

Absolutely Above Politics:
The reconfiguration of the Thai monarchy's political
influence after the Siamese Revolution, 1932-1988

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ABSTRACT

The 1932 Siamese Revolution supposedly abolished absolutist rule in Thailand and made the nation a constitutional democracy. Though this forced the monarchy to temporarily assume a submissive position to the government, it made many attempts to reclaim its political power. By reconfiguring its means of exerting power, and with the help of opportunists from various sectors of Thai society, the monarchical institution's political influence was revived by the end of the 20th century, despite obstacles. The monarchy's renewed political position allowed it to practice absolutist-adjacent political rule while claiming to be 'above' politics, a phenomenon encapsulated in Duncan McCargo's phrase, 'Network Monarchy.' This thesis will explore the journey of the Thai monarchy course of the 20th century, and demonstrate how the institution became increasingly complex, less focused around just the 'royal family,' and more omnipresent in the daily lives of all Thai citizens.

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2020, the same year as the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a clip of Thitiwat Tanangaroon’s interaction with King Vajiralongkorn of Thailand was widely circulated on social media, even making it onto mainstream news outside of Thailand. Prior to his encounter with Vajiralongkorn, Thitiwat had reportedly attended an anti-establishment protest, but not as an anti-establishment protester. He attended only so that he could hold up a royal portrait in defiance of the protesters, demonstrating his support for the Thai monarchy. In 2019, anti-government and anti-monarchy demonstrations broke out across the nation, continuing for several years. Complaints included frustrations about the government’s corruption, mishandling of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand, suppression of the people’s freedom of expression, and how Thailand’s *lèse-majesté* laws played a role in this.¹ In the video, captured at a pro-monarchist gathering after the protest, Thitiwat repeatedly shouts “Long Live the King” in Vajiralongkorn’s direction, capturing his attention. It is implied from background conversation in the footage that one of the King’s associates had pointed Thitiwat out to the King, letting him know that Thitiwat was the man who had valiantly defended the monarchy amidst a sea of its condemners. The King is then shown addressing Thitiwat directly, calling him “very brave, very good,” and thanking him for showing support for the monarchy during a time where the institution was experiencing heightened criticism.²

¹ Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, known as the *lèse-majesté* law, allows the Thai court to charge people with harsh criminal offences based on allegations of monarchical defamation. It has long been used as a weapon by the Thai government to intimidate and persecute its political enemies.

² “Thai king praises 'very brave' man who held up royal portrait at anti-government protest,” *South China Morning Post YouTube Channel*, October 26, 2020. Accessed April 12, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juop9q-QICA>.

Thitiwat's act was bold indeed. In an interview he gave the month after his video went viral, Thitiwat told *Reuters* that he experienced severe online backlash. He was threatened, called "disgusting," and caused the restaurant he was the manager of to lose a lot of business.³ Regardless of all of this, Thitiwat stood his ground as a loyalist to the monarchy. He retorted insults to the online trolls and the anti-establishment movement in general, saying the protesters made him "want to vomit," and reiterated proudly that to him, "the monarchy is god."⁴

Members of the 'other side' challenged this view. In the same *Reuters* article, young activist Tattap Ruangprapaikitseree is quoted saying that what unites the anti-establishment protesters is the idea that "they see that [the monarchy] is human, the king is human," and therefore, that the monarchy is "not a god."⁵ The activist movement that peaked between 2019 to 2021, led primarily by students of Thammasat University, cited their resistance as a response to a long history of their voices being suppressed, and of human rights atrocities being committed against them and their predecessors. One of the most pressing things the protesters demanded was reform of Thailand's *lèse-majesté* legislation, which empowered the government to enforce severe punishments onto people for the vaguely defined 'crime' of 'insulting the monarchy.' Part of their resistance has included educating the masses about the long history of the Thai establishment's suppression of free speech, and its inhibition of the people's freedom to obtain knowledge. They hope that through this education, more will be driven to understand that the

³ Jiraporn Kuhakan and Matthew Tostevin, "The monarchy is god: A Thai royalist in a divided kingdom." *Reuters*, November 12, 2020. Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-protests-royalist-feature-idCAKBN27S1BU>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

monarchy is made up of humans, not deities, and therefore embolden people to stand up against the institution.

The movement's focus on historical memory and uncovering taboo aspects of Thailand's past were what made their demonstrations particularly profound. Their narratives call into question the monarchy-centric, government-sanctioned, nationalism-heavy histories taught in Thai schools, passed down like legendary stories by parents to their children, and repeatedly reinforced on Thai mainstream media. Independent journalist Andrew MacGregor Marshall, whose own published works about the Thai monarchy have been banned from Thailand for their critical nature, describes the 'official' story:

“[T]he official story [perpetuated by the Thai establishment] is that Thailand is a constitutional monarchy in which King Bhumibol, Queen Sirikit and Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn are universally adored but remain scrupulously above politics, only intervening reluctantly at times of great crisis to prevent bloodshed and chaos.”⁶

This was the generally accepted narrative for many Thais during the late 20th to early 21st centuries, and though recent activism has unraveled it to an extent, it still makes up the foundation of many Thais' beliefs regarding their identities. Further, because of the existence of *lèse-majesté*, and the use of monarchism is one of the Thai state's most effective normative forces to control society, many people are reluctant to speak openly and critically on this topic, or even dare to question it.

⁶ Andrew MacGregor Marshall, “The foreign media are failing Thailand,” *ZenJournalist*, February 1, 2013. Accessed April 4, 2023. <https://www.zenjournalist.org/2013/02/01/the-foreign-media-are-failing-thailand/>.

The histories that the student activists have raised awareness for include events like the massacre of student activists at Thammasat University on October 6th, 1976. As will be elaborated on further in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the 1970s-era government and monarchy made conscious efforts to bury the topic, and for a long time, they succeeded. Though this took place before many of the 2019 student activists were even born, these younger activists likely felt a connection to their 1976 counterparts. Though time has passed, the students' demands have remained, at least fundamentally, the same.

The activists managed to spread awareness for this event on a national scale. For many home-grown Thais of various ages, this might have even been the first time they had ever heard of the incident in this level of detail, and through a critical rather than avoidant lens. This 'unforgetting' was particularly powerful because it spurred difficult conversations among people of all levels of the Thai hierarchy about not only the failures of the Thai official establishment, but also the ironies of Thai societal values. Debates occurred on national television between politicians and journalists, in LINE group chats between friends, in heated arguments between parents and their children, and at the front lines of demonstrations, as exemplified by Thitiwat's story.

Regardless of how many people's stances on the monarchy or Thai society actually changed as a result of this awareness, the fact that the story of the Thammasat Massacre was being spoken of with exponentially more openness than it had been before had a significant influence on the Thai national consciousness. It empowered people with knowledge, and solidarity over the possession of knowledge, which in turn empowered many to express previously repressed thoughts and feelings. In the late 20th century, especially after 1976,

someone like Thitiwat likely would not have had to worry about receiving backlash for his praise of the monarchy; behavior like his was encouraged, and behavior like that of the student protesters would have been hushed, likely even violently suppressed. In 2020, the suppressed voices had re-emerged with vigor.

On a wider scale, the ‘unforgetting’ of this history also empowered people across the nation to let the scales fall from their eyes, and to indirectly realize how while ignorance was bliss, the bliss often came at the expense of others’, or even one’s own, freedom. The idea of ‘unforgetting’ is central to my motivation in writing my thesis on this topic. Thongchai Winichakul, historian and survivor of the 1976 atrocity, has been an advocate of ‘unforgetting’ Thai history, and discusses this concept extensively in his work. To him, ‘unforgetting’ is not just the straightforward process through which memories are retrieved from a state of being ‘forgotten.’ He emphasizes that removing memories from their abandoned state does not necessarily mean that the memory was ever completely erased from history.⁷ He also acknowledges, however, that ‘unforgetting’ will not necessarily uncover everything.

Thongchai’s nuanced definition accurately captures the process of reviving the memory of the Thammasat Massacre; though the student activists encouraged the ‘unforgetting’ of this history on a nation-wide scale, not all the details were retrieved, and many of the details were likely not retrievable. Nevertheless, the very process of ‘unforgetting’ has made an impact on Thai activism, even if parts of the story have been lost forever to the past, because it has helped explain a lot of previously unexplainable things and helped validate a lot of feelings that some

⁷ Thongchai Winichakul, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvwvr2pb>. 17.

Thais have not had the vocabulary, power, or means to express. Though this thesis is not exclusively about the October 6th event, it does aim to contribute to the ‘unforgetting’ process. This thesis will reach deep into Thai 20th century history, discussing some key events like the Thammasat Massacre in depth, while also considering the *longue durée* lens.

My thesis aims, along the way, to demonstrate the flaws of the ‘official story’ upheld by the Thai elite. Andrew MacGregor Marshall’s description of the story notes how the official narrative wants the Thai people to believe that upon the establishment of Thailand’s ‘constitutional monarchical’ system in 1932 after the Siamese Revolution, the monarchy no longer intervened directly in politics, and willingly forfeited absolutism forever. Chapter 1, focusing on 1932 to 1957, will demonstrate how even though the monarchy took a relatively dormant position after the Revolution, many events suggest that the monarchy was reluctant to lose its political power, and made attempts to reclaim it. Chapter 1 is also an exposition of some important characters to the overall story, including that of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, also known as Rama IX or ‘the Great.’ It was Bhumibol who would form the center of ‘the monarchy’ for the scope of this story.

Marshall notes that the mainstream narrative also assumes that the monarchy is ‘above politics,’ and intervenes ‘reluctantly’ during times where the nation is under threat. Chapters 2 and 3 will challenge these ideas. Chapter 2, with the scope of 1957 to 1973, will focus on the administration of military dictator Sarit Thanarat and how he played a key role in helping the monarchy build its influence back up. It will also demonstrate how Sarit’s aggrandization of the monarchy was complemented by the advent of the Cold War and the US’ intervention in Thai affairs, creating a prime environment for the monarchy to work to win over hearts and minds.

Though at this point, the monarchy would not yet assert much direct political power, Sarit putting the monarchy on a pedestal and tirelessly working to build up its image set a precedent for what was to come.

Chapter 3, focusing on 1973 to 1988, will show how once the monarchy started to feel more confident with its revived levels of influence, it experimented more with asserting direct political power. In 1973, the monarchy's direct intervention in the October 14th political uprising benefited its image. However, when global circumstances changed in 1976, leading the monarchy to react to the protests of 1976 in a very different way to how it did regarding the 1973 situation, its image suffered greatly. I argue that this was a sort of wake-up-call for the monarchy, causing it to realize its need for a contingency plan in the face of popular backlash. This chapter will therefore describe how under the Prem Tinsulanonda administration, the monarchy's strategy was to surround itself with a 'network' of politicians, powerful businesspeople, and other bureaucrats, in order to exert political power in a more undercover way, distributing the burden of the crown among Thai elites. The monarchy thus became able to be directly politically active through its 'network,' while still being able to claim that it was 'above' politics.

This paper is about more than just the royals - it is about the 'monarchy' as a political institution, a symbol of Thai normativity, and a more abstract concept that tells us about the behavior of Thai society. By focusing on 'the monarchy' rather than just 'the royals' or 'the royal family,' I aim to show how the issue of the monarchy is institutional. When describing Thailand in the early 20th century and prior, perhaps the terms 'royal family' and 'the monarchy' can be used interchangeably. By the end of the 20th century, however, though the 'royal family'

was still the symbolic ‘heart’ of the ‘monarchy’, ‘the monarchy’ had become much more complex and wide-reaching. In demonstrating this change over time, I aim to show the development of the façade of the monarchy being a cultural-figurehead institution that is apparently supra-political and supernatural.

Though the royal family will play a large role in my discussion, my chapters will also demonstrate how non-royal people and institutions played a crucial role in the monarchy’s survival, and that as part of this process, these non-royal entities became interwoven with the monarchy in complex ways. The official narrative wants Thais to believe in the invincibility and omnipotence of the monarchy so that it will not challenge it. It wants Thais to believe that the monarchy has ultimate power to give and take away. All that has happened to the Thai monarchy over the past century, however, says otherwise. In post-1932 Thai society, the monarchy has leaned on others - on ‘mortals’ - for its survival.

It must be noted that disproving the Thai ‘official narrative’ is nothing new. Many scholars and activists have attacked different parts of the ‘official narrative’ from different angles. However, a lot of these narratives, often written by non-Thais, are not accessible to most people within the Thai jurisdiction, due to censorship and other barriers. I aim to contribute my unique perspective that I personally feel is important as a Thai person who has lived both inside and outside of the Thai jurisdiction, that has allowed me to ‘unlearn’ the Thai mainstream narrative and thus helped me see the Thai nation for more of what it truly is. My narrative was written with Thais in mind, and most of all, Thais who have only been taught histories that were designed to disempower them and keep them ignorant or afraid.

Like Tattep, I was also around the age of nine when I witnessed my first coup in 2006, which ousted Thaksin Shinawatra, the billionaire businessman-turned-Prime-Minister whose widespread appeal and influence among the Thai Left and millions of rural workers from the Thai 'peripheries' threatened members of the Network Monarchy.⁸ I watched the smear campaign against Thaksin happen in real time on television and radio, and witnessed oceans of 'red' and 'yellow' shirt demonstrators flood the streets of Bangkok in alternation every few weeks. I listened as elders complained about the government in coded language when in public places, walking on eggshells with regard to the topic of the monarchy's participation in politics. Though many adults might argue that politics is not an issue for young people to be concerned about, the topic of the monarchy was certainly a topic that Thai children had to engage in as part of their education, participation in national rituals, and the sheer act of existing in Thailand. Assuming that the issue of the Thai monarchy is indeed a political one, contrary to the state-perpetuated narrative, this means that children ended up participating in politics from a young age anyway, determined by the way their parents, teachers, and other role models taught them about the monarchy.

Though a young child is unlikely to understand electoral politics, elders wove filial piety logic into their teachings about loyalism to the crown. To me and to many other children my age at the time, this worked as our early introduction to loyalism to the King and to the state. For example, the elders around me painted Thaksin and the 'red shirts' as not only the enemies of the nation, but the enemy of our king, *our father*. Even if I did not understand Thaksin's policies, or

⁸ Laignee Barron, "'People Have Been Really Angry.' The Political Journey of a Young Activist in Thailand's Democracy Struggle," *Time*, December 16, 2020. <https://time.com/5919207/tattep-ruangprapaikitserec-thailand-democracy/>.

the political structure of the Thai nation, I was taught that the King needed to be protected; if Thaksin was threatening the King, of course he was the enemy. For myself and many other Thais raised under this national order, we were taught to choose loyalty to the King and state, sometimes even before we knew what these institutions represented. This not only includes my generation, but every generation since the monarchy started reasserting its cultural and political influence.

I have provided these personal anecdotes to demonstrate how deep monarchism runs in the veins of the Thai ‘geobody,’ and to provide an example of how the complexification of the Thai monarchical institution over the course of the 20th century has affected the way Thais experience life in the present day.⁹ My elders were not of royal blood or even obviously connected to the monarchy in any way; yet, for some reason, they and many others like them were so staunchly loyal and protective of the institution. This phenomenon did not just come out of nowhere. Over the course of the 20th century, and parts of the early 21st, the monarchy became more ‘accessible’ and ‘edible.’ As it developed more parasocial connections with the Thai masses, more people began to feel a personal responsibility for the monarchy’s survival. Especially in the latter half of the 20th century, the monarchy not only became part of Thai political life, but also Thai daily life, culture and national identity.

My angle with this thesis, inspired by Thongchai’s idea of ‘unforgetting,’ is one of shedding light on historical patterns regarding the Thai monarchy’s existence. My overall argument is that Thailand’s national consciousness has been shaped by propaganda and restriction of people’s freedoms, all with the issue of the monarchy at its center, for as long as the

⁹ The term ‘geobody’ was coined by Thongchai Winichakul and is crucial to the ar *Siam Mapped* (1994).

current Thai ‘geobody’ can remember, affecting life in Thailand to this day. In addition, because of Thailand’s political instability, and the propaganda work of ‘political strongmen’ like Sarit and Prem, a collective ‘memory’ of what ‘actually’ happened is very difficult to maintain. As this has been the case, it is exceptionally difficult for Thai people to appreciate and accept their history in its entirety, and therefore difficult for Thais to feel agency over their own futures.

Though I acknowledge that this thesis’s academic nature inherently makes it inaccessible to many, if this kind of narrative that demonstrates the ‘bigger picture’ were to eventually become more easily accessible to the Thai masses, it could perhaps empower more people to challenge the ‘official story,’ and bridge the gap between polarized factions of Thai opinion. This narrative was not available to me while growing up in Thailand, and had I not left the jurisdiction, perhaps I would be a very different person. Having access to previously-inaccessible information is a privilege that has helped me fill in many gaps in the Thai ‘story,’ and while I can still be critical, has allowed me to view every Thai perspective as valid products of history, rather than entirely ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect.’ As a result, I have been able to begin to make peace with contradictory, confusing, and disturbing feelings I have had about my nation. I personally believe every Thai person deserves the same privilege. Nevertheless, the Thai state continues to withhold this peace, by censoring the people’s access to their history and freedom of expression, likely out of fear of what would happen if these things were allowed. More rigidity in statecraft is often a symptom of insecurity, dishonesty, and anxiety. Knowing the history of how intertwined monarchism became with the elite over the course of the 20th century, this rigidity makes sense. The more ‘unforgetting’ Thais perform, the more explaining their elites will have to do.

As Tattap mentioned in the *Reuters* interview, “there has to be dialogue, not harassment.”¹⁰ I believe that by ‘unforgetting’ and showcasing the ‘bigger picture’ of Thai history, people might feel less compelled to harass, as learning history and looking at the systemic nature of human issues fosters understanding. Then, perhaps, the dialogue between contrasting camps of opinion might be of better quality.

CHAPTER 1: ‘THE END’ OF ABSOLUTISM, 1932-1957

THE 1930s: THE SIAMESE REVOLUTION (1932) AND EARLY EXAMPLES OF MONARCHICAL ATTEMPTS TO REASSERT POWER

In June of 1932, the Siamese Revolution was carried out by a group of pro-constitutionalists, harshly accusing the monarchy for abusing its power and treating the people ‘like slaves,’ demanding that Thailand become a constitutional monarchy. ‘Official’ narratives claim that King Prajadhipok apparently agreed to this willingly, and allowed the promulgation of a constitution that heeded the revolutionaries’ requests shortly after the Revolution.¹¹ The initial charter wanted to strip the King of many of his absolutist powers, including his rights to approve death sentences.¹² What is often omitted from this narrative is how in December of that same year, in response to Prajadhipok’s protests against the charter, the ‘permanent’ constitution was finalized, and many of the more radical parts of the June charter were reversed. Though still taking into account the initial charter’s points and giving the illusion that the King’s powers had

¹⁰ Kuhakan and Tostevin. “The monarchy is god.”

¹¹ Frederico Ferrara, “The Legend of King Prajadhipok: Tall Tales and Stubborn Facts on the Seventh Reign in Siam,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2012): 4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41490294>.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

been stripped, the new, ‘real’ constitution ensured that the King’s position was protected in the Constitution as “sacred and inviolable.”¹³ Thus, the finalized constitution ensured that the monarchy’s prestige remained.¹⁴ With this prestige, the extent to which the monarchy was actually disempowered was, and continues to be, ambiguous. The monarchy also continued to express its discontent with the diminishment of power, exhibited by events such as the 1933 Boworadet Rebellion, a monarchist counter-revolution that attempted to completely reverse the effects of the Siamese Revolution. Though this rebellion failed, it exemplified the beginning of the monarchy’s long journey of trying to reclaim its power. Nevertheless, as the story has been told by mainstream nationalist narratives, Thailand was, from this moment onward, a constitutional democracy, and at least for now, various emerging political forces ensured that the monarchy stayed out of politics where possible.

The political force that came to dominate during the 1932 and 1957 period was a growing clique of military-affiliated politicians, many of whom were involved in the 1932 Revolution. These leaders would successfully keep the monarchy out of reasserting their political power for over a decade. On one hand, this was in line with the spirit of the Revolution. On the other hand, these politicians behaved in ways that were hardly in line with the constitutional rights they claimed to have won for the nation. For example, the military government clique would be responsible for various coups, interfering with the ‘democratic’ process. Orathai Kokpol writes:

¹³ รัฐธรรมนูญฉบับแรกแห่งราชอาณาจักรสยาม (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand) B.E. 2475 (1932).; "รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรสยาม พ.ศ. 2475 (Constitution of the Kingdom of Siam 1932)," Legislative Institutional Repository of Thailand. Accessed January 10, 2023. <https://dl.parliament.go.th/handle/20.500.13072/290453>.

¹⁴ Saad M. Hashmi, “1932 Revolution in Thailand.” *India Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1962): 254–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45068982>.

“Out of 19 elections [between 1933 when the first ‘democratic’ election was held, and 1996 before the new 1997 constitution was passed], only those in 1946, 1975, 1976, September 1992, 1995 and 1996 were held in a democratic environment with the expectation of political changes to follow. The others were held either under military rule or under a semi-democratic regime, and were a show to provide a façade of legitimacy for military or military-dominated governments.”¹⁵

This information reveals that, out of all the administrations this chapter will mention, Pridi Banomyong’s administration was the only one that was elected under a truly ‘democratic environment,’ and not while Thailand was under some kind of non-democratic political regime. Unfortunately for Pridi, after hardly five months in office, Pridi Banomyong was forced to resign, accused of involvement in the death of 20-year-old King Ananda Mahidol, Rama VIII, for whom Pridi had served as regent while Ananda was still living in Switzerland during WWII. Among his accusers were Democrats, royalists and monarchists, members of the general population, and military politicians alike.¹⁶ This accusation would form one of the key points of the 1947 Coup Group’s manifesto, and used to justify why the Coup was necessary.¹⁷ Further, even during a time remembered for the military’s dominance over politics, it is interesting to see how the issue of the monarchy was very important for Thai politics, even if the monarchy was apparently, at this time, politically powerless. This chapter will elaborate on the above to

¹⁵ Orathai Kokpol, “Electoral Politics in Thailand,” In *Electoral Politics in Southeast & East Asia*, ed. Aurel Croissant, Gabriele Bruns, and Marel John (Singapore: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2002), 280.

¹⁶ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Love and Death of King Ananda Mahidol* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 57-58, 64-66, 127.

¹⁷ Thak Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 29.

illustrate the roles of the military and monarchy in the early post-1932 years, and the relationship between the two entities.

1940s: POSTWAR SYMPTOMS OF UNREST, AND PRECEDENTS FOR A COUP

The circumstances in late 1940s Thailand, compounded with what is expected from any small, 'Third World' nation after the Second World War, were opportune for a Coup to occur. Prime Minister Plaek 'Phibun' Phibunsongkhram, who was seen as responsible for Thailand's wartime involvement with the Axis powers, was overthrown and replaced by Khuang Aphaiwong. Some major factors contributing to this were: 1) the impact of the war on Thai society, including issues of inflation, recurring rice shortage and famine, foreign limitations on Thai trade, and increase in crime rates correlated with the postwar experience; 2) government instability, inefficiency, and corruption; 3) Thailand's its forfeiting of its Southeast Asian wartime territorial gains in return for its acceptance into the United Nations after the end of the War; 4) the question of Pridi's influence; and 5) the mystery surrounding the death of King Ananda Mahidol and the accession of King Bhumibol Adulyadej.¹⁸ This section will elaborate on the latter two factors, as they are most relevant here, to explain how the 1947 coup succeeded, and set up context for the coup of 1948.

After WWII, Thais across the nation suffered from post war socioeconomic issues, psychological implications, and grappling with 'peacetime' after years of traumatic events.¹⁹ Thak Chaloemtiarana argues that the rice shortage and decline of the Thai baht were the two

¹⁸ Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, 20-29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

most problematic issues for the postwar Khuang and Pridi governments, as they exacerbated the already-sensitive postwar atmosphere. Thai rice supplies were already under extreme pressure in the mid-to-late-1940s due to multiple periods of flooding, heavy Japanese rice demand while Thailand was under Japanese occupation, and the postwar-treaty-enforced demand of 1,500,000 free tons of Thai rice for Britain, expected within a two-year time period.²⁰ Ineffective Thai governmental regulation intensified the issue. The Thai government's choice to single-handedly manage rice distribution, taking away agency from the people, led to a lot of political and economic corruption over the issue of rice. People, especially those living in marginalized provinces, starved and suffered, able neither to grow nor afford to eat the nation's staple crop. Further, rice prices inflated, and the Thai baht became devalued. The government was forced to print more money to pay off wartime loans to Japan, and the country also suffered from Britain's postwar trade penalties, further hurting Thai economy. These two factors induced widespread frustration among Thais across the country.

Additionally, many troops returning from war felt that their needs were being neglected as they struggled to reintegrate into Thai society after their traumatic wartime experiences. This, compounded with the other implications mentioned above, led to a rise in *Sua* (bandit) violence, piracy, and general petty crimes, particularly in politically marginalized areas of Thailand, such as the Southern region. The violence was particularly concerning because the troops had access to lethal war-grade weapons. The frustrated discharged troops, affiliated by nature to the military, blamed the civilian governments led by Pridi and his allies for the nation's problems.

