

# Thai Monarchy

*Gothom Aryan*

*Abstract:* In pre-modern time, a Thai King might have influence over a large territory but exercised absolute power only in the vicinity of his city. The emergence of Absolute Monarchy (AM) was mainly in response to the colonial threat and the desire to join world capitalism. Its development began in the 19th century and coincided with the nation-state building process. The process needed the participation of aristocrats and able commoners. The competition between the two led the latter to choose the loyalty to the nation over the loyalty to the King. As a result of the 1932 revolution, the King graciously accepted to come under the constitution thus ushered the country into the era of Constitutional Monarchy (CM). At the beginning, CM was on shaky ground. It survives and blooms thanks to the dedication of a multi-talented Monarch who realized that only by winning the heart of the populace would he be able to ensure the continuity of the task he inherited. This background of Thailand allows us to understand the inherent weakness of absolutism and the difficulty to sustain the monarchy. In theory, monarchical and republican democracies have more or less the same values: the former may be weaker in ensuring moral autonomy of the people but stronger in ensuring their solidarity through the loving and loved Monarch. In a country where the pros and cons of having CM are being debated, it may be useful to look at the Thai and other country case studies so that the debate would not be positional but articulated. If CM is to be preserved, appropriate laws and institutions must be in place and the King be properly assisted. The importance of the King's own efforts to earn respect cannot be overlooked but more importantly is to know where the values of the monarchy lies and to create the will of the people to maintain them whose lack thereof would put the monarchy in great danger.

## 1. Introduction

Siam became a nation-state in the 1900s and the nation-state building coincided with the efforts to establish an absolutism or Absolute Monarchy (AM). The AM was to be soon after followed by Constitutional Monarchy (CM) as a result of a revolution led by a group of middle-rank military and civil officials called Kana Rasadorn or People's Party, on 24 June 1932. The brief history of the rise and fall of AM as well as the establishment of CM is here given to provide a case study of monarchy whose merit and demerit in modern-time society are also discussed.

Those who are familiar with the Thai political history or who are impatient to enter in the debate on monarchy can skip the sections 2, 3 and 4 and directly go to the section 5 where the issue of Monarchy and democratization is discussed.

This article provides the historical background that would allow us to understand the driving forces and historical facts behind the changes. It also attempts to answer the questions of desirability and sustainability of CM. It is hopeful the discussion on CM would put us in a better position to understand what would make CM flourish, decline and eventually change into a republic.

## 2. The Rise of Thai Absolute Monarchy (AM)

### 2. 1 The Pre-modern Time

The monarchy in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sukhothai was regarded as a form of patriarchy wherein the Ruler-King had a father-figure and looked after the people according to ten Buddhist Virtues called Thotsapit-Rajadharma. The dynasty of Ayudhaya, which came to pro-eminence in mid 14th century, was hierarchic and followed the divine kingship or Deva-Raja concept<sup>1</sup>. The Kingdom, later known as Siam and recently as Thailand whose center of power is in the Chaophya valley,

---

<sup>1</sup> Prudhisana Jumbala, Nation-Building and Democratization in Thailand: A Political History, Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 1992, pp. 7-8.

claims a centuries-long and continuous monarchical rule despite the relocation of capital cities and the changes of dynasty. So it may be interesting to look at the history of monarchy in Thailand and its longevity up until the modern time.

It can be asserted that, in the pre-modern time or before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Kingdom was not a single political organization under a unified authority. In fact, it comprised of the most powerful township, the capital, and a number of other major and minor townships with varying degrees of autonomy. In times of peace each township ran its own affairs and paid tribute: minor townships paid tribute to major ones and all did so to the most powerful. Because of geographical barriers and communication difficulty, the capital could exercise the direct rule only over an area within a radius of, say, two days of traveling<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the power of the monarch was not always absolute: there was a balance of power among king, princes, and bureaucrats<sup>3</sup>.

### 2.1 Chakri Dynasty

Upon ascending to the Throne, Thai monarchs announce that they will rule “righteously and well for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people”. Kings rose and fell through how they did or did not do so and also how they adapted to or exploited the prevailing conditions of their time.

After the sack of the old capital, Ayudhya, by the Burmese, King Taksin succeeded in pushing them back. He established a new capital at Thonburi but was soon replaced by his General, King Rama I, who established the capital in Bangkok. Thus began the Chakri Dynasty that has been reigning up to the present King Rama IX. In the beginning of Chakri dynasty, the country was still known by the name of Siam and the conditions of the pre-modern time prevailed.

It is argued that the conditions that compelled the centralization of power through absolutism were created by Siam’s increasingly profitable involvement in the world-economy<sup>4</sup>. In other words, absolutism and capitalism assured the transition from pre-modern Ayudhaya to modern nation-state reached by the time of 1932’s revolution.

Although King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1868) was normally credited for initiating the modernization, the trends themselves could be traced back to the reign of his half-brother, Rama III (1824-1851). During the latter’s reign, the economic expansion, responsible for the first stages of state formation, included the increase in Sino-Siamese trade in response to demands of world capitalist system and the expansion in tax farming system that enabled the monarch to shift his dependence from royal monopolistic trade to internal exaction<sup>5</sup>. The kingdom thus became better prepared when the royal trade monopoly came to an abrupt end with the Bowring Treaty in 1855.

