

THAILAND'S MOMENT OF TRUTH

A SECRET HISTORY OF 21ST CENTURY SIAM

[#THAISTORY](#) | PART ONE OF FOUR | VERSION 1.3 | 240611

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“The battle lines in Thailand's political environment are clearly drawn... The Thaksin machine faces off against a mix of royalists, Bangkok middle class, and southerners, with Queen Sirikit having emerged as their champion, as King Bhumibol largely fades from an active role. The two sides are competing for influence and appear to believe, or fear, that the other will use the political power it has to marginalize (if not eliminate) the opposing side. They are positioning themselves for what key actors on both sides freely admit to us in private will be Thailand's moment of truth - royal succession after the King passes away.” - U.S. cable [08BANGKOK3289](#), November 4, 2008.

ช้างตายทั้งตัวเอาใบบัวปิดไม่มิด

- Thai proverb

“Nothing will come of nothing; speak again.”

- Lear to Cordelia in William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act I Scene I

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NOTES

There are several ways to transliterate Thai into English, and there is little agreement even on basic ground rules. The U.S. cables often use eccentric spelling for Thai names, and often use several different spellings, sometimes even within a single cable. Quotes from the cables and other sources are reproduced verbatim, even if this means conflicting spellings in the text of the article.

I have followed three rules in my redaction policy for this story: 1. If the source of information is a player in the game, their identity is not redacted. 2. The exception to this is if identifying the source could subject them to significant risk of physical harm. 3. If the source is not a player in the game, their identity, and other information that could help identify them, has been redacted. Xs in the text signify redaction. It should be noted that the number of Xs used has been deliberately randomized. Counting the number of Xs will not provide any secret insight into the source.

My name is Andrew MacGregor Marshall. I am not based in Thailand. There is an excellent Bangkok-based freelance journalist called Andrew Marshall, who writes for Time magazine among other publications and authored a book on Burma, *The Trouser People*. He has nothing to do with this article and obviously should not be held responsible for anything I write.

This story is dedicated to the people of Thailand and to the memory of my colleague Hiroyuki Muramoto, killed in Bangkok on April 10, 2010.

PROLOGUE: “THE DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY PICNIC”

Late in the evening of Tuesday October 6, 2009, the world's [longest reigning living monarch](#), King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX of the Chakri dynasty of Siam, was restless and alone, unsteadily pacing the corridors of Siriraj Hospital on the west bank of the Chao Phraya river that loops and weaves through the unruly urban sprawl of Bangkok. Bhumibol, a [revered ruler](#) whose towering influence during six decades on the throne profoundly shaped the character and destiny of modern Thailand, had been admitted to Siriraj on September 19, a few months before his 82nd birthday, with a mild fever and difficulty swallowing. His recovery was complicated by his Parkinson's disease and a possible bout of pneumonia, and there were worrying whispers among well-connected Thais that the king was also sunk in deep depression. Even so, by the first week of October his doctors pronounced him well enough to be discharged to the nearby Chitralada Palace, where he had lived for most of his reign. But Bhumibol declined to go home. He remained at Siriraj, in a 16th floor room in a special section reserved for royal use in one of the hospital's towers. On October 4, a full moon hung in the sky over Siriraj, heralding the start of the holy *kathin* month in the ancient Theravada Buddhist tradition, an auspicious time for merit making at the end of the rainy season and the beginning the rice harvest. Two nights later, Bhumibol rose from his bed and went for a solitary walk along the quiet hospital corridors.

Pausing at a window and gazing out into the Bangkok night with his one good eye, the king looked across the river, past the soaring silhouette of Wat Arun, the Temple of the Dawn, to the opposite bank and the golden spires of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and the Grand Palace that for more than two centuries, since the founding of the Chakri dynasty, have represented the heart of spiritual and royal power in Thailand.

They were shrouded in darkness, lost and invisible in the gloom. [Bhumibol sent orders](#) that the lights of the Grand Palace were not to be turned off during the night. He wanted to always be able see it from his hospital on the far side of the Chao Phraya.

In Bangkok's frantic jumble of slums and shophouses, luxury high-rise condominiums and decrepit apartment buildings, stretching away to the horizon from Bhumibol's hospital windows, and in the constellations of provincial towns and rural villages beyond, many millions of Thais were anxious and fearful of the future. Millions were angry, too. Thailand was troubled and divided, and Bhumibol's illness seemed to be a reflection of the disorder that afflicted his kingdom, and a disquieting omen of turmoil to come. A decade earlier, brash Chinese-Thai telecoms billionaire [Thaksin Shinawatra](#) had launched an unprecedented effort to transform Thai politics with his authoritarian "CEO-style management" of the country. Thaksin had been more spectacularly successful than anyone had expected - so successful that the elderly courtiers and bureaucrats surrounding the king had come to view him as a dangerous rival to Bhumibol and an existential threat to the very survival of the Chakri dynasty. And so Thailand's establishment had turned on Thaksin. The escalating struggle threatened to tear the country apart, exposing deep ideological, social, regional and economic faultlines that belied the official myth of a harmonious and contented "Land of Smiles". A proud nation that just a few years before had symbolized the emergence of Southeast Asia as a dynamic developing and democratizing region was suddenly flung backwards into conflict, self-doubt and confusion.

For Bhumibol, it was a personal tragedy. In his declining years, after devoting himself for well over half a century to the task of reviving the prestige of the palace as the unifying sacred core around which his country revolved, he was watching his life's work crumble before his eyes.

Nobody had ever thought he would inherit the throne of Thailand, least of all Bhumibol himself, son of a celestial prince who saw no future for the monarchy and a mother with no royal blood who was orphaned as a child. Bhumibol grew up in Switzerland, a world away from the arcane universe of Siam's royal court which appeared to be dimming into insignificance and extinction. He was pulled gradually into the orbit of the palace as his elder brother Ananda unexpectedly found himself first in line for the royal succession before even more unexpectedly becoming the reluctant Rama VIII. And then one momentous morning in June 1946, Ananda was found dead in his bed in the Grand Palace, shot in the head, a mystery that has never been solved, and 18-year-old Bhumibol Adulyadej was suddenly the ninth monarch of the Chakri Dynasty.

It was a position that had already been stripped of almost all of its formal powers and most of its wealth. Ananda's death deepened doubts that the Thai monarchy would survive at all. The fortunes of the House of Chakri appeared to be at their lowest ebb. Yet over succeeding decades, against seemingly insurmountable odds - not to mention the tide of history - Bhumibol restored a central role for the palace in Thailand and won the adoration of the vast majority of his people as the beloved "Father of the Nation". In the words of journalist Paul Handley in his groundbreaking academic biography *The King Never Smiles*:

King Bhumibol Adulyadej's restoration of the power and prestige of the Thai monarchy is one of the great untold stories of the 20th century....

Overnight, the happy-go-lucky, gangly, and thick-spectacled Bhumibol... became King Rama IX, holy and inviolate sovereign of a land whose language he spoke poorly, whose culture was alien to him, and whose people, compared to those of Switzerland, seemed crude and backward.

From the day of his brother's death, the story of Bhumibol's reign developed like a tale from mythology. After four more years in Europe studying, Bhumibol finally returned in 1950 for an opulent formal coronation. He married a vivacious blue-blooded princess, Sirikit, who would become world famous for her charm and beauty. They had four children, including one handsome boy to be heir and three daughters.

A figure of modernity in a feudal-like society stuck in the 1800s, the young king sailed, played jazz, ran his own radio station, painted expressionist oils, and frequented high-society parties. Whenever required he donned golden robes and multi-tiered crowns ... to undertake the arcane rituals and ceremonies of traditional Buddhist kingship...

At each juncture, his power and influence increased, rooted in his silent charisma and prestige.

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In June 2006, King Bhumibol marked [60 years on the throne of Thailand](#), amid an outpouring of adoration from the Thai people and an impressive show of respect from other royal families around the world. Thirteen reigning monarchs attended the celebrations in person, and 12 others sent royal representatives. The only reigning royal families not represented were those of Saudi Arabia and Nepal. The Saudi absence was due to the ill-health of the octogenarian King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz, officially at least, but relations between the two countries had been tarnished by a dispute over the unsolved theft of a famed blue diamond and other priceless gems from the Saudi royals in which Thailand's police and powerful establishment figures were implicated. The Nepalese monarchy was still in turmoil following the 2001 massacre of King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya and many of their relatives by their son, Crown Prince Dipendra, who went on a drunken rampage through the Narayanhity Royal Palace in Kathmandu with a Heckler & Koch MP5 submachinegun and an M16 assault rifle before committing suicide.

Over [several days of joyous festivities](#), millions of Thais wore the royal colour of yellow to show their respect. Fireworks lit up the sky, and the assembled monarchs watched the unforgettable sight of a royal barge procession, with 52 sleek dragon-headed vessels rowed by liveried Thai oarsmen gliding down the Chao Phraya past the Grand Palace. An estimated one million people crowded into Bangkok's Royal Plaza on Friday June 9 as Bhumibol [gave a public address](#) - only his third in six decades - from a palace balcony. Many millions more watched intently on television. Later that day at the auspicious time of 19:19, hundreds of thousands who had gathered around the brightly illuminated buildings of the Grand Palace lit candles in his honour.

In a [confidential U.S. embassy cable](#), American Ambassador Ralph "Skip" Boyce described the celebrations:

The multi-day gala offered dramatic and often times moving evidence of the nation's respect and adoration for its monarch...

While the Thai people's respect and reverence for the 78 year old monarch is often cited, the weekend's celebration was a rare occasion to see - and feel - the depths of this sentiment in person. In contrast to the tens of thousands who have rallied against and in support of the Thaksin government, the King's public address on Friday at [the] throne hall inspired an estimated one million Thai to brave the mid-day sun to listen to their "father" speak... Much of the audience had camped out since the evening before...

All local television stations carried the same live feed of each event, which featured crowd shots of attendees alternately crying and smiling. Late night television shifted to cover the opening of the World Cup, but even this event was colored by the King's celebration: a newspaper cartoon explained that most Thai people were cheering for Brazil because the Brazilians wear yellow uniforms.

It was an astonishing testament to Bhumibol's achievements in the six decades since he inherited the crown at such a perilous time for the monarchy and in such tragic circumstances.

And yet even as he basked in the adoration of his people and the respect of the world, Bhumibol was acutely aware that everything he had built during his 60 years on the throne was at risk of being reduced to ruins by mounting internal and external challenges that threatened to undermine the foundations of the Thai monarchy and destroy his legacy.

The father of the nation was facing serious problems within his own divided family: Boyce refers to the celebrations in his cable as “the dysfunctional family picnic”. Bhumibol had been estranged from Queen Sirikit for two decades since she suffered a breakdown following the mysterious death of her favourite military aide. Rama IX’s son and heir, Crown Prince Maha Chakri Vajiralongkorn, was a cruel and corrupt womanizer, reviled by most Thais almost as viscerally as Bhumibol was loved. The king's second daughter, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, was the overwhelming favourite of the Thai people to succeed her father, even though her gender and royal tradition seemed to render this impossible. As Boyce wrote in his cable:

In a shot heavy with unintentional meaning on Friday, the television broadcast showed the unpopular Crown Prince reading a message of congratulations to the King, who was seated on the royal balcony above the Prince. Just visible behind the King, however, was the smiling face of Princess Sirindorn - the widely respected "intellectual heir" of the monarch - chatting with her sisters and trying to take a picture of the adoring crowd below. The physical distance between the King and his legal heir far below, and his beloved daughter just behind him, captured the internal family dynamic - and the future of the monarchy - quite nicely.

Besides marital strife and an underachieving wayward son, Bhumibol was also troubled by the bitter power struggle between Thaksin and Thailand's traditional elites, which was becoming increasingly divisive and dangerous:

In his public remarks on Friday, the King thanked the assembled dignitaries and crowd for their congratulations and called upon the Thai people to show compassion, cooperate with each other, display integrity, and be reasonable. In a not-so-veiled reference to the ongoing political crisis, the King stated, "unity is the basis for all Thai to help preserve and bring prosperity to the country".

Prime Minister Thaksin had been fighting a rearguard action for months against a determined effort by Thai monarchists to oust him. His role in the celebrations was deeply ambivalent, Boyce noted:

Prime Minister Thaksin was front and center for much of the festivities: greeting foreign guests, and reading a congratulatory message for the King on behalf of the caretaker government. In an unfortunate bit of timing, the television camera covering the opening ceremony on Friday panned on the PM just as he was checking his watch. Aside from this minor gaffe - not mentioned in the newspapers, yet - the PM's personal perspective on the celebration remains unclear... Thaksin recently told the Ambassador that his own popularity in the countryside is seen by the palace as threatening to the King's popular standing. After this weekend's massive, unprecedented display of public adoration for the monarch, however, one hopes that Thaksin has a firm enough grasp of reality to reconsider this idea.

Within months of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, Thailand's smouldering tensions exploded. In September 2006 Thaksin was deposed by a military coup - the 18th attempted by Thailand's military since the country began its halting and bloody flirtation with democracy in 1932. The generals who ordered their tanks onto Bangkok's streets believed they were defending the monarchy and insisted they were acting in support of democracy against an increasingly authoritarian and mercurial prime minister who had co-opted most of the country's key institutions and subverted the rule of law. Yet the elderly men who took charge of Thailand after the coup were completely unprepared for the challenges of running a 21st century economy and totally bewildered when it came to trying to counter the machinations of a media-savvy telecommunications tycoon with deep pockets and a determination to get even, whatever the cost.

A coup designed to crush support for Thaksin and end his influence over Thai politics forever was an abject failure. It only succeeded in wrenching an already divided country even further apart. The high-stakes struggle between Thailand's most powerful figures spilled onto the streets of Bangkok, where mass protests and civil disobedience by the royalist "Yellow Shirt" followers of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the broadly pro-Thaksin "Red Shirts" of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) erupted repeatedly into violent clashes and destructive efforts to sabotage the very functioning of the Thai state.

By the autumn of 2009, when Bhumibol was admitted to Siriraj Hospital, the country was mired deep in an intractable social and political crisis with no apparent way out.. As the end of his life approached, instead of looking back with pride over his incredible achievements, Bhumibol was fretting over fears that everything he had fought to achieve during his extraordinary reign was in danger of turning into dust.