Further, the mysterious death of King Ananda Mahidol added to the people's anxieties. If

²⁰ Ibid, 21.

the government could not even ensure the safety of the nation's most esteemed institutions, how was it to ensure the safety of the nation as a whole?

1946: COUP GROUP MOTIVES FOR MISINFORMATION REGARDING KING

ANANDA'S DEATH

Before proceeding, we should first consider how the 1947 'Coup Group' would later justify their coup, as this provides us background for the Coup Group's motivations, and therefore behind their treatment of the discourse around Ananda's death. It is also a prime example of how even in the early days after the 1932 Revolution, Thai non-royal politicians drew on the concepts of 'Nation,' 'Religion,' and in particular, 'King,' as part of their political propaganda. The following are some points in the 1947 Coup Group's manifesto:

- “2. The coup that overthrew the government of Luang Thamrong will form a new government that will respect the principles of Nation, Religion, and King...
3. The coup was conducted to uphold the honor of the army, which has been unjustly treated.
5. The coup will make it possible to clear up the assassination plot against the king and to arrest those responsible.
6. The coup will rid the country once and for all of the vestiges of communism and insure that the nation will cherish the Buddhist religion forever.”²¹

The Coup Group explicitly targets the Pridi-allied Prime Minister Thamrong and his

²¹ Chaloeontiarana, 29.

administration, accusing them of upholding ‘the vestiges of communism,’ and insinuating that they were to blame for the death of King Ananda Mahidol.²² This manifesto makes clear who the Coup Group claimed to be acting in the protection of, and who they wanted to use as scapegoats for the nation’s problems.

On June 9th, 1946, not long after the young king had just returned to Thailand from his wartime home of Switzerland, Ananda Mahidol was pronounced dead, after being found lying in his bedchamber with a gunshot wound to his head at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. There was no time for processing, though. The evening of the day of Ananda’s murder, under the encouragement of Pridi Banomyong, succession was hurried along, with Bhumibol, Ananda’s younger brother, immediately named as the new King of Thailand. The details of the incident were unclear back then, and are still unclear today. Theories about Ananda’s death vary vastly within the categories of suicide or homicide, accidental or intentional.²³ Pavin Chachavalpongpun argues in his book, *Love and Death of King Ananda Mahidol*, “evidence, what there was of it, was destroyed or hidden long ago,” and acknowledges that we must “accept that the case of Ananda’s death will remain unsolved, unless hitherto unseen evidence surfaces in the future.”²⁴ It continues to be a mysterious and taboo topic in Thai society, and was heavily politicized in the 1940s.

Though it is a valid argument that perhaps some truthful narratives and details have been skewed over time due to genuine human error, historical evidence strongly suggests that indeed,

²² It is interesting how even before communism was seen as a significant threat to Thailand or even Southeast Asia, Thai military politicians were othering ‘communists’ in their rhetoric, using it in conjunction with the spirit of protecting the monarchy.

²³ Chachavalpongpun, 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

politics destroyed any chance of justice being served, neither for King Ananda, nor for others who were wronged as a result of how his death was handled. As Pavin writes, though there is not much that can be done now, the ordeal could have potentially been “less intricate” of an issue, had the investigation been “primarily based upon logic and reasoning, not politics.”²⁵

1946: MONARCHICAL MOTIVES FOR MISINFORMATION REGARDING KING ANANDA’S DEATH

As already mentioned, the 1932 Revolution removed absolute monarchy. Though, as mentioned, the monarchy was defined by the constitution as an inviolable, untouchable institution, members of the monarchy still felt vulnerable because 1932 posed stark evidence that there were people who wanted to, and would, try to disempower them. Additionally, King Prajadhipok did not name a successor after abdicating in 1932, was the youngest child in his line, and had no son of his own, causing uncertainty regarding succession and the continuation of royal power. However, Prajadhipok did imply upon his exit that the then-ten-year-old Ananda Mahidol was at the top of his list of preferred successors, even though he did not confirm this. Pavin argues that Ananda was likely seen as the perfect King for this era, who would ensure the Chakri dynasty’s survival in a ‘post-royal absolutism era,’ meaning that the monarchy felt like he would be a good ‘constitutional monarch,’ unthreatening to the constitutionalists, yet still someone with royal blood who would continue the tradition of succession and thus safeguard the monarchical institution.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Kings, Country, and Constitutions: Thailand’s political development, 1932-2000* (London: Routledge, 2003), 128.

Many reasons contributed to the view that Ananda was an ideal figurehead. He was young, and thus likely seen as an unthreatening individual, unlike his predecessors associated with the old order. He was also Western-educated and thus more easily marketable to the global community. Additionally, being the son of a ‘commoner’ and a Prince, he was the embodiment of the ‘compromise’ that the Thai state has long upheld as an intrinsically Thai value.²⁷ These factors, along with Ananda’s poor physical health, caused the monarchy to invest a lot of energy into protecting him at all costs. This likely made Ananda’s death all the more devastating for his family, as well as for the monarchical institution as a whole, because after finally feeling solace in finding a ‘safe’ new monarch, the killing of Ananda signaled clearly that threats to the monarchy were not yet over.

This was also compounded by the monarchy’s need to keep up appearances and preserve its dignity, which it was already struggling to do in the post-1932 era. Pavin remarks that Ananda was the first, and so far only, king whose reign ended due to a tragic, premature death.²⁸ In addition to the conflicting narratives being spread by the palace, the government, the media, and other parties, speculation was ubiquitous across Thai society, which was expected, given the lack of transparency and confusion around the case. Some of the speculated theories were highly unacceptable and damaging to the monarchy’s narrative, which they wanted to keep pristine and untouchable.

²⁷ Early roots of this value lie particularly in Thai monarchical history, based on the attitudes many Thai kings of the past had regarding foreign policy and the question of sovereignty. A key example of this is how to this day, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) of Thailand is glorified in state narratives as the great king who ‘saved’ Thailand from being colonized by a Western power, because he chose to concede land to the Westerners, allow the Westerners extraterritorial rights in the Kingdom, and adopt ‘modernizing’ policies so that the West would leave Thailand (then Siam) alone. ‘Compromise’ was thus promoted by the Thai state as something that is ‘very Thai,’ exemplified by its heroic, intelligent King Rama V.

²⁸ Chachavalpongpun, 51.

The possibility that Ananda committed suicide on purpose, for example, was humiliating for the monarchy. The first official announcement put out by the Bureau of the Royal Household, that ended up becoming the accepted, mainstream narrative, stated that Ananda killed himself by accident. Though tragic, this would not have been as scandalous as him committing suicide with a motive. Thai society has a particularly negative stigma against suicide, with roots in religious and historical tradition. According to an ethnographic study by W. Naiyapatana, P. Burnard and G. Lloyd surrounding mental illness and health in Thailand, since before the ascension of King Chulalongkorn, mental health issues were treated as the fault of evil spiritual entities and often treated with religious rituals and/or ostracization, shame, and physical harm to the supposed host.²⁹ Though advancements were made in the world of psychology, stigmatization and the tradition of shame surrounding suicide continues to persist in Thai society. For a king in particular, committing suicide would have been completely unacceptable, and would have likely been viewed with judgment by members of society. Further, since the monarch has long been treated like a superhuman, deity or deity-adjacent entity whose essence exists above that of ‘mortals,’ the idea that the king was internally troubled was humanizing. Humanization was and is detrimental to the way the Thai monarchy ran, because it promoted the idea that the royal family is inherently superior to the people.

Further, some of those who speculated that king had committed suicide on purpose suggested that his reasoning was somehow tied to his alleged love affair with Marileine Ferrari, a

²⁹ P. Burnard, W. Naiyapatana, and G. Lloyd, “Views of mental illness and mental health care in Thailand: A report of an ethnographic study,” *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 13, no. 6 (2006): 742–749. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17087678/>.

non-Thai woman he met in during his time receiving his education in Switzerland.³⁰ This story, though now brought to light in a very humanizing way by Pavin in his book on Ananda, was kept very quiet during Ananda's reign and for a long time afterward, because it was yet another thing that the monarchy felt would tarnish its pristine image. According to Pavin, throughout his courtship with Marileine, the Princess Mother constantly warned Ananda about "his duty towards his people who would not accept his marriage with a Westerner."³¹ Not only would a love affair between King Ananda and a non-Thai 'commoner' be seen by conservatives as unacceptable, it would have also been an obstacle for the monarchy's maintenance of the Chakri bloodline, which was, so far, 'pure' and free of 'foreigner' blood. Miscegenation would have called into question state-perpetuated nationalist myths, such as the myth of Thailand's freedom of Western colonial interests. This was likely also related to insecurities surrounding Western imperialists and other 'foreigners' that were prevalent in the post-WWII era.

Nevertheless, King Ananda committing suicide was still just an unconfirmed possibility. Narratives also emerged that the King was killed on purpose. The question of who killed Ananda was heavily politicized. Key figures who have at some point been accused, whether or not there was any conclusive evidence to accuse them, include: 1) the King's pages, Busaya and Chit, as well as their commander, Pridi-ally Chaliew; 2) Pridi Banomyong and his allies; 3) foreign spies, in particular, Japanese spy Masanobu Tsuji; and 4) anyone else who was present near the palace at the fateful time, including members of the royal family and their servants. We know that in the end, Chaliew, Busaya, and Chit were the ones who took the fall so that the Thai establishment

³⁰ Chachavalpongpun, x.

³¹ Ibid., xii.

could claim that ‘justice’ was served.

While the individuals named above were ruthlessly antagonized in the media and in court, discussions regarding the potential involvement of certain *other* figures were heavily suppressed. Though there is very little available ‘concrete evidence’ implicating some of these other figures, it is perhaps the lack thereof that speaks volumes. The most controversial accusations of all were those against Ananda’s brother, Bhumibol, who was next in line for the throne. This was the same Bhumibol who would reign over Thailand for over 70 years, known for being a pacifist and role model for good Buddhist kingship, and the only Chakri King aside from Chulalongkorn to be given the title of *maharaj* (‘The Great’) to honor his extraordinary contributions to Thai society and culture. The prevailing narrative for this accusation is that Ananda was shot by accident while the two brothers were playfully toying with the gun.³² It suggests there was no malicious intent, though regardless of intent, this narrative was unacceptable for the monarchy’s image.³³ Though, indeed, another unconfirmed accusation, the energy put into silencing and creating a taboo surrounding this particular narrative, especially relative to the uproar around other narratives, is suspect. Pavin outlines some pieces of information that demonstrate the possibility of this, which also provide us with insight into ways in which Thai elites have engaged in damage control - something that will continue to be used throughout the 20th century.

One source of evidence is the information from various doctors’ reports about the incident.³⁴ Dr. Keith Simpson, who contributed to the forensic investigation, wrote in his report

³² Chachavalpongpun, 54.

³³ Ibid., 54.

³⁴ Chachavalpongpun, 61.

that the “evidence was very strong” for the possibility of murder, and that he “thought [Ananda] had almost certainly been shot while dozing,” likely because “the muzzle of the pistol had evidently been close to but not against the skin, giving the King no warning or any chance to try to protect himself.”³⁵ Simpson also suggests evidence for a cover up; he recounts how he was paid for his services “at night, in cash, carefully counted under a Cromwell Road lamp post near the Embassy—by arrangement,” and Simpson never found out why he was paid in such a peculiar manner.³⁶ If there really were such a scarcity of evidence and an uncertainty regarding the truth, it seems unlikely that the Thai authorities would lose any opportunity to flaunt ‘concrete’ analysis from a medical professional, thus making this covert behavior more questionable.

Various individuals within the monarchy’s circle also contributed incriminating comments. British Lord Louis Mountbatten reportedly warned King George VI to not welcome Bhumibol to Buckingham Palace for a visit because of the allegations, and the King allegedly said with regard to the situation that “Buckingham Palace does not host murderers.”³⁷ Further, below is an excerpt from the now-declassified US Embassy memorandum of a 1948 conversation between Prime Minister Luang Thamrong and US ambassador to Thailand, Edwin Stanton:

"[Thamrong] said speaking quite confidentially the evidence which was accumulated while he was Prime Minister tended to implicate the present young King, but that

³⁵ Keith Simpson, *Forty Years of Murder: An Autobiography* (London: Harper Collins, 1978), 144.

³⁶ Chachavalpongpun, 62.

³⁷ Bruce Palling, “King Bhumibol Adulyadej Obituary,” *The Guardian*, October 13, 2016. Accessed January 4, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/13/king-bhumibol-adulyadej-obituary>.

[Thamrong] would never have dared to hint any official action that such was the case. He asserted that [Pridi] had found himself in a similar predicament and scoffed at the idea that Pridi might have been implicated in any way. I asked him what he thought the consequences might be if it should be revealed that His Majesty is in fact involved. He said he presumed that the present King would abdicate and thought that this development would be followed by a period of confusion and wild intrigue. He said that Prince Chumphot was next in line, but because Chumphot and his wife were unpopular it was doubtful...next in line to Prince Chumphot was Prince Phanuphan, who he said was equally unpopular. He said that this question of personalities complicated the situation and was most unfortunate..."³⁸

Thamrong and Stanton both acknowledge how in Thailand, there were consequences for even ‘daring to hint’ at something that showed the monarchy in a negative light. Thamrong also seems to make clear that in his opinion, Pridi, and therefore likely all the others who were convicted for being connected to Pridi, were innocent. Additionally, this conversation also highlights a crucial issue to keep in mind in order for us to understand how Thai politics functions - the issue of personalization. There is often the assumption that in a ‘constitutional monarchy,’ the character and virtue of the monarch should not matter, because ultimately, the government is meant to represent the people’s politics. However, inferring from Thamrong’s comments regarding Chumphot and Phanuphan, this was not the case for Thailand at the time. Personalization was an essential element of the post-1932 Thai monarchy; if the royal figurehead

³⁸ American Embassy Bangkok, "Confidential Memorandum of Discussion between Prime Minister Luang Thamrong and Ambassador Edwin F. Stanton, 31 March 1948," *Political Prisoners in Thailand Blog*, 1 March 2013. <https://thaipoliticalprisoners.wordpress.com/2013/03/01/cable-on-the-death-of-king-ananda/>.

were to be unpopular, many felt like the monarchy would be unable to survive. It will be interesting to keep this point in mind while considering the rest of this history, especially considering the role Bhumibol's image and character would come to play in Thai politics.

LATE 1940s: THE MISINFORMATION

Throughout the late 1940s and intensifying in the early 1950s, investigations continued, with the final Supreme Court Judgement ruled on October 12th, 1954, convicting pages Busaya 'Butr' Pattamasarin, Chit Singhaseni, and their Pridi-ally commander Chaliew Pathumrot for regicide. On February 17th, 1955, the three men's petitions for innocence were rejected directly by King Bhumibol, and the men were executed by firing squad on February 18th.³⁹ Included below are some excerpts from the 1954 Thai Supreme Court case verdict, which took place on October 12th of that year, that are of particular intrigue:

“All 3 defendants denied allegations against them, and claimed that the only reason why these defendants were accused was because certain people wanted to take advantage of the royal death as part of their political ‘game’ in order to destroy other people, [the ‘other people’] included Pridi Banomyong, Lt. Col. Watcharachai Chaisithiwet, Chaliew Pathumrot, [who] threw Chit and Butr under the bus...”⁴⁰

³⁹ Anonymous, “Has Rama X revived Thailand's death penalty?,” *New Mandala*, June 22, 2018. <https://www.newmandala.org/rama-x-revived-thailands-death-penalty/>; Chachavalpongpun, 57.

⁴⁰ คำพิพากษาศาลอุทธรณ์ ศาลฎีกา พร้อมด้วยคำแถลงของพนักงานอัยการ โจทก์ ความอาญา คดีประทุษร้ายต่อพระองค์พระมหากษัตริย์รัชกาลที่ 8, 2498 (*Judgment of the Court of Appeal, Supreme Court, together with the statement of the prosecutor, the plaintiff, the criminal case against King Rama VIII, 1955*), (Phra Nakhon: Chairit Publishing House, 1955), [https://digital.library.tu.ac.th/tu_dc/frontend/Info/item/dc:47999#](https://digital.library.tu.ac.th/tu_dc/frontend/Info/item/dc:47999#.). 624.

Though this is stated clearly in the court case's concluding remarks, a case vetted and contributed to by the highest of judges, officials, political and legal experts, and criminologists in the country, its possibility is completely disregarded, with the ruling proceeding to convict Chit and Butr. This denial is consistent with Pavin's analysis, and is consistent with the historical climate of this time period.

Further, disproportionate attention is paid throughout the investigation record to incriminate Chaliew, Chit, Butr, and political figures such as Pridi:

“ The plaintiff...asserted that Chaliew lacked respect for His Majesty the King, for example, sending His Majesty's car for others to use...presenting official documents in an unprofessional manner...kissing a female office worker in front of the Phra Borom Phiman Throne Hall...these are insults to royal etiquette, and to the King.”⁴¹

The court case is full of similar ad hominem attacks of the three accused men, particularly Chaliew, and reasoning that elaborates extensively about how these men are connected to Pridi. Though the report also contains alleged 'facts' such as dates, times, and testimonies, it is reasonable to remain skeptical overall regarding anything being published by the Thai establishment during this time. The court case *itself* contributed to the 'political game,' creating a narrative where all these men, associated with Pridi, were obviously in the wrong because of their apparent disrespect for the King.

Though not speaking for all Thais, I would argue that if this kind of history were to be more openly taught about and discussed, it would cause many to question a lot about what they

⁴¹ Ibid., 624.

know not only about Thailand and the cult of the monarchy, but also regarding ‘Thainess’ itself and the values the nation claims to uphold. The publishing of Pavin’s book in 2021, on a topic historically situated in the late 1940s, signifies a move in the direction of more openness regarding Thai history.

“PRIDI KILLED THE KING”

We will now return to the implications of the King’s death on the political turmoil. Pridi was already on thin ice with the monarchists because of his central involvement in the 1932 Siamese Revolution, and the suppression of the 1933 Boworadet Rebellion, earning him an anti-monarchist reputation. Thak Chaloemtiarana has written that Pridi was portrayed as “antiroyalist and even communistic in his ideology,” for the aforementioned reasons, as well as his policies, which conservatives and monarchists considered to be too left-leaning.⁴² Conservatives, monarchists, and others with ‘right-wing’ ideology expressed resistance against Pridi, and worked to cause his downfall. However, perhaps the most grave of his miscalculations that was detrimental to his image was how hastily he urged the accession of Bhumibol to the throne after Ananda’s death, and how mysteriously he treated the overall incident. Pridi had a lot working against him at this time.

A justification and reasonable assumption for why Pridi proceeded in the way he did, despite him likely knowing about all the public backlash against him, is *because* of the animosity that monarchists showed towards him. Perhaps Pridi believed that, even if his work would be perceived as overcompensating, acting certain and urgent about monarchical succession would

⁴² Chaloemtiarana, 32.

help tame his enemies' accusations that he was an anti-monarchist.⁴³ Furthermore, regardless of whether he was part of the crime or not, Pridi was suspiciously secretive about what he knew. It must be remembered that despite being seen as an anti-monarchist, Pridi had been Ananda's regent for around four years. Thus, he worked in very close proximity with the monarchy, and was one of the first responders to the incident, making it difficult not to infer that he likely knew more than he was admitting to knowing.

Though Pridi's choices regarding the succession were approved by members of the government politicians, many would argue that Pridi's rush with regard to the succession issue, and his hasty statements about the reasons for Ananda's death, especially without even time for an investigation, were some of his biggest mistakes.⁴⁴ By trying to compensate for one aspect of his unpopularity - the view that he was anti-monarchist - Pridi created yet another, very incriminating reason for monarchists to dislike him.

For the rest of his career, Pridi dealt with public threats to his life and career because of this ordeal. For example, the *Prachatipat* (Democrat) Party - a party historically known for its monarchist-leaning, conservative politics - sent representatives to shout anti-Pridi slogans such as "Pridi killed the king" in public spaces, injecting their finger-pointing political agenda into the public sphere.⁴⁵ This is another example of how much the Thai monarchy has been used as a political weapon. Since the Thai establishment has long encouraged public loyalty and reverence for the monarchy, public propaganda like this would have been effective because this idea that

⁴³ Chachavalpongpun, 57.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Pridi Banomyong, *Pridi by Pridi: Selected Writings on Life, Politics and Economy* (Chiangmai: Silkwork Books, 2000), 218.

‘Pridi killed the king’ would have inevitably elicited an emotional reaction amongst many Thais, and had an effect on swaying public opinion.

DECADES OF DENIAL

Investigations, investigative literature, and analytical works of all sorts that pertain to the monarchy were censored by Thai law throughout the 20th century, and many continue to be. Some books that are still banned in Thailand today regarding this topic include Rayne Kruger’s 1964 book *The Devil’s Discus: An Inquiry into the Death of Ananda, King of Siam*, as well as Paul Handley’s 2006 book *The King Never Smiles*. Giles Ungpakorn’s 2007 book *A Coup for the Rich* was also banned from various bookstores and libraries in Thailand just for citing Handley’s book as a source. This is all a testament to my earlier comments regarding how much of a profound societal impact an ‘unforgetting’ of this history would have on the Thai people. The still-banned status of these books suggests that to date, the Thai state still relies on carefully curated myths about the Thai monarchy in order to function.

1947: A COUP

As illustrated above, Thailand had become very unstable in the post-WWII era. The Coup Group seized their opportunity in 1947 to launch their coup, marking a watershed event in Thailand’s history that consolidated the military’s place in the political order. On November 8th and 9th, 1947, the ‘Coup Group’ consisting of various influential men of the Thai armed forces launched a coup that ousted the Khana Ratsadon Prime Minister, Thawan ‘Thamrong’ Thamrongnawasawat, a political ally of Pridi Banomyong and his followers. The Group included

Phin Choonhavan, Luang ‘Kat’ Katsongkhram, Kan Chamnongphumiwet, Thanom Kittikachorn, Prapat Charusathien, Chatichai Choonhavan, Phao Siyanon, and Sarit Thanarat, all names that would become important in the Thai political sphere for the rest of the 20th century. On the Coup Group’s side also stood ex-Prime Minister Phibun, who had his own intentions of returning to power after being ousted after the war. He proved to be an essential weapon in the Coup’s success. Despite being severely unpopular among members of the Thai masses, Phibun was a very well-connected military leader, and a well-respected figurehead to members of the Thai military. At least for what Thak describes as ‘symbolic leadership,’ Phibun was a valuable asset to the Coup Group, and an essential factor to the growth and consolidation of the military in the Thai government.⁴⁶

Another key factor in the success of the military during this period was Sarit Thanarat, military commander of the Bangkok First Regiment of the First Division, in the practical execution of the coup. He played a major role in orchestrating Prime Minister Thamrong’s capture. There was an attempt to capture Pridi, though he was able to hide and flee thanks to the Royal Thai Navy, and his Western allies.⁴⁷ Though Sarit was still one of the less influential members of the Coup Group, his leadership during this event earned him a lot of respect from powerful individuals in the military who would soon also become politically powerful.⁴⁸ The 1947 Coup was also arguably the event that really made a name for Sarit in the Thai political scene, and thus helped him step closer toward his political goals.

⁴⁶ Chaloeontiarana, 27.

⁴⁷ It is important to note that the Thai Armed Forces do not all share the political alignment of Thailand’s land army. The Royal Thai Navy, for example, has historically been more aligned with the elite class and with the monarchy. Thus, it is contextually consistent that the Royal Thai Navy would help Pridi escape threats from the army.

⁴⁸ Chaloeontiarana, 30.

Nevertheless, because of the Coup Group military men's current lack of political clout, ex-Prime Minister Khuang Aphaiwong was chosen to represent the Coup Group's government. A staunch conservative and monarchist, Khuang was determined to assign as many of his like-minded allies into the new government as possible, even against the wishes of the comparatively anti-conservative Coup Group. Though Phibun was one of the Coup Group's top choices for the position of Prime Minister, Khuang was chosen likely to avoid criticism, sanctions, and interventions from the United States and other international powers. Under Khuang, a new constitution was created. According to Thak, one of the most crucial developments exhibited in this constitution was the "theoretical" increase of the King's powers.⁴⁹ Consistent with what has been discussed so far, this was another indicator of how forces within the Thai government, even under the 'Constitution,' were perhaps not yet ready or willing to truly accept the diminishment of the monarchy's power, and were making efforts to bring it back.

1948: ANOTHER COUP

The Coup Group's patience with Prime Minister Khuang, and patience with their compromises with the royalists and *Prachatiapat* (Democrat Party) affiliates, was short-lived. The Coup Group members felt themselves being discriminated against, and pushed out of the government they helped install. Khuang nominated his own conservative affiliates to various offices, even against popular votes, which was especially ironic considering Khuang's party's name. Further, with Pridi now in exile, Khuang and the Coup Group no longer had their shared nemesis to unite over; thus, infighting in the Thai government ensued. Daniel Fineman has

⁴⁹ Chaloeontiarana, 31.

written that there was evidence of the planning of another coup as early as February of 1948, only around three months after the last coup, though the Coup Group was likely treading lightly because they feared foreign intervention.⁵⁰

On April 6th, 1948, the Coup Group refused to tolerate Khuang and the Democrats any longer, and launched another coup. On April 8th, Phibun was made Prime Minister, just as he had desired. However, as expected, Phibun had to deal with marked animosity expressed by the foreign powers, making his administration very challenging. The following sections will provide background regarding the role of foreign, namely American, relations with Thailand during the late 1940s as context for the political landscape during Phibun's administration.

