

Paul Handley. *The King Never Smiles. A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. pp. 499.

Paul Handley, a former Thailand-based correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, has produced one of the best scholarly books on modern Thailand in the past two decades. His biography profiles the life and times of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the ninth king of the Chakri family dynasty and the world's longest reigning monarch. The king is said to be the world's wealthiest royal, with assets that *Forbes* magazine estimated at US\$35 billion in September 2008. Handley's book is also controversial. In fact, even before it was published, *The King Never Smiles* was banned in Thailand and the Thai government blocked web access to Yale University Press and Amazon book sales.

It may seem odd that a biography of an octogenarian king should spark such a response, but Bhumibol is no ordinary constitutional monarch. In Thailand, the king has god-like status. The king's stern image is displayed in homes, offices and schools, on television, in movie theatres and on countless billboards. Each Monday, government officials dutifully don the king's colour—yellow—and loyal citizens often do the same. The wardrobes of Thais in business, government and the academy are now dominated by yellow items. Indeed, it is a rare government minister who appears in public without some yellow attire, except for a period when pink became a fashion sensation following the king's appearance in a pink jacket.

Such public devotion is a sign of respect. It is also a show of loyalty to the country. With more than six decades on the throne, this king is the only one most Thais have ever known. The supposed significance of the king and royal family for the nation is highlighted in everything from school texts to prime ministerial speeches. The Thai media regularly produces fawning accounts of mundane royal events and portrays them as extraordinary. Foreign reporting seldom looks

Kevin Hewison, review of *The King Never Smiles. A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*, by Paul Handley, *Journal of Historical Biography* 4 (Autumn 2008): 115-122, www.ufv.ca/jhb. © Journal of Historical Biography 2008. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

behind royal propaganda. In Thailand, criticism of the king, his family, those close to him, or his projects and his ideas, is rare, and accusations of *lèse majesté* are remarkably common. Indeed, as I write this review, an Australian languishes in a Thai jail charged with writing some one hundred words in a little-known novel deemed insulting to royals.

In circumstances where King Bhumibol is considered untouchable, a foreign-authored book from a major university press was always going to be challenging. While there have been critical Thai-language accounts of the king, none of these was well researched or analytical, and all circulated surreptitiously. Handley's account, based on years of in-country experience and research, caused some to worry that the book would lift the veil on a protected pillar of Thailand's nationalist ideology and undo decades of image creation and national myth-making. Some feared that the exalted king might be revealed as possessing human flaws. The flavour of this consternation was displayed by a Thai Embassy spokesman in Washington D.C. who claimed that he could not comment on Handley's book because "All Thais revere the king and there is a law that he may not be criticized." In any case, the spokesman added, "You can't criticize the king because there is nothing to criticize him about."¹ Indeed, Handley is critical of aspects of the king's reign. However, this criticism is embedded in a narrative that avoids the salacious rumours often associated with the royal family and that is balanced in assessing King Bhumibol's long reign.

The book begins with an iconic image associated with King Bhumibol. This is the May 1992 scene of a prime minister and his leading opponent crouched at the seated king's feet as he admonishes them to end their dispute, a dispute that had seen troops shooting protesters.(1-2) This intervention underlined the fact that the constitutional monarchy was a powerful political institution. The image of senior Thais appearing subordinate before a constitutional monarch

¹ Scott Jaschik, "The King and Yale University Press," *Inside Higher Ed*, 3 February 2006, <http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/02/03/thai>.

has been explained by the palace and its supporters as the king fulfilling his “traditional” role of saving the nation from turmoil and crisis.

This book dismantles this image and focuses on King Bhumibol and the restoration of the throne’s political fortunes. This focus means that Handley charts his way across much of Thailand’s modern political history. Writing the monarchy back into political events, from the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932 to 2005, is a long neglected task. *The King Never Smiles* locates the monarchical institution and the king in a number of important stories. The great success of the book is the manner in which these stories are interlaced in a coherent account of the long ninth reign.

