

# **Toward the End of King Bhumibol's Era: The historical suicide of royalist democracy<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Severe damages to democratization in Thailand have been done by the current political crisis that began in 2006, especially by the royalist coup in September of that year. Not only did a military rule become a political option in the name of "Thai-style Democracy," but credibility and trusts in the parliamentary system, the judiciary, media and academics are currently at the lowest point in the history of democratization in Thailand. But all of these setbacks merely reflect the fundamental dilemma: popular democracy vs. the royalist rule. This essay will give the background of the dilemma and clarify the unraveling of Thai democracy and the rise of royalist democracy.

## **Historical Background: the absolute monarchy and its end**

The fact that Siam was not formally colonized has always been mentioned to praise the uniqueness of the country. Special credits always go to the enlightened monarchs as the country's savior. Not only has this uncritical view of history become conventional in Thailand and in scholarship on the country, but it has become intellectual limit to understanding the consequences and legacies of being non-colonized. One of the most important consequences was Siam's absolute monarchy, roughly from the 1870s to 1932, and its strong, lasting legacies to the present time.

Under colonial pressure, the Siamese rulers were collaborative with the colonial projects for modernity, nation-state and the colonial global economy because their ultimate objective was to maintain and strengthen their rule over the kingdom.<sup>2</sup> The absolute monarchy in Siam was the consolidation and expansion of their power even further and far stronger than any previous time in the country's history.<sup>3</sup> Siamese elites comfortably embraced Western ideas and technologies as long as they were useful in maintaining their rule and superiority over their subjects. Siam's paradoxical approach to modernity and Western ideas since then is that, on the one hand, it always follows and adopts new ideas very quickly in order to claim to be on par with the most advanced civilizations, but on the other hand it simultaneously reaffirms the superiority and irreducibility of Thai identity (Thainess).<sup>4</sup> In Siam, modernization was the approach the absolute

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a "Note" for discussion only, not for citation either for academic or other purposes. Revisions and full references are expected in the future versions. The author claims no neutrality in the current controversy in Thai politics but instead he speaks what he believes to be the case.

<sup>2</sup> Kullada Kesbunchoo, *The Rise and Fall of Absolute Monarchy in Siam*, 2004

<sup>3</sup> Chaiyan Rajchagoo, *The Absolute Monarchy in Siam*, 1994; Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam*, 2006, chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> See articles by ... in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West*, ed. Rachel Harrison and Peter Jackson, forthcoming.

monarchy advocated in tandem with the promotion of (modern) Thai identity and royal-nationalism in history and culture.

Politically, this means the embrace for changes toward modern politics, including democracy, on the conditions that the changes were initiated by, or within the limits acceptable by the royal elite, and did not undermine the royalist rule. (Look at China in the past 30 years.) As the waves of Republicanism and democracy were widespread since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the royal elite confronted the political ideas that they saw as threats with their articulation of what later known as Thai style democracy. In a nutshell, the hierarchy of moral authority represented by the supreme moral authority of the monarchy remains essential in Thai political system. This is the essence of the uniquely Thai political system, it has been said. But as democratization developed over time, the system of hierarchical moral authority must be articulated in modern democracy. This is not simply a matter of content and form. Rather it is a political project that Thai society, especially the royalists, has been struggling to realize since late 19<sup>th</sup> c to the present time.

After laying down the foundation of the modern state in Thailand, the absolute monarchy during 1910-1932, however, found its legitimacy deteriorated due in part to the incompetence and unaccountability of the monarchs and his royal associates. Demands and the rising challenges from the non-royal elites for political changes arose.<sup>5</sup> The revolution in 1932 was regarded as the beginning of Thai democracy in the sense that it ended the absolute monarchy. While it opened up the opportunity for political participation by common (non-royal) people, however, the revolutionary regime turned militaristic and dictatorial. The revolutionary regime after 1932 was, therefore, also regarded as the beginning of military rule in Thailand. The 1932 revolution was paradoxically both democratic (ending the absolute-monarchy) and anti-democratic (becoming military dictatorship).