THE EARLY COLD WAR: THE UNITED STATES AS A STAKEHOLDER IN THAI POLITICS

To lay down important historical foundations of why/how the US would become so intimately involved with Thailand throughout the postwar period - namely, the Cold War period - US motives in Thailand must be acknowledged.⁵¹ This also adds context with regard to why Khuang was allowed by the 1947 Coup Group to be their Prime Minister.

Firstly, relative to other regions of the world including the rest of Southeast Asia, Thailand was of little colonial interest to the United States; it was not an ex-colony of any Western power, and in terms of Communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia and general global affairs, Thailand was hardly on the US' radar. However, the US grew a special interest in

⁵⁰ Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 38.

⁵¹ This situation is very complex; this section will not do it justice. For more information on the US' involvement in Thailand, see Daniel Fineman's *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (1997).

Thailand during the Cold War because of its great potential as part of the US strategy in Southeast Asia regarding containment of Communist insurgencies. Benedict Anderson has described the general post-WWII era as Thailand's 'American Era' because of the increased closeness of Thailand and the US during this time.⁵² This will become even more important later on in this chapter, after Phibun manages to regain his Prime Ministership.

Secondly, given the above, the US administration's lack of understanding of Southeast Asia in general led to misguidance when interfering with Thai political decisions. In this case, the US became primarily concerned at the idea of Phibun's return to power, because of the US administration's issues with Phibun's character, and his legacy of allyship with the likes of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hideki. The US did not understand the deep, complex issues Thailand was facing, or the complex reasons for the Coup Group's actions.⁵³ This is particularly interesting as later on, when Phibun was made Prime Minister again, the US ended up benefiting a lot from his administration. Nevertheless, at this point, US policy regarding Thailand prioritized keeping Phibun out of power. Knowing this, the Coup Group decided against making Phibun the Prime Minister for now, and elected Khuang. According to Fineman, Khuang was a more palatable choice because he identified as a 'Democrat,' was Western-educated and of elite social class, was seen as 'cosmopolitan,' and was likely to instate individuals of similar background to him into his new government. In contrast to the "rustic, northeastern politicians prominent in Pridi's cabinets," the Americans saw Khuang and his people as more respectable.⁵⁴ Throughout his

⁵² Anderson, Benedict (ed.), *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam and in the American Era* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985).

⁵³ That is, they did not understand that the coup was about more than just Phibun, and that Phibun's interests did not necessarily align entirely with those of all the Coup Group members.

⁵⁴ Fineman, *A Special Relationship*, 41.

office, Khuang Aphaiwong fought very hard to have his government formally recognized by the US, Britain, and China, and finally achieved this on the 6th March 1948. This gave him the long-awaited Western validation that he wanted, and his office with Western backing and legitimacy, making it all the more risky for the military men to attempt to overthrow him.⁵⁵

Further, it must again be reiterated that Khuang and his allies were monarchist politicians. The United States saw monarchists and monarchies as useful checks against spread of communism, and thus effective weapons for use in Western colonial projects. Further, as also alluded to earlier regarding Ananda's character, we witness here how respectability politics contributes to the likelihood that the US will support 'Third World' politicians. The US naturally gravitated towards backing politicians with more proximity to Western values and interests. During this time where communism was one of the US' primary targets, being a monarchist was a favorable trait. Throughout the 20th century, the Western powers would continue to sympathize with Thai monarchists for the above reasons, giving the monarchists a political advantage.

THAI-AMERICAN FRIENDSHIP, PART I: SERI THAI AND THE OSS

Another piece of context that emphasizes the increasing relevance of the United States to the Thai political, social, economic, and cultural scenes, is the relationship Pridi and the *Seri Thai* ('Free Thai') movement had developed with the United States at the end of WWII, particularly through the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Throughout WWII, the *Seri Thai* Movement, led by Pridi Banomyong and Seni Pramote, worked with the US State Department,

⁵⁵ Fineman, 38.

using Thai contacts living overseas in Allied territories as well as close cooperation with the OSS, to oust Phibun from power during his first office. The OSS was a fundamental player in the history of the 1948 Coup, and that of Thailand during the Cold War in general.

One of the most widely known stories in *Seri Thai* history, often used as part of triumphalist Thai nationalist narratives reinforcing the idea of Thai independence, is the story of how Seni Pramote ‘saved’ Thailand from ending up on the ‘losing’ side of WWII. Thanks to Seni’s refusal to deliver Phibun’s declaration of war to the US State Department, the declaration was voided in the 1945 Peace Declaration, saving Thailand from being a formal nemesis of the United States. According to Seni Pramote’s obituary, which was published in the New York Times in 1997, Seni said to the Secretary of State:

“I’m keeping the declaration in my pocket because I am convinced it does not represent the will of the Thai people. With American help, I propose to prove it.”⁵⁶

We must remember as well that Seni was also made Prime Minister for a short time in 1945, before Khuang came to power in 1946. According to Matthew Phillips, “Seni [Pramote’s] appointment [to the position of first postwar prime minister] was a clear recognition of the importance placed on winning international friends,” indicating that in contrast to Phibun’s anti-Western stance during WWII, Seni Pramote stood as a symbol of a potentially new era for Thai relations with the rest of the world - in particular, through a potential close relationship with the United States.⁵⁷ The tone of Seni’s statement insinuates that to him, the true ‘will’ of the Thai

⁵⁶ New York Times Associated Press, "Seni Pramoj, 92, Is Dead; Thai Defied Japan on War," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1997. Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/29/world/seni-pramoj-92-is-dead-thai-defied-japan-on-war.html>.

⁵⁷ Phillips, 87.

people was on the side of the US, not with Phibun's fascist government, and that growing a friendship with the United States would help Thailand achieve true peace.

Further, it is noticeable that Seni was a Prime Minister who could confidently claim Chakri royal ancestry, being the great grandson of King Rama II. Though Seni was out of the question when it came to royal succession, royal blood is still a fundamental factor in the survival of any feudally-based monarchy. Seni was of the royal family, and was a monarchist, who held the post of Prime Minister of Thailand multiple times during the 20th century. His brother, Kukrit Pramote, would also become Prime Minister in the 1970s. This all indicates that it is not impossible for ennobled relatives of the royal family to rise to the head of Thailand's government, under the so-called constitutional monarchical system.

Though the British and Thai situations can only be compared to a limited extent because of the vastly different natures of these two nations, it is interesting to see that within the British 'modern constitutional monarchical' tradition, the royal family has long been more limited in terms of how much political power could hold.⁵⁸ The British Bill of Rights of 1689, promulgated after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, imposed many restrictions on monarchical power.⁵⁹ Further, though some ennobled royals were historically allowed in the House of Lords of Parliament, the deep integrity the British government has upheld with regard to its constitution has long made it difficult for royals to go near the title of Prime Minister, especially after legislation such as the House of Lords Act of 1999 which heavily restricted the hereditary

⁵⁸ "Constitutional Monarchy," *British Monarchist League*, 2014. Accessed April 3, 2023. <http://www.monarchist.org.uk/constitutional-monarchy.html>.

⁵⁹ "Bill of Rights, 1689," *UK Parliament*, 2023. Accessed April 2, 2023. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/parliamentaryauthority/revolution/collections1/collections-glorious-revolution/billofrights/>.

tradition of the House of Lords. In contrast, though figures like Seni and Kukrit were not of the immediate royal family during their era, they were nonetheless royals with titles who both at some point occupied the highest position of the Thai government. Further, though this was not a successful run for her, even as recently as 2019, Princess Ubolratana Mahidol, sister of King Vajiralonkorn of Thailand, attempted to run for office.⁶⁰ Thailand has never had laws like those of the United Kingdom, and this has had an impact on the way Thai constitutional politics has functioned throughout history. It is, and has never been, out of the question for royals to be involved with politics, even if they claim otherwise to be true.

THAILAND-AMERICAN FRIENDSHIP, PART II: THE CIA, PHAO SIYANON, AND SEA SUPPLY

As mentioned earlier during the discussion of the Seri Thai movement, the American OSS had developed intimate connections with political forces within Thailand, such as members of the Seri Thai Movement, as a result of the War. The Thai-American relationship became even more complicated when OSS associates, many of which were now CIA affiliates, started making connections with Thai forces that would soon go head-to-head with other Thai forces. These other Thai forces were also backed by other American forces. This will later be elaborated on in Chapter 2. For now, this section will make note of the relationship between the OSS and Phao

⁶⁰ Associated Press of Bloomberg News, "Thai princess upends tradition by running for prime minister," *Bloomberg News*, February 8, 2019. Accessed March 2, 2023. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/thai-princess-upends-tradition-running-prime-minister-n969206>.

Siyanon, Director of the Thai police, 1947 coup group member, and ally-turned-nemesis of both Phibun and Sarit.

After becoming established and comfortable in Thailand after the end of WWII, ex-members of the OSS such as Willis Bird capitalized off their networks within Thailand and continued to make deals with Thai politicians over covert aid, taking their relationships into the Cold War. Now with many of his former fellow OSS workers employed for the CIA, Bird had a lot of influence and many connections to take advantage of. Bird opened an importing firm to import everything from American consumer goods to ammunition to Thailand. The consumer goods would satisfy demand for American products in Thailand, and the ammunition was used by Thai and American counterinsurgency efforts fighting communism in Southeast Asia. Fineman describes this as a scheme which “combined money-making with anti-communism.”⁶¹ Some of Bird’s most important clients in Thailand that were in the ‘Naresuan Committee,’ formed as part of Bird’s clandestine anti-communist strategy group. This group included Phao Siyanon as well as Sarit Thanarat.

While the US State Department actors such as Ambassador Edwin Stanton were more supportive of Thai civilian politicians, Bird and his CIA allies chose to befriend influential members of the Thai military. The CIA representatives were reportedly inspired by the potential of the Thai armed forces held for US anti-communist strategy, and convinced Washington to provide a great deal of covert assistance to Bird’s clients.⁶² Though Sarit benefited from this assistance, Bird was more personally close with Phao. Fineman also notes that “because

⁶¹ Fineman, 133.

⁶² Ibid., 134.

Thailand's political system was so highly personalized, American intimacy with these leaders added weight to US pronouncements and requests."⁶³ As a result of their close relationship, Phao increasingly became Bird and the CIA's primary contact in Thailand, which by extension, empowered the previously-unassuming institution of the Thai police relative to other competing institutions.

Phao's power was increased even more when Bird worked with his friend, OSS affiliate and lawyer Paul Helliwell, to obtain a dummy firm based in Miami called the Sea Supply Company as a 'front' organization for a new project Bird was working on. Bird and the CIA then opened a Sea Supply office in Bangkok, which was then used as a front for the CIA's anti-communist work in Thailand, using it as a base through which propaganda was disseminated and arms were exchanged. As Phao was Bird's primary connection in Thailand, as he helped the CIA increase its political and military influence in Thailand as part of its Cold War strategy, Phao benefited a lot from the arms and support.

PHIBUN'S DEALS WITH THE DEVIL: BAO DAI, AND THE KOREAN WAR

Above, context was given for growing US interests in Thailand during this period, and a precedent was set for why Phibun might need to work exceptionally hard to gain US favor. Notably, however, everything Phibun did to appease the US often ended up upsetting Thais, as well as Thailand's other diplomatic relationships, such as its relationships with China and other Southeast Asian nations. Thus, this leg of Phibun's political career could be characterized as a disastrous culmination of the consequences of his career of opportunism and misjudgments; he

⁶³ Ibid., 136.

orchestrated his own downfall by having contradictory politics.

Throughout his office during the postwar period, Phibun rebranded Thailand with the image of being a ‘fully democratic’ country, ready to embrace modernization. Phibun’s brand of nationalism, *ratthaniyom* (state-ism), promoted the idea that though Thailand was a great nation on its own and did not *need* Western ‘help,’ Thais could, and would, demonstrate their ability to keep up with a cosmopolitan global society. Phibun and his government emphasized consumption as a means for Thais to ‘modernize’ in the Western sense, encouraging Thais to consume more to spur the Thai economy as well as ‘improve’ their personal appearance and social performance, so that at least on a superficial level, Thais would seem ‘civilized.’ It was also during Phibun’s office that ‘Siam’ was officially renamed to ‘Thailand.’ Phibun’s aim in doing this was not only to foster a sense of national unity based on the ‘Thai ethnicity,’ but also to distinguish the ‘new, democratic’ era from the old ‘absolutist’ era represented by the name ‘Siam.’⁶⁴ This was all very ironic, considering how Phibun’s plans actually caused Thailand to become very reliant on foreign aid, how Phibun’s nucleus for Thai ‘national unity’ centered very much around the ‘Bangkok center’ while marginalizing the rural ‘peripheries’ of Thailand, as well as how his ruling style was, in the end, hardly ‘democratic’ at all.

One major way in which Phibun’s government deepened Thailand’s reliance on foreign aid and pandered to foreign colonial projects was through Phibun’s ‘anti-communist’ stance, and his obsession with making Thailand appear like a ‘model minority’ of Southeast Asia - a ‘communism-free’ sanctuary where the ‘White Man’ would feel safe. This was particularly

⁶⁴ Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War*, 62.; Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Thailand or Siam? What's in a Name," *The Irrawaddy*, June 29, 2009. Accessed January 3, 2023. https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=16227.

appealing to people of Western colonizer nations during an era where decolonization movements were occurring globally. People of many nations, including the many nations in Southeast Asia that were formally colonized by Western powers, held strongly negative sentiments towards their colonizers during this period, thus making those colonizers feel victimized and uncomfortable in their colonies and ex-colonies.⁶⁵ In contrast, not only did Phibun frame Thailand as a place that was a safe refuge for Westerners to stay, but he also offered Thailand up to Westerner troops as if it were an army outpost. As Phibun once told American *United Press*' Richard Applegate in September of 1949, "Thailand would welcome British and American troops who were combating communism in other parts of the world."⁶⁶ Fineman notes that Edwin Stanton suggested, after observing the Applegate interview, that Phibun was 'reluctant' in his answer. Phibun likely felt pressured by the American reporter and by the US aid-givers he was fixated on impressing, while at the same time, he likely knew deep down that many Thais would be upset by his statement.

Phibun was true to his word when it came to supporting Western 'anti-communism' and colonial projects. Fineman outlines two key incidents in the 1950s where Phibun made decisions, disregarding the advice of many of his own cabinet and of the sentiments of the Thai people, so that Thailand could receive generous military aid packages from the United States. The first incident was how in early 1950, Phibun exchanged recognition of Bao Dai, the French 'puppet leader' who was disliked by Vietnamese and non-French Westerners alike, for US military aid.

Regardless of the US distrust of Bao Dai, they and the British accepted that he was an effective puppet to contain the Viet Minh, and thus pressured Phibun to recognize him.⁶⁷ In

⁶⁵ Fineman, 35.

⁶⁶ Fineman., 96.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 102-103.

return for Phibun's eventual recognition, Thailand was granted at least \$10,000 in early 1950.⁶⁸ The second incident was in mid-1950, where the United States promised another hefty development and military aid package to Phibun if he agreed to materially support the Korean War effort on the side of the Americans. Sure enough, Phibun dispatched four thousand Thai troops, along with rice rations. Through this, Thailand was made the first Asian country to ever pledge its forces to the U.N. cause in Korea.⁶⁹ Additionally, it is notable that the \$25 million that was given to Thailand from the World Bank, via America, was the first ever World Bank funding package that was approved for an Asian country.⁷⁰ As mentioned earlier, despite boasting of Thai *ratthaniyom* and of how Thailand is a strong, independent nation and insinuating that Thailand was superior to its neighbors for resisting Western intervention, Phibun could not resist what the US was willing to offer him, even at the cost of sending even more Thais to war just a few years after WWII ended, and ignoring protests from his people against antagonizing other Asian countries.

Phibun's actions outlined above bring up a contentious discussion with regard to the history of Thai identity. It must be noted that the underlying motives for the spread of 'communism' across the rest of Southeast Asia were primarily rooted in decolonization efforts. Phibun's actions reflected the implicit sentiment of some Thais, likely particularly elites and those who benefited somehow from Thailand's unique position as what many Thai Leftists as

⁶⁸ Ibid., 114.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 118.

well as some scholars of Thailand have called a ‘semicolonial’ state.⁷¹ Being a country that was never formally colonized by the United States or any other Western power might be part of the explanation for why Thailand and the US were able to and chose to become so intimately connected through culture and politics during the Cold War. Though there were many people with nuanced knowledge and historically informed critiques who likely saw that Thai government bodies’ indulgence to colonial interests was questionable, due to the glorification of Thailand as being ‘never colonized by a Western power’ through mainstream Thai propaganda, Phibun’s government was somewhat able to get away with its conservative, anti-communist, anti-decolonial pandering.⁷² Further, a majority of Phibun’s political choices contributed to the distancing of Thailand from its Southeast Asian neighbors in every way possible, especially in ways that put Thailand in closer proximity to Western perceptions of the ideal ‘civilized’ nation.

This is characteristic of a ‘semicolonial’ state. It might appear or present itself as liberated, with intact sovereignty, but in a world dictated largely by colonial and decolonial implications, Thailand has never truly been able to function independently of colonizer interests, even if it was never formally colonized. Further, in a world dictated largely by colonial and decolonial movement, the ‘semi-’ in ‘semicolonial’ suggests that Thailand was probably tied somehow in colonial projects, whether its own or others. Thailand was, and continues to be, complicit in Western colonial projects through cooperating with Western forces, while also simultaneously experiencing ‘colonized’ treatment, because ultimately, Thailand was still a

⁷¹ Tamara Loos, “Competitive Colonialisms: Siam and the Malay Muslim South,” in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*, ed. Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv1nhkfw.10>.

⁷² For more on the ‘semicolonial’ nature of Thailand, see Peter A. Jackson’s chapter, “The Ambiguities of Semicolonial Power in Thailand,” in Jackson and Rachel V. Harrison’s book, *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*.

‘Third World country’ in the eyes of the West.

This unique experience, felt in every corner of Thai society, also likely contributed to the strong desires of the Thai people during the 20th century to identify and emphasize cultural narratives surrounding ‘what it means to be Thai,’ because of the identity confusion that inevitably came out of the cognitive dissonance perpetuated by government. ‘Monarchist’ culture was, in a way, one of the cultural narratives promoted as being ‘traditionally’ Thai, because of the Thai monarchy’s unique global status, and because of many Thais’ feelings that they owed Thailand’s escape of ‘formal colonization’ to their kings, thus owing everything that Thailand is to this day to the monarchy.

Though this discussion might seem tangential, it is a very important factor to consider when attempting to explain the survival of the Thai monarchy, especially as so many monarchies across Southeast Asia failed to survive the Cold War period, at least to the extent the Thai monarchy has.⁷³ Independent of the Thai government’s domestic-sphere wants and needs, the Thai government wanted Western approval. For a nation to gain Western approval during this particular moment in history, especially when said nation would otherwise be disrespected by the West for its remoteness from Western ideals of ‘modernization,’ the nation must prove itself monumentally. Though Phibun was highly disorganized with his promotion of the monarchy as an institution in particular, Phibun still perpetuated the continuation of an anti-communist, right-wing, non-democratic, authoritarian atmosphere in Thailand. Along with the absence of the same level of decolonization-fuelled anti-establishment energy that the rest of Southeast Asia had,

⁷³ Michael Vatikiotis, "Monarchy and modern politics in Southeast Asia," *Brookings*, September 3, 2015. Accessed January 4. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/monarchy-and-modern-politics-in-southeast-asia/>.

Thailand remained in a state that allowed the monarchy to continue to breathe. Even if the monarchy was not ‘strong’ relative to the military during this period, it is important to note that the circumstances Phibun perpetuated allowed the monarchy to persist.

THE FOUR GENERATIONS KING: KING BHUMIBOL

Though he has already been introduced as Ananda’s brother and the successor to the throne, Bhumibol’s character must be emphasized because of his central role in Thai 20th century history. He reigned from 1946 to his death in 2016, and is known informally in the early 21st century by some Thais as the ‘three-’ or ‘four-generations-king,’ because most Thais alive in the present day have lived under at least part of his reign.⁷⁴ Personality-wise, Bhumibol was seen as an exemplary role model of divine kingship, especially during the later years of his reign. The media also portrayed his personality to be very regal and essentially Thai; he was seen as a benevolent, charitable, charismatic, mighty King while also upholding an understated, wise aura.

Bhumibol’s public activity was very limited during the early days of his reign because of the 1947 coup-imposed Phibun government’s suppression of the monarch’s activities. The government restricted the monarchy’s public appearances, allowing the royals to make public appearances only occasionally, such as for music concerts or event inaugurations. However, Bhumibol would soon undergo a monumental rise in popularity, coinciding with Phibun’s downfall and the rise of Sarit, an opportunist politician who arguably did the most favors for Bhumibol’s image, that would last until even after Sarit’s death.⁷⁵ In those ‘four generations’ during which he reigned, Bhumibol played various roles, and would become increasingly central

⁷⁴ Palling, “King Bhumibol Adulyadej Obituary.”

⁷⁵ Matthew Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 130.

to the Thai national image. Further, though the King's activity was restricted during Phibun's administration, it must be acknowledged that propaganda of the time was still quite laudatory and protective of Bhumibol; the King was still evidently seen with a lot of prestige in spite of his reduced political power.

PRO-MONARCHIST, BUT WHEN CONVENIENT: THE 25TH CENTENARY, AND PHIBUN'S LAST ATTEMPTS AT HOLDING ONTO POWER

One could attempt to empathize with Phibun's situation and assert that he did what he could at the time to benefit the Thai nation in terms of military and economic reinforcements, as well as foreign approval and support. Nevertheless, steamrolling through all of his grand ideas for the 'improvement' of Thailand, Phibun seldom took into account the people's feedback. For example, many Leftist sources accused Phibun of "compromising Thai sovereignty" through allowing the US and Britain to use Thailand as an army outpost for the West's 'anti-communist,' anti-decolonial activity in Southeast Asia.⁷⁶ With regard to Phibun's Korean War provisions, much of the Thai general public was exhausted by war and thus unlikely to support the Prime Minister's decisions. Fineman also writes that Thai politicians were very wary of Phibun's plans, and warned against them, as Thailand could not afford to lose any more internal defense forces. For example, in 1950, Thai Foreign Minister Worakan Bancha wrote that "if Thailand [tries to] provide aid in the form of armed forces, it would be most difficult and we would be at our wit's end [in attempting it]."⁷⁷ Attempts were made by different groups of people to overthrow Phibun,

⁷⁶ Fineman, 96.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 116.

including the February 1949 Palace Rebellion led by civilian rebels, and the June 1951 'Manhattan' boat rebellion orchestrated by members of the Royal Thai Navy. Nevertheless, Phibun persisted, though nobody but his military allies supported his decisions, as they were the ones who predominantly benefited from US aid.

It is also important to remember that Phibun had been a long-time antagonist of the Thai monarchical institution, having contributed to the suppression of monarchical power and influence during the 1932 Siamese Revolution overthrow of absolute monarchy, and his involvement in the suppression of the 1933 Borawadet Rebellion. Thai monarchist politicians, including Seni, Khuang, and Prince Wiwatthanachai, naturally disapproved of Phibun. Specifically referring to the Bao Dai situation, Wiwatthanachai told American diplomat W. Walton Butterworth that “Ho Chi Minh is your problem, not ours.”⁷⁸ Especially with Phibun losing support from practically every other faction of Thai society besides his military allies, Phibun could not afford to upset the monarchy and monarchists any more, because of how culturally influential of an institution it was.

Additionally, in early 1957, Phibun faced even further backlash from many Thais who accused his government of electoral fraud that skewed votes in Phibun’s favor during the February elections. Protests were held by students, and riding on the wave of anti-Phibun sentiment, Sarit Thanarat held intimate conferences with protestors where he slandered the elections, calling the election ‘dirty,’ arguing that ‘everybody cheated.’⁷⁹ Nevertheless, as an opportunist unafraid to do whatever was necessary for his political gain regardless of the enemies

⁷⁸ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁹ Fineman, 235.

he would make along the way, Phibun decided to rebrand himself once again, this time drawing on the culturally respected image of the monarchy for legitimacy. An example of how he did this was through his ‘25th Centenary Celebration,’ which he had been planning even before the election, as another attempt to gain popularity. Matthew Phillips has described it as an event aimed to “rejuvenate state-led spectacle,” promote nationalism, cater to a public sentiment yearning for “new cultural narratives on what it means to be Thai,” and draw on “nostalgia for ‘traditional’ customs” through the performance of “symbols of royal power.”⁸⁰ The event was a propaganda fair marketed as a celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Lord Buddha’s enlightenment, a very ironic combination.

Phibun used this event to attempt to save his image, particularly by aligning himself with the benevolent, moral cultural identity of the monarchy, and self-proclaiming to be a champion of the Buddhist faith and of Buddhist values. One example of this seen in the 25th Centennial Celebration was Phibun’s revival of royal barge procession rituals, an old Siamese royal tradition that was gradually becoming extinct ever since the 1932 Revolution, an event that, ironically again, Phibun contributed to.⁸¹ For this revival, he assigned ฿1,530,000 to his newly-established ‘Ministry of Culture,’ just for his event procession, with most of the proceeds going to the expensive physical restoration of the ancient royal barges.⁸² The ceremony was held in the style of a market or fair, with foreign and Thai companies invited to contribute,

⁸⁰ Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War*, 127-128.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁸² Phillips, 129.

providing many opportunities for attendees to engage in consumer culture. The main attraction, however, was King Bhumibol. He had been invited to preside at the event, and because of the general allure all things ‘royal’ brought to anything in Thailand, Phibun might have felt that even if people would not attend the event for Phibun and his programming, people would at least be attracted by the prospect of the King being there.

