Joy and apprehension over the Thai monarchy

For the people of Thailand, December 1987 was indeed a topsy-turvy month. It started with a great deal of pomp and circumstance as King Bhumibol Adulyadej, whom the Thais rever, celebrated his 60th birthday on 5 December. However, like the fireworks marking the occasion, the joy of the celebration rapidly faded — to be replaced by deep apprehension.

The fear was born of several thousand leaflets, distributed in the country and containing critical material, not only about Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn but also about the monarch himself. The problem was sufficiently serious for the armed forces and the police to interrupt normal TV programmes on 8 December to assert their determination to put an end to these attacks on the monarchy in the “most decisive and severe manner.” Some of these culprits were identified as communists.

The nation’s joy is not at all difficult to explain. More than any of his predecessors, Bhumibol, the ninth in the line of the reigning Chakri dynasty, has made the monarchy an institution close to the hearts and minds of the people in an age when most other monarchies, either have been overthrown or are in the process of withering away.

When Bhumibol acceded to the throne after his elder brother’s sudden and still unexplained death in 1946, he was not prepared for the task of kingship. His predecessor was only a few years his senior and thus had been expected to remain ruler for a very long time. Nor was he given much of a role in the beginning, for the institution of monarchy had been kept under firm control by a succession of political leaders, who had participated in the overthrow of absolute monarchy in 1932.

That the monarchy’s flagging fortunes were dramatically revived in the late 1950s and early 1960s was initially due to the force of circumstances. The then ruling strongman, field marshal Sarit Thanarat, needed to enhance the legitimacy of the authoritarian system he was building and turned to the monarchy for support. Once more the king was treated with extreme veneration and honour. Once more the monarchy became the focus of the nation’s attention, as the king and his family were allowed to travel, not only within the country but also on numerous state visits abroad.

Assisted by the rapid expansion of communications technology in the 1980s, Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit were able to gain access to the hearts and homes of their subjects, in a way that his predecessors in a less advanced age had never been able to do.

However, there is little that is fortuitous about the present strength and popularity of the monarchy. As he made clear to a recent gathering of all families descended from the Chakri kings, Bhumibol considers kingship which is created, not by divine beings for divine purposes but by the people, to be depended upon by the people and to act for the good of the people.

The Buddhist-inspired concept of kingship is, of course, not new and can be traced back at least to the annals of the Sukhotai era in the 13th century. But what is new is the present monarch’s strength and commitment towards it. Bhumibol considers his kingdom to be besieged by a number of grave challenges and is determined to resolve them. Towards this end, he sees the monarchy’s active leadership of and participation in the country’s development as necessary and desirable.

Thus, he and his family have travelled constantly through remote and poor areas, visiting people to hear their grievances and gauge their needs. The king has personally initiated many development projects — now numbering more than 1,000 — mostly concerned with improving water, land and human resources. For him the key is not to draw up “macro” plans which may be irrelevant to the people, but to bring to the developmental process the human dimension, the balanced touch and the patient gradualism that are generally lacking in national economic strategies.

In post-1932 Thailand, the monarch performs various functions as head of state, but his primary duties are considered political — his role is...
above politics. But popular acceptance of the monarchy as an institution and of the king as a person, combined with the latter's role as the catalyst of development, makes royal involvement in politics more or less inevitable.

At the present juncture, the monarchy, directly or indirectly, intentionally or otherwise, plays a number of roles which have become integral to the Thai political system.

One is that of the symbol of national unity, essential for a society which, though relatively homogeneous, has its share of cleavages. In this connection, the monarchy also acts as the factor of continuity, when conflicts occur in other political institutions. Since 1932, the kingdom has gone through 13 constitutions, 16 coups and 46 cabinet changes. The monarchy has also become a force of national reconciliation, when extreme political polarisation takes place, as evident from the royally initiated development projects at former conflict centres.

The second major role is that of the last-resort conflict manager when the stresses and strains of the system reach a point of crisis. On several occasions since 1973, the palace has intervened to restrain military groups which would have toppled the government, caused bloodshed or precipitated unacceptable crises. In turn, this role creates a balance — precarious at times to be sure — among the power groups: military, bureaucratic, political parties and business interests.

The nation's apprehension is less easy to explain. Certainly many Thais are unhappy with the purported contents of the leaflets. But the root of the matter runs much deeper. These leaflets came at a time of uncertainty in the minds of the public about the king's plans in the immediate future.

Simply put, rumours have been circulating for some time that the king may abdicate, perhaps going into monkhood, before mid-1988. And the king has not made any attempt to quash the rumours. In fact, in his 1986 birthday address he made some cryptic remarks about water not standing still but inevitably having to flow on. "In our lifetime," he said then, "we just perform our duties. When we retire, somebody else will replace me and he cannot stick to a single task forever, one day we will grow old and die."

Apart from these remarks, there has not been any development to lend credence to the rumours, but they seem to have been considered sufficiently serious for a high-ranking prince and a deputy private secretary of the king to make public denials.

These rumours, in turn, serve to put the spotlight on the crown prince, who as the only son of the king is the successor to the throne. The Palace Law of 1924, which is still in force, categorically denies the right of succession to female offspring of royalty. Under the 1978 constitution, royal succession has to take place in accordance with the Palace Law concerning succession, subject to consent by parliament.

Now a major-general in command of the Bangkok-based Royal Guards Regiment, the crown prince had over the past few years rapidly come into his own as heir to the throne. He has been entrusted with carrying out an increasing number of royal duties both at home and abroad. And for all intents and purposes, he has his own court which is centred around his second wife and their five children, who recently have received extensive media coverage.

Given the monarchy's role in Thailand's political and economic development, as well as its place in the hearts and minds of the populace, any uncertainty regarding the future of the monarchy inevitably causes a great deal of apprehension. Doubts continue to be expressed, mostly in private but now increasingly in the open, about the crown prince's capacity to evoke the kind of intense political loyalty from the people and the major domestic political power groupings that his father is able to do. Doubts also persist as to whether the crown prince can match his father's subtle and mediatory role in politics.

All men and institutions go through processes of change and transformation. Bhumibol has achieved a great deal for his country and for the institution he inherited without forewarning, but by doing so, he has set perhaps an impossibly high standard of attainment for his successors. Should the leadership provided by the monarchy become less effective for one reason or another in the future, there will be grave political consequences.

The precarious balance among the major political groups and factions would certainly be destroyed. A vacuum would be created both in the political system and in the soul of the nation. This vacuum is one which only the military would be capable of filling, given its monopoly of coercive power, organisational cohesion and control of the media and grassroot politics. For many Thais, this ultimately is the root of their apprehension.