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The Destruction of a Shrine to Brahma in Bangkok and the Fall of Thaksin Shinawatra: The Occult and the Thai Coup in Thailand of September 2006

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**The Destruction of a Shrine to Brahma in Bangkok and
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Charles Keyes

THE THAO MAHA PHROM OR ERAWAN SHRINE

On the night of 21 March 2006, a 27 year-old man named Thanakorn Pakdeepol took a hammer and smashed the image of the Hindu deity Brahma – whom the Thai call Thao Maha Phrom – near the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok.¹ The destruction took place just before the political crisis centering on Thaksin Shinawatra, the prime minister, reached a climax with the subsequently discredited election of 2 April 2006. Because the shrine had long been the most significant non-Buddhist shrine in Bangkok, its destruction immediately led both anti- and pro-Thaksin supporters to interpret the act as an omen related to the ongoing political crisis. In this paper, I use the story of the destruction of the Erawan shrine, which I believe can be seen as a watershed event in the crisis, and of the interpretations of the meaning of this act to reflect on the crisis of legitimacy surrounding Thaksin. This account is also part of a longer story of power and the occult which culminated in the coup of 19 September 2006.

¹ I am grateful to Chris Baker, Pattana Kittiarasa, Martin Platt, Nicholas Tapp, Donald Swearer, Nathan McGovern, and Jane Keyes for comments on an earlier version of this paper. For sources for this paper I have used primarily articles in the two English-language newspapers in Thailand, *The Nation* and *Bangkok Post*. A Wikipedia article in English (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erawan_Shrine) has brought together additional material, but the Thai Wikipedia article (<http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E0%B8%97%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A7%E0%B8%A1%E0%B8%AB%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%9E%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%AB%E0%B8%A1>) contains far fewer details on the destruction of the shrine than does the English one. I have also used some Thai language sources from on-line editions of *Daily News*, *Thai Rath*, and *The Manager*. In addition I have drawn on an on-line article by the Tourist Authority of Thailand (http://www.tatnews.org/tourism_news/detail.asp?id=2850), a few stories in English-language newspapers outside of Thailand, the forum managed by *The Nation* (<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/board/thaipol/view.php?id=646&offset=0>), and a blog by Paul Dorsey, a Bangkok resident (<http://dorseylab.blogspot.com/2006/03/24/black-magic-afoot-in-the-city-of-angels/>). Although the credibility of some information on the forum and the blog is questionable, they provide hints about the story not found elsewhere. For images of the shrine after its destruction, see BBC News on line, 21 March 2006 (http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/41465000/jpg/_41465564_shrine203ap.jpg), <http://www.taipettimes.com/images/2006/03/22/20060321172845.jpeg>; and <http://dorseylab.blogspot.com/2006/03/24/black-magic-afoot-in-the-city-of-angels>. Photos of the shrine before its destruction can be found in several of these websites as well as the following: www.thaiwebsites.com/erawanshrine.asp and http://www.mikal.org/photo_journal/bangkok_2002/1390_erawan_shrine.JPG.

The shrine to Thao Maha Phrom was originally erected in 1956 in conjunction with the building of the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok. Thao Maha Phrom means the ‘Great Lord Brahma’. Although in the Hindu tradition Brahma is one of the *trimurti* or Trinity of high gods – the other two being Śiva and Viṣṇu – and is credited with being the creator of the universe, in the Thai context he is usually simply understood as a powerful deity (*thewada*). The shrine is one of the ubiquitous shrines which business owners and home-owners believe must be built and offerings placed at on a daily basis in order to placate the spirit or deity that is believed to have original claim over the land. Most houses have a small shrine dedicated to an unnamed spirit of the place (*caothi*). Businesses typically have shrines to deities belonging to the Indian pantheon but which have long been subsumed within the Thai Buddhist tradition. For business owners, daily offerings at such a shrine are believed to be essential to the success of their business.² There are also a few shrines to deities that are believed to influence the polity, the most important in Bangkok being a shrine to Śiva at the ‘pillar of the city’ (*lak müang*) located near the Grand Palace.

The plaque on the Thao Maha Phrom shrine states that it was first erected because the Thai government agency that first built the Erawan Hotel was told by “Rear Admiral Luang Suwichanphaet, who specialized on astrology,” that the foundation stone had been laid at an inauspicious time.³ A sculptor from the government’s Fine Arts Department was commissioned to produce the statue of Brahma out of plaster and it was then covered with gold-leaf. From the time of its dedication on 9 November 1956, the shrine, located at the crossroads of the commercial center of Bangkok, began to attract many worshippers and it soon acquired more significance than most such shrines. Because so many ordinary people came to believe that they gained spiritual assistance by making offerings at the shrine, it became, in effect, the shrine of Bangkok, overshadowing the *lak müang* shrine in the old royal section of the city.⁴

² Many Sino-Thai business people in Thailand, especially in Bangkok, maintain shrines to Chinese deities rather than to local deities linked to the Thai pantheon. Some have both types of shrines.

³ This English translation of the inscription was taken from information on a website run by the Tourist Authority of Thailand (http://www.tatnews.org/tourism_news/detail.asp?id=2850).

⁴ The old Erawan hotel, originally built by the Thai government, was torn down in 1987 and the new building on the site was rechristened the Grand Hyatt Erawan. The shrine, however, remained in its original location.

The area around the shrine is crowded at most times of the day and night as petitioners come to make offerings or sponsor Thai classical dance performances in order to gain the assistance of the deity for success in business, for recovery from an illness or an accident, for winning or winning back the love of a lover or spouse, or for guidance in choosing a winning lottery number from one of the vendors near the shrine. The shrine is not only popular among Thai, but many visitors from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and now China also come to make offerings to Thao Maha Phrom.

On the ninth day of the ninth month (September) in 1999, 2,000 Chinese from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Macau came together at the shrine for a very special ceremony to “open the eyes” of a replica of the statue which was to be installed in Taipei. Nithinand Yorsaengrat described the reason for this ceremony:

[In 1998] Gua Min Tong, the president of the Taiwan Kidney Foundation visited Bangkok and asked Mahaprom to help him in his illness, a dysfunctional kidney. When he returned to Taiwan, his brother agreed to donate one kidney to him. The operation was dangerous, but both brothers survived and today are healthy. Out of gratitude Min Tong ordered a Thai artisan to produce a replica of Mahaprom for Bt 400,000. (Nithinand Yorsaengrat 1999)

The date had been chosen because “9” is a very auspicious number for Chinese as well as Thai. In Thai, the word for ‘nine’ – *kao* – is cognate with the word meaning ‘to move ahead, or progress’. This number will figure again in the story I am recounting.

