

CHAMLONG SRIMUANG

Chamlong Srimuang remembers almost nothing about his father. A fishmonger who migrated to Bangkok from Swatow (Shantou), China, he died just a year or two after Chamlong was born on 5 July 1935. Chamlong's mother, Sae Tia, was also of Chinese descent but she was born in Thailand and was assimilated to Thai ways. She bore two sons. Chamlong's elder brother was sent to live with his grandmother in China and died there as a boy. As a result, Chamlong and his mother formed a family circle of two.

Theirs was a difficult life. When Chamlong was very little, Sae Tia earned a daily subsistence by buying fruits and betel leaves from gardeners in Thonburi, where they lived, and selling them in Phranakorn on the other side of the Chao Phraya River. Later, she and her small son moved into the home of a retired naval officer where Sae Tia worked as a servant and Chamlong helped with the chores. Mrs. Lamoon Tangsubutr, the lady of the house, warmed to the little boy and often took him along when she went about her errands. After leaving Mrs. Lamoon's household a few years later, Sae Tia and her son went to lodge with her aunt and engaged in a home industry. Using a pedal-operated machine, they spun jute fiber purchased from local farmers into thread to sell to nearby jute sack factories. A year or two later, mother and son switched to hand plaiting banana-leaf food containers, a skill at which Chamlong became so adept that he could do it without looking while studying his school lessons.

When Chamlong was twelve, his mother remarried. Chote Srimuang was a postman and Chamlong remembers him as a "very, very good father." But the family remained poor, and Chamlong was never freed from the need to work.

Chamlong's early education occurred at municipal schools attached to local Buddhist temples. He was bright and a striver from the outset. Even though he assisted in his mother's household industries morning and night, he still managed to excel in school. This led to a great opportunity. In Thonburi, the government operated an exclusive high school called Ban Somdej Chao Phraya. Only the brightest students could pass its difficult entrance examination. In his year, Chamlong earned the highest score.

Chamlong's six years at Ban Somdej were formative. Unlike most of the other boys, he had no time for sports. But he threw himself

into his lessons; year after year, he was the school's top student. He liked all subjects except for drawing and remembers especially the mentoring of his science and mathematics teachers, Mr. Suporn and Mr. Montree. Ban Somdej was the kind of school that opened doors. Chamlong longed to attend university and eventually fixed his hopes on Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, in part because his living expenses, clothing, and books would be completely subsidized in that school. Top scholars received an additional stipend. But places in the academy were highly prized and competitive. When the time came, Chamlong found that Ban Somdej had prepared him well. He passed the entrance examinations for pre-cadet school, the two-year gateway to the academy itself.

Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy was founded by Thailand's great reforming monarch, Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), and bore the weight of tradition and royal patronage. Its graduates not only filled the senior ranks of the armed services, they also controlled the senior tier of government. For in Thailand, following the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, the military had successfully asserted itself as the country's guiding *political* institution. Reforms inaugurated a few years before Chamlong's matriculation had remodeled the academy's curriculum after that of West Point in the United States. His cohort, known as Class Seven, would be the seventh to complete their degrees under the new American-based course of study.

Along with his classmates, Chamlong endured a period of hazing and harsh discipline at the hands of senior cadets. "We had to keep our mouths shut and do as we were told," he says. Chamlong managed to thrive and kept his grades high enough to receive a high-scholar's stipend. Early on he became a leader and in his final year was elected chief cadet. The curriculum was broad-gauged. Aside from military training, Chamlong and his schoolmates received instruction in mathematics, science, and engineering as well as the social sciences. There was no specialization. Everyone followed the same route, which yielded, after five years, a Bachelor of Science degree and a commission as second lieutenant. The king himself appeared annually to confer these honors.

Chamlong did not graduate with his class, however. As chief cadet, he had angered certain school officials by making outspoken complaints about corruption at the academy. A case in point was the problem of uniforms. Year after year, Chamlong alleged to the school's commandant, cadets were being issued substandard uniforms because of an under-the-table arrangement between school officials and the uniform suppliers. Individuals who were embarrassed by this (and other) revelations took their revenge toward the end of Chamlong's final year.

By tradition, it was the duty of chief cadets to raise a sum of money as a class gift to the academy. A common practice was to sponsor early morning movie shows, with the proceeds accruing to

the class fund. However, this had been forbidden by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, Thailand's ruling strongman and the academy's highest ranking alumnus. Nevertheless, earlier classes had sponsored such programs without consequences. When Chamlong attempted to do the same, however, the authorities did not wink. A week or so after presenting the class fund to the grateful commandant, Chamlong and his collaborators were accused of disobeying Field Marshal Sarit's order. By the letter of the law—martial law, that is—he might have been expelled from the academy and even imprisoned for twenty years, but sympathetic school officials managed to prevail with a relatively mild punishment: for Chamlong and six fellow cadets, graduation was delayed for three months. As a result, he received his diploma not from King Bhumipol, but from the deputy school commander.

Chamlong admits that one of his motivations for entering the Royal Military Academy had been the assurance of a job at the end of his degree. Now a commissioned officer, twenty-five-year-old Second Lieutenant Chamlong chose the signal corps and was posted to Bangkok as a platoon leader. Through a joint Thai-U.S. military agreement, however, he was soon accepted for advanced training in the United States. With American soldiers and a few other foreign officers as classmates, he studied military communications and received on-the-job training with the newest microwave technologies at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, and Fort Gordon, Georgia. It was his first trip abroad and Chamlong was frankly amazed to see North America's big cities and high-tech modernity, little of which had reached Thailand.

Back in Bangkok, Chamlong resumed his work as an army signal officer. He also resumed a courtship that had begun during his cadet days. Sirilak Kheolaor was a pharmacy student at Chulalongkorn University when Chamlong first met her at an army-navy rugby match. Like Chamlong, she was from a Sino-Thai family. Her parents, who were engaged in the rice trade, ran a small shop. Chamlong and Sirilak were married on 14 June 1964, just prior to Chamlong's second assignment in the United States—at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii—for a six-month course on military signal equipment.

