



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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### Thailand 1965–83

#### Executive Summary

The internal conflict of Thailand from 1965–83, also known as the Communist insurgency in Thailand, was fought between the government of Thailand and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Following the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, the CPT began to align with Maoism and signaled this alignment in 1964 through congratulating the People’s Republic of China on its 15th anniversary of independence, demanding the removal of US military forces from Thailand and expressing a desire for a regime change. Beginning in 1965, the CPT largely focused on development, training, and recruitment. Numerous political assassinations were carried out by the CPT, however, beginning in 1961 and continuing until full-scale conflict began in the summer of 1965.<sup>1</sup>

During the initial stages of the conflict in 1965–66, around 90 percent of all CPT incidents occurred in northeastern Thailand. The CPT received significant help in 1967 during the beginnings of the Opium War in Laos, when the insurgents sought out and recruited many resettled Communists from that conflict. In the last few days of 1968, the CPT established the Thai People’s Liberation Army (TPLA) for fighting, production, and political mobilization, under which the supreme command ordered the study of Mao’s political philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

In 1969–70, the armed insurgency notably escalated, particularly in the northern provinces and along the Thai-Malaysian border. The Thai government believed at this stage that around 10,000 villagers were providing support to the Communist insurgency.<sup>3</sup> In late January 1972, the Thai government launched its largest combat operation against Communist insurgents, deploying over 12,000 Royal Thai Army troops, which resulted in approximately 30 government casualties and reportedly over 200 guerillas killed.<sup>4</sup>

The sudden peak and equally sudden decline of the CPT occurred in the late 1970s when the 1976 Thai student massacre and external support led to TPLA’s height of powers with an estimated six to eight thousand armed guerillas, perhaps as many as one million sympathizers, and half of the provinces in Thailand being “communist infiltrated.”<sup>5</sup> A combination of factors, however—including military-initiated Thai nationalization and democratization, Chinese-Vietnamese relationship tensions, and government order 66/2523 (which encouraged defections of CPT members)—led to the decline of the CPT until the conflict’s eventual end in 1983.<sup>6</sup>

## Assessing the Five Factors

### 1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

**Yes.** The main goal of the CPT was to establish a communist government, and their objectives did not resonate with most ethnic Thai, as CPT lines drawn at the start of the conflict were political and anti-American.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, from the incitement of the conflict onward, the CPT mainly recruited from diverse groups of tribal people and others outside Thai society, such as ethnic Chinese living in Thailand. Before 1973 and the Bangkok student uprisings, very few ethnic Thai joined the CPT, and the party's composition was a contradiction itself, where the Communist Party of Thailand “. . . was not a party for the Thai.”<sup>8</sup>

### 2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

**Yes.** Although at the peak of their power and influence the CPT encompassed one million sympathizers and six to eight thousand soldiers, the overall population still far outweighed these numbers as the general population at the incitement of the conflict was estimated at just above 31 million people, the vast majority of whom were ethnic Thai who approved of their king and government.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

**Yes.** At the beginning of the conflict the Communist movement had little appeal in Thailand, with fewer than 500 indigenous members at the onset of the movement.<sup>10</sup> Recruitment and appeal increased exponentially following the Bangkok student uprisings, leading to the highest number of guerillas in the CPT (six to eight thousand) and as many as one million sympathizers but still only encompassed 3 percent of the total population of the country.<sup>11</sup> Although by the end of 1978 there were armed insurgents of the CPT operating in 52 of the 72 provinces, mass CPT defections in 1982 and 1983 as a result of Thai government order 66/2523 largely ended the threat of CPT violence in rural areas.<sup>12</sup>

### 4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

**Yes → No.** External support and sanctuary were initially given by the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Laotian governments. Examples included the CPT headquarters and radio station, which were both located in China. Until 1975, the Vietnamese trained many of the CPT insurgents in North Vietnam. Laos was home to more than 20 CPT bases by 1978, and CPT insurgents would regularly cross from northeastern Thailand into Laos for external sanctuary from the Thai government. External sanctuary for the CPT ceased, however, and support heavily declined in 1978 due to strained relations between the CPT, Vietnamese, and Laotian governments and a reduction in Chinese aid.<sup>13</sup>

### 5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

**Yes.** The predominant security institution in Thailand was the Royal Thai Army, along with the Royal Thai Police and paramilitary organizations to work alongside their formal institutions.<sup>14</sup> Thai government forces in 1966 consisted of 127,700 military forces and 45,800 Thai police and paramilitary forces, where the Thai Army conducted counter-subversive operations through regional security programs and the police forces of 6,800 Border Patrol

forces and a 500-man Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit helped aid in anti-guerilla activities.<sup>15</sup> A Thai regiment served in combat in Vietnam in support of US operations in the 1960s.

THAILAND 1965–83	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES → NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

## Outcome

Government victory. Between 1978–79, the CPT began a pronounced decline with the loss of external training bases in Laos and most of their external funding being halted, as well as several central committee members of the CPT defecting or being captured. From the years 1979–82, more than 7,500 CPT insurgents, along with associates and other sympathizers, were either killed or captured, and by 1983–85, the remaining insurgents were largely dispersed and defeated.<sup>16</sup> This case supports the Five Factors theory.

## Endnotes

1. CIA, *Communist Insurgency in Thailand*, National Intelligence Estimate no. 5266 (Washington, DC: CIA, 1966), [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000012498.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000012498.pdf).
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3. “The Communist Insurgency in Thailand,” Marine Corps Association (website), 1973.
4. “Communist Insurgency.”
5. Martin Stuart-Fox, “Factors Influencing Relations between the Communist Parties of Thailand and Laos,” *Asian Survey* 19, no. 4 (April 1979): 333–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643855>.
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7. Yuangrat Wedel, “The Communist Party of Thailand and Thai Radical Thought,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1981): 325–39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27908437>.
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9. Stuart-Fox, “Factors Influencing Relations”; “Population of Thailand 1800 to 2020,” Statista (website), August 2019, accessed October 7, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1067115/population-thailand-historical/>; and “Population Growth in Thailand,” WorldData.info (website), January 2018, accessed October 21, 2023, last updated January 2024, <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/thailand/populationgrowth.php>.
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15. CIA, *Communist Insurgency*.
16. Thomas, “Communist Insurgency.”



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