4 The monarchy and democratisation

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[Since King Bhumibol Adulyadej came into world media focus, aspects of his life and thought have remained shielded by the centuries-old aura of reverence and dignity surrounding Thai kingship, as well as contemporary legal constraints. Probably nothing in Thailand can be as sensitive a subject as the monarchy, and some... have exercised a measure of self-censorship when writing about it.]

(Grey 1988: 6)

Any statement which touches upon the conduct of the King is liable to be interpreted as lèse majesté. In addition, a statement which is not strictly lèse majesté may nonetheless be regarded as disrespectful.

(advice from a leading Thai scholar)

The contemporary monarchy has staged a remarkable political comeback. In 1932 the absolute monarchy was overthrown and the institution stripped of its most significant powers. It is now an important and, arguably, a central institution and political actor. This return to prominence is largely due to the efforts of the incumbent monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej. This King has the ability to intervene in the nation's political affairs in a manner which has altered the course of events considerably. To consider the monarchy’s political role will be insulting to some Thais. The dilemmas faced by the political scientist who examines the position and role of the monarchy are clear from the above comments. However, to not consider this role is to both miss an important element of modern Thai history and analyse political life with one of the major institutions absent. For, as Monratchawongse Tongnoi Tongyai (1990: 154), the King's Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs, explains, 'we Thai... feel that any study or attempt to understand our country would not be complete... unless you take the role of the monarchy... into consideration'. Unfortunately, this is not a call for critical academic analysis. Rather, it is part of a statement which suggests that the monarchy is the key to understanding Thailand, and that any observation of the monarchy should essentially be uncritical. Tongnoi (ibid.: 158) states that 'anti-monarchists, the sceptical or the plain jealous' should know that the position of the monarchy is one of the 'facts of life', and 'one has to accept it'.

Most Thai academics are unwilling to comment on the monarchy due to lèse majesté laws or because of a genuine belief that the monarchy is above criticism (Streckfuss 1993). Foreign academics, however, none are unlikely to be subject to the lèse majesté law, but there remain four reasons for not scrutinising the monarchy. First, like their Thai colleagues, many appear to believe that the monarchy is above criticism. For example, Copeland (1993) has indicated that foreign academics have chosen to neglect critical material on the current dynasty (see, as examples, Vella 1978; Batson 1984). Second, there is a fear of being banned from Thailand if comments on the monarchy are construed as criticism. While few, if any, foreign academics have been banned, journalists have, and this has led to self-censorship. Third, there is an unwillingness to offend or endanger Thai colleagues who may be held responsible, by association, for any critical comments. And, fourth, it is extremely difficult to find a publisher for anything that might be critical of the monarchy, as major international publishers are aware that the government can act to reduce their sales in Thailand. In addition, should research be conducted, a major problem is that the present monarch's reign has been so long - 50 years in 1996 - that he has been responsible for defining the modern monarchy. This means that any critical comments can be interpreted as sleights against the present King.

However, an understanding of modern Thailand’s politics and the future of democratisation must consider the position of the monarchy. This is not to suggest a ‘great person’ theory of politics or history. Rather, it is to indicate that an important political institution has been ignored, and that it should be the subject of academic analysis. While there have been regular anonymous attacks on the royal family in recent years (see, for example, a brief report in the Bangkok Post (BP) 9 December 1987), these will not be examined here. Instead, attention will be on the monarchy as an institution and the way this institution has been shaped and changed as constitutional political forms have developed. This chapter begins with a brief explanation of common perspectives on the monarchy. This is followed by a discussion of the political philosophy of the present King and some of his closest advisers. The emphasis is on their definition of the constitutional monarchy and its role in democratisation.

THE ‘STANDARD TOTAL VIEW’ OF THE MONARCHY

This section briefly summarises the ‘standard total view’ of the monarchy. The present King is seen to be a truly great man. One popular account states: 'His Majesty... is a man of many versatile interests and abilities which have brought him international acclaim and recognition together with the pride and devotion of his own people' (Rosenthal 1988: 9). Some
go further, with Nation Publishing (1988: 11) stating that the King has ‘expertise in virtually all fields of human endeavour’. The adoration for and popularity of King Bhumibol has become an important element of the monarchy’s public image. This image is ‘protected by jealous courtiers against comment that most monarchies might shrug off’ (Kulick and Wilson 1992: 60–1). Indeed, the penalties for lèse majesté have been increased in recent years, and few who are charged escape penalty (Streckfuss 1993). Nevertheless, the popularity of this King is seen to be due to his own hard work and his occupation of the throne at the end of a long line of other multi-talented monarchs (see Van Praagh 1989: 17–21).

