Saying the Unsayable

Monarchy and Democracy
in Thailand

Edited by
Søren Ivarsson
and **Lotte Isager**

SAYING THE UNSAYABLE

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Preface

Monarchy and democracy in Thailand are topics that have engaged researchers for many decades. After the coup in 2006 these topics came to the forefront of academic and public discussions about the future of Thai society. However, under the current political conditions in Thailand such discussions are curtailed by censorship, the lese-majesty law and political persecution. In light of this situation we felt that an anthology containing critical academic analyses of Thai-style democracy and monarchy was timely. The anthology is a result of lengthy and continuous exchange of ideas among researchers, journalists and diplomats and others who share an interest in these topics. Some of them have contributed chapters to the book. Others have provided ideas and valuable insights. In the final stage of the editing the suggestions by the two anonymous readers were particularly helpful. We wish to extend our gratitude to everyone involved.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Challenging the Standard Total View of the Thai Monarchy

Søren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager

In April–May 2010, large numbers of demonstrators questioned the legitimacy of the Abhisit government in Thailand. The demonstrations, which were finally dissolved in a very violent manner, represented a culmination of the political tension that had first developed in the months leading up to September 2006, when a group of high-ranking officers in the Thai military removed the democratically elected prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, from his post.

Immediately after the 2006 coup, it was evident that the coup-makers enjoyed support from people who were closely associated with King Bhumibol Adulyadej, and the king himself soon endorsed the new military government. On their part, the coup-makers eagerly employed royal imagery to add legitimacy to the new regime. Curiously, the coup also enjoyed support from groups of urban based intellectuals and social activists who had throughout the 1990s fought to ensure democracy in Thailand. In their growing despair over Thaksin's leadership they had begun to gather around King Bhumibol and his ideas about 'sufficiency economy' as the moral leader and the true development path for Thailand, and when the military coup finally came they welcomed this clearly undemocratic ending of Thaksin's power. Altogether, and in different ways, the coup highlighted the influence of the royal family and its associated institutions. The network monarchy (McCargo 2005) had yet again shown its clout by intervening in the Thai political process, although, as so often, it was

difficult to verify what (if any) role the king and his proxies had in this process. The efforts of consecutive governments to protect the royal family from negative publicity on paper as well as on the internet has demonstrated the centrality of the monarchy in the construction of legitimacy and the conceptualization of power and moral order in Thailand.

Among contemporary monarchies Thailand is a unique case. Not only does King Bhumibol hold quite extraordinary political powers for a constitutional monarch. He is also the longest reigning monarch among the current kings and queens in the world. Just three months before the military coup, on 9 June 2006, Thailand celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of his accession to the throne. Moreover, King Bhumibol is publicly revered as a semi-divine king, a man of unlimited goodness and wisdom as well as an unusually gifted renaissance man whose accomplishments as composer, engineer, inventor, agricultural adviser, nature conservationist, protector of democracy, and philosopher are said to be astounding. The song 'Father of the Land' (*phor haeng phaendin*) – which was popularized in Thailand around the king's eightieth birthday – neatly makes reference to all these talents of the king. This reverence for remarkable royal talents and contributions to the nation is extended to many of King Bhumibol's family members and relatives, including deceased kings.

The cult of personality surrounding members of the royal family is a part of what Kevin Hewison has called the 'standard total view of the Thai monarchy': 'a perspective which is based on incomplete and selective information, often selected for particular ideological reasons, and yet totalizing and accepted as correct, especially by outsiders' (Hewison 1997: 266).¹ The standard total view of the Thai monarchy is a complex assembly of different cultural meanings, which may be summarized as follows:

- The Thai monarchy safeguards traditions and is a timeless institution that transcends past, present and future.
- The king is an egalitarian 'development king'. He is a deliverer of modernity and progress to the country and works tirelessly for the welfare of his subjects.
- The monarchy is a protector of the nation.
- The king is a benevolent guardian of democracy and a moral being above politics.
- The monarchy is natural to Thai society and culture: if you do not feel it, you do not understand it.

¹ Writing about a quite different situation, this term was coined by Michael Vickery (Hewison 1997: 266; Vickery 1984).

The standard total view of the Thai monarchy is manifested in a hagiographical literature which reproduces idealist notions of kingly virtue, power and benevolence. In contrast, the nature and extent of royal political-religious powers has relatively rarely been turned into a subject of critical analysis by researchers. This is possibly due to a combination of cultural and political factors, including the fact that the Thai royal family is protected by strict lese-majesty laws unlike many other countries where members of royal families are subjected to public scrutiny and paparazzi surveillance to such a degree that the ideal and symbolic purity of the royals has proved hard to maintain. Still, there exists an academic literature dealing with the role of King Bhumibol and the political networks around him, including some quite recent works (e.g. Gray 1986, 1991, 1992, 1995; Bowie 1997; Chanida 2007; Chanida, Chaithawat and Thanapol 2004; Connors 2003; Handley 2006; Hewison 1997; McCargo 2005; Ockey 2005; Somsak 2001; Thanapol 2007; Thongchai 2005). And the coup in September 2006 caused a spree of critical texts dealing with this issue (Connors 2008; Giles 2007, 2008; Hewison 2008; Thongchai 2008; Ukrist 2008; Porphant 2008). The Thai publisher Fa Diao Kan (SameSky) in its publications and its website has offered space to critical discussions of the Thai monarchy. And at the Thai Studies Conference held at Thammasat University in Bangkok in January 2008, three panels were dedicated specifically to the Thai monarchy and one panel to a critical appraisal of the king's sufficiency economy. These texts and activities signal a desire to turn the Thai monarchy into a legitimate subject of study.

This book shares that desire by offering a critical academic analysis of the popular image of the contemporary Thai monarchy through a discussion of cultural, historical, political, religious and legal forces involved in the production and reproduction of this image. As the first edited volume dealing with this topic, the book challenges the standard total view of the Thai monarchy with a series of well-documented analyses which, each in their own way, argue that historical selectivity and manipulation of politics and religion are inherent in this view of the monarchy. Even though immensely powerful groups in Thai society stand as guardians of this view of the monarchy, that is no reason not to examine this view more closely. Such scrutiny is offered by this book, which shows how new visual media, the spectralization of life under neoliberalism, and royalist manipulations of popular prosperity religions have come together to institutionalize a commodified and mass-mediatized ideology of supernatural royal power that legitimates King Bhumibol's accumulation of political authority; how the lese-majesty law has supported a failing and deeply undemocratic

edifice of a nationalist identity in order to police the minds of Thai people; how, since 1932, royalists have laid the basis for Thailand's chronic democratic crisis through political machinations, which conveniently have been written out of the standard total view of the Thai monarchy; how, for decades, the notion of 'Thai-style democracy' has provided strong support for authoritarian regimes and governments led by unelected prime ministers; and how the royal 'new theory of agriculture' and 'sufficiency economy', besides miscomprehending the reality of contemporary rural livelihoods, can be seen as mainly tools for disciplining the population to maintain the hierarchical social order, which is perceived as threatened by forces of globalization and democratization.

MONARCHIES: NATIONAL AND UNIVERSAL SYMBOLS

Monarch is a Latin word derived from the Greek *μόναρχος* (*μόνος*, one/singular; and *ἀρχός*, leader/ruler/chief). A monarchy is a form of government with one man or woman as head of state. Thailand is one of around thirty remaining monarchies in the world. Looking at these monarchies in a comparative perspective it is clear that the roles and freedom of action for monarchs in different countries are diverse and quite incomparable. The official roles assigned for a monarch may be similar in two different constitutional monarchies and yet be defined by quite dissimilar sets of political and cultural meanings. It is, for example, unthinkable that a European constitutional monarch would intervene in rural development planning, not to mention other political affairs, in the way King Bhumibol has done in Thailand. Likewise, the image as protector of democracy – which we discuss in more detail later in this introduction – is a rarity for the Thai monarchy. Absolute monarchs such as the King of Saudi Arabia and the Sultan of Brunei obviously do not protect democracy since their rule implies an absence of democracy. And most European constitutional monarchies are associated with a history of absolutism, which was not given up voluntarily but after immense public pressure. Here, democracy is seen as protected by the constitution and by the electorate rather than by the monarchy.²

Having said that, contemporary monarchs do appear to share certain common traits. In Thailand, the media generally combine the representation of royals as awe-inspiring extraordinary individuals possessing human qualities that are beyond the possibilities of ordinary mortals with reports about royal

2 It was an exception when Spain's King Juan Carlos I on the eve of a military coup attempt in February 1981 acted swiftly to defend the constitution and denounce the coup. In that situation the king protected democracy and the coup failed after one day.

displays of informality and familiarity during interaction with their subjects. Studies of symbolic representations of royalty in the British press show a similar pervasive trend of presenting royals as being simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary (Billig 1992: 14). The British sociologist Richard Jenkins states that ‘the combination of formality and informality summarizes a complex performative balance between hierarchy and equality, distance and proximity, the untouchable and the touchable’ (Jenkins 2008: 4.2). In Nepal, in 2008, the royal family lost this performative balance altogether, so to speak, and the monarchy was abolished. In other contemporary monarchies some royals appear to walk the tightrope more elegantly than others. But common to all royalty is that they must strive to achieve the performative balance appropriate to the political and cultural conditions in their particular countries.

Another common trait of contemporary monarchs is the image as guardian of tradition and protector of the nation. The official web page of the Queen of the United Kingdom, for instance, states that ‘in addition to [...] State duties, the Queen has a less formal role as “Head of Nation”. She acts as a focus for national identity, unity and pride; gives a sense of stability and continuity’ (The Official Website of the British Monarchy). This job description could fit any contemporary crowned head in the world. It is no coincidence that the monarch’s role as provider of a sense of continuity is linked with the role as focus for national identity. ‘In the modern world, to be king or queen is to be king or queen of a nation’ (Billig 1992: 25). Historically, the formation of the monarchies in their modern form was directly connected with the formation of the nation-states headed by the kings and queens. And just as a monarch needs a nation in order to be monarch, the nation uses the monarch to symbolize the unity of the nation. One of the reasons why monarchs are well-suited for this role is that the lines of descent of kings and queens add a sense of historical continuity and legitimacy to the relatively new forms of imagined communities (Anderson 1991), which nations are. In Billig’s words:

Nationalism as an ideology is paradoxical: it is a product of the modern age but it creates myths about the antiquity and pre-modernity of nation states. The symbolism of nationhood hides its own recency (Hobsbawm, 1983) [...] Monarchy has a lineage of great antiquity, and, if placed at the centre of the modern state, it confers an imagined antiquity on that state. For this purpose, as David Cannadine (1983) has shown, royal traditions have been invented in the past two hundred years, and old rituals have been transformed by being put to new uses. The process of invention still continues (Billig 1992: 26).

If nationalism as an ideology is paradoxical, so is the relationship between nationalism and monarchies. To give an example, the official web page of the Danish royal house says that ‘the Danish Monarchy can be traced back with certainty to Gorm the Old (d. 958) [...] who united Denmark’ (The Danish Monarchy). This is a line of royal descent, which, even if indirect, merits the contention that Denmark is the world’s oldest kingdom. Moreover, a ‘plausible claim can be made, despite a conventionally *international* European royal family tree, to a timeless and authentic Danishness (Jenkins 2008: 6.2, italics added).³ The paradox is not only that this, by Danish standards, unusually international family stands to represent true Danishness but that most pre-modern ancestors of the incumbent queen referred to in the official web page would not recognise the ideas of nationhood, which they *qua* their status as royal ancestors are used to legitimize. In other words, paraphrasing Billig, the Danish monarchy is a product of the modern age but it creates myths about its own antiquity and pre-modernity and confers these qualities on the nation-state. This is also the case in other monarchies and certainly in Thailand.

SACRAL KINGSHIP IN A MODERN WORLD: CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The standard total view of the Thai monarchy holds that the monarchy is a timeless institution that transcends past, present and future. This sense of continuity is, for example, expressed when King Bhumibol is placed in a historical continuum with the previous eight kings of the Chakri dynasty that stretches back to the late eighteenth century and the establishment of the royal palace in Bangkok. Thus, a typical image found in textbooks and elsewhere is that of portraits of the nine kings of the Chakri dynasty pasted as icons side by side. Hereby, as Sarun Kittikarn argues in this book, history is flattened: ‘Time that should be distinguished between the reigns is levelled up on the same surface of space, eliciting the unity and continuity of the whole group represented in the picture.’ The same sense of continuity and timelessness is expressed when King Bhumibol is linked more specifically with King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) – the most celebrated hero-king of the previous members of the Chakri dynasty. They are the only two Thai kings who have been elevated to the title ‘Great King’ (Thai: *Maharat*; Pali/Sanskrit: *Maharaja*). The linkage between these two kings is a

3 The incumbent monarch, Queen Margrethe II, has a German grandmother, a Swedish mother, a French husband, and her daughters-in-law are from Australia, France, and Hong Kong.

quite recent phenomenon as it dates back only to celebrations in 1988 when King Bhumibol broke the record of the longest reign by a Thai king (Stengs 2008: 2). Formerly, King Chulalongkorn held that record and linking the two kings together was obvious. Subsequently, double-portraits of the two kings depicted on coins, medallions, greeting cards, stickers and posters have become plentiful in Thailand, and, as argued by Irene Stengs the two royal images have been merged (Stengs 2008: 3) to become a carrier of a notion of timelessness and continuity associated with the Thai monarchy.

This sense of timelessness is given further depth when the modern Thai monarchy is linked to the mythical thirteenth-century Sukhothai Kingdom. According to the logic of the standard total view of the Thai monarchy we need to go back to the Sukhothai Kingdom if we want to understand the present-day Thai monarchy (e.g. Anand 1996: 2). In the Sukhothai Kingdom:

[T]he king, having been entrusted with the task not out of any divine right, but by the consent of his peers, had an inherent obligation to rule the country ‘with righteousness’, not for the glory of himself or his family, but ‘for the benefits and happiness’ of the people in his trust. The king, being a Buddhist, was in effect a ‘dharma raja’ [Thai: *thammarat*; Pali: *dhammaraja*] – that is – a monarch upholding the rule of Buddhist righteousness, ruling in a style of kingship some have summarized as ‘patriarchal’. The royal code of conduct emphasized the major Buddhist precepts and the Tenfold Practice or Duties of Kingship, which to this day remain the cornerstone of Thai kingship: almsgiving, morality, liberality, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and non-obstruction (Anand 1996: 2).

In the spirit of the Sukhothai Kingdom, King Bhumibol is said by some to embody a ‘dhammaraja’ – the Buddhist concept of a righteous king – who upholds the ten kingly/royal virtues (Thai: *thotsaphitratchatham*; Pali: *dasaraja-dhamma*). The latter age-old concept is translated into the modern language and seen as compatible with the principles of good governance and democracy (e.g. Bowornsak 2006). In this way, the standard total view of the Thai monarchy projects a direct link between the present-day Thai monarchy and the Sukhothai Kingdom and enacts a royalist–nationalist tale of benevolent rule and royal brilliancy. This representation of the Thai historical kings has been challenged, though. Jit Poumisak in *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today* (1957) argued that Thai kings of the past were not benevolent rulers but leading members of an oppressive and exploitative landlord class. In Jit’s words, the king was the ‘chairman of the committee safeguarding the profits of the Land-Lord class’ (Reynolds 1987: 51). Likewise, Nidhi Aeusrivongse’s readings of the Thai past

entail a demystification of the historical kings: King Narai is depicted as a political animal who seeks to consolidate his political power amidst the factional politics of his court (Nidhi 1986), the early Bangkok kings are characterized as bourgeois merchants (Nidhi 1982), and Nidhi further demonstrates how famous hero-kings' paths to power were framed by coincidence and practical circumstances rather than by their store of religious merit (Nidhi 1980, 1986).

From a historical perspective the idea of the monarchy as the guardian of the nation has likewise been challenged in revisionist studies of the transformations that occurred in the economic, administrative and educational spheres at the turn of the twentieth century under the reign of King Chulalongkorn. While the standard total view of the monarchy presents the Chakri dynasty in a heroic role as safeguarding Siam's independence, other analyses of the events at the turn of the twentieth century have likened the Chakri reforms to an internal colonialism aiming to consolidate the power of the royal family vis-à-vis other power groups in Thai society (e.g. Anderson 1978; Loos 2006; Thongchai 1994; Peleggi 2002; Streckfuss 1993; Chaiyan 1994; Kullada 2004). These studies have exposed the historical contingency of the modern Thai monarchy and demonstrated that, as in other monarchies, the modern Thai monarchy is intimately related to the historical formation of the Thai nation-state.

In the standard total view of the Thai monarchy the sacrality and the image of the timelessness of the monarchy are important parts of the mythology of the nation just as the sacrality of the nation is integral to the mythology of kingship in Thailand. But this attempt to naturalize the status of the contemporary monarchy tends to obliterate the facts that the Chakri dynasty for much of its early history was not the only ruling royal dynasty in Thailand and, equally significantly, besides the official understanding of the Thai monarchy and kingship there exist alternative traditions and notions of kingship in Thailand. In southern Thailand, for example, 'some groups imagine Pattana as a Malay Sultanate in which the sultan, his family, and the Dato are the centre of power' (Horstmann 2007: 6). Another contemporary example is the Karen people's use of royal imagery in their quest for moral leadership founded on Buddhist ethics (Gravers 2008). While Karen royal imagery poses no threat to the political and symbolic hegemony of the Thai monarchy, its very existence and persistence within Thailand nonetheless demonstrates a plurality of views about the Thai monarchy and about kingship and Buddhism that are erased from the standard total view.

Contrary to the view of the monarchy as an ahistorical, sacred foundation of Thai society, a fundamental premise for this book is that the monarchy like any

other societal institution has been made and remade throughout history. Indeed, the Thai monarchy has suffered several attempts at ‘unmaking’ it, most notably in the forms of an attempted coup in 1912 and the revolution of 1932 when the absolute monarchy was replaced by a constitutional monarchy. And from the abdication of King Prajadhipok (r. 1925–1935) in 1935 until the coronation of Bhumibol in 1950, Thailand did not have a reigning adult monarch in residence. Bhumibol became king in 1946 after a shooting episode in which his older brother, King Ananda Mahidol, died. During the first years of his reign, he lived abroad and completed his studies. After his coronation and return to Thailand, the king seemingly played a modest role in the political and social affairs of the country. Still, as Nattapoll Chaiching argues in this book, in post-World War II Thailand the king and his royalist supporters were fighting to restore their political power and the rights they had lost with the coup in 1932, and by the mid-1950s the king and the royalists were playing an increasingly crucial role as a major faction in Thai politics. With their support for the coup in 1957, when General Sarit seized power, the political era of the People’s Party was over, and during Sarit’s military dictatorship there followed a ‘restoration’ of the monarchy.⁴ In this campaign the role of ‘sacred’ Buddhist ruler – consecrator of authority, epitome of disinterested virtue – was devised for King Bhumibol.

The ‘resacralization’ of the Thai monarchy was linked intimately with a reinvention of sacred traditions of hierarchy concerning speech and sight, and the manipulation of Theravada religious images, which, in the words of Christine Gray, created ‘a magic circle of knowledge’ and ‘a magic circle of silence’ around the king. Enacted through ritual displays this ‘magic circle’ buttresses the notion of King Bhumibol as a righteous Buddhist ruler – who is the protector and defender of all his people and of all righteous causes – and it conceals existing links between the king and a new capitalist elite who have been drawn into the circle of the king’s moral influence (Gray 1986, 1991, 1992, 1995).

The resacralization of King Bhumibol has run counter to what Maurizio Peleggi terms ‘the demotic refashioning of the monarchy in the latter part of the Fifth Reign [1860–1910]’ (Peleggi 2002: 166). Framed by modernist notions of rationality and secularization, the latter encompassed a trend towards ‘humanizing’ the king and the monarchy as an institution – e.g. the king was made visible throughout the modern state in the making, and the practice of prostration in front of the king was terminated. As Peleggi shows, the efforts to ‘civilize’ the modern Thai monarchy during the reign of King Chulalongkorn

⁴ The classic study of the restoration of the Thai monarchy under Sarit is Thak (2007 [1979]).

linked the king with a cosmopolitan, bourgeois ethos rather than with religious notions of deified kingship. In comparison, the restoration process in Thailand from the late 1950s increasingly immersed the monarchy in a religious framework, for example through the reinvention of royal rituals and language. Certainly, King Bhumibol did not leave behind what Paul Handley calls his 'European-bred modernist persona', including his preference for jazz and expressionist art (Handley 2006). Rather, the two different aspects – the king as human and the king as a selfless Buddhist king ruling by the Buddhist ethical code of Dhamma – have come to coexist comfortably. Together they form part of a cultural pool from which representations of the Thai monarchy are drawn. Martin Platt in this book presents different socially and royally sanctioned depictions of monarchs, ranging from classical poetry in the Sukhothai era to the newspaper tributes produced for King Bhumibol's sixtieth anniversary as monarch. Platt shows that a variety of characteristics have been attributed at different times to Thai monarchs ranging from physical beauty, sexual power and martial prowess to wisdom, hard work, personal sacrifice and Buddhist virtue. These diverse royal qualities exist simultaneously as a kind of cultural treasure of which certain aspects are emphasized according to particular purposes and circumstances. In light of this, it may seem less paradoxical that the two royal images of King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol have been merged since the late 1980s, because what count in this image-merger are not apparent differences between the two kings and reigns but the perceived similarities which are constituted through a flattening of history.

When dealing with the royal virtues of King Bhumibol reference has primarily been made to the Buddhist ideal of a Righteous King or Dhammaraja. Recently, however, a discourse on King Bhumibol as a 'god-king' has surfaced in Thailand. In the opening chapter of this book, Peter A. Jackson analyses how the discourse of royal virtual divinity has intensified in parallel with the growth of discourses of democratic rule. Rather than referring this most vital question to 'the idiosyncrasies of Thai late modernity' (Peleggi 2002: 168), Jackson traces the rehabilitated discourse of 'god-king' to the combined influences of new visual media, the spectralization of life under neoliberalism, and a palace-centred political project to harness popular prosperity religions to a conservative nationalist agenda. Jackson argues that these influences, together with Thailand's strictly policed lese-majesty law, which forbids public criticism of the monarch and his family, have institutionalized a commodified and mass-mediatized ideology of supernatural royal power that legitimates King Bhumibol's accumulation of political authority. Jackson analyses the monarchy's symbolic

and practical relations to different Buddhist, Brahmanical, and animist strands of Thailand's religious complex and their connections with the country's modern economy and system of political and bureaucratic powers. He thereby provides an understanding of the Thai monarchy as an intensely modern phenomenon. The ascribed divine status of Bhumibol is not an anachronism left over from a mythical past but, rather, a part of the monarchy's preferred model of modernity which obviously defies Weberian visions of a secular modernity inasmuch as political and religious forms of power have remained closely connected.

Jackson's argument is, in part, inspired by Rosalind Morris's (1998, 2000) analyses of the connections between the enhanced 'auratic power' of the Thai monarch and the extension of photography and other modern imagining technologies:

[T]he era of mass media in Thailand corresponds directly to that of a new monarchical visibility. Where once the King's power entailed his secrecy, his withdrawal from commoners' eyes, he is now the most visible of all Thai citizens, and indeed he is often pictured on his walking tours of the nation with a camera around his neck (Morris 1998: 358).

The tele-visionary bond between royals and commoners in Thailand is the starting point of Sarun Kittikarn's contribution to this book. Sarun Kittikarn is particularly interested in the mutual gazes of royals and commoners, since it is through gazing, the ever more important medium in shaping everyday perception of what is 'real', that the boundaries of royal/commoner subjectivities are made – sometimes clashing, sometimes converging, sometimes simply blurring supposedly clear-cut identities and, in any case, continuously defining and redefining the subject and the object, the gazer and the gazed. Sarun Kittikarn shows how a new form of nationalistic sentiment is aroused in the modern Thai visually-mediated society, which serves purposes of entertainment and immediate pleasure rather than purposes of nation-building. In contrast to its predecessors, this 'entertainment nationalism' is channeled through the individualistic fleeting and volatile desires and emotions of the sensation-gathering, pleasure-seeking commoners for whom the king has become a logo, a flattened-as-image deity in flattened, spatialized historical time.

THE LEGAL SANCTION OF SACREDNESS

Embedded in the Sukhothai–Chulalongkorn–Bhumibol amalgam is the sense that the monarchy is natural to Thai society and that there is a perfect match

between the Thai monarchy, Thai culture and the Thai people. According to Borwornsak Uwanno the Thai monarchy is not a political institution but a 'social institution in the same way as the family institution [...] which Thai people love, feel bound to and revere as "Father" of a large family, not as "semi-gods" in heaven' (Borwornsak 2006: without page).⁵ This idea of the monarchy is expressed in the 1997 and 2006 constitutions which declare explicitly that the king is 'enthroned in a position of revered worship'. From this perspective the Thai people's love and respect for the king are presented as unquestionable and inevitable – and, indeed, something which people from the West ('those materially developed but spiritually deteriorating countries' (Borwornsak 2006: without page)) cannot fully understand. The relationship between the Thai king and the Thai people

[...] cannot be appreciated by those who have never lived in a country where warm ties exist between the ruler and the people as 'father' and 'children'. The leaders of these countries are 'politicians' who have equal status as all other citizens. The ties between them and those who elect them are political in nature, so that once expired, such ties no longer matter, and the latter can make whatever criticisms of their political leaders, citing 'freedom of expression'. However, the Thai people, who love and revere their 'Father', will never let any one unfairly criticize their King. Such is the socio-cultural dimension of the Thai monarchy, which those who never 'feel' it will find it hard to understand [...] (Borwornsak 2006: without page).

Borwornsak's sentiments not only highlight the standard total view's notion of the Thai monarchy as an inevitable 'natural' institution in Thailand but also accentuate that this monarchy is not open to scrutiny and criticism. Sheltered behind a strict and archaic lese-majesty law, which can give up to fifteen years in prison, the standard total view holds a monopoly on defining the public image of the Thai king and the monarchy. It is well known that the printed and the electronic mass media in Thailand practice a high degree of self-censorship and only run stories about the king and the monarchy which conform to the tenets of the standard total view (Pravit 2008).

The lese-majesty law has long been used as a political tool to silence political opponents (the many charges brought against Sulak Sivaraksa illustrates well

5 Borwornsak Uwanno is former dean of Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Law. Until a few months before the coup in 2006 he was cabinet secretary under Thaksin. After the coup he became a member of the junta-appointed National Legislative Assembly. In April 2006 he travelled to the US to try to stop or at least postpone the publication of Paul Handley's unauthorized biography of the Thai king.

this use of the lese-majesty law). As mentioned earlier the 2006 coup caused an outpouring of critical texts dealing with the role played by the monarchy and royal symbolism in the coup. In this context the lese-majesty law has been reactivated in an attempt to silence such 'heretical' expressions. In addition to that, direct official censorship was increased in 2009 when the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology blocked thousands of websites deemed offensive to the Thai monarchy. In Thailand in 2009, it was no longer possible in public to suggest the existence of a linkage between the Thai king and the 2006 coup – as the lese-majesty charges against Giles Ungpakorn for eight passages in his book *A Coup for the Rich* (2007) show. Moreover, a group of members of the Thai parliament led by a Democrat Member of Parliament formed the website 'Protect the King', which invited any Thai to become their informant by reporting on the internet any possible violation of the lese-majesty law (see Pravit 2009).⁶

In an interview with *Bangkok Post*, the Minister of Information and Communication Technology defended this attack on the freedom of speech in Thailand by proclaiming a case of Thai exceptionalism: '[T]he Royal Family is our Father and Mother, the Father and Mother of the land. Would anyone allow people to insult their father and mother? Not us. Democracies are always different. France is different from America and South Korea. [...] It depends on the country and traditions' (Voranoi 2009). In a similar fashion, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva in an interview with the *Far Eastern Economic Review* defended the lese-majesty law:

We have a revered institution that should remain above conflict because such an institution has no defence mechanism when people abuse the institution. So people respect the law. Then there is no problem. Is it counter to free expression? Well is the law on contempt of court [...] why do countries have that? [...] Interviewer: So shutting down Web sites is acceptable? [...] Well, it's no different when Western countries shut down extremist Web sites. You know what offends in one country might not seem offensive in another (Murphy 2009).

The views formulated by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Information and Communication Technology, and by Borwornsak all express the standard total view of the Thai monarchy and, along with that, a notion of a Thai style of democracy in which it is literally 'unsayable' to publicly voice concern over something the king said, to question his moral and intellectual being, or to express that the monarchy as any other institution in a modern democracy

6 The webpage is: <http://www.protecttheking.net/>.

should be open to scrutiny and criticism. In defence of the reasonableness of the lese-majesty law and the blocking of web pages, Thai officialdom refer to the love that Thai people feel for their king and to the defenceless ‘above politics’ situation of the royal family as an institution. The irony is, of course, that by celebrating political suppression in the name of love, the two high-level politicians and the prominent scholar openly establish that the modern Thai monarchy, unlike most other contemporary constitutional monarchies in the world, is indeed an immensely political and politicized institution.

In his contribution to this book, David Streckfuss traces the evolution of the lese-majesty law in Thailand. He focuses on the unique and profoundly anti-democratic dynamics of this law and displays the archaic nature of the law through a comparison with the lese-majesty law in the German Empire at the turn of the twentieth century. Streckfuss argues that the lese-majesty law has always supported a failing and corrupt edifice of nationalist identity that is antithetical to democracy, and that the law has always served the primary ‘enemy function’. Indeed, the history of lese-majesty is a chronicle of silence: the things never said, the articles never written, the thoughts never imagined. It is moreover a chronicle of a remarkable juridical logic – as exemplified when Daranee Charnchoengsilpakul was given a total of eighteen years in prison for three counts of lese-majesty in 2009. In the preliminary judgment against Daranee, the decision showed that she accused Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda and the palace of being behind the September 2006 coup. But by the time of this judgement the coup itself was not an illegal act, as it had been exonerated by the 2007 constitution. As the author points out the verdict did not explain that if the coup was a legal act how could Daranee’s remarks about those behind this coup be defaming or insulting to them? If the act of the coup was not illegal, how could Daranee’s remark become a crime?

THAI-STYLE DEMOCRACY AND THE KING AS A BENEVOLENT PROTECTOR OF DEMOCRACY

Protector of democracy is generally not a quality attributed to contemporary monarchies in the world. But embedded in the standard total view of the Thai monarchy is what Thongchai Winichakul has called the ‘conventional historical view of the progress of Thai democracy’ or ‘the monarchist’s strategic discourses’ in which the path of democratization is intimately linked with the Thai monarchy (Thongchai 2008). In the words of Thongnoi Thongyai – at one stage royal aide and private secretary to Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn – the

‘Thai monarchy takes to democracy like fish to water’ (quoted in Hewison 1997: 61). And King Bhumibol has personally likened the Sukhothai Kingdom with democracy and thereby stressed the same idea about a harmonious relationship between democracy and a timeless Thai monarchy (Hewison 1997: 60). This idea of associating the Sukhothai period with democracy is not new. Apparently, it goes back to the end of the 1940s when Seni Pramoj proposed that Thailand had had a constitution since the Sukhothai era – not just since 1932 (Chattri 2008). In this royalist tale of the origins of Thai democracy the so-called Ramkhamhaeng Inscription is the first Thai constitution, which implies that there has been a democracy in Thailand ever since the Sukhothai era. More specifically, however, the linkage between the Thai monarchy and democracy is expressed with reference to two kings: King Prajadhipok (r. 1925–1935) – heralded as ‘Father of Thai Democracy’ – and King Bhumibol who is habitually called a ‘Guardian of Thai Democracy’.

In 1932, King Prajadhipok and the absolute monarchy were toppled by a military coup. Still, in the standard total view of the Thai monarchy this coup is not perceived as a defeat for the Thai monarchy and as emblematic of the move towards democracy. Rather, the coup constitutes a hindrance to a royal democratization process, as the People’s Party, which was behind the coup, is reduced to ‘a group of mere opportunists whose premature *coup* disrupted and ruined the democratization process’ set in motion by King Prajadhipok (Thongchai 2008: 23). The statue of King Prajadhipok placed in front of the Thai parliament in Bangkok expresses the quintessence of this linkage between the monarchy and the emergence of democracy in Thailand. Likewise, the recently established King Prajadhipok Museum celebrates the king as the bringer of Thai democracy. The museum is situated in the former Public Works building by the Phan Fa Lilat Bridge just off Ratchadamnoen Avenue and it is an example of how this avenue is being reclaimed to express symbolically the notion of the intimate relationship between the Thai monarchy and democracy (Chattri 2008).⁷ Ratchadamnoen Avenue was built during the reign of King Chulalongkorn to connect the ‘old Siam’ area of the Royal Palace and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha with the ‘new Siam’ area of Dusit Palace and the Marble Temple. According to Chattri Prakitnonthakan (2008), this avenue and its monumental and architectural environment – including bridges, palaces and the houses of nobles, the equestrian statue, and the Ananta Samakhom Hall at the end of the avenue – reflected the new royal power and the centre of the

7 The name ‘Ratchadamnoen’ is a compound of ‘ratcha’ (*royal*) and ‘damnoen’ (*walk, process*, when used of royals).

universe of the absolute monarchy system. After the 1932 coup, the People's Party gave the avenue a new symbolic meaning when the Democracy Monument was constructed on it. Symbolically, this monument marked the transition to another 'new Siam', a Siam with democratic rule where citizens – not the monarchy – hold sovereign power.⁸ Since then, however, Ratchadamnoen Avenue has been reclaimed to express symbolically the tale of the Thai monarchy as the bringer and protector of democracy. In addition to the statue of King Prajadhipok in front of the parliament building at the end of Ratchadamnoen Avenue and the museum for this king, the many pictures of King Bhumibol that nowadays frame the Democracy Monument celebrate the idea of the Thai monarchy as protector of democracy. Arguably, the arches celebrating King Bhumibol in several places along Ratchadamnoen Avenue also serve to weave together the Thai monarchy and Thai democracy. Certainly, the restoration of the Thai monarchy has not implied the demolition of the Democracy Monument of the People's Party. Instead the monument has become part of the royalist tale.

The idea that democracy in Thailand originated with the Thai monarchy has been disputed. Recent studies highlight a thriving anti-royalism among sections of the elite in Siam in the 1920s as well as the power struggle between the monarchy and other social forces in Thailand leading up to the 1932 coup and reveal how the king and the royalists tried to secure a continued political influence after that coup (e.g. Copeland 1993; Nakharin 1992; Barmé 1993; Prajak 2005; Somsak and Prajak 2001). In his contribution to this book, Nattapoll Chaiching considers the roles of the monarchs and their royalist supporters as political actors in the period after the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932 and up until the military coup in 1957, which paved the way for a more overt political role for the monarchy in Thai society and politics. He shows the movements of the royals and the royalists in their attempts to return to power after the revolution through their support for counter-revolutionary activities and networks, their support for military coups and participation in drafting constitutions that structure the political system in ways favourable to them, and their efforts to build up political alliances with whoever would support their positions and privileges. It is based on these manoeuvres between 1932 and 1957 that the royalists succeeded in re-establishing their power after Sarit was ushered into power in 1957. Thereby, the royalists have contributed to laying the basis for a chronic crisis for the democratic system in Thailand. With this analysis Nattapoll Chaiching documents the political machinations of the

8 For an elaborate discussion of the different meanings linked with the Democracy Monument, see Malini (2005).

monarchy and royalists, which have been written out of the standard total view of the Thai monarchy, and shatters the illusion of the Thai monarchy as the bringer of democracy.

The notion of King Bhumibol as the guardian of Thai democracy is primarily linked to the king's interventions in October 1973 and May 1992, when the police and military used violence to suppress massive demonstrations in Bangkok. According to the standard total view of the Thai monarchy, these events were 'extraordinary political situations' where the king sensed the suffering of the people and restored democracy after the government lost control (Anand 1996: 5–6). From this perspective, the king's actions are linked with a non-partisan interference for the interests of the country and the people. The Thai king is not involved in any political considerations and under the democratic system the king represents the 'morality of society' lead by honesty, integrity, truthfulness and ethics (Borwornsak 2006). Therefore the king is 'above' politics and all conflicting groups and his intervention is likened to a 'guiding hand' (Anand 1996: 7).

The idea of King Bhumibol as a political actor above politics and as the protector of democracy should be open to debate. Several authors and scholars have expressed a rather discrepant view of the king's democratic disposition, most famously perhaps Paul Handley in his recent unauthorized biography of the Thai king (Handley 2006).⁹ In contrast to the public image of the monarchy as an ahistorical and natural part of Thai society, Handley offers an analysis of the contingency of the modern Thai monarchy and the overt political role played by the present king. Handley regards it as undeniable that King Bhumibol's political interventions in 1973 and 1992 contributed to the fall of military governments. However, Handley argues, the king's specific actions on those occasions should not be mistaken for support of democracy and popularly elected governments over authoritarian military rule. What is omitted from the official image-making is how the Thai monarchy came out tainted by the tumultuous events of the 1973–76 period, when the monarchy ultimately became linked intimately with the rightist movements – such as Village Scouts and Red Gaur – and with the extreme violence that culminated with the massacre at Thammasat University in 1976 (see also Bowie 1997; Somsak 2001). Besides, as Handley documents, in public speeches the king has often distanced himself from democratic principles, some of which he considers as 'highbrow ideals' and 'foreign imported principles' that would weaken Thai society (Handley 2006: 343). And the king has

9 Other biographies of King Bhumibol include: National Identity Office 2000; Stevenson 2001.

interfered in Thai politics in more subtle ways, too. Prem Tinsulanonda, for example, was not only installed as prime minister with support from the king but throughout his premiership royal backing was essential to secure his position. Prem's move to power 'appeared to be democratic, but in fact it was a royal coup' (Handley 2006: 278). The Prem-Bhumibol relationship gave the term 'the government of the king' a deeper truth than ever before. Handley also draws attention to the king's manoeuvrings before the 1991 coup, which signalled that a military coup was acceptable and that 'protecting the constitution and the democratic process apparently was not a high priority in the palace' (Handley 2006: 339). Hence, beneath the standard total view's representation of King Bhumibol as a protector of democracy looms a king who, according to Handley, has throughout his long reign, at times openly, at times in more concealed ways, discredited democratic rule and considered military takeovers as legitimate tools in modern Thai politics.

In a review of Handley's book, Duncan McCargo hailed it as 'the first serious, independent study of the King' and he called it 'cathartic' in the sense that 'finally, someone has dared to say the unsayable, and those trying to understand Thai society have a new intellectual reference point from which to work' (McCargo 2007: 136–137). Unsurprisingly, official Thailand has not shared McCargo's praise of the book.

Responding to the description of King Bhumibol as being 'above politics' Thongchai Winichakul has offered an analysis of this political topology:

[B]eing 'above' politics no longer meant being beyond or out of politics. It meant being "on top of" or overseeing normal politics [...] the notion of being 'above politics' for the new monarchy also means that the monarchy is held to be a moral authority superior to, and on top of, the realm of normal or usual politics. It is the upper realm of the political system, 'above' the political but no longer outside the system' (Thongchai 2008: 20–21).

The fact that the Thai king is very much 'inside' the political system is stressed in the notion of a 'network monarchy' coined by Duncan McCargo (2005). McCargo stresses that the complexities of the political role of the monarchy are missed if one looks only at the cases when the king intervenes directly in politics as these cases are 'only the exposed element of a vast web of royally inspired political moves, most of which are hidden from the public eye' (McCargo 2005:500). In the Thai network monarchy 'the monarch will be presented as the central component of a rather novel mode of governance, best understood in terms of political networks [...], which] permit the formation of apparently representative

governments, while employing political networks in order to undermine and subvert them' (McCargo 2005: 501–502).¹⁰

While these studies challenge central tenets of the standard total view of the Thai monarchy, they obviously also confirm how the monarchy is at the centre of the political struggle in Thailand by providing an alternative source of political legitimacy to the country's official electoral democracy. This was evident during and after the coup in 2006 which toppled the Thaksin government. Supporters of the 2006 military coup hailed it as a good coup and placed morality at the centre of politics. In doing so, they conformed to a 'Thai-style democracy' or 'guided democracy' rooted in a specific Thai cultural worldview with the king as the central pillar of Thai democracy. In fact, the notion of a 'Thai-style democracy' has become central to royalist discourse on governance in modern Thailand. The 2006 coup and the events leading up to it clearly gave the discourse on Thai-style democracy increased relevance but this discourse has a much longer history than that. In their contribution to this book, Kevin Hewison and Kengkij Kitirianglarp trace its genealogy and highlight the uses of this discourse over time. In doing so, they show how 'Thai-style democracy' has been a critical agenda in political struggles for many decades. They argue that this notion of Thai politics has provided strong support for authoritarian regimes and governments led by unelected prime ministers and that it is resonant with the political worldview of the present king who sees party politics and 'Western-style democracy' as alien to Thai traditions.

The 2006 coup also forms the pretext for the contribution of Han Krittian to this book. He discusses how royal ceremonies, the king's public appearances and royal imagery were activated around the time of the coup in a process whereby royalist groups sought to reinvent their military and ideological power. Han Krittian argues that these endeavours are linked with an attempt to re-establish the position of the monarchy as the focal point of the people's loyalty and to discredit Thaksin at a time when the king's popularity had been dimmed by Thaksin's popularity. The promotion of royalist imagery and ideology by the royalist groups are, according to Han, associated with a new battle for the masses which is reminiscent of the fight against communism in the 1960–70s. With many highly influential groups involved in this battle and with a population and a military which are both divided over the issue, Thailand is facing a volatile political situation where the democratic image of the king and his followers is yet again questioned.

10 For other studies, see, for example, Giles 2007, 2008.

SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY AND THE KING AS A DEVELOPMENT KING

Like the image as protector of democracy the Thai monarchy's image as carrier of modernity and progress is something of a specialty for this monarchy compared with other constitutional monarchies. According to the standard total view of the Thai monarchy, King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868) and King Chulalongkorn were responsible for rationalizing and modernizing Buddhism; for bringing modern technology, modern dress codes and new cultural values to Siam; and for modernizing the state and the economy by imposing new administrative structures and practices. In line with this historiographic tradition, King Bhumibol is customarily represented as a monarch deeply involved with securing the continuous progress of Thailand through his personal efforts in resolving complicated ecological, technological, economic and social problems. Constantly reproduced pictures and TV reportages of the king meeting his subjects in the countryside, assessing their needs, and providing solutions to their problems serve to underline this public image of Bhumibol as a charitable developmental king (*nai luang haeng kan phatthana*) who tirelessly and selflessly seeks to improve the livelihoods of his subjects. Certainly, there is more to this story than mere image making. It is a fact that King Bhumibol and other members of the royal family have long been engaged in rural development projects, the most famous being the Royal Projects which began in the 1970s as an opium-eradication scheme in the highlands and evolved into a large-scale cash crop and trading organization that incorporates tens of thousands of rural people. Still, a critical analysis of the king's developmental projects has yet to be produced. In a recent book, however, Chanida Chitbundid analyses the political function of the king's royal projects in relation to creating ideological hegemony (Chanida 2007).

Over the past decade, King Bhumibol's 'new theory of agriculture' and his ideas about 'sufficiency economy' have become emblematic of his endeavours to navigate the pitfalls of unbridled global capitalism in order to save not only the poor peasants but the nation as a whole. The king's sufficiency economy is a philosophy based on Buddhist values and communitarian ideals which are meant to inspire Thai people to become hard-working subjects set in small-scale communities characterized by mutual compassion and self-sufficiency. sufficiency economy is a product of the king's own words and ideas mixed with the ideas of many other elite people who strive to reform the moral and economic performance of ordinary Thais and not least to fortify the political power of the monarchy by 'remoraliz[ing] the state around the figure of the monarch' (cf. Connors 2003: 129). Lotte Isager and Søren Ivarsson in this book trace the history of sufficiency economy from King Bhumibol's birthday speeches in 1997

and 1998, through the codification of the king's ideas by the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), in 1999, and the further elaboration into the 9th and 10th national development plans, and, finally, into the post-2006-coup politics of both the military and civilian governments. Isager and Ivarsson approach sufficiency economy as an example of 'etho-politics' – that is, a political discourse 'freighted with values: partnership, civil society, community, civility, responsibility, mutuality, obligations, voluntary endeavour, autonomy, initiative' aimed at governing the behaviour of individuals through acting upon this ethical force-field (Rose 1999: 474). In an Asian context, these politics of community and behaviour is part of a 'liberalism imbued with quasi-religious pastoral power', which Aihwa Ong has described as typical of 'Asian liberal forms of governmentality' (Ong 1999: 57). With reference to Foucault's notions of pastoral and disciplinary power, Isager and Ivarsson demonstrate how sufficiency economy and 'new theory agriculture' are associated with the disciplinary power exercised by different state agencies. Students are subjected to it via the school curriculum, and farmers must abide by the rules and regulations of State agencies which are responsible for implementing new theory. At the same time, sufficiency economy is closely connected with the personal moral authority and pastoral power of King Bhumibol and other elite figures who have promoted this philosophy. As such, sufficiency economy signifies what Valverde/Foucault has called the 'demonic' intertwining of pastoral power and disciplinary power generally associated with modern state power (see Valverde 2007: 165) – a connection which became even more 'demonic' in Thailand after the September 2006 coup when sufficiency economy was held up as the ideology of the generals who ousted the democratically elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra.

The king's thinking on agriculture and sufficiency economy has a significant anti-modernist bend. Still, his focus is on progress – the nation needs to 'move backwards in order to move forwards' (Royal Speech 1997). But the question is whether this recipe for progress is realistic. In his contribution to this book Andrew Walker argues that the royalist vision of agricultural and economic progress is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of rural livelihoods. Walker explores the limitations of the sufficiency economy model through a detailed examination of the economy of a northern Thai village. This analysis highlights how the king's sufficiency economy recommendation that external linkages should only be developed once there is a foundation in local sufficiency is simply not consistent with the economically diversified livelihood strategies pursued by rural people in contemporary Thailand. Walker suggests that the mismatch between sufficiency economy rhetoric and local economic practice indicates that

the post-coup regime's preoccupation with sufficiency economy may not really reflect a concern with rural development at all. Rather, sufficiency economy is one of the ideological tools used by elites to avoid issues of redistribution of income and resources. Under the sufficiency economy ideological framework, initiatives that seek to direct resources to relatively impoverished rural areas are easily dismissed as immoderate and populist handouts that undermine the sufficiency foundation of local communities. And the sufficiency economy emphasis on developing capability from within is readily deployed to offer comfort to those who resist serious and substantial resource allocations to rural communities.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

This book shows that the cultural and political dynamics that made the idea of the sacredness of royal power part of the unique amalgam that constitutes modern Thai kingship are nourished by an ever creative mix of historical meanings and material with new technologies, new social and political conditions, new aspirations, and new struggles. It is obvious that the Thai monarchy, as any other monarchy, is an institution which is always in-the-making. Any incumbent monarch must decide what kind of monarch he wishes to be, but the options for personal agency are at any time limited by various forces in society that may accept or prohibit specific ways of enacting the kingship. By bringing together insights from different academic disciplines – political science, religion, anthropology, history, mass media and communication – in the investigation of the complex interplay between kingship, magic and media, politics and history in modern Thai society this book will hopefully provide its readers with a good understanding of the multifaceted basis of the modern Thai monarchy. This understanding reaches backwards in time in the sense that it incorporates former reigns of the Chakri kings as well as earlier ruling dynasties in Thailand. At the same time, it aims to facilitate a better comprehension of the elements of historical continuity and change that will inevitably characterize the future of the Thai monarchy.

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Part I

Sacral Kingship in a Modern World: Cultural and Ideological Foundations

CHAPTER 2

Virtual Divinity

A 21st-Century Discourse of Thai Royal Influence

Peter A. Jackson

INTRODUCTION: THE 'MYSTIQUE' OF KING BHUMIBOL

Many of the enigmatic features of economy and society [...] are concrete, historically specific outworkings of millennial capitalism and the culture of neoliberalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 334).

In this chapter I document the growth of the discourse of 'god-king' (Pali: *devaraja*) around King Bhumibol and explore how Brahmanical symbolisms of royal absolutism have acquired renewed potency alongside Buddhism as a basis of political legitimation in 21st century Thailand. Previous studies have interpreted the growing trend for Thailand's constitutional monarch to be represented as a 'demi-divine' 'virtual god-king' to reflect an ideological strategy set in train by mid-20th century authoritarian military rule. However, political processes alone do not account fully for the persistence and intensification of this phenomenon since the end of military dictatorship. The pre-modern discourse of 'god-king' has also been given new life by visual media and the spectralization of life under neoliberalism, which together produce a regime of representation that auraticizes King Bhumibol. These technologies of enchantment have permitted emerging prosperity religions to be harnessed to a conservative nationalist agenda and, together with Thailand's strictly policed lese-majesty law, have institutionalized a commodified and mass-mediatized ideology of magico-divine royal power that has worked to legitimate King Bhumibol's acquisition of political influence.

Over more than six decades, King Bhumibol or Rama IX¹ (b. 1927) has participated in a dramatic rehabilitation of the Thai monarchy, both symbolically and in terms of political authority. The years after the June 1932 revolution that overthrew Siam's² absolute monarchy and established constitutional rule saw the abdication of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, r. 1925–1935) and his replacement by a young prince, Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII, r. 1935–1946), elder brother of the present king. This young king spent most of the next decade at school in Switzerland, and died in a never-explained shooting incident in the royal palace soon after returning to Bangkok after the end of World War II. Ananda Mahidol was succeeded by his younger brother, Bhumibol Adulyadej, who ascended the throne in 1946 as the weak figurehead of a decidedly shaky royal institution.

Six decades later the picture could not be more different. The monarchy has reassumed a genuine political role and enjoys a representational omnipresence across the country that places it at the centre of nationalist discourses of Thai identity. Along with this rehabilitation of the institution of the monarchy, King Bhumibol has become enveloped by a symbolism and discourse of magico-divinity. For example, in June 2006, a Thai reporter described seeing the 'Grand Exhibition of the King', celebrating the 60th anniversary of Bhumibol's accession to the throne, as eliciting 'a very special, almost indescribable feeling; a mixture of love, respect, reverence, appreciation, awe, and worship' (Chatravat 2006). The king is often attributed with 'mystique' (Songpol 2006), and is popularly regarded to possess almost supernatural powers, with numerals associated with his reign, age, and period of rule regarded as auspiciously lucky. On the occasion of celebrations for the King's 60 years on the throne, the English-language *The Nation* reported,

Government lottery tickets, including two- and three-digit tickets, are being snapped up at vending stalls across the country as punters make rush-purchases of auspicious numbers linked to His Majesty the King. [...] The best-sellers have been the numbers 960 and 60. The nine refers to the Ninth King of the Chakri Dynasty and the 60 to His Majesty's 60 years on the throne. The next most popular number is 992, the number of His Majesty's car licence plate, and then

1 In English the kings of the Chakri Dynasty established at Bangkok in 1782 are referred to by their given names. However, in Thai they are referred to by the number of their 'reign' (*ratchakan*), whereby King Bhumibol Adulyadej is known as *ratchakan thi kao*, 'the 9th reign'. This Thai nomenclature is then rendered into English by giving each king the title Rama, an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, and the number of his reign. In this system King Bhumibol, ninth king of the Chakri Dynasty, is referred to as Rama IX.

2 The country was called Siam until 1939, when it was renamed Thailand.

2470, the King's year of birth, according to the Buddhist calendar (*The Nation* 2006a).³

Press reports routinely refer to the king's divine or semi-divine character. In December 1999, *Bangkok Post* columnist Sanitsuda Ekachai wrote that despite fears that a downpour would dampen celebrations for the king's 72nd birthday, the gathering clouds 'instead provided welcome shade. For Thais, a dry day for royal ceremonies during the monsoon months is not uncommon; it is just part of the King's divinity' (*Bangkok Post* 1999). Even ostensibly Buddhist-framed accounts of King Bhumibol's rule increasingly reflect the non-Buddhist language of royal 'magicality'. In an article devoted to King Bhumibol's status as a Buddhist *dhammaraja* or righteous monarch, political scientist Borwornsak Uwanno wrote,

Once the King speaks, all sides will wholeheartedly act accordingly, thereby *miraculously* calming down heated political problems, as evident in the cases of the incident on Oct 14, 1973, the Black May incident in 1992 and the Royal remarks of April 25, 2006. [...] Consequentially, the Thai monarchy has attained a social status of Supreme Arbitrator and Conciliator of the Nation [...] (Borwornsak 2006, emphasis added, capitalization in original).⁴

The ascribed divine status of King Bhumibol also infiltrates Western media reportage, albeit sometimes in an ironic tone. Writing for *The Financial Times*, Amy Kazmin has described King Bhumibol as 'a monarch styled as a demi-god' (Kazmin 2006). Indeed, the divinity of the Thai king has become a stock journalistic introduction to reports on Thai politics, as reflected in the following comments from a *Weekend Australian* survey of political tensions in late 2008, 'Many ordinary Thais believe the royal family is demi-divine or at the very least divinely anointed' (Powell 2008). This discourse of royal mystique and demi-divinity contrasts with the staunchly Buddhist, anti-supernatural tenor of royalist religiosity from the establishment of Bangkok in 1782 through the 19th and early 20th centuries and marks a return of Brahmanical symbolisms. Connors notes that as recently as the 1970s the Ministry of the Interior produced

3 The Buddhist Era (BE) calendar is used in Thai-language contexts and publications, with the Common Era (CE) calendar being used in English-language contexts and publications. In these two calendars King Bhumibol's birth year is BE 2470 and CE 1927, respectively.

4 The dates mentioned refer to political crises in which King Bhumibol's interventions have come to be seen as having 'saved' the country from political violence.

official manuals on democracy that criticized Brahmanical beliefs in a divine monarchy as an obstacle to democratic development (Connors 2007 [2003]: 79).

The redivinization of the monarchy has been widely noted by political scientists and historians. Hewison credits Thak with having shown that Sarit Thanarat's 1957 coup laid the foundations for the return of god-king discourse (Hewison 2008, Thak 2007 [1979]). In contrast to democratically oriented notions of Buddhist kingship that had been emphasized in the post-revolutionary period after 1932, Sarit re-instituted the trappings of the absolute monarchy to legitimate military rule. This military-backed rehabilitation of the monarchy included a return to symbols of royalist absolutism, and as Anderson has noted, 'The monarchy became more "sacred" as the dictatorship entrenched itself' (Anderson 1977: 22). Thongchai traces the seeds of the redeification of the monarchy to the late 1940s and 1950s, arguing that the rehabilitated monarchy and its politics 'rest on three important characteristics: being sacred, popular and democratic. [...] The deification rituals are not necessarily ancient ones. Several traditions have been invented, both by the government and by civil society' (Thongchai 2008: 21).

As reflected in Thongchai's view of the redivinized monarchy as an invented tradition, most accounts interpret the phenomenon as a political project. Hewison states that 'decades of work [have] gone into creating a national mystique and myth' (Hewison 2008: 191) around King Bhumibol, a project executed by the king himself, courtiers, other members of the royal family, loyal civil and military bureaucrats and assorted royalists (Hewison 2008: 195). A network of actors – what McCargo calls the 'network monarchy' (McCargo 2005) – have indeed been active in reascribing a divine aura to the king. However, political interpretations of the return of the god-king discourse and symbolism do not account fully for the continued growth of the phenomenon after the end of military rule; nor do they explain the intensification of the aura of royal magicality in the face of ostensible processes of rationally guided democratization.

The redivinization of the Thai monarchy needs to be seen as a politically inflected instance of the worldwide resurgence of religiosity that has been incited by the mediatization of social life and the spectral effects of neoliberal capitalism. Weberian predictions that modern political and social life would be increasingly rationalized and paralleled by a decline in the institutional importance of religion have widely come to be seen as premature. The global resurgence of diverse religious forms – including market-based prosperity religions, magical cults of the nation, and Hindu, Islamic, Christian, Jewish and Buddhist fundamentalisms – is a major phenomenon of this second era of market-driven

globalization. As Stollow notes, a ‘growing body of scholarship [is] challenging both the evidence and conceptual viability of modernisation as a process of “secularisation”’ (Stollow 2005: 122). He critiques cultural studies for largely overlooking this phenomenon and observes,

[E]ven the most pedestrian account of what is going on in the world today is likely to provoke some doubts about the myth of modern media as agents of secularisation. Everywhere one looks, one cannot help but notice the deep entrenchment of religious communities, movements, institutions and cultural forms in the horizons of modern communication technologies and their attendant systems of signification and power (Stollow 2005: 122).

Significantly, Weber’s Europe-derived model of secular modernity was never accurate for Thailand. The early-20th-century European disciplines of sociology and political science emerged from a post-Enlightenment culture in which religion and politics had been differentiated as discrete social domains. However, political and religious forms of power have never been clearly separated in Thailand, which was not colonized and whose indigenous political and social institutions were not overturned by Western rulers. From the mid-19th century, the Thai project of engaging the West through self-modernization was built upon a state-led bureaucratization of the Buddhist monkhood and a rationalization of Buddhist doctrine, not on institutional or doctrinal secularism (see Somboon 1982, Ishii 1986, Jackson 1989). The integral place of religion in Thai modernity is reflected in contemporary discourses of power. In Thai, ideas of power are described in terms of three notions: *amnat*, *barami* and *saksit*, with the last two terms having strong religious resonances. *Amnat* denotes raw, amoral power that may be used for either good or evil and which is accumulated and maintained by sheer force. In contrast, *barami* denotes the charismatic power possessed by morally upright, righteous people. Ideas of *barami* are strongly inflected with Buddhist views that this charismatic influence results from karmic merit accumulated from good deeds performed in previous lives. The third notion of power, *saksit*, or *khwam saksit* (the state of being *saksit*), denotes the magico-divine power possessed by holy objects (e.g. Buddha images and blessed amulets), spirits or human beings linked to ritual authority. Thai politicians and military leaders have *amnat* (raw power) and in some situations may be regarded as possessing *barami* (righteous charismatic authority) but are never seen as *saksit* (magico-divine). Thai kings are seen as possessing a vast store of righteous charisma or *barami*, but in the modern era have rarely been represented as *saksit* or magico-divine. This study focuses on the way that capitalism and new media have contributed to a return

of *saksit* symbolisms and discourses around King Bhumibol, and the subsequent appropriation of this re-ascribed magico-divine authority towards buttressing his accumulation of *amnat* or political influence.