In retrospect, the period under the regime that was antagonistic to the royalists lasted only for 15 years from 1932 to 1947. By 1947, the royalists stroke back, collaborating with a military regime that allowed the royalists to return to prominence in Thai polity.<sup>6</sup> This coincided with the beginning of the reign of King Bhumibol. Their most important political project was to restore the political supremacy of the monarchy. By then, however, they realized that they cannot return to the absolute monarchy. They must establish the supremacy of the monarchy in a democracy. The result was what officially known as the “Democratic Regime with the Monarchy as the Head of the State” – the euphemism for the royalist democracy that is sometimes called Thai style democracy. The phrase appeared for the first time in Thai history in the 1949 constitution drafted under the dominance of the royalists. In the same constitution, a prohibition of any “violation” against the monarchy also appeared for the first time.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Characteristics of Royalist Democracy in King Bhumibol’s Era**

King Bhumibol (the ninth king of the Chakri dynasty; born 1927; reign 1946- ...) has been the corner-stone of the royalist democracy project. It shaped his reign and his character as much as he has formulated and shaped royalist democracy during his reign. Under Bhumibol, the success

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Copeland, Contested Nationalism

<sup>6</sup> Paul Handley, The King Never Smiles, 2005, pp. ...

<sup>7</sup> See an English version of this constitution in ....

of Thai monarchy can be characterized by the combination of four fundamental elements: 1) the new Dhammaracha ideology, 2) royal populism, 3) royal capitalism, and 4) the above-politics politics.<sup>8</sup>

1) Dhammaracha (lit. righteous/ Dharma king), was a Hindu-Buddhist concept of moral authority of kingship that were the foundation of Theravada Buddhist polity in Southeast Asia for centuries. It characterized a great king as a combination (two sides of the same coin) of a great emperor who expanded the Buddhist Empire, and a great religious king who was the supreme patron of the religion and whose ultimate aspiration was nirvana.<sup>9</sup> Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> c., as modern Buddhism was developed, this old concept of kingship was modified for modern monarchy. By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> c., given the end of the absolute monarchy and the emerging democracy, a new concept of Dhammaracha was formulated.<sup>10</sup>

The new Dhammaracha and its concept of moral authority solely emphasize benevolence, loving-kindness, and moral righteousness above all mundane or political matters. The monarchists created this image of Bhumibol from his coronation at a young age, and the image has been intensified to this day. One of the most cited evidence of his benevolence are those thousands Royal Projects for irrigation and water management, lowland and upland agriculture, local industries, drugs prevention and its alternatives, education, and many more. Starting with a few in 1952, the number and locations of the Royal Projects have expanded rapidly throughout the country since 1957 under a military regime that was friendly to the monarchy.<sup>11</sup>

But the most effective and most powerful ideological dissemination is the historical knowledge. Royal-nationalism has been fundamental to historical thinking among Thais since the absolute monarchy. In a nutshell, this historical ideology suggests that Thailand have become a happy country, thanks primarily to the monarchy. It could not have survived without a monarchy. And the country might collapse or disappear if there is no monarchy in the future.<sup>12</sup> Even under the post-1932 revolutionary period as the significance of commoners was added to history, the far more prominence of the monarchy in the country's history was little affected. King Chulalongkorn, the founder of absolute monarchy and the modern monarchy, for example, remained highly revered in the post-1932 nationalist historiography. In fact the new Dhammaracha concept was formulated by claiming the 13<sup>th</sup> c. kingship, supposedly the

