I

Configurative and Comparative Aspects of Military-Civilian Relations

ZAKARIA HAJI AHMAD

ALTHOUGH there is a vast and growing literature on the role of the military in the politics of the Third World, there are still gaps in our knowledge of the nature of this role, especially in terms of military-civilian relationships. In non-communist South-East Asia, the role of the military is underscored by the fact that three governments are led by military officers while in the region (both communist and non-communist) as a whole the military, though not always in power, is usually an important institutional actor.

To understand better this role, it was decided that a relatively detailed and thorough treatment was required in order to illuminate the configurative (or contextual) and comparative aspects of military-civilian relations in South-East Asia. To achieve this a compilation of case-studies of the role of the military in South-East Asia would be useful and could serve as a basis for empirically verifying extant theoretical knowledge of military-civilian relations. In basing such studies on examples from South-East Asia the implication is not that the region presents a laboratory for analysis any more significant than elsewhere but that such enquiry is important in itself and would contribute to the enrichment of understanding of the area useful to both the layman or general observer as well as the area specialist. A parallel thrust aimed at the analytical aspects of military-civilian relations in order that the case-studies of South-East Asia could be juxtaposed with the theoretical issues of the roles, functions and consequences of the military in politics—this approach was deemed as not only useful to those 'interested in theory' but also intended to provide a conceptual or perspectival backdrop against which particular examples of the region would be better understood.

In using the term 'military-civilian' rather than the more con-

ventional 'civil-military', more than a mere change of nomenclature is intended. Although studies of the military have been prominent since the early 1960s, the notion of the latter concept implied the role of the military in terms of *civilian government*, that is to say, militaries were seen as political entities only when they intervened in the political process. Or, in other words, that the military's political role was recognized only when there was a breakdown of civilian authority. Although there is some justification for such premises, it may not be theoretically useful as militaries that do not intervene in the political process may very well have a political role as well.

It should be stressed, then, that the object of enquiry here is the military and its relationship with the political system and society of which it is part. We are interested in not just those militaries which have intervened in the political process but also those that have not. Most, if not virtually all, studies of the military[1] have focused on the causes and effects of military intervention and rule, which albeit legitimate as a theme of enquiry, probably do not render complete a whole phalanx of theoretical answers. Why do some militaries intervene in the political process and others do not? Is military intervention simply a question of the political vacuum created by divided civilian elites? How important was the colonial impact on the formation of political attitudes in the military, and why do countries with a common colonial experience not have militaries with similar political attitudes? Were there particular 'crises' in the struggle for independence that have resulted finally in military intervention? Are there specific patterns of military-civilian relations and even of the type of political system that lead or do not lead to a political role of the military? Why do some countries have civilian elites who can prevent military intervention whilst others do not? Do the nature of military activities serve as a factor for or against military intervention in politics?

Given the flexibility in approach, however, the authors of the case-studies have not addressed fully the whole range of theoretical posers that can be raised about military-civilian relations in the individual countries of South-East Asia. It may well be that the initial step of 'problemation' as articulated by Harry Eckstein in his critique of the studies of internal war[2] had not been fully undertaken by the various writers here, but it is to be admitted that the attempt to confront data with theory is always one of 'tension' as is the case of a body of knowledge counterpoised by the complex facts of a given region or country.[3]

Nevertheless, it is possible to detect common, underlying themes in each particular case-study that highlight the political role of the military *vis-à-vis* civilian institutions, even if each case-study approach is different. Underneath the complexity of each case-study one finds that the importance of the terminal colonial period and the character of the struggle for independence are important cues for later military-civilian relations. Where colonialism was not a factor, the critical step at the onset of modernization, as in Thailand, laid in fact the pattern of military-civilian relations that was to follow. Where the nationalist struggle was much more 'gradual', the military's role has been subservient to the civilian authorities as in Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, although in the lattermost country its role has been increasing. And where the nationalist struggle was 'violent' as was the case in Indonesia, Vietnam, Burma and Laos, the military's role has been enhanced as to almost legitimize its position in politics.

The politicization or non-politicization of the military's officer corps is yet another factor that emerges in all the case-studies. In Burma, Indonesia and Thailand, the experience of the officer corps has been intertwined in the political process of each country, but in Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines this has not been the case. In Vietnam and Laos, military officers have been political officers as well and thus the military's role is a highly political matter. Politicization of the officer corps is a function of the strength and cohesion of the civilian elites: if civilian elites are strong, as in Singapore and Malaysia, the military's role is circumscribed, but if civilian elites are divided and weak, as in Burma, Thailand and Indonesia, then the military dominates the political process.