The shift towards magico-divine symbolisms of the monarchy emerges in the context of broad changes in patterns of religiosity in the country. Anthropologists (e.g. Kirsch 1977) have long noted that Thai religion is an amalgam of Buddhism, Brahmanism and animistic beliefs. Since the Thai economic boom in the 1980s and 1990s, these different religious strands have become intimately interconnected with the market economy, just as they have been, and remain, linked with the established system of political and bureaucratic powers. To understand the religious status of the monarchy today and the accentuation of magical discourses and symbolisms it is necessary to consider this institution's changing relations to Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism. In brief, understanding the politico-symbolic power of the monarchy requires an account of the 'mythopraxis' of 21st-century Thai royalism, which Kraidy defines as 'the ways in which ancient myths are re-enacted in the present' (Kraidy 2005: 61). I follow Mukhopadhyay's account of the mediatization of myth as a political force in modern Asian societies. Drawing on Indian popular culture, he argues:

The semiotic valences of objects are no longer functions of secular historical memory or social taxonomy [...] but determined by the serial logic of spectacular assemblages. It is not a matter of virtuality or 'spectacle'. It is myth sanctified by technology – a techno-mythologisation of the body politics – which demands a Political Cultural Studies (Mukhopadhyay 2006: 289).

Central features of royal mythopraxis in Thailand today emerge from magic-like effects produced by the cultural logic of late capitalism and associated commodified media. These influences have been intensified by new wealth-centred prosperity cults that draw on royal symbolisms to enhance business and improve luck in Thailand's rapidly expanding economy. This commodified and thoroughly modern magical culture, which includes the image of a redivinized monarchy, has been appropriated to a conservative political project in which King Bhumibol, Rama IX, is the symbolic focus of a magical cult of wealth. The Thai number 'nine' (*kao*) is a close homophone of the word for 'progress' (*kao*). This coincidence enables the Thai expression for the present monarch as '(the king of) the ninth reign' (*ratchakan thi kao*) to have a second meaning of 'the reign that is (marked by) progress'. Before considering the intersecting market, media and political forces that have supported the rehabilitation of royal magico-

divine symbolisms I first trace the impact of changing political conditions on the hybrid Buddhist-Brahmanical ideology that historically legitimated royal authority in Thailand.

VICISSITUDES OF THE DEVARAJA CULT IN THAILAND

Early Southeast Asian kingdoms drew on Brahmanical ideas of the monarch as a *devaraja*, which Heine-Geldern has called a ‘cosmomagic principle’ of rule (Heine-Geldern 1942: 28). As Lehman puts it, ‘For reasons of ritual and as cosmological bases for authority and legitimacy [...] kings (*raja*) were seen as analogues within their domains of one of the Brahmanical (Hindu) gods (*deva*)’ (Lehman 2003: 23). *Devaraja* literally means ‘the king of the deities’, often considered to be Indra, but in political settings took on the sense of ‘the divine essence of kingship which embodied itself in the actual king’ (Heine-Geldern 1942: 18). Theravada Buddhism, also of Indian origin via Sri Lanka, provided a competing model of religiously legitimated kingship in which the monarch was considered to be a *dhammaraja* or ‘righteous king’ who modelled his rule after the moral example of the Buddha and whose political function was regarded as being governed by Buddhist moral law (*dhamma*) rather than by divine authority. While Brahmanical ideas of royal divinity were often hybridized with Buddhist notions of meritorious power, Lehman observes that a ‘troublesome conceptual dissonance’ (Lehman 2003: 24) remained between the two ideologies of kingship. Heine-Geldern argued more strongly that, ‘[t]he theory of divine incarnation as found in Hinduism [...] is incompatible with the doctrine of the Buddhism of the Hinayana [i.e. Theravada]’ (Heine-Geldern 1942: 23).

Lehman argues that the dominance of the Buddhist *dhammaraja* model over Brahmanical *devaraja* kingship in early Thai kingdoms such as Sukhothai reflected the politics of the time. Formerly Khmer vassals, by the 13th century Thai rulers had claimed independence from Angkor, and in this context ‘the linkage to the Khmer [*devaraja*] tradition had become unwelcome because it demonstrated the [Thais’] former dependency upon a polity that had fallen greatly in prestige’ (Lehman 2003: 29). Despite the early dominance of Buddhist notions of *dhammaraja* rule, in later centuries the Thai rulers of Ayutthaya nonetheless reverted to elements of a hybridized *devaraja* cult. This hybridization was facilitated by Brahmanical teachings that appropriated the Buddha to the Hindu pantheon. In these teachings the deity Vishnu or Narayana is regarded as having ten incarnations or *avatars*. The seventh *avatar* is Rama, whose story is told in the *Ramayana* epic poem and after whom all Bangkok period kings are

named in official discourse. The ninth incarnation of Vishnu in this schema is the Buddha Gotama, while the tenth and final incarnation is the future *avatar* Kalki (Krom Wichakan 1983 [2526]: 42). The ostensibly Buddhist kings of Ayutthaya legitimated their rule by linking themselves with Vishnu. For example, Ayutthaya was named in honour of the mythical city of the same name (Sanskrit: Ayodhya) ruled over by Rama in the *Ramayana*.

While the royal cult of Vishnu/Rama was pervaded by Buddhist resonances, dissonances between the different ideologies of rule were never resolved. Through most of Thai history political edicts have defined Buddhism as the supremely authoritative religion, followed in order of prestige (*barami*), but not in order of truth-value, by Brahmanism, and then by spirit beliefs or animism. Doctrinal inconsistencies between different strands of the Thai religious complex have been managed by greater emphasis being placed on correct ritual practice (orthopraxy) than on correct belief (orthodoxy) (see Jackson 2003: 19), an accommodation that permits a high degree of symbolic interpenetration amongst Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism.

The Ayutthaya-period Buddhist/Brahmanical religio-symbolic accommodation was radically disturbed by the Burmese destruction of the city and the toppling of the Siamese monarchy in 1767. Wyatt argues that in the early Bangkok period the fall of Ayutthaya was attributed to a lack of Buddhist faith, with the authority of the restored monarchy being based upon a reaffirmation of the ideal of the Buddhist *dharmmaraja* monarch (Wyatt 2002). Across the 19th century, the dominance of Buddhist notions of rule was cemented by King Mongkut's (Rama IV, r. 1851–1868) reforms of Buddhist clerical practice, and dialogue with the growing number of scientifically minded Western residents in Bangkok contributed to a rationalization of elite interpretations of Buddhism that de-emphasized supernatural Brahmanical cults. Brahmanical ideas and rituals nonetheless remained part of the panoply of power in the early Bangkok period. While Rama I rehabilitated Buddhism as Siam's supremely authoritative religion, his ostensibly rationalist Buddhist successor, Mongkut, relied on Brahmanical ideas of the monarch as a *devaraja* when he renamed the Thai capital in the mid-19th century. Mongkut's Pali-derived title of Bangkok is a Brahmanical eulogy of Vishnu that, among other things, describes the Chakri capital as a gift of Indra, built by Vishnu, and 'wherein resides the reincarnated deity' (Pali: *avatara sathita*).⁵

5 In 1782, Rama I initially called the new capital of the Chakri dynasty *Ratanakosin Indra Ayothaya*, with Mongkut's immediate predecessor, Rama III, subsequently renaming the city *Krungthep Mahanakhorn Boworn Ratanakosin Mahinthara*

While strictly speaking in contradiction with non-theistic Buddhist teachings, theistic Brahmanical beliefs have continued to be associated with kingly power. These beliefs constitute the discursive context from which the god-king discourse has re-emerged, with key elements being a doctrine of 'virtual divinity' and Mongkut's 'inauguration/installation', a new god, Phra Siam Thewathirat, as the protective deity of Siam.

KING BHUMIBOL: A VIRTUAL OR ACTUAL DEVA?

In the Bangkok period, the Thai king has never been called an actual deity, but rather a *sammuti deva* (Thai: *sammuttithep*) or a *sammuti devaraja* (Thai: *sammuttithewarat*). The Pali term *sammuti*, also variously rendered as *sammati* and *sammata*, means 'as conventionally understood', and is drawn from Buddhist epistemology in which *sammuti sacca* denotes 'conventional truth' or the 'common sense' understandings of non-enlightened beings and which is contrasted with *paramattha sacca*, denoting 'absolute truth' or the insight into reality achieved by an enlightened *arahant* (Buddhist saint) or *buddha*. The notions of *sammuti deva* and *sammuti devaraja* reflect attempts to negotiate tensions between incompatible Brahmanical and Theravada conceptions of kingship. In Brahmanical belief a *devaraja* was regarded as an actual incarnation (*avatar*) of a deity. While Buddhism also used this term, it questioned the presumed divine status of the beings that are called *devas* in Brahmanism. The Pali Text Society's *Pali-English Dictionary* provides the following gloss on the Buddhist notions of *deva* and *sammuti deva*:

[*Deva*]: Always implying kingship and continuity of life with humanity and other beings; all *devas* have been man and may again become men [...] hence 'gods' is not a coincident term. All *devas* are in *samsara*, needing salvation. [...]

A current distinction dating from the latest books in the canon is that into 3 classes, viz. *sammuti-deva* (conventional gods, gods in the public opinion, i.e. kings and princes [...]) *visuddhi-[deva]* (beings divine by purity, i.e., of great religious merit or attainment like *arahants* or Buddhas) and [...] *upapatti-[deva]* (being born divine, i.e. in a heavenly state) (Davids and Stede 1966: 329).

Ayutthaya (Nidda 2004: 6). The current full official Thai name of Bangkok, conferred by Mongkut and based predominantly on Sanskrit and Pali, is: *Krungthep Mahanakhorn Amornrattanakosin Mahinthagayutthaya Mahadilok Phop Noppharat Ratchathaniburirom Udomratchaniwet Mahasathan Amornphiman Awatansathit Sakkathattiya Witsanukamprasit*. Which translates as: 'The city of angels, the great city, the residence of the Emerald Buddha, the impregnable city (Ayutthaya) of the god Indra, the grand capital of the world endowed with nine precious gems, the happy royal city, abounding in an enormous royal palace that resembles the heavenly abode where reigns the reincarnated god, a city given by Indra and built by Vishnukam'.

In this vein, one Thai dictionary defines *sammuti devaraja* as ‘The king eulogised as a deity’ (*Sammuttithewarat: Phra mahakasat nai thana thi yok yorng kheun pen thewada*) (n. a. 1989: 519). While Thailand’s official Royal Institute Dictionary does not list *sammuti devaraja*, it does list *sammati deva*, which is defined as ‘a deity by convention, namely, the monarch’ (*Sammattithep: thewada doi sammat mai theung phra jao phaen din*) (*Royal Institute Dictionary* 2003: 1127). The term *sammuti devaraja* does not appear in classical Buddhist literature, and appears to be a Thai coinage based on *sammuti deva*. *Sammuti devaraja* is a key concept in Thailand’s hybrid Buddhist-Brahmanical discourse in which royal power is legitimated by a king’s ritual performance of godlikeness rather than from an ascription of literal divinity. The *sammuti devaraja* is a performative god-king, with this doctrine emerging from an appropriation of Khmer rituals of the god-king without the Brahmanical belief system that originally legitimated those rituals. In a setting where Buddhism is legally enshrined as the most authoritative of Thailand’s religions, the description of monarchs as *sammuti devaraja* legitimates royal power by deploying the Brahmanical aura that formerly surrounded Khmer *devaraja* monarchs in a context where faith in the actual divinity of the king is acknowledged as impossible. The Thai *sammuti devaraja* is thus a ‘virtual god-king’, where the ritual performance of a god-like status is differentiated from the monarch’s actual humanity.

In the Grand Palace the room in which King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910) was born, and which during his reign was redeveloped into a throne hall, is called Phra-thi-nang Sommuti Thewarat Ubat, (Naengnoi 2000: 65; Nidda 2004: 94) literally ‘the throne hall in which the virtual deity (i.e. Chulalongkorn) was born’. Within the complex of Wat Phra Kaew, or the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, deceased kings of the Chakri dynasty are honoured in a temple building called Prasart Phra Thep Bidorn, (Nidda 2004: 48), literally ‘the palace of the divine fathers (of the nation)’. The official English name of this temple, which was built during Mongkut’s reign, is The Royal Pantheon (Naengnoi 2000: 65).

Perhaps because of an over-emphasis on the importance of Buddhism in Thai political history, the notions of *sammuti devaraja* and *sammuti deva* have received surprisingly little academic attention. However, journalist Paul Handley has commented on these ideas, noting, ‘As a linguistic convention, Thais refer to the king as a sommutthithec [i.e. *sammuti deva*], a “supposed angel”. To outsiders this comes across as a somewhat cute characterization. But it has serious meaning’ (Handley 2006: 435). Handley also observes:

In a lecture on kingship to a mostly foreign audience at the Siam Society in 1999, one of Bhumibol's closest aides, M.R. Butrie Viravaidhya, explained that Bhumibol is a *sommuthithep*. 'The king is not a divine being. He is only an imaginary divine being,' she explained vaguely and cautiously. Even so, she proceeded to describe the monarchy through representations of its divine attributes (Handley 2006: 436).

While the king is understood to be a man, even if in rituals he is regarded *as if* he were divine, performativity theory (see Butler 1993) contends that the ritualized reiteration of cultural norms can create the illusion of prior essence. And in Thailand, whose modern political system is heir to the rituals of the Southeast Asian theatre state (Geertz 1980, Jackson 2004a, 2004b), the performative effect of the rituals of the *sammuti* or virtual god-king produces a highly ambiguous context. While the literal divinity of the king is not pronounced, this notion nonetheless runs through popular discourse and visual representations as an ever-present undercurrent. The rituals of the virtual god-king Bhumibol are increasingly producing the symbolic effect of an actual god-king. In early 21st century Thailand there has been a slippage between the king assuming the symbolic place of a *sammuti* deity and his being regarded as an actual deity, with a tendency for the qualifying term *sammuti* or 'virtual' to be left out of descriptions of King Bhumibol's religio-symbolic status and for an actual 'semi-' or 'demi-divinity' to be ascribed to him. In May 2006, Naphaphorn Laosinwatthana published a book titled *The Accession to the Throne: Royal Ceremonies, Beliefs, Meanings, and Symbols of a 'Virtual God-King'* (*'sammati devaraja'*). The final chapter of this book is titled: 'The Monarch: A "Virtual God-King" (*'sammati devaraja'*) On Earth' (Naphaphorn 2006: 91ff). However, an item in *The Nation* rendered Naphaphorn's title in English as 'The Accession to the Throne: The Royal Ceremonies, the Ideas, Meanings, and Symbols of God-Kings' (*The Nation* 2006b). This article translated *sammati devaraja* as 'God-King', rather than conventional or virtual god-king, and left out the scare quotes that Naphaphorn included in her own title to emphasize that she was not ascribing to the king any actual divinity.

THAILAND'S 'GUARDIAN ANGEL': PHRA SIAM THEWATHIRAT

Pattana argues that the ideological influence of state policies of Buddhist nationalism have led studies of Thai religion to over-emphasize the importance of Buddhism in the country's religious complex, with a dominant Buddhist-centred paradigm working 'to submerge popular religious beliefs and rituals under the

shadow of state-sponsored Buddhism' (Pattana 2005: 462). This academic over-emphasis on Buddhist reforms as a defining feature of the modernizing Thai polity is paralleled by an under-emphasis of the extent to which Thailand's leaders – whether royal, appointed, or elected – have deployed supernatural beliefs across the modern period. While Buddhism may have been defined as modern Thailand's pre-eminent religious form, this does not mean that non-Buddhist religions have been irrelevant to the country's political processes.

The redivinization of the monarchy has also found support from the royal cult of Thailand's so-called 'guardian angel', the non-Buddhist deity Phra Siam Thewathirat (Pali: Sayamadevadhira). While Mongkut is often lauded as a rationally minded scientific Buddhist monarch, it is rarely observed in English-language studies that this king also 'inaugurated' a new royal god. In a 2003 article in the Thai-language *Nation Weekly*, columnist Rung-arun Kulthamrong quotes Prince Damrong, one of Mongkut's sons, as saying, 'His Majesty King Mongkut inaugurated/installed (*pradit*) Phra Siam Thewathirat in order to worship the spirit of Thailand (*bucha spirit khornng meuang Thai*) in the royal palace' (cited by Rung-arun 2004: 78).⁶ In a 2007 Thai-language newspaper article titled 'Guardian Angel of Rattanakosin [Bangkok]', journalist Ram Watcharapradit states that this deity was invoked and named by Mongkut after the 1855 signing of the Bowring Treaty with Britain, and after neighbouring countries such as Burma and Vietnam had begun to lose their autonomy to Britain and France, respectively. At the time, Mongkut is reported to have said that Siam 'had been defeated and lost its independence many times in the past but the country had always survived these dangers. There must then be some protective deity saving the country (*khong ja mi thepphayada ong dai ong neung thi khoi phithak pok-pornng raksa prathet*)' (Ram 2007). Mongkut had an image of this guardian deity cast in gold, composed a Pali chant in its honour, and initially had the image installed in the Royal Chapel of Wat Phra Kaew. The image is currently installed in the Phaisarn Thaksin Throne Hall in the Grand Palace (Phlu Luang 1993: 10), where members of the royal family still perform ceremonies in its honour.

Some Thai authors writing in English for an international audience attempt to represent the Brahmanical and animist dimensions of Thai religious beliefs

6 The quotation is from a publication whose title Rung-arun (2004: 47) gives as 'Somdet Phra Jao Boromwongthoe Kromphraya Damrong Rachanuphap Speaking To Mormratchawong Sumanachat Sawatdikul Na Wangworadit', *Bantheuk Rap Sang*, p. 65. I have not been able to locate the original of this text to verify Rung-arun's citation.

and practices as aspects of Buddhism in order to accord with the officially constructed image of the country as a Buddhist kingdom. For example, in a book on the architecture of the Grand Palace, Nidda describes the Phaisarn Thaksin Throne Hall as housing ‘the Siam Thevathiraj Buddha Image’ (Nidda 2004: 81), misrepresenting the invented tradition of Siam’s ‘guardian angel’ as the Buddha. However, when writing in Thai for a domestic audience, authors have few reservations about describing the non-Buddhist origins of Phra Siam Thewathirat. For example, in a collection on ‘Thai beliefs’ (*khwaam cheua khong thai*) Phlu Luang quotes from the Chronicles of the Fourth Reign to demonstrate Mongkut’s ‘belief in protective deities (*thewada arak*) that looked over His Majesty and the royal family’ (Phlu Luang 1993: 13). This author then proceeds to emphasize the non-Buddhist character of the deity by detailing the Chinese and Hindu symbols with which it is associated in the Grand Palace. Phlu Luang describes how Mongkut had the image of Phra Siam Thewathirat installed on a sandalwood base carved with images of a phoenix (*hong*) and dragon (*mangkorn*) and inscribed with Chinese characters that translate as ‘the abode of Phra Siam Thewathirat’ (Phlu Luang 1993: 15). Images of four Hindu deities – Sarasvati, Ishvara (Vishnu), Uma and Narayana – are also arrayed around the guardian spirit standing on its Chinese-themed pedestal.

The supernatural protection of Phra Siam Thewathirat is regularly invoked in times of crisis. In a page-one article titled ‘Thailand Saved by Guardian Angel’, *The Nation* reported comments by an unnamed dignitary at the king’s birthday speech on 5 December 1998 that Thailand had been saved from the worst of the 1997 Asian economic crisis by supernatural intervention:

For some Thais, only mythology can explain how Thailand survived the precarious, if not near death, situation of the past year. Simply put, Thailand, unlike less fortunate Indonesia, has a guardian angel (*The Nation*, 5 December 1998: 1).

The article links Thailand’s ‘guardian angel’ with the publication of King Bhumibol’s morality tale, *Mahajanaka* (Bhumibol 1999). This story, inspired by Buddhist mythology, tells of a nation gone astray that is saved by a Buddhist hero, Mahajanaka.⁷ The subheading for *The Nation* item read: ‘His Majesty the King’s book on the Buddha’s life, “Mahajanaka”, teaches Thailand that there is a

7 In the Buddhist scriptures Mahajanaka (Thai: Mahachanok) is one of the previous incarnations of the Buddha Siddhattha Gotama. This name literally means ‘the great father’. The symbolic connection to King Bhumibol, often called the ‘father (*phor*) of the nation’ in nationalist discourse, would not be lost on Thai readers.

guardian angel which has come to its rescue in these perilous times.’ The name of this ‘guardian angel’ is not given. Is it Phra Siam Thewathirat, Siam’s ‘protective deity’ inaugurated by the ostensibly rationalist King Mongkut, or is Thailand’s contemporary guardian angel King Bhumibol himself? This ambiguity is not deciphered in the accompanying text.

In the lead up to the September 2006 coup that ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Privy Councillor and Thaksin foe General Prem Tinsulanonda delivered a speech at the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, which *The Nation* reported was intended ‘to rally the military behind the monarchy and the Kingdom’ (*The Nation*, 1 September 2006: 1). In this address Prem is quoted as saying, ‘I believe the Guardian Spirit of the Kingdom will always guide and protect good people while putting a curse on bad people. [...] The Thai Kingdom is sacred and the forces of evil will be defeated in the end [...]’ (*The Nation*, 1 September 2006: 1). The Thai-language *Matichon Daily* quoted Prem as saying, ‘I believe that Phra Siam Thewathirat is magico-divine (*mi khwam saksit*) and truly charismatic (*mi barami jing jing*), and protects good people while cursing the bad’ (*Matichon Daily* 2006). Here a key royalist was widely interpreted as arguing that Siam’s guardian angel was allied with the King against Thaksin.

The above press articles exemplify a common discursive strategy that contributes to the resacralization of the monarchy. An implicit non-Buddhist magicality – such as the protective influence of the guardian angel of Siam – is drawn upon to enhance the auratic presence of a Buddhist ritual, religious object, or personage. The official nationalist discourse of Thailand as a Buddhist kingdom is not questioned or denied, but non-Buddhist magical forms are used to give an implied divine tone to religious phenomena that, according to Buddhism’s non-theistic teachings, are not linked with any actual divinity. To appreciate the extent of the return of symbolisms of a divine monarchy one must look beyond official platitudes that Thailand is a ‘Buddhist kingdom’ to the discursive strategy of implied royal divinity. It is also necessary to look beyond the realm of discourse to the proliferation of commodified visual representations of royal magicality.

21ST-CENTURY SOURCES OF ROYAL MAGICO-DIVINITY

The growth of a discourse of god-king, both virtual and actual, around King Bhumibol contrasts with the rationalist Buddhist model of kingship that dominated earlier periods of the Bangkok era. Why are magico-divine Brahmanical associations increasingly drawn upon to enhance the already significant Buddhist

charismatic authority (*barami*) of King Bhumibol? Central to this phenomenon has been the king's accumulation of political influence. While technically a constitutional monarch, Bhumibol's interventions to quell a number of violent confrontations between the military and pro-democratic civilian movements – in particular, in October 1973 and May 1992 – have seen him progressively acquire political influence. McCargo says King Bhumibol is now much more than a figurehead monarch, having become the central component of a novel mode of governance that he calls Thailand's 'network monarchy' (McCargo 2005). This network monarchy has become a 'para-political institution' that has instituted a form of 'semi-monarchical rule' (McCargo 2005: 501) supported by a range of figures guided politically by General Prem Tinsulanonda.

However, the accumulation of power by a hereditary monarch finds little symbolic support in an era when political authority is legitimated, at least discursively, in terms of 'democracy' and 'popularly elected government'. The revived discourse of the god-king can be seen as one plank of an ideological strategy to legitimate the authority of the unelected network monarchy. While in contradiction with notions of democratic governance, the discourse of royal divinity has nonetheless intensified in parallel with the growth of discourses of democratic rule. As Connors notes, the rehabilitation of the monarchy is also discursively linked with the ideology of Thailand as a 'democracy with the King as head of state' (Connors 2005: 531; 2007 [2003]: 93), and the Brahmanical discourse of royal virtual divinity co-exists with discourses of the king as a pro-democratic Buddhist leader. How has this dual set of inconsistent ideologies of modern royal authority emerged? How has a discourse of unelected, divinized royal authority grown alongside equally strong discourses of rationally guided elected government? Connors traces the political course of this paradoxical rise of discourses of royal absolutism in parallel with notions of popular democracy (Connors 2007 [2003]: esp. Ch. 6). As noted above, a mid-20th-century military regime created the politico-cultural space for a return of representations of the king's magico-divinity by drawing on premodern symbols of royal absolutism. However, the rehabilitated symbolism of a semi-divine absolute monarchy has outlived the army strongman who drew on this ideology to bolster his power in the early 1960s. Indeed, royal magico-divine symbolism has become increasingly prevalent since Sarit's death in 1963 and has not been dampened by the rise of discourses of democratic governance. To a significant extent, the monarchy has been re-divinized in the face of discourses of democratic rule as an effect of mass imaging technologies and as a consequence of the impact of the market economy on Thailand's popular religious cultures. The magic-like symbolic regime

induced by contemporary technologies of enchantment has subsequently been appropriated by the network monarchy as an ideological framework to legitimate the accumulation of royal political authority.

NEOLIBERAL OCCULT ECONOMIES AND PROSPERITY RELIGIONS

In understanding the resacralization of the monarchy it is important to emphasize that Thailand's premodern magical folk religious cultures were never eradicated. While the state-directed project of Buddhist modernization (see Jackson 1989) marginalized magical religious beliefs and practices, they were never expunged, and remained persistent undercurrents throughout all strata of Thai society, both rulers and ruled, ready to resurface should the politically instituted dominance of Buddhism be challenged. Since the mid-1980s, the state has retreated from the intensive management of religious culture that typified earlier decades. With the end of both the Cold War and the communist insurgency inside the country in the early 1980s, less centralist cultural policies have been followed (see Jackson 1997). Affirmations of local religious culture, often expressed in regional languages, are no longer seen as politically threatening, and the state now harnesses aspects of local culture, renamed *phumpanya* or 'local wisdom', as a means of further integrating regional populations. In part, this has been made possible by the success of policies that entrenched the dominance of the Central Thai language and culture throughout the country. From the late 1980s, the retreat of state control over folk magical religiosity created a space within which popular religious movements, which in earlier decades may have incited political intervention, were able to emerge and flourish (Jackson 1997).

The state retreated from imposing a centralized model of national religious culture just as the country's rapidly expanding market economy had a dramatic impact on popular religion. Since Thailand's economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s, a diverse range of new prosperity religions that link supernatural forces to commerce, market speculation, and luck-based wealth creation have become prominent features of Thailand's religious landscape. The symbolic cores of these distinct but structurally similar cults of wealth include the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist goddess Guan Yin (Thai: Kuan Im) (see Nidhi 1994, Jackson 1999a) and Buddhist monks with wealth-related names such as 'Reverend Father Money' (*Luang Phor Ngern*) and 'Reverend Father Multiply' (*Luang Phor Khun*) (see Jackson 1999b). One of the most popular prosperity cults centres on the figure of King Chulalongkorn, great-grandfather of King Bhumibol. The return of semi-divine symbolisms of the monarchy has received a considerable boost from the

prosperity cult of this king revered as a divine being believed to bring wealth and good luck to his devotees (see Nidhi 1993, Jackson 1999a, Stengs 2009).

Pattana sees Thailand's prosperity religions as reflecting a situation in which 'conventional Theravada Buddhism, state and Sangha authorities, multi-original religious beliefs and the drive for material success in the capitalist market all come to coexist and produce a hybrid moment of religious change' (Pattana 2005: 468). Klima similarly sees Thailand's prosperity religions emerging from a 'fusion of Buddhism, spirit possession, gambling, public works, and irregular financial instruments' (Klima 2006: 56). Thailand's prosperity religions are far from unique. Comaroff and Comaroff argue that religions in which a 'messianic, millennial capitalism [...] presents itself as a gospel of salvation' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 292) are a worldwide phenomenon linked with the global triumph of capitalism since the end of the Cold War. They point to 'the exuberant spread of innovative occult practices and money magic, pyramid schemes, and prosperity gospels; the enchantments, that is, of a decidedly neoliberal economy' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 292), and they argue that new forms of market-based enchantment, which they call 'occult economies' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), have emerged under neoliberalism because 'Once legible processes – the workings of power, the distribution of wealth, the meaning of politics and national belonging – have become opaque, even spectral' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 305). In this context, 'the occult becomes an ever more appropriate, semantically saturated metaphor for our times' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 318). The popular supernaturalism that emerged in tandem with 1990s neoliberalism was paralleled by a religion-like faith in the market amongst the ideologues of finance capital. The magical capitalism of the underclasses is not a mere persistence of premodern 'superstition' but a refraction through folk cultural metaphors of the beliefs of capitalism's ruling elites, for whom neoliberalism was 'a gospel of salvation' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 291).

The cult of the spirit of King Chulalongkorn, called 'Royal Father of the Fifth Reign' (*sadet phor ror 5*) by devotees, is among the most ubiquitous of Thailand's prosperity cults and has received tacit official support. Comaroff and Comaroff observe that 'appeals to the occult in pursuit of the secrets of capital generally rely on local cultural technologies: on vernacular modes of divination or oracular consultation' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 317). Thailand's royalist prosperity religions are such local cultural technologies deployed in an occult pursuit of the secrets of capital.

In Thailand, the monarchy plays a similar symbolic role to that of anti-colonialist resistance heroes in formerly colonized Southeast Asian countries.

The saintly aura that surrounds the memory of martyred independence heroes like Rizal in the Philippines accrues to the monarchy in Thailand, in particular, the increasingly divinized image of Rama V. In nationalist historiography, Chulalongkorn is credited with preserving Siam's independence in the face of French and British imperialism, and setting the country on a self-determined course to modernity and economic development. Chulalongkorn's two grand tours of Europe in 1897 and 1907, when he met kings, queens, prime ministers and presidents, symbolized independent Siam's claim to be seen as an equal of colonial-era European states. In the 1980s, this royal symbol of Siam's independent modernity became the focus of a cult amongst small traders and middle-class business people. Devotees believe this king's spirit can intercede to improve sales, draw in customers, and promote wealth. While a rationally inclined Buddhist king is the symbolic centre of this cult, it is decidedly non-Buddhist in its ritual and beliefs.

The originally demotic cult of King Chulalongkorn has contributed to the aura of divinity that now surrounds visual representations of King Bhumibol. While emerging out of popular religious culture, and contrasting with ostensibly Buddhist state-sanctioned religious forms, royalist sections of the state and bureaucracy have nonetheless appropriated this symbol of popular devotionism to a project of political and cultural hegemony. The present king is commonly linked symbolically with the worship of his ancestor, Rama V, and the image of Rama IX is often integrated into the design of devotional products for the cult of King Chulalongkorn that adorn altars in shops, offices, homes and even Buddhist temples across the country. The commonness of visual representations of a relationship between the spirit of Rama V and the present monarch reflects the emergence of a proto-cult of King Rama IX that has strong resonances with notions of *devaraja*. King Bhumibol's sacral status within Thai prosperity movements is not expressed in doctrine but rather emerges as a semiotic effect of his widespread representational association with these movements (see Jackson 1999b for examples).

The prosperity movement of King Chulalongkorn is associated with nationalist narratives of Thai development and cultural pride, which in earlier decades had been related to state-sponsored Buddhism. This royalist prosperity cult represents more than an eccentric religious movement, as it has partially decentred the symbology of Buddhism as Thailand's de facto national religion. This decentring has taken place in the fields of ritual practice and visual representation, not within official discourses, where Buddhism remains central to notions of Thainess. While large sections of the population embrace non-

Buddhist prosperity movements, and the proto-cult of a demi-divine Rama IX has become a state cult in all but name, platitudes of Thailand being a 'Buddhist kingdom' continue to be produced in official discourses. Stengs (2008, 2009) has also studied the intersecting symbolologies of the King Chulalongkorn prosperity cult and of King Bhumibol, interpreting the phenomenon as emerging from 'exalted expectations of what Buddhist kingship can do for the nation and the people' (Stengs 2008: 1). In contrast to Stengs, I contend that the worship of Rama V, and that cult's contribution to the auraticization of King Bhumibol, are primarily non-Buddhist and constitute a commodified form of ancestor worship blended with a revived royal Brahmanism. The non-Buddhist nature of the worship of Rama V is shown by the fact that the cult's most sacred site is not located within a Buddhist monastery but rather is the equestrian statue of King Chulalongkorn situated in the middle of Bangkok's traffic-strewn Royal Plaza. In light of Pattana's critique of the overemphasis on Buddhism in studies of Thai religion (Pattana 2005), to interpret the prosperity cult of King Chulalongkorn in terms of Buddhism is to overlook the fact that it, along with several other supernatural prosperity movements, reflects a resurgence of the animist and Brahmanical dimensions of the Thai religious complex and that a non-Buddhist, or perhaps post-Buddhist, analysis best captures its full religious-political importance.

THE MEDIATIZATION OF ROYAL CHARISMA

'Mass-media have made the gods more real, not less'
(Mukhopadhyay 2006: 288).

The auraticization of the Thai monarchy also emerges in the context of a highly visual culture flooded with print and electronic images. Stolorow observes that media 'have become central to [...] the imagined worlds that constitute the sacred in the global present' (Stolorow 2005: 123). He contends that the 'religious – that is to say, the transcendental, enchanting, thaumaturgical, uncanny, haunting – powers of media technologies themselves' (Stolorow 2005: 124) induce a 'reactivation of aura' (Stolorow 2005: 127). Pattana similarly argues that the mass media have played important roles in fostering new religious phenomena, '[T]he mass media is the most decisive catalyst for religious hybridization. The heavy religious content and coverage in the popular media have shaped the public's beliefs and practices in the direction of a more prosperity-oriented religion' (Pattana 2005: 486). More specifically, Morris argues that imaging

technologies such as photography have ‘enhanced and extended the auratic power of the monarch’ (Morris 2000: 246), contributing to the rehabilitation of the symbolisms of ‘absolute theologico-political power’ (Morris 1998: 370). She contends that:

[T]he era of mass media in Thailand corresponds directly to that of a new monarchical visibility. Where once the king’s power entailed his secrecy, his withdrawal from commoners’ eyes, he is now the most visible of all Thai citizens [...] (Morris 1998: 358).

Morris describes a technologically induced change in the relations between forms of visual representation and political power:

[T]he restoration of kingship is at least partly due to the power of images [...] and one might even argue that it has been restored to prominence in direct proportion to its privileged place as the subject of photographic representation. [...] Far from [...] de-auraticising the monarchy and ushering in an era of secular democracy, mechanically reproduced images of the king appear to have extended that [...] transformation (Morris 1998: 358–359).

This phenomenon is not unique to Thailand. In describing the mediatization of Hindu mythology in contemporary Indian politics Mukhopadhyay observes, ‘the aura of ritual has given way to [...] *technologies of enchantment*. [...] This enchantment is not predicated on what Marxists call the “fetishism” of the commodity, it is rather a matter of commoditisation of the fetish’ (Mukhopadhyay 2006: 288, emphasis in original).

‘MINISTERING’ THAI CULTURE⁸ AND STATE APPROPRIATION OF THE PROSPERITY RELIGIONS

While not having explicit royal support, the symbolic placement of the monarchy at the heart of the prosperity religions has not been criticized by either the palace or by figures linked with the monarchy. Indeed, the absence of criticism of the monarchy’s incorporation within the symbolism of the prosperity movements may be read as a tacit expression of official support. McCargo states that the extent to which the creation of Thailand’s network monarchy has been a deliberate elite project or has evolved incidentally remains a matter for debate, but he nonetheless concludes that, ‘[t]he balance of the evidence suggests a significant degree of planning and calculation’ (McCargo 2005: 504). The

8 I take this expression from the title of Connors’ 2005 article.

re-auraticization of the monarchy also appears to have emerged from a similar mixture of incidental developments and planning. On the one hand, it has been based on the pragmatic appropriation of independently arising popular religious movements that coincidentally have drawn on royal symbolisms. On the other hand, this process has also involved self-conscious symbolic manipulation. A diffuse but nonetheless effective project of power has augmented the influence of the media and the enchantments of capitalism to support the resacralization of the monarchy. As Connors notes, the nationalist cult of the resacralized monarchy has emerged as one consequence of state cultural policies since the 1970s, which he interprets as a process of re-hegemonization with two broad aims, 'First to expand the meaning of Thai culture and identity so as to integrate broader social forces into more pluralized notions of Thainess; second, to ideologically rehabilitate the monarchy' (Connors 2005: 530). He identifies several agencies – the National Culture Commission in the Ministry of Education (established 1979), the National Identity Board in the Office of the Prime Minister (established 1980), and the Ministry of Culture (established 2003) – as bureaucratic centres of this project that over several decades have been involved in 'hundreds of identity-producing projects' (Connors 2005: 525). An array of private companies and state enterprises also produce greeting cards, amulets, postage stamps, clocks, watches, and a vast array of other souvenir items illustrated with god-king-like images. These souvenir items are not all orchestrated by the palace or state agencies, but the marketization of royal souvenirs nonetheless works to further enhance the auraticization of the king.

As Taussig and Coronil have shown in their studies of the magicality of modern states in Latin America, the phenomenon of modern politics drawing upon supernatural symbolisms is not restricted to Asia (Taussig 1997, Coronil 1997). In describing cultural hybridity in Latin America, García Canclini observes that contemporary forms of capitalist development do not suppress traditional popular cultures, giving as reasons:

[...] the need of the market to include traditional symbolic structures and goods in the mass circuits of communication in order to reach even the popular layers least integrated into modernity; [and] the interest of political systems in taking folklore into account with the goal of strengthening their hegemony and legitimacy [...] (García Canclini 1995: 153).

In this vein Comaroff and Comaroff note, 'There is a strong tendency for states to appeal to new or intensified magicalities and fetishes in order to heal fissures and breaches in the fabric of the polity. [...] [S]tates rely on magical means

to succeed [...] in articulating nationhood' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 327). Since the 1997 economic crash, state organs have channelled the popular devotionism of the prosperity religions towards royalist symbols. In parallel with the introduction of IMF-sponsored mechanisms of 'good governance' and 'transparency' to regulate Thailand's unruly boom-time economy, symbolic management techniques were instituted to regulate the country's once equally unruly occult economy. While the modernist 20th century state suppressed popular supernaturalism, the 21st century state tames folk magic by rechanneling it towards the double signifier of Rama V/Rama IX. Ideologically, there is a convergence between the cultural logics of folk magic and royal Brahmanism. Both religious forms are based on hierarchies of supernatural power, which in turn can be accommodated to justifications of wealth and power differentials that support established status divides. The harnessing of the worship of Rama V to an emerging cult of a demi-divine Rama IX has intensified the charismatic charge attaching to the monarchy to such an extent that, according to Morris, 'the king's two bodies – his temporally contingent, material being and his symbolic or institutional image – are constantly threatening to collapse into one phantasmatic potency' (Morris 2000: 104).

LIBERAL SUPPORT FOR THE VIRTUALLY DIVINE MONARCHY

Some Thais who hold more rationalist religious views nonetheless appear to be complicit with the return to forms of feudal royalist discourse. Speaking of anti-capitalist intellectuals in Latin America, García Canclini, observes,

The old order, precisely with what it still possessed of the aristocratic, offered a set of codes and resources with which intellectuals and artists, even the innovators, saw it possible to resist the devastations of the market as the organising principle of culture and society (García Canclini 1995: 45–64).

This observation helps us understand why some otherwise democratically committed Thai intellectuals may laud the monarchy despite its chequered association with anti-democratic forces. The monarchy provides a counterpoint to 'the devastations of the market', and offers a non-capitalist principle of social, cultural and political organization. As McCargo observes, 'Because formal politics was dominated by money-oriented actors, liberal monarchical networks offered an alternative way of promoting progressive political agendas' (McCargo 2005: 502). Connors has written critically of Thai liberals' 'agnosticism' concerning the value of 'majoritarian democracy' (Connors 2008: 143) and their

attraction to extra-constitutional, royal-mediated responses to political crises. He characterizes 'royal liberalism' as an elitist ideology 'shaped by fear of an uneducated citizenry [regarded as being] unschooled in appropriately restrained democratic practice and manipulated by demagogues' (Connors 2008: 144), reflecting 'a long-term project to establish a liberal state based on the ideological power of the monarchy' (Connors 2008: 144). Connors identifies a key figure in the development of the ideology and political practice of royal liberalism as the late Kukrit Pramoj, a prime minister in the mid-1970s whom he characterizes as a 'sometime supporter of military rule [...] [who] [...] warned against investing the people with too much power' (Connors 2008: 145).

Liberals position the king in opposition to neoliberal globalization, a situation that crystallized after the 1997 economic crash and the publication of the king's retelling of the legend of *Mahajanaka* and his 'theory' of the sufficiency economy. Nonetheless, liberals' support for the monarchy places them in an awkward position. Most, including prominent royalist intellectual Prawase Wasi, support rationalized forms of Buddhism, especially the demythologized doctrinal Buddhism espoused by the philosopher monk Buddhadasa (see Jackson 2003). Furthermore, many are critical of the marketized forms of supernatural religion that the network monarchy has drawn on in its project of managed re-aurationization. Liberals' attachment to the monarchy as a strategy to resist neoliberal globalization and domestic money politics means they have to remain silent in the face of the royalist supernaturalism that contradicts their otherwise rationalist outlook. Ironically, the symbolic aura of the monarchy has been heightened by the commodification and mediatized massification of the image of the king, which are effects of the very market that royalist intellectuals criticize and against which the King is regarded as having positioned himself. It is doubly ironic that while many liberals denounce popular commodified supernaturalism, which they disparagingly label *phuttha phanit* (commodified Buddhism), they tacitly support the virtual re-deification of the monarchy.

LESE-MAJESTY LAW: A VIRTUAL GOD-KING (NOT QUITE) BEYOND CRITICISM

The deification of the king, while raising him to an almost unbelievably exalted position with regard to his subjects, has in no way succeeded in stabilising government, rather the contrary (Heine-Geldern 1942: 27).

Nonetheless, even those who harbour critical views of the redivinization of the monarchy are legally prohibited from expressing their opinions. Both the Chulalongkorn cult and its symbolic association with the present king have

remained free of criticism because of the intensely policed lese-majesty law that punishes any negative public remarks about the monarchy. The Thai criminal code specifies that whoever ‘defames, insults or threatens the King, Queen, the heir-apparent or the Regent’ can be gaoled for between three and fifteen years. Regular recourse to this law silences public remarks about the monarchy that are not in the form of a standardized eulogy, and the constant threat of this law means that the semiotic linking of Rama V and Rama IX in a circuit of auraticized images has taken place in a policed space of enforced silence. The lese-majesty law is the keystone of the regime of power over public discourse (see Jackson 2004a: 193) that has permitted the redivinization of the monarchy to take place in the absence of public opposition (see Streckfuss 1996, Somchai and Streckfuss 2008, Streckfuss in this volume). This regime is not a cultural system reflecting the inertial force of ‘traditional’ norms, but emerges from and is held in place by a very recent project of power. Early-20th-century kings, especially Vajiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910-1925), were criticized trenchantly in the lead up to and the aftermath of the 1932 revolution (see Copeland 1993, Barmé 2002). Political efforts only succeeded in reinstituting a respectful silence around the monarchy in the second half of the last century. Magico-divine symbolisms have been able to proliferate around King Bhumibol because critical reason has been held in abeyance, or at least silenced, by legal means. The lese-majesty law means that, at least until quite recently, the many critiques of other forms of commodified religion have not directly touched the supernaturalism that has re-enveloped the monarchy.

Nonetheless, there are signs that even a growing recourse to the lese-majesty law is failing to silence criticism of the monarchy or to obscure the tensions that underlie royal resacralization. Earlier this decade, the power of the network monarchy was challenged by populist billionaire Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who, McCargo states, ‘sought systematically to displace the palace power network with a new set of connections’ (McCargo 2005: 501). In the increasingly tense political environment that led up to General Sondhi Boonyaratglin’s September 2006 coup that overthrew Thaksin, the then prime minister accused an unnamed ‘extra-constitutional charismatic figure’ of undermining the democratic system and causing confusion in the country (*Bangkok Post* 2006). Thaksin’s remarks were widely interpreted as referring to Privy Councillor General Prem Tinsulanonda, but it was also mentioned in the press that Thaksin’s description equally fitted the king. This was perhaps the most public criticism of the re-auraticization of the monarchy to emerge to that date.

In the aftermath of what Thongchai calls the ‘royalist coup’ of September 2006 (Thongchai 2008), the lese-majesty law has been used ever more frequently to try to prevent tensions between the monarchy and Thaksin emerging too openly into the public domain. 2008 saw a large number of high profile lese-majesty charges laid against senior figures aligned with both the anti-Thaksin, anti-government People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the pro-Thaksin, pro-government United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). In October 2008, the *Bangkok Post* reported that 32 lese-majesty cases were pending, 15 concerning websites, two relating to community radio broadcasts, and the rest relating to remarks made in other media (*Bangkok Post* 2008d). This situation led a *Bangkok Post* editorial to lament the growing politicization of the lese-majesty law in Thailand’s highly polarized political deadlock, ‘In recent years [...] this law concerning lese majeste⁹ has been exploited as a political tool by politicians and their ilk, against rivals under the pretext that they are safeguarding the royal institution’ (*Bangkok Post* 2008c). Increasing use of the lese-majesty law points to the vulnerability and potential instability of the discourses of respect, honour and homage that surround the monarchy. The law has not prevented the circulation of views critical of the monarchy’s political role being expressed on internet webboards. Hewison notes that the palace’s prominent role in the 2006 coup means that ‘[t]he problem for the king and his advisors is that they have now placed the monarchy at the centre of ongoing political struggles. This is a risky strategy and means that everything royal now has a political meaning’ (Hewison 2008: 208). *Bangkok Post* military affairs commentator Wassana Nanuam has observed:

The putsch of Sept 19, 2006 appears to have opened the floodgates to anti-Prem and anti-monarchy movements, especially on the internet. More than a thousand websites have spawned, which run public webboards carrying remarks deemed impugning the royal institution which the country holds sacred (Wassana 2008).

Queen Sirikit’s public support for PAD members injured by the police and for the families of demonstrators killed by exploding tear gas canisters in demonstrations on 7 October 2008 was followed by a further spike in anti-monarchy comments on the internet, with Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Minister Mun Patanotai stating, ‘the number of websites deemed to be insulting to the monarchy had increased sharply following the Oct. 7 [2008] clash between police and the [anti-Thaksin] People’s Alliance for Democracy’ (*Bangkok Post* 2008d).

9 English language newspapers in Thailand variously use the English ‘lese-majesty’ and the French form *lèse majesté*.

In late October 2008, Army chief General Anupong Paojinda ordered military units and the Internal Security Operations Command to monitor the media to work proactively help prevent acts of lese-majesty (*Bangkok Post* 2008a). At the same time, the ICT Ministry announced that in collaboration with the National Intelligence Agency and Police Special Branch it would spend several hundred million baht to introduce an 'internet gateway system to block websites containing lese majeste content' (*Bangkok Post* 2008b). Despite these intense responses by state authorities, in the rapidly changing political situation it is becoming possible for expressions of doubt about some forms of royal magicality to be voiced. In November 2008, Singapore-based Pavin Chachavalpongpun cautiously debunked what he called 'the myth of Phra Siam Devathiraja', asking where the deity's claimed protective power had been during the 'horrendous events' of October 1976, Black May 1992, and the 1997 financial crisis, 'Why did Phra Siam Devathiraja ignore the call for help from the people [at these times]?' (Pavin 2008). While not professing outright disbelief in the deity, Pavin nonetheless critiqued mythical modes of reasoning:

Thais waiting for the supernatural power of Phra Siam Devathiraja, or even an attempt to explain the political situation in a mythical way, particularly at this critical juncture, can be interpreted as a way to postpone a permanent solution to the crisis. Thais can no longer wait for angelic power (Pavin 2008).

CONCLUSION

Since the 1960s, King Bhumibol's progressive accumulation of political influence has been paralleled by the growing prominence of a reformulated version of the *devaraja* discourse that contributed to the legitimation of the premodern Siamese absolute monarchy. Sarit Thanarat's militaristic rehabilitation of symbols and rituals linked with the absolute monarchy provided an initial political impetus for the revival of the god-king discourse. However, the persistence and intensification of this discourse is not explicable in terms of Sarit's 1960s political agenda. The god-king discourse has also been supported by a popular religious culture that has been dramatically impacted by new media technologies and the expanding market economy. The influences of a mediatized and commodified popular religious culture explain why the auratic intensity of the god-king discourse today exceeds anything that was achieved by political means in the 20th century. The semiotic charge that the monarchy receives from popular religious culture also helps explain the apparent paradox of a rise in god-king symbolisms in parallel with discourses of rationally guided democratic development. While emerging

independently of any project of elite hegemony, prosperity cults that draw on royal symbols have nonetheless proved eminently suitable to being appropriated to support royalist agendas. The monarchy no longer manufactures its own religious forms, as King Mongkut did in the 19th century when he founded the new elite Thammayut Order of Buddhist monks and inaugurated a new protective deity for Siam. The dual images of a divinized Rama V and a semi-divine Rama IX that are at the heart of popular movements that spiritualize wealth have contributed to a resuscitation of symbols of the absolutist state and provided a basis for a new legitimating mythopraxis for the Thai monarchy.

Nonetheless, the growing recourse to the lese-majesty law to silence critics shows that the integration of the monarchy into the symbolic complex of Thailand's prosperity religions has not succeeded in fully masking anxieties about the future of the institution. As Connors observes, 'The monarchy will undoubtedly face challenges to its prestige once the immensely popular King Bhumibol [...] departs. It is difficult to imagine his successor wielding sufficient authority and having enough respect to maintain the monarchy's current position' (Connors 2005: 529). It remains to be seen whether the symbolic process of redivinization, and indeed the political formation of the network monarchy, will survive the individual around whom they have both grown. Indeed, the highly fluid political situation at the time of writing (December 2009) points to the potential fragility of the 21st century ideology of the Thai monarchy's virtual divinity.

Author's note

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CHAPTER 3

Entertainment Nationalism

The Royal Gaze and the Gaze at the Royals

Sarun Krittikarn

On 9 June 2006, at one moment of the week-long official ceremonies to celebrate King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 60 years on the throne (making him the longest-reigning monarch of Thailand, and, in fact, of the world since year 2000), while the king made an appearance on the southern balcony of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall to greet those of his subjects who had gathered to show their respect towards him, it was noticeable that Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn was moving about behind her father's back with a digital camera, snapping away at whatever she saw from the balcony. The sight must for her have been breathtaking – we can only make this assumption for we did not have the same privileged perspective as the princess. But this conclusion is not difficult to come to, seeing that there were almost one million people coming together, shoulder to shoulder, in and around the Royal Plaza, all wearing yellow shirts and waving yellow flags. No one could resist capturing this spectacular moment. The whole anniversary, including the participation of royal representatives from 25 countries in the celebration, was described by one newspaper as a 'major part of global history' (*The Nation* 2006b). But the princess's (and not her alone, as we shall see below) method of memorizing the moment and the event, and thus actually *making* history, confirms one important trend of contemporary society: that the creation of memory, which provides a fundamental foundation for the formation of meaning in everyday life, common sense, rationality, feeling and relationships, at both individual and societal levels, has been increasingly regulated by visualization and the desire to gaze.

This chapter re-examines the relationship, often taken for granted, between the monarchy and the people of Thailand through an analysis of recent developments, although, as readers will see below, historical accounts are also taken into account.¹ Unlike many theories about the king and his family – nationalistic, royalist, critical, conspiracy, gossip-like or otherwise – it is less concerned with what the king did, whether in public or in private, whether this was altruistic or just a pursuit of self-interest undercover, whether he is a Buddha-like selfless, benign and sacred or plain Machiavellian human being, or even a mixture of both – for all these are equally essentializing him into a static model. Rather, it emphasizes the relationship *between* the king *and* his Other, rather than *either/or*. The monarchy, I argue, has ever-changing subjectivities, incessantly in the making, in relation with this Other, the most recent being the common people, especially the urban middle class, who increasingly possess the power to gaze. That this relationship is mediated by gazing and visualization is the main argument of this chapter. Through gazing – the ever more important medium in shaping an everyday perception of what is ‘real’ – the opposing binary boundaries of subjectivities between the royal, on the one hand, and the common people, on the other, drastically clash, and the two worlds converge, blurring the clear-cut individualities, and thus creating a new kind of relationship that keeps defining and redefining the subject and the object, and the gazer and the gazed – to take the words from Michel Foucault’s description of Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* – ‘reverse their roles into infinity’ (Foucault 2002: 5). It is W.E.B. Dubois’s *double consciousness*, that is ‘this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’ (Dubois 1989: 5), or, in Jacques Lacan’s terms, ‘I am photo-graphed’ (Lacan 1977: 105).

Although image has taken centre stage in the life of many people, the gaze is not an isolated act but is deeply involved with imagination, especially in our case, the imagination that allows groups who have never been in face-to-face contact to think of themselves in terms of a nation, as Benedict Anderson famously argues (Anderson 2000). However, we also must try to understand a society that has moved away from print capitalism and adopted a visual medium as the technology of the self, a shift from purely thought processes towards the

1 Especially from the onset of the modernization period. Kullada (2004), and Pasuk and Baker (1997), although they are different in details and arguments, offer excellent illustrations of the politico-economic effects of the expansion of Western influence on Siam as part of the world economy system. This chapter, however, will give a very preliminary attempt, without any pretension to claim absolute historical truth, to demonstrate one facet of the changes in the socio-cultural sphere from this critical epoch.

increasing domination of the body. The creation of the Thai nation, 'Thai-ness', or Thai subjectivity, which is constantly in the making and not once-and-for-all in the past², is no exception. Responding to Anderson, Arjun Appadurai is right in maintaining that 'other forms of electronic media can have similar, and even more powerful effects' (Appadurai 1996: 8), but he goes on to argue for the widespread existence of transnational collective experience, without elaborating more on how those media operate on the continuing and persisting nation-making process, something which he perhaps sees as already outmoded. We can see in the case of this chapter how nationalistic sentiment can also be aroused by the utilization of media technologies. Yet, in contrast to its predecessors, it is a kind of nationalism channelled through the fleeting and volatile desires and emotions of the sensation-gatherers and pleasure-seekers (Bauman 1997: 179), whether to be enjoyed individually or in a group, spawning what I would call *entertainment nationalism*. This is, however, not to say that, although obviously entertaining, this nationalism cannot lead to serious consequences. The coup d'état in 2006, the changes in many political institutions and bureaucracies, a series of protests by the coup's supporters and critics, which caused deaths, suffice to exemplify the graveness this nationalism could entail. Yet, it seems to me that this violence is going on *outside* the realm of Thai harmony, or outside (in the words of Kevin Hewison) the 'standard total view'³ nationalism, of which entertainment is now an essential element: any violence done is to exorcize other dissenting views in order to protect the seamless and blissfulness of this nationalistic discourse and to guarantee that those who participate in it will continue to enjoy it to the full. It is the workings and dynamics *within* this entertaining standard-total-view nationalism that I am focusing in this chapter.

THE ROYAL GAZE

Princess Sirindhorn was definitely not alone in adopting a visual tool to keep memory, make history, and establish reality. The king himself is known to have practised photography from an early age and is reported to often provide 'insider' photographs of his family to newspapers. Moreover, the image of him with a camera hung around his neck when he travelled to rural areas for his 'development

2 Russell goes much further, to suggest that 'the planet has been created just a few minutes ago, furnished with a humanity that "remembers" an illusory past' (Russell, *The Analysis of Mind*, quoted in Borges 2000: 34).

3 See the Introduction by Ivarsson and Isager as well as the chapter by Hewison and Kengkij in this book.

work' from the mid-1950s is a common one. The royal gaze, however, goes much beyond a mere pleasurable hobby, especially when it links with science. Many projects of his, such as the royal artificial rain, forest conservation, water management and the urban environment, are based on scientific knowledge, method, experimentation and technology. According to Sumet Tantivejkul, the king's close aide in managing thousands of development projects:

Before dealing with a new problem, His Majesty visualises the situation he is facing and the changes that he would like to make. Then he gathers information, analyses it and distils the information into a list of important facts (*Bangkok Post* 2006).

This led Sumet to conclude that 'from the earth up to the sky, His Majesty has tried to adapt nature to fit the needs of his subjects' (*Bangkok Post* 2006). This belief in science, scientific thinking and methodology has paramount importance, both for the king's approach in dealing with many issues and for our discussion about visualism here. In the words of King Bhumibol himself, although he maintains that 'science and wisdom cannot be separated; you need to use both', what he meant by *wisdom* was

[not only] intellect or academic skill, but also moral intellect, or the ability to judge right from wrong, to be farsighted, and to be almost enlightened to the point of seeing into the future by the light of your wisdom. Wisdom can light your way through the use of reason. Wisdom, when used properly, lets you see the future, because you have seen the past, and its conditions. Considering the people's skills and problems, you can see what the future will hold (Speech given on 5 March, 1964, quoted in *Bangkok Post* 2006).

It is proper to relate his use of the word 'enlightened' to the Enlightenment of eighteenth-century Europe, which put human reason and capacity at the centre of the universe, rather than to 'enlightenment' in the Buddhist sense.⁴ Even his 'morality', based on 'wisdom', can only come 'through the use of reason'. Although he did not elaborate further, it is clear that he referred to a kind of *a*

4 The word referring to such a state of awakening in Thai is *tratsaru*, which contains no sense of 'light', but, rather, of to 'know'. Its counterpart in Sanskrit and Pali is *bodhi*, again with no connection with light or seeing. Although there exist many metaphors with light/darkness throughout Buddhist scriptures – comparable to the 'internalization' of light of medieval Europe (Blumenberg 1993: 50) – the translation of it into English as 'enlightenment' possibly has to do with the transformation of Buddhism into formal 'religion', modelled on a scientific 'prototype' of Christianity, at the beginning of the modernization period (see the case of Japan in Josephson 2006). See also note 11 below.

priori, objective, impersonal ethics, which is doubtlessly associated with a value-free scientific paradigm, manifested in his development projects in three decades after the speech, before the turn of the discourse in the late 1990s towards a 'self-sufficient economy', with Buddhist overtones. Consciously or unconsciously, his metaphor of light and seeing dominated the speech: consider 'farsighted', 'enlightened', 'seeing into the future' (three times), 'by the light of wisdom', 'light your way'. As is common in science, the king's choice of words strongly reflects the spatialization of time: time is stretched out into a linear line of past, present, and future, all of which is to be laid out before the eye, to be measured by the visual sense. This scientific teleology allows the unpredictable, shapeless future to be securely held in *sight*, much because the past and the present are already *seen*.

Submerged in scientific discourse, the king thinks, speaks and acts at its dictates, despite his later mythical, almost super-human, ultra-mundane attributes as seen by his admirers. This quality has partly developed from the constantly repeated praise that the king selflessly made close contact with people in rural areas, especially in the time when the population in many parts outside Bangkok was viewed by the government as in the grip of a Communist insurgency, and when communication and travel were difficult. Although it is widely known that the king usually went to the source and *listened* to people when he wanted to solve a problem or start a new project, this seemingly direct, personal contact was mediated by the impersonal force of a scientific approach, and its 'empirical vigilance receptive only to the evidence of visible contents', where 'the eye becomes the depository and source of clarity' (Foucault, quoted in Jay 1993a: 392–393), even if his intention was purely benevolent. Ocular tools, such as photographs, aerial and satellite images, and maps were the king's primary preferences, all remote and cold, when he was engaged in projects to 'relieve people of their plight'. Even the widely held and venerated belief that he listened to the people is sometimes shaken by the details of what he listened to: again, to quote Sumet – who in later days is influential in creating and reproducing the discourse of the hard-working, simple and down-to-earth monarch – on how a royal dam project was initiated:

[...] at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, His Majesty would start his work. He would drive by himself, and would not tell anyone where he was heading to. But, of course, he had a clear goal and plan laid out before the trip. He already had his map and detailed information of the geography of that area. When he arrived at the destination, he would go to old folks and *ask them questions to verify the data he had, until he was certain that the map and the actual landscape matched*. Then

he would summon the local government officials [...] to recheck the information [...]. The next step was to have related authorities [...] see if the marked space was suitable. He would then *look up the map and it took only 2-3 minutes for him to decide where to build the dam* [...] (Sumet, quoted in Chanida 2007: 265–266, emphasis mine).