The first story is about how the monarchy is viewed in Thailand through the lens of traditional ideas. Handley’s first chapter details various beliefs about the position and role of the monarchy, ranging from Hindu-Brahman ideas about “god-kings” (*devaraja*) to Theravada Buddhist principles associated with the notion of the good and moral king (*dhammaraja*). A second story is about Bhumibol and his family. Handley reports on Bhumibol’s early life, his loves and education (Ch. 4-6), and his family’s trials and tribulations (Chs. 13, 16, 20). Accessing substantive information about this family is not easy, so the author’s interviews and his use of royal books and reports, funeral volumes, and popular magazines is most welcome. Another previously untold story is of the creation of the royal family’s reputation for good and charitable works through the use of public donations and, more recently, substantial government funds. This iconic representation of the charitable “developer king” has been crucial to the king’s reputation and is a triumph of palace image-building.(Ch. 13)

For this reviewer, the most compelling story is the account of how the king and his group of supporters—courtiers, members of the royal family, loyal civil and military bureaucrats, and assorted royalists—managed the resurrection of the palace as a political institution. It needs to be remembered that the palace’s position is always that the king is “above politics.” *The King Never Smiles* shows that, when

Bhumibol's political activities are seriously considered, our understanding of Thailand's political history is much richer.

In chapter three, Handley reminds readers that a republic was briefly considered in 1932. While the monarchy was maintained, it was much weakened in its constitutional form. Even so, intense competition between royalists and the new regime dominated domestic politics for many years. An early casualty of this struggle was King Prajadhipok, whose abdication and exile in England meant that the crown passed to the boy-king Ananda Mahidol, the present king's elder brother. The brothers, who were foreign born and raised—Bhumibol was born in the United States—and who lived in Switzerland during this critical period, had little role until after 1945.

Bhumibol came to the throne following the still unresolved shooting death of Ananda in 1946, which occurred when the family was visiting Bangkok. This tragedy had a political outcome as royalists used accusations of regicide to discredit their opponents. For a time, the royalists achieved some influence, formed a political party, and regained administrative control of the palace, royal household, and the throne's business affairs.(96-9) The young King Bhumibol, back in Switzerland, left the political struggles to senior princes. Bhumibol concentrated on fast cars, European royalty, his new wife, and preparations for his return to Thailand. When he did return in November 1951, a military coup had rolled back many of the palace's hard-won gains, and the relationship between the palace and the government was strained for several years.(116-117)

The coup convinced palace advisers that they needed a resident king and stronger links to the military, bureaucracy, and business. They also decided that developing the king's public image would be a powerful force in strengthening the monarchy. From this time until today, King Bhumibol has been portrayed as a remarkable person: an outstanding artist, photographer, and musician, a champion yachtsman, and a talented scientist.(Ch. 7)

Arguably the most significant event in reviving the monarchy as an institution was General Sarit Thanarat's 1957 military putsch.

Sarit revived the court, provided funds for the palace, and identified the king with government activities. The king became Sarit's ally and admirer. This period of military domination, which lasted until 1973, was the incubator for the contemporary palace.

While strongly supportive of the military, by the late 1960s the king also began to gain an unlikely reputation as a liberal and a democrat. International criticism of Thailand as corrupt and authoritarian saw the king timidly suggesting a constitution and parliament. The resulting constitution was short and the parliament weak, leaving the military in control. When the parliament was thrown out by the military in 1971, the king seemed to accept the return of authoritarianism.(Ch. 11) A pattern was established for coups in 1976 and 1991 (Chs. 12, 17) and, most recently, in 2006 (Ch. 22): the king apparently gives his support to democratization to avoid conflict or limit corruption, but then comes to see parliamentary-based politics as corrupt and disorderly, and so supports a new military intervention.

Handley correctly marks 1973 as a critical year for the throne. In October, a student-led uprising against the military government saw troops attack demonstrators. Many sources praise the king for ending the shooting, exiling the military dictators, and "saving" the country. Handley is right to revise this perspective, showing that it was a split inside the military leadership that was critical for ending violence. But the legend that the king restored constitutionalism and democracy was made.

