ON THE ROLE OF THE KING IN THAILAND

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For some he is the sad-looking fairy King from the Land of Smiles, who appears ever young, with a far-eastern beauty at his side. For others he is a western-educated, open-minded King, who played a seemingly progressive role and in the revolt of 1973 seemed to support the demands of the students (for whom he used to play saxophone in the Thammasat University - will he play again this year?). And for yet others he is the staunchest feudalist, who stands at the centre of the counter-progressive factors, and who through shrewd policy till now always managed to play first violin (not saxophone this time) in the concert of the rightist disarray.

How far he adapts himself to the tradition of the Thai Monarchy, or whether he gives it his own imprint, the following article, written by a friend of TISK, will try to shed light on.

PART I

Before Phnom had been cleared of the serious charges in connection with the 14 October uprising, the patriarch of the Buddhist church and the high-ranking monks allowed him to be ordained in a monastery. So voices of disagreement were heard from people, monks and laymen alike, who had really no intention to speak ill of the institution but were concerned lest this preferential treatment of the privileged few would lead to the loss of faith in the religion. It must also be made quite clear that this article does not address itself to the institution of monarchy but merely attempts to describe the personality and the deeds of a sovereign - accounts would however be given of what the Thais usually have no courage to talk in public, so as to give readers an overall, or more or less complete picture.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: We wish to express our sincere thanks to THAILAND CORRESPONDENZ for having kindly allowed us to publish the complete version of this article in English. The PART I of this article first appeared originally in German in THAILAND CORRESPONDENZ No 1, and its PART II will be published very soon in the coming issue of THAILAND CORRESPONDENZ. We hope that the publication of this article would partially satisfy the demand of many of our readers who wish to be informed about the role of the Thai-monarchy (see THAI INFORMATION BULLETIN No 12, pp. 36-37).
To begin with, the present King of Thailand is King Bhumibol, whom one would like to elevate to the title "the Great" (Anand Phakorpinli, member of Parliament before the October 1976 Coup had suggested this).

In the early days, in Sukothai-period, the King was the head of a large family, and the citizens members of the family, who had at any time access to him. Gradually he came to assume the form of God reincarnation and an absolute ruler over life and death. This was already the case in Ayudhya period, and more evident in the early Bangkak-period. (The King in the Ayudhya-period had the title "Somdej", the Kings in the Bangkak-period "Phraphaksanomdej" ; "Phraabat" means the King’s feet - it probably expresses that his feet are above the heads of the subjects). Direct access to the King became rare and finally he became unapproachable and untouchable.

The sixth King of Sukothai-period (1354-1373) was famous for his devotion to religion; his position in the country was accordingly weak. It was an opportunity for the towns in the South to declare their independence from the Kingdom. A man by the name of U-Thong succeeded in 1356 in uniting these towns into an independent, rival Kingdom with himself as King and Ayudhya as the Capital. Finally the whole of the Kingdom Sukothai was conquered by Ayudhya.

Thanin Kraivixien’s account - in the foreward of his book "Thai Kings in the Democracy" - that Thailand has always been ruled by a King, is not quite correct. For instance, in 1767 the Kingdom of Ayudhya was conquered by the Burma Forces and the reigning dynasty exterminated. A brave citizen came into prominence by leading at first small fighting group against the Burma; because of his success more and more people joined him. With the army which he was able to build up he finally succeeded in driving away the occupying Burmese. The town of the people established Thonburi as the new Capital. In the mind of the Thais at that time a King was the only source from which the highest state authority flowed. A General, however powerful he may be, lacks luster and glory that seems to shine automatically from a King. So he proclaimed himself King Taksin. Just to make it quite clear, he was not usurper of the throne like several predecessors in Ayudhya; the throne had been vacant for some time. Kraivixien must have recognized the Burmese King as the King of Thailand, while the throne was vacant.

To be able to rule a country, a King must be popular or powerful enough. The forefather of the present King, the founder of the Chakri dynasty was the most powerful General in the country, when he dechonred King Taksin. As a friend and the right hand of King Taksin he rose from a commoner ("Nai Duong") to noblness and to the highest official of the country ("Somdej Chao Phraya Chakri"). He ordered the execution of his one-time royal patron - on the ground that the latter was insane. (Kraivixien tries, however, to paint a new historical picture in the above mentioned book: "At the end of the Thonburi period there was a riot in the Capital. King Buddha Yotfa-1762-1810 - put an end to the chaos and established Krung Ratanakosin, the present Bangkok as the new Capital"). It was claimed that the King had ordered monks to be whipped and forced them to pay his ransom. We do not know if this was true. We do not know either whether King Taksin was really insane. Historiand recorded that the allegedly insane had expressed one last wish - to speak to the new King - which was not granted. Was this wish of an insane? When the third King of the Chakri dynasty died, his
half-brother, who at the age of 48 years lived as monk in a monastery, was
invited to ascend the throne - it seems that he was more popular or more
acceptable than the descendants of the third king.