In this way, maps are not only his principal tool but they also ultimately determine what is ‘real’ to him. Even though he corporeally journeyed into the areas and talked to its inhabitants, all these serve the purpose of improving the map. A better map means that it better corresponds to reality; yet, to behold it as the overriding truth – to make a decision based on it in a few minutes, for instance – is to replace that reality with the map. The bird’s-eye-view, aerial map is real, at least more real than, say, the cool splashes of the river, the sound of the singing bird, or the daily life of the people finding wild foodstuffs in the forest, all of which would be permanently changed by the flood following the construction of the dam. Then, later, the dam would appear on the map. The map is no longer a mere representation of objective reality ‘out there’, or a reference point, because ‘the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it [...] it is the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – it is the map that engenders the territory [...]’ (Baudrillard 1988: 166).

Thongchai (1994) and Anderson (2000) prove well that this is by no means a recent case, but has its history, in fact, since the demarcation of the borders of Siam against adjacent Western colonies, or, in other words, since the emergence of the Thai nation itself. Thongchai reaches a similar conclusion: ‘a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent [...] it had become a real instrument to concretize projections on the earth’s surface’ (Thongchai 1994: 130). Through map-making, the abstract notion of a nation is made visible and tangible (when the map is printed on a paper, for example). Along with capitalism and other scientific ‘miracles’ that swept into Siam in the latter half of the nineteenth century – spurring great transformations in political, legal, economic, cultural and religious realms – maps emanated the enigma of the only ‘real’, and laid down the rule that what is ‘real’ must be made to appear before the eye. Siam has become what Anderson aptly terms ‘map-as-logo’, where countries that appear on the map can be dyed with colours and be indefinitely reproduced, ‘available for transfer to posters, official seals, letterheads, magazine and textbook covers, tablecloths, and hotel walls’ (Anderson 2000: 175). It is arguable that the meaning of the Thai word *du-lae* (literally, watch-see) gained the sense of ‘to govern’ from this early period of mapping. Bradley’s 1873 Thai dictionary referred to *du* and *du-lae* (as one entry together) as ‘the act of seeing

with the eye, as in overseeing the work', without any implication of administration or government, unlike in later dictionaries (see, for example, the Royal Institute Dictionary 1950). That the act of *du-lae* can be extended over a nation means that a nation must already be able to be *seen* with the eye. We must also remember that King Rama V travelled to Singapore, Java, Burma and India to see the patterns and traditions of Western administration in those colonial states before he made a journey in 1892 to inspect the provincial administrations of his own country for the first time (Wilatsawong 1977: 19, 23) – when, arguably, the nation, built upon the colonial models, was ready to be gazed on and governed.

If a nation, in order to exist, must be gazed on, its nationals are also subject to a constant stare in order to feel a sense of belonging to it. The closely related gaze – which turns time, space, nation, people or anything in its field into a visual object of scrutiny – is, therefore, the *panoptic gaze* to which Thais are so accustomed. This calls to mind the omnipresence of the king who casts his gaze over his subjects everywhere they go: he watches over them from the calendars at home, in the kitchen where they have breakfast, from the side of the computer monitor at the workplace, from framed photographs in classrooms, banks, government offices, in taxi and *tuk-tuk*, in almost all buses, trains and boats, which must have at least one image of him on board, on the streets, especially at times of celebration, every now and then from the television, and every time before a film starts in the cinema. The central watch tower of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon is diffused into various forms in the vast penitentiary of a nation, creating a total empire of the royal gaze. His image is even popular in the refugee camps along the border, where, for many social scientists, the sense of a nation would become less distinct. But on the contrary, when the tormented, displaced, stateless people enter into the realm of a watchful nation, the gaze felt by the refugees, being outsiders, is double: firstly through the immediate, physical vigilance of the military officers who patrol the camps (in the name of the nation), and secondly through the host's national cultural obsessions – the most inflated of which is the monarchy – which they have to learn to respect and adapt to. They are, thus, under permanent physical and psychological observation, being stared at day and night by the 'owner' of the land upon which they are standing, until they internalize a love for the king, and are, as often found, exaggeratedly proud to adopt him as their own.

The ubiquitous presence of the royal, of course, has its history. Patterns are being repeated in the present reign. Emerging are new practices or restored ancient traditions that constitute the premises and preponderance of the king's gaze. Thak claims that this was very much a product of Sarit Thanarat's military

regime (1957–1963), which developed a close relationship with the palace to seek royal support to legitimize his seizure of power and leadership:

The Sarit regime made conscious efforts to give the king more exposure domestically and internationally. While the prestige of the king increased, the government's popularity grew. Under Sarit's leadership, elaborate tours of the country and foreign countries were arranged, traditional ceremonies were revived [...] (Thak 2005: 354–355).

While these 'invented traditions' soon became customary and last until today, a parallel trend was also developing, which was the increasing substitution of the corporeal presence of the royal by the widespread symbolic presence, mediated by the visual representation of images and emblems. In the 1970s, these were used by both the government and the radicals in their attempt to advocate their own political causes (Pracha 2006: 89). After 1976, when the student movement was violently uprooted by rightist force, according to Pasuk and Baker,

[...] elements in the military and bureaucracy projected an enlarged role for the King and the royal family in the national culture. [...] The television stations owned by the army and the government's Public Relations Department played a major part in increasing the royal family's public visibility. The army's Channel 7 transmitted to most parts of the nation by 1979. By the mid-1980s, television reached over 90 per cent of rural households. The national news, one of the most highly viewed programmes, offered a daily dramatization of the political hierarchy. The programme opened with reports on the day's activities of the King and other members of the royal family, followed by those of the Prime Minister (Pasuk and Baker 1997: 315–316).

The 1980s and 1990s saw the newly emerging culture of a nation woven together by the transmission of television signals, before the digital and internet revolution around the turn of the century. Most of the people in the country never saw the king in person in their entire life, but felt his propinquity and his gaze through flattened images that reached out to them from the screens like magic and generated a virtual tele-visionary bond between him and the people, and among the people who watched the same programmes every day, disciplining and monopolizing their ideas regarding the monarchy.

Noteworthy is also the recent trend in the popular media, such as in commercials, TV dramas, movies, and national and royal anthem music videos, to render the king as *invisible*. Instead, he appears as various symbolic avatars, such as drops of rain for people in a drought region (referring to the artificial rain project), the sun above a vast space of green hills (the re-forestation project),

or in shadows to which people would prostrate or cry with utmost respect and admiration – all without a single familiar image of the king. The films by nine ‘indie’ directors who participated in a short-film project, initiated by the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture of the Ministry of Culture to celebrate the king’s 80th birthday anniversary in 2007, are also indicative of such absence of the king or his bodily image. The symbolisms employed do not only involve the natural phenomena mentioned above, but some also attempt to go beyond mere sight (although films are ocularcentric anyway) and transpire as sound/silence, abstract idea, or inspiration, involving everyday life, on the streets, through small people – the common ingredients of indie films – i.e., everywhere⁵. This development from the overexposed king-as-logo to the more mysterious and sacred king-as-shadow, or the ‘shift from spectacle to surveillance’, recalls both the panopticon and King Louis XIV of France, who, later in the reign, ‘had absented himself from the spectacle and become an empty place in the power structure of the monarchy, which gave the impression of being able to see without being seen’ (Apostolides, quoted in Jay 1993a: 410; Saint-Simon 1964: 142). Likewise, in those footages, the camera always directs our sight away from the king, although we are fully aware that he is there (because the theme that runs throughout the movie or the song is about him), creating the effect that he is somewhere behind the camera, which is to say, behind us whose eyes spontaneously move with the lens and can only see through it. From a privileged point of view, which we do not know where, the king sees us while we cannot see him, and we, from our position, who cannot *look*, are helpless, vulnerable, and lost, as if naked, while he is all-around, almighty, always looking over his citizens and the Thai nation.

However, to many people, rather than the cold, impersonal *scientific gaze* and the controlling, disciplining *panoptic gaze*, the royal watchfulness is warm, protective, forgiving, full of self-sacrificing love and care, and ‘ambiguously gendered, as both the stare of the Patriarch and the loving look of the Mother’ (Fujitani 1996: 242). The king’s gaze, although it would leave us weak and defenceless, is nothing to be suspicious of, and even desirable: under his gaze, we are turned into a child in need of security; we are in a state of lack and long for the perfection which can be found in the king (Thanes 2005: 127), although this role can also be reversed, as will be shown below. This masochism of being gazed at and total subjugation to superior power, which is internalized but subdued in the everyday sub-consciousness of the Thais, will automatically surface when pressed, and this was operating on 9 June 2006, culminating to

5 I would like to express my gratitude to ‘Khru Ben’, Benedict Anderson, who kindly gave invaluable advices and suggested me to see the films.

the highest point when Princess Sirindhorn was taking the picture of the crowd. At that moment, the abstract sadomasochistic relationship was materialized into the tangible object of a photograph, in which the individuality of the people in the Royal Plaza was temporarily dissolved into a mass, uniform, larger Self: the self of being 'Thai' under the protective royal patronage. In other words, the royal, represented here by the princess, is the Subject, the one and only, who possesses the gaze while the people, the gazed, are faceless, innumerable, at this moment invisible, and thus keep changing while the Subject remains the same. This establishes that, after losing each individual self, we do not exist without the Subject: the Subject defines us, and is the fountain of our collective subjectivity.

For many people, being the object of the royal gaze – whatever kind of gaze it is – is not necessarily a bad thing. Being among the same kind of people, having the same concentration, turning in the same direction (i.e., towards the balcony), shouting and singing similar words (e.g. '*song phra jaroen*' or Long Live the King) and songs (e.g. the king's anthem), shedding tears for the same cause, having the same faith, expressing it in a similar, uniform way, the people in the Royal Plaza on 9 June, could feel immense security, fraternal affinity and love that is hard find in modern, secularized society. As Tiryakian (1978: 220), explaining Émile Durkheim, points out,

Economic life is dull, monotonous: 'it is generally of a very mediocre intensity,' [...] 'making its life uniform, languishing and dull'. The religious life, generated by the coming together of the collectivity in a ceremonial and dramatic occasion, is an entirely different sort of affect; it is a *festival*, a period of *enthusiasm*. Collective sentiments of stimulation become magnified in the effervescence, the mundane world is transformed into an extraordinary world, one wherein individual boundaries break down, solidarity reaches a crescendo, in the process of which even antinomian behavior may take place.⁶

As argued by Featherstone (1991: 121–122), similar spectacular events, such as 'coronations, royal weddings, state funerals and even rock concerts and sports

6 The reference to the antinomians, who oppose the doctrine that moral law is obligatory and believe that only faith is necessary for salvation, is a useful analogy here, because only three months after the ceremony, while the royalist sentiment, raised to the point of mass euphoria, still strongly persisted and, in fact, overwhelmed every fabric of Thai society, the coup d'état took place, and its makers, openly exhibiting a symbolic connection with the monarchy, were revered by many people as true saviours, although the constitution was torn, many laws and basic rights, such as public gathering and free speech, were bypassed, martial law was imposed, and the government, the parliament and many derivative independent entities were dissolved – some permanently.

championship finals, may heighten the sense of the sacred' and have come to replace religions in giving people in the mundane world the opportunities to experience the intense collective emotion of living in unison, of the bliss of the transcendence. People participating in such events can forget about their individual worries for the time being, an escape from what Hegel called 'the unhappy consciousness of modernity' (Prendergast 2000: 7) into Walter Benjamin's 'the unconscious of the dreaming collective' (Buck-Morss 1989: 39). All class conflict disappeared in this moment of festivity: whether I was a street vendor, a farmer, or a taxi driver, I now came shoulder to shoulder, if not hand in hand, with business owner, university professor, bureaucrat – who, at other times, might exploit my labour for their surplus profit or give me a scornful look when I spoke in a dialect – standing under the same burning sun, within the same omnipresent gaze of the king. Acting in many ways like commodities of consumer society, festivities provide a glimpse and fleeting taste of the socialist utopia, the classless society, without having to put much effort of making a tiresome revolution.

Perhaps this taming, humanizing, pleasure-giving, or even liberating technique that tones down the otherwise-fearsome royal stare is one example of a critique of the supremacy of panoptic gaze, as made by de Certeau that 'Foucault focused so insistently on the dangers of panopticism that he remained blind to other micro-practices of everyday life that subvert its power' (de Certeau, quoted in Jay 1993a: 415). This is the first glimpse of *entertainment nationalism*. Although this can be seen as a mask of power, the de-centring of power works even more intensely, if suppressed in the undercurrent, when the royals are gazed back.

THE ROYALS GAZED

M. Sivaram, a former sub-editor of the *Bangkok Daily Mail*, wrote of the morning of 24 June 1932, the day that the Siamese absolute monarchy was overthrown,

Their Majesties King Prajadhipok and Queen Rambai Barni were quietly holidaying at Hua Hin, a pleasant sea-side resort on the west coast of Siam. After a light breakfast, the King and Queen went out on the sunny golf links on the beach to enjoy a round of golf. A few minutes later, H.R.H. Prince Purachatra of Kambaeng Bejra rushed to their side and, in a few hurried words, told them of the happenings in Bangkok early that morning. The King listened calmly. Maybe he was moved by puzzled surprise but his face did not reveal the thoughts that rose in his mind. He had already made his decision – to accept the People's proposals (Sivaram 1981 [1936]: 21).

This journalistic gaze into the king's private quarter, carefully discerning each of the royal movements and attempting to penetrate his mind, as if the writer had been present there and witnessed diminutive details with his own eye, breaks the rule that 'the heart of the king is unsearchable' (Thanes 2005). This anticipates the future voyeurism arising with the new technologies of the look that constantly searches and guesses the monarch's mind. Although such writing with such a piercing gaze has been impossible in public in Thailand, gossip about the royal family – relationships, extra-marital children, tastes, fashion, behaviours and misbehaviours – go around the town in whispers in the market, hair salon and café, and over the dinner table when a family watches the news from the palace together. Moreover, with an increasing number of the population now accessing the internet at home, work or school, or in the ever-growing number of internet cafés, partly because of the telecommunication-oriented policies of the defunct Thaksin government,⁷ forwarded e-mails are now an important source of widespread open secrets and photographs of the royal family, especially among the younger generation. Perhaps one short example will suffice to show how intimately one could 'watch' the monarchy. An e-mail I received during the June celebration, titled 'Tales from the Palace, and You Will Love His Majesty', went:

One morning, around 7 a.m., a lady-in-waiting of the youngest daughter of the king answered a phone call. It was a male voice asking to speak with the princess. The lady-in-waiting asked who it was, and the caller said it was the person in the bank. She was confused because banks should be still closed at such hours. But when the princess picked up the phone, she realized that the 'bank' meant 'banknote'⁸ and it was His Majesty whom she was talking to.

Whether the story is true, partly true, or not at all, and although its main purpose is to further celebrate a king who is widely admired as easy-going, down-to-earth, with a good sense of humour, the point is that a massive number of similar e-mails are in circulation among internet users, who, at the moment of reading them, see everything like the omniscient narrator in a third-person novel with the eye of a fly on the wall in the most private corners of the palace. Flows of information in the cyber world are a stimulant of the fleeting and erratic moods of 'sensation-gatherers' of the consumerist age, when, just one click away, one comes upon another e-mail about a wholly different issue that engenders a different emotion. This 'three-minute happiness' had its forerunner in the

7 The official figure shot from 5.64 per cent in 2001 to 12 per cent in 2005 (National Statistical Office, 2001 and 2005).

8 In colloquial Thai, the word for 'bank' refers to both.

television ‘zapping’ culture in which emotions ebb and flow with advertisements or news that change every three minutes, or less, or with the navigation through remote control. The gaze at the royals has necessarily become associated with instant consumption, entertainment and pleasure.

To understand such conditions more fully, we need to move beyond gossip and voyeurism theories because, although they have the potential of destabilizing the pre-eminence of power⁹, these arguments clumsily hang in the air. On the one hand, they do not delve deeply enough to consider the social relations that make such intimate gaze and gossip possible in the first place, and, on the other hand, they assume too much of something hidden and uncertain, and thus involve a large amount of guesswork (and that is part of the fun of gossiping), and yet underestimate the power of manifest representation.

The royal family can become the object of gaze and rumour only because it is seen as a human entity, and not a deity. This humanizing of divinity has been a century-old process, arguably beginning in the modernization period in nineteenth-century Siam. Not only was a nation-state born under the rationalized, science-based gaze of the monarch through modern maps and the restructuring of local administration to be *du-lae* (over-seen) by and from the central government, but the monarchy was also subjected to great transformation under the scientific discourse that unfurled across the globe by means of colonialism and Christian missionaries. In response to the accusation of being a backward and irrational religion, Buddhism was cleansed of supernatural beliefs by King Rama IV and the Siamese elites¹⁰, but this meant that they also had to be distanced from a kingship which had been imbued with Khmer-influenced Brahmanic mythologies and rituals. The *devaraja* or king-god was increasingly displaced by a king-as-human who had power and charisma because of his virtues (Wilatsawong 1977: 5). National ideology, instead of divinity, yet no less sacred, became the source of royal authority in the new system, and the image of the king who led the newly emerged nation to join the rank of modernity with the rest of the world and who did good deeds, mostly as ‘progress’, for his

9 See, for instance, gossip as social control in Nithi (2000: 112).

10 The famous document that testifies to this process is *Nangseu sadaeng kitjanukit* by Chao Phraya Thipphakorawong (2002 [1867]), who advocated the ‘purification’ of Buddhism of superstition by employing arguments from scientific, geographical, and comparative religion perspectives. Arguably, Buddhism took a Self as an organized religion in comparison to the Others (significantly, Christianity) from this period onwards. The text, first printed by lithography technique in 1867, can be compared to *Meishin to Shukyo* (Superstition and Religion) by Inoue Enryo, who played a similar role in Japan (see Josephson 2006).

citizens was soon distilled under the triune banner of Nation, Religion and King. Moreover, Mukhom (2006: 77–81) shows that, in this process, the private and public spheres of the life of the king were sharply distinguished, and his wish or complaint could no longer automatically become the law: the emotional part of the king's split self was directed to his private realm and finally superseded by his rational ego, necessary for running the increasingly rational–legal society through a modern bureaucracy. As an institution, the monarchy was subjected to more and more of the visibility and transparency of modern society, and more and more it was challenged by commoners, especially the western-educated military and civil servants. Eventually, what brought down the French *ancien régime* in 1789 came into effect in Siam in 1932, although to a much more limited extent.¹¹

The period between 1932 and 1946 – before King Bhumibol was enthroned – can be characterized by the advancement of a rational–legal society, symbolized by the fact that, under the first quasi-fascist Phibun Songkhram government, the monarchy was eventually brought under the common law. King Ananda Mahidol until his mysterious death and the succeeding King Bhumibol at the beginning of his reign were, in fact, seen only as two powerless little boys in a political landscape from which ‘the Chakri throne could easily have disappeared’ (Handley 2006: 2). In his first three decades on the throne Bhumibol assumed thoroughly human attributes whose charismas could only come from merits, mostly through his closeness to and his extension of loving-kindness and aid to his people. This calls to mind a similar trend in the reigns of his predecessors, who might have been influenced by late eighteenth and early nineteenth Britain and elsewhere when the institution of monarchy was in decline and its visibility and popularity were boosted through travelling to remote areas, founding charities, donations, and religious benevolence (Thanes 2005: 130–131). This monarch as a kind-hearted, self-sacrificing human being, and as an individual (rather than institution) who held ‘the nation's heart’, can be seen in the romantic popular novel, *Si Paendin* (Four Reigns), by Kukrit Pramoj, who, in the late 1950s, played an important role in creating the discourse of the ‘Thai-style leader’, the king as representing the Thai nation in the civilized world, and the monarchy as an inviolable entity (Saichon 2005: 55–56).

11 Three of the leading figures in the People's Party, namely Phibun Songkhram, Pridi Phanomyong and Khuang Aphaiwong, were educated in France and arguably inspired by its history and ideas in their actions.

The portrayal of the king as simultaneously, if paradoxically, human and divine, which can still be discerned today, was intensified by Sarit who introduced many symbolic measures of royal revivalism:

[Sarit] proclaimed the royal birthdays as national holidays and switched national day from the 1932 anniversary to the King's birthday. He reintroduced royal ceremonies, including the First Ploughing, a Sukhothai-era royal rite (Pasuk and Baker 1997: 282).

It was also during his administration that the practice of crawling in front of royalty was restored after being banned in King Chulalongkorn's period. Not surprisingly, in line with these invented traditions, King Bhumibol increasingly 'left behind his European-bred modernist persona', including his preference for Jazz and Expressionist Art, 'to guide his kingdom in the millennium-old tradition of the *dhammaraja*, the selfless king who rules by the Buddhist code of *dhamma*' (Handley 2006: 5). After the period of a decade short of a century (1867–1957) since superstitions and rituals were first officially repudiated, the rehabilitation of the divinity and mystery of the monarchy was anticipated by the religious aura attached to the public appearances of King Bhumibol, underpinned by both official and popular narratives. Although it was during the governments of Phibun (1938–1944 and 1948–1957), who prohibited the portrait of King Rama VII and instead exhibited his own everywhere, that royalty was suppressed, what survived from that period were his *techniques* to build up a nationalism and a cult of the leader through the manipulation of the mass media.

In the late 1970s and the 1980s, the process of deification was made full-scale, history was stretched back from the perspective of the present to establish the truth regime, and the ninety years of the humanizing process of the monarchy suddenly vanished, and was bypassed in the mainstream historiographies in which the past until now was seen as a seamless, continuous history. This is epitomized in the 200-year anniversary of the Rattanakosin era, in which

[...] the government held celebrations and festivities throughout 1982. There was a royal ceremony of merit-making dedicated to the past kings on 5 May 1982. The royal barge procession was re-installed in this ceremony. A specific honorary commemoration of King Bhuddha Yodfa Chulaloke Maharaja [Rama I] was held (Chanida 2007: 246).

In addition,

[...] the title 'Maharaja' [Great King] was added as reverence to King Bhumibol on 5 May 1987 [...]. The '5 December Maharaja' fair, first begun in 1977, has

been held annually to date. The unique ritual of the fair was the night-time well-wishing, candle-lighting ceremony and veneration to the King, led by the Prime Minister in the central *Sanam Luang* ground. To celebrate such an auspicious day, the government also arranged the rite of the royal audience in the morning of 5 December 1987, so that people from all walks of life could equally pay tribute to him (Chanida 2007: 246).

This flattening of history which lifted King Bhumibol to the rank of the great Thai kings of the past can be typified by the usual image in school textbooks and elsewhere of the nine kings of Chakri dynasty, pasted as icons side by side each other. It makes history literally *flat* on the piece of paper: time that should be distinguished between the reigns is levelled up on the same surface of space, eliciting the unity and continuity of the whole group represented in the picture.

This representation in itself, making an appeal to the eye, tells much about the re-emergence of the king-as-god which, on the surface, might seem to bring Thailand back to pre-modern era. However, in contrast to the Ayutthaya's Shiva-reincarnated monarchs who were veiled behind taboos and rituals, King Bhumibol was born again as king-god on television, his avatar in symbols and images, with all the associated rites and rituals extravagantly displayed: he was born under the popular gaze with the coming age of televised culture of the 1980s.

Here I would like to distinguish between *what the king did* and *the display of what he did*. Most theories about the Thai monarchy and Thai political culture focus on the former while the latter remains merely a peripheral ornament among many other tools for establishing royal hegemony (Chanida 2007) or political network (McCargo 2005). For Chanida, the main tool was the king's 'NGO'-style development work; for McCargo, his ability to compromise, adapt, influence or intervene with various players in the political power game that changes over time. The emphasis on the king's actions also underlies such behind-the-scenes, voyeuristic accounts as *The King Never Smiles* or its forerunner *The Revolutionary King*, as well as somewhat more outside-looking-in criticism, such as that of Sulak Sivalaksa and those associated with *Fa Diaa Kan* (lit.: 'same sky') magazine. However, these emphases do not pay enough attention to the surface representation itself, nor do they take seriously the tendency after the 1970s when the exhibition of the royals' images began to overshadow the royals themselves, which rendered their actions – increasingly limited to repetitive day-by-day rituals – akin more and more to performance in theatre or, more exactly, TV shows, and their appearances to those of celebrities. Stressing the significance of representation, Saichon (2005) explains how the knowledge or the sense of

being Thai, 'Thainess', invariably coupled with the king, came into being by careful weaving, and sometimes the official imposition, of the ideal images of the monarchy and Thai society, providing warmth and personally relatable to emotions that bypassed the cold logic of government and bureaucracy. But lacking in her analysis is the transformative process of imaging and gazing, in which the king's portraits have saturated the visual field of the Thais so much that it has reached the point where the narratives have become secondary, where there is no more need for narrating, translating, decoding, explaining, arguing, counter-arguing, where the image is self-sufficient, self-referring, perfect in itself, where it hardly matters to contend whether what the king does is selfless or egoistic (thus silencing all questioning), because the image says it all. Not unlike modern Siam's map that emerged over a century ago, the symbol of the king has replaced the real him, recalling Baudrillard's famous quote from Ecclesiastes, 'the simulacrum is never that which conceals truth; it is the truth which conceals that there is none; the simulacrum is true'.

The king-god who is reincarnated on television and in photographs can never escape the genesis, the rule, the syntax that created him. He can only, and must, go on reproducing himself in images, always remain under the public gaze: although it seems that Thai people are apparently in need of their king, it is the king – lonely and constantly seeking attention like a baby (Thanes 2005: 127) – who cannot exist without the people watching and worshipping him. No matter what the newly crafted myths attempt to claim, the exhibitionist monarch can never resume the same position as the pre-modern king-god, because even rituals and taboos, instead of being tools for veiling, are now for display and exposure. The imaged, rather than imagined, royalty is forever caught in the reluctant state of deified human, and of 'observed spectator' (Foucault 2002: 312). The monarchy has become a logo, a flattened image in spatialized historical time, which, in consumerist society, can be easily turned into a fetishized commodity. We will go back to the jubilee celebration of June 2006 for examples. One newspaper described how

readers of *Kom Chad Luek* newspaper have inundated its switchboard with calls asking it to continue to cover the front page with full-size pictures of Their Majesties the King and Queen. They want the poster-sized pictures as souvenirs for themselves and for their children to look at later on. Some plan to have the pictures framed and placed in their living rooms (*The Nation* 2006a).

Picture-framing shops have, as a result, reported brisk business. Aside from the print media, '[t]he public has expressed a keen interest in viewing video

footage, broadcast on Channel 9, of the Royal Family featuring His Majesty when he was younger. The rare footage shows His Majesty's childhood, his coronation ceremony, his monkhood period, his various trips abroad' (*The Nation* 2006a). One viewer 'spent hours watching Channel 9 through Tuesday without pressing the remote control for other channels' (*The Nation* 2006a). It is a sign of contemporary Thai society, where commodification of everything, including the monarchy, is an intrinsic trend, that it is of utter importance not only to appreciate, but also to *own* the commodity. Picture books, video tapes, VCDs and DVDs about the ceremony and the replayed stories regarding the monarch were in high demand, as 'a way of treasuring the precious moments' (*The Nation* 2006a). The tendency has pushed not only the images of the monarchy but also its related symbols to the point of commercialized fetishism:

People line up in long queues to acquire a variety of the memorabilia associated with the jubilee celebration, such as stamps, Bt60 denominated banknotes, the Royal Emblem, the yellow shirts with the Royal Emblem or with a simple phrase 'Rak Nai Luang' (Love the King). [...] The yellow shirts with the Royal Emblem are the hottest selling item now in Thailand (*The Nation* 2006a).

A television watcher mentioned that 'whenever that moment [of the King and Queen's appearance on the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall] is replayed on TV, tears of delight come to my eyes' while another said, 'after I viewed the footage it made me love His Majesty even more' (*The Nation* 2006a). It is clear that nowadays it is through the ocular sense that people's hearts and feelings are moved. In the social context where people are so accustomed to gain pleasure from 'look but don't touch' (Buck-Morris 1989: 85), they only need to watch the *display* of the king's past deeds and activities to believe that they are true and to be emotionally stimulated. It can also be said that even people who were present at the public audience granted by the King and Queen on 9 June in the Royal Plaza, although their initial intention may have been to *feel* the royal family in person, all they could do was watch from afar, and all their memories about the event, rather like those of tourists (Urry 2002: 128–129), were a collection of images gathered from what they saw, their cameras, live and post-event TV footage, newspaper and magazine reviews and the internet. The royal, then, is forever receding in the labyrinth of spectacles, the inter-referential wall of images, where one only finds image that refers to another image, and so on into infinity.

While it is true that this was anticipated by Martin Heidegger who claimed that 'the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture' (Heidegger 1977: 133) and that technology has distanced the subject

from the object, it was by Jean-Paul Sartre that the concept was further expanded to cover the process in which ‘the visual produces disturbing intersubjective relations and an inauthentic version of the self’ (Sartre, quoted in Jay 1993b: 149). Blurring the distinction between subject and object, perception, for Sartre, is to look at and to be conscious of being looked at. This being-seen-by-the-Other and the internalization of the Other’s gaze is so powerful that it has the effect at the primary level of the creation of the self, the subject, itself: ‘Other’s look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret – the secret of what I am’ (Sartre, quoted in Jay 1993b: 158). In place of contact through other senses, gazing, image and display have increasingly become the medium and modality which defines who we are – the process of detached, remote, yet not passive, formation and transformation of selfhood, which can now occur from a long distance.

This process is also in operation in our case here: the king who has become image must always think and act as image, which is a consciousness of being observed by the Other at all times. The gaze does not stop short at bringing about objectification and commercialization, but it also leads to an intricate relationship between the gazer and the gazed. Within less than a month, Princess Sirindhorn held an exhibition of the photographs she took from the balcony of Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall on 9 June, providing the public the opportunity to see what she saw. The exhibition is symbolic for this gaze-regulated relationship because, taking into account that, as discussed above, image has competed to replace reality, the commoners could, for one brief moment, assume the self of the royal. Proving popular, many other similar photographs were approved by the Bureau of the Royal Household to be disseminated on the internet and other media, including the images seen from behind the king at the moment he walked onto the balcony with the yellow-shirted crowd in the far background, and the pictures of the royal family inside the Throne Hall previously shielded from the public eye and of the crown prince quietly speaking to the king in his ear. Not long afterwards, a picture book containing photographs shot in the past by the king was re-issued in a CD-ROM format (*Manager* 2006), making them more accessible to the spectator mass, who could now virtually sit in the golden pavilion of the Royal Barge Suphannahongse, or watch (from behind) the late King Ananda Mahidol speaking to a crowd with a carbon microphone in Samut Prakarn in 1946.

The cultural transformation in the 1980s and 1990s to the triumph of the visual has established the new grammar of the relationship between the

imaged king-god and the public gaze. It has been necessary for the continued existence of royalty to allow people's visual penetration to relieve the pressure of the desire to gaze and of the middle-class obsession for visibility. Old, rare, and even forbidden images might induce the feeling of awe and increase the distance between the positions of the holy monarch and lowly commoners, but the fact that they are reproduced, popularized, readily available and accessible emphasizes the changing social context where the royal sacredness now stems from self-identification and empathy through gazing and exposure rather than from distinction and differentiation through rituals, taboos, and covertness.

Moreover, the interchange of visual perspectives has brought a convergence of the two worlds to such a degree that not only the TV and image consumers can now, even if temporarily, feel the regal moments, it is obvious that the royal family has gradually adopted middle-class values and lifestyles. The royal self has been constantly shaped by the observant eye of the Other, which has shifted from Science and Western colonizers, to politicians and the military, to the peeping general public. This has been incubating since 1970s when

[The royal family] started to provide royal sponsorship for marriages among the top business families. For the wider, urban middle-class constituency, the royal family offered a model of a modern nuclear family unit. The King regularly appeared in the dress of the modern urban dweller. The royal children were models of the importance of education – the crown prince within the military, and the three royal princesses within social and scientific disciplines (Pasuk and Baker 1997: 282).

The 1990s and early 2000s saw the rise of royal super-stars and trendsetters: the king sparked off 'Tongdaeng Fever' in 2002 by writing a story about one of his dogs, which later became an emblem on a best-selling T-shirt. Princess Ubolratna, the eldest child of the king, after divorcing her American husband and returning to Thailand in 2001, has started many projects following in her father's footsteps, one of which is the famous anti-drug campaign, *To Be Number One*, in which she and her daughter, Ploypailin Jensen, are the main presenters: they are often found singing pop songs and dancing on stage and touring schools around the country. They have also starred in various TV soap series, as well as movies. The Crown Prince, twice divorced, married a commoner in 2001, and has admitted in an interview that he wanted to have a simple, 'normal' family life. The down-to-earth and 'cute' Princess Sirindhorn is often found 'blending in' among the middle class, like going shopping by taking the sky-train from her palace without any formal procedure or security. She has also published a

diary notebook about the pets in her palace. This trend is even more obvious in the third generation: Princess Bajrakitiyabha went to Cornell University for a law degree; her cousin, Princess Siribhachudhabhorn, studied fine arts; and her sister, Princess Siriwannawari Nariratana, has pursued fashion design. The royal family also takes turns in touring abroad both officially and unofficially, often with a special TV crew who send the details of the trips home, where they are broadcast in the daily royal news in a narrating style one might get from tour guides, kindling a romantic dream of travelling and providing a model route for the affluent middle class.

It is not surprising then that many newspapers and commentators dub the king a rock star. It has become obvious that, despite the nationalistic discourse which often emphasizes the fixed, timeless monarchic characteristics based on age-old myths, legends and inviolability, the monarchy of the twenty-first century, as an entity within a dynamic social context, constantly prone to change and transformation, cannot dodge two important forces which underpin contemporary Thai society: *image*, which has vied to replace essence, and *entertainment*, which has outdone ideologies.¹² To be sure, what happened on 9 June, as well as in the events leading to it and after it, was a kind of nationalism. But, unlike the anti-colonial sentiment in post-1945 Southeast Asia and elsewhere, and unlike the official nationalism during the Sixth reign and its revival during Phibun's government in Siam/Thailand, we are arguably facing a decisive break with the past and experiencing a new form of nationalism – owing much to an interplay with a newly emerging form of social life – that serves less the purpose of nation-building than to entertain and to give immediate pleasure. In this new mode of thinking and being, the old ideology of the foundational 'triple gems' of Thai identity – the Nation, the Religion, the King – are not subverted; their relevancy and glory are even magnified, but that magnification is only to serve a new grammar of everyday life: the desire to consume, to derive excitement, to be constantly entertained. It is entertainment nationalism: the king assumes the leading role of a rock star, the Nation the stage of his performance, and Buddhism, more or less the *de facto* Religion of the State (no matter how the drafters of the liberal 1997 Constitution, now non-existent, attempted to redefine the Thai State by formally incorporating other religions), the back-up

12 Much to the grief of such Marxists as Slavoj Žižek, who, as a result, tries to reinstate the significance of ideology, first of all by arguing that this end-of-history age of seemingly unlimited, promiscuous pleasure and entertainment is, in fact, ideology at its purest. See, for example, Žižek 1997.

band which is there to guarantee that the rapturous emotion of 'being Thai' will be heightened to the full.

CONCLUSION

To be sure, an ostentatious display of rituals and spectacular festivities celebrating the glory of the monarchy is not a recent phenomenon, as splendour ceremonies were used to symbolize the power of the British Empire, even to the point of becoming 'the essence and the heart of the matter' (Cannadine 2001: 111), as well as in the courtly spectacles of the French Sun King, Louis XIV, whose 'image of his double body, invented at the time of courtly festivals, will detach itself from the private person and will function in an autonomous way [...] confused with the machine of the State' (Apostolides, quoted in Jay 1993a: 50). What has changed, however, are, firstly, the characteristics, the volume, the intensity, and the velocity of the gaze which technological advancement has effected, and, secondly, perhaps more significantly, the royalty's Other, whose gaze has become increasingly popularized, and evermore piercing, creating a condition to which the monarchy has to adapt.

This trend is not limited to the Thai case, as Mirzoeff illustrates in the case of the 'pop princess' Diana and the implications of the aftermath of her death for the British royal family. As he puts it: 'Two years before its close, monarchical Britain officially joined the twentieth century' (1999: 253). Fujitani also observes a similar trend in Japan, although he still wonders 'how it is that despite the withering of aura and belief, and regardless of the recent demystification of the Nation and the monarchy, so many people still act as if they believe in the dominant narratives of the nation that were created in the time of Japan's modernity' (1996: 243–245). One reason is perhaps the relentless effort on the part of the Japanese Imperial Household Agency to devise the pre-modern strategy of keeping the monarchy behind the Chrysanthemum Curtain as much as possible, as in the words of a retired official of the IHA, 'the aim has been to cut a low profile, to go unnoticed' (Frederick 2006: 19). But more importantly, it is perhaps because of the obsession for demystification on the part of Fujitani and other commentators themselves that prevents them from seriously taking into account the persistently recurring process of mystification in everyday life. The choice of words by Handley is indicative of this de-auratizing, deconstructive tendency when he described the appearance of King Bhumibol when he was ordained as a monk as 'some cool, beat dharma bum from a Jack Kerouac novel' (Handley 2006: 5). Christopher Prendergast points out that 'representations

have a strong built-in tendency to self-naturalization, to offering themselves as if what they represented was the definitive truth of the matter [...] representations define worlds, subjectivities, identities' (2000: 9), and we must also, instead of merely attacking *representation* as illusion, consider and analyze how the process of *representing* works.

Imaging and entertainment, as recent fundamental rules of representing, were also in operation during September 2006 when the royalist army staged a *coup d'état* and overthrew the government of Thaksin Shinawatra. The tanks and soldiers paraded in Bangkok with yellow ribbons, signifying an explicit connection with the monarchy as well as with the public who wore shirts of the same colour during the June ceremonies, and every Monday afterwards. It united them in a semiotic family of loyalty, with Thaksin as the demonic Other. Unlike the previous military takeovers, the September coup expressed a strong tie with the king, whom Thais are so accustomed to associating with splendour, spectacle and heartwarming feelings, as these have developed and embedded in the culture over the past three decades. And this relationship is not the result of a simple equation, as is commonly held, that automatically links 'the king did good things for the people' with 'that is why he is popular', but of a deliberate, popularizing, repeated exposure of the monarchy and a display of its activities specifically for the ever-growing number of remote, detached viewers who are ready to believe that what is shown on the flat screen is real.

The protests against Thaksin that finally brought about the coup, as well as in the wake of it, by People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) were also an inflated version of the 'commonsense' or the standard total view which has favoured the visual sense that directly links the monarchy with warm emotions and ecstasy. The protests were highly symbolic and, through 24-hour live TV broadcasting, interrupted only by fund-raising commercials, were said to resemble a 'reality show' (Kasian 2008). During the PAD siege of Government House, for instance, walking into the compound evoked a music festival: two large stages with fully equipped lighting and sound, muddy ground, stalls selling yellow shirts and other merchandise, tents and toilet queues. Music, dance, poetry, performance, appearance of celebrities constantly occupied the stages and kept the viewers entertained while the speeches by the PAD leaders were kept to a primetime like a headline act. In these PAD protests, one could easily feel that one had safely returned to entertainment nationalism, with its visual link to royalty intact. And this association in the cultural subconscious helped to justify the PAD's moves, even though they provoked the coup, the termination of the Constitution, seizures of Government House and airports, and raids on a television station and

ministries. Thaksin, after being exiled, also attempted similar moves with the Red Shirts, often sending his live speeches directly to protest sites and broadcasting on a satellite TV channel. But his and the Red Shirts' definition of 'Thai' is not yet hegemonic; i.e., the sense is not yet 'common', while the Yellow Shirts built directly upon a well-established nexus of signifiers and signified. This may well be seen as simply a game of signs and symbols, but they are important because they are personally and emotionally related. The turbulent politics of Thailand in the past few years are not concerned simply with changes within political institutions, but also intensely involves the cultural context and transformations and contestations in the very being of the Thais that is visually intertwined and emotionally enthused.

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CHAPTER 4

Culture of Monarchy

A Repertory Theatre through Time

Martin Platt

Academic discussion of the Thai monarchy tends to emphasize either its political aspects, that is, its power, or its historical aspects, particularly its continuity (or lack thereof) over time. However, the deep, even grave, importance of the monarchy is much more broadly based in the cultural-religious bedrock of Thai society. Ideas of what monarchy is and what it means have been understood and expressed over centuries in ways that have not developed and evolved so much as realigned and reoriented according to the needs and realities of a given time. While the emphasis may change, the repertoire of monarchical characteristics remains broad, to be called up and perhaps added to as required. This conglomeration of traits and concepts ascribed to monarchs and monarchy is collectively held and culturally expressed in ways that are comprehensible to members of the society. These cultural expressions may originate with the monarch himself, or from within his immediate circle, or may issue from a more peripheral milieu. All of them, though, contribute to and are part of an overall totality of monarchical meaning and social significance.

In this chapter I look at depictions of monarchs and monarchy through particular examples of cultural expression beginning sometime in the Sukhothai era (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries CE) and extending right up into the present day. I have chosen these particular examples for two reasons. The first is that they show a range and diversity of possibility in what a Thai monarch can or should be, thus contrasting with the more narrowly defined characteristics

of the monarch today. Second, I believe these depictions are both socially and royally sanctioned; they have been either issued by the court itself (at one time or another) or supported by it, and they are widely known and approved in society (that is, taught, published, and reproduced in and through a variety of institutions). These cultural expressions take the form of literary tale, royal eulogy, public encomium, and even populist music video.

LILIT PHRA LAW

'*Lilit Phra Law*' ('The Tale of Prince Law') is considered a classic, indeed one of the oldest and greatest classics, of Thai literature. Though often attributed to the reign of King Narai (r. 1656–1688), it seems likely rather to date to the Sukhothai era (Bickner 1991). In all probability it was composed by a court poet under royal patronage, and its quality and importance were reaffirmed in 1916 by the Literary Circle under Rama VI. In the poem, Phra Law ascends the throne in the city of Suang on the death of his father. Although it is not immediately clear where this place might be located in relation to modern geography, the tale is told and Phra Law himself described in ways that a modern Thai reader would likely admire and feel some affinity with. The work is written in Thai in poetic form (a combination of *khlong* and *rai*). The following stanzas are quoted, with minor changes, from a translation appearing in *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures* (1979a).

- 11 Could it be that the god Indra
 Had descended from the heavens so that
 People on earth could feast their eyes on him?
- 12 Well-proportioned he appeared,
 Slender-waisted, he was
 Astoundingly elegant.
- 13 In appearance he had no rivals
 His unsurpassed beauty
 Captured the three worlds.
- 16 His eyes were like those of a golden doe
 His eyebrows were arched
 Like drawn bows.
- 17 His ears were most beautiful
 Like delicate lotus petals
 His cheeks glowed like the golden *maprang* fruit.

- 18 His nose was exquisite
As if fashioned by the gods –
The hook of *Kama*, the god of love.
- 19 His lips were more beautiful than painted.
They were like the moon
That was smiling enticingly.
- 20 His chin was becoming; his neck was well sculpted; his
shoulders alluring; his chest as broad as a lion's; his arms
as graceful as elephants' trunks; his fingers were supple and
the nails perfect. He was peerless all over.

Phra Law is described as a cosmologically ordained love match for the two equally glorious and illustrious princesses, the sisters Phra Pheuan and Phra Phaeng. When he sets out to find them, even his mother can barely control herself:

- 191 'What consequence of your past deed is this
That makes you resolute on going to them?
Alone I shall suffer the pain of longing.
Let me hold you to ease my troubled heart.'
- 192 She lovingly touched his cheeks, brow, and hair,
His fine mouth and captivating eyes.
She adored the glorious beauty of his face
And his personality; she caressed his ears and cheeks.
- 193 She kissed his nose, breathing in the sweet scent.
Kissing his chin and neck, her heart was near breaking.
She adored his clear skin, his handsome chest,
Also his shoulders, his back and arms.
- 194 She wanted to embrace her son even more
But he stayed her with due respect, saying,
'Bestow your kiss on the top of my head.
Deserve I your touch only on my cheeks and hair.'

In fact he has great reverence for his mother:

- 203 The Prince [really King] listened to the Queen Mother.
He bowed down to her feet in deep respect
Taking in his mind her words of advice.
- 204 He bore upon his head her blessing,
Then untied his hair and with it
Wiped the feet of his mother in homage.

His bathing, before departure, is described in this way:

- 224 [...] He began his toilette ritual, at once taking his bath, dousing himself with perfumed water blended with fine gold dust [...].

When he is finally united with the two princesses, his love-making is described in the famous 'miraculous passages':

- 529 Both the age-old and various methods he used
Without fatigue and exception.
Thus was the love-making he gave to the girls.
- 530 Like a steed at the prime of season he was,
So forceful and high-spirited in strength
Thrusting hurriedly without restraint.
- 531 Like an elephant in frenzied passion
Using its tusk to stab and its trunk to grab
In an effort to come close and conquer.

Indeed, his love-making is so powerful and miraculous, it inspires coupling in the natural world as well:

- 538 Lions mated with lionesses.
Elephants sauntered side-by-side with their mates;
Golden deer strolled gracefully in groups and copulated
with joy;
Rabbits and squirrels hopped and skipped and paired off,
making love.

The father of the princesses (king of a rival realm) learns of Phra Law's secret incursion, but is then charmed as well:

- 594 But when the King saw Phra Law
In full glory and gorgeousness,
His rage declined.
- 597 Having him with us [thought the King]
Is like having the earth and sky in our hands.
- 598 Should he be our son-in-law
The honor and glory
Will be immeasurable.

And, when Phra Law respectfully asked to be joined to the King's family for eternity, the King was filled with joy:

- 599 [...] His face glowed with utter happiness, much more so than when he himself became king.

Eventually, however, catastrophe ensues, and a great battle is fought that results in a mass orgy of death, taking the life of Phra Law, his loyal servants, the princesses, their beloved attendants, and their father the King. Both kingdoms are overcome by grief ‘in a high fever’ (Anthology of ASEAN Literatures 1979a, stanza 535).

Thus Phra Law, King of Suang, is depicted as extremely graceful, beautiful, and full of what might be called ‘sex appeal’. He is greatly admired by all who set eyes on him, and beloved throughout his realm. His glorious sexuality is so powerful and transcendent that it transforms the natural environment, stimulating and inspiring emulation among animals in the wild. Although in the end his actions, along with those of the princesses, bring about calamity, this calamity is of such magnitude that it could only be caused by a royal personage of the highest merit and righteousness. Thus, both the devices of the plot and its disastrous ending confirm Phra Law’s kingly and karmic supremacy.

THE TALE OF PRINCE SAMUTTAKHOTE

‘The Tale of Prince Sammutthakhote’ (*Samutthakhot Kham Chan*) is a poetic legend written initially during the reign of King Narai (r. 1656–1688) and completed in 1849, nearly two centuries later. The Prince and his Princess travel in heavenly realms and meet various adventures before they ascend the throne and teach the Buddhist precepts. The information and translation used here come from Hudak (1993). Prince (later King) Samutthakhote is depicted in three main ways. The first describes his personal battlefield prowess:

- 877 Then Samuttakote appeared
Showing his warrior skills,
His might and his intent.
- 878 With the power of a naga
Able to battle with special powers
He took to the field.
- 879 He seized the iron bow,
Swung the powerful weapon,
And proved his power to all.
- 881 His magic might instilled fear;
As he showed his superior force
In battle on the field.

- 882 Like Rama of the Solar Race
He lifted the iron bow
With might and magnificence.
- 883 He plucked the string and clear thunder
Echoed across the earth
Shaking every corner.
- 885 To all directions, he was polite, courteous,
But his power was feared
By enemies across the earth.
- 898 Every King, soldier, warrior
Praised the Prince's power,
His perfect skill and ability.

The second quality of Prince Samutthakhote, and related to the first, is his knowledge of men and war, power and strategy:

- 931 He reviewed the brave battalions,
Ordered every rank,
Their numbers known.
- 935 He sought brave ones, the best of all,
Asked them to volunteer,
To follow without question.
- 936 He sought a group of keen minds,
That knew all strengths,
All ways the enemy fought.
- 937 He sought brave ones with stamina,
Experienced in battle
With strength and fighting skill.
- 939 He sought a group firm in fidelity,
Who loved the Ruler of the Land
With no treason, no deception.
- 940 Before the Prince they volunteered
To support him,
Never to be remiss in their duties.
- 941 He sought those with stout hearts
Who'd incite each other
With echoing cheers and cries.
- 947 Finishing inspecting thousands,
He chose ten warriors,
Surpassing all others in all ways.

The third and most important characteristic of Prince Samutthakhote is revealed at the end – he is an incarnation of the Buddha:

- 2195 And the Prince who praised the Bho spirit,
Samuttakote,
Was the Buddha, the Great Victor,
Powerful and virtuous.

In this example, the emphasis is on the King's martial prowess, and his ability to discern skilled warriors, build camaraderie, and inspire their loyalty. Moreover, not only does he have the requisite great reserves of merit built up over countless incarnations, as would any king, but he is in fact the Buddha Himself.

A POEM IN TRIBUTE OF KING TAKSIN OF THONBURI

'A Poem in Tribute of King Taksin of Thonburi' was written in 1771 CE by Nai Suan, a page of King Taksin. The poem extends to 85 stanzas in the poetic form known as *khlong si suphab*, and thus allows ample opportunity for the poet to describe in detail the many outstanding qualities of the King. Some examples will be drawn here from the translation in the *Anthology of ASEAN Literary Works* (1979b); they are particularly interesting for their parallels (see below) with twenty-first century descriptions of the ninth king of a dynasty founded upon the regicide of Taksin.

First, his spiritual merit, knowledge, and diligence are extolled:

- 3 His Majesty's merits showered upon the entire world.
His Majesty's power was based on unsurpassed expertise.
His Majesty's scholarly ability and industriousness were unique.
His Majesty's wisdom and determination were unrivalled
worldwide.
- 4 It is analogous to compare His Majesty to Narai, the mighty god,
Who descended to the earth on a Garuda
From a swirling ocean to this very continent.
His Majesty transcended the Disciple of the Buddha.
- 5 The Three Visions he possessed qualified him as supreme man
Who had insight into earthly misery.
He could see and grasp the shortcomings of the followers of
Buddhism.
His Majesty had only the drive to relieve the misery and
suffering of mankind.

Next, the King's dedication to the well-being not only of his own subjects, but of all people, is noted, along with his adherence to the Ten Rules of Kings, and his overall supremacy:

- 8 His mercy nurtured the well-being of men,
 Showering pleasurable experiences over his subjects wherever
 they were.
 The men serving him were both knowledgeable and diligent,
 Raising themselves upward to an appropriate status.
- 11 The merit he made was presumed that of an angel.
 He did all his best to bring advancement to all mankind.
 He ruled with the Monarchical Precepts¹ which impressed
 the whole world.
 His crowning leadership could never be surpassed by anyone.
- 33 His absolute power was supreme and went much beyond
 all other royals in the world.
 In his own right, His Majesty deserved the title to the throne
 which sparkled like a crystal in the sky.
 It acted as a pillar for the world at large to take refuge in.
 Under His Majesty's inspiration, power yielded great
 solidarity and strength.

The King is clearly identified with Buddhist attributes, indeed the Buddha himself, through the use of references to a crystal and a refuge (allusions to the Triple Gem) and the King's dedication to relieving suffering. Furthermore, in Buddhist imagery of teaching, protecting, and emancipating, the King is presented as a benevolent father and paragon of purity:

- 57 His Majesty was the sole savior for all the people.
 His Majesty acted as the parents to all of them.
 His Majesty was both the monarch and the teacher of all people.
 All the people, both men and women, could now enjoy happy
 lives.
- 58 His Majesty was looked at as the place for all people to take
 refuge.
 His mercy relieved the misery of the poor and the unfortunate.
 He assumed the role of freeing all the creatures from their
 sufferings.
 He was also looked at as a stock of wealth which could bring
 happiness to all.

1 This appears to refer to the *thotsaphitratchatham*, or ten royal qualities of monarchy, although the term is not mentioned specifically.

- 70 The bright vision came along with His Majesty's wisdom.
 His Majesty's enlightened mind kept away all sin.
 This built on His Majesty's worldly fame and honor.
 His past meritorious deeds made him a champion of the
 Three Worlds.

In this poem, physical characteristics and beauty are irrelevant, and even martial prowess is a minor element² in comparison with knowledge, world renown, untiring efforts on behalf of the people, and transcendent, paramount Buddhist virtue. The kingly characteristics of a previous era and personage have been replaced, or overshadowed, by a new set of virtues; this new set, by contrast, will retain much of its contemporary relevance in the descriptions of another king more than two centuries later.

BANGKOK POST SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS PUBLICATION

In 2006 the *Bangkok Post* issued 'The Sixtieth Anniversary Celebrations of His Majesty's Accession to the Throne: A Pictorial Commemoration'. If the magazine was not actually produced by the Palace, it can be assumed that all the content would have been either directly approved by the Palace or that the publishers would be completely confident of such approval, as no legal organization would dare publish anything directly commenting on the monarchy, especially in relation to such a high-profile event, if there were any risk of Palace disapproval.³

The publication consists primarily of photographs of the celebrations. However, the first significant text appears on page 5 (English version) and page 6 (Thai version), and is entitled, 'A reign of righteousness'. It begins with a quotation from the King's oath on taking the throne, 'I shall reign with righteousness for the happiness and benefit of the Siamese people', explaining this as a 'commitment to a lifetime of sacrifice and hard work for the sake of the Thai people and nation' (Pattnapong undated: 5). The article goes on to declare that the King has 'remained true to his word' and 'dedicated himself and his whole life to improving the well being and the standard of living of his subjects in all corners of the country', going so far as to travel to all regions 'so that he could see and hear for himself the problems of his subjects' (Pattnapong undated: 5). Furthermore, the King 'is not involved

2 This is particularly surprising in view of the fact that, in his lifetime, Taksin was celebrated as a general who resisted and survived the sack of Ayuthaya and led the nation to new glories in a new realm in Thonburi.

3 The specific mechanisms and details of publishing with actual or anticipated approval of the Palace are beyond the scope of this chapter.

in politics', it states, but serves as a 'refuge' for the people; his 'total devotion has earned His Majesty the unreserved love and respect of the people, making him one of the most beloved monarchs in Thailand's 900-year history' (Pattnapong undated: 5).

Another important characteristic of the King is given as follows:

With rational use of the environment and natural resources, and with great wisdom and understanding of the people's needs and sentiments, he has devised countless agricultural and development projects that have made the lives of Thai people, especially farmers and the rural poor, much easier (Pattnapong undated: 5).

And finally:

His Majesty has been the longest reigning monarch in the history of Thailand. The longevity of his reign is, in itself, truly remarkable, yet what is much more significant is the fact that he has bridged the gap between past and present, traditional and modern, symbolic and realistic, and has redefined the role of the monarch into a truly contemporary sense of the word (Pattnapong undated: 5).

Farther along in the magazine are fifteen pages of photographs of the members of the world's royal families (with special emphasis on neighbouring countries) who came to Thailand for the celebration. 'The Royal Guest List' is provided to show that some three dozen members of royalty from 25 countries (how many readers were aware that 25 monarchies still exist in the world?) attended the gala event.

In this publication, the King's virtues include sacrifice, hard work, wisdom, environmental commitment, and concern for the well-being of underprivileged Thais. He is above politics, loved by the people, and part of a long Thai monarchical tradition dating back nine centuries. In fact, he is the longest reigning monarch in Thai history, it is noted (Pattnapong undated: 9), surpassing even the great King Chulalongkorn, who ruled for 42 years. In addition, he has enjoyed, or been blessed with, the longest reign of any living monarch in the world, and his glory attracts royalty the world over to attend his celebration. This attendance echoes the homage paid throughout history to great emperors, whose pre-eminence drew kings and representatives of lesser states to present themselves at his court as a way of expressing their acknowledgement of the emperor's superiority. All of the outstanding attributes and events recounted in the described publication attest to the King's supreme stature and his tremendous reservoir of righteous merit.

THAILAND'S ROYAL PROJECT

On 12 June 2007, the Royal Thai Embassy in Copenhagen sponsored a reception and exhibition on 'Thailand's Royal Project', also known as the Royal Development Project. Admission was limited to invited guests, each of whom received an information packet containing booklets, pamphlets, and CD-ROMs. These materials evidently were specially prepared for the exhibition, which also travelled to Stockholm and other European capitals. The two main aims appeared to be extolling the King and his Project and promoting foreign trade for the Project's products.

One of the publications in the packet, a blue pamphlet simply titled, 'Thailand's Royal Project', describes the history, operations, achievements, and future of the Project (Thailand's Royal Project undated). It begins with an account of how the highlands of northern Thailand were 'close to disaster' in the late 1960s due to the opium trade, slash and burn agricultural methods, and lack of roads and education; the 'hill tribes' were 'permanently sick' and 'did not have enough food to eat or proper shelter' (Thailand's Royal Project undated: 3–4). Now, however, '[t]he highlands are lush and green' and characterized by 'peace and prosperity'; deforestation has been arrested, opium has been eradicated, and hill-tribe families are 'living in well-made housing with electricity and satellite television and with a new pickup truck parked outside' (Thailand's Royal Project undated: 3–4).⁴ The cause of this progress is clear:

This transformation has taken place because of the vision and leadership of His Majesty King Bhumiphol Adulyadej. In 1969, His Majesty the King saw the possibility of replacing opium-based farming with more environmentally friendly and profitable forms of farming, and started an initiative to make this vision a reality. This initiative came to be known as 'The Royal Project' (Thailand's Royal Project undated: 3–4).

This publication, and the exhibition of which it was a part, expressed an image of the King which is in very close agreement with that of the *Bangkok Post* publication discussed above. The King is again shown as visionary, environmentally committed, concerned with the welfare of the poor, and working for the good of the country in general. His long-term efforts, stretching across nearly 40 years in this particular endeavour, have brought about a transformation in the lives of the hill tribes, and have helped to save the nation's mountains and rivers for the Thai people. The Project also brings high-quality, healthy produce – 'tested

⁴ Of course, it is not mentioned that many hill-tribe people are still denied citizenship and identity cards.

for unsafe levels of chemical residue' (Thailand's Royal Project undated: 27) – to urban customers in Chiang Mai, Bangkok, and beyond.⁵ In this depiction, the monarchy serves as a model demonstrating characteristics widely valued in contemporary global society, including environmental awareness, sustainable development, and international commerce.

