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**Thailand in Crisis:  
The Twilight of a Reign or the Birth of a New Order?**

*Proceedings of a Roundtable  
with a foreword by Anthony Reid*

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## FOREWORD

This discussion has been placed on the web because it is an issue of great concern particularly to the citizens of Thailand. In recent months the *lèse majesté* laws have been used to make public discussion of the Thai monarchy impossible in Thailand, at the very time when discussion appears particularly essential. On the one hand the institution of monarchy has been politicized as a legitimization for moves of dubious constitutionality against the elected government; on the other a 60-year reign that has transformed Thailand's monarchy is nearing its end, increasing anxieties about the succession.

The constraints now operating in Thailand increase the obligation on friends of Thailand to allow that necessary discussion to take place elsewhere. The Asia Research Institute convened a Round Table of three Singapore-based historians of Thailand, to allow a diversity of informed views to be expressed on this important subject. Our Thai friends and colleagues encouraged us to take this step, even though feeling unable to participate actively in the forum. They have also encouraged us to make the symposium available on line. We therefore present here the three papers presented.

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# Monarchy and Constitution in Recent Thai History

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## INTRODUCTION

Thailand has had a constitutional monarchy since 1932, but in many respects the system has been unstable. To some extent this reflects the broader political instability of the Thai political system, with its alternating cycles of military and civilian rule. At the same time, it is due to the weakness of constitutionalism in Thailand: the country is currently on its 17<sup>th</sup> promulgated constitution, and there have been times when none was in force at all. As a result, the balance of power between the two institutions of monarchy and constitution has fluctuated dramatically over the nearly eight decades since the end of the absolute monarchy. The history of the constitutional monarchy can be divided into at least five distinct periods based on the evolution of the specific relationship between these two institutions.

## 1932-1947: MONARCHY UNDER CONSTITUTION

During the early years after the coup by the People's Party (a group of officers and civilian officials) against the Chakri Dynasty, the monarchy was subordinated to the constitution. The parameters of its power were spelled out within the charters (a temporary and then a permanent constitution in 1932, and then a new one in 1946), and it generally operated within these parameters. The People's Party attempted to promote the constitution as something saksit ("sacred"), adding "Constitution" as a fourth element to the "Nation, Religion, King" triad which had characterized state ideology since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After the June 1932 coup, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, r. 1925-35) cooperated with the new regime but was engaged in a constant tug-of-war over the extent of royal prerogatives. Following his abdication in self-imposed exile, he was replaced by King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII, r. 1935-46), a young boy who spent most of his reign with his family in Switzerland. This period is generally considered as a low point for the modern Thai monarchy, since the People's Party held the upper hand by virtue of having seized power and rarely, if ever, felt itself obliged to make concessions to the royalists. This was particularly the case under Field Marshal Phibun (1938-44), who disliked the monarchy and was determined to minimize its political and ritual significance.

The monarchy suffered a further blow with the mysterious shooting of King Ananda in 1946. Not only did this tragedy end the life of a popular young ruler, it also led to dramatic changes in the configuration of Thailand's political forces. Royalists in particular became once more a force to be reckoned with; their position was strengthened by the numerous questions surrounding the King's death.

### **1947-1957: MONARCHY VS. CONSTITUTION**

Ananda's death led to an alliance (or perhaps more properly a marriage of convenience) between the royalists and the military, both groups being opposed to the more liberal faction led by Pridi Phanomyong, whom they were accusing of involvement in the shooting. Pridi had been Prime Minister at the time, and the fact that the apparent regicide occurred on his watch provided a golden opportunity for his numerous enemies. The army staged a coup in 1947, inaugurating a quarter-century of military rule. Relations between the military and the royalists remained tense, as they had fundamentally different conceptions of the monarchy's role in politics. The army, although by now less hostile to King Bhumibol (Rama IX, r. 1946-) than the first People's Party government had been toward his uncle Prajadhipok, remained wary of the royalists' agenda. The years after the 1947 coup saw a series of constitutions, some reflecting the royalist desire to enshrine as many royal prerogatives as possible, and others demonstrating the military's preference for a constitutional monarchy with minimal authority.