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Nahrawan is a miserable, dusty, flyblown Iraqi town in the [parched rural hinterland](#) southeast of Baghdad, [haunted](#) by sectarian hatred and murderous cycles of revenge, nearly 4,000 miles away from Bangkok. As Bhumibol was beginning his long hospitalization in the autumn of 2009, a 21-year-old U.S. Army soldier called Bradley Manning was beginning a deployment at Forward Operating Base Hammer, a recently built American outpost in Nahrawan. Increasingly disillusioned by what he was being asked to do in Iraq, and by revelations he read in secret U.S. files he had access to as an intelligence analyst, Manning began stealing hundreds of thousands of confidential documents, downloading them onto compact discs while pretending he was just listening to music, and taking them out of the supposedly secure computer room in the base in Nahrawan.

In May 2010, Manning initiated [a series of online chats from Iraq](#), using the pseudonym Bradass87, with convicted American hacker [Adrian Lamo](#). On May 22, he asked Lamo:

(12:15:11 PM) bradass87: hypothetical question: if you had free reign over classified networks for long periods of time... say, 8-9 months... and you saw incredible things, awful things... things that belonged in the public domain, and not on some server stored in a dark room in Washington DC... what would you do?

Manning described how he had "listened and lip-synced to Lady Gaga's Telephone while exfiltrating possibly the largest data spillage in American history". Secret U.S. intelligence traffic revealed "things that would have an impact on 6.7 billion people", he said. And he wanted the world to see what he had seen.

(12:26:09 PM) bradass87: lets just say *someone* i know intimately well, has been penetrating US classified networks, mining data like the ones described... and been transferring that data from the classified networks over the "air gap" onto a commercial network computer... sorting the data, compressing it, encrypting it, and uploading it to a crazy white haired aussie who can't seem to stay in one country very long =L

(12:31:43 PM) bradass87: crazy white haired dude = Julian Assange

Manning said the vast trove of secret documents he was leaking had "global scope, and breathtaking depth... its beautiful, and horrifying".

(1:11:54 PM) bradass87: and... its important that it gets out... i feel, for some bizarre reason

(1:12:02 PM) bradass87: it might actually change something

Bradley Manning was arrested by U.S. military authorities on May 26, 2010, and after months in solitary confinement in a Marine Corps brig, including periods when he was [forced to strip](#) and stand naked every evening for inspection by prison guards, he now awaits a hearing to decide whether he will be court martialled on more than 20 charges, including "aiding the enemy", a capital offense. Prosecutors have said they will not seek the death penalty, but if convicted Manning will face life imprisonment, reduction in rank to the lowest enlisted pay grade, a dishonourable discharge, and loss of pay and allowances.

Julian Assange is the founder of WikiLeaks, an organization dedicated to putting secret documents in the public domain in the belief that this promotes positive political change. Since February 2010, WikiLeaks has been gradually releasing documents and video from a massive archive of secret U.S. files. Assange has said he does not know Manning, and has never revealed the source of the material. Among the huge haul of information is what WikiLeaks calls 'Cablegate' - 251,287 confidential diplomatic cables, including 15,652 classified as secret, from 274 U.S. embassies, consulates and diplomatic missions around the world, dated from December 28, 1966, to February 28, 2010. WikiLeaks began selectively publishing the cables in November 2010, in cooperation with several Western newspapers. U.S. cables about [Tunisia](#), [Egypt](#), [Libya](#) and other regimes in the Middle East and North Africa have been credited with playing a role in galvanizing support for the "Jasmine Revolutions" that swept the region from late 2010, although the extent to which they impacted events is the subject of fierce controversy. To date, only around 5 percent of the cables in the database have been published.

Assange is a controversial and polarizing figure. Over the past two years he has made an enormous and lasting global impact - and reinvigorated the profession of journalism at a time when it seemed to be slowly stumbling towards irrelevance - by reframing political and geopolitical debate around the fundamental issues of transparency, accountability and freedom of information. He restored belief in the existence - and value - of truth, a concept that had been increasingly forgotten in political discourse

and news reporting. And through technical genius and an audacious faith in his own ability to change the world, he stunned and unsettled the most venerable news organizations by scoring some of the most astonishing scoops of all time. However, like many driven, intense people with plenty of logical processing power but less emotional intelligence, Assange tends to be regarded by some of those he comes into contact with as overbearing and arrogant. This is particularly true of those who have worked closely with him; Assange's management style is, by all accounts, brutally dictatorial, and a number of disillusioned former colleagues have angrily abandoned WikiLeaks, some of them loading up their laptops and thumb drives with secret documents on their way to the exit. WikiLeaks itself became the victim of leaks, and Assange clumsily compounded the irony by furiously denouncing those who had stolen his stolen information, and trying to force employees to sign a \$20 million [nondisclosure agreement](#). It was a telling parable on the addictive lure of secret knowledge: if power corrupts, and information is power, then those who seek to uncover hidden truths must be wary of the temptation to hoard them somewhere out of sight instead of bringing them out into the daylight where they belong.

The information that spilled out of WikiLeaks during its periods of upheaval found its way to other news organizations. The Cablegate database was acquired by several, including my former employer Reuters, without Assange's permission.

In the spring of 2011 I gained access to the documents. I went straight to the cables on Thailand.

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Of all the world's countries, Thailand is among those for which the publication of the U.S. embassy cables could have potentially the most profound impact. All nations have their secrets and lies. There is always a gulf between the narrative constructed by those in power, and the real story. But the dissonance between Thailand's official ideology and the reality is particularly stark and troubling. Suthep Thaugsuban, Thailand's deputy prime minister, blithely claimed in December 2010 that [the cables would have no impact on the country](#):

We don't have any secrets... What happens in Thailand, we tell the media and the people.

His comments could scarcely be further from the truth. Thailand is a nation of secrets, and most of the biggest secrets are those involving the Thai monarchy. The palace is at the centre of an idealized narrative of the Thai nation and of what it means to be Thai, which depicts the country as a uniquely blessed kingdom in which nobody questions the established order. Thais are well aware that the truth is very different - they could hardly be otherwise, following the violent political crisis that has engulfed their country - and yet many continue to suspend their disbelief and, at least publicly, to profess their faith in the official myths. Most feel unable to voice the truth, due partly to immense social pressure in a society where to question the official story is to be regarded as "un-Thai", and partly to some of the strictest defamation laws in the world.

At the heart of the legal structure protecting the official myth is the lèse majesté law. Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code states: "Whoever defames, insults or threatens the King, Queen, the Heir-apparent or the Regent, shall be punished with imprisonment of three to fifteen years."

A law originally intended to shield the monarchy from insults and slander has become something far more: it is increasingly used to prevent any questioning of Thailand's established social and political order. As historian David Streckfuss says in the foremost academic work on the subject, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason, and Lèse Majesté*: "Never has such an archaic law held such sway over a 'modern' society (except perhaps 'Muslim' theocracies like Afghanistan under the Taliban)":

Thailand's use of the lèse majesté law has become unique in the world and its elaboration and justifications have become an art. The law's defenders claim that Thailand's love and reverence for its king is incomparable. Its critics say the law has become the foremost threat to freedom of expression. Barely hidden beneath the surface of growing debate around the law and its use are the most basic issues defining the relationship between those in power and the governed: equality before the law, rights and liberties, the source of sovereign power, and even the system of government of the polity - whether Thailand is to be primarily a constitutional monarchy, a democratic system of governance with the king as head of state, or a democracy.

Most Thais remain unaware of the full story of how Bhumibol restored the power and prestige of the monarchy over the past half century. Handley's book *The King Never Smiles* is banned in Thailand - as is Handley himself - because he violated the taboo that forbids a critical look at the role of the palace in Thailand's modern history. As he writes in the introduction:

Any journalist or academic who takes an interest in Thailand soon learns that one topic is off-limits: the modern monarchy. One is told variably that there is nothing more to say than the official palace accounts; that such matters are internal; that the subject is too sensitive and complex for palace outsiders to handle; or simply that it is dangerous, and one risks expulsion or jail for lèse majesté.

Most people give in to these explanations with little argument. It is easy to do: nearly every Thai one meets expresses unquestioning praise for the king, or at least equivocates to the point of suggesting that there really is not much to be said: the history that is in the open is the whole of it. Palace insiders sometimes concede that there is indeed more to the story, but then demur to say that only real insiders, only Thais within the inner royal circle, can comprehend the mysteries of the king's reign.

The subject, then, hardly seems worth the trouble to dig into, and so as even the most curious succumb to Thailand's charm and King Bhumibol's carefully crafted image, the palace remains an enigma. The result, however, is a crucial gap in modern Thai history and political analysis.

Thongchai Winichakul, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and visiting fellow at the National University of Singapore, discussed the chilling effect of the lèse majesté law in his 2008 paper [*Toppling Democracy*](#):

The current generation of Thais mostly grew up after the Second World War when they no longer lived with the memories and experiences of the 1932 revolution. Instead they have lived

through military rule and the struggle against it, and through the time when the monarchy has been elevated to a sacred and inviolable status. The role of the monarch and the “network monarchy” in past or present politics are ... beyond public discussion, due to the *lèse majesté* law that would penalise anybody who defames the monarch with up to fifteen years in jail. The lack of conceptualised narratives that explain how the monarchy remains a critical element in Thai democratisation further contributes to overlooking the political role of the monarchy.

Discussion of the reality among Thais is relegated to private conversations or [oblique references using coded imagery and parables](#). The truth about the palace's enormously influential role in Thai politics and economics cannot be uttered openly in public. As Streckfuss says:

The *lèse majesté* law shields this overwhelming, inescapable presence in Thai society, politics and the economy. As a result, the operation of the *lèse majesté* law in Thailand creates a black hole of silence in the center of the Thai body politic. Political and social discourse is relegated to the fringes as whisperings and innuendo.

The WikiLeaks Cablegate database contains 2,930 cables from the U.S. embassy in Bangkok, 71 of them secret, and a further 239 from the U.S. embassy in Chiang Mai, 17 secret, plus dozens more from other U.S. embassies that also discuss Thailand. Only [a handful of have been published so far](#). The cables begin in late 2004, when Thaksin was at the height of his political ascendancy, and end in early 2010 when Thaksin was in exile, current Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva was in power, and Thailand was about to enter the most tragic phase of its crisis so far. Most were written by [Ralph "Skip" Boyce](#), ambassador from 2004 to 2007, and [Eric G. John](#), ambassador from 2007 until 2010.

One reason above all makes the leaked U.S. embassy documents invaluable for an understanding of modern Thailand: unlike almost all journalistic, academic and public discourse on the country, they were written without explicit and extensive self-censorship about the absolutely pivotal role played by the monarchy in Thai political developments throughout the country's modern history.

Explaining Thai politics without reference to the role of the palace is like trying to tell the story of the Titanic without making any mention of the ship. Some brave Thais in the media and academia make a valiant effort, through the use of tortured euphemisms and oblique hints, as Pravit Rojanaphruk, one of the country's most outstanding journalists, wrote in [a June 2011 column](#):

The "invisible hand", "special power", "irresistible force", all these words have been mentioned frequently lately by people, politicians and the mass media when discussing Thai politics, the upcoming general election and what may follow.

These expressions are used as a substitute for an alleged unspeakable and unconstitutional force in Thai politics, to make the otherwise incomplete stories about politics and its manipulation slightly more comprehensible.

The leaked U.S. cables do not have to resort to enigmatic innuendo about hidden hands and spooky inexplicable influences. They were written by American diplomats doing their best to explain events in Thailand to the State Department in Washington. They were intended to be secret, made public only when the events they described were distant history and the people involved were long dead. Those who wrote them did not have to fear the threat of social ostracism or lengthy jail sentences if they simply tried to give a clear explanation of the most important issues facing the people of Thailand at a momentous time in their history at the start of the 21st century.

The account they give of Thailand's ongoing political crisis may not always be correct: like everybody else struggling to unravel the truth, senior U.S. diplomats had to rely on sources who were by no means always honest and who often gave a partial or even deliberately misleading picture. John explicitly concedes this point in one of the most remarkable of all the cables, from November 2009, entitled "[CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE INSIDE THE INSTITUTION OF THE MONARCHY IN KING BHUMIBOL'S TWILIGHT](#)":

The Thai institution of monarchy remains an opaque institution, full truths about which are difficult to fix with any certainty...

We offer this "royal primer" mindful of the opaque nature of the institution, the difficulty in establishing absolute truths about public yet very remote royal figures, and the inherent biases of inside players, even those we have known for years (several of whom recently repeated a Thai aphorism about the institution: "those who know aren't talking, and those who are talking aren't in the know").

The cables also reflect the biases of their authors: like many Western observers of Thailand, Boyce and John were always uneasy with Thaksin's demagoguery and corruption, and were much more comfortable dealing with the refined, patrician, British-born and educated Abhisit, [described by John](#) as "a photogenic, eloquent 44-year old Oxford graduate who generally has progressive instincts and says the right things about basic freedoms, social inequities, policy towards Burma, and how to address the troubled deep south". John seems to have only realized rather late that Abhisit's instincts may not have been as progressive as they appeared, and that while he may say the right things, that does not mean that he does them.

No other country has been so inextricably involved with Thailand over the past century as the United States, and this adds even more value to what the cables have to say. America's influence has had a transformative impact on Thailand - and on the life and reign of U.S.-born King Rama IX. And just like the palace's critical but secret role in shaping Thailand's destiny, the central part played by the United States is often obscured and denied. As Christine Gray wrote in her remarkable 1986 PhD dissertation, [Thailand: The Soteriological State in the 1970s](#):

Any study of contemporary Thai society must account for the U.S. influence on that polity *and the mutual denial of that influence*. Thailand's relationship with the United States is complex, heavily disguised and, in many instances, actively denied by the leaders of both countries...

In many cases, it is difficult if not impossible to determine the extent of American influence in Thailand. Thailand is a nation of secrets: of secret bombings and air bases during the Vietnam War, of secret military pacts and aid agreements, of secret business transactions and secret ownership of businesses and joint venture corporations. This is precisely the point; the American presence has taken on powerful cosmological, religious and even mythic overtones. The American influence on the Thai economy and polity has become a symbol of uncertainty, of men's inability to know the truth.