CONCLUSION

The few examples quoted here show some of the many different characteristics attributed at different times to monarchs in Thailand. I would contend that all of these diverse depictions (and more) exist simultaneously in a kind of cultural treasury, and that certain aspects are emphasized at given times for particular purposes and as befits the circumstances. That is, from this repertoire (which is large but not infinite, and diverse but not unrestricted) attributes are chosen based on the historical moment, which subsumes contemporary issues, political concerns and social values. Currently some attributes cannot be claimed, while others might not be seen as valued or relevant. As the King is old and infirm, physical attractiveness or martial prowess are not available as characteristics; sex appeal or the ability to choose war experts are currently irrelevant. His status as a bulwark against Communism, so important two to three decades ago, is no longer meaningful.⁶

However, there are other characteristics that can be ascribed to the King to glorify him in the current situation. In political crises, his wisdom enabled him to bring about a solution by supporting particular experts (generals). Environmental problems, which attract increasing public concern, have been alleviated due to his vision and hard work. Under the pressures of globalization and perceived foreign exploitation of the country, he has improved the livelihood of the rural poor. Perhaps most important now, though, according to what we see and hear, is the longevity of the King and his rule. This is shown by his ability (power) to attract the crowned heads of the world in celebration of his achievement.⁷ All those who came to Thailand in his honour paid a contemporary version of tribute

5 Many of the Project's products were available for sampling and purchase (and preferably large-scale orders) at the exhibition, including temperate climate fruits and vegetables, herbal teas, woven baskets, and souvenirs.

6 On this topic, see Bowie (1997); Girling (1981); and Terwiel (2005).

7 The volume and nature of the coverage given in the media to the visit of the Crown Prince of Bhutan (who very soon afterwards became King of Bhutan upon the abdication of his father) show that the attributes of youth, attractiveness and sex appeal are still valued and available elements of a royal repertoire among Thai people.

– appearing before the media in their finery in yet another production of the theatre state, not to enhance his great prestige and charisma, but to demonstrate it and bask in it.

POSTSCRIPT

One recent depiction of the King today in Thailand takes the form of a music video that started to appear on BTS trains in Bangkok around the beginning of November 2007 (perhaps replacing previous videos on the theme of the sufficiency economy). In this depiction, the song is in a modern folk style and the action takes place up-country. An elderly woman is shown paying reverential respects (or *wai*-ing) in front of a picture of the King. When her granddaughter asks who it is in the picture, the grandmother replies, ‘*thewada thi mi lom hai yai*’ (a living, breathing angel).

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Part II

The Legal Sanction of Sacredness

CHAPTER 5

The Intricacies of Lese-Majesty

A Comparative Study of Imperial Germany and Modern Thailand

David Streckfuss

A huge and sophisticated state apparatus in Thailand is dedicated to preserving a particular image of the Thai monarchy, with experts in law, technology, public relations, marketing and crime suppression. The portrayal of the Thai royal family's image is meticulously produced by the palace's public relations unit. It is the efforts of this 600-strong production unit that create the heart-rendering movie clips of the royal anthem shown before cinema showings and arranged the logistics that brought millions of grateful Thai citizens pouring into Bangkok to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne in 2006 (Anonymous source).¹ These marvellously staged performances have a single objective: to show the enduring loyalty of Thais to the institution as a natural outcome of love and devotion. In a fit of hyperbole, many Thais declared King Bhumibol 'the Greatest King Ever' (*The Economist*, 2 July 2009).

At the same time, the lese-majesty law ensures that such 'love and respect' is strictly observed, and appropriately a subject of outrage when questioned. It becomes literally 'unsayable' to publicly voice concern over something the king said, to question the near-enlightened state of his moral and intellectual being,

¹ Michael Connors depicts the efforts of the palace as part of an 'iron regime of controlled imagery' (Connors 2003: 113). See also Handley (2006: 269).

or to express the view that the monarchy, like all institutions in a democracy, be open to scrutiny and criticism.

When in public places, discussions of the monarchy are always accompanied with a looking over one's shoulder, lowering the voice, and pulling in more closely to the other conversing. All Thai academics know how to call a conference 'academic' in order to lend greater legitimacy to what may be said in reference to the monarchy. All Thai writers know that publishing in English makes navigating around lese-majesty charges less dangerous. All Thai social commentators know that they cannot actually speak publicly about the most obvious reality of Thai political discourse – the utter black hole that is the monarchy and the lese-majesty law that mans its gates. If the monarchy is referred to, even in confidential exchanges, it is often with a system of euphemisms such as 'from above' to refer to the palace. Rather than shrinking from this archaic law, Thai officialdom is instead emboldened and proclaims the authenticity of the love Thais have for their monarch and monarchy, and, to prove it, indicate the reasonableness of an active and potent lese-majesty law (Borwornsak 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

A history of lese-majesty is a chronicle of silence: the things never said, the articles never written, the thoughts perhaps never even imagined. How can history ever account for this inaccessible and prominent silence created by lese-majesty that has pervaded Thai studies in general?

Thongchai Winichakul has written that because scholars 'have been penalised' or work 'under self-censorship in order to avoid trouble due to the serious nature of the *lèse majesté* charge [...] the monarchy [...] has been able to escape the attention, let alone scrutiny, by most observers and scholars'. The result is that, 'when we study and talk about politics', the monarchy – 'a most crucial piece' – is omitted (Thongchai 2008: 19). Kevin Hewison, in his review of Handley's book, *The King Never Smiles*, makes a similar point:

It seems that many scholars consider that the monarchy is indeed above criticism. [...] The resulting self-censorship means that critical material on the current monarch has been ignored. [...] With the publication of Handley's book, there is no longer any excuse for ignoring the palace's political role (Hewison 2008: 195).

In his recent piece on Thai historiography, Patrick Jory has pointed out that historians of Thailand have been in an acutely sensitive situation for more than a half century, as perceived criticism of the monarchy

[...] is effectively unconstitutional, may count as a criminal offence, and in theory could also be regarded as an act of treason. Not surprisingly, a long list of books deemed critical of the monarchy, including histories, are officially

banned in Thailand. Controversial events of the last 60 years involving the king are dangerous territory for Thai historians to tread and are treated with a high degree of self-censorship (Jory forthcoming).

Lese-majesty in Thailand, as never before, has come not only to dictate the terms of the debate, but also who will be party to the debate. From 1992 to 2004, there were fewer than an average of five cases of lese-majesty tried per year in Thailand. For the four-year period of 2005–2008, the average rose to an average of more than 60 cases annually, with an all-time high number of 126 cases tried in 2007 alone – an astounding 1,575 per cent increase of lese-majesty cases prosecuted.² Moreover, defendants in lese-majesty cases from 1992 to 2005 had only a six per cent chance of acquittal (Streckfuss 2008: 20–23).

Some scholars, and rightly so, have attributed the recent spate of lese-majesty cases to the ever-looming question of succession (Montesano 2009). Others, like the rightist People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and members of the Democrat Party, claim there is an organized movement, backed by the ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, to overthrow the monarchy.³ As such, the rise in lese-majesty cases makes perfect sense: those tried for the crime are part of the conspiracy.

But the main cause for the accelerated use of the lese-majesty law is more historical in nature, having more to do with a failing, century-old national ideology (in the last half century touted as 'Thai-style democracy') and fundamental, unresolved contradictions of democratization. These contradictions became pressurized during Thaksin's administrations (2001–2006), in the political chaos beginning in 2005, in a series of desperate, poorly thought-out decisions by the palace (its failure to address the problem of the lese-majesty law, its perceived support for the 19 September 2006 coup, and the appearance of the palace and courts to take sides in the ongoing political conflict), and in the unwise and indiscriminate use of the lese-majesty law by the authorities. As a result and largely by its own doing, the palace has squandered the immense political and social capital it had built up by mid-2006. At the same time, opponents of

2 Prior to 2006, the highest number of arrests recorded in a single year was 36 in 1977, and the highest number of cases actually tried in a single year was a mere eight cases – in 2005, 1998, and 1995, respectively (Office of the Judiciary n.d.; Police Department n.d.; Attorney General's Office n.d.).

3 In November 2009, Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya claimed Thaksin 'is using a helping hand from a neighboring country as a tool to overthrow the monarchy and the Thai government' (see Bangkok Pundit 2009).

the political status quo have found novel ways to attack the institution of the monarchy without necessarily defaming or insulting the royal family as such.

LEGAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE CONFLICT

Two Thai legal provisions, inheritances from the age of absolute monarchy, represent a serious, perhaps irreconcilable, conflict with the aspirations of the democratic form of government established in Siam in 1932. Section 8 of the 2007 Thai Constitution reads: 'The King shall be enthroned in a position of revered worship and shall not be violated. No person shall expose the King to any sort of accusation or action.' The law that ensures the observance of such revered worship, Thailand's 'lese-majesty' law, is Section 112 of the 1957 Thai criminal code, as amended in 1976, which reads 'Whoever defames, insults or threatens the King, the Queen, the Heir apparent or the Regent shall be punished with imprisonment of three years to fifteen years' (Royal Gazette 1976: 46).⁴

In conflict with these authoritarian measures are a number of provisions from the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand of 2007. Sections 4, 5 and 30 uphold the principle of equality of 'all persons' who shall not suffer 'unjust discrimination' for 'difference in [...] constitutionally political view'. Section 45 guarantees that 'A person shall enjoy the liberty to express his opinion, make speech, write, print, publicise, and make expression by other means', and Section 50 ensures academic freedom 'provided that it is not contrary to his civic duties or good morals'. Sections 28 and 29 forbid the State to 'affect the essential substances' of the 'rights and liberties' that every person may exercise as long as it is not 'contrary to this Constitution or good morals'. Finally, Section 6 upholds the principle that 'The Constitution is the supreme law of the State' and that laws contrary to the Constitution 'shall be unenforceable' (Office of the Council of State 2007).⁵

4 Beyond Section 8, there are a number of other constitutional provisions that refer to the monarchy, such as Section 77: 'The State shall protect and uphold the institution of kingship and [...] shall arrange for the maintenance of [...] armed forces [...] for the protection and upholding of its [...] institution of kingship [...] and the democratic regime of government with the King as Head of State [...]'.
5 The restrictions on liberty described in Section 45 are rather extensive, allowing the State to restrict freedom of expression when there is 'law specifically enacted for the purpose of maintaining the security of the State, protecting the rights, liberties, dignity, reputation, family or privacy rights of other persons, maintaining public order or good morals or preventing or halting the deterioration of the mind or health of the public'.

Is Thailand primarily a democracy protected by a constitution that guarantees rights, or is it primarily a monarchy with authoritarian structures that prevent democratization? The discourse over the lese-majesty law in Thai society is a microcosm of the serious conflict between the sacredness and privilege of absolute monarchy, on the one hand, and basic democratic rights and freedoms, on the other. This discourse has largely gone unexamined by Thai academics and has never directly been challenged in court by human rights advocates. Foreign scholars of Thailand have also avoided addressing the subject too closely or critically.⁶

In most modern monarchies, the use of a law like lese-majesty is so limited and measured that it sheds little light on the political dynamic of the polity. But Thailand's political regime in the past half century and certainly since 1976 has been largely defined by lese-majesty. Its use reflects oceanic shifts, subterranean political fissures, and a framework of an 'unwritten constitution' and unwritten laws that shape Thailand's current political contours (Ginsburg 2009). Just how illiberal and eccentric Thailand's use of the law is has been pointed out elsewhere; here we are trying to understand comparatively the architecture of this illiberal anachronism, and what it means within a Thai context.

To do so, we have to travel back more than a century to the German Empire of 1871–1918 to find a suitable comparison, for here an extraordinary cluster of lese-majesty cases came to regulate and define German national political culture. In both the German and Thai cases, lese-majesty laws shared some of the most conservative and suppressive tendencies of the law, including: (1) protections under lese-majesty law move toward conflation and expansion, (2) lese-majesty law serves as a self-protecting mechanism within a defamation regime, (3) cultural and political conditions of authoritarian structures are partially determined by lese-majesty law, and (4) legal permutations make lese-majesty law both prone to abuse and seemingly impossible to change.

A SHORT HISTORY OF LESE-MAJESTY

Lese-majesty has had a relatively short lifespan. Although the term and its precedents emerged under Roman law, it did not really become a clearly defined discursive topic until the age of absolutism in Europe. The few scholars who have examined lese-majesty have focused primarily on France, where a rather sophisticated philosophical and political justification for the importance and use

⁶ For a comprehensive summary of Thai and foreign works on lese-majesty, see Streckfuss (forthcoming).

of the law was developed by the French jurist Cardin Le Bret in the seventeenth century, and the use (and abuse) of the law in the eighteenth century represented the first real lese-majesty cluster (see Bret 1632 as quoted in Church 1972: 274; Kley 1984: 226–270; Merrick 1990: 25–26, 37, 85–86, 167). With the shift to constitutional monarchies in the aftermath of the French Revolution, the central tension between freedom and the inviolability of the person of the monarch became more focused and problematic. A typical rendering of this tension, between two conflicting and ultimately irreconcilable modes – the public, secular, and democratic sphere versus a sacred sphere protected by a type of anti-blasphemy law – is Samuel Horsley’s of 1793: ‘Our Constitution [...] unites the most perfect security of the Subject’s Liberty, with the most absolute inviolability of the sacred person of the Sovereign’ (Oxford English Dictionary).

Lese-majesty, as a vestige of the absolutist state within a growing number of constitutional monarchies, was increasingly separated from its automatic coupling with treason, and became a form of essentially *petty* treason that focused on actions or words that represented a personal affront to the monarch. In the mid- to late eighteenth century and through the entirety of the nineteenth century, the emerging bourgeoisie, depending primarily on the press, wrestled with monarchical states for power, forcing monarchs to establish representative legislative bodies and constitutions. As the public sphere widened (à la Habermas), or civil society strengthened (à la Gramsci), the repressive mechanism of lese-majesty became a focal point of struggle between the sacred and privilege, on the one hand, and democracy and equality, on the other.

Lese-majesty experienced an ignoble and rather messy demise, culminating prominently in a second key cluster under the German Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Streckfuss 2008: 20–23). Its exit into historical obscurity was arrested suddenly when Thailand’s lese-majesty flared into fluorescence quite unknown anywhere else. Never has such an archaic law held such sway over a ‘modern’ society. The question here is how such an anachronistic feat was accomplished.

LESE-MAJESTY UNDER THE GERMAN EMPIRE

A cursory examination of lese-majesty under the German Empire, where discourse about it would nowhere become as pointed (and absurd) will help in understanding the Thai case of a century later. Broadly speaking, the case of the German Empire was largely accentuated by two main poles: the utter persistence exercised by the German state in using the lese-majesty law, and the remarkable

tenacity of the German press in challenging it. It is truly history's finest example of the increasingly desperate attempts by a 'sacred' regime to preserve its prestige through the lese-majesty law.

Between 1882 and 1888, an annual average of 439 persons was put in jail for lese-majesty. During the first seven years of the reign of the last German Emperor, Wilhelm II, the average annual number of persons sentenced for lese-majesty increased to 551, reaching a total of 4,965 sentences for lese-majesty handed down by German courts by the mid-1890s.

Arithmetically, prosecution of lese-majesty cases seemed to be overwhelming. One newspaper wrote, 'The offense of lèse-majesté is of almost daily occurrence, and if all were to be prosecuted who expressed discontent with the acts of the Emperor and the Government, it would be necessary to turn all the barracks into prisons in order to find room for them' (*New York Times*, 13 November 1898).

Even after repeated calls for the repeal of the law in the Reichstag, the number of lese-majesty cases increased at a dizzying pace (*New York Times*, 16 October 1897 and 18 December 1898). It was reported that there were 48 lese-majesty trials in January 1899 alone (*New York Times*, 5 February 1899). One observer even estimated that the number up to 1898 may have even quadrupled since Emperor Wilhelm II came to the throne (*New York Times*, 13 November 1898). Astounded, the *New York Times* correspondent in Germany Edward Breck remarked: 'Never have there been so many prosecutions for lèse-majesté, nor have they ever been aimed at so distinguished persons.' Noting that even conservative newspapers called the prosecution of a prominent academic 'a grave political faux pas', Breck incredulously observes, 'we may well rub our eyes and ask where the advisers of his Majesty are going to stop in their reactionary course' (*New York Times*, 8 January 1899).⁷

The law allowed a maximum period of imprisonment of five years, but sentences typically ranged from a month to three years. The average sentence up to 1895 was almost six months (*New York Times*, 23 January 1898).⁸ Although the sentences seem relatively modest, the sheer quantity of those sentenced equalled a lot of jail time for Germans. One newspaper calculated in the past decade, 'as the price of the very limited amount of freedom of speech which exists in the German Empire', German courts had, as a whole, condemned those found guilty of lese-majesty to 2,600 years of imprisonment (*New York Times*, 5

⁷ A recently discovered apparently fictional story about a lese-majesty case in Imperial Germany has been attributed to Breck. See 'Crimes against the State [*Verbrechen Gegen Den Staat*]' in New Mandala's website (New Mandala 2009).

⁸ For instance, *New York Times*, 18 May 1896: 6, 9, and 12 months.

February 1899). In a six-year period, a total of 248 persons under 21 years of age had been incarcerated for lese-majesty, seven of them under 15 years of age (*New York Times*, 23 January 1897).

Lese-majesty seemed to be everywhere: in Hamburg, ‘a man scoffed’ at a song the Emperor composed (*New York Times*, 22 November 1894); a 19-year-old girl was given two months ‘for merely criticising a picture of the Emperor’ in a store window; a 17-year-old girl was given six months ‘because, in the presence of another girl, she tore down a portrait of the Emperor from the wall of her own room’ (*New York Times*, 6 November 1898); a drunk German-American was accused of calling the Emperor a ‘sheep’s head’ and deported – in his own defense, the accused countered that he had said merely that the Emperor was a ‘blockhead’ (*New York Times*, 21 December 1898); 13-year-old John Brodowski was given a week in jail (*New York Times*, 26 February 1899); a ‘popular music hall comedian’ was ordered to stop making jokes about the Emperor (*New York Times*, 22 January 1899); an actor’s Emperor jokes earned him nine months (*New York Times*, 22 August 1903); in Dusseldorf, a deaf man was given four months (*New York Times*, 10 October 1900); a street porter in Marburg was given six months for insulting the Empress (*New York Times*, 28 April 1900); a worker of Beuthen was given one year (*New York Times*, 28 October 1900); a farmer who questioned the piety of the Emperor and court landed two months in jail (*New York Times*, 5 October 1902); two newspaper editors were found guilty of lese-majesty for publishing an article from an Austrian newspaper that reported that a recently-deceased tramp in Austria was really a son of a past German Emperor (*New York Times*, 18 October 1903).

UNDERSTANDING THE GERMAN EXPERIENCE WITH LESE-MAJESTY

The incredible cluster of lese-majesty charges in Germany between 1894 and 1906 – a 13-year stretch – reveals much about German politics and the lese-majesty law. Analyzing the ways that contemporary commentators, both in the German Empire and outside it, understood and criticized the lese-majesty law provides insight into the power dynamics underlying German politics and culture of the time. Broadly speaking, the issues surrounding the law can be clustered into: the law and its use, the problematic role of the Emperor in politics, the debilitating effects the law had on the state of German democracy, and the role the law played in helping to form a certain political and cultural form of German-ness. Despite these conditions strengthening the lese-majesty law, appearing on the German political scene was a new ‘band’ of Germans ‘who

are determined to speak what they think, no matter what the consequences may be', and who showed a remarkable boldness in demanding greater democracy vis-à-vis the imperial state (*New York Times*, 23 January 1898).

THE GERMAN LESE-MAJESTY LAW AND ITS USE

Given the wide variety of political forms existing under the fractured German Empire, it was unclear to contemporary observers exactly who was covered by the law.⁹ 'Representatives of the Emperor' could include government ministers down to petty officials carrying out the work of Empire.¹⁰ Outside of the realm, other monarchs were protected by the German lese-majesty law, as in an 1897 case involving a German newspaper editor charged with insulting the King of the Belgians.¹¹ It appeared that Germans (and some foreigners in Germany) from all walks of life could be targets of lese-majesty charges, and it was not uncommon for state officials to be charged and jailed for the crime (*New York Times*, 6 May 1899; 6 April 1900; 25 December 1906). The interpretation of words spoken or written was 'very elastic', and could 'be made to apply to almost any words spoken which may be offensive to the Emperor' and was prone to accusations of 'more or less imaginary offences' (*New York Times*, 23 January 1898).

The law's loose variables – the uncertainty of who was covered, the indiscriminate targeting, and the ambiguous interpretation – made abuse a common occurrence. Anyone could make the charge, with little review from prosecutors and no consent needed from the Emperor to file charges. The result

9 One commentator pointed out that it was 'a very complicated affair'. Those 'directly' covered by the law were: 'the Emperor, the Regents of all German States, all the members of their families, and the monarchy of a State not belonging to the German Empire' (*New York Times*, 24 April 1898).

10 A contemporary scholar explained: 'In a monarchical state all officials, whether high or low, whether administrative or judicial, whether civil or military, are simply the assistants of the monarch, in the eyes of the public law a part of the monarch as the source of all power in the state; this principle finds formal expression in the appointment of the officials by the ruler' (see Zorn 1899: 83).

11 When King Leopold was attacked by the *Hamburg Echo*, its editor was sentenced to eight months for lese-majesty (*New York Times*, 27 November 1897). A Socialist ridiculed the policy by inviting monarchs to king-friendly Germany: 'All the rulers of the earth joyfully recognize the fact that in Germany the monarchic principle is carefully shielded against wicked critics, and the fame of the German Penal Code will penetrate even to the rulers of the African tribes. Wherever a ruler is unpopular, let him come to Germany. Here, where under the shelter of lèse-majesté, every criticism is forbidden, he may spend the rest of his days in peace' (*New York Times*, 23 January 1898).

was that casual conversationalists had to be wary, and the Empire became a state of informers.¹²

Although it was recognized that the law was subject to massive abuse, the nature of the law's position in relation to the Emperor made even public discussion hazardous. An attempt by a few Reichstag members to reform the law by requiring state prosecutors or the Emperor to review accusations before charges were made failed in 1897 (*New York Times*, 13 March 1897).¹³

THE PROBLEMATIC ROLE OF THE EMPEROR

Emperor Wilhelm II played an active role in laying out state policy and commenting on various political matters in his speeches. When the Emperor showed favour to proposed laws or policies, it was difficult for ordinary citizens or politicians to make any critical comment for fear of the lese-majesty accusations.¹⁴ The Emperor's role as sovereign made him automatically a public figure, but there was no clear separation between the Emperor's 'personal opinions' and his 'official pronouncements'. To clear up the matter, a decision by the German Imperial Court confirmed that 'a speech from the throne is a Government act, and not a personal expression of opinion on the part of the Emperor'.¹⁵ With reason, critics blamed the Emperor himself for allowing the matter of lese-majesty to remain unclear (*New York Times*, 14 May 1897).¹⁶ Others (outside

12 'Denunciation was ever the faithful ally of tyrannies, and it is in full swing in the German Empire' (*New York Times*, 8 January 1899; 14 May 1897).

13 Commentators at the time recognized that it was not the law itself that was the problem, but rather the political and legal context in which it was used. After all, they reasoned, similar lese-majesty laws were in the penal codes throughout the continent (*New York Times*, 14 May 1897).

14 One Frankfurt newspaper opined: 'We have reached a stage where it becomes impossible to freely comment upon political affairs, for, with the prominent part the Emperor has taken in politics, it is impossible to separate him from criticism, and it thus becomes a difficult trick to avoid prosecution upon the part of a crazy State Attorney' (*New York Times*, 13 November 1898). It made free and open debate in the Reichstag impossible (*New York Times*, 13 March 1897).

15 At the same time, seemingly contradictorily, the court also voiced the opinion that the 'the Emperor may proclaim his personal opinion' in speeches (*New York Times*, 31 July 1899).

16 If only the law could be applied with 'some discretion' and the 'potentates', said one critic, who put it into motion were restrained. The Emperor could have voiced his opposition to 'petty inquisition' and 'petty persecution' involved with lese-majesty, and cases would end at once. Then, 'The police would concern themselves with the doings of real enemies to the State, and not of the law-abiding Germans who may be

Germany), argued that lacking any mechanism to hold the Emperor accountable skewed political debate. When attacking state policy, critics had to direct their criticisms at others, rather than at the Emperor himself.¹⁷

The nature of the Emperor's role and the use of the lese-majesty law made nearly impossible debate on basic political rights or on the position of the citizenry in relation to the state. As such, without open and free debate, the law negated the usefulness of the main democratic body of the Empire, the Reichstag. 'The rule', wrote one observer, was that it 'is absolutely necessary to the existence of a constitutional Government' that 'representatives of the people shall not be questioned elsewhere for words spoken in debate'. Instead, Reichstag members could not 'express themselves freely about measures which personally affect their "dread sovereign"', and were forced to adopt a 'very gingerly manner' when 'expressing themselves'. Limits on debate in the greater society were deemed just as bad: 'The debates upon the subject are deprived of the illuminating power which they would have if the discussions were free' (*New York Times*, 14 May 1897).

THE LAW'S ROLE IN CREATING 'GERMAN-NESS'

The law began to affect the way German history was to be understood. When the government attacked a Berlin University historian for committing lese-majesty, a commentator, arguing that academics should have 'the right to speak critically of historical events', expressed a worry that:

[...] it would appear that any citizen, at the close of the nineteenth century, (excepting in Russia and in uncivilized countries,) should have the right to criticise the policy of the Government, and still more so a professor of history, unless he consents, against all the glorious traditions of the German universities, to teach with a gag in his mouth (*New York Times*, 3 January 1899).

occasionally exasperated by the doings of their ruler to the point of mentioning, in the freedom of social intercourse, that the Kaiser is an ass' (*New York Times*, 8 February 1903).

- 17 An Austrian newspaper (which could write more freely) suggested that the lese-majesty law forced political players into a game of subterfuge, where criticism of the Emperor was hidden, although he was the target: '[...] an open and honest war against the erroneous views of the sovereign would be preferable to the present custom in Germany of 'arbitrarily' interpreting his utterances and with 'veiled' insinuations attacking the Emperor under cover of the Chancellor. This manner of slipping like an eel through the meshes of the law of lese-majesty is more damaging to the monarchical sentiment than the most violent stroke of crushing criticism' (*New York Times*, 29 September 1902).

Moreover, the use of the lese-majesty law invigorated the 'enemy function' and became indispensable to the construction of the 'culture' of the German Empire. With the daily accusations of lese-majesty, the state could define an enemy as one opposed to the monarchy – and emphasize the importance of defending the Emperor.¹⁸ Academics of the time well served the Empire by providing a rationale for using the lese-majesty law. Ernest Schuster, a law professor in Munich, for instance, defended three key aspects of the German law in 1901.

First, he affirmed the view that it was 'not only the right, but also the duty, of the Sovereign to take an active part in the government of his country'. Accordingly, Schuster argued, the Emperor 'becomes much more prominent in politics and more exposed to attack'. Second, Schuster stressed the need for a vigorous application of the law and heavy punishments, because attacks on the Emperor 'tend to degrade the position of the Sovereign in the public estimation', which in turn could 'create a danger to the institutions of the country'. Third, Schuster contended that Germans were unique in that 'personal insult' is a crime in Germany, and all Germans deserve protection from it. The German legal conception of insult was 'unknown to English Criminal Law', and 'German law protects, attempts to protect, every individual, whatever his station may be, against personal insult, and that the special provisions relating to insults, directed against German sovereigns [sic] are only of a supplemental nature and are based on the same principles as those relating to the punishment of ordinary insults' (Schuster 1901).

These three key principles – the Emperor playing an active political role, the use of the lese-majesty law fostering the political notion of 'an enemy of the state', and 'insult' being the basis not only of the German lese-majesty law but being a unique German cultural construct – provide the legal justification for the prodigious use of the lese-majesty law in the German Empire. If lese-majesty was the suppressive side of a state ideology, then the other side was the state-sponsored representations of the monarchy, the person of the Emperor, and his actions as the national source of all that was good, all progress, all hope (Schierbrand 1902).

18 Perhaps the most widespread effect of the lese-majesty law was to support the 'enemy function' that certain states need to legitimize rule. The German Emperor, in 13 years on the throne, had by 1903 defined what he called the 'inner enemy' – the Socialists – who primarily represented a force that would replace citizens as the nexus of political power rather than the monarch (*New York Times*, 8 February 1903). The Emperor was rather clear on this, saying, 'For me a Social Democrat is the equivalent of an enemy of the Empire and the Fatherland.'

In 1902, Wolf von Schierbrand published his book on the ‘German character’. In what a reviewer claims to be ‘a very careful analysis of the character’ of the Emperor, von Schierbrand depicts the Emperor as

[...] a curious combination of the thoroughly modern man as far as ends are concerned, and a pronounced reactionist as regards the means by which those ends shall be attained. With one foot he stands in the eighteenth century, in the century of Louis XV and absolutism; and with the other he touches the twentieth century, the century of electricity and of an untrammelled press. [...] He is an autocrat by belief, by training, by temperament, and not a constitutional monarch. [...] he profoundly believes in the divine right of Kings and in the providential character of his own mission. He believes, with Charles I, that a monarch can do no wrong. [...] He believes in paternalism and enlightened despotism, and not in parliamentary rule nor in constitutional barriers to his own will.

The German character (‘German-ness’) was centered on the person of the Emperor. As a contemporary observer noted: ‘There can be no doubt of the tremendous personal influence of Wilhelm II in almost every department of politics, society, and culture’ (*New York Times*, 12 December 1902). A triad forming German culture – monarchy, lese-majesty, and the monarch’s subjects – came to define ‘German culture’.

Viewed from inside, in a peculiar twist of logic, the existence of lese-majesty law itself seemed to prove the German love for their Emperor. Violators of the law could be imprisoned for up to five years (according to most accounts) or up to fifteen years, or even for life in serious cases (according to Schuster). Surely this showed the seriousness of the German love for their Emperor! Passing short sentences for lese-majesty would indicate that Germans did not place value on their king. At the same time, though, there was a great increase in lese-majesty cases. The numbers fulfilled the enemy function, it is true; yet the sheer number of cases seemed to show that there was in fact growing opposition to the Emperor. As a result, the sentences for those found guilty of lese-majesty were relatively short – averaging six months – probably similar to the maximum sentence for ‘insult’ of private citizens.

The contradictions evoked by the definition and use of the lese-majesty law in Germany perhaps made a certain sense to Germans at the time. But a keen observer of the time expressed what no doubt was a more global view of Germany at the time – that German laws like lese-majesty ‘seem archaic and useless’ (*New York Times*, 12 December 1902).

LESE-MAJESTY AND THE GERMAN POLITICAL SITUATION IN 1900

The discourse on the law of lese-majesty is not merely a legal one, for a good deal of its force and direction is defined by the social and political milieu in which it operates. Much of the scholarly and popular literature at the time in Germany bordered on the delusional. For instance, Schuster argued that Germany was quite unlike Great Britain, for in the latter, he wrote, 'a numerous and powerful political party openly proclaim their preference for Republican institutions' (Schuster 1901). This was simply untrue. Partly because of the high number of lese-majesty charges, the German socialist party represented up to a quarter of the voters and was the largest party in the Reichstag. Another instance of delusion was the inability of some segments of the German press to honestly assess their own level of freedom. When challenged by newspapers in other European countries, some German newspapers defensively affirmed (unconvincingly for the rest of the world) the healthy state of press freedom in the Empire, despite the greatest use of the lese-majesty law in the modern world (*New York Times*, 8 April and 23 April 1900).

A second feature of the political situation in Germany at the time was that the state found it increasingly difficult to control the flow of information. With an expanding and vociferous print media, the state simply could no longer rein in political expression.

A third aspect was the boldness of the German press and some politicians, especially the socialists, who made no secret of their desire to end the monarchy. But this aspiration was expressed in eminently reasonable and polite terms. Witness, for instance, the reasoned response in the Reichstag of the leader of the German Social Democratic Party, August Bebel, to the Emperor's characterization of his party as 'a mob of men, not worthy to bear the name of Germans'. Bebel took the opportunity to lay out the Socialists' position on monarchy:

We are against the monarchy, but not opponents of rulers. It is with them as with our position to the bourgeois society, for which we do not hold every single member responsible. A Prince is born as a Prince. Is it his fault? By chance he has become a ruler, and if a Prince is human, is not personal toward us in his opposition, we shall never personally oppose him. Monarchy is an institution, not a question of person.

One observer wrote of Bebel's speech: 'Never in the history of Germany has a monarch been addressed in words of such brutal frankness' (*New York Times*, 8 February 1903). There were many examples showing a remarkable sense of sacrifice whereby some Germans were willing to go to jail in the name of

freedom.¹⁹ There was even a case where parties who felt slighted by the words of the Emperor considered charging the Emperor for ‘insult’ (*New York Times*, 13 March 1897).²⁰

Of course, as history shows, application of the lese majesty law ultimately proved counterproductive. One newspaper argued in 1897: ‘The law has been vigorously enforced, but it has been not only powerless to prevent offenses of this nature – it has, to a large extent, created a condition of affairs it was designed to guard against’ (*New York Times*, 23 January 1897). In a way, the ‘enemy function’ of the law had worked in identifying those coming to oppose the monarchy and what it had come to represent. But it had also unified that opposition and eventually made it the primary force in German politics. A 1902 article opined that the intransigence of the Emperor had pushed the German public further and further to the side of the Socialists, which this writer directly attributed to the lese-majesty law: ‘Paradoxical as it may seem, the Kaiser [...] has undoubtedly added much strength’ to the Socialists and ‘the party has gained enthusiastic adherents through the punishments inflicted upon those who have transgressed the law of lèse-majesté’ (*New York Times*, 12 December 1902).

It is curious to note that it was the Emperor himself who ended the lese-majesty regime. It was reported in late 1904 that the Emperor ‘directed the Ministry of Justice to deal liberally with all persons convicted of insulting him who petition for pardon and show penitence’. Then in August 1906 he apparently pardoned all those held in jail for lese-majesty.²¹ At least in the international press, reports of German cases of lese-majesty virtually disappear.²²

19 In mid-1897, for instance, a mere seven years after the ban against the Socialist Party had been lifted, 8 of its 48 Reichstag members were simultaneously in jail on lese-majesty convictions (*New York Times*, 18 July 1897). One Socialist member of the Reichstag even gave up his immunity in order to share a three-year sentence for lese-majesty with the editor that had published his fairy tale that had been adjudged as lese-majesty (*New York Times*, 30 September 1899).

20 A monarchist notes: ‘An Emperor cannot publish that he did not mean what he said. He can only regret that some of his subjects, who usually have axes to grind, persist in taking him so literally’ (*New York Times*, 5 December 1897).

21 In late 1904, the Emperor took ‘a radical departure from the previous practice’ by announcing that ‘he will hereafter use the pardoning power liberally in cases of lèse-majesté’ and ‘intends to pardon almost without exception when the offender is shown to belong to the uneducated classes or to be incapable of weighing the consequences of a hasty word’. In August of 1906, the Emperor, to mark the baptism of his grandson, announced that all persons convicted of lese-majesty would be pardoned (*New York Times*, 11 November 1904; 26 August 1906).

22 The last reported case in Germany appearing in the *New York Times* was on 10 June 1906, when a newspaper was ‘confiscated’ for poking fun at the relationship between

LESE-MAJESTY AFTER 1906

Thus ended perhaps the richest concentration of lese-majesty cases in world history. Nonetheless, lese-majesty remained a fashionable tool for both absolute and constitutional monarchies. The Sultan of Turkey was quick to pick up on the technique, suing a French newspaper for implying that the Turks had massacred the Armenians.²³

King Chulalongkorn of Siam, too, apparently took a liking to the use of lese-majesty in the less democratic countries in Europe. He had just happened to visit Emperor Wilhelm II in 1898, during his first trip to Europe, just as the number of lese-majesty cases in Germany reached their apogee. While some scholars have argued that the first Siamese lese-majesty law was based on the Japanese version, it might well be the case that Germany provided the inspiration. Indeed, within a year or so of King Chulalongkorn's return to Siam, the first 'modern' Thai lese-majesty law was issued.²⁴

A case illustrating the exquisite tension between suppression and freedom in terms of lese-majesty was that of Edward James, an editor of an English-language journal published in France, whose expressed purpose was 'influencing monarchies to change into republics'. James's nephew had been jailed for one year on charges of lese-majesty in England for allegations made in the publication about King Edward VII. James claimed that his nephew, if anything, was guilty of simply 'a newspaper crime' and not 'moral turpitude'. James took the opportunity of his nephew's return to America to espouse a critique that goes to the core differences between a sacred-driven and democratic-driven political philosophy: (1) *Equality*: 'In America a commoner has the same rights as a King [...] no man's personal position is sufficient to put another in prison in defiance of law'; (2) *Accountability*: '[My case] could not be a case between one citizen and another because the King is above the law'; (3) *Supreme importance of truth*: 'Any accusation made against the King could not be tried with any regard for the truth in an English court. [...] Kings can destroy the proof, but they cannot destroy the truth' (*New York Times*, 13 January 1913).

The overwhelming global trend was for lese-majesty to be replaced with something more akin to sedition, or, in more liberal regimes, with decriminalized

Emperor Wilhelm II and the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Josef.

23 In France, the actual form of the suit was not lese-majesty as such, but rather libel, and leading to a payment of damages – in this case, 500,000 francs – rather than a prison sentence (*New York Times*, 1 December 1907).

24 Piyabutr Saengkanokkul has made the case that the Thai law was based on the Japanese constitution (Piyabutr 2007). However, there might be reason to look at the German law as the model, given the king's trip in 1898.

libel. As monarchies in Europe were either weakened or ended during World War I, lese-majesty seemed largely spent as a law, erupting desultorily for a few decades, and appearing more and more absurd.²⁵ It remained the preferred weapon of militaristic, fascist regimes (of the monarchical type), where it survived in final, minor concentrations in Spain during the 1920s and early 1930s, and in Japan during the 1930s.²⁶ Lese-majesty by most indications was relegated to the dustbin of history, with hardly a flicker by the 1950s when even in Thailand there were but a handful of lese-majesty cases. Not counting Thailand, the past half century has seen a mere spattering of cases here and there, although the law remains on the books for most, if not all, constitutional monarchies.²⁷ Penalties for lese-majesty vary in each country. The penalty in Spain is from six months to twelve months for a less serious violation and up to two years for a serious one (Penal Code – Spain n.d.); up to three years in Jordan and in recent Nepal (Committee to Protect Journalists n.d.);²⁸ up to five years in the Netherlands and Norway;²⁹ up to six years in Sweden.³⁰

25 There is the peculiar case of the Hungarian man who is found guilty of lese-majesty for saying he was a Republican. The court reasoned that 'while the country has no King', it is nonetheless 'a kingdom' (*New York Times*, 30 July 1926).

26 The Spanish novelist, Vicente Blasco Ibanez, was indicted for a pamphlet he wrote, 'A Nation Seized: The Militaristic Terror in Spain'. When asked if he would leave France and report before the military court in Spain, Ibanez 'laughed heartily', and said, 'I would just as soon take refuge on a cannibal island or throw myself into waters inhabited by crocodiles or famished sharks as to confide myself to the government of bandits now ruling Spain' (*New York Times*, 18 December 1924).

27 Europe has seen a few lese-majesty cases over the past decade, but convictions have usually been for acts that would have been crimes against private citizens. There have been two recent cases in the Netherlands. In one case, a Dutch man was charged with lese-majesty for drunkenly screaming insults about the queen, and saying he 'wanted to put a bullet through her head' (*The Cheers Magazine* 2008). In 2007, a Dutch court fined a man 400 euros for calling Queen Beatrix a 'whore' and 'described several sexual acts he would like to perform on her' (Wikipedia n.d.). Strangely, the 'lese-majesty' wording persisted in a number of republics, such as in Poland, where in 1938 a conviction could bring up to three years' hard labour (*New York Times*, 20 February 1938).

28 In Nepal, the equivalent law was the 'Treason (Crime and Punishment) Act' which sentenced those found guilty of creating 'hatred, malice or contempt' of the royal family (see Amnesty International n.d.: 253–254).

29 Article 111 of The Netherlands Penal Code: 'Calculated insult of the King is punished with an imprisonment up to five years or a fine of the fourth category' (Blazing Indiscretions 2007, Legislationonline n.d.a; Becker 1916: 201).

30 Chapter 18, Section 2 of the Swedish law code (Legislationonline n.d.b).

The story of lese-majesty would be a quaint and occasional footnote in history were it not for the fact that this peculiar law, and all of its bizarre dynamics, has enjoyed a remarkable resurgence in Thailand, creating the richest concentration of the charge in recent history, with a punishment almost twice as draconian as any seen in centuries anywhere.³¹

THE THAI LESE-MAJESTY LAW AND ITS USE

A comparison between the similarities and dissimilarities between lese-majesty in the German Empire, and lese-majesty in Thailand a century later, sheds considerable light on the changing dynamics of this largely unique and certainly problematic law. There is a modest but growing critical literature on the origins and use of the lese-majesty law in Thailand. Although the lese-majesty law is closely related to defamation laws, there are key differences. The penalty is much greater, there are no exclusions available to defendants as there is in common defamation (e.g. an expression of an honest opinion, the truth of the allegation, the latitude given to reportage on public figures), and the law resides within the national security section of the criminal code.

The cousin to lese-majesty is defamation, or libel, and it is no coincidence that they are both prominent in countries like Thailand. When lese-majesty cannot be applied, competing parties use defamation to silence their adversaries. It is both a criminal and a civil offence in Thailand, which allows plaintiffs to depend on the state to carry out their cases. Somchai Krusuansombat, former president of the Thai Journalists Association, said:

[A]t this time there are no more civilized countries in the world where defamation can lead to imprisonment. All such laws have been abolished but there are still fines, sometimes of large amounts. That's how it is in the modern world. Putting someone in jail is old-fashioned. If [those countries] have abolished [criminal libel], why do we still need it? (*Thai Post* 2002).

But while press groups have called for the revision of the defamation law, only a few scattered Thai groups and individuals have called for the revision or abolition of the lese-majesty law (Symposium 2009).

31 While it was reported that a serious case of lese-majesty in the German Empire could lead to significant time or life 'in a fortress', most observers report that it appears that the maximum punishment was five years. At the time of its repeal, the maximum punishment for lese-majesty in Japan was 15 years (*New York Times*, 8 October 1947); in Russia in 1910 it could bring 'eight years in the galleys' (*New York Times*, 18 December 1910); in Spain in 1906 it could bring up to eight years' imprisonment (*New York Times*, 6 March 1906).

The military-appointed legislative body of 2006–2007 shepherded through a number of laws that have affected the media. The 2007 Press Act empowers the chief of police, under the power to forbid the importation of any materials deemed offensive to, amongst other groups, the royal family. Borwornsak Uwanno, when secretary-general of the Cabinet under Thaksin in early 2006, was instrumental in banning Paul Handley's *The King Never Smiles*.

The Thai media is not very concerned with the issue of lese-majesty and has had long practice in censoring itself when reporting on royalty (Pravit 2008a). When self-censorship fails, newspapers have not hesitated to dismiss reporters. The most recent case was that of the *Thai Post* newspaper which dismissed one of its reporters in early 2007 for writing 'Newspapers should not just investigate the stock transactions of ShinCorp more than the corruption of Thaksin Shinawatra, but also go deeply into how the Crown Prince may be involved' (Prachathai 2008; *Fa Diao Kan* 2006). The Thai media has good reason to feel pride for its investigative reporting into political corruption, but it assiduously avoids critically commenting on the monarchy, in what one scholar has called the media's 'reconciliation with the monarchy' (Somsak 2007: 401).

There is a fair understanding about the lese-majesty law's effects in practice (see, for instance, Streckfuss 1995 and Somchai and Streckfuss 2008). The law and its use do not lend themselves to the administering of justice. Somchai Preechasilpakul has argued that the law, so easily and often used as a political weapon, deviates from accepted legal principles. First, lese-majesty cases can be initiated by anyone, unlike regular defamation cases which can be initiated only by the damaged party. Second, the police and the prosecutors are part of an apparatus that is biased toward the interests of the state. Third, the courts have tended to interpret lese-majesty quite broadly and out of context, making convictions almost certain (Somchai 2006: 72).

Lese-majesty cases in Thailand since 1960 number more than 500. This 50-year total barely compares with the German Empire, where there were as many as 500 cases in a single year. In the 1950s in Thailand, there was an average of about one charge per year, with only half of those actually going to trial. In the 1960s, there were five cases a year, with three going to trial. In the 1970s, the number of charges peaked at 11 per year, but only an average of 2.5 per year leading to prosecution. The average number of lese-majesty charges per year has fluctuated since then, going from 2.5 in the 1980s, to 5.2 in the 1990s, and dipping significantly to 1.6 from 2000 to 2004. But the political chaos and the coup in 2006 sent the numbers soaring. According to the Office of the Judiciary statistics, lese-majesty prosecutions climbed from 17 in 2005 to 30 in 2006, 127 in 2007, and 77 in 2008. In the three years 2006–2008, 231 people were tried

for lese-majesty in Thailand. If the conviction rate of 94 per cent has remained for lese-majesty in these cases, it would mean that there are conceivably more than 200 Thais recently put in jail for the crime. Websites following lese-majesty cases, such as Political Prisoners in Thailand, have information on only four convictions, representing less than two per cent of the convictions for the period. Who and where are the remaining 98 per cent?³²

There is reason to believe that the number of cases remained high in 2009.³³ A Thai human rights advocate has said he was told by a police representative that more than 3,000 potential cases are being investigated as of 2009 (Anonymous source). If just a fraction of these cases were pursued, present-day Thailand would represent the richest cluster of lese-majesty in modern world history. Even in comparison with Imperial Germany where lese-majesty convictions resulted in relatively short jail sentences, Thais convicted of the crime are given an average sentence of at least six times that of Imperial Germany. Most recently, Daranee Charnchoengsilpakul was given a total of 18 years in prison for three counts of lese-majesty in 2009 (*Bangkok Post*, 28 August 2009).

The wording of the Thai law on lese-majesty has changed a bit over time, although its construction is comparable to what is found in other constitutional monarchies.³⁴ Upon returning from Europe, and in response to foreign journalists in Siam at the time, King Chulalongkorn issued the first 'modern' lese-majesty law in 1900. In this first version, lese-majesty was merely a serious kind of defamation. Lese-majesty was words that could injure the reputation of

32 In early January 2010, LM Watch had information on only 37 cases. In the overwhelming majority of these cases, charges have been filed but the prosecution department has yet to bring them to trial. Political Prisoners in Thailand lists only 19 active cases with four convictions.

33 From late 2008 into the first half of 2009, there was a slew of lese-majesty reported in the news. For statistics of cases up to 2005 see Somchai and Streckfuss 2008. Statistics for the years 2006 to 2008 are available in Office of the Judiciary n.d.; Police Department n.d. Very little information is available on these cases – only a handful of them are followed by media watch groups like LM Watch and Political Prisoners in Thailand.

34 For instance, similar to Section 8 of the Thai Constitution, Article 5 of the Constitution of Norway states: 'The King's person is sacred; he cannot be censured or accused. The responsibility rests with his Council' (Stortinget n.d.). Section 101 in the Norwegian criminal code reads: 'Any person who defames the King or the Regent shall be liable to detention or imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years.' A significant difference in the Norwegian case, though, is the additional criminal clause of Section 103: 'Prosecution of any defamation pursuant to sections 101 and 102 shall be initiated only by order of the King or with his consent' (Legislationonline n.d.c).

royalty and the king's officials (roughly, but not entirely, 'the state'), and then there was simple defamation to protect the reputation of private citizens. Injuring the reputation of the king could bring three years' imprisonment, while doing the same with a private individual could bring a maximum of two years. That these various forms of defamation were conceptualized as similar is important, as will be touched on later (Somchai and Streckfuss 2008).

The first Thai 'modern' law code was issued in 1908. The provisions of lese-majesty covered the immediate royal family with up to seven years' imprisonment for defamation, and three years for other members of the royal family. Unlike defamation of private individuals, there was no 'saving clause' for an expression of an honest opinion, something that would provide for the common good, or the expression of truth. The overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932 led to some indirect changes in the way the lese-majesty law could be interpreted. In 1934, a revision of the law code, written in the spirit of the new constitution, allowed citizens to express criticism of the state, and indirectly, the monarchy. The final adjustment to the lese-majesty law came with the revised criminal code of 1957, in which the word 'insult' was added as an aspect of lese-majesty. This was one of the key features that brought the Thai lese-majesty law in line with the German version of 1900. The addition has made determination of 'true' lese-majesty even more difficult (Somchai and Streckfuss 2008).

The wording of the law has not changed since, but the valorization of the king vis-à-vis private citizens has. In 1900, the difference between maximum jail time for lese-majesty and defamation was just 50 percent. In 1908, that percentage difference increased to 350 per cent. After 1976, the difference became 750 per cent. In other words, the 'value' of a private citizen's reputation has remained the same for over a century, while the 'value' of the monarch's reputation has grown by a factor of five.

But actually the comparison is impossible. For while truth can be at least a partial if not an absolute defense in defamation cases (cutting down a prison term to one year if not bringing absolute acquittal), truth cannot reduce the sentence of one found guilty of lese-majesty, and may even make it worse.

The number of those protected by the law has been winnowed down from what must have been hundreds of Siamese who had royal blood in 1900, to only four since 1908 – the king, queen, heir-apparent, and regent (when there is one) (*Prachum Kotmai*).³⁵ A strict reading of the law would focus only on

35 Somsak Jeamteerasakul argues that this first formulation of the Thai lese-majesty law within the modern, codified criminal law code was modelled on the Japanese constitution of the same period (Somsak 2006: 80–81).

the persons protected. But in Thailand, the range of those protected has often been extended, with lese-majesty charges suggested for persons questioning the wisdom of the great-great-grandfather of the present queen, a daughter of the king (but not the heir-apparent), the institution of the monarchy itself, and the symbols or symbolic references that can be equated with the king (Streckfuss forthcoming).

Just as in Imperial Germany, anyone in present-day Thailand, from the lowest in society to the highest government ministers, can be charged with lese-majesty. Because 'insult' lies in the brain of the beholder, almost any word or action can be construed as insulting. As a result, offhand private comments made in what is perceived as a public place can land a Thai in jail. A comparison with Germany's 'empire of informers' is not entirely unreasonable.³⁶ Public comment on the monarchy can only be one of praise; anything less might be interpreted as lese-majesty. So, in the eyes of Thais and outsiders, the only conclusion is that the monarchy is revered and respected.

But every Thai also knows that there exists a robust underground rumour mill churning out stories of scandal, sending out shocking videos and photos through the internet, and whispered commentary on the monarchy and politics. In fact, attention to this hidden world might be called a favourite Thai pastime.

THE PROBLEMATIC ROLE OF THE THAI KING

Through the constitution and popular understanding, there are three aspects through which the Thai monarchy's role can be defined: (1) the constitutional stipulations invoking 'inviolability'; (2) the narrow Thai cultural understanding of 'politics/political' and 'power'; and (3) the specific legal conditions under which the lese-majesty law operates in Thailand.

The king of Thailand has always been protected constitutionally from 'any sort of accusation or action' (Office of the Council of State 2007).³⁷ Presumably this means that the King cannot be charged with a crime nor sued in court. The other part of the construction, at least in the 1997 and 2006 constitutions, is less clear. What does it mean legally to say that the king is 'enthroned in a position of revered worship'? Is it not reasonable to suggest that 'revered worship' makes the

36 BBC News reported in May 2009 that 'The government in Thailand has set up a special website urging people to inform on anyone criticizing the monarchy' (BBC News 2009).

37 The provision in the 1997 constitution was identical (Office of the Council of State), while the version of it in the 1932 constitution was a bit different: 'Provision 3: The person of the King is sacred and inviolable' (1932 Constitution 1971: 11–12).

subject of the monarchy more like a religion which compels Thai ‘worshippers’ to see the king as a sacred being?³⁸

In English, the historical definition of the word ‘inviolable’ has included ‘not [...] allowed to suffer violence; to be kept sacredly free from profanation, infraction, or assault’ and ‘does not yield to force or violence; incapable of being broken, forced, or injured’. The Thai lese-majesty law forbids defamation or insult of the king, queen, heir-apparent, or regent. But what often constitutes a crime is inappropriately ‘referring to’ (*phat phing*) royalty (see McFarland 1944: 583). In the 2009 case of Daranee, the entire decision of the Court of First Instance is peppered with the interesting phrasing, ‘excoriate/affront, compare, make invidious comparisons, defame, insult’ (*japjuang priapthiap priap proeimin pramat dumin*). It makes it appear that in addition to what the law specifies – defaming and insult – that affronts and invidious comparisons are also illegal. ‘Excoriate/affront’ (*japjuang*) is legally quite inexact (even less exact than ‘insult’), but it has become a common way of determining guilt in recent lese-majesty cases. It is an old wording, similar to the former nineteenth-century Thai lese-majesty provision that began with ‘Whosoever dares [...]’ (*bang at*) (Streckfuss 2009: 232–233; Streckfuss forthcoming: Chapter 8).

The narrow way in which ‘politics’ and ‘political’ are popularly understood in the Thai context is important here. Politics is defined as being within a realm of selfishness and narrow party politics, leading to chaos. It is understood as relating particularly to parliamentary democracy, with competing political parties. Unrecognized are other definitions of politics that would more accurately portray how power works in Thai society, such as the science of ‘guiding or influencing governmental policy’, or ‘the total complex of relations between people living in society’, or a set of ‘assumptions or principles [...] underlying any activity, activity, or theory’, particularly in relation to ‘power and status in society’. Instead, there is a mere single way of viewing of politics – more like the following: ‘Belonging to or taking a side with the party system of government; partisan, factious, [...] serving the ends of (party) politics’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

It is within this latter context that the idea of the king as ‘above politics’ makes sense. The king is not elected, and therefore well positioned to guide Thai

38 With such archaic language that harkens back to blasphemy, what of the constitutional provision ensuring the right to ‘exercise a form of worship in accordance with his belief; provided that it is not contrary to his civic duties, public order or good morals’ (Office of the Council of State 2007)? What if a person believed that ‘worshipping’ a king was not ‘accordance with his belief’? Could a person in Thailand invoke this constitutional provision? This in fact is an argument being made by Chotichai in an example below.

society selflessly. And it is this same 'selflessness' that the military makes claims to after staging coups, and bureaucrats in the service to the crown. These 'neutral' institutions are the ones that shore up the ever-messy business of parliamentary politics. Thailand, at least recently, has been in a perpetual crisis, perhaps created by the very parties entrusted to maintain stability. As Suchit Bunbongkarn has written, 'Our political system has been unstable all the time. So whenever there is a political crisis people expect the King to solve the problem.'³⁹ But of course the military, the bureaucracy, and the monarchy have immense political power – as power is commonly understood elsewhere in the world – as in 'actions concerned with the acquisition or exercise of power, status, or authority' (*The Free Dictionary & Merriam Webster Online Dictionary*). The result of this narrow understanding of power and politics is that there is really very little 'debate' in Thailand (Streckfuss forthcoming: Chapters 6 and 13).

The lese-majesty law largely veils the operation of power in Thailand. For instance, the mere observation (not under debate elsewhere in the world) that the palace and the king's advisers were behind the 2006 coup cannot be said publicly or at least legally (Thongchai 2008: 30).⁴⁰ In the preliminary judgment against Daranee, the decision clearly shows that she accused Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda and the palace as being behind the coup. But the coup itself was not an illegal act, as it was 'made legal' by a later amnesty. The verdict does not explain that if the coup is a legal act, exonerated by the 2007 constitution, how Daranee's remark about those behind the coup defames or insults those people. If the act of the coup was not illegal, how could Daranee's remark of such become a crime? It should also be said here that one can be charged with defamation for impugning immoral conduct. Is a coup in Thailand an initially immoral act that suddenly becomes moral with an amnesty? This question reveals the legal ambivalence that has sustained decades of impunity (*Fa Diao Kan* 2009).

The vagueness of the language used in the law, the lack of guidelines on arrests and prosecutions of lese-majesty cases, and the ability of any citizen to make the charge all contribute to the persistence of the present power system in Thailand. First, as the law does not specify to what level 'insult' can go, off-limits for political debate include the wealth and practices of the immensely wealthy

39 Quoted in a piece by the BBC's Jonathan Head (himself charged with lese-majesty in April 2008) (Head 2007).

40 A court found Daranee guilty of 'defaming Privy Council president Prem Tinsulanonda and former coup leaders' and was fined 50,000 baht (*Bangkok Post*, 17 September 2009).

Crown Property Bureau, projects of the king such as dams or his 'new theory' of agriculture, or 'sufficiency economy', his children (although some are not covered in any way by the law), his ancestors (at least back to four generations), and all the instances when the king intervened in Thai politics, directly or indirectly, and affected the fortunes of democracy in Thailand.

Second, police, prosecutors and judges are given no guidelines in interpreting lese-majesty. As a result, police, perhaps fearful of being charged themselves for not acting on the accusation, must make the arrest, the prosecutors must prosecute, and the judges must hand down their decisions.

Finally, the inclusion of the word 'insult' in the lese-majesty law in 1957 is significant as it confirms a profoundly authoritarian basis for society, creating an entire logic, a rationale of the state, based on the defamation principle which in turn skews a society's ability to perceive and act upon the truth, whether social, political, cultural or historical.⁴¹

In Thailand, as in the German Empire, lese-majesty has always served the primary 'enemy function'. The monarchy serves as the final linchpin in the construction of official 'Thai-ness'. As there are no principles in particular to hold Thai society together, the sense of societal cohesion is based on the perpetuation of the monarchy. At least since the 1960s, there are no definitions of Thai-ness in which the monarchy is not its central focal point. It is nearly impossible to imagine Thailand without the monarchy, or its accessory, the lese-majesty law.

Accordingly, as in Germany, one of the most important roles of Thai scholars has been to define Thai culture, and the key role of the monarchy in it. Rather than admitting the failure of democracy and the victory of authoritarianism, many scholars studying Thailand, both Thai and foreign, continue to claim Thailand's uniqueness in constructing models like 'Thai-Style Democracy'. Although academic freedom has been guaranteed by the last few constitutions, relatively few academics condemned the investigations against Silapakorn University lecturer Boonsong Chaisingkananont who seditiously asked in an exam question: 'Do you think the monarchy is necessary for Thai society? How should it adapt to a democratic system? Please debate' (Schuettler 2007; Telephone communication with Boonsong Chaisingkananont, 2007). Nor did many academics publicly stand up for Giles Ungpakorn, a Chulalongkorn University lecturer who wrote a book condemning the 2006 coup, which was deemed as offensive to the palace (Political Prisoners in Thailand n.d.).