The popularity of the shrine is evident not only on special occasions such as the one in 1999. From 6 a.m. when the shrine opens until 10 p.m. when the shrine closes, the area around it is always crowded with worshippers. Most taxi drivers who are conscious of always being at risk on the roads of Bangkok always raise their hands palm-to-palm in the Thai salutation known as the *wai* when passing the shrine. Vendors of flowers, incense, and candles used to worship the spirit, as well as dancers contracted to perform in front of the deity, make decent livings selling their goods and services to worshippers.

The shrine is, thus, one of those places where capitalism and the occult are dramatically linked. In contrast to other places such as Latin America (Taussig 1983) and South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002) where those marginalized by global capitalism have turned to the supernatural to adapt to the economic conditions in which they find themselves, in Thailand (Pattana, in press) as elsewhere in East Asia, and especially Taiwan (Weller 1994, Weller, in press), middle class and wealthy people who are deeply enmeshed in capitalist enterprises have been conspicuous in their seeking supernatural assistance to overcome the risks they confront. Given the significance of the Erawan shrine for not only urban Thai and especially Sino-Thai but also for many people from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, the shock when the shrine was destroyed was felt transnationally.

Thanakorn Pakdeepol chose the early hours of the morning of 21 March 2006 to carry out his destruction of the shrine. As he fled from the site after doing so, he was pursued by two street vendors who beat him to death. They were charged with homicide, but were almost immediately released on bail secured by Deputy Prime Minister Surakiart Sathirathai (Subhatra Bhumiprabhas 2006). Most Thai friends with whom I have spoken with doubt that the street vendors will ever be brought to trial for what was, at the very least, manslaughter.

Although Thanakorn was identified as a Muslim because of Arabic characters tattooed on his back -- an identity subsequently confirmed by his father⁵ -- the destruction of the shrine was not interpreted as having any connection to the conflict that has been raging since January 2004 in the area of southern Thailand populated primarily by Malay-speaking Muslims. Thanakorn was not branded as a Muslim terrorist. Rather, he was said to have been mentally,

⁵ I first became aware of this identification from an Associated Press story in the *Washington Post* (Sutin Wannabovorn 2006). It was also reported in the Thai press such as *Khao Sot*, March 22, 2006, *Matichon*, March 22, 2006, and *Thai Rath*, March 22, 2006. I am grateful to Nathan McGovern, a graduate student in religious studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, for providing these references to the Thai press accounts.

disturbed.⁶ His being beaten to death immediately after the event made it impossible to ask him what he had intended.⁷

THE CONTESTED MEANING OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SHRINE

Instead of linking the destruction of the shrine to the conflict between the Thai state and Malay-speaking Muslims in the southern part of the country, it was widely interpreted as an omen relating to the crisis surrounding Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra which had intensified in the early months of 2006. Although Thaksin had proved to be the most successful politician ever in Thailand following the impressive wins by his Thai Rak Thai ('Thai love Thai') party in parliamentary elections in 2001 and 2005, his legitimacy had been increasingly questioned by a growing number of middle-class Thai based primarily in Bangkok. The opposition pointed to Thaksin's sanctioning of extra-judicial killings of several thousand suspected drug dealers, his offenses against Muslim citizens during the prosecution of a 'war against terrorism' in the provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala in southern Thailand, populated primarily by Malay-speaking followers of Islam, his subversion of the courts and regulatory bodies, his guiding of the Thai Rak Thai-dominated parliament to enact laws beneficial to his own financial interests and those of his cronies, and his disdain for the monarchy.

The catalyst which led to the intensification of the protests occurred when Thaksin and his family sold their huge holdings worth nearly two billion baht in the telecommunications Shin Corporation to a Singapore holding company (Temasek) without incurring any taxes. This tax evasion was clearly, in the eyes of the opposition, only possible as a result of laws passed by the Thaksin-led government. The protestors saw Thaksin's actions as entailing such a gross

⁶ The on-line edition of *The Manager* identified him as 'crazed man' (*chāi wikōncarit*) (<http://www.manager.co.th/Home/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9490000038081>). Whether he was certifiably insane will never be known, but one wonders about the label given the way in which it has been used in the past to relegate political dissidents to marginal status (see Irvine 1982). I am indebted to Nicholas Tapp for reminding me of Irvine's important, but unpublished, dissertation.

⁷ Paul Dorsey, a long-time Bangkok resident, in his blog about the destruction wrote: "It is pretty dumbfounding that the two city street sweepers who beat to death Thanakorn Pakdeepol after he smashed the statue to bits with a hammer were bailed out by the official who runs that part of the capital, and went straight back to work. 'We will seek ways to help them out because what they did was aimed at protecting the Great Brahma statue,' the official said. 'They did not intend to kill the man.'" (<http://dorseyland.blogspot.com/2006/03/24/black-magic-afoot-in-the-city-of-angels/>). It appears, since I have been unable to find any references to Thanakorn in either English- or Thai language sources since the immediate aftermath of the incident, that he has become one of many murder or manslaughter victims in Thailand who become non-persons after their death and whose cases are never prosecuted.

misuse of power that he no longer had real legitimacy. As an editorial in *The Nation* (February 3, 2006), concluded: “The richest man in the Kingdom simply does not have the moral fibre to lead us.” By January and February 2006 a large but loosely-connected movement had begun to mobilize protests calling for Thaksin’s resignation. The movement, which subsequently took the name People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD),⁸ had begun with attacks on Thaksin’s ethical conduct led by Sondhi Limthongkul, like Thaksin a media magnate, but one who had been very much overshadowed by Thaksin. The movement acquired the backing of a number of non-governmental organizations, many faculty and students in the major universities, members of the print media, and leaders of the major parties opposed to Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai Party.

The size and persistence of the protests, and perhaps even more critically the negative impact these were having on the Thai stock market and the economy more generally, appear to have led certain members of Thaksin’s inner circle to persuade him that a dramatic act was necessary to resolve the crisis. On 24 February 2006 Thaksin suddenly announced the dissolution of parliament and set the date for a snap election on 2 April. It was during the very uncertain period following the dissolution that the destruction of the Erawan shrine took place.