Apart from endogenous factors, exogenous factors are also important. The role of the former colonial authorities, of the Japanese during the Second World War, and of the Americans, Chinese and others have been important inputs in military-civilian relations in South-East Asia. Although it would appear that Vietnam might be the exception to this observation, it is difficult to deny that some impact had been made by some of these foreign forces at some point or other.[4]

It is also possible to view the case-studies in typological terms. Three archetypes of military-civilian relations (since 1975) can be identified in South-East Asia, namely (1) non-communist countries in which the military has intervened or is in authority, (2) non-communist countries in which the military is subservient to the civilian authorities in varying degrees, and (3) communist countries

in which military and civilian spheres are separate but where authority is fused between the two. It is most likely that these patterns will hold for quite a while yet in the region, with Burma, Indonesia and Thailand in the first category, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore (and Brunei) in the second category, and Laos and Vietnam (and Kampuchea) in the third. Regime changes with the military playing a key role may alter the conditions of any particular country but that country will only need to be placed in its new conceptual property-space as defined here.

It is against these commonalities that the case-studies should be seen for comparative purposes. Each case-study, in turn, can be regarded on its own, for in many ways the experience of the military in each South-East Asian country is virtually a microcosm of the history and political process of the individual countries of the region. To complement and provide theoretical comment on these case-studies in terms of military-civilian relations, two essays are included in this volume, namely one on why the military has not withdrawn from politics, and a concluding overview on the applicability of theoretical propositions to South-East Asian cases. The organization of this volume as such follows the typological ordering for the case-studies (organized together as Part II) and is complemented by two theoretical essays (Part III).

Thus, in the cases dealing with the military as a principal actor in politics, Robert H. Taylor finds the Burmese military as a highly political institution from the beginning of modern Burma at the end of the Second World War and explains that process; Harold Crouch lays stress on the theme of political domination as the military's trend in Indonesia; and Chai-Anan Samudavanija and Suchit Bunbongkarn survey the role of the military in Thailand since 1932 and characterize modern Thai politics as 'more in the context of military-civilian relations and intramilitary conflict'. It is interesting to note that all three authors approach their subject in 'historical-chronological' fashion to explain the emergence of the military in these three countries.

In Taylor's essay on the Burmese military, he notes that the military's officer corps has become more 'personally and ideologically united' than the 'faction-ridden' force it was at the time of independence. This trait is a function of the 'nationalist' orientation of the Burmese army which was highly involved in the struggle for independence but although the military's role has grown in civilian sectors since it came to power in 1962, it remains a non-corrupt force as compared to other militaries that have intervened in the

political process. The Burmese military has attempted to inject organized politics in the country through the National Solidarity Association but it remains clear that it will safeguard the political process and the interests of the nation from backsliding into a situation of disunity and the bickering of civilian politicians. Although the Burmese military appears cohesive against the background of the country's ethnic and sectional problems, Taylor identified as well the role of personalities as an important consideration of the military's continuing role—an issue that has raised much speculation about Burma in the 1980s.

In the chapter on Indonesia, Crouch also finds that the military's role has been significant in the struggle for national independence, although it was itself a contributing factor to political instability in the period before military rule. As a result of the New Order regime led by the military since its take-over of the country in 1965–6, a process of 'depoliticization' has been effected so that Indonesia can be characterized as more a 'bureaucratic polity' with 'neo-patrimonial' features. Crouch notes that political challenges to the military regime are ever-present in spite of depoliticization and that loyalty and generational changes are issues the military will face in the 1980s. None the less, the Indonesian military's concept of participation in society *and* defence (through its *dwifungsi* doctrine) would seem to prevail as long as there is no alternative civilian force.

In the Thai case, as in Burma and Indonesia, the military's interventionist stance is also 'nationalist' and it took power from the civilians to 'safeguard democracy'. Although since 1973 there has arisen reform-minded military cliques such as the 'young Turks'[5] and the 'democratic soldiers', Chai-Anan and Suchit see little prospect for the emergence of a civilian regime because of the 'low level of legitimacy of participatory political institutions', and they expect that the political process would continue to be characterized by coups and counter-coups as a means of alternating the leaders in power.

The three studies by Taylor, Crouch and Chai-Anan and Suchit are rich in detail of the roles played by the military in non-political arenas but it is significant that their analyses do not deflate the continuing political role of the military, as contrasted with Hoadley's observation that 'once consolidation of power, destruction of opposition and creation of a basis of legitimacy are accomplished, the military moves away from the direct exercise of political power and assumes a guardian role in the wings of the political stage'.[6]

Turning to the case-studies of Malaysia, the Philippines and

Singapore, we find that the role of the military in all these countries is increasing but that their potential for intervention remains debatable. Zakaria Haji Ahmad and Chan Heng Chee respectively characterize the context of military-civilian relations in Malaysia and Singapore as one in which civilians are in command and that the military is only an arm of the government. However, Carolina G. Hernandez analyses the Philippines case as one in which the influence of the military has been rapidly growing since the advent of martial law and thereafter from one of *influence* to *participation*, and that its role as an arm of civilians in power might propel it to one of *control*.

In the essay on Malaysia, Zakaria catalogues the process of the institution-building of the military and explains the factors why the military has not intervened in politics in this multiethnic country. He notes that the military is Malay-dominated and therefore would seem to support the Malay regime in power but that its apolitical stand is more important than its ethnic composition.