### **1957-1973: MONARCHY WITHOUT CONSTITUTION**

The year 1957 saw the final generation of the original People's Party and their followers replaced by a new strongman, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, who had had no involvement with the 1932 coup. Sarit held power in various capacities until his death in 1963, when he was succeeded by his two military protégés, Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphat Charusathien. These two men held power for the next decade, until they were driven from power by a student-led uprising in October 1973.

Sarit cultivated a close relationship with the King and Queen and took great pains to heighten the monarchy's public profile while also restoring some of the prerogatives removed under earlier regimes. His years in power are widely recognized as a watershed in the history of the Thai monarchy and as laying the foundations for the expansion of its prestige and authority in the decades to come. For much of this quarter-century there was no functioning parliament or constitution, with the exception of a brief three-year interlude between 1968 and 1971. The King maintained a relatively low profile in political terms, with little overt intervention in national affairs, but the "restoration" initiated by Sarit enabled him to gain the moral authority which would undergird his more active role after 1973.

### **1973-1997: MONARCHY OUTSIDE CONSTITUTION**

The period between 1973 and 1997 saw a return to the alternating cycles of military and civilian rule, with two high-profile interventions by the King, in October 1973 and May 1992. In both cases he intervened to end fatal clashes between the military and civilian protestors, appointing an interim civilian prime minister. These interventions (particularly the first one) dramatically raised his public profile while creating long-term precedents for his role as crisis-resolver. Although Thailand had constitutions for most of this period, the frequent scrapping of one charter and promulgation of a new one did nothing to consolidate the authority of the constitution as an institution. It can be argued that the strengthening of the King's moral authority and the legitimacy of his prerogatives outside the scope of the constitution came in direct proportion to the weakening of constitutionalism.

The royal prerogatives as defined in the constitutions remained relatively constant and there was little or no public discussion of them, with the exception of the 1974 charter, when the King himself objected to a particular clause which he felt gave the monarchy more power than it should legitimately have. At the same time, however, this period saw a significant increase in the influence being exercised behind the scenes by the King and those close to him, particularly General and former Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond. Moreover, the rise of the political Left (including but not limited to the Communist Party of Thailand) provoked a corresponding proliferation of Rightist forces, with the protection of the monarchy as one of their most explicit objectives. The lèse-majesté laws, strengthened under Sarit but less frequently used until the 1980s, were increasingly wielded against political opponents and critics of the military regime.

### **1997—: MONARCHY ABOVE CONSTITUTION**

The 1997 constitution, considered as one of the most significant in Thailand's political history and often billed as a "reform constitution", contained an important clause which was to open up a Pandora's box of possibilities for royal intervention in political affairs. Article 7 of the charter stated that situations where other clauses of the constitution could not be applied should be handled "according to the tradition of democratic government with the King as Head of State". With the rise of vocal and violent opposition against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2005-6, this article was increasingly linked to calls for royal intervention in the country's political crisis. Thaksin's opponents called for a "royally-appointed Prime Minister" (nayok phraratchathan) and for a "return of royal power" (thawai khuen phraratchamnat) on the grounds that he had shown disrespect for the monarchy and attempted to usurp royal prerogatives in specific areas. The "Yellow Shirts" movement made use of the royal color to link all opposition to Thaksin – including the 2006 military coup which drove him from power – to support for the monarchy. The latest constitution (2007) has retained Article 7.

### **CONCLUSION**

I argue that the transition to a constitutional monarchy which began in 1932 is in effect an unfinished process, since the relationship between the two key institutions has yet to fully stabilize and since the functioning of the political system continues to involve a considerable degree of royal authority outside of constitutional prerogatives. The constitution has failed to become 'saksit', and thus it is unable to serve as a baseline or foundation for the political process. At the same time, the evolution of the Thai constitutional monarchy has been a conceptual and discursive change from "king under constitution/law" (phramahakasat yu tai ratthathammanun, phramahakasat yu tai kotmai) to "democracy with King as Head of State" (rabop prachathipatai an mi phramakasat song pen pramuk). To some extent this change is linked to the broader discourse of "Thai democracy", as opposed to Western-style ("farang") democracy. Unlike the original phrase which clearly subordinated the monarchy to the constitution, this formulation makes no explicit or implicit attempt to define the relationship between the two; thus it can be constantly readjusted and renegotiated.