### 2.1 State-building

The State-building involved the creation of new structures and organizations designed to “penetrate” the society in order to regulate behavior in it and draw resources from it<sup>6</sup>. Facing the threat of European colonialism, King Mongkut tried to reform the traditional state by opening itself to western knowledge and technology, engaging the powers of the west and accepting to enter the world capitalist system. He might not do so wholeheartedly as trade liberalization had an immediate effect of reducing royal income. It was speculated that the great family of nobles (Bunnags), where much power laid, forced the acceptance of the Bowring Treaty with the British whereby British

---

<sup>2</sup> Chaiyan Rajchagool, The Rise and Fall of the Thai Absolute Monarchy, Bangkok, White Lotus, 1994, pp. 2-3

<sup>3</sup> Prudhism Jumbala, op.cit., pp. 8-9

<sup>4</sup> Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism, Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D. in Politics, SOAS, April 2000, p. 9

<sup>5</sup> Nithi Aeusrivongse, Pakkai lae bairue (Quills and Sails), Bangkok, Matichon Press, noted in ibid, pp. 14-15

<sup>6</sup> Prudhisan Jumbala, op. cit., p. 10

citizens could trade with whomever with minimum custom duties and enjoyed extra-territoriality rights.

His son, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910) is one of the great kings of Chakri dynasty and was a great reformer. He began his reign at a young age and skillfully started to reduce the power of Bunnag family and consolidated power under the monarchy. Although the threat of colonialism had somewhat subsided, he still exploited it to pressure the ruling class to accept his reforms. The system of assigning bureaucrats to oversee the provinces without remuneration was abolished, for it led to excessive extraction from the populace as well as the withholding of revenue from the King. It was replaced by a salary system<sup>7</sup>. Slavery and corvée labour were abolished, as a result, a class of owner-cultivators was created and became a productive force in yielding raw material for exports.

As far as State-building is concerned, the most significant reform was in the area of territorial administration. The local ruling aristocracies were replaced by paid officials directly answerable to the Ministry of Interior. A modern army was set up, mainly trained and organized to maintain internal stability and quell possible rebellions thus constituting the seed of the enduring involvement of the military in Thai politics.

## 2. Nation-building

The Nation-building aims at gaining loyalty and commitment to the central state authority through a common culture<sup>8</sup>. The creation of Thai nationalism is usually attributed to King Vajiravuth (Rama VI, son of Rama V, 1910-25). It is more likely, however, that his father himself started the process of Nation-building by ideologically assimilating various autochthonous ethnic groups into Thai identity<sup>9,10</sup>. One of the main vehicles to propagate nationalism is education whose modernization started in the early years of King Chulalongkorn's reign. The necessity to introduce nationalism, interpreted here as the loyalty to the King, stemmed from the fact that in pre-modern time local nobility controlled the uses of manpower and blurred the image of the monarchy. Once local nobility were sidelined, the central authority had to create and reinforce the image of royalty in people's mind.

It can be concluded that the success of the necessary reforms that laid the foundation of and became instrumental to the nation-state building was largely due to the absolutism of the monarchy and the charisma of the monarch.

## 3. The Decline of Thai Absolute Monarchy (AM)

It is argued that the emergence and decline of Thai absolutism constituted a single process<sup>11</sup>, as if it has dug its own tomb. For as much as it seemed to be a historic necessity, its fate was sealed since the beginning by its inherent contradictions and the ever-changing environment. AM is a system of government in which supreme power was vested in a single individual, free from checks by any higher authority or organ of popular representation<sup>12</sup>. To enter world capitalism system, the state had to reform and absolutism helped to overcome the resistance to such change. At the same time, the reforms required greater participation of old and new stakeholders. It turned out that such

---

<sup>7</sup> Prudhisana Jumabala, op. cit., pp. 11-12

<sup>8</sup> Prudhisana Jumabala, op. cit., p. 10

<sup>9</sup> Kullada Kerdboonchoo Mead, op. cit., p. 18

<sup>10</sup> Chaiyan Rajchagool, op. cit., p.149

<sup>11</sup> Kullada Kerdboonchoo Mead, op. cit., p. 9

<sup>12</sup> Chaiyan Rajchagool, op. cit., p. 131

participation and competition between them led to the contradictions that could not be solved by absolutism.

### 3.1 Inherent Contradiction in State-building

In the process of State-building, the unified state dissolved the powers of local nobility and claimed exclusive jurisdiction over the subjects to regulate and control a growing number of activities and relationships among individuals. However, the subjects had no rights to make demands on the state. In fact an edict promulgated on 29 April 1901 forbade courts to receive lawsuits brought by private citizens against government officials<sup>13</sup>. This is an example of an increasingly antagonistic contradiction between the state and civil society. The paradox is that absolutism on the one hand facilitated the return to Sukhothai patriarchal pattern and brought the monarch closer to the subjects to substantiate his autocratic authority, on the other hand the closeness brought up the issue of legitimacy of absolute power itself<sup>14</sup>.

The second important contradiction was between the shifting realities of power and the form of the state. As the state developed, the management of the state and that of affairs of the crown began to separate. At the same time, the civil/military bureaucracy was being transformed into an independent political oligarchy that intermittently challenged the absolutism<sup>15</sup>.

