

## The legend of King Prajadhipok: Tall tales and stubborn facts on the seventh reign in Siam

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*The figure of King Prajadhipok (r. 1925–35), Siam’s last absolute monarch, remains of great significance to Thailand’s contemporary political discourse. King Prajadhipok’s historical role as the ‘founding father’ of Thai democracy, in particular, lies at the heart of the Chakri dynasty’s claim to democratic legitimacy — a claim that is now widely questioned, both at home and abroad. This article re-examines King Prajadhipok’s conduct in the early days of constitutional government in Siam. While the King’s status as the father of Thai democracy is exposed as a myth, his actual historical legacy is shown to have been no less profound.*

I feel that the government and its party employs methods of administration incompatible with individual freedoms and the principles of justice. I am unable to agree to any person or any party carrying on such a government in my name.

I am willing to surrender the powers I formerly exercised to the people as a whole, but I am not willing to turn them over to any individual or any group to use in an autocratic manner without heeding the voice of the people.

King Prajadhipok’s Abdication Statement, 2 March 1935<sup>1</sup>

By the time King Prajadhipok, the seventh king of the reigning Chakri dynasty, renounced his position, he had already been stripped of most of his actual ‘powers’. On 24 June 1932, a coup d’état staged by some of Siam’s brightest lights — the mostly young, foreign-educated military officers and civil servants of the People’s Party (คณะราษฎร) — had easily toppled the King’s absolutist regime, leaving him with little option but to accept to become the country’s first ‘constitutional’ monarch. The ensuing months would witness a partial restoration of King Prajadhipok’s formal prerogatives. The Permanent Constitution promulgated on 10 December 1932 vested in the monarch a broader set of powers than the Constitution of 27 June, which the King had obtained be declared ‘provisional’. King Prajadhipok had also appeared to gradually reassert his influence over the political process. On the advice of the King, Prime

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1 *Siam’s political future: Documents from the end of the absolute monarchy*, ed. Benjamin A. Batson (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1974), pp. 101–2.

Minister Phya Manopakorn Nititada ('Mano') dismantled the People's Party in early 1933, then dissolved the National Assembly, suspended portions of the Constitution, and started purging the Promoters' most influential leaders from crucial positions in the armed forces as well as the civilian administration.

The partial restoration of Siam's ancien régime was brought to an abrupt end on 20 June 1933, when the Promoters seized power from Mano and, this time, took direct charge of the country's government. After royalist forces led by Prince Bowaradet attacked the city of Bangkok in October 1933 — and were routed in a series of fierce battles with government troops — King Prajadhipok went into self-imposed exile in Europe. Increasingly reduced to a mere figurehead, the only recourse left for him to exercise any influence over the political process was the threat of abdication. As 1934 drew to a close, however, the threat had been made so insistently that the government of Colonel Phya Phahon Phonphayuhasena suspended all but the most perfunctory attempts to accommodate the King's demands. King Prajadhipok's abdication became official a few months thereafter.

The terse statement with which King Prajadhipok abdicated his throne is perhaps the best known and most widely read political document from the early years of the country's post-absolutist history. By couching the decision to abdicate in the rhetoric of freedom and democracy — grounding it, that is, in his commitment to ideals the Promoters could be said to have betrayed — King Prajadhipok's statement has been instrumental to the decades-old quest by Thailand's royalists to attribute the country's shift towards constitutionalism and 'democracy' to the selfless deeds of benevolent Chakri monarchs. In the mythology that has been relentlessly hyped by the state since at least the 1970s, Prajadhipok is immortalised as the King who gave the Thai people democracy and then stood up for those ideals when those to whom he had 'willingly' entrusted Siam's administration took advantage of the opportunity to seize power for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly, the Promoters of the 1932 Revolution helped lay the foundations for what would later become the 'legend' of King Prajadhipok. Desperate to consolidate the gains of the Revolution, they quickly disavowed their most incisive criticism of the monarchy, as outlined in the first statement issued by the People's Party on 24 June, and sought to secure King Prajadhipok's support by ascribing to the King a crucial (if entirely fictional) role in Siam's 'change of administration' (การเปลี่ยนแปลง การปกครอง), as the coup came to be euphemistically known. The lengthy preamble of

2 One of the most visible products of this state-sponsored campaign of historical revisionism has been the King Prajadhipok's Institute (KPI), created in the 1990s to promote 'democratic development' through education and research (for a brief discussion, see Michael K. Connors, *Democracy and national identity in Thailand* [Copenhagen: NIAS Press, rev. and updated 2007; orig. pub. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003], pp. 95, 208). While beyond the scope of this article, the historical genesis of the 'legend' of King Prajadhipok is discussed in some detail in Somsak Jeamteerasakul, พระราชหัตถเลขาของพระเจ้าบรมโกศ [King Rama 7's abdication statement: A document's life history], in ประวัติศาสตร์ที่เพิ่งสร้าง: รวบรวมบทความ เกี่ยวกับ 14 ตุลาคม และ 6 ตุลา [Recently made history: Collected articles on 14 October and 6 October] (Bangkok: Samnak pim 6 tula ram leuk, 2001), pp. 20–30. An overview of the scholarly debates about the role of the monarchy after the 1932 Revolution appears in Nattapoll Chaiching, 'The monarchy and the royalist movement in modern Thai politics, 1932–1957', in *Saying the unsayable: Monarchy and democracy in Thailand*, ed. Soren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010), pp. 148–51.

the 1932 Permanent Constitution is an early attempt to rewrite history in this direction.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, actions taken by the Promoters before and, especially, after King Prajadhipok's abdication are often interpreted as vindication for both the sincerity of the King's commitment to democracy as well as his harsh assessment of the Promoters as incipient autocrats. By the onset of the Second World War, the country had completed its reversal into military dictatorship — Thailand's new, self-styled 'leader' (ผู้นำ), Luang Phibun Songkhram, made no bones about his admiration for the fascist regimes of Italy, Germany and Japan.

While it is natural that contemporary views on King Prajadhipok's historical role would be coloured by one's feelings about the Chakri dynasty generally, and the reigning King Bhumibol Adulyadej in particular, the real story of the last three years of King Prajadhipok's reign (1932–35) is not especially well known. Anecdotally, even avowed critics of the royalist myth-making that recast King Prajadhipok as the founding father of Thai democracy generally limit themselves to pointing out that the Promoters had threatened to establish a republic if the King refused to co-operate; sometimes, the ambiguous stance that Prajadhipok took during the Bowaradet Rebellion might also receive a mention. Plenty of evidence, however, documents the King's views and behaviour in the run-up to his abdication, as well as the content of the King's interactions with the governments of Phya Mano and Phya Phahon. Particularly voluminous is the documentation that Phya Phahon's government made publicly available, in the wake of King Prajadhipok's abdication, to counter the charges that the King had levelled in his parting statement.<sup>4</sup> While the existence of this documentation is often acknowledged in academic works on the period, its content is seldom discussed and analysed in any detail. This is true of writings that portray King Prajadhipok in a liberal-democratic light<sup>5</sup> as well as writings that dispute that rather generous characterisation.<sup>6</sup>

By bringing these contemporaneous Thai-language documents back to life, this article seeks to offer a more complete account of King Prajadhipok's conduct in the early days of constitutional government in Siam. For context, extensive reference is made to 1930s news accounts, mostly drawn from the pages of the long-defunct *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*. While almost 70 years have gone by since King Prajadhipok's untimely death in 1941, at the age of 47, the subject remains of great significance to Thailand's contemporary political discourse. Not only is Prajadhipok's role in the country's political development as contentious today as it was back then; King Prajadhipok's status as the founding father of Thai democracy

3 'The Constitution of the Kingdom of Siam, B.E. 2475', in *Thai politics 1932–1957: Extracts and documents*, ed. Thak Chaloeontiarana (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, 1978), pp. 96–108.

4 แถลงการณ์เรื่องพระบาทสมเด็จพระปรมินทรมหาประชาธิปกพระปกเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัวทรงสละราชสมบัติ [Official report on the abdication of King Prajadhipok] (Bangkok: Rong pim prajant, 1935).

5 For an example, see Benjamin A. Batson, *The end of the absolute monarchy in Siam* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984). A wealth of books and dissertations in Thai (perhaps most prominently, several writings by Chai-Anan Samudavanija) make similar revisionist arguments. For a recent work arguing this line, see Nakarin Mektrairat, พระผู้ทรงปกเกล้าฯ ประชาธิปไตย: ๖๐ ปี สิริราชสมบัติกับการเมืองการปกครองไทย [The protector of democracy: The 60th anniversary of King Prajadhipok's reign and Thai politics] (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 2006).

6 For example, see Paul M. Handley, *The King never smiles: A biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 44–53. See also Nattapoll, 'The monarchy and the royalist movement in modern Thai politics'.

lies at the heart of the monarchy's claim to democratic legitimacy — a claim that is now widely questioned, both at home and abroad.

The defence of the monarchy, of course, has figured prominently in the rationalisation of the coup d'état staged by the military on 19 September 2006 — as it has in most coups launched over the past half-century. Perhaps most strikingly, after coming to power in late 2008 the royalist administration of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva took unprecedented steps to censor print and Internet publications considered injurious to the monarchy — by some accounts, over 200,000 Internet sites have been blocked for this reason — and has initiated a record-breaking number of prosecutions for the crime of *lèse majesté*.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, vast resources have been committed to 'protecting' the monarchy through increased surveillance as well as investigations into a vast, shadowy conspiracy to overthrow the King. Also, whereas the recent massacre of Red Shirt protesters was justified by the government based on the need to 'protect the institution' — just as every massacre of pro-democracy protesters in the country's history — this time neither the King nor any of his surrogates publicly intervened to stop the carnage or demand justice for its victims. As the Chakri dynasty approaches a critical turning point, increased censorship and repression have only fuelled the debate about its democratic credentials.