The day after the shrine was destroyed, “Samrit Klomkliang, who says he has been a longtime personal astrologer for Thaksin’s family, told reporters that the destruction of the statue was a sign that there would be bloodshed in Thailand if the prime minister doesn’t quit before March 29.”⁹ That Thaksin’s family should have “a longtime personal astrologer” was not a fact that anyone in Thailand would consider to be strange. Although Thai are followers of Theravada Buddhism, they have long integrated beliefs in spirits and Hindu deities into their religion (Kirsch 1977; Pattana 1999, 2005).

In 2001, after he had led the Thai Rak Thai party to its first electoral victory, Thaksin had faced a serious threat to remaining as premier. Shortly after the election, the National Counter Corruption Commission had brought charges against him for having concealed assets when he was a minister in a previous government. Given the evidence – that these assets had been

⁸ In Thai the movement is known as *Phanthamit Prachāchon phūa Prachāthipatai* (Ph.P.P.).

⁹ Website of *Mainichi Daily News* (<http://mdn.mainichi-msn.co.jp/international/news/20060321p2g00m0in025000c.html>).

“registered in the names of his housekeeper, maid, driver, security guard, and business associate” (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 1) – it seemed very possible that he would be found guilty and have to resign. He turned not only to his party, his classmates in the police academy, and the public that had elected him for political support, but also to supernatural assistance. Pasuk and Baker, in their biography of Thaksin, report that “he attended a temple where 1,017 monks in the presence of nine Buddha images and 30,000 onlookers conducted a chanting rite to ward off evil influences (another prominent monk described this as ‘voodoo’)” (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 3).¹⁰

Throughout his administration, Thaksin has engaged from time to time in what can only be termed ‘magical realism’ in order to ensure that events moved as he wished. Early in 2006, as the criticisms of his governance were beginning to mount, Thaksin made dramatic visits to northeastern Thailand where voters had overwhelmingly supported the Thai Rak Thai party. In January he literally moved his government to villages in At Samat District, Roi-et for what was called in the media a ‘reality show’ – or what his entourage termed a ‘backstage show’. His meetings with village leaders, his travels around the rural area by motorcycle, and his meals with ordinary villagers were broadcast live on TV. He clearly basked in the adulation that he received from rural people in a poor province, one, not incidentally, from which a majority of taxi drivers in Bangkok come from. An article in *The Nation* (January 17, 2006) reported that “locals screamed and reached out their hands as Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra walked past. He waved back, shook hands, and worked the crowd like a movie star.” It was almost as though Thaksin or his advisors had read Clifford Geertz’s (1980) *The Theatre State* to make reality conform to stagecraft. As Thanong Khanthong wrote in *The Nation*, “Make no mistake about the name of At Samat, which literally means ‘courage with ability’. Thaksin needed all the auspicious symbols he could find to prop up his sagging fortune. He would re-empower himself from the harsh environment. The bed and the mosquito net were precisely arranged according to the principles of feng shui, or the order of the universe” (Thanong Khanthong 2006).

On a subsequent trip to Surin, another northeastern province, Thaksin sought to bolster his hold on power by engaging in a magical rite in a community populated by people long known as elephant hunters and, more recently, as trainers of elephants.

¹⁰ Pasuk and Baker cite the *Bangkok Post* for 15 and 16 June 2001 as their source.

In Surin, Thaksin rode an elephant and performed the old ritual carried out by warriors before a battle of walking under the beast's belly to boost his power and fortune. In an unusual but deliberate act, carried out with precision, Thaksin toured Baan Taklang, also known as Elephant Village... To scare off his enemies, Thaksin was given a magical elephant prod. He happily responded: "I will use this prod, along with spells and talismans, to control the fierce opponents who are trying to oust me. (*The Nation*, 16 March 2006)

The reporter for *The Nation* who penned this story concluded: "It is an open secret that during recent weeks Thaksin has followed strict routines and instructions from astrologers and black magic masters."

Sondhi Limthongkul, one of the main leaders of the opposition to Thaksin, accused Thaksin or the TRT of having destroyed the shrine as an act of black magic (*The Nation*, March 26, 2006). Whether spurred by Sondhi's challenge or by the interpretation of the destruction by his family's astrologer, Thaksin clearly was disturbed by the event. He rushed back to Bangkok the day after the destruction from a campaign trip in northern Thailand to visit the shrine.

Thaksin took time in the afternoon to visit the shrine, where he was met by Surakiart Sathirathai, the deputy prime minister, and the heads of the Fine Arts Department, Religion Department and Foundation of Thao Maha Phrom. Thaksin said it would take about two months to restore the statue to its original shape. "The restoration will have to strictly follow the religious principles and all the rituals. Some parts of the original statue may also be placed at the shrine," he added. Thaksin worshipped at the shrine before setting free nine birds as part of a merit-making ritual. (*The Nation*, 23 March 2006)¹¹

¹¹ An image of Thaksin visiting the shrine, one reproduced above, can be found at <http://dorseyland.blogspot.com/2006/03/24/black-magic-afoot-in-the-city-of-angels/>.

Whatever Thaksin may have made of the prediction of his family's astrologer, he clearly did not want this bad omen influencing the election on 2 April. The time was, however, too short for the restoration of the shrine to take place before the election. In the meantime, other steps had to be taken to dispel the bad influences associated with its destruction.

Prime Minister Thaksin at the Shrine to Thao Maha Phrom after its destruction



There was wide agreement among astrologers to whom the media turned that the destruction was a very bad omen:

The incident portends that something bad will happen. If the upcoming general election goes ahead, bad things will happen,"" said Surattaphong Suwannarat, from the Astrological Association of Thailand (AAT). He called on relevant parties to prioritise national interests and begin talks as soon as possible. "Negotiations could ease the situation," he said. . . .

Pinyo Pongcharoen, another famous astrologer, said the sacred being had issued a warning to all parties that they must negotiate. "The Brahma has four faces and now there are apparently four sides in the country: the government, the opposition parties, People's Alliance for Democracy and poor-people demonstrators," Pinyo said. He said if these four groups of people turned to each other, the country would be at peace again.

AAT vice chairman Wiwat Jareogsiri said the destruction of the Brahma statue was connected with the country's horoscope, which was currently not good. "When the country's horoscope is not good, this affects many things. Now that the sacred Brahma statue is destroyed, the country's economy may suffer," he said. (*The Nation*, March 22, 2006).

