HOW DEEP ARE THE CRACKS IN THE KINGDOM?
REFLECTIONS ON A KING'S BIRTHDAY

by
Mong Doo

Each year, in early December, many Thai government offices come to a standstill. It's not that officials are off on early holidays, but that all is given over to preparations for the birthday celebrations of King Bhumiphol Adulyadej (Rama IX). Normal television and radio programs are interrupted by long speeches praising the King, and newspapers and magazines produce special supplements. 1987 saw all of this mushroom into a year-long affair as the King celebrated his fifth cycle or 60th birthday.

Every government department searched for tributes it could pay. The Department of Local Administration made sure that, want them or not, millions of suitably inscribed, large water storage jars would be distributed in rural areas. The powerful Ministry of Interior even held a nationwide 'vote' on what title should be allocated to the King - 'the Great' or some similar honorific - with the results being published (everyone was said to have voted), and a shrine erected to house the books of votes. In other places such displays by government would probably be seen as 'authoritarian', 'sickening' (by republicans), or just silly; but not so in Thailand.

The massive, country-wide celebrations of December 1987 were unprecedented, even for Thailand. On the surface, the bright lights and numerous 'events', not to mention the massive traffic jams they created in Bangkok, indicated a Thai nation united in its love and respect for the monarchy. All media reports, local and foreign conveyed this impression. Take, for example, the article by long-time resident and foreign correspondent E.F. Dunfree (Asia Magazine, 29 November 1987), who was so moved that he proclaimed: 'The devotion is by all means real. No Thai who proudly calls himself [sic] Thai will tolerate even a hint of a slur on the Royal Family.'

Reality, however, is quite another matter. Many Thais will admit, in private and safe from prosecution, that the monarchy does not enjoy the total adulation that the syrupy media stories would make out. But such views can't be easily expressed. Respect for the monarchy, and especially this king, is demanded in all spheres of public life. Every government office and public ceremony must display portraits of the king and obeisance must be made. Reverence for the monarchy is synonymous with being 'Thai'. If you publically express even the slightest dissatisfaction, then you can't be a 'real' Thai, and the chances are that you are a communist!

The media campaigns which have continued, unabated, since the dictator General Sarit Thanarat came to power in 1958 and resurrected the ideological symbol of the monarchy, were initially designed to rehabilitate a discredited monarchy - overthrown in 1932; a blundered attempt at restoration; self-imposed exile and then abdication; a boy king who lived in Switzerland, who later died in mysterious and violent circumstances; and his replacement by another minor who had spent most of his life overseas. All of this has now been publically 'forgotten' as this king has been promoted to godly status. All of the sins of the Chakri dynasty have been twisted to become something else. For example, King Vajiravudh, an Anglophile who promoted his male favourites and virtually bankrupted the
country, is portrayed as the father of Thai nationalism. King Prajadhipok, his successor, who was overthrown by the People's Party, later abdicated, and died a bitter man in self-imposed exile, is now curiously seen as the father of Thai democracy.

Such fairy tales have become official history and ideology. To oppose them is to risk severe retribution. Recently, MP and former minister, Veera Musikapong made an off-the-cuff remark about the benefits of being rich and royal; he has received a six year jail sentence. If this can happen to a big shot, then the average Thai is well warned. Keeping one's mouth shut on the monarchy is essential, and generally only trusted friends will hear one's real opinions.

This monarchy has become more ideologically powerful than at any time since King Chulalongkorn died in 1910. In addition, it has tremendous economic resources, and is a determining force in all important political events.

Nevertheless, from time to time, anonymous voices are raised. Most recently this has been seen in a stunning series of leaflets attacking the monarchy right at the height of the King's birthday celebrations. Emerging from the shadows of gossip and hearsay, the pamphlets were suddenly everywhere. The military and police found it necessary to interrupt normal radio and television programming just three days after the King's birthday to denounce the anonymous authors as '... enemies of the nation ... bent on undermining the monarchy' (Far Eastern Economic Review, 24 December 1987). The military and police claimed that the offending literature was from 'a group of the Kingdom's enemies' (Bangkok Post, 9 December 1987); not just of the monarchy, it should be noted, but the whole country.

What was expressed in these leaflets to provoke such an extraordinary response? A brief excerpt from one of the offending leaflets will provide the flavour: 'Sia O is totally besotted by Nang Yu. So much so that he would willingly sniff her feet, or any other part of her body for that matter, since there is nothing he would not do for her.'

