songkram Lok Khrang Thi 2*, pp. 415-474. (The author adds (p. 477) that only Phibun himself really knows the truth or falsehood of this account, but that in any case it is of historical interest.) The parts in question are on pp. 459-463. In English see also the memoirs of *Thanphuying La-iad Phibun Songkhram* in *Portraits of Thai Politics*, pp. 204-208 (including passages translated from her husband's account cited above.)

Phibun's account is in part corroborated by the memoirs of General Net Khemayothin, *Chiwit Nai Phon* (ชีวิตนายพล; Life of a General), Bangkok, 1954 and 1967, and *Ngan Tai Din khong Phan-ek Yothi* (งานใต้ดินของพันเอกโยธี; Underground Work of Colonel Yothi), Bangkok, 1957 and 1967 (2 vols.). (References here are to the 1967 editions.) See especially Chapter 2 of the latter work, which is cited by *Thanphuying La-iad* in *Portraits of Thai Politics*, p. 203. The 1967 edition of *Chiwit Nai Phon* contains a substantial introduction by Thawee Bunyakhet, which includes (pp. 6-7) a list of four objections—ranging from military considerations to malaria to the appearance of the government's abandoning the population—which Thawee says the Seri Thai had to Phibun's plan to make a stand against the Japanese at Phetchabun; the work also has (pp. 344-352) an excerpt from Phibun's 1945 testimony corresponding, with minor variations, to pp. 456-463 of *Thai kap Sathanakan Songkhram Lok Khrang Thi 2*.

Ngan Tai Din khong Phan-ek Yothi contains the well-known story of how Phibun, when asked in 1942 by Net ('Colonel Yothi') against whom Thai military planning should be directed, is said to have replied, "Which side do you think is going to lose this war? That side is our enemy." (pp. 1, 11).

the new capital site, which was described as a malarial jungle. Figures were given for the large numbers conscripted, and for the numbers who had died or contracted disease. The expense of the project and the unsuitability of the site were also criticized, as well as the government's questionable procedure of issuing an emergency decree only days before the Assembly was scheduled to reconvene.²⁴ At the end of the debate the government bill was defeated by a margin of 48-36.²⁵

Two days later the Assembly took up the bill to establish a Buddhist city at Saraburi. There was no objection to the principle of supporting the Buddhist religion, but the government was once again criticized for having issued the emergency decree only a few days before the opening of the Assembly, especially as the government itself said that the project would take years to complete. When the government explained that it had timed the decree to coincide with *wisakhabucha*, a Buddhist holy day,

- 24) *Nai Khuang kap Maethap Yipun*, pp. 130-167, gives the texts of the speeches of Thongin Phuriphat (Ubon), Khemchat Bunyaratananphan (Roi-et), Liang Chaiyakan (Ubon), and Fun Suphanasan (Ayutthaya). No source is given, which is unfortunate as even the National Library (Bangkok) apparently has no wartime proceedings of the National Assembly, and there is some evidence that they were never published (see the *Bangkok Times*, February 6, 1942, and the *Bangkok Chronicle*, December 30, 1944.) There is also a brief account of the Assembly debate in Bunchuai Sisawat, *Phantri Khuang Aphaiwong, Nayok Rattthamontri 4 Samai* (พันตรี คง อภัยวงศ์ อดีตนายกรัฐมนตรีกี่ 4 สมัย; Major Khuang Aphaiwong, Four-time Prime Minister), Bangkok, n.d., pp. 201-202. (Khuang's military title was honorary.) The author was a member of the National Assembly, and his source may have been the Assembly's own records.

Thongin claimed that at least 100,000 laborers had been conscripted in ten *changwat*'s, of whom 10,000 had died, and various other figures were given for specific areas, particularly in the Northeast. Charles F. Keyes, in *Isan: Regionalism in Northeast Thailand* (Cornell, 1967), p. 28, n. 9, notes that, whether it was true or not, many Northerners at least believed that most of the labor conscripted came from the Northeast. On the fall of the Phibun government, Keyes quotes from John Coast, who he says provides "a good summary." In fact Coast's account, including the passage quoted in Keyes, has a number of inaccuracies. (*Isan*, pp. 28-29, and Coast, *Some Aspects of Siamese Politics* (New York, 1953), pp. 26-27.)

- 25) *Phantri Khuang Aphaiwong, Nayok Rattthamontri 4 Samai*, p. 202; *Bangkok Chronicle*, July 21, 1944.

critics replied that the government had announced that it was abandoning the 'superstitious' practice of invoking auspicious occasions. It was pointed out that the plan involved large scale expropriation of land and eviction of the former owners, which was seen as incompatible with Buddhist principles. And the question was raised as to how such a large religious establishment could be supported in a rural area, when even the monks at Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, a large new government-sponsored temple on the outskirts of Bangkok, had to buy food rather than relying on the usual offerings of the laity. A representative from Ayutthaya noted that the area to be expropriated included his home town of Tha Rua, a populous river market on the railroad just south of the Saraburi provincial border, and recommended that the project be reduced in area and moved north to center around the historic Buddhist shrine at Phra Phutthabat.²⁶ In the end the government bill was defeated, 43-41, on a secret ballot.²⁷

On the face of it, it is difficult to see how the government could ever lose a vote in the National Assembly. In 1944 the Constitution of December 1932 was still in force, which had established a National Assembly that was half elected and half appointed. A provision in the

26) The speeches of Liang Chaikyan (Ubon), Fün Suphanasan (Ayutthaya), and Thongin Phuriphat (Ubon) are given in *Nai Khuang kap Maethap Yipun*, pp. 172-196. See also Phantri Khuang Aphairwong, *Nayok Ratthamontri 4 Samai*, pp. 202-204, and Hat Daoruang, *Chiwit lae Ngan khong Si Adit Ratthamontri* ชีวิตและงานของสี่อดีตรัฐมนตรี; Lives and Works of the Four Former Ministers), Bangkok, 1965, pp. 244-264.