The end of the Cold War marked a change in the relationship, but it remains fundamentally important, particularly given Thailand's role in the so-called "War on Terror" and America's geopolitical rivalry with a rising China. In multiple cables written for visiting high-level officials, John wrote that "[Thailand's strategic importance to the U.S. cannot be overstated](#)". The country hosted one of the CIA's infamous "[black sites](#)" where al Qaeda prisoners were tortured: vociferously denied, of course, by the Thais, and never acknowledged by the Americans.

The leaked cables provide a coherent and insightful account of the complexities of Thailand's crisis by respected senior U.S. diplomats who consider the kingdom a crucial strategic partner, who have unparalleled access to most of the key players, and who did not censor the monumental role of the monarchy out of their analysis. As such, they revolutionize the study of 21st century Thailand.

But their importance goes further. The cables do not merely illuminate Thailand's history - they are also likely to have a profound impact on its future. The official culture of secrecy that has criminalized public acknowledgement of truth among Thais and prevented academic and journalistic study of fundamental issues affecting the country has been irretrievably breached. The genie cannot now be put back into the bottle.

Some underwhelmed critics of the leaking of Cablegate documents have dismissed them as containing few genuine revelations - in general, they have largely tended to confirm what everybody suspected all along. And this is to some extent true of the cables on Thailand. There are no bombshells that will stun Thais or foreign experts on Thailand who are already aware - at least privately - of the story that the cables tell.

But this is missing the point. As Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has argued in [a brilliant essay on WikiLeaks](#):

The only surprising thing about the WikiLeaks revelations is that they contain no surprises. Didn't we learn exactly what we expected to learn? The real disturbance was at the level of appearances: we can no longer pretend we don't know what everyone knows we know. This is the paradox of public space: even if everyone knows an unpleasant fact, saying it in public changes everything.

Hans Christian Andersen made the same point in his parable *[The Emperor's New Clothes](#)*. Even if most people privately suspect the truth, putting it in the public domain makes it impossible to sustain official narratives that depend on a refusal to acknowledge the reality.

For that reason, the cables may, finally, force Thailand to confront some uncomfortable facts about its past, its present, and its future.

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Bhumibol has remained in Siriraj to this day. And the king still suffers restless nights, according his youngest daughter Princess Chulabhorn Walailak in [an extraordinary interview](#) with popular talk show host [Vuthithorn “Woody” Milintachinda](#), broadcast in [two parts](#) in April. Amid scenes of an emotional Woody prostrating himself on the ground, eagerly sharing a cupcake fed to the princess's pet dog, and frequently bursting into tears, [Chulabhorn told him](#):

HM goes to sleep very late. Sometimes he cannot sleep. Sometimes he sleeps a little. Sometimes when there are problems, he would follow them up, like floods, for example, concerned about the hardship of the people. He would order [officials] to send bags of emergency supplies to the people. When he sees on TV where are floods, where it is hot, or where people have been injured, he will give help without telling anyone. He does good without being seen indeed. If I were not his child, I'd never know this.

His continued hospitalization since September 2009, even when his health had seemed to be on the mend, has troubled Thais and baffled foreign observers. As Eric John wrote in February last year:

The real question at this stage remains: why does he continue to be hospitalized? The stated rationale - to build up his physical strength and endurance - could be accomplished in a palace, either in Bangkok or his preferred seaside residence in Hua Hin. Some will suspect other motives, but what those might be remain unclear. [[10BANGKOK287](#)]

More than a year later, Bhumibol's behaviour seems even more of a mystery.

During the king's seclusion in Siriraj, the malady afflicting the nation has only worsened. In March 2010, many thousands of Red Shirt protesters began congregating in Bangkok for a series of mass rallies against the government of Prime Minister Abhisit. Over two tragic months in April and May, as the military moved in to try to crush the protest, 91 people were killed and more than 1,800 wounded in a series of violent clashes between Thai troops, Red Shirts and shadowy groups of armed men known as "[Black Shirts](#)" or "Ronin warriors" with unclear affiliation to Thaksin and the protest leaders. For weeks the Red Shirts occupied an area of five star hotels and luxury malls in the centre of the capital, a few miles east of Bhumibol's riverside hospital. When soldiers finally stormed the barricades around the Red encampment, on May 19, dozens of buildings in Bangkok were set ablaze in an apparently well-planned wave of arson attacks. The months that followed saw a determined crackdown by Thailand's resurgent military and the Abhisit administration. A state of emergency was imposed in several areas. Most Red Shirt leaders were imprisoned. Community radio stations in rural areas where Red support is strong were shut down. The millions of rural and urban poor who form the main support base for the Red Shirt movement were left seething with anger and a bitter sense of injustice.

Another element of the crackdown was increasing use of the *lèse majesté* and computer crimes laws to stifle dissent. Respected [journalists](#) and [academics](#) have been among those targeted. In late May, Lerpong Wichaicommart, a 54-year-old Thai man with U.S. citizenship who also calls himself Joe Gordon, was [arrested in Thailand on charges of using the internet to insult the monarchy](#) that could carry a sentence of up to 22 years. Among his alleged offences was providing a link on his website to a digital version of *The King Never Smiles*.

In such a climate, it became clear that the article I was writing on Thailand, based on the full set of more than 3,000 leaked U.S. embassy documents relevant to the country, could never be published by Reuters. Even though U.S. diplomatic cables were the key source material, and they were always going to eventually end up in the public domain after WikiLeaks acquired them, just linking to them and discussing their content as this article does will be regarded by many in Thailand as a highly provocative act. Quite clearly it represents *lèse majesté* on an epic scale. Reuters has hundreds of staff in Thailand, and there were concerns they could be put at risk. Like all major foreign media organizations, the company has had to self-censor its reporting from Thailand for years, to protect its staff and the revenues it earns in Thailand. The U.S. cables were just too risky to run. It was an understandable decision.

But for me, there could be no turning back. From the day I first arrived in Bangkok 11 years ago as deputy bureau chief for Reuters, I was - like most visitors before me over the centuries - beguiled by the luminous beauty and vibrancy of Thai culture, and moved and inspired by the graciousness, charm and warmth of most Thai people. No other place in the world means more to me, and nowhere else has broken my heart more often. It just became impossible to ignore all the everyday horror and human misery that are allowed to flourish in Thailand alongside so much to cherish and admire. And it troubled me that so many Thais seemed to have lost faith in their ability to solve the problems their country faces, and had decided to just pretend the problems didn't exist at all.

Thailand needs to escape the wretched cycle of corruption, conspiracies and coups that has blighted its modern history. A first step is to clearly acknowledge what is happening in Thailand today. Thailand's people deserve to know the truth, and they deserve to be allowed to express what they believe, instead of facing jail or exile for simply saying things that cannot be denied.

As Pravit says, "like a vampire fearing the scrutiny of sunlight, Thai politics can never be comprehensible or democratic without trying to make visible the invisible hand":

The hand (he or she, there could be more than one invisible hand), operates in the shadow because it cannot bear the scrutiny, the transparency and accountability of a democratic society. It also apparently does not believe the majority of voters should be able to elect their own representatives and determine the future course of Thai society.

Politics in Thailand has become more and more like a badly acted television drama series. The actors all know that the lines they are speaking and the roles they are playing while the cameras are rolling are not real: the reality is quite different. The audience knows it too. When we watch a television melodrama, of course, we don't start complaining that what we are watching is fake. We allow ourselves to imagine it is real, to enjoy the show. Thailand's tragedy is that people have come to view the dismal farce acted out

by their politicians, generals, bureaucrats and business tycoons in the same way: everybody *knows* it's all fake, but everybody feels it wouldn't be polite to interrupt the theatrics by saying so. With the greatest of respect, it's time to say the show is over. Thailand needs to start dealing with reality. Especially now, when the whole country is convulsed by anger and pain and anxiety, and when so many dark clouds are gathering on the horizon.

Everybody knows that a storm is coming. The only question is how much time is left before it hits. What happens then will fundamentally define what kind of country Thailand becomes in the 21st century. You don't get any shelter from a storm just by closing your eyes and refusing to look at it.

When I realized I would not be able to say what needs to be said about Thailand as a Reuters journalist, I began making copies of all the U.S. cables relating to the country over a few fraught sleepless nights of frenetic cutting-and-pasting and excessive amounts of Krating Daeng. Technology has made the theft of secret information much easier than it used to be: an eccentric Thai writer and publisher called K.S.R. Kulap Kritsananon had a much more difficult time 130 years ago when he wanted to share the wealth of accumulated historical wisdom contained within the manuscripts held in the Royal Scribes' library in the Grand Palace. He saw his chance when the library was under renovation and the manuscripts taken out of the palace and entrusted to the care of Prince Bodinphaisansophon, head of the Department of Royal Scribes. Craig Reynolds tells the story in *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts*:

The accessibility of these manuscripts to Kulap sparked his curiosity, and out of his love for old writings, he paid daily visits to admire the most ancient books in the kingdom. Naturally, he desired copies for himself, his passion for old books guiding him around any obstruction. According to Prince Damrong's account of the episode, based on conversations with Kulap's accomplices, he circumvented the prohibition on public access to such documents by persuading Prince Bodin to lend the texts overnight one at a time. With a manuscript in his possession, Kulap then rowed across the river to the Thonburi bank to the famous monastery, Wat Arun or Wat Claeng. There, in the portico of the monastery, Kulap spread out the accordion-pleated text its entire length, and members of the Royal Pages Bodyguard Regiment, hired by Kulap to assist in this venture, were then each assigned a section of the manuscript. In assembly-line fashion, they managed to complete the transcription within the allotted time. Kulap then rowed back across the river to return the original, with the prince apparently none the wiser.

On June 3, 2011, I resigned from Reuters after a 17-year career so that I could make this article freely available to all those who wish to read it. Reuters was explicitly opposed to my actions and sought to prevent me writing it while I was employed there. They have also informed me several times of the potential consequences of making unauthorized use of material that came into my possession through my work as a Reuters journalist. I have chosen to disregard those warnings, but it is important to make clear that Reuters made every reasonable effort to stop me publishing this story, and some frankly rather unreasonable efforts too. Responsibility for the content and the consequences of my article is mine, and mine alone.

Besides having to leave a job I loved with a company I had believed in, it also seems likely that I can never visit Thailand again. That feels unbearably sad. But it would have been infinitely sadder to

have just accepted defeat and given up trying to write something honest about Thailand. My duty as a journalist, and as a human being, is to at least try to do better than that.

What follows is a rough first draft of the truth.

I. "A WATERSHED EVENT IN THAI HISTORY"

One inescapable and traumatizing fact haunts 21st century Thailand, and not even the country's most potent myths have the power to tame it: Bhumibol Adulyadej, the beloved Rama IX, is approaching the end of his life. Frail and hospitalized, he is already just a shadow of his former self.

His designated successor, Crown Prince Maha Chakri Vajiralongkorn, is widely despised and feared. Whether or not the prince becomes Rama X, the royal succession will be a time of profound national anxiety and uncertainty far more shattering and painful even than the tragic events of the past five years of worsening social and political conflict.

The looming change in monarch and the prolonged political crisis gripping Thailand are - of course - inextricably intertwined. A large number of parallel conflicts are being fought at all levels of Thai society, in the knowledge that Bhumibol's death will be a game-changing event that will fundamentally alter longstanding power relationships among key individuals and institutions, and may also totally rewrite the rules of the game. Ahead of the succession, the leading players are fighting to position themselves for of the inevitable paradigm shift.

Professor Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University's faculty of political science, describes the crisis beautifully in *Thailand Since the Coup*, published in the Journal of Democracy in 2008:

The setting sun of the King's long reign is the background against which the battle of attrition for Thailand's soul is taking place. In this twilight struggle are locked opposing webs of partisans and vested interests both for and against what Thaksin has done to Thailand. The old establishment confronts the popular demands and expectations that the age of globalization has wrought, and strains to find ways to render the new voices irrelevant.

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When very important U.S. officials come to town, American ambassadors around the world prepare for them a confidential "scen setter", a concise briefing to read during their flight, about the country in which they are about to arrive. In July 2009, it was the task of Eric G. John, the American ambassador in Bangkok and a former deputy assistant secretary of state for Southeast Asia, to write a scen setter for a particularly important visitor: his boss, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the woman in charge of the foreign policy of the most powerful nation in the world.

Here is what he wrote about the "troubled kingdom" of Thailand in cable [09BANGKOK1662](#), "THAILAND SCENESETTER FOR SECRETARY CLINTON'S JULY 21-23 VISIT":

Madam Secretary: You will arrive July 21 in a Kingdom of Thailand divided politically and focused inward, uncertain about the country's future after revered but ailing 81 year old King

Bhumibol eventually passes. ...

The past year has been a turbulent one in Thailand. Court decisions forced two Prime Ministers from office, and twice the normal patterns of political life took a back seat to disruptive protests in the streets. The yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) occupied Government House from August to December 2008, shutting down Bangkok's airports for eight days in late November, to protest governments affiliated with ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The red-shirted United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), followers of Thaksin, disrupted a regional Asian Summit and sparked riots in Bangkok in mid-April after Thaksin, now a fugitive abroad in the wake of an abuse of power conviction, called for a revolution to bring him home. While both yellow and red try to lay exclusive claim to the mantle of democracy, neither is truly democratic in intent or tactics.

The current PM, Abhisit Vejjajiva... is beset with a fractious coalition, with partners more interested in self-enrichment than good governance, as well as a resurgent post-2006 coup military not interested in political compromises in the deep south or reducing its profile, at least as long as uncertainty over a looming royal succession crisis remains to be resolved.

While Thailand in 2009 has been more stable than in 2008, mid-April red riots aside, it is the calm in the eye of a storm. Few observers believe that the deep political and social divides can be bridged until after King Bhumibol passes and Thailand's tectonic plates shift. Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn neither commands the respect nor displays the charisma of his beloved father, who greatly expanded the prestige and influence of the monarchy during his 62 year reign. Some question whether Vajiralongkorn will be crowned King, as Bhumibol desires. Nearly everyone expects the monarchy to shrink and change in function after succession. How much will change is open to question, with many institutions, figures, and political forces positioning for influence, not only over redefining the institution of monarchy but, equally fundamentally, what it means to be Thai. It is a heady time for observers of the Thai scene, a frightening one for normal Thai.