Thaksin and his associates sought out another astrologer whose interpretation was reported by Police General Chidchai Wannasathid, acting deputy prime minister: "I have talked to an astrologer who told me that the incident could be seen as a self-sacrifice of Phra Phrom. The situation should now start to improve. I have also had a telephone conversation with Bovornsak Uwanno, the secretary of the Cabinet, about this self-sacrifice of Thao Maha Phrom. This time we have a sacrifice of love in a great way, which should help dispel the bad luck" (*The Nation*, March 22, 2006).¹²

Thaksin appears to have heeded the advice only of the (anonymous?) astrologer consulted by General Chidchai since he neither called off the election nor entered into negotiations with the opposition. The shroud that remained over the shrine not only until after the elections but until 22 May when the restored shrine was re-dedicated served, however, as a sign that Thaksin's legitimacy was in question.¹³

CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS FOR ELECTORAL LEGITIMACY

Why should Thaksin's legitimacy have been in question? From a Western perspective, Thaksin had clearly demonstrated his legitimacy by gaining wide popular support in the elections of 2001 and 2005; even in the controversial election of 2 April 2006, sixteen million voters out of a total of 29 million cast their ballots for candidates of the Thai Rak Thai Party. The electoral success of the Thai Rak Thai led by Thaksin could be seen as the culmination of the goal of transforming the Thai polity into a parliamentary democracy that had begun with the revolution of 1932 when a group of military and civil service officials had taken over the government and persuaded the then monarch King Prajadhipok to accept a constitution.

¹² Bovornsak would, however, soon resign from Thaksin's cabinet and enter the monkhood for a temporary period. His act can be understood as questioning the moral legitimacy of Thaksin's leadership.

¹³ Photos of the shrine under the shroud can be found at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4827660.stm> and <http://dorseyland.blogspot.com/2006/03/24/black-magic-afoot-in-the-city-of-angels>.

Prior to 1932, the morally legitimate political order was seen as depending on the Buddhist monarchy and the sangha, the “two Wheels of the Dhamma”.¹⁴ According to the worldview of Theravāda Buddhism to which the vast majority of Thai adhere, both the monarch and members of the sangha were recognized as possessing *barami*, that is, the positive legacy of previous positive kamma (*bun*) accumulated in past existences. *Barami* is the Buddhist equivalent of the original Christian conception of charisma, meaning the ‘gift of God’. A person possessing *barami*, like one possessing charisma, is recognized by others by certain outward signs. Being clothed in the raiment of a king or the yellow robes of a monk are significant signs but they must also be accompanied by others – such as age, participation in significant rituals, acts of compassion – for *barami* to be accepted. While monks were expected to eschew worldly attachments, the *barami* of a monarch made him a legitimate ruler in the eyes of those who shared the same Buddhist worldview. The monarch validated his legitimacy by being the foremost supporter of the sangha.

The promoters of the 1932 revolution introduced a new principle for the legitimation of power – a constitution (*ratthathanun*) which recognized the citizenry of the nation rather than the monarch as the source of sovereignty and vested their elected representatives with the authority to exercise power on their behalf. The principle of constitutional legitimacy proved, however, very difficult to establish.

Between 1932 and 1950, a period during which, there was no resident king in the country,¹⁵ a small oligarchy led by field marshals claimed to act according to the will of the people while for the most part in fact ignoring parliament. The 1932 revolution did not, however, eliminate the monarchy as the source of political legitimacy. After King Bhumipol returned to the country in 1950, it soon became evident as he traveled around the country that most Thai viewed him as the only lay person in the realm with supreme Buddhist charisma.

¹⁴ The “two wheels of the Dhamma” refers to a symbiotic relationship between monarchy and the sangha that first was established by King Aśoka, the first great emperor of India in the 3rd century BCE and was subsequently adopted by Theravāda Buddhist kingdoms in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. On the model see Reynolds (1972) and Smith (1972) and on its historical development in Siam/Thailand see Tambiah (1976). Also regarding the charisma of the monarch, see the interesting MA thesis by Princess Sirindhorn (1982)

¹⁵ King Prajadhipok was in exile between 1932 and 1935, King Ananda lived mainly in Switzerland between 1935 and his death in 1946, and King Bhumipol Adulyadej also mainly lived in Switzerland until 1950.

Political tension began to mount as the popularity of the King grew. In 1957, Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram, the major leader of the 1932 coup and the longest-serving prime minister in Thai history, was overthrown in a coup led by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat. Although Sarit was a man whose power derived from amoral sources (Thak Chaloemtiarana 1979), he effected an alliance (or perhaps a *détente*) with the King in order to be seen as legitimate. While the King remained the repository of *barami*, the military assumed the role of safeguarding the monarchy.

The alliance was not a smooth one. Sarit and his successors, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn and Field Marshal Prapas Charusathien, who led governments between 1957 and 1973, engaged in conspicuous corruption that proved increasingly distressing to King Bhumipol. The perfect military partner for the alliance with the Crown would later emerge in the person of General Prem Tinsulanond, who served as prime minister from 1980 to 1988. Even after General Prem stepped down as prime minister, he remained a major arbiter of the use of power in Thailand owing to his membership and later leadership of the King's Privy Council and his great popularity among the military.¹⁶

General Prem is widely viewed as the person primarily responsible for bringing to a positive resolution the political crisis that beset Thailand during much of the 1970s. The crisis developed in part because many members of an expanding middle class, located primarily in Bangkok, felt deeply unhappy about their lack of influence in the political system. A movement led by students, most of whom were children of the urban middle class, sought to pressure the government to institute a true constitutionally-based parliamentary system of government. At the same time, many rural people strongly resented the fact that they were not benefiting from the 'development' being promoted by the government. Not only were their incomes significantly declining relative to those of the urban population, but the implementation of government development programs upcountry by arrogant officials often created additional hardships. Because of their grievances, some rural people had joined a Communist-led insurgency. The military dictators proved to be ineffectual in confronting both this insurgency and the student-led movement.

¹⁶ For information about General Prem, see the official biography in English by William Warren (1997), General Prem's own website (<http://www.generalprem.com>), and the critical discussion in Paul Handley's controversial biography of King Bhumipol (Handley 2006, especially ch. 15).