The government case was presented by the police general Prayun Phamonmontri, Minister of Education and head of the paramilitary *yuvachon* youth movement, who was generally regarded as pro-Axis and particularly pro-German. However, according to General Net, Prayun was chosen by Phibun as a member of a secret mission that was to have been sent to negotiate with the Chinese Nationalist Government in Chungking. The fall of the Phibun government resulted in the cancellation of the proposed mission. *Ngan Tai Din khong Phan-ek Yothi*, pp. 33, 41). (The Thai military did have secret, friendly contacts with Chinese military units in the Shan States region (see *Chiwit Nai Phon*), and the Free Thai movement sent agents from Bangkok to Chungking.)

27) *Nai Khuang kap Maethap Yipun*, p. 9, and *Bangkok Chronicle*, July 24, 1944.

original Constitution had provided that when one half of the electorate had attained a certain level of education, and in any case within a period not to exceed ten years, the National Assembly would be composed wholly of elected members. However, in 1940 a government-sponsored amendment had extended the transitional period to twenty years, at the same time dropping the educational criterion that could have made possible an all-elected Assembly at an earlier date. The term of the Assembly had been set by the original Constitution at four years, and the first election had taken place in November 1933, and the second as scheduled in 1937. However, following a defeat in the Assembly in 1938 the government had dissolved the Assembly and called a new election in the fall of that year. In the normal course of events the next election would have been held in the fall of 1942, but the government, citing the wartime emergency situation, pushed through a measure extending the terms of office of the members elected in 1938 an additional two years. In the fall of 1944 a new two year extension was passed, on the same grounds as the earlier one, and new national elections did not take place until after the war.

Thus in 1944 the Assembly was made up of equal numbers of appointed and elected members, the elected members having been chosen in 1938, or in a few cases in by-elections held to fill vacancies that had occurred in the six intervening years.²⁸ The total number of elected seats was ninety-one, although at the time of the defeat of the Phibun government there were several vacancies.²⁹ The appointed members were predominantly military and usually supporters of the government.

28) Vacancies had occurred through death (including a suicide, and the arrest and execution of one member on political charges), resignation, and expulsion by the Assembly. And early in 1944 a member had been killed in an air raid (see *Bangkok Chronicle*, May 10, 1944).

29) There is a list of the membership as of August 1944 in a booklet issued by the Public Relations Department with the texts of the decrees establishing the new government and of official policy statements (*Prakat Tang Phusamret Ratchakan Thaen Phra-ong Tang Nayok Ratthamontri lae Ratthamontri Nayobai khong Ratthaban*. . . ; ประกาศตั้งผู้สำเร็จราชการแทนพระองค์ ตั้งนายกรัฐมนตรีและรัฐมนตรีนโยบายของรัฐบาล. . . (Bangkok, 1944), pp. 31-42). The list gives the names of 88 elected members and 91 appointed members.

The government normally had considerable support among the elected membership also, and in the brighter days of 1940-42 most government measures had passed by large majorities.³⁰

But, despite the apparently insuperable advantage that governments since 1933 had held in being able to name half of the Assembly, there were precedents for rejection of government measures by the Assembly.³¹ A number of minor bills had been defeated at various times, and others had been withdrawn by the government because it appeared likely that they would be voted down. And in several cases, the government had resigned after losing on what it considered important issues. In 1934 the Assembly had voted by an overwhelming 73 to 25 against an international rubber agreement endorsed by the government, leading to the resignation of the Phahon cabinet, while in 1938 the Assembly had passed, by a vote of 45-31, a budgeting measure opposed by the government, and the government had again submitted its resignation. In the 1937 royal lands scandal, in which members of the Assembly had sharply criticized certain government figures, the government had resigned before any vote could be taken.

The reasons for the defeat of the government bills on Phetchabun and the Buddhist city in July 1944 have been variously interpreted, and it would seem that a number of factors played a part. The fall of the Japanese government only days earlier has already been mentioned, and it is not likely that the timing was just a coincidence.³² Thawee Bunyaket has written that rumors circulating in Bangkok and Allied broadcasts from Ceylon, which named names, threatened members of the Assembly with possible treatment as war criminals if they continued to support the Phibun regime.³³ The basis of all these external pressures was the

30) In January 1942 a motion of confidence in the government had passed unanimously. *Bangkok Times*, January 30, 1942.

31) The government advantage was somewhat reduced by the fact that the appointed membership of the Assembly had always included most of the cabinet, who usually did not take part in votes.

32) According to his own account, Khuang at the time made several explicit references to the Japanese case as a precedent. *Kan To Su*, pp. 110-111.

33) *Portraits of Thai Politics*, p. 83. Thawee says that, "Prudi played an important role in engineering these rumours and broadcasts" in order to pressure the Assembly into ousting Phibun.

growing conviction that the Allies were going to win the war. It has been noted before that in most periods since 1932 no substantial segment of the National Assembly has dared to oppose the government unless it had, or at least thought it had, the backing of some significant military force; the special circumstances of 1944 show that this force need not necessarily be inside the country.

