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Three years later, Thaksin is facing the largest opposition ever confronted by a democratically elected prime minister in Thailand. The country plunged into deep political turmoil with almost all the regular problem-solving mechanisms in a democratic system grinding to a halt.

However, Thirayuth's influence and the media's take on his role is not without controversy.

Last year a prominent observer of Thai politics coined the term "Thirayuthism", while asserting in a somewhat sarcastic tone:

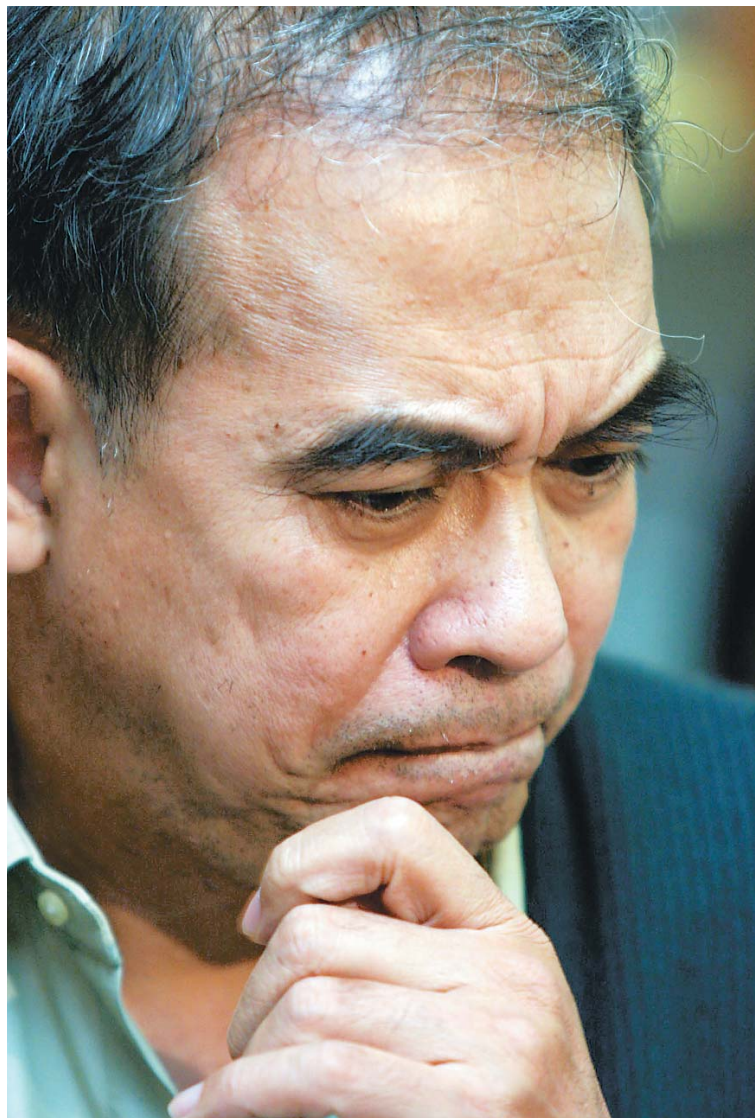
"Readers of the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* should be familiar with stories, often lead stories, that dutifully and single-mindedly quote him and offer nothing else.

"What you may not know, however, is that such servile transcription of Thirayuth Boonmi is a ritual as well for the Thai News Agency, the most state-dominated of all the media and strongly sympathetic to the Thaksin government.

"In brief, Thirayuth enjoys virtually universal deference, and often genuine respect, from Thailand's journalistic class."

It must be said that reporting on Thirayuth's political commentaries offers little challenge to journalists. Many of his peers, when contacted by reporters to comment on Thirayuth's analysis, say that they could not agree more with him. His critics, mostly from the government camp, usually fail to dispute the substance of his criticisms – they must resort to attacking his personality.

Thirayuth's rise to national acclaim commenced during his years of student activism. In



1973, Thirayuth was a fresh, 23-year-old engineering graduate and a key leader of a student-led pro-democracy movement, which ultimately overthrew the military dictatorship that had ruled Thailand for more than three decades.

Since those high-profile student days, Thirayuth's path has taken many twists and turns.

Thirayuth knew his life was in danger after the slaughter of students by a right-wing mob on October 6, 1976, at Thammasat University. The Thai military had once again seized power in a coup. He fled to the jungle where he joined

the Communist Party of Thailand, spending five years hiking up and down the high mountain ranges of Nan with a rifle on his shoulder.

Upon "surrendering" and returning to Bangkok in 1981, he accepted a fellowship at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. Three years later, he decided to take up an academic career, and he accepted an offer from the Bielefeld University in Germany to research the psychology of people in the military.

His first academic work at Chulalongkorn University's Social Research Institute land-

ed him in hot water. An opinion survey of how Thai people felt about the sitting government of General Prem Tinsulanonda back in 1987, and his analysis of the result which appeared in the media, seemed to irk the administration so much that it was "suggested" to Thirayuth that he leave his job.

The incident gave rise to what became the famous "Thirayuth's polls", and his much-awaited annual political reviews.

In 1991, Thammasat University welcomed Thirayuth with a lectureship at its Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, where he continues to teach today.

Many observers point out that even if Thirayuth is generally referred to as a "renowned academic" or more specifically as "a leading sociologist", his solid academic work – if there is any – has not been publicised much outside the walls of Thammasat University.

In contrast to his public acceptance, Thirayuth is not a favourite of his students. He is known to be tough when it comes to giving assignments and grading examination papers.

Some of his students complain that they are not able to do well in his class because they have a hard time following his lectures. They say he usually speaks on several complex topics, sometimes unrelated, all at the same time. If those students knew a small secret – Thirayuth reads mathematics textbooks during his leisure time as a means to "relax" his brain – then they would probably agree he represents further evidence of the fine line that exists between insanity and genius. The only difference is success. ■

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