## **Defending The Monarchy: Why and How?**

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### **“DEFENDING THE MONARCHY: WHY AND HOW?”**

We have not gathered today for an academic discussion. Rather, the purpose of this gathering is to bring together a number of friends of Thailand with the humble intent of initiating discussion of the troubling circumstances in which the country now finds itself. We realize that many of our Thai friends and colleagues could bring far more to this discussion than can we. And, in part, our concern over Thailand’s present circumstances stems from their inability to participate in a similar public discussion on Thai soil.

I hope that I can begin with a story ... One of my favorite places in Bangkok used to be the Silom Club, on Soi Si Wiang near Bangkok Christian College in Bangrak. For years, the club allowed non-members to stop in for a relaxed dinner in its open-air front room. The food was inexpensive and very good. More recently, a mere snack bar replaced the restaurant, but the club’s front room remained a wonderful spot to have a cup of coffee in an atmosphere that recalled another era.

The club sat on Crown Property Bureau land. There began in the past decade to be stories of its having difficulties renewing the lease on its prime Silom-Sathon area site.

I had long looked at the names of former officers of the Silom Club listed on its walls, but until about two years ago I had never walked over to the entrance to the club’s members-only locker room to have a look at the portrait hanging above the doorway to that room. When I finally did, I saw that it was a portrait of Chao Phraya Sithammathibet, the club’s founder, one of the leading participants in the Thai monarchy’s effort to reassert its prestige during its dark days of the mid-1950s, a sometime member of the Democrat Party, and a member of the Privy Council till he died in 1976.

About a year ago, I decided to take a friend to see the Silom Club’s wonderful inter-war building and the portrait of its founder. We found the gate locked. The watch-man told us that everything had been moved out, prior to demolition of the building and the construction of something else on the site. I asked whether Chao Phraya Sithammathibet’s portrait was still hanging inside the club. The watch-man told me that he did not know.

I use this story to suggest several points. The most obvious is that monarchy in Thailand has a history. It has always been a dynamic, rather than a static institution. Much of its historic success can be attributed to that dynamism. Monarchy in Thailand has long been able to reinvent itself during bad times in order to play a new, constructive role later on. So it was that, in the 1870s, the combination of lingering Bunnag family influence and the power of the Front Palace led King Chulalongkorn to bide his time, so that, from the 1890s, he and his half-brothers could modernize the government of Siam and lift the monarchy to a previously unknown position of real power. So it was that, between the abdication of Rama VII and the

coups d'état of Sarit Thanarat in 1957 and 1958, monarchy had nothing like the centrality to Thai life that it had by the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

Similarly, but on a smaller scale, Chao Phraya Sithammathibet was a man of great importance to the success of the current reign in its first decades. By the early twenty-first century, however, he is largely forgotten, and the Crown Property Bureau has attached greater importance, in the wake of its losses in the 1997 financial crisis, to realizing the value of some of its prime Bangkok real estate than to preserving the club that he founded.

Or we can look at Chanida Chitbandit's impressive history of the royally initiated projects of this reign, which divides that history into four distinct eras: the eras of the birth of the royal projects, of development for national security, of what Chanida terms coordination, and of the emergence of a quasi-private agency. Royal projects, Chanida makes clear, have been a central feature in the current reign, but their history shows that dynamism rather than stasis has marked the Thai royal institution.

With this clear idea of the Thai monarchy's dynamic nature in mind, it is puzzling and sad to learn that "defending the monarchy" is now considered a top priority of the Thai state, a matter of "national security". The house of Chakri has never thrived when it has circled the wagons and made its own defense its highest priority. Moments when others have circled the wagons to defend it have always risked associating the Thai monarchy with thuggery. That monarchy has prospered when it and those who have served it have understood the reality of change and found ways to play constructive roles under circumstances that would have been unimaginable even just a few years before.

Thailand has changed beyond the ability of anyone to imagine in the 63 years since the beginning of the present reign. Even in the four decades years since the current king began, during the premiership of Field Marshall Sarit, to play the active role that had been impossible during the Phibun period, Thailand's population, economy, value systems, and level of education have changed beyond all recognition. Just as few who now say that they want to defend the monarchy would be satisfied with the monarchy as it was in 1950s, so the monarchy of 1960—which then enjoyed the strong backing of Field Marshall Sarit—would have had little relevance to the circumstances of 2000 or 2005. Likewise, the monarchy of 2006 or 2009 will have little relevance to the conditions of 2015 or 2025. Setting out to "defend the monarchy" as we now know it thus makes little sense, even when such defense is not merely a pretext for using *lèse majesté* laws for narrow political score-settling.