Various accounts stress that by the summer of 1944 the growing public dissatisfaction with the Phibun regime had spread to both elected and appointed members of the Assembly. A particular cause of Assembly resentment against Phibun was the rather highhanded manner in which in the previous year he had forced the members' choice to head the Assembly, Thawee Bunyakert, to step down in order that a candidate more to his liking could be chosen.³⁴ Furthermore, even the Japanese were becoming disenchanted with Phibun, both because they suspected that he was making plans to go over to the Allies' side and because he was so publicly identified with the Japanese cause that they feared his growing unpopularity would also affect them.³⁵ It seems likely also that at least some of the issues raised by critics of the government in the Assembly debates, notably the hardships of the labor force conscripted to build the new capital, were genuinely felt. Phibun and his followers later blamed their defeat on the need for absolute secrecy, which made it impossible for them to reveal the true anti-Japanese purposes of the projects in the Assembly. And Phibun even defended the Phetchabun labor conscription on the grounds that it gave him an excuse for not providing the Japanese with a labor force they wanted for construction in the southern peninsula.³⁶

34) Pramot Phungsunthorn, editor, *Bang Ruang kieokap Phraboromawongsanuwong nai rawang Songkhram Lok Khrang Thi 2* (บางเรื่องเกี่ยวกับพระบรมวงศานุวงศ์ในระหว่างสงครามโลกครั้งที่ 2; Some Accounts Concerning the Royal Family During the Second World War), Bangkok, 1972, p. 67. (The section pp. 38-101 is by Pridi.) See also *Kan Tq Su*, pp. 102-104, 109.

35) Pridi in *Bang Ruang*, pp. 64-66.

36) *Thai kap Sathanakan Songkhram Lok Khrang Thi 2*, pp. 454-455, 460-461; *Portraits of Thai Politics*, p. 204. On p. 208 *Thanphuying* La-lad writes that Phibun was bitter that he received no credit for his contributions to the anti-Japanese cause, and particularly that two key elements of his plan, the Phetchabun and Buddhist city projects, were "debunked by civilian politicians."

Whether or not there was actually a conspiracy to oust Phibun through a parliamentary *coup*, presumably masterminded by Pridi,³⁷ is unclear. Thawee writes that the Assembly was "prodded by Pridi," and Khuang says that Pridi sent agents to get in touch with appointed members of the Assembly.³⁸ On the other hand Liang Chaikyakan, one of the leaders of the anti-Phibun group in the Assembly, emphatically denies that there was a plot, and says that the defeat of the government was as much of a surprise to the opposition as to the government. He notes that at this time he was not close to Pridi, and sums up Phibun's fall and replacement by Khuang Aphaiwong as a "fluke."³⁹ It is possible that both accounts are correct, Pridi and his group relying on the largely Northeastern 'opposition' to lead the attack, and trying to add enough

37) Pridi, leader of the civilian faction of the 1932 *coup* group, had long been a rival of Phibun. In the 1930's Pridi had served as Minister of the Interior and Minister of Foreign Affairs, and when the war broke out he was Minister of Finance. He was removed from this post and made a member of the Council of Regency, both because the Japanese wanted someone more sympathetic in the key economic position and because, according to Phibun, it was felt that he would be safer in a non-political office. The Regency Council, headed by Prince Aditya, acted for the young King Ananda (who resided in Switzerland throughout the war). In 1942 a third member of the Council died and was not replaced, and thus in July 1944 Pridi was one of two members of the Regency Council, while also covertly the head of the underground 'Free Thai' movement.

38) *Portraits of Thai Politics*, p. 81; *Kan To Su*, p. 110.

39) This information comes from conversations with Nai Liang, and notes on the subject which he wrote for the present author in August 1973, for which the author wishes to express great appreciation.

Liang has had an extraordinary career in Thai politics, having been elected to the National Assembly from his native Ubon in every election from 1933 through 1957, and he is perhaps the only living member of the first elected group of representatives. At various times in his career he has been associated with almost every major party in Thai politics, including one of his own, and he has also served in several cabinets. In the 1930's and 1940's he was a leader of the largely Northeastern 'opposition' group in the National Assembly, and he initiated the attack on government figures allegedly involved in the 1937 royal lands scandal.

votes from other factions to defeat the government.⁴⁰ Absenteeism may have also played a part; because of the war situation many military members of the Assembly, Phibun's greatest source of support, were away from Bangkok, and Liang adds that on the day of one of the crucial votes an important cremation resulted in the absence of a number of government supporters. On both bills the number of votes for and against totalled less than half of the total number of Assembly members.

Following the defeats in the National Assembly on July 20th and 22nd, Phibun submitted his resignation to the Council of Regency on the 24th. There has also been considerable speculation about the reasons for this action. According to the Constitution, the government was required to resign only if it lost a formal vote of no confidence, which had not happened. In the past government measures had been rejected occasionally with no particular consequences,⁴¹ and in practice governments since 1932 had resigned only over defeats on 'important' questions. However, it was up to the discretion of the government itself to decide what constituted an 'important' question, and the Phibun government had not indicated in advance that the Phetchabun-Buddhist city bills were 'important' questions on which the government would stake its existence.⁴² Phibun, in his letter of resignation, said that in rejecting two major government projects the Assembly had shown that it no longer trusted the government, the equivalent of a vote of no confidence.⁴³ His wife has written that he did not have to resign and that many advised against it, and suggests that alternatively Phibun could have dissolved the Assembly. She attributes his resignation to respect for constitutional process, and also to Phibun's conviction that Thailand's postwar situation

40) There were no political parties at the time, but Liang describes the Assembly as consisting of three groups: the 'opposition' already described, a group of hard core supporters of the government, and a middle group that might go either way depending on the issue.

41) See for example the defeat of a minor government bill reported in the *Bangkok Chronicle*, January 3, 1944.

42) In the 1938 budgeting crisis, for example, Phya Phahon had warned in advance that the government would resign if the Assembly voted a bill the government deemed unacceptable.