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<sup>8</sup> It should be made clear here that Bhumibol cannot do all of them by himself. Neither is royalist democracy accomplished single-handedly by the king. When we talk about the "monarchy" and "royalist democracy", they are class or corporate projects in which the competence, character and image of the monarch, so far meaning only Bhumibol, are critical to their success and failure. Yet the projects involve the "network monarchy" (Duncan McCargo, 2005), a wide arrays of the monarchists whose various ideologies and interests find a common ground in the strong monarchical institution in culture, economy and politics. The network includes the royalist liberals and conservatives, the military, bureaucrats and NGOs activists, from varieties of professions. Many are explicitly parts of the palace circles; others are not. Many are materially benefited by the strong monarchy. Most are not but are part of the network because of their ideology – their faith in royalism and royalist democracy for the good of the country.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley J Tambiah, *World Conqueror, World Renouncer*, 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles*, 2005, rightly discusses the significance of the Dhammaracha concept. But he follows the conventional royalist explanation that traces this concept to back to the 13<sup>th</sup> c. origin. In fact, new Dhammaracha was the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> c. invention.

<sup>11</sup> Chanida Chitbundit, ....

<sup>12</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, "Siam's Colonial Conditions and the Birth of Thai History," in .... ed. Volker Grabowsky, forthcoming

beginning of Siam, as the origin of the concept, but as exemplified by all previous kings in the current dynasty. Bhumibol continues the successfully historic traditions of his ancestors.

2) A distinctive characteristic of the new Dhammaracha under Bhumibol is his popularity/populism. Thai monarchy lifted its god-like secrecy surrounded its sacredness and embraced the public since the 19<sup>th</sup> c. The fame of King Chulalongkorn partly owed to his masterly performance and frequent presence in public. Pompous events for public spectacle became part of Siam's modern monarchy.<sup>13</sup> The monarchy's public performance is not merely for his popularity but for a monarch it is taken as services to his people. Bhumibol performed these services far more often and more seriously than King Chulalongkorn. Since 1957 he visits people all over the country regularly like a politician does to his constituents. The differences are that his constituencies are country-wide and that he has been doing this over a much longer period than any politician in Thailand in the past sixty years. Bhumibol's royal populism is unprecedented and unmatched.

The age of television that coincides with his reign helps the royal populism tremendously. Every evening exactly at 8:00 to the present day, people can witness a tireless monarch and his family who dedicatedly work for people. The age of unusually pompous public events and ceremonies in the past 20 years or so is also important. Since the late 1970s, there have been various national celebrations for Bhumibol at every tenth anniversary of his birthday and his reign and at every twelve-year cycle of them too, plus ceremonies for various other occasions and many more for the Queen. Media and public space is saturated with images and stories of the monarchy. The Benevolence One is omnipresent in the entire country. As Thailand increasingly becomes more royalist under his reign and as the draconian lese majeste law prevents any possible negative light or criticism, let alone accountability, Bhumibol's populism is stronger and uncontested.

3) Recently Forbes listed King Bhumibol as the fifth richest monarch in the world and the top investor in Thailand's stock market.<sup>14</sup> That is his personal wealth. But the Thai monarchy, as an institution, is also one of the biggest and most powerful corporations in the country as well. The Crown Property Bureau (CPB), the corporate arms of the monarchy but not of individual kings, controls the biggest cement producing company (whose market shares in Thailand and its neighboring countries are more than 50%) and the third largest bank in the country. It also owns the majority of prime real estates and a huge percentage of all lands in the entire Bangkok. The King, his family, and the CPB also own or invested so many other domestic and international businesses, from luxury hotels in Berlin and Chicago to several residential projects, construction and other businesses in the country. Part of the CPB's success is due to special privileges it enjoys that are not available to any other private corporations in the country. For example, it does not pay any income or capital gain tax, and is not reported or accountable to any public bodies, media or shareholders, but only to the reigning monarch. Its books and operation are not subjected to public examination or any authority. Meanwhile the operations of the Royal Household, and the expenses of the monarch and his family are written in the government budget (i.e. tax money). Even the Royal Projects which were originally funded by the CPB and the

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<sup>13</sup> Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things*, chapter...