By 1965, when Chamlong returned to Thailand, the long-simmering war in Indochina was heating up. In that year, the United States increased dramatically its material commitment to the defense of South Vietnam. As a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), Thailand was also committed to South Vietnam, where a communist-led national movement threatened a friendly noncommunist regime based in Saigon. In neighboring Laos, where the United States was also fighting, albeit secretly, a communist movement also threatened to overtake the state Thailand's military government under General Thanom Kittikachorn (1963-

1973), facing homegrown leftist guerrillas of its own, fully backed the American aim of halting communist advances in Southeast Asia. General Thanom committed thousands of Thai soldiers as well as military bases and other facilities to the cause. Chamlong, who was in accord with this policy, was soon drawn into the fray.

Chamlong served as a communications officer in Laos for Thai units fighting the communist Pathet Lao. Later, he was made leader of a combat team. His unit's special duty was guarding a remote U.S. radar site in northern Laos. Here Chamlong worked hand-in-hand with American soldiers operating secretly in the area, as indeed the Thai forces were as well. Encounters with the Pathet Lao were frequent. It was his first real combat experience. Years later, when Chamlong became a devout Buddhist, he eschewed all violence. But, at the time, he felt differently: "We thought that when it comes to fighting, we had to protect our village, our King, and our nation."

After two years in Laos, Chamlong was reassigned to Thailand where he attended the Army Command and General Staff College and engaged in six months of counterinsurgency training in preparation for an assignment in Vietnam. Once in South Vietnam, he served as a senior planning and operations officer for a Thai infantry division headquartered in Bienhua Province, just one small component of the ten-thousand-strong Thai deployment in the country. After a year's rotation in Vietnam, Chamlong returned to Bangkok where he was assigned to the Military Research and Development Center before winning a prolonged respite abroad.

In 1972, Chamlong returned to the United States for a two-year management course at the U.S. Navy's Postgraduate School in California. The course was designed to provide military officers with management training useful in both government and business. Chamlong was being groomed for the senior ranks. For his master's thesis, Chamlong wrote a study of labor unrest in Thailand. He and Sirilak enjoyed their residence in the lovely seaside town of Monterey and took the opportunity to travel widely during summer holidays.

Meanwhile, in Thailand, General Thanom brought an abrupt end to his country's tentative evolution toward democratic government, which had been initiated under a new constitution in 1968. In November 1971, he disbanded Parliament, banned political parties, and unequivocally reasserted the military's domination of the government. This blunt display of strongman rule, combined with accumulated grievances against the corruption, arrogance, and nepotism of Thanom's ruling clique—which included General Praphas Charusathian and Thanom's son Lieutenant Colonel Narong Kittikachorn (who was married to Praphas's daughter)—fostered a popular movement to topple the government. The Thanom-Praphas regime's perceived subservience to U.S. military policy in Southeast Asia also inspired discontent and anger. Led by militant students, this political movement was supported by many middle-class

Thais. Chamlong was still abroad when the so-called student revolution succeeded in October 1973 and ushered in a era of civilian rule. Returning home soon thereafter, he rejoined the Military Research and Development Center at the army's Supreme Command Headquarters.

Chamlong had been sympathetic with student activists protesting the military dictatorship and sent money to support them from the United States. But Thailand's turbulent post-1973 experience with parliamentary democracy was unsettling for many younger army men including Chamlong. It was their generation after all, that had borne the brunt of combat in Laos and Vietnam and of quelling the communist insurgency at home, while the old guard monopolized lucrative desk jobs in Bangkok. Moreover, under Generals Thanom and Prapas, the military had badly discredited itself through power and wealth seeking and through debilitating factional quarrels. The entire army now stood in disrepute and suffered the open scorn of the country's student activists and civilian politicians.

Driven by these circumstances, several members of Class Seven, Chamlong among them, joined together in a secret organization. They did so "as professional officers," he says, "to safeguard the nation and the throne" and to advance their vision for Thailand. The organization was called the Young Military Officers Group, or the "Young Turks."

Claiming the moral high ground, the Young Turks argued that only incorruptible leadership could bring things aright. They did not find this among the fractious, quarreling governments borne of the post-1973 elections. Moreover, to the Young Turks, civilian leaders were moving the country unacceptably leftward. To be communist was no longer illegal—indeed the public expression of leftist ideas surged during this period—and, following communist victories in Indochina in 1975, diplomatic accommodations were being pursued with old enemies such as the People's Republic of China and communist Vietnam. Members of the Young Military Officers Group came to believe that Thailand was drifting uncontrollably in the wrong direction. So, "like other battalion commanders in Bangkok at the time," says Chamlong, they "did not disobey the orders that led to the military overthrow of Thailand's elected government on 6 October 1976. Broad elements of Thai society who had supported the student revolution in 1973, but who were frightened by the political confusion and polarization rising in its wake, also supported the coup.

The coup itself was extraordinarily bloody. Right-wing youth groups in league with the army and the police brutally massacred student protesters at Thammasat University and other centers of resistance. Some were lynched, others were burned alive. Although analysts of the event attribute to Class Seven officers a guiding role in the putsch, the influential historian Chai-anan Samudvanij exonerates them from its brutal culmination. In any case, the next

several years—which brought another coup in 1977 and the ascension of Young Turk mentor General Prem Tinsulanonda to the premiership in 1980—marked the high tide of Class Seven’s influence in Thai politics. Major Chamlong rose with the tide.

As chief planning officer for research and development at the Supreme Command Headquarters in Bangkok, Chamlong conducted research and advised senior officers on issues ranging from equipment to strategy. His commanding officer at headquarters was General Kriangsak Chomanand. As a result of a coup d’état in October 1977—widely understood to have been masterminded by the Young Turks—Kriangsak became the prime minister. Two years later, Kriangsak named Lieutenant Colonel Chamlong to a four-year term in the Thai Senate, an appointed upper house that reviewed and approved laws initiated by the lower house. (Military men made up about a quarter of the Senate’s membership.) It was his first overtly political position.