What makes far greater sense is considering and discussing the role that monarchy can play in Thailand's future. The absence of such discussion in today's Thailand is a terrible shame. It is a cause for great worry. That discussion hardly requires criticism of the king, his consort, or the heir. It does not require that one break the law. But it does require acknowledgment that the circumstances of the current reign have been unique, and that for the royal institution to play the role in the Thailand of 2015 that it played in 1965 or even 1985 is simply impossible. The economy and society of Thailand are too complex now. Better-educated Thais, in all regions and of all socio-economic levels have come to have different expectations of their government. One of their expectations is to be taken seriously by those who oversee their affairs. These are changes that the house of Chakri can embrace and and of which it can make the best. Instead, its alleged defenders seek to cower before such changes or to wish them away. If the king's evident ill-health causes people not only sadness for him but also anxiety for the future of Thailand, then the pronouncements about defense of the



monarchy rather than open, constructive discussion of its future role ought only to increase our anxiety for Thailand.

Of course, the future of monarchy in Thailand is debated and discussed by thousands of Thais every day. Much of this discussion takes place on the Web, and much of it is reasonable, intelligent, and constructive. But—like any activity driven underground through intimidation and threat and fear—some of it is irresponsible and unconstructive. Were this discussion out in the open, constructive discussion would soon crowd out irresponsible comment.

To those who say that Thaksin Shinawatra is responsible for greater discussion of the future of monarchy in Thailand in recent years, or that Chakkraphop Penkhae was actually the author of *The Economist's* article on the role of the monarchy in the politics of 2008, one need only ask several questions. Are Thai people so dim-witted as not to wonder what the inevitable end of the current reign may mean for their country? Was the intensive participation in the political show-downs of 2006 of Privy Council president Prem Tinasulanon not sufficient to make Thais previously unfamiliar with the Privy Council and its roles think more about its place in the governance of the country? None of this has been Thaksin's doing. And the role of blind hatred of him in shaping the conduct of many in Thailand today is a further cause still for anxiety about the country's future.

If comparison across time is of value in thinking about these issues, then so too may be comparison across space. Thailand and the house of Chakri in effect invited such comparison in hosting so many representatives of brother-monarchies at the celebrations of the current reign's sixtieth jubilee in 2006 and displaying the large group photo of assembled sovereigns in Suwannaphum airport even today. Many before me have drawn comparisons between the Thai monarchy and others represented at the jubilee celebrations. One comparison in particular has intrigued me. I have wondered, I should say, what went through the mind of Queen Sofia of Spain during her time in Bangkok as representative of her husband King Juan Carlos in June 2006. Her proper title is, of course, Sofia of Bourbon and Greece. She is, on the Bourbon side, the consort of a man whose throne was abolished in favor of a Spanish republic only to be restored by a fascist dictator (and only upon that dictator's death), a man who in 1981 defied his military's attempt to tear out the roots of his country's new democracy through a coup, and a man whose rapidly changing country is openly uncertain of the relevance of monarchy to the next generation of Spaniards. She is also, on the Greek side, the sister of the former King Constantine, who lost his throne in the aftermath of a military coup and whose country is now a republic. What, indeed, did Queen Sofia think of what she saw in Bangkok in June 2006?

## Semiotics of Rama IX

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### INTRODUCTION

As the duration of King Bhumibol's reign (the ninth of the Chakri dynasty) now spans more than six decades, and thus the living memory of three generations of Thais, it is not an easy proposition to make that the Thai monarchy today represents the outcome of a historical process of resuscitation: from the nominal institution it had become by 1946, when Bhumibol inherited the throne upon the accidental death of his brother Anantha, to its purported unanimous popularity in the present. Not unlike many a monarchy in Europe and Asia during the first half of the twentieth century, Thailand's too went close to landing in history's dustbin or surviving only as a purely symbolic institution. Instead, shifting political circumstances and the ambition of a sovereign born in Cambridge, Massachusetts to a princely father and a commoner mother both studying at Harvard University have resulted in the throne achieving a degree of power and authority far exceeding the boundaries commonly associated with the system of constitutional monarchy which was instituted in 1932. The crisis of anxiety that is presently shaking Thailand, as the nation prepares itself to a problematic dynastic succession amidst clear instances of civil conflict, reinforces the notion that the Ninth Reign has indeed brought about a critical transformation in the place and role of the monarchy in Thailand's collective consciousness.