The political crisis that has riven Thailand since the start of Thaksin's struggle with the establishment can only be understood in this context, as John explains in cable [09BANGKOK2967](#):

Bhumibol's eventual passing will be a watershed event in Thai history. It likely will unleash changes in institutional arrangements in Thailand, affecting the size and role of the monarchy, its relationship to the elected government and the military, and the roles of both of the latter, unmatched since the 1932 transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy, which nevertheless retained the monarchy at the core of Thai national identity.

The twilight of Rama IX's reign is casting long shadows across the political landscape:

It is hard to underestimate the political impact of the uncertainty surrounding the inevitable succession crisis which will be touched off once King Bhumibol passes. Over the past year, nearly every politician and analyst, when speaking privately and candidly, regardless of political affiliation or colored perspective, has identified succession as the principal political

challenge facing Thailand today, much more important than normal political issues of coalition management or competition for power, which clearly do factor into the mix of political dynamics...

It is entirely possible King Bhumibol will return to his Hua Hin seaside palace several hours south of Bangkok in the coming days and live quietly for many years - postponing the day of reckoning and change that will inevitably come. In the meantime, the bustle of normal politics and changing societal attitudes will continue apace, while Thais keep a wary eye on the health of their ailing King. [09BANGKOK2488]

Fear about the succession transfixes many Thais at all levels of society, and evidence of it can be seen everywhere.

Duncan McCargo, professor of Southeast Asian politics at the University of Leeds, begins his study *Thailand: State of Anxiety* in Southeast Asian Affairs in 2008 with a reference to an obsession that swept the nation for magical amulets originally created by policeman in the southern town of Nakhon Si Thammarat. They became so wildly popular that in April 2007 a woman was killed in a stampede at the temple where they were made, and a crime wave spread worsening havoc through the town as Thais unable or unwilling to buy the amulets decided to try stealing them instead. The chaos prompted Thailand's supreme patriarch - the most senior Buddhist monk in the kingdom - to declare he would no longer provide some of the sacred ingredients, such as incense ash from his temple, used in the production of the lucky amulets.

"Today, Thai people are without hope ... there is no certainty in their lives."

This statement came not from one of Thailand's many academics or social critics, but from a popular young entertainer, Patcharasri "Kalamare" Benjamas. She was writing about the national anxiety epitomized by the extraordinary cult of Jatukham Ramathep amulets which seized Thailand in late 2006 and the first half of 2007. Deeply uneasy about the economy, politics, and the royal succession, Thais bought tens of millions of these much-hyped amulets to protect them from adversity....

The fevered collective enthusiasm for monarchy seen during 2006 and 2007 had a darker downside, testifying to growing national anxiety about the royal succession... The inability of the palace to address public anxiety about the succession threatened to undermine the glory of the Ninth Reign. [McCargo, *Thailand: State of Anxiety*]

McCargo has convincingly argued that the gruesome mutation that afflicted the Yellow Shirt movement of the People's Alliance for Democracy is also a symptom of the panic stalking Thailand as the Bhumibol era comes to an end. The Yellow Shirts were initially a broad-based and relatively good-humoured alliance from across the ideological and political spectrum that drew together royalists and liberals, radical students and middle-class aunties, progressive activists and patrician establishment patriarchs, united in opposition to the increasingly baleful influence of Thaksin Shinawatra; over the years they morphed into a proto-fascist mob of hateful extremists addicted to the bloodcurdling rhetoric of rabble-

rousing demagogues. The Yellow Shirts proclaim their undying love for the king, but it is the flipside of that love that has transformed them into a baying apocalyptic death cult: they are utterly petrified about what will happen once Rama IX is gone.

Thailand was firmly in the grip of “late reign” national anxiety, which formed the basic explanation for the otherwise illegible performances and processions of the PAD...

As time went on, the PAD became captives of their own rhetoric, unable to converse with others, let alone back down or make compromises. Rather than seek to build broad support for their ideas, core leaders made vitriolic speeches... in which they denounced anyone critical of, or unsympathetic, to their actions. Such megaphone posturing served to alienate potential supporters, and to strengthen the PAD’s dangerous sense of themselves as an in-group of truth-tellers and savants, whose nationalist loyalties were not properly appreciated or understood. This self-presentation had distinctly cultic overtones... [McCargo, *Thai Politics as Reality TV*]

Another stark indication of anxiety about the succession - due to the uncertainty and additional risk it will inject into investment decisions - was the collapse in the Thai stock market in October 2009 on rumours that Bhumibol's health had taken a turn for the worse:

As widely reported in the local and international press, rumors of the King Bhumibol's ill health drove the Thai stock market into a frenzy for two straight days this week. Combined losses over the two days amounted nearly \$13 billion...

The market jitters and selling frenzy on the trading floor demonstrates just how sensitive investor confidence in Thailand is to news about the King's health. This volatility creates a wealth of opportunities for mischief in the market, particularly for profit-seekers and bargain-hunters. The veracity of rumors is very difficult to track down, but their impact on the market, true or not, is clear. [09BANGKOK2656]

And yet Thailand claims to be a constitutional monarchy, in which the king does not interfere in politics. The extent of the fear and turmoil roiling Thailand in the final years of Bhumibol's reign can be baffling for foreign observers. In Britain, Queen Elizabeth II is fairly widely respected even among those who are indifferent or opposed to the monarchy, and few people are greatly enthused about the prospect of Prince Charles becoming king, but the country is hardly convulsed by frantic worry about the succession. Quite clearly, Bhumibol is no ordinary constitutional monarch. And making sense of Thailand’s trauma requires some understanding of what the monarchy means to Thais, and in particular how Bhumibol came to hold such a special place in their hearts.

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Bhumibol's ascent to the throne of Thailand was so improbable that it would strain credibility in a work of fiction. His mother Sangwal was born in 1900 to impoverished parents, a Thai-Chinese father and a Thai mother, in Nonthaburi near Bangkok. By the time she was 10 both her parents and an elder sister

and brother had all died, leaving her an orphan with one younger brother. Through some fortunate family connections she moved into the outer orbit of the royal court, and after an accident with a sewing needle she was sent to stay in the home of the palace surgeon who encouraged her to become a nurse. At the age of just 13 she enrolled at Siriraj Hospital's School for Midwifery and Nursing. She met Bhumibol's father, Mahidol Adulyadej - 69th of the 77 children of Rama V, King Chulalongkorn - in Boston in 1918 after winning a scholarship to further her nursing studies in the United States. If anybody had expected Mahidol to get anywhere near the pinnacle of the royal line of succession, his marriage to a Thai-Chinese commoner would never have been approved. But he was far down the list. Bhumibol was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1927, the couple's third child after a daughter, Galyani Vadhana, and a son, Ananda Mahidol. His name means "Strength of the Land, Incomparable Power".

By the time Bhumibol was born, his father had been catapulted into contention for the throne, after several other claimants died young and childless. But Mahidol was studying medicine and wanted to be a doctor; he had no interest in becoming king. In December 1928, the family returned to Siam. Mahidol hoped to practise as a doctor in Bangkok, but palace law decreed that his royal status meant he could not touch any part of a patient's body apart from the head. Trying to escape restrictions he considered ridiculous, he went to work at the American Presbyterian Hospital in the northern town of Chiang Mai. Shortly afterwards the chronic kidney problems he had suffered all his adult life flared up again. He died in September 1929 in Bangkok, aged 37. This put the young Ananda first in line for the throne, with Bhumibol next. Even then, it seemed very unlikely that Bhumibol would ever rule Thailand. King Prajadhipok, Rama VII, was still a young man, and there were doubts about how long long the monarchy would last in a modernising Thailand and a changing world in which many royal dynasties were being swept from power. Sure enough, in 1932, a group of military officers and bureaucrats [overthrew the absolute monarchy in Siam](#). In the political ferment, Sangwal took her sons to Europe, where they set up home in Switzerland.

After trying and failing to claw back some of the royal powers stripped from him, Prajadhipok abdicated the throne in 1935, declining to name a successor. The government named Ananda Mahidol, nine years old and living in Lausanne, as King Rama XIII. Siam's new king and his brother remained in Switzerland, far from the rituals and intrigues of the royal court, apart from a two-month visit in 1938/39. After the end of World War II, during which Siam had been occupied by the Japanese, they visited again, arriving on December 5, 1945, in a country they barely knew.

It was Bhumibol's 18th birthday; Ananda was 20, and according to many contemporary accounts, gauche, painfully shy and ambivalent about being king: Louis Mountbatten, the British commander in Southeast Asia, described him as "a frightened, short-sighted boy, his sloping shoulders and thin chest behung with gorgeous diamond-studded decorations, altogether a pathetic and lonely figure".

There is no shortage of sources on Bhumibol's life, but finding accurate accounts is difficult. Most of what has been written is [hagiographic](#) and of limited reliability; a small proportion is vitriolic and even more unreliable. Two full-length book biographies by foreign authors have been published. Paul Handley's *The King Never Smiles* is a pioneering academic work, meticulously researched and infused with its author's deep understanding of Thailand after years working as a journalist in the country. It is banned in Thailand. William Stevenson's *The Revolutionary King* is riddled with factual errors and

its claim to be a serious work of history has been [met with derision](#) (its subtitle - *The True-Life Sequel to *The King and I** - hardly helps) but the book is nevertheless extremely valuable for one key reason: Bhumibol gave Stevenson unprecedented access, personally meeting with and talking to him several times over a period of six years. Whatever Stevenson's shortcomings as a historian and writer, and despite the fact he may well have exaggerated his closeness to Bhumibol, many of the tales and messages the book conveys are likely to have come directly from the king and those in his inner circle.

Leading Thai officials [went to extraordinary lengths](#) to try to prevent the publication of [Handley's biography](#), and the book is frequently denounced in tones of horror and outrage by Thai officials. Stevenson's book is a highly sympathetic romanticised portrait of Bhumibol that only caused outrage among historians; [it is not sold in Thailand](#) mainly because it depicts Bhumibol in a way that a Western audience would find reasonable but that would startle and baffle many Thais. Just to give one example, Stevenson repeatedly refers to Rama IX using his Thai nickname Lek, which means "little"; for Thais, who if they ever meet Bhumibol have to address him using a special archaic language called rajasap, such a thing is quite simply unthinkable.

Handley notes in the preface to *The King Never Smiles* that his book:

is in no way meant to be the definitive version of [Bhumibol's] story. Such a version awaits the day internal palace and government records regarding the monarchy are open to public scrutiny.

Even then, some of the most pivotal moments of Bhumibol's life are likely to remain forever shrouded in mystery. None more so than the tragic incident that propelled him onto the throne.

On June 9, 1946, at 9:20 in the morning, King Ananda was [found dead in his bed](#) in the Grand Palace, lying flat on his back [with a pistol](#) beside his left hand and a bullet hole above his left eye. The mystery of his death has never been solved. Even the simple question of whether Rama VIII killed himself - either in a deliberate suicide or by accident - or whether somebody shot him remains unresolved. [The Devil's Discus](#), a book-length investigation by South African writer and historian Rayne Kruger, concluded that the most likely explanation was that Ananda, depressed, overwhelmed, and lovelorn over Marylene Ferrari, the Swiss girl he had left behind in Lausanne, committed suicide. However, British pathologist Keith Simpson, asked to give his opinion by Thai officials who came to see him in London and set out all the available evidence, concluded [it was extremely unlikely that Ananda had shot himself](#).

If Ananda was killed, it remains unknown who pulled the trigger. Royalists accused Pridi of being behind Ananda's assassination and he was eventually driven into exile; after a tortuous legal process in which several defence lawyers and defence witnesses were murdered, three men - Ananda's secretary and two pages - were [executed in February 1955](#) for conspiring to murder the king. Yet there is no credible evidence linking any of them to his death. Stevenson's *The Revolutionary King* suggests Ananda was killed by Masanobu Tsuji, a notorious Japanese spy who is portrayed as a figure of ultimate evil, masterminding mayhem and intrigue all over Asia. But it offers no genuine evidence in support of the theory, and in fact plentiful documentary sources suggest Tsuji was nowhere near Bangkok when Ananda was shot. The bizarre final chapter in the book appears to imply that even Stevenson - and Bhumibol - are doubtful about the theory.

The possibility that Bhumibol shot his brother - probably by accident - was [regarded as the most likely scenario by many senior Thai officials and foreign diplomats at the time](#). The common view was that the truth had then been suppressed to prevent Thailand sinking deeper into turmoil. Stevenson writes that Mountbatten sent an ill-informed letter to King George VI that said "King Bhumibol shot his brother to obtain the crown"; as a result, the British king refused to receive Bhumibol, declaring "Buckingham Palace does not host murderers." It is also widely reported that during the early years of Rama IX's reign, on several occasions the generals locked in a power struggle with the throne used the threat of publicly revealing evidence - either real or fabricated - that the king had killed his brother, in an effort to force Bhumibol to comply with their wishes. But if there was ever any genuine evidence that Bhumibol was responsible, it has never emerged.

In August 1946, amid widespread concerns that Bhumibol's life was also in danger, the young king left Thailand to return to Lausanne. He was away from his homeland for almost four years. During his absence, the generals running the country tried to strip the throne of even more of its influence and establish themselves as Thailand's unquestioned rulers, while a coterie of princes fought to preserve the powers of the palace. Bhumibol went back to his studies in Switzerland.

The axle around which this whole cosmic wheel spun, meanwhile, was ensconced in Lausanne, Switzerland, maybe pondering his schizophrenic life. One persona was a European university student caught up in the postwar reconstruction zeitgeist. The other, less familiar identity was the sacral dhammaraja king of Thailand, turgid, conservative, confined by an entourage of elderly men who emphasized only the old...

His personalized studies left him much free time to travel, play his music, and socialize. He frequently drove himself to Paris to go shopping and pass nights in smoky jazz clubs. He helped his car-racing uncle Prince Birabongs in the pits at the Grand Prix des Nations in Geneva, and in August 1948, during a motor tour of northern Europe, he watched Birabongs take first place at Zandvoort. Bhumibol put even more time into his photography and music, fancying a second career as a jazzman. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

Rama IX was also the most eligible Thai bachelor in the world. He was encouraged to meet several blue-blooded young Thai women, and one of them charmed him above all others - Sirikit Kitiyakatra, daughter of Prince Nakkhat, Thai ambassador to Paris. In an interview for the 1980 BBC documentary *Soul of a Nation*, Sirikit recalled their first meeting in Paris:

It was hate at first sight... because he said he would arrive at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. He arrived at 7 o'clock, kept me standing there, practicing curtsy, and curtsy.