While serving in the Senate, Chamlong continued his work at the army’s Supreme Command Headquarters. He also assisted the commander in chief, Prem Tinsulanonda, in raising funds and providing guns for village self-defense corps in Thailand’s beleaguered countryside. General Prem was widely admired by Class Seven officers, many of whom had served under him. When he assumed the premiership with their support in March 1980, Prem named Chamlong his secretary general.

“This was a very important position,” says Chamlong. As secretary general, Chamlong helped coordinate the work of Prem’s office and served as liaison between the premier and his ministers. He became a trusted adviser. Chamlong admired Prem immensely for his astute leadership and, most of all, for his integrity. When his Young Turk friends became tired of Prem’s leadership and moved against him in April 1981, Chamlong broke with the group and stood by the prime minister. The coup collapsed when the royal family signaled its support for Prem. Prem survived, with Chamlong by his side.

A national issue soon arose, however, that alienated Chamlong from Prem’s government. With the support of Prem’s cabinet, Thailand’s lower house passed a new abortion law that was considerably more liberal than the old one. The draft law permitted abortions in cases of rape and when a mother’s life was endangered. Although the law still imposed conditions, Chamlong felt that these conditions were framed so broadly as to be virtually useless. The result, he said, would be “free abortions.” Chamlong believed that such a law violated Buddhism’s reverence for life and that its acceptance in Thailand would lead to unwelcome social changes. “We are going to be destroyed by this kind of law,” he argued.

Chamlong was determined to oppose the law in the Senate. In order not to embarrass Prem, he tendered his resignation as secre-

tary general. Prem was reluctant to accept it but he eventually did so, hinting to Chamlong that he agreed with him about the abortion issue. Chamlong then launched a national campaign to mobilize support against the draft law.

“I could not convince the senators by myself,” he says. “So I had to go to the people.” Traveling throughout the country, he spoke of the dangers of “free abortion” and its violation of universal religious doctrines. He urged his listeners to write to members of the Senate and other officials about their opposition to the law. Chamlong’s national protest worked and the abortion law died in the Senate. In a similar campaign in 1983, Chamlong succeeded in preventing the adoption of constitutional changes proposed by the army’s commander in chief, which would have weakened Thailand’s burgeoning democracy.

After leaving the Prime Minister’s Office, Chamlong—still an active-duty officer—was assigned to teach psychology and politics at the National Defense College, after which he joined the Ministry of Defense as a staff officer. As elections approached in 1985, however, he began contemplating a run for the governorship of Bangkok, the only city in Thailand in which the governor was elected. His frustration with the rampant corruption of Thai politics fueled this ambition. He also had fresh ideas about how political campaigns should be conducted. He frankly admits that he savored the risks involved.

On 1 October 1985, Chamlong was promoted from colonel to major general. Two days later, he resigned from the army and registered as a candidate for governor. As he plunged into the election campaign, Chamlong was guided by strong moral and religious beliefs arising from his intense personal engagement with Buddhism.

Like all Thai youths, Chamlong grew up in a Buddhist cultural world. His earliest teachers were monks and the schools he attended as a child were affiliated with local monasteries. When he was seven, he became a “baby monk,” following the custom in which little boys enter a monastery for seven days. Much later, on the eve of his marriage to Sirilak in 1964, Chamlong entered the monastery again and lived as a monk for three months. His involvement with Buddhism was pervasive. But it was also superficial.

After his return to Thailand from Monterey in 1974, however, Chamlong and his wife grew spiritually restless. “We found that even though we were Buddhists, we didn’t get anything from Buddhism that was better for our lives and our society,” he recalls. This led to a new effort on their part “to follow Lord Buddha.” Chamlong sought out religious advisers and began to study Buddhism intently. Together, he says, he and Sirilak became devout Buddhists.

Chamlong’s spiritual search coincided with a period of ferment within Thai Buddhism. Leading monks and Buddhist intellectuals were grappling vigorously with the challenges posed by Thailand’s

turbulent politics and the vast and rapid economic and social changes overtaking the country. Many openly questioned traditional practices and beliefs and promoted the elevation of rational thinking and critical insight over mindless piety and superstition. Chamlong sought out the reformists and pondered their teachings. Among them were the Venerable Phra Phutthathat (Buddhadasa) Bhikkhu, a philosopher of great influence who spurned supernaturalism and emphasized the need for virtuous leadership, and Phra Panyanatha, who abhorred authoritarian rule and advocated democracy. Both men left their mark on Chamlong's thinking. But in 1979, Chamlong met another monk who would become his true spiritual mentor. This was Phra Phothirak, founder of a new reformationist Buddhist sect called Santi Asoke.

Like Chamlong himself, Phra Phothirak was a self-made man who had surmounted a youth of poverty to achieve adult success. He became a television personality and a prolific composer of popular songs. However, disillusioned with the fruits of his worldly success, in 1970 Phothirak became a monk and a vegetarian and turned his back on the rampant materialism of contemporary Thai society. Three years later, rebelling against the lax practices of many monks, he established his own religious center and declared his independence from the orthodox *sangha*, or monkhood, while continuing to live as a monk.

Phra Phothirak taught his followers to eschew amorality, sensual indulgence, and greed (as well as superstitious practices) and to lead simple, self-reliant lives. "Eat little, use little, work a lot, and save the rest for society" became the motto of his movement. Devout Santi Asoke adherents were strict vegetarians and ate only one meal a day. They pared their personal possessions to a minimum and did not bathe with soap. Many abstained from sex. These practices were designed to instill moral discipline, a key Buddhist value. But Phothirak advocated more than moral discipline. He also advocated moral *action*, including political action. All of this struck a deep chord within Chamlong, who soon became one of Santi Asoke's most avid adherents. He and Sirilak were already vegetarians. In 1979, they also vowed to abstain from sexual relations and, in Sirilak's words, to start "a new life together in purity and friendship."