<sup>14</sup> Forbes, ..., 2007

monarch's purse have been funded by the government budget since the 1980s. The latest budget for the monarchy affairs in 200.. was ...billion US dollars.<sup>15</sup>

Economically, Thai monarchy is not a remnant of the *ancien regime* (known as “Sakdina” in Thai); it has been part of global capitalism as much as any other Thai capitalists including the former PM Thaksin Shinawatra. The difference is that the non-royal capitalists do not have the huge “cultural capital” as their asset like the CPB and the royals do.

### **The Highly Politicized, Non-Political Monarchy**

4) The monarchy in Thailand has been an integral part of Thai political system most of the time. The King himself has had his hands in politics more often than acknowledged. It is a mistake, scholarly and otherwise, to talk about the Thai “state” without taking into account the monarchy, even though its formal political authority is none. Apart from the moral authority of a populist Dhammaracha, the legitimacy of the monarchy's politics is based, ironically, on the perception that it is non-political, or “above politics” in Thai rhetoric.

After the 1932 revolution, the monarchy and royals of all ranks was banned from politics. They were “above” politics, the revolutionaries declared, in the sense of being beyond, out of reach, cannot (and not allowed to) involve in politics. After the monarchists returned to political influence after 1947, however, they maintained the “above politics” status of the monarchy. But they have articulated an opposite meaning of the phrase since then. As the monarchy is not involved in normal politics, the monarchists put forward, it is cleaner, incorruptible, and morally far superior to anybody else in normal politics – be they the military junta, interest groups, or elected politicians.<sup>16</sup> The monarchy's highest moral authority is attributed to a status that nobody else in the land and in the same democracy can get – “above politics”.

After the 1957-1973 period of build-up of Bhumibol's credential as neo-Dhammaracha under a friendly military regime, the breakthrough for royalist democracy came in the popular uprising against the military rule in 1973. In that incident, the royal family welcomed people who were fighting against the military to take refuge within the palace compound. In the same evening, Bhumibol struck a deal with the junta to them to leave the country. King Bhumibol became famous for being able to save people's lives, bring the country to normalcy and to provide stability to the country. But in fact it was a genius stroke by the monarchists to insert the first truly palace-backed government since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932. The 1973 uprising that has been regarded as the breakthrough for popular democracy was in the same moment also a breakthrough for royalist democracy since 1932.<sup>17</sup> It was a parliamentary system with the monarchy “above” the normal politics. The roles of King Bhumibol and the network monarchy never decrease since then.

In 1973-1976 as the perceived communist threats were looming after the revolutions in Indochina in 1975 and as the local leftist radical movement grew rapidly, the monarchy became

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<sup>15</sup> Information about the CPB comes from Phorphant Ouyanont, “The Crown Property Bureau and Its Success after the 1997 Crisis,” in ..... ed. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, 2008, pp.

<sup>16</sup> More details in Thongchai Winichakul, “Toppling Democracy” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38:1 (2008), pp. ...

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ...

explicitly politicized by supporting the right-wing movement and paramilitary groups.<sup>18</sup> Eventually the monarchy played important roles in the massacre of the radical students in 1976.<sup>19</sup> The palace unofficially set up a royalist dictatorial government.

As the parliamentary system resumed in Thailand most of the time since the 1980s, royalist democracy is a parliamentary system with a relatively weak government but with the monarchy as the highest moral authority on the top of normal politics. The interventions by the palace were frequent, in various forms, and were intensified at times, although they were mostly unknown or not explicit to the public.<sup>20</sup> Throughout this time, it is no secret that the royalists despise elected politicians who were considered vulgar, profane and irreparably corrupt. An election has always been seen as a process for the lowly politicians to literally “buy” their ways to power, as people are too uneducated and ignorant about democracy.<sup>21</sup> The royalists prefer a system that grants some power to the non-elected, “clean”, uncorrupt, “noble” professionals and technocrats, to check and balance the elected power, such as by an appointed Upper House. In other words, they prefer a hierarchical parliamentary system, with the monarchy remains the highest moral authority “above” normal politics.<sup>22</sup>