The result of all these factors is a dynamic between the construction of Thai culture, the monarchy, and the lese-majesty law that supports the peculiar logic

41 This idea is discussed at length in Streckfuss (forthcoming).

that affirms the need for the lese-majesty law, a cultural dynamic that celebrates suppression in the name of love. It is true that the number of lese-majesty cases in 2010 Thailand pale in comparison to the huge numbers of cases in 1900 Germany. But it might be argued that perhaps due to the threat of a long sentence, and the relatively few arrests and prosecutions, the lese-majesty law in Thailand has had a much more profound effect. It was not a matter of whether to 'say the unsayable' in Germany, for it is clear that many Germans, knowing they would be charged, nonetheless spoke. Such has not been the case in Thailand, at least until recently.

LESE-MAJESTY AND THE THAI POLITICAL SITUATION

The letter of the lese-majesty law and its use in Thailand is not unique to world history. As we have seen, it was rather common in many constitutional monarchies, at least until 1945. What makes the Thai case different is the political and social milieu in which lese-majesty has risen as a central feature, the seemingly inexplicable rise in the number of lese-majesty cases in the face of apparent democratization, and the utter anachronism of there being a lese-majesty law anywhere in the twenty-first century.

The German Emperor was clearly a public figure in his central role in policy-making and a newly constructed 'German' culture. Even then, it was difficult for the public (and courts) to distinguish between the Emperor's official statements and his personal opinions, until the Imperial Court made the rather absurd determination that there was no difference. The dynamic in Thailand is similar, but not the same. With the heavy influence that the media has in modern life, and the state's domination of it in the case of semi-authoritarian states like Thailand, the 'public' role of the Thai king can penetrate every level of society. If by the 1940s the extent of patriotism was defined by every home displaying a portrait of the king, one can hardly find the words to describe the utter royal saturation of Thai society today through television, radio, magazines, books, and song.

But the key difference between the political situations in Thailand and the German Empire is surely the boldness of Germans committed to freedom. With what must have seemed complete certainty, German newspaper editors, academics and politicians gave voice to the unsayable, and then waited for the police to show up with charges of lese-majesty. Application of the law created perhaps close to 10,000 cases from 1888 to 1906. Not unexpectedly, the question of the role of the Emperor and the abuse of the lese-majesty law were common topics in the Reichstag, with calls for the law to be reformed or abolished.

In comparison, quite the opposite has happened in Thailand. We might ascribe this to the innate temerity of Thai proponents of freedom of speech or to the daunting sentence waiting the few unlucky ones to be found guilty of the charge of lese-majesty, but I would propose something in fact much more pessimistic. Reasoned discussion of the monarchy in Thailand, making a call for the repeal of the lese-majesty law, even the entertaining of republican sentiments, has until recently become not just ‘unsayable’ but virtually *unimaginable*.

In other constitutional monarchies, the very existence of the institution, to varying degrees, is a matter of debate. The question of whether or not to retain the monarchy or to become a republic is an opportunity for advocates and opponents to take their case to the public forum. It is a common poll question or referendum topic for countries like Australia and the United Kingdom. It is normal because constitutional monarchies are mostly democracies where *constitutional* has precedence over *monarchy* in the phrase *constitutional monarchy*. In Thailand, *monarchy* trumps *constitutional*.

SUMMARY OF THE COMPARISON BETWEEN IMPERIAL GERMANY AND THAILAND

Our account of lese-majesty’s history and the comparison with Imperial Germany underscores the most salient features of Thailand’s lese-majesty law. First, there has been extension from the four legally stipulated persons protected under the law, to a widening number of entities whether other members of the royal family, Thai history, the institution of the monarchy, development strategies the king supports, implying that the king has (or does not have) power, the royal anthem, the status of the Royal Crown Property Bureau, to name just a few. There has also been a conflation of the person of the king and the institution of the monarchy. The institution is not protected by the lese-majesty law, but any criticism of the institution is automatically viewed as an insult to the king himself.

Second, lese-majesty is a part and parcel of a complex set of relations defined by national security assessments and based on defamation laws, where the vagueness of the law, compounded by the inclusion of the word *insult*, has further complicated the problem of interpretation. What emerges from these conditions is the construction of the principal enemy of the state as defined as those espousing ‘republican sentiments’, criticizing the monarchy or even calling into question the use and abuse of the lese-majesty law.

Third, the lese-majesty law is perhaps *the* key mechanism that secures an image of the monarch and protects the monarchy-centered construction of a

Thai culture and identity that is fundamentally undemocratic and unequal. This construction is strengthened by the particularly narrow Thai interpretations of concepts such as ‘inviolability’ and ‘politics/political’, which are met with general societal acceptance.

Fourth, Thai law allows anyone to make a lese-majesty charge, and provides no guidelines for police, prosecutors or judges on the conditions under which charges can be made or cases be tried and adjudicated. Neither is there any direct, legal role for the king or Privy Council in granting consent for lese-majesty cases to be tried. In addition, a lese-majesty case, like the lasting sting of an insult, has no clear end. Unlike with other laws when a case is closed, lese-majesty cases stay alive apparently forever.⁴² I contend that debate about the lese-majesty law is a primary nexus in the general, larger discourse on democracy that defines the basic values of society and the relationship between citizens and the state. Without that debate, these fundamental issues can never be resolved.

THE THREE ERRORS OF THE THAI LESE-MAJESTY REGIME

Error One: The king, in his 2005 address to the nation, did seem to indicate that the lese-majesty law should not be invoked any longer. However, charges flew in the very next month with no comment from the palace. Indeed, it might be argued that it is only the king who is perceived as enjoying enough prestige in Thai society to make the intervention into politics necessary to bring an end to the law. One must also assume that calls to require charges of lese-majesty be made only with the consent of the king or his councilors, as is the case in other constitutional monarchies like Norway, show the importance of the law in maintaining existing relations of power. Lese-majesty cases would be directly attributable to the palace, making too clear what the palace perceives as threats. This chance would at least make the palace accountable, at least in terms of lese-majesty. But it would also make the monarchy merely one more institution, with certain interests. Various Thai governments, for whatever reasons, have not acted upon the king’s advice to stop using the law. Neither has the palace played a prominent role in thwarting attempts to increase the punishment and coverage of those protected by the lese-majesty law. The palace’s failure to address the problems of the law will unfortunately be an enduring legacy of the reign.

⁴² For instance, in the lese-majesty cases of both Sulak Sivaraksa and Thanapol Eawsakul, editor of *Fa Diao Kan* magazine, the police have assured each that the case is closed, but they have never received documentary evidence to confirm this. As such, anywhere down the road the case can be revived.

Error Two: The appearance of the palace backing the 2006 coup did irreparable damage to the institution's image. The coup-makers abolished the immensely popular 1997 constitution and further destabilized the political situation. Other constitutional monarchs have elected for other courses of action, such as not recognizing coups.⁴³ Worst of all, the coup shattered any semblance of the rule of law. Moreover, the king became closely identified with the courts in April 2006 when he forcefully called them into action to remedy the political situation. When it appears that leading judges may have played some role in planning the coup, then the prestige of the monarchy and the courts in the eyes of those opposed to the coup dimmed. Many Thai parties feel that the prosecution department and the courts have compromised their own standings by appearing to be biased in favour of PAD ('Yellow-Shirts') and against members of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD/'Red-Shirts'). In addition, the queen's presiding over the funeral of a PAD follower seemed to show for many a strong bias on the part of at least some members of the palace (Crispin 2008). Through its own actions, the palace contributed to de-legitimizing the institution of the monarchy itself.

Error Three: The coup-makers and opponents of Thaksin overplayed their hand by moving the lese-majesty law in exactly the wrong direction. Had the new rulers been discreet in their use of the law, or if they had revised the law and lessened its punishment, they might have achieved greater reconciliation with their opponents. The head of the military-appointed legislative body warned in October 2007 that there were groups trying 'to topple the institution of the monarchy', one of which was 'using the public stage to debate whether the institution of the monarchy should continue to exist'. A panel was monitoring 'anti-monarchy activities' which could be countered by seeing to it that the police department 'strictly enforces the law' and by the government 'promoting the image of the monarchy institution, especially by creating understanding with the international community' (*The Nation*, 8 October 2007).⁴⁴ The legislative body entrenched behind the law, seeking to sacralize persons beyond the royal family, and used the law to charge its critics with an unprecedented 126 cases prosecuted in 2007. The Democrat Party in the opposition in late 2008 attempted to

43 In the introduction to this volume Ivarsson and Isager note that, in 1981, King Juan Carlos I of Spain, also in the face of a military coup, chose to respond differently: he 'acted swiftly to defend the constitution and denounce the coup. In that situation the king protected democracy.'

44 The exception might be Sulak Sivaraksa who has taken an increasingly aggressive stand for fuller democracy and a critical stance against the monarchy.

introduce into parliament a measure that would have increased the maximum penalty for lese-majesty to 25 years imprisonment.⁴⁵

If the example of Imperial Germany is of any relevance to the Thai case, it is this: an indiscriminate use of the lese-majesty law was not an effective way of silencing criticism of the monarchy and suppressing legitimate democratic aspirations. In fact, the use of the law galvanized the opposition. The continued use and abuse of the law in Thailand will only heighten an awareness of the institution's weak points, and may result in not just stemming calls for needed reforms of the institution, but lead to its ultimate destruction.

NEW FACTORS IN THE THAI LESE-MAJESTY REGIME

A factor that was not new to the Thai political scene was the obsequious support of the monarchy by the Democrat Party. The new Democrat Party leader and prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, announced upon coming to power in December 2008 that the two top priorities of his administration were to fix the economy and defend the institution of the monarchy. At the end of his first year in office, Abhisit told the police that their top priority should be to protect the monarchy. 'Do not hesitate' to arrest those committing lese-majesty, the prime minister instructed, 'in cases where the offence is obvious'. A special committee was set up to screen possible cases and to 'prescribe criteria' for proceeding with such cases (Prachatai 2009).⁴⁶

The Abhisit government has also taken on the daunting task of keeping the Thai public safely away from technologies like the internet and whatever anti-monarchical views might be there. The repressive power of lese-majesty has been transferred from the criminal code law into other legal acts designed to control criticism, such as the Computer Crime Act and the Movie Act, under which inappropriate or insulting representations of the monarchy are prohibited. As of December 2009, the government's information technology supervision office, staffed by 'a team of bilingual civil servants and young professionals' working 'around the clock', had since 2007 blocked 'systematic attempts' of some 20,000

45 Thailand, Government, Parliament, *Lek rap 115/2551 wan thi 29 t.kh. 2551, somnakngan kekhatbikan sapha phuthaen ratsadorn; banthuk lakkan lae hetphon, prakop rang phraratchabanyat kaekhai phoemtoem pramuankotmai aya (chabap thi...), ph.s. ...* [Received no. 115/2008, 29 Oct. 2008, Office of the Secretary General to the House of Representatives; 'Notes on the principle and rationale, accompanying the Draft Act to revise and amend the criminal code (no. ...), ofyear].

46 The proposal for guidelines, criteria, and transparency for lese-majesty cases has been made many times, but as of yet, there are none. See *Bangkok Post*, 28 October 2008.

websites 'to undermine the throne' (Political Prisoners in Thailand 2009; Ahuja 2009).

In the last few years, three new factors have emerged in Thailand: unprecedented attacks on leading members of the Privy Council, increasingly vocal criticism of the lese-majesty law, and a new-found boldness and savvy on the part of critics of the monarchy and lese-majesty law that have stymied the Thai justice system.

First, there have been largely unanswered accusations that two leading members of the Privy Council – Prem Tinsulanond and Surayud Chulanont – were the masterminds behind the 2006 coup. As neither is covered by the lese-majesty law, each may not prefer to resort to making defamation charges against their accusers, as their alleged involvement might become a point of contention in a legal case. This approach has allowed criticism of 'the palace' without any reference to the king or institution of the monarchy as such, and thus is largely exempt from lese-majesty charges. At the same time, criticizing Privy Councillors to such a degree is new to Thailand, a new and perhaps irresolvable perceived conflict of interest: the Privy Council is supposed to be 'above politics' like the monarchy. But its involvement in the coup this time was held by many in Thailand not to be legitimate.

Second, despite the risks, many international organizations as well as academics, both foreign and Thai, have openly criticized the use of the lese-majesty law and called for its revision or its repeal. With the notable exception of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, free speech and journalist organizations such as Article 19 and Reporters Without Borders have noted the problems of both Thai defamation and lese-majesty provisions. The latter organization has seen Thailand's once-celebrated status of the freest press in Southeast Asia wither as the kingdom's worldwide rank plunged from 59th in 2004 to a low of 135th (out of 169) in 2007, putting it behind its neighbours Malaysia, Cambodia and the Philippines, just below the Democratic Republic of Congo, and only five places higher than Sudan.⁴⁷ A number of prominent international academics including Noam Chomsky, Immanuel Wallerstein, Charles F. Keyes and James C. Scott called for the Thai government to reassess the lese-majesty law (Scott et al 2009: 7–9). Reporters Without Borders also made a similar call to the Thai government on 26 April 2009 (Joint Action 2009).⁴⁸

47 Thailand recovered slightly in 2008, with a rank of 124th (Reporters Without Borders 2002–2008).

48 In response to increasing calls to revise the lese-majesty law, a seminar at the National Institute of Development Administration was organized to defend the law's use. The

In January 2008 at the International Conference on Thai Studies held at Thammasat University, three panels were held, dedicated to discussion of the monarchy. The three subjects were the financial status of the crown bureau, the effects of the lese-majesty law on freedom of expression, and the impact of Handley's book *The King Never Smiles*.⁴⁹ There were concerns that the lese-majesty law might limit frank discussion of the monarchy, but the decision of the conference's organizing committee to allow the panels helped somewhat to muffle calls by some academics to boycott the conference altogether.⁵⁰

Thai academics set up a two-day symposium in early 2009 to discuss the legal, historical, media and human rights aspects of the lese-majesty law, advertised as the first public forum in Thailand ever held on the issue (Symposium 2009). A law professor from Chiang Mai University even proposed doing away with the law altogether.⁵¹ Also new are a number of courageous websites that have dared to challenge the lese-majesty law and serve as a public record to its victims.⁵² It

resulting petition concluded: 'There have been a rather high number of lese-majesty cases in the past few years. When considered on whole it can be seen that [these cases] are actions linked into a movement that aims for the abolishment of the institution of the monarchy, which would result in a change of the governing system of Thailand from a democratic governing system with the king as head of state to another form of governing. Therefore, the proposal to revise or abolish the lese-majesty law which protects the king from being violated and from lese-majesty is a matter of a political struggle of groups wanting to change the governing system of Thailand and not an honest call for rights and liberty of freedom of expression.' As seen throughout this work, it is inconceivable that any Thai wanting to change the present system could be honest. See National Institute of Development Administration 2009.

49 It has been suggested by Midnight University that the Ministry of Justice take steps to restrict lese-majesty cases to those in which there is clear evidence, and not to use it broadly, as in the case of someone not standing up in respect when the royal anthem is played before movies. See Midnight University 2006.

50 'The key message of the panels', wrote Andrew Walker, 'was that the persistent self-censorship imposed by the international academic community can now be cast aside. The sky will not fall in if we talk freely and frankly about the king's role in contemporary Thai politics. Let's make sure this is a starting point for ongoing frank and public discussion' (Walker 2008).

51 Somchai Preechasilpakul, on the panel entitled, 'The lese majesty law and Security of the State [*Kotmai min phraboromdetchanuphap kap khwam mankhong khong rat*]'.

52 These websites include, for instance (alphabetically): Bangkok Pundit (<http://www.asiancorrespondent.com/bangkok-pundit-blog>); FACT – Freedom Against Censorship Thailand (<http://facthai.wordpress.com>); *Fa Diai Kan* (www.sameskybooks.org/); LM watch: (<http://lmwatch.blogspot.com>); Midnight University (www.midnightuniv.org/); Political Prisoners in Thailand (thaipoliticalprisoners.wordpress.com/), and Prachatai (www.prachatai.com).

may be of some significance that the Thai government has either been willing or has felt obligated to leave these websites largely unmolested.

Finally, there is a new-found boldness in challenging the status quo. These politically disparate critics are showing some of the verve and creativity exhibited by German intellectuals more than a century ago. Chotisak Onsoong refused to stand up for the playing of the royal anthem in a cinema. His case caused an uproar from the right, and elicited sympathy from many who rallied around the motto, 'Not standing is no crime. Different thinking is no crime' (Pravit 2008b).⁵³ Sulak Sivaraksa, tried for lese-majesty three times, and accused of it many, many more times, has for long been the most vociferous critic of the monarchy and wants to make it accountable and open to public scrutiny. He was charged for making remarks unbecoming to the monarchy in late 2007 (*Bangkok Post*, 8 November 2008; *Nation*, 3 May 2009). Jakrapob Penkair, a Thaksin supporter, made a speech at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Bangkok in August 2007 titled, 'Democracy and the Patronage System of Thailand'. The text of the speech shows it was an academic critique arguing that at least the present Thai form of constitutional monarchy was antithetical to democracy, without little personal reference to the king as such.⁵⁴ When threatened with lese-majesty charges, Giles Ungpakorn fled to the United Kingdom, but not before firing off a final salvo – the 'Red Siam Manifesto' – that called for Thailand to become a republic.

It is true that Daranee was given an unusually long jail sentence, but she went down unrepentantly, for the whole nation and world to see. It is also true that Chotisak went largely underground, and that Jakrapob and Giles fled Thailand. But it is clear as well that the police and prosecutors have been placed in a difficult position with these notable cases. Charges cannot be dropped without stirring up the right; neither can these cases move forward without incurring the wrath and condemnation of those already opposed to the government. In the case of Chotisak, for instance, prosecutors are unsure how to proceed given no precedent (Anonymous source). Their options for charges are ridiculously incongruous: Chotisak's act was either a violation of a 1940s national culture act which stipulates that not standing at a cinema be punished with a 100-baht fine and a maximum of one month in jail, as compared with 15 years for lese-majesty

53 To indicate the particular sensitivity this case touches upon, it should be said that this account, written by Pravit Rojanaphruk, was deemed unfit for print by the *Nation* as 'a higher authority' at the paper felt that publication 'carries certain risks' (Pravit 2008).

54 His speech is available on the Political Prisoners in Thailand website.

– a difference by a factor of 180 (Prachatai 2008b)! On the other hand, if the authorities do continue to pursue charges into an expanding circle in Thai society, the absurdity of the charge against Chotisak will become even more apparent, creating in turn even more vehement opposition to the law, and perhaps the monarchy itself. Or what might Sulak say in court? Prone to speaking his mind, Sulak's unpredictable court testimony may become part of the public record.

More importantly, perhaps, the romance between many Thai people and the monarchy seems to have largely ended. More than any of Thaksin's machinations, the PAD's virulent anti-poor, anti-democratic stance did much to solidify the UDD's Red-Shirts. It had always been 'the people' who scholars affirmed cherished the monarchy. But there is a new political consciousness amongst 'the people', and an openness in voicing discontent with the justice system and the monarchy. It is not uncommon to encounter average Thai citizens, many in the Northeast, who say without a bit of nostalgia that perhaps the monarchy should come to an end, at least after this reign.

The lese-majesty law is nearly no longer functional. It can be used as a threat, but to be effective as a threat there must be concrete examples of others jailed for the offence. From the statistics, it is possible that tens of cases – or maybe as many as 100 or more – have been prosecuted either quietly or secretly, beyond the notice of greater society. And thousands of other cases are being investigated. How much longer can this continue? The central question should not be obfuscated: Should Thais, under a democratic form of government, be able to criticize the monarchy, and even call for its abolition? The question might be answered sooner rather than later. State authorities, blindly following the irrepressible logic of the lese-majesty law, are increasingly creating a situation where the contradictions of the law and its use will become impossible to maintain.

It is a dubious distinction that Thailand has what may well be one of the most repressive laws restricting freedom of speech in the world. Despite the incessant affirmation of the government and many Thais themselves that the monarchy is loved by all Thais, the existence and active use of the draconian lese-majesty law make hollow such claims. The lese-majesty law in Thailand has supported a failing and corrupt edifice of a nationalist identity that is antithetical to democracy, human rights and the truth.

If Ginsburg is right in saying that Thai politics actually operates more along the lines of an unwritten constitution – 'a set of informal norms and rules that constrains the exercise of political power' – then it might be time to ask whether such an unwritten constitution is still legitimate in the eyes of many Thais (Ginsburg 2009: 86). The lese-majesty law and its use, part and parcel of this

unwritten constitution, no longer ‘constrains’. However, its growing role does not reflect the strength of the state, but rather its weakness and desperation. Thai written constitutions are frequently torn up. Many in Thailand are waiting for some definitive event to happen that will end the political chaos. But it is possible that the event has already occurred – a series of errors committed by the palace, and an increasingly bold opposition that has irrevocably altered the Thai political landscape. In effect, the Thai unwritten constitution, or ‘Thai-style democracy’, in place for the past half century may already be in shreds and we are merely watching the slow death of a century-old ‘Thai-ness’.

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Part III

Thai-Style Democracy

CHAPTER 6

The Monarchy and the Royalist Movement in Modern Thai Politics, 1932–1957

Nattapoll Chaiching

The overthrow of the Thai absolute monarchy by the People's Party in 1932 ushered in a new political era. Yet the establishment of a democratic political system did not proceed smoothly, as the king and his royalist supporters were unwilling to accept genuine change in the country's administration. Indeed, the new order was resisted by its royalist opponents who sought a return of monarchical power. The period from 1932 until 1957 marked a time of intense political struggle as the monarchy and an attendant royalist movement used every conceivable avenue to re-establish its authority.

Royalist opposition to the new political order remains an area insufficiently studied and it is my purpose to examine the issue by drawing on a range of materials including official documents, personal recollections and other sources to flesh out a more comprehensive view than presently exists. Some of the government documents used in this paper have been dismissed by royalists in the past as false and defamatory. Yet, curiously, when the political environment changed and the authority of the throne and royalists increased, a rash of personal recollections appeared in which supporters of the monarchy admitted their involvement in opposing the new order and in the various attempts to bring it down. These texts provide greater detail about the nature of the royalist opposition than that found in the official sources. Used in conjunction with one another these materials allow us to develop a clearer and more comprehensive picture of what transpired in the wake of the overthrow of the monarchy.

Before I turn to this topic, however, I present a brief survey of the existing literature dealing, in general, with the development of the political role of the Thai monarchy, and, more specifically, with the role of the Thai king and the royalists in the first decades after the Revolution in 1932.

One body of research portrays the development of the monarch's political power as related to the transformation of a state that has been influenced by the world system. These include the works of Chaiyan (1994) and Kullada (2004). Both pieces investigate the Thai state's adaptation to the world system at the beginning of the twentieth century. Kullada's study points out the changes in structure and establishment of the modern state, which caused conflict between the monarch and the nobles, and resulted in the monarch seizing power and the successful establishment of an absolutist state in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868–1910). In the process of constructing this absolutist state, the monarch managed to amass wealth and allow commoners into the civil service instead of nobles. This gave rise to challenges to the monarch's power by commoners within the civil system, for example the failed democratic revolutionary attempt in 1912. Although the scope of Kullada's research ends in 1912, the conflict between monarch and commoners that arose within the absolute monarchy did not subside. Two decades afterwards, the Revolution of 1932 succeeded in overcoming the absolute monarchy and establishing a democratic system. However, a crucial question remains to be answered, what was the monarch's reaction to the Revolution?

Another set of research studied Thai politics in the era following the Revolution of 1932 and painted an image of politics being severely interfered with by the military. These include the works of Wilson (1962) and Riggs (1967). Most notably, the idea of a bureaucratic polity in Riggs's work gives the impression that Thai politics since 1932 has been continuously dominated by the military. This idea has influenced and dominated the studies of Thai politics from the 1970s onwards and has resurfaced in many other researches, such as Morell and Chai-anan (1981), Likhit (1985), Suchit (1987). These academics have produced their research according to Riggs's idea, which viewed the Revolution of 1932 in a negative light and considered it to be the beginning of the bureaucratic polity that has incessantly troubled Thai democracy. Even historians like Wyatt believe that the military dominated Thai politics from 1932 and effectively ended the monarch's role in Thai politics until 1957 (Wyatt 1984: 243–245). Hence, the use of the idea of bureaucratic polity in the studies of Thai politics suggests that the military's interference in politics has been the major obstacle to the development of Thai democracy. At the same time, this set of research fails to identify the monarch as a political actor.

Benedict Anderson noted in 1979 the lack of research concerning the monarchy, an institution that has been highly influential in Thai politics throughout the 20th century (Anderson 1979: 193). In the following years, however, certain works concerning the monarch emerged, such as Batson (1984) and Lockhart (1990). They continued to maintain the view that the monarch was a political victim following the 1932 Revolution, without considering this institution as an important political actor in post-1932 era.

The idea of bureaucratic polity views the military as the only truly influential actor in Thai politics. For this reason, Anderson started to question the appropriateness of employing this idea to explain Thai politics (Anderson 1979: 216). Thak pioneered the study of the monarchy and politics in his landmark work, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Thak 1979). He concluded that the monarchy's political role started after 1957 under the military dictatorship of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat. However, since 1957 marked the beginning of the monarchy's political role for Thak, his work did not discuss the activities of royals and royalists in the years following the 1932 Revolution. There was little development in the field after Thak's work was published. Nearly two decades later, Hewison pointed out that the continuous dominance of bureaucratic polity in the study of Thai politics had eradicated the monarchy's role as a political actor from all analysis of Thai politics. Hewison suggested that, even though the Revolution of 1932 ended absolute monarchy, this did not mean that the political significance of the monarchy had vanished. In fact, the king continued to be an important political force (Hewison 1997b: 59–60). Therefore, it was unfortunate that the idea of bureaucratic polity eliminated questions concerning the political role of Thai kings in the post-1932 era.

Recent studies of Thai politics have moved away from the idea of bureaucratic polity, thereby making the monarch's political movements more visible. The first group in this wave of research includes Kershaw (2001), Kobkua (2003) and Nakarin Mektrairat (2006). Although these authors provide valuable historical data their conclusion hardly differs from that of the bureaucratic polity school of thought. Their view is that the military causes problems while the king is the protector of democracy. At the same time, another body of research, including Hewison (1997b, 2008), Thongchai (2004, 2008), McCargo (2005) and Handley (2006), considers the king's political movements as being related to, or even causing, problems in the development of Thai democracy.

As mentioned earlier, the debates concerning the king and politics depend partially on the domination of the bureaucratic polity idea, which prevents any questioning of the monarch's role after the Revolution of 1932. They also depend

on how academics interpret the 1932 Revolution. For example, Nakarin (2003: 3–77) thinks that the Revolution of 1932 could be interpreted in many ways: as an establishment of a new political system, as a revolution, as an incomplete revolution, or as a *coup d'état*. Somsak Jeamteerasakul (2003) believes that a researcher's support for the People's Party or the king could influence his/her interpretation of the 1932 Revolution either positively or negatively. Nattapoll Chaiching (2005) thinks that the meaning of the 1932 Revolution as the birth of democracy has been continuously deconstructed by the royalists. This deconstruction happened especially after the coup of 1947, which was the turning point that brought the king and the royalists back to power while the People's Party started to deteriorate. Prajak Kongkirati (2005: 464–537) suggests that the royalists succeeded in creating the illusion that the king is a 'democratic monarch' in the early 1970s and that this illusion has since become the mainstream perception of the public. Moreover, Thongchai (2004, 2008) suggests that there are many trends in the study of Thai democratic history, depending on the time period and the parties involved in political conflict, for example, the studies of politics during 1932–1951 concern conflict between the king/royalists and the People's Party/commoners. The studies of this historical period show that the movements of the king and the royalists in their attempts to return to power after the revolution resulted in a chronic crisis for the democratic system in Thailand.

Nevertheless, Thongchai's comprehension of the conflict between the king and the commoners lacks some crucial details, which prevents it from serving as a firm base of understanding. Hence, I propose that although the monarchy was defeated by commoners in the Revolution of 1932, the king retained firm control over the royalists to support resistance. Consequently, the political situation in the post-Revolution era became a time for the king and the royalists to strike back and overcome the People's Party and commoners involved in the 1932 Revolution. The study of this conflict should be extended to 1957 because the conflict concerning the role and power of the king remained until the elected government of Field Marshal Phibun Songkram – the last leader from the People's Party who continued to claim the historical importance of the 1932 Revolution and aspired to limit the king's power – was overthrown by a military coup led by Field Marshal Sarit. Sarit, the military leader who later became Prime Minister, did not represent the People's Party but supported the process of restoring the king's status and power in an unprecedented manner since the Revolution of 1932.

I disagree with the traditionalist explanation of Thai politics in 1932–1957 that follows the path of bureaucratic polity. I disagree because this approach

suggests that the military was the only political actor causing problems for the development of democracy in Thailand in the post-Revolution period, and that the People's Party was composed of 'problematic' military officers. Instead, I propose a revisionist explanation that considers the political situation of that period as a time when the People's Party and the commoners who led the revolution had to face a counterstrike from the king and the royalists. Explanations of the role of the king and the royalists have long disappeared from studies of Thai politics. Hence, the main objective of this chapter is to discuss the portrait of the 'democratic king' by investigating the post-1932 political dynamics in which the king and the royalists were active political actors. They not only refused to depart from politics after the Revolution of 1932, but also fiercely opposed the Revolution. This chapter shows that, far from being victims of politics, the king and the royalists took the offensive political role of contesting the Revolution and transforming the political system according to their will.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part examines the role of the king and the royalists' roles and forms of resistance against the Revolution. The second part explains the process of restoring the influence of the king and the royalists in politics through their support of military coups, participation in the drafting of constitutions that structure the political system in ways favorable to them, as well as other political activities that led to the closing of the political 'Era of the People's Party'.

PART I: IN EVERY WAY POSSIBLE: COUNTER-REVOLUTION BY THE KING AND THE ROYALISTS, 1932–1939

Academics who adhere to the idea of bureaucratic polity in studying the Revolution of 1932 tend to explain that the king had already planned to lay the foundations of democracy by giving the people a constitution. Then the People's Party, from this viewpoint regarded as essentially a military junta, staged the Revolution in 1932. This resulted in the failure of the king's democratic plan and marked the beginning of military interference that became a constant obstacle to the development of democracy in Thailand (see Chai-anan et al 1971). I disagree with this explanation because the king did not prefer democracy to maintaining the absolute monarchy. That is to say, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1910–1925) managed to preserve, albeit with great difficulty, the old order from challenging forces of commoners (Kullada 2004: 126–178). The hope to salvage the absolute monarchy from deterioration was inherited by King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, 1925–1935) – the last monarch of the old regime – who had to carry on the

burden of bringing this old order of governance through the tide of change into the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless, his goal was not democracy, since he believed that Siam was not suited to democracy. His view was clearly stated in a letter written to a personal adviser in 1926: 'Is this country ready to have some sort of representative Government? [...] My personal opinion is an emphatic NO' (King Prajadhipok's Memorandum, in Batson 1984: 288).

What the king wanted was a reform of the absolute monarchy. For this reason, he had secretly prepared two copies of a monarchical constitution so as to allow him to control the political direction of the country according to his own will. In 1926, the same year that he suggested that his country was not suited to democracy, he had his personal adviser Francis B. Sayre draft a law concerning the transformation of the system of governance. The structure of political power in this draft stated that sovereign power would be retained by the monarch. Later in 1931, King Prajadhipok again ordered a law, *An Outline of Changes in the Form of the Government*, to be drafted by Raymond B. Stevens and Phraya Srivisaravacha. The main idea of this legal document was that the monarch shall retain sovereign power and control over the legislative council, the supreme council, the prime minister, and the cabinet (Kobkua 2003: 86–90). Memoirs of the Japanese Ambassador Yasukichi Yatabe, which was composed around the same time, assessed that the king's reform plans could never succeed because a few high-ranking and powerful members of the royal family would resist a reform that consolidated the king's power, yet diminished their own. However, as social pressure from intellectuals and commoners who were dissatisfied with the old order intensified to a feverish level, the Revolution became unavoidable (Nakarin 1997; Yatabe 2007: 16).

OLD MONARCH IN THE NEW ORDER: REACTIONS FOLLOWING THE REVOLUTION

As soon as the People's Party instigated the Revolution on 24 June 1932, a clear division was established between absolute monarchy – the old order – and democracy – the new order – through the transfer of sovereign power from the monarch to commoners. Thai politics within the nation-state came into being from that moment. However, this commoner-led Revolution of 1932 caused much discontent to the king and the royalists who had been the power-brokers in the old order. This discontent eventually led to their violent resistance against the Revolution. They employed every possible way to reclaim political power in the period between 1932 and 1957. What were their projects? Who were involved

and what forms did this resistance take? To answer these questions, we should start at the centre of the structure of political power in the old system – King Prajadhipok.

It is important to note that the first prime minister after the Revolution was Phraya Manopakon Nitithada – a high-ranking judge in the old system. He had close ties with the king and was admired by some of the leading figures in the People's Party for bold actions that made it seem as if he did not fear the power of the king, even under the old absolute regime. This, together with the People's Party's need to compromise with the king, gave them little choice but to support Phraya Manopakon as the prime minister. Nonetheless, this turned out to be a mistake on the part of the People's Party inasmuch as he later proved to be a royalist and secretly supported the king and the royalists in their resistance against the Revolution (Nakarin 2003: 232–267).

As mentioned earlier, the king intended to reform the old system in a way that would consolidate his powers. However, the Revolution of 1932 not only did not result in the consolidation of the monarch's power, but also transferred the monarch's power to the common people according to the constitution of 27 June 1932. This constitution stated that the monarch shall be equal in status to the government, the parliament, and the court. The parliament shall possess the highest political power and shall be capable of passing judgment in all legal cases concerning the monarch. This was the first time that the monarch's power became limited by the law (Kobkua 2003: 33–34). Although the king agreed to sign his name approving this document, he was highly dissatisfied with this constitution. Thus, he responded by adding the word 'temporary' to the title of the document before signing it. Consequently, there had to be a new constitution (Yatabe 2007: 44), the Constitution of 10 December 1932, whose drafters were almost all royalist legal professionals, with only one representing the People's Party (Barmé 1993: 73; Thamrongsak, 2000: 111–118). This new constitution contained many flattering terms which praised and provided protection to the monarch. More importantly, the king and the royalists inserted an ancient phrase into the new constitution. This was an ancient political tradition which claimed that 'The King of Siam is supposed to be elected by the people.' They re-interpreted this phrase quite fantastically so as to appear to be more in line with democracy, claiming that the idea of democracy had always existed in the old system. This was yet another attempt to justify the existence of the old-style monarch in the new political system (Nakarin, 2003: 83–84).

The king and the royalists promoted the old tradition instead of the new, which held that sovereign power should rest with the people. They succeeded

in passing the new constitution that the king had drafted (Report from the First Parliamentary Meeting in 1932: 359–362). As a result, the key alterations that allowed the king to employ sovereign power on behalf of his people and through political institutions that are beneath him, and which gave the king the power to appoint half of the members of parliament, became the common practice according to the Constitution of 10 December 1932.¹ It is important to note that the king worked very closely with and provided detailed suggestions to the drafters of that constitution (Thamrongsak 2000: 118). Hence, it is not surprising that Yatabe would comment in his memoirs that this constitution allocated more power to the king than the previous one (Yatabe 2007: 45).

The king was highly satisfied with the new constitution. However, it is quite surprising that later, when the king repeatedly failed to return to power he blamed the People's Party and altered his political stance from opposing the Revolution to employing the ideals of democracy in negotiating with and attacking the People's Party as dictators (Somsak 2001: 16). A clear example of this is the king's position vis-à-vis members of parliament. Initially, the king desired the power to appoint half of the members of parliament himself, but later he denied that that was his desire and accused the People's Party of attempting to monopolize power for themselves (Statement on King Prajadhipok's Abdication 1935: 89–90). Field Marshal Phibun, as a member of parliament and as Prime Minister, answered these charges openly in the assembly. He stated that the king had dominated the drafting of the Constitution of 10 December 1932 and it was the king's desire to maintain monarch-appointed members of parliament for the next decade (Collection of Rallies and Speeches by the Prime Minister 1940: 148–149).

1 The Constitution of 10 December 1932 stated that there shall be only one assembly, which is the parliament. There shall be two types of members of parliament. The first type of members shall be elected by the people. The second type shall be appointed by the monarch. Both types shall have equal numbers. All this resulted from the monarch's heavy influence in the drafting of this constitution due to his desire to retain control over the country's political direction instead of relinquishing his political roles. This subsequently became a bone of contention between the monarch and the People's Party. The monarch understood that he had the power to select the second type of MP directly while the People's Party believed that, according to the democratic system, all political actions of the monarch required approval from the government.

THE KING CAN DO NO WRONG! THE KING AND
OPPOSITION TO THE REVOLUTION

In the period after the Revolution of 1932, even though the People's Party was willing to compromise with the king in the drafting of the constitution, it was less lenient in their arrangements of the crown's property. The People's Party divided the crown's property into two parts. The first being the crown's property and the latter being the private property of the king. This was done so as to facilitate the government's task of management and so that the property could be taxed fairly according to the ideals of democracy. From then on, the crown's property came to be managed by the government (Supoj 2002: 63–80; Somsak 2006: 67–93). It is obvious that the rapid change which transferred the power and control of property that once belonged to the monarch affected King Prajadhipok directly. The question that arises is what was his reaction to the sudden collapse of the old system that was taking place before his eyes, and is there any evidence that could prove his true reactions in that situation? In the past, it has been very difficult to find any clear evidence: there were only the accounts of King Prajadhipok's queen, who gave the impression that he was a gentleman and a victim (see Rambhaibarni 1973: 2–28). Nonetheless, the king's personal correspondence that has recently been published demonstrates that, in March 1933, the king sent a letter to his adopted son – Prince Jirasakdi – expressing his dissatisfaction with the new order (Manee 1999: 54–55).² Statements in this letter suggest a degree of counter-revolutionary planning and movement on the part of the king, although he did not express clearly what those plans were.

In the second week of March 1933, Pridi Phanomyong, leader of the left-wing of the People's Party, proposed an economic plan that aimed to transform the structure of land ownership and allow for a state-controlled economy. According to this plan, all citizens would become civil servants and the state would provide welfare according to a socialist framework. Pridi submitted this plan to the cabinet so that it could be approved and handed over to parliament, which would then ratify and pass it as legislation. Pridi's economic plan caused much anxiety to the king himself and among the royalists and landowners (Suphasawatwongsanit 2000: 90–94, Thamrongsak 2000: 282–288).

In early April, only one month after he had expressed his dissatisfaction in the letter mentioned earlier, the king reacted to the People's Party by joining forces with Phraya Manopakon in closing down parliament and suspending the

² The letter in question was published in the commemorative volume for the funeral of Manee Sirivarasan, the wife of Prince Jirasakdi.

constitution by royal decree. This amounted to a 'silent *coup d'état*' (1933), which effectively blocked Pridi's economic plan from being considered by parliament (Thamrongsak 2000: 288–314). Yatabe recorded the backstage planning of this coup, suggesting that the king and the royalist prime minister made preparations by signing the decree one week ahead of the actual announcement to close down parliament and suspend the constitution. This was done in order to destroy Pridi with communist charges. According to the Japanese Ambassador, the allegation was outlandish and was designed for the political assassination of Pridi and to justify the king's coup (Yatabe 2007: 88). Thus, the reaction from the king and the royalists defeated the radical economic plan of the People's Party.

After the silent coup took place between early-April and mid-June, political power returned to the king and the royalist prime minister. They collaborated in issuing laws that infringed upon public liberty as soon as parliament was successfully inactivated. These laws included the Communist Act of 1933. Pridi was banished from the country at this point. Moreover, the king widely publicized his personal critique of Pridi's economic plan as being of the Communist mindset (Thamrongsak 2000: 295–296). This critique was announced in the name of the king, without any approval from parliament or the government and as such was clearly a violation of an important principle of the new order.

After the coup succeeded in restoring the king's political power, the next step was to destroy the People's Party. The king ordered the royalist Prime Minister to transfer all military officers who were leading members of the People's Party out of troop-commanding positions. He then appointed his own loyal officers to take charge of the military. Furthermore, the king issued a memorandum to the prime minister, urging him to hasten the destruction of the People's Party (Special Court Verdict 1939: 24). The king's plan would have continued with the complete crushing of the People's Party by ordering the execution of all of its members on 24 June 1933. They would have been decapitated on treason charges (Chittasen 1999: 80) if they had not realized the plot and staged a coup on 20 June, only four days before their heads were to be displayed on spikes at the courtyard in front of the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Hence, this coup foiled the king's reactionary plot.

'UNDERGROUND KINGDOM': THE KING AND THE ROYALIST NETWORK

King Prajadhipok's underground movement originated almost immediately after the Revolution of 1932. He established the king's secret service and started an underground network to work against the Revolution. This network involved

members of the royal family, secret agents, assassins, military officers, civil servants and journalists – all of them loyal to the old regime. The king ordered Prince Suphasawatwongsanit (royal guard), Prince Wongnirachara (former head of the royal secret police in the old regime) and Chaophraya Worapongphiphat (Palace Minister) to establish a unit of secret agents who would gather intelligence concerning royal family members who switched alliance after the Revolution and to report on the movements of the People's Party as well as other political groups. Every agent was appointed from people who were highly trusted by the king. They would act as moles in military, civilian and journalist circles. Further information on the works of the king's secret agents can be found in the memoirs of one agent who was a palace official and worked as 'His Majesty's agent', providing intelligence directly to the king (Special Court Verdict 1939: 303; A.K.Rungsaeng 1978a: 191–193, 229; Suphasawatwongsanit 2000: 51).

In September 1932, four months after the Revolution, Kromphra Sawatdiwatwisit, the king's father-in-law, and other nobles secretly supported a few royalist newspapers – *Bangkok Daily Mail*, *New Thai (Thai Mai)*, *Young Siam (Siam Num)* and others – and used them as anti-Revolution mouthpieces to rally the public against the People's Party and gain support for the royalists' plot to revive the old order (Barmé 1993: 71).

Later, in October, the royalists attempted to establish the Nation's Party as the opposition party of the People's Party. Members of the Nation's Party included loyal members of the royal family, royalists, conservative landowners, civil servants (both civilians and military officers) and journalists. What they wanted was a political system that would provide them with a fair share of power. Prince Suphasawatwongsanit noted in his memoirs:

It was a well known fact that the members of this party wanted a nice Constitution with the members having real shares in it. The openly stated policies of the Nation's Party included the promotion of a democratic system that would forever include the monarchy. However, their secret objective was to protect their political and economic interests from radical policies of the People's Party, Pridi's economic plan, for instance. Most importantly, their true goal was to restore the old order and to destroy the People's Party as a form of revenge (Suphasawatwongsanit 2000: 90–94; Thamrongsak 2000: 234–235).

Subsequently, when the king and the royalists succeeded in creating conditions for closing down parliament, the Nation's Party was able to openly support anti-Revolution activities. An obvious example of this move was their support for the Boworadet Rebellion or the Blue Army Rebellion that subsequently came into being (Suphasawatwongsanit 2000: 101).

THE BLUE ARMY REBELLION AND PLOTS FOR THE CRUSHING
OF THE PEOPLE'S PARTY UNDER ROYAL PATRONAGE

Of all the actions in opposition to the Revolution of 1932, none was as severe as the Blue Army Rebellion that occurred in mid-October 1933. This was the first time that full military force – including infantry units, artillery and military aircraft – was employed in opposition to the Revolution. The main objective of this operation was nothing less than conquering the People's Party, restoring power to the king and returning to the old order. This rebellion received the full support of the king and the royalists (Nikom 1976; Suthachai 1991: 226; Somsak 2001: 14).³

Prior to the Blue Army Rebellion, the king and the royalists successfully established a large anti-Revolution organization whose headquarters was at Klai Kangwon (meaning: far from worries) Palace, some 300 kilometres south of Bangkok. This network of resistance could be divided into many sub-categories, for example the category of royal family members (such as Kromphraya Chainadnarenthorn, Major General Prince Wongnirachara, and General Prince Bovoradet) who enjoyed direct and personal contact with the king. Prince Bovoradet asked to be the commander of this Blue Army. The king made a gesture of support with a personal donation of 200,000 baht, and ordered that the combined army infantry units from the northeast should be the rebels' principal troops (Poonpisamai 2000: 126–127; Special Court Verdict 1939: 30).⁴ Some close relatives of the king also joined this resistance, such as Queen Rambhaibarni, the queen's father Kromphra Sawatdiwatwisit, and the queen's older brother Prince Suphasawatwongsanit (Special Court Verdict 1939: 26). Royalists from the Nation's Party also descended upon Klai Kangwon Palace and engaged in preparations for the upcoming grand resistance.

In early August 1933, or approximately two months before the arrival of the Blue Army, evidence suggests that King Prajadhipok sent a letter to his former adviser in England, recounting his plan to support the anti-Revolution movement in various ways. He assessed that his plan was highly effective and also commented on a further plan to go into hiding while awaiting the successful results of the rebellion (Barmé 1993: 101).⁵ It is also important to note that, after the Revolution

3 See further study of this event as 'history of mentalities' in Nakarin Mektrairat's landmark work (Nakarin 2003: 269–317).

4 Evidence from the royalists and the Special Court Verdict of 1939 both state the exact amount of 200,000 baht being presented to the rebels by the king.

5 Batson does not believe that the king was involved in the rebellion (Batson 1984: 248). Wyatt sees no evidence that he supported the rebels (Wyatt 1984: 248). Murashima

of 1932, the monarch was almost always at Klaikangwon Palace. As the date for the launch of the Blue Army approached, the monarch made preparations accordingly. He ordered the Palace Ministry in Bangkok to secretly send machine guns and reinforcement troops to guard the palace, to stock up on provisions, to prepare to construct a road from the palace to the Thai-Burmese border in case the king needed an emergency escape route, and to prepare a royal train trip to the south (Special Court Verdict 1939: 29; A.K.Rungsaeng 1978a: 262–263). These plans would only be put into action once the resistance started. During the same period when the king was formulating these plans, Prince Suphasawatwongsanit was actively coordinating with the military and police forces as well as civilians who had agreed to join the Blue Army (Special Court Verdict 1939: 26; Suphasawatwongsanit 2000: 510). The task of rallying the public's support for this resistance in Bangkok was delegated to the Nation's Party who published articles attacking the People's Party as illegitimate dictators in the various royalist newspapers (A.K.Rungsaeng 1978b: 47; Bhuthorn 1978: 67).

When the appointed time arrived in mid-October, the Blue Army transported a large number of military units from the northeast to besiege the capital. They demanded that the government should resign immediately. At the same time, the king relocated from Klaikangwon Palace to the south, away from the site of conflict and according to plan. He declared neutrality and awaited news of success, while the People's Party refused to accept the ultimatum from the royalists and announced their decision to fight. The People's Party relied upon military units within the capital who, despite being outnumbered, had superior weapons. They also undermined the morale of rebel troops through radio broadcasts. The government eventually managed to suppress the Blue Army Rebellion. Upon being defeated, Prince Bovoradet, commander-in-chief of the rebels, together with a group of officers fled the country. Many commanding officers died in the battlefield. Since the expected victory never arrived, the king remained in the south awaiting the government's next move. The government then ordered the arrest of the king's close relatives – including Kromphra Sawatdiwatwisit, Prince Suphasawatwongsanit, and King Prajadhipok's secretary, Prince Wibulsawatwong – on charges of rendering support to rebels. However, the government's intentions failed to materialize completely since the king had ordered all those involved at

questions the facts presented in the Special Court Verdict of 1939 (Murashima 1991: 44). The latest work of Handley still cannot confirm that the king was behind this rebellion (Handley 2006: 53). Nonetheless, evidence from the king and royalists that has been subsequently disclosed ascertain that the king was involved in opposing the Revolution of 1932 (see A.K.Rungsaeng 1978; Manee 1999; Princess Poonpisamai 2000, 2002; Prince Suphasawatwongsanit 2000).

the higher level to flee the country. Hundreds of royalist officers and civilians were arrested and sentenced to prison (Bhuthorn 1978: 49; Poonpisamai 2002: 101–105). After they were sentenced, the royalist prisoners regrouped in prison and called themselves the ‘True Blues’. They took the colour of the monarch as the symbol of their hope and aspiration. They established a secret newspaper to communicate with one another and composed a song, *True Blue*,⁶ as their group anthem (Chulee 1945: 267–270).

The political turbulence that occurred after the Revolution was caused by the king and the royalists. Phra Sarasas recorded briefly the events of that era in English and published it in Japan. His account stated that the king had plotted to destroy the People’s Party by closing down parliament and suspending the constitution. However, when the People’s Party’s coup ended his resistance, the king then supported the Blue Army in staging its rebellion. But again, the People’s Party succeeded in suppressing this royalist rebellion. When both plots failed, the king fled to England with all his money and subsequently abdicated. Phra Sarasas concluded that the appropriate role of the monarch should be as follows: ‘A king can do no wrong, implies also, a king can do no right, in other words, a king can do nothing’ (Phra Sarasas 1942: 232–235).

Supporting the rebellion was not the only method employed by the king and the royalists in opposing the Revolution. Official documents and memoirs of ‘His Majesty’s secret agent’ mention numerous plots to assassinate important leaders of the People’s Party in 1933–1938, such as the attempt to poison Phraya Phahon Phonphayahasena – prime minister from the People’s Party – and various attempts to assassinate individual ministers as well as groups of ministers (Special Court Verdict 1939: 31, 35, 107–111, 120). Further details can be found in the verdict report of the special court of 1939.⁷ Although the royalists retorted that this verdict was nothing more than groundless accusations, one of the assassination plots against the People’s Party is confirmed in the memoirs of ‘His Majesty’s secret agent’. The memoir states that, before the arrival of the Blue Army, the royalists plotted to assassinate the leader of the People’s Party by

6 ‘We’ve been in prison for over three years, but there’s no need to live in fear. We’re bright and merry, because we’re not sad at being here for merely doing our duty to country and King, so let’s be cheery and make the heavens ring. Long live the King. We say hooray and sing. We hope to go home soon. Yes, we do. You, too. Back to wives and sweethearts, also true to you. Let’s say that we vow all of us to remain True Blue. And pray that our King be with us all life through, Chai-Yo, True Blue.’

7 The Special Court Verdict of 1939 is the verdict for the offenders of the 1939 rebellion. This document provides information on the counter-revolutionary movements of the king and the royalists since 1932.

two teams of assassins. The first team was supposed to be a group of snipers who would shoot at the leader of the People's Party in front of the cabinet building. The second team of assassins would be assigned to assassinate the first team and the shooter in this case was none other than 'His Majesty's secret agent' (A.K. Rungsaeng 1978b: 80–82). However, that plot failed as well.

THE FAILURE TO RETURN TO POWER AND THE ABDICATION

Assessing King Prajadhipok's political movements after the Revolution of 1932 through his correspondence with the government in 'Statement on the Abdication of King Prajadhipok' (1935) and related researches, it is possible to comprehend the king's failure to adapt to the democratic system in several important aspects. Firstly, he violated the principle that 'the king can do no wrong' when he repeatedly acted on his own initiative without first receiving approval from the government. For example, transferring 6,000,000 baht from the crown's property in a foreign bank into his personal account (Supoj 2002: 70),⁸ distributing the critique of the People's Party's economic plan and signing his own name as the author (1933), and providing financial subsidies for the publication of 3,000 copies of this document (Thamrongsak 2000: 296).

Secondly, the king was behind various counter-revolutionary activities, for instance, the use of a non-constitutional law article in the 'silent *coup d'état*' (1933). He conspired with the royalist prime minister to seize power by closing down parliament and suspending the constitution. Moreover, the king provided financial support to the attempt to overthrow the People's Party by force by donating 200,000 baht to the Blue Army.

Thirdly, the king protected his own interests. For example, he vetoed a law that required the monarch's assets to be taxed and vetoed legal amendments that would reduce his power. Nonetheless, the parliament insisted that these laws be enforced and this caused great discontent to the king. According to the People's Party, all that the king had attempted to do was to protect his own interests (Statement on the Abdication of King Prajadhipok 1935: 109–110, 120–121).

Fourthly, the king lacked consistency in his principles. When he failed in his attempt to regain power through forceful means and as the People's Party became less willing to compromise, King Prajadhipok made a drastic change in political tactics and switched to the principles of democracy. This was despite

8 When the government subsequently discovered this transaction, a law-suit was filed demanding that the court confiscate the remainder of King Prajadhipok's assets in Thailand to compensate for the amount that he illegally transferred out of the country.

having strongly opposed the Revolution and previously refusing to accept the principles of democracy. One obvious example was his demand that all members of parliament be elected members despite his prior demands for power to appoint half of the parliament himself (Statement on the Abdication of King Prajadhipok 1935: 166). Furthermore, he demanded the re-establishment of the Nation's Party as a political party despite having opposed the principle of having political parties in the past (Murashima 1991: 14–18). Because the king constantly altered his standpoint he was criticized by members of the parliament for being fickle (Statement on the Abdication of King Prajadhipok 1935: 249).

After the Revolution of 1932, the king and the royalists did not peacefully accept their lot under the new order. Neither did they disappear from politics. On the contrary, they actively and continuously resisted the Revolution. Even though the king eventually abdicated (1935) and remained in London for the rest of his life, he continued to resent the People's Party for their role in destroying the old order and reducing his position of power within the new order (Manee 2001: 437).

THE DEFEAT OF THE ROYALISTS

Throughout the period between 1933 and 1938, the royalists continued their counter-revolutionary movements in various forms. This resulted in many incidents of suppression by the government. Some important royalist leaders were arrested while many fled the country, but their opposition did not die out (Suphasawatwongsanit 2000: 108). After the defeat of the Blue Army and the king's abdication, the resistance persisted in an article accusing the People's Party of being dictators, which was published in *Meuang Thai* newspaper (National Archives, Ministry of Interior, 0201.1.1/89 box 3, 'Meuang Thai newspaper published article on dictatorship, 1936'). Moreover, they published and distributed pamphlets as a political tool to discredit the People's Party as a gang of dictators. This subsequently led to their publishing house being shut down by the government (Cheua Kasat 1936; National Archives, Ministry of Interior, 0201.1.1/90 box 3, 'Mr. Balloon Piampongsant, 1936').

The royalist movement regrouped and retaliated again in 1938. However, the People's Party was able to arrest a large group of counter-revolutionaries. Among those arrested was a high-ranking royal family member, Krom Phraya Jaina Narendhorn. According to the Special Court Verdict of 1939, after the defeat of the Blue Army rebellion he had acted as co-ordinator between the counter-revolutionary network in the country and the former king and other royal family

members residing abroad, requesting financial support from the exiled royals and organizing various private meetings (Special Court Verdict 1939: 219–221, 227, 250–253; Siriratanabusabong 1981: 74, 80). Many of those involved who were arrested in this incident were tried and sentenced to death. Some were stripped of their titles, including high-ranking members of the royal family, who also became convicts. The clamp-down that occurred succeeded in pacifying the counter-revolutionaries temporarily.

The Special Court Verdict of 1939 concluded that King Prajadhipok's retaliation by repeatedly providing support to the counter-revolutionaries suggested that he had a plan to destroy the People's Party so as to restore power to the monarchy, but this plan failed. However, the king did not give up and continued his plan of resistance through his recognition and financial support of the Blue Army rebels. Soon after the People's Party managed to vanquish that rebellion, King Prajadhipok abdicated (Special Court Verdict 1939: 354). Later, Field Marshal Phibun made a statement, which was broadcast on national radio, that suppression of the counter-revolutionaries was necessary for the preservation of the new order and to prevent the king and the royalists from restoring the old order (Collection of the Prime Minister's speeches and rallies 1940: 72).

PART II. REVIVAL OF THE MONARCH AND THE ROYALISTS, 1947–1957

To sum up briefly, after King Prajadhipok abdicated, King Ananda (Rama VIII, 1935–1946) ascended the throne. At the time, the new king was residing in Switzerland and therefore a council of regents was appointed to act on his behalf in Thailand. It is important to note that in the period between 1939 and 1941 the regents co-operated in support of the new order, possibly because the leading figures in the resistance movement were either imprisoned or in exile. This weakened the movement significantly. Consequently, the political atmosphere during that period was free of counter-revolutionary disturbances and the People's Party was able to achieve political stability.

Later, due to the international political context, especially the World War II, conflict arose which broke the People's Party into two major factions – the Phibun faction and the Pridi faction. At the end of 1941, Japanese troops made a sudden landing on Thailand's southern coast en route to Burma and India. Phibun's government allowed Japanese troops to pass through Thailand and eventually entered into a formal alliance with Japan. Hence, the political context of Thailand in 1942–1945 – in the midst of war – allowed royalists in Thailand and overseas to join forces in support of Pridi's underground network

opposing Phibun's government and Japanese forces. This alliance became known subsequently as the 'Free Thai Movement' (Sorasak 2005). When the war drew to a close, Thailand managed to escape the fate of a defeated nation. Pridi aspired to end the bad blood between the People's Party and the royalists and therefore he persuaded the postwar government to grant an amnesty to the royalists who had been incarcerated on treasonous charges. This was done according to an agreement Pridi had made with leading figures of the royalist movement who were living in exile in England when the war broke out (Suphasawatwongsanit 2000: 517–518). Consequently, many political prisoners and exiled rebels were able to return to Thailand at the end of World War II. In other words, this was a great liberation for the royalists.

However, this liberation failed to heal the wounds of defeat of a number of royalists. They did not agree with the government's aspirations. Instead, they had their own plans to reclaim what they had lost after the Revolution. According to one report from the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS) issued towards the end of 1945, the establishment of the English branch of the Free Thai Movement by the royalists was part of their plan to return from exile and find a way back into power as well as reclaiming King Prajadhipok's assets, which had been confiscated by the government before the war broke out. Queen Rambhai Barni was the leading figure in this postwar attempt. To achieve all this, they also planned to establish a royalist government (Thanet 1987: 194).

Along with the conclusion of World War II, the anti-Phibun/anti-Japanese alliance between the royalists and Pridi's faction in the People's Party came to an end because the two groups had different political objectives. The amnesty brought back to life the conflict that had deepened its roots since the Revolution of 1932. The liberation allowed the royalists back into the political arena once again. Among those granted an amnesty was a high-ranking member of the royal family, Krom Phraya Jaina Narendhorn. He subsequently became the regent and assumed the leading position among the royalists in the postwar era. Almost immediately after the political prisoners were released, they joined forces with the royalists and established the Progressive Party in 1945. This party evolved into the Democrat Party in the following year (Suthachai 1991: 226–231). They ran in the election and some succeeded in becoming members of parliament. They radically opposed and contested the political parties in the government's coalition. Some became active in intellectual and journalist circles, writing and publishing articles and documentaries attacking the Revolution of 1932 and the People's Party, as well as attempting to refute accusations that had been made against the royalists in the past (Nattapoll 2005). Even though these former

convicts were scattered in various areas of society, their mutual goal and the experience they shared back when they were singing ‘True Blue’ in prison never seemed to fade away.