During the next several years—the same years in which he served in the Senate, was secretary general to the prime minister, lecturer in sociopsychology at the National Defense College, and a Defense Ministry staff officer—Chamlong devoted himself increasingly to his religious life. He became a lay preacher and toured the countryside giving talks extolling Phothirak's ascetic Buddhism and urging villagers to abstain from beer, cigarettes, meat, and gambling. Adopting the ways of itinerant monks who sleep in the open on temple grounds, he earned the popular honorific of Maha, ordinarily reserved for highly educated monks and one which he personally disclaimed.

But it stuck. By the time he entered the race for governor, “Maha Chamlong” had established his own ashram on the grounds of the Santi Asoke Temple in Nakhorn Pathom, fifty-six kilometers west of Bangkok.

Chamlong concluded that politics could not be separated from religion; indeed, politics *should not* be separated from religion. Speaking at Thammasat University in 1982 and invoking the ideas of Phra Phutthathat, he asserted, “If economics and politics do not have *dhamma* [the Buddha’s message of salvation] then both economics and politics will become means of destroying the world . . . of rendering us devoid of humanity.”

In this spirit, Chamlong’s race for governor of Bangkok was frankly moralistic. Running as an independent and supported by an organization named Ruam Phalang, or United Force, he set out to show that effective political campaigns could be mounted without huge financial contributions. He spent only six thousand baht (about U.S.\$220) of his own money—to register and to pay for some photographs—and otherwise relied on small voluntary contributions. He pledged that he would not compromise himself by accepting large campaign contributions and thus acquiring political debts. To this end, he abandoned the practice of blanketing the city with huge posters and other expensive tactics. In talks with voters, he promised to run a corruption-free government, saying, “I am a devout Buddhist.”

Chamlong’s reputation as a good Buddhist and a man of integrity gave his anticorruption campaign credibility. He advanced quickly from outsider to front-runner. Although most of his campaign helpers were from the ranks of Santi Asoke—something his opponents harped upon—Chamlong points out that he was also supported by other Buddhist groups and by Christians and Muslims as well. Also hearkening to his anticorruption message was the Bangkok press. In the end, he won almost half a million votes, twice as many as his nearest rival. He was elected, says his biographer Duncan McCargo, in “a whirlwind of popular faith.”

Chamlong became governor of one of Southeast Asia’s largest capital cities. Bangkok proper covers 1,565 square kilometers and, at the time, was home to six million people. Like most cities of contemporary Asia, it had two faces. One was prosperous and exotic, the glamorous and rapidly modernizing gateway to the Kingdom of Thailand and home to the country’s governing elite and its burgeoning middle class. Bangkok’s other face reflected the grimmer aspects of life in the city: millions of poor people living in slums; filthy, garbage-strewn streets and polluted waterways; crippling, smoke-belching traffic; destructive flooding; and the absence of adequate health care, education, and public parks and services. As a poor boy who had risen to elite status, Chamlong was intimately familiar with both faces of the city.

Officially, Chamlong was chief of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), an agency that employed fifty thousand civil servants and workers. The BMA shared responsibility for the management of the city with Thailand's central government. Through the Ministry of the Interior and various agencies and state enterprises, the central government controlled such key services as water, electricity, public transportation, the police, and a variety of welfare activities, including most hospitals. Even traffic fell largely under federal jurisdiction. Other urban services fell to the BMA, along with nominal authority to regulate the city's growth by issuing building permits. In many key areas, therefore, Chamlong's hands were tied. Using a term he learned in management school, he describes the BMA as "management under constraint." Even so, as governor, he set out wholeheartedly to put his Buddhist principles into practice wherever he could.

Anticorruption had been the major theme of his election campaign. As head of the BMA, Chamlong was in a position to profit richly from kickbacks and commissions offered routinely by contractors doing business with the city. As he himself revealed to a Bangkok newspaper, before his tenure it was customary for the governor to receive a commission of 4 percent of the construction cost for all new buildings rising in the city; the city clerk and other officials, he said, got 3 percent. It is fortunate, he says, that he had practiced "sacrifice and honesty" for many years before being exposed to such an opportunity. In putting an end to the practice, Chamlong characteristically chose not to punish past violators, saying, "We will pay attention to what we are now doing and what we will do in the future . . ."

Chamlong also put an end to collusion between BMA officials and price-fixing contractors who conspired to keep uniformly high bids on city projects such as canal dredging and dike building. In his first year as governor he ordered the bidding for several such contracts reopened, with the result that the cost to the city dropped by some 30 percent. Thus, he was able to save eighty million baht (nearly U.S.\$3 million) in the first year alone. Chamlong redirected the money to services that badly needed improvement, such as garbage collection and flood prevention.

By being scrupulously honest himself, and being vocal about it, Chamlong strove to set a moral tone that would pervade the entire city administration. His strategy in rooting out corruption in the ranks was largely inspirational. He established a "quality-of-life" training program to raise the consciousness of his subordinate officials through lectures—which he often delivered himself—on the values of cleanliness, honesty, hard work, frugality, sacrifice, and gratitude. Chamlong believed that the application of these values by both officials and the public was the key to solving Bangkok's many problems.

Cleanliness, for example. When Chamlong assumed the governorship, Bangkok was notorious as one of the six filthiest capital cities in the world. Looking into the problem, he was disturbed to discover that Bangkok's small army of street sweepers actually swept the streets only once every morning, despite receiving a full day's pay. Taking his moral crusade directly to the sweepers, he says, "I trained them to sacrifice for the public, to work harder. And they followed me." To encourage them—and to make a public point—Governor Chamlong, on one occasion, joined the street cleaners in their early morning sweeping rounds and dedicated his public charity fund to their welfare. The results were dramatic. Bangkok became clean.