43) The text of Phibun's letter to the Regents is in the *Bangkok Chronicle*, July 29, 1944. See also Phibun's letter to the Assembly in the July 31 *Chronicle*.

would be easier with a new Prime Minister, as "He had declared war on the Allies, and the Allies were going to win."⁴⁴ Pridi says that a majority of the cabinet thought that political 'etiquette' required that the government resign, but also that it was possible that Phibun would be reappointed Prime Minister, a common practice in Thai politics.⁴⁵ Most critics of Phibun have argued that he resigned only because he thought that the lack of any acceptable alternative would force the Assembly and the Regency Council to call him to form a new government.⁴⁶

The resignation of Phibun was only the beginning of the political crisis. Pridi, of course, accepted the resignation at once, but the head of the Council of Regency, Prince Aditya, whose signature was also required, refused to sign. Prince Aditya was in the awkward position of being closely identified with Phibun both personally and in policies, and also having incurred Phibun's displeasure on several occasions in the past. He probably doubted whether Phibun, with the military behind him, would really allow his government to be overthrown by a vote in the Assembly, and he had had past experience with Phibun 'resignations' which were submitted one day and withdrawn the next. But Prince Aditya was finally persuaded to give his signature and, after some further complications, on the 26th the Council of Regency formally accepted Phibun's resignation. The National Assembly was now consulted about the selection of a new Prime Minister, and, as had been anticipated from the beginning, the clear choice of the anti-Phibun forces was *Phya Phahon*, the venerable elder statesman who had led the military forces in the 1932

44) *Portraits of Thai Politics*, pp. 205-206.

45) Pridi in *Bang Ruang*, p. 67. *Phya Phahon*, for example, had resigned four times between 1933 and 1938 (and had tried to resign several other times), in each case being reappointed Prime Minister. (The resignations had resulted in some reshuffling of cabinet ministers.) One resignation had followed the government defeat on the rubber issue in 1934, and another the controversy over the royal lands transactions in 1937.

It was in 1938, after the government defeat on the budgeting bill, followed by the dissolution of the Assembly and the holding of new national elections, that Phahon left the Prime Minister's office for good.

46) Liang and Thawee both support this view. See *Portraits of Thai Politics*, p. 100, and also *Chiwit lae Ngan khong Si Adit Ratthamontri*, pp. 264-266.

coup and had served as Prime Minister from 1933 to 1938.⁴⁷ But Phahon, who was in poor health and had repeatedly vowed never to enter politics again, flatly refused to serve.⁴⁸ Phibun, who still held the position of Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, had meanwhile moved to his military headquarters at Lopburi, and speculation was rife in Bangkok as to what would happen next.

The Assembly was again called into emergency session, and this time the choice, from among three names mentioned, was Khuang Aphaiwong. Khuang attributes his selection to Pridi's influence;⁴⁹ Pridi says

47) The account in *Nai Khuang kap Maethap Yipun*, p. 16, says that the Japanese diplomats favored Phya Phahon as Phibun's successor, while the Japanese military preferred Luang Sinthu Songkhramchai, an admiral considered to be pro-Japanese, but that neither Japanese group interfered in what was regarded as a matter of Thai domestic politics. In 1942 Phya Phahon had headed a high level Thai goodwill mission to Japan.

48) Khuang, in *Anuson nai Ngan Phraratchathan Phloeng Sap Phantri Khuang Aphaiwong* (อนุสรณ์ในงานพระราชทานเพลิงศพ พันตรี คง อภัยวงศ์; Khuang Cremation Volume), Bangkok, 1968, p. 127, says that after the Assembly voted in favor of Phahon supporters of Phibun visited Phahon privately, presumably with the intention of persuading him to refuse the post. This account is from a lecture Khuang gave at the Khurusapha on November 23, 1963, which illustrates the point made about the haziness of the events surrounding the fall of the Phibun government. In spite of the fact that he was as intimately involved as anyone, Khuang inserts the defeat of the Buddhist city bill in an unrelated episode that took place early in 1943 (p. 125), and then says that in the 1944 case the government was defeated on another bill that he "can't recall." (p. 127). There is a more accurate account in the same volume, pp. 60-76, and also in Khuang's *Kan To Su* (published in 1958), particularly Chapters 7-15 (pp. 95-210).

The lecture cited contains a memorable firsthand account of the night of the 1932 *coup* (pp. 117-119). There are some comments by Pridi on the accuracy of various points in Khuang's lecture in *Bang Ruang* (cf. pp. 84ff).

49) *Kan To Su*, p. 115. According to this account, the other two nominated were the police head Luang Adun, who was Deputy Prime Minister under Phibun but also a chief aide to Pridi in the Free Thai movement, and the admiral Luang Sinthu.

However, a biographer of Phibun says that the three nominated were Khuang, Luang Sinthu, and Phibun himself, and that Luang Sinthu had been nominated in order to split the votes of Phibun's supporters. (Charun Kuwanon, *Chiwit Kan To Su khong Chomphon P. Phibunsongkhram* (ชีวิตการต่อสู้ของจอมพล ป. พิบูลสงคราม; Field Marshal Phibun's Life of Struggle), Bangkok, 1956, pp. 257-260). This work has a detailed account (pp. 245-264) of the parliamentary stratagems employed by the anti-Phibun forces, which expands on and in some respects differs from the other accounts cited; it mentions a number of Assembly members by name and gives voting figures on major questions, including the two Assembly polls to choose a new Prime Minister.

that he and his followers would have preferred Thawee Bunyakert, who was experienced, popular with the Assembly (his forced withdrawal as Assembly President has been mentioned above), a leader of the Free Thai movement, and one of the early members of the 1932 *coup* group,⁵⁰ but that it was felt that he was too forthright and outspoken to manage the delicate problem of relations with the Japanese. Khuang, who had a considerable reputation as a witty and resourceful speaker, was chosen instead, largely for his ability to dissemble with the Japanese.⁵¹ Despite his later career in party politics, Khuang at the time was a relatively non-political figure popular with all factions. His training had been in engineering (his role in the 1932 *coup* had been to cut the telephone lines), and his previous government positions had been relatively technical and non-political ones such as Director-General of the Post and Telegraph Department and Minister of Communications. He was also popular with the Assembly, of which he was an appointed member and Vice-President at the time of his selection to be Prime Minister.