Based on the evidence available, it would be difficult to portray the figure of King Prajadhipok in too negative a light. In his own writings and pronouncements as well as in first-hand accounts offered by others, Prajadhipok consistently emerges as thoughtful and even-tempered, if decidedly unexceptional. The King's actions in the wake of the 1932 Revolution, however, could be said to have had very damaging consequences on the country's short- and long-term prospects of democratisation. In the short term, King Prajadhipok's effort to undermine the People's Party, for reasons both good and bad, was among the most decisive contingent factors that prevented liberal democracy from taking hold. The King's actions induced the Promoters to rely on a host of repressive measures to stave off the royalist challenge to the constitutional regime. Perhaps more importantly, Prajadhipok's successful attempt to taint Pridi Banomyong and his followers with the charge of communism — and destroy the embryonic party organisations that could have evolved into alternatives to the power of the military — ended up strengthening the hand of Promoters, like Phibun, who had far less of a taste for liberal democracy. What is worse, the legacy of Prajadhipok's campaign against the Promoters is also easily discernible in Thailand's long-term failure to consolidate a working democratic regime. On the one hand, the King's actions in the wake of the Revolution helped create the space necessary for the subsequent reassertion of the monarchy's role as an extra-constitutional force. On the other hand, the use of democratic rhetoric to camouflage covert attempts to undermine democratic institutions pioneered a strategy that came to be perfected and deployed repeatedly over the course of the Ninth Reign.

While King Prajadhipok's status as the 'founding father' of Thai democracy is a myth, his actual historical legacy is no less profound.

<sup>7</sup> See David Streckfuss, *Truth on trial in Thailand: Defamation, treason, and lèse-majesté* (London: Routledge, 2010).

### Original sin

The pre-dawn coup of 24 June 1932 took place while the King was vacationing at his palace in the seaside resort town of Hua Hin. As People's Party leader, Phya Phahon, read a strongly worded communiqué from the headquarters of the revolutionary government at the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, grounding the seizure of power in the cronyism, incompetence and venality of the King's government,<sup>8</sup> it is fitting that the news of the coup would reach King Prajadhipok and Queen Rambhai Bharni on the golf course. The King is reported to have taken the news with aplomb, urging the young Queen to finish out the round of golf while he met with his advisors. Shortly thereafter, Prajadhipok rejected the possibility of putting up a fight to reclaim his absolute powers and accepted the rebels' demands.<sup>9</sup> The next day, the King and Queen returned to Bangkok by special train. Once there, King Prajadhipok issued a Royal Proclamation declaring the seizure of power to have been 'lawful' and agreed to promulgate a Temporary Constitution. The newly appointed 'People's Assembly' met on 28 June, electing Phya Mano as the country's first-ever prime minister.

In the Royal Proclamation issued on 26 June, the approach that King Prajadhipok took in his endorsement of the People's Party was to state that he had long considered making similar changes to Siam's institutional architecture:

As a matter of fact we have long contemplated the institution of a constitutional monarchy and what the People's Party have done is quite right and receives Our appreciation.<sup>10</sup>

Statements of this kind would play a central role in both the subsequent lionisation of King Prajadhipok and, sometimes, in the criticism of the People's Party's actions as rash, unnecessary, selfish and ungracious. In fact, as he told Queen Rambhai upon learning of developments in Bangkok, King Prajadhipok had anticipated the possibility of a coup and had long thought of ways to forestall it, including granting a constitution.<sup>11</sup>

At least two documents attest to the King's examination of alternatives to the absolute monarchy — a skeletal draft submitted in 1926 by Francis B. Sayre, in response to the King's solicitation for advice on the issue of political reforms, and an outline completed by two officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Raymond B. Stevens and Phya Sriwisarn Waja, in March 1932.<sup>12</sup> As for the 1926 draft, one would be hard-pressed to describe it as 'democratic'. Though the 12 articles envisioned the appointment of a prime minister, to whom much of the day-to-day administration would be delegated, no provision was made for an elected legislature, while

8 'First announcement of the People's Party, 24 Jun. 1932', in Thak, *Thai politics 1932–1957*, pp. 4–7.

9 Queen Rambhai's recollections of the day's events are reproduced in Thak, *Thai politics 1932–1957*, pp. 8–11. A more dispassionate account of the deliberations at Hua Hin appears in Judith A. Stowe, *Siam becomes Thailand: A story of intrigue* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), pp. 19–20.

10 As translated in: 'The new Siam: The King and the constitution', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 27 June 1932.

11 The full range of reforms that King Prajadhipok considered in the run-up to the Revolution is described in considerable detail in Nakarin Mektrairat, การปฏิวัติสยาม พ.ศ. 2475 [*The 1932 revolution in Siam*] (Bangkok: Khongkan 60 pi prachathippatai, 1992), pp. 169–203.

12 Both documents (originally written in English) are reprinted in full in Batson, *Siam's political future*, pp. 34–6; 86–9.

the King retained legislative, executive and judicial powers. Whereas, moreover, the outline submitted to the King in March 1932 proposed that the government be structured in a manner quite similar to the constitutions that the People's Party would later design, conspicuously absent from both drafts is any mention of any political and civil rights reserved for the country's population.

The failure to enact either of the proposed constitutions prior to the People's Party's seizure of power is generally attributed to the opposition of 'the princes', some of them undoubtedly quite illustrious and powerful, who advised King Prajadhipok. However, while there are good reasons to believe that the King may have needed to secure the support of 'the princes' — perhaps especially the five men who served on his Supreme Council — before enacting reforms of this import, it is not difficult to see why their arguments would have resonated with the King. In 1926, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab put his objections in writing, arguing that introducing a constitution may have raised questions about the King's competence and commitment to administer the country. Presciently, Damrong warned of a potential situation where, in the event of a conflict between the King and a popular prime minister, the King might find himself on the wrong side of public opinion.<sup>13</sup> In March 1932, the outline prepared by the King's advisors was accompanied by notes written by Stevens and Phya Sriwisarn, who counselled against the implementation of their own suggestions. Phya Sriwisarn speculated that the changes might have emboldened aspiring usurpers by signalling the King's weakness.<sup>14</sup>

The reason why King Prajadhipok was probably sensitive to the dangers that introducing a more or less 'democratic' constitution carried for the institution of the monarchy and his own image as a competent, committed steward of the nation's interests is that, if nothing else, the King had consistently exhibited a high degree of self-awareness about those very issues. In several writings prior to the 1932 Revolution, the King had expressed, in rather strong terms, his belief that the prestige of the monarchy was severely compromised. Prajadhipok, moreover, was afflicted by considerable self-doubt about his own competence and commitment to rule. Until shortly before King Vajiravudh's death, Prajadhipok was a long shot to succeed him — a 'dark horse', in his own words. In the wake of his brother's passing, in 1925, he had even offered to let the enormously powerful Prince Boriphat take the crown in his stead. On multiple occasions, moreover, King Prajadhipok had revealed, with disarming sincerity, his discomfort with the volume of work with which he had been tasked as well as a marked sense of insecurity about his own ability to perform duties of such complexity and momentous importance. The frank admission of his unpreparedness to make difficult decisions to tackle the domestic effects of the global economic depression is often cited as evidence of King Prajadhipok's unease about the enormity of responsibilities that were placed, with little advance notice, on the shoulders of a man who had just turned 32 when he ascended to the throne in November 1925.

13 Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, 'Memorandum, 1 Aug. 1926', in Batson, *Siam's political future*, pp. 37–41.

14 Phya Sriwisarn Waja, 'Memorandum, 9 Mar. 1932', *ibid.*, pp. 90–3.

Indeed, King Prajadhipok had not considered introducing a constitution out of any desire to bestow ‘democracy’ upon the Siamese people. Though Prajadhipok may himself have had comparatively liberal views, his own writings confessed to a strong measure of scepticism about the suitability of liberal democracy to Siam (and vice versa). In the aforementioned exchange with Francis B. Sayre, in 1926, the King offered ‘an emphatic NO’ to the question of whether the country was ‘ready to have some sort of representative Government’.<sup>15</sup> A year later, in a memorandum titled ‘Democracy in Siam’, Prajadhipok made strong statements about the fact that ‘a parliamentary government is not suited to the racial qualities of the Siamese’.<sup>16</sup>

All along, King Prajadhipok’s interest in a constitution was motivated by two concerns wholly unrelated to considerations of the freedoms that the Thai people should or should not enjoy. First, Prajadhipok was especially worried about the possibility that a ‘bad king’ might rise to the throne in a situation where the only available remedy would be, as he put it, ‘to chop off his head’.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, he was committed to finding ways to both institute checks on the king’s absolute powers and reform the laws of succession to prevent the selection of any such ‘bad king’. Second, Prajadhipok sought ways to defuse the potential for the monarchy to succumb to a rebellion, which seemed imminent to him in light of the widely shared disgust that King Vajiravudh’s inept, profligate reign had brought on the royal family. On the one hand, Prajadhipok believed that ‘the prestige of Kingship in this country can hardly be lower’ and that ‘it would be a wild goose chase to try and get back any of the old glory’<sup>18</sup> — hence his determination to implement gradually reforms that might otherwise come more abruptly, through revolution, at the cost of compromising the survival of the monarchy and the prosperity of Siam. On the other hand, the King was hesitant to signal vulnerability or fuel doubts about the monarchy’s ability to govern the country, which might have actually precipitated its removal — hence his sensitivity to the opposition of Prince Damrong, Phya Sriwisarn, and others.

Though the King’s concerns were sensible enough — indeed, reflecting precisely the kind of prudence and clear-headedness that Thai royalists have long since abandoned in favour of outright proto-fascism and transcendental hero-worship — a more complete examination of Prajadhipok’s motivations renders his portrayal as the founding father of Thai democracy problematic. His ultimate inaction, moreover, raises serious questions about the idea that the People’s Party’s actions were premature or unnecessary. It should also be noted that whatever consideration was given to concrete reforms took place in secret and within a highly restricted group of advisors. As of the early 1970s, Pridi Banomyong — the erstwhile Luang Pradit Manutham, leader of the People’s Party’s civilian faction — still claimed to have first learned of the King’s abortive plans in an audience on 30 June 1932.<sup>19</sup>

15 King Prajadhipok, ‘Memorandum, 23 July 1926’, *ibid.*, p. 18.

16 King Prajadhipok, ‘Democracy in Siam’, *ibid.*, p. 48.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

18 King Prajadhipok, ‘Memorandum, 23 July 1926’, p. 18.

19 A detailed discussion can be found in Pridi Banomyong, ‘Some aspects of the establishment of the People’s Party and democracy’, in *Pridi by Pridi: Selected writings on life, politics, and economy*, ed. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000), pp. 139–42.