In 1973, the King sided with the student movement against the military. Although it seemed for a brief period that power would shift to a constitutionally-based parliament, elements in the security forces, drawing support from rightwing monks, the royalist village scout (*luk süa chao ban*) movement, and from public fears about the Communist takeovers in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, used intimidation to make it impossible for democratically-elected governments to exercise effective authority. In October 1976 the King acquiesced to another military coup, preceded by the bloody repression of the student movement. Many student leaders who avoided death or imprisonment fled to the strongholds of the Communist insurgents. In the late 1970s it seemed as though Thailand was headed for a civil war.

That a civil war did not happen was in no small part due to the decision of a few military leaders who had spent a number of years both fighting and undertaking civic action programs in the rural areas where the Communists were strongest, and who agreed to work for a political rather than a military solution to the insurrection. In 1980, the government of General Prem proclaimed an amnesty for those who had joined the Communists. Because the Communist Party of Thailand had failed to offer an alternative vision of political authority which was credible to most Thai, especially to those in the countryside whose worldview was still fundamentally based on Buddhism (see Keyes forthcoming) and because China decided to withdraw its support for the CPT, the insurrection collapsed and many took advantage of the amnesty.

This amnesty became the foundation for a resurgence of democratic elements in Thai society. Even though the government continued to be led by General Prem Tinsulanond during most of the 1980s, there was a very rapid expansion of non-governmental organizations and the rise of political parties which represented the interests of the growing middle class. In 1988 following an election, General Prem was replaced as prime minister by the head of a coalition of political parties.

Although by the late 1980s the principle of democratic rule based on a constitution was gaining increasing acceptance among the citizens of Thailand, ultimate legitimation of power still rested with the monarchy. In 1991, senior military officers, pointing to significant corruption among elected political leaders and to offenses against the monarchy, staged a coup in an attempt to reassert the domination of the political order by the military. The by-then much expanded urban middle class did not accept this move, and in May 1992 many

from this class joined large-scale protests against a government headed by the unelected General Suchinda Kraprayoon. The confrontation, which turned violent, was resolved by the King who requested that General Suchinda and Chamlong Srimuang, a major leader of the protests, appear before him at an audience also attended by General Prem. Although Chamlong, a former general and then a popular governor of Bangkok, held in the eyes of many a moral authority that came from his being the leading lay follower of the fundamentalist Buddhist sect Santi Asoke,¹⁷ he was conspicuously subservient to the King.

After the May 1992 crisis was resolved, with General Suchinda resigning as prime minister and new elections being held, the principle of constitutional democracy seemed finally about to become well-established. In 1997, after a long drafting process, a new constitution – the most liberal in Thai history – was adopted and promulgated by the King. As Article 3 of the constitution demonstrates, legitimate power is exercised on behalf of the people by the King through the Council of Ministers and the Courts. In other words, those who aspire to legitimate power must seek the approval not only of the people through elections but also the approval of the monarch who continues to embody Buddhist charisma.

The 1997 Constitution established the parameters for the political system in which Thaksin was to become such an effective actor. However, as Kasian Tejapira concluded: “In Thaksin’s hands – as if the dreams of the post-1992 reformers had undergone some monstrous genetic modification – the 1997 Constitution has proved perfectly adapted for an authoritarian-populist government by and for big business” (Kasian Tejapira 2006: 39).

THAKSIN’S STYLE OF ‘DEMOCRACY’

Thaksin, born into a wealthy Sino-Thai family in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, began his career as a police officer. The police force has long had the reputation of being the most corrupt of all institutions of power in Thailand: “Many policeman are believed by the public to extort money, rape detainees, traffic in drugs, steal from public funds, acquire stolen property recovered by the state, and engage in all kinds of corruption willingly and without social conscience” (Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Pitiyarangsan 1994: 108). Although

¹⁷ On Santi Asoke, see Apinya Fuengfusakul (1993) and Heikkilä-Horn (1996). I also have discussed the movement in two papers (Keyes 1999a and 1999b).

Thaksin initially avoided the stigma associated with the police, because while in the force he worked to improve its technological competence rather than assuming a role as a line officer, his experience in the police and his close ties with many ranking police officers could well lie behind his willingness to use instruments of force to gain and maintain power.

After fourteen years in the police force, Thaksin resigned and in 1987 he founded, with capital provided by his family, a new telecommunications company. In 1990 in a move that was stunning, especially as he described himself as almost broke,¹⁸ he succeeded in getting a 20-year concession from the Telephone Organization of Thailand for establishing and operating a mobile phone company. Shin Corporation proved to be an immensely profitable company.

Having established himself as an extremely successful entrepreneur, he then turned to politics. In 1994 he was recruited by Chamlong Srimuang to become the deputy head of the Phalang Tham (Phalang Dhamma, or Power of the Dhamma) Party. Chamlong had sought to predicate the appeal of the Palang Tham Party primarily on the Buddhist charisma of the Santi Asoke movement. However, this appeal proved to be too narrow and so Chamlong invited Thaksin and other non-Santi Asoke politicians to join him in leading the party. The Phalang Tham party could not, however, hold together its religious and non-religious factions and collapsed after a disastrous showing in the 1996 election.

Drawing on his own wealth and that of other rich business backers as well as on the political capital Thaksin had accumulated from his years in the police and membership in other political parties, he subsequently forged an alliance of political factions and local party canvassers to found the Thai Rak Thai Party in 1998. The Party's agenda, part nationalist, part populist based on promotion of health and economic benefits for the vast majority of rural and urban poor, and part reformist based on public commitment to anti-corruption and social justice, proved to have wide appeal. The Party won a decisive victory, although not an absolute majority of seats, in the election of January 2001.

¹⁸ See "Thaksin Shinawatra – A Biography," *Bangkok Post*, August 2001 as reproduced on line as <http://www.bangkokpost.net/election2001/thaksinprofile.html>.

The new government that took power in January 2001 was widely praised for including several leftist-oriented student leaders from the 1970s, for its apparent openness, and for its concern for social justice. Chamlong was very positive in his support of the new government.

Within two years, however, Thaksin assumed a more authoritarian approach to governance. In 2003 his government launched an anti-drug campaign that aimed at ending or controlling the large-scale sale and consumption of methamphetamines and other illegal drugs in the country. The campaign sanctioned (even if it did not authorize) the police to carry out extra-judicial killings of several thousand suspected drug dealers. No prosecutions have ever been pursued for these killings. He also alienated the Muslim peoples of Thailand by very publicly aligning himself with U.S. President Bush in the war on terrorism. Thailand joined the 'coalition of the willing' in the Iraq War.