But in October 1948, Bhumibol crashed his car into the back of a truck outside Lausanne. Sirikit helped care for him during his recovery in Switzerland. She told the BBC:

It was love... I didn't know that he loved me, because at that time I was only 15 years old and planned to be a concert pianist. He was gravely ill in the hospital... He produced my picture out

of his pocket, I didn't know he had one, and he said: "Send for her, I love her." I thought of being with the man I love only. Not of the duty, and the burden of becoming queen.

Bhumibol and Sirikit were engaged on July 19, 1949. And in 1950, the two [set off to at last return to Thailand](#). Time magazine's coverage of the country at the time was embarrassingly condescending - its [description of Thailand](#) as "a land which most Americans are apt to regard as a musical-comedy setting" certainly holds true of its own coverage - and as Bhumibol sailed home it was [not particularly complimentary](#) about him either:

Three times in the last three years the young (22) King had been rumored on the way home from the villa in Lausanne, Switzerland to which he went two months after his brother's death. Three times something (a Siamese coup, an automobile accident or a mere change of plans) had interfered. Meanwhile, as the King spent his days going to school, organizing a swing band, tinkering with his cameras and driving his cars from Switzerland to Paris, royal duties piled up in Bangkok.

Last week [gangling, spectacled Phumiphon](#) was on the Red Sea in the steamship Selandia, with his pretty fiancée, 17-year-old Siamese Princess Sirikit Kitiyakara at his side. In Bangkok's downtown dance halls, where Siam's hepcats curve their fingers backward and dance the rumwong, the hit of the week was a song composed by the royal jitterbug Phumiphon himself:

The little bird in a lonely flight

Thinks of itself and feels sad . . .

The overwhelming majority of the people of Thailand did not share the magazine's scepticism. Bhumibol received [a rapturous welcome](#). On March 29, King [Ananda was cremated](#). A month later, Bhumibol and Sirikit were married. And on May 4 and 5, [Rama IX formally crowned himself king](#):

The coronation on May 4-5 involved mostly inner-palace Hindu-based rituals evoking the devaraja cult: a ritual bath of the king in waters collected from auspicious sites, followed by the anointment of the king by Prince Rangsit representing the royal family, and an anointment by the sangharaja. The king then donned the royal robes and climbed atop an elevated octagonal throne, the faces of which represented the eight cardinal points of the compass, the expanse of his realm. He received homage at each side, a Brahman priest pouring holy water from 18 spiritually significant stupas. Then the president of the senate, representing the people, pledged the kingdom's loyalty.

Bhumibol then moved to another throne, shielded by a nine-tier umbrella. The Brahmans presented him with the official royal regalia: his conical golden crown, the royal sword and cane, the whisk made from a white elephant's tail hairs, a fan, golden slippers, and two rings of kingship. Kneeling, the priests recited Sanskrit incantations summoning the Hindu gods to descend and take up residence in his person. Bhumibol poured some holy water from a small ewer and, finally imbued with the correct spirit and tools to take the ultimate step, he crowned

himself. Making a pledge to rule with justice, he scattered silver and gold flowers on the floor, symbolically spreading goodness over his kingdom.

Other holy acts, like formal horoscope reading and two hours of lying on the royal bed in the ceremonial residence of the king, sealed his deity. After two days, Bhumibol finally emerged in front of his subjects, accompanied by a trumpet fanfare and a cannon salute. The now fully crowned Rama IX declared that he was deeply attached to the Siamese people and would reign with righteousness, for their benefit and happiness. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

In an [interview with New York Times correspondent Barbara Crosette](#) in June 1988, Bhumibol was dismissive of the more arcane symbolism and rituals of his role, suggesting talk about this aspect of the kingship was exaggerated by the foreign media:

"At first, it was all this rubbish about the half-brother of the moon and of the sun, and master of the tide and all that," he says, in slightly accented English. "I don't know where they found this - I think they did it for my uncle, King Rama VII, when he went to America," he says, adding that foreign correspondents, having made up those titles for a predecessor in 1931, continued to apply them to him in the 1950s. He considers it "irking." "They wanted to make a fairy tale to amuse people - to amuse people more than to tell the truth."

Bhumibol was, of course, being disingenuous. He has always downplayed the ritualistic and spiritual aspects of the Thai monarchy when talking to a Western audience, but within Thailand he does exactly the opposite. In her thesis *Thailand: The Soteriological State in the 1970s*, Christine Gray identified an inescapable source of friction in Siam's contacts with the West, which helps explain Bhumibol's behaviour - and much else in Thai history and politics. She argues that a fundamental incompatibility - or "antinomy" - between the universe that most Westerners believe in and the universe experienced by most Thais has been a source of constant tension since the two worlds first came into contact, and that this tension has been another influence on Thailand's historical development. People around the globe may not be so very different, but there is often an enormous gulf between the cultural and spiritual universes they inhabit that can profoundly impact the way they interact:

South and Southeast Asian cultural systems share a common cosmological framework, terminology, and emphasis on asceticism whereas Western and Thai-Buddhist cultural systems do not. The antimony theory was developed from the observation that the cosmology and symbolic systems of Western and Theravada Buddhist societies are so disharmonic as to be mutually negating. For a Thai-Buddhist king or Thai political leaders to advance or otherwise embody Western ideals or adopt Western speech styles is, in most cases, to automatically transgress indigenous ideals. The reverse situation also hold true: in many cases, for Thai elite to advocate or embody indigenous ideals in ruling the modern polity or in their interactions with Westerners is to automatically delegitimize themselves with that audience. [Gray, *Thailand: The Soteriological State in the 1970s*]

The spiritual and cosmological foundations that underpin the monarchy are absolutely fundamental to an understanding of the role of the palace in modern Thailand.

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In the 1920s, a young British scholar called H.G. Quaritch Wales worked in the Lord Chamberlain's Department in the Siamese royal court as an adviser to Rama VI and VII. In 1932 he published an exhaustive study of Thai royal ritual: *Siamese State Ceremonies; Their History and Function*. It is an extraordinary and explicitly political document. Written in the dying years of the absolute monarchy in Siam, it is infused with the conviction held by Quaritch Wales - and the kings and princes he worked for - that "whereas it is good for Siam to make material improvements and break down old abuses it is, on the contrary, suicidal for her to interfere with her religion and cultural inheritance". Quaritch Wales believed that reverence for the monarchy was utterly essential for Siam to prevent its people falling for the lure of dangerous ideologies of social equality. In the opening chapter he quotes - in horror - an item in the Bangkok Daily Mail from October 21, 1930:

Owing to the failure of the public in general to give proper attention and due respect to His Majesty the King when the Siamese National Anthem is being played after performances in the local entertainment halls, H.R.H. the Minister of Interior has issued an order to police authorities to remedy the situation. It has been noticed that when the band strikes up the National Anthem some persons seem to pay little attention to it, while others walk out of the hall, quite oblivious to the patriotic custom.

To Quaritch Wales, this was clear evidence that Siam was on the road to ruin:

In the days of Old Siam there was no National Anthem. But had there been one, or had the people found themselves in the presence of a Royal Letter or any other symbol of royalty, they would have known quite well what to do. They would have immediately thrown themselves flat on their faces. That custom was abolished long ago in accordance with the needs of a new age. But what was left in its place? ... Though the people are at present absolutely devoid of evil intent, the door is left open for the dark teachings of communism, or whatever doctrines may chance to catch the ear of the masses, to step in and hasten the work of social destruction.

The young British scholar goes on to explain why, in his view, the monarchy is essential for social order in Siam. Tracing the history of the Thai people "in the course of their evolution from a tribe of nomads in southern China to their present position as the rulers of the modern kingdom of Siam" he says that in the world of "Old Siam", from the earliest days of the Ayutthayan kingdom in the 14th century to the rule of King Mongkut, Rama IV, in the mid 19th century, a deeply rooted terror and respect for authority was engraved into the psyche of the people of the kingdom:

In Old Siam the inhabitants of the country were considered only as the goods and chattels of the king, who had absolute power over their lives and property and could use them as best suited his purpose. Otherwise they were of no importance whatever...

The absolutism of the monarch was accompanied and indeed maintained by the utmost severity, kings of Ayudhya practising cruelties on their subjects for no other purpose than that of imbuing

them with humility and meekness. Indeed, more gentle methods would have been looked upon as signs of weakness, since fear was the only attitude towards the throne which was understood, and tyranny the only means by which the government could be maintained...

Despite the fact that all were equally of no account in the presence of the king, a many-graded social organization had evolved, and the ingrained habit of fear and obedience produced a deep reverence for all forms of authority.

Near the top of the hierarchical pyramid - though still far below the lofty realm of royalty - were minor nobles and bureaucrats, and below them the rest of the people, branded to make clear their status as the property of the state:

All these officials were continually occupied in showing the necessary amount of deference to those above them, and to the king at the top, while mercilessly grinding down those below them in the social scale...

The great mass of the people were divided into a number of departments for public service... the members of which were numbered and branded by the noblemen in charge of each department.

The luckier ordinary citizens could escape compulsory obligations to the state in return for paying tax. As for the rest:

The vast majority of the people... were collected in rotation as required, obliged to serve as soldiers, sailors and other public menials... for whom no escape was possible, the status being hereditary.

At the very bottom of the hierarchy were slaves, although Quaritch Wales says reassuringly that "it must be added that Siamese slavery was always of a very mild type".

Thailand's King Chulalongkorn, Rama V - grandfather of both Bhumibol and Sirikit - launched a dramatic modernization of Siam, something Quaritch Wales appears to feel rather ambivalent about:

The reforms of King Rama V brought about great changes, many of them for the better, in the life of the Siamese masses. One of the most far-reaching of these was the abolition of slavery; another was the abolition of bodily prostration of inferiors in the presence of their superiors.

Despite efforts to modernize the monarchy and Siam's social structures as the kingdom came into increasing contact with the West, Quaritch Wales argues that the country's people still maintained enormous reverence for royalty after many centuries of brutal tyrannical rule:

So great, it might be added, are these hereditary instincts, that bodily prostration still lingers to some extent, although it is, of course, entirely voluntary. Siamese servants often crouch in the presence of their masters, officials lie almost full length when they are offering anything to the King on his throne and I have seen ladies of the older generation crawling on their hands and

knees when in the presence of a prince of high rank with whom they held conversation, with their faces parallel to the ground, while the prince was seated in a chair. While the old instincts thus lurk so closely below the surface there can be no doubt but that the monarchy still remains the most important factor in the Siamese social organization.

The religious architecture that supports the Thai monarchy is largely derived from ancient Hindu Brahmanical tradition, overlaid and modified by the Theravada Buddhism that forms the basis of the spiritual beliefs of most Thais today. *Siamese State Ceremonies* explains in extensive and arcane detail how religious ceremony and symbolism are used to bolster the inviolable spiritual status of the monarchy, derived from Brahmanic-inspired cults of the *devaraja* king as a living god, and Buddhist-based ideology of the *dharmmaraja* monarch whose status is a product of his unmatched virtue. Quoting Prince Damrong that “the Siamese conception of the kingship has always depended on the religious point of view of the people”, Quaritch Wales writes:

The functional value of the Divine Kingship, whether from a Brahmanical or Buddhist viewpoint, is obvious to anyone who appreciates the present state of civilization of the Siamese masses. With an education still almost confined to the religious sphere... the conception of a king as a superior being, to be obeyed implicitly, is the only one known to the ordinary Siamese. He has no wish for a share in the government, he does not trouble about politics, and he is as yet unfitted for any other regime than the present. It is certain, therefore, that any conception of the kingship that strengthens his belief in the ruling power is of the highest sociological value. That his belief and loyalty are in the main supported by the pomp and glamour of Royal Ceremonial will be shown in the course of this book.

The cremation ceremony for King Ananda followed ancient traditions, “Buddhist superimposed on a Hindu basis, and accompanied by the survival of much Brahmanical ritual”. According to the prescribed ritual, a funeral pyre is built, to symbolize Mount Meru - the mythical peak at the centre of both the physical universe and the metaphysical spiritual cosmos according to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism - on the Royal Cremation Ground, an expanse near the Grand Palace which, Quaritch Wales notes, “is also used for kite-flying and other sports when not required for Royal Cremations”. On the day of the cremation, the urn containing the corpse of the king is opened, and the crown, gold ornaments and lavish clothing removed. “Only the bones remained,” says Quaritch Wales, “and these, if they fell to pieces, were rearranged in the form of a human skeleton.” A lavish, carefully ordered procession carries the body to the pyre; Quaritch Wales notes that similar processions can be seen carved in the stone bas reliefs of the beautiful Bayon temple of the Khmer in Angkor, built nearly a millennium ago. The whole ceremony is designed to emphasize that while the king’s physical body may have died, his spirit - and, crucially of course, the monarchy - survive:

It is particularly important that a Royal Cremation should be celebrated with the greatest possible pomp, because death is the greatest danger that the idea of divine kingship has to combat. It strikes right at the roots of the whole conception, and instils doubt into the minds of a people who, until recently, had not dared even to contemplate the possibility of a king suffering from any mortal infliction; and now, with the spread of western education, modern scepticism, and the shadow of communism, the Royal Cremation plays an even bigger part than formerly in

impressing on the people that the king is not dead, but has migrated to a higher plane, where he will work out his destiny as a Bodhisattva for the good of all beings. The mixture of Brahmanism and Buddhism is fortunate: the former lends itself more to the exaltation of the kingship, while the latter emphasises the royal protection of the people's religion and enables them to enter into the spirit of the ceremonies...