If Prajadhipok's words and behaviour prior to the 1932 Revolution make him, at best, an unenthusiastic advocate for a somewhat less than democratic constitution, the actions the King took after being placed under a semi-democratic, liberal constitution thoroughly undermined the possibility that Siam would consolidate any semblance of a liberal democracy in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution.

The fate of the 1932 Revolution was arguably sealed in the first five days since the seizure of power, in which the revolutionists — out of insecurity, naiveté or excessive magnanimity — left an opening for the old order's predictable attempt to reassert its power and roll back the Revolution's gains. In doing so, the People's Party acted against its first instincts. For better or worse, by and large the leaders of the Revolution despised the monarchy. While there is some evidence that some questioned the wisdom<sup>20</sup> of the 'First Announcement of the People's Party', the sentiments it expressed were probably representative of the revolutionaries' feelings. Moreover, one of the keys to the success of the 24 June operation, masterminded by Phya Song Suradet, had been the decision to place members of the royal family under arrest — princes Boriphath, Damrong, Narit, Dewawongse, among others, were picked up at their residences and escorted to the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, while Prince Purachatra narrowly escaped capture and fled to Hua Hin. Within days, however, the People's Party had reversed course. On 28 June, newspapers reported that the Promoters objected to the term 'revolution' — what they had done was merely to establish a 'Government by and for the people with the King's consent'.<sup>21</sup>

Several measures were taken in those first, fateful days against the revolutionists' better judgement. The People's Party took back its initial announcement and apologised to the King for the offensive language it contained.<sup>22</sup> Though, moreover, the constitution written by Pridi Banomyong had initially been drafted as a 'permanent' constitution, the People's Party agreed to King Prajadhipok's demand that the document be promulgated as a 'provisional' charter. The content of the Permanent Constitution introduced five-and-a-half months later — designed by a nine-member ad hoc committee where Pridi served as the People's Party's lone representative — reflected several concessions made to the King. While the increased powers that the December constitution vested in the King were neither very extensive nor very incisive,<sup>23</sup> there is also an argument to be made that the result was nonetheless to dilute the Promoters' power.<sup>24</sup>

20 Virginia McLean Thompson, *Thailand: The new Siam* (Reprint, New York: Paragon, 1967; New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 63.

21 'The New Siam: The King signs the new constitution', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 28 June 1932.

22 The apology was formalised in a self-abasing letter that the Promoters submitted to the King months later. In the message, the Promoters not only begged the King for his blessing and forgiveness, but also entirely walked back their initial proclamation by lauding the Chakri dynasty for having 'brought progress to Siam'. Before attributing to Prajadhipok the success of the change in the form of government, the Promoters thanked the King for 'the opportunity to assist Your Majesty in national administration'. Reproduced in Thak, *Thai politics 1932-1957*, p. 11.

23 See Thawatt Mokarapong, *History of the Thai revolution: A study in political behaviour* (Bangkok: Chalermnit, 1972), pp. 120-1. For a description of the composition of the committee, the background of its members, and implications for the document it generated, see Nakarin, *The 1932 revolution in Siam*, pp. 222-4.

24 Fred Riggs, *Thailand: The modernization of a bureaucratic polity* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1966), p. 161.



In retrospect rather incredibly, the Promoters initially resolved to ‘withdraw’. Citing their youth and inexperience, they allowed senior members of the old royalist establishment to hold key governmental posts.<sup>25</sup> Only about 40 members of the 70-seat National Assembly were appointed from the ranks of the People’s Party. Phya Mano, the former Supreme Court justice and not a member of the People’s Party, was made chief executive (formally, President of the People’s Committee), after a series of consultations where the Promoters considered appointing none other than Prince Bowaradet. Whereas, moreover, the Provisional Constitution provided for a dual executive — a 14-member ‘People’s Committee’ (numbering 11 Promoters) appointed eight ministers, none of whom had participated in the Revolution — the Permanent Constitution instituted a single executive body, the State Council (คณะรัฐมนตรี, or cabinet). Significantly, while the Promoters retained a one-vote majority in the 20-member executive, no members of the People’s Party initially held ministerial portfolios. More importantly, given the Promoters’ own lack of cohesion, the new constitution made it easier for Mano to push through the executive measures designed to undo the Revolution.<sup>26</sup>

Two months after the coup, an article in *The Times* of London chided the revolutionists for being too eager to dispense with the talent of some of the princes.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the problem was the exact opposite. To be sure, the princes had been retired or exiled, but the Promoters nonetheless gave some among the absolutist regime’s senior officials prominent positions in the People’s Assembly and the various ministries, in the interest of ‘maintain[ing] friendly relations with the royal class’.<sup>28</sup> Shortly before his death, Pridi Banomyong would attribute the failure of the revolution to the Promoters’ inability to ‘sustain victory’ and ‘avoid counter-revolution’. Chief among the People’s Party’s mistakes had been to invite ‘old bureaucrats’ to join the government.<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding their initial bluster, the People’s Party gave the old regime every opportunity to erode the initial gains of the Revolution. None of the property that the princes had been accused of embezzling was seized — Phya Mano ridiculed the notion that officials in the absolutist regime had amassed illegitimate fortunes by speaking of ‘mythical millions’. Equally important, the deference with which the King was treated as well as the efforts made by the Promoters to persuade the public of the idea that the King agreed with the objectives of the Revolution — and had relinquished his powers ‘willingly’ — unduly boosted the ancien régime’s democratic credentials, giving it a chance to portray its subsequent actions as undertaken in the

25 See Kenneth Perry Landon, *Siam in transition: A brief survey of cultural trends in the five years since the revolution of 1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), pp. 32–3. See also M. Sivaram, *The new Siam in the making: A survey of the political transition in Siam 1932–1936* (Bangkok: Stationers Printing Press, 1936), pp. 39–40.

26 Riggs, *Thailand*, p. 161. The manoeuvres of the old regime officials included in the new government (before and after the Permanent Constitution’s promulgation) are discussed at some length in Nakarin, *The 1932 revolution in Siam*, pp. 232–6.

27 Reprinted in ‘The new regime in Siam: The princes’ fall from power’, *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 29 Aug. 1932.

28 Thawatt, *History of the Thai revolution*, p. 130.

29 Pridi Banomyong, ‘The People’s Party and the revolution of 24 June’, in *Pridi by Pridi*, p. 169.

interest of furthering the kind of 'democracy' the King had willed, if only vicariously, into existence.

This was not the only option available to the Promoters. It is important to recognise, in particular, that back then Bangkok's project of cultural hegemony was still in its infancy — the notion of 'national identity' prevalent today, based on the mantra 'Nation, Religion, King' was underdeveloped and had not yet been sold to much of the population. As a result, the coup was largely shrugged off in the provinces. In Bangkok, where life had gone on without disruption, the Revolution was met with enthusiasm, when not indifference.<sup>30</sup> As King Prajadhipok knew, the 'educated classes' in the capital, both commoner and minor nobility, had long turned on the monarchy. By taking the princes into custody, then, the People's Party had neutralised the only realistic source of active opposition to the coup. Though King Prajadhipok is widely credited for the avoidance of bloodshed, members of his own entourage in Hua Hin had serious doubts over whether both fight and flight were viable alternatives once the coup had taken place.<sup>31</sup>

There are different explanations for the magnanimity exhibited by the Promoters. Some observers attributed it to their 'good intentions'.<sup>32</sup> Pridi himself would later explain that he had overestimated the old regime's willingness to co-operate. Other reasons frequently cited are the People's Party's insecurity about their own appeal to the population as well as their fears of foreign intervention. An internal report issued by the British Foreign Office at the time reports that the Promoters abandoned the idea of doing away with the monarchy altogether after being persuaded by Foreign Minister Prince Dewawongse that foreign powers might have stepped in if the new government failed to guarantee a sufficient measure of continuity.<sup>33</sup> In all likelihood, each of these factors had a role to play, as it is natural that the concern paramount in the minds of the Promoters in the aftermath of the successful seizure of power would have been the smoothness of the transition.

In making overtures to the ancien régime, the Promoters thought they could sacrifice some of the Revolution's transformative potential in exchange for greater stability in the short term. However, they were wrong, and, in so doing, the Promoters would undermine both the new regime's stability and their own chances of fulfilling the objectives set out in the early days of the Revolution. The People's Party, and later the country as a whole, would pay a steep price for the Promoters' miscalculation — the original sin of Thailand's inveterately half-fledged democracy.

### Counter-revolution

The Constitution promulgated on 10 December 1932 inaugurated a system of 'tutelage' that mapped out a three-stage transition to full representative democracy. In the first phase, which would last until elections could be organised, the National Assembly would be composed of the 70 members who had been appointed in the wake of the 24 June coup. In the second phase, the National Assembly would be

30 See Batson, *The end of the absolute monarchy in Siam*, pp. 237–9.

31 Stowe, *Siam becomes Thailand*, p. 18.

32 Landon, *Siam in transition*, p. 33.

33 Cited in Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the creation of a Thai identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), pp. 67–8.

made up of an equal number of ‘first category’ members (selected on a provincial basis by subdistrict or *tambon* representatives elected by the people) and ‘second category’ members formally appointed by the King through a selection process dominated by the State Council. In the third phase, to begin after 10 years, the entire National Assembly would be elected by the people.