Chamlong applied a similar form of suasion in dealing with Bangkok's ubiquitous street vendors. Officially illegal, these petty merchants crammed the city sidewalks day and night, seven days a week. Knowing that most vendors were struggling members of the honest poor, Chamlong did not wish to press them out of business. But so that the sidewalks could be cleaned, and so that pedestrians could ply the sidewalks freely at least one day a week, he ordered that street vendors "take a holiday" every Wednesday. This was something they dearly needed, he argued, but were afraid to take for fear of losing out on the competition. He prevailed upon them to take their weekly holiday in the public interest. After some resistance, they did.

Chamlong's style of leadership as governor was deliberately exemplary. He continued to follow Buddhism's Eight Precepts and led a conspicuously spartan life, whether in his Bangkok residence—a large but simply appointed home located in an old garment factory—or at one of the Santi Asoke temples in Nakhorn Pathom, to which he retreated once a month and where he dwelled in a simple hut and bathed without soap in a nearby stream. Although on some occasions he liked to don the governor's military-style uniform, most often he preferred to wear a simple collarless blue shirt, peasant-style. His famous crew cut was trimmed by his wife. He donated his official salary to charity and paid for his one vegetarian meal a day with a small allowance he drew from his military pension. He rose early to meditate and exercise and spent up to fourteen hours a day on the job, practicing what he preached about working hard and sacrificing for the public. Also frequently, he preached. Educating people to change their behavior, he believes, is the main purpose of government.

Chamlong's approach to poverty illustrates this principle. As governor of Bangkok, he often visited the city's slums and endeavored to uplift the lives of the poor by improving education and public hospitals. He improved squatter communities with paved footpaths and other amenities. But he also exhorted the poor to be frugal and hardworking in their quest to rise from the morass of poverty. At the same time, he enlisted Bangkok's wealthier citizens to make

personal sacrifices that would benefit the poor. With his wife, he established a chain of thrift stores through which clothing and other useful items donated by the well-to-do were sold to the poor at prices they could afford. The proceeds were donated to charity. (These thrift stores still operate today.) In a similar scheme, Chamlong established a not-for-profit company that purchases basic necessities wholesale and sells them to the needy public at cost; it is capitalized with donations from wealthy people. His main purpose, he says, "is to help rich people reduce their desires, to sacrifice for the public. As a by-product, I can help poor people to buy very cheap things."

Rampant prostitution is one of Bangkok's most notorious problems. But because regulating the sex industry falls under the jurisdiction of the police and other agencies of the central government, it was outside Chamlong's domain as governor. Chamlong believes that, in the long run, relieving poverty will also relieve Thai women of the need to resort to prostitution. As governor, he exhorted prostitutes and their customers to be mindful of Thai customs and Buddhist values.

Of course, not all of Bangkok's problems bent to Chamlong's will. Although cleaner and less flood-prone, the streets of Bangkok remained clogged with traffic. The air was still polluted; urban growth continued unchecked; the sex industry thrived; and so on. Moreover, Chamlong's critics charged that he was so puritanically frugal that he was willing to leave certain critical needs unmet rather than pay what needed to be paid, such as slum clearance and public health measures. He rejected street-cleaning machines in favor of human street sweepers and once held up the construction of a garbage disposal plant because he thought the bids were rigged. And to some, his emphasis on living simply and reducing desires seemed like a rationalization for not doing more to help the poor. But Chamlong's unquestioned integrity and his obvious sincerity weakened the impact of criticisms like these. As his reformist zeal and effective showmanship seized the popular imagination, his popularity soared.

In April 1988, Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda dissolved Parliament and called for general elections in July. Chamlong decided to mobilize his followers to contest the elections. In June, he formed the Palang Dharma (Moral Force) Party (PDP) as a vehicle for his candidates, 318 of whom competed for parliamentary seats throughout Thailand—the largest slate advanced by any party. Chamlong himself remained in the governorship but his support for PDP candidates was the driving force of the campaign. As a result, attempts by other parties to defeat Palang Dharma candidates became largely a campaign against him.

In their efforts to discredit Chamlong, rival politicians raised questions about the role he played in the bloody military coup of October 1976. He denied having been involved in either rebel troop

maneuvers or the massacres. "I didn't kill students," he told voters emphatically. Today, Chamlong points out that some students who opposed the coup in 1976 have become members of Palang Dharma.

A second and more effective line of criticism related to Chamlong's association with Santi Asoke. Phra Phothirak's sect had grown dramatically during the 1980s, attracting more than two thousand lay devotees and some eighty monks ordained by Phothirak himself. It had four temples. And in Chamlong, it had a politically powerful and highly visible patron. But many Thai Buddhists believed that Phra Phothirak's teachings were heretical and that Santi Asoke was an illegal religious organization. (It was not formally registered with the Department of Religious Affairs, for instance.) Phothirak's attacks on the formal *sangha* angered the hierarchy, all the more so because he presented himself as a pure-hearted reformist waging moral war against a corrupt religious establishment. Chamlong, said his opponents in the election, was using his political power to protect and promote an illegal and dangerous organization.

It is true that members of Santi Asoke were heavily represented in Palang Dharma. Half of the party's candidates were devotees, and the party's message of moral governance clearly reflected Santi Asoke teachings. Moreover, Phra Phothirak openly supported the party. During the campaign, however, Chamlong placed some distance between himself and the sect. He denied giving it political protection and said that he followed the teachings of Santi Asoke "because they are practical and teach people to be unselfish."

It became clear as the campaign progressed that much of the anti-Santi Asoke agitation was politically motivated. The leader of a strong rival party, and vehement Santi Asoke critic, for example, was standing for a seat in the same district as Chamlong's wife. But the issue was not purely partisan. Among those who feared Santi Asoke's rising influence were serious Buddhist thinkers, such as Sulak Sivaraksa, who abhorred what they viewed as the sect's dogmatism and self-righteousness.