King Chulalongkorn's reforms were intended to consolidate dynastic state rather than to achieve political development. He had built a modern bureaucracy from the old ruling class and commoners, with the tendency of applying paternalism to promote the former and educational qualification and merit to the latter. When the opportunities for career advancement of the latter became restricted, they started looking for alternative ideology and institutional system. The modern bureaucrats resolved the contradiction between being loyal to AM and to the nation by choosing the nation. They also saw in western democratic institutions a promise of a wider participation in the political process. Modern bureaucracy, necessitated by the reforms led by absolute monarchs, also sealed the downfall of absolutism<sup>16</sup>.

### 3.2 Inherent Contradiction in Nation-Building

Being aware of the contradiction and tension within the bureaucracy, King Vajiravudh pursued the nation-building efforts, started by his father, in another direction. In fact, he introduced the "official nationalism" as a tacit response to the tendency of nationalism becoming more liberal. His nationalism nicely incorporated the old symbols of monarchy into the new symbols of nation. The message was the Throne and the Nation are one and the intent was to maintain absolutism and counter political democracy<sup>17</sup>. In the process, he tried to instill the strong sense of Thai identity, and went even as far as to evoke the Chinese as foreign threat from within<sup>18</sup>. The "official nationalism" was propagated through education channels and cultural activities including literature and theatre. A group of officials, called Wild Tiger Corps, was especially created for this purpose.

The first sign that the promotion of "official nationalism" did not work that well was the conspiracy of 1912 led by junior army officers. The interrogation of the conspirators revealed both

---

<sup>13</sup> Chaiyan Rajchagool, *op. cit.*, p. 132

<sup>14</sup> Prudhisana Jumbala, *op. cit.*, p. 10

<sup>15</sup> Chaiyan Rajchagool, *op. Cit.*, p. 134

<sup>16</sup> Kullada Kerdboonchoo Mead, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22

<sup>17</sup> Kullada Kerdboonchoo Mead, *op. cit.*, p. 30

<sup>18</sup> Prudhisana Jumbala, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-19

the interests for limited reforms created by their sense of injustice and their need to build successful career and their sense of loyalty to the nation as distinct from loyalty to the monarch<sup>19</sup>.

For the society at large, the early phase of Thai nationalism resulted in the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment and the ideological assimilation into Thai identity of various autochthonous ethnic groups. The supremacy of Bangkok called for ideological hegemony and resulted in the breaking down of local and regional ethnic identities. The positive side of this long assimilation process is a more homogenous nation with generally little ethnic tensions. The downside of this forcing of coincidence between territorial boundary and the cultural community was that cultural diversity was not only undervalued but at times considered as national security threat. The understandable resistance of some ethnic groups created problems that were ambiguously resolved and continues to the present time.

### 3.3 Other Contributing Factors

The creation of the Wild Tiger Corps antagonized the regular army because of the unclear boundary of duties and the competition over resources. In fact, King Vajiravudh was criticized for his favouritism and overspending. He was succeeded by his brother King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, 1925-1935) who wrote in a memorandum to his advisor dated July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1926:

“In the reign which has just ended...the King has become a person liable to be influenced by anybody who could gain the ears of a favourite. Every official is more or less suspected of embezzlement or nepotism...What was very regrettable was that the court was heartily detested and in the later years was on the verge of being ridiculed”<sup>20</sup>.

King Prajadhipok also faced another formidable problem namely an economic crisis as a repercussion of the Great Depression in the later years of 1920s. He reportedly said, while in self-exile in England after his abdication that “I’m only a soldier. How can I know about politics?”<sup>21</sup> In his Memorandum, he mentioned, in arguing in favour of the Supreme Council, that “the days of absolute power are numbered. The Supreme Council certainly lessens the King’s power to do harm by the arbitrary actions, but surely, it does not lessen his power to do good”<sup>22</sup>. He also contemplated a Legislative Council “similar to what existed in Russia”. He did give more power to few aristocrats and even pleaded with them in a memorandum dated 26 May 1932 that “We should prepare the ground for Constitutional Monarchy as fast as possible and provide an education appropriate to it, shouldn’t we?” His efforts, however, were stalled because there was no consensus among the privileged aristocrats.

On another front, his proposal to introduce political participation of his subjects by establishing local self-government as a starting point for representative government seemed to receive more support but could not quickly bare fruit as the wind of change already blew from another direction. A group of discontent middle-rank civil and military officials was formed. They were talented and most of them educated from Europe where they had been inspired by liberal ideology and exposed to democratic institutions.

What King Prajadhipok offered was too little too late. His indecision led to the 1932 Revolution. He graciously accepted to be the first Constitutional Monarch saying that this corresponded to his original ideas.

---

<sup>19</sup> Kullada Kerdboonchoo Mead, op. cit., pp. 291-302

<sup>20</sup> King Prajadhipok, Memorandum to Dr Sayre, Bangkok, 23 July 1926 cited in Benjamin A. Batson, The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 288

<sup>21</sup> Prudhisana Jumpala, The Soldier King Who Resigned for Constitutional Monarchy, Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University, to be published

<sup>22</sup> King Prajadhipok, op.cit., p. 291

#### 4. Constitutional Monarchy (CM) and Vacillating Democracy

King Prajadhipok abdicated on 2 March 1935, stating that “the government and its party employ methods of administration incompatible with individual freedoms and the principles of justice”<sup>23</sup>. He was succeeded by his nephew, King Ananda (Rama VIII, 1935-46) whose reign came to an abrupt end because of his mysterious death due to gunshot. His brother King Bhumibol (Rama IX, 1946-present) would preside over the ups and downs of democratic institutions and prove to be a great Constitutional Monarch.