Phibun was right in thinking this; according to a report by the *Ta Khlong Thai Mai* magazine in 1957, masses of Thais reportedly flocked to the event to see the King.⁸³ However, their attendance was in vain, as on the morning of the ceremony’s launch, the King announced that he was ‘sick’ and thus unable to attend.⁸⁴ Embarrassingly for Phibun, many interpreted this as a sign of divine intervention against Phibun’s regime. This was compounded with the critiques Phibun was already receiving from the court of popular opinion and from press releases. Critics pointed out the irony of how Phibun was allegedly celebrating Buddhist values while also promoting mass consumerist culture at the event, spending excessively on the revival of a ‘traditional’ royal ceremony using money he could have more appropriately spent on Thailand’s national development, and doing all of this while also being notoriously anti-monarchist. Phibun would be ousted in September of 1957 in Sarit’s coup; this time, it was for good.

Though not immediately evident, Phibun’s downfall in this way was also arguably a key factor increasing King Bhumibol’s relative popularity. Phillips argues that especially as a result of the massive failure of the 25th Centenary celebration, “the [Phibun] government’s lack of legitimacy was... juxtaposed [by] a popular monarch who, it could be claimed, far better

⁸³ Ibid., 139.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 130.

represented the aspirations of the Thai people.”⁸⁵ The question remained, what were the “aspirations of the Thai people,” really? The next chapter, discussing the period between mid-1957 to 1973, will demonstrate how this discussion continued, and how Sarit Thanarat attempted to find an answer to this question.

MID-1957: THE STATE OF THE MONARCHY, POST-PHIBUN

This chapter has attempted to expose all the different factors characterizing the Thai monarchy between 1947 to 1957, taking into account the historical context of the 1932 Siamese Revolution and WWII. Additionally, it has described the impact on the story of factors such as Thailand’s unique experience as a ‘semicolonial’ nation, a lot of political instability, the tragic death of King Ananda, the rise of King Bhumibol, and the increasing role of characters like Phao Siyanon, Sarit Thanarat, and the United States.

At this point in the 20th century, it is apparent that the Thai military - particularly through the coups of 1947 and 1948 - managed to weave its way deeply into the Thai political scene, empowering itself, as well as disempowering its main competitor for political influence, the Thai monarchy. However, due to the highly complex and personalized nature of Thai politics, these two entities should not be seen as entirely mutually exclusive; that is, politicians did not necessarily commit entirely to being ‘military’ or ‘monarchist’ all the time, and the military government and monarchy did in many ways benefit from aspects of associating with each other.

This chapter put a lot of emphasis on the situation of Ananda’s death because it provides a crucial case study of the political dynamics of the period between 1947 and 1957, and in the

⁸⁵ Phillips, 139.

words of Pavin, “effectively shaped the future of the throne,” meaning that it was a watershed moment in the history Thailand in the 20th century.⁸⁶ The entire nation was involved in this story from every rank of the national hierarchy - Ananda, Bhumibol, the Chakri royal family, Swiss civilians, people who fought for the end of absolutism in 1932 as well as those who fought for more monarchical influence 1933, the British royal family, the Coup Group, military politicians, monarchists politicians, civilian politicians, American politicians, and because Ananda’s death was made such a public affair, every regular Thai citizen was involved in this story. Thai history centers predominantly on the royal figures within the monarchy, while often forgetting that the ‘monarchy’ is an institution, and one that affects the daily lives of ‘regular’ people. The history of King Ananda’s death is also a crucial case study because through the story of a monarch, we are reminded of how monarchy affects people like Marileine Ferrari, Chaliew Pathumrot, Butr Pattamasarin, Chit Singhaseni, as well as arguably, the mortal within King Rama VIII - Ananda Mahidol, a king, but also a child whose life was prematurely cut short.

The 1932 Revolution might have abolished absolute monarchy, but as demonstrated by this chapter, the monarchy itself has still managed to survive as part of the ‘constitutional monarchical’ system. Nevertheless, monarchist pushback throughout the early 20th century has made it difficult for the monarchy to truly take a back seat in Thai politics, against the goals of the 1932 revolutionaries, and against the goals of many Thais who wanted major constitutional change to the Thai political system. During this era, the military dominated, and managed to bar the monarchy from reasserting itself in any significant way.

⁸⁶ Chachavalpongpun, *Love and Death of King Ananda Mahidol*, 3.

Besides the success of protecting the Mahidol line of succession in the royal family, this chapter has demonstrated how the royal family and wider 'monarchy' has been upheld not only by those who consider themselves 'monarchists,' but also those who might not necessarily have a positive opinion of the royal family, but who benefit from associating with the royal family. Through the examples of Pridi and Phibun, it is evident that the monarchy has long been used as the ultimate legitimizing trump card of Thai opportunist politicians, even when politicians like them were the ones to diminish the monarchy's power in the first place.

CHAPTER 2: THE DESPOT, THE FATHER, AND DESPOTIC PATERNALISM, 1957-1973

The last chapter characterized the early 20th century as a time where the Thai monarchy, disempowered after the 1932 Siamese Revolution, made various attempts to reassert itself into political power, to no avail. Though the monarchy was able to *survive* as an institution through the 1932 Revolution and the era leading up to 1957, harnessing the connections and support of loyal monarchists and opportunists who were using the monarchical institution for political gain, the monarchy still failed in their mission because there was not yet something or someone powerful enough to uplift the monarchy back into a place of significant political dominance. However, we also saw in the last chapter the ascension to the throne of charismatic, young, understated King Bhumibol, coinciding with the fall from grace of military dictator Phibun and his regime. During this time, many Thais were frustrated with the corruption and ineffectiveness of Thailand's leadership over the past few decades, and yearned for leadership that better represented the values of the people.

THE TRIUMVIRATE POWER STRUGGLE

Sarit Thanarat was introduced in the last chapter as an increasingly important figure within Thailand's political world, especially for his role in the 1947 Coup. During 1957 and 1958, Sarit would win the power struggle between the 'Triumvirate' consisting of Phao, Phibun, and Sarit. Despite all being technically affiliated with the *Seri Manangkhasila* Party and all using similar opportunist strategies, the three represented fundamental differences in public expressions and ideology. They were also all in competition over Chinese and American

backing, control of the armed forces, and the hearts and minds of the Thai people, particularly the Thai Left, which was seen by the Triumvirate as one of their 'swing' demographics.

It must also be remembered that with particular regard to the issue of US backing, though each member of the Triumvirate had their own respective allies in different factions of the US government and secret services, American policy with regard to Southeast Asian leaders was heavily affected by American respectability politics. For example, Sarit had a reputation for being a heavy drinker and a 'womanizer,' with an aura that some would call 'unrefined.' Many American politicians and diplomats preferred to interact with more 'palatable' figures, such as the monarchists and elites of the Thai Democrat Party.⁸⁷ Further, Sarit had also spent much of the mid-1950s, likely in response to the US' discriminatory treatment of him and favorable treatment of his rivals, spreading anti-American propaganda through his widely read newspaper, *San Seri*, further intensifying animosity between Sarit and the US. This was an aspect of his image that Sarit would have to work hard to overcome.

Sarit took advantage of the February 1957 elections, mentioned in Chapter 1 as the elections that sparked popular protests, including student demonstrations, condemning his own *Seri Manangkhasila* party and defaming Phibun. Leading up to his first coup, he campaigned on the promise that he would listen to the people's demands and follow the 'popular will,' and intolerance against 'corruption,' unlike the current government.⁸⁸ Sarit managed to secure some loyal backers in students and intellectuals, particularly after his personal efforts to connect with these groups by holding open forums, which he used as opportunities to distance himself from

⁸⁷ Fineman, *A Special Relationship*, 232.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

the *Seri Manangkhasila* party and portray himself as a champion of transparency. However, this was not enough. The various factions that had a stake in Thai politics were all very divided. As earlier mentioned, some crucial demographics being contested over by the Triumvirate during this time included the elites, monarchists, supporters of democracy, military affiliates, police, rural peoples, urban peoples, the CIA, foreign diplomats, and Leftists. It was practically impossible to appease all of these groups, given the conflicts of interest involved. Therefore, for this first part of Sarit's coup, Sarit's priorities were furthering anti-Phibun sentiment through attacking 'corruption' within the government, taking down Phao and Sea Supply, and appeasing the Leftists who was seen as a 'tie-breaker' demographic for the Triumvirate's power struggle.

1957: SARIT'S FIRST COUP

By mid-1957, Sarit had accumulated a substantial amount of power. Sarit was a popular figure among the Thai masses; in spite of his public persona, many had high hopes for the 'system' that he promised to bring to the people.⁸⁹ Further, Sarit would soon also successfully secure for himself a majority of control over the Thai army, pushing out Phao, Phin Choonhavan, and their supporters. This was particularly important for Sarit who was not yet as established in the political world as his rivals such as Phibun, though he was a popular figure among other demographics. Though many influential American figures continued to dislike Sarit, and though Sarit continued to push anti-American propaganda, many were left with no choice but to accept that Sarit was someone to maintain amicable relations with.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Chaloeontiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism*, 96.

⁹⁰ Fineman, 241.

On the August 20th of 1957, Sarit and many of his allies in the government resigned from their positions in protest against the government's inefficiency. On September 13th, Sarit and his followers issued demands for Phibun and the government to resign, and for Phao to be ousted. These events were accompanied by popular support of many Thais, who took to the streets in protest against the government and in support of Sarit's demands. Some key members resigned, including Phao and Phin, but Phibun held his ground. Thus, on September 16th, Sarit took matters into his own hands, sending the army to advance through Bangkok, seizing control wherever they could. Intimidated, Phibun finally gave in, and fled the country.

Sarit was not done; even with Phibun, Phin, and Phao gone, Sarit was determined to deal with the CIA and Sea Supply once and for all. On the same day, Sarit's forces, backed by masses of pro-Sarit demonstrators, stormed the Sea Supply office. Daniel Fineman has described this as "the single most frightening clash between Americans and Thais in the history of relations" between the two nations, which could have become the nail in the coffin for the already-deteriorating Thai-American relations.⁹¹ Nevertheless, the tension was eventually de-escalated, allegedly by CIA station chief John Hart, pacifying the soldiers and demonstrators. Though the crumbling state of Thai-American relations posed as another obstacle for a future Sarit to deal with, this event was undeniably successful in intimidating the US administration and forcing them to take him seriously. Sarit's coup had succeeded.

It is important to note where the King was amidst all of this. As a result of Phibun's restriction of the monarchy's interaction with greater Thai affairs, and likely in the wake of ongoing controversy regarding the death of King Ananda, King Bhumibol maintained his low

⁹¹ Fineman, 242.

profile, preserving his respected, understated image. He thus remained relatively apolitical with regard to Sarit's coup.⁹² Bhumibol's activity in the wake of coups will be interesting to monitor moving forward; though he was quite uninvolved in this coup, his behavior regarding other coups would be different.

THE MEANING OF 'PATTIWAT'

This interlude will discuss Sarit's definition of *pattiwat*, which when translated from Thai is often equated with the term 'revolution,' though Thak Chaloemtiarana interprets it more specifically to mean 'reactionary cultural revolution.'⁹³ It is interesting that Sarit was determined to use this term for his 1958 takeover, instead of *rattaprahan*, the term used for 'coups,' such as the one that put Phibun in power. Though the term *pattiwat* will be most relevant in the discussion later in this chapter with regard to Sarit's second 'coup,' it is a term that helps provide background to Sarit's long-term goals, values, and motives. As will later be discussed, Sarit would proceed with caution after the 1957 coup, and did not yet establish the kind of government he really wanted. Perhaps, at this point, Sarit had not even fully established his vision for this kind of government. Nevertheless, from the very beginning, Sarit's values guided him, rooted in his strong desire to foster national solidarity and national pride, as well as rid Thailand of ideologies and systems he deemed incompatible with Thai society, such as the 'Western' concept of 'constitutional government.'

⁹² "Thailand: Coup de Repos," *Time*, November 3, 1958. Accessed March 3, 2023. <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,810576,00.html>.

⁹³ Chaloemtiarana, 92.

Thak interprets Sarit's *pattiwat* as a *reactionary* cultural revolution because to Sarit, this type of revolution did not aim to create a whole new system. Rather, Sarit framed his *pattiwat*'s as a means of uprooting Phibun's political ruling style that confused 'Indigenous' Thai structures and values with 'constitutionalism' and 'democracy' imported from the West. To Sarit, the current system, that resulted from this confusion, was incompatible with Thai society. As Sarit was quoted saying in a 1951 *Bangkok Post* article, before he came to power:

"It should be...admitted that Western democracy is not such a system [that] could be adopted and put into operation immediately by all countries regardless of the state of economic or political progress. As far as Thailand is concerned, it is high time we utilized the lessons we have learnt from the past practice of democracy in adapting our democratic system to suit [our] condition [...] the garb of democracy was weighing down Thailand."⁹⁴

By highlighting how Thailand should 'learn from the past,' Sarit was not just blaming Phibun for Thailand's system; his critiques were also anchored in the idea that since the 1932 Siamese Revolution, Thailand's 'natural path' was disrupted. By looking inward, taking inspiration from 'traditional' forms of Thai leadership, and making Thailand's leadership 'Thai-style' again - at least, according to Sarit's definition of 'Thai-style' - Sarit believed that Thailand's path could be reconfigured. The Thai concepts of *devaraja* and *pokhun* will be discussed later in this chapter. It is these concepts that Sarit would use in order to define his personal brand of Thai-style leadership, which Thak Chaloeontiarana has described as 'despotic

⁹⁴ Frank C. Darling, "American Policy in Thailand." *The Western Political Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1962): 104. <https://doi.org/10.2307/446100>.

paternalism.’ It is this despotic-paternalistic leadership style that would hold the key to the monarchical institution’s reassertion into the dominion of Thai politics.

It is also important to note that by reconfiguring Thailand’s political system by drawing on ‘tradition,’ Sarit did *not* mean causing Thailand to regress or go ‘backwards.’ Sarit’s ideal leadership style would “return to old concepts,” but as a “*means* [to] propel the nation toward modernization.”⁹⁵ This is why Sarit called his 1958 efforts a *pattiwat*, (reactionary cultural revolution) and not just a ‘revolution’ or a *rattaphrahan* (revolution by a coup). *Pattiwat* is defined as a ‘reactionary cultural revolution’ because while it was the act of overthrowing an existing institution, it apparently does not do so in order to change the Thai system into something completely different, but rather ‘reset’ Thailand back to where it ‘should’ have been, had the 1932 Revolution not happened, so Thailand could modernize on its own terms instead. What is important to our story is how Sarit felt like reviving the monarchy was an important part of his ‘reset.’

THE POST-1957 COUP GOVERNMENT (THE ‘FIRST THANOM CABINET’)

In Sarit’s ideal world, he would have immediately made attempts to eliminate from the Thai government traces of liberalization, democratization, and sympathy for the West. Nevertheless, even after launching a successful coup and laying out a system that appealed to many, Sarit knew he still had to appease the United States. Largely thanks to Phibun, Thailand relied extremely heavily on US political and budgetary aid. For example, in 1957 alone, an estimated \$26.2 million in US aid was supplied to the Thai military, making up over 41% of total

⁹⁵ Chaloeontiarana, 107.

military spending for that year.⁹⁶ Cutting ties with the US would have severely jeopardized Sarit's goals, especially because of his vested interest in the Thai military. Further, Sarit likely wanted US support for his political interests in Laos, in order to expand Thai influence over Laos, as well as to support his cousin, Laotian army commander Phoumi Nosavan.⁹⁷ The United States also needed Sarit's allyship, so that it could continue to use Thailand, as described by a November 1957 US National Security Council paper, as a "hub of security efforts in Southeast Asia," an essential asset to the US during the Cold War.⁹⁸

Sarit thus declared to the US that he would comply with US interests with regard to Thailand, and appointed Phot Sarasin as interim Prime Minister, before free elections could be held. As a Western-educated former ambassador to the US, the Americans were satisfied with this choice. Though Sarit and his followers openly condemned many of Phot's political decisions, such as his attempts to silence the Thai anti-American press and his upholding of parliamentary democratic values, Sarit's priority during this time was to regulate and maintain his image in the eyes of both domestic and international entities. Had Sarit appointed himself, or other politicians of the "new generation of Thai military [leaders] lacking foreign experience or exposure to democratic societies" who "preferred authoritarianism to liberalism," perhaps the US would have made more active moves to sabotage Sarit, which would derail his long-term interests. Nevertheless, throughout all of this, Sarit still had *pattiwat* on his mind.

Finally, true to his word, Sarit facilitated a 'largely free and fair' election. The Sarit-allied *Sahaphum* Party won, though not by a significant enough margin, encouraging Sarit to create the

⁹⁶ Fineman, 243.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Fineman, 243.

new *Chatsangkhomniyom* party on December 21st, 1957. This new party included members of the *Sahaphum*, *Seri Manangkhasila*, and *Prachatipat* (Democrat) parties, and notably many leftist politicians, with First Army Commander Thanom Kittikachorn appointed as Prime Minister. Expectedly, it was extremely difficult for the members of this politically diverse party to work together harmoniously. Just some of the issues that Thanom faced included the resignation of 26 party members who disapproved of the disproportionate increase in the military budget at the expense of the education budget, accusations that the government was using Lottery Bureau money to pay for Sarit's expensive medical bills, discontent among the general public over tax raises due to government budget scarcity, as well as the dispute over the Preah Vihear temple on the Thai-Cambodian border that is still at the core of Thai-Cambodian relations to this day.⁹⁹ Compounded with Sarit falling severely ill and having to get treatment abroad for prolonged periods of time, Thanom was forced to deal with many impossible situations without Sarit, and reportedly expressed strong discontent with the burden of his job.¹⁰⁰

From a distance, Sarit attempted to hold the *Chatsangkhomniyom* party together, but to no avail. The party was simply too divided in its interests, and especially with the chaotic, makeshift nature of the coup and the formation of *Chatsangkhomniyom*, Sarit and his allies had not yet formed a concrete manifesto or set of values to uphold and unite the party over. Further, despite preaching 'anti-corruption' at the center of his campaign, Sarit and his 'clique' hypocritically resorted to the same tactics he had previously condemned, such as using bribery and intimidation to try to retain MPs, censoring the press, and mishandling government funds.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Chaloeontiarana, 90.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 96.

From London, Sarit heard of the mayhem back home, and decided to take action.

Sarit was determined to nurture the image he had cultivated himself leading up to his first coup, and the backlash his government was receiving did not help. He wanted to be seen as an “honest, disinterested defender of clean elections and fairness in government” who put the people’s needs first and served the masses, but also one who was also deeply respected, loved, and feared by his people.¹⁰² The 1957 coup’s disorganized government, built with emphasis on compromise rather than efficiency, seemed not to be working out for Thailand; Sarit therefore felt this was an appropriate time for a real *pattiwat*. On October 18th 1958, Sarit left his recovery retreat in the United Kingdom and returned to Thailand. Drawing an analogy from his personal experience getting medical treatment and healing for his health issues, Sarit declared that Thailand needed to undergo “major surgery.”¹⁰³

OCTOBER 1958: SARIT’S *PATTIWAT* (SECOND COUP)

On the 19th and 20th October, Sarit launched his real *pattiwat*. Typical traits of an authoritarian takeover were witnessed: political parties were banned, the current (1952) constitution was frozen, bookshops were closed, gatherings of more than five people were banned, restrictive legislation was passed, ‘enemies of the regime’ were arrested, and a Revolutionary Council was established in order to garner more popular support for Sarit’s regime.¹⁰⁴

From the very beginning of his new regime, Sarit guaranteed that he would work to

¹⁰² Fineman, 247.

¹⁰³ Chaloeontiarana, 96.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

preserve the monarchy.¹⁰⁵ Sarit's regime worked hard to uplift the monarchy, and suppress anything that could potentially undermine it. Sarit heavily scapegoated 'Communists' and 'Communist-sympathizers,' framing them as anti-monarchical, anti-Buddhist, and therefore incompatible with Thainess. He also reformed Thai legislation in a way that not only consolidated his own dictatorial power, but also gave the monarchy a great advantage in their journey to reasserting their dominance in Thai politics. This, in turn, was politically advantageous for him, for reasons that will become more evident later on.

In 1959, an Interim Constitution of Thailand was created to use in place of the frozen constitution. Article 17 of this Interim Constitution granted Sarit practically uninhibited dictatorial powers, reading:

“During the enforcement of the present Constitution wherever the Prime Minister deems appropriate for the purpose of repressing or suppressing actions whether of internal or external origin which jeopardize the national security or the Throne or subvert or threaten law and order, the Prime Minister, by resolution of the Council of Ministers, is empowered to issue orders or take steps accordingly. Such orders or steps shall be considered legal.”¹⁰⁶

The Article notably emphasizes 'national security' and 'the Throne' as things the government served to protect, demonstrating how much Sarit's regime sought to rely heavily on monarchical legitimacy for its actions.¹⁰⁷ Sarit used in particular the phrase *det khat*, meaning 'decisively

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 97.

¹⁰⁶ Darling, "American Policy in Thailand," 104. [cites the Bangkok Post on December 12, 1951]

¹⁰⁷ James R. Klein, *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 1997: A Blueprint for Participatory Democracy* (Asia Foundation, 1998).

forbidden,' to define actions that he deemed punishable by law.¹⁰⁸ These actions, which ranged from littering to prostitution, could be assigned punishments ranging from fines to execution. Sarit was now able to legally justify all his actions by claiming that they were in order to 'protect' the revered monarchy or 'protect' public safety, regardless of public opinion regarding his actions. It is interesting that Sarit has called this Interim Constitution a reflection of "traditional Thai concepts of state," almost suggesting that increased authoritarianism is an inherently Thai style of leadership.¹⁰⁹ According to Tyrell Haberkorn, Sarit justified the executions of at least six people for *det khat* reasons over the course of his regime.¹¹⁰

Sarit also notoriously used Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code as a means of suppressing his political enemies and promoting reverence for the monarchical institution. *Lèse-majesté* laws have existed for hundreds of years, and though the 1932 Siamese Revolution technically removed the Thai monarchy from absolute power, laws that punished people for *lèse-majesté* were never fully abolished.¹¹¹ In 1956, made effective in 1957, *lèse-majesté* was defined as a criminal offense through the infamous Section 112 of Thailand's Criminal Code, that is still in use today. Section 112 stated that "anyone who defames, insults or threatens the King, Queen, Heir-apparent, or Regent shall be liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding seven years," and was a weapon Sarit, as well as many of his successors, would take advantage of

¹⁰⁸ Chaloeontiarana, 123.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 101. [Derived from Sarit Thanarat, "Khamprasi nai Wan Ratthathammanun lae Wan Sitthimanuchon [Speech on Constitution and Human Rights Day]," December 10, 1960, in *Pramuan Sunlzoraphot I*, 301.]

¹¹⁰ Tyrell Haberkorn, *In Plain Sight: Impunity and Human Rights in Thailand* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 34.

¹¹¹ Achamas Nopphon, "วิวัฒนาการของ "กฎหมายหมิ่นประมาทพระมหากษัตริย์" ในรอบ 200 ปี ตามบริบทสังคมการเมือง [Evolution of 'Lèse Majesté' law over the past 200 years, according to the Thai social and political context]," *iLaw Freedom*, September 21, 2015. Accessed March 3, 2023. <https://freedom.ilaw.or.th/en/node/263>.

extensively.¹¹²

Further, considering all of the above, the US administration saw value in the new regime that they could use to their advantage. As described earlier in this chapter, the Thai government and US government needed to nurture their relationship, regardless of differences. Though their prejudices, fears and concerns regarding Sarit remained, the US made a conscious effort to relate to Sarit in order to maintain their Thai ‘bulwark against communism’ in Southeast Asia. Sarit also needed US endorsement for his coup to bolster his legitimacy, especially after the chaos that unfolded in Thailand while he was away from the country. To do this, Sarit agreed to cooperate with the US, such as by promising to take anti-communism very seriously, and gave the US warning of the 1958 coup in advance, hoping the US would be more likely to recognize his ‘revolution.’ To prove this, Sarit even ordered the arrest of hundreds of alleged ‘communist’ agents and sympathizers on the day of his coup.¹¹³

It must be noted that while genuine, devout communists trained in Marxism or other sorts of communist theory *did* indeed exist within Thailand during this time, there were very few openly ‘practicing’ communists, especially in the Thai political ‘centers.’¹¹⁴ Many of the ‘communists’ Sarit arrested over the course of his time as Prime Minister were often the more easily traceable and scapegoat-able, ambivalent ‘communists’ or ‘socialists,’ who were often students, scholars, and politicians. More devout ‘communists’ were more difficult to find. Thus, perhaps Sarit’s initial anti-communist strategy was not actually doing much genuine work.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Fineman, 256.

¹¹⁴ Further details regarding the Thai communist insurrection can be found later in this chapter, as well as in Chapter 3.