Chumphon Adulyadej, "the brook," became king after the mysterious
death of his older brother, King Ananda Mahidol. The dead king was found
with a bullet wound in his back. It happened in the history of the Thai
monarchy that a brother killed another in order to take the throne belonging
rightfully to the latter. The investigator, who was later commissioned,
followed in his investigation a politically fixed direction and simply
excluded such a motive. It has been ascertained that a Gouvernante, who is
now dead, ran immediately into the king's bedroom when she heard the shot.
She could still feel the pulse of the dying king, but did not notice any-
thing else. Furthermore, the personal physician of the dead king had cleaned
and sewed his wound before the police came. Has the Royal Court something to
hide?

The present king was born in New York and educated in Switzerland.
At first he studied Pharmacy, then changed to Political Science after he
ascended the throne. Abroad he is considered to be modern and democratic-
minded. On state visits abroad he showed himself to be sociable with
Europeans. In the early years he amused himself, just as one would expect
a man of his age, born in a good family, to do; he enjoyed playing musical
instruments, once played saxophone with Benny Goodman. At home among
his subjects to the surprise of the Europeans he puts on the appearance of the
traditional God-King. Close by just a few high officials dare rise as high
as his shoulders. Other subjects crawl at his feet. One thinks unintention-
ally of a scene in the film: "The King and I!" when the young King makes
the subjects who were prostrating before him in the throne hall to stand
up, they followed him reluctantly. But the king in the film did not.

Children are taught already in their pre-school days to worship the
King (even his picture). In schools only wonderful things are told about
him. Not until the University is reached that some begin to feel puzzled, but
many still dare say nothing and remain conform further.

The vertical distance between the God-King and the subjects re-
mains, but he understands how to make it acceptable while maintaining
the appearance of godliness. He and members of the Royal Family travel exten-
sively through the country. In passing by he bends down now and again to
whisper a friendly word to the waiting masses at his feet. Sometimes even
strokes the hands of the elderly, which are folded together in a gesture of
reverence. It is a life experience to be touched by the untouchable, in
Thailand where the officials treat the common people just as the master does
his servants, this novel conduct must have the effect of rain drops after a
long drought. Of course, the Royal Court self-circulates the pictures of
such events.

Besides the official ceremonies which the King performs patiently
(such as conferring a university degree - thereby not all graduates consider
it an honour to receive a degree certificate from Majesty's hand), he
appears interested in the welfare of the people. Thus he gives breeding
clubs broad hen, broad sheep and broad swine; village headmen seed corns;
peasants blankets and school pupils books and notebooks as demonstration of
the royal mercy which touches so little the cause of poverty. Often he has an expert advice ready, for instance: land which is gained by destruction of forest should not be owned by an individual, but a cooperative should be formed to manage it (14 August 74, in Takbai, Narathiwat), or makeshift bridges should be able to be removed so that they would not be damaged by logs flowing down the streams (31 August 74 at River Saiburi).

The King, as reported by Krudthien, has initiated numerous projects – so numerous that one must wonder, what still remains to be done by the Government. All projects are in the experimental stage.

The King and the Crown Prince can work wonders. The King, for example, has designed a light machine gun that can be operated by electricity and mounted on a helicopter – this machine gun has been successfully tested. During the oil crisis with the King's formula a chemical substance was produced from raw material found in Thailand, which, dissolved in water, before it could be transported to be superior to that of benzine. To produce this substance it was proposed to establish a public company, and then to invite to contribute to the capital of the company. Williams bowed in, but until today no one has heard of the company. It is not known where the money remains.

The Crown Prince was sent for further education in England after finishing his elementary school. He went to the following schools, one after another: King's Head, Millfield and King's School. After that as a Lieutenant of the Royal Thai Army to the Royal Military College in Dunrobin, which he visited was one of the best – and why he finally went to Australia.

After the day in Australia he was promoted to a Captain. He loves to dress in a full battle dress and to armed to the teeth in public. Apart from serving with the Military Intelligence he has the duty to protect his father.