Indeed, the version of history promoting this view draws a direct link between the present-day monarchy and thirteenth-century Sukhothai. For example, Tongnoi (1990: 156) states that Thailand has ‘continuously’ had a king on the throne since the earliest historical times (Office of His Majesty’s Principal Private Secretary [OPPS] 1987: 7–8). To this is added the assertion that Thailand’s avoidance of direct colonialism was due to the talents of ‘good’ kings (ibid.: 7). Good kings are divine, even magical, and this is supported by the monarch’s religious role, and by the King’s sponsorship of Buddhism (see Kukrit 1988: 4–5; OPPS, 1987: 51). Well-known royalist and adviser to the King, Thanin Kraivixen (cited in Heiecke 1977: 31) notes that Thai kings are a mixture of father figure and God-king. 5 Above all, the King must be virtuous, upholding the ten virtues of the good Buddhist monarch (Phaya 6 Srivisarn 1954). 7 As an official memoir (OPPS 1987: 7) explains, kings rose and fell ‘mainly through how righteously and . . . well they ruled for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people’.

This leads to the observation that the monarchy is ‘natural’, and that the country is deeply monarchical (Blofeld 1960: 17). Some argue that human nature leads people to want the ‘best’ person as their leader (Poon 1977: a), and that the King has always filled this role. Further, this natural leadership has survived and prospered because it has always been ‘democratic’. King Bhumibol considers himself an ‘elected king’, arguing that if the people are unhappy, they ‘can throw me out’ (cited in Grey 1988: 54). He also sees Sukhothai as the model, stating: ‘I call that [Sukhothai] democracy, . . . that anybody can have justice, and that is seven hundred years ago, and all through history, we have this same sense of justice and liberty’ (King Bhumibol [KB] 1974: 646).

In line with this, the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy is nowadays portrayed, not as a defeat for the monarchy, which it clearly was, but as part of an historical process of democratisation fostered by the Chakri dynasty. King Prajadhipok is credited with having ‘presided over Thailand’s historical transformation from absolute to constitutional monarchy’ (Office of the Prime Minister [OPM] 1979: 126). 8 Indeed, Tongnoi (1990: 156) assures readers that the monarchy’s strong connection to the common people was not lessened by the events of 1932 (OPM 1979: 117). The present King is seen as the logical successor of this line, providing the stability required to steer Thailand along its path to constitutional democracy (see Grey 1988: 171). This role is seen to be greatly enhanced by the King’s supposed egalitarianism and his direct links to the people (Neher 1985: 143–5).

King Bhumibol is portrayed as a true constitutional monarch and as a force for democratisation. Tongnoi (1983: 19) explains that, because of its popular base going back hundreds of years, the ‘Thai Monarchy takes democracy like fish to water’, 10 and Paul (in Grey 1988: 134) describes the King as the ‘architect of . . . his country’s . . . rendezvous with democracy’. It is usually added that this involvement is constitutionally correct, being ‘cautious’ and avoiding ‘excessive palace involvement in politics’ (FEER 10 December 1987). Surin explains this common perspective further, also indicating the political centrality of the monarchy:

Although the King does not have any political or administrative power under the system of constitutional monarchy, his role in times of political crises has been crucial. The Thai view the King as sacred and as a spiritual leader who serves as a symbol of unity . . . Because of this, the monarch remains above all conflicting political groups. Support of the monarchy remains an indispensable source of political legitimacy. A political leader or regime, even a popularly elected government, would not be truly legitimized without the King’s blessing.

(Surin 1992: 334)

In other words, the monarchy is seen as crucial to political stability (see also Kukrit 1988: 4; OPM 1979: 123), and the paramount institution of the nation, country and people. The King is often viewed as the nation personified. For example, the King’s memoir states:

The King and People become one. The Throne and the Nation become one, and a profound meaning is thus given to the Throne. It becomes the personification of Thai nationhood, the symbol of the Nation’s unity and independence, the invariable constant above the inconsistencies of politics.

(OPPS 1987: 52)

The current Crown Prince has used similar words in describing the role of the monarchy (in Grey 1988: 174).

The monarchy is increasingly seen as the ‘sole source of unity and strength’ in the nation (OPPS 1987: 11), a role reinforced by the identification of this monarchy as a working institution, with the royal family’s regular trips to ‘meet the people’ being cited in almost all reports and assessments. 11 The monarchy is thus seen as having played a crucial role, being both a dynamic and modernising institution and a force for stability and tradition. As Wright (1991: 59–60) summarises it, ‘the King is a force that spiritually binds the Thais together as a nation and links their heritage
to the future. The supreme national symbol, his prestige attaches to him the aura of legitimacy.

The linking of the traditional and modern is personified in the royal family. The King carries considerable traditional baggage, and the symbols and pageantry of the past have long been created and recreated. Princess Sirindhorn is the official patron of cultural heritage, Princess Chulabhorn is promoted as a leading scientist, while the Crown Prince, who attended Australia's military academy, represents Thailand's martial tradition. The Queen is both a symbol of tradition and a modern environmentalist. All in all, a perfect family for modern Thailand (see Kinnaree April 1989, January 1993; KB 1990: 11–7; Chang 1976).