A far from secondary aspect of this monarchical resuscitation concerns the reconstitution of the monarchy's sacred aura, as manifested in courtly rites and royal ceremonies and, more fundamentally, by King Bhumibol's charisma (*barami*). Paul Handley's controversial book, *The King Never Smiles* (2006) refers in its very title to Bhumibol's Olympian persona, even though Handley is dismissive of royal pomp as a relic of premodern politics. In so doing, Handley shows a peculiar lack of understanding of the Thai theatrics of power, whose roots lay in Hindu-Buddhist religious and political symbolism, and of contemporary political theatrics in general, in which the public image of prime ministers and heads of state is often not an appendage but the very essence of political communication.

It is worth noting at the outset that the reconstitution of the monarchy's mystique in the current reign runs contrary to the demotic refashioning of its public image that took place under King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910), when the throne took on the mantle of modernity while entrenching its domestic power and international prestige. At the turn of the last century Indic costumes and regalia were shelved in favour of sabres, sashes and western uniforms, while pageants in the turn-of-the-century imperial style celebrated the monarchy as an institution in the service of national progress rather than the conservation of the cosmic order. Overseas education, mainly in England but also Prussia and Russia, gave Thai princes a worldly outlook that deepened the gap between ruling elite and the commoner class in the last two decades of the absolutist era, during which open criticism of the royalty was articulated in the printed media; articles denouncing their egoism and social backwardness were matched by political cartoons satirizing the physical and moral deficiencies of King

Vajiravudh (Rama VI) and King Prajadhipok (Rama VII). It is symptomatic of the success of the royalist revival of the second half of the twentieth century that this anti-monarchical strain has not only been expunged from the national narrative, but its heretical character appears alien to the dominant representation of Thai political culture.

When in 1935, following the abdication of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII), the line of succession switched to ten year-old Anantha, the eldest son of Prince Mahidol (a son of Rama V by a minor queen), the monarchy entered an eclipse phase that lasted a decade and a half. Because of his young age and the uncertain political situation in Thailand, Anantha continued to reside with his mother and his younger brother Bhumibol in Switzerland, where the two boys were at school. Anantha visited Bangkok with his mother and brother at the end of 1945; but on 9 June 1946, on the eve of their departure, Anantha was found dead in the royal palace with a bullet through his head. Eighteen-year-old Bhumibol was rushed to the throne and immediately after rushed back to Switzerland with his mother on trumpeted fears their life may be at risk. Bhumibol returned briefly to Thailand in the spring of 1950 for his coronation and wedding ceremonies to Queen Sirikit, and then permanently the following year.

Photography has since been regularly employed for the documentation and public representation of the monarchy, so that a semiotic analysis can be undertaken by considering official images of Rama IX and the royal family. For analytical purpose, I propose a six-stage periodization of the Ninth Reign by which to frame the shifts in the monarchy's public image:

1. 1951-63: Fitting in the king's clothes
2. 1963-76: Accumulating symbolic capital
3. 1976-82: Loss and recovery of symbolic capital
4. 1982-1996: Royal apotheosis, from the Chakri Bicentennial to the Golden Jubilee
5. 1997-2006: Consensus and challenges, from the People's Constitution to the Diamond Jubilee
6. 2006-the present: Political turmoil and dynastic anxiety

### **STAGE 1: 1951-63**

In his first decade on the throne, the young Bhumibol, who was born and grew up far from the court, had to adjust to his new institutional role. This adjustment entailed tutorage in courtly etiquette and the archaic royal language upon his return to Thailand. His attempt at literally fitting in the new clothes of a king is exemplified by photographs of the royal wedding in 1950 (**Fig. 1**), in which King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit wear costumes that bear an uncanny resemblance to those of the musical *The King and I*, whose original stage production (with Yul Brynner in King Mongkut's role), with costumes produced by Jim Thomson's Thai silk factory, opened in Broadway in 1951; and of Rama IX during his time as a Buddhist novice in 1956 (**Fig. 2**), which established a biographical analogy to his predecessors.