Thai military after the 1932 Revolution feared a failure of legitimacy for themselves if monarchy were abolished. In the beginning of his reign, King Bhumibol employed himself to a strict political role as figurehead of state. But he started in earnest his social role and brought the monarchy close to his subject. In economic areas, he is known as a “developmentalist” King, having initiated thousands of “royal projects”<sup>24</sup> ranging from small self-help projects in rural area to big irrigation projects.

The governments just after the 1932 Revolution were at best semi-democratic marred by infighting between old guard bureaucrats and Kana Rasadorn (People’s Party) on the one hand and among civil and military members of Kana Rasadorn on the other. Finally the old guards and the civil leader, Pridi Banomyong, were definitely out of power by 1947, and the strongman Field Marshal Pibun Songkram had a field day to implement his brand of nationalism with little regard to the Monarchy.

Pibun’s commander-in-chief of the Army, Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, staged a coup in 1957 to establish himself as a full dictator with no regard to democratic institutions. He astutely reversed the trend and revived the prestige and pageantry of the Monarch, thus the monarchy was used to legitimize the newly established full dictatorship. To his credit, Sarit also reversed the nationalist economic policy to fully embrace the world capitalist economy under the leadership of the US. The intensive economic development brought into the scene middle class and educated people with new political aspiration.

#### 5. Thai Constitutional Monarchy and Democratization

##### 5.1 Democratization

The democratization process in Thailand is said to follow the so-called pattern of “vicious circle”. Simply described, the vicious circle started with an oligarchic or military regime with a promise of the return to democracy, a new constitution was then drafted that took various lengths of time after which an election was organized. Then started a non-stable parliamentary regime that eventually entered into a crisis that could not be solved by democratic means or sometimes was instigated by an ambitious military group. The “crisis” was resolved by a coup and the scenario went back to square one. The scenario, however, qualitatively changed when the process of drafting a constitution, after the prime minister had staged a coup against his own government and constitution to continue in power in 1971, obviously dragged its feet. For the first time, extra-bureaucratic challenges entered the scene. On 14 October 1973, the student-led demonstration succeeded in toppling the military regime and forced Field Marshall Thanom and Prapass and their successor-designate (as well as son and son-in-law), Colonel Narong, into exile. But the military brought the vicious circle back again when they stage a coup in 1976. The reestablished parliamentary regime in 1979 showed a sign of stability that was to be denied by, once again, an unjustified coup in 1991. This time around the tide seemed to be in favour of democratic forces as the government led by the coup leader was short-lived and forced to resign after a bloody confrontation with the protesters in the streets of Bangkok in 1992. It is now

<sup>23</sup> King Prajadhipok, op.cit., p. 317

<sup>24</sup> Rodney Tasker, Sovereign Guide, Far Eastern Economic Review, vol. 159 (13 June 1996), p. 20-21

hopeful that the “vicious circle” has come to an end and democratic institutions would be allowed to develop without military intervention. The price for this achievement was that during the demonstration in 1973, the coup in 1976, and the confrontation in 1992, scores of protesters were each time killed by the military or military-supported groups. Since the 1932 Revolution, there have been 17 military coups (some however failed) and the present Constitution, 1997 is Thailand’s 16<sup>th</sup>.

### 5.2 King’s Immense Popularity and Enormous Political Influence

In this arduous path of democratization, where did the Monarch stand and what was his role? His principal private secretary thought that he had to “go beyond the three basic rules of constitutional monarch: warning, encouraging and giving advice to the government, to assume the role of the arbiter in times of national crisis”<sup>25</sup>.

King Bhumibol can play the role of arbiter because of his immense popularity. He did come out of the shadow of the military unscratched with increased charisma. Although his popularity was enhanced by Sarit’s policy in the 1960s, he in fact largely earned it through his own hard work. The following extract from his official memoir more or less reflects the sentiment of Thai citizens vis-à-vis their monarch:

“Thus his dedication to the welfare of his people becomes so apparent and infectious for all people in all walks of life, and they respond to him and his generosity in an equally dedicated manner. In this way a link is formed between the King and his people which has steadily grown into a bond of mutual trust and affection. 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 help 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. The Throne and the Nation become one, and the profound meaning is thus given to the Thai Throne”<sup>26</sup>.

Unlike the royalty in some other countries who are submitted to criticism under the freedoms of expression and of the press, the royalty in Thailand is above criticism. Section 8 of the 1997 Constitution stipulates, as in previous constitutions, that “the King shall be enthroned in a position of revered worship and shall not be violated. No person shall expose the King to any sort of accusation or action”. In fact, in Thailand the law of lèse majesté is very strict and strictly enforced and the media daily give good coverage of the activities of the royal family.

Given the immense popularity and wisdom gained over the 57 years of his reign, he has enormous political clout. Although the constitutional powers of the King are limited, he has managed to informally expand them and effectively exerts influence over the government through the audiences with ministers and bureaucrats.