Bhumibol's coronation ceremony was similarly infused with ancient symbolism common to the ancient kingdoms of Ayutthaya and Angkor, and lost Southeast Asian empires even more distant in history. In the cosmologies of monarchy adopted by their rulers, the king is at the centre of concentric circles of power that radiate outwards from the palace, through the capital city and the wider realm. The king is a microcosm of the country, and a monarch who is attuned to the natural order through his virtue will naturally bring order and prosperity to the realm, And in turn, that brings order to the wider macrocosmos: the turning of the seasons, the orbit of the planets and the stars, the harmony of the universe. In the words of Robert Heine-Geldern in *Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia* in The Far Eastern Quarterly in 1942:

According to this belief humanity is constantly under the pressure of forces emanating from the directions of the compass and from stars and planets. These forces may produce welfare and prosperity or work havoc, according to whether or not individuals and social groups, above all the state, succeed in bringing their lives and activities in harmony with the universe... Harmony between the empire and the universe is achieved by organizing the former as an image of the latter, as a universe on a smaller scale.

In such cosmologies. Heine-Geldern writes: "The king is identified with the axis of the universe. The same idea seems to be expressed by the title Paku Buwono, 'Nail of the World', of the Susuhunan of Solo in Java." Literally at the political and geographical centre of the realm, and just as importantly at the spiritual centre of the cosmos, the king brings harmony by good governance. *Bhumibol's coronation* emphasized his position at the centre of the universe.

In Southeast Asia, even more than in Europe, the capital stood for the whole country. It was more than the nation's political and cultural center: it was the magic center of the empire. The circumnambulation of the capital formed, and in Siam and Cambodia still forms, one of the most essential parts of the coronation ritual. By this circumnambulation the king takes possession not only of the capital city but of the whole empire. [Heine-Geldern, *Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia*]

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In *The Revolutionary King*, William Stevenson recounts stories likely to have been told to him directly by Bhumibol and those in the king's inner circle. In the grim weeks and months after the death of Ananda, Stevenson says, with the future of the monarchy in doubt and his movements monitored by agents of the generals who wanted to usurp the primacy of the palace, the 18-year-old King Rama IX would often slip secretly out of the Grand Palace wearing a singlet, shorts and sandals. Sometimes he sneaked out on foot, to listen to the talk of ordinary people while eating Thailand's incomparable street food. And sometimes

he would paddle off from the Grand Palace pier down the Chao Phraya river in a flat-bottomed boat for secret meetings with his uncle, Prince Rangsit, the regent and later the head of Bhumibol's Privy Council. Rangsit tells Bhumibol not to ignore the Siamese belief in spirits, gods and demons, telling him: "They're part of our inner world." And he shows the young king a passage from *Siamese State Ceremonies*, which quotes in turn from the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski:

A society which makes its tradition sacred has gained by it inestimable advantage of power and permanence. Such beliefs and practices, therefore, which put a halo of sanctity round tradition, will have a 'survival value' for the type of civilisation in which they have been evolved. They were bought at an extravagant price, and are to be maintained at any cost. [Malinowski, *Science, Religion and Reality*]

These words, Stevenson writes, "made a deep impression" on the young Bhumibol. Prince Dhani Nivas, one of the country's foremost celestial princes and a grandson of Rama IV, highlighted the same passage in [a famous lecture on kingship in Bangkok in 1946](#), with Bhumibol and Ananda sitting in the front row.

Thailand has undergone a fundamental transformation in the six decades since the coronation of Rama IX. In *Transforming Thai Culture*, William Klausner writes about life in Bangkok just 40 years ago:

Patriarchal and hierarchical forms abounded in law and day-to-day behavior. Both verbal and body language were much more formalistic than they are today. Children deferred to their parent's wishes. Teenagers did not date without chaperones. Boys and girls could not be found holding hands though the practice of two young men with intertwined pinkies was much more prevalent then than it is today. There was almost no divorce and minor wives were quite common. Two-income families were the rarity, not the norm. The heady wine of egalitarianism and individualism had yet to be tasted. Servants were abundant and most often crawled when serving elders. Many homes had Indian guards who were noted for their rope beds and sound sleeping.

In Bangkok, most people adhered to the dictates of Brahminism and animism as well as to their Buddhist faith. One may find it difficult to believe today, but barber shops were closed on Wednesdays not Sundays, as Wednesday, under Brahmanic restrictions, was deemed to be off limits for haircutting. Even today, in some Bangkok suburbs, one may still find a few barber shops closed on Wednesdays. There were also auspicious days for buying new clothes, changing bedsheets, washing one's hair, etc. The culturally correct color of one's dress was also mandated by the day of the week.

In rural Thailand, the change has been even more profound. "Rural society has undergone a cosmic change during the past half century," [Klausner writes](#).

Villagers' understanding of the world beyond their rural confines has expanded significantly as mobility markedly increased beginning in the mid-sixties. Villagers have left to work in the provincial centers, in Bangkok and further abroad in the Middle East, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan... In most villages today, off-farm income is greater than in-farm income. And advances in communication technologies and rural electrification have resulted in villagers no longer

being dependent on the rural focused bamboo radio or rice harp. They have become connected and conversant with urban worlds via television, newspapers, radios, computers/internet, DVDs, mobile and land line phones.

But despite the rapid and often disorientating evolution of the country, Thai society remains deeply spiritual, at all levels. In Bangkok and in remote rural villages, in the corridors of power and among the dispossessed, most Thais still inhabit a cosmos in which there is a constant interplay between the material and supernatural realms, and in which the temple plays an essential role. As Christine Gray has written, when Thais speak to foreigners, they often self-censor themselves, leaving out references to [spirits](#), stars, [omens](#), offerings and rituals that they feel will not be understood or will be regarded as irrational. But the spiritual dimension of life in Thailand is very real, and it is an essential source of reverence for the monarchy.

The royalist effort to recapture the political power of the palace in the decades since Bhumibol's coronation was an explicit attempt to achieve what Malinowski had described, and put a halo of sanctity around tradition. Far from continuing a trend begun by previous Thai kings to deemphasize ancient ceremony and ritual, Bhumibol and the princes around him made a determined effort over succeeding decades to resacralize the monarchy. The practice of prostration - [officially abolished by King Chulalongkorn](#), Rama V, in 1873 - was encouraged: the [behaviour of talkshow host Woody Milintachinda](#) in his April 2011 interview with Princess Chulabhorn is just one example of how successful this effort has been. The arcane court language of *rajasap*, which emphasizes the immense moral superiority of the monarch in comparison with the ordinary mortals who address him, was reintroduced. And from their earliest years, Thais were taught to revere the king:

To restore the strong monarchy, the princes seized tight administrative control over education, religion, and how history is recorded and interpreted, and they injected the idea of an indivisible trinity underpinning Thai society - known as *chart*, *sasana*, *phra mahakasat*, or nation, religion, and king - throughout everyday life. Monarchy was the central pillar of this trinity.

Meanwhile, in schools, in history lessons and books, and throughout the broadcast media, competitors to royal prestige were excised. There were no politicians, prime ministers, or statesmen to remember for their accomplishments, only Chakri kings and princes. In society there were no selfless do-gooders, save the royals; all holidays were constructed to honor the monarchy, and social institutions, schools and hospitals especially were named calculatedly to commemorate royals.

This was exceptionally effective in the Thai milieu. At the time Bhumibol acceded to the throne, the country was edging towards democracy. But some four-fifths of the 18 million Thais lived on meager farms or in forests, their lives centered on the village *wat*, or temple, and planned around seasonal Buddhist ritual and farm schedules. With little education or sense of the modern state, the people readily accepted the idea that their well-being rested on the figure of the virtuous and inviolate Buddhist king. From him came all good, from seasonal rainfall to disaster relief to scientific innovation and above all justice, rather than from the bureaucratic government or elected representatives or constitutional laws. These were only sources of misery.

Through disciplined training, astute image management, and above all dedication to an incessant regime of ritual, Bhumibol assumed this exalted role. Ritual imagery conveyed to the people that he had unique sacrality, wisdom, and goodness. They saw proof in the way powerful generals, bankers, statesmen and even the most respected monks prostrated themselves before him - even though the law requiring prostration before the king had supposedly been abolished a century before. And they saw proof in his dour countenance, exuding at the same time serenity and suffering. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

The United States played an essential supporting role in elevating Bhumibol to his exalted reputation as a monarch of matchless sagacity and virtue. Particularly after Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat seized power in a 1957 coup, Thailand's military became a crucial ally of the United States in fighting communism in Southeast Asia. Central to their strategy was using and boosting Rama IX's image. Time reported on the strategy in [a 1966 article](#):

Seen on a soft spring night, the luminous spires of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha seem to float over Bangkok scarcely touched by the blare of traffic, the neon slashes of bars and the ragged hurly-burly of mainland Southeast Asia's largest city. So too does the Kingdom of Thailand, proud heir to virtually seven centuries of uninterrupted independence, seem to soar above the roiling troubles of the region all around it.

Neighboring Laos is half in Communist hands, Cambodia hapless host to the Viet Cong, Burma a xenophobic military backwater. The Chinese talons are less than 100 miles away, North Viet Nam a bare 20 minutes as the U.S. fighter-bombers fly from their Thai bases. Everywhere on the great peninsula, militant Communism, poverty, misery, illiteracy, misrule and a foundering sense of nationhood are the grim order of the Asian day.

With one important exception: The lush and smiling realm of Their Majesties King Bhumibol (pronounced Poom-ee-pone) Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit, which spreads like a green meadow of stability, serenity and strength from Burma down to the Malaysian peninsula - the geopolitical heart of Southeast Asia. Once fabled Siam, rich in rice, elephants, teak and legend, Thailand (literally, Land of the Free) today crackles with a prosperity, a pride of purpose, and a commitment to the fight for freedom that is Peking's despair and Washington's delight.

The meadow inevitably has its dark corners, notably the less fecund northeast, where Red insurgency is struggling for a foothold. But the military oligarchy that rules Thailand in the King's name is confident the Communists will not succeed. So is the U.S. For Thailand is that rarity in the postwar world: a nation avowedly antiCommunist, unashamedly willing to go partners with the U.S. in attacking its problems - and its enemies...

Rarer and more precious than rubies in Southeast Asia, however, is political stability and its sine qua non: a sense of belonging to a nation. The Thais have both. Though various ruling officers have come and gone since a 1932 coup gently displaced the King as absolute ruler, Kings and soldiers have combined, in a typical Thai equilibrium of accommodation, to provide a smooth

chain linkage of government.

The Thai sense of nationhood is partly the result of never having felt the trauma of colonial conquest. Even more, it resides in the charisma of the throne, reinforced by the nation's pervasive Buddhism. In Buddhist theology, the King is one of the highest of reincarnations, rich in his person in past accumulated virtue. Even in remote parts where spirit-worshiping peasants may never have heard of Thailand, they are likely to know - and revere - the King.

In an age when kings have gone out of style and the craft of kingship is all but forgotten, it is the good fortune of Thailand - and of the free world - that the present occupant of the nine-tiered umbrella throne, ninth monarch of the 184-year-old Chakri dynasty, not only takes the business of being a king seriously but has taken it upon himself to mold his emerging nation's character.

In the musical five-tone Thai tongue, his full name rings like the roll of monsoon thunder on the Mekong: His Majesty the Supreme Divine Lord, Great Strength of the Land, Incomparable Might, Greatest in the Realm, Lord Rama, Holder of the Kingdom, Chief of the Sovereign People, Sovereign of Siam, Supreme Protector and Monarch...

Nearly every Thai household boasts a picture of the King. American information officials in Bangkok long ago concluded that USIS funds could not be better employed than in spreading the likeness of His Majesty.

This effort could never have been such a success were it not for the personality of Bhumibol himself. In the eyes of most of his people, he acted in accordance with all the virtues of a great *dharmaraja* king: wise, selfless, uninterested in the trappings of wealth or power, dedicated to the good of the kingdom:

Thais, who believe it is their land's fortune, their karma, to be blessed with such a king, saw a man who worked tirelessly for them, without reward or pleasure. His sacrifice was readily visible: while Thais are known for their gracious smiles and bawdy humour, and what-will-be fatalism, King Bhumibol alone is serious, gray, and almost tormented by the weighty matters of his realm. Ever since the day his brother mysteriously died, he seemed never to be seen smiling, instead displaying an apparent penitential pleasurelessness in the trappings and burden of the throne.

For Thais, this was a sign of his spiritual greatness. In Buddhist culture, either a smile or a frown would indicate attachment to world pleasures or desires. Bhumibol's public visage was unfailingly one of kindly benevolence or impassivity. In his equanimity he resembled the greatest kings of the past, the dhammarajas of the 13th century Sukhothai kingdom, who were called *Chao Phaendin*, Lord of the Land, and *Chao Cheevit*, Lord of Life. Increasingly many Thais compared his noble sacrifice to the Buddha's own. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

As Thongchai Winichakul writes in *Toppling Democracy*:

Some of the sacred royal rituals were revived after the 1947 coup and fully flourished in the 1960s under Sarit. But the huge industry of royal deification was elevated to an unprecedented level following the 1976 massacre, which was seen among the right-wing royalists as a decisive

victory over the communism that threatened to end the monarchy. The deification rituals are not necessarily ancient ones. Several traditions have been invented, both by the government and by civil society. The important point is that they enhance the monarchy's perceived barami (virtuous or moral power), an ancient concept of power innate to the righteous king. Among the prominent invented rituals is the royal birthday celebration that became a major annual festival for the entire country. The king's birthday has been designated "Father's Day" and the queen's birthday as "Mother's Day," and there are grander celebrations every tenth anniversary and every twelve-year cycle for each of them. The birthday rituals reinforce the cultivated notion that they are the parents of all Thais. Grand celebrations for the Silver, Golden and Diamond jubilees for the reign, and so on, have reinforced the idea of King Bhumibol as Dhammaraja. A year hardly goes by without a grand royal celebration for one occasion or another. Any accomplishments were and are celebrated to the highest level.

The result, Thonghai says, is that:

Thais who are currently sixty years old or younger grew up under the pervasive aura of an unprecedented royal cult.

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But the elevation of the palace was not merely based on emphasizing its sacred lustre. In place of the tyrannical rule of past kings described by Quaritch Wales, the modern monarchy in Thailand is portrayed as being fundamentally sympathetic to and protective of the people, in particular the poorest and most vulnerable in society.