In the views of most political observers and scholars on Thailand, the monarchy, i.e. Bhumibol provides stability and continuity to Thai politics. He foiled a few coup attempts by refusing to grant his support. He arbitrated a near civil-war situation between another military regime and another popular uprising in 1992. In fact, he foiled the coups that could have derailed the royalist regimes. He supported a coup in 1991 since it was acceptable to the monarchists and another one recently in 2006 because it was a coup by the monarchists themselves. It is, however, probably true that a military regime is not an ideal in royalist democracy. But neither is a strong parliamentary system, especially a strong executive branch, without any roles for the unelected aristocrats. Royalist democracy prefers a hierarchical parliamentary system that allows elected politicians to perform their normally “dirty” political jobs, but that is weak enough to be guided, checked, and balanced by the non-elected but higher moral authority, with the monarchy on top as the Head of the State.<sup>23</sup>

But the politics of the monarchy has not been recognized the way it actually is. Most of them were not explicit or even secret. Apart from that, the sacredness of the monarchy, Bhumibol’s popularity, and the lese majeste law that prevents any damaging facts from being publicized, all contribute to the general perception that he remains non-political. Given the strong faith in the

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<sup>18</sup> Katherine Bowie, *Rituals of national Loyalty*,

<sup>19</sup> David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, .... 1981; Thongchai Winichakul, “Remembering the Traumatic Past.” in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory*, ed. Charles F. Keyes, 2002, pp....

<sup>20</sup> But it has been a common knowledge among journalists, politicians, academics, and relevant professionals. See Handley, KNS, chapter...

<sup>21</sup> Duncan Mccargo and William Callahan, “....”

<sup>22</sup> See elaboration on this idea of the royalists in Thongchai Winichakul, “Toppling democracy,” pp. ....

<sup>23</sup> In my article, “Toppling Democracy,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38:1 (2008), pp...., I have proposed a summarized scheme of history of Thai democracy that is in contrast with the conventional historiography of Thai politics that failed to take into account the roles of the monarchy. In my scheme, we can see the various roles of the monarchy in politics since the absolute monarchy to the democratic period. The article also explains in more details the royalist views of democracy, election, clean politics, and how the monarchists undermined and ousted the Thaksin government with the 2006 coup.

monarchy like a semi-god, when the fact may suggest otherwise, such as the monarchy's role in the 1976 massacre and its aftermath, and the role of the President of the Privy Council in the 2006 coup, the faithful can also find excuses and explanations. Meanwhile, hyper-royalism gets stronger over the years since the 1976 massacre. It is not exaggerated to say that King Bhumibol has become a cult idol. He cannot be mentioned in public in a manner lower than highest praise. Any slightly negative mentioning of him is forbidden and could be punishable, either legally or in public opinions. Political criticism or accountability of the monarchy is impossible. Royalist democracy now survives by the cult of Bhumibol; they fortify each other.

The royalist coup in 2006 was the latest episode that proves the royally messy intervention in politics. Thaksin, the ousted Prime Minister, was seen as a competitor and a challenge to the popularity of the monarchy. Although it was true that his government abused power, violated human rights, corrupted and committed several misconducts, but these were not true reasons for its fall. The government was too strong and perceived to be challenger to the monarchy's popularity and loyalty. It was dangerous to the monarchy especially as the reign of King Bhumibol might come an end any time. The possibility of sudden royal succession became a condition that the monarchists cannot allow a regime that was too strong to remain in power at this critical time. Thaksin regime might jeopardize the entire royalist democracy project that has been nurtured over the past sixty years.

### **The Conditions at the End of King Bhumibol's Era**

Here we are at the last leg of the reign of King Bhumibol, an 80 year old monarch with a history of health problems. Even if he could survive 15-20 more years, the anxiety of succession, the ongoing internal conflict within the palace circles, the jockeying among the kingmakers, all of these are likely to spill into politics any time during this period, and at least some more years at the beginning of the next reign.