To Thais the idea of getting one's face close to another's feet is repugnant and indicates total submissiveness. 'Sia O' and 'Nang Yu' are familiar to almost all adult Thais, who follow their exploits as closely as they do the popular soap operas which fill television screens each night. 'Sia O' is, in fact, the most common nickname for Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. 'Sia' is a term used for wealthy Chinese or Sino-Thai businessmen (the royal family has Chinese ancestry, most recently through the King's commoner mother who is from a Chinese family.) It also carries the connotation of being a gangster. 'O' simply refers to the sixth syllable of the Prince's royal title. Another nickname for him is 'Ai Thum', meaning moron or blockhead, and used by intellectuals to indicate the Prince's less than spectacular academic record. For example, when at Australia's elite military academy Duntroon, the Prince was incapable of completing the academic requirements of the course.

'Nang Yu', on the other hand, is Yuwathida Phonprasert, a former movie star, who has been the Prince's principal mistress for about ten years. The relationship between Sia O and Nang Yu has become public knowledge, with offspring from the relationship receiving the royal title Mom Chao. However, the Prince is officially married to Princess Soamsawali, formerly Mom Luang Soamsawali Kittiyakon, a daughter of the Queen's elder brother. This has, in the past, dictated that a modicum of discretion be maintained in the non-official relationship.
Over the past 18 months, however, all pretences have been discarded. Yuwathida is now known as Mom Sucharini Wiratchorawong, and she and her children have made numerous public appearances. She has accompanied the Prince on official visits to Australia and Japan. The latter visit caused a diplomatic storm, when the Prince felt that the Japanese had snubbed his mistress and cut short his program and returned to Thailand in a huff.

The openness of the relationship has surprised many observers, and occasioned much comment, but it was Nang Yu's sudden rise to scholastic stardom, with her 'achievements' being published in the mass circulation daily Thai Rath, in November, which appears to have been the stimulus for some of the leaflets.

A number of the hastily typed leaflets, phrased in an awkward style, replete with misspellings, begin with references to Nang Yu's 'studies'. One begins:

'Beloved countrymen [and women], over the past few days you have probably read about the extraordinary academic success of one man's brilliant mistress. She successfully completed two degrees with top marks, and is currently working on a masters degree at Prasanmit [a former teacher's college, now a second tier university in Bangkok]. It's really quite an achievement considering the fact that earlier in life she was a failure as a student, ... without ever completing her education. But, genius will not be denied, and you can be assured that she will soon take a doctorate.'

Another leaflet, circulated in the name of 'justice-loving officials, students and citizens' put Yuwathida's achievements in a broader context: 'Nang Yu had Sia O made sure that her studies were completed in time for her to receive a degree at the annual conferring ceremonies he [the Prince] was to preside over in mid-November.' It is then suggested that her 'accomplishment' was calculated to impress the King, who might be so moved as to bestow Nang Yu with the prestigious title 'Phra Worarat Thewi' during his birthday celebrations.

The implication of such courtly politics is that the Prince's commoner mistress would move into royal ranks. The emphasis on formal education is ideologically important, for this King has placed great emphasis on academic qualifications. The King himself, while not having high formal qualifications, is portrayed as a brilliant scientist (as in all other fields of human endeavour). All of his offspring have been credited with academic brilliance and regularly present seminars and receive honorary doctorates. The Prince, however, has a slightly different image - a he-man, with great military skills - the logic apparently being that in his case the lack of academic ability was so obvious that another image was necessary. For Nang Yu, though, it is important that she be seen as one with academic abilities, especially if she hopes to be official queen in the future.

Despite the prominence given to Yuwathida's 'studies', the underlying theme of these particular leaflets was to question the Prince's suitability for the throne. It is noted, for example, that, in the past, king's have had more than one wife. King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910):

'had one hundred wives, but he was a good husband who paid his principal wives ... due respect and honour. His concubines knew their place and kept in the background.... He set an example of propriety....
This Prince, however, is altogether different.... He is a disgrace and totally lacking in morals. If we should choose to emulate him, chaos would engulf the country.'

Although authorities have blamed 'communists' for the anti-monarchy literature, and have arrested a number of university students as scapegoats, the emphasis on the rise of Yuwathida, at Soamsawali's expense, indicates that at least some of the leaflets may have been produced by Soamsawali's supporters.