However, further difficulties developed, for Prince Aditya now refused to sign the decree appointing Khuang Prime Minister. By Khuang's account, Prince Aditya tried to persuade him to turn down the position, and repeatedly brought up the possibility of a military move by Phibun. When Khuang refused to withdraw, Prince Aditya solved the impasse by resigning himself on July 31.⁵² The National Assembly

- 50) Although Khuang had been in France in the mid-1920's with Phibun, Pridi, and other early leaders of the *coup* group, he had joined the group only a few months before the *coup* took place. The more radical students in France had tended to be wary and suspicious of Khuang because of his family ties; not only was he descended from an old provincial ruling family (see note 6), but he was related by marriage to King Vajiravudh and, worst of all, was a brother-in-law of Prince Charoonsak, the Thai Minister in Paris in the mid-1920's with whom Pridi and his group clashed repeatedly.
- 51) Pridi in *Bang Ruang*, p. 68. See also Thawee's account in *Portraits of Thai Politics*, pp. 100-101.
- 52) *Anusorn* . . . *Khuang Aphairwong*, p. 129. There has been much speculation about the motives behind Prince Aditya's resignation. According to Khuang, Prince Aditya didn't dare sign the decree, presumably for fear of Phibun, and warned Khuang that he would resign first. Pridi says that Prince Aditya believed that Phibun would soon return to power, and recall him as Regent (Pridi in *Bang Ruang*, p. 70). A rather obscure passage in a cremation volume for Prince Aditya says that many people have misunderstood his motives, and that the results, even of a miscalculation, if it is made with the good of the country in mind and things work out satisfactorily, should be forgiven. Hasan (หะซัน), Bangkok, 1946, pp. 21-22. (This is a translation of the English work "Hassan," with a biography of Prince Aditya, pp. 1-35.)

immediately named Pridi sole Regent and Pridi installed Khuang as Prime Minister, with Thawee as his main deputy with special responsibility for Free Thai affairs, and with a predominantly civilian cabinet composed largely of Pridi's supporters. In his address as Regent to the new cabinet, Pridi advised them to continue the worthwhile programs of the Phibun regime, but to drop those that were "unpopular with the people" or "premature."⁵³

Khuang had experienced considerable difficulty in forming a government, and particularly in finding someone willing to serve as Minister of Defence, a position that impinged on Phibun's personal preserve. In the end *Luang* Sinthu Songkhramchai of the Navy was persuaded to take the post, and *Phya* Phahon, while firmly refusing to take charge of any ministry, finally agreed to join the cabinet as a minister without portfolio, on the condition that his name be listed last. Bringing Phahon into the government considerably strengthened Khuang's rather precarious position, for Phahon was the only military leader whose influence could rival that of Phibun. However, rumors continued that Phibun would lead the army on Bangkok to overthrow the new government. It was decided that the only way to end the tense situation was for Khuang to talk to Phibun, so in a borrowed car (Phibun had taken the Prime Minister's cars with him) Khuang went to Lopburi. At a cordial meeting Khuang succeeded in getting a signed statement from Phibun saying that he had no intention of leading his forces on Bangkok to oust Khuang, whom he looked on "like a younger brother." The government publicized the statement widely in the media, and the immediate crisis subsided.⁵⁴

However the government felt that no lasting political stability was possible so long as Phibun remained in command of the military—at any time he might change his mind or his supporters might well take the initiative in the hope of forcing him to act, and there was also still the possibility of complications with the Japanese. Therefore Khuang again made the trip to Lopburi 'to see the tiger in his cave', but when asked to

53) Pridi Phanomyong, *Kham Prasai khong Phanathan Pridi Phanomyong* (คำปราศรัยของ พระท่าน ปรีดี พนมยงค์; Address by Pridi), Bangkok, 1944, p. 3.

54) The text of Phibun's statement is given in Thai in *Anusorn . . . Khuang Aphaiwong*, pp. 64-65, and in English in the *Bangkok Chronicle*, August 21, 1944.

resign his post as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Phibun refused. Upon Khuang's return to Bangkok an order was prepared in great secrecy abolishing the post of Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and naming *Phya* Phahon 'Commander-in-Chief', the change in title being made to preserve the fiction that Phibun was not being replaced. As soon as the order was issued, Phahon circulated a pointed message to all military units instructing them that only his orders were to be obeyed, and that they should have "absolute proof" that any orders received were genuine before acting upon them.⁵⁵ The government then prepared what little military force it had at its disposal, mainly naval units loyal to Pridi, and awaited the worst. Khuang and the ailing and partly incapacitated Phahon were spirited across the river to naval headquarters in Thonburi, Phahon grumbling dejectedly about what kind of Commander-in-Chief had to go into hiding in his own capital city, where Khuang spent the night sleeping on a table.⁵⁶ But the expected move on Bangkok did not materialize, and Phibun sent a personal letter to Khuang saying that he did not regret that he had been dismissed from his post, but had been unwilling to quit voluntarily for fear his military supporters would think that he had abandoned them.⁵⁷ At the time Phibun's military position had been abolished he had been given the high sounding but meaningless title of 'Adviser of the State', and he soon left his military headquarters at Lopburi for quiet retirement near Bangkok. The columnist 'Alethea' wrote with scarcely concealed satisfaction that his new position would allow Phibun "a well-earned rest."⁵⁸

55) *Bangkok Chronicle*, August 24, 1944. The text in Thai is in *Phantri Khuang Aphaiwong, Nayok Ratthamontri 4 Samai*, pp. 228-229.