This alignment proved to be one of the reasons behind the rise of a Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand beginning in early 2004 – a situation exacerbated by the government's very heavy-handed response to the insurgents during 2004 and 2005. In his press conferences and public statements Thaksin demonstrated a lack of understanding of the problems in southern Thailand and contributed to growing anti-Muslim sentiments among Buddhists.

Despite the fact that an increasing number of members of the middle class as well as southern Muslims were becoming disenchanted with Thaksin, his government's programs for cheap health-care, debt relief, and government monies for village funds made him and Thai Rak Thai very popular among rural people and among members of the urban working class who remained closely tied to their rural families. In February 2005, Thai Rak Thai won a landslide victory with overwhelming support from villagers and urban workers.

It is important to emphasize that Thaksin succeeded in making villagers feel empowered in a way that no previous regime has done. I myself witnessed this while observing the February 2005 election in a village in northeastern Thailand where I have carried out long-term research over a forty-year period. Villagers felt that for the first time they had greater influence than the urban middle class or the military in determining the shape of government. A popular mandate did not, however, gain Thaksin full legitimacy in Thai terms, especially in the eyes of the urban middle class.

THAKSIN: A LEADER LACKING “MORAL FIBER”

Those who mobilized in such large numbers in early 2006 to call for Thaksin’s resignation questioned his “moral fiber” because of his gross misuse of power. This accusation implied that he was amoral by Buddhist standards.

One person who many saw as being an arbiter of ‘morality’ was Chamlong Srimuang. Although Chamlong had first recruited Thaksin into politics as a member of Phalang Tham and had welcomed his election in 2001, he subsequently found many of Thaksin’s policies objectionable and he increasingly came to question the morality of his actions. In early 2005, Chamlong had an open break with Thaksin over a proposal submitted by Thaksin’s government to Parliament and the Senate to permit whiskey and beer companies to be listed as public companies on the stock market. For Chamlong, the issue was moral:¹⁹ “Chamlong said alcohol corroded the social fabric and morals of Thais” (*The Nation*, August 26, 2004). He was backed by a movement which drew together monks, teachers and others. The demonstrations succeeded in persuading enough senators to vote against the proposal, resulting in one of Thaksin’s few legislative defeats.

In February 2006, Chamlong joined the leadership of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD). Chamlong was clearly drawing on his own virtue to question Thaksin’s legitimacy. He claimed that Thaksin had abused power to make possible the sale of the bulk of shares in Shin Corporation to a foreign company. Chamlong mobilized what he termed a “Dharma Army” of followers of Santi Asoke, including many monks, to join the PAD protests in Bangkok (*The Nation*, February 28, 2006).

Thaksin was also challenged by a highly respected Buddhist monk, Luangta Maha Bua Nyanasampannō, the renowned disciple of Acan Man Phurithatta (Bhuridatto Thera), a monk widely believed to have achieved enlightenment before his death in 1949. Like Chamlong, Maha Bua, who resides in the northeastern Thai province of Udorn, had first been a supporter of Thaksin. When, however, Thaksin intervened to have his own choice of senior monk installed as acting Supreme Patriarch because Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara Suvaddhana

¹⁹ In every Buddhist ritual, lay followers take the “five precepts” which includes a commitment to refrain from ingesting substances that cause heedlessness. Despite this, alcohol consumption is very high in Thailand, especially among males.

Mahathera had become incapacitated, Maha Bua, backed by many other monks, strongly protested (*The Nation*, March 5, 2005; *Bangkok Post*, March 4, 2006). Because Thaksin ignored this challenge, Maha Bua gave his support to the protests led by PAD (*The Nation*, March 8, 2006).

The monks that Thaksin turned to in an effort to demonstrate a positive relationship to the sangha were ones that had had a morally equivocal relationship to the pursuit of wealth. Soon after becoming prime minister, a scandal erupted over Phra Issaramunee, a monk whom Thaksin had once called his “doctor for soul sickness” (*The Nation*, Oct 16, 2001). Although renowned for his interpretation of the Buddha’s teaching about detachment from the world, Phra Issaramunee was, according to one account, “obsessed with worldly possessions and owned such luxurious items as telescopes, infra-red binoculars, scuba diving gear and a whirlpool bath tub. He recently purchased a Mercedes after complaining that the seats were not supportive enough in the Japanese car that Thaksin had given him” (Sanham 2001).²⁰ His “fondness for worldly goods” (*Bangkok Post*, October 16, 2001), however, did not prove to be his undoing or his reason for leaving the monkhood; rather this was due to his affair with a married woman. Thaksin then publicly distanced himself from his former spiritual mentor.

After Issaramunee, Thaksin’s favorite monk appears to have been Luang Phô Khoon, a very popular monk from northeastern Thailand widely referred to as a ‘capitalist monk’ (*Bangkok Post*, May 28, 2004).²¹ Luang Phô Khoon had gained a reputation for being a *nabun*, a ‘field of merit’, to whom donations resulted in worldly benefits for the donors. Thaksin had taken a particular interest in Luang Phô Khoon when the latter had to be hospitalized in 2004. In March 2006, in the midst of the crisis surrounding Thaksin “Luang Phor Khoon Parisuttho ...urged followers to send postcards to Government House to show support for Thaksin” (Chularat Saengpassa 2006).

²⁰ I am grateful to Chris Baker for bringing the story of Phra Issaramunee to my attention. For this story also see stories in *The Nation*, October 15, 2001; *The Nation*, Oct 16, 2001; *Bangkok Post*, October 16, 2001; *The Nation*, Oct 17, 2001; *The Nation*, Oct 18, 2001; “Planetsave” 2001.

²¹ On Luang Phô Khoon’s reputation, see Jackson (1999a, 1999b) and Pattana (in press).