This total standard view is powerful, emotive and convincing, perhaps even for the King himself. Asked about his faults, he acknowledged some:

Everybody has faults. That is one thing I see in the comics (I read comics, Superman and all that) where the people want to always find faults. Take Superman, he is as fallible as all superheroes. . . . A leader should not be fallible. He should be a superhero. But as he becomes a leader . . . there are always people who want him or her to be fallible.

(Grey 1988: 135)

While the monarchy has indeed been promoted as something greater than human, it is also seen as central to the future development of democratic institutions. This view has been enthusiastically and uncritically adopted—and heavily promoted—by foreign observers, with the US press having been especially powerful (ibid.: 7). An influential Australian journalist has summarised the common perspective:

If there was a contest among royal families of the world to determine which is the best, the most exemplary in their private conduct, the most beloved by their people, the most judicious and restrained in their political activities, the most effectively concerned for their people's welfare, the Thai royal family would win hands down. . . . If they wrote textbooks on how to be a monarch in a constitutional democracy, this [king] would be its central chapter.

(Sheridan 1992: 11)

The total standard view is indeed powerful in its imagery, both in terms of the hold it appears to have gained on commentators and in the legal sanctions it applies to those who challenge it (see Streekfuss 1996).

Democratic politics in Thailand is usually defined as having to do with parliamentary representation, while the position and powers of the monarchy are seen as constitutional. It is now appropriate to turn to the relationship between the total standard view of the monarchy and its constitutional and democratic position, as articulated by the current monarch, his family and senior officials.

THE CONTEMPORARY MONARCHY AND DEMOCRATISATION

The total standard view portrays the present King as a popular, egalitarian, 'elected' and constitutionally correct monarch, vitally interested in the democratic transition, and as the architect of democratic development, while being cautious and avoiding excessive palace political involvement. The current monarch and his family have an important stake in the development of the political system and the manner in which the position of the monarchy has, and will be, defined will be critical to the path of democratisation.

That the present King, his family and advisers should have attempted to shape both the institution of the monarchy and the course of political development is unremarkable. What is interesting is that, after a period where the institution was relatively unimportant (1932–57) and where royalists were often a conspiratorial opposition, the monarchy is now seen as the most important national institution and, arguably, the most politically significant. In this section the monarchy's political philosophy and its definition of democracy will be examined.

Conservatism and the monarchy

Coming to the throne following his brother's tragic and still unexplained death in 1947, the present King inherited a position which had little political power or influence. Personally, King Bhumibol did not have much involvement with Thailand until after his coronation in 1950. While he and his family were able to bargain some concessions for royalist politicians, the King himself was described as 'unsmiling', 'formal', 'shy' and 'aloof from his people' (Grey 1988: 40), and there was certainly no love lost between the anti-royalist Prime Minister Phibun and the royal family (Monratcahawong Seni Pramoj, cited in van Praag 1989: 100–5). It was only after General Sarit Thanarat's twin coups of 1957–58, overthrowing the constitution and parliament and establishing a highly authoritarian regime, that the monarchy's position was revived and the present King given a higher profile. His interest in politics was encouraged by Sarit.

Darling (1960: 360) believed that the King would be a liberal and democratic monarch with an interest in preserving freedom; however, this optimism was misplaced. As will be shown, the present King's legacy has been to define a conservative monarchy, supporting stability and order, authority and tradition, developmentalism, unity and solidarity, national chauvinism, and national security and anti-communism. Interestingly, there is a remarkable similarity between these positions and those adopted by Sarit to define his regime (see Neher 1974: 40–4). Because of its conservatism, this monarchy has not indicated any fundamental commitment to democratic reform. The monarchy has only been prepared to support reforms which have been congruent with its conservatism and have not
challenged its increasingly pivotal political position (Morell and Chai-Anan 1981: 68).

Conservatism might be considered a natural political position for any monarchy in the modern industrial world (Nairn 1988: 229–64; Schwarz 1986). However, as noted above, this is not a part of the total standard view. The following discussion will emphasise the present King’s conservatism and the impact this has for political activity.

One of the major philosophical elements of conservatism is the opposition to the idea of radical change and a preference for the conservation of values and traditions considered essential to society (O’Sullivan 1976: 9; Viereck 1962: 36). For others, there is a desire to conserve particular social and political institutions (O’Gorman 1986: 2). These elements are well-represented in the monarchy and its relationship to Buddhism (see Tambiah, 1976: 255, 390–2, 501). The King has indicated a strong opposition to revolutionary change, arguing that if all members of society know their roles, then radical change will be unnecessary (Bangkok World 16 March 1970). He has also noted the importance of existing institutions, especially in political life, stating that he opposed the idea that

the destruction of old established things for the sake of bringing about the new would lead to entirely good results, since surely there must be some good in the old-fashioned things, which, according to the theory, must be destroyed.