The young Royal Captain possesses all the qualities of a future king. Kukrit Pramoj has followed his development for over twenty years out of love, concern and loyalty and has never been disappointed. Kukrit is of the opinion that the young Prince is the embodiment of the royal tradition which has been passed on for centuries ("Khaosilai Ko", SiAM NATH, 3 Jan. 77).

The Crown Prince has proved himself to be praiseworthy. Then it was reported by Radio Thailand and Newspapers in Bangkok that on 13 Feb 77, just as the convoy was approaching a defence post, the armoured personnel carrier, in which he was travelling, was attacked by an unknown number of armed with unheard-of courage rushed to the nearby defence post to order mortars to shell the guerrillas' position. The communiqué which the army issued later and much to the surprise of many admirers made no mention of the heroic
PART II

It is officially claimed that the King is always above politics, that the democratic system in Thailand models itself after the English system and that the principle "The King can do no wrong" is also applicable to the Thai system. Let us consider it closely. In reality, Queen Elizabeth takes no part in the exercise of the three State Powers. Once the appropriate State Organs come into being, the State Powers are exercised in her name without her participation. (Theoretically, Queen Elizabeth can appoint anyone at will as Prime Minister, in practice, she appoints the person, who can command a majority in the House of Commons at the time, and usually follows the advice of the retiring Prime Minister. After the appointment, she still do one thing without his recommendation - confer the highest order, "Knight of the Garter (K.G.)"). She has in the exercise of the legislative power no veto right. Bills, which have been passed by Parliament must go through a so-called "Royal Assent" ceremony, performed by officials of the Royal Court, to become law, but the Queen herself does not sign the bills, does not take part in the ceremony, and must in fact not sign any notice of the bills at all, if she does not wish to.

According to the Constitution of 1974 King Bhumibol has a veto right subject to the overriding power of Parliament. His right can be compared to that of the President of the Federal Republic of Germany. He, who has a right, has also a duty - in this case, a duty to see that the bill is conform to the Constitution and is in the interest of the people, before signing it. At the time the Constitution of 1974 was being drafted, the King did not express a wish to renounce the veto right, although he once issued a memorandum about the mode of appointment of the members of the Upper House, which led to alteration of the draft on this point.

The King once let the time pass by without signing the bill providing for the election of subdistrict chief and village headmen. At the end of Parliament Session he still had not signed it, so that Parliament must take up the draft bill again at the next session. (Fearing that they might lose their offices at the election, a group of several thousand subdistrict chiefs and village headmen under the leadership of the rightist group "Kawesak" had demonstrated against the bill in Bangkok).

Let us consider one or two paragraphs in the Constitution of 1974:

"One has a duty to protect the Nation, the Religion and the King and the democratic system according to the provisions of this Constitution."

It follows that the highest law of the country, the Constitution is to be protected and may be altered only in accordance with the provisions laid down in the Constitution itself. Suffice it to consider the Constitution of 1974 as an example. Earlier the King must have also committed a breach of his constitutional duty, when he several times signed the draft constitutions of the military coup groups. Can one imagine that the President of the Federal Republic would do such a thing? But, consenting to Article 21 (now § 27) coming into force, by which the Prime Minister is given absolute power to do anything, also to order an execution of someone without trial by an ordinary court, he has also in effect annulled the traditional right to grant a reprieve.
In short, "the King can do no wrong", because others act in his name, but when he himself acts and in so doing disregards the provisions still in force, it is difficult to understand why "the King can do no wrong". It is quite another thing when the King does wrong, but one tries to overlook it.

Krivixian (p. 29 in his book) tries to justify the King's breach of duty by arguing that the Constitution at the time of emergency is just a collection of empty words. There are no organs of State Powers to enforce its provisions. He cites the bloody incident in 1973 and says that the King had solved the crisis masterly. In such a situation one is forced to rely on the one hand on the King's graciousness, influence and tactfulness, and on the other on the loyalty of the subjects.

It is questionable, if the organ of the State Power was missing, when Dictator Thanon staged a coup against his own regime, because he was not satisfied with the extent of power he already had - the King affixed his signature to the document, called interim constitution, limiting the rights of the people. One is reminded of Winston Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister at the time of crisis without the fundamental rights of the English people being touched upon.

It is impossible to reconcile Krivixian's argument with the well recognized democratic principle that the sovereign power emanates from the people (even the present interim constitution which in all respects limits the rights of the people to the extreme, signed by the King on 9th November, 1977, takes care to mention this in Article 2). His uncle, King Prachaphitak, the seventh King of the Chakri Dynasty could give away sovereign power which still belong to him by granting a constitution. But what right has King Chumphon to assign power, belonging rightfully now to the people, to a clique? Is it to be understood that he was party to the clique seizing power from the people?