The political conflict between the king, the royalists and Pridi’s faction in the People’s Party came to the point of crisis in 1946 due to the mysterious death of King Ananda who died from a gunshot wound in the Royal Palace. Nobody has dared to name the killer up to the present day. The royalists took this opportunity to attack Pridi – the architect of the radical economic plan that was proposed soon after the Revolution of 1932 – by accusing him of being involved in the death of King Ananda. Then they supported a *coup d’état* in 1947. This coup effectively expelled Pridi and his clique from the country. It also marked the end of the alliance that was born during the war years. Nonetheless, a ‘new alliance’ was born, which allowed the royalists to return to power in the postwar period.

THE FORMATION OF A ‘NEW ALLIANCE’ AND THE COUP D’ÉTAT OF 1947: AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETURN

When the People’s Party defeated the counter-revolutionary movement many important leading figures of that movement fled the country while some were arrested and punished. However, Prince Dhani Nivat – a former minister in the old order – kept a low profile throughout that period of defeat and he returned to assume a key role after the conclusion of World War II when the royalists returned to the political arena. He was dissatisfied with the Revolution of 1932 (Bidyababh Bridhyakon 1969: 92).

The death of King Ananda in 1946 resulted in a serious political crisis. The trial investigation was carried out with great difficulty. Prince Suphasawatwongsanit submitted a report assessing the stability of the People’s Party to King Bhumibol, the new monarch: ‘They won because they were afraid like a dog in the corner. Ever since those days they have lived in fear. And because of this fear they still consolidate themselves for the last 14 years. Today the situation is still the same’ (Suphasawatwongsanit 2000: 511). In the atmosphere of mourning after the loss of King Ananda, Pridi’s government remained unable to clarify the circumstances around his death. In the view of Prince Dhani – an important leading figure of the royalists who was later appointed as member and chairman of the Privy Council to King Bhumibol⁹ – the return path to power of the king and the royalists would be without obstacles if two important leaders of the

9 He became chairman of the Privy Council upon the death of the previous chairman, Kromphraya Chainadnarenthorn, in 1951.

People's Party, Pridi and Phibun, could be eliminated. The prince viewed both persons as highly dangerous (Sulak 1985: 15).

The death of King Ananda made Thai politics, which was already in a rather difficult situation at the conclusion of World War II, even more chaotic. A new alliance between the new king (Bhumibol), the royalists, the Democrat Party, and a group of military officers who had lost power in the postwar era was quietly forming. Pridi had distanced himself from politics by resigning from his position as prime minister. However, the new government which he supported continued to suffer severe attacks from the royalists and Democrats (Handley 2006: 80). Kromphraya Chainadnarethorn¹⁰ – the regent and leader of the royalists – did not want to compromise with Pridi. He was an ally of the military officers who staged the coup that successfully expelled Pridi from politics on 8 November 1947 (Handley 2008: 9). When the coup first happened, Edwin F. Stanton, the US Ambassador to Thailand, hesitated to offer his approval of the new government established by the royalists, which had Khuang Aphaiwong – a royalist and the leader of the Democrat Party – as prime minister (Kullada 2003: 50). Nonetheless, the regent expressed his endorsement of this coup to the American diplomat (Stanton 1956: 210). Hence, it would be fair to conclude that the king and the royalists played a role behind the scenes of the coup of 8 November 1947. An English report suggested that the Princess Mother of King Bhumibol was behind this coup (Tarling 1996: 3) and a contemporary Thai newspaper published this in its headline, 'The king knew of the revolution 2 months in advance'. According to an interview with Lieutenant General Kaj Kajsongkram – one of the important leaders of this coup – he sent a secret telegram reporting the plan for the coup to King Bhumibol two months in advance (*Ekarat*, 10 November 1947).

Following the success of the coup, Prince Dhani perceived that the political atmosphere allowed the king and the royalists to return to political power (Bidyalabh Bridhyakon 1969: 115). The coup group subsequently sent a delegate to report their success to the king in Switzerland, who sent a reply letter expressing his satisfaction with the outcome of the coup ('King Bhumibol's letter to Field Marshal Phibun Songkram, 25 November 1947'; *Wichai* 1955: 305). Prince Dhani called the political atmosphere and the opportunity that arose after the defeat of Pridi, one of the greatest enemies of the royalists, 'the nation's new day' (Bidyalabh Bridhyakon 1969: 118). On the contrary, Stanton viewed the coup

10 Kromphraya Chainadnarethorn was one of the sons of King Chulalongkorn. He was close to both the father and mother of King Ananda and King Bhumibol.

that overthrew the government and the content of the constitution of 1947 as a regression back to the past (Stanton 1956: 209–210).

RESTORATION OF POLITICAL POWER AND RECLAMATION OF ASSETS

Because the king and the royalists were involved in the 1947 coup, the drafters of the new constitution of 1947 also included royalists such as Seni Pramoj (former prime minister) and his younger brother Kukrit Pramoj (politician and journalist) (Kobkua 2003: 223). Consequently, the principle of this constitution was different from that of the Revolution of 1932, which aimed at limiting the monarch's power. Instead the constitution of 1947 greatly increased the monarch's power, for example allowing the monarch the power to control the government by appointing and dismissing the prime minister; allowing the monarch to select and appoint all members of the senate; allowing the monarch to have power over parliament and have the ability to pass law in certain cases. Also the government was prohibited from changing any of its administrative policies without the approval of the monarch. This constitution also allowed the monarch the power to appoint 100 members of parliament to act on behalf of the national assembly. The constitution of 1947 in fact allowed the monarch and the royalists to control politics. It also revived the Privy Council from the old order. Moreover, the post-coup cabinet included more royalists (members of the royal family, civil servants from the old order, and former political prisoners) than any other cabinet since the Revolution of 1932 (Suthachai 1991: 105, 111, 176).

After the coup of 1947, Khuang's royalist government came to power. The king and the royalists' plan to restore their power and reclaim their former assets started to materialize in 1948. The royalist government issued a law for reorganizing the crown's property. The power to control the crown's property, which had belonged to the government since the post-Revolution years, was restored to the king (Ockey, 2005: 115–127; Somsak 2006: 67–93). Moreover, the government returned to Queen Rambhai Barni the 6 million baht that had been confiscated from the former monarch (Supoj 2002: 63–80). Thus, what the king and the royalists gained in return for their support of this coup was the beginning of the restoration of their political power and their rights to assets, which they had lost after the Revolution of 1932.

Aside from eliminating Pridi from politics, the attempt to establish a political order that would satisfy royalists was an important goal. The Democrat Party royalist government embarked on drafting the constitution of 1949 so as to establish political power for the monarch and bring the royalists back into politics.

Most of the drafters were, once again, royalist legal experts. When parliament was convened for the consideration of this draft constitution, some members of parliament criticized the ‘hidden order’ within the constitution, which allowed much political power to the monarch (Thongchai 2005: 21). Nonetheless, the constitution of 1949 was eventually promulgated.¹¹ It is fair to conclude that the constitutions of 1947 and 1949 were ‘royalist constitutions’, which were intended for the construction of a political order that would allow more power to the monarch. They were similar to what King Prajadhipok had drafted prior to the Revolution of 1932.

THE HALT OF THE ‘BLUE ORDER’ DUE TO THE COUP D’ÉTAT OF 1951

In April 1948 – merely 6 months after the coup of 1947 – signs of inability to co-operate among the new alliances emerged. The military overthrew the Democrat Party royalist government and Phibun returned to office as Prime Minister for the second time. This led to a confrontation between the two power cores – the king and the royalists vis-à-vis Phibun – within the political framework that was inherited from the royalist government. This means that under the constitution of 1949 there remained an imbalance in the political relationship between the monarch and the government and parliament. The framework accorded much power to the monarch – the Blue Order – as, for example, the monarch had the power to freely appoint and administer the Privy Council without any balance of power from the government and parliament. In June 1949 – only three months after this constitution had been promulgated – there was a news report that the government had failed in their attempt to support an individual they could trust to become a member of the Privy Council (Handley 2008: 10). While the monarch and the Privy Council gained power over the government and were able to appoint senators who made up half the members of parliament, signs of conflict between the regent and the government began to emerge. Most of the senators were appointed from among royal family members and loyal civil servants from the old order by the regent and without consultation with the government. This caused problems in the relationship between the government and the senate. The political power of the regent and the Privy Council seriously interfered in politics. For example, the regent started to attend cabinet meetings. The regent’s and the royalists’ political interference caused much discontent to Prime Minister Phibun (*Bangkok Post*, 18 December 1950).

¹¹ The constitution of 1949 was promulgated on 23 March 1949.

Phibun staged a coup on 29 November 1951 to abrogate the constitution of 1949. This incident took place only a few days before King Bhumibol returned to Thailand and marked the collapse of the new alliance. This coup resulted in the decrease of the monarch's political power. Phibun subsequently brought back into use the constitution of 10 December 1932 for a short period.¹² The monarch's power was more limited under the constitution of 1932 than the constitution that had been abrogated, for example he did not have the power to appoint members to the Privy Council and the senate. This decrease of the monarch's power made it very difficult for Prince Dhani, the regent, to sign his name in approval of this constitution. Even after King Bhumibol had returned to Thailand and had agreed to the promulgation of the new constitution, the coup that abrogated the royalist constitution continued to cause the king much dissatisfaction (Sulak 1985: 16). In other words, the coup of 1951 was a cause of discontent for the king and the royalists because it put an end to the political order that they had so painstakingly sought to establish.

Later when Phibun and the coup group received an audience with King Bhumibol, the king started to negotiate for a new constitution instead of continuing to use the constitution of 1932 according to Phibun's proposal. He demanded that the abrogated constitution of 1949 be included in the drafting of the new constitution because he wanted to regain the power to appoint senators. The king's reasoning for this demand was that having only elected members of parliament did not provide sufficient insurance ('Record of the king's critique of the draft of the constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand of 1952, 17 January 1952' in Yud 1952: 258–259). However, in the constitution of 1952 that was eventually promulgated,¹³ the government agreed to only some of the king's demands. For example, it allowed the monarch to appoint members of the Privy Council, but he no longer had the power to appoint senators. For this reason, according to Prince Dhani, Phibun was 'highly poisonous' (Sulak 1985: 37). Hence, the coup of 1951, which was for the sake of destroying the Blue Order, marked the collapse of the new alliance between the monarch/royalists and Phibun.

12 The constitution of 10 December 1932 was promulgated again between 6 December 1951 and 7 March 1952, while the constitution of 1952 was being drafted.

13 The constitution of 1952 was promulgated on 8 March 1952.

SUPPORT OF THE COUP D'ÉTAT OF 1957: ENDING THE
POLITICAL ERA OF THE PEOPLE'S PARTY

The crucial rift between the king/royalists and Phibun did not arise only from issues relating to the limitation of the monarch's power. In August 1953, another conflict arose between the king and the government concerning the land reform law. The government aimed to limit ownership of large plots of land. However, the Privy Council disagreed with the principles of this law. The king sided with the Privy Council on this matter and delayed signing the promulgation of the law. The government insisted on the necessity of this law and the king ultimately agreed to sign the promulgation. Later in May 1957, the king refused to join the celebration of the 25th century of the Buddhist Era (Kobkua 2003: 150–155) because he was dissatisfied that the government did not make him the centre of the event. He considered that Phibun was 'intoxicated with power' and aspired to be 'the second monarch' (Kobkua 1995: 100). The events that might have been the last straws that broke the camel's back between the government and the king were the return of Pridi – who had been in exile in China since the coup of 1947, bearing the accusation of murdering King Ananda – and the re-opening of the court case about the mysterious death of King Ananda (Nattapoll 2008: 29–80).

Thai politics in the mid-1950s was plagued by numerous factional conflicts, especially between the government, the police, and the military – known as the triumvirate of Thai politics – with the royalists playing an increasingly crucial role so as to become the fourth major faction in Thai politics. In the triumvirate, Phibun was in the most difficult position because he did not have a power-base of his own. Nonetheless, what he did was use the power-bases of the other two factions to balance each other out. The reason why Phibun aspired to bring Pridi back was that he feared that his government would not survive the new coalition that was about to be formed between the king/royalists and Sarit's military faction – that is, the 'new alliance without the People's Party' (Somsak 2001: 32). Thus, the movements of Phibun and Police General Phao Sriyanond towards the end of 1955, which aimed to bring Pridi back from China, caused much anxiety for the royalists. They also urgently wanted to suspend plans to re-open the case of King Ananda's assassination. The US embassy reported the news of the royalists' attempts to interfere in politics and their goal to overthrow Phibun during that period (Kullada 2007: 35).

In mid-April 1957, the British embassy reported that the royalists and the military were making preparations for a *coup d'état*. Leading royalists, such as

Prince Dhani (chairman of the Privy Council), Seni Pramoj (deputy chairman of the Democrat Party) and Kukrit Pramoj (journalist and younger brother of Seni), had been invited to join a meeting with the military (Kullada 2007: 35). This plan was subsequently carried out through a series of newspaper articles, which attacked the government. These articles were published in royalist newspapers and through the opposition parties, namely the Democrat Party and the Sahabhumi Party. At the end of August, before Phibun's government was overthrown by the coup, information was disclosed through parliamentary debate that the king had provided financial support (worth 700,000 baht) to Seni and the Democrat Party for their political movements (Parliamentary meeting report 1957: 1031–1032). Later, the US embassy reported that the king frequently engaged in secret night-time visits to Seni's residence (Kullada 2007: 35).

The conflict among the triumvirate and the royalists evolved into a bipolar division in Thai politics: between Phibun and Phao's clique and Sarit and the king/royalists, or the new alliance without the People's Party. The two power cores were engaged in cut-throat competition. On 16 September 1957, the same day that the coup took place, Phibun had an audience with the king twice – amounting to two failed attempts to dismiss Sarit who was his arch enemy in the military, but who enjoyed support from the king and the royalists. King Bhumibol did not agree with the prime minister's plan to dismiss Sarit (Chalerm 1975: 179; Suwat 1978: 55–56). And that same night when tanks appeared in important corners of Bangkok, the royalists – Phraya Sriwisarawaja, a member of the Privy Council, for instance – responded to the sure signs of yet another military coup with laughter (Jongkol 2003: 454). Not long after that, there was a radio broadcast of a royal decree appointing Sarit as military protector of the capital (*Royal Gazette*, 16 September 1957). This decree remains problematic in terms of the king's power under the constitution. It was an action by the king that did not receive approval from the government and, therefore, violated the terms of the constitution of 1952, which at the time had not yet been abrogated. Only one day after the coup, the US embassy opined that the king and the royalists had become politically involved in this coup because they aspired to extend their political role to a greater degree (Kullada 2007: 36).

Two days after the coup of 1957, Sarit, as the head of the coup group and a key leader of the new alliance without the People's Party, mentioned in an interview that the king was satisfied with the coup (*Thai Raiwan*, 19 September 1957). The post-coup government subsequently returned the power to control the office of the palace, which previously belonged to the prime minister, to the secretary of the office of the palace (National Archives, Personal Documents of Pin Malakul,

5.1.1/9 box1, 'Agenda of Cabinet Meeting 3/1957'). The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported that the Thai king rendered his patronage to the coup because he was dissatisfied with Phibun (Surachart 1988: 78).

CONCLUSION

The destruction of the absolute monarchy in Thailand through the Revolution of 1932, which was spear-headed by the People's Party, aimed to establish democracy. However, politics remained unstable from 1932 to 1957 because the different kings and their royalist supporters worked against this new order in every way possible. Although they failed in the earlier stages, their support for the coup of 1947 allowed them to return to the political arena again. Their dreams were ultimately realized when their support for the coup of 1957 ended the 'Political Era of the People's Party' – a time when most prime ministers came from the People's Party and the principal political trend was to limit the monarch's power – and ushered the country into a new era that provided a golden opportunity for the royalists to re-arrange the political relationships of the old order that they preferred with the military dictatorship that arose subsequently.

In conclusion, the royalists' retaliation against the People's Party during this period evolved around the different kings, members of the royal family, and the Privy Council and was carried out through royalists in the civil system, the military, political parties, and journalists. The kings and royalists played the following important political roles in opposing the Revolution:

First, the use of political tactics that allowed them to return to power. Hence, (1) King Prajadhipok added the term 'temporary' on to the title of the first constitution – which would reduce his powers – so as to allow him to dominate the drafting of the new constitution (10 December 1932) with principles of the old order; (2) the use of non-constitutional legal articles in the silent coup (1933), which closed down the parliament and suspended the constitution; (3) the attempt to order the mass execution of People's Party members; (4) the king's/regent's direct participation in the drafting of the constitutions of 1947 and 1949; (5) King Bhumibol's negotiation for power in the drafting of the constitution of 1952 so as to ensure the power of the monarch according to his own will.

Second, the use of force in various counter-revolutionary activities, such as (1) the royalist support for the Blue Army (1933); (2) assassination plots (1933–1938); (3) support for the coups of 1947 and 1957, the latter ending the political

era of the People's Party, and ushering in a new era of dictatorship that no longer related to the Revolution of 1932.

This chapter refutes the traditionalist employment of the idea of bureaucratic polity in explaining Thai politics 1932–1957, which provides only images of the role of the military. Instead, I propose a revisionist explanation that challenges the view of the 'democratic King'. This explanation allows into view the political activities of consecutive kings and royalists after 1932, proving that they did not disappear from politics. In fact, their activities have been largely overlooked in previous scholarship despite the fact that this particular period in Thailand's history was a time when they were attempting in every way possible to regain power in Thai politics. The royalists succeeded in re-establishing their power after 1957. This has become an important factor in the process of democratization in Thailand up to the present day.

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'Thai-Style Democracy'

The Royalist Struggle for Thailand's Politics

Kevin Hewison and Kengkij Kitirianglarp

On 29 August 2007, former Thaksin Shinawatra government spokesman Jakrapob Penkair spoke at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand on the topic of 'Democracy and Patronage System of Thailand' (Jakrapob 2007).¹ Months later, a low-ranking police officer lodged a complaint alleging that some of Jakrapob's comments amounted to lese-majesty (see AFP, 24 March 2007). On 30 May 2008, the police announced that formal lese-majesty charges would be laid, and Jakrapob resigned as Minister in the Prime Minister's Office (*Bangkok Post*, 30 and 31 May 2008).

What was it in Jakrapob's talk to a relatively small audience of mainly foreign journalists that proved so challenging that Thailand's longest established political party, the Democrat Party, joined a clamour that called for Jakrapob's sacking? In the complex political environment that followed the 2006 palace-backed military coup, Jakrapob had challenged royalist constructions regarding politics and governance.

Jakrapob's core message was that there had developed a 'head on clash' between democracy and the 'patronage system' that would shake Thailand and its political foundations. In essence, Jakrapob viewed Thai politics as dominated

1 Various versions of this speech as transcripts have been produced. The versions used here are considered accurate. There are also video clips of the speech widely available. The transcript used in this chapter is available at the Thai Political Prisoners webpage (Jakrapob 2007).

by a patronage system that weaves together highly idealized notions of kingly virtue, power and benevolence. He says: 'If you have [...] unquestionable loyalty to the King, you would be protected, in order to show this protection more clearly, people who do otherwise must be punished'. The current king, under whom this patronage system has been renovated and modernized, is now acclaimed as the 'traditional King, the scientific King, the developing King, the working monarch. And now [...] the guardian of [...] democracy'. Jakrapob is critical of a dependency he sees as established in Thai society: 'It leads to a strong belief [...] that with a benevolent reign like this we don't actually need democracy. We are led into [...] believing that the best form of government is guided democracy or democracy with His Majesty[']s gracious guidance.'

The 'democracy' identified here by Jakrapob as linked to ideas about the monarchy and governance can be characterized as 'Thai-style democracy' (TSD or, in Thai, *prachathipatai baep thai*). As we will indicate, this is not a new conceptualization (cf. Connors 2003: Ch. 3). In this chapter, we will examine the foundational elements of TSD and the attempts to further embed and defend various political and ideological forms associated with TSD following the 2006 coup.

THE 2006 COUP AND THAI-STYLE DEMOCRACY

The 2006 coup overthrew an elected government. Led by Thaksin, the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party, in terms of votes gained, was Thailand's most popular political party ever. The military putsch also threw out the 1997 constitution, which had been the basis of a developing, but still highly flawed, parliamentary system. The control that huge electoral successes granted Thaksin and TRT was identified by conservative and authoritarian forces as challenging their long 'management' of Thailand's politics. Democratization was to be defined only in ways that did not threaten their power or the ideas that underpinned that power.

For us, this means that the 2006 coup, the subsequent period of military rule that led to the promulgation of the 2007 constitution, and the elections of the same year, need to be considered as a critical conjuncture in a long struggle for control over Thailand's politics. Much of that struggle has been about the *nature* of democracy (Connors 2003). In this section we briefly examine the renewed attention to TSD that emerged in contextualizing the coup and academic responses to it.

Immediately following the coup, writing of its intellectual impact, Surin Maisirikrod (2007: 340) asserted that TSD had emerged for commentators as 'a

legitimate alternative to Western-style democracy'. His position owed much to an unpublished paper by Pattana Kitiarsa (2006) who discussed reactions to the coup in a dichotomous manner, contrasting a 'localist' response (or 'community of interpretation') to the coup with a 'Western' perspective.

Pattana's discussion of these communities of interpretation is essentially an account of the divergences between what he identifies as 'Western' interpretations, that the coup was not necessarily a good outcome for Thailand or its democratic development, and a 'Thai' position, that this was a 'good coup' getting rid of an increasingly authoritarian government. Like all dichotomous perspectives, Pattana's elides variation. So it must be that Thais who opposed military intervention should be in the 'Western' camp and the many who initially supported the coup must exhibit a 'Thai' perspective.

For Pattana, the Thai community of interpretation defines TSD by pointing to the failings of Thaksin and his government. Essentially, Thaksin and TRT are seen to have diverged from the norms of Thai politics. Pattana (2006: 3) asserts that there is a culturally Thai way of doing politics. The 'localist' perspective views Thai culture as being incompatible with 'Western' ideas about 'democracy'. This Thai way is based on a rationality that draws on 'Buddhist-based cultural paradigms that emphasize improvisational, compromised, and flexible adjustments to their [Thai's] social world'. Pattana claims that the proponents of TSD are 'practical and realistic', and emphasize the 'nation's integration, security, and spirituality'.

The Buddhist cultural principles included in this approach emphasize notions of good governance, righteous leadership and the ideals of dhammic kingship. While asserting that Thais exhibit an 'ambiguous construction of authority', this is not the case for the dhammic leadership provided by the king (Pattana 2006: 5). Pattana explains that Thaksin was politically doomed when people compared the 'amoral capitals of wealth and power' represented by Thaksin with the 'aura of Buddhist righteous charisma' represented in the person and reign of the current monarch (Pattana 2006: 6). He points out that from the TSD perspective, 'Thailand is too elite-oriented and too hierarchical to be successful in its attempts to establish strong democratic structures and culture.'

The TSD perspective was indeed evident during the long period of political disputation leading up to the coup and immediately after it. For example, political historian Nakharin Mektrairat (2006: 220) has argued that the king is a pillar of Thai democracy because his moral power contrasts so starkly with the corrupt and corrupting practices of politicians like Thaksin. As we mentioned above, influenced by Pattana's work, Surin (2007: 349) declares Thaksin's rule

a case of ‘electoral power without moral authority’. Surin considers that those close to the king also bask in the glow of moral authority that derives from the dhammic king. He states that when General Prem Tinsulanonda, as president of the king’s Privy Council, decided to publicly campaign against the Thaksin government, this was ‘more than mere physical presence. Prem represented the moral order.’

From this perspective, claimed to be rooted in a Thai cultural worldview, the coup was not only a ‘good coup’ but one that was restoring a moral equilibrium to politics that Thaksin and TRT had dangerously upset. Hence, Surin (2007: 351) can claim that the coup is not a setback for democracy of the Thai-style but only if it is compared with ‘the standards set by Western democracies’. Citing earlier arguments about ‘Asian-style democracy’, Surin writes of unelected sectoral representation and representation for the monarchy in a parliamentary system (Surin 2007: 352–353). Endorsing TSD, Surin (2007: 354) declares that ‘placing the king at the centre of politics is placing morality at the centre of politics’.

Remarkably, just hours before the coup, Privy Councillor Prem was asked how TSD differed from ‘Western-style democracy’. The general replied,

We are a kingdom. You [the West] are not. So you have to think some minor different ways to run your country. Normal people love the king very much, you know that. If you saw what happened on June 9 [60th anniversary celebrations of King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s reign], you can tell how much we love the monarch. That’s something [...] different between your [country] and mine (cited in Murphy 2006).

Prem explained that it was impossible for Westerners to understand this conception of politics that is, in essence, culturally Thai. It becomes clear that there is a politically significant set of ideas, called ‘Thai-style democracy’, that is considered culturally specific in which the monarchy is its central support. As we will show, TSD has been a critical element of political struggles for several decades.

THAI-STYLE DEMOCRACY’S HERITAGE

Pattana and Surin provide an outline of a conservative conception of politics that has come to be represented by the shibboleth-like incantation of the description of TSD as ‘democracy with the king as head of state’ (*prachathipatai an mi phramahakasat song pen pramuk*).² Under the influence of the palace-military

2 Chalermkiat (1990: 137) notes that the phrase ‘democracy with the monarch as the head of the state’ first appeared in the 1968 constitution. The military junta’s

alliance that had perpetrated the coup, it became impossible to use the term 'democracy' without appending 'with the king as head of state'. Indeed, it is lese-majesty to suggest a democracy without the king as head of state; indeed, it is unconstitutional to promote an alternative form of government. Behind these positions lies a heritage of political philosophy and political struggle that has long pitted conservatives against communists, social democrats and liberals. In this section we trace some of this history and the meanings attributed to TSD.

The idea that there could be a Thai-style of government (*kan pokkhrong baep thai*) was most cogently presented by Kukrit Pramoj who was a prolific and influential propagandist of this notion from the early 1960s. While Kukrit's position is often seen as the foundation of the TSD discourse – and will be discussed below – TSD's heritage is in political struggles that began the moment the absolute monarchy was overthrown.

After some initial republican rumblings, the post-1932 People's Party-dominated governments claimed they wanted the power of the king to be limited by law and the constitution. It was argued that this form of constitutional monarchy protected the Chakri dynasty as the king, under the constitution, was not responsible for political decisions (*Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 12 December 1936; see Noranit 2006: 13). Royalists vigorously opposed this arrangement. Through restorationist rebellions, innumerable plots and attempted assassinations, as well as through more conventional political means, they wanted political power returned to the monarchy.

Initially, royalists demanded increased powers for the king under the 1932 constitution. These overtures were rejected and King Prajadhipok abdicated in 1935. This was triggered by the passing of an inheritance tax that impacted on the royal family, and the king's rejection of it. The king was also vexed by the national assembly, which he saw as limiting his powers, and by the government's rejection of his demands for broader royal prerogatives (Murashima 1991: 37–38). He had also complained about not having the power to appoint second category members to the national assembly, about a perceived lack of public respect for the king, and about assembly members criticizing the monarchy (he wanted critics punished) (Ramphai Barni 1978: 15, 27–28).

In what is now well-known as evidence that Prajadhipok was a 'democratic king', his abdication letter stated that he supported democratic and constitutional

chosen chair for the Constitutional Drafting Assembly overseeing the development of the 2007 constitution Noranit Setabutr (2006: 3) disingenuously claims that 'parliamentary rule with the King as the head of state' has been in place since 1932. In fact, this is the official line (see Department of Local Administration 1993: 3).

government, proclaiming that he gave his 'powers [...] to the people as a whole', adding: 'I am not willing to turn them over to any individual or any group to use in an autocratic manner without heeding the voice of the people' (Prajadhipok 1984: 317). In fact, if the king was a democrat, he was a contingent democrat. For example, when the royalists were politically weak, in 1933, he opposed the formation of political parties, arguing that the people were politically immature and he called for all parties – essentially the People's Party – to be abolished (Murashima 1991: 23–4). When royalists seemed likely to gain from enhanced democratization, he supported political parties.

As Murashima (1991: 3) points out, it was only in the lead-up to the 1946 elections that competitive party politics finally emerged in Thailand. The first political party – the Progressive Party (*phak kaeo na*) – was formed by Kukrit Pramoj, a minor prince and staunch royalist. This increase in party-based politics coincided with the promulgation of the 1946 constitution, recognized as a more democratic document than anything that had gone before it. At the same time, it represented something of a victory for the royalists. While the king's constitutional role in legislation was essentially unchanged, lower-ranked princes and their families were legally permitted to re-enter the political fray (Blanchard et al, 1958: 156). Immediately, members of the royal family joined royalist politicians like Khuang Aphaiwong in vigorously attacking the government led by Pridi Phanomyong (see Thawee in Ray 1972: 116). Pridi was forced to flee the country following the death of King Ananda Mahidol and a military coup.

The coup had positive political outcomes for the royalists as the Provisional Constitution and the resulting 1949 constitution gave the throne vastly expanded powers. The king became supreme commander of the armed forces, gained greater control over the Privy Council, and the throne's prerogatives were enhanced (e.g., the king could declare war and grant pardons). Most importantly, the monarch gained the power to fully appoint the Senate and, between the Senate and the king, legislation could essentially be vetoed (Thak 1978: 822–858; Wyatt 1984: 268).

Kobkua (2003: 49) observes that this constitution represented the true 'royalist interpretation of the [...] constitutional monarchy', and ideas such as the monarch appointing members of parliament are regularly broached during each exercise in constitution drafting. The royalist argument has been that the will of the people cannot be trusted. In 1949, one commentator warned against too much representation: 'Do not give too much trust to the will of the people who are not [...] capable of expressing their common will' instead suggesting that 'we [should] have faith in the traditional grace and goodness of our Kingship' (Hermit 1949). Interestingly, this constitution, drawn up by a committee of

royalists and put before the legislature as a take-it-or-leave-it proposition, did not sail through parliament (see *Bangkok Post*, 17 and 18 January 1949). There was determined opposition from the *elected* members of the assembly, the majority of whom *rejected* this most royalist of constitutions. Kobkua (2003: 50) notes that it was only with the support of *appointed* members – nominated by the throne – that the new constitution was passed.³

The 1949 constitution was eventually thrown out just days prior to King Bhumibol's return from Switzerland in 1951. The remnants of the 1932 revolutionists, strongest in Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram's military-based faction, are usually considered to have staged their coup to pre-empt an alliance between royalist parliamentarians and the young king (Neher 1974: 30–21). It is noteworthy that the sections of the new constitution dealing with the king, while drawing on some elements in the 1932 constitution, retained considerable congruence with the 1949 basic law. This was a strategic compromise. The regent, Prince Dhani, had refused to recognise the coup and the resulting government. However, the palace soon negotiated a compromise where they accepted the loss of some of the powers the monarchy had had in return for regaining control over palace affairs (Kobkua 2003: 47, 54).

Under Phibun, the royalists were again checked and a political stand-off re-emerged. However, as Phibun allowed party politics to re-develop, royalist versus anti-royalist camps were mobilized. The royalist Democrat Party (including Seni and Kukrit Pramoj and Khuang Aphaiwong) vigorously attacked the government. In turn, the government accused the Democrats of receiving palace funds (*Bangkok Post*, 6 September 1957). In election speeches, Police General Phao Sriyanond attacked 'aristocrats', asserting that Thailand was held back by the 'aristocratic system' and claiming that he wanted to rid the country of the last vestiges of the 'privileged aristocracy' (*Bangkok Post*, 4 December 1956). When Phibun claimed that Kukrit's *Siam Rath* newspaper was 'supporting the King', Kukrit fumed. Demanding that the premier declare that he held no prejudice

3 Interestingly, when debates over the constitution turned to appointed members of parliament, the royalists did not want appointed members of the assembly as they were seen as a means for the 1932 revolutionists to retain power. At the same time, they liked the idea that the king should appoint senators and saw the senate as a means to control parliament (see Hermit 1949). An editorialist in the *Bangkok Post* (18 January 1949) described the notion of appointing the senate as 'conservative and even reactionary'. We find ourselves in disagreement with Connors (2003: Ch. 3) who claims that the royalists of this period were seeking a more liberal political system. The evidence of several plots against Pridi and Phibun and a political cynicism, especially towards parliament, and political opportunism are not suggestive of any liberal commitment.

against the king, Kukrit preached that the king was loved by all and that those who did not show 'devotion and loyalty' were of 'abnormal mentality' (*Siam Rath Weekly Review*, 7 June 1956).⁴

It was no surprise that the February 1957 election saw the government's party emerge victorious. Most commentators consider that the government meddled in the campaign to ensure that its party, with 85 seats, trounced the Democrats with just 28 seats (Thak 2007: 72). Bangkok's middle class was unhappy with what they saw as rigged elections and a protest movement developed. Remarkably, General Sarit Thanarat spoke at a student-led rally attacking 'dirty' elections and agreed not to prevent student-led demonstrations against the government. When Sarit's coup took place, few were surprised (Thak 2007: 73).

The coup was a breath of fresh air for the besieged royals. As is explained in Thak's classic study, the Sarit period of strict authoritarian rule saw the re-establishment of the monarchy as a significant political institution (Thak 2007). In addition, the palace, through the Crown Property Bureau, was permitted to develop and expand its businesses (*Siam Rath Weekly Review*, 28 April 1960).

That the young king appreciated the efforts of Sarit as a loyal father figure was indicated time and again. For example, in one public address, the king called on the assembled people to cheer Sarit, and stated: 'This is an expression of thanks for his administration of our country which has brought happiness and content[edness] to everybody' (*Siam Rath Weekly Review*, 2 February 1961). Well might the king have cheered Sarit, for the general effectively made the king sovereign, in place of the previous notion that the people were sovereign (Kobkua 2003: 57; see also Borwornsak n.d.: 2).

It is in this period of military government and massive political repression, when constitutionalism was considered totally unimportant, that the defining characteristics of TSD were established.

THAI-STYLE DEMOCRACY DEFINED

While Sarit's political philosophy is not defined in any particular document, the modern genesis of TSD may be seen in his approach to political rule. Sarit, apparently a master of linguistic manipulation, was able to redefine a number of terms. For example, *patiwat* (revolution) was transformed into a term for his military coup (and many of those that followed), which was, to use Thak's (2007: 9) term, 'reactionary'. Sarit's use of *prachathipatai* (democracy), with the

⁴ The idea that not showing loyalty to the king was an 'abnormality' is also seen in General Prem's 2006 interview with the *FEER*, cited above.

qualifier *baep Thai* (Thai-style) appended, describes a political system that was, again using Thak's (2007: 10) words, 'harsh, repressive, despotic and inflexible'.

Sarit needed a new legitimacy as the previous ruling elite, associated with the People's Party, and its ideology had been overturned (Saichol, n.d.: 2). Sarit sought this legitimacy in the development of notions of 'Thainess' – including ideas about TSD – that overturned 'Western' ideology associated with democratic government (Connors 2004: 48). A new ideological cement was required for a society that was to be ruled by a military leadership with no particularly strong links to the ideas associated with the old regime.

Summarizing Thak's assessment, the principles of Sarit's political philosophy begin with a generalized notion that Western-style democracy does not fit Thailand and that it was transplanted into the country prematurely, with insufficient preparation of the citizenry (Thak 2007: 100). Thai society was considered to be much more amenable to strong leadership through an authority figure who could unify the country. That figure would uphold notions of *samakhitham* or unity based in moral principles (Thak 2007: 100–101). As might be expected from such a conservative conception, social hierarchy was emphasized, with an expressed desire to maintain the rural base of society as a way of limiting social mobilization and keeping traditional institutions strong (Thak 2007: 104–105). The nation was viewed as a patriarchal family and the unity of this family–nation was given considerable importance. The head of the family, the father-leader, was required to uphold notions of *samakhitham* (Thak 2007: 101, 105–106). Indeed, 'representation' was identified with the father-leader who would visit his children to learn of their problems and their needs (Thak 2007: xiii). This 'representation' actually meant that Thailand was a 'democracy' even if it had no elections or constitution. Political contestation was also taken off the agenda as political struggles led to a loss of order and discipline and a descent into anarchy (Connors 2003: 49).⁵

As already mentioned, it was Kukrit Pramoj who became the great propagandist for Sarit's authoritarianism and the revival of 'royalism'. Kukrit claimed that 'under the military regime, people should be confident that the country [was] ruled by a 'good man' and that this is very different from being governed by politicians who seek only their own interest' (Saichol 2007: 69). Indeed, when

5 Finally, Sarit recognized the importance of science and considered that learned people should have a role in administration (Thak 2007: 108). The similarities between Sarit's views and those expressed by King Bhumibol over the next five decades are remarkable. Sarit appears to have had a deep and lasting impact on the king's ideas and ideology.

Sarit promulgated a 20-article interim constitution in January 1959 that gave him sweeping dictatorial powers, Kukrit's *Siam Rath Weekly Review* (5 February 1959) argued that this was no cause for concern as Sarit had the nation's best interests at heart. Celebrating this military authoritarianism, Kukrit's version of 'Thai-style government' was constructed as an attack on, and an alternative to, liberal notions of democracy (Saichol 2007: 31–32). This anti-liberalism has remained an important underpinning of TSD to the present day.

Kukrit began to talk seriously about a Thai-style constitution and Thai-style politics in 1962, asserting that the Thai-style of government 'corresponds to Thai traditional institutions and also to the state of mind of Thai people' (Saichol 2007: 31). Arguing that Thais were not ready for (Western-style) democracy, Kukrit asserted that determining government through elections was inappropriate for Thais. In fact, so unsuitable were elections that Kukrit blamed them for the coups of 1957 and 1958. At the same time, Kukrit claimed that coups were not such a bad thing if they got rid of bad politicians and bad parliamentary politics and resulted in social peace and political stability. In this sense, 'Thai-style government' is a political regime where the coup becomes a mechanism for changing governments that do not have good or moral leadership and have brought harm to the people (see Saichol 2007: 32–34, 54).

Kukrit portrayed Thai society as an organism in which the king is the head and the government and bureaucracy are its organs. Society was strictly hierarchical and structured in a way that has every person fulfilling particular functions and where social mobility was limited, if not impossible (Saichol 2007: 46, 53). In terms of governance, the Thai style was 'a political regime where the leader had absolute power' so that 'order, peace, security and progression' could be sustained. Western-style democracy, on the other hand, led to chaotic politics (Saichol 2007: 38–39).

In Kukrit's view, the monarch's political role is to control and watch over government in the best interests of all of the people, because the king is the father of the family–nation and a benevolent and moral leader who protects his people from all threats. Thus the monarchy is not an obstacle to democracy, but the very centre of Thai-style democracy; the king is effectively the moral check and balance on government, acting in the interests of his children–people. According to Kukrit, because the king has all of these virtues, all good political leaders will display respect to and loyalty for the king and must be his defenders (Saichol 2007: 40–47, 61).

In this assessment, while Kukrit was supporting the establishment of Sarit's military authoritarianism he was also promoting the long-held royalist desire

to return the monarchy to its pivotal political position, something that Sarit's coups had finally permitted.⁶ Kukrit's major contribution is to be found in his insistence that the monarchy was indispensable to the peace, prosperity and stability of the nation and in his emphasis on the morality of the elite (Kriangsak 2007: 23; Saichol n.d.: 13).

TSD, or what Kobkua calls a 'traditionalist style of democracy', embraces a Buddhist monarch:

[A]s a ruler, a Thai King ruled with supreme power/*ayasit* of the one whose great store of merit claimed for him the unquestionable right to rule over those within his kingdom. Yet his supreme power was always tempered by the Buddhist political ideology of the *dharmarajal/cakravartin*, who constantly abided by the ten kingly virtues/*dasabidba-rajadharma*. Thus ... the power and authority of a Thai king has never been absolute; it is limited by the prescribed principles of the Buddhist kingship (Kobkua 2003: 21).

In other words, the monarchy is claimed to be an inherent element of a Thai democratic system that has existed for centuries. The monarchy has always been a kind of 'constitutional monarchy' in the sense that the king was never absolute. Some suggest that the monarchy's benevolent paternalism, moderated by a Buddhism that makes the monarchy righteous and law-abiding, emphasizing harmony, prosperity and the well-being of the people, means that Thailand has always had an 'unwritten constitution'. Some royalists suggest that the monarchy's benevolent paternalism means that Thailand has always had an 'unwritten constitution' and the view that the king is actually 'elected' (Kobkua 2003: 20-22).⁷

6 Kukrit became a purveyor of this created 'tradition' to foreigners. For example, in his talk on the role of the monarchy to the American Chamber of Commerce in 1974, Kukrit (1983: 69-76) explains the greatness of the monarchy, its history and its bright future under King Bhumibol. In those turbulent political times for Thailand and as the Lao monarchy was under threat, Kukrit (1983: 75) warned that 'lawlessness and disorders [sic]' will see the military act to protect the 'position and honour of their supreme chief [the king]'. Ominously, he adds: 'Should they decide [...] that the position of their Sovereign is at stake, I am certain that they will come out in full force. Then blood [...] will flood the streets of Bangkok.' In other words, Kukrit was warning of the potential for a coup but telling his foreign audience that a coup, even a bloody one, needed to be understood in terms of Thai 'tradition'. Following his death, others filled this position as interpreter of the monarchy for foreigners. These have included Thongnoi Thongyai, Anand Panyarachun and Borwornsak Uwanno.

7 King Bhumibol himself once commented: 'I am really an elected king. If the people do not want me, they can throw me out' (cited in Grey 1988: 54).

THAI-STYLE DEMOCRACY ENTRENCHED

While Nakkarin (2006) prefers to consider TSD as a historical period – essentially from 1957 to 1976 – it is clear to us that TSD is a political idea that was developed to justify conservatism and authoritarianism. It has been entrenched during King Bhumibol's long reign. As indicated above, recent political events have given TSD immediacy and increased significance, but this is just the latest iteration of a powerful idea. While the initial aim of explicating TSD might have been to support Sarit's authoritarian regime and the political role of the military (Chalermkiat 1990: 133), the ideology has proved considerably more resilient and, hence, more useful than this. This is because TSD has become *the* conservative royalist discourse on governance for modern Thailand (see Kriangsak 2007: 25). Thaksin's time in government came to be identified by royalists as posing a significant challenge to their ideological hegemony. In order to understand how this occurred, the current monarch's own views on government and democracy need to be briefly considered (for more detail, see Hewison 1997).

Coming to the throne at a particularly turbulent time, the king has described politics as a 'filthy business' (cited in Grey 1988: 53). In some of his earliest speeches, Bhumibol already identified parliamentary politics as divisive and threatening to national unity (*Bangkok Post*, 26 June 1956). In addition to offering an opportunity for a resurgence of the palace and royalism, the king's support for Sarit's authoritarianism can be understood as reflecting his personal preference for order and a reliance on traditional symbols and institutions. The king's few statements of support for parliamentary politics are limited to the view that parliaments and constitutions are a means to restore order when authoritarian–military regimes have failed to do so (see *Bangkok World*, 12 April 1969; Bhumibol 1974: 81–86; Bhumibol 1992a: 14, 18).

Order, national unity and tradition have been constant themes in Bhumibol's speeches throughout his long reign. The king's constant refrain is not for 'democracy' but for 'unity'. Unity is most closely associated with the strong political leadership of authoritarian governments so long as it is tempered by moral righteousness. This is illustrated in the king's response to the political uprising that saw the military and police open fire on demonstrators in May 1992. The demonstrators were motivated by calls for democratization and opposed the military's consolidation of political power. Whereas observers recall the king's belated brokering of an agreement between certain leaders of the military-backed government and protestors, when increasing numbers of people took to the streets, it is forgotten that the king's principal desire was for a return to order. He complained that political conflict would lead to the 'utter destruction of

Thailand. It will mean that the Thai Nation which the Thai People have built up for so long will turn into an insignificant country' (Bhumibol 1992a: para 2). He argued that 'Everybody must know how to treasure Unity' (Bhumibol 1992b: 1, 12).

The king views party politics and Western-style democracy as alien to Thai traditions. During the constitutional debates of 1992, Bhumibol (1992a: 38) stated that the system of elected representatives 'usually ... does not work ... because the system is deficient'. He has repeatedly urged that 'democracy' be defined in Thai terms, stating that 'Thais [...] need not follow any kind of foreign democracy and should try instead to create our own Thai style of democracy, for we have our own national culture and outlook and we are capable of following our own reasoning' (cited in OPPS 1987: 47). This kind of democracy had to be in line with Thai customs and values (see Kulick and Wilson 1992: xvi).

Conservatives who have made the case for TSD have gone beyond the denunciation of parliamentary politics to condemn constitutions as foreign implants. While it is always claimed that the king upholds his position as a constitutional monarch, conservatives also assert that constitutions are unnecessary for TSD. Royal retainer Thongnoi (1983: 15–18) argues that constitutions in Thailand were born of Francophile civil servants and US-educated political scientists. He implies that constitutions do not grow organically from the Thai political earth and argues that they are not, in fact, critical for 'democratic' rule. His contention is that a Thai-style democracy is more rooted in Thai traditions.

For the king, the most basic principle of being a constitutional monarch is that the monarch can do no wrong (cited in Grey 1988: 134–145; see also Pramuan 2005). In this respect, the Thai monarchy is often compared to its English counterpart, with Anand (2007) portraying the former as constitutional in the manner of Bagehot (1909), having the right to be consulted, to encourage and to warn. However, Anand and like-minded commentators (see Pramuan 2005) also make a case for a 'Thai-style constitutional monarchy', where the current monarch has greater power than the English model allows. This is because, as Anand (2007) puts it, King Bhumibol has great love and respect accumulated amongst Thais, and, recalling Prem's comment on this, Anand adds that this adulation 'cannot be fully comprehended by foreigners'. The former prime minister argues that the king's long experience in his position and his devotion to the people have provided the monarch with unwritten (and unexplained) 'reserve powers'.

King Bhumibol is clear that he has greater powers than those set out in all of Thailand's constitutions. For example, when asked about his role in choosing political leaders, he replied:

In the constitution it is written that the king appoints the prime minister. This is a system in which, perhaps, the experience of the king can be of use in looking for people who would be suitable for prime minister. The president of parliament will come and have a consultation, but the king may have more power because the people have faith in their king [...] (cited in Grey 1988: 135).

In line with the general approach of TSD and his disdain for the factionalism and disunity inherent in parliamentary politics, the king has provided strong support for authoritarian regimes and governments led by unelected prime ministers. For the conservatives who promote TSD, the perfect political leader was General Prem. As a soldier whose loyalty to the king was unquestioned, Prem was praised by both Kukrit and the king as a role-model of Thai-style leadership (Saichol 2007: 382).⁸ The king gave strong support to General Prem during the Young Turks' challenges to his government. While 'palace sources' portray this as support for constitutional government (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 December 1987), when elected prime ministers were overthrown by military coups in 1976, 1991 and 2006, the palace was either quiescent or actively involved in the events leading to the coup.⁹

THAKSIN, THE COUP AND THAI-STYLE DEMOCRACY

We cannot recount all of the events leading up to the 2006 coup (for further detail, see Hewison 2008 and Pye and Schaffar 2008). Rather, this section will examine the interests involved in the coup. As a first point, it is important to acknowledge the palace's involvement in the events that paved the way for the military's seizure of power. This involvement has been denied repeatedly since the coup, but the evidence says otherwise.

When the king declared the result of the opposition-boycotted April 2006 election to be a problem and an extraordinary meeting of the judges from several courts ruled the election invalid, the leadership of the anti-Thaksin opposition shifted. Initially, leadership was with a disgruntled former Thaksin supporter, the media businessman Sondhi Limthongkul. By early 2006, Sondhi and many others came together under the banner of the People's Alliance for Democracy to take the lead. However, following the king's declaration on the election,

8 So strong has this perception linking leadership and the defence of the monarchy become that in 2002 the royalist Meechai Ruchuphan (2004: 586-7) claimed that all Thais defended the king and that this trait was the very essence of 'Thainess'.

9 On 1976, see Van Praagh (1989) and Morell and Chai-Anan (1981); on 1991, see Handley (2006: Ch. 12); and on 2006, see Hewison (2008) and Ukrist (2008).

General Prem became the locus of opposition (Piyabut 2007). Because Prem is the king's chief adviser, his several highly-publicized speeches criticizing Thaksin made it clear that the palace wanted Thaksin out. The anti-Thaksin campaign then became a struggle for control of the military (see Ukrist 2008). Prem, supported by other privy councillors, visited various military camps and academies demanding that military officers give their loyalty to the king rather than the government (*The Nation*, 15 July 2006). From this point, with powerful military leaders and members of the Privy Council at Prem's side, a coup was the most likely outcome.

There was little subtlety in the palace's position. Prem's status made him a powerful political opponent and as a loyal servant to the king, he could not have acted independently in such a public and political manner. Indeed, through Prem, it seems that the palace knew of the coup well in advance. Wassana Nanuam (2006) states: 'The coup plot was known within a tight circle of people, among them Gen Prem Tinsulanonda [...] and his close aides [...], Air Force Commander [...] Chalit Pukkasuk [sic Pukpasuk] and Lt-Gen Anupong Paochinda, commander of the First Army Region.' When the coup took place, the sight of troops with their uniforms, tanks and weapons all bedecked with yellow ribbons – the king's personal birth colour – loyalty and allegiance were displayed.

For the coup leaders, royal support was of critical significance. As one columnist pointed out,

His Majesty's support is crucial. [...] [I]t helped consolidate [General] Sonthi [Boonyaratglin]'s position and win the support of the rank and file from various regions and headquarters [...] It is not wrong to say that without Royal support, troops commanded by Sonthi and [...] Anupong [...] would have encountered fierce resistance [sic.]. The outcome would have been uncertain (Kavi 2006).

Within hours, the king gave the coup conspirators his blessing, granting the military coup-makers several royal audiences (CNN.com, 2006).¹⁰ The military's later denials of palace involvement were unconvincing (e.g. *The Irrawaddy*

10 Borwornsak (n.d.: 1–2) claims that the presentation of the coup leaders to the king was Sarit's innovation and that this 'set a precedent for subsequent power seizures [...] in 1991 and [...] 2006'. He uses this, and the fact that the king's royal command was countersigned by General Sonthi, as reasons for considering the king's role as being 'neutral'. See this tortured logic in Borwornsak (n.d.: 2–4), where contrary evidence of royal displeasure with some coups (e.g. General Kriangsak Chomanan's coup in 1977) is omitted (see Darling 1978) and the support provided to Prem in facing down coup attempts is not contrasted with the support for the coup in 2006.

Online, 20 September 2006), especially as the king's closest advisers were widely reported as having mentored the coup-makers (e.g. Crispin 2006).

What were the motivations for the palace's deep involvement in the coup? Answering this question requires an analysis of the economic, political and ideological interests involved in a period of political contestation that stretched over a five-year period. Other analysis has concentrated on the political and economic interests (see Hewison 2008).

Economic wealth is often said to have been Thaksin's primary motivation. In the many criticisms made of him, one is that he attained great wealth through cronyism and that he fostered cronyism and 'big money politics'. Already fabulously wealthy when he became premier, Thaksin is said to have used his office to benefit his supporters and family, and to have seemed unable to distinguish between personal interests and those of the nation (see Pasuk and Baker 2009). This can be seen as posing a challenge to the Crown Property Bureau. As Porphant Ouyyanont (2008) has revealed, the Bureau is extraordinarily wealthy, worth \$28 billion in 2005. The Bureau and other royal enterprises are considered 'special businesses' receiving various forms of state benefit, including considerable tax exemptions. Royal businesses both co-operated and competed with Shinawatra family companies. However, it seems that Thaksin's mode of doing business challenged the Crown Property Bureau by failing to fully acknowledge and protect its special status.

Thaksin's combination of wealth and political power was especially challenging for the managers of royal businesses. Probably more significant was political competition. Thaksin challenged what McCargo (2005) has dubbed the 'network monarchy'. Thaksin had moved quickly to shake-up the organizations linked to the palace's network, especially in the civil and military bureaucracies, promoting those who supported TRT. This brought Thaksin into conflict with the palace's network, especially for influence over the military.

Arguably, however, the most significant contest between Thaksin and the palace was for the hearts and minds of the masses. A central ideological component of the monarchy's position is the portrayal of the king as a champion of the poor, with the palace's rural development projects the symbol of the monarch's connection to the masses (Borwornsak 2006). The palace portrayed itself as *the* saviour of poor peasants, through notions of sufficiency – doing better with what one already has – and palace charity. Thaksin and TRT offered a different approach to the same constituency. Far from urging rural 'sufficiency', TRT emphasized 'getting ahead', producing for the market and promoted entrepreneurialism (Pansak 2004). TRT's 'populist' policies that established elements of a social welfare system were

immensely popular. Government-sponsored welfare challenged the king's well-known opposition to state welfare (Bhumibol 1992b). Of course, Thaksin had to appeal to the poor as they voted for TRT (Pasuk and Baker 2008), but the success of this appeal made the palace most uncomfortable. Thaksin's mix of social welfare and grassroots capitalism was rejected and his immense appeal to the rural poor and downtrodden (as vividly demonstrated in the 2005 election landslide victory) was feared.

Thaksin and TRT must have been aware that their political and economic model was challenging the palace's preferred approaches. After all, in public speeches, and apparently also in private audiences, the king had chastised Thaksin and his government (see Pasuk and Baker 2009: 160, 228, 243, 257). As a political practitioner, however, Thaksin may not have been entirely aware that he also challenged entrenched ideas associated with TSD.

It is important to recall how deeply embedded TSD ideas about kingship and democracy have become. The 'localist community of interpretation' identified by Pattana is a reflection of this. Historian Thongchai Winichakul (2008) argues that there is a 'conventional historiography of democratization'. This conventional view is a story of the Chakri kings as champions of democratization. Indeed, the failures of the democratic system since 1932 are said to be due to the People's Party's haste to change the system. If they had followed the king, who is claimed to have wanted a more gradual democratization, the birth of democracy would not have been premature and the resulting long periods of military dictatorship would not have happened (see Prajak 2005; Connors 2003).

This perspective of a 'democratic path created from above' and of the present king as on the 'side of democracy' is regularly and uniformly reinforced (Uthai 2006: 307). It seems that it was this position that was challenged by Thaksin and his government. While Thaksin would later claim that TRT's agenda and aims were no accident, as Jakrapob (2007) explains, Thaksin was not totally aware of the consequences of his approach. Jakrapob claims that Thaksin 'sleepwalked' into his challenge against the 'patronage system', adding 'He didn't launch those policies philosophically. He simply wanted to do his job. He wants to be liked [...]. He wants to be a useful rich man.'

The idea that Thaksin was 'sleepwalking' into history may be overdone, especially when it is recalled that the 1997 constitution supported Thaksin's strong position as premier, enhanced the power of the executive and that the electorate gave unprecedented support to TRT. That his government opened hitherto closed political doors cannot be denied. People at the grassroots, especially in the north and northeast, began to see that they had political rights and that

they could have a say in who led government. They clearly felt that TRT was responsive to their needs. By unleashing these sentiments amongst a previously ignored electorate confronted long-held paternalistic notions embedded in TSD. As Ockey (2004: 183) presciently observed, '[c]onservative royalists fear that allowing a political leader to develop a truly national constituency would mean competition with the monarchy, which they see as dangerous.' Likewise, the idea that voting could be seen as a political tool by 'small people' was a challenge to conservative royalist notions of 'democracy'. While Jakrapob (2007) opines that 'Thaksin didn't do it to challenge anyone', it is clear that conservatives were unhappy with a strengthening political system that threatened the very foundations of TSD.

This is not to say that Thaksin did not display some of the characteristics of the TSD leadership; he had qualms about 'Western-style democracy' fitting Thailand. At times Thaksin viewed elements of democratic politics as obstacles to his own political agenda (see Pasuk and Baker 2008). And he was a strong leader. However, in the TSD scheme of things, having the largest-ever election victory was not evidence of unity. Rather it was evidence of the danger Thaksin posed to the monarchy and its definition of unity. Moreover, Thaksin was identified as lacking the moral principles that conservatives claimed 'good' leaders required. His appeal to the electorate, especially to the poor, challenged the social hierarchy so prized in TSD. His plans for development promised a thorough-going capitalist revolution that would industrialize rural areas and bring social mobility. Neither was prized by TSD proponents who saw capitalism and social mobility as threats to unity, stability and 'Thai culture'. In terms of governance, Thaksin's style encroached on the monarch's 'traditional' role. Thaksin shook up traditional institutions such as the bureaucracy and the military. Thaksin, through government welfare policies, was increasingly seen by rural and poor voters as a benevolent leader. And, his government's remarkable electoral power and parliamentary domination undermined the king's moral 'check and balance' role.

The TSD political ideology was also used against Thaksin. The People's Alliance for Democracy's rhetorical attacks on Thaksin appealed to TSD-like arguments. These opponents accused Thaksin of not being loyal or patriotic and alleged that he challenged the king in quite crude ways. In other words, these arguments made the case that Thaksin and TRT did not fit the expected and required pattern of Thai-style leadership. In the end, this array of challenges was too much for the conservatives and Thaksin and TRT were swept aside by the 2006 coup.

CONCLUSION

When the 2006 military coup occurred, it was initially seen by many as a 'good coup'. As Kukrit had argued more than four decades earlier, while electoral politics inevitably led to instability, the resulting military coups were not a bad thing when they could rid the country of bad politicians who did not display the required moral leadership. If a military-appointed government was led by a 'good man' then people could be confident that the country was in the best hands. Indeed, after the coup, General Surayud Chulanont was appointed prime minister, presumably seen as just such a 'good man', especially as he was plucked from the king's Privy Council.

When Surayud's government and the junta behind it set about developing a new constitution, they were resetting the political agenda, re-emphasizing TSD as 'democracy with the king as head of state'. The 2007 constitution was drafted to prevent any Thaksin-like politician emerging in the future to challenge the conservative status quo. The constitution and associated legislation increased security powers, strengthened the civil and military bureaucracies and reinserted political rules that had long been key political aims of TSD, including the appointment of half of the Senate. The message was clear: 'with a benevolent reign ... we don't actually need democracy' (Jakrapob 2007).

Its name notwithstanding, there is nothing astoundingly Thai about an ersatz democracy. There are historical and contemporary examples of 'semi-democracies' or 'pseudo-democracies', and quite a literature on 'illiberal democracies', 'hybrid regimes' and 'competitive authoritarianism' (cf. Anderson 2000, Ch. 1; Diamond 2002; and Levitsky and Way 2002), not to mention the 'Asian-style democracy' arguments of the 1990s (see Hood 1998). Together with TSD, these are all forms of government best seen as authoritarian wolves in sheep's clothing. Indeed, as we have indicated above, arguments for such a pseudo-democracy were attractive for Thaksin and will continue to be ideologically attractive to conservative leaders. At the same time, one of the points of this chapter has been to highlight how, over five decades, TSD has been developed as a conservative ideology that has underpinned a particular and remarkably successful political transformation. That transformation has been the political (and economic) renaissance of the monarchy in Thailand. The ideology of TSD discussed in this chapter is indelibly royalist. Taking the monarchy out of TSD would mean that much of its meaning would dissolve. At the same time, TSD is so closely associated with the ninth reign that we might question whether it can easily make the transition to the tenth Chakri king. If this particular conceptualization of TSD were pushed aside, the other authoritarian elements now packed together as TSD

would remain useful for those opposed to ‘Western-style democracy’, and could be repackaged.

