Preface

I grew up in an area adjacent to Bangkok's Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the centre stage of many significant events in modern Thai politics. I had the opportunity to witness several popular demonstrations, beginning with the 14 October 1973 uprising, and too many military coups d'état. Even before the generals made a public announcement, I knew we had another coup when the phone line at home was cut off and the area was swarming with soldiers and military trucks. Despite being familiar with this vicious cycle of civilian government and military rule, I refuse to accept that military rule is the norm for Thailand. It is frustrating to see the growing popularity of the military among a large section of people, the consolidation of military power, the increasing militarization of society in various aspects, the lack of accountability for those involved in violent crackdowns, and the impunity that the military and the rightist elite enjoy. Still, like the majority of Thai people, I have long overlooked the political apparatus of the military. Like most others, I paid attention to the military mainly when the country was under its rule.

The sweeping and heavy-handed attempts of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the junta of the 22 May 2014 coup, to impose its version of security and order in civil space triggered my curiosity. The first unusual activities of the NCPO I noticed took place soon after the coup. For example, there were forced evictions of small farmers from the forest reserve areas, an obsession with management of traffic and street food in Bangkok, remobilization of many mass organizations, the resurfacing of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) in news headlines, and the establishment of ISOC-led popular surveillance mechanisms in Bangkok and the provinces. The longer the NCPO stayed in power, the more expansive and intensive the military’s political control over civilian lives became, justified on grounds of the nation's internal security. I could not find a satisfactory answer to why all this happened. The matter was too important to ignore. I decided to dig for more information. This became my first research project on the Thai military, a topic I had never thought I would address, mainly because I do not enjoy the politics of cliques and classes, a dominant feature of Thai military studies, and partly because the military’s machoism dulls my interest. This may be my weak point. Fortunately, my research mainly deals with the military’s civil affairs.

At the beginning of my research, I began to notice that the attempt to impose firm control over the people and electoral politics began soon
after the 2006 military coup, which brought down the hugely popular elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra. Development for security programmes, the ISOC-dominated mass organizations, state surveillance in various forms, ideological indoctrination and the counter-democracy psychological warfare proliferated from then onwards. These were once the major components of Thailand’s counterinsurgency operations. The military has given them a new euphemistic label as kitchakan phonlaruen khong thahan or the military’s civil affairs.

To understand what the military is doing with its political apparatus at present, I had to look back to the counterinsurgency period, when the foundations were laid for the Thai military’s internal security operations, including the definition of national security, and the key concepts and methods to fight the internal threats, which are still relevant today. On the one hand, these old concepts and methods are obsolete, indicating the military’s failure to catch up with the modern world. On the other hand, their continued use shows that the military and its conservative allies never abandoned the remnants of the counterinsurgency operations despite the demise of communism decades ago. They proudly believe that these old methods will bring them victory over internal threats, just as they did over the Communist Party of Thailand. I argue that such a belief is a political myth. However, in Thailand a myth may give life to a gigantic political apparatus which grants greater power to the military and the establishment.

ISOC is known as the key agency in charge of Thailand’s internal security affairs since the counterinsurgency period. In fact, all branches of the armed forces have been actively involved in various internal security programmes. The military has never waged a large-scale warfare with an external enemy since its modernization in the early twentieth century. Internal security has become the raison d’être of the Thai armed forces, defining its main mission, operations, perception of its role towards national institutions, the people and its political power. This book is, therefore, not just about ISOC. The agency’s coordinating authority enables the military to dominate and direct other government bodies, even when the country is under a civilian government.

Whether or not Thailand is under military rule, the bureaucracy of internal security is present on a routine basis. The attempt to keep society under control requires persistence and patience. The military coup is a convenient way for the military and its allies to amplify its power in the short term, but commanding the loyalty of the people and mobilizing them in mass organizations is more effective in the long run. On the one hand, this strategy allows the military and conservative elites to dictate the
country’s long-term political direction. On the other hand, this strategy creates division among the people and thus makes democratization in the future more difficult. Thailand will not escape the vicious cycle of coups and weak civilian governments as long as the infrastructure of power is controlled and manipulated by the military and its conservative allies. As an academic and a citizen, I wish this book could help reshape the understanding of military-state-society relations in and beyond Thailand. I feel an obligation to inform people about what the military and its allies are doing. Thailand may soon return to civilian rule but a genuine reform of the security sector will never happen until the role of the military’s political apparatus is understood and addressed.

Since embarking on this book in 2017, I have written a few articles in Thai and English, given talks in public and closed-door forums, and been interviewed by the press. I believe that a good proportion of politically active citizens are now aware of the political projects of the military and ISOC. However, there are constraints on what I can say to the press and in open forums in Thailand. Writing in English allows me to put these constraints aside and write with greater freedom.

I do not deny that I have a firm political position and I make no effort to hide it. I believe in a free and fair political system with good governance, transparency, and accountability, all of which military governments have failed to provide for the Thai people in the past, and will continue to fail in the future. Under military-led authoritarian rule, people have paid too high a price for too long a time. I hope readers will appreciate the research, the substantial evidence and the serious arguments in this book.

Puangthong Pawakapan
Bangkok in the time of Covid-19
March 2020