56) There is a detailed account of all these events in *Kan Tq Su*, Chapters 11-13. There is another version, differing in some respects from that of Khuang, in *Phantri Khuang Aphaiwong, Nayok Ratthamontri 4 Samai*, Chapter 11.

57) *Anuson . . . Khuang Aphaiwong*, p. 67. The exit of Phibun was followed by a major shakeup in the military, and particularly the army, removing his supporters from key positions (*Ngan Tai Din khong Phan-ek Yothi*, p. 45).

58) *Bangkok Chronicle*, August 26, 1944. 'Alethea' called Phahon "the only man who can succeed him."

'Alethea' wrote two weekly pieces, "The Passing Hours" and "Alethea's Column," in the *Bangkok Chronicle* throughout the war years. 'Alethea' had taken over "The Passing Hours" in September 1942 from 'Prem Chaya', who

The common interpretation, both in Thailand and in the West, of the replacement of Phibun's government by that of Khuang was that Japan's deteriorating military position had led to the fall of a pro-Japanese regime and its replacement by one which, while still unable to break openly with the Japanese, was as pro-Ally as circumstances permitted. Thus a United States Office of Strategic Services report entitled "Trend Toward Democracy in Thailand" hailed the overthrow of the "collaborationist" Phibun and his replacement by the "anti-Japanese" Khuang. Pridi was identified as "the strong man of the new government," and the spirit of the new post-Phibun Thailand was said to be "a renaissance of the democratic movement which framed the Constitution in 1932."⁵⁹

had run afoul of the government censors. 'Prem Chaya' was the well-known pen name of Prince Prem Purachatra; 'Alethea' was in fact none other than Prince Prem and his wife. (For information on this point, as well as other subjects of the period, the present author is greatly indebted to Prince Prem.) After the war a collection of *The Passing Hours* was published by 'Prem Chaya' and 'Alethea' (Bangkok, 1946), with the apt subtitle "A Record of Five Amazing Years." The published collection includes notes elucidating references that were intentionally obscured in the original texts to get them past the censors (even so they did not always get by), and provides a unique picture of wartime conditions in the capital. Alethea's columns ranged over a multitude of topics and mixed humor with satire and subtle criticism, particularly of the Phibun government and the Japanese. Thus for example "The Passing Hours" of July 22, 1944, the day the National Assembly rejected the Buddhist city bill, discussed a partial eclipse of the sun that had been observed in Bangkok, the history of astronomy in Siam, and ended with the suggestion that the government establish a School of Astronomy so that the public could be told in advance when eclipses were due, "and especially a total eclipse of the sun, which I am told is a grand sight." In a note, 'Prem Chaya' observes that the total eclipse of the Rising Sun occurred on August 15, 1945.

- 59) United States, Office of Strategic Services, "Trend Toward Democracy in Thailand" (Washington, mimeographed), pp. 1-2, 13. This report is undated, but from internal evidence was probably written in October 1944. Despite some minor errors, it is a good indication of how accurate and complete OSS intelligence on Thailand was during the later years of the war. Part of the data came from the monitoring of radio broadcasts, but part could only have come directly from sources inside Thailand, presumably through the Free Thai underground. (Another useful OSS report is *Japanese Domination of Thailand*, dated September 18, 1944, a detailed study of Japanese control in various sec-

However, the account of Khuang himself gives exactly the opposite impression. Khuang argues that by the summer of 1944 the Japanese had become highly distrustful of the Phibun regime, and that there was a real and immediate danger that the Japanese military would seize control of the whole Thai civilian and military administration, as they did in French Indochina in March of 1945. Khuang even claims that if the old government had remained in office another 24 hours the Japanese would have acted.⁶⁰ All of the various Thai factions have agreed in their praise for the Japanese commander in Thailand, General Nakamura,

tors of Thai life. An appendix includes lists of Japanese officials, civilian and military, and Japanese organizations and businesses active in Thailand during the war.)

For a similar interpretation of the change of government in Bangkok see also Sir Josiah Crosby, *Siam: The Crossroads* (London, 1945), pp. 166-168. (The author was the last prewar British Minister in Bangkok.) Crosby's account is the basis for a considerable part of the section on wartime Thailand in Great Britain, Foreign Office and Ministry of Economic Warfare, *Siam, Basic Handbook* (London, 1945), pp. 66-94. This work includes an appendix with useful, though often critical, brief biographies of 44 wartime Thai leaders (pp. 84-94), and a valuable section on the Bangkok press (pp. 50-52).

The Japanese, publicly at least, professed to see no significance in the change of government. For instance *The Voice of Nippon*, an English-language weekly published in Djakarta, on August 14 ran a story datelined Bangkok, August 3, under the headline "No Change in Basic Policy of Thailand: Rapid Progress Assured Under New Cabinet." It said in part: "There will be no change in Thailand's three basic economic policies of supplying goods to Japan and other areas of Greater East Asia, establishment of a self-sufficient economy, and stabilization of the people's livelihood."

It is reported from Tokyo that the Domei Political Correspondent commented that the new Cabinet was definitely pro-Japanese, as . . . numerous pro-Japanese elements were included."

The Japanese did, however, immediately send one of their most experienced diplomats to take charge of the embassy in Bangkok.