(KB 1974: 60)

This position was carefully displayed in 1973, when the King praised the right-wing Village Scout movement for safeguarding ‘all that is worthwhile and has helped to sustain our nation’ (ibid.: 75). He has consistently argued for the application of ‘reason’ to creativeness, and has emphasised the need for indigenous solutions to problems, building on national heritage and progress in order to maintain order and ‘national harmony’ (see ibid.: 97–103). Of course, the monarchy is also seen as the institution which is the binding force in society.

Conservatives also emphasise unity and discipline, with the latter being necessary because humans are imperfect and need controls (O’Sullivan 1976: 14–5). Such themes have remained constant in King Bhumibol’s speeches. Following the Sarit coups, he expressed the opinion that unity and harmony were essential, and on returning from one of his overseas trips in 1961, he stated that one of the lessons he had drawn was that countries which were united and disciplined were the most ‘advanced and well-off’ (KB 1974: 8). Following the October 1973 uprising – giving support to the disgraced military – he again took up this question:

One of the important marks of a soldier is discipline. At present, discipline is viewed by some quarters as being virtually meaningless. . . As a matter of fact . . . discipline . . . is highly essential, for it is the major cause why the rules and regulations that exist for the orderliness of men, organization, society or country are not rendered useless.

(KB 1974: 88)

This theme re-emerged repeatedly during the turbulent 1973–76 period, as political activism moved far beyond the established political institutions. The King feared that uncontrolled political activity meant disunity and was damaging the nation and threatening its security. In 1992, when people again took to the streets against the military, the King returned to this theme, saying 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’ (KB 1992a: paragraph 2). He argued that unity could only be maintained through compromise, and urged that ‘Everybody must “know how to treasure Unity”’ (KB 1992b: 1, 12). The King’s view is that unity prevents trouble, and where unity does not exist, subversion and crime will be the result (KB 1974: 64–5, 91; 1992b: 28–30).

In the conservative mind, discipline and unity are closely linked to law and order and authority (Scruton 1986). These themes are common in the King’s speeches over a long period. He has often spoken on the need for law and order to avoid ‘chaos’, and argued that law is the ‘pillar of national existence for the sake of good order, progress and justice for every one’ (KB 1974: 61, 72). Indeed, on the day of the overthrow of the military dictatorship in October 1973, usually considered a turning-point in Thailand’s modern history, the King referred to a ‘day of great sorrow’, criticised the violence of the previous few days, and called for a return to order (cited in Piansri and Peterson 1974: 73). As Morell and Chai-Anan explain, the King’s

fundamental political interests are aligned with stability rather than change, with law and order rather than the political noise of representative processes. Although he has demonstrated his interests in social and economic reforms, his model of change is that of very gradual, incremental modifications.

(Morell and Chai-Anan 1981: 271)

Many have found this position difficult to comprehend. For example, Seni Premo, speaking of the 1976 overthrow of his government, ‘agonised’ over the King’s role in his downfall. He says that he came to understand that the King did not change sides, but was always on the side of ‘law and order’ (cited in Van Praagh 1989: 176). Responding to the turbulence of the 1973–76 period, King Bhumibol (1974: 112) told an audience that harmony and unity would only come about if responsibilities and duties were taken seriously. If not, society would ‘degenerate and become confused and unstable, and possibly collapse altogether’. This fear has caused
him to support the forces of stability – invariably including the military and bureaucracy – rather than change.

Conservative political philosophers place great emphasis on an organic model of society, viewing society as a functioning organism, being far more than the sum of its parts. Political activity is seen to be most efficacious when it is directed towards the growth and development of this complex body, and individuals must be committed to it (O'Gorman 1986: 2). This has been a theme in King Bhumibol's speeches. For example:

A nation is made up of various institutions in the same way as all the organs which make up a live body. Life in a body can endure, because the organs, large or small, function normally. Likewise, a nation can endure, because its various institutions are firm and are fully discharging their respective duties. You must all realize that the nation is the life, the blood and the property of everyone. . . . To uphold and safeguard the nation is the duty . . . of every party. Each and everyone must work together . . . sharing common aims and objectives. Should any group fail in its duty . . . the entire nation may collapse and be destroyed.

(KB 1974: 49)

In this speech, the King stresses that no person is separable from the societal whole, and this is related to the idea of the common good. Especially in times of crisis, the King has been keen to link notions of authority, discipline, duty and allegiance to a seemingly objective national interest or common good (ibid.: 44–5, 58–9, 103). Following demonstrations against the military-backed government in late 1991, the King again stressed the need to resolve political differences by focusing on common aims and in the national interest (BP 1 January 1992). Again, he was supporting those who claimed to uphold order.

Like most conservatives, King Bhumibol sees duties as being more significant than human rights (see O'Sullivan 1976: 24). He has argued that the rights of one should not impinge on those of others and must be limited (KB 1974: 14), stressing that individual freedom can only go as far as it serves the interests of the 'common weal' (ibid.: 44–5). In any case, as Tongnoi (1983: 17) explains, it is the institution of the monarchy which provides the protection of the rights of individuals.