Figure 1



Figure 2

The counterpoint to Rama IX's domestic self-presentation in accordance with an archaic royal imagery was his international persona as a cosmopolitan, progressive-looking 'Asian' monarch, not unlike Persia's last shah, Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941-79), who spent his time between family and hobbies. Photos of Bhumibol and Sirikit taken during their world tour of 1960 show them at ease in the company of European monarchs and heads of state, the Catholic Pope and even pop idols such as Elvis Presley and Benny Goodman. Young and fashionable, the Thai royal couple was the perfect advertisement for a government that, in the midst of the Cold War divisions, stood proudly in the 'Free World' camp and boosted his strategic alliance with the USA.

The royal world tour had been engineered by the Thai prime minister, strongman Sarit Thanarat, who in 1958 had ousted Marshal Phibul Songkhram, one of the organizers of the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Phibul's downfall marked the beginning of the monarchical revival that restored the throne to the centre of the Thai socio-political universe under the military's vigilant gaze. Indeed, the royalist revival sponsored by the Sarit regime (whose own catchword was 'development', *kanpattana*) bore some parallels to the patronage of demoted Southeast Asian monarchies by colonial governments, which sought to enshroud their 'rational' political authority in the trappings of traditional symbols and rituals. So, it is not surprising that one of the earliest initiatives was the reinstatement of royal ceremonies that had been scrapped in the 1930s. But the crucial role in boosting the monarchy's popularity was played by radio and television (the latter starting regular broadcast as early as 1955), which have since provided daily coverage of the royal family's activities, the opening item on evening news bulletins.

A more sinister aspect of the military patronage of the throne was the manipulation of *lèse-majesté* as a tool to silence political opponents. Under Sarit, *lèse-majesté* was transformed from an offence against the monarchy to a much graver offence against national security. Sarit even forged a closer connection between the throne and the military (which the former regarded with suspicion because of its role in the 1932 coup) by having the King assume honorary command of the Cadet Academy and the Queen become honorary colonel of the regiment assigned to royal duties. This is the historical context in which to appreciate the photograph of Bhumibol and Sirikit exercising in a shooting range under the supervision of an army officer (**Fig. 3**) – an image that contrasts and complements that of Bhumibol in novice's clothes as a representational yin-yang.



**Figure 3**

**STAGE 2: 1963-76**

Following Sarit's death in 1963, Rama IX took on a gravitas more appropriate to his maturity and growing political role. This was the period (up until 1976) when the throne accumulated a significant amount of symbolic capital. King Bhumibol's hedonistic pastimes (sailing, music) were played down in favour of the display of concern for the welfare of the rural population, whom the king started meeting in frequent tours of Thailand's even most remote provinces – some, like Mae Hong Son, never before been visited by a sovereign. The deferential attitude of villagers towards the monarchs on these occasions, while not surprising, obviously reflected also the careful organization and orchestration of the royal visits by local officials. As an outcome of the visits, 'royal projects' were also initiated in the countryside under a labour division of sort between Queen Sirikit, who began engaged in the revival of village crafts, and King Bhumibol, who experimented innovative agricultural techniques in the palace's orchards.

During the decade of rule by Sarit's army associates (1963-73) the throne continued to legitimate authoritarian governments, yet also tried to reach out to emerging social groups. The whole royal family participated in the task of establishing a special relationship with tertiary students – the sons and (increasingly) the daughters of the provincial middle strata engendered by the economic growth of the 1960s – by presiding over degree convocations in the capital's two universities and the newly established provincial universities (the King's Scholarship was significantly established in 1965). By the early 1970s the institutional re-foundation of the monarchy had made considerable advance and Rama IX, strong of his newly accumulated moral capital, had begun to voice some criticism of the military in his public speeches. Massive street demonstrations organized by the student movement in the early weeks of October 1973 demanded the resignation of the junta that two years earlier had dissolved the parliament and suspended the constitution. The generals moved to violently repress the protests, but failed to obtain the support of the army commander and the validation of the throne; instead, Rama IX requested the dictators to leave the country and appointed a caretaker prime minister.