When Sarit came to power following the 1957 coup, he was supported by a considerable section of the Bangkok-dominated middle class. Sarit and his intellectual acolytes legitimated authoritarianism through an appeal to the elements of what is now recognized as TSD. Five decades later, in overthrowing Thaksin and TRT, a more ‘naturally’ royalist military and its palace allies found that TSD continued to appeal to the middle class. In 2006, a common middle-class refrain was that those who supported Thaksin were ignorant, bewildered, bought off, or coerced. This refrain has been directed particularly at the working class and rural poor who voted for Thaksin; that these people are Thaksin’s core supporters is reason enough to conclude that these people are still not ready for ‘Western-style democracy’; rather, they need to be controlled and prevented from challenging existing privilege and power. The royalism, traditionalism, nationalism and paternalism of TSD are one means to achieve this. The threat from the coercive power of the security apparatus is also critical, along with the economic power of the palace and the capital and the dead weight of the civil bureaucracy that controls, regiments and orders society.

Authors’ note

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CHAPTER 8

Post-Coup Royalist Groups

Re-inventing Military and Ideological Power

Han Krittian

During the time of intense political pressure calling for his resignation from the premiership, Thaksin Shinawatra made a controversial speech in the presence of high ranking government officials who had convened an urgent meeting at Government House on 29 June 2006. He stated:

[...] there is chaos in society because charismatic people and some organizations outside those sanctioned by the constitution are trying to overthrow the government, rule and law, constitution and democracy [...] (INN Editorial Board 2006: 21).

With the decision of the Assets Scrutiny Committee (ASC) to freeze 520 billion baht worth in assets held by Thaksin and his family on 12 June 2007, former Prime Minister Thaksin sent a video tape of his speech which was broadcast live to a group of protestors rallying against the Council of National Security (CNS) at Sanam Luang centre Bangkok on 15 June 2007. In this speech, he would repeat that he was a victim of unfair treatment and had been bullied by those who had disliked him from the time he became Thailand's prime minister (Thaksin 2007: 2). He also claimed that:

I have previously announced that I would quit but they would not let me go easily. So far they have perverted the legal system to make me a convict, make my family criminals. I cannot tolerate that. I hope the general election will take place in no time. Thai people must be the ones to choose their government – for the sake of the country and His Majesty the King (Thaksin 2007: 2).

Delivered to his angry supporters at Sanam Luang, Thaksin's statement of discontent claiming that he had been bullied marked a horrific split in Thai society – between the pro- and the anti-Thaksin factions. Later on, when his assets were frozen, Thaksin was reportedly contemplating his return to Thailand. Dr Prawase Wasi MD, a royalist–liberalist academic, found this news very disturbing. In an interview, he analysed the incredibly tense political atmosphere saying that if Thaksin did return, the situation would come out of hand. He feared not only that violent clashes between the pro- and the anti-Thaksin factions would occur but also that Thaksin would be killed by the military. As he put it:

If Thaksin returns then confrontations are unavoidable. Therefore the junta will not let Thaksin live because his presence is controversial and divisive. They think Thaksin is the problem, the cause of all chaos that undermines the monarchy and the country. *If the junta want to get rid of someone, they will find ways to do it. They may not be great when it comes to politics and governance but they know well how to handle a weapon* [emphasis by author]. Thaksin's death would not be the end to the turmoil. The society would remain divisive and riotous, and the protests would go on. It is best that Thaksin be stopped from coming back (*Thairath*, 15 June 2007: 19).

During the fifteenth months of political unrest, from the *coup d'état* on 19 September 2006 to the general elections on 23 December 2007, the conflicts between the pro- and the anti-Thaksin factions continued. Thai society remained polarized. Thaksin's allies still called vehemently for popular support, while the junta tried to curb their influence and to justify their own undemocratic intervention. This, at least, suggests that the coup alone did not resolve the political conflict that culminated with the 2006 coup, and nor can the parliamentary system as the general elections in 2007 revealed.

When one looks into Thai political history, the divisions between the pro- and the anti-Thaksin factions are unique because it is a nationwide conflict and it includes several highly influential social groups (see Pye and Schaffar 2008). The conflict also involves and affects the monarchy – be it economic interests or clashing political ideologies and policies (Hewison 2008: 205–207). The conflict moreover coincides with the question of the succession of the new king – a major transitional event for the Thai monarchy, which requires political stability at the national level (Ukrist 2008: 129–130, 138–139). At the same time, the prestige of the monarchy has, more than ever, been manipulated in order to legitimize attacks on opposing factions, as seen one year prior to the coup in September 2006 (see Ukrist 2007 and 2008).

This chapter discusses developments in the royalist groups' political manoeuvres in post-coup politics. It focuses on how royal ceremonies are employed as a sophisticated political ideology machine. It also investigates how royalist groups utilize royalist discourse embedded in the Yellow Shirt movement, royal ceremonies and sufficiency economy philosophy as part of their political ideology. It is argued that since the coup the royalist groups have dramatically re-invented their military and ideological power.

NEW COMMUNISM RE-EMERGING AND LEGITIMACY FOR THE JUNTA

Once Thaksin was ousted, the junta re-emerged as the key political actor and successfully took over strategic military posts. Nevertheless, the post-coup era was marred by political instability and unrest. The junta as well as the interim government faced challenges everywhere – the most unsettling being the explosions in Bangkok on New Year's Eve 2006. On this festive evening, bombs were set off at eight different spots in the Bangkok. This suggests that despite the nationwide martial laws, the surveillance and control by the junta was not as effective as it seemed. At the same time, the interim government led by General Surayud Chulanont was criticized by Thaksin himself and his supporters. Dismissing the claim of his disloyalty to the crown, Thaksin attacked the interim government and the junta for failing to prove their charges of massive corruption and abuse of power under his government, while Thaksin himself projected himself as a happy billionaire trotting the globe to play golf, sip coffee and socialize with his friends (Beech 2007: 1). That he was also very often seen escorted by a young female singer sparked Thais' interest in his post-coup lifestyle.

Besides imposing control, the junta did not simply hand over the administration to the interim government, but closely co-operated with it under the guise of the Council of National Security (CNS). The Council, which was formerly chaired by General Sonthi Boonyarataglin, later re-introduced the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC), which had been developed during the Cold War era.

Established in 1965, ISOC focused mainly on the suppression of communism and was headed by prime ministers and deputy prime ministers. With the diminished threat of the communist ideology the Chuan Leekpai administration (1997) revised ISOC's role, placing emphasis instead on narcotics suppression, strengthening the borders, development for security in specific areas, solving minority problems, illegal immigrants and addressing the problems of the

Muslim southern border provinces (New ISOC 2007). The biggest changes in ISOC's post-cold-war organizational structure, however, took place after the 2006 coup in order to pave the way for the military's re-entry into politics. On 13 November 2006 Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont signed the orders appointing Army Commander-in-Chief Sonthi Boonyaratglin as ISOC's director. ISOC subsequently underwent an organizational revamping by increasing the number of deputy directors to nine – six of them full generals, one police officer holding the position of Deputy Director-General of the Royal Thai Police, and two civilians each holding the position of deputy permanent secretaries (one from the Ministry of Interior and the other from the Justice Ministry). Most importantly the work of ISOC now covers the entire country with the military overseeing the entire operations. Commanders of military regions 1-4 are placed in the position of ISOC regional directors overseeing all the country's 76 provinces (New ISOC 2007)

The junta's move to re-introduce such a security unit can be linked with a strategic move to tackle and negotiate with the pro-Thaksin faction. Besides the re-introduction and re-structuring of ISOC the armed forces expanded their political role by pushing forward the Internal Security Act (ISA) after the coup. This Act enabled them to carry out political operations over the entire country, aided by a huge budget increase and protective laws. The military in turn has revealed its standpoint: to oppose all other political powers. Interestingly, along with these strategic moves, the junta also preaches its political ideology and standpoint to other political groups. This can be gained from two secret documents leaked to the public in late September 2007. The first of these is entitled 'Information operation from then until the closing date of application for the general election' dated 18 September 2007. The second is entitled 'Summary of the Army Chief's Lecture and Address to the Military Units of Battalion Rank and above,' dated 26 September 2007.

Both documents are top secret papers intended for high-ranking military leaders as well as General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, Chairman of the CNS, army chief, and ISOC's director. They were revealed on the website of ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (hi-thaksin.net). It seems that the documents were to be used as evidence in legal action against General Sonthi as well as other high-ranking military leaders for acting with partiality in the elections. The two documents reveal the attitudes of the military, their vision for future Thai politics and how they saw their prospective role.

The documents express the views of the military on the national situation and their role in securing political stability in Thailand. Most interestingly,

the documents reveal how the military views the current political situation as a 'battle for the people', which involves a campaign for the people's support. In this battle the military is opposed to politicians, particularly those former communist activists who disguise themselves in the politics of a political party. The military's analysis is that in the past the military managed to overcome the Cold War by luring communist insurgents hiding in the forests to return to the city and lead ordinary lives. The analysis, however, claims that these communist activists never changed their political ideals or ambitions. They aim to take control of state power through popular support and subsequently to use state power to enforce their policies, including the overthrow of the monarchy. From this point of view their hunt for people's support through an election is not substantially different from the guerrilla attacks that sought to win support from the masses in the upcountry in the past.

Judging from the two documents, the military seem to believe that the communist activists' strategies are intrinsic to the populist policies introduced during recent elections, all of them designed for one purpose – to win support from the people, then election and then high political office. These people have no intention of solving the problems of the people. The military analyse that, should this direction be allowed to persist, Thailand would end up like Nepal, where Maoism won immense support from the people and where the monarchy was overthrown.

Following such an analysis, the military's view is that their most significant duty now is to fight a new form of Cold War. The external dangers are seen as of no significant danger except for drugs and human trafficking. Even the violence in the south is perceived as less perilous while the military fight in this new 'war for the people'. They feel the need to win back the people, particularly those at the grassroots level.

As part of this 'war for the people' the military is actively propagating a positive image of the military's role in Thai society. Despite the media's minimal coverage of the military's fight against drugs, the army's radio programmes publicized information regarding the army's duty to serve people and their crucial role behind most of the country's developments, like other military institutions all over the world. According to the plans outlined in the secret documents it is also necessary that the military build up alliances with and gain support from various groups in Thai society. Support and alliance from other state agencies is sought in order to win this war. In a situation like the coup, the army troops need to find an opportunity to work closely with all levels of the government sector and persuade government officers to accept their aforementioned view of the current

political situation as well as its outcome. In the initial process to win back the people's support, the army's focus is on business people and the middle class. The regional and provincial units of ISOC play a crucial role in mustering support from people of the grassroots level. These units can use sub-district heads, village chiefs and other officers working at the local level as their tools to win the war for the people. The latest change in the administrative system, which shows that sub-district heads and village chiefs are appointed by the central administrative body, is a strategy to ensure continuous support. In terms of ideas, the local units of ISOC should take control of problems such as drugs, illegal immigration, terrorism and poverty alleviation, since such operations will strengthen the efficiency of ISOC's work in winning the people's support. To succeed in the operations, army officers need to have a better education with a better political awareness in order to make them efficient leaders. The army needs to restructure its internal organization to match a further increase in firearms support, while the military budget has not yet been used effectively.

All the plans mentioned in the two secret documents seem to have been drafted from the point of view of a gamekeeper who needs first to be able to tame the post-23 December 2007 election government.

The political concept of a 'battle for the people' is shown in the two secret documents, whose genuineness has been much debated. They were presented to the Election Commission (EC) to take legal action against several high-ranking military leaders. The most important issue, however, remains that these documents reveal that some military figures currently in power believe that Thailand is confronted by a new Cold War, during which former communist activists, who play roles in political parties, elections and parliamentary politics, are attempting to win popular support. Their populist policies are seen as a crucial strategy to win over the people. The military leaders see that the ultimate goal of this war for the support of the masses is a political change that stretches as far as an overthrow of the monarchy – as in Nepal. The military leaders even refer to the revolutions that succeeded in overthrowing the monarchies in Laos, Russia and France.

The 2006 coup reopened an opportunity for direct military involvement in politics, which had disappeared after Bloody May 1992. Since 2006, many military leaders have gone out from the barracks to play politics quite overtly. However, the military is by no means a politically unified organization but rather a wide stretching network of different classmate-based and Army faction-based cliques whose members typically construct their own networks and alliances with politicians and business groups at both national and local levels. There is

a symbiotic relationship among military leaders and business elites for whom the cultivation of political interests and economic profits go hand in hand. The military cliques with their political and business networks make up a core political factor in Thailand's democracy at present. The political influence of Army Classes 17, 20, 21 and 23 is growing both within and outside the barracks. Coup leader General Sonthi represented Class 17 while General Anuphong, the successor as Army Commander Chief when General Sonthi retired, is head of Class 21.¹ Interestingly, they have reconstructed communism as a national threat in order to legitimize their political roles and functions. The military has utilized ISOC as a core mechanism to beat any national enemy. Consequently, ISOC is now above the government. As such, Thailand's post-coup period has offered a perfect opportunity for the military leaders to give birth to a draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) of the same kind as authoritarian states like Singapore and Malaysia. Under the ISA, military commanders may legitimately declare a state of emergency and use force against street protests that they consider destabilizing for the country. Even if the military leaders do not have a clear idea of their own political future, their broader political thoughts about 'war for the people' and 'monarchy guard' are their main purposes, which could mobilize budgetary increases. The revitalization of the military is turning Thailand's democracy back to the situation of the 1960s and opening up possibilities for further political intervention by the military. However, political power is not enough. Military leaders realize that they need more sophisticated nationalist and royal ritual campaigns to legitimize them.

The military's boosting of nationalist and royalist sentiments in an attempt to win mass support increased dramatically following the constitutional referendum on 19 August 2007, which showed that the rejection of the new constitution, a rejection which is associated with Thaksin Shinawatra's popularity, still prevailed in the north and the northeast. Politically, the army has shown itself ready to confront those remaining political activists who aim to win elections. At the same time, those politicians remaining loyal to Thaksin and the successors to his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party – and determined to compete in elections – need to be prepared. What needs to be considered now is how royalist groups utilized royalist sentiments and royal ceremonies for their political ends.

1 General Anuphong was not loyal to Thaksin but, on the contrary, betrayed Thaksin as one of the coup leaders. However, Thaksin's supporters still dominate in Class 21. And other friends of Thaksin in the military present a challenge to the coup leaders and the anti-Thaksin group.

THE ROYAL CEREMONIES, THE YELLOW SHIRT MOVEMENT
AND SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY PHILOSOPHY

Originally devised as an effective mechanism to extend the militarists' roles and influence in national politics after 23 December 2007 general election, the new version of ISOC and the maintenance of the ISA have been met with strong opposition from various factions and have led to a serious rift between the high-ranking military and the intellectual elite. The utilization by the military of royalist ideology to achieve their political ends took place both before and after the 2006 coup.

Let me start by looking back on how royalist ideology was used following the October 1973 student uprising. At that time the prevalent socialist and Maoist ideologies that dominated the leftist student movement created a sense of panic and a strong reaction from the royalist groups, which subsequently resulted in the founding of rightist organizations and political campaigns. These political campaigns, designed to put an end to the student movement and the leftist factions, were initiated right after the October 1973 incidents. At that time it was suggested that national stability could be resumed with a sacrifice of around 20,000 student and activist lives. Public campaigns to boost nationalist and royalist sentiments were extensively carried out through radio (the Royal Army Stations), television, newspapers, propaganda pamphlets, rumours and mail communication (Puey 1977: 50–51). A number of militant rightist groups, such as the Village Scouts, Red Gaur (Krathing Daeng) and Nawapon, were established and promoted while ISOC, certain military groups and rightist politicians were directly involved in the use of force and violence to intimidate, harm and execute members of the leftist groups in an effort to boost nationalist sentiments and to protect the monarchy (Puey 1977: 60–61). Patriotic songs with strong political rhetoric such as *Nak Phaendin* (Villain) and *Rao Su* (We Fight) were composed for the same purposes during this period (Somsak 2001: 115–148).

During the years of the Thaksin regime, between 2001 and 2006, no rightist groups equivalent to the Village Scouts, Red Gaur and Nawapon were founded. On the contrary, it was the TRT Party which supported grass-root movements within its ranks in order to rally support from the rural people and party members in the forms of the Caravan of the Poor and the taxi-drivers movements. All ranks of government officials and provincial governors were brought under the tight-fisted control of the Thaksin government through his newly introduced CEO-style administrative policies (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 214–225). Most policemen and military officers were pressured into pledging their allegiance

and loyalty to Thaksin and TRT leaders through threats of reshuffle or transfer (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 225–233).

Interference with the freedom of the media and the recruitment to the government side of most media in the country were actively implemented. Any radio stations that criticized the government were either closed down or put under a self-imposed censorship. During this period there was no effort to produce songs with nationalist or royalist sentiments. Thaksin's government did not attach much significance to the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the king's accession to the throne that was held during June 2006. It was carried out on a much smaller scale in comparison to the previous *Rak Ya Su Rak Kaeo* (From Grass Root to the Core) exhibition, which was held at Impact Arena, Meuang Thong Thani, to showcase the government's accomplishments in the year 2005. The Gala Dinner in honour of foreign royal guests attending the celebrations held in June 2006 was actually hosted by the Bureau of the Royal Household, not the government.

Between 2005 and 2006, the campaigns to boost nationalism and royalism took various guises. They began with accusations of corruption against members of the Thaksin government, in conjunction with allegations of Thaksin's acts of lese-majesty by the *Manager* newspaper, which is owned by Sondhi Limthongkul (Ukrist 2008). It was also insinuated that Thaksin harboured ill intentions to relegate the monarchy to mere symbolic roles, through the revelation of his alleged involvement in the so-called 'Finland Declaration'². A famous and highly revered Buddhist monk, Luang Ta Maha Bua joined Sondhi Limthongkul in attacking Thaksin for another alleged act of lese-majesty, when his government attempted to appoint the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch of its own choice instead of following the traditional appointment by the king (Ukrist 2007). Subsequently, these anti-Thaksin campaigns, masterminded by Sondhi, developed into the formation of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) group, which culminated in the Yellow Shirts campaign to demonstrate people's power on 9 June 2006, the sixtieth anniversary of the king's accession to the throne. Hundreds of thousands of Thai people wore yellow shirts and flocked to catch a glimpse of the monarch

2 Kamnoon Sithisamarn and Sophon Suphapong were the first two figures who initiated this allegation in mid-May 2006, revealing the five principles of the Finland Declaration – one of which involved the idea of reducing the Thai Monarchy to a symbolic institution (see Khamnoon 2006: introduction). However, Phumtham Vetchaiyond, TRT party member, sued Sondhi Limthongkul and Chaianand Samutvanid, who wrote an article in the *Manager Daily* that Thaksin and Phumtham were key players in the Finland plot. The court ruled that the Finland plot had no involvement in an overthrow of the monarchy.

in front of the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, where the crowd filled the street from the Royal Plaza all the way to Makhawan Rangsan Bridge (see also Chapter 3). The gigantic scale of the Yellow Shirt movement was one of the decisive factors that prompted the President of the Privy Council, General Prem Tinsulanonda, to persuade certain segments of the army under the leadership of General Sonthi to assume the roles that led to the staging of the 2006 coup (Ukrist 2008: 124–142).

Since the 2006 coup the Yellow Shirt movement has continued to promote loyalty to the monarchy. With the popular Prime Minister Thaksin gone, the trials concerning his family's corruption charges under way, his failure to disclose his actual stock holding for the second time, and the Constitution Court's order to dissolve the TRT Party, the king's public appearances at various royal ceremonies and functions have become highly significant – more than at any other period within the past seven years.

The yellow shirt has now become a tool for political justification. Those who wear these yellow shirts present themselves as driven by a royalist ideology. Wearing a yellow shirt is a symbolic political act, harking back to the post-14 October 1973 era when patriotic and royalist music was constantly broadcast over the radio and television, and when mass politics was developed in the form of leagues of village scouts. The Yellow Shirts movement, therefore, is a manifestation of the divisions in society – between those who hold a royalist ideology and those who do not.

The subject of the king's address on 25 April 2006 in Klai Kangwon Palace, Hua Hin, was Article 7 of the 1997 Constitution. The king stated that this Article did not invest the monarchy with the authority to take any action that was beyond the scope his responsibility – such an action would be undemocratic.³ Therefore, the political crisis was not solved at that time. Prime Minister Thaksin refused to resign from his post and three parties – the Democrat, Chart Thai and Mahachon – declined to participate in the general election while a campaign to request a royally-appointed prime minister remained unfulfilled. The Administrative Court later ruled to nullify the May 2006 election. A coup was staged on 19 September. The king's speech on 24 May 2007 touched upon the upcoming ruling on the dissolution of wrongful political parties. The Constitutional Court ruled on 31 May that the TRT was to be dissolved. Despite serious controversy surrounding this ruling, the king's words of caution on this

3 '[...] article 7 of the Constitution did not grant the grant the Monarch the power to decide to do anything as that would beyond his responsibility and whatever is beyond responsibility is undemocratic' (Speech by HM the King 2006).

issue prior to the actual ruling had effectively curbed any disruptive political confrontation that might have ensued.

In 2007, the king remained the focal point of the Thai people's morale, someone who is expected to make a timely public appearance to quell national crises. For example, on 24 May, not long before the Constitution Court was due to pass its judgment on the dissolution of a number of political parties, the king granted a royal audience to Akrathorn Chularat, head of the Supreme Administrative Court, and members of the Supreme Administrative Court. The king gave the following words of caution:

This is what I have to say. You should make your own interpretation of the facts. All judges have to derive their own interpretation, make sure that it is the correct interpretation; otherwise the country will be ruined. I told the Head of the Administrative Court about a year ago in Hua Hin that one has to take responsibility for what happened (*Matichon*, 25 May 2007: 13).

In 2007, the king made a number of occasional public appearances. For example, on 14 June 2007 he accompanied Queen Sirikit on her return trip from hospital after a successful operation on a finger of her left hand (*Matichon*, 15 June 2007: 1). The king also granted a number of royal audiences to individuals or groups of important personages. For example, on 23 July 2007 he received Robert D. Ray, who represented the World Food Prize Foundation, to present him with the Dr. Norman E. Borlaug Medallion in recognition of his significant contribution to the Thai people's improved nutrition (*Matichon*, 24 July 2007: 13). On 9 August 2007 he granted an audience to Apichai Chawa-charoenphan, Director-General of the Department of Mineral Resources, and a group of the Department officials to accept a Thailand Natural Resources Map Book (*Krungthep Thurakit*, 10 August 2007: 1). On 22 August 2007 he granted an audience to Apisak Tantiworawong, president of the Thai Bankers' Association in his capacity as the president of a joint committee of three private institutions⁴ together with his group to present a report on the industrial-scale production of the royally-initiated Chaipattana Aerator at Chitralada Villa in Dusit Palace (*Matichon*, 23 August 2007: 1).

The king's public appearances were regularly reported through the royal news programme, the TV Pool programmes on all television stations, and on the front page of both Thai and English newspapers. The broadcasting of these royal appearances was significant as a means to re-establish the vital role

⁴ The three institutions consist of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Thai Industries, and the Thai Bankers' Association.

of the monarchy as the focal point of the people's loyalty and national unity. The king's popularity had been considerably dented by the strong rapport that an extremely popular political leader had established with the people through his many regular radio and television programs, attractive policies and promises during the past seven years. With its role of being the focal point for nationalist-royalist sentiment, the Yellow Shirt movement continues to provide support for the royalist ideology.

Nevertheless, Thailand's political crisis was not ended with the staging of the September 2006 Coup. As can be seen in the events of April–May 2010, confrontation between the pro- and the anti-Thaksin factions has continued in earnest through to the present day. Even during the period of military rule, rumours about the conduct of different members of the royal family flourished through VCD and the Internet media on an unprecedented scale. Rumours about the ineffectiveness of Surayud's government and estrangements among military leaders were also rife. But royal and auspicious ceremonies continued to be held to boost people's morale, to enhance royal sovereignty, and (for a time at least) worked to strengthen the Yellow Shirt movement.

On 12 September 2007, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) held a religious ceremony to celebrate the completion of the construction of the new Giant Swing, Sao Ching Cha, in front of the Bangkok Metropolitan City Hall. Tens of thousands of people lined the street to attend the ceremony, which was presided over by the king, and repeatedly shouted 'Long Live the King' in unison while waving the national flags. Many shed tears when observing the king waving his hand to the gathering crowd from the window of his royal vehicle, which, under the king's command, moved as slowly as possible to allow the people the best view of his appearance (*Matichon*, 13 September 2007: 13). This ceremony, together with scenes of the attending crowd, stories of the Giant Swing's history and significance, and the Triyamapawai Ceremony, were broadcast by various national radio and television stations (Channel 11, 6.00 pm News, 10 September 2007), and were reported in most newspapers. The Triyamapawai Ceremony is one of the twelve-month ceremonies that supposedly have been held continuously from the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya period to the present day. This Brahmin ceremony celebrates the time when Isavara, a Hindu God, descended from heaven to visit the earth, bringing with him peace and prosperity (*Daily News*, 13 September 2007: 13; *Manager*, 13 September 2007: 1; *Bangkok Post*, 13 September 2007: 1). The BMA marked this auspicious occasion with the most magnificent ceremony and splendid celebrations. The ceremony was attended by the king and queen and Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. The king also instructed that tissues of the

teak trees that provided the wood used to build the new Giant Swing be planted at Chitralada Royal Residence (*Manager*, 13 September 2007: 1).

Almost a decade ago, the nation was absorbed with the then new and popular prime minister, who had come to office with a mandate following a landslide vote based on his election promises and policies. During the same period the Yellow Shirt movement, whose goal was to promote reverence for and the exaltation of the king, gradually emerged and developed to achieve the large celebratory turnout of people on the day of the sixtieth anniversary of the king's accession to the throne. The movement has continued to pursue its dedicated goal of promoting and instilling the royalist ideology. The king's public appearances, the royal speeches delivered at times of critical political confrontations, and the royal ceremonies for national peace and prosperity significantly reiterate the royalist ideology. Active promotion of the king's sufficiency economy philosophy during the post-coup period is part of the campaign to endorse his role as the supreme leader of the nation.

Originated to cope with the 1997–1998 economic crisis, the king's sufficiency economy philosophy has recently been cited to discredit Thaksin and his populist policies. (See also chapters nine and ten in this book.) Actually, the sufficiency economy has long been propagated in Thai society and was adopted by the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDB) as the guiding principle of the Ninth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2002–2006), which coincided with the period of the Thaksin regime. sufficiency economy philosophy, which emphasizes economic rationalization and an immunity against economic instability, was in direct opposition to the economic policies of the Thaksin government, which championed high government expenditure, high investment, high consumption, and entry into the international global economy, policies labelled as Thaksinomics. After the September 2006 coup ISOC adopted the sufficiency economy philosophy and the promotion of a popular royalist ideology as its main objectives in 2007 (The New Internal Security Operation Command 2007).

A sensible suggestion for a return to economic basics, sufficiency economy was regarded by some analysts as a means to oppose the economic solutions proposed for Thailand at the time by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which suggested that Thailand should embrace free trade to increase economic growth and promote financial stability (Crispin 2006).

At the 31 January 2007 meeting of ISOC, General Sonthi (ISOC's Director General at that time) reiterated the importance of properly educating the public on the concept of sufficiency economy, which was being criticized by outsiders who did not have the right understanding of the concept. This suggestion came

at the time when the pro-Thaksin faction were actively publicizing the success of his populist ideas and attacking sufficiency economy in the foreign media.

General Surayud Chulanont declared his determination to promote the concept of sufficiency economy by proclaiming that he favoured Gross National Happiness over Gross Domestic Product. The prime minister stated that his government would adopt an inward-looking policy under the sufficiency economy principle (Beech 2006). A number of key public figures in Thai society such as M.R. Pridiyathorn Devakula, the Finance Minister at the time, hailed sufficiency economy as more suitable for the Thai economy because of its rejection of excessive economic growth. He explicitly attacked Thaksinomics on the basis that if Thailand continued to pursue this policy for another three years the Thai economy would plunge into deep economic crisis from over-expenditure (*Matichon*, 1 February 2007). Coming from a respectable business administrator and former cabinet member for economic affairs in several governments who was also Governor of the Bank of Thailand during Thaksin regime, such strong criticisms effectively undermined Thaksin's credibility and his economic policies. M.R. Pridiyathorn Devakula had consistently voiced his disapproval when Thaksin was in power.

In one interview, Privy Councillor Kasem Watanachai stated that throughout 2006 the sufficiency economy philosophy had been an important topic of discussion. After learning about this philosophy, Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, requested an audience with the king to present an award for the king's endeavour in this field. Kasem Watanachai, a regular critic of Thaksin and his associates, attacked critics of the sufficiency economy philosophy, accusing them of misunderstanding the concept or even accepting bribes to attack it in favour of Thaksinomics (*Matichon*, 23 August 2007).

Ignored by the Thaksin government even after being adopted as the guiding principle for the national development plan for 2002–2006, sufficiency economy was restored and rigorously endorsed by General Surayud's government and leaders of various elite groups as a significant way to restore the people's faith in and respect for their king. This renewed endorsement of sufficiency economy is actually an attempt to impose the royalist ideology over Thaksinomics.

CONCLUSION

The Thai political situation since the September 2006 coup has remained extremely volatile. It still involves a conflict between members of the Thai elite, who employ various political strategies, public relations tactics and diverse media

forms, while feigning the support of the masses. Due to the divisions between the coup leaders, the indecisiveness of Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont, and the influence of Thaksin and his supporters, the former prime minister was able to retain his popularity during the period of military rule. Indeed, he even succeeded in restoring his de facto political power for a short period when the December 2007 general election was won by the People's Power Party (PPP), successor to the TRT Party after it was disbanded by the Constitutional Court. Even with the return to power of a Democrat-led government in late 2008, there has been no decrease in political conflict; this has in fact increased. Throughout this period and especially since the 2006 coup, the role and the ideologies of the military along with those of the royalist groups have become key factors in deciphering changes in Thai politics, which continues to be marked by a distinct lack of stability.

Following the takeover on 19 September 2006, the military was transformed in terms of organization and its political role and ideology. Despite divisions among the junta, a new organizational mechanism in the military was introduced in the form of a transformed ISOC. This resulted in a nationwide re-structuring of the national security system. The junta also enforced stringent security laws, which increased the power of the military, especially the role of the army commander in chief. According to the new internal security law, the army commander in chief also acts as the Director of ISOC and is thus able to enforce martial law whenever a situation arises that may infringe on national security. After the declaration of martial law, the army commander in chief can also prohibit people's movements and order 24-hour arrests (article 25, Internal Security Act, 2008). This new law was widely criticized since it was deemed to allocate too much power to the military. Also, the definition of 'a situation that may infringe on national security' is too elusive and entirely subject to interpretation by the military (article 12, Internal Security Act, 2008). The new law can, more or less, be abused by the military to crack down on any political movements.

The military's viewpoint regarding the political situation in Thailand after the September coup has altered tremendously and become somewhat jeopardizing to Thai democracy. This viewpoint is reminiscent of the era of crackdown on left-wing ideologies decades ago. The military seems to be convinced that communists are once again waging a war surreptitiously in the urban areas and are playing a crucial role in the parliament. They also believe that the communists have gained power through democratic means such as the parliament and political parties, and that the political party that won the majority of votes in 2001, especially from the poor voters in rural areas, was filled with leftists disguised as

politicians. The military also quotes the Maoist uprisings and victory in Nepal to exemplify the alleged threats of communism in Thailand. No one can tell if this communist hypothesis is true.

The use of a royalist ideology by political leaders is nothing new. In the 1950s–1960s royalist ideology was used by both Phibun Songkhram and Sarit Thanarat during their power struggles to justify their actions. According to Thak Chaloemtirana, the ‘Sarit regime’ created the space for establishing political power for himself by making use of the monarchy with a then youthful monarch who assumed a public role and became loved and revered by the whole nation. Prior to that, the symbolic power of the monarchy was unclear. After the 1932 coup, Phibun, acting as prime minister, limited the power of the monarchy for fear that it would rival his authority. By contrast, Sarit empowered the monarchy and exploited it as his political tool for his own purposes. The monarchy has, since then, become the nation’s supreme symbol (Thak 2005: 27).

The king’s visits to far-flung areas in the northeast of Thailand in 1955 alarmed Phibun, who feared that the monarch would become close to his people and in effect reduce the premier’s own popularity (Wilson 1962: 114). By contrast, when Sarit was in power, the king could enjoy frequent trips to the rural areas and abroad (fourteen such trips from 1959–1963 up until the death of Sarit). This, more or less, softened the dictatorial image of Sarit in the eyes of western countries. Sarit’s revival of royal ceremonies that were no longer in practice, such as the royal ploughing ceremony (1960), the royal *katin* presentation of ceremonial robes to monks (1960), and the annual military trooping of the colours on the occasion of the King’s birthday celebration (from 1959) all contributed to solidifying Sarit’s political power simultaneously with restoring monarchical authority, both of which were interdependent upon each other.

These ‘royal and royalist ceremonies’ continue to take place to this day. This raises two major questions. Firstly, does the government perceive the importance of such forms of myth-making through these ‘ceremonies’ and have Thai political leaders since the 1980s exploited them for political self-justification? Do these ‘ceremonies’ still carry a political significance? Secondly and more importantly, ceremonies related to royalist ideologies in various times and contexts are dynamic and manifest themselves differently. In a major study David Cannadine posits that in English history, royalist ceremonies have served to signify the socio-economic as well as cultural changes and challenges that the British monarchy has encountered. Such ceremonies tend to suggest the glory of the monarchy (Cannadine 1983: 105–107). In looking at Thai history before

and after the September coup, one recognizes that royal and royalist ceremonies have been widely exploited. This also points to a significant shift in power among Thailand's political elite, a matter that has not yet been the subject of extensive scholarly study and analysis. But we can observe that royalist groups are re-inventing their military and ideological power to secure their future.

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Part IV

Sufficiency Economy

Strengthening the Moral Fibre of the Nation

The King's Sufficiency Economy as Etho-politics

Lotte Isager and Søren Ivarsson

In the wake of the 1997 economic crisis, King Bhumibol in his annual birthday speech to the Thai nation told his subjects that 'being a tiger is not important. What is important is to have an economy which provides enough to eat and live' (Royal Speech 1997). Behind the apparent denunciation of capitalism and economic growth the king's message was mainly a moral one. 'This crisis originated from wasteful extravagance or from cupidity; I do not want to say from corruption, because even without corruption, it is bad enough' (Royal Speech 1998: 38). In other words, the economic crisis that hit the national and regional economy was rooted in a shortage of morality. The king accordingly proposed a new path for Thai society, economy and culture, which would strengthen the moral fibre of the nation and thereby serve as both remedy and prophylaxis for economic calamities. This new path came to be known as the king's philosophy of sufficiency economy. Drawing on well-known Buddhist philosophical and moral principles, sufficiency economy aims to create a new economic man who lives a moderate, self-dependent life without greed, uncontrolled cravings and overexploitation.

This chapter discusses sufficiency economy as an example of a contemporary moral vocabulary for politics, or 'etho-politics' (Rose 1999), which is not unique to Thailand although it is localized there in a specific way due to the country's political and cultural history, of which the monarchy is an immensely important dimension. In Thailand and the world over, political discourse seems 'freighted

with values: partnership, civil society, community, civility, responsibility, mutuality, obligations, voluntary endeavour, autonomy, initiative [...] and new ways are emerging for governing the behaviour of individuals through acting upon this ethical force-field' (Rose 1999: 474). This new etho-politics of community and behaviour is articulated in many different forms, for example in New Labour's 'Third Way' for Britain, in the American Republican Party's new 'Contract with America', in the NGO/donor-driven strengthening of the political role of civil society in developing countries, and in King Bhumibol's sufficiency economy. Nikolas Rose distinguishes etho-politics from Foucault's classic identification of disciplinary power and bio-power: 'While discipline individualizes and normalizes, and bio-power collectivizes and socializes, etho-politics concerns itself with the self-techniques necessary for responsible self-government and the relations between one's obligation to oneself and one's obligations to others' (Rose 1999: 478). Therefore, according to Rose, etho-politics is a politics of behaviour by which community becomes 'the object and target for the exercise of political power while remaining, somehow, external to politics and a counterweight to it' (Rose 1999: 475). It involves 'a double movement of autonomization and responsabilization of the subjects. Politics is to be returned to citizens themselves, in the form of individual morality and community responsibility' (Rose 1999: 476).

Etho-politics seeks to act upon conduct by acting upon the forces thought to shape the values, beliefs and moralities that themselves are thought to determine the everyday choices that human beings make as to how they lead their lives (Rose 1999: 478). It enters economics when economic health is governed indirectly through 'fostering an ethos of human enterprise and moral responsibility' (Rose 1999: 484). Rose calls this etho-political vision of economics an 'economics without enemies' (Rose 1999: 483).

[...] we are able to enter an economic world which may have risks and disputes, but where there are no implacable foes, fundamental conflicts, intrinsic exploitations and dominations, where the wealth of some no longer seems to depend upon the immiseration of others. Each individual is to see it as their moral duty to invest in their own capacities, to subscribe to the commitments of waged labour, to play their part in the networks of reciprocal obligation and mutual responsibility that bind together all citizens in a benign and munificent economy sustained by the values of honour and shame (Rose 1999: 485).

In his treatment of etho-politics Rose draws exclusively on a Western context. But it would be wrong to link etho-politics only with Western politics and societies. In Asia this kind of politics has been discussed by Aihwa Ong as 'post-

developmental state strategies' of late-developing liberal economies (Ong 1999). Such strategies are put into play by Asian political leaders who have relinquished much of the control over development to private enterprises and rely more and more on non-repressive measures to produce the kinds of subjects that are attractive to global capital both as low-skilled and technical workers and as newly affluent consumers. What is distinctive – but by no means unique – about these strategies are the ways 'essentialised cultural terms are deployed to regulate the population, constitute modern subjects, and to culturally authenticate social policies of control' (Ong 1999: 57). With reference to Foucault, Ong associates post-developmental state strategies with 'liberalism imbued with quasi-religious pastoral power' (Ong 1999: 61) and with what she calls 'Asian liberal forms of governmentality' (Ong 1999: 57). In Foucault's genealogy of the modern arts of government, 'pastoral power' figures as the religious roots of modern state power which is reinscribed in the institutions and discourses of the modern state. Unlike sovereignty, pastoral power is unconcerned with space. It is linked with the pastor's spiritual power and his role is to constantly sustain, improve and guide the lives of everyone. He exercises this power upon his followers like a shepherd upon his flock. Through his caring efforts and sacrifice the pastor generates a sense of debt and loyalty in the follower, thus achieving, in the words of Mariana Valverde (2007: 165), both subjection and 'subjectification', obedience and agency.

Ong discusses how pastoral power is cast in the cultural logic of Confucianism or Islam, for example in the 'communitarian capitalism' described by Malaysia's former prime minister Mahathir Mohamed and Shintaro Ishihara, a member of Japan's parliament (quoted in Ong 1999: 59). Communitarian capitalism justifies social regulation in terms of religion because '[you] cannot legislate the empathy and affection that bind family and close friends' (quoted in Ong 1999: 59). Mahathir and Ishihara strongly believed in this Asian version of etho-politics.

In the years ahead the Asian tradition of stressing these bonds will provide us with guidelines for increasingly complex information societies. The fundamentals of eastern thought – avoiding unnecessary conflict, eschewing coercive tactics, living within one's means – will sustain us (Mahathir and Ishihara, quoted in Ong 1999: 59).

Malaysia under Mahathir Mohamed's government saw different variations of etho-politics such as the islamization policies pursued during the 1980s and the 'Look East' campaign initiated in 1981. Both campaigns intended

to produce hard-working, entrepreneurial, disciplined individuals dedicated to Muslim/Asian values, to the leadership of Mahathir and UMNO (United Malays National Organization), and to the continuation of national economic development and modernization. In contrast, King Bhumibol's sufficiency economy envisages a somewhat different Asian post-developmental state scenario. The king's sufficiency economy is an etho-politics where Buddhist values and communitarian ideals are brought together to encourage the production of modest but hard-working subjects set in small-scale communities characterized by mutual compassion, self-sufficiency and – very significantly – a deep-rooted devotion to the moral leadership of King Bhumibol and the institution of the monarchy.

CONCEPTIONS: SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY AND NEW THEORY AGRICULTURE

King Bhumibol's sufficiency economy was neither conceived all at once, nor by the king alone. It is a product of many different elite minds who appear to share the goal of reforming the moral and economic performance of ordinary Thais and, perhaps more importantly, the goal of protecting and fortifying the moral and political power of the monarchy by 'remoraliz[ing] the state around the figure of the monarch' (cf. Connors 2003: 129). These two goals have been ever-present in the public discourse about sufficiency economy since the famous birthday speech by the king in 1997 when he stated that 'being a tiger is not important'.

If we can change back to a self-sufficient economy, not completely, even not as much as half, perhaps just a quarter, we can survive. [...] But people who like the modern economy may not agree. It's like walking backwards into a *khlong*. We have to live carefully and we have to go back to do things which are not complicated and which do not use elaborate expensive equipment. We need to move backwards in order to move forwards [...] (Royal Speech 1997).

The king's 1997 birthday address and the metaphor about Thailand as a non-tiger about to walk backwards into a *khlong* immediately struck a chord with bands of Thai media commentators, public speakers and academics, but to begin with sufficiency economy was hardly defined beyond the few selected notes from this speech. Nonetheless, one of the leading themes in the commentaries to these notes is that the king had said it all before. The 1997 birthday address is, for example, often compared with a speech given in 1974 by the king to students at Kasetsart University:

[...] development must be carried out in stages, starting with the laying of the foundation by ensuring the majority of the people have their basic necessities [...]. If we were to concentrate only on fast economic progress without allowing the plan of operation to harmonize with the conditions of the country and people, an imbalance in various aspects would be caused and may bring about failure in the end (H. M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, July 18, 1974, Kasetsart University, quoted in Office of the Royal Development Projects Board 2004: 7)

The juxtaposition of speeches from 1974 and 1997 conveys the message that the king foresaw Thailand's development destiny long before it actually took shape and tried to warn people about the dangers ahead, but to no avail. The speech from 1974 is read as a prophecy which turned out to be true, the implication being that for decades Thai people and policy makers ignored the king's vision, but the economic crisis in 1997 finally opened their eyes to the truth. This reading not only suggests that sufficiency economy was conceived decades before the crisis in 1997, but it also transmits the idea of the king as a seer, a possessor of deep knowledge, a man of immense spiritual power who is able to sustain, improve and guide the lives of every Thai.

In King Bhumibol's own narrative, 'Sufficiency Economy followed the New Theory of Agriculture' (Speech 1998: 26). New theory agriculture is a concept introduced by the king in 1994 about a three-step programme for integrated farming designed to overcome water shortage and the market vulnerability of Thai farmers (see chapter 10 in this book for more details). New theory agriculture has its own origin story. In his 1994 birthday address to the nation, the king explained that he had had a dream about an imaginary person who had come to Thailand from Sri Lanka in order to visit the footprint of the Buddha in Saraburi.¹ On his trip he passed the temple named Wat Mongkhol (meaning 'auspicious') outside Saraburi town. He visited the temple and made a contribution toward the building of the convocation hall. Subsequently, he also made a contribution for the construction of a weir in an area that was not suited for agriculture. After the weir had been constructed agriculture became possible in the area. After this dream, the king decided to search for the locality of his dream. He managed to locate Wat Mongkhol on a map and sent representatives to the place to buy a piece of land. Amazingly, it turned out that one villager had recently dreamt that the king would help this village and although the king's representatives acted incognito, the villagers realized who had sent them and

1 This section draws on the recording of the king's speech found on the home page of The Golden Jubilee Network (2006). It differs significantly from the written version in Thai found in the same place.

happily sold fifteen *rai* to the king. Interestingly, the king's narration about the origins of new theory alludes to a pre-modern vision of a prophetic king, not in the sense of foreseeing the future but in the sense of his ideas and actions being of divine provenance. And from the idea of new theory agriculture followed the idea of sufficiency economy. 'Those who apply the New Theory must be reasonable and realistic, and must not be extravagant' (Speech 1998: 26). And: '[...] both the Sufficiency Economy and the New Theory will be the instrument for the prosperity of the country' (Speech 1998: 30).

After the royal birthday speeches in 1997 and 1998, this 'instrument' was fine-tuned by scholars and important leading figures and institutions in Thailand. The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) orchestrated the king's ideas into a more complete philosophy, which was officially codified through royal approval in November 1999:

'Sufficiency Economy' is a philosophy that stresses the middle path as the overriding principle for appropriate conduct by the populace at all levels. This applies to conduct at the level of the individual, families, and communities, as well as to the choice of a balanced development strategy for the nation so as to modernise in line with the forces of globalisation while shielding against inevitable shocks and excesses that arise. 'Sufficiency' means moderation and due consideration in all modes of conduct, as well as the need for sufficient protection from internal and external shocks. To achieve this, the application of knowledge with prudence is essential. In particular, great care is needed in the utilisation of untested theories and methodologies for planning and implementation. At the same time, it is essential to strengthen the moral fibre of the nation, so that everyone, particularly public officials, theorists and businessmen, adheres first and foremost to the principles of honesty and integrity. In addition, a balanced approach combining patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom and prudence is indispensable to cope appropriately with critical challenges arising from extensive and rapid socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural changes occurring as a result of globalisation. (Office of the Royal Development Projects Board 2004: 9).

The philosophy was presented at the end-of-year meeting of the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) in 1999. It is noteworthy that the NESDB categorized sufficiency economy as a philosophy. It does not address the economic system directly but strives for a new economy through the reform of the economic behaviour of individual people and communities in Thailand. The sense of sufficiency economy as a politics of behaviour which targets communities for the exercise of political power and seeks to autonomize and responsabilize Thai people came out clearly in former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun's opening speech at the TDRI conference:

Although we know the philosophy by the name of the ‘Sufficiency Economy’, the very crucial element of the philosophy does not lie in the economic system, but in the ‘way of life’, the way of life of the Thai people that cuts across all social segments, ranging from individuals, families, communities and the country [...]. In Buddhism karma is action. Whose action? Individual actions of each and every one of us, personally. I think we must change [the] attitude of seeking for causes of problems from the outside. Before blaming or seeking assistance from others, we must look at ourselves and make peace with our own understanding that everything that happens lies within us. [...] we must rely on ourselves and take the consequences of the risks we choose by ourselves (Anand 1999).

At the TDRI conference sufficiency economy was discussed by a group of distinguished Thai economists (Apichai and Titiporn 2004) who presented it as a mode of production firmly based in Thai culture: ‘It is also not just about livelihood or ways to make a living at the family level, but can be national development strategy. It can therefore be considered as the [sic] mode of production which includes arts, culture and the history of the nation’ (Apichai and Titiporn 2004: 27). In an archetypical example of an etho-political vision of ‘economics without enemies’ the economists argued that sufficiency economy brings economy, society and culture into a harmonious relationship with each other. While the king’s ideas may endorse a critique of globalization and global capitalism as such, they do not call for a radical solution through conflict. Sufficiency economy locates the root causes of economic problems as greed and lack of moderation and ‘it strengthens local communities – which form the backbone of Thailand’s society and economy – as it ensures that people are not too greedy and do not take advantage of others’ (Apichai and Titiporn 2004: 16).

Subsequently, the philosophy of Eufficiency Economy was ‘adopted’ in the Ninth National Social and Economic Development Plan for Thailand. In that context sufficiency economy is interpreted as a paradigm shift which takes the middle path as the ‘economic life guiding principle’ which will lead to a more ‘resilient, balanced and sustainable development’. In so doing, sufficiency economy is believed to offer a ‘holistic concept of moderation and contentment’ (NESDB 2000: 1, 3).

WHEN EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN: FRAGMENTS OF A GENEALOGY OF THE CONSERVATIVE ROYAL VISION FOR THAILAND

By linking the economic crisis with ‘changes occurring as a result of globalization’ sufficiency economy is in harmony with many well-known refrains in Thai public debate. The counsel to be patient and prudent, diligent and persevering

is recognisable as common sense to most people. The call for honesty and integrity among officials and businessmen is in accord not only with ordinary Thais' wishes but also with pleas for 'good governance' which Thai scholars and political activists as well as the IMF and the World Bank pursued in the 1990s. Above all, the emphasis on the need to balance forces of modernization and globalization is nicely harmonized with the persistent national struggle in Thailand to embrace modernity and development and foreign influences while upholding traditional values and protecting the nation. Both globalizers and communitarians (Reynolds 2001) can find confirmation of their views in the philosophy of sufficiency economy.

One *leitmotif* in the king's sufficiency economy and new theory agriculture is a critique of capitalism. Although the king is against greedy and immoral capitalism rather than capitalism *per se* his ideas convey a sense of capitalism as something foreign to Thai people and culture. This brings reminiscences of development debates in the 1980s when Bamrung Bunpanya and Apichart Thungyuu, among others, argued that there are 'two currents' in Thai culture: village culture, the oldest form of Thai society, and capitalist culture, an imported idea, mainly geared to supply the needs of Westerners (quoted in Chatthip 1991: 121). The argument by Chatthip Nartsupha in *The Thai Village Economy in the Past* (1984) that capitalism, along with the state, was historically located outside the village – the original site of true Thai culture and Thainess – is another case in point. It is ironic, as mentioned by Paul M. Handley, that the king's critique of capitalism seems to be in agreement with many socialist or Marxist oriented Thais, including members of the former Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), whose worldviews he has otherwise disputed. But as Handley rightly points out, the agreement never really existed because 'for the Marxists of CPT... [critique of capitalism] was political economy, but for Bhumibol it was a matter of *dhamma*' (Handley 2006: 200). As such the king is in line with Prawase Wasi who argues that village culture should be strengthened in terms of Pañcakkhanda, the five groups of existence in Buddhist thought. The booklet published by Prawase on Buddhist agriculture (1987) deals with many of the ideas contained in the king's sufficiency economy and it is not surprising that Prawase has come forward as a firm believer and supporter of sufficiency economy, which he likens to a new 'genetic code' for Thai society (e.g. Prawase 2006).²

2 Both King Bhumibol and Prawase Wasi have been inspired by Schumacher's book *Small is Beautiful* (1973). In 1975, the king translated one of its chapters – about Buddhist economics – into Thai. See also Sulak Sivaraksa's article in response to Schumacher's book, entitled 'Buddhism and Development – Is Small Beautiful?'

Another *motif* in King Bhumibol's public discourses is the sense of loss of community, which he shares with a diverse group of communitarian thinkers worldwide. It is one of the constitutive themes of modernity, which has inspired a range of different political campaigns and projects aiming at recovering the sense of community that has gone missing. Possibly the two most inspirational examples for King Bhumibol have been Mahatma Gandhi's ideas about *Swadeshi* ('self-reliant village home-economies') in India and the *Kibbutz* movement in Israel. King Bhumibol's fascination with the latter goes back to the 1960s. In 1967, in a village near his Hua Hin residence in which he had taken a particular interest, he introduced the idea of a village farming cooperative modelled on an Israeli kibbutz. Later, in the 1970s, the king combined capital from the Crown Property Bureau with capital and technology from an Israeli businessman, Shoul Eisenberg, for the purpose of establishing a larger-scaled community-based rural development project – again modelled on the kibbutz movement and, again, not a success in the Thai rural context (see Handley 2006:190 and 270).

A third *motif* in the king's sufficiency economy is that it resonates with core elements of former official ideological campaigns, for example, the Basic Five Values campaign – a spiritual development programme launched by The National Culture Commission in 1982, which propagated self-reliance, diligence, responsibility, frugal spending, saving and discipline (Amara 1996). Notions about Buddhist virtue, self-reliance, thrift and a commitment to community and nation were likewise embedded in the Land of Justice, Land of Gold Project (*phaendin tham phaendin thorng*) launched in the 1980s (Connors 2003: 141–143). From this perspective the king's ideas represent nothing new but are part of a long tradition where the conservative capitalist state uses the monarchy to 'ideologically discipline the rural population through the discourse of thrift, self-reliance, national security and moral selfhood' (Connors 2003: 132). Kasian Tejapira has associated this tradition with an 'ethno-ideology of Thainess', which (resembling the etho-political vision of economics without enemies) represents the Thai nation as

a happy and calm village community [...] where intimate, reciprocal, cooperative, familial and clientelistic socio-economic relationships obtain. There are no serious problems and conflicts since there is hardly any real difference in terms of political and economic interests, values and world views (Kasian 1996: 247).

(1994 [1977]), and Phra Payutto's book on Buddhist economics (1992). The king's ideas about Buddhism, economic development and sufficiency strongly resemble the ideas presented in these works.

SPREADING THE MESSAGE

A very substantial amount of public and private resources have been spent to promote sufficiency philosophy and new theory agriculture. sufficiency economy has become a stable ingredient in material used in schools in Thailand, for example in the form of cartoons published by the National Identity Board for the teaching of morality. These cartoons, set in rural fairytale-like environments, seek to inculcate in the students a sense of the blessings of a simple life based on hard work and sufficiency. This vision of a perfect simple life is often linked with a family engaged in agricultural production modelled on the king's new theory (e.g. Samart 2002). A recurrent theme is also how a city family after experiencing economic hardship in the 'IMF age' move to live in the countryside. Here they encounter blissful happiness in a new life modelled on the king's ideas (e.g. Daen 2000). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and the Crown Property Bureau are co-operating to integrate sufficiency economy more firmly in the school curriculum. Priyanut Piboolsravut, who is Research Director of Sufficiency Economy of the Crown Property Bureau, is involved in this project. According to her, teachings about sufficiency economy will not only be implemented in all grades but the aim is to involve aspects of sufficiency economy in all subjects taught (personal interview, August 2007). The ultimate goal is to create a 'new generation' with a 'new mindset' (personal interview, August 2007). In this endeavour the Crown Property Bureau is supported by the Siam Cement Group, which has also financed a new programme on Thai TV in which young people are invited to talk about how they practise sufficiency economy in their daily life. The young people share their experiences with prominent stars from TV, movies or the rock scene in Thailand. According to Priyanut this strategy is adopted in order to make sufficiency economy attractive to the young (personal interview, August 2007).

Another initiative to promote sufficiency economy and new theory agriculture is the opening of four study centres in 2003 and 2004 in Mae Rim (North), Khorat (Northeast), Surat Thani (South), and Chachoengsao (Central). Each centre is dedicated to educating the public about the king's ideas. Forty-eight people work at the centre in Mae Rim, most of them soldiers on government salaries who work on agricultural demonstration plots and teach visitors the rules of new theory farming. It is built on land belonging to the military and cost around 50 million baht, which was paid by members of the Thaksin government personally. After completing the construction of the centre's facilities, Thaksin and his family paid another 2 million baht to get the place fully operating (personal interview with the director of the centre, January 2005). Still, as

Han Krittian points out in his chapter in this book, the Thaksin government only gave superficial support to the king's ideas about sufficiency economy as a guiding principle for the national economy (see Chapter 8).

In addition to these channels for spreading the king's ideas, the government designed a special programme to persuade farmers to practise new theory agriculture. In 1997, the Department of Agricultural Research (*krom wicha kan kaset*) under the Ministry of Agriculture initiated new theory demonstration projects in eight provinces. The projects were aimed at farmers and people made redundant by the economic crisis. However, the unemployed groups turned out to be more motivated for developing small businesses than for going into farming, and the farmers discontinued their collaboration after the initial phases of the project (personal interview, Khun Suraphun, Chiangmai Province Sahakorn, January 2005). In 1998, the Ministry of Agriculture delegated the responsibility for implementing new theory agriculture in Chiangmai Province to the Provincial Sahakorn. Involved partners included the Department of Irrigation, the Department of Fishery, the Department of Veterinary Science, the Department of Agricultural Research, and the Department of Land Development. Each department was given a budget to implement the programme, and participating farmers were trained in new theory principles and received 5,000 baht per year to cover investment in ponds, technical assistance, etc. Several people were rumoured to have received money under the table for signing up with the programme. After one year, it was found that only ten farmers actually followed the principles of new theory and the programme never matured into dealing with the second and third steps of new theory (personal interview, Khun Suraphun, Chiangmai Province Sahakorn, January 2005). The national programme target was to get 8,000 farmers to follow new theory in 1998 and an additional 8,000 farmers in 1999. By January 2005, neither the Ministry of Agriculture, nor NESDB, nor Chaipattana Foundation, nor any of the departments involved with the implementation of new theory in Chiangmai Province were able to produce data about the success rate. However, interviews with officials whose departments took part in the programme suggest that the national targets were far from met.

These examples illustrate how sufficiency economy and new theory agriculture have been associated with the Thai state bureaucracy and the disciplinary power exercised by different state agencies. Students are subjected to it via the school curriculum, and farmers must abide by the rules and regulation of state agencies which are responsible for implementing the new theory. At the same time, of course, sufficiency economy is closely connected with the personal moral authority and pastoral power of King Bhumibol and other elite figures who have

promoted this philosophy in such a way that it resonates well the knowledge, values and beliefs held by the people it is meant to responsabilize. As such, sufficiency economy like other forms of etho-politics signifies the ‘demonic’ intertwining of pastoral power and disciplinary power, which Foucault associates with modern state power (see Valverde 2007: 165). The ‘demonic’ plurality of forms of government associated with sufficiency economy became even more significant after the September 2006 coup when sufficiency economy seemed to be virtually everywhere and was held up as the ideology of the generals who claimed responsibility for ousting the democratically elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra.

POST-COUP SUFFICIENCY

The 2006 coup was a coup dressed in potent royalist symbolism, and sufficiency economy was an important mantra for the post-Thaksin regime. When Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont outlined the new government’s policies he stated that

[...] the new government will uphold market mechanisms in its economic policies, but good governance will be instilled under the philosophy of sufficiency economy to ensure economic fairness and minimise conflicts of interest as well as personal interests (*The Nation*, 28 October 2006).

Sufficiency economy was written into the draft constitution, which was passed in August 2007, and into the tenth national economic development plan. An increase of programmes and informative spots dealing with sufficiency economy were aired on Thai television. The prime minister guaranteed an allocation of ten billion baht to projects promoting well-being in line with the king’s philosophy of sufficiency economy (*Bangkok Post*, 10 March 2007). The post-coup government’s commitment to the king’s ideas is moreover reflected in the naming of various government projects, e.g. Happy Living Project and Community Development Project under the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy, and Centre of Poverty Eradication under the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy. Further, the Internal Security Operation Command has also adopted sufficiency economy and has mobilized the army to educate the population about sufficiency economy.