Nevertheless, it was Sarit's praxis, or at least the appearance of anti-communism, that satisfied the United States, and gained Sarit the American endorsement. Handley and Thongchai have also written that the US saw Sarit's political strategy of aggrandizing the Thai monarchy as advantageous to US strategy too, as a "potent politico-cultural weapon for [communist] counterinsurgency."¹¹⁵ Significant US administrators expressed their acceptance of Sarit's decisions. Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, who is quoted saying that though he was initially "skeptical" of Sarit and his coup, he "approved of Sarit's arrest of communists," and that even if he disapproved of Sarit's coup execution, he accepted that Sarit "was in a much better position than any outsider to judge the necessity of the means he used."¹¹⁶ This was a paradoxical, though characteristic, statement from a representative of a nation notorious for political interference. After the completion of the *pattiwat*, the United States State Department announced officially that Sarit's coup would not affect Thai-US relations.

Even if the failure of the government installed after the 1957 coup was in many ways an embarrassment for Sarit, it also provided him with a prime example of how reform of an existing institution was not enough for Thailand. Sarit was a staunch critic of 'Western constitutionalism,' and strongly resentful of having to constantly appease all factions of his 'democratic' elected government. With the descent into chaos of the 1957 elected *Chatsangkhomniyom* government, Sarit had an even stronger case for why *pattiwat* was

¹¹⁵ Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 135-179.; Thongchai Winichakul, "Thailand's Hyper-Royalism: Its Past Success and Present Predicament," *Trends in Southeast Asia*, no. 7 (2016): 5-6.

¹¹⁶ The Office of Hugh S. Cumming, "497. Memorandum From the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Cumming) to the Acting Secretary of State," *US Department of State Office of the Historian*, October 20, 1958, (published online; available at the archives of the Department of State, Central Files, 792.00/10-2058). Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v15/d497>.

necessary. Through his 1958 *pattiwat*, Sarit took matters into his own hands, inspired by what he felt claimed was the best political system for Thailand at this point in time - a 'despotic paternalistic' dictatorial government that claimed to value true 'Thainess' and Thai-style leadership, and wielded a lot of its legitimacy through exploiting the image of the monarchy, the ultimate symbol of 'Thainess.' Ironically, even after being so openly critical of the existing Thai establishment and of compromising with the West before his 1958 *pattiwat*, Sarit found himself forced to work within a hopelessly fractured Thai political situation that he was unable to single-handedly change. His work included having to cooperate with an institution he was critical of, and compromising on some of his radical pledges, resorting to some of the same tactics used by leaders he had criticized. Sarit passed away in 1963, and was succeeded by Thanom Kittikachorn. Thanom's cabinet, and the challenges Sarit left to him, will be addressed at the end of this chapter.

SARIT: CHANNELING THE 'POKHUN'

This chapter began with the idea that perhaps "there was not yet something or someone powerful enough to uplift the monarchy back into a place of significant political dominance." The following sections will show how Sarit became the perfect 'someone' for this stage of the monarchy's journey to reasserting its political power. Sarit and the monarchy, represented by King Bhumibol, could be described to have had a 'symbiotic,' mutually-beneficial relationship. As many scholars of Thai history, such as Thak, have argued, the relationship between Sarit and the monarchy was essential not only for the monarchy's reassertion of power, but also for Sarit to bolster his own image. The following sections will outline some examples of how this was

achieved throughout Sarit and Thanom's regimes.

In an Army Radio broadcast discussing from August, 1965, a Revolutionary Council spokesperson expressed Sarit's 'revolutionary' manifesto:

"The revolution of October 20, 1958 abolished democratic ideas borrowed from the West and suggested that it would build a democratic system that would be appropriate to the special characteristics and realities of the Thai. It will build a democracy, a Thai way of democracy."¹¹⁷

This paper has already discussed Sarit's definition of *pattiwat*, and described how Sarit aimed to draw on 'traditional' forms of leadership and culture to set Thailand down a path that was beneficial for the country, and rid the country of unhelpful, irresponsibly-implemented 'foreign' influences. This section will elaborate more on the alternative form of government Sarit wanted to establish in place of 'democratic ideals borrowed from the West' in order to create 'Thai democracy,' and what the Thai monarchy had to do with this.

Where Phibun wanted himself to be seen as an omnipotent, supreme leader, inspired by Western leaders including the *fuhrer* leadership style, Sarit branded himself differently, marketing himself as more of a personable, 'tiger-father' figure who ruled over his people with 'tough love.'¹¹⁸ He wanted to be seen as a relatable, personable figure, while also being a dictator. It is also noteworthy that even though Phibun occasionally drew on monarchical clout for his own political gain, he had contributed to the general political diminishment of the monarchy ever since 1932 where he was directly involved in the Siamese Revolution. Sarit, on

¹¹⁷ Chaloeontiarana, 101. [Transcription from Army Radio "20," August 17, 1965, in *Prachathipatai Bab Thai* (Bangkok: Chokchai Thewet Press, 1965), 65.]

¹¹⁸ Chaloeontiarana, 94.

the other hand, fully embraced the monarchy from the very beginning, working hard to uplift the monarchy's image out of the subversion it experienced under Phibun. Thus, he had demonstrated from the very beginning that he was a pro-monarchist politician, making him trustworthy for the monarchy. Further, he did this to such an extent that as of the mid-1950s, the monarchy and military were arguably on a similar league in terms of political power, with the monarchy the most politically significant it had been since it was overthrown in the early 20th century. Both Phibun and Sarit were ultimately oppressive dictators and opportunists. However, they were not oppressive dictators and opportunists in the same way; there were specific reasons for why Sarit proceeded in the way he did in order to secure legitimacy and reverence for his regime.

Though Sarit had gained a lot of popularity and respect both within military and popular circles after his involvement in the 1947 coup, as well as his publicity campaigns, he still wanted to grow his legitimacy more, particularly in the eyes of people who did not yet see him as an established politician. Sarit was a military commander; though he was now technically a politician, he did not have the advantages his politically-experienced predecessors had. Sarit also did not identify as a Bangkokian urban elite; he was of Isan heritage, and therefore seen by many as a man of the 'peripheries.' Moreover, Sarit was not Western-educated in the same way many Thai politicians, especially those affiliated with the Democrat party, were. Further, as mentioned earlier, his personality was seen as unpalatable by many because of his attitude and methods of asserting control. Thak, James Ockey, and Craig Reynolds have all argued to some extent that Sarit embodied the Thai archetype of *nakleng* ('tough guy,' gangster-style leader).¹¹⁹ Not only

¹¹⁹ Craig J. Reynolds, *Power, Protection and Magic in Thailand: The Cosmos of a Southern Policeman* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019), xiii.

did this likely make him less credible as a politician by international, Western standards, this also meant that Sarit was not conditioned to embrace liberalism or democracy in the same way many of his predecessors had. Sarit turned to Thai domestic models as his inspiration. Even if he was familiar with what liberalism and democracy looked like, he was unlikely to feel affinity with those systems, and likely did not relate to the liberalizing reform proposals of the 1932 Revolution.

Blaming political instability in Thailand on “the sudden transplantation of alien institutions onto our soil without careful preparation [and] without proper regard to the circumstances that prevail in our homeland,” likely referring to events such as the 1932 Revolution, Sarit organized his leadership inspired by what he saw to be a ‘traditional’ Thai ruling style.¹²⁰ One example of this was how Sarit articulated his three ideal societal tiers: the *rat/ratthaban* (state and government), *kharatchakan* (bureaucracy), and *prachachon* (people).¹²¹ While slightly different, this is reminiscent of the hierarchical structure of pre-1932 Kingdom of Siam, dating back to the reign of Ayutthaya King Boromatrailoknat (Trailok), who ruled during the 15th century. The Ayutthaya model, interestingly, was defined with the *devaraja* (divine ruler) at the top, followed by the *kharatchakan*, and then the *ratsadon* (the popular masses). The most striking difference here is the fact that Sarit chose the term *rat/ratthaban*, meaning the ‘state and government,’ rather than *devaraja*, meaning the ‘divine ruler’ or ‘king.’

This three-tiered system represented a ‘horizontal’ model of rule, rather than a ‘vertical’ one represented by Western-standard democratic systems with political parties.¹²² Through the

¹²⁰ Chaloeontiarana, 100.

¹²¹ Ibid., 104.

¹²² Chaloeontiarana, 104.

promotion of this structure, and his claim that ‘alien institutions’ were incompatible with Thai society, Sarit implied that Western-style political parties were not compatible with Thai politics. By drawing inspiration from a system used by a great king of the ancient Ayutthaya Kingdom, Sarit claimed he was reviving a ‘genuine,’ ‘Indigenous’ Thai system. This is a fundamental idea underlying the Sarit system, and important for Sarit’s justification of his authoritarian regime.

Further, in terms of his own character, Sarit was still disadvantaged in the world of Thai politics due to prejudices held against him regarding his character, and his lack of credible credentials. He thus needed to draw on structures, ideally digestible by the Thai people, in order to increase his political power and increase his regime’s credibility. In order to do this, Sarit defined his role in the system based, again, on ancient Siamese concepts, namely the Sukhothai concept of *pokhun*, and Ayutthaya concept of *devaraja*.

The *pokhun* concept was the foundation of Sukhothai kingship. Sarit aligned himself in particular with King Ramkamhaeng, one of the great kings of the Sukhothai era who established Theravada Buddhism as Siam’s state religion. The phrase ‘paternal government’ closely embodies the *pokhun* idea; an ideal Sukhothai ruler must possess good *thamma* (Pali: *dharma*), meaning a sense of righteousness, as well as the Buddhist *thotsaphiratchatam* (Pali: *dasavidhārājadhamma*), meaning the Ten Kingly Virtues.¹²³ Further, the *pokhun* idea is also tied to Buddhist concepts of family values and filial piety, values fundamental not only to Indigenous Southeast Asian cultures, but many other Asian cultures or cultures influenced in any way by Buddhism. The Thai term ‘pho’ translates to ‘father,’ and ‘khun’ in this context translates to ‘noble.’ The ‘traditional’ model for an ideal *pho-luk* (father-son) relationship was used as an

¹²³ Chaloeontiarana, 106-109.

analogy for how the King and his subjects should relate; though the King was an exceptionally powerful individual, he was portrayed as a benevolent, father-like figure, who only had the best intentions for his subjects - his children. The *pokhun* was expected to be personable, like the head of a household, where he was the fatherly ‘head,’ and his subjects were his ‘household,’ and would interact closely with his subjects, for example, sit atop his *Prathaen Manangkhasila* (a special stone platform) and listen to comments and requests from his people. A *pokhun* was not a tyrant; assuming that the aforementioned family values are upheld, a *pokhun* should only act in the best interests of his subjects.

In contrast, a Ayutthaya-era *devaraja* would be accurately described as a ‘despot.’ After the fall of the Sukhothai era and the rise of the Ayutthaya era, many Hindu-Khmer influences were brought to Siam. The *pokhun* standard of kingship was transformed into the *devaraja* standard, inspired by Hindu-Khmer tradition. ‘*Devaraja*’ translates directly as ‘divine king;’ respectively, the role of the King during Siam’s Ayutthaya era was more removed from ‘commoner’ society. The King occupied a more distant position in Siamese society, and was less personable than a Sukhothai *pokhun* would have been. It was also during this era where more specific laws and societal expectations became articulated, such as taboos restricting how physically close ‘mortal’ subjects were allowed to get to the ‘divine’ monarch.¹²⁴

How did Sarit use these two concepts to consolidate his power? We must recall that in 1932, the Thai King was demoted from ‘absolute monarch’ to mere ‘cultural figurehead.’ As Chapter 1 demonstrated, figures within the monarchy attempted to reassert the monarchy’s

¹²⁴ Fred Riggs, *The Thai Bureaucracy: Institutional Change and Development* (Honolulu, HI: East West Center Press, 1966).

political power, but was constantly suppressed by coups and individual leaders like Phibun, so that they would remain subordinate to the military, which managed to become the dominant political entity. Chapter 1 also suggested that perhaps the monarchy did not have the outlet, or momentum, to successfully reassert its power. In the 1950s, Sarit became the key to the political revival the monarchy had been looking for, and it would all be thanks to Sarit's claim to a *pokhun-devaraja* hybrid.

For this *pokhun-devaraja* hybrid, Thak has coined the phrase ‘despotic paternalism,’ which accurately captures the essence of the Sukhothai as well as Ayutthaya terms. From the above descriptions of these two ruling styles, it initially seems unlikely that a single ruler could act as both a true *pokhun* and a *devaraja* simultaneously. A *pokhun* was supposed to be a personable, ‘fatherly’ ruler who, even with the highest power in the land, was still a human. A *devaraja*, on the other hand, was a *divine* king who was holy, to be feared and revered.

Sarit did not possess royal blood, and therefore had no claim to divine kingship. However, claiming a *pokhun*-adjacent title for himself was not impossible. In fact, framing himself as a *pokhun* was arguably very marketable for Sarit, considering his ‘tiger-father’ ruling style as well as his individual persona. In Craig Reynolds’ work, *Power, Protection and Magic in Thailand: The Cosmos of a Southern Policeman*, Reynolds theorizes on the leadership style of local Thai statesmen, particularly those of the Thai ‘peripheries.’ He states that many Thai provincial statesmen, whether called *nakleng* (gangsters), *jaopho* (godfathers), or otherwise, often ruled using fear, exhibited through frequent performances of violence or potential for violence. These statesmen, according to Reynolds, are stereotypically associated with the use of “violence, brutality, belligerence, hedonism and lawbreaking” to exert control over their

subjects.¹²⁵ Simultaneously, however, the *nakleng* stereotype goes deeper; though *naklengs* might seem like ‘tough guys,’ they are often of “generous spirit and dignified bearing,” acting the way they do only for the greater good of the people they are responsible for.¹²⁶ They are also believed to be able to wield extraordinary power, drawing from the cosmological, mythological, and other religious beliefs of those they ruled over, to justify their power. Though Reynolds’ work does not focus exclusively on Sarit, the picture he here paints of leaders of the Thai peripheries that could in many ways be used to describe Sarit.

While these traits undeniably hold moral weight, I am not using the term *nakleng* to convey any sense of moral judgment of Sarit. I am using it to convey how Sarit’s ruling style is very reminiscent of *nakleng* leadership, and how he perhaps framed his *nakleng* attitude as a sort of rougher-around-the-edges brand of a *pokhun*, making his ruling style more palatable to Thais in the ‘centers’ and ‘peripheries’ alike. Whether one chooses to call him an *akleng* or *pokhun*-style ruler, or both, Sarit wanted to be seen as a ruler who cared for his people like a tough father. Even if his ‘parenting’ was harsh, it was all apparently out of love. Sarit accepted he was not the kind of refined, classy ruler the West or Thai urban elite would have found palatable. What he was instead was a proud Isan man, leading with a ‘real, traditionally Thai’ style of leadership, that he defined himself, without conceding his ‘Indigenous’ edge for anyone, especially not for respectability politics. He wielded a lot of control through terror and inciting fear, but Sarit would have framed it, his methods of control were all out of “love and mutual

¹²⁵ Reynolds, 110.

¹²⁶ Ibid., xiii. [Definition of *nakleng* according to Reynolds: “tough guy of generous spirit and dignified bearing, especially but not exclusively in rural areas; local political leader with these characteristics; gambler (nineteenth century).”]

goodwill.”¹²⁷

Some plans for the ‘goodwill’ Sarit preached included his promises to reduce taxes and general living costs, revolutionize Thai trade, reform public transport, as well as facilitate more community gathering spaces and events. For example, Sarit aimed to establish more local food markets, inspired by the widely popular Sunday market at Sanam Luang, to increase people’s access to produce.¹²⁸ Additionally, in true *pokhun* fashion, Sarit made a point to go on excursions both in Bangkok as well as in non-central regions. This was both a way for him to convince the masses that he was not just a detached, uninterested politician, and that like a ‘father,’ he wanted to make personal connections with his ‘children.’ It was also an attempt to foster ‘national unity’ by ensuring the ‘periphery’ felt included under his leadership. After all, one of Sarit’s revolutionary goals was his idea of *samakhitham*, or ‘national solidarity.’¹²⁹ In order to do this, he found it important to always remind the Thai ‘peripheries’ that he himself identified deeply with his Isan heritage, and that he would never neglect them, reflecting his inclusion of the ‘peripheries’ in his policies.¹³⁰ For example, Sarit contributed heavily to popularizing tourism to the Thai ‘peripheries,’ such as rural areas of the *Isan* region of Thailand, rather than promoting tourism only to the ‘centers,’ such as Bangkok. He claimed that by encouraging Thais to engage in domestic tourism, wealth from the ‘centers’ would be redistributed to the ‘peripheries,’ and encourage Thais from different backgrounds to interact with each other, so that the spirit of

¹²⁷ Chaloeontiarana, 106. [Quotation obtained from Sarit Thanarat, "Khamprasai nuang nai Wan Khroprop Pi haeng Kantang Khanaratthamontri [Cabinet Anniversary Speech]," February 10, 1960, in Pramuan Sunthoraphot I, 127-128]

¹²⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹²⁹ Chaloeontiarana., 101. [Quotation obtained from Sarit Thanarat, "Khamprasai nai Wan Chat [National Day Speech]," June 24, 1959, in Pramuan Sunlzoraplzot, I, 16]

¹³⁰ Chaloeontiarana, 131.

‘national unity’ could be strengthened.¹³¹ Examples of initiatives and activities that were promoted to engage people in domestic tourism included village tours, elephant sanctuaries and elephant riding activities, and markets selling ‘locally-made’ consumer goods.¹³²

Sarit was arguably the first Thai Prime Minister to make an active effort to integrate the peripheries into the ‘pan-Thai’ idea. As explored in Chapter 1, though Phibun encouraged Thai nationalism, his vision for an ideal Thailand was one that embraced Western ‘modernization,’ though this vision prioritized the ‘Bangkok center’ and marginalized the ‘periphery.’ Sarit’s integration of the ‘peripheries’ was in line with his interpretation of nationalism - one that, to him, was inclusive of the kind of ‘Thai’ identity that he personally identified with.¹³³

Sarit also reinforced his *pokhun*-style persona through propaganda. Sarit commissioned Major-General Luang Wichitwathakan, a novelist, playwright, and politician known for his compelling, nationalistic works, to spread propaganda that bolstered Sarit’s image as a benevolent, fatherly politician. Luang Wichit’s works often referred to Thai monarchical history, such as the story of Sukhothai King Ramkhamhaeng, emphasizing the benevolence of these

¹³¹ Phillips, 165.

¹³² Though this is out of scope of this thesis, it is interesting to consider and question the actual impact of Sarit’s ‘periphery-inclusive’ initiatives on Thais from the ‘peripheries.’ Though Sarit claimed that these initiatives would help foster solidarity and unity between ‘central’ and ‘periphery’ Thai folk through exposure to each other, the interactions between the host and visitor groups, the social dynamics made these interactions more complex than Sarit’s ideal presented. For more on this topic, see Chapter 4 of Linda K. Richter’s *The Politics of Tourism in Asia* (1989).

¹³³ Ironically, Sarit’s ‘integration’ of the Thai ‘peripheries’ arguably complicated Thai politics further. Regardless of whether the ‘centers’ and ‘peripheries’ ever felt a sense of connection or solidarity, they certainly did not feel these things during the mid-20th century. The drastically different level of economic development seen in the ‘peripheries’ versus in the ‘centers,’ for example, was one major factor in this. Bangkok was, and continues to be, a starkly different representation of Thailand than the rest of the nation. Thus, even if Sarit believed that by exposing ‘centers’ and ‘peripheries’ to each other, he could foster a nationwide sense of ‘pan-Thai’ solidarity, this was a greater challenge than Sarit perhaps expected. This topic would require another study to do it justice; this thesis will not discuss this in detail.

leaders.¹³⁴ By projecting the mythologies of ancient Thai role models to the masses, Sarit not only added legitimacy to his regime, but also encouraged a sense of national pride based on the greatness of Thailand's historical monarchs. It is also observable through the above example that through using ancient ideas to legitimize himself, Sarit simultaneously spurred a glorified revival of 'the monarchy' as a concept in general. This is a prime example of perhaps how the monarchy was provided with such a golden opportunity to reassert its power during the Sarit era.

This brings us to a discussion of the *devaraja* or 'despotism' aspect of Sarit's 'despotic paternalism,' which gave Sarit's brand of authoritarianism its uniquely unquestionable edge. Sarit could not have obtained adjacency to the power of the *devaraja* alone; he himself could never be a divine king. However, Sarit wanted to channel this *devaraja* potential, as his secret ingredient to consolidate his authoritarian control. While he did not entirely make a *devaraja* out of Bhumibol, used it to lift the monarchy's image out of the ashes of their 1932 political demotion, so that Sarit could, by association, tap into the monarchy's potential for divine kingship.

BHUMIBOL: CHANNELING THE 'DEVARAJA'

Earlier, this study mentioned Sarit's fortification of his dictatorial powers through Article 17 of the Interim Constitution of 1959, and through his broadening of the definition of what could constitute as *lèse-majesté* through amendments to Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code. This section will elaborate on how through Sarit's use of legislation and propaganda to 'protect,' uplift, and support Bhumibol and the Thai monarchy, Sarit and the monarchy eventually

¹³⁴ Chaloeontiarana, 116.

developed a mutually-beneficial relationship where each institution fed off of the other's legitimacy.¹³⁵ In particular, Sarit wanted an outlet to channel the power of the *devaraja*, something one only had the claim to if one had divine endorsement. For Sarit, King Bhumibol would be his outlet.

As with his self-promoting propaganda, Sarit made an active effort to raise the monarchy out of the detached, passive role that it had assumed as a result of the 1932 Revolution and the military government's suppression of the institution throughout the earlier half of the 20th century. Sarit also organized ceremonies, national holidays, and rituals to promote the monarchy as the face of the Thai nation. He revived the royal *kathin* ceremony which involved the King's presentation of robes to monks, a tradition that ceased in light of the decline of monarchical popularity, and the Revolution in the 1930s.¹³⁶ In 1960, Thailand's 'National Day' was officially changed from the 24th of June, which commemorated the 1932 Siamese Revolution, to the 5th of December, which was the birthday of King Bhumibol.¹³⁷ Regular media broadcasts, such as radio features, showcased the daily lives of the King and his family members, recounting some of their day-to-day activities, portraying them as likable, hard-working, charitable individuals who, while still literally untouchable by regular Thai people and considered superhuman beings, were more than just faceless figureheads who did not do anything to contribute to the nation. These examples all support once more Sarit's aim of reviving the glory of the monarchy, using the model of *devaraja* as his basis.

¹³⁵ Peter A. Jackson, "Markets, Media, and Magic: Thailand's Monarch as a 'virtual deity,'" *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (2009): 361-380. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649370902949366>.

¹³⁶ Chaloeontiarana, 208.

¹³⁷ Winichakul, "Thailand's Hyper-Royalism," 5.

Further, as part of Sarit's definition of *riaproy*, one was expected to learn and abide by regulations of *riaproy* etiquette when in the presence of the King, if one was to get the opportunity to meet him. For example, 'commoner' Thais who knew they were going to be in the presence of royals were taught to curtsy in a correct manner, and to remember to never stand physically higher than a royal while in their presence. This is reminiscent of the aforementioned Ayutthaya taboos against non-royals touching royals, demonstrating more of how Sarit fortified the idea of King Bhumibol as a divine or semi-divine King.

Yet, Sarit did not shape the image of Bhumibol to be entirely like that of an Ayutthayan *devaraja*. Earlier, it was noted that in contrast to the Ayutthaya model that put *devaraja* at the top, Sarit's 'three tier' model put *rat/ratthaban* at the top of his hierarchy meaning the 'state/government.' This clarifies the crucial point that while Sarit would boost the image of the monarchy, he did not intend to do so in a way that put the monarchy *above* himself or his regime. Unlike in the Ayutthaya era, the general tier of the *rat/ratthaban* ruled as the hegemony. Though there is no explicit reference to the monarchy under the title of *rat/ratthaban*, this choice of a label included the monarchy as well as the government in this tier. This further reinforced Sarit's manifesto for his *pattiwat*; in his eyes, he was not causing Thailand to 'regress' to a time of absolute monarchy. Rather, his *rat/ratthaban* was one that combined the powers of Sarit, the father of the nation, and of the monarchy, the symbol of legitimacy.

Thus, while Sarit encouraged a high level of reverence for the monarchical image, he also incorporated aspects of the *pokhun* archetype into portrayals of Bhumibol's image, in ways similar to how Sarit branded himself. One way Sarit achieved this was through his organization of frequent opportunities for King and other members of the royal family to be seen in public as

part of ‘royal visits,’ in order to bridge the distance between the *devaraja* and the *prachachon*. Instead of confining them to the palace like Phibun had, Sarit sent King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit on frequent trips around the country, as well as around the world. On visits like these, Sarit and the Thai court worked together to ensure that the royal couple looked pristine, interacted in a personable manner to their hosts, and especially for the international trips, spread ‘Thai culture’ as defined by the Thai state.