- 60) *Kan To Su*, pp. 124, 133. In the foreword and Chapter 1 of *Underground Escape* Colonel Tsuji discusses at length Japan's distrust of the Thai, and Japanese plans—to which he was strongly opposed—to strike first and disarm the Thai military and police, but he gives no details about timing. Tsuji believed that any Japanese move against the Thai would be a dishonorable betrayal of the alliance, and that "It was imperative that we keep Thai(land) as an ally as long as possible, if failing that, to keep her neutral."

as a moderate and reasonable man, but the Japanese commander was under pressure, both from his superiors in Saigon and from his more zealous subordinates in Bangkok, to take stronger action against the obvious Thai double-dealing.⁶¹ What was needed, in Khuang's view, was not less cooperation with the Japanese but more, at least, superficially. Phibun's ill-concealed attempts to play both sides of the fence, Khuang believed, were likely to result in the loss of what remained of Thailand's independence, and Khuang made the re-establishment of good relations with the Japanese one of his top priorities. Thus Free Thai matters were left to Pridi, Thawee, and *Luang* Adun, and Khuang preferred to know as little as possible about the details of what they were doing, which could only complicate his dealings with the Japanese.⁶² (When potentially embarrassing issues did arise, Khuang was usually successful in talking his way out of them, sometimes with rather preposterous explanations.) One of the six points of the first policy statement of the new government affirmed the treaty commitments to Japan as the basis of Thai foreign policy, and while after the war Phibun went to lengths to show the extent to which he had betrayed the Japanese, Khuang has denied doing so.⁶³ Khuang even offered repeatedly to make

61) Cf. *Anuson Khuang Aphaiwong*, p. 77, *Thai kap Songkhram Lok Khrang Thi 2*, p. 308, and Thawee's account in *Chiwit Nai Phon*, pp. 19-20. The Japanese knew a great deal about Free Thai operations, and on occasion might casually ask a Thai official about last night's parachute drop or whether a certain Allied agent were enjoying his stay in Bangkok. That they did not do more about it has been attributed in part to General Nakamura, who was sympathetic toward the difficulties of the Thai situation, particularly once the war was clearly lost for Japan.

62) Pridi in *Bang Ruang*, p. 70, and Thawee in *Chiwit Nai Phon*, p. 18.

63) *Thai kap Sathanakan Songkhram Lok Khrang Thi 2*, pp. 414-474; *Anuson Khuang Aphaiwong*, p. 131ff. (Nevertheless, Phibun spent his last years in exile in Japan, where he died in 1964.)

According to Col. Tsuji, when Khuang discovered that his movements were being shadowed by Japanese agents the "furious" Prime Minister remonstrated with the Japanese as follows: "I have faithfully adhered to the Japan-Thai Alliance, despite being seriously misunderstood by a portion of the Thai people. But now what do I find? If you have no confidence in me I shall resign immediately." The threat of resigning was one of Khuang's strongest weapons in dealing with the Japanese, and one which he used often. Tsuji

the trip to Japan which Phibun had always refused, even though by 1944-45 the journey had become an extremely hazardous one, and only circumstances prevented his going.⁶⁴

The two interpretations of the change in government are not necessarily incompatible, and the difference can be seen as a difference in tactics rather than in goals. Khuang was not so much pro-Japanese or anti-Japanese as pro-Thai, and while clearly favoring the Allied cause he (and Pridi) apparently believed that in the circumstances the interests of the country were best served by a government that maintained good relations with the Japanese, while the activities of the anti-Japanese underground were kept out of the sphere of the Prime Minister. Even his critics have conceded that Khuang played his difficult role well, and it is a measure of his success that while his government was improving Thai relations with Japan it was at the same time regarded by the Allies as being anti-Japanese.

notes that Khuang "enjoyed the overwhelming confidence of the Thai Parliament. When he spoke, even the Opposition listened to him with close attention and applause," and "In the face of the critical war situation, the resignation of Prime Minister Apaiyon (Aphaiwong) would stir up Thai's political world into a hornet's nest."

Tsuji was astonished at Khuang's simple manner and life style. On his first visit to Khuang he found Khuang's house "a small and unimposing structure. I could not bring myself to believe that the Prime Minister of an independent state could live in such a place." Nor could he believe that the "unpretentious and rather thin youth" in a sport shirt who answered the door was none other than the Prime Minister himself. On a later occasion Allied planes raided the central Bangkok railroad installations, and bombs landed near Khuang's house (located in a lane opposite the National Stadium). Tsuji rushed to Khuang's rescue, only to find "the youthful 44-year-old leader of the Thai busily brushing away the sparks falling on his clothes and supervising the fire-fighters and the fleeing people. He seemed oblivious to the falling bombs." (*Underground Escape*, pp. 10-14.)

64) *Anuson Khuang Aphaiwong*, p. 71. The picture of Khuang's relations with the Japanese given here is based on *Kan To Su*, Chapters 8-17, the accounts in *Anuson Khuang Aphaiwong*, and *Nai Khuang kap Maethap Yipun*.

At the end of the war in August 1945 Khuang, still maintaining that his government had been in alliance with the Japanese and hence had been 'defeated', insisted that it was only proper that he resign.

Domestically, the new government proceeded to dismantle most of the programs which had characterized 'The Leader' phase of Phibun's rule. The Phetchabun and Buddhist city projects, the immediate issues which had led to the fall of the Phibun government, were abandoned. Decrees regulating dress and behavior were repealed, and 'modern Thai' was dropped in favor of the traditional spelling. The 14 *wiratham's*, a list of what were supposed to be characteristic virtues of the Thai, including such admonitions as 'follow the Leader', were rescinded. The traditional Thai *wai* salutation was reintroduced, replacing the more characteristically Japanese bow. Titles of nobility bestowed under the absolute monarchy, which holders had been pressured and finally compelled to give up, were restored. Freedom of religion was guaranteed. The radio commentators 'Nai Man' and 'Nai Khong', who had been leading spokesmen for the Phibun government, were dismissed.⁶⁵ On the occasion of King Ananda's birthday in September an amnesty was declared for political prisoners, who included several princes. Even the dead were not excluded—the ashes of *Phya* Song Suradet, a leader of the 1932 *coup* and rival of Phibun who had been exiled in 1939, were returned from Phnom Penh with government honors. The finances of the old government were scrutinized, and an Assembly committee, dominated by Northerners, was set up to make recommendations as to which existing laws were in need of revision. And the investigation was reopened into the collapse in