For the students, who had rallied in the streets holding giant photographs of the king and queen as symbolic shields for protection against the charges of the army and the police, Rama IX became instantly the nation's saviour. In the collective imagination, the October 1973 events also established a connection between the rejuvenated monarchy and the newfound democracy. However, the government's inability to control domestic unrest in the mid-1970s and the concurrent US defeat in Vietnam and overthrow of the Lao and Cambodian monarchies by communist armies led the throne to withdraw its support to the democratically elected parliament and unleashed the reaction of the military. It is significant that the impetus behind the storming of the Thammasat University campus by police and paramilitary forces on 6 October 1976 was the charge of *lèse-majesté* based on the artfully spread rumour that the students had staged the mock hanging of a puppet representing the Crown Prince (in reality, the performance re-enacted the lynching of a student that had taken place a few days earlier).

**STAGE 3: 1976-82**

The brutality of the backlash dissipated the bond the throne had established with the younger generations of Thais over the previous decade. Many students were arrested on political charges and many more other fled to the jungle where they joined the clandestine Communist Party of Thailand. Thus, as soon as 1977, Rama IX took steps to mend the monarchy's tarnished image by elevating his much admired daughter, Princess Sirindhorn, to the special rank of Maha Chakri – a rank elevation that was understood to represent her de facto investiture as next in the line of succession to Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, whose racy private life and close association with the military were the cause of much rumours. Princess Sirindhorn (b. 1955) began following regularly Rama IX in his visits to the provinces. Photographs taken on these occasions (**Fig. 4 and 5** – the former documenting a visit to a southern Muslim province) show Sirindhorn knelling next to her father and taking notes of his instructions as if she were the first of the royal collaborators rather than royalty herself. Bhumibol's persona in these visits became iconic of the mature stage of his reign, focused on improving the welfare of rural Thais: dress uniform, later replaced by civilian clothes; a topographical map of the region visited outspread in his hands or folded in his jacket's pocket; and a camera dangling from his neck – almost a prosthetic eye for surveying and recording the state of the countryside and its people.

**Figure 4**





**Figure 5**

As Princess Sirinthorn's own visibility increased considerably in the following years to become second only to the king's, the modesty of her public image (plain clothes, no makeup, and simple deportment) – highly uncharacteristic in a society like Thailand's, obsessed with beauty pageants – set her visually apart from her mother and sisters, and arguably contributed to the public perception of her as an individual with great *barami* and the moral (if not dynastic) heir to King Phumiphon. Like the other members of the royal family, Princess Sirindhorn has been assiduously promoting the monarchy's charitable initiatives, but she also gained special recognition for her symbolic role as guardian of the country's arts and culture, a role enshrined by the institution of Thai Cultural Heritage Conservation Day on 2 April to mark her birthday. Only in recent years has Princess Sirindhorn somewhat receded on the background to allow greater visibility of the Crown Prince's public activities, designed to boost his lack of popular support in preparation for his eventual succession to the throne.

#### **STAGE 4: 1982-96**

In the context of the cautious political liberalization of the early 1980s, the motto 'nation, religion and monarchy', originally coined in the 1910s, was expanded in the formula 'and democracy with the king as head of state'. Concurrently, a series of royal celebrations was set in motion by the twin bicentenary of Bangkok and the Chakri dynasty (1982), followed by the king's auspicious sixtieth birthday, or fifth life's cycle (1987), the year of the longest reign in Thai history (1988), culminating with the fiftieth anniversary of reign (1996). This string of royal celebrations also originated a hagiographic literature, which articulated an extra-constitutional idea of kingship based on the spiritual and emotional bond of the sovereign with his subjects, and even more on the subsumption (of absolutist derivation) of the nation's body politic under the king's sacred body. Thus, *A Memoir of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand* (1987) states lyrically:



Wherever there is joy or celebration, the King is there to bless the joy and share in the celebration. Wherever there is a problem, the King is there to look for a solution. Wherever there is distress or sorrow, the King is there to soothe, to assist, to strengthen. People thus become used to feel his presence in all instants of life. The King and the People become one.