Domestically, the Sarit administration created opportunities for the royal family to interact directly with Thai ‘commoners,’ particularly for important life milestones. For example, royals could be invited to preside over marriages, and as of 1960, they began presiding over graduation ceremonies at Thai public universities to distribute diplomas to every single graduate. Thongchai has emphasized that this custom is seldom found in any nation other than Thailand.¹³⁸ Even today, this practice has persisted. The official image taken at these events always features a side-profile perspective of the graduate kneeling and receiving the diploma from the hands of the royal family member, always positioned in a higher position than the student, sitting on an elevated platform. These photographs are often displayed proudly in the graduates’ houses. Not only did these images certify that a graduate had received a degree, which was already a very prestigious thing to have; these images also served as status symbols because they presented the graduates in the auspicious presence of the monarchy. Having every single Thai public university graduate go through this sort of event ritualized this uniquely Thai experience, developing millions of parasocial relationships between the Thai people and members of the royal family, encouraging the people’s loyalty to the royals, and thus ingraining monarchism deeply into the

¹³⁸ Winichakul, 18.

fabric of Thai society.

The royal family members were also sent on visits to the Thai countryside, often bringing with them material aid such as food and blankets, and sometimes coming for purposes of demonstrating new technological mechanisms to make rural life 'easier,' such as new irrigation technology for farming.¹³⁹ This was particularly important as part of Sarit's desire for his administration and for the King to be seen as inclusive and caring of the whole nation, not just the central region or Bangkok. All official royal visits were extensively reported on in the Thai media, and always framed by the media as evidence that the royal family was caring of all Thai people, regardless of their background.¹⁴⁰

The Thai monarchy also served as ambassadors of Thai culture to the international community. Phillips notes that within just the final four years of Sarit's administration before he passed away, the King, often accompanied by the Queen, visited as much as 23 countries, acting as a symbolic cultural ambassador for the Thai nation, building rapport and respect for Thailand, and spreading awareness of 'Thai culture.'¹⁴¹ Queen Sirikit, for example, would be dressed in a combination of Western designer clothes and Thai 'traditional' wear for her visits abroad, reflecting the state's desire for Thailand to be seen as both a nation that embraced 'modern' concepts as well as its own rich history.

It is also worth noting the role the monarchy played as an excellent liaison between Sarit and the American establishment. As this was the Cold War era, the United States practiced ideological strategies as well as military strategies as part of its containment efforts; the Thai

¹³⁹ Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty*, 88-93.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Phillips, 180.

monarchy was used as an ideological weapon. Being a monarchy, it was inherently an antithesis to communism. Further, as already witnessed, Sarit shaped the monarchy to be an essential part of Thai nationalism and daily life. Since communism was apparently a threat to the monarchy, and by extension a threat to 'Thainess,' Sarit and the US were thus able to send messages to the people that if they were to be good Thai citizens, they had to resist communism. This was effective because it translated and equated American fears into Thai ones. 'Safeguarding capitalism' was likely not as impactful a cause for Thais as much as 'protecting the monarchy' was. In Paul Handley's words, "to the Thai public, thanks to Cold War propaganda, the communists were not opponents of capitalism, but the evil enemy who wanted to destroy Thailand by abolishing the monarchy and everything that was Thai."¹⁴²

EARLY 1960s: THE STATE OF THE MONARCHY, POST-SARIT

This public relations strategy surrounding the Thai monarchy was very successful. Thongchai notes how particularly during Sarit and Thanom's offices, popular displays of reverence and love for the monarchy grew significantly.¹⁴³ This was likely thanks to Sarit's propaganda. In turn, because Sarit's personal image was very consciously tied to the monarchy's image, whenever the monarchy benefited, Sarit also did. Sarit and the monarchy, especially through the character of King Bhumibol, thus developed a mutually beneficial relationship.

To the monarchy, this was an hopeful time for the reassertion of its political power. Though the King was still adjusting to this level of notoriety, with this level of public approval

¹⁴² Handley, *The King Never Smiles*, 192.

¹⁴³ Thongchai, 5.

and reverence, increasing his political activity in Thai society seemed like something he could now do with less caution. As Irene Stengs writes, by the late Sarit administration, thanks to the closer relationship he now had with ‘commoner’ Thais like students and members of the private sector as a result of personalized propaganda around his image, Bhumibol felt like he had more direct access to the ‘people,’ and therefore influencing those people.¹⁴⁴ Stengs also notes that though the government was still a strong force backing the King’s actions and determining his behavior, the changing status of the King’s role in society allowed him to start “[developing]...power of his own, controlling politics rather than being under political control.¹⁴⁵ In 1963, after Sarit passed away, Bhumibol personally appointed Thanom Kittikachorn as Sarit’s successor, demonstrating how much more the King was now getting involved in politics compared to before.

DECEMBER 1963: PRELUDE TO CHAPTER 3 (THE SECOND THANOM CABINET)

Thanom Kittikachorn held the Prime Minister’s position until the 1973 people’s uprising. Thanom tried to continue the work Sarit had started. Most crucially, this included further aggrandizing the Thai monarchical institution, ruling by dictatorship, as well as fighting communism and enemies of the state. Thanom claimed he would work to restore Thailand to a parliamentary democracy, and eventually oversaw the creation of a new constitution, though this would only be effective in 1968, with elections in 1969. In the meantime, however, Sarit’s 1959 Interim Constitution continued to be in effect, which Thanom took advantage of, for example by

¹⁴⁴ Irene Stengs. “A Kingly Cult: Thailand’s Guiding Lights in a Dark Era.” *Etnofoor* 12, no. 2 (1999): 64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25757965>.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

ordering the execution of 11 enemies of the state, as well as the imprisonment of 34.¹⁴⁶ In 1969, elections were finally held, where Thanom's *Sahaprachathai* Party won a parliamentary majority. However, the effects of the new constitution and election did not last long. After just two years, Thanom launched a self-coup in late 1971, abolishing this constitution, leaving Thailand constitution-less, so that he could once more take advantage of this time and execute 37 people, imprison 60, and bring Thailand again under full military dictatorship.¹⁴⁷

In 1972, Thanom issued a constitution, but one which enabled him to oppress more freely. This constitution contained a revised, even more oppressive Article 17, which Thanom used to execute, imprison, and detain even more people. Tyrell Haberkorn observes that a majority of Thanom's detainees were student activists calling for the resignation of Thanom and his cabinet.¹⁴⁸ In the next chapter, we will witness the dramatic culmination of popular discontent against the Thanom government, with students and workers spearheading the anti-Thanom movement. These uprisings would result in even more arrests and fatalities, independent of those mentioned above. We will also witness further how Thanom's cabinet used Article 112 and *lèse-majesté* accusations to justify its repressive acts.

LATE 1950s-EARLY 1960s: GROWTH OF THE THAI COMMUNIST INSURGENCY

It is worth providing background on the potential for communist activity in Thailand during this era, as it will play a key role in the politics of Thai leaders leading up to the Prem Tinsulanonda administration. It must also be noted that the communist movement in Thailand

¹⁴⁶ Haberkorn, *In Plain Sight*, 73.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

never became anywhere near as strong as those of its fellow Southeast Asian neighbors, such as Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia. The insurgency grew during Sarit's regime, and peaked during Thanom's regime, with this peak correlated with the people's discontent towards the corruption and oppression of these two leaders.

During the early 1960s, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) began to develop into a more concrete movement, gradually recruiting and training members, and building up a military faction. Most of the CPT's activity was found in *Isan*, or Northeastern Thailand, considered a 'periphery' among most of Thailand's Bangkokian urban elite, and were long seen by them as rural, unregulated, uncivilized, and more at risk of falling to communism.¹⁴⁹ Especially with the Thai North and Northeast being of closer geopolitical proximity to key communist insurgency battlegrounds of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Thai and US anti-communist efforts made peripheries like *Isan* a policy priority.

Nevertheless, CPT activity arguably did not reach levels of genuine concern for the government during Sarit's era. Though Sarit's anti-communist efforts and repression likely facilitated the growth of the Thai communist insurgency and CPT to an extent, tensions between the CPT and Thai administration rose the highest during Thanom's era. By 1978, the CPT would have around 14,000 armed insurgents, 12,000 armed village militia, around 70,000 active general supporters, and spheres of influence in 52 out of 72 Thai provinces.¹⁵⁰ The insurgents also worked closely with communists in North Vietnam and China for their campaigns in the Indochina War. Just like allyship with the Thai government was strategically important for the

¹⁴⁹ M. Ladd Thomas, "Communist Insurgency in Thailand: Factors Contributing to Its Decline," *Asian Affairs* 13, no. 1 (1986), 17.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

US anti-communist movement, allyship with the Thai CPT and rural communist insurgent bases was important for the Chinese and Vietnamese communist movement. Thanom, working closely with the United States, executed counterinsurgency efforts against internal as well as external communist threats, including allowing the United States free reign over Thai air bases.

A lot of the CPT's growth could be attributed to Thanom's generally oppressive leadership, but in particular, attributed to the fallout after the 1973 and 1976 uprisings, which attracted many Leftist politicians, student and scholar victims of state-sanctioned violence, proletariat, and labor activists to the CPT. The next chapter will continue the story of the Thai CPT, and demonstrate how despite its steady growth, it would soon experience a period of decline. The next chapter, though about more than just the Thai communist insurgency, will demonstrate the central role the CPT played in the political climate of the 1980s, and in Prem Tinsulanonda's administration.

CHAPTER 3: NETWORKING THE MONARCHY, 1973-1988

EARLY 1970s: THE PEAK OF THE THAI COMMUNIST INSURGENCY

The 1970s marked a major turning point for the presence of the ‘communist insurgency’ in Thailand, and the question of the ‘threat of communism’ greatly shaped Thai society during this decade, regardless of whether this ‘threat’ was significant enough to tangibly affect Thailand. Though it would never grow to the ranks of the communist movements in Cambodia, Laos, or Vietnam, and though no ‘communist revolution’ would ever manifest in Thailand in the same way they manifested in those other nations, the CPT is an important factor for this chapter. The last chapter discussed the steady growth of the communist insurgency in Thailand, with its roots in the Thai ‘peripheries,’ supported by foreign entities. During the 1970s, the CPT would grow exponentially, though this success would be short-lived.

The rapid growth of the CPT in the 1970s was largely due to the widespread unpopularity of Thai military dictators, such as Thanom, and the post-1976 Prime Minister, Thanin Kraivichien. This was further aggravated by his cabinet’s unsuccessful containment strategy, such as through applying excessive brute military force onto insurgents and using ineffective attack strategies such as the ‘sweep and encirclement’ of insurgent camps.¹⁵¹ Additionally, as the following sections will discuss further, the government’s gross mishandling of popular dissent, particularly after the October 6th Thammasat Massacre, significantly increased the popularity and manpower of the CPT, with around 2,000 individuals angered by the aftermath of the event joining the CPT in 1976.¹⁵² Leading up to this event, many already knew that Thanom and the

¹⁵¹ Thomas, “Communist Insurgency in Thailand,” 20.

¹⁵² Ibid.

non-monarchy ruling elite was not to be trusted. This event, however, created severe disillusionment among the people. The monarchy would also expose themselves as untrustworthy, opportunistic, and perhaps not actually the benevolent protectors of the people, as they had presented themselves to be.

What is important here about the CPT's history is the context it provides for this chapter, and what it reveals to us about the feelings of the Thai people towards the administration, and therefore the Thai monarchy, as well as how the Thai monarchy reacted to the people's dissent. When analyzing the history of any Southeast Asian or any sort of 'Third World' nation during the 20th century, even in a nation like Thailand that was seen by the world as a containment weapon of the United States during the Cold War, it is crucial to consider how many efforts labeled as 'communist' attracted support for other reasons, such as decolonial, anti-dictatorship, anti-establishment, and/or anti-elite sentiments. Though some individuals in the CPT were aligned with the Soviet or Chinese 'communist' central governments, and some had studied Marxist or other socialist thought, many did not, and were not attracted to the movement for these things at all. Some were attracted to 'communist' activism for those aforementioned 'other' reasons.

Whether or not the CPT actually stood for these things, students were most attracted to the organization for what it symbolized *to them*, those being anti-capitalist values, anti-dictatorship, and a rejection of the current ruling establishment. This 'establishment' did not just include Thanom and his cabinet - it also included the monarchy. Perhaps, especially after the immensely traumatic events they had experienced and the sense of social ostracization they suffered from as a result, the CPT also symbolized to the students a refuge, or somewhere they

could find non-judgmental community. The CPT's rise during this era is indicative of how people across Thailand, be it the original CPT members or the ones who joined after October 1976, were failed by the Thai administration, and saw the CPT as a potential beacon of hope.

OCTOBER 14, 1973: THE POPULAR UPRISING

The earlier portion of this chapter will focus on the history surrounding two popular uprisings, one in 1973 and one in 1976. Both were anti-Thanom, anti-dictatorship, pro-constitution, and had significant student involvement. The two contrasted, however, in the ways in which the monarchy responded to them. It was these responses that would mark another shift in the monarchy's place in Thai society.

The last chapter insinuated the escalation of people's discontent toward the military government, especially under Thanom's leadership, rooted in frustration with the regime's dictatorship, corruption, and inefficiency. Katherine Bowie cites the Thung Yai affair of April 29th, 1973, as a catalyst for the eruption of the October Popular Uprising.¹⁵³ It involved the crash of an army-owned helicopter that was returning from Thung Yai carrying many carcasses, likely the loot from an illegal hunting campaign of rare and endangered animals. Massive public outrage was expressed, but as expected, it was met with repression. Nine students who satirized the incident were expelled from Ramkhamhaeng University in June of that year.

The Thung Yai incident was a representation of everything the people were exhausted with when it came to Thanom's cabinet: lack of transparency, corruption, gross negligence,

¹⁵³ Katherine A. Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 94.

elitism, destruction of national resources, and the violent silencing of people who expressed any criticism of the government. It was not just students who expressed their frustrations. People across the nation, of all kinds of backgrounds, were united in their opposition to the government, including workers, some conservative elites, people of urban areas, and people of rural areas.¹⁵⁴

Protests continued for months, with students at the front of the movement. On October 6th, 1973, thirteen student activists were arrested and charged with treason for disseminating leaflets promoting the overhaul of the current constitution, triggering the largest popular protest in Thai 20th century history on October 13th, 1973. They were apparently arrested for charges of communist activity, referring to their promotion of a new constitution.¹⁵⁵ 400,000 people turned out to demand the release of the thirteen arrested activists.¹⁵⁶ This protest continued into the next day. On the early morning of October 14th, there were reports of violence against the protesters, causing even more people to turn out in support. The government responded with even more violence, killing at least 70 protestors, and injuring around 1,000.¹⁵⁷ Throughout all of this, many protesters appealed for the support of the King, with some even marching while holding up Buddhist flags and images of royal family members, and gathering in front of the Grand Palace.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Bowie, 93.

¹⁵⁵ “วันมหาวิปโยค 2516 (The Day of Great Tragedy),” *Thai Film Archive YouTube Channel*, October 14, 1973, published online October 13, 2020, accessed April 2, 2023, 0:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5iWB_OE-2Q. [Features King Bhumibol’s ‘Wan Maha Wipayok’ speech]

¹⁵⁶ Bowie, 95.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Taipei Times Associated Press, “Former Thai strongman, booted out in 1973, dies,” *Taipei Times*, June 18, 2004, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2004/06/18/2003175532>.

Acting in line with the charitable, fatherly, caring image that the Sarit era had built for them, the monarchy performed support for the masses. During the protests, the royal family allowed some of the protesters to camp out on the palace grounds. Additionally, they made a point to show up in public wearing ‘commoner clothes’ as a symbol of support for the people, and the King held multiple audiences of student activist leaders at the palace to hear their concerns.¹⁵⁹ After the audience on the 13th, King Bhumibol strongly reprimanded the government, demanded that the government release the activists, and for a new constitution to be created.¹⁶⁰ Further, on the 14th, the King made a speech, televised on national news, expressing his deep disappointment regarding the violence. Despite the King being technically excluded from direct political authority, his word held a high amount of moral authority, and his condemnation of the government was debilitating for its legitimacy.

Thanom and his equally oppressive partners Narong Kittikachorn and Prapas Jarusathien, known as the ‘Three Tyrants,’ eventually all resigned from their posts, and fled the country.¹⁶¹ The promulgation for a new constitution was projected for 1974. Parliamentary democracy was established, and the King appointed the respected Thammasat University law faculty dean Sanya Dhammasakdi as the new Prime Minister.¹⁶² The King and other royal family members also made visits to some of the fallen and injured protesters and their families, visiting the injured in hospitals and paying respects to those who were killed. These visits were, as always, televised and reported on over the radio. All of these actions sent a message to the people that the

¹⁵⁹ Winichakul, “Thailand’s Hyper-Royalism,” 5.

¹⁶⁰ Bowie, 95.

¹⁶¹ Taipei Times Associated Press, “Former Thai strongman, booted out in 1973, dies.”

¹⁶² Winichakul, 5.

monarchy was there to protect them, even against the regime. The public now felt as if they had concrete evidence that the monarchy championed the constitution and pro-democracy, making the people feel like the monarchy was on the people's side, and further reinforcing its image.

At this point, we observe that just because the monarchy and military had an amicable, mutually-beneficial relationship during the Sarit era, this did not mean that it was the same under Thanom. As we have witnessed before, government personalities mattered just as much as institutional labels. The context had changed, and therefore, the monarchy reconfigured its behavior. During the Sarit era, the King and the military administration leaned on each other for legitimacy, and had a relatively balanced share of power - though it must be remembered that this was during a time where the monarchy was only just reasserting itself. Now that the monarchy had been built back up again, it did not need the military as much, especially not when the military government was despised by the masses. Thanom's government engaged in violence, maintained government inefficiency, promoted corruption, and actively oppressed marginalized citizens such as those in the Thai 'peripheries.' These were all things that a benevolent, 'fatherly' monarch was supposed to protect the people from. Appearing to be on the side of the people, at this point in the monarchy's political career, was what made most sense for them at this point in time. Though the outcome of October 1973 demonstrated an example of the King more confidently involving himself in Thai political life, this only worked because the King acted in a way that supported the Thai people, because it was the people's approval that gave the monarchy its legitimacy during a time when the military could not be counted on.

The monarchy's contradictory public stance during the 1976 Thammasat student massacre will demonstrate the complexity and opportunism of the Thai monarchy's behavior and

motives. It is true that like the students and the masses of other Thais who turned out to protest the government, the monarchy exhibited genuine motives for wanting to suppress the Thanom government, causing them to take the stance they did. Nevertheless, as was the case with all the different groups involved in the movement against Thanom, the monarchy certainly had its own agenda. What the monarchy chose to present to the people surrounding this incident reflected the stage of the ‘political reassertion journey’ the monarchy was currently in. At this point, the King wanted to be seen as a “benevolent stabilizer,” and after the 1973 incident, one could argue this image was successfully established.¹⁶³ Considering this, it is unsurprising why the October 6th 1976 incident was such a mass-disillusioning event.

1976: A SHIFT IN TONE - THE MONARCHY GROWS ANXIOUS

In the aftermath of the events of October 14th 1973, King Bhumibol made a speech:

“This is a day of great tragedy (*wan mahawippayok*)...for the history of Thailand. For the past six to seven days, discussions and negotiations between the students and government officials have been occurring, until they managed to come to a consensus...In order for us to return the nation back to normal, and to get rid of the source of evil, Thanom Kittikachorn has resigned from his post as Prime Minister.”¹⁶⁴

In his various public statements in light of the October 14th event, the King also reiterated how much he condemned corruption, and expressed his support for the activists fighting for the anti-corruption cause. The events of October 1976 ironized these words.

¹⁶³ Winichakul, “Thailand’s Hyper-Royalism,” 5.

¹⁶⁴ “วันมหาวิปโยค 2516 (The Day of Great Tragedy).”

A lot can change in just three years. Southeast Asia in the mid-to-late 1970s seemed like an increasingly unsafe place for a monarchy to survive, and communism seemed to be its premier enemy. The Vietnamese monarchy had been abolished since 1955, forced to abdicate by the Communist Viet Minh. In December of 1975, with the ascension of the Communist Pathet Lao and the Lao PDR, Prince Sisavang Vatthana of Laos was forced to abdicate, making him the last King of Laos. Further, though the Cambodian monarchy was technically abolished between 1970 to 1993, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia returned to reign as ‘figurehead of state’ in 1975 when the Communist Khmer Rouge took over. Nevertheless, in 1976, Sihanouk retired from his position, reportedly due to fundamental disagreements with the Khmer Rouge’s leadership.¹⁶⁵ There is very little explicit primary source evidence available in the public domain that certifies the monarchy’s fears, however given its behavior in October of 1976, and given the context, it seems highly plausible that the situation in Southeast Asia was indeed causing the monarchy to be very anxious. The Thai monarchy had survived 1932 against the odds, and as the last chapter demonstrated, it was very specific, fortunate circumstances that resurrected the monarchy to the status it was now at. During a time of heightened political instability, with the looming threat of communism, and without a Sarit-like lifeline readily available, King Bhumibol likely felt increased dread for the future of the Chakri dynasty, and for the Thai monarchy.

It was not just the monarchy that was filled with anxiety. The rare moment of popular consensus amongst most Thais, over the events of October 1973, was short-lived. Tensions during the mid-1970s were exceptionally high, with domestic Thai affairs complicated even further by the cataclysmic end of the Second Indochina War, the withdrawal of the United States

¹⁶⁵ Vatikiotis, "Monarchy and modern politics in Southeast Asia."

from Thailand through Operation Palace Lightning, and a general atmosphere where everyone was suspicious of one another. After elections in 1975, Prime Minister Sanya was succeeded by monarchist, royally-descended politician Seni Pramoj, who was temporarily replaced by his brother Kukrit Pramoj, but who then took office again in April 1976. Prime Minister Seni would be the one to face the October 6th event.

Anti-communist sentiment and red-baiting, infused with uniquely Thai right-wing, pro-monarchist narratives, was rampant. Anti-communist propaganda was omnipresent in Thai daily life; examples include the playing of anti-communist song *Nak Phaendin* ('Traitors') frequently over the radio, the presence of posters reading 'Right Kill Left,' and the dissemination of anti-Left fear-mongering leaflets. Further, though various people's movements such as those of the workers, farmers and students were initially united, due to inherent differences as well as the divisive interventions of the government and anti-Left agitator groups, divergence began to occur between different Left-leaning groups. To complicate matters even further, it must be remembered that before the October 6th incident, many students did not even identify with the 'Leftist' label as much as they merely identified as pro-democracy, anti-dictatorship activists with sympathies with the Left, and with marginalized groups in Thai society.

Forces that contributed greatly to the fragmentation among the Thai Left, that increased tensions leading up to the events of October 6th of 1976, and contributed to the political shift that occurred afterwards, included the work of various Right-wing agitator groups such as the *Krathing Daeng* (Red Gaurs), *Nawaphon*, and the Village Scouts. These organizations were created with the sabotage of the Left in mind, and would be deployed by the Thai ruling elite

against the ‘political deviants.’ These groups would all be involved directly in the October 6th uprising.

1976: October 6th Event

Some of the main catalysts for the October 1976 uprisings were the returns from exile of Prapas in August, and Thanom in September, various acts of student rebellion against the government and Right-wing, as well as the ‘skit incident.’ Prapas was brought back with the justification that he was needed to deal with increasing Communist threats in Thailand. Thanom returned and joined the monkhood at Wat Bowonniwet, claiming that he was there to do merit to make up for his wrongdoings.¹⁶⁶ Both of these returns were met with uproar, especially from students. Leading up to October, the students of Thammasat University along with other intellectual institutions across the country held rallies, boycotts, and educational gatherings that aimed to expose the atrocities of the military government. All of these were peaceful protests.

This tension between the students and the government was even further aggravated by a *lèse-majesté* accusation made against the Thammasat University drama club for performing an anti-monarchist skit on October 4th, 1976.¹⁶⁷ Thongchai reports that first, articles about the skit, often accompanied by a photograph of a mock hanging scene featured in the skit, were published by various news outlets, including the paper of the National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT), one of Thailand’s leading student-led political organizing groups that would be responsible for the Thammasat protest on October 6th. On October 5th, after these articles were published, an

¹⁶⁶ Handley, 234.

¹⁶⁷ Thongchai Winichakul, *Moments of Silence: The Unforgetting of the October 6, 1976, Massacre in Bangkok*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2020), 27-53.

unnamed woman allegedly filed a legal claim against the NSCT accusing them of *lèse-majesté*, on the grounds that the hanged victim in the image bore resemblance to the Crown Prince of Thailand. Newspapers such as *Dao Sayam* added fuel to the fire, publishing articles about the skit that outright proclaimed that this was an act of *lèse-majesté*, and that this skit was surely an attack on the Crown Prince and therefore the Thai monarchy. Various students and NSCT members were arrested. This skit, along with practically every other aspect surrounding this ordeal, became very controversial topics in Thai political conversations. To this day, very little is certain about whether this skit was truly an act of *lèse-majesté* at all, whether it was even remotely concerned with the monarchy, who was behind the skit, who reported it, and how much news outlets over-reported or under-reported.¹⁶⁸ The bottom line, regardless, is that all of these above events symbolized a climax in tension between different affinity groups in Thailand along the lines of Left against Right, students against conservatives, and nonconformists against conformists.