Conservatives are generally hostile to social welfare, arguing that it reduces personal responsibility, extends the role of impersonal and potentially corrupt government, expands until it eventually threatens the economic order and assigns tasks to the state which are rightfully those of family and community (Nisbet 1986: 58–9; Scruton 1991: 21). King Bhumibol has adopted this perspective. Taking the US as his example, he has argued that millions are spent on welfare, stating that access to welfare is a 'constitutional right' in that country, but that this has several negative aspects:

[T]hese jobless individuals will not be willing to work; they can apply for public welfare and they get it. These people refuse to work. . . . The . . . individual on welfare will be a useless person for the community and even for himself. Furthermore, he will be a ponderous burden on society.

(KB 1992b: 26)

Then, turning to Thailand, he argues that to allow the development of a welfare system would cause suffering:

We would be squandering our national budget by giving charity from the money earned by hard-working people from whom taxes are levied, to those who make it a point not to work. Thailand is not like that. Everybody works, some more, some less, but everybody works.

(ibid.: 29)

The conservative also has a strong brief for private property (Nisbet 1986: 55–6). The King, through the Crown Property Bureau's investments, the Royal Household and the royal family's personal investments, is one of the largest corporate groups in the country (Gray 1988: 107–8; Hewison 1989). From the 1950s, the King has given great support to national development based on the expansion of private property. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the King spent considerable time meeting foreign and domestic investors and promoting industrial development (see Siam Rath Weekly Review 19 March, 27 August 1959; BP 20 January 1961).

The transformation of the monarchy's own financial position has been remarkable for, as the King noted – exaggerating somewhat – on coming to the throne, 'We had nothing' (Grey 1988: 109). His support for private property is clearly related to the expansion of his family's and the monarchy's wealth and business empire and also to his opposition to communism (ibid.: 53). While the royal family has done well, the King has been keen to demonstrate that he puts his wealth to good use – for example, the royal development projects receive remarkable, wholly uncritical press coverage. He has also resolutely opposed public greed, and while close to many wealthy business people, the King has been critical of capitalists who ruthlessly exploit villagers, arguing that this threatens unity (KB 1974: 26). Wealth brings responsibilities, and the King has indicated that the linking of Buddhism to capitalism can moderate greed (see Gray 1991: 55).

These concerns define a monarchy which is solidly conservative. While it is no surprise to find that the monarch is a conservative, the significance and impact of this for the pattern of political development needs to be examined. Because the monarchy has become so influential, the King's conservative outlook has been significant in the development of Thailand's constitutionalism and the course of democratisation.
The monarchy and democratisation

It is worth recalling that the present monarch came to the throne in political circumstances that were electric. Intense political competition revolved around two axes: first, between royalists and anti-royalists; and second, between civilians and the military. Royalists were in the minority and had been largely ineffectual in parliament – *Phra*¹⁴ Sarasas (1950: 181) described them as a ‘court in miniature [which] lingers on in a corner of parliament’. At the time, the royal family feared republicanism, and it is clear that this has been a concern for the present monarch, especially in his early years on the throne (see Morell 1974: 790; Van Praagh 1989: 178). The King has often expressed his dislike for the cut-and-thrust of politics, stating that when he was 18 he learned that ‘politics is a filthy business’ (Grey 1988: 53). This did not predispose the King to support parliamentary politics. That the monarchy has played a central role in determining the path of parliamentary politics and in defining the role of the constitutional monarchy is clear. It is to these aspects that attention is directed.

In addition to his conservatism and personal dislike of party politics, the King has identified party politics as divisive, setting people against each other rather than uniting them (BP 26 June 1956). It is no surprise, then, that the King would view authoritarianism as potentially attractive. On one occasion he stated: ‘If . . . a dictator is a good man, he can do many things for the people. For a short while, Mussolini did many good things for the Italian people’ (KB 1974: 52). His strong support for Sarit’s strict authoritarianism can be understood in this context, with the King providing Sarit with legitimacy and receiving the ‘veneration and honour’ the monarchy needed in return (Sukhumbhand 1988: 22; Thak 1978: Chapter 6). The little enthusiasm the King has had for party politics has been limited to the view of parliaments and constitutions as a means to restore order after authoritarian governments have failed (see Bangkok World 12 April 1969; KB 1974: 81–6; KB 1992a: 14, 18).

Reflecting the conservative desire for organic growth in society, the King has urged that democracy not be defined in ‘foreign’ terms, stating that:

[W]e 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)

The King has argued that democracy needs to be modified to meet Thai customs and values (cited in Kulick and Wilson 1992: xvi).