### 5.3 King’s Self-restraints

The King is aware that he has greater power than the constitution permits, but at the same time he does exercise self-restraints. He was quoted as saying that “But how can I have the respect of the people? It is because I don’t use the power...If there is a rule I go by the rule. But if there is no rule then my opinion would be heard”<sup>27</sup>.

One example of self-restraint or more exactly of circumscribing his powers was in 1974 when the newly promulgated constitution gave him indirectly the prerogative of selecting the Senators

<sup>25</sup> As mentioned by Birabhongse Kasemsri, in Rodney Taker, *ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> Office of His Majesty’s Principal Private Secretary, *A Memoir of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand*, Bangkok, 1987

<sup>27</sup> Kevin Hewison, *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation* London, Routledge, 1997.

by stipulating that the president of the Privy Council was the one who shall countersign the royal appointment of the Senators. His public complaint against this section of the Constitution led to its amendment in 1975 to the extent that the prime minister shall countersign the appointment moving this political power from the palace back to the government house. Any disappointed aspirant to the position of Senator only had him/herself or the prime minister to blame.

The King does not normally give any public comments on politics of the day. He rarely exercises his constitutional power of vetoing a draft bill by sending it back to the parliament. The only recent time that he did so was when a draft education bill was evidently technically flawed and the government fully recognized its mistake with embarrassment.

#### 5.4 King's Political Interventions

In several occasions, the King played decisive role in time of political crisis. The first clear intervention was during the 1973 student-led demonstration. Then the situation became violent and when the military shot down demonstrators in the streets of Bangkok, he quickly stepped in and asked Thanom, Prapass and Narong to go abroad. He subsequently appointed, in a rather hand picked manner, the new prime minister, Sanya Thammasak. He appointed 2,436 persons from all walks of life to convene and select among themselves 299 persons to serve as a legislative and constituent assembly.

During the 3 year of political turmoil that followed the fall of military regime in 1973, there was an open left-right confrontation. The right was represented most powerfully by the military interest, and the left most vocally by the student movement. At that time, the socio-economic situations, long restrained and controlled by the military, revealed a desolated state of deprivation, landlessness, debt, low wages etc. that offered a fertile ground for revolutionary left led by the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). The CPT actively recruited young elite and there was a "domino" psychology that Thailand would become the next communist country with a perceived threat to the monarchy. The King showed his disaffection to the turn of event and the student movement by visiting Thanom who returned in the guise of a monk. The student's protest against the return led to a military-instigated lynching of students in Thammasat University that provided an opportunity for a military coup allegedly supported by the King. It seemed that he also hand picked the next prime minister, Thanin Kraivixien<sup>28</sup>.

The so-called Young Turks faction in the army, who had successfully supported General Kriangsak and General Prem in the coup of 1977, wanted to stage their own coup in 1981, but the King showed clear sign of disapproval by moving to the Second Army region in the Northeast. It was well known that General Arthit who commanded that army was a rival of the Young Turks and supportive of the then prime minister Prem. The coup attempt was thus doomed. When General Arthit became commander-in-chief of the army and thought his time has come to be prime minister, he created a crisis banking on the unpopular baht devaluation. But this time, the King sent a message of sympathy to General Prem thus squashing the attempt of General Arthit.

The clearest action of the King as an arbiter was in May 1992. The demonstration against General Suchinda, coup leader in 1991 who had succeeded to turn himself into prime minister, degenerated into violent confrontation and shooting. The King summoned him and his rival, Major General Chamlong who led the demonstration, to an audience shown on television. He asked them to reconcile and the next day general Suchinda resigned, thus putting an end to the bloodshed. The King might have again a say in by the House Speaker's choice of Mr. Anand to resume for a second time the premiership and assure the smooth continuation of the parliamentary system.

#### 5.5 A Conservative Yet Innovative King

For most of his reign, King Bhumibol has been opposed to radical change. In December 1997 during the height of the economic crisis, he said that "to become a 'tiger' is not our main concern.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Kershaw, Monarchy in South-East Asia: The Faces of Tradition in Transition, London, Routledge, 2001



What is important for us is to have a decent standard of living and sufficient food, as well as maintain a self-sufficiency economy”<sup>29</sup>. His conservatism is shown in his support of stability, order, tradition, discipline, unity, solidarity, nationalism, national security etc. He specially values constancy in the pursuit of improvement as shown in his book: the Story of Mahajanaka. He seems to dislike partisan politics and political bickering. The current thinking is that people have become disillusioned with corruption and put their trust in the monarchy as a symbol of integrity and continuity.

As a ‘developmentalist’ King, he has shown to be resourceful and innovative in his multitude of projects he initiated. His special interest lays with irrigation and communication among many others. His theory of development called New Theory aims at improving the livelihood of the rural people and his self-sufficiency theory aims at sustainability and resilience against the vagaries of life. The two theories are of his original contribution to development discourse.

He excels in music and sport. In fact, he is a multi-talented and very versatile traditionalist.