The link between the post-coup regime and sufficiency economy gained publicity in UNDP’s *Thailand Human Development Report 2007*. Prime Minister Surayud’s foreword stated that

[...] the sufficiency economy philosophy has now firmly taken root in Thai society. It has become the guiding principle for our country’s development

strategies. [...] The thinking advocates growth with economic stability over rapid but unbridled growth. It emphasizes sustainable development, sound macroeconomic policies, and the equitable sharing of economic benefits (UNDP 2007: iii).

The report noted: 'The sufficiency economy now serves as a mission statement of the nation' (UNDP 2007: 68). This UNDP report, along with the UN's awarding in 2006 of the first Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award to King Bhumibol, lent credibility to sufficiency economy as Thailand's guiding principle with claims to universality.

The military coup was launched against a government which enjoyed unprecedented support from the electorate. Subsequently, some legislators, officials and political activists who supported the coup called for a reform of the political system designed to reduce the electoral power of the rural voters. An example was the 'New Politics' proposed by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) after the coup. Basically, this 'New Politics' was identical with a new proportional election system in which 30 per cent of the members of the House of Representatives would be elected from their constituencies while the remaining 70 per cent would be filled with appointees from various professions. Charaspong Surasvadi – a well-known comedian, talk-show host and outspoken PAD supporter – has branded a political system devised along these lines as *phor phiang prachathipatai* which translates into 'sufficiency democracy' or 'sufficiencracy' (Bangkok Pundit 2008). As noted by Andrew Walker in chapter 10 in this book, sufficiency economy has become the moral underpinning of sufficiency democracy in which electoral power is constrained.

Nikolas Rose warns that etho-politics appeals to 'an imaginary universal moral consensus, in order to justify a banal and stultifying vision of a future much like the present only without its downsides' (Rose 1999: 490). Assuming that few people would stand against a world without downsides, this means that etho-politics easily presents itself as a politics without enemies. In this context it is interesting to note that Anthony Giddens in *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* stresses that this form of politics is about 'a new relation between the individual and community, a redefinition of rights and obligations ... *no rights without responsibilities ... no authority without democracy ...*' (Giddens 1998: 64–67 quoted in Rose 1999: 467, italics original). Giddens's emphasis that democratic political contest and opposition is a vital prerequisite for Third Way politics for helping 'citizens pilot their way through the major revolutions of our time: *globalization, transformations in personal life, and our relationship to nature*' is obviously absent from the Thai sufficiency economy.

In the Thai sufficiency economy version of etho-politics, the enhancement of democratic values and practices is not considered relevant for the strengthening of the moral fibre of the nation. This is also the case with other post-developmental state strategies described by Aihwa Ong as typical of Asian late-developing liberal economies (Ong 1999). Indeed, the intertwining of pastoral power and disciplinary power related to sufficiency economy took a particular 'demonic' turn with the September 2006 coup inasmuch as the king's philosophy was adopted as the official ideology of the military with its monopoly on violence. By offering an image of a reborn Thailand where the military and civilian bureaucracies act on behalf of the king (the country's 'moral being number one', said to be 'above politics'), sufficiency economy has served as an important denominator in the branding of the post-coup regime vis-à-vis the policies pursued by Thaksin's government (for a more elaborated analysis of this aspect of sufficiency economy, see chapter 8 in this book). This image enacted a Manichean split-vision with Thaksin embodying unbridled capitalism, consumption and greed while the new regime stood as the very guardian of ethics, Buddhist morality and the king. In this way, sufficiency economy was very much promoted as a politics without enemies. But, of course, there is no such thing in real life as a politics without enemies. And quite clearly, the position as enemy of the government and its policies was never an easy one in Thailand. But after the 2006 coup, political contest and opposition became even more difficult. Not only because a military government, which has thrown over a democratically elected government, is obviously no keen supporter of democracy and public political contest, but also because the new government's ideological association with sufficiency economy meant that political divergences were reduced to a matter of moral choice between good and evil. How to stand up against sufficiency economy and its vision of a world without downsides? And how to stand up against a politics based on the vision of a king who is above politics due to his moral superiority?

CONCLUDING REMARKS: MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

In this chapter, sufficiency economy is approached as an example of etho-politics which seeks to align the prevailing cultural emphases upon autonomy and self-realization with the demand that all citizens accept their duties, obligations and responsibilities to their communities. It began as a more or less loosely connected set of ideas formulated by King Bhumibol after the 1997 economic crisis. Subsequently, selected scholars and cultural elite figures codified these ideas into a 'proper' philosophy and the philosophy was gradually disseminated by

various parts of the state bureaucracy. This trajectory illustrates how sufficiency economy is no longer solely associated with the personal moral authority and pastoral power of King Bhumibol but is also associated with the disciplinary power of different state agencies. As such, sufficiency economy has taken on a life outside the king's influence. The king has noted how this often happens: in a speech the king raises an issue and subsequently people put his ideas into practice. In some cases, according to the king, he finds it difficult to understand that such initiatives derive from his ideas (e.g. Apichai and Titiporn 2004: 50). But in the case of sufficiency economy and sufficiency democracy there seems to be a fairly close connection between the king's ideas expressed in his own words and the initiatives carried out by others.

The long-term effects of the linkage of the pastoral power of the king with attempts to curtail the electoral power of the population remain to be seen. Will it ultimately open up more overt criticism of the Thai monarchy, which will in turn require a reformation of the monarchy's role in Thailand? With ideas about sufficiency economy and sufficiency democracy floating freely about in Thai public debate, it may seem as if many people who during the 1990s advocated a strengthening of civil society in Thailand, democratic reforms of the political system, the 'People's Constitution' of 1997, and the Community Forest Bill have been co-opted by the discourse of sufficiency economy. However, criticism of the sufficiency economy and 'royalist populism' does exist in the media in Thailand (e.g. Pravit 2007; Thulee 2007) and on the internet. And there have been attempts to appropriate sufficiency economy and use it as a yardstick to criticize government policies (e.g. Chanida and Bamford 2007). In time, sufficiency economy may even be employed as an ideological tool to delegitimize government policies and military intervention in politics after 2006. Sufficiency economy will then have been turned into a medium for contest and an expression of national disunity, which was most certainly the last thing King Bhumibol wished for when he treated his birthday audiences to ideas and dreams about sufficiency back in 1997 and 1998.

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CHAPTER 10

Royal Sufficiency and Elite Misrepresentation of Rural Livelihoods

Andrew Walker

Let me start with a fairy story that has been produced in Thailand. It is presented in a lavishly illustrated volume that recounts the adventures of a little kingdom and its good king, who triumphs over a series of dark forces (Sonthiyan and Waethin 2005). One of the king's triumphs occurs during his many travels around the kingdom.

In a far off place, the king came across a village that had almost no one living there. 'Where has everyone gone?' the king asked the small group of remaining villagers. The villagers answered their king: 'A demon of the dark called Greed came and visited and asked the people to leave the village. Most of the villagers abandoned the village and went to live in the City of Extravagance.' The king thought for a moment and then gave the villagers a radiant seed. The villagers took the seed and planted it and it grew into a radiant tree that grew large branches and spread its radiance in all directions. The king told the villagers that the radiant tree is called Sufficiency. The radiance of the tree shone to far off places, as far as the City of Extravagance. And many of those who saw it travelled back to return to their village (Sonthiyan and Waethin 2005: 10–13).

In the sixteen months of military government that followed the coup of September 2006, Thailand embarked on an unprecedented spate of enthusiasm for the royal theory commonly referred to as 'sufficiency economy'. The coup makers and their appointed government presented their policies within a package of royalist sufficiency in order to draw a clear contrast with the so-

called populist policies of the overthrown Thaksin government. Throughout the country, local development initiatives funded by Thaksin were re-badged as ‘sufficiency economy’ or ‘sufficiency agriculture’ projects. Programme objectives were adjusted, policy guidelines re-written and the signs throughout the countryside that promoted the Thaksin-era programmes were repainted. Senior government spokesmen promoted the importance of a return to political and economic morality, based on the adoption of the royal sufficiency economy philosophy. Generous budgets were reportedly allocated to the implementation of an array of sufficiency economy projects (Hewison 2007: 213). In an attempt to anchor future government policy to the moral foundation of royal sufficiency, two provisions of the military-backed constitution of 2007 required future governments to implement the sufficiency economy philosophy in relation to state administration (section 78.1) and economic policy (section 83) (Government of Thailand 2007).

So what does ‘sufficiency economy’ mean? A useful introduction to the concept can be found in the 2007 Human Development Report for Thailand (UNDP 2007).¹ In the wake of the September 2006 coup, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) raised eyebrows when it used its 2007 Human Development Report to enthusiastically endorse the sufficiency economy philosophy, seemingly unconcerned that sufficiency economy had been politically mobilized to justify the military overthrow of an elected government (Hewison 2007). The report contains a foreword by the military-appointed prime minister, Surayud Chulanont, in which he declared that sufficiency economy ‘has become the guiding philosophy for our country’s development strategies and policies’. Surayud writes that sufficiency economy ‘is the *modus operandi* for my Government’s efforts to promote human development, reduce income inequalities, and ensure sound foundations for sustainable economic growth’ (UNDP 2007: iii).

The Human Development Report explains that a three-stage process of human development lies at the heart of sufficiency economy’s approach to rural Thailand. This staged process of development builds on a foundation of self-reliant agriculture. The first stage of human development involves the famous ‘model farm’, a much cited example of royal genius. In the model farm, land is allocated (in thirds) between fish ponds, rice cultivation and crops/fruit:

1 See also Ivarsson (2007: 23–24) and Chanida and Bamford (2007) for outlines of some of the philosophical underpinnings of sufficiency economy and how the concept was used in the post-coup environment.

In 1994, the King unveiled a model of a self-reliant family farm. He had begun experimenting with the model on a small plot in Saraburi province a few years earlier, just as the [economic] boom began. The model was based on a 2.4 hectare holding which was the median for smallholders in much of the country. This was divided into four zones: 30 percent for digging a pond to store 19,000 cubic metres of water for cultivation in the dry season and to raise fish; 30 percent for rice cultivation sufficient for year round home consumption; 30 percent for other crops and fruit; and 10 percent for housing, animal husbandry and other activities. Soil fertilization, weed control and pest control used natural methods. The production system maximized synergies between livestock and crops, and made the household self-reliant (UNDP 2007: 28).

Of course, it would be foolhardy to take this model farm too seriously.² What, for example, do farmers do with the 19,000 cubic metres of soil excavated from one third of their land? Rather than regarding the model farm as a prescription for local agricultural development it would probably be wiser to view it as a general philosophical framework that can guide locally appropriate responses. Nevertheless, the model's emphasis on local agricultural production as a basis for household sufficiency is clear. Indeed, when inspecting a famous, and widely circulated, illustration of the model farm it is hard to avoid an impression of pre-social autarky (Rasi 1999: 20–21). The image shows the royally-designed farm in splendid isolation, surrounded by what looks like a forest of coconut trees. One farmer is carrying straw to a pig pen while another (his wife?) seems to be feeding chickens or ducks. There are no neighbours, and no sign of a road, village or market, let alone an electric line, mobile phone tower or satellite dish! Adam and Eve in Eden.

But the advocates of sufficiency economy are keen to emphasize that the philosophy does not amount to a rejection of the market altogether. The Human Development Report reminds us that 'self-reliance did not mean isolation' (UNDP 2007: 28). Scriptural authority for this view can be found in the king's own words:

A self-sufficient economy doesn't mean that each family must produce its own food, weave and sew its own clothes. This is going too far, but I mean that each village or district must have relative self-sufficiency. Things that are produced in surplus can be sold, but should be sold in the same region, not too far so that the transportation cost is minimized (UNDP 2007: 29).

The model farm designed by the king is capable of producing a surplus which can be sold in local markets. Accordingly, the second stage in the sufficiency

2 Nevertheless there are much lauded cases where it appears to have been implemented quite strictly. See, for example Vasana 2000.

economy model of development extends self-reliance to the community level with localized exchange of household surpluses via a network of communal institutions:

This might be done through cooperative forms of production, community savings groups, community health centres and community forms of a social safety net. The idea was to increase the local provision of goods and services by introducing some division of labour to achieve economies of scale and scope, while still relying principally on the community's own capacity and resources. Exchange with the outside would increase, but local exchange should be preferred because it economizes on transport and other transaction costs (UNDP 2007: 28)

The third stage, in turn, involves a higher level of external exchange to sell excess production and to obtain technology and resources.

It should be clear, then, that sufficiency economy is not about economic isolation. The second and third stages of local agricultural development involve increasing levels of external exchange. But it is crucial to recognize that this is a model of local economic development in which primary emphasis is placed on achieving local sufficiency:

Before moving to another stage, there first had to be a *firm foundation of self-reliance* or else there was a strong chance of failure and loss of independence. The driving force for development had to come from within, based on accumulation of knowledge (UNDP 2007: 28, emphasis added).

This sounds like a sober and sensible approach to human development. But it is one that seriously misrepresents the nature of rural livelihoods in contemporary Thailand. The view that agriculture can provide a 'firm foundation of self-reliance' is a highly selective and simplified interpretation of economic realities. In fact, local agriculture frequently exists, and persists, on a foundation of external social and economic linkages. The notion that external linkages should only be developed once there is a foundation in local sufficiency is simply not consistent with the economically diversified livelihood strategies pursued by rural people in contemporary Thailand. It is an agrarian vision from the past.

A FOUNDATION IN LOCAL SUFFICIENCY?

The sufficiency economy approach proposes a hierarchical model of rural economy in which livelihoods are based on a broad foundation of local agricultural sufficiency. On top of this foundation, local and non-local exchange involves

the circulation of surpluses produced within the subsistence-oriented base. Local subsistence needs, not regional, national or international market demand, are the key drivers of production. The exchange of surplus is primarily a fortuitous by-product of the abundance of locally-oriented production.

In order to explore the limitations of this model I examine the economy of a northern Thai village where I have been undertaking ethnographic fieldwork for the past five years. Ban Tiam is a northern Thai (*khon meuang*) village located about one hour's drive from the main northern city of Chiang Mai. It is located in a narrow intermontane valley a few kilometres to the west of the district centre of Pad Siew. Despite its bucolic appearance, Ban Tiam is the site of a diverse and dispersed economy. Its 126 households (making up a total population of about 400) are engaged in a wide variety of livelihood pursuits: rice cultivation, cash cropping, wage labour, local enterprise and government employment. In the following sections I examine the main sectors of this local economy. As a first step, it is useful to place this economy in its local demographic context.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITIONS

Over the past two or three generations Ban Tiam's population has grown rapidly. The older residents recall a small hamlet of ten or so households clustered on the narrow strip of land between the temple and the paddy fields. About thirty years ago there was a population influx when another small hamlet from across the valley was shifted to Ban Tiam, given its better road connection and more ready access to the nearby school, government services and electricity. Since then, there has been significant expansion and the residential area of the village has spread steadily up the eastern slope of the small valley where it is located. The population growth has been fed by a natural increase and by the in-migration of farmers, traders and labourers from the more densely populated areas on the Chiang Mai plain. Population growth has been accompanied by substantial investment in local agricultural resources. This has included the creation of new areas of paddy cultivation, an increase in upland cultivation (though this has been restricted by government forestry regulation), the establishment of fruit orchards, and the government-funded improvement of local irrigation systems.

Given this expanding population, to what extent can local resources be seen as providing a basis for economic sufficiency? In order to approach an answer to this question it is useful to delve a little deeper into Ban Tiam's demographic transition. There are two key processes that need to be highlighted. First, Ban Tiam has been a substantial exporter of population, matching a process that

has occurred throughout rural Thailand. Second, local population growth has been accompanied by an ongoing withdrawal from agricultural activity. This withdrawal has been driven both by agricultural resource constraints and expanding opportunities in other sectors.

These trends can be nicely illustrated in relation to the lineage of great-great-grandmother Maeo, and her three daughters Mon, La and Fon. At present, I have information on 87 of Maeo's descendants and their spouses. Of these only 44 are still regularly living in Ban Tiam (or did so at the time of their death). I know of 43 who are living outside the village. In all likelihood there are considerably more living outside, given that my genealogical information on these scattered descendants is much less complete. Let me illustrate some of the recent demographic processes in relation to one branch of the lineage – the four grand-daughters of great-grandmother Mon. The oldest granddaughter, Kluai, was regularly resident in the village up until two years ago. She was an active farmer, but relied largely on land rental because much of her own land had been sold to pay for a succession of family medical bills and funerals. In 2005, partly in response to a succession of crop failures, she moved to southern Thailand to work as a full time carer for the invalid mother of an affluent shopkeeper who had visited Pad Siew district on several occasions. Kluai's household in Ban Tiam is now maintained by her husband (who works as a carpenter) and her daughter (who has just commenced university education in Chiang Mai). Her younger sister, Nok, left Ban Tiam in 1992 and worked in various jobs in Bangkok. She contracted AIDS and died in 1996 (leaving her daughter in the care of her sisters). The next sister, Noi, also worked in Bangkok where she met her husband who is employed as an electrician on major construction projects throughout Thailand. Up until 2006, she maintained a household in the village (where her daughter and niece lived under the supervision of her elderly mother) but she now spends almost all of her time with her husband. Her daughter and niece are now attending university in Chiang Mai. The youngest sister, Mai, lived for a period with her husband in Chiang Rai province and has now moved to the Pad Siew district centre where she operates a food stall in the district market. It is unlikely that any of the children of these four sisters will end up living in Ban Tiam once they have completed their secondary and, in most cases, tertiary education.

This dispersed network of kin remains connected, though unevenly, with the local economy. Many, like Kluai, are still active members of households in Ban Tiam, despite their prolonged absences. In fact, almost one third of the households in the village have a current household member who is living outside

the village. Many of these dispersed family members make regular contributions towards day-to-day living expenses and, if their earnings are sufficient, they can support more substantial outlays. Kluai, for example, has been able to fund the construction of a new house complete with new furnishings, a computer, a refrigerator and a fully automatic washing machine. She has purchased a motor-bike for her daughter and is intending to fund the tertiary education of both her daughter and her orphaned niece. Many others are less closely connected with household economies in Ban Tiam – having established fully independent households elsewhere – but they can still be called upon for loans in times of hardship, for financial support for home improvements and local enterprises, and for contributions towards key domestic events such as weddings and funerals. At the funeral of great-grandmother La, a spatially and economically dispersed network of descendants assembled to stage an elaborate and expensive ceremony complete with generously catered food, musical performances, abundant flowers and an elaborate cremation pyre.

Among those still living in Ban Tiam the relatively small number still working in agriculture is striking. Great-grandmother La has 20 descendants currently resident in Ban Tiam who are of active working age. Of these only 10 are still active farmers. Others have moved into a range of other occupations: running a restaurant at the district high school; local processing of bananas; construction; shopkeeping; money lending; and teaching. Of course, these occupations are not necessarily disconnected from the local agricultural economy but in most cases they are heavily dependant on external sources of funding and investment. The situation among great-grandmother La's Ban Tiam descendants is representative of the situation in the entire village. Out of Ban Tiam's 126 households, 54 do not undertake any independent farming activity, most commonly because they do not own agricultural land. For some this reflects affluence and a voluntary disengagement from agricultural activity to pursue more lucrative pursuits. But for most, non-participation in farming is a product of landlessness. Some, including more recent migrants into the village, have never owned land while others have sold it or lost it through foreclosure.

This brief examination of Ban Tiam's livelihood demography immediately raises important questions about the plausibility of an economic foundation in local sufficiency. There is no doubt that agriculture plays a very important role in Ban Tiam's economy but rather than representing a foundation for local sufficiency it is itself underpinned by substantial out-migration and internal economic diversification. To put the matter bluntly: without these external livelihood options the internal competition for agricultural land in Ban Tiam

would be extreme and large numbers of residents would be forced to adopt low-yielding upland agriculture in the neighbouring national park in pursuit of the most basic subsistence livelihoods. The pressure on natural resources would be immense. In fact, if all of great-great-grandmother Maeo's descendants were to return to the village from the city of extravagance, the royal tree of sufficiency would soon be cut down and sold to a furniture factory in Chiang Mai.

RICE PRODUCTION

Rice is the primary staple in northern Thailand, consumed with almost every meal. During the wet season (June to November) rice cultivation is the most important agricultural activity in Ban Tiam. In 2003, for example, rice made up over 85 percent of the cultivation on the wet-season paddy fields. On the rain-fed upland fields, rice is also important, but much less dominant than on the irrigated paddy. In 2003, 42 percent of the upland area was devoted to rice production. Given high labour demands at peak periods (planting and harvesting), rice production relies on the mobilization of large labour teams. This is achieved primarily by reciprocal exchange labour, though there is increasing use of wage labour as a result of competing demands on the available workforce. Paddy rice yields are generally very good, averaging around 800 kilograms per *rai*.³ This compares very favourably with the national average of 427 kilograms (Office of Agricultural Economics 2006: Table 5). Ban Tiam's upland rice yields are considerably lower at around 380 kilograms per *rai*. An increasing number of farmers are coming to the conclusion that upland rice cultivation is simply not worth the effort, though this may change as a result of higher rice prices in recent years, especially in 2008 (Walker 2008b).

In a very broad sense, Ban Tiam can be regarded as self-sufficient when it comes to rice. My estimate of the rice subsistence requirement for the village as a whole is about 120 tonnes.⁴ Under good cultivation conditions the village produces about 140 tonnes of rice. Of course, yields can be substantially reduced by flooding – which is a regular occurrence – and by disease and pest attack, but surpluses from good years can assist in tiding over during bad years. However, this broad impression of rice sufficiency is rather misleading. In fact only slightly over half of the village's households are engaged in rice cultivation (66 out of 126). The most common reason for non-rice cultivation is that the households do not own any agricultural land.

3 1 *rai* equals 0.16 hectares.

4 Based on an estimate of 300 kilograms of unmilled rice per person per year.

Some indication of the nature of the rice economy of Ban Tiam can be gained from a small survey of 29 farmers conducted in 2005. Villagers were asked if they normally produce enough rice to support themselves for the full year. Fourteen said that they did and fifteen said that they did not. Most of these who did were, predictably, owners of irrigated paddy fields. Of the fifteen rice-insufficient households, two cultivated some paddy, five cultivated lower-yielding upland fields and eight undertook no rice cultivation at all. So how did these households meet their rice requirement? Only three indicated that they obtained rice from sharing with friends or relatives. This was somewhat surprising because eight of the rice surplus producing households said that sharing was the primary use of their surplus rice. This mismatch may reflect the relatively small sample. It may also reflect a greater cultural willingness to admit to generosity than dependence. But most likely it is a reflection of the fact that most sharing takes place within narrowly defined kinship and familial domains (such as sharing rice with elderly parents). The primary way in which rice-deficit households obtain rice is via purchase, either within the village from rice-surplus households or outside the village from rice traders in the nearby district centre. For nine of the fourteen rice-deficit households purchase was their primary source of rice, and for four others it was their secondary source. About half also obtain some rice as payment for wage labour.

So, while in a very general sense Ban Tiam can be regarded as being rice sufficient, the ways in which people access rice varies significantly. Images of local sufficiency, even in the limited sectors of the economy where they may be applicable, conceal local inequalities in access to resources and production. The sufficiency economy imagery of exchanges of surpluses via an idealized array of communal institutions glosses over the reality that many rural people obtain their most basic subsistence goods via market transactions.

Three other factors related to rice production also need to be emphasized. First, as noted in the previous section, Ban Tiam's broadly defined rice sufficiency is a result of considerable out-migration. If significantly more people had remained in the village there simply would not be enough locally produced rice for local consumption needs and dependence on external purchase would be substantially higher than it is now. Secondly, to the extent that it is achieved, rice sufficiency is a relatively recent phenomenon. Many older, and even middle-aged, residents recall the rice shortages and outright hunger of the past very vividly. They report that rice yields have increased dramatically in recent years as a result of the introduction of improved varieties. These varieties require relatively high inputs of fertiliser but the greatly increased returns easily justify the additional

outlay. Of course, the sufficiency economy model of rural development does provide for the introduction of new technology as part of the third stage of rural development. But according to sufficiency economy precepts this should follow on from a firm foundation in self-reliance and local knowledge. In Ban Tiam, and many other parts of Thailand, local sufficiency in rice production is the result of ongoing external investment in variety improvement, irrigation infrastructure and agro-chemical input. Third, despite its cultural importance, rice is only one component of the contemporary household economy. In fact, it is a relatively modest component. My estimates suggest that the value of rice production makes up between 10 and 20 percent of rural household income in northern Thailand even when household income is assumed to be at the poverty line.⁵ Rice is culturally important, but it represents a very narrow economic foundation.

CASH CROPS

In 2003, I undertook a simple survey asking households to rank their major sources of income. The production of cash crops was nominated by 34 percent of households as their most important source. Slightly fewer (30 percent) nominated agricultural wage labour. Most of this wage labour takes place in the cash crop sector given the heavy use of exchange labour in the subsistence rice sector. Clearly, cash crop production is very important in Ban Tiam, but the ways in which people engage in the sector – either as independent producers or as wage labourers – varies considerably.

Cash cropping in Ban Tiam is undertaken primarily during the dry season on the irrigated paddy fields. During the dry season of 2002–2003, two crops predominated: garlic (56 percent of the cultivated area) and soybeans (33

5 The 2007 Human Development Report (UNDP 2007: 117) states that the average household income in the northern region in 2004 was 128,280 baht per year. Of course average rural incomes in the north would be considerably lower. The Human Development Report states that the poverty line in the north is 1,131 baht per person per month (UNDP 2007: 117). For a household of four people this translates to 54,288 per year. For argument's sake I assume that this poverty-line represents the average rural income in northern Thailand. Annual rice consumption is assumed to be about 1,200 kilograms (unmilled) per household (see footnote 4). Of course, some households produce more than they consume, but many other households produce less or none at all. In 2004 the farm-gate price for unmilled rice was about 6 baht per kilogram, making the total value of consumption about 7,200 baht. This is about 13 percent of the poverty line income I have used as a very approximate proxy for rural incomes.

percent). There was a dramatic shift in 2003–2004, for reasons to be discussed below. Sweetcorn was adopted by many farmers and it took up 47 percent of the cultivated area. The second most popular crop was tobacco (24 percent). Garlic rated a distant third (13 percent) followed by potato (8 percent), soybean (5 percent) and a few plots of cabbage, beans and Chinese parsley. The following dry season (2004–2005) showed signs of both reversion and innovation. After the solid experiment of the previous year, cultivation of sweetcorn was completely abandoned and the major crop was tobacco, which covered 42 percent of the cultivated area. Ban Tiam had become the most important production site for tobacco in the district. The next two most popular crops in Ban Tiam were the old favourites: garlic (29 percent) and soybeans (19 percent). The balance of 10 percent was made up of a diverse range of experimental crops – cabbage, chilli, eggplant, strawberry, tomato and peanuts. One farmer even grew a dry season crop of rice because he had lost much of his wet season crop in floods.

The recent history of the cash-cropping sector raises important questions about the appropriateness of the sufficiency economy agenda. Up until 2002–2003, garlic was the predominant cash crop in Ban Tiam. However, the poor garlic yield of the 2002–2003 dry season represented a key turning point. Garlic production this year was widely reported to be a failure, with almost all farmers consulted indicating that they had lost money on their crop: ‘the heads were small, the leaves were short and the crop developed slowly’ one farmer lamented as he explained his 10,000 baht loss. ‘The heads were this big’, a more cheerful farmer joked, holding his hand as if grasping an enormous garlic head. ‘But that’s five heads’ he added, pointing to each finger in turn to show that the heads were actually little bigger than a fingertip. When surveyed later, farmers indicated that yields on over 70 percent of plots were ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’. Only one plot was described as returning a ‘very good’ yield and only two others rated ‘good’.⁶

Farmers explained the failure of the garlic crop in various ways. One commonly-cited reason was climatic variability. Farmers in Ban Tiam have a strong perception that the weather is now departing from its usual patterns. One farmer told me that in the past the weather used to be good for agriculture but now it was too unreliable. ‘One minute it’s cold, then it’s raining and then it’s hot,’ she explained. ‘And now hot means very hot, cold is very cold and wet is very wet.’ Another garlic farmer had a different version of climate change. He said that 10 or 20 years ago it used to be cool in Ban Tiam, not like in Chiang Mai where it was unpleasantly hot. ‘But now,’ he said, ‘it is hot here too, just

⁶ Farmers were asked to subjectively rate the yield of their crop as ‘very bad’, ‘bad’, ‘average’, ‘good’, or ‘very good’.

like the city.' Now the cooler weather that was good for garlic could not be relied upon. 'Perhaps it is because the forest is all gone.' Concerns about climatic unreliability were compounded by the unseasonable rainfall in late December 2002. This very unusual dry-season rainfall had resulted in the flooding of low-lying areas of the paddy fields, flattening the garlic and resulting in negligible yield on the most waterlogged sections. Even in the fields above the clearly visible flood line, farmers felt that the excessive moisture, combined with unusually warm weather, had reduced yields.

These concerns about unreliable climate were combined with even more potent concerns about the state of Ban Tiam's soil. By the time the garlic crop was harvested, poor soil fertility – rather than excess rain earlier in the season – had emerged as the main talking point. The emerging consensus was that the soil was depleted, probably as a result of excessive chemical use over the years and lack of input of natural manure. The long history of intensive garlic production in Ban Tiam – with increasingly heavy inputs of fertiliser, herbicide and pesticide – meant that the paddy soil was now spoilt. The presence of an unknown small red soil mite in some of the plots was, for some, a disconcerting sign of the soil's decline.

There was a third factor that contributed to uncertainties about garlic production. In 2003 Thailand signed a bilateral trade agreement with China which abolished the 30 percent import duty on agricultural products. Even before the agreement was signed, there were reports that it would result in a flood of Chinese garlic into the Thai market. It was widely reported that this duty-free garlic would be sold in Thailand at a price considerably lower than local production costs. The status of these reports was considerably enhanced when the Thai government announced an adjustment scheme that would make cash payments to farmers who switched their dry-season production from garlic to other crops. Prices did fall sharply in 2004 but in the following years they recovered, partly a result of the success of the adjustment scheme in reducing the area of garlic cultivation.⁷

From this brief account it should be clear that farmers in Ban Tiam have faced many of the same environmental and economic anxieties that have contributed to the sufficiency economy philosophy. As at a national level, Ban Tiam's farmers have had to deal with concerns about resource degradation, environmental change and external economic impacts. But their response has been quite different to that laid down by the sufficiency economy precepts. Rather than seeking to limit their engagement with external markets and focus on consolidating an

⁷ But collapsed again in 2008, partly as a result of garlic farmers re-entering the market.

agricultural base oriented to subsistence production and local exchange, farmers have pursued new forms of engagement with agricultural commercialization.

As noted above, since the dry season of 2003–2004 Ban Tiam's farmers have adopted a range of new cash crops. Some, like sweet corn, have been tested and abandoned. Others, like tobacco, eggplants and zucchinis have been much more enduring. There has been some return to garlic as prices and yields have improved, peaking with record prices in 2007. And with a sky-rocketing rice price in 2008 a number of farmers grew a dry-season rice crop, primarily for sale on the lucrative national rice market.

Many of these new cash crops are now grown under contract farming arrangements. This is a very important transformation in Ban Tiam's local economy. Since the early 2000s, agricultural companies based in Chiang Mai have been visiting the local area, keen to secure farmers who can supply an increasingly buoyant national and international agricultural commodity market. In Ban Tiam, the companies provide the basic agricultural inputs (seedlings and agro-chemicals) and purchase the crops at guaranteed prices (after the input costs have been deducted). Initially, most of the companies used formal written contracts. These contracts take the form of a legalistic agreement between the 'seller' (the farmer) and the 'buyer' (the company). The farmer agrees to plant a specified crop on a specified area and to sell it to the company. Contracts may include provisions about the timing of the planting and harvesting of the crop, and the timing and rates of application of agrochemicals. The company agrees to purchase the crop – often with strictly enforced quality provisions – at an agreed price and within a defined period. The contract also sets out the cost of the inputs to be provided by the company and specifies that this cost will be deducted from the contract payment for the produce. These written contracts provide a formal institutional underpinning for the relationship between company and farmer. However, in Ban Tiam, relations between the companies and farmers quickly moved to a more socially legible footing and contracts soon gave way to informal verbal agreements. When I asked about this, farmers indicated to me that contracts soon become unnecessary as they and the company now 'understood each other' or had achieved a degree of 'solidarity'. They also said that the detailed specification of techniques was unnecessary as they were now completely familiar with the production schedules.

Farmers regularly state that they became interested in contract farming because they do not have to invest their own capital. By contrast, the independent production of garlic, which is a very high cost crop, requires the investment of considerable capital which is usually borrowed. If yields are good these costs are

readily covered and loans can be repaid, but declining yields in the early 2000s left many farmers with heavy debts. In this context of local indebtedness, the fact that contracting companies meet the input costs is a very strong incentive:

We are growing for the companies because at least they are willing to invest the capital, we don't have to hurt ourselves with debt, we don't have to get stressed or tired. Investing labour is not as stressful as investing money.

If the crop fails the loss is borne by the company. Of course, crop failure is still regarded as something of a disaster, but farmers regularly state that their only loss is the time they have invested in the crop and that their debt situation is not worsened. Farmers also acknowledge, not without some resentment, that the input prices charged by the company are often somewhat higher than market rates but the fact that the company is bearing the risk of investment is generally regarded as outweighing this disadvantage.

One of Ban Tiam's farmers provided an eloquent summary of the recent transformations that have occurred in the village's agricultural sector:

The companies have been coming for a long time but people were not interested because people just wanted to grow garlic. People only really became interested in the past few years. The first person to grow peas for a company was the headman. The first year, he grew 15 *rai* and made about 200,000 baht. The second year he could not rent so much land so he grew a lot less. This year I tried out less than one *rai* and I made 6,000 baht from just that little bit. The company is good, the inputs just arrive – seeds, fertiliser and chemicals. If it is not Saturday or Sunday you can just ring up the broker and the fertiliser and chemicals just come. And the extension officers come and check on what we are doing and give us advice if we need to change anything. And if the crop fails there is no cost and no problem. The company does not want us to invest our own money because they are afraid we will sell to other companies. There are several of them that want to buy our produce. New Asia Food has a quota of about 500 *rai* for the whole district. So why not grow for them? If you grow your own crops you have to go and borrow from the cooperative and if the crop fails you are in debt and the interest just mounts up and up and up. And you get more and more into debt. But there is no problem with the company. All you lose if it fails is your labour.

These comments reflect the pragmatism and adaptability that farmers bring to their agricultural decisions. Of course, contract farming has its downsides. Farmers complain bitterly about companies that make late payments for produce or who reduce the purchase price by downgrading the crop (Walker 2009). But, the broad consensus in Ban Tiam is that the advent of contract farming has introduced a wider range of agricultural alternatives into the village.

The range of alternatives has been enhanced by a revival in the yields and price of garlic and, most recently, the opportunity to produce a lucrative cash crop of dry-season rice.⁸ This is a local economic system based on the active exploration of agricultural options from outside the village. Adoption of new crops is accompanied by careful observation and vigorous discussion of the numerous experiments that are going on at the margin. Each year, around 10 or 20 percent of the dry-season paddy fields are cultivated with an array of minor crops, some under contract and some independently. Although these plots are of minor importance in terms of the income they generate, they are the sites of experimentation where agricultural alternatives are actively tested and evaluated. In times of economic and environmental uncertainty, livelihood security and improvement is not sought through consolidating a foundation in subsistence-oriented sufficiency but through weighing up the costs and benefits of external economic connections.

NON-AGRICULTURAL ENTERPRISE AND GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT

It is worth emphasizing the point that about 43 percent of Ban Tiam's households are not engaged in independent farming. A good number of these derive income from working as agricultural wage labourers, primarily in the cash-crop sector. But employment outside the agricultural sector is also very important in the local economy. In a livelihood survey I undertook in 2003, 28 percent of households indicated that non-agricultural employment was their most important source of income. An additional 8 percent were supported by shopkeeping. Local handicrafts and small-scale local industry supported about 3 percent of households. In brief, this survey indicated that for around 40 percent of the village, non-agricultural employment or enterprise is the most important source of income.

The data collected in 2003 were broadly corroborated by a 2006 survey. This latter survey sought to disaggregate the sources of wage income in more detail. About a third of those surveyed nominated agricultural labour as their most important source of wages. The second most important was government employment with 27 percent. The importance of this government sector was underlined by the additional 9 percent who nominated 'community projects', most of which are heavily dependent on direct government grants, as their most important source of wages. Other important sources were local business activity

⁸ The garlic price fell again in 2008 (Walker 2008a). For details on growing dry-season rice see Walker (2008b).

(18 percent) and non-agricultural wage labour (10 percent). Overall, 61 percent of households surveyed said that they obtained more income from wages than they did from cash crops. It is a mistake to assume that someone living in a rural village necessarily has a livelihood that is focused on agriculture.

Construction is an important sector in which Ban Tiam residents gain business income and wage-labour employment. In local perceptions, construction is one of the key markers of development. Over the past few years, Ban Tiam has witnessed an array of construction projects: the paving of village roads; a handicrafts centre (now used to house the community shop); a large concrete pavilion for the conduct of village rituals; improvements to the temple, including an elaborate bell tower; a new water supply system; a new irrigation weir; two bridges; a community rice mill; a village meeting hall; and several large private houses. A similar array of projects is evident in the surrounding villages. These various construction projects are mainly funded by government grants, donations from sponsors living outside the village and private investment in housing, which is usually a result of lucrative salaried employment. The local municipal council alone allocates 800,000 baht per year to the village for various projects. The most direct beneficiaries of these construction projects are the two local contractors who are resident in the village. One is a highly successful businessman who has won a steady supply of construction work from the local administration, no doubt linked to the fact that his father-in-law is the local mayor. Another contractor focuses on the design and construction of private residences both within Ban Tiam and in neighbouring villages. There is also another wealthy contractor in the district who has close links with Ban Tiam, having acquired significant land holdings there. Each of these contractors employs Ban Tiam residents to work on their various construction projects. Construction work usually pays considerably more than casual wage labour in the agricultural sector, especially for those undertaking skilled activities, such as carpentry or bricklaying.

Along with their financial contribution to local construction projects, government agencies also provide direct employment in various ways. First, there are those who hold official and salaried positions. Most prominent is the mayor and deputy mayor of the local municipal council, both of whom are resident in Ban Tiam. Several other residents also hold professional positions with the district or provincial administration. Others hold salaried positions in government departments, particularly the forestry department and the national park administration or in government-run services such as the district hospital or the primary and secondary schools. Less skilled employment is also available in local agricultural development projects – especially the nearby Royal

Project development centre – and in various environmental projects aimed at national park management and watershed rehabilitation. Government agencies also support an array of community projects that provide various forms of employment and income.

There is also an active commercial sector within Ban Tiam. There are seven shops; two small restaurants; two small petrol stations; several crop traders and several stall-holders in the nearby district market. The shops sell a wide array of basic consumer durables and some locally produced fresh vegetables. Much of their custom is from Ban Tiam, but some of the shops have an active trade with residents of an upland village that is located in the national park about ten kilometres to the east. Shops and restaurants in the nearby district centre also employ a number of Ban Tiam residents. Within Ban Tiam there are several small-scale enterprises. These include one household producing fried bananas; another producing steamed bamboo shoots; and several producing furniture and other forms of woodwork. There is an active underground trade in illegally cut timber from the nearby national park. A number of Ban Tiam residents are involved in felling trees, milling the timber and selling the high value planks to builders and furniture producers. Judging the economic significance of the illegal timber trade is not easy, but I strongly suspect that it makes an important financial contribution to about five or ten households within the village. A woodcarving project, established partly with a donation I made to the village, was rumoured to be a scheme for ‘laundering’ illegally cut timber – large and crudely carved elephants were sold to a dealer in Chiang Mai who then cut them up to produce high-cost teak furniture!

CONCLUSION: SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY AND ‘SUFFICIENCY DEMOCRACY’

The image of rural economy which underlies the sufficiency economy philosophy is one in which external economic connections are, at best, peripheral and, at worst, disruptive. It is an image of rural livelihood in which subsistence-oriented agriculture is seen as potentially providing a firm foundation for household livelihood and in which local subsistence needs are – or should be – the primary driver of economic activity.

In this chapter I have painted a rather different picture of rural economy. In Ban Tiam, subsistence agriculture is only one component of a diverse economy. In very broad terms, Ban Tiam produces enough rice to live on, but for many residents access to rice is mediated by labour and market relations. This is a product of both resource constraint – many residents do not own land – and of

the presence of other livelihood alternatives: some residents would prefer to buy rice from business or wage income than grow it themselves. It is also important to remember that Ban Tiam's general rice sufficiency has been achieved as a result of substantial out-migration, the introduction of high-yielding varieties of rice, the use of agro-chemicals and government investment in irrigation infrastructure. So, even in the sector that lies closest to the sufficiency economy vision the importance of external economic input is evident. And this subsistence sector is only one small part of a diverse economy. Most local economic activity involves an even more active engagement with the modern market and the bureaucracy. Ban Tiam has an active cash cropping sector that is an important source of income for about 60 percent of the population, both as direct cultivators and as wage labourers. This sector has been buffeted by environmental and economic uncertainty but farmers have responded by restructuring their connections with the external agro-industrial sector. There is also a substantial proportion of the local population – about 40 percent – that derive their primary income from non-agricultural sectors, especially from various forms of government employment. This sector is likely to be larger than my survey data suggest given the difficulties involved in documenting remittance flows from household members scattered throughout Thailand and, in some cases, overseas.

What are the implications of these findings for rural development policy? Most importantly, the notion that subsistence-oriented agriculture can act as a foundation for rural livelihoods – and that this foundation should be firmly established before moving on to later stages of development – fails to engage with the diversity of local livelihood strategies. In Ban Tiam the subsistence agricultural sector can be seen, in a very general sense, as providing a basis for local sufficiency in rice, provided the village continues to export its population. But, making this quite modest part of the local economy a primary focus for rural development would be to condemn many rural households to a sector of the economy in which the potential for livelihood transformation is very constrained and would exclude the substantial percentage of households that are now disengaged from the agricultural sector. A more realistic development standpoint would be to see the foundation for local livelihood as lying in a diverse and spatially dispersed package of agricultural and non-agricultural pursuits. Local economic resilience lies in diversity, not in a narrow focus on subsistence production and locally-oriented exchange. Strengthening this diverse economic foundation involves a multi-faceted package of agricultural extension, enterprise development, infrastructure investment and, probably most importantly, high quality primary and secondary education. Of course, there is considerable

potential for improving agricultural productivity and in enhancing subsistence security, especially for these most vulnerable farmers who cultivate subsistence crops on marginal lands. But enhancing local livelihoods will necessarily involve both supporting the production of higher value commercial crops and supporting the ongoing movement of household labour and resources into non-agricultural pursuits.

It is legitimate to ask to what extent the situation in Ban Tiam is representative of other villages in Thailand. Clearly, there is enormous local diversity, and one of my objectives in writing this chapter is to encourage other researchers to look critically at the applicability of the sufficiency economy philosophy in local contexts. But it is important to recognize that there has already been valuable work done in Thailand on documenting the extent to which rural livelihoods can no longer be assumed be to purely, or even substantially, agricultural livelihoods.⁹ One recent study demonstrates that, even in some of Thailand's most remote villages, it is only the poorest and most marginal farmers who depend primarily on subsistence agriculture – a livelihood option that regularly fails to meet the basic test of food security (Samata 2008). In these villages those who have been able to create more secure household economies have done so through diversification into cash cropping and, in particular, off-farm employment. On a much broader scale it is evident that the dramatic decline in agriculture as a share of Thailand's GDP is not just an urban phenomenon but has ramifications throughout the country's rural districts. According to Thailand's national agriculture survey, the number of farming households who derived all of their income from agriculture declined precipitously from 46 percent in 1993 to only 21 percent in 2003 (National Statistics Office n.d.: Table 7). These rural households are not making a simplistic transformation from agrarian to post-agrarian but are developing economically diversified and spatially dispersed livelihood strategies in which agricultural and non-agricultural pursuits are often intertwined (Wilson and Rigg 2003).

In examining the applicability of the sufficiency economy philosophy in local contexts it would also be valuable to look closely at some of the prominent rural development projects that carry its imprimatur. The Royal Project Foundation, with its 37 development stations scattered throughout northern Thailand, is often cited as demonstrating that the sufficiency economy philosophy is based on decades of grass-roots development practice (Chanida and Bamford 2007; UNDP 2007: 26–27, 35). The problem is that the Royal Project's esteemed status has

9 These include the work of Rigg and Sakunee (2001); Rigg et al. (2004); Ritchie (1996a; 1996b); Singhanetra-Renard (1999); and Mills (1999).

prevented any frank evaluation of its methods or its impacts. Nevertheless, there are obvious questions about the extent to which the Royal Project itself operates according to sufficiency economy principles. Royal Project development centres rely on costly investment in infrastructure (roads, dams, terraces, greenhouses and crop-processing facilities) and their establishment sometimes involves the appropriation of land, water or forest resources from local farmers. Many of their activities involve the coordination of generous resource inputs from other government agencies keen to attract some of the charisma of royal initiative: 'This tends to be high-budget, long term intervention that is the natural domain of governments' (Highland Research and Development Institute 2007: 163). And many of the crops they promote are high-value vegetable and fruit crops targeted at Thailand's urban markets rather than at local consumption. In Ban Tiam and other villages, I have heard farmers complain that the Royal Project tends to target farmers not on the basis of need but on the likelihood of their success in cultivating high-cost and labour-intensive crops. Farmers who have grown crops for the Royal Project also complain bitterly about the regular rejection of crops that – usually on aesthetic grounds – do not pass the strict grading tests required for sale in increasingly discerning urban markets. In Ban Tiam, local sufficiency seems to be enhanced primarily by the wage labour payments that several villagers receive for their work at the nearby Royal Project development station. All in all, there are indications that the Royal Project operates on the basis of substantial government subsidy and with a strong orientation to external markets in high-quality and high-value commodities. There is little evidence that a foundation in local sufficiency preceded this state-backed entrepreneurialism.

The mismatch between sufficiency economy rhetoric and local economic practice suggests that the current preoccupation with sufficiency economy may not really reflect a concern with rural development at all. It is important to remember that one of the key ideological projects of the regime in post-coup Thailand was to argue that the Thaksin government's electoral mandate was illegitimate because it had been 'bought' from an unsophisticated and easily manipulated electorate (Walker 2008c). The military overthrow of an elected government was justified on the basis that the Thai electorate, and especially the rural electorate, was in no position to make a rational decision about Thaksin's controversial policies and administration. Rural voters, we were consistently told, are vulnerable to the lure of vote buying and the political pressures of local strongmen. What is required, they argued, is a political system in which electoral power is tempered by the guiding hand of the 'good men' in the judiciary and the bureaucracy.

Following the coup of September 2006, the military government wasted little time in mobilizing the sufficiency economy philosophy to serve this ideological project. In a series of statements the coup leader, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin and his appointed prime minister, Surayud Chulanont, argued that the key problems with Thai political life was a lack of morality which arose, in large part, from a preoccupation with economic growth in local and national development.¹⁰ Thaksin's 'populist' economic programmes were specifically targeted as undermining the morality of local economic and political systems. In a speech launching the sufficiency economy policy, Surayud condemned the corruption of local development schemes which he compared to a 'perfectly good piece of bamboo that ended up being used as a marijuana bong' (Government of Thailand 2006a). Surayud's aim was to link economic populism and political corruption under the Thaksin government. Local power-brokers, he argued, could build up political war-chests by diverting funds from economic development schemes, creating a dishonest cycle between the economic and political spheres. The solution lay in reintroducing balance and accountability via a moral turn towards sufficiency. In General Sonthi's more militaristic vision, there was a 'war for the people' going on, and the sufficiency economy philosophy had to be used by the army to win the population back from the lure of populism and 'Thaksinomics' (Sonthi 2007; Chang Noi 2007). He saw the army as playing a direct role in educating people about sufficiency economy in order to strengthen their loyalty to the king and to challenge the power that Thaksin, and his old 'communist' allies, had captured via the ballot box.

In declaring their commitment to sufficiency economy neither Surayud nor Sonthi were proposing any serious economic reform of Thailand's market economy. Nor did they appear to be committed to administrative sufficiency, granting the military an extraordinary 60 percent increase in its budget (Pavin 2007).¹¹ In fact, the primary objective of the sufficiency economy campaign was to publicly construct a moral connection between royal virtue, the sufficiency economy philosophy and the new political regime in which electoral power was to be constrained. Sufficiency economy became the moral underpinning of 'sufficiency democracy' – a system in which elite morality would triumph over

10 See, for example, Government of Thailand (2006a; 2006b; 2006c); Office of the Royal Development Projects Board (2008); Nationchannel (2006); Chang Noi (2007); and Sonthi (2007).

11 There was also a widespread feeling that the government leaders did not observe the sufficiency economy philosophy in their personal lives (Anonymous 2007).

populism and money politics.¹² The clear message of the sufficiency economy philosophy was that the appropriate role for the rural population lay in localized and modest pursuits. Not only were rural people to be shielded (or excluded) from full and active participation in the national economy but their full and active participation in electoral democracy was delegitimized and the power of their elected representatives was constrained. Underlying the sufficiency economy approach was the message that when rural people become involved in national economic networks they readily breach the moral regulations of reasonableness, moderation and immunity. Their journeys to the city are not attempts to improve their livelihoods but morally dubious pursuits of extravagance. In the same way, votes cast for Thaksin did not reflect local political judgement but were the readily-mobilized results of financial inducement. In this elite vision of electoral participation the problem lay in money politics – the demon of greed. The solution lay in the royally bestowed tree of local sufficiency.

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12 One of the first uses of the term 'sufficiency democracy' (*prachathipatai phor phiang*) in public debate in Thailand was in an article in December 2006 when one of the election commissioners declared that he wanted to extend the government's sufficiency economy philosophy into the electoral arena (Somchai 2006).

nayok rattamontri nai okat morp nayobai reuang 'setthakit phor phiang' hai kae tua thaen phu nam chum chon thua prathet na deuk santi maitri thamniap rattaban wan thi 24 tulakhom 2549 wela 16.00 [Speech of General Surayud Chulanont, the Prime Minister, on the occasion of policy delivery on 'sufficiency economy' to representatives of local leaders from the whole country in the Santimaitri Building, Government House, 24 October 2006 at 16:00hrs] (<http://media.thaigov.go.th/pageconfig/viewcontent/viewcontent1.asp?pageid=471&directory=1796&contents=2281>), accessed 5 May 2008.

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- First study in English to examine the Thaksin phenomenon in depth.
- Draws on extensive research by two leading specialists in the field.

The 1997 economic crisis ended two decades of pluralism in Thai politics and helped create the conditions for the landslide election victory in January 2001 of Thaksin Shinawatra, a fabulously wealthy telecommunications magnate often compared with Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi. Prime Minister Thaksin proceeded to exercise an extraordinary degree of personal dominance over the Thai political scene. The emergence of Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai (Thais love Thai) Party transformed Thailand's electoral landscape, rendering previous analyses of Thai politics substantially outdated. This important study examines Thaksin's background, his business activities, the emergence of Thai Rak Thai, his relationship with the military, Thaksin's use of rhetoric through media such as radio, his wider political economy networks, and the future direction of Thai politics. Published before the 2006 coup that deposed Thaksin, this was the first study to analyse and warn of the dangers of repoliticization of the Thai military.

'[A] fascinating and detailed account of new patterns of wealth and power that amount to a "Thaksinisation" of Thailand's political and economic order' (Kevin Hewison, *Bangkok Post*).

Preface and Acknowledgements • 1. Introduction: Who is Thaksin Shinawatra? • 2. Thaksin and the Politics of Telecommunications • 3. Thai Rak Thai: A New Form of Thai Party? • 4. Thaksin and the Repoliticization of the Military • 5. Thaksin's Political Discourse • 6. Thaksin's New Political Economy Networks • Conclusion: The Thaksinization of Thailand and Future of Thai Politics • Bibliography • Index.

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A study of Isan radicalism that again is highly topical

Civil Society and Democratization

Social Movements in Northeast Thailand

Somchai Phatharathananunth

Published 2006, 263 pp.

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- Sophisticated, well-researched and important contribution to Thai political studies.
- Succeeds in revising orthodox understandings of Thailand's democratization by exploring the role and impact of neglected social forces.

The heart of Thailand's Red Shirt movement lies in the country's north-eastern region of Isan. This, too, was where Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party and its successors have won much of their political strength. There is a good reason for this. An important ingredient in the success of the Thaksin government was implementation of populist policies that were of immediate and direct benefit to the poor. Helping formulate and implement these policies were many leftist (also former communist) activists who now saw the best chance of a social revolution via an alliance with the wealthy Thaksin. A significant number of these activists were based in Isan and, prior to Thaksin's 2001 electoral victory, were involved in a then important social movement in Thailand, the Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan (SSFAI). This study investigates the SSFAI and, in so doing, examines the role of civil society in the process of democratization. This first major work on the SSFAI demonstrates how civil society organizations in the form of social movements contribute to the democratization process in the key areas of citizenship rights. An anonymous reviewer of this work rated it a 'sophisticated, well-researched and extremely important contribution to Thai political studies'.

1. Introduction: Civil Society and the Struggle for the Right to Have Rights • 2. Political Radicalism in Isan • 3. Origin and the Transitional Period of the Small-Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan • 4. The Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan during the Radical Period (1993–1995) • 5. Conflicts, Splits and Experimentation with a New Strategy • 6. The SSFAI after the Failure of the Compromise Strategy • 7. From Regional to National Organization • 8. Conclusion • Bibliography • Index

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Offers a deeper understanding of social change in Isan

Childbirth and Tradition in Northeast Thailand

Forty Years of Development and Cultural Change

Anders Poulsen

Published 2007, 292 pp., richly illustrated
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- A unique longitudinal study spanning some 40 years of childbirth practices, cultural change and social development in Isan (northeast Thailand).
- Publishes (and acts to preserve) very rare information on precious customs and rites related to pregnancy and childbirth in northeast Thailand.
- Considers why some traditions maintain their vitality while others fade away.

The roots of social change in Isan are more than political. This beautifully illustrated volume offers a rare study of Isan–Thai customs and belief associated with pregnancy and birth and how they – and wider Isan society – have changed over almost half a century. Here, Anders Poulsen discusses the function of various birth rites while giving an unmatched description of all traditions specifically connected to pregnancy and birth. He includes an interesting description of the tradition of confinement by fire (*yuu-fai*) and documents that it is still widely practiced, contrary to what has been reported. He also puts forward a theory of why some traditions maintain their importance while others fade away. The findings of this study are supported by the transcription in Isan (and translated into English) of the ritual texts that are used in these rites. Much material used in the preparation of this book is now held by the Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre.

Foreword (Richard A. Engelhardt, Unesco) • Preface • Editor's Introduction • Part 1: Customs of Pregnancy and Birth – Then and Now • 1. Village Life and Economy in Isan 1961–2005 • 2. Faith, Belief, and Birth • 3. Ritual Practice Surveyed, 1961–2005 • 4. Pregnancy and Birth Surveyed, 1961–2005 • 5. The Confinement – *Yuu Fai* • 6. The Young Baby • Part 2: The Ritual Texts • Part 3: Appendices • Bibliography • Index

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~ also of interest ~

Identifies an important but neglected aspect of Thai politics

Women and Politics in Thailand

Edited by Kazuki Iwanaga

Published 2008, 300 pp., illustrated
NIAS Women and Politics in Asia series, no. 1
Hardback ISBN 978 87 91114 34 2
Paperback ISBN 978 87 91114 35 9

- The first study in English to analyse in detail the position of women in Thai politics
- Subjects various dimensions of women and politics in Thailand to both theoretical and empirical scrutiny
- Draws together previously fragmented research in this field

Nor are Thai politics simply a matter of Red Shirts versus Yellow Shirts. This edited volume, including contributions from some of the leading scholars in the field, addresses the challenges, obstacles and opportunities for increased women's political representation in Thailand. Will Thai politics be different with an increase in the number of women politicians? What are the possibilities for Thai women to take proactive initiatives that aim to transform Thai politics into being more gender aware and equal? In seeking to address these and related issues, the analysis brings together a complex interplay of factors, such as traditional Thai views of gender and politics; the national and local political context after promulgation of a new Thai constitution in 1997; and recent experiences of selected women politicians in the legislative and executive branches of Thai government.

Preface • Abbreviations and Acronyms • Notes on the Contributors • 1. Introduction: Women's Political Representation from an International Perspective (Kazuki Iwanaga) • 2. Women in Politics and Women and Politics: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of the Thai Context (Juree Vichit-Vadakan) • 3. NGO Advocacy for Women in Politics in Thailand (Suteera Vichitranonda and Maytinee Bhongse) • 4. Prohibited Spaces: Barriers and Strategies in Women's NGO Work in Isaan, North-East Thailand (Cambria G. Hamburg) • 5. A Glimpse of Women Leaders in Thai Local Politics (Juree Vichit-Vadakan) • 6. Women as Parliamentarians (Kazuki Iwanaga) • 7. Women's Equal Rights and Participation in the Thai Bureaucracy (Supin Kachacupt) • 8. Political Participation of Thai Middle-Class Women (Tongchai Wongchaisuwan and Amporn W. Tamronglak) • 9. My Story as a Woman in Thai Politics (Supatra Masdit) • Index

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Examines the role of the monarchy in Thai national identity

Democracy and National Identity in Thailand

Michael Kelly Connors

Published 2007, 312 pages

NIAS Studies in Contemporary Asian History, 7

Paperback ISBN 978 87 7694 002 7

- Fascinating discussion of how debates about democracy and national identity have evolved in Thailand since the 1960s.
- A 'must' for all courses on Southeast Asia, the book also offers valuable insights for courses dealing with democratization.

Focusing on state- and civil society-centred democratic projects, this widely praised study uses original Thai language sources to trace how the Thai state developed a democratic ideology that meshed with idealized notions of Thai identity, focusing on the monarchy.

'A significant contribution to Thai political studies ... a major scholarly achievement. Connors has clearly mastered the fundamental literature on the politics and political thought in modern Thailand and lays out the result with admirable vigour and clarity.' (Robert H. Taylor, SOAS)

'A wonderfully constructed and thought-provoking account ... It reflects a deep engagement with Thai language material and, through the careful use of political and social theory, weaves this material into a coherent narrative of the long-term development of democratic ideology ... this book is bound to prompt ongoing debate and discussion.' (Andrew Walker, Australian National University)

Introduction: Talking democracy • Making democracy mean something • Before the doctrine: from constitutional democracy to Thai-style democracy • Developmental democracy: villages, insurgency and security • Delayed liberalism, the general will: the doctrine entrenched • Citizen King: embodying Thainess • New times, new constitution • Liberalism, civil society and new projects of subjection • Rethinking the nation in times of crisis: democracy, civic engagement and community • From abstract citizen to concrete struggle • Conclusion The lash of civic virtue • Bibliography • Index.

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