65) 'Nai Man Chuchat' and 'Nai Khong Rakthai' did didactic dialogues. The last names mean to 'uplift the nation' and to 'love the Thai race', while 'Man' and 'Khong' when written together as one word mean to be 'steadfast' or 'firm'. The lengthy memoirs of 'Nai Man' (Sang Phatthanothai, *Khwaam Nyk nai Krong Khang* (ความนึกในกรงขัง; Reflections in Prison), Bangkok, 1956, but written immediately after the war) deal in large part with the war years. 'Nai Man' followed Phibun to his military headquarters at Lopburi in August of 1944; his account (Chapter 37, pp. 481-498) of events at this time parallels Khuang's accounts factually but differs sharply in interpretation, praising Phibun and criticizing Khuang.

1943, before it was even finished, of one of the buildings in the complexes that still line both sides of Rajadamnern Avenue.⁶⁶

Under the new regime there was also greater freedom of the press and a more open expression of opinion. In August, at a time when the war news could hardly have favored the Axis powers, 'Alethea' commented on "stirring news" from the war fronts.⁶⁷ Prince Wiwat, a career official in the Ministry of Finance, wrote several memoranda on postwar finances for the Bank of Thailand, all based on the assumption of a return to the prewar link between the baht and sterling. In a paper dated August 15, 1944, he noted, referring indirectly to the yen, that of Thailand's reserves, a "substantial part is in the form of a currency the post-war value of which may well depreciate, nor is it likely to be easily convertible into gold or sterling."⁶⁸ In the National Assembly a bill

- 66) *Bangkok Chronicle* (all 1944), March 1; April 29; May 19; September 14, 16, 18, 21; October 24; November 2, 18, 25, 29; December 2, 4, 12, 16, 20, 22, 23, 25, 27, 29, 30. Two innovations of the Phibun era which have survived are the salutation 'sawatdi' and the *ramwong* dance, a modified version of the traditional *ramthon*.

One consequence of the dropping of titles of nobility during the war years is that Thai leaders generally known by their title names appear in the documents of the period under other names (sometimes derived from title names, sometimes from their original names), some of which might not be immediately recognizable. *Phya* Phahon, for example, became Phot Phahonyothin, and *Luang* Sinthu Songkhramchai used Sinthu Kamonnawin. Most of those who had had titles reclaimed them in 1945; a few, like Khuang and Admiral Sinthu, did not.

- 67) *Bangkok Chronicle*, August 26, 1944. Even before the change in government, 'Alethea' was often outspoken. When a government broadcast urged the public to strive for a higher standard of living at a time when runaway inflation was making maintaining even the former standard virtually impossible, 'Alethea' compared the advice to Marie Antoinette and 'let them eat cake', and castigated the official theory that 'supply will follow demand.' *Bangkok Chronicle*, April 12, 1944.
- 68) *Wiwatthanachaiyanuson* (วิวัฒนาชัยานุสรณ์; Prince Wiwat Memorial Volume), Bangkok, 1961, p. 414. This memorial volume includes several of Prince Wiwat's memoranda (in English) on Thailand's wartime currency and finances, and another on the establishment in 1942 of the Bank of Thailand, the country's first central banking institution, and Japan's role in this undertaking.

On p. 424 there is an index of wholesale prices from 1938 to mid-1944, with monthly figures for the last year.

was introduced that would have permitted the establishment of political parties. The government successfully opposed the bill, citing wartime conditions. As Khuang put it during the debate, "Whether we shall see the birth of political parties here or not depends on how cleverly you dodge the bombs."⁶⁹

The reversal of the policies of the Phibun era was to have a lasting effect. Backed by the military, Phibun again became Prime Minister early in 1948 (rather ironically, it was Khuang that he replaced), and he continued in office for nearly a decade. But in the changed circumstances of the postwar world, the policies, both domestic and foreign, of the later Phibun regime were very different from those of the war years.

Moreover, the change in government in 1944, in addition to leading to significant changes in domestic policies and, to a lesser degree, in foreign relations as well, also set two important precedents for postwar Thai politics. This was the first political crisis in which the lines of conflict were fairly clearly drawn between the army and the navy, rather than between factions within the army. And it was also the first political crisis in which, excepting the cases of a few non-partisan figures like the 'elderly, unaggressive' Phahon,⁷⁰ there was an open split between the civilian and military leaders of the 1932 *coup* group, and the threat of a violent confrontation. Phibun's wife has written:⁷¹

This was in another way, then, a very significant event in the life of the Promoters of the 1932 Revolution. For it was the first time that Pibul (Phibun) and Pridi took the opposite stands openly. It was becoming clearer, too, that the breach

69) *Bangkok Chronicle*, December 11, 1944.

70) The phrase is from the OSS paper cited in note 59. At the time of his death shortly after the war, it was said of Phahon that he was 'the only person in Thai politics about whom there were not two opinions'.

71) *Portraits of Thai Politics*, p. 205. Going even further, Thawee Bunyakert, one of the leading members of the civilian faction, called the change of government in 1944 "one of the most important events in Thai history." (*Chirwit Nai Phon*, pp. 11-12).

between the civilian and the military factions of the Promoters was getting too wide to bridge. Henceforward, the unity of the 1932 Coup Group would gradually be dissipated, as the line was distinctly drawn between the civilians and the military.

The fall of the Phibun government in 1944 is a little known episode in modern Thai political history, but an important one whose consequences, both immediate and subsequent, have been considerable.