In principle the Constitution also guaranteed the country’s citizens a host of liberal freedoms — speech, assembly and association. However, while the first few months since the Revolution had witnessed a great deal of political debate and activity, the government retained a variety of means, both legal and extra-legal, to restrict individual rights. Phya Mano’s administration routinely put pressure on the print media — both informally and formally, by ordering the closure or (more commonly) the suspension of news outlets that the government deemed to be inciting unrest.<sup>34</sup> While, moreover, political parties were not explicitly banned, the government could withhold or deny the registration of political associations. As *The Times* correspondent in Bangkok put it, in reference to the Provisional Charter, the Promoters had ‘a little of the modern suspicion of democracy’ — therefore, ‘they have resolved their doubts in a Constitution which, though democratic, leaves some scope for applying the methods of modern dictatorship’.<sup>35</sup>

By the time King Prajadhipok publicly forgave the Promoters’ impudence and presided over the promulgation of the Permanent Constitution, the ancien régime’s campaign to undermine the People’s Party had been underway for months. In correspondence with the government, King Prajadhipok would later say that he had rejected the entreaties of many who sought his blessing to launch armed rebellions in the aftermath of the Revolution.<sup>36</sup> The King, nonetheless, took the lead in a multipronged counter-revolutionary effort that enlisted means decidedly more subtle and thus, perhaps, more befitting his temperament. The counter-revolution eventually failed to dislodge the Promoters or restore any of the King’s old prerogatives. Its sole ‘accomplishment’ would be to sabotage Siam’s democratic transition.

The campaign to roll back the Revolution began in earnest after the 24 June coup, through an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the Promoters and destroy the public’s trust in the ability of the new government to protect Siam from upheaval. Publicly, the royalist opposition relied on newspapers such as *Thai Mai* and the Siam Free Press’s *Bangkok Daily Mail*, *Krung Thep Daily Mail* and *Seriphap* to attack the government. Luang Wichit Wathakan, for one, wrote a number of columns and pamphlets that not only criticised the government’s performance, but also raised the possibility that the People’s Party would reserve for the monarchy and Buddhism the same treatment that the Romanovs and the Russian Orthodox Church received from

34 M. Sivaram (*The new Siam in the making*, p. 55) describes it as follows: ‘[The government] suppressed a number of cheap Siamese language newspapers while the more popular journals, English and Siamese, were dexterously persuaded to appreciate and propagate the Government’s view of matters.’ Reprinted in ‘The new regime in Siam: The princes’ fall from power’, *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 29 Aug. 1932.

36 From the ‘Second royal note’ (พระราชบัญญัติ ๒) transmitted to the government on 26 Sep. 1934. See รายงานการประชุมสภาผู้แทนราษฎร ครั้งที่ ๑๖/๒๔๗๗ ๓๑ มกราคม ๒๔๗๗ [‘Minutes of the secret meeting of the National Assembly on 31 Jan. 1935’], in *Official report on the abdication of King Prajadhipok*, p. 140.

the Bolsheviks.<sup>37</sup> The papers of the Siam Free Press, part-owned by King Prajadhipok's father-in-law Prince Sawat, similarly took to drawing parallels between the new government and the Soviet regime, arguing that the Promoters planned to move the country in the direction of communism.

At the same time key royalists raised the spectre of communism in books, columns and interviews; others commissioned incidents and disturbances designed to make the threat appear real and imminent. According to some reports, conservative figures close to the King were involved in covert efforts to create disorder and disseminate communist literature. Perhaps the most famous among the episodes of communist pamphleteering, which were reported breathlessly by the local press during the first six months since the 1932 Revolution, was a document that surfaced on 29 September. Written in Thai, English and Chinese, the leaflet would later be attributed to conservative writer Luang Wichit — a charge that Luang Wichit's biographer Scot Barmé considers plausible.<sup>38</sup> Concurrently, a series of strikes by Chinese workers and rickshaw drivers broke out in the first few months since the People's Party came to power,<sup>39</sup> contributing to an atmosphere of increased confusion and fear.<sup>40</sup> According to government documents, powerful princes such as Boriphat and Purachatra bankrolled the disturbances with donations amounting to several hundred thousand baht.<sup>41</sup>

There is no evidence suggesting that the advent of communism was anything other than an imaginary threat trumped up by conservatives to undermine the government. Communist groups had been active in Siam since at least 1927, but the strength of the movement was negligible at the time. Nobody in the People's Party, moreover, harboured any desire to install a communist regime or a collectivist economy — Pridi himself, the highest-profile target of the royalists' accusations, had never been a communist.<sup>42</sup>

Aside from portraying the People's Party as a group of dangerous radicals, the purpose of the campaign was to expose the government's inability to keep the peace through constitutional means, and hence goad the Promoters into betraying the Revolution's more democratic ideals in an attempt to prove their mettle. In this endeavour the royalists were quite successful. After prompting Mano to clamp down on the virulent criticism of the monarchy that much of the print media had unleashed in the weeks after the coup, the government responded to intensifying social upheaval by getting tough on the press and Chinese labour. In addition, the government's concerns about political instability and softening public support induced the People's Party to lean more heavily on the King. The conspicuous request for forgiveness and the accommodations pursued by the December Constitution were

37 Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, pp. 76–8.

38 Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, p. 72.

39 A description of the strikes appears in G. William Skinner, *Chinese society in Thailand: An analytical history* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957), p. 219.

40 For an overview, see Thompson, *Thailand*, p. 67.

41 Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, pp. 72, 96. More detail about the royalists' underground activities appears in Nattapoll, 'The monarchy and the royalist movement', pp. 156–7.

42 The responses Pridi gave to a parliamentary inquiry conducted in early 1934 are especially illustrative in this sense, not to mention consistent with his statements and behaviour before and after the fact. See 'Luang Pradit: Clear of communist stigma', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 12 Mar. 1934.

in all likelihood related to the Promoters' self-consciousness about their deficit of legitimacy.

King Prajadhipok scored another major victory shortly after the Permanent Constitution was enacted. In early January 1933, a group of conservatives led by Luang Wichit Wathakan submitted registration papers for a new political group, the 'National Party' (คณะชาติ). The boilerplate description that the founders provided for the group's planned mission, organisation and activities made no mention of electoral competition,<sup>43</sup> but it was clear to observers that this group was intended as an alternative to the People's Party.

At that time, at least some of the Promoters still aspired to make the People's Party into a mass organisation. In late August 1932, the party's spin-off group — the People's Association (สมาคมคณะราษฎร) — boasted that its membership had risen to 10,000 and announced that branches would soon be opened in the provinces.<sup>44</sup> Thereafter, newspapers reported a flurry of activity by the People's Association — meetings, fund raising, recruitment, merit-making ceremonies, the adoption of new internal regulations, and even an incipient effort at establishing a measure of symbolic content.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, a number of high-level dignitaries from the People's Party attended a ceremony for the country's first trade union, the Tramwaymen's Association, whose activities were explicitly aimed at supporting the government.<sup>46</sup>

Whereas the People's Party/People's Association had, up to that point, remained ambiguous about the organisation's electoral objectives, the registration of the National Party forced the Promoters to show their hand. Both Pridi and Luang Wichit confirmed details of a conversation in which the two men agreed that the National Party should be formed; Pridi, moreover, reported that the Promoters held a meeting, in the presence of Phya Mano, where it was decided to grant the National Party registration. Pridi claimed to have instructed People's Party officials to prepare for an electoral campaign immediately thereafter.<sup>47</sup>

Phya Mano's about-face is commonly attributed to his consultations with King Prajadhipok. In a letter written to the Prime Minister on 31 January 1933, the King expressed 'great nervousness' (ความวิตกเป็นอันมาก) over the plan to register a political party. In Prajadhipok's view, party competition had the potential to cause violence and unrest given the Siamese people's lack of preparedness and understanding of the system; political parties should only be allowed to form once the people had demonstrated proper understanding of 'government, morality, and constitutionalism'. The King also noted that, to avoid the appearance of hypocrisy and double standards, the denial of the National Party's registration should be accompanied by the

43 'A new association', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 9 Jan. 1933.

44 'The People's Association', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 30 Aug. 1932.

45 These activities are reported in a series of articles entitled 'The People's Association', which appeared in the pages of *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* on 26, 28 and 30 Sept. 1932, and on 12 Oct. 1932.

46 'Bangkok's first trade union', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 25 Oct. 1932.

47 First-hand accounts of these meetings were provided by Luang Wichit and Pridi, respectively, in the secret meeting of the National Assembly that took place on 31 Jan. 1935. In *Official report on the abdication of King Prajadhipok*, pp. 203–4 and p. 285. See also Nakarin, *The 1932 revolution in Siam*, p. 237.

disbandment of the People's Association. In the meantime, members of parliament (MPs) should remain unaffiliated.<sup>48</sup>

Mano, of course, had his own reasons to go along with the King's recommendations. Having long since fallen out with several of the Promoters, Pridi chiefly among them, Phya Mano saw in the disbandment of the People's Association an effective way to both reduce their power and assure greater personal control over members of the legislature. In a letter to the National Assembly, Pridi would later say that Mano had confessed his preference for an electoral campaign 'of whispers' — that is, one where the government would manipulate elections by 'whispering' in the ears of local officials to deliver the right results — over one based on policies or ideas.<sup>49</sup> Having no personal interest in furthering the Revolution, Mano increasingly relied on King Prajadhipok to buttress his personal power and diminish the influence of the Promoters. After securing the King's support, Phya Mano denied the registration of the National Party and approached Luang Wichit, promising that the People's Party would also be disbanded.<sup>50</sup> The People's Association voluntarily dissolved in April 1933, after a series of crippling government regulations had forbidden state employees (both military and civilian) to take part in the organisation's activities.<sup>51</sup>

For King Prajadhipok, this 'double play' had both short- and long-term benefits. In the long term, strong, organised political parties with an independent base of support in the electorate — even those like the National Party with an avowedly royalist platform/ideology — posed a threat of morphing into one of the throne's main competitors for political power.<sup>52</sup> Whether or not this consideration even crossed Prajadhipok's mind, however, the short-term benefits of getting the People's Association disbanded were attractive enough to induce the King to lobby for the denial of the National Party's registration. The People's Party's dissolution deprived

48 'Letter from the King to Phya Mano, 31 Jan. 1933'. Entered into evidence in the 'Minutes of the secret meeting of the National Assembly held on 31 Jan. 1935', in *Official report on the abdication of King Prajadhipok*, pp. 176–8.

49 'The Assembly: A long letter from Luang Pradit', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 2 Aug. 1933.

50 Luang Wichit maintains to have responded to Mano that this was neither his problem nor his intention (*Official report on the abdication of King Prajadhipok*, p. 204). Virginia Thompson (*Thailand*, p. 71), however, argues that at the time 'it was generally accepted that such an eclipse of the People's Party was precisely what the sponsors of the Nationalist Party were aiming at'.