Military media sources and Right-wing agitators responded with attacks against the students, promoting the idea that the students were *nak phaengin* (burdens to the land, traitors) even encouraging violence against them.¹⁶⁹ Further, between the uproar regarding the skit incident and the Massacre, the military media began mobilizing Right-wing groups like the Village Scouts, *Krathing Daeng*, *Nawaphon*, and members of the police force, encouraging them to gather around Thammasat University. In response to the arrests of the individuals accused of

¹⁶⁸ For more information, see *Moments of Silence* by Thongchai Winichakul. Not only does it discuss the controversy surrounding the skit and the photograph of the skit, but also all the known details about the whole October 1976 ordeal, and provides an analysis of some of the most widely circulated primary and secondary sources about the event such as Neal Ulevich's Pulitzer-winning photograph of a man being actively lynched and beaten by an individual holding a chair, taken during the 1976 conflict.

¹⁶⁹ Bowie, 25.

lèse-majesté after the skit, students and other members of the Thai public had gathered on the Thammasat campus, in solidarity with each other and as a sit-in to protest the government's actions. To agitate the hearts of these Right-wing, monarchist, pro-establishment groups, radio broadcasts accused the Thammasat students of planning an attack on the auspicious Wat Bowonniwet, and emphasized that by attacking and intimidating the students, these groups would be defending the nation, the monarchy, and the establishment against the *nak phaendin* Communist students. It is worth noting that the army's Yarn Kroh radio station, the main media outlet riling up the Right-wing groups, was run by Lieutenant Colonel Uthan Sanitwong na Ayutthaya, a monarchist general who was related to Queen Sirikit.¹⁷⁰ David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija report that by the early morning of October 6th, around 4,000 Right-wing group members, including many Village Scouts hailing from both within Bangkok and from the 'peripheries,' had gathered around the Thammasat campus.¹⁷¹

Violence allegedly started around 5:45am, which involved the use of violence by military-grade weaponry as well as makeshift arms against the students, acts of sexual violence, lynchings, live burnings, forcing students to strip and lie face down on the ground, looting of the students' possessions, and mutilation of dead bodies.¹⁷² Due to the censorship around this event, the death and injury tolls are still uncertain to this day.¹⁷³ Regardless, it is certain that a lot of

¹⁷⁰ Bowie, 25.

¹⁷¹ David Morell and Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*, (Cambridge: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, 1981), 275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1983.10409041>.

¹⁷² For a full detailed primary source account of the events of October 6th, see Puey Ungphakorn, "Violence and the Military Coup in Thailand," in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (1977). Dr. Puey was the rector of Thammasat University, who later resigned and fled the country, after being heavily blamed for the events of October 6th. All the historical details I have used for my narrative were taken from a combination of Puey and Thongchai's accounts, as well as Bowie's citations of Puey and Thongchai's accounts.

¹⁷³ "เหยื่อความรุนแรง (Victims of Violence)," *บันทึก 6 ตุลา (Doct6 Project)*, last updated October 2018. Accessed April 3rd, 2023. <https://doct6.com/remember/victims>.

human losses came out of this incident, regardless of the numbers.¹⁷⁴ There are far more details about this event that this thesis has the capacity to outline, and the complexities, again, have been contested by various sources of Thai history, with very little consensus over what actually happened. Regardless, given the information available and while temporarily disregarding the complex contradictions and vested interests of the sources, the bottom line is that on October 6th 1976, violence occurred on the Thammasat campus due to the climax of tensions between members of the Thammasat community and members of the Thai Right-wing faction. The Right-wing faction, represented by groups like the Village Scouts and bolstered by the Thai police, were supported behind the scenes by the Thai military, ruling elite, and monarchy, in different ways and to different extents. Therefore, the October 6th 1976 event, despite its similarities and connections to the October 14th 1973 event, was bloodier and more multifaceted.

Right-Wing Groups

In the same way the Thai Left was complex, the Right-wing groups represented different areas of Thai society that promoted Right-wing, fascist, pro-monarchist, anti-communist, and Thai nationalist ideologies. The military, as before, remained powerful. There were also Right-wing groups affiliated with the military, such as the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC), as well as police-affiliated groups such as the PARU, the Crime Suppression Command (CSC), and the Special Operation Command (SOC). Further, there were groups of ‘regular’

¹⁷⁴ While it was mentioned above that there is still little consensus over the death toll and limited information available to the public regarding the people affected, grassroots organizations such as the ‘Doct 6 Project’ have made efforts to publicize their ongoing research about what happened on October 6th of 1976. The page in the citation above contains a list of known individuals who were killed or injured, and information regarding their individual cases.

Thais, including *Nawaphon*, *Krathing Daeng*, and the Village Scouts.¹⁷⁵ Though these were mostly made up of non-politician individuals, they all contributed greatly to the national political atmosphere, and were often sought out for support by the government and monarchy in their counterinsurgency work.

Nawaphon was made up of conservative bureaucrats, elites, and even members of the Buddhist sangha. *Krathing Daeng* was made up of vigilantes and gangsters, who were known for committing various acts of intimidation and terrorism, including an attack on Thammasat University in 1975, a year before the Thammasat Massacre, which they were also involved in. Perhaps one of the most fascinating examples of Right-wing counterinsurgency organizations from this era is that of the Village Scout movement. The Village Scouts, formed in the early 1970s, grew rapidly in membership throughout the decade, with its activity peaking in 1976.¹⁷⁶ Though membership came from people across the nation, the movement focused on recruiting villagers, especially those based in the Thai ‘peripheries.’ Supported directly by the government, the Village Scouts promoted anti-communism and pro-monarchism, and served to police their local communities to conform within ‘good Thai’ values, as defined by the state during this time. Some examples of Village Scout mission statements, that would exhibit themselves in very dark ways on October 6th, included:

“5. Try to persuade the bad to become good. If not possible to do so, cooperate with government officials to persuade them. [...]

¹⁷⁵ Bowie, 105.

¹⁷⁶ For a detailed history and anthropological analysis of the Village Scout movement, see Katherine Bowie’s *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand*.

7. Be loyal to the nation, the religions, and the King; to abide by the law, order, and good culture of the Thai nation.”¹⁷⁷

Mythology surrounding the monarchy was integrated directly into Scout folklore. For example, Scout initiates were taught that the iconic red kerchiefs that represented the Scouts, presented to them at a special ceremony, were auspicious gifts from the King, and were to be treated like sacred amulets.¹⁷⁸ The Village Scouts also often behaved like village representatives during royal visits to the ‘peripheries,’ giving them status over other villagers. During a monarchical visit to San Patong in Northern Thailand, villagers flocked to welcome the royal procession. The Village Scouts were instructed to chaperone, meaning they were enabled to be in closer proximity with the royals than their fellow non-Scout villagers. Bowie, who was present at the event, observed that “several [villagers] expressed resentment that the Village Scouts occupied the front rows and kept ordinary villagers from being able to talk with the queen.”¹⁷⁹ This exemplifies how during this time, strong devotion to the monarchy often gave certain people an advantage over others, and how proximity to the monarchy was coveted. Both of these examples also shed more light on the dynamic between the royals and ‘common’ Thai people, who did not necessarily seek proximity to the monarchy for institutional political gain. Being blessed by the presence of the monarchy, or even by symbols of them such as the Scout kerchiefs, were all things that gave individuals social clout. The pervasiveness of this

¹⁷⁷ Bowie, 2.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁷⁹ Bowie, 162.

phenomenon, especially in the peripheries, is arguably again thanks to the Sarit era, which played a major role in sending the monarchy, and therefore monarchism, to the peripheries.

It is thus unsurprising that groups like the Village Scouts played a significant role in the October 6th event, and in the coup-installed government's further counterinsurgency efforts. The government on its own was overwhelmed with responsibilities; having 'civilians' and 'regular people' to do their 'dirty work' was an advantage. The state increased its use of the Village Scouts as political weapons during the mid-1970s, using them as 'eyes and ears' for state surveillance of suspected cultural and political deviants.¹⁸⁰ Like other Thai fascist and Right-wing groups, the Village Scouts used a combination of Red-baiting and *lèse-majesté* accusations to police people's behavior. Anti-communism and pro-monarchism went hand-in-hand. Further, because of the nation-wide scale of the organization, the government realized it could use the Village Scout divisions as little Right-wing armies to control different corners of the nation. For example, Village Scouts were sent by the government to sabotage progressive and Leftist student activists who were working in the villages, in solidarity with their peasant and proletariat comrades, intimidating them and forcing them to go home. One graduate student, Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, described how while volunteering in Northern Thailand in the post-October 6th period. His project was one of many initiated by Leftist students to try to foster understanding and solidarity between 'urban' and 'rural' peoples. Chayan noticed that during the late 1970s, the rural North was "filled with fear and suspicion," and that "many villagers became unduly

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 288. [Derived from Table A.3: The Missions of Village Scouts of Thailand, reprinted without corrections from VS history (1983), an official publication of the Village Scout Operations Center, Bangkok]

suspicious of any strangers due...to their overexposure to the counterinsurgency and counter-intellectual campaigns.”¹⁸¹

Though by no means excusing the atrocious behavior of these Village Scouts, from the context we have visited so far regarding the history of the Village Scouts and of the relationship of the monarchy with the Thai ‘periphery’ population, the Village Scouts’ motives for violence were likely not the same as their agitators’ motivations, even though they worked together. Given the amount of propaganda being fed to these Scouts that made them feel like they had an exceptional relationship with the monarchy, and were responsible for protecting the monarchy against all threats, it is unsurprising that they would be utilized as tools of violence against the student activists who were supposedly ‘communist’ and threatening the King. Bowie even notes that many Village Scouts wore their iconic red kerchiefs while committing their acts of violence.¹⁸² Given the amount of censorship the ‘real’ perpetrators created surrounding the event, and how these ‘real’ perpetrators have yet to be fully exposed and trialed, the kerchief-bearing Village Scouts, who showed up to the massacre proudly representing their organization, likely felt like what they were doing was right. In the Introduction of this thesis, I wrote that “over the course of the 20th century, and parts of the early 21st, the monarchy became more ‘accessible’ and ‘edible,’ and as it developed more parasocial connections with the Thai masses, the more Thai people began to feel a personal responsibility for the monarchy’s wellbeing.” The Village Scouts situation is a prime example of this.

¹⁸¹ Bowie, 155.; Bowie quotes student Chayan Vaddhanaputi, 1984.

¹⁸² Ibid., 26.

The monarchy and the October 6th Event

The 1970s history of the Village Scouts represents only a small fraction of the multitude of ways the monarchy was directly or indirectly complicit in the October 6th event. It is impossible to list all of the ways and discuss them with enough detail, especially as a lot of the facts continue to be contested. Nevertheless, some indisputable examples exist that strongly suggest the monarchy's covert involvement in the massacre, as well as in the support of the Thai political direction that came after the event, that ensured that the perpetrators would not be brought to justice, that information about the event was heavily censored, and that the monarchy's name be left out of negative discourse regarding this incident.

A key example is how the monarchy was known to have had strong ties to Wat Bowonniwet, the temple in which Thanom was ordained upon his return to Thailand that sparked student anger in the first place.¹⁸³ Though some could argue this was not a conspicuous example of the monarchy caught red-handed in its involvement, this is still compelling evidence for the monarchy's endorsement for bringing back the depraved dictator the October 1973 demonstrators asked the monarchy to send into exile. Further, for the monarchy, relationships and endorsement were important, because its image was important; thus the monarchy's associations were very conscious. Them being associated with these institutions should not be taken lightly.

Additionally, the monarchy did not intervene in any direct way in the violence against the students during October of 1976, in striking contrast to its very clear intervention in October of 1973. Thongchai writes that “[King Bhumibol's] silence that day was conspicuous, and he has

¹⁸³ Frederico Ferrara, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 179.

remained silent ever since.”¹⁸⁴ As was the case with the temple, the monarchy’s true motives are often seen through observing its actions rather than its words. The monarchy’s lack of words in this incident, as Thongchai said, said everything that needed to be said.

Moreover, right after the October 6th massacre, the Thai military launched a coup, removing Seni from office. The military coup leader Sangad Chaloryu proclaimed that this coup was a protective measure against a “communist plot” against Thailand, and in order to protect the Thai monarchy.¹⁸⁵ All of this was supported by the King; allegedly, the coup leaders even went to the King personally to ask for permission to launch the coup, and the King did not stop them.¹⁸⁶ The final nail in the coffin was King Bhumibol’s personal appointment of Thanin Kravixien, another Right-wing dictator, as the next Prime Minister after the coup, a clear act of monarchical involvement in politics.

Kravixien’s rule was typical of a Right-wing military government. It prioritized extremely strict control over the people’s right to free speech, with government-sanctioned censorship of books, the press, and individuals that were considered communist, Leftist, anti-monarchical.¹⁸⁷ The news media was very censored. Thongchai remembers:

“...a rigid format was imposed on the 8pm news segment...it had to start with news about the royals, from the king, the queen, to the prince, princesses, and other royals according to their royal ranks.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Winichakul, *Moments of Silence*, 39.

¹⁸⁵ Frank C. Darling, “Thailand in 1976: Another Defeat for Constitutional Democracy,” *Asian Survey* 17, no. 2 (1977): 116.

¹⁸⁶ Ferrara, 179.

¹⁸⁷ Darling, 130.

¹⁸⁸ Winichakul, “Thailand’s Hyper-Royalism,” 5.

Hundreds of individuals were also arrested for their involvement or alleged involvement in the events of October 6th, or in ‘communist’ or ‘anti-monarchist’ activity in general. This included Deputy Rector of Thammasat University, Dr. Saneh Chanarik. The Rector, Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, went into exile.¹⁸⁹ Further, another constitution was also promulgated. Its Section 21 empowered the Prime Minister with similar dictatorial powers as outlined in Sarit’s Article 17, allowing the Prime Minister to punish anyone who they felt was a threat to the nation or the monarchy. All of the repression, especially after the occurrence of the darkest events in Thai history, caused a lot of disillusionment. Further, unlike in 1973, the monarchy did not try to stop this; in fact, they contributed to this.

Thongchai Winichakul, having lived through the October 6th event himself as a student activist, has reiterated many times the significance of this part of history. Though it must be acknowledged that this was just one event in Thai history, and certainly not the only one of its kind in the 20th or even 21st centuries, it was a landmark event that tells us not only a lot about the monarchy at this point in time, but also about Thai society as a whole. Especially looking at it relative to the October 1973 event, the massacre of October 1976 was a representation of the contradictory, opportunistic, and complex nature of the Thai monarchy.

Firstly, the monarchy was willing to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with any institution in Thai society that ensured its survival. Those with the assumption that the Thai monarchy has always been omnipotent are mistaken; though the monarchy possessed a lot of legitimizing clout due to the bloodline, they had very little else without support, especially after 1932. On the other hand, even if an institution had helped it survive, the monarchy was always

¹⁸⁹ Darling, 131.

ready to withdraw their endorsement at any time if associating with that institution was no longer flattering. This is exemplified by how in 1973, the monarchy in many ways turned against ‘the military,’ which was largely responsible for the monarchy’s initial reassertion of power. It was also during this time that the monarchy chose to endorse the student protesters, claiming to be on the side of the people. In 1976, however, the monarchy appeared to reverse their allegiances.

Secondly, the monarchy clearly made efforts to uphold the ‘benevolent’ image that Sarit had built during his administration, continuing to produce propaganda that made the King and his family seem like charitable protectors of the people. However, this ‘benevolence’ and ‘charity’ was not unconditional. The monarchy was, and continues to be, highly performative. It engaged in altruistic acts in the ‘peripheries,’ visited ‘commoners,’ and imparted its moralistic wisdom onto students and politicians, but only did these things if the moralism and altruism would end up helping the monarchy survive. The events of October 6th 1976 exemplified this. The student activism of 1976 was cut from the same pro-democracy, anti-corruption cloth as that of 1973. Nevertheless, because the monarchy was now in a state of high anxiety regarding what supporting anti-corruption might actually mean for their own institution, they cowered.

Thirdly, despite the cowering, and despite the censorship and image-repairing campaign that followed the October 6th event that attempted to erase the monarchy’s involvement in the incident, many could not help but remain curious. After all, we know now that the Thai collective memory has chosen to remember the incident, even if its memory continues to be fragmented. This suggests to us that the Thai consciousness, in resistance to censorship and denial of Thailand’s past, is not yet done with holding the institution accountable. A recent example of this accountability is exhibited in the people’s uprisings of 2020 to 2021, protesting

the Thai dictatorial government in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also by virtue of the topic, protesting the corruption perpetuated by the role of Thai *lèse-majesté* laws, and complicit nature of the Thai monarchy in the oppression of marginalized Thais. The legacy of 1976 was resurrected for these protests. With Thammasat students once again at the front of the movement, activists revived the archives, which included freeing the suppressed memories of people who survived 1976. Many of these people were telling their stories for the very first time, decades after the 1970s.

Fourthly, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the monarchy, ruling elite, and Right-wing in many ways worked against their own interests by reacting so violently and without discretion regarding the October 6th Massacre, because it riled up even more support for the CPT and for Leftism in general. Thanom and Thanin's hard-line stances against communism were examples of this. The more extreme they were, the more compelled people were to empathize with the Leftist movement. A lot of the protesters involved in October 6th, regardless of the accusations against them of being 'communists,' were generally not communists at all. In fact, though they had sympathies with the Leftist movement, and vouched for Left-leaning ideas, these protesters were not trained in communist theory. They were just pro-democracy activists, many of them very young, who were frustrated with the human rights atrocities and corruption exhibited by their government. The monarchy and Thai Right's extreme response to their protests actually drove many of those affected by the October 6th Massacre to join the movement they were not part of, but were accused of being affiliated with: the CPT. In this regard, the monarchy made a grave mistake for its own interests; its actions moving forward suggest that the monarchy learned from this phenomenon.

Finally, the incidents of the 1970s pointed out that while the monarchy had been on a rising pedestal that peaked in 1973, it fell very hard off that pedestal in 1976. As more and more people began to speculate regarding the monarchy's involvement with the atrocities of October 6th 1976, they started to question whether the monarchy actually cared about the people or not, and started to become increasingly disillusioned about the monarchy's role in Thai society. The monarchy therefore now needed to tread with extra caution. Especially without an effective external 'publicity manager' - namely, an individual or an entity with as much charisma, power, and legitimizing power as Sarit - the monarchy would have struggled to stay afloat. The monarchy realized that in order to survive, it would have to find a way to seamlessly exert the power it wanted to exert, while also having a damage control system to fall back on. It was not about to give up its elevated pedestal. It just needed a mechanism through which it could pad any of its future falls from the pedestal, or at least divert attention away from those falls. This conversation will best be continued after the next section, which will discuss Prem Tinsulanonda and the idea of the 'Network Monarchy,' as two solutions to the monarchy's aforementioned issues.

'PREMOCRACY'¹⁹⁰

Thanin created chaos for Thailand. The more he oppressed, the more the people resisted. In October of 1977, yet another coup was launched that ousted Thanin from the government, led by a group nicknamed the Thai 'Young Turks,' replaced by Prime Minister Kriangsak Chamanan. Though yet another military leader, he attempted to repair the fragmentation in Thai

¹⁹⁰ Frederico Ferrara, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand*, 37.

society created by his predecessor, especially with regard to the increasing anger coming from the CPT and its sympathizers.¹⁹¹ He would retire in 1980, giving way to the Prem Tinsulanonda administration.

Prime Minister Prem's work under Thanin and Kriangsak in the late 1970s, and then as Prime Minister for most of the 1980s, were crucial in the shaping of the 'Network Monarchy,' a new phase in the Thai monarchy's behavior that reflected its needs in a post-1976 era, and that would prove extremely successful in consolidating the monarchy's political influence. In a similar way to how Sarit helped breathe life into the previously restrained monarchical institution, Prem would help it sustain itself. While the two were vastly different in character, where Sarit was exactly what the monarchy needed for its political reassertion during the mid-1950s, Prem was this for the monarchy after 1976.

Though Prem himself was technically a military politician, his behavior suggested that he wanted to distance himself from the reputation that Thai military politicians had built for themselves since the early 20th century. Under his administration, corrupt political officials were all allegedly ousted, programs were established in order to support the Thai peripheries, and 'democratic' general elections were held, among other things. Arguably one of the most effective initiatives that Prem was responsible for that helped ease tensions the post-1976 Thai society was his amnesty program for anyone involved in the October 6th protests, in the CPT, or in any Leftist activity.

¹⁹¹ New York Times Associated Press, "Kriangsak Chamanand, Thai General, Dies at 86," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2003. Accessed April 3, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/25/world/kriangsak-chamanand-thai-general-dies-at-86.html>.

THE 1980s: THE DOWNFALL OF THE THAI COMMUNIST INSURGENCY

The beginning of this chapter mentioned how widespread anger towards Thai politicians and the disillusionment regarding the Thai monarchy after the October 6th event drove many people to join the CPT, making the late 1970s a time of peak interest for the CPT; nevertheless, this was a very short-lived period of success.

A peak in the CPT's numbers did not necessarily mean an increase in cohesion or strength. It must be remembered that as we have seen in the previous chapter, there was little that people of the Thai 'peripheries,' who made up the majority of the pre-1976 CPT, had in common with people of the Thai urban 'centers,' the demographic of many of the post-1976 additions. Further, most of these people were students, educators, or at least individuals associated with intellectual circles, which makes sense as these were the kinds of people involved with the Thammasat protests. These people, though sympathetic with Leftist ideology and likely knowledgeable about communism to an extent, very few of them had a concrete background in Marxist or any sort of communist organizing. Further, as many of these 'radicals' were young, college-age students, it is likely that many of them had yet to form concrete ideas about their identities, let alone their political leanings. They all came with their own views, with the only common thread we can safely attribute to them being their shared traumatic experiences during the Massacre at their university, as well as shared beliefs about justice, albeit rooted in different motives. As Thongchai has written, regardless of the 'Leftist' or 'radical' labels that were projected onto them by red-baiters and monarchists, the nature of this demographic "[concealed] how much and in what ways [the students'] pre-radical thinking remained in their radical-

ness.”¹⁹² Many existing CPT members feared that the introduction of the new members’ ideas would dilute the cohesion of the CPT, leading to mass disagreement between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ members over what the CPT’s movement should look like caused fragmentation within the party. Thus, though the CPT enjoyed an increase in interest and growth for at least three years, it was this lack of cohesion that contributed to the movement’s downfall.

Prem was able to take advantage of the increasing weaknesses within the CPT, employing tactics of his own to further drive the CPT to its downfall. Under his administration, legislation was passed including Orders No. 66/2523 and 65/2525 in the early 1980s.¹⁹³ These Orders decreed that amnesty should be granted to people who joined the CPT or were involved in any Leftist, anti-monarchical activity who were up to this point seen by normative Thai society as ‘terrorists’ and ‘traitors.’ His decisions demonstrate a contrast between Prem’s strategy and that of his predecessors towards the issue of the communist insurgency in Thailand. To promote his initiative, Prem implied that he was above issues like containing communism, and was more concerned with Thailand’s socio-economic development. The government even sent representatives to the Thai peripheries to promote the idea of *santinimitr* (Peace Aspiration) and encourage people to defect away from Leftist movements, claiming that Prem’s government was here to foster peace and unity, rather than penalize them.¹⁹⁴

This was a perceptive stance for Prem to take during this period. Though there was a lot of anger and resentment in the air towards the ruling elite, including revolutionary sentiment that

¹⁹² Winichakul, *Moments of Silence*, 216.

¹⁹³ Haberkorn, 104.

¹⁹⁴ Chulacheeb Chinwanno, “Thailand In 1983: The Parliamentary System Survives,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1984): 319. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27908509>.

wanted to overthrow the entire establishment, Prem likely knew that at the heart of a lot of the pressing issues in Thailand was the people's discontent with Thailand's status regarding its socioeconomic development. Prem wanted the masses to see his administration as one that wanted to repair rifts in Thai society so that Thailand could move forward. Unlike his predecessors like Thanom, who created those rifts, Prem performed a willingness to forgive and rehabilitate, rather than cause more fragmentation. In doing this, Prem sent a message to the people that if they were led astray by Leftist tendencies, they would be forgiven as long as they recognized they had made a mistake, and rejoined 'good' Thai society as loyal and useful members of society.

Further, in reward, not only would the defectors be legally pardoned from accusations of being 'traitors to society,' but Prem also assured them that they would be protected, offered support, and given praise. For example, people who took Prem's bait to leave the CPT and return to their old lives were called "participants in Thai national development," and offered government support to help them reintegrate with the societies they left.¹⁹⁵ Prem was here targeting the 'new' members of the CPT who mostly joined after the Thammasat massacre. As mentioned earlier, these individuals were less likely to have deep interests in the actual communist movement, given their backgrounds, and given how they were mostly attracted to the movement out of anger for how they and their friends were treated during October of 1976. Fundamentally, these 'new' members were not built for the Thai 'peripheries' or for the CPT. Especially during a time where the CPT was becoming increasingly fragmented because of the divided interests of its 'new' and 'old' members, which was likely causing these 'new' members

¹⁹⁵ Thomas, 21.

to question what they had gotten themselves into, Prem's offering of an olive branch was effective. After all, if Prem's administration had brought back 'democratic' elections and freedom to 'peacefully' protest, returning to their old lives did not seem like the worst thing. Sure enough, many people accepted this deal. The later section titled 'A Self-Sustaining Network' will describe how this played out in the long run.

