

## THAILAND

Thailand is the only country of Southeast Asia which retained its independence during the era of colonial rule. It is a constitutional monarchy headed by King Bhumibol (RAMA IX) who is venerated by the vast majority of Thais. Actual control of government rests with Prime Minister General PREM TINSULANONDA who assumed office in a peaceful transition of power in March 1980. Thailand lies at the crossroads of Southeast Asia; its geo-political importance has received greater recognition as a result of the increased threat it faces from an expansionist Vietnam.

### Domestic Political Situation

Thai politics have been traditionally "centre-oriented" and dominated by the military. In the past half century, Thailand has experienced numerous changes in leadership, including experiments with popular democracy, but changes in political outlook and policy directions have depended to a large extent on events in Bangkok, where financial leadership and student movement have been most prominent. The past decade has witnessed challenges to the political centre from elements of Thai society (students, workers, farmers) who have sought, with growing political awareness, greater government concern for the development needs of the nation. These challenges have resulted in some instability at times, but the fundamental allegiance of the Thai people to the Royal Family and the Buddhist faith has served to offset destabilizing factors.

Since 1977, Thailand has enjoyed relative internal stability. This has been the result of the efforts of successive governments, under General Kriangsak Chomanan and General Prem, to come to grips on the one hand with the worst effects on Thailand of increased fuel prices and global recession, and on the other with the need to concentrate increasing government resources to programmes affecting the rural and poorer sections of the country. Internal communist subversion (particularly in the south) and the growing threat of an expansionist Vietnam have in part prompted these efforts plus the realization that only through widespread economic development can the conditions necessary for long-term stability be realized.

On March 31, 1981 a group of army colonels known as "the Young Turks", led by General Sant Chitpatima, staged an attempted coup in Bangkok. This group (the vanguard of the right in Thai politics) was dissatisfied with the leadership of Prem and his failure to resolve Thailand's economic problems. In particular, they were dissatisfied with