51 'The People's Association', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 22 Apr. 1933.

52 Of course, it is impossible to say what would have happened if the National Party had been granted registration and had been allowed to compete against the People's Association for National Assembly seats. At the very least, however, it might be ventured that this constituted a missed opportunity for Siam and later Thailand. At the time, Pridi and Luang Wichit were not only young, but were genuinely towering figures on account of their unparalleled knowledge, intellect and charisma. After the elections of Oct.–Nov. 1933, when both served as 'second category' members of the National Assembly, the two men frequently dominated parliamentary debates — both elected and appointed legislators were generally keen to defer to their positions and legal interpretations. Once again, whether or not Pridi and Luang Wichit could have played the same role that Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson played in the emergence of a two-party system in the United States is hard to tell (see John H. Aldrich, *Why parties? The origin and transformation of political parties in America* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995]). However, it is fitting that it was the palace that deprived Siam of the best chance to develop, early on, the kind of institutions that might have helped consolidate a functioning democracy. During the Ninth Reign, keeping political parties weak, fragmented and territorialised is a policy that palace associates and self-described palace guardians would turn to consistently and to great effect.

ambitious Promoters whom the palace detested and feared, above all Pridi, of the main organisational vehicle to political power. Also, the destruction of the People's Party aggravated some of the personal conflicts that had been brewing in the ranks of the government (and the Promoters themselves), offering the King an opportunity to recover some of the prestige, influence and clout that he had been forced to relinquish on 24 June.

Divisions between the Promoters are reported to have first emerged just days after the coup, when Phya Song Suradet — one of the leaders of the People's Party's senior army faction and mastermind of the operation — is said to have angrily rebuked Pridi over some of the language employed in the draft constitution submitted to the King. The strategy that Phya Mano seems to have adopted, with King Prajadhipok's backing, was to enlist Phya Song to further deepen the rift between Pridi's supporters and the senior army faction, then essentially purge both while neutralising the People's Party junior military clique in a series of reshuffles.

Mano's stratagem only fell a few days short of completing a successful counter-revolution. After an audience with the King, who expressed interest in his ideas, Pridi was invited to submit a detailed economic plan aimed at realising the 'six principles' of the Revolution. By contemporary standards, the plan reads as quaint, utopian and overly *dirigiste*, but was not quite the 'communist plan' his critics alleged. Right or wrong, the nationalisation of industry, the system of cooperatives and the comprehensive social insurance scheme that the plan envisioned were very much in line with policies proposed by mainstream social-democratic parties in Europe at the time; in an interview with the *Straits Times*, Pridi himself cited Britain's Labour Party as the organisation that most closely reflected his economic views.<sup>53</sup> The plan made no provision for either expropriation of property or the prohibition of private enterprise. Nonetheless, in a lengthy commentary replete with crude and disingenuous parallels with Soviet Russia — the most famous of which being: 'What is not certain is who the imitator is; does Stalin imitate Luang Pradit or vice versa?' — King Prajadhipok rubbished the proposal as a communist scheme.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps buoyed by the sympathetic response of a government-appointed investigative committee, which rejected the plan only after failing to come to unanimous agreement on the majority opinion that it should be implemented,<sup>55</sup> Pridi circulated his 'Yellow Book' among his supporters in the National Assembly. Some demanded that the government allow a parliamentary debate on the subject. By the time the State Council rejected the plan — Mano having secured the support of the non-Promoters in the executive as well as the Promoters less supportive of Pridi — the atmosphere in the National Assembly had turned incandescent. Later, Mano's government would allege that Pridi's 'radical' faction, which was said to control 30 seats, had begun carrying pistols in the Assembly. In turn, the 30 members of what Mano referred to as the 'middle party' stayed away out of fear for their safety, making the 10 or so remaining legislators supportive of the government powerless to prevent the Assembly from approving the economic plan, or indeed any measure the 'radicals'

53 Reprinted in 'Luang Pradit in Singapore', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 24 Apr. 1933.

54 The full English text is reproduced in Thak, *Thai politics 1932–1957*, pp. 193–234.

55 The minutes of the committee's proceedings are reproduced in Landon, *Siam in transition*, pp. 303–23.

may have wanted. Mano claimed that, as a result, the choice before the country was to either accept communism or recur to extra-constitutional means to forestall its advent.<sup>56</sup>

On 1 April, after securing the King's signature on the illegal decree, Mano staged an *autogolpe*. The Assembly was prorogued until new elections could be held, its legislative powers transferred back to the King. Pridi and four of his supporters were forced out of the State Council, while Pridi himself was sent abroad to 'continue his studies'. A new (and exceedingly broad) 'Act Concerning Communism' imposed stiff jail terms on those advocating 'communism or any communist doctrine', while an amendment to the Civil and Commercial Act gave the Registrar the power to deny or lift the registration of associations 'likely to endanger the public peace'.<sup>57</sup> Phya Mano warned journalists who had shown themselves unimpressed with the government's rationalisation of its drastic measures: 'You will be drastically dealt with if you fail to recognize and support the Government's policy of excluding communism from Siam'.<sup>58</sup>

The King's Secretary described the self-coup as 'merely a strike at the snake's tail'.<sup>59</sup>

Having purged Pridi, Phya Mano moved swiftly — indeed, perhaps too swiftly for his own good. Newspapers that criticised the prorogation of the Assembly or defended Pridi's economic plan were suspended or closed. The electoral law was changed. New economic policies were introduced. Suddenly, on 10 June, the four leaders of the People's Party's erstwhile senior military clique — Phya Phahon, Phya Song, Phya Ritthi Akhane and Phra Prasat Pitthiyayuth — submitted their resignations, effective 24 June 1933. This turn of events should have given Mano some pause, but the Premier instead pressed ahead and reshuffled the ranks of the military. Two ultra-conservatives, Major-General Phya Phichai Songkhram and Colonel Phya Sisitthi Songkhram, were nominated to fill the posts of Commander in Chief of the Army and Director of Military Operations, respectively held by Phya Phahon and Phya Song. Sensing that the replacement of the most senior military leaders of the Promoters with staunch royalists harboured the end of the Revolution, junior Promoters in the Army and Navy, led by Colonel Luang Phibun Songkhram and Naval Commander Luang Supha Chalasai, resolved to take power by force, before it was too late. After securing Phya Phahon's co-operation, the junior Promoters struck on 20 June. Much like the previous year, the seizure of Bangkok was clean and bloodless.

Upon taking the office of Premier, which he would occupy until September 1938, Phya Phahon initially recommitted himself to some of the stated objectives of the Revolution. In the days after the 20 June coup, he pledged to allow complete freedom of speech and of the press,<sup>60</sup> which the Mano administration had aggressively

56 'Luang Pradit's scheme: An official statement', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 13 Apr. 1933.

57 'People's Assembly dissolved: Appointment of new State Council', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 3 Apr. 1933.

58 Cited in Sivaram, *The new Siam in the making*, p. 62.

59 Cited in Stowe, *Siam becomes Thailand*, p. 50. Months later, in correspondence, the King would question the wisdom of dissolving the National Assembly, characterising Mano's actions as heedless and rash.

60 'The new revolution in Siam: The men concerned', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 21 June 1933.



curtailed over the previous year. Taking no chances of a repeated hostile takeover of the government, Phahon retained the dual position of Premier and Commander in Chief of the Army. The State Council and other key positions in the country's administration were reserved for Promoters, while those who had aided Mano's counter-revolution were retired.<sup>61</sup> The National Assembly was reconvened almost immediately, the constitutional provisions suspended by Mano quickly restored. Shortly thereafter, Pridi was invited to return to Siam — to clear his name and take the lead in the country's economic reform, provided he dropped the idea of nationalising land and industry.<sup>62</sup> Upon his arrival in Singapore, papers reported that Phya Song and Phra Prasat, two of the key senior Promoters, were also there, on their way out of Siam.<sup>63</sup>

Phya Phahon has been praised for the moderate, 'revengeless' approach he took to dealing with Phya Mano and King Prajadhipok, as well as subsequent challenges to his rule that would soon be mounted by disgruntled royalists. Perhaps concerned about the fact that his signature had appeared on the Royal Decree that suspended the Constitution back in April, Phahon nudged the National Assembly to approve the legality of legislation passed in the last two-and-a-half months of Mano's rule. Requests that Phya Mano be prosecuted and the King impeached for suspending the Constitution were denied, while a defamation suit against the King — submitted by supporters of Pridi among the Tramwaymen's Association — was met with criminal charges for the petitioner, Thawat Rithidet.

But King Prajadhipok would have none of it. In an open letter to the reconvened National Assembly, he hastened to remind 'all members' of 'the importance I attached to the Constitution when I gave it to them'.<sup>64</sup> Shortly thereafter, royalist publications resumed peddling ugly rumours of an impending communist takeover. Despite expressing admiration for Phahon in public, moreover, King Prajadhipok undertook a campaign to discredit the new government with foreign powers. In a 4 August letter sent to two foreign advisors attached to the government, the King spoke of Phya Phahon as someone 'not blessed with brains' and argued for the necessity of keeping the Promoters in check by invoking 'the bogey' of foreign intervention. 'One must use that bogey to the last', the King said, 'even if there is no chance of foreign intervention taking place'. Prajadhipok then explained his motivations for staying away from Bangkok: 'With the King at large and free to lead a revolt they have to be more cautious.'<sup>65</sup>

The royalist rebellion that King Prajadhipok foreshadowed broke out in the middle of October, as the first National Assembly elections were in full swing throughout the country. Prince Bowaradet, aided by troops from Nakorn Ratchasima, Nakorn Sawan, Ayutthaya and Petchaburi, took control of Don Muang Airport, laid siege to Bangkok and issued an ultimatum for the government to resign. The government pushed back hard against the rebels. In two weeks of heavy fighting, Phibun's troops first chased Bowaradet out of Don Muang and

61 See Nakarin, *The 1932 revolution in Siam*, pp. 257–8.

62 'Luang Pradit on his way back', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 1 Sept. 1933.

63 'Luang Pradit to plan Siam's economic recovery', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 2 Oct. 1933.