This perspective is also applied to the constitution. While the King has not been vocal on this topic, his trusted servants have a clear position. Put simply, constitutions are foreign implants. For example, Tongnoi (1983: 15–8) challenges the idea that ‘democracy is represented by having a constitution’, implying that these are unimportant documents. In Thailand, he contends, constitutions have been the ‘brain-children’ of ‘French-centred’ civil servants and US-influenced political scientists, and are therefore ‘French in foundation and American in ideal’. He goes on to claim that an unwritten constitution would be best for Thailand, but that the people are not yet ‘sophisticated enough to understand’ this kind of arrangement (ibid.: 18). When constitutions have been written, he suggests, this has been to address short-term circumstances, and not to match the needs and understanding of the people. Reflecting a quite cynical view of politics, this palace official adds that if there is a constitution, even an ‘autocratic’ one, elections ‘now and then’, the press is not ‘too harshly’ dealt with, and ‘some MPs are appointed to cabinet’, then the ‘people will . . . consider themselves free and democratic’ (ibid.: 18).

The King has commented that there are many ways to organise government, and that even in democratic countries there are unelected heads of government (KB 1992a: 44). He has also expressed a view on ‘real democracy’, pointing to the 1973 National Convention with its 2,346 representatives from all parts of the country and all walks of life as a useful example. Interestingly, none of the representatives was elected, and this notion of an unelected but ‘representative’ assembly follows the approach of a number of authoritarian regimes. During the constitutional debates of 1992, King Bhumibol (ibid.: 38) agreed that representation was important in government, but that the system of elected representatives ‘usually . . . does not work . . . because the system is deficient’. Despite this less than enthusiastic approach to elections and political parties, the monarchy remains a constitutional one.

As noted above, like ‘democracy’, there is a view that constitutions need to be adapted from their Western origins to more carefully match Thai values. Indeed, one official document, reflecting on the passage of constitutions from 1932, states that:

The initial introduction of such an alien concept as constitutional government necessitated a long process of refinement and reconceptualization. Each change of detail in the successive constitutions has marked another attempt to successfully adapt the democratic system to the specific needs of the Thai nation.

(OPM 1979: 139)

This appears progressive when compared to the views of royal advisers Tongnoi and Thanin Kraivixien, both of whom question the need for a written constitution.¹⁶ The latter has argued that it is unnecessary for a king to follow the constitution, for it is merely words on paper (cited in Heiecke 1977: 29–31). Tongnoi concurs, seeing the constitution as a ‘lifeless’ document, changing so much that its basic tenets are unknowable, meaning that the only constant in politics is the monarchy. For him, ‘the
Thai monarch stands on a par with... the constitution in the United States or Marxism in communist countries'. Lumpking politicians, military coups and constitutions together, the royal adviser suggests that people have become disillusioned with corruption and the system of government and must place their trust in the monarchy (Tongnoi 1990: 155-6).

Such views are reflected in King Bhumibol's ambivalence towards constitutionalism. For example, the King gave exceptional support to unelected Prime Minister General Prem Tinsulanonda during the Young Turks' challenges to his prime ministership. While 'palace sources' portray this as support for constitutional government (FEER 10 December 1987), when elected MP and Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan was overthrown by the military in 1991, there was no hint of support from the palace. The King is said to have thought that Chatichai's cabinet reshuffles were 'comic', that the prime minister was personally responsible for not controlling the internal situation, and is reported to have supported the 1991 coup (Kulick and Wilson 1992: xxii, 8). One of the differences between Prem and Chatichai was that the former 'showed unwavering loyalty to the monarchical institution. His defence and reverence for... [the institution] have gained him trust and admiration' (Likhit 1992: 220). While Chatichai might have tried to develop this personal and political relationship, he was unsuccessful. A second difference was that the Young Turks did not seek the King's approval for their attempted coups against Prem, whereas the perpetrators of the 1991 coup appear to have sought this.

Following the 1991 coup, the draft constitution was faxed to the King in Chiangmai, and was returned in the same manner, reportedly with some minor alterations (FEER 14 March 1991). This nonchalant attitude was also reflected in the King's reaction when the constitution was challenged. He pointed out that while the draft was 'not... fully adequate', it should be promulgated because it was 'reasonable' [mi khunnaphap pho' chai da] and could be 'gradually amended... in a "democratic" way' (KB 1992b: paragraph 4). In other words, the principles embodied in the constitution were not particularly important, but its promulgation was necessary so that instability could be avoided (KB 1992a: 46). When conflict persisted, leading to the May 1992 demonstrations, the King chose to interpret this as a personal conflict between Major-General Chamlong Srimuang, who had a pivotal role in the demonstrations, and General Suchinda Kraprayoon at the head of the military-dominated government (KB 1992b: para 1). The King's approach to these matters has been consistent over the years. For example, Morell notes that while the King apparently pushed for a constitution prior to 1968, once gained, and for the following 41 months until a military coup, the

King and royal family did little to enhance the legitimacy and status of the elected parliament, participant politics as an activity, or the institutions created to implement Thai-style democracy.... He made no commitment to the success of the transition experiment, leaving the parliament exposed and vulnerable to attack by the military.