Prem also contributed greatly to drying up the CPT's outside support. Up until this point, the Chinese, Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese communist parties had been supplying the Thai CPT with allyship, aid, campsites, political support, and supply routes.¹⁹⁶ However, due to various unfavorable circumstances, such as China's decision in the early 1980s to ally itself with the Thai government so they could work together to contain Soviet influence in Southeast Asia, led to the CCP's withdrawal of support for the CPT, heeding Prem's government's negotiations.

Finally, to obliterate the communist insurgency once and for all, and to punish those CPT members who chose to disregard his amnesty offerings, Prem and the military used new and improved tactics to intimidate the CPT members. These included deploying the 'Rangers,' consisting of village volunteers, to attack CPT members at insurgent camps.¹⁹⁷ By October of 1983, the Thai Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) reported that the Thai communist movement had been decreased to less than 3,000 insurgents, compared to the tens of thousands of members described in Chapter 2.¹⁹⁸ With decreased membership, loss of support, and increased efforts at sabotage against them, the CPT found it increasingly difficult to survive.

¹⁹⁶ Thomas, 24.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁹⁸ Chinwanno, 319

1980s: NETWORKING AND ‘PUBLIC RELATIONS’

The above example of how Prem negotiated with a group that the monarchy and government saw as a threat, offering them amnesty in return for their loyalty, is emblematic of Prem’s strategy, and exemplifies a microcosm of the wider system he built. Prem grew his web by making connections in this manner, building relationships with people and offering them benefits in return, building up institutions that benefited his interests, and tearing down institutions that threatened his interests. Not only was he doing this for his personal interests or the interests of the government; he was also doing this on behalf of the monarchy.

Prem reportedly met with King Bhumibol every week during his administration to discuss matters that needed to be handled. His day-to-day job, accordingly, was to act as a liaison between the public and the King, representing the King in meetings, speaking for the King, and accompanying the King on royal visits.¹⁹⁹ He would grow personal relationships with powerful Thai bureaucrats, growing his network of influential people he could benefit from on a later date, and therefore by extension growing the King’s arsenal of connections. Like the conductor seeking to manage an orchestra consisting of distinct-yet-interconnected sections, Prem managed a ‘network’ of elite Thai institutions and individuals, all with the King in his ear. Frederico Ferrara effectively summarizes the components of the ‘Network Monarchy:’

“...the ‘network monarchy’ loosely amalgamates ‘the palace’ – the monarchy and its court of royal advisors, including members of the Privy Council and top officials in the Office of His Majesty’s Principal Private Secretary, the Royal Household Bureau, the Crown Property Bureau, and royal charitable foundations, organized in competing

¹⁹⁹ Ferrara, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand*, 37.

‘circles of influence’ around senior members of the royal family...with networks [centered] on conservative military officers, career civil servants, judges, politicians, business elites, and opinion leaders in the media and the academy.”²⁰⁰

Prem was officially the Prime Minister, and unofficially the King’s proxy. Within Prem, the roles of the King and government were infused. Prem’s political decisions, no matter how much they were advised by the King, technically did not count as the King’s direct influence. Thus, King Bhumibol was able to still claim his constitutional monarchical position and pose as being disinterested in politics, even if he was still pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Prem spread monarchy-aggrandizing propaganda and weaponized the monarchy as a political weapon. in ways reminiscent of the Sarit era. During the first year of Prem’s administration, the first Thai Father’s Day to be held on the King’s birthday was celebrated.²⁰¹ In 1986, Prem bestowed the title of ‘supreme artist’ to King Bhumibol, referring particularly to Bhumibol’s widely known musical talents; in 1987, he gave Bhumibol the title of ‘Bhumibol the Great.’²⁰² To this day, Bhumibol is still referred to as ‘The Great,’ ‘maharaj’ or ‘maharaja’ by some Thais, indicating the general understanding that ‘The Great’ could only be referring to one king. He scheduled frequent opportunities for the royal family to perform their care and ‘down-to-earthness’ for the people, such as sending members of the royal family to visit slums in Bangkok and greet the people.²⁰³ Even after his time as Prime Minister, he was appointed to the King’s Privy Council, and continued his work from there, playing a major role in the smear

²⁰⁰ Ferrara, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand*, 8.

²⁰¹ Winichakul, “Thailand’s Hyper-Royalism,” 7.

²⁰² Handley, 317.

²⁰³ Handley, 307.

campaign against controversial politician Thaksin Shinawatra whose administration would deeply divide the Thai people for the most part of the early 2000s. A crucial part of the smear campaign's argument was that Thaksin was anti-monarchist, and by extension, therefore anti-Thai. This narrative proved very effective in tearing apart the Thai masses, exhibited starkly in the way many anti-Thaksin members of the population chose yellow - King Bhumibol's royal color - as a symbol of their allegiance to the anti-Thaksin effort. People would wear yellow shirts to protests, and out in public as part of their regular clothing, often emblazoned with the King's royal seal, to demonstrate their solidarity with the monarchy and defiance of Thaksin. Thaksin's supporters, on the other hand, wore red to represent their faction.

Further, what was particularly unique about Prem's leadership was how on top of promoting the monarchy, he was particularly skilled at getting the monarchy out of trouble. Though Sarit was also skilled and charismatic, and though that was sufficient for the role he played in the monarchy's reassertion journey, Prem's character was essential to the monarchy during this era because he represented the sort of image Bhumibol wanted to be known for. Unlike Sarit the *nakleng* who often struggled to earn credibility from the masses, Prem was "soft and understated," while also unquestionably powerful.²⁰⁴ After how vulnerable the monarchy was after 1976, Bhumibol could not afford to face any other threats to the monarchy's supremacy without a plan. Where Sarit was primarily a promoter, Prem was, on top of being a publicity manager, a defamation reduction specialist.

As seen previously, *lèse-majesté* and fear of the law were not enough to make the monarchy invulnerable to criticism. One of the Thai monarchy's greatest obstacles over the past

²⁰⁴ McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand."

few decades has been the reputation of Bhumibol's successor, Vajiralongkorn. From rumors of him being a spoiled, demanding prince who would order around the Thai military to intimidate people he did not like, to his neglect of his wife Soamsawali while simultaneously having affairs with non-royal women such as actress Sucharinee Vivacharavong, Vajiralongkorn's actions constantly attracted negative press, hurting the overall image of the monarchical brand and causing people on all levels of Thai society to fear a Thailand under the reign of Rama X. Unlike his monogamous, disciplined father, whose benevolent, charitable image made the job of maintaining a good image for the monarchy easy even during times of backlash, Vajiralongkorn's reputation caused a lot of stress for those with stake in the survival of the Thai monarchy.²⁰⁵

Prem worked hard with the Network Monarchy to save the Vajiralongkorn's image. For example, he staged opportunities for Vajiralongkorn to bestow Buddha statues to temples across the nation - a ritual pioneered by Sarit during his reign as part of his publicity for Bhumibol.²⁰⁶ Prem killed two birds with one stone by using opportunities like these to also build up the image of Vajiralongkorn's 'commoner' mistress, Sucharinee. Vajiralongkorn and Sucharinee's relationship was seen as very scandalous in palace and non-palace opinions alike, especially after Sucharinee went on to bear Vajiralongkorn four sons and one daughter, all while Vajiralongkorn was still married to Princess Soamsawali, who had only produced for him a single daughter. Prem ensured that Sucharinee was seen with Vajiralongkorn on as many occasions as possible, and seen participating in pious activities 'fit' for a royal consort, so that the public would warm

²⁰⁵ Handley, 307.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 314.

up to the idea of her as the future king's wife. In the early 1990s, Vajiralongkorn then divorced Soamsawali, and married Sucharinee. Vajiralongkorn would go on to marry three other women - Srirasmi Suwadee, Suthida Bajrasudhabimalalakshana, and the current Queen of Thailand, Niramon Ounprom - with all these marriages accompanied with similar levels of scandal, and subsequent efforts at covering them up. His marriage to Srirasmi, for example, ended after accusations were made against her and her family for exploiting royal connections for inappropriate uses; her titles were stripped, and some of her family members were given jail sentences for alleged corruption.²⁰⁷ The charges were for *lèse-majesté*.

A further example that is also a prime example of the Network Monarchy in action is how in 1986, most likely as a result of Prem's influence, Vajiralongkorn did an interview with the *Dichan* magazine that smeared his wife's name, and made himself look like a pious, dutiful son following in his father's footsteps.²⁰⁸ The *Dichan* magazine was owned by Piya Malakul Na Ayutthaya, a powerful businessman with close ties to Prem Tinsulanond and the monarchy in general.²⁰⁹ Piya was also allegedly part of the 2006 anti-Thaksin scheme, orchestrated clandestinely by Prem and his loyalists. Piya likely had a major role in curating the story when it eventually came out in order to make Vajiralongkorn look as good as possible, while throwing Soamsawali under the bus, despite her also being a royal. This is an example how even independently of the official governmental and monarchical institution, the bureaucracy now also

²⁰⁷ Reuters Staff, "Parents of former Thai princess jailed for two-and-a-half years," *Reuters*, March 11, 2015. Accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-lesemajeste/parents-of-former-thai-princess-jailed-for-two-and-a-half-years-idUSKBN0M70BN20150311>.

²⁰⁸ Barbara Crossette, "Bangkok Journal; Once Upon a Time, a Good King Had 4 Children," *New York Times*, December 15, 1987, published online. Accessed April 12, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/15/world/bangkok-journal-once-upon-a-time-a-good-king-had-4-children.html>.

²⁰⁹ Patrick Jory, "Thailand's Politics of Politeness: *Qualities of a Gentleman* and the Making of 'Thai Manners,'" *South East Asia Research* 23, no. 3 (2015): 361. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26372004>.

had an active hand in the running of the Thai monarchy, through shaping its image. In a way, institutions like the *Dichan* magazine and individuals like Piya were *also* proxies for the palace, all brought into the Network Monarchy by Prem.

A SELF-SUSTAINING NETWORK

As alluded to above, Network Monarchy was not just about Prem and Bhumibol. The benefit of having a Network to do the monarchy's heavy lifting with regard to its politics, image, and influence was that if it was strong enough, the monarchy would no longer need to worry about its survival like it had for the entire early-to-mid 20th century. The members of the 'Network' would be the monarchy's minions; they benefited from their association with the monarchy, and therefore protecting the monarchy was in their own best interest. The nation was now run by hundreds of mutually beneficial relationships, not just Bhumibol's relationship with his designated Prime Minister like Sarit or Prem, or just Bhumibol's relationship with the military government. The nation was run by the kinship, friendship, and business ties between the palace and government with bureaucrats, bureaucrats with their mutuals, corporations with their endorsements, and how the endorsements were created in order to keep the Network Monarchy untouchable and powerful. Bolstered by *lèse-majesté* laws and the decades-long state effort to spread popular monarchism, association with the monarchy became the ultimate bestower of power. This all had an effect on the entirety of Thai society. An example of how this was the case that also unites earlier-discussed aspects of history is how the 'Octobrists,' namely those who were part of the October 6th 1976 uprising, were brought into the 'Network Monarchy,' in spite of what one would expect.

Political Scientist Kanokrat Lertchoosakul has written about how after the ‘defection’ of many ‘Octobrists’ from the CPT, many went on to pursue very successful careers, with many even joining the ranks of the Thai bureaucratic elite, or even supporting pro-monarchist causes.²¹⁰ For example, during the era of political turmoil in the early 2000s, the Thai masses were divided over their stances over their views on the leadership of Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin’s supporters were represented by the ‘Red Shirts.’ The ‘Yellow Shirts,’ representing Thaksin’s opposition, weaponized the accusation that Thaksin was anti-monarchist against him and his administration. ‘Octobrists’ could be found on both sides.²¹¹ Some Octobrists affiliated themselves with Thaksin, with some even representing major roles in Thaksin’s *Thai Rak Thai* (TRT) party. Some were on the opposing side. However, as hatred for Thaksin grew, and as more people made generalized claims that all Octobrists were Thaksin supporters, all Octobrists began to suffer from the collective backlash against their ‘identity’ group. This caused severe fractures within Octobrist solidarity, with non-aligned as well as ‘Yellow Shirt’ Octobrists spreading ostracizing narratives about the Thaksin-supporting Octobrists, and distancing themselves as far away as they could from the ‘Octobrist’ label. For many people, aligning themselves with the Yellow Shirts, and with pro-monarchism, was one way to create this distance.

This demonstrates not only how diverse the politics of ‘Octobrists’ truly were, but also demonstrates how much of an impact the Network Monarchy had on people’s lives. The

²¹⁰ Kanokrat Lertchoosakul. *The Rise of the Octobrists in Contemporary Thailand*, (New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 2016), 235-250.

²¹¹ For more, see Kanokrat Lertchoosakul’s *The Rise of the Octobrists in Contemporary Thailand*, and Chapter 18 of Thongchai Winichakul’s *Moments of Silence*.

dynamics and details of this topic are too complex for this thesis to summarize; however, it is evident from this example that the Yellow-Red divide, and the implications of the Octobrists on it, that history contributed to people's allegiances. It also demonstrates a prime example of the normative, systemic role that monarchism, and weaponized accusations of anti-monarchism, came to play in Thai society. The Octobrists ended up dividing themselves, and weakening the cause they had historically supported, without the 'monarchy' necessarily having to intervene directly.

Those without an understanding of the Network Monarchy in Thai history might be surprised at the idea that some of the people who lived through the October 6th Massacre, joining the CPT, and Black May of 1992, would become staunch monarchists or even dream of supporting the monarchist side.²¹² However, after acknowledging the history laid out in this chapter, one can see how this all actually made a lot of sense. Decades later, the fact that many of these defectors ended up supporting the very institution they had previously critiqued, whether or not they fundamentally believed in its agenda, is a testament to how effective Prem's amnesty program was in diffusing tensions during this time.

²¹² 'Black May' of 1992 was a wave of mass political protests in Thailand where hundreds of thousands of people protested the regime of Suchinda Kraprayoon, another military dictator who came to power after the 1991 coup. Hundreds were killed and injured. The royals, including Princess 'Mom Noi' Sirindhorn, as well as Prince Vajiralongkorn, demanded an end to the violence. King Bhumibol then hosted an audience with Suchinda and protest leader Chamlong, playing pacifist and broadcasting to the nation that the two opposing parties were in the process of finding compromise. King Bhumibol then pardoned Suchinda.

CONCLUSION: ABOVE POLITICS?

As of the late 20th century, the monarchy not only survived; it thrived. In Chapter 1, we witnessed how the Siamese Revolution of 1932 abolished absolute monarchy, though the monarchy was allowed to remain relevant as a symbolic institution in Thai society. A civilian government rose for a short period, though it was not long until the military took over as the new dominant institution. Particularly between 1947 to 1957, the military upheld its political dominance over everyone, including the monarchy, suppressing attempts at overthrowing the regime coming from all directions, and confining the monarchy to the palace as mere symbolic figures.

However, as indicated by the various counter-revolutionary attempts by monarchists such as the Boworadet Revolution of 1933, and by the presence of monarchist politicians like Khuang Aphaiwong making it into high positions in the Thai government, the monarchy seemed not yet ready to settle in their newly downgraded position. Further, as also explored in Chapter 1, the monarchy's continued moral, spiritual, and cultural influence over Thai society meant that it was still used in governmental officers' political games as a legitimizer. Though the monarchy would remain in its politically dormant position until the rise of Sarit, the way many politicians using the monarchy as a legitimizer, compounded with how many Thais of the early 20th century still held a lot of regard for the monarchy at least in terms of celestial beliefs, meant that the monarchy was still relevant and held societal value, even if it was not politically powerful. This was arguably a key factor in why the monarchy would eventually be able to reassert its political power.

Additionally, unlike in revolutions like that of the United Kingdom that abolished absolute monarchy by forcefully removing an offending monarch and instituting very strict regulations on monarchical power, the Siamese Revolutionaries of 1932 was rather lenient to the monarchy, allowing the monarchy to have an input in the constitution. This, compounded with the monarchy's framing of the constitution as something it bestowed on the people willingly, meant that the it would still be able to claim for the rest of Thai history while under this system that it was *the King* who graciously gave the people what they wanted, therefore insinuating the people's indebtedness to the monarchy. It was these foundational details about the early days of the Thai 'constitutional monarchy' that had an effect on the rest of the 20th century. The Thai monarchy's stems were cut, but its roots were left alone. Where the British monarchy's potential to grow back into a dominant political entity was relatively uprooted, the Thai monarchy's remained.

I would argue even further that the compromises made since the Mongkut and Chulalongkorn era that supposedly ensured Thailand's sovereignty and allowed it to evade Western colonization, as well as the idea itself that Thailand was never formally colonized by a Western power, are important factors that inform the behavior of the Thai 'geobody' throughout the 20th century. Benedict Anderson has argued in his 1978 essay, *The State of Thai Studies*, that the 1932 revolution, and the aftermath of it that we explored in Chapters 1 and 2, represented an "incomplete transition from kingdom to modern nation state."²¹³ Though most of Thailand's Southeast Asian neighbors have also struggled with finding political systems that are

²¹³ Ferrara, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand*, 21.; Andrew MacGregor Marshall, "The foreign media are failing Thailand," *ZenJournalist*, February 1, 2013. Accessed April 4, 2023. <https://www.zenjournalist.org/2013/02/01/the-foreign-media-are-failing-thailand/>. [Features an excerpt from Anderson's essay, *The State of Thai Studies*.]

representative and nurturing for its people, they all share the obstacle of ‘formal Western colonization,’ and are able to use discourse surrounding ‘formal Western colonization’ and of ‘decolonization’ to help them navigate the obstacles they need to overcome. The Thai mainstream narratives, and therefore the mainstream ‘memory’ claim that the monarchy was graciously responsible for both the nation’s evasion of colonialism as well as the nation’s constitution, and things that are things the nation should be grateful for. Perhaps this explains why the Thai ‘geobody’ has not collectively felt compelled enough to unite over diminishing the monarchy’s power, or getting to the root of the corruption of the nation’s establishment - which arguably has a lot to do with the monarchy’s continued existence as a politicized entity.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 demonstrated how, from the Sarit era beginning in the mid-1950s to the Prem era of the 1980s, the monarchy was able to re-cultivate the roots that had survived into a flourishing institution, unlike the one it was before 1932, but still very much of the same seeds. As we witnessed in Chapter 2, Sarit and his military government could be characterized as the *pokhun* to the monarchy’s *devaraja*, creating a mutually beneficial, power-balanced, ‘despotic paternalistic’ entity to rule over the nation. This was exactly what the monarchy needed if it wanted to regain its political power. Sarit’s use of the monarchy’s image for his political goals, compounded by Cold War implications such as the United States’ separate but complementary communist-containment agenda, created the perfect storm for the monarchy to assert more of its presence in Thai political life. Under Sarit, the military government and monarchical institution became increasingly intrinsically linked, with each institution relying on and uplifting each other, creating a relative balance of political power over the nation. The Sarit era was so effective in aggrandizing the moral image of the monarchy that even in times where

the previously-superior military government was being questioned, such as during the Thanom administration and in light of the 1973 people's uprising, many people turned to the monarchy in hope that it would help them put corrupt politicians in their place. The monarchy performed their care for the people by supporting their protests, gaining them even more support from the masses.

However, during this period, the Thai monarchy was still nowhere near as powerful as it had been during its absolutist past, and especially in light of monarchies being challenged by Leftists across Southeast Asia, it also feared for its future. It was no surprise, therefore, that the events of the later 1970s, including the 1976 student protests, were alarming to the monarchy, and drove it to intervene in ways that did not align with the 'benevolent' image it was supposed to represent. This led to a lot of disillusionment, and perpetuated a period of mass political instability. The monarchy realized it needed to tread with more care and adopt more safeguards for its image, as they could not guarantee that there would always be a capable, charismatic politician like Sarit to help it with its publicity.

Thus, the Prem administration was what the monarchy needed as the next step of its political reassertion journey in a post-1976 world. Prem to the monarchy was not what Sarit was to the monarchy. Sarit had resuscitated the monarchy from dormancy, though only empowering it to levels of equaling the military government, rather than surpassing it. Using his Prime Ministerial and later Privy Council powers, Prem did not just bolster the monarchy's image, and did not just develop a mutually beneficial relationship between himself and the monarchy. He spread the 'essence' of monarchical prestige and legitimacy throughout the Thai bureaucracy, creating a 'network' of mutually beneficial relationships. He also became the representative of

the King, and the King's mouthpiece. This is something that Sarit would have arguably not have been able to do, given Sarit's *nakleng* reputation and unconventional political background, and given the historical context. Under Sarit, though both benefited from each other, Sarit and Bhumibol were very separate characters. Prem's role, however, as described by Duncan McCargo, was to be a proxy for King Bhumibol who allowed the king to be a "proactive participant" in politics.²¹⁴ In this way, the monarchy found a loophole in Thailand's so-called 'constitutional monarchy.' Through their newfound connections made in the government and bureaucracy, the King could 'proactively participate' in Thai politics through non-royal entities, including a proxy figure for the King himself, all while being able to claim that he was still a constitutional monarch who was removed from politics. This gave the monarchy, in some ways, unlimited ways to exert its power through seemingly 'indirect' means, with the added bonus of not having to be held fully accountable when faced with popular critique.

Duncan McCargo has even described the way the monarchy and its society by the time Prem's Network Monarchy had become solidly established was "nostalgic" of pre-1932 absolutism.²¹⁵ Indeed, by the end of the 20th century, it had become an unquestionable institution thanks to official regulation and legislation such as the *lèse-majesté* laws, as well as a vastly unquestioned institution, as a result of propaganda that made it seem morally superior and above politics. Especially after all that had happened in the mid-to-late 20th century, the monarchy arguably knew better than trying to reinstate 'true' absolutism. Nevertheless, though Network

²¹⁴ McCargo, 501.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 506.

Monarchy allowed the monarchy to have a lot of power, it is still important to note that it was still unable to regain its pre-1932 absolutist power.

Under Bhumibol's reign, perhaps Network Monarchy was indeed all he wanted and needed; for the rest of his reign until his death in 2016, the Network Monarchy remained relatively intact. There was, no doubt, a lot of political instability that continued well into the early 2000s. However, because of the success of the Network Monarchy and the widely accepted sense of respect built around Bhumibol's image, the period of political instability was seen as more of a problem for politicians like Thaksin, Abhisit, and the reigning military dictator who took control in 2014, Prayuth. Bhumibol's public persona in the later stages of his monarchy was charitable, respectable, regal, selfless, somber, hardworking, and most importantly, the manifestation of a morally superior 'father figure' of the Thai people, who was just as tired of corrupt politicians as his 'children' were. This once again demonstrates how effectively the monarchy managed to distance its image from politics in the eyes of the masses, upholding the spirit of Thai constitutional democracy, while being involved all along. As Thongchai writes, "Bhumibol's dedication to his people is often cast in sharp contrast to the corruption and selfishness of elected politicians. The more that political corruption is magnified and becomes an everyday discourse, which it has since the late 1980s, the stronger Bhumibol's virtuous aura becomes."²¹⁶

To conclude, I want to reassert some of the implications of this history that compelled me to do this thesis study. It should be remembered that regardless of how much critical scholarship exists outside of Thailand that demonstrates how the Thai mainstream narrative falls apart,

²¹⁶ Winichakul, "Thailand's Hyper-Royalism," 16.

because Thailand is still under an authoritarian regime that imposes a lot of censorship over the topic discussed in this paper, very little critical knowledge is available to the general Thai people living in the jurisdiction of Thailand. The Thai jurisdiction has arguably yet to experience a world where people can have open, critical conversations about the monarchy, its politics, the Thai identity, the issues of marginalized people, and about censorship. I would argue that the Thai nation needs to collectively come to terms with the following things before it can break through.

Firstly, the nation needs to acknowledge that the Thai monarchy is absolutely *not* above politics, and has arguably never been; it has managed to create an illusion that this was the case by doing what it did over the course of the 20th century. Secondly, the ‘Thai monarchy’ as a concept is about more than just the ‘institution’ or the ‘royal family;’ in a way, it has become a part of all Thai people, whether they want this or not. Thirdly, the spirit of the Thai monarchy has been embedded into Thai life, consciously and unconsciously, and its roots run deep because of how long this embedding process has been happening - the century-long story outlined in this thesis is just scratching the surface.

Fourthly, as Duncan McCargo writes, the Thai monarchy has “long [been] dedicated to resisting democratic change,” creating a “series of inept governments” in order to “[delay] Thailand’s day of political reckoning.”²¹⁷ As long as the monarchy remains resistant to radically stepping aside, and continues to be protected by the ‘Network’ and normative forces, this ‘political reckoning’ will likely never come. What makes this seem unlikely, in my opinion, is the ‘Network’ itself. Because the Network is about more than just the royal family, there are

²¹⁷ McCargo, 504.

many forces in Thailand *other* than the King and the royals themselves who benefit from the existence of the Network and/or of the monarchy, or even from just the protection and privilege they have as a result of association with the Network. A lot of individuals and institutions within the Network, therefore, likely also have reason to resist changing this order, making change difficult.

Fifthly and finally, elites and political decision-makers aside, the people's part in the Network Monarchy is more significant than people might feel. The continued existence of *lèse-majesté* laws in Thailand is a testament to this. As long as the majority of people are barred from information, intimidated from seeking it, discouraged from questioning the norm, and controlled by censorship and self-censorship, authorities will continue to break down all movements that could potentially liberate Thailand out of this state.

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