The bases of civilian control of the military, however, are different in Singapore where the government has had to 'build from scratch', as it were, after it became independent from Malaysia in 1965.[7] Chan Heng Chee notes the conscious attempts to create a citizen army by the PAP government of Singapore and that although it has a strong core of reserves and national servicemen, neither militarism nor the military's political influence has been allowed to emerge. Alone among all the case-studies in this volume the Singapore military's development has appeared to unshackle its colonial origins although other exogenous forces (such as Israeli advice)[8] have played a role. As long as strong political institutions are in existence, the military will be merely an instrument of defence and nation-building.

In the case of the Philippines, Hernandez sees the role of the military as having been expanded since the onset of martial law and thereafter under President Marcos, and notes that the 'corporate interests' of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) support the Marcos administration. It is therefore unlikely to intervene in the political process during the rule of President Marcos. However, in spite of the AFP's 'above politics orientation', it is not clear if its increasing participation in governmental tasks will constrain it from intervening in the political process should conditions become unstable after the transition from Marcos' rule.

If in the last three aforementioned cases the roles of the military and civilians are seen as separate, the situation in the communist

polities of Laos and Vietnam imputes a strong connection between the two. In the Laotian case, the military's close relationship with politicians approximates the 'bureaucratic polity' model and in Vietnam it seems evident from theory and practice that the 'party controls the barrel of the gun'.

Geoffrey C. Gunn describes the problems of factions in the contest for Laos that engendered thereby rival armies of these factions that exacerbated the quest for a political solution in a country fragmented both ethnically and geographically. Although the United States provided massive aid in building up the royalist army, the result was negative since it instead 'backslided from professionalism into warlordism'; on the other hand, the leftist forces were more cohesive and emerged from being the arm of an insurgent political party to an instrument of state power that it has been since 1975. In the context of military-civilian relations, there is a 'party-military symbiosis' which is an outgrowth of the communist party's insistence of its dominance over the military.

A similar case exists in Vietnam where Carlyle A. Thayer notes that the Vietnamese People's Army (VPA) since 1975 has become even more integrated into Party and State processes so that the VPA is a centre of power with similar status to the Vietnamese Communist Party and the State Apparatus. It would appear that the military roles in communist South-East Asia extend as well into socio-economic spheres. In both the Laotian and Vietnamese cases, it is not that there is a need for a political role or intervention but that the military is simply an important arm of the state as with other governmental organs.

This wide spectrum of the nature of military-civilian relations raises interesting theoretical questions and observations. Thus, in the penultimate chapter, Ulf Sundhaussen provides an analysis of the issue of the military's staying power in politics in South-East Asia, or in his terms 'the durability of military regimes'. Having explored the conditions, both 'endogenous' and 'exogenous', in which the military has withdrawn from politics elsewhere, Sundhaussen concludes that the endogenous factor of an absence of disposition to withdraw is the major reason for military regimes to continue to rule in the specific countries of the region.

In the concluding chapter, Crouch attempts to synthesize the information and analysis contained in the case-studies together with extant theoretical propositions on military-civilian relations. As has been expounded by Hoadley,[9] Crouch finds that assessments of the military's political performance in office and as an agent of

modernization are 'mixed' in that the military seems 'no more successful than civilians'. Crouch's chapter is iconoclastic in its attempt to reify theoretical premises about the factors for military intervention, but he notes that it is 'difficult to state definitely the conditions leading to military intervention', whereas it is 'less difficult to identify factors associated with non-intervention'.

In this brief introduction, it has been possible only to highlight some of the issues raised by the authors in the chapters that follow. The subject of military–civilian relations is complex but will continue to be an important one in South-East Asia; analyses of the military as a political institution must therefore receive priority by all interested in the questions of security, stability and development. There is a need to bridge the general and the particular in our understanding of military–civilian relations as well as improving our conceptual analysis; as such we hope that this volume of South-East Asian case-studies with a flavouring of theoretical discussion is yet another step in the pathways of knowledge.

1. One outstanding account of military–civilian relations in a Third World country where the military has not intervened appeared in the late 1960s. Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph, 'Generals and Politicians in India' in Wilson C. McWilliams, ed., *Garrisons and Government: Politics and the Military in New States*, San Francisco, Chandler, 1967, pp. 130–49.

2. H. Eckstein, 'Introduction: Toward the Theoretical Study of Internal War' in H. Eckstein, ed., *Internal War*, New York, The Free Press, 1964, pp. 1–32.

3. See L. Pye, 'The Confrontation between Discipline and Area Studies' in L. Pye, ed., *Political Science and Area Studies, Rivals or Partners*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1975, pp. 3–22.

4. See the discussion in Zakaria Haji Ahmad, 'US Military Effectiveness: The View from Southeast Asia' in Sam. C. Sarkesian, ed., *The US Military: The View from Abroad*, forthcoming.

5. Chai-Anan Samudavanija, *The Thai Young Turks*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982.

6. Hoadley, *Soldiers and Politics in Southeast Asia: Civil-Military Relations in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1975.

7. See also Patrick Smith and Philip Bowring, 'Singapore Stresses Security as an Arm of Nation-building', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 January 1983, pp. 26–9.

8. On a discussion of 'models' for the Singapore military, see ibid.

9. See Hoadley, op. cit., Chapters 7 and 10.