Thaksin also allied himself with Dhammakaya, an evangelical Buddhist sect whose leader, Dhammachayo, despite strong support from many members of the middle class and political elite, had been under indictment for many years for corruption.²² When criminal charges against him were dropped in August 2006, Sanitsuda Ekachai, an influential columnist and Assistant Editor of the *Bangkok Post*, wrote:

The Dhammakaya court case has been dragging on for so long that most people have lost interest. The press is currently too busy with the heated politics of the day to bother with old news. The public is emotionally exhausted with political divisiveness caused by our Dear Leader to take up another controversy. The ailing Supreme Patriarch has long been hospitalised. For Dhammachayo's supporters who are politicians in power, time is also running out. Now that they are losing their grip, they know they must act before it is too late. (*Bangkok Post*, 24 August 2006)

There can be little question, as Sanitsuda implies, that Thaksin was behind this dropping of charges. Because both Dhammakaya and Luang Phô Khoo are seen as providing religious justification for this-worldly economic success, because the leader of Dhammakaya has been publicly humiliated for his alleged corruption, and, above all, Thaksin's own behavior has been seen by many critics as immoral, Thaksin was not able to counter the criticisms of his "moral fiber" posed by Chamlong and Luangta Maha Bua; in other words in the eyes of many he lacked the legitimacy derived from the *barami* of the sangha.

NOT ONE OF THE KING'S MEN

If Thaksin's relationship to Buddhism was, at the very least, somewhat equivocal, his relationship to King Bhumipol Adulyadej clearly demonstrated that he lacked the legitimacy of one who holds power in the name of the King. After becoming Prime Minister in January 2001, Thaksin paid lip service to exercising power on behalf of the monarch, but in practice either ignored advice given by the King or acted as though the monarchy was irrelevant to the exercise of power.²³ In December 2001, in his annual birthday speech, the King was publicly

²² On Dhammakaya, see Jacobs (2002). I also have discussed the movement (Keyes 1999a and 1999b).

²³ Handley (2006: 424ff) provides details about the relationship between Thaksin and the King. Handley's book appeared in the midst of the crisis surrounding Thaksin and even though the book is banned in Thailand, it has

critical of Thaksin's economic policy which ran counter to the King's own advocacy of sustainable development. A short note about this speech that appeared in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* on 10 January 2002 provoked Thaksin into having his government initiate proceedings to expel the *FEER* reporters based in Bangkok for posing a "threat to national security" (*Bangkok Post*, 23 February 2002). The controversy lasted for two months until the reporters "apologized." The apology was made for "any adverse commentary concerning Thailand's highest institution," but as an editorial in the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, which is also owned by Dow Jones, observed: "Mr Thaksin has a thin skin and is quick to blame others, especially foreigners, for his own mistakes" (quoted in the *Bangkok Post*, 5 March 2002). In retrospect, it seems clear that Thaksin had "picked the fight" with the *FEER* reporters to deflect public attention from the friction between himself and the palace.

Over his period in office, Thaksin successfully undermined or neutralized almost all the regulatory bodies established by the Constitution, but the palace remained a potent check on his power. In his assessment of the anti-Thaksin movement, Kasian Tejapira, a prominent Thai political scientist and public intellectual, wrote that "In the end the only rallying point for these disparate forces [of opposition] was the King" (Kasian 2006: 35). Both at the protests and in press releases many of the leaders of the PAD called for the King to intervene and replace Thaksin with a royally-appointed prime minister. Thaksin was himself partially responsible for bringing the monarchy into the political crisis. On his weekly radio program on 4 February 2006 he said: "The only person who can tell me to quit is His Majesty the King. If His Majesty whispers to me: 'Thaksin, please leave', I'll go" (*The Nation*, 5 February 2006). The King never publicly responded to these calls for his intervention, but there were signs that the King's advisors wanted him to believe that the King had "whispered."

Throughout the crisis there were many references to the King's birthday speech of December 2005 in which he told the people that he himself was not above criticism – a statement which was taken by many as suggesting an example that Thaksin should follow. There were also a couple of as yet unexplained incidents that took place during this time. On 12 March 2006 a video of "His Majesty the King's mediation of the bloody political turbulence in May 1992 was replayed to millions across the country on a TV pool Sunday night under the Royal

provided support for Thaksin and his supporters who see themselves in a struggle with the palace to promote democracy. For scholarly assessments of Handley's book, see Evans (2006) and Baker (2006).

Household Bureau's request in a clear signal of a Royal wish for all parties engaged in the current political bickering to reconcile" (*The Nation*, 12 March 2006). On 20 March, *The Nation* reported that the Privy Council had decided to replace Thaksin as the head of the committee organizing events in honor of the King's 60th year on the throne. This story was strongly denied the next day by a spokesman for the Privy Council, but there is no evidence as yet that *The Nation* fabricated the story.

Thaksin's legitimacy, despite the electoral successes of his Thai Rak Thai party, was, in short, being called into question at least indirectly by the palace as well as by the demonstrators. Thaksin strongly rejected the calls for his resignation and sought to reassert his legitimacy. He claimed that he was "the symbol of democracy" in the face of those "outlaws" who sought to oust him through mob rule (*The Nation*, 18 March 2006). This claim, however, rang hollow for many. Although Thaksin as prime minister controlled most of the institutions in which power then resided in Thailand, his political power (*amnat kanmüang*) had been increasingly shown to lack moral legitimacy (*phra khun*), especially in relationship to the monarchy.²⁴

THE LEGACY OF THE BAD OMEN OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ERAWAN SHRINE

Over four decades ago, Lucien Hanks in a seminal paper entitled "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order," posed a question that can be seen as very relevant to the crisis surrounding Thaksin. "What permits," Hanks asked, "a cruel and unjust tyrant to maintain himself, when the law of morality clearly says his reign must stop or, for that matter, never should have begun in the first place?" (Hanks 1962: 1254). In considering this question, Hanks noted that those who fail to demonstrate moral authority associated with Buddhism (and, I would add, the monarchy), may still succeed in their efforts by seeking validation for their authority through association with supernatural powers, thereby being able to claim that they are "specially favored because they stand in the protective aegis of a guardian outside the social order of mankind" (Hanks 1962: 1254). The destruction of the Erawan shrine

²⁴ In a personal communication (12 September 2006) about an earlier draft of this paper, Pattana Kittiarasa wrote "The power which Thaksin has is still *amnat kanmüang* or *phra det* rather than *phra khun*. It is based on amoral/supernatural/capitalist Buddhist sources." Pattana has elaborated on this point in an analysis of the coup, "In Defense of Thai-Style Democracy," which he presented at the National University of Singapore on 12 October 2006.

rendered profoundly problematic, I argue, the assumption – held by Thaksin as well as others – that he was “specially favored” because he was under “the protective aegis of a guardian outside the social order of mankind”.