The election was a disappointment for Chamlong's new party. Only fourteen of his candidates won seats—ten in Bangkok, four in the provinces. Santi Asoke candidates fared especially poorly. Evidently, the negative election campaign had borne fruit. It is also true, however, that many Palang Dharma candidates were relative unknowns and that, in reaching for a national presence, Chamlong had stretched far beyond the confines of his largely middle-class constituency in Bangkok. In the provinces, the rules of politics were different. Voters there were more easily swayed by parties with cash to spare. In the face of "money politics," the Palang Dharma's ambitious appeals for honesty and clean government had simply failed to win the day. Even so, with fourteen of his party members sitting in the new Parliament—independent of both the ruling coalition and

the formal opposition—Chamlong had become a political figure to be reckoned with.

As a result of the 1988 elections, Chamlong's old mentor and patron, Prem Tinsulanonda, was replaced as premier by Chatichai Choonhavan, a former general and leader of the Chart Thai Party, which dominated the new government. Chamlong immediately found his authority as governor challenged by Chatichai's interior minister and brother-in-law, Pramarn Andireksarn. Pramarn deftly exploited jurisdictional ambiguities between the ministry and the BMA to pare city spending and to promote his favored contractors. At the same time, Chatichai's government reopened investigations into Santi Asoke, which led to a decision by the supreme council of the *sangha* to defrock Phra Phothirak. Phothirak sidestepped the defrocking by abandoning his brown robes for white ones and agreeing to refrain from calling himself a monk. (He adopted instead the title *samana*, which means "the ordained one.")

This power struggle was played out as Chamlong faced new gubernatorial elections in January 1990. Ten other candidates challenged him for the position and, eager to knock him off his pedestal, Chart Thai mounted a particularly vociferous campaign against him. Once again he was attacked for his Santi Asoke connections, but to no avail. When the votes were counted, Chamlong had again garnered twice the number of votes of his nearest rival and 62 percent of the total. Other Palang Dharma candidates in related city and district council elections also fared well. Chamlong's resounding victory reverberated even within the ruling Chart Thai Party. Pramarn lost the power struggle and his ministry; Chatichai demoted him to the less powerful Ministry of Industry portfolio.

Chamlong's rise to influence occurred during an important period of transition in the Thai political system. In 1932, Western-influenced reformists peacefully ended the country's absolute monarchy. It was envisioned that the constitutional monarchy that replaced it would be of a democratic character. But in the decades that followed, military strongmen consistently gained the upper hand over Thailand's civilian politicians, whose short-lived governments were inevitably toppled by generals. The tenures of the military-led governments were, by contrast, considerably longer.

Nevertheless, certain elements of democracy were nearly always present: constitutions, national assemblies, occasional elections. These democratic elements were sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker. But even when they served merely to legitimize a strongman, they also served as a public reminder that a democratic alternative existed. A pattern evolved. In his book *The Thai Young Turks*, Chai-anan Samudvanij describes this pattern in terms of six recurring phases, "namely (1) a military coup, followed by (2) the promulgation of a new or resurrected constitution, followed by (3) a period of politicking and elections, followed by (4) a 'honeymoon' pe-

riod of cooperation and all sorts of new legislation, followed by (5) bitter arguing and stagnation among the governmental elite, followed by (6) a military coup d'état to restore order and stability."

Beginning with Prem Tinsulanonda, however, this pattern seemed to change. It is true that Prem was a general and that he was not elected. But Prem resigned his commission in the army and governed as a civilian leader with the backing of elected politicians. Twice during his tenure, in 1981 and 1985, he successfully fended off military coups. In doing so with the support of the monarchy, he publicly discredited the coup makers—although he did not punish them. In 1988, Prem refused another term as prime minister and paved the way for a civilian premier. His successor, Chatichai Choonhavan, was the first elected member of Parliament to become prime minister since 1976. Although he, too, was a former general—he had resigned from the army in the early 1970s—Chatichai assumed power as head of the Chart Thai political party, not as head of a military faction.

Other things had also changed. Political parties and Parliament had grown stronger. Economic growth was surging. And a rising urban middle class was asserting democratic values. At the same time, the end of the Cold War and resolution of nearby conflicts in Indochina had rendered the army somewhat less essential to a sense of national security. Even the generals themselves now seemed content to wield influence from behind the scenes. By the early 1990s, elected civilian politicians appeared at last to be gaining the upper hand in the Thai body politic. Coup d'états were passé, people said. Democracy was taking root.

Chamlong personified this change. The army had facilitated his own rise to influence and, as a member of the Young Military Officers Group, he had been party to movements that ended Thailand's vexed democratic experiment following the student revolution. But as his commitment to Buddhism deepened in the late 1970s, so did his conviction that good government could only come from a democratic government. He turned his back on the coup plotters of the 1980s, his Class Seven comrades, and made his own successful plunge into electoral politics. There was much about Thai democracy that he detested, in particular its rampant corruption and the other evil fruits of "money politics." But Chamlong came truly to believe—as his own successes seemed to show—that the system could best be cleansed *from below*.

By the early 1990s, Chamlong's Palang Dharma M.P.'s had extended his crusade into Parliament. Chatichai's government and the behavior of mainstream politicians gave them much to complain about. The popular view was that corruption was rampant. Daily, the newspapers reported a litany of scandal—stories about how huge government-connected deals for cable television, oil refineries, and telecommunications and infrastructure projects were en-

riching Chatichai and his cronies. People spoke derisively of his "buffet cabinet." A constant round of political intrigues and power struggles also soured many Thais on the government so that, when the military struck again in early 1991, few people bothered to object openly.

Chamlong had just embarked on his second term as governor of Bangkok when, on 23 February 1991, army commander in chief Suchinda Kraprayoon (leader of the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy's influential Class Five) forcibly dismissed the elected government, abrogated the constitution, and arrested Prime Minister Chatichai on his way to a meeting with the king. The coup d' état was bloodless. Suchinda disarmed the public by disclaiming any interest in being prime minister himself and promising instead to appoint a respected civilian. He promptly approached Anand Panyarachun, a Cambridge-educated former diplomat and prominent business leader, who assumed the premiership under the loose supervision of Suchinda's cabal, constituted formally as the National Peace-Keeping Council (NPKC).