64 'The new order: The King to the Assembly', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 6 July 1933.

65 Cited in Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, pp. 82–3 and p. 99.

Bang Sue, then crushed the insurgents around their northeastern stronghold in Pak Chong. By the end of October, the revolt was quelled.

King Prajadhipok's role in the Bowaradet Rebellion is still somewhat controversial. Some, Prajadhipok included, have pointed out that Prince Bowaradet had a difficult relationship with the King and other officials in the absolutist regime. While, moreover, it is true that Bowaradet justified the armed insurrection based on the supposed 'disrespect' shown by the government to the King, the government's own propaganda machine also justified fighting back against the rebels based on the need to protect the King.

Prajadhipok's critics at the time pointed to the composition of the rebels' ranks. There is little doubt, in particular, about the royalist credentials of some of Bowaradet's main lieutenants — among them, Phya Sena Songkhram, Phya Sittthi Songkhram, Phya Deb Songkhram, Luang Balaharn Songkhram, Phya Sarabhaya Bidadh and Phya Surabhand Sena. The King's ambiguous behaviour during the revolt also raised suspicions. At the height of the violence, while Phya Phahon requested his return to Bangkok, the King made a precipitous escape to Songkhla, while other members of the royal family crossed the border into British Malaya. The reason for the King's hurried departure is, again, disputed. Shortly thereafter, Prajadhipok's Private Secretary issued a bland statement that expressed His Majesty's regret over 'the suffering caused by the civil war' and announced a donation of 10,000 baht to the Red Cross Society.<sup>66</sup> According to the Special Court convened by the Phibun government years later, however, King Prajadhipok had provided Prince Bowaradet with a sum 20 times as large to finance the rebellion.<sup>67</sup> While there is good reason to be sceptical of the findings released by the Special Court in 1939,<sup>68</sup> accounts offered by the King's own associates support the notion that Prajadhipok was deeply involved in the rebellion's planning, financing and execution.<sup>69</sup>

By the end of 1933, the Promoters had crushed the counter-revolution. However, they had done so at the cost of sacrificing the Revolution's democratic potential. While the government eventually exhibited a measure of restraint in dealing with those convicted of an active role in the rebellion, its actions in the immediate aftermath placed Siam onto the track to military dictatorship. Hundreds of officials were arrested or dismissed from government service over their (at times merely suspected) involvement in the rebellion. Royalist newspapers like those controlled by Prince Sawat were closed down as the government tightened the screws on dissent. A draconian 'Act to Protect the Constitution', moreover, criminalised public expressions of disrespect for the Constitution or the constitutional regime, an all-purpose definition that would place few limits on the government's authority to silence dissent.

King Prajadhipok left the country in early 1934, officially for medical reasons, never again to return to Siam.

66 'The situation: Translations of official communiques', *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 17 Oct. 1933.

67 Cited in Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, p. 101.

68 For an account of the Court's politicisation and subservience to Phibun's interests, see Stowe, *Siam becomes Thailand*, pp. 133–5.

69 For a summary, see Nattapoll, 'The monarchy and the royalist movement', pp. 158–60.

### **Democrat in extremis**

Since the 1932 Revolution, King Prajadhipok had made repeated offers or threats to abdicate — the first time the King mentioned the possibility of abdicating his throne was in a meeting held with the Promoters and Phya Mano on 30 June 1932. Indeed, the threat had been made so often that Prajadhipok boasted to foreign advisors to the government that his ‘strongest weapon is the threat to abdicate — effectively used several times already’. What seems to have driven the King to act on the threat to abdicate his throne, however, were two decisions that the National Assembly took during the extraordinary session held in August–September 1934. In both instances, the National Assembly had enacted, without change, legislation that the King had previously elected not to sign (as per his constitutional prerogative), citing objections to the content of the original drafts.

The first bill in question was the Inheritance Tax Act, which Prajadhipok had opposed on the grounds that the legislation failed to include an exception for Crown Property. Despite the King’s objections, in early August the Act passed the National Assembly, without amendment, on an 89–35 vote. The second piece of contentious legislation was an Amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure. In this instance, King Prajadhipok objected to having been stripped of the power to approve death sentences and expressed concern that the King’s right of pardon would ‘somehow be made ineffective’. This bill also passed without amendment in late September, on a 75–36 vote. Aside from seeing his objections dismissed so readily by the Assembly, the King was especially troubled by the nature of the discussion in parliament. On both subjects, legislators harshly criticised the King for his refusal to accept the principle of equality under the law (on the subject of taxation<sup>70</sup>) and for his encroachment of the legislature’s authority (on the subject of criminal procedure<sup>71</sup>).

It is around this time that King Prajadhipok took to making specific demands from the government as a condition for returning to Bangkok and for staying on the throne. On 26 September 1934, two Royal Notes were sent to the government through an intermediary. In the First Royal Note (พระราชบัญญัติ ๑),<sup>72</sup> the King stated his dismay over three news items. First, Prajadhipok complained about the firing of Mom Chao Suphasawat — the Queen’s brother — and others in the Palace Guard (ทหารรักษาวัง), whom the government suspected of having been involved in the Bowaradet Rebellion; he noted that the government’s failure to reinstate the men would be regarded a ‘personal affront’ (เป็นการกระทบกระเทือน ต่อตัวฉันมาก) and would hence be cause for the King to abdicate. Second, Prajadhipok protested that he could not accept the government’s planned elimination of the Palace Guard, arguing that the King needed an armed guard for protection — especially in view of the factionalism that was rife within the military. The government’s failure to preserve the Palace Guard in its traditional form would be also be cause for abdication. Third, Prajadhipok expressed his concern over a rumour that the Ministry of the Royal Household would be scrapped or reformed; that, in his view, would have turned

70 ‘The Assembly: The Inheritance Tax Act’, *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 6 Aug. 1934.

71 ‘The Assembly: An important meeting’, *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 29 Sept. 1934.

72 The ‘First royal note’ (พระราชบัญญัติ ๑) was entered into evidence in the ‘Minutes of the secret meeting of the National Assembly held on 31 Jan. 1935’, in *Official report on the abdication of King Prajadhipok*, pp. 133–5.

the King into 'a hostage', forcing him to surround himself with people he did not trust. Prajadhipok stated he would 'rather die' than return to Bangkok to face this situation. As a condition for remaining on the throne, King Prajadhipok asked that every member of the State Council sign a written guarantee that each one of his demands would be met; failing such guarantees, he would resign.

In the 'Second Royal Note' (พระราชบัญญัติ ๒) submitted to the government on the same occasion,<sup>73</sup> King Prajadhipok elaborated his position on the Inheritance Tax Act. The King professed himself to be disappointed over not just the failure to grant an exemption to royal wealth, but also at the insinuation by members of the Assembly that his opposition was more self-interested than principled. After making a somewhat convoluted case about the difficulty of assessing tax on Crown Property and the damage that the status of the King would suffer from submission to this form of taxation, Prajadhipok promised the government that, without exception, he would no longer sign any legislation that damaged the King 'directly or indirectly'.

From there, King Prajadhipok accused the People's Party of considering him an enemy of the government and of wanting to see him removed. Though expressing doubts about the possibility of reconciliation (ปรองดอง), the King made four additional demands that the government would have to grant if he was to stay on the throne. First, Prajadhipok demanded that the government 'end casting aspersions on the King'. Second, he asked that any criticism of the dynasty and previous governments should cease immediately, adding that the government should 'strictly repress' anyone who 'looks down on' the monarchy (ขอให้ปราบปรามผู้ที่ดูถูกพระราชวงศ์ จักหรืออย่างเข้มงวด). Third, the government should make its loyalty to the throne clear. Fourth, in the interest of keeping in check the groups responsible for the country's unrest, the King demanded that Phya Phahon take appropriate measures to reassure those who accused the government of socialism and accommodate those punished for their involvement in the Bowaradet Rebellion by reducing their jail terms and restoring their pensions.

The contents of these Royal Notes are striking in that King Prajadhipok made it perfectly clear that the motivations for his abdication were exclusively related to the monarchy's own status and power. Even in the instances where the King sought to dress up private concerns in the language of public interest, his motivations are transparent enough. Equally befuddling is Prajadhipok's idea of 'reconciliation'. 'Reconciliation', in the King's view, merely required that the government restore the King's powers, pursue policies no royalist could find cause to label 'socialist', and make concessions to insurrectionists whom the government had, presumably, itself driven to take up arms to overthrow the constitutional regime. None of the high-minded concerns for 'democracy' and 'the voice of the people' that fill King Prajadhipok's abdication statement appear in these notes, save for the demand that the 'voice of the people' be 'strictly repressed' if it happened to be critical of the King, his associates or his predecessors.

Faced with the government's inaction over the two Royal Notes sent in late September, as well as the National Assembly's vote to enact the Amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure, the King's Regent in Bangkok wrote a stern letter to

73 See 'Second royal note', *Ibid.*, pp. 136–50.

Phya Phahon. In the letter, Prince Narit conveyed to the Prime Minister the King's displeasure over the unwillingness of the State Council and the Assembly to make concessions and warned Phya Phahon that if the government wanted to work with the King, it must agree to consult with him in advance of making any important decision. Once again, Prince Narit noted that in the absence of these guarantees, the King would abdicate.<sup>74</sup> A week later, Phya Phahon responded by noting his sadness over the recurrence of the threat, but notably refused to grant the King's latest demand, arguing that the government and the National Assembly were conducting their business in accordance with the Constitution.<sup>75</sup> In the ensuing days, nonetheless, the government would make some attempt to accommodate Prajadhipok's earlier requests. On 26 October, the government announced that no prosecutions would henceforth be initiated against officials suspected of involvement in the Bowaradet Rebellion.<sup>76</sup>

Frustrated with the government's response, King Prajadhipok issued the strongest statement yet about his intention to abdicate in a memorandum sent to the Royal Secretary in Bangkok on 27 October.<sup>77</sup> In the memorandum, the King complained that the government had made him 'take on the same status as the King of England' — something he was not prepared to accept. He added: 'I am tired of fighting like this, when I always have to lose' (หมอมฉันเมื่อหนายตอการทะเลาะกัน เชนนี้ซึ่งหมอมฉันคงตองแพทุกเรื่องไป). Seeing no point in negotiating further, Prajadhipok stated that the government must accept his conditions as they were, as he would no longer submit to playing the role of mere 'underling' (ลูกมือ). A few days later, the government announced that a delegation composed of Chao Phya Sri Thammathibet, Luang Thamrong Nawasawat and Nai Direk Chaivanam would travel to England to meet with the King, in an attempt to come to an agreement consistent with the Constitution.