This flurry of activity comes at a bad time for the Prince. Over the past few years there has been a concerted effort to give him a more dignified image, as a future king concerned for the people. Hence his much publicized trips to the countryside to plant and harvest rice (much to the amusement of real rice farmers); forays into the slums of Bangkok; and wide exposure as the King's official representative in China and Japan (the latter now seen as a disaster). In addition, the Prince has given a number of interviews for both local and foreign journalists, where he is portrayed as a dedicated servant to his father. People are not entirely convinced by contrived media events, such as attempts to show dignity and maturity by having photos in Dichan magazine showing the prince smoking a pipe.

However, the public displays of the Prince and his favorite mistress are not what is expected of a future king. Even the usually slick palace propaganda machine seems to have misread the public mood in promoting the offspring of the Sia O - Nang Yu relationship. The eldest boy was recently the subject of concerted media attention as he entered the monkhood and, accompanied by the Prince and travelling by plane and air-conditioned Mercedes, visited important temples around the country. Nang Yu also made appearances at these events, as did high-ranking palace officials (perhaps signifying palace approval). Such a blatant use of the monkhood and the King's birthday celebrations to promote Nang Yu and her progeny offended many.

In addition to attacks on the Prince, another series of leaflets were directed at the King. These attacks were similar to previously circulated material. They repeated allegations found in illegal publications such as Kao ratchakan haeng ratchawong chakri (The Nine Reigns of the Chakri Dynasty) distributed in 1982 to coincide with the lavish bicentennial of the Chakri dynasty. A counter-history of Thailand, this particular work heaps scorn on the various Chakri monarchs and contains an amazing proliferation of rumors about the King and Queen.

The officially promoted image of the royal couple as generous, considerate individuals, united in their love for the Thai people and nation is turned on its head. For example, the anonymous authors write: 'Behind the scenes, deep, irreconcilable differences exist between Rama 9 [the King] and the Queen, both of whom use their exalted positions for great personal gain. On the surface, however, they present a united image so as to maintain the faith and loyalty of the people.'

This has ramifications for succession: 'The King had the succession law changed in order to allow a woman to become monarch. He did this in the hope that his favorite, Princess Sirinthorn, would be able to carry on the father's line. This was in response to the Queen's attempts to have her feeble minded son become King and further her family's [Kittayakon] interests.'
In another section the King is denounced as a 'big business man' (the combined interests of the royal family and the Crown Property Bureau are probably the largest business group in the country), whose interests are more in tune with those of local and foreign capitalists than the Thai people at large. The Queen, on the other hand, is referred to as 'Susi Thaihao' (CiXi Taihou, the Empress Dowager Cixi), and is accused of meddling in key military appointments and having a penchant for political intrigue.

Much space is also given to the mysterious death of King Ananda Mahidol, the present King's elder brother. This subject is virtually taboo in Thailand, and according to this account, the young king died as a result of a number of factors. It is said that he supported Pridi Phanomyong's plans for land reform, that he wanted to abdicate and abolish the throne, and that he was in conflict with his mother over a love affair with a foreigner. In keeping with long-standing gossip, it is claimed that the person responsible for the 'callous murder of Rama 8 [King Ananda] was none other than Rama 9, the present monarch.'

The same kind of rumors appear in a clandestine booklet attributed to a group within the Army, Roi rao khong phaendin (Cracks in the Kingdom). Apart from the regicide claim, it is observed that:

'Faith in the monarchy amongst students and intellectuals ceased on 6 October 1976 when members of the royal family were involved in ordering Border Patrol Police, Village Scouts and Red Gaurs [right-wing thugs] to murder students.... [Now,] as a result of its actions on 1 April 1981 [where it reportedly gave the Young Turks military group the green light to stage a coup, but then opposed them] the throne has been discredited in the eyes of many, previously loyal, middle and upper ranking military officers...'.

The soap operatic quality of all of these rumors, speculation and gossip are of truly regal proportions. The signs are, however, that the melodrama's conclusion has been written. It appears that the King has decided that it must be the Prince who succeeds him. The palace-directed media campaigns are, therefore, likely to continue to counteract the Thai rumor mill, and promote the future Rama X.

Interestingly, though, the anonymous authors conclude by citing an old prophecy that says the Chakri dynasty will only have nine ruling kings. The military leadership has changed since this publication, and the present supreme commander, General Chavalit Yongchaiyut, shows his respect for the monarchy by falling on his face before the king, his prostrations only being exceeded by the Prime Minister, and King's favourite, General Prem Tinsulanonda. Nevertheless, as the pamphlet campaign has indicated, deep cracks remain. The prophecy thus continues to have life.