By the early 1990s signs of Rama IX's incipient apotheosis were aplenty, but none more eloquent than the televised royal audience, on 20 May 1992, with the antagonists behind the bloody political clashes of the previous days: unelected Prime Minister, General Suchinda Krapayun, and his opponent, Chamlong Simuang. Fifty millions TV spectators watched Suchinda and Chamlong knelling at the king's feet in the presence of the powerful Privy Councillor, General Prem Tinsulanonda, and humbly receiving the royal admonition to take a step back and stop the violence in the streets (**Fig. 6**). Two days later Suchinda resigned, thus opening the way for a royally appointed caretaker prime minister; and King Bhumibol, who appeared to have defused Thailand's most dramatic political crisis in years as a veritable *deus ex machina*, was hailed for the second time as the nation's saviour. In the mid 1990s Rama IX took an even more admonitory stance by denouncing political corruption and articulating, at the time when Thai urbanites were enthusiastic about globalization, a vision of sustainable development and economic self-reliance that seemed vindicated when a financial crisis of massive proportions erupted in the latter half of 1997.



**Figure 6**

### **STAGE 5: 1997-2006**

The seemingly unanimous consensus about the monarchy's institutional centrality that had formed by the early 1990s was underscored by the so-called 'People's Constitution', promulgated in September 1997, just when the financial crisis had broken out. As King Bhumibol turned seventy, Thailand's chart reaffirmed the sacredness and inviolability of the sovereign and shielded him constitutionally from possible criticism. The re-sacralization of not only the monarchical institution but the very person of the monarch, whose semi-divinity started to being openly alleged by royalist spin doctors, entailed a re-iconicization of his images as well. Portraits of the king and royal family members were invested with a sacredness they had arguably never possessed, and disrespect towards them became tantamount to an act of *lèse-majesté* (as in the case of a Swiss man resident in Chiang Mai,

who in 2007 received a ten year sentence, promptly annulled by a royal pardon, for spraying paint over portraits of Rama IX).

Conversely, the ambiguous legal formula of ‘democracy with the king as head of state’ validated the institutional as well as symbolic pre-eminence of the monarchy over government, parliament and constitution, and so cast the sovereign as the nation’s true and only representative. With the rise of Thaksin Shrinawatra to prime minister, however, the throne faced for the first time since the early 1950s a direct challenge to its symbolic pre-eminence (**Fig. 7**). Royal chastising of Thaksin did not stop him from competing with Rama IX for the role of champion of Thailand’s rural population, the basin of voters behind Thaksin’s two landside victories in the general elections of 2001 and 2005.



**Figure 7**

In June 2006 Rama IX celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of his accession in the presence of royal guests from twenty-five countries and amidst much public jubilation. The Bangkok liberal newspaper *The Nation* wrote that the Diamond Jubilee ‘had an enormous impact on the Thai people. It has created a long-lasting spiritual bond between them and their monarch in a way that people from other cultures may find hard to understand.’ Yet the jubilee celebrations took place during a growing confrontation between government and opposition, a confrontation of which the throne was not neutral spectator. When the next September a bloodless army coup deposed Thaksin, Rama IX promptly sanctioned an action that marked an unwelcome return to past interferences of the military in the political process, in spite of the support of the Bangkok middle class to the coup. Once more, Thaksin’s deposition demonstrated the throne’s willingness to rely on its moral authority to act politically in the nation’s alleged interest.

**STAGE 6: 2006-PRESENT**

In the aftermath of the overthrow of Thaksin, Thailand has entered a volatile political crisis, somewhat anticipated by the outbreak of the Muslim insurgency in the southern provinces in 2000, which shows no signs of abating. Because of the assiduously promoted identification of the sovereign's body with the body politic, King Bhumibol's increasingly fragile health has become a fitting representation of the nation's political malady. On the day of his discharge from Siriraj Hospital in November 2007, after three weeks spent in observation, a failing Bhumibol wore a pink shirt and jacket (**Fig. 8**). Whatever the reasons for such an extravagant sartorial choice, allegedly due to the advice of court astrologers, it was hard not to see it in connection to the colour-coded political tribalism – 'yellow shirts' (Thaksin's opponents) against 'red shirts' (Thaksin's supporters) – that is the dismal mark of the twilight of the Ninth Reign.

**Figure 8**