Anand gained credibility by insisting on Chatichai's early release and the prompt lifting of martial law. Thereafter, by reducing corruption and effectively addressing a range of problems that Chatichai and the politicians had bungled, Anand and his cabinet helped assuage public anxieties about the return of military rule. Anand made it clear that his government was strictly an interim one whose most important mandates were to draft a new constitution and to restore elections in a year's time.

By December 1991, a new constitution was written and approved. It possessed a few progressive features; for example, government officials and military officers were required to resign before taking up a political office. But it gave considerable powers to a 270-person upper house whose members were to be appointed, not elected. And, critically, it did not require that the prime minister be elected. Thailand's pro-democracy critics, Chamlong prominently among them, felt that these conservative features rendered the new constitution an instrument of the ruling group.

Otherwise, however, Chamlong respected Anand and enjoyed good relations with his government. But as new elections were scheduled for 22 March 1992, Chamlong decided to resign as governor and join Palang Dharma's slate of candidates for seats in Parliament, a move that could potentially lead to his assuming the premiership himself. Polls showed that Chamlong's Bangkok constituency supported him overwhelmingly. The military's electoral strategy was to forge alliances with sympathetic political parties and, thereby, sustain through elections the influence it had gained through force just a year before. Three such parties, including the Chart Thai (now under new leadership), mounted a joint effort to elect candidates who favored the junta. Together with two other pro-democracy par-

ties, Chamlong and his 194 Palang Dharma candidates pledged to support amendments to the new constitution that would make government more responsive to the people—by requiring the prime minister to be an elected member of Parliament, for example.

Through the media, Prime Minister Anand launched a national “clean election” campaign to discourage vote buying and other anomalies. Although his efforts helped to mitigate against the worst election excesses, the effects of “money politics” were still conspicuously present as the campaigning heated up in the early months of 1992. In this context, Chamlong’s earnest call for integrity struck a powerful chord in Bangkok, where Palang Dharma candidates won 32 of 35 seats. Outside Bangkok, however, Palang Dharma candidates fared poorly and Chamlong entered the new Parliament with only 41 party mates. They and the other pro-democracy victors, 165 altogether, accounted for only 45 percent of the new legislature. The pro-junta parties had carried the day.

Narong Wongwan, leader of the largest party in the winning coalition, was nominated to be prime minister. Narong was a timber and tobacco tycoon and a seasoned politician who, although a civilian, was viewed as a pliant ally of the Suchinda junta. On the very day of his nomination, however, the U.S. State Department confirmed that Narong had been denied a visa to the United States in 1991 because of suspected drug trafficking. The coalition swiftly dropped him. In his place, it named General Suchinda himself. Despite having explicitly declared that he would not accept the premiership, Suchinda now said that he had to go back on his word, “for the sake of the country.” On 7 April, he resigned from the army. King Bhumipol and the Parliament approved his appointment, but pro-democracy Thais (and the influential *Nation* newspaper) called it “Suchinda’s second coup.” Fifty thousand people immediately demonstrated against the new government.

Anger against Suchinda’s deft maneuver mounted as he proceeded to fill his cabinet with discredited politicians and as his Class Five comrades filled the country’s top military posts. More than half of the newly appointed Senate was made up of active or retired military men or police. Chamlong had warned on election day that “public opposition to a non-elected prime minister will grow and grow.” As students, nongovernmental organizations, and pro-democracy groups now clamored for Suchinda to step down (or face an election), Chamlong placed himself at the center of the rising hue and cry. At a mass rally on 4 May in Sanam Luang Park, in the heart of old Bangkok, Chamlong announced that he would follow the example of several other nonviolent protesters and go on a hunger strike. “I have considered it thoroughly,” he said in a letter that he read to the crowd of eighty thousand, “and decided to put my life on the line. . . . I will fast until Suchinda resigns or I die.” Thousands joined him as he walked to the front of the National Assembly to begin his fast.

Over the next several days, crowds ranging to over a hundred thousand amassed daily around Chamlong, who addressed them from atop a minivan. Crying out "Suchinda must go!" and "Suchinda is a liar!" masses of protesters followed Chamlong in marches along Rachadamnoen and Rachadamnoen Nok Avenues. (These avenues linked Sanam Luang Park to the Democracy Monument and, farther along, to several government buildings including the National Assembly, Parliament and the prime minister's office, Government House.) Here and there at blocked intersections, angry crowds clashed with the police and threw bottles and stones. The government responded with threats and dropped leaflets from military planes telling the people to disperse. When they failed to do so, the armed forces grew bellicose. (Very little of this was known to most Thais, however, since government and military-run television and radio stations imposed a news blackout on the protests.)

By 9 May, Suchinda was obliged to say that he would support an amendment making individuals who had not been elected to Parliament ineligible for the premiership. This and other verbal concessions diffused the tension; pro-democracy leaders suspended demonstrations with the caveat that, without clear signs of progress, they would recommence on 17 May. Chamlong doubted Suchinda's sincerity, saying, "We have been deceived for a long time." Nevertheless, he ended his fast. On the evening of the ninth, to the clamorous approval of the crowds he took his first meal in six days. He also announced his resignation as leader of the Palang Dharma Party to allay suspicions that his actions were politically motivated.

The truce between Suchinda's government and the pro-democracy forces was short-lived. On Sunday, 17 May, the two leading parties in Suchinda's governing coalition announced that, while they supported democratizing amendments to the constitution, they also favored transitional clauses that would permit Suchinda to serve as prime minister for the life of the current Parliament—potentially four years. By 8:00 that evening, two hundred thousand demonstrators filled Sanam Luang Park and the surrounding streets to hear speeches by leaders of the Coalition for Democracy.