Given the tenor of earlier communications, the government's envoys may have been taken by surprise when, in their first meeting with King Prajadhipok held on 12 December, they were treated to a lecture on representative democracy.<sup>78</sup> The delegation's account of the meeting mirrors the contents of the third and final 'Royal Note' that the King submitted a week or so later.<sup>79</sup> Whereas previous correspondence had focused almost exclusively on the King's status and power — specifically, on the King's refusal to play the limited role to which the Constitution relegated him in principle and the failure of the counter-revolution consigned him in practice — the Royal Note submitted on 20–21 December centres on demands ostensibly designed to make Siam a 'real democracy'.

Far from demonstrating King Prajadhipok's commitment to democracy, it is hard to miss the glaring contradictions between his latest statement and earlier positions

74 'Letter from Prince Narit to the Prime Minister, 14 Oct. 1934', *ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

75 'Letter from the Prime Minister to Prince Narit, 23 Oct. 1934', *ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

76 The 'Letter from the State Council to the Minister of the Royal Household, 26 Oct. 1934' was entered into evidence in the 'Minutes of the secret meeting of the National Assembly held on 31 Jan. 1935'. *Ibid.*, pp. 183–4.

77 'Letter from the King to the Royal Secretary in Bangkok, 27 Oct. 1934', *ibid.*, pp. 9–14.

78 บันทึกยกอกรไปเฝ้าพระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัว ครั้งที่๑ เมื่อวันที่ ๑๒ ธันวาคม พ.ศ. ๒๔๗๗ ['Brief notes on the first audience with the King on 12 Dec. 1934'], in *ibid.*, pp. 24–30.

79 The 'Third royal note' was entered into evidence in the 'Minutes of the secret meeting of the National Assembly held on 31 Jan. 1935', *ibid.*, pp. 99–113.

articulated in writings spanning the entire duration of his reign. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that by the time Prajadhipok ever began to couch his dissatisfaction in the Promoters' failure to uphold democratic ideals, the government's refusal to budge on previous requests had already made the King's abdication somewhat of a foregone conclusion. Faced with the inevitability of abdication, it is likely that the King merely sought to establish some basis to claim that the decision to abdicate was driven primarily by concerns for the country, as opposed to his unwillingness to accept a ceremonial role. Other than an improbable, late conversion to liberal democracy, that is, the demands made by the King in late December could only have reflected his desire to ground the impending abdication in reasons less personal and, perhaps, less petty than the King's discomfort with the monarchy's own powerlessness.

In the last Royal Note, King Prajadhipok made a series of eight demands, spelling out in some detail the actions that the government would have had to take to satisfy his wishes. Whereas the latter part of the document focused on issues raised in previous communications — namely, the treatment of rebels (actual or suspected) and the status of the Palace Guard<sup>80</sup> — these concerns were decidedly downplayed in this document.

First, the King offered a lengthy statement on the issue of the 'second category' MPs, blaming many of the country's problems on their continued existence. King Prajadhipok cited the pressure he placed on the Drafting Committee that designed the 1932 Permanent Constitution to write 'a real democratic constitution' and specifically noted his opposition to the provision that half of the legislature be composed of appointed members. Faced with the Committee's unwillingness to give in to his demands, the King claimed to have reluctantly agreed in the interest of preventing an even worse constitution from being written. There is reason, however, to be sceptical of King Prajadhipok's version of the events. By most accounts, the King was deeply involved in the drafting of the Permanent Constitution, which was entrusted to a Drafting Committee chaired by Phya Mano and composed, for the most part, by non-Promoters.<sup>81</sup> Up to the release of the Royal Note in late December 1934, moreover, the King had never been on record as supporting 'a real democracy'.

While calling the existence of second category MPs a 'violation of the principles and doctrines of a real democracy' (เป็นการผิดหลักผิดทางของลัทธิ 'democracy' โดยแท้), the King hastened to say that he still thought that the appointed members were needed in the legislature's initial, transitional period. His chief objection, as it turns out, was merely to the manner in which second category MPs were selected. As an alternative, the King suggested that appointed legislators should be men over 35 years of age chosen from among the highest ranks of the civil service. As for the mode of election, the King suggested that the choice must be left to either the people as a whole or the 'intelligentsia' — that is, citizens with high levels of education or

80 With regard to the Bowaradet Rebellion, the King demanded that the government declare an amnesty for 'political crimes', commute the sentences of those found guilty, restore the pensions of officials dismissed on suspicion of disloyalty, and drop all ongoing prosecutions. Finally, the King returned to the issue of the Palace Guard, whose budget, independence and ability to carry weapons was to be protected.

81 See, for instance, Thamrongsak Petchlertanand, 2475 และหนึ่งปีหลังการปฏิวัติ [1932 and the year after the revolution] (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2000), p. 118.

government officials with the rank of ‘royal appointee’ (ชั้นสัญญาบัตร). King Prajadhipok did not explain why this latter proposal, which he described as the easiest, would constitute any less of a violation of democratic principles than the system already in place. In its response to the Royal Note, issued on 9 January 1935, the government reminded the King that virtually all of the existing second category members had been chosen from the highest ranks of the civil service.

What is most extraordinary, however, about the King’s extended critique of second category MPs is the staggering claim that it was this very issue that triggered the Bowaradet Rebellion. The King explained that it was because the Constitution was not sufficiently democratic that ‘some people’ began to think about overthrowing the government — having been left with no option but to take the government down by force. It is in large part because of the second category MPs, Prajadhipok stated, that Thai people had to resort to killing each other. The King added that the repression of the Rebellion caused him to lose all confidence in the government.

The second demand the King made in the final Royal Note was that the government amend Section 39 of the Constitution in a manner that would strengthen his veto powers. King Prajadhipok reiterated that his failure to sign legislation could only be due to important reservations, which should not be overridden so easily, by simple majority vote (especially in a situation where only half of the National Assembly was elected). The King suggested that, in the event of a Royal Veto, the government should consider holding a referendum, dissolving the Assembly, or enacting a constitutional provision requiring a supermajority to override it — failing that, the government would prove itself to be a dictatorship.

Whatever the merits of the proposal, Prajadhipok’s own words point to the fact that his unease may have had to do with his distaste for ‘constitutional monarchy’ at least as much as his abhorrence of ‘dictatorship’. While, in particular, one could sympathise with the King’s discomfort with a position requiring him ‘to take responsibility [for legislation] without having any power’ (รับผิดชอบโดยไม่มีอำนาจเลย), for better or worse that is precisely what a constitutional monarch is expected to do.

The third set of demands that appear in the final Royal Note took direct aim at the government’s restriction of the political rights of the Thai people. Here, King Prajadhipok warned the government that this would be its last chance to grant full freedom of expression as well as freedom of assembly and association, including the possibility for citizens to organise in political parties. These concerns are reiterated in the King’s fourth demand — specifically, that the government repeal the Act to Protect the Constitution, which he accurately described as a measure whose sole purpose was to protect the government from criticism.

Of course, any proponent of procedural democracy cannot but concur with King Prajadhipok’s demands for greater freedom of expression, assembly and association. Nonetheless, it is hard to miss the jarring contrast between, on the one hand, the demand that citizens be afforded more expansive rights to publicly criticise the government and, on the other hand, the King’s earlier request that the government ‘strictly repress’ criticism of the monarchy. In addition, the King’s position on political parties marked a radical departure from Prajadhipok’s previous stance on the subject. The King had previously stated, in writing and in the clearest possible terms, his opposition to the formation of political parties in a country like Siam, while his

intercession with Phya Mano was decisive to the denial of the National Party's registration as well as the subsequent unravelling of the People's Association.

In a subsequent meeting with the delegation, held on 23 December 1934 to discuss his demands, King Prajadhipok also struck a markedly different, more conciliatory tone. He expressed hope that 'reconciliation' was still possible; describing the latest Royal Note as a 'tentative proposal', he opened the door for negotiation on the first two points he had raised.<sup>82</sup> It is hard to say, however, whether the shift away from the uncompromising, impatient, and frustrated tone the King had taken in correspondence with the government and palace officials in September and October was owed to a sincere change of heart, or whether, anticipating that the situation would not be resolved in his favour, Prajadhipok was simply positioning himself to blame the government for the eventual failure of the talks.

The government's response, which came almost three weeks later, was polite but firm. In the memorandum that Phya Phahon sent to the King on 9 January 1935, the Prime Minister noted that the government had already taken steps to accommodate most of the demands that the King had made in the first two Royal Notes sent in late September — the exception being to interrupt judicial proceedings that were already before the courts. As for the additional demands, the government stated its receptiveness to the idea that dismissed government officials should see their pension restored as well as the possibility of commuting the sentences of convicted rebels, though only at the end of the Special Court's proceedings. The government, however, rejected the King's demands on the issues of second category MPs, royal vetoes, freedom of speech/association, and the repeal of the Act to Protect the Constitution.

As a result, in subsequent meetings with the delegation in London, King Prajadhipok declared the negotiations closed<sup>83</sup> and accused the government of having sent the delegation only as 'propaganda'.<sup>84</sup> The King requested that the National Assembly be given a chance to consider his demands; the final decision about his future would be based on the outcome of the deliberations.

However insincere King Prajadhipok's latest demands may have been, considering his earlier statements and positions, the fact remains that the King was right to allege that the government was acting in ways contrary to the principles of democracy. Of course, Prajadhipok's own actions had a lot to do with the Promoters' betrayal of some of their own ideals; still, the government was justifiably quite sensitive to those accusations. The possibility of a parliamentary debate on the subject, moreover, raised the prospect of fracturing the National Assembly, where the King still enjoyed residual support.