The constitution of the dictatorial regime, which was the cause of the uprising in October 1973, was itself an anomaly arising out of disregard of the provisions in the earlier constitutions. The King's masterly solution, which outwardly was a show of mercy to students who were then still loyal, served in its effect to maintain status quo of various cliques, whose powers and influences remain intact. Had there been a show of force between the two groups, resulting in more bloodshed, could it be possible that the King's own position would be affected by the upheaval caused thereby? As it stood, in spite of the democratic constitution later promulgated, nothing in the power ratio of the cliques was changed.

Besides, the King was no less friendly to the corrupt dictators. On his initiative a special plane was placed at their disposal for a journey into temporary exile.

King Chulalongkorn, the fifth King of the Chakri Dynasty and Grandfather of the present King had toyed with the idea of democracy. King Vajiravudh, the sixth King and an uncle had experimented with democracy; to acquaint his court officials with the fundamental idea of democracy, a fictive town was founded in the Royal Court, in which he played the part of a commoner by the name of "Nai Rum". Another uncle, whom we have mentioned above, was preparing to turn over the absolute power to the people, when it
was seized from him in 1932. He later abdicated; in the declaration of abdi-
cation he wrote: "I am ready to hand over the sovereign power, belonging
originally to me, to the people in general, but I will not consent that all
my powers be given to an individual or to a certain group, who uses them
without the regard to the wishes of the people ".

Against this background one must be amazed at the fact that the
King, who was educated in Switzerland, without hesitation signed a document
legalizing the seizure of sovereign power from the people by a military
clique as though it still rightfully belonged to him. On the contrary, he
hesitated to sign, as provided in the Constitution, a bill providing for
election according to the democratic rules ( mentioned above ).

At ceremonies he made speeches and gave good advice. " Whether one
is successful or not, depends on one's ability to two respects, namely, the
ability to make use of the acquired knowledge, and the ability to cooperate
with others " ( at teachers' graduation in Bangkok, 19th August 74 ).
" Laws must be applied on the basis of justice " ( at lawyers' graduation in
Bangkok, 31st October 74 ). " One should not let oneself be deterred from
one's idealism. It is true, idealism does not fill the stomach. Please
understand that one is born not only to fill one's stomach, but also to be
useful to others " ( at police officers' graduation in Sampran, 8th April 75 ).
He reminded the listeners of their duties, but the sentence on the rights of
the individual was sadly missing from his speeches. Most Thais are not con-
cious of their rights. Thailand came out of the era of absolute monarchy only
to plunge almost immediately into the era of military dictatorship.

Not so long ago the King began to use strong words of warning. He
warned the Nation of the danger from the left, of the danger of the Nation
being divided, although murder, bomb-throwing and other violent acts were,
as is well known, committed with official connivance by the rightist groups.
" I believe, you are aware of the danger that is threatening our national
security " ( at the opening of the National Administration Reform Assembly,
Nov. 76 ). " We should understand, that the situation of our country on
the whole is not very good " ( New Year message 1977 ).

He and the other members of the Royal Family visited the troops
often. After the communist take-over in Indochina, he must have been con-
cerned about his throne. What he did otherwise, sometimes roused uneasiness
in the mind of the neutral observer. In the night of 23rd September 1976 at
21.30, he made an unscheduled visit to Wat Bowonniwet, where Thanom three
days earlier was ordained a monk. He had just arrived back at 18.00 from
Southern Thailand. Furthermore, he let a private secretary announce to the
people gathering at the monastery: he entrusted the monastery in their care.
They should watch out that nobody set fire to it. Did he really believe that
someone was going to set fire to it?

Kraivixian sets up a theory ( pp.3 and 11 ) that Thai Kings are a
mixture of God-King and family father. Whether a King cares for his subjects,
as a father does his children, is different from case to case. One must re-
 cognize that the present King does his best to remain acceptable to the
subjects. The "God-King" element is however present to a greater extent.
Lii - majesté is, for instance, a serious offence. A man was thus sentenced
on 8th February 77 by Bangkok military court to six years imprisonment,
because witnesses heard him say something not flattering about Majesty, and
saw him put Majesty's picture on the ground. If it so continues, the post
employee must be very careful, when he stamps Majesty's portraits on stamps.
Those who are sentenced on account of illegitimate children are not eligible for
parole before they serve out their full prison term. Fathers and children
children? The King seems to be pleased that the relic from the time of
the General is an effective weapon for shutting off political
opponents.