In 1833, a [stone obelisk](#) inscribed with writing was discovered by the future King Mongkut, Rama IV. It had apparently been written during the reign of the 13th century King Ramkhanghaeng of the Sukhothai kingdom that had preceded and eventually been conquered by the Ayutthayan empire, and described a utopian realm ruled by an accessible and just monarch:

In the time of King Ram Khamhang this land of Sukhothai is thriving. There is fish in the water and rice in the fields. The lord of the realm does not levy toll on his subjects for traveling the roads; they lead their cattle to trade or ride their horses to sell; whoever wants to trade in elephants, does so; whoever wants to trade in horses, does so; whoever wants to trade in silver or gold, does so. When any commoner or man of rank dies, his estate--his elephants, wives, children, granaries, rice, retainers, and groves of areca and betel--is left in its entirety to his children. When commoners or men of rank differ and disagree, [the King] examines the case to get at the truth and then settles it justly for them. He does not connive with thieves or favor concealers [of stolen goods]. When he sees someone's rice he does not covet it; when he sees someone's wealth he does not get angry. If anyone riding an elephant comes to see him to put his own country under his protection, he helps him, treats him generously, and takes care of him; if [someone comes to him] with no elephants, no horses, no young men or women of rank, no silver or gold, he gives him some, and helps him until he can establish a state [of his own]. When he captures enemy warriors, he does not kill them or beat them. He has hung a bell in the opening

of the gate over there: if any commoner in the land has a grievance which sickens his belly and gripes his heart, and which he wants to make known to his ruler and lord, it is easy: he goes and strikes the bell which the King has hung there; King Ram Khamhang, the ruler of the kingdom, hears the call; he goes and questions the man, examines the case, and decides it justly for him. So the people of ... Sukhothai praise him...

The authenticity of the inscription is the subject of [considerable debate](#): it is, almost certainly, fake. But the paradigm of monarchy it depicts became central to the modern Thai reinvention of kingship. As Prince Dhani said in his 1946 lecture:.

The old Thai had their own traditions of kingship. The monarch was of course the people's leader in battle; but he was also in peace-time their father whose advice was sought and expected in all matters and whose judgment was accepted by all. He was moreover accessible to his people, for we are told by an old inscription that in front of the royal palace of Sukhothai there used to be a gong hung up for people to go and beat upon whenever they wanted personal help and redress...

The ideal monarch abides steadfast in the ten kingly virtues, constantly upholding the five common precepts and on holy days the set of eight precepts, living in kindness and goodwill to all beings. He takes pains to study the Thammasat and to keep the four principles of justice, namely: to assess the right or wrong of all service or disservice rendered to him, to uphold the righteous and truthful, to acquire riches through none but just means and to maintain the prosperity of his state through none but just means...

The ten kingly virtues above cited are often quoted in Siamese literature... They are: almsgiving, morality, liberality, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, non- violence, forbearance and non-obstruction.

Bhumibol's role as father of his people was emphasized through the royal development projects sponsored by the palace and his travels around the country to inspect the work being done for the benefit of the poor:

The monarch has been highly praised for his dedication to royal development projects that aim at helping the poor, particularly the rural and highland people. Beginning in the 1950s, the breadth and scope of the royal projects expanded enormously especially during the Cold War and after 1973... Several of them began as non-governmental but eventually most of them were integrated into government bureaucracies and budgets. The truth about these projects, and their successes and failures, will probably remain unknown for years to come, given that public accountability and transparency for royal activities is unthinkable. Suffice it to say that the endlessly repeated images of the monarch travelling through remote areas, walking tirelessly along dirt roads, muddy paths and puddles, with maps, pens and a notebook in hand, a camera and sometimes a pair of binoculars around his neck, are common in the media, in public buildings and private homes. These images have captured the popular imagination during the past several decades. Bhumibol is portrayed as a popular king, a down-to-earth monarch who works tirelessly for his people and, we may say, has been in touch with his constituents for decades long before any

politicians in the current generation began their career. [Thongchai, *Toppling Democracy*]

In a country where politicians, officials and military rulers are commonly blatantly venal and corrupt, Bhumibol came to be seen as a guardian of ordinary people, whose great personal morality and sense of justice served to protect them from the greed and cruelty of those who sought to exploit them. And the palace rewrote its historical role to portray itself not as an anachronistic relic from the days of feudal absolutist rule, but as the driving force behind Thailand's evolution towards democracy. The famous abdication letter of King Prajadhipok in 1935 became a part of the myth:

I am willing to surrender the powers I formerly exercised to the people as a whole, but I am not willing to turn them over to any individual or any group to use it in an autocratic manner without heeding the voice of the people.

As Thongchai says:

The passage was originally written in the context of a humiliating failure to regain power. In the king's view, of course, the revolution was merely the grab for power by a small group of disgruntled military leaders... Since the late 1960s, royalist historiography has made the passage, devoid of its original context, a democratic declaration against authoritarianism. It appeared in several scholarly as well as political publications against military rule. [Thongchai, *Toppling Democracy*]

Bhumibol's credentials as a democratic king siding with the people against oppressive rulers, and as the ultimate arbiter of social conflict who saves the nation with a decisive intervention at times of great crisis, rest above all on two key episodes in Thailand's modern history.

In 1971, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn launched a military coup against a government of which he was already prime minister. Thailand's military has shown an inordinate fondness for coups in the years since the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, and there is no better illustration of this than the fact generals have sometimes thought it even made sense to launch a coup against a government they were already in charge of. As Ambassador Boyce noted in a 2007 U.S. cable (when some generals were again plotting a "re-coup"):

Although a coup against one's own government sounds ridiculous, this has happened here before: elected prime minister Thanom launched a coup against his own government in 1971. Thanom dissolved Parliament, banned political parties and strengthened military rule...
[07BANGKOK311]

After the coup, Thanom ran the country with the help of two key lieutenants: his son Colonel Narong Kittikachorn and his father-in-law Praphas Charusathien; they became known as the "Three Tyrants". Thailand was gripped by the bloody fight against communist insurgents in the northeast of the country, and roiled by mounting demands - particularly from students - for democracy. On October 13, 1973, hundreds of thousands of protesters rallied at Bangkok's Democracy Monument and parliament. Many carried pictures of the king and queen. Bhumibol summoned Thanom and Praphas to Chitralada Palace,

and shortly after meeting them, invited some student delegates into the palace for an audience. They emerged to say that Bhumibol had ordered the junta to agree to a new constitution. Most of the protesters believed they had won, but tens of thousands remained camped around Chitralada Palace overnight, and the following day, violence erupted. Tanks rolled down Rachadamnoen Avenue, with troops firing on students; they were also shot at from above, including by Narong himself, from helicopters hovering overhead. Students commandeered buses and fire engines and tried to ram them into tanks. At least 70 people were killed.

Desperately trying to escape the bloodshed, some students clambered over the walls of Chitralada Palace. They were given sanctuary by the royal family:

Probably the most important act that symbolically defined the monarchy in Thai politics was on the morning of 14 October when demonstrators who were beaten by police in the street beside the palace climbed over the fence seeking refuge inside the palace ground. Then, the royal family in informal dress came out to meet and expressed sympathy to students. By the evening, the military junta had been forced out, thanks to a rival faction within the military that gained the upper hand, and – it is said – to an agreement between the junta and the palace. A grim-faced King Bhumipol appeared on television and declared 14 October “the Most Tragic Day”, and appointed as prime minister the President of his Privy Council. [Thongchai, *Toppling Democracy*]

The Three Tyrants fled the country. It was an unprecedented moment in Thai history, the first time a popular uprising appeared to have succeeded in achieving political change. And as Thongchai argues, almost paradoxically it was also the beginning of the king’s status as the ultimate arbiter and saviour of the nation at times of great crisis:

The same moment, then, that gave birth to people’s power and to the opportunity of politicians in the parliamentary system was also the new beginning for the monarchy in Thai politics. Most importantly, the king became the higher authority “above” normal politics. But being “above” politics no longer meant being beyond or out of politics. It meant being “on top of” or overseeing normal politics. [Thongchai, *Toppling Democracy*]

Handley describes how the events of October 1974 became a seminal moment in terms of fostering Bhumibol’s image of a democratic monarch who ruled for the good of the people:

October 14 has ever since taken on legendary proportions, in Thai consciousness and in Bhumibol's own record. To the students of that and succeeding generations, it was an unprecedented people's uprising against tyranny...

In official histories, however, it was the king who had single-handedly restored constitutionalism and democracy. Rather than credit the popular uprising, later books and articles overwhelmingly emphasized King Bhumibol's intervention against the dictators, saving the country from disaster.

However it was characterized, the October 1973 uprising marked a new zenith in the restoration of the throne's power and grandeur. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

On February 23, 1991, Thai generals mounted another of their many coups, [overthrowing the elected government](#) of Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, which had become known as the "buffet cabinet" for the unabashed enthusiasm with which its members helped themselves to the spoils of office. The dominant member of the new ruling junta was army commander General Suchinda Kraprayoon. He promised to clean up Thai politics and then return power to the people - a common theme in successive Thai military coups. But as [Federico Ferrara](#), assistant professor of politics at the City University of Hong Kong, writes in his book *Thailand Unhinged: The Death of Thai-Style Democracy*, "The events that followed offered a poignant demonstration that coups in Thailand have nothing at all to do with restoring democracy." After repeated promises that they had no interest in power, the military installed Suchinda as prime minister after March 1992 elections by doing deals with many of the same politicians they had ousted a year before due to unbridled corruption. The result was mounting popular anger.

The events of 1991 and 1992 are analyzed in detail by New Zealand academic David Murray in his book *Angels and Devils*. Following the March 1992 elections, Chamlong Srimuang, a retired major-general in the Thai army, became a key leader of the protest movement against military rule. Chamlong was a committed follower of the ascetic Buddhist Santi Ayoke sect - in accordance with their precepts he and his wife slept on the bare floor without a mattress, ate only one meal a day (vegetarian of course), and abstained from sex. In 1985 he had resigned from the military to run for the governorship of Bangkok, and won. In early May 1992, as protests against Suchinda's government swelled, Chamlong went on hunger strike, announcing to a mass rally: "This is no joke. I am putting my life on the line."

His announcement galvanized protesters who - crucially - included many members of Thailand's burgeoning middle class. As Murray writes:

They were nicknamed "*mob mua thue*" (the mobile phone mob), "*mob hi-tec*", "*mob rot keng*" (the sedan mob), "*mob picnic*", "*mob nom priew*" (the yoghurt-drink mob) and the "yuppie mob"... Many demonstrators brought with them their own provisions. Instead of bullet proof vests and gas masks, they came armed with bags of drinks and snacks, portable stereo sets and mattresses. [Murray, *Angels and Devils*].

On May 17, some 200,000 people filled Sanam Luang, the large open park in front of the Grand Palace and Temple of the Emerald Buddha. At around 8:30 in the evening, Chamlong led them on a march towards Government House; they were blocked by razor wire barricades at the Phan Fa bridge. Scuffles broke out, and scores of protesters and around 20 police were wounded. Two fire trucks that had been hosing water on the protesters were set ablaze. In the early hours of May 18, the government declared a state of emergency. As the violence worsened, soldiers fired M-16 assault rifles directly into the crowd. Several people were killed; protesters refused to disperse and defiantly raised their hands in the air to show they were unarmed.

Early in the afternoon, Suchinda appeared on television to declare the government had no choice but to use whatever force necessary to quell the violence. Troops moved in to secure the area. But the protesters still refused to give up:

About 10,000 protesters remained milling around outside the Public Relations Department. By 6:00 p.m. there were also 20,000 outside the Royal Hotel. They booed and jeered the troops, waving bloodied clothing and challenging the soldiers to open fire. The troops fired repeated volleys over their heads. By 8:30 p.m., the crowd had swollen dramatically, buses were commandeered to block [Rachadamnoen] Avenue, vehicles were set on fire, and large cement flower tubs lined up as barricades. The crowds continued to jeer, shouting anti-Suchinda slogans. Troops and demonstrators clashed in battles to control the area in front of the Public Relations Department. At 8:40 p.m., troops opened fire on about 30,000 protesters, and again at 10:20 p.m. On both occasions the firing was for sustained periods, and more than 30 were feared killed. Demonstrators covered the bodies of the dead with the national flag. In a video tape recording, an officer was heard to instruct the troops to shoot at will. The same footage showed a demonstrator who was running away cut down in a hail of automatic gunfire. The number of unarmed civilians killed in the rally remains unknown. [Murray, *Angels and Devils*]

Around 5 a.m. on the morning of May 19, troops stormed the Royal Hotel, which was being used as a makeshift medical centre to treat wounded protesters:

The whole world (apart from Thailand) saw this "heroic" military action on television. Unarmed demonstrators on the pavement outside were ordered on their faces, and some were trampled on. As the soldiers burst into the lobby of the hotel, everybody was ordered to lie down, and those who were a little slow to respond to the command were beaten to the ground. Bodies were kicked and stomped on. At least 1,500 demonstrators, stripped to the waist, with hands tied behind their backs were carted away in military trucks at 5:40 a.m. A further 1,000 male protesters in the small groups of resistance that remained were rounded up and trucked out by 8:30 a.m. The resistance in Rachadamnoen Avenue had finally been crushed.

The Avenue was deserted. Smoke still curled from the shells of the government buildings that had been burned. Thousands of sandals were scattered about. The scorched, wrecked bodies of cars, pickup trucks, three petrol tankers and seven buses littered the street. The pavements and roadway were strewn with glass. [Murray, *Angels and Devils*].

The front page of the Bangkok Post newspaper on May 19, 1992 can be viewed [here](#). Some detail from the newspaper on May 18 is [here](#).

Many of those who fought shoulder-to-shoulder in the name of democracy against the military in May 1992 are now leaders on opposite sides of Thailand's yellow-versus-red political divide, a point made poignantly by Karuna Buakamsri, herself a student protester in 1992 and now one of Thailand's most respected journalists and television anchors, in [an article in the International Herald Tribune](#) in 2010.

Even after the bloody clearing of Rachadamnoen Avenue, the protesters refused to be broken. In the evening of May 19, they rallied at Ramkanghaeng University in the east of the capital. By midnight, 50,000 people were gathered there. Despite attempts to shut them down, some Thai media defied restrictions to bravely report what was happening. More - and far worse - carnage seemed certain.