The election of 2 April went ahead and Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai won a decisive victory – albeit one marred by the failure of two score TRT candidates to get the necessary 50% of the votes in their constituency even without any opposition and by the large number of “no” votes in Bangkok. The victory proved to be pyrrhic. After an audience with the King on 4 April, Thaksin announced that he would not accept the premiership in a new government to be formed following the election. Then on April 25th the Constitutional, Supreme and Administrative courts, following the advice of the King to review the outcome, found that the election of 2 April 2006 had not been a truly legal election and nullified it (*The Nation*, 8 May 2006). This decision plunged the country into a limbo that was to last for six months.

Because of uncertainty about when a new election could be held owing to a controversy surrounding the Election Commission, Thaksin resumed the premiership as a “caretaker”. He then proceeded to give signals that he would lead the Thai Rak Thai Party in the next election and would not rule out becoming prime minister again. He subsequently engaged in a very public contention with General Prem Tinsulanond. The social drama, to use a term originally put forward by Victor Turner (1974), still had not reached the point when the curtain could be drawn.

The dénouement in this drama can be seen, I believe, to have begun with the destruction of the Thao Maha Phrom shrine. Writing before the election in April, Ploenpote Atthakor, Chief News Reporter for the English-language newspaper *The Nation* (2006), concluded his editorial on the implication for Thaksin of the destruction of the shrine as follows: “The shattered image of the Brahma deity will be restored and before long, people will forget about the sad incident, the death of Thanakorn, and the people’s faith in the deity will continue to flourish. But the shattered belief in the country’s leader is a different story – it can never be restored, even if that leader manages to win the practically one-sided election.”

Popularity in an election could not trump Buddhist charisma; resort to strong-arm tactics such as sending out supporters to stage physical attacks on opposition demonstrators could not stop the questioning of Thaksin’s moral fitness to be prime minister; and no amount of

offerings to the Erawan shrine or to other spirits could overcome the bankruptcy of Thaksin's cultural capital which was dramatically evident in the aftermath of the destruction of the shrine.

In late August Thaksin flew to Burma, ostensibly to consult with the military rulers of that benighted country. It appears, however, that the more pressing reason was to consult with a famous Burmese astrologer, E Thi, better known as ET.²⁵ ET is reported to have told Thaksin that:

He should stay away from the Kingdom between September 8 and 22, because there are eclipses during this time. These eclipses could cast a dark pall over his duang [his star]. If he manages to endure the long journey and all of his sufferings in foreign lands, he would, after September 29, emerge with renewed energy. His duang will then shine like a bright star. He will once again become invincible. But at this point, he isn't sure himself how long he will have to sleep in strange places and stay away from Thailand.

Thaksin had official reasons to be absent during this period – he had arranged to leave the country on September 9th to go to several countries, ending up in New York where he planned to address the UN General Assembly. He did not even return home after 16 September when terrorists set off bombs in the southern city of Hat Yai, killing four and injuring 82. He kept to his schedule and planned to return to Bangkok on 22 September.

On 19 September, the army, led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, staged a coup. Thaksin's supporters put up no resistance and no blood was shed. It is not known whether General Sonthi or any other leader in the junta had chosen this day after consulting with astrologers, but the date was astrologically auspicious, as was noted in an article in *The Nation*: “General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the Army chief, led a successful coup to topple the Thaksin government. His destiny hinged heavily on the auspicious number nine.” The coup took place on the 19th day of the 9th month in the Buddhist year 2549. The day following the coup,

²⁵ The following is based on accounts of his visit to ET reported in a story in *The Irrawaddy*, September 2006 (on line edition, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/aviewer.asp?a=6112&z=12>), in *The Manager* (on line Thai edition of September 12, 2006) in *The Nation* (September 13, 2006 and September 15, 2006),

and on conversations with several Thai colleagues in September 2006.

General Sonthi appeared on TV at 9:39 am. “It was the number nine all the way.” *The Nation* article continues:

We aren’t sure how E Thi, the Burmese astrologer commonly known as ET, fit into the equation, but rumours swirling around the capital have it that she must have played a part in issuing a warning signal. Thaksin's fortunes were sandwiched between two eclipses – a bad omen for him – between September 8 and 22. Thaksin had been warned about this interval and told that if he were able to weather it, his political fortunes would shine again like a bright star.

Both Thaksin and his wife Khunying Pojaman hate eclipses. Their star forces coincide with the dark moon or *chan dap*. This means that the dark moon always stands in their way and they are destined not to be loved by those who associate with them. Thaksin did indeed travel abroad during this interval to avoid this bad omen. But he could not escape his fate, which had been written in the sky and dictated by the stars: he was toppled on 19/9/2549.²⁶

The legacy of the bad omen of the destruction of the Erawan Shrine had, one might conclude, finally come to fruition. Thaksin had clearly not only overreached in challenging those deeply offended by the corruption of his government and those who looked for political legitimacy to the authority of the throne and the charisma of those with close relations to the Buddhist sangha, but he had also in the eyes of many lost the mandate of the spirits and the stars (*duang*) which remain a significant influence on how Thai at all levels of society make decisions about important undertakings.

Quaritch Wales, in his study of “divination” in Thailand, observed that “Since the fateful year 1932 Siam, now Thailand, has certainly moved a long way from absolute monarchy. But whatever is to be her ultimate political fate, whatever is to be the future status of the Buddhist religion, belief in the power of the supernatural to order the affairs of daily life is too deeply ingrained to be easily uprooted” (Wales 1983: vii). Nerida Cook, one of the few recent scholars to give serious attention to the significance of astrology in Thailand, has written that

²⁶ For an insightful discussion of the significance of the number nine for Thai, see Cornwel-Smith (2005:166-67).

“Political astrology in Thailand borrows concepts and assumptions from the wider concerns and debates at the moment” (Cook 1991: 252)²⁷. Both private and public discourses about spirits, omens, and horoscopes contribute to the understandings Thai have about personal affairs and public political crises. The destruction of the Erawan Shrine did not lead directly to Thaksin’s being overthrown by a coup, but the interpretation of this destruction being an ill omen for him did contribute to the perception that his political authority was deeply compromised.

The stars, however, move and the spirits can always be propitiated again. When and if Thaksin is finally allowed to return home, perhaps after first seeking an audience with the King, he should then once again seek the patronage of Thao Maha Phrom.

²⁷ Cook wrote her PhD dissertation on astrology in Thailand (Cook 1989).

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