The King's oldest daughter has married a Puerto Rican by the name
of Jansen. Since then her name has not been officially mentioned (also not
himself, the Queen, the Princess Mother, the Princess Sister of the King,
the King's daughter? One former married a commoner, but after her divorce reverted to
the status of princess and is now a member of the Royal Family. It seems that
the one at the regal seat is more esteem than the generals. If the people are
forced to obey an order issued as the King's order.

Kraivixien argues (p.30) that the legal position of the King in
the so-called Thai Democracy in spite of numerous coups has not been touched.
not touch is. They do have interest in letting his still remain on the
throne. With his signatures all their illegal acts could be in their appear-
ance legalized. The Thais themselves would not question, whether the king is
found a new dynasty acceptable to the people. (President Nokkrai of the
Central African Republic will let himself be crowned on 4th December 1977.
3 years ago, many generals would certainly wish to ascend the throne themselves,
still need him on the throne as an instrument to further their own purposes.
The King takes the throne, the generals
not ready to listen to an order of a general, they are nevertheless prepared
to obey an order issued as the King's order.

Without ascending the throne themselves and with the present rule
the King and the generals are at present two poles that support each other.
The King has undoubtedly more interest than his uncle, who dedicated, to
remain on the throne or at least to pass it on to his son.

Everyday it is hammered into the mind of the Thais, especially the
younger generation, to have the Nation, the Religion and the King - a political
movement that appears like brainwash. No word is mentioned about the
Constitution, which in other countries one swears "to serve, protect and
defend". Small wonder, when the Constitution is, as Kraivixien means
the generals.

The Nation at present means centralization of power in the hands
of the Central Government which would hold a tight reign over minority groups
as well. The Religion means Buddhism. On Christmas and Easter, the people would not at first agree to lift the surau so as to allow Christians to go out to worship in accordance with their faith.

Let us consider a few questions: Would Thailand have had more than one Kingdom, if the people in the history always loved the Nation as it means here? Would the Kingdom of Ayuthya have ever been established? Would Thailand have had more than one reigning dynasty, if the people and, above all, the generals always loved their kings in the history? Would Chakri Dynasty have ever been founded? Is it not advisable to try to protect the Constitution which prescribes the positions of the Nation, the Religion, and the King in accordance with the democratic rules, and, moreover, lays down the rights and duties of individuals in relation to one another and to the organs of State powers? In this way would not all mentioned in the Constitution be protected?

Kruatvikin means that King Taksin had instilled in the mind of the Thais a spirit of unity which was always inherited from generation to generation until today (p. 8). King Taksin was only an ordinary man who was elevated onto the throne. Afterwards one loved him no more.

The future of the Monarchy in Thailand depends on the short run on the usefulness of the king to the generals, who share the actual power among themselves. Conflict of interests between the royalist and the military troops has recently begun to show itself. The King now commands less respect either from the left or from the right. Earlier explosion in the vicinity of the King like the incident in Yala Province would be quite unthinkable. The regime has tried to tone it down by declaring that it was the work of a separatist group, which was seeking publicity without intent to injure anyone. It is more probable that it was done by a rightist group who was looking for a reason, acceptable to the people, for getting rid of the royalist cabinet ministers. Rightist elements, which had been lying dormant after the bloody coup in October 1976, surfaced immediately to demand resignation of the responsible minister. Kruatvikin (once a superior of one of the Queen's brothers in the provincial court of Chiangrai), who was in October 1976 hounded by the King as Prime Minister, was against the will of the King overthrown by the military on 20th October 1977. This time the King was not given a chance to handpick again. He must simply appoint the candidate of the military. Should the generals at any time decide that they could command enough respect from the people without the King in the forefront, the Monarchy could come to an abrupt end.

Because of the contentedness and humbleness of Thai commoners and because of the conservative attitude of many, the King's position is, with regard to the wishes of the people, secure in so far as the people are still happy where they are. The question here is not whether the people are for the King, but whether the King is really for the people. In the long run, people would realize that the highly praised royal show of mercy had no more than propagandistic value, and could at best bring temporary relief. Moreover, the King's interests are so tied up with those of the generals and others that he is not in the position to help them break the devil's circle, in which they are unfortunate to be born. Indeed, people are his only true allies, but the King himself is forcing them to turn away from him. Would the King, before it is too late, cut his ties with other interest groups and think more of the people than of his throne.