Shortly thereafter, Chamlong led the entire gathering on a two-kilometer march to Government House to demand Suchinda's resignation. As they reached the intersection of Rachadamnoen and Rachadamnoen Nok Avenues, they were halted by the police at Phan Fa Bridge, which had been barricaded with razor wire. For a time, the marchers attempted to talk their way through. When this failed, some of them stampeded and broke through the barricade. The police retaliated with water cannons and by beating up demonstrators with clubs when they tried to commandeer one of the fire trucks. Soon, stones and molotov cocktails were flying. From the sidelines, Chamlong used a loudspeaker to exhort the marchers not to attack the police. But his words were lost in the din.

During the next several hours, the government launched Operation Destroy the Enemy. Hundreds of troops arrived to quell the demonstration. Just after midnight, Suchinda declared a State of Emergency. Gatherings of more than ten people were declared illegal, but no one paid any attention. Chamlong remained with the group around Phan Fa Bridge and the nearby Democracy Monument, vowing to fight on until he was arrested. Sometime around 4:00 A.M., soldiers threatened protesters near the bridge by firing their M-16 rifles. An hour and a half later, they began firing again, and then yet again when some forty thousand uncowed demonstrators sang the Thai national anthem. Using a public address system, Chamlong pleaded with the soldiers to stop shooting. In the morning, as the army moved more troops in, the crowds grew even larger and formed satellite demonstrations in other sections of the city.

Early that afternoon, Suchinda publicly accused Chamlong of fomenting violence and defended the government's use of force. Shortly thereafter, military police, firing continuously in the air, moved in on the crowd surrounding Chamlong, forcing thousands to the ground. In full view of television cameras beaming the scene around the world, they handcuffed Chamlong and dragged him away. But the crowds did not disperse.

For the rest of the day and night and all through the following day, crowds shouting "Suchinda, get out" continued to defy and taunt soldiers. The troops retaliated by brutally killing more demonstrators and arresting more than a thousand people who had gathered around a makeshift emergency hospital at the Royal Hotel. Doctors at the hotel were kicked, forced to lie on the floor, and were detained for hours. After government troops had secured the area around Phan Fa Bridge and the Democracy Monument, the mass of demonstrators moved to Ramkhamhaeng University. By the evening of 19 May, some fifty thousand people had gathered there. Meanwhile, violent clashes continued to occur sporadically throughout Bangkok; army "headhunter" squads stalked the city shooting at motorcycle-riding youths. Already, government forces had killed a number of people and injured hundreds. And there was no end in sight.

Early the following morning, 20 May, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn addressed the country on television. Her urgent appeal to stop the killings was rebroadcast later during the day. In the evening, her brother, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, made a similar public appeal. Then, at 9:30 the same evening, King Bhumipol called Suchinda and Chamlong into his royal presence. As they knelt humbly before him side by side—in a scene of abasement that was broadcast via television later that night—the king demanded that the two protagonists put an end to their confrontation and work together to democratize the constitution through proper parliamentary processes. Following the royal reprimand, Suchinda released Chamlong

and announced an amnesty for participants in the rallies. He also agreed to support an amendment requiring the prime minister to be chosen from among elected officials. For his part, Chamlong enjoined the demonstrators to disperse. They did so quickly.

Suchinda made a last-ditch attempt to remain in power but hastily retreated in the face of withering condemnation and public humiliation. On 24 May, he resigned and went into hiding. The victory was Chamlong's.

But it was a painful victory. Chamlong had not anticipated the violence. "I wanted a peaceful rally," he said afterwards. "I can't deny some responsibility for the damage and loss of life. I feel deeply sorry for those families whose members were killed in the incident, for those people who were injured and their families." Nevertheless, he remains convinced that "we were right in what we have done."

Following Suchinda's departure, Anand Panyarachun agreed to steer Thailand toward fresh elections as head of a second caretaker government. The success of his first term as prime minister had gained Anand the stature needed to bring the country's ship of state aright and to restore its credibility abroad. As Anand planned once more for elections—scheduled for 13 September 1992—he also deftly subordinated military figures who were responsible for the violence in the May crisis, rendering civilian rule stronger. At the same time, critical amendments to the constitution at last enshrined the principle that, in order to be named prime minister, an individual must first be elected.

As elections approached, Chamlong attempted to strengthen his Palang Dharma Party, although he was no longer its official leader. He made himself a candidate, but vowed not to accept any ministerial positions if Palang Dharma achieved a place in the winning coalition. In the campaign, his rivals—including his pro-democracy comrades of the past—portrayed him as dangerously uncompromising. Some criticized him bitterly for having led patriotic young people into harm's way during the May upheaval. Others ridiculed him for breaking his vow to fast to the death. In the end, Chamlong was reelected to Parliament, along with forty-seven other Palang Dharma candidates. But other pro-democracy parties fared better and it fell to Chuan Leekpai, leader of the Democrat Party, to form the new government. As he had promised, Chamlong declined a post in Chuan's cabinet.

In the wake of the elections, Chamlong has increasingly devoted himself to farming. Thailand's farmers, he observes, are getting poorer, due for the most part to the high costs of agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, and farm machinery. On a forty-acre (sixteen hectare) plot of donated land in Kanchanaburi, he, Sirilak, and four others have begun an experiment in "integrated farming" as the first step in setting up a leadership school. They use no chemicals. "I want to prove that we can survive by farming in a natural

way," he says. Of course, Chamlong emphasizes that good Buddhist values will enhance their prospects for success. Farmers should be hardworking, honest, frugal, and free of vice.

These values continue to define Chamlong. He insists that what he wishes most of all is to return to being simply Chamlong, living in a small hut, enjoying nature, and "practicing *dhamma* to counter worldly desires." But it is hard to imagine Chamlong abandoning the worldly life altogether. He believes that thoughtful Buddhists should participate in public life and he often feels compelled to act. It is his character.

September 1992

Manila

J.R.R.

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