

# Role of Parliament in defence budgeting in Thailand

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## **1. The Thai Defence Budgeting Process**

### 1.1 Legal Framework

According to Thailand's constitution, the Thai Parliament has the power and duty to conduct state affairs and promulgate laws. In respect to Thailand's defence budgeting system, it is the duty of the government to propose the defence budget bill to Parliament which then sets up a subcommittee - consisting of selected MPs as well as experts and academics - to help oversee and audit the budgeting process within the Ministry of Defence (MOD).

The subcommittee usually spends from two weeks to one month studying the budget items in detail. Within this period of time, the subcommittee has the authority to call on MoD officials to explain and prove why they have chosen the particular budget items. After the subcommittee has fulfilled its task, Parliament can decide whether it votes for or against the MOD's budget bill.

### 1.2 Internal and External Controls on Defence Spending

While the MOD is endowed with the Auditor General Office, the Office of Auditor General is responsible for the government as a whole. The degree and intensity of checks and balances within the military budgetary system is, in my opinion, still few and far between because the main issue is not how to control the budget, but rather how to re-structure the MOD by separating the Armed Forces and The Permanent Secretary Office which control and manage the entire ministry's resources. This point will be clarified later on in this paper.

### 1.3 Implementation of the System in Practice

Security matters and security prioritisation are actually driven from below and are decentralised amongst the three forces. By this it is meant that the MOD and Supreme Command Headquarters (the official name of the latter has been changed to the Royal Thai Armed Forces HQ) have less say in what the army, navy and air force wish to spend their funds on. This is because the structure of the Thai MOD grants autonomy status (by law) to each of the forces,

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empowering the commanders of each force to design or request budget items without having another force intervening in this matter.

In Thailand, the duties of each of the Armed Forces overlap, for example, there are four different staff colleges (Army, Navy, Air Force and the joint staff college of the Supreme Command Headquarter) to attend to educational needs as opposed to the joint staff colleges found in other countries. This is only one example, but in reality it is not only the education system that overlaps but also the medical, the support and the maintenance system which require a huge manpower for each force. It is apparent that the spending for MOD personnel makes for some 40% of the entire defence budget while the development fund is very low.

After Parliament's approval, the actual defence budget is directly distributed to the commanders of each force who have already decided on how to spend the sum. It is indeed within the power of the individual commander, and not the Supreme Commander or Defence Minister, to use the budget as they deem fit. This won't change unless new laws are introduced to re-structure the MOD's finances and put them in the hands of the Supreme Commander or MOD.

#### 1.4 Role of general public / media

The Thai public and the media have more power than many other organisations, for example, news programmes present data on what type of arms the forces would like to purchase and this sometimes succeeds in raising public awareness over the control of military spending. For instance, when the former government decided to purchase Griffin jet fighters for the Air Force and armored vehicle carriers for the Army, news agencies criticised both the purchase of the vehicles and the lacking transparency in respect to the choice of the (Ukrainian) provider selling those vehicles. In the aftermath, the jet fighters were purchased, the vehicles were not.

In the eyes of Thailand's general public, news agencies and NGOs alike play a significant role in combating corruption and providing transparency.

#### 1.5 Major challenges

The budgetary system of not only the MOD but all of Thailand's ministries is flawed as it does not account for the outcome of a particular project but only how the money is spent. However, the National Auditing Office attempts to alter the budgetary drafting process by means of calculating project outcomes in order to not only reply on the mere output.

The MOD must gain greater awareness of project outcomes rather than merely stressing the procedural output. Performance must be measured against the wider influence and direct impact that the military can exert to improve the level of national security and create a stable and peaceful state of affairs. The MOD must move away from its narrow definition and its focus on project implementation via the bureaucratic machinery that simply carries out its tasks and orders without establishing why it is being done in the first place. Such blind

action, time and time again, leads to unsatisfactory results in terms of what society gets out of military spending.

For example, we should not just count the number of students who go through a course, but rather whether or not their real capacity level has been improved and whether they have become better prepared to accomplish their assigned mission both efficiently and effectively. Are they capable of independent and critical thinking; have they become self-starters, problem solvers and learners? Are our personnel better able to detect the need to change before it is too late? A new paradigm must be established that is worthwhile for tax payers. The structure, the working environment and the executives must all be capable and able to act as agents of change themselves whilst managing change. The MOD needs to adopt transparent recruitment and promotion processes to be in a better position to select a capable commander who can plan and use the budget effectively and efficiently. During Thaksin's tenure many efforts have been made to reorganise the morale or mentality of government officers through a number of programmes; so far without much tangible success.

## **2.1 Role of Parliament in Defence Budgeting**

### 2.2 Legal framework

As mentioned earlier on, Parliament not only has the power and duty to approve the MOD's budgetary bill but also to control the administration of the MOD by various means, such as interpellation. That is, Parliament can demand hearings, troop visits and/or non-confidential debates.

However in reality, the power structure of the Thai political system is controlled by the main party in government. The selection of the head of the military standing committee or another important committee was thus mostly under control or influence of the incumbent party. This resulted in the incapability of the parliamentary committee to pursue its formal duties as stated above, leading to a situation in which the powers of the government and Parliament virtually merged. An exception may only come about if the MP from an opposition party heads a standing committee; a scenario that has never evolved in respect to the military standing committee.

### 2.3 The Powers and the Scope of Parliamentary Approval

The annual budget debate is where Parliament gives its approval or disapproval of the government budget proposal on who gets what. Which ministry will get how much of the share of the national budget is normally decided at the parliamentary level. As mentioned previously, the approval of the budget is also part of the incumbent party's internal power struggles in which the vested interests of influential party members prevail over rational decision-making processes.

## 2.4 The Functioning of Parliaments' Defence Budget Oversight

There are various defence committees as well as sub and -standing committees that can control the administration of the MOD. In reality however, as mentioned before, the committees are dominated by the incumbent party and the opposition has little room to maneuver. Only if some strong evidence on cases of corruption or non-transparency is presented, can the opposition parties take on the role of overseeing the defence budgeting process.

## 2.5 Capacity of Parliament for Dealing with Defence Budget Oversight

Normally, Parliament provides enough experts and resources for the budgetary committee to overlook the MOD's budget bill. However, after the budget bill is passed by Parliament, it is the duty of the National Auditing Office to oversee the spending both at national level and internally.

## 2.6 Major challenges

The role of the Thai Parliament in overseeing and controlling the defence budget depends on the reality of Thai politics whereby social power structures play an important role. The 2006 *coup d'etat* altered the MOD's budgeting process in-so-far as the military personnel became MPs who were now able to increase the budget and purchase arms successfully. While other civilian ministries were remodeled during Thaksin's tenure, the MOD remains overstretched and unable to face the new threats