

Political Changes in Thailand

There have been several changes of government among the countries of Asia during the past year, involving the suspension or amendment of parliamentary institutions, which have been watched with interest and some concern by Western nations. Attention was particularly attracted by the change of government in Thailand during October 1958, for that country is a member and a staunch supporter of SEATO and, furthermore, has a place of considerable importance in the maintenance of the political and economic stability of the area.

Field Marshal Sarit Takes Over

On October 20, it was announced that the Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, had taken over direct control of the Government, with the agreement of the King and Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn. It was Field Marshal Sarit who in September 1957 had overthrown the long established regime of Field Marshal Pibul Songgram and who, at the beginning of 1958, had supported the installation of Prime Minister Thanom. Marshal Sarit was away from Thailand during most of the early part of 1958 for health reasons, when the political scene, complicated by factions, was an uneasy one. The Field Marshal returned for a time in June in an attempt to resolve political differences and his efforts appeared to meet with some success. It was evident, however, by his sudden return to Bangkok in October and his decision to take over the direct control of the Thai Government, that the difficulties had not been permanently resolved. Indeed, the Government was faced with other problems as well.

According to a statement issued on his assumption of power, the Field Marshal had become increasingly concerned over the efforts of communist agents in the country to prevent the administration from carrying out its responsibilities. He stated further that the country's external relations had also been affected by the creation of distrust between Thailand and friendly nations. At a later press conference, Field Marshal Sarit stated that not only was it necessary that communist activity be checked but the machinery of government must be overhauled to stamp out corruption.

Revolutionary Council Set Up

Among the first measures taken by Marshal Sarit was the suspension of the constitution which, it was stated, was not adequate to cope with the threats to the country. Subsequently Parliament was dissolved and the control of the country was placed with a Revolutionary Council, consisting of the three branches of the Armed Forces, a certain number of civilians and headed by Field Marshal Sarit himself. Along with the dissolution of Parliament, political parties were banned, a number of arrests were made (including some members of the Assembly and newspaper men suspected of communism) and some crypto-communist newspapers were closed down.

While ordinary democratic procedures were superseded by martial law, the Revolutionary Council announced that the monarchy would be upheld,