(Morell 1974: 803-4)

Morell (ibid.: 824) also notes that following the 1971 coup, which the King reportedly supported, his lack of commitment to constitutional rule was demonstrated when he celebrated Constitution Day less than a month after the coup which had torn up the constitution. It might be that the King's attitude reflects his belief that when a constitution is abrogated, 'the people's mandate returns to me' (cited in Kulick and Wilson 1992: xviii).

As noted above, Tongnoi (1990: 159) does not believe that the trappings of democracy matter too much: '... when a cabinet falls or parliament is dissolved, the general public hardly cares. In fact, the people rather enjoy the changes'. Further, he argues that 'Thai-style' democracy is intimately related to the monarchy: 'Democracy is essentially a method of government in which the rights of an individual citizen should be as fully protected as possible' (Tongnoi 1983: 16). Not surprisingly, he sees that the answer to protecting rights is to be found in the monarchy. He states: 'Our Monarchy is far too deep-rooted and thoroughly involved in the protection of the individual's rights to be done away with... and... continues to grow in usefulness and involvement in democratic times (ibid.: 17).

If constitutions are relatively unimportant, then it is interesting to consider the position of the constitutional monarch. Prudhisan (1992a: 124) argues that Thailand is fortunate in that its traditional institution's considerable influence is, 'constrained by the constitutional nature of the monarchy'. In a related article he adds that it is the constitution which sets the limits and conditions under which the monarch operates (Prudhisan 1992b). As was noted above, the monarchy's position is defined as acting through the executive, the courts and the parliament (see Department of Local Administration 1993). But this is not exactly how the King and his advisers define a constitutional monarch.

When asked to comment on the role of the constitutional monarch, the King stated that the basic principle is that the monarch can do no wrong, and that his position is symbolic of the nation as a whole (cited in Grey 1988: 134-5). In this respect, the Thai monarchy is often compared to its English counterpart (e.g., Blofeld 1960: 49). However, as Heiecke (1977: 28) notes, this is a false comparison, as the Thai monarch has far more real power than the English counterpart. This has often been demonstrated, with the King's political interventions during the 1973 and 1992 events and his role in a border dispute between Thailand and Burma in 1992 (see Surin 1992: 347) being well-known examples.

The King himself is clear that he has greater power than the constitution permits. When asked about his role in 'choosing' political leaders, he replied that:
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. That is one aspect, but in principle it is exactly the same as any constitutional monarch when there is a constitution which says the monarch or chief of state appoints the prime minister [sic]. If the chief of state is no good they will make him into a rubber-stamp. But if . . . [he] is better they will perhaps ask for his opinion because the opinion is respected — that is the difference. But how can I have the respect of the people? It is because I don’t use the power . . . [sic] If there is a rule I go by the rule. But if there is no rule then my opinion would be heard.

(cited in Grey 1988: 135)

In this context it is interesting to speculate on the reasons for the King’s highly publicised Thai-language translation of A Man Called Intrepid (Stevenson 1989). While an unexceptional book, the King’s attraction to it may be due to its message that parliaments cannot always be trusted to act in the national interest. It suggests that serious damage would have been done in both the US and Britain if strong leaders had not acted against elected parliaments. Britain’s King is portrayed as an ardent nationalist who was prepared to act without the knowledge of parliament or the prime minister, often through his direct links to military and civilian security organisations. No doubt Thailand’s King can identify with arrangements that provide the monarch with such independence.

Certainly, the King and his advisers feel that he should intervene in the political process. While continually affirming that the monarch ‘does not take part in the day-to-day administration of the country’, it is often added that he is ‘privy to all decisions made by his cabinet. . . . He has far more knowledge of the working of statesmanship than any political or military leader’ (Asiaweek 23 April 1982). Further, it is acknowledged that the King does not merely sign orders, laws and decrees, but ‘acquaints himself with all subjects . . . and makes observations wherever appropriate, requesting clarification from the relevant officials wherever necessary’ (OPM 1979: 17). In addition, he appoints his own Privy Council, an august body of distinguished advisers who possess exceptional experience and knowledge of state affairs. The Privy Council reviews all draft laws and makes germane recommendations to His Majesty. Additionally, it meets twice weekly to ponder unusual or complex issues . . . before forwarding recommendations for King Bhumibol’s consideration.

(OPM 1979: 123–4)

With this advice, the King is not a mere Seal or Signature. His views, instead, become of great importance and the Government of the day has come to place great value on the King’s advice[sic]. High officials are known always to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the subjects at hand whenever they have to go into audience with the King in order to be prepared . . . and people in all walks of life eagerly seek Royal opinions on matters of vital concern. (ibid.: 19)

Thus, the King is not simply approving legislation, but is taking a role in the legislative process. In addition, at least under Prem, as Asiaweek (23 April 1982) reported, ministers spent much of their time in attendance at court. More significantly, as noted above, the King regularly intervenes in the political process, even to the point of consulting MPs beyond the cabinet, as in 1992, when he conferred with the leaders of all political parties during the constitutional crisis (KB 1992b: paragraph 3).

