The Last Thai King?

When King Rama I, founder of Thailand’s present dynasty, laid the cornerstone for the Bangkok Palace, he had to choose between two dates for the ceremony. According to the royal astronomer, one date would assure the dynasty a long life—through nine kings—at the cost of widespread popular suffering. The other date promised the country’s people a peaceful and prosperous life, but it also carried the prediction that the dynasty would last for only a few kings. After due consideration, Rama I laid the palace cornerstone on the date which favored the longevity of the dynasty. Today’s King Bhumipol, who believes profoundly in the wisdom of astronomers, is the ninth king in the dynasty founded by Rama I. On August 17, 1976, an astronomer told King Bhumipol that he could prolong the life of the dynasty by killing 30,000 people, with September and October as auspicious months for the massacre. Although the death toll on October 6 was nowhere near 30,000, the savagery of the coup, much of it carried out by the royal-sponsored Village Scouts, was unprecedented in recent Thai history.

Frequently described as above politics and beloved by all Thais, the Royal Family actually has powerful economic reasons for opposing any radical changes in the status quo. In addition to owning vast areas of land—and collecting rent on them—the Royal Family is deeply involved in Thailand’s capitalist economy. It holds shares in leading banks—which are under royal patronage—and industries, including Firestone Rubber, and it enjoys special privileges in exporting the products of royal lands. The Crown Property Bureau is the richest organization in Thailand, and the King’s Personal Property Office accounts for the highest personal income in the country. All of this was threatened by the events of 1973-76, forcing the Royal Family to enter the political arena directly and forfeit its image of benign detachment.

—Phoo Phakphoom, “The Present King and the Coup d’Etat” (unpublished)