He seems to be ambivalent toward constitutionalism and many a time stood idle when one constitution is torn and replaced by another. This may be due to his alleged preference of unwritten constitution and pragmatic approach. However, the King has ensured the stability that has allowed Thailand to develop democratic institutions. A former deputy Foreign Minister remarked that “the fact he has fully sanctioned and indeed encouraged development toward democracy means that tradition gives its blessing to democracy which is important”<sup>30</sup>

#### 5.6 Continuity

It was earlier argued that during the pre-modern time, the monarchy that has continued for about six centuries in Thailand could hardly be called absolute in view of its limited territorial control and influence. AM only emerged in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to reach its peak during the reign of King Chulalongkorn known for his great efforts of nation-state building. However, the emergence and the decline of AM is a single process.

In the Thai case, the downfall of AM was caused by the rising liberal ideology. When confronted with democratic values, the absolutism, interpreted as loyalty to the King, had to make way to the loyalty to the multitude or the nation. When confronted by the choice between AM and the continuity of monarchy, King Prajadhipok wisely chose the latter. He chose CM because it was compatible with democratic trend. It, however, took many more decades for the democratic institutions to be established. King Bhumibol assured the continuity of monarchy by maintaining it above the competition between elite within the military and bureaucracy and between them and non-bureaucrat elite. He stayed with the winning sides and finally when democratic force seems to prevail, the monarchy is credited for assuring the stability for this emergence, thus proving that constitutional monarchy promotes constitutional democracy.

Having narrated the brief history of Thai Monarchy, we now turn to the discussion of monarchy in general.

#### 6. The viability of Absolute Monarchy (AM)

Mark Tamthai, in his study about the values that are proper to democracy, proposes three set of values, namely (1) intrinsic, (2) utilitarian, and (3) epistemological values. (1) Intrinsic values include the moral autonomy of human nature and the equality of human beings. (2) Utilitarian values include social synergy and resilience as well as the better protection of basic rights of the people as they themselves participate in the formulation of societal laws. (3) Epistemological values include the possibility of fully using human intelligence to solve social problems through freedoms of thoughts and expression and the impossibility of knowing, a priori, who would be good rulers

---

<sup>29</sup> Shawn Crispin, Leading the way, Far Eastern Economic Review, vol. 162 (16 December 1999), pp. 20-22

<sup>30</sup> Sukhumbhand Boribhat, quoted in Shawn Crispin, *ibid*.

and in the absence of certainty, democratic means offer lesser risks.<sup>31</sup> Absolutism cannot withstand the values of democracy. In Asia, the monarchy in Nepal moved away from absolutism in 1990. In Bhutan, the King commissioned a committee to draft a constitution in 2001, but it has yet to be approved. In the meantime, the National Assembly is established with wide range of powers. The Monarch transferred his executive powers to the council of ministers in 1998. It seems that the King himself initiates a transition to CM.

In Brunei, however, the initial attempt toward democracy by electing Legislative Council members in 1962 failed. The British forces were used to suppress the rebellion that followed the non-convening of the Council. The present Council consists of 20 members all appointed by the Sultan. It has been suspended since 1984 when the country became fully independent from Britain. The Sultan serves as his own prime minister. It seems that AM still prevails in this last bastion of absolutism.

Various means have been employed to replace AM. The transition can be by force, by consent or by both. The use of force would be the cases of military coup or insurrection. The King himself could give his consent to the request for democratic transition or even initiate the transition by himself as is the case of Brunei. The contention could be peacefully resolved through referendum. In the Thai case, the King was partially forced by a coup but gracefully consented to the transition.

The outcome of the transition can also be varied. It may be useful here to make a distinction between the political regime and the head of state. The political regime that follows AM may not be fully democratic; in fact it could as well be totalitarian, dictatorial, autocratic, authoritarian or democratic to varying degrees. Except being totalitarian, the regime may still be compatible with monarchy and the King or Queen may remain in the position of head of state. In the Thai case, the regimes were unstable, being more or less dictatorial or democratic, but the CM that came out of the transition from AM has remained a stable feature. In other words, the republic was not envisaged and now has become taboo.

## 7. Constitutional Monarchy Discourse

What is CM? What does CM bring to democracy that is a proper value added? Can CM be sustained or is it merely a transition towards the inevitable establishment of a republic? If CM is desirable, what are the “do and don’t” in order to sustain it? There might not be any consensus answers to these questions or similar ones. So the debate is open.

### 7.1 What is CM?

Some basic elements of CM may be agreed upon:

- The Monarch is the head of state
- A Monarch is selected more or less on a hereditary and traditional basis
- The Monarch is above partisan politics
- The Prime Minister is the head of the executive
- The Prime Minister and Ministers are nominated from the parliament and are received, not designated, by the Monarch
- Civil service and military are apolitical with allegiance to the Throne but subordination to the government
- The Monarch enjoys at least three rights: to be consulted, to encourage, and to warn
- Other roles of the Monarch are more or less accepted: to arbiter, to guarantee the continuity of institutions, to grant pardon, and to be a symbol of national unity

Other prerogatives and duties of the Monarch could be specified in the Constitution or established through tradition

<sup>31</sup> Mark Tamthai, Karn Pokkrong Rabob Prachatipatai An Mee Phra Mahakasartiya Song Pen Pramuk (Democratic Regime with a Monarch as Head of State), Vithi Sangkom Thai, Bangkok, Foundation for Children, 2001

In Europe, the Monarch is much more open to criticism and media scrutiny than in Asia. The effective powers or influence of a Monarch are not well defined and depend very much on the charisma and the command of respect of each Monarch.