The King often appears to be acting outside the limits usually considered appropriate for a constitutional monarch. This propensity to be involved in the political and legislative process is, for example, not seen in the English monarchy. Norton (1982: 6) points out that the English monarch’s royal prerogative is determined by convention. Conservative Lewis Namier (1952: 3–4) argues that the basic elements of a constitutional monarchy are that the sovereign should be above parties and politics; the prime minister and government appointed from parliament should be received rather than designated by the monarch; the civil service should be apolitical, show allegiance to the crown, but should be subordinate to party government; and the prime minister is the undisputed head of the executive, with the monarch having no role in the choice of the chief minister. This does not appear to be the case in Thailand.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This chapter has attempted to do two things. First, to outline a total standard view of the monarchy, indicating the ‘constructed’ version of the monarchy. This view is powerful and emotive, and to challenge it risks sanction. Second, it has endeavoured to define the political philosophy of the present monarch and link this to the process of democratisation.

While not all aspects of the total standard view have been fully addressed, this chapter has indicated that, as might be expected, it is a glorification of the present monarch and his family, and places them at the centre of the political process. In addition, it provides a monarchy-centred definition of democracy, which has become a most powerful discourse, threatening all other political definitions. In his approach to politics, the King is inherently conservative, and from this position he has attempted to define a conservative polity. Such a polity would preserve
and further extend the power of the monarchy. To do this, the King has had to become increasingly involved in politics. Far from being ‘above politics’, this King is intimately involved. His involvement means he is an ‘activist monarch’, quite an innovation when it is considered that most other constitutional monarchies have increasingly been withdrawn from direct political activity over the last century.

Indeed, nearly a century ago, in the most famous of all publications on the English constitution, Bagehot (1909:71–5) summarised the three rights of the constitutional monarchy as the right to be consulted, the right to encourage and the right to warn. He added that a sensible and mature monarch would want no others, and argues that a wise monarch will err on the side of inaction, allow parliament to take its course, and be responsible. He continues:

So long as parliament thinks it is the sovereign’s business to find a government it will be sure not to find a government itself. The royal form of ministerial government is the worst of all forms if it erect the subsidiary apparatus into the principal force, if it induce the assembly which ought to perform paramount duties to expect some one else to perform them.

(Bagehot 1909:71–2)

Clearly, this is advice the Thai monarchy could well consider. However, it appears that this King is unlikely to remove the monarchy from politics until a conservative polity is established. The process of entrenching such a polity is, however, challenged by the emergence of civil society. Parliament, popular elections and constitutions have the potential to move power closer to the populace and away from the conservative ideals represented in such unrepresentative institutions as the military and bureaucracy (see Hewison 1993a). While the powerful discourse of the total standard view allows this King to be interventionist and to influence the development of the polity, it is unlikely that his successor will have the necessary credentials to continue this (see Sukhumbhand 1988). A developed constitutional system can protect a weak or unpopular monarch. However, this King has not supported the development of such a system. It the short term this may well prove to be to the detriment of the dynasty and the institution.

5 Withering centre, flourishing margins
Buddhism’s changing political roles

Peter A. Jackson

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s one of the most notable religious phenomena in Thailand has been the rise of a diverse range of movements and cults at the periphery of the state-controlled sangha (the Buddhist monkhood) and a shift in the pattern of relations between Buddhism and secular political authority (see Jackson 1988a, 1989; Taylor 1993a).

The formal organisation of the sangha, the forms of religious ritual and the interpretation of doctrine propagated by the order of celibate monks have been important in legitimating the exercise of state power of Thai kingdoms since at least the Sukhothai period in the thirteenth century (see Ishii 1986). I have argued that Buddhism’s political importance as a system of legitimating practices and discourses explains the intensification of state control that was exercised over the sangha in this century through a series of efforts to restructure the monkhood in the image of the secular political order (Jackson 1989). State-initiated and enforced Sangha Acts – in 1902, 1941 and 1962 – decreed that the national organisation of the monkhood should have a form that mirrored the changing structures of secular power – from absolute monarchy, to popular democracy and subsequently to military dictatorship. Throughout this period state control over clerical organisation and practice was closely monitored by an arm of the secular bureaucracy, the Department of Religious Affairs within the Ministry of Education, and heterodox religious movements were periodically quashed because of their subversive character (see Jackson 1988a).

However, in the 1990s this historical situation has been transformed. While a semblance of state control remains in the form of the Sangha Act, administered by the Department of Religious Affairs, practical state control over Buddhism has declined markedly. Since the 1980s a rapid weakening in politicians’ interest in controlling forms of Buddhist religiosity in Thailand – except to eradicate monastic corruption or counter clerical immorality – has permitted the rise of a range of religious movements which, in earlier decades, would have incited political and legal intervention to enforce normative practice and teaching. However, declining state