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CHAPTER 7

'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 Maisrikrod (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 pokkebrorng 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 kao 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, *patiawat* (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-rajadharmma*. 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 thoroughgoing 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).