### 6.2 The Proper Values Added or Subtracted of CM

Following the reasoning of Mark Tamthai, a monarchical democratic system has almost the same values as ascribed to the republican democracy. As far as epistemological values are concerned, the human intelligence could as well exercise in both cases and the impossibility to have, a priori, a certainty on the quality of the rulers remains the same. The difficulty and the problem of succession in CM will be addressed later. As for utilitarian values, the basic rights could as well be protected (some may even argue they might be better protected with the Monarch as guarantor) and the social synergy and resilience would still be there (some may however argue that CM might indirectly sustain the class division that hampers social synergy). There are more arguments concerning the intrinsic values of democracy. Mark Tamthai contends that CM does not affect the equality values because equality may as well be based on other belief systems such as religion (equality with respect to God or as sentient creatures) or modern institutions (equality before law). However, one could also note that the Monarch is certainly first among equal as he or she has special rights and duties. The intrinsic value of moral autonomy poses some difficulty. Mark Tamthai argues that a King is by definition a great opinion leader. An assertive King can do much to influence the thinking of the citizens thus reducing their moral autonomy. In short, there seems to be some but not so significant values subtracted for CM.

Let us now examine the possible values added. Mark Tamthai has counter arguments against the belief, in currency, that CM has strong uniting values. Although not denying the value as such, he points out that uniting values can be created with or without CM. Citizens in many republics have strong sense of citizenship due to their allegiance to matrimony, to constitution etc. He, however, finds that, in republican democracy, good relationship and solidarity among citizens are usually to be desired: they don't feel "linked" to each other. This weak point shows precisely where the CM can contribute. The King is the transmission link. Two citizens may not know each other, but one knows that the King is concerned about each and every citizen, and all return the same solicitude toward the King, so the two may feel an invisible link between them. This unique benefit is because of the King as a person and he cannot be replaced by an institution because only human being can love and transmit love. That is why this is unique but the uniqueness cannot be taken for grant. The described benefit exists only when there is love between the Monarch and citizens. A bad King cannot contribute to this value added.

### 6.3 Some Issues of Concern for CM

In many democratic countries, the freedom of expression is so valued that it may not possible to enact a *lèse majesté* law. In the case of Thailand however, the built up of popularity of the Monarch could to a certain extent be associated with the existence of a strict *lèse majesté* law. Nobody would dare to speak publicly what he or she thinks about the King or the Royal family, let alone criticize them. The positive side of this law is the prevention of the royal family from being subject to the frenzied coverage of the media that has afflicted the royal families in those democratic countries. The down side is that rumours abound.

One point of concern about the longevity of monarchy is the issue of succession. This issue has been somewhat solved in the past by the usurpation of powers whose success led to the establishment of a new dynasty. Nobody then thought about the qualitative change into a republic. So the Kings rose and fell but long live the monarchy. Nowadays, people may think alternatively of a republic to avoid the potential of having a bad King that normally reigns for life. King Prajadhipok, in his last years of AM, pondered on the issue in his Memorandum as follows: "If the King is really an Elected King, it is probable that he would be a fairly good King...in reality the King[s] of Siam are really hereditary...Such being the case, it is not at all certain that we shall always have a good King". And again: "At present the King alone has the right to nominate an Heir.

It would be perhaps more logical to allow a council of some sort to exercise that right when the King has not done so. This would be consistent with the idea of an Elected King”<sup>32</sup>. He did practice what he preached, in his abdication statement he wrote: “I do not wish to exercise my legal right to name a successor”<sup>33</sup>.

According to the constitution of Cambodia, the King does not have the power to appoint an heir to the Throne. The King-to-be must be a member of the Royal family, of at least 30 years old descending from the blood line of King Ang Duong, King Norodom or King Sisowath. The King is to be chosen by a Royal Council to the Throne which shall consist of the President of the Senate, the President of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister, the Chiefs of the Orders of Mohanikay and Thammayert, the First and the Second Vice-President of the Senate and the First and second Vice-President of the Assembly.

In Thailand, the succession law dates back to the AM time in 1924. It is interesting to note that, because of the immense popularity of Princess Sirindhorn, successive constitutions tried to open the possibility for her, or another princess for that matter, to succeed to the Throne. Up until the Constitution #7 in 1959, Palace Law on Succession 1924 cannot be amended. For the Constitutions #8 and #9, the said law can be amended following the same procedure as constitutional amendment. Later constitutions added that, in case there is no Heir Apparent, a princess could be nominated to the Throne. Another important change occurred in the Constitution#15 as well as in the present one (#16): the amendment of the Palace Law of Succession shall be the prerogative of the King. In other words, if the King so wishes, he can appoint his son or any of his daughters to the Throne.

In case of a bad King, is there any safeguard or control so that the damages created by such King be limited. Here again it would be illuminating to hear from King Prajadhipok himself. He wrote: “The Position of the King must be made more secure if the Dynasty is going to last. Some sort of GUARANTEE must be found against an unwise King”<sup>34</sup>. And again: “A sound democracy depends on the soundness of the people, an a benevolent absolute monarchy depends on the qualities of the King. It is unfortunately a fact that *every* dynasty, however brilliant will sooner or later decay, and the danger of having someday a bad king is almost a certainty...The alternative method used is to chance having a bad king and make some institution that could control him”<sup>35</sup>.