Thailand has been digging itself into deep trouble in many ways. First of all, and most importantly, instead of the institutionalization of a political system that is less personal and would not be affected as much by particular individuals, royalist democracy has hindered such institutionalization. Instead it is an intrinsically unstable system. Every transition of the reign, despite the monarchy's no formal authority, will have a huge impact. Secondly, however, for the past sixty years, the possible instability has been postponed, thanks to the long lasting reign of Bhumibol. The perceived political stability under royalist democracy hinges primarily on the fact that this particular King has lasted unusually long. Paradoxically, the longer his reign is, the more delusion the public live by and the greater trouble the transition might face.

Thirdly, the fortunes, success, and otherwise of the monarchy in the past sixty years cannot be separable from the ones of Bhumibol. Either this could mean Bhumibol has strengthened the monarchical institution, or it may suggest that he could take the popularity, faith and all accomplishments with him. If the highly unpopularity of the Crown Prince is an indication, the latter is likely the case. The perceived virtue of royalist democracy might be quickly unraveled if the virtue Bhumibol has accumulated is not transferable to the next monarch. Over the past 30 years, there has been innumerable number of secretive circulations of damaging stories, innuendos, documents, pictures, even video recordings of shockingly scandalous behaviors of the

Prince.<sup>24</sup> As a matter of fact, contrary to general misunderstanding that there is another candidate to the throne, his younger sister Princess who is much more popular and warmly accepted by the public, up to now the Crown Prince was the only legitimate and legal successor to Bhumibol. Nobody else is.<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that the unpopularity of the Crown Prince owes as much to his doings as to the perceived accomplishments and greatness of Bhumibol. As the succession is looming, wishful rumors and fantasies are widespread in Thailand today for various scenarios in which the next monarch might not be the Crown Prince. This symptom should not have occurred. The next monarch should have been anybody with no consequence – had popular democracy been institutionalized. Royal democracy that is known for providing stability could be the source of the most serious instability in modern Thai history.

Fourthly, due to all above uncertainly, the significance of the kingmakers increases, unfortunately. Politics among the country's top elites, including among the various factions within the "network monarchy", will be unnecessarily too critical, as they are jockeying for positioning for the next era. The 2006 coup was certainly one of the early episodes of such situation. Thaksin was perceived by the royalists as a threat to the throne either as a competitor to the monarchy's popularity and/or as a kingmaker who is "patronizing" certain candidates to the throne. Meanwhile the role of the Privy Council in preventing Thaksin was unusually explicit. They, too, are the real kingmakers. The military definitely considers themselves an important voice in the process too, and it is said that the army do not support the Crown Prince.

Fifth, in this situation, the parliamentary system and the elected government that the monarchists prefer are the weak and/or obedient ones. As we are having our discussion right now, struggles in Bangkok streets continues. The royalist movement continues trying to oust the elected government they see as the proxy of the former PM Thaksin. Tension and the possibility of violent clashes are looming. Thai-style democracy or the rule of the moral royalist leaders over the elected ones is their goal. Whether or not the current government survives, a fragmented coalition government with more or less royalist inclination is likely to be the norm through the succession period. Popular democracy has to be postponed, probably forever. Potential for violence depends on how obedient the elected government is.

Last but not least, suppression of opinions, widespread censorship, and violations of rights and freedom in the name of protecting the Monarchy has been and will be common. For the past few years as the royalists tried to topple Thaksin, there have been more charges and arrests relating to the lese majeste law than any other time in history. The latest victims include a BBC correspondent in Bangkok, a government minister, and several bloggers and webmasters. Web sites, including You Tube are closed down, hacked, or blocked both by the authorities and by

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<sup>24</sup> Gossiping about the Crown Prince has been a common sport among Thais of all ideologies for the past 30 years or so. Many of the gossips and circulated information turn out to be truthful and undeniable, and not unfound rumors. See more in Handley, KNS, pp. ... An additional example, the latest one, in 2006 is probably the most damaging so far. ....

<sup>25</sup> Every constitution since 1992, i.e. including the 1997 and 2007 ones, however, allows the king has the authority to change the successor at any time he wants to and he only needs to "inform" the parliament, who has no authority to say otherwise on this matter. The President of the Privy Council (not a royal) also has the authority to choose the successor in case no successor was chosen by the king or in case the chosen successor cannot assume the throne for any reason.

loyal citizens. Misinformation and propaganda campaigns are common, including by the respected mainstream media, thanks to fear of lese majeste and to their own royalist volition.

### **A Historical Allegory**

Bhumibol is the ninth king of the Chakri (current) dynasty. From the beginning of the dynasty in 1782 and among the eight succession transitions, only twice the successions were smooth and without tension or troubles. One of the two peaceful successions turned out to be a disastrous monarchy that eventually led to the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, i.e. from King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) to King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) in 1910.

The peaceful transition was due to King Chula's naming of his heir long before any sign that his reign might come to an end. His son, Vajiravudh, was appointed the Crown Prince as a young lad long before his adult character became obvious. As King Chula became increasingly popular and highly revered, his son's misfits and dubious character that were inappropriate to the throne began to surface. The father died with highest popularity and reverence than any kings before him. The son assumed the throne amidst unpopularity and distrusts among the royals, nobles, bureaucrats and the public, except his own small circle. His failure was, in retrospect, foreseeable even before his reign began, thanks not in small part to his father's success.

Only one year on the throne King Vajiravudh faced a coup attempt to establish a republic. The coup group cited several failures of the absolute monarchy. One of them was a minor incident while he was a Crown Prince. It sounds, in my opinion, like a rumor the current Crown Prince has always got. In any case, such a minor issue was certainly the tip of much larger dissatisfaction that was articulated only in terms of a minor case. As Vajiravudh's reign went by, dissatisfaction with the monarchy grew, even among his royal associates. Many senior royals resigned their services, only to be replaced by the king's inner circle of like-minded people. Public frustration brewed; the king was rudely mocked and savagely criticized openly in newspapers – an unprecedented phenomenon in Siam.<sup>26</sup> Vajiravudh died in 1926 with the absolute monarchy weakened and very unpopular. The next king did not have much time or opportunity to repair the damages. Six years later, a revolution that ended the absolute monarchy took place, thanks partly to the failure of Vajiravudh who, in retrospect, had little chance to succeed, thanks partly to his father's success.

Was the story of Rama V to the VI above a mere historical allegory?

The current situation in some strange ways reminds me of the transition from King Chula to King Vajiravudh: an era of a highly popular and highly revered king is coming to a close. The Crown Prince has little chance to succeed, thanks partly to his father's success and partly to his own misfits and flawed characters unacceptable for the highest moral authority of the land. Had the political system been mature enough, the monarchical transition could have been irrelevant. But in similar fashion to the absolute monarchy, Thailand's royalist democracy today still hangs its hope for success and failure on the moral character and popularity of the monarch.

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew Copeland, [Contested Nationalism](#).

For fifteen years after 1932, conflicts and tensions between the royalists and the revolutionaries were high, resulting in one bloody civil war in 1933, and several more executions, imprisonment and deportations. The monarchists returned to some power after a major purge of its opponents in 1946-47. Royal democracy then got a breakthrough after a bloody uprising in 1973. Then it protected itself against the radical threat in a massacre in 1976. It rose to dominance after another bloody conflict in 1992. Through the bloody history, the monarchists and their royal democracy have been undermining the institutionalization of the parliamentary and popular democracy. Now it tries to protect its dominance against elected politicians in a continuing political crisis that possibly ends up in bloodshed in the near future.

At the end of a reign, the Thai monarchy may dig itself a graveyard and take the country down with it.