At 6 a.m. on the morning of May 20, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the most beloved royal after Bhumibol himself, appeared on television pleading for the killing to stop. Her intervention made the front pages of afternoon newspapers. At 9:30 p.m., Bhumibol summoned Chamlong and Suchinda. What happened next became the stuff of legend, with [photographs](#) and [video](#) of it seen around the world. Handley tells the story at the start of *The King Never Smiles*:

The image was scratchy, the sound poor, reminiscent of television 40 years before. Two men were prostrated on a thick carpet, one wearing the coarse indigo garb of a Thai peasant, the other a trim business suit. Legs tucked behind them submissively, they gazed up at a stern figure seated on a gilt-trimmed settee.

With aides crouched at his flanks, the figure in the chair addressed the men, and even though his voice was muffled, the image spoke loud and clear: a father, calmly but with utmost firmness and authority, scolding his sons for fighting...

Just at that moment, Suchinda's troops were bearing down on a university where thousands of students were gathered for a new confrontation. Neither side showed signs of compromise.

The two men now knelt side by side, bowing to the fatherly figure seated in the middle, a man who held no political office, wielded no arms, and commanded no soldiers...

As television cameras recorded the event, King Bhumibol softly reprimanded Suchinda and Chamlong for the damage wreaked by their personal rivalry and selfish desires. It was their moral and patriotic duty to stop, he said, before the entire kingdom was destroyed.

His halting words carried neither order nor demand. Yet within hours the violence ceased, soldiers and demonstrators returned home, and both Suchinda and Chamlong withdrew from politics. "Who will soon forget the remarkable picture of the military ruler and the opposition leader together on their knees before the king of Thailand?" the Washington Post said admiringly the next day.

Bhumibol's intervention in 1992 is widely regarded at home and abroad as the defining proof of his greatness, and it remains the most enduring single memory of his reign. In the words of Maurizio Peleggi, associate professor at the National University of Singapore, in his paper [Semiotics of Rama IX](#):

By the early 1990s signs of Rama IX's incipient apotheosis were aplenty, but none more eloquent than the televised royal audience on 20 May 1992... Fifty million TV spectators watched Suchinda and Chamlong kneeling at the king's feet... and humbly receiving the royal admonition to take a step back and stop the violence in the streets.

The events of 1973 and 1992 ensured that Bhumibol's reputation as a defender of the people against corrupt politicians and scheming, cruel generals was etched deeply in the hearts of the Thai people:

With only minimal statutory powers, King Bhumibol had accrued the authority to summon

the country's most powerful men to his feet and, with a few deliberately spoken words, expel them from politics and end the bloody fighting on the streets of his kingdom. Amid established institutions of law, a parliament, courts, and influential religious, social and business leaders, only Bhumibol had the prestige and command required to rise above explosive chaos and restore peace and unity...

Among his people, King Bhumibol had become a sovereign of unmatched virtue and sagacity, alone able to resolve the most intractable problems and disputes. For many worldwide he represented the enduring utility of sovereign monarchy amid the uncertainty of liberal democracy and capitalism. For some of his Thai subjects he was much more: a bodhisattva, an earthbound incipient Buddha, like a living deity. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

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By the start of the 21st century, Bhumibol's moral authority towered over Thailand, far outshining elected politicians or anybody else in the kingdom. His image was everywhere; [writing about Bhumibol](#) in New York Review of Books in 2007, Ian Buruma described the astonishing ubiquity of Rama IX throughout the country:

Everywhere you look, especially during the sixtieth anniversary year of his reign, you see His Majesty's face, on posters and billboards, on the walls of every store and restaurant, in all public buildings and many private ones, on streamers and banners strung across major thoroughfares, in hotels, airports, schools, and shopping malls, and at the beginning of every movie screening: Bhumibol receiving foreign monarchs; Bhumibol visiting the rural areas, a notebook and camera readily at hand; Bhumibol surveying his kingdom from above the clouds, a golden halo playing around his bespectacled face; Bhumibol the family man, with Queen Sirikit and their loving children; Bhumibol the warrior king in uniform; Bhumibol the jazz player, his trumpet to the fore; Bhumibol the priest-king, in a gold coat, waving a kind of papal blessing; and so on.

A typical Thai description of Bhumibol's unique role is this passage from *By the Light of Your Wisdom: King Bhumibol Adulyadej, A Wise and Righteous King* by Danai Chanchaochai, one of the many books on sale in Thailand expressing heartfelt reverence for the king:

His Majesty is a constitutional monarch in a democratic country. He appears neither to seek nor want a political role. But sometimes the government and the people are truly in difficulties and do not know where to turn. That is when they turn to His Majesty. He is the most respected and trusted in the land. He is their Lord of Life.

Bhumibol played this role by appearing only to explicitly intervene exceptionally rarely, at times of crisis. But through his speeches, in which he addressed Thailand's people - and politicians - in oracular, sage-like language, he was seen as a moral guardian overseeing the government and ensuring it did not stray too far from the right path:

The highest moral authority with legitimacy equal to or surpassing that of an elected government

is the monarchy. Occasionally, the king comes out in public criticising politicians or bypassing them and directly works with bureaucrats to tackle problems. From the early 1990s, the king's televised birthday speech has become a new royal ritual the public look forward to as he usually puts politicians on trial in front of the national audience. The monarch's criticisms are usually mild and often presented in a light-hearted manner. Most of the time, there are no specifics and no names named. But the targets are clear. The media and the public always get satisfaction from the royal reprimand of politicians. Even when the king's words are unclear or even when they are not criticisms, people enjoy reading between the lines and direct their interpretations at politicians. The birthday speech becomes a ritual to display the hierarchy of moral authority and to reaffirm the monarchy's place "above" the normal realm of politics. At the same time, the ritual draws the public to identify themselves with the moral authority of the king. It is one of the cleverest political rituals, with the impact probably many times that of an electoral campaign. As the current monarch has reinvented the institution's place in democracy "above" politics, and elevated it to an unprecedented stature, the monarchy becomes an alternative source of legitimacy to the electoral democracy. According to the royalist-inspired "cultural constitution," the monarch's moral authority is far superior to the elected ones. [Thongchai, *Toppling Democracy*]

As U.S. ambassador John wrote in a 2010 cable describing two of the king's recent speeches to judges, the style of speech Bhumibol developed is an essential part of his mystique:

The King's messages to both sets of judges would have sounded familiar to anyone who has heard the King speak in the past: grounded in Buddhist tenets, delphic in nature, but potentially applicable to the current Thai scene in a number of ways - in other words, how Bhumibol has addressed his ministers, judges, and citizens for decades. [[10BANGKOK287](#)]

Rama IX's incredible popularity has enabled the palace to make the seemingly paradoxical claim that Bhumibol is an "elected" and "democratic" king, his rule deriving from the assent of the people. In a 1967 interview with the U.S. magazine *Look*, he said:

I really am an elected king. If the people do not want me, they can throw me out, eh? Then I will be out of a job.

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But while Bhumibol's moral authority remains immense, his health is failing. A [2009 cable](#) by Eric John says he is "by many accounts beset long-term by Parkinson's, depression, and chronic lower back pain". In October 2007, the king suffered a stroke:

Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej was hospitalized on October 13 after what the Palace described publicly as inadequate blood flow to his left cerebral cortex, resulting in weakness on the right side of his body. Privately, Arsa Sarasin, the King's Principal Private Secretary, told the Ambassador late on October 13 that the King had suffered a minor stroke.

The Ambassador spoke again with Arsa Sarasin on October 16. Arsa said the King's condition

was improving, but he would need physical therapy for his right side. Arsa noted also that the King, whose enjoyment of jazz is legendary, would not be able to join in a jam session with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, which will visit Thailand in the middle of November and perform at events in honor of the King's 80th birthday. [07BANGKOK5437]

By early November, the king's condition had improved, and he was able to leave hospital:

At mid-day on November 7, King Bhumibol left the Bangkok hospital where he had received medical care since suffering a minor stroke on October 13 and returned to Chitralada Palace. Thai television news footage showed the King, moving steadily under his own power (but relying on a wheeled walker) as he walked from the hospital to his vehicle. The King's expression was his usual poker face, but he appeared alert and acknowledged the crowd as his vehicle departed. [07BANGKOK5718]

Tej Bunnag, deputy principal private secretary of the king, told Boyce later in November that the king was recovering well; there were suggestions he was well enough to want to join in a jazz jam session, one of his biggest passions throughout his life.

Responding to the Ambassador's questions, Tej said the King was able to speak and to stand on his own. (Note: November 7 television footage showed the King walking out of the hospital at a quick pace with the assistance of a walker; the King was not seen speaking in public, however. End note.) Tej said the King was resuming his regular duties, and approximately 80 files were awaiting the King's signature. If the King's health were to worsen, Tej said, the King would immediately return to the hospital.

Tej said the King had made it clear on more than one occasion that he wanted to leave the hospital, but his doctors held him back. Given the King's desires, Palace staff members were unable to clear the King's schedule; they had to cancel all events at the last possible moment. The Ambassador noted the upcoming visit under Embassy auspices of the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. Some members of the King's musical entourage had indicated to Embassy officials that the King would like the band to come to the Palace for a private performance, with his possibly joining in a jam session. The Ambassador asked if these reports seemed credible. Tej replied this scenario sounded quite possible, although, like other events, a performance for or with the King could be canceled at the last moment. The Palace was continuing to plan for the King's participation in the full range of ceremonies and celebrations during the several days around his 80th birthday (December 5). [07BANGKOK5738]

In late 2008, with Thailand facing political crisis as Yellow Shirt mobs occupied Bangkok's airports, Bhumibol once again fell ill:

On December 4, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn and his sister, Princess Sirindhorn, appeared jointly before assembled dignitaries to announce that King Bhumibol was ill and unable to deliver his customary annual address to the nation. After the Crown Prince made brief remarks on the King's behalf, Princess Sirindhorn explained that her father had bronchitis, was exhausted, on an

IV, and unable to eat. Subsequent official reports from the Palace indicated that the King suffered from a fever and had an infection, but by December 8 his condition was improving and he was able to eat soft food. [08BANGKOK3585]

And then, on September 19, 2009, Bhumibol began his hospitalization at Siriraj that still continues. Unlike his previous spells in hospital, when the king was eager to leave but doctors held him back, he now seemed unwilling to go home even when his medical team gave permission. And talk began to circulate that Rama IX was suffering from depression:

There is clearly no way for anyone to analyze accurately the King's state of mind, or draw certain conclusions between political developments, possible mental stress, and his physical ailments. However, one long-time expat observer of the Thai scene, present in Thailand since 1955, has repeatedly asserted to us over the past year that the King shows classic signs of depression -- "and why wouldn't he, seeing where his Kingdom has ended up after 62 years, as his life comes to an end" -- and claims that such mental anguish likely does affect his physical condition/failing health. [09BANGKOK2488]

A cable a few weeks later quotes Democrat Party politician and Deputy Prime Minister Suthep as also saying Bhumibol was afflicted by depression:

It appears likely that issues related to his Parkinson's led to the initial hospitalization, that he probably caught pneumonia about a week into his stay at Siriraj hospital, and that what a number of informed observers describe as depression hinders a quick recovery. One palace source indicated that the King was out of bed and cleared for discharge by October 6, but that he had chosen to remain in hospital to facilitate physical therapy...

Few would have predicted at the time of a routine September 15 check-up that King Bhumibol was on the cusp of a month-long hospitalization. Initial reports seemed focused on a low-grade temperature and difficulty swallowing; the absence of stress on the part of insiders or visits by the Queen and Princess Sirindhorn seemed proxy indicators that the hospitalization was not particularly serious... A series of conversations over the past several weeks with contacts in the palace, and those with connections inside the medical team treating the King at Siriraj Hospital, combined with the opaque, generally cheerful daily medical bulletins from the Royal Household Bureau, paint a more nuanced picture of what may have been going on with King Bhumibol's health...

The King is known to be suffering from Parkinson's; one of our sources, whose father died of Parkinson's, stated that he believed complications from Parkinson's led to the initial hospitalization (he also noted in passing that his father exhibited symptoms very similar to the King approximately two years before his death). There has also been some speculation whether he might have suffered a minor stroke...

DPM Suthep confirmed to then-Charge on October 1 reftel's assessment that King Bhumibol exhibits classic symptoms of depression. Tapping his forehead, Suthep claimed that the King's

physical health was okay, but that the really worry was his state of mind, depressed at the state of affairs in his Kingdom at the end of his life. [09BANGKOK2606]

By February 2010, Bhumibol appeared to be a little better, both physically and mentally.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej has actively presided over three separate swearing-in ceremonies at Siriraj Hospital since mid-January, dispensing philosophic advice to ministers and judges in public and the Prime Minister in private. In addition to swearing-in the five new cabinet members on January 18, King Bhumibol also administered the oath of office to two separate groups of judges on January 25 and February 1, delivering extemporaneous remarks — which were later broadcast on TV — both times...

Despite these clear indications that the King is resuming a more active life in recent weeks, he remains hospitalized at Siriraj Hospital, where he has stayed since last September.

The status of his ongoing physical recovery aside, the recent audiences are promising signs of King Bhumibol having re-engaged mentally after whispers that he was suffering from depression in addition to physical ailments like Parkinson's and pneumonia. His ability to deliver off the cuff comments to new ministers and judges were in marked contrast to more pained delivery of written remarks at his December 5 birthday audience and for New Year's. [10BANGKOK287]

Yet it remains clear that Thailand is in the twilight of Bhumibol's reign. And as his health fails, his influence is fading with it. As Boyce wrote in 2007:

While some Thais appear psychologically unable to cope with the idea of the eventual death of their revered King, many in the political class recognize that this is a looming prospect that will transform Thai politics...

What is certain is that the King's death will prove heart-wrenching for the millions of Thais who genuinely adore him, and normal political life will come to an immediate halt for a period of months and possibly longer. [07BANGKOK5718]

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Many Thais sincerely and passionately believe that Bhumibol's interventions at times of crisis and his unmatched moral authority have been essential for Thailand's development and prosperity, and they are deeply afraid of how - and whether - they will cope without him.

With characteristic eloquence, Chulaongkorn University's Professor Thitinan explains in *Thailand Since the Coup* exactly why so many people in 21st century Thailand are so fearful of the future.

What happens after the current king leaves the