Handley's account of the 1973-76 democratic interlude is also important.(Ch. 12) In October 1973, the military regime that had ruled Thailand since 1957 was toppled following student-led demonstrations. This period saw the king expand his political role and play an important part in what was to be a short-lived democratic experiment. Having been on the throne for three decades, the king was now an experienced and mature political actor whose prestige and public profile had grown considerably. When the military regime was overthrown, the king was able to select an interim prime minister—appointing one of his own Privy Councillors—and establish constitu-

tional assemblies dominated by palace loyalists. Even so, the king soon became worried that the democratic political system that was emerging was far too messy, and the palace began to establish links with an increasingly violent and hyper-nationalist right wing that opposed parliamentary representation and broader liberal and left-wing activism. When the monarchy in neighbouring Laos was overthrown by communists in 1975, Bhumibol's palace became concerned that its own position could be threatened by Thailand's communists. Their response was to throw palace support behind the Right's push to destroy Leftists, leading to a bloody massacre in October 1976. Handley documents the palace's role, arguing that the "palace's hand was everywhere...stirring up the frenzy." (237) As thousands fled a brutal crackdown, the king appointed a right-wing royalist as prime minister, leading a government that was harshly repressive. The palace's involvement in these events is now whitewashed. Even the military found this iron-fisted rule too strong, and the king's selected prime minister was thrown out in 1977. The king was not amused. When the new military prime minister was replaced in 1980, the new premier was the palace's favourite general, Prem Tinsulanonda. (Ch. 15)

In power from 1980 to 1988, Prem understood that he worked for the throne. He willingly submitted to the king and vigorously promoted the monarchy. Prem poured government funding into royal development projects, splurged on every conceivable royal event, and advanced the crown's economic interests. Never elected, Prem kept parliament weak, with the military and palace continuing to control the appointed Senate. The only threats to Prem's government came from within the military, with two attempted coups in the mid-1980s, both of which he defeated with explicit palace support. In 1988, when Prem reluctantly stepped down in favour of an elected prime minister, his reward was appointment to the Privy Council where he remains today, wielding exceptional power.

When the military ousted the next elected government and tried to establish arrangements that maintained its political control, an

uprising began, reaching a violent crescendo in May 1992. The king supported the military's conservative constitution while royalists labelled demonstrators as anti-monarchy.(351) Even when the military gunned down demonstrators, the king continued to support them. In his famous meeting with the crouching prime minister and opposition leader, the king seemed to view democracy activists as promoting disorder.(356-7) Handley concludes that the king was disdainful of democratic processes and constitutionalism.

While the king's reign continues, Handley closes his study in 2005. He does so with a call for the monarchy to be transformed into an institution that promotes a more democratic Thailand. He also affirms that King Bhumibol "has sealed his own reputation, and it is unlikely to be undone."(448) He notes that the nominated successor, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, is unlikely to achieve his father's status. Handley is probably correct on both counts, although the palace's widely acknowledged involvement in the 2006 coup suggests that the king's reputation may still be sullied.

Of course, there are some shortcomings in this fine book. For a reader with limited background on Thailand, it would be easy to conclude that the king and his advisers have been *the* principal political actors in recent decades. Such a conclusion is perhaps inevitable in a book that seeks to direct attention to a little-studied political institution. There can be no doubt that the king and palace are important, but so are the military, political parties, and the business and other classes. Nor does the palace always get its political way; its political interventions are inevitably contested. In the final chapter, Handley summarizes the uneasy relationship between now deposed and exiled Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the palace. This chapter is relatively weak, having been completed without the benefit of the interviews and the in-depth research that distinguishes earlier chapters.

Even though Handley's biography ends prior to the 2006 coup, it is essential reading as a background to that event and Thailand's continuing political crisis. *The King Never Smiles* is a most

welcome addition to the still-limited literature on Thailand's political history. No serious scholar of modern Thailand can ignore it and general readers will gain a far deeper understanding of the country and its politics by reading it.

Kevin Hewison
Carolina Asia Center
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill