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Review

Thailand: All the King's Men

By [Ian Buruma](#)

[The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej](#)

by Paul M. Handley

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1.

When it rains in Thailand, it usually comes in torrents. I arrived in Bangkok in October in the middle of a tropical storm. The great postmodern shopping malls, marble corporate palaces, and gleaming new hotels, built in the late 1980s and early 1990s when there seemed to be no end to the property boom, rose imperviously above the floods. But many parts of the city were under water, causing endless traffic jams on inundated roads. The inhabitants of Klong Toey, a fetid slum of about 80,000 people plagued by drug addiction and AIDS, were living in raw sewage. On my way to the hotel I saw shoppers wading through water up to their thighs to buy groceries at markets that remained open despite the floods. The main headline in the next day's newspaper was: "Flood Disaster: King's Move Helps Save Capital." [\[1\]](#)

What King Bhumibol had done was to grant permission for the Royal Irrigation Department to divert excess water from the Chao Phraya River, which runs through Bangkok, to farmlands which had been "presented to His Majesty by the original landlords...." This was no doubt a relief to the nine million people of Bangkok, but there was something a little hyperbolic, even fawning, about the headline, which cannot have been unintentional. What was suggested was that in a crisis it is the King, and not his government, who comes to his people's rescue. So it is during tropical storms, and so it is in politics. As the longest-serving head of state currently in power and the longest-serving monarch in Thai history, Bhumibol, who came to the throne in 1946, is a formidable figure in the Thai national imagination. Although the monarchy lost its absolute authority after a revolution in 1932, and the country had a fully elected parliament since the new "people's constitution" of 1997, the King remains the ultimate arbiter of power.

On Tuesday, September 19, another rain-sodden night, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin staged a coup d'état against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, an ex-policeman and tele-communications tycoon elected by a landslide in 2001. Thaksin's rise to power had come after the great 1990s boom turned into a bust in 1997. Property prices plummeted. The Thai baht crashed. Stocks lost up to 65 percent of their value. And this is when Thaksin, a combination of Silvio Berlusconi and Hugo Chavez, came charging in as the "CEO politician," the man who would clean up the mess with

all the efficiency of an entrepreneurial genius, unhampered by the shabby compromises that mark the politics of more conventional men.

A self-styled champion of the poor, Thaksin bought popularity and votes with cash handouts, and those he couldn't buy, he bullied. Parliament was more or less ignored as irrelevant. Thaksin barely bothered to show up when it was in session. He owned a cable television station, and allowed his minions to threaten editors and journalists who criticized his policies. Part of his telecommunications empire "transferred to his wife and children" was sold in January 2006 to the Singaporean government for \$1.88 billion without his family paying a cent in tax.

Thaksin's aim, never realized, was to use his wealth to turn his own Thai Rak Thai ("Thais Love Thais") into a super-party in total control of the state. His other aim, also thwarted in the end, was to turn the army into his own political tool, by placing friends and relatives in key positions. And after ingratiating himself with the royal family by helping them out financially, he began to upset them by behaving more and more regally himself—presiding over religious ceremonies at Buddhist temples in places normally reserved for the King, for example.

Still, some of his social programs, such as universal health care, public housing projects, debt relief, and cheap loans, were popular, especially in the rural areas, where people were convinced that here at last was a politician who cared about them. And as the economy picked up, Thaksin was reelected in 2005, and again in April 2006, after protests against the government, mostly in Bangkok, forced him to call a snap election that was boycotted by the opposition parties. The urban elite, university students as well as bankers, politicians, courtiers, and bureaucrats, saw him for what he was, an aspiring dictator. His opponents claimed that Thaksin's victory was unconstitutional, because his Thai Rak Thai party was the only contender and failed to get the requisite number of votes to fill all seats in parliament, without which parliament can't be convened. Thaksin thumbed his nose at the constitution. The judiciary, tamed under Thaksin rule, did nothing.

At this point the seventy-eight-year-old monarch stepped in, as he did when the rains poured on Bangkok. The country was "a mess," he declared in a rare televised speech. The elections had been "undemocratic," and the constitutional court should solve the problem forthwith. Given the choice between obeying the King or the autocratic politician, the judges followed the King. The election results were duly annulled, and Thaksin decided to bide his time as a "caretaker prime minister."

Large numbers of demonstrators in Bangkok, many in monarchist yellow T-shirts, continued to demand Thaksin's resignation. Thaksin supporters, known as "caravans of the poor," mostly from the rural areas, where he was still a kind of folk hero, staged counterdemonstrations. A huge anti-Thaksin rally was planned for September 20. Thaksin hinted at violence and the imposition of martial law, an old and trusted tactic in Thailand before installing dictatorial rule. He had the police on his side, as well as an assortment of rural strongmen and their armed thugs. But the army, backed by the monarch, decided to move first. While Thaksin was in New York attending a United Nations summit, a military junta calling itself the Council for National Security took control of the government in Bangkok and suspended parliament. Thaksin was

forbidden to return to Thailand, and after several months of biding his time on the golf course in London, he is now traveling around Asia, giving interviews designed to embarrass the junta. He told the Asian *Wall Street Journal* in Hong Kong that "Democracy is in the blood of the Thais," and the *Asahi Shimbun* in Tokyo that "the respect of the rule of law and the justice system [by the international community]" is at stake. Hypocritical, perhaps, but vexing to a regime that has no democratic credentials. The junta made things worse by censoring the broadcast of the CNN interview in which Thaksin argued for the restoration of democracy.

As military coups go, this was a most peculiar one, bloodless, and in Bangkok at least quite popular.^[2] Martial law was imposed, but there were no roadblocks or grim-faced soldiers pushing people around, and the tanks that were stationed around government buildings disappeared quickly. Bangkok's vaunted nightlife continues, as though nothing happened. The world of girly bars, sex shows, and massage parlors, catering to Thais as well as the tourists, never seems to be affected by politics. (Thaksin tried to crack down on prostitution, without making much of a dent.) Apart from a handful of Thaksin's most egregious cronies, few people were arrested. The junta did clamp down on television stations to keep the coup free from criticism, but protests from the Thai Broadcasting Journalists Association were still reported in the newspapers. And, as I write, martial law has been lifted in Bangkok and surrounding areas, but not in the rural Northeast, where Thaksin remains popular. Several bombs exploded in Bangkok on New Year's Eve, killing three and wounding thirty-six. Although Thaksin supporters were blamed, there is no evidence pointing to anyone as yet.

I had lunch this autumn with Kavi Chongkittavorn, a much-respected senior editor of *The Nation*, a staunchly liberal English-language Thai newspaper. He was in a buoyant mood, and echoed sentiments I had picked up from others in the capital. "I was against the coup," he said, "but I love the fact that Thaksin is gone." Thailand, said Kavi, "is not a business, it is a kingdom."

Indeed it is. Everywhere you look, especially during the sixtieth anniversary year of his reign, you see His Majesty's face, on posters and billboards, on the walls of every store and restaurant, in all public buildings and many private ones, on streamers and banners strung across major thoroughfares, in hotels, airports, schools, and shopping malls, and at the beginning of every movie screening: Bhumibol receiving foreign monarchs; Bhumibol visiting the rural areas, a notebook and camera readily at hand; Bhumibol surveying his kingdom from above the clouds, a golden halo playing around his bespectacled face; Bhumibol the family man, with Queen Sirikit and their loving children; Bhumibol the warrior king in uniform; Bhumibol the jazz player, his trumpet to the fore; Bhumibol the priest-king, in a gold coat, waving a kind of papal blessing; and so on.

And yet, since the promulgation of the "people's constitution" of 1997, Thailand appeared to have become a democratic kingdom with a fully elected bicameral legislature, a modern country that had no more need for military coups, and a shining example of liberty in Southeast Asia. Even the more enlightened generals said that the time for military interventions was over. But the constitution has been torn up once again (Thailand has had seventeen since 1932). The restoration of popular sovereignty has been promised at some future date, which is yet to be announced. Meanwhile, the

King told his subjects to obey the new order. He had never hidden his contempt for the upstart nouveau riche populist tycoon anyway. The new order was really the old order. The man appointed as interim prime minister, Surayud Chulanont, is a respected ex-army commander and privy councilor to the King.

Not very democratic, then, at least not to foreign eyes, which matter a great deal to Thais. This was the "Thai way to democracy," said the coup's defenders. The US embassy received a petition from a group of academics who supported the coup. "Our democracy is different from American democracy," they claimed. "Please respect our political maturity. We can solve problems our own way within the framework of democracy under monarchy." ^[3] This has been, more or less, the line taken by many liberals and democrats in Bangkok, including the former senator Kraisak Choonhavan, whose own father, Chatichai Choonhavan, democratically elected as prime minister, was ousted in a coup in 1991. Chatichai too was accused of corruption (with reason) and "parliamentary dictatorship" (less reasonably), and that coup, too, was carried out by military men who claimed to have acted with the King's blessing.

Then, too, the unique Thai way was extolled by the King himself, who despised Chatichai's messy democratic government, and said: "Procedures or principles that we have imported for use are sometimes not suitable to the conditions of Thailand or the character of Thai people." When Thais protested against the junta in May 1992, soldiers fired machine guns into the crowds, leaving many dead. The military commander, who later deplored the killings, was the same Surayud who is now prime minister.

Not everyone is convinced by this talk about the Thai way. The political scientist Giles Ungpakorn, who hated Thaksin's autocratic populism as much as anyone, protested that the military had

no right to stage a coup or tear up the constitution, or to appoint a temporary government. That is why true supporters of democracy must stand together and demand that the military leave politics and that the 1997 constitution be immediately restored. ^[4]

Advocates of press freedom staged a demonstration in front of Bangkok's Democracy Monument, built in a kind of Oriental-modernist style to celebrate Thailand's first constitution of 1932. They were dressed in black to mourn the death of the last constitution.

Near the Democracy Monument I visited another site of memory, of the bloodbath in October 1973, when hundreds of thousands of students and other citizens demonstrated against the autocratic regime of Generals Thanom and Praphas, many of them carrying portraits of the King and Queen. They were fired upon by tanks and helicopter gunships. At least seventy protesters were killed in the crackdown before Thanom and Praphas, lacking broader support from the military, were forced to resign and were replaced by a civilian government appointed by the King. The King has been widely credited for stopping further bloodshed, although he might be faulted for stepping in too late, or even for encouraging the kind of military autocracy that provoked the revolt in the first place. He was less than sympathetic to the students, and had treated Thanom as a court favorite.

There is one topic, however, that neither Giles Ungphakorn, nor the free press activists, nor indeed anyone in Thailand can broach safely in public, and that is the role of the monarchy as an obstacle to liberal democracy. As with the September coup this year, coups have been justified in the past by allegations of *lâ^se-majestà^%*. Publications have been banned and people arrested for being critical of the King. Web sites posting unfavorable foreign articles about the monarchy are instantly censored. And so it is that even the most Westernized, liberal Thais in Bangkok gossip about Thaksin's alleged slights to the King, as though they were valid reasons to oust him. This is why even an impeccable democrat like Kavi Chongkittavorn, the *Nation* editor, will write piously that "the monarchy has been a stabilising force for Thai politics and society," and "HM the King's words are sacrosanct," ^[5] without pausing to think that sacrosanct words, however well meant, may not always be what is most needed in a developing democracy.

2.

Since Thais cannot do it themselves, it has been left to a foreigner to write the first critical biography of King Bhumibol. Paul Handley, an American journalist who reported from Bangkok for many years, has written one of the most important books on Thailand to appear in English. It is no surprise that *The King Never Smiles* has been banned in Thailand as "a threat to stability," and that attempts were even made to stop it from being published in the United States. ^[6]

A common feature of books about political figures or institutions is the exaggeration of their power and influence. Perhaps Handley sees the hand of the King falling too heavily on Thai society, even when it is not merited. But Handley is right to point out that

as a constitutional monarch pursuing political power in competition with the modern elected government, King Bhumibol is some-thing unique in the 20th century. Rather than accepting his position as simply a benign cultural object like the modern Japanese or British monarchs, Bhumibol made himself a full-fledged, dominant political actor.

Despite his interventions to stop violence from getting totally out of hand after several bloody military coups, despite his many good works in rural development and social welfare, and despite his genuine air of benevolent moderation, Bhumibol has never had much time for elected politicians, whom he tends to denigrate as selfish, venal, and divisive. Tough military men and loyal bureaucrats are more congenial to his vision of unity, order, and harmony under the wise, selfless, and virtuous monarch. Even the worst military strongmen—Field Marshal Sarit in the early 1960s, Thanom and Prapas in the early 1970s—were given the benefit of the doubt. When democracy had a chance of lasting, the King sometimes sided with those who sought to undermine it.

The cold war had something to do with this bias. When communism swept across Indochina, it was all too easy to discredit Thai democrats as dangerous revolutionaries, especially when the US government shared the Thai military's distrust of anyone left of center. But Handley goes back further in history to explain the peculiar nature of the Thai monarchy, and of the present Chakri dynasty in particular.

He explains at great length, in sometimes rather dense prose, how traditional Thai kingship is a mixture of Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism. The king's right to rule is based partly on divine bloodlines and partly on virtuous practice according to the Buddhist laws of *Dhamma*—charity, selflessness, piety, and so forth. Cosmic order, all the way down to controlling the floods in Bangkok, can only prevail under a wise, virtuous, and Buddha-like king, the Dhammaraja. This is the concept of monarchy that Bhumibol imbibed from his mentors.

The idea of divine monarchy based on superior karmic virtue is not in itself remarkable. What makes the Thai monarchy so interesting is its claim to superior democratic principles too. Bhumibol and his official scribes have often stressed how the Dhammaraja is inherently democratic, because he, in his superior wisdom, cares for all his people. Western-style democracy, as they see it, produces confrontation and disunity. "The alternative," as Handley explains, "was Thai tradition, good government under a sagacious sovereign who selected the most virtuous men to lead. A system like this, Bhumibol had been taught..., was truly democratic."

Dhammocracy, as some call it, goes back in the eyes of its supporters to the thirteenth century, when King Ramkhamhaeng ruled over Sukhothai. A famous stone tablet, supposedly from that time, mentions a bell hanging over the palace gate, and says that "...if any commoner in the land has a grievance...King Ramkhamhaeng, the ruler of the kingdom, hears the call; he goes and questions them and examines the case, and decides it justly for him. So the people of this [city-state] of Sukhothai praise him." This stone is often invoked when King Bhumibol, or his scribes, lecture on the Thai way to democracy.

But the key proponent of the idea that Thai kingship represents true democracy is Bhumibol's grandfather, Chulalongkorn, also known as Rama V, son of King Mongkut (the model of the Siamese monarch in *The King and I*). His reign, from 1868 till 1910, coincided almost exactly with that of Japan's Meiji Emperor. Modernization along Western lines marked the reigns of both. Chulalongkorn, whose portrait is almost as ubiquitous in Thailand today as that of his grandson, was much impressed by modern science, as well as European bureaucratic methods and legal systems, and wished to introduce them in Thailand.

He was an enlightened man who abolished slavery, opened education to girls, established a common currency, and above all managed through deft diplomacy and luck to keep Thailand from being colonized. Citing the famous Sukhothai stone, he also saw himself as a modern democrat. His group of handpicked advisers was called a legislative council, and as Handley writes, "he characterized himself as a 'prime minister almost exactly like the British prime minister.'" Since he was in fact an absolute monarch, this characterization was an illusion. In fact, as in Meiji Japan, or even Victorian England, modernization actually strengthened the need for tradition. Buddhism became the state religion of Thailand, and the Chakri dynasty, which only began in 1782, became the sacred symbol of the modern Thai state.

The confusion of democracy with more autocratic, quasi-traditional practices would have disastrous consequences in Japan, where the emperor became the center of a kind of fascist cult in the 1930s. In Thailand, which has had its share of extreme ideologues, the result was a little different. Perhaps because Thai kings have had more

actual political authority than Japanese emperors, and at least some of them were enlightened figures, they have often had a moderating effect on would-be dictators. Even the most violent strongmen have had to prostrate themselves at the monarch's feet. At the same time, as is true of Bhumibol, they have sometimes stood in the way of liberal democracy.

One problem with the royal claim to democratic principles is that popular sovereignty is seen as something that is graciously bestowed by the monarch, rather than something established by the people themselves. In fact, constitutional monarchy was established after the revolution in 1932, led by two leaders of very different political stripes. Pridi Panomyong was a liberal leftist, while Phibun Songgram was a right-wing nationalist soldier who ran a kind of Vichy regime during World War II and came back after the war as an anti-Communist ally of the United States. Both, however, managed to curb the absolute powers of the monarchy, and Pridi at least was serious about strengthening parliamentary government. The royalists, though much weakened for decades, never stopped fighting back. Pridi was eventually hounded out of Thailand and denounced as a Communist, while Phibun, who behaved more and more like a king himself, was finally overthrown in 1957, after many coups and counter-coups, by an equally unsavory military strongman, backed by the King, Field Marshal Sarit.

Much has already been written about these events. The originality of Handley's book lies in his tough but I think fair-minded analysis of the revival of royal authority under King Bhumibol. The King was raised in Switzerland, where he lived with his widowed mother and brother. He was a gentle jazz lover, with an interest in science, who spoke better French than Thai; there was nothing in those early days that suggested a strong Dhammaraja. But once he took over, after his brother was killed in a mysterious shooting accident, which even Handley, despite his digging, can't explain, Bhumibol grew into his role as king with unfailing industry and loyalty to his inherited institution. It was under his reign that the Sukhothai tablet, the legacy of Chulalongkorn, and the first constitution, supposedly "granted" by his uncle, King Prajadhipok, became the mythical building blocks of the most powerful monarchy since 1932, all in the name of Buddhist virtue and democracy. Coups have come and gone, but the monarchy has just seemed to get stronger and stronger, partly because of Bhumibol's undoubted personal qualities, partly because of cold war politics, and partly because Thais have become dangerously dependent on royal intervention whenever they are in trouble.

One of the dangers of this dependency is the one that plagues all systems based on personal charisma: What if the successor lacks the necessary qualities to command respect? It is no secret in Thailand that Bhumibol's probable successor, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, is not at all like his father. Spoiled, prone to violent rages, vindictive, he is little respected by the Thais (his picture is rarely seen in public). This may, as Handley hopes, result in the increasingly well-educated and prosperous Thais being weaned from their royal dependency. They might well try. But the process is unlikely to be smooth.

3.

In the beginning, Thaksin Shinawatra behaved more like a toady than a challenger to the monarchy. After the Asian economic crash in the late 1990s, he used his wealth to soften the blow to royal fortunes. He bailed out the Siam Commercial Bank, for example, in which the palace has a major stake, by paying far too much money for a struggling independent cable television station named iTV. He then used this station to support his own political ambitions. According to Bangkok gossip, reported in Paul Handley's book, Thaksin also paid for the renovation of several royal palaces.

There was much about Thaksin, however, that soon put him at odds with the monarchy. Unlike most Thai prime ministers, including the present one, he came from neither the military nor the social elite. The son of a Sino-Thai businessman in Chiang Mai, Thaksin was an arriviste who attempted to buy his way to the top. A coarse practitioner of spin and glitzy self-promotion, he cut out the traditional networks of Bangkok bureaucrats, political fixers, provincial businessmen, and privy councilors, and tried to engage directly with the voters, especially in the countryside. Traditional Thai political parties have been pragmatic, better suited to power brokering than devising political programs. Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party did at least have a clear social program.

Jon Ungphakorn, a former senator, thinks of himself as "a kind of socialist." He told me that he had approved of Thaksin's welfare initiatives, such as universal health care and farmers' debt relief. He just "wished he had done them better." Instead, he "bought up the senate, got his cronies into government bodies, and it was clear that regions that didn't vote for his party would be neglected." Thaksin did worse things, not all of which were unpopular. Thailand has long had a problem with drugs, the trade in amphetamines being especially vigorous. Thaksin promised to stamp it out. The King himself had given a birthday speech in December 2004, telling his subjects to cooperate in a war on drugs. ^[7] Thaksin used the police to crack down on "dark influences" by extrajudicial killings. Some two thousand alleged drug dealers and users were murdered without due process.

Demands for autonomy by Malay-speaking Muslims, who make up some 5 percent of Thailand's 65 million people and are predominantly in the south, near the Malaysian border, have long been a feature of Thai politics. Muslim unrest has grown more violent in recent years because of radical Islamist influences. Thaksin, partly to impress the Bush administration, tried to solve the problem by using brute force as well as by transferring more money to the south: in 2004 a mosque was stormed by police units, causing the deaths of more than eighty people, many of them teenage boys. Terror suspects have routinely been tortured and sometimes murdered. In the words of Jon Ungphakorn: "In a democracy, he would have been tried for human rights abuses." ^[8]

That the coup against Thaksin was led by General Sonthi, a Muslim himself, is no coincidence. "The country's problem," he said after the coup,

which originated some time ago and has prevailed until now, has saddened His Majesty, which has upset and worried me.... As a soldier of His Majesty, I would like to help him relieve his worry and the army will adhere strictly to whatever advice he gives us. ^[9]

Exactly what the King advised is not known, but General Sonthi has already promised to negotiate with the militant Muslim leaders, something Thaksin refused to do. To him, the problems in the south had nothing to do with culture, history, or religion. They were a criminal matter, to be dealt with accordingly.

Even though the King is said to have disapproved of Thaksin's intransigence, the Muslim question was probably not the main bone of contention between the prime minister and the palace. In some ways Thaksin might be compared to the earlier strongman Phibun Songgram; their types of self-promotion threatened to upstage the king. ^[10] Like many monarchs, King Bhumibol has an aristocratic disdain for capitalist business, which he regards as selfish, even as the palace benefits from it. The King, who is one of the richest men in the world, owns vast holdings in Bangkok and elsewhere, administered by the Crown Property Bureau, which has shares in many companies, including Siam Commercial Bank and Siam Cement. But charity is the Buddhist way to accumulate personal virtue, and Bhumibol, being supremely virtuous, spends a great deal of time spreading his largesse, using funds donated to the palace by charitable citizens who see this as a way to raise their own karmic stakes.

Thaksin's brand of populism—handing out money to villagers, offering cheap loans, paying for grand spectacles—is self-serving in a different way perhaps, but might well have been regarded as competition. And as Paul Handley rightly observes in his book (published when Thaksin was still in power): "While Thaksin's autocratic government is problematic in the context of democracy and good governance, his concentration of power around himself as the country's self-styled "chief executive" can be seen as a move to neutralize the palace in politics."

To describe royal charity as a form of populism would seem to be a paradox, for what could be more elitist than a monarchy? But it is not unusual for aristocrats and kings to claim to be on the side of the common man against the greedy rich. What we see in Thailand, then, is two competing forms of charismatic autocracy: a traditional type, seeking its legitimacy in religion, culture, history, bloodlines, and superior virtue, and a new kind, based on money, celebrity, and media savvy. This is not unique to Thailand. Anyone who has seen *The Queen*, the movie about the British royal family in Tony Blair's United Kingdom, will recognize the phenomenon. But the drama in Thailand is especially acute, because unlike Britain, Thailand is still struggling with democratic institutions. Those who applaud too loudly, for understandable reasons, the victory of the old guard over the new should think of the damage done whenever people look to kings and generals to solve problems they should really take care of themselves.

â€”January 31, 2007

Notes

^[1] *The Nation*, October 11, 2006.

^[2] According to a monthly poll on "gross domestic happiness" the happiness score for Bangkok rose from 5.54 to 6.47 after the coup.

^[3] *The Nation*, October 11, 2006.

[4] World Politics Watch, September 28, 2006.

[5] *The Nation*, August 22, 2005.

[6] Jane Perlez, "A Banned Book Challenges Sainly Image of Thai King," *The New York Times*, September 25, 2006.

[7] See Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand* (NIAS, 2004), p. 227.

[8] See also *Human Rights Watch News* , April 29, 2004.

[9] BBC News, September 19, 2006.

[10] A point made in *The Thaksinization of Thailand* .

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