

Prayuth's tactical transfers pave way for long tenure

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With a hint delivered during his weekly address last Friday, National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) and Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha let us know that his tenure will not end in one year as initially announced.

That's no surprise; his reform plan is so ambitious it cannot be achieved within such a short time. It may take two to three years or longer, not to mention the underground movements of anti-coup groups which are ready to surge once martial law is lifted. Those movements may obstruct the roadmap to reconciliation. This is the reason pro-coup people want the military to stay on longer to make sure that the "Thaksin regime" will not return.

In Friday's address, Gen Prayuth said: "We are to see each other for some time. Don't get tired of us."

Apart from dropping hints, he has strengthened his power base for a long tenure. Recent military transfers were completed in a way that allows his administration to secure support from the armed forces.

That explains why he handpicked deputy army chief Gen Udomdej Sitabutr as his successor for the top army position and also deputy defence minister. He also made Gen Paiboon Kumchaya deputy supreme commander on the sidelines. The heartbroken Gen Paiboon thus gets the justice portfolio as a consolation prize.

Gen Prayuth and Gen Udomdej, who was also a Musketeer Queen's Guard at the 21st Infantry Regiment, have been close since they were junior officers. They fought side by side in 1983, when the Vietnamese army, which had invaded Cambodia, spilled into Thai territory at Phanom Pa Hill in Prachin Buri's Ta Phraya district. The area is now part of Sa Kaeo province. During the counter-operation, young Gen Prayuth was surrounded by the Vietnamese army, and it was Col Udomdej who came to his rescue. The two eventually pushed the Vietnamese out of the Thai border.

The two colonels were awarded medals of honour and Ram Mala or Rama badges from Her Majesty the Queen.

Gen Udomdej grew up in the Queen's Guard at the 21st infantry regiment and served both Gen Prawit Wongsuwon and Gen Anupong Paojinda. His rise to army chief is the consensus of the two bigger brothers and Gen Prayuth. But since Gen Udomdej will have only one year in government service, Gen Prayuth needs to look beyond this time for a military heir-apparent who will help secure his power base.

Two potential candidates for the top army job are Lt Gen Thirachai Nakwanich, 1st Army commander who is close to Deputy Prime Minister Gen Prawit, and Lt Gen Preecha Chan-ocha, younger brother of Gen Prayuth who was promoted to the rank of full general to become assistant army chief. Both will be promoted to the rank of general this October and retire in 2016.

It is said that Gen Prayuth, as prime minister, will have a major say in naming the next army chief, and it would not be unusual to push his own brother to the top post. It would be an honour for the Chan-ocha family if two members become army chief, and Gen Prayuth has no doubts over his brother's loyalty. But we have yet to see if Lt Gen Preecha can take the helm since he commands the 3rd Army region, while active combat forces come under the 1st Army Region.

Gen Prayuth has looked to the next generation by promoting Deputy 1st Army Commander Maj Gen Theppong Thipyachand to the position of corps commander of the 1st Army Region, another step closer to becoming the 1st Region Army chief, and subsequently, army chief in the "Tigers of the East" lineage. Maj Gen Theppong will retire in 2018. At the same time, he promoted Maj Gen Apirat Kongsompong from chief of the 1st Division King's Own Guard, to the position of deputy 1st Region Army chief. Maj Gen Apirat, who will retire in 2020, is a potential candidate for the army chief position.

Similar arrangements have been made at the other armed forces; only trustworthy people are in place for the top job. In particular, Gen Woraphong Sanganet who replaces Gen Tanasak as the supreme commander, was Gen Prayuth's classmate at the Class 12 of the Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School, while Admiral Kraisorn Chansuwanich and ACM Tritos Sonjaeng are to take the helm at the navy and air force, respectively. It should be noted that Gen Prayuth gave the commanders in other armed forces free hands in the transfer process.

Therefore, Gen Prayuth has nothing to worry about while he runs the country. A counter-coup is not possible. If the situation is not good for general elections, Gen Prayuth can prolong his interim government with no challenges from the armed forces.

How long Gen Prayuth can stay in power depends not only on support from the armed forces, but the people. If he can solve the country's problems, people will continue to support and give him a chance. But if he fails to make a difference, allowing his administration to be riddled with corruption and cronyism like previous politicians, and betray the people's trust, the people will push him from the tiger's back.