This is easier said than done. The constitution of Cambodia however provides the clear delimitation of the powers of the King by stipulating that “The King of Cambodia shall reign but shall not govern”. But there seems to be no recourse or sanction against an abusive King as “The King is the head of state for life”. An indirect control or safeguard is provided in the case of Bhutan: the National Assembly, by a two-thirds majority, can vote to remove the King.

Not only the King is the titular head of the state, he often also holds the position of the Head of the Armed Forces. Again, this should not be interpreted literally but in the light of the basic principle that the King does not rule. The intervention of the King in the military affairs, be it on personnel, deployment or any other matters, would be in the long run detrimental to the monarchy. The use of powers usually erodes the position of power user as there will always be discontent persons who lost out in the exercise of power. Not exercising power, but only benevolent influence, seems to be the arts of reigning of King.

#### 6.4 Is CM Desirable, If so How Can it be Sustained?

Perhaps the answer to the first question is blowing in the wind: the beauty of CM is in the eyes

---

<sup>32</sup> Prajadhipok, op.cit., p. 287

<sup>33</sup> Prajadhipok, op.cit., p. 317

<sup>34</sup> Prajadhipok, op.cit., p. 288

<sup>35</sup> Prajadhipok, op.cit., p. 305

of the beholders. Let's look to the examples of pros and cons as follows:

<b>Arguments in favour of CM</b>	<b>Arguments against CM</b>
King can help usher peace when there is violence	King, always siding with Armed Forces, can not bring a just peace
King can help build the nation-state and push the country into modern era	Monarchy is the product of the few last centuries and has no relevance to the 21 <sup>st</sup> century
Why not "use" a monarchy when it is available: to abolish it is easy but if abolished, to restore it would be so difficult. So better think twice.	Democratic forces want a republic and not a monarchy with its tendency toward autocracy
King can be caring, empathetic, proactive and yet political unambitious	If the only support of the King is the armed forces, how can he become a Constitutional Monarch in a true sense
King can be a mediator between the agitating far left and the far right seeking lost privileges and short-cuts to powers	Monarchy is usually a conservative force siding with major landholders and big capital
King is guarantor against corrupt practices	King does not rule and has no capability to deal with corruption
King represents change and continuity and is the symbol of unity and integrity	King represents the tradition and usually opposes changes. King should be close to the people otherwise unity would remain artificial
King can be assisted by responsible members of the intelligentsia and political leaders to stand by the people in times of crisis	In a republic, the head of state can be periodically changed. There is no safeguards against bad King who is there for life

To make CM failed is not too difficult. As monarchy depends on the personality of individual King, one or two bad Kings may alienate the population. Continuous attack on personality, in the press or by other means, can ruin a reputation of any good person let alone a King who may not be in a good position to respond or counter attack without eroding his aloofness position. If the institutions in support of the monarchy are narrowly based, say on urban middle class and the armed forces, the King could not become close to and win the heart of the population.

To make CM a success needs considerably more efforts. To start, it helps a lot to have a long line of capable and multi-talented monarchs within the dynasty. This is the case of Thai monarchy. Nevertheless what is important is the present or the personality of the present King. Remember the adage: the respect is earned not given. How to be interactive is crucial. The King should strike a balance between intervention and non-intervention, for this he needs a very good and loyal team of advisors. But the loyalty should more go towards the institution of monarchy than towards the King as a person. The question is now shifted to how to wisely choose the advisors? The King must strike the balance between the preservation of tradition and modernity. The society is always on the move and it is not easy to understand the complexity of the stages of development. The King should develop his capacity to adapt to changing situations but remains a leader without leading.

### 7. Concluding Remarks

Monarchy is a created institution and part of the society. It can not take responsibility for any shortcomings of the society nor should it takes credit for any good things that happen. But it certainly helps us to reflect on who we are and what do we want. It certainly has a place in a historical context of a country. We should enter the debate about its desirability and sustainability without pre-conceived ideas. In case of inevitable incompatible views, could the debate be moved to the ground of higher principles such as the benefit and happiness of the people?

We should be guarded against excessive emotion. Allow me to cite King Prajadhipok again, he wrote: “The majority of people do not think rationally, but think sentimentally...It would be of no avail to explain, even with the best reason... they will surely yell louder that they are being oppressed by a tyrannical ruling class, and there may be some trouble”,<sup>36</sup>.

Mark Tamthai teaches me that it is not enough to know that something, say an orange, is valuable. It is important to know where its values lay, say in its vitamin C content. In this way we shall know what to preserve, say orange with vitamin C and not to develop sweet orange without vitamin. If we want to preserve Constitutional Monarchy we should also know where its values lay and convince others to help us preserve them. But if those values are already lost beyond recognition, what shall we preserve it for?

We harvest what we sow. The rising absolutism sow the seeds of its decline, military dictatorship sometimes hastens the transition towards democracy. Do we have enough vision to see the result of what we do today?

In Thailand, the traditional rallying motto is “Nation, Religion, King” and the emerging one is “Constitution and Democracy”. The success of Thai monarchy is maybe to show that the two can coexist. They may not be after all that contradictory.

---

<sup>36</sup> King Prajadhipok, op. cit., p. 304