In an ultimately successful attempt to prevent the debate from spiralling out of its control, the government made ingenious, if underhanded, use of its agenda-setting powers. When the Assembly convened on 31 January 1935, at 15:00 hours, the

82 บันทึกย่อการไปเฝ้าพระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัว ครั้งที่ ๒ เมื่อวันที่ ๒๓ ธันวาคม พ.ศ. ๒๔๗๗ [Brief notes on the second audience with the King on 23 Dec. 1934], in *Official report on the abdication of King Prajadhipok*, pp. 33–7.

83 บันทึกย่อการไปเฝ้าพระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัว ครั้งที่ ๓ เมื่อวันที่ ๒๐ มกราคม พ.ศ. ๒๔๗๗ [Brief notes on the third audience with the King on 20 Jan. 1935], *Ibid.*, pp. 52–6.

84 บันทึกย่อการไปเฝ้าพระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัว ครั้งที่ ๔ เมื่อวันที่ ๒๔ มกราคม พ.ศ. ๒๔๗๗ [Brief notes on the fourth audience with the King on 24 Jan. 1935], *Ibid.*, pp. 60–4.



government asked that parliament enter secret deliberations on an unspecified matter. While some representatives claimed to have no idea what the deliberations were going to be about, the fact that attendance was higher than usual suggests that the members might have been alerted to the fact that a very important subject would be discussed. Once the secret deliberations had begun, the government asked that the Assembly consider the matter in a single sitting, but failed to give a clear mandate for what exactly the Assembly was being asked to decide. The government then proceeded to read much of the documentation summarised in this paper, which most of the representatives had never seen before. After a quick break lasting barely an hour (18:20–19:25), legislators debated 10 of the demands raised by the King as well as the government's response. While King Prajadhipok's points received some minority support individually, legislators (mostly elected ones) excoriated the King for both the hypocrisy of his arguments and his attempt to overstep the bounds of his constitutional authority in demanding, as a condition to stay on the throne, that specific pieces of legislation be passed/repealed, or that the Constitution be amended in this or that manner.

By 23:00 hours, the government's rejection of the King's demands had earned the Assembly's unanimous endorsement. The Seventh Reign was effectively over.

### Unfinished business

The debate over the role that King Prajadhipok played in Thailand's process of democratisation generally focuses on what the King did or did not do before the end of the absolute monarchy and in the hours immediately following the 1932 Revolution. On that count, it should be said that the King did not do much at all to either help or damage the cause. Before the 24 June coup, he repeatedly solicited advice on potential reforms and commissioned an outline constitution he lacked the will or the clout to enact. In the hours after the coup, while it is to the King's credit that he refrained from taking actions that might have resulted in bloodshed, the reality is that the Revolution was already a *fait accompli* by the time he was asked to approve it. The real test of the King's commitment to liberal democracy would be provided by events that took place in the two-and-a-half years after the Revolution. On this count, the King can be said to have done much to undermine the country's democratisation.

The Promoters certainly carry a large share of the blame for what this paper has called the 'original sin' of Thai democracy — allowing King Prajadhipok to claim to have bestowed democracy upon the Siamese people himself — as well as for ultimately betraying the stated objectives of the Revolution in the years that followed the King's abdication. In the twilight of his life, Pridi Banomyong wrote wistfully about the Promoters' impotence to prevent the *ancien régime* from taking the nation 'back into a *khlong*'.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, it is a testament to the Promoters' failure that 'walking backwards into a *khlong*'<sup>86</sup> would later become one of the main slogans for a central plank of Thailand's official ideology, founded upon King Bhumibol's avowedly retrograde ideas about politics and economics.

85 Pridi, 'The People's Party and the revolution of 24 June', p. 169.

86 See Pasuk Phongpaichit, 'Developing social alternatives: Walking backwards into a *khlong*', in *Thailand beyond the crisis*, ed. Peter Warr (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 161–83.

Whereas the approach that King Prajadhipok took in the aftermath of the 1932 Revolution could be said to have failed to do much good to either himself or the country, Prajadhipok's campaign was successful in one sense. By shattering the confidence of the Promoters in their ability to govern an open, liberal-democratic society, the King effectively stifled Siam's democratisation before the process could gather any momentum. What is worse, by undermining those among the Promoters, like Pridi Banomyong, who believed in the democratic rhetoric of the Revolution and, at least initially, had the popularity, charisma and clout to lead Siam in that direction, the King's actions tipped the balance of power within the People's Party in favour of those who were far less enthusiastic about liberal democracy. In the years following the King's abdication, Phibun prevailed in his internal struggle against Pridi as well as his conservative arch-enemy Phya Song, going on to preside over the completion of the country's reversal into authoritarianism and militarism. In turn, the country's abortive transition to democracy created the opening that was needed for the future reassertion of the monarchy's political ascendancy. The improbable resurrection of the monarchy as the main locus of political power would later be driven by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat's quest to establish a more potent source of legitimacy. If the deficit of legitimacy that plagued governments up to the late 1950s could be attributed largely to the weak institutionalisation of the country's constitutional regime, the failure of democracy to take hold has a lot to do with King Prajadhipok's actions in the wake of the usurpation of his absolute powers.<sup>87</sup>

At the same time, King Prajadhipok's rhetorical embracement of democracy not only served to shield the monarchy from blame in precipitating the failure of constitutionalism, but offered the basis to present the subsequent revival of the monarchy's political role as crucial to establishing a superior form of 'democracy' — one purportedly more ideally suited to the country's unique circumstances and traditions. Indeed, while 'Thai-Style Democracy' (ประชาธิปไตยแบบไทย), as it came to be known in the days of Sarit, has never been much of an actual 'democracy',<sup>88</sup> the Chakri dynasty's claim to democratic legitimacy has offered a slew of much less than democratic regimes the opportunity to dress up harsh dictatorial measures in a benign, paternalistic attire. As the events of the past five years have shown, that remains the foremost impediment to Thailand's democratisation.

It is quite possible that King Prajadhipok himself, had he lived long enough to witness it, might have taken no small measure of pride in the fact that his actions made room for the restoration of the Chakri dynasty's power to heights not reached since at least the days of King Chulalongkorn. In some ways, moreover, the Ninth Reign realised the vision that Prajadhipok had developed in the run-up to the Revolution. While, in particular, King Prajadhipok had never really been a democrat, neither was he terribly interested in managing the country on a day-to-day basis. What he was keen on experimenting with was a 'limited monarchy' — a system of government where the King would remain the locus of the Kingdom's executive

87 For a summary of the political activities undertaken by royalists between King Prajadhipok's abdication and Sarit's coup, see Nattapoll, 'The monarchy and the royalist movement', pp. 162–72. See also Handley, *The King never smiles*, pp. 64–99.

88 See Federico Ferrara, *Thailand unhinged: The death of Thai-style democracy* (Singapore: Equinox, 2011).

and legislative powers (hence his frequent complaints about being relegated to a similar status as the King of England) but would delegate some of that authority to a prime minister, who would run the country's day-to-day affairs.

That is precisely what the Ninth Reign would accomplish under King Bhumibol in the late 1970s — a shift back from 'constitutional' to 'limited' monarchy. Inter alia, this development is reflected in the shifting terminology used locally to describe Thailand's system of government. Whereas, after the 1932 Revolution, the expression generally in use to describe 'constitutional monarchy' was a variant of 'democracy with the King under the Constitution' (ระบอบประชาธิปไตยอันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงอยู่ใต้รัฐธรรมนูญ), the expression 'democracy with the King as Head of State' (ระบอบประชาธิปไตยอันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุข) is decidedly more in vogue today. In fact, prominent royalists openly dispute the notion that the authority of the King is in any way constrained by the constitution.<sup>89</sup>

King Bhumibol's own view of 'democracy' appears to have much in common with King Prajadhipok's — for both, 'democracy' always denoted the delegation of some of the King's sovereign powers, not the transfer of sovereignty from the King to the people. Aside from his long-standing contempt of elected politicians, his frequent support of military strongmen, and his availability to endorse a series of coups undertaken in his name, King Bhumibol articulated that view himself in 1989: 'Nobody can do everything alone [...] The king at present does not carry the duty to run the country. He has someone else do it.'<sup>90</sup> This, in essence, is the vision put forth in Francis B. Sayre's 1926 draft constitution.

During the Ninth Reign, of course, the palace went much farther than King Prajadhipok had ever ventured. While Prajadhipok was deeply sceptical of the possibility that the monarchy's support and respect could be restored, the cause was pursued vigorously during the Ninth Reign — through schooling and aggressive legal enforcement as well as a massive, taxpayer-funded propaganda campaign that built a cult of personality quite uncharacteristic of a modern society like Thailand. For all the Ninth Reign's undeniable achievements, however, after years of upheaval the Thai monarchy finds itself in a predicament quite similar to the one King Prajadhipok confronted before the 1932 Revolution. As Prince Damrong predicted back in 1926, the problem with Sayre's model of limited monarchy is that the entire system might be compromised in the event of a conflict between the King and a popular prime minister. The 2006 coup may have successfully prevented the restoration of an actual 'constitutional monarchy' from taking place on Thaksin Shinawatra's terms, but only at the cost of putting the dynasty's entire future on the line.

At this critical juncture, when the role of the monarchy is increasingly questioned and a traumatic succession looms large on the horizon, the palace has shown little of King Prajadhipok's foresight and self-awareness. Instead of modernising the institution, reforming its political role, and making its survival less dependent on the talents, charisma and good fortune of one man — as Prajadhipok at least considered doing — the decision of its supposed defenders to double down on fanaticism, hatred,

89 See, for instance, Pramuan Ruchanaseri, พระราชอำนาจ [*Royal powers*] (Bangkok: Sumet Ruchanaseri, 2005). For a summary in English, see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009), pp. 255–6.

90 Cited in Handley, *The King never smiles*, p. 337.

ensorship and repression is only turning its preservation into an anachronism. The choice that the palace faces today is the same choice the Promoters had placed before King Prajadhipok on 24 June 1932 — the triumphs of the intervening 79 years have only served to delay a decision that the palace does not have the luxury of putting off indefinitely. Should its leaders fail to recognise the past as mere prologue, it may not be long before the House of Chakri becomes a victim of its own success.