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Prem has played a key role in recent times, particularly as His Majesty the King's representative to pass on "royal concern" to the government, from the turbulence in the southern-most provinces to current political crises.

Prem succeeded General Kriangsak Chomanan as prime minister in 1980 after serving as defence minister a year earlier. Prem's tenure experienced a number of upheavals.

Battling serious political threats, his loyalty to the Royal Family was a key factor that enabled his premiership to survive two coup attempts, in 1981 and 1985.

Prem dissolved the House three times and reshuffled his Cabinet four times, either to put power-hungry politicians back in line or ward off political threats from the military.

Despite the turmoil, Prem is credited with having adopted careful economic and monetary policies that would serve as a foundation for the country's unprecedented economic growth.

An exemplary cavalry officer, Prem received national acclaim for his successful strategy in fighting the war against communism when he was commanding general of the 2nd Army Region in 1974.

By a fast-track promotion, he was brought from the Northeast to become the Army's assistant commander in 1977 and assumed the top slot a year later.

With the overwhelming support of political parties, Prem took the government's helm in 1980 following Kriangsak's resignation. Kriangsak,

who became prime minister following a military coup in November 1977, chose not to face a no-confidence vote over oil policy and bowed out.

Prem's fatherly approach won him the affection of journalists and politicians, who came to refer to him as "Pa", and at times he did act like one.

His relationship with the Royal Family was a major factor reinforcing his premiership against serious political threats. One of the biggest challenges came from his one-time saviour, General Arthit Kamlang-ek,

who as Army commander-in-chief helped crush the April 1-3 coup attempt. Prem fired Arthit in 1985 after he went on air denouncing the premier for devaluing the baht.

In the latter part of his premiership, Prem came under increasing political pressure for his style of leadership. Critics accused him of avoiding problems, hoping they would go away with time.

After eight years in power, the critics said, Prem no longer considered himself a politician and thought he was above criticism.



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The crunch came in April 1988 when a group of government MPs voted against the amendment of the Copyright Act. Prem responded by dissolving the House. To the surprise of many, he rejected an invitation to take up the premiership again.

Almost immediately, he was appointed privy councillor and given the status of elder statesman by HM the King. In 1998, at the age of 78, he was appointed president of the Privy Council. Prem has remained a senior counsellor in Thai politics and was present

when the King brought General Suchinda Kraprayoon and Chamlong Srimaung before him to put an end to the bloodshed in May 1992.

Prem was born in 1920, rising through the ranks of the officer corps from sub-lieutenant in 1941 to commander-in-chief.

He was deputy interior minister in 1977 in the Kriangsak government; he became defence minister in 1979 and then prime minister in 1980.

Prem quit as the Army's commander-in-chief in 1981 and continued his role in the administration as a civilian prime minister, retaining control of the military by concurrently holding the post of defence minister.

He has a reputation for being untouched by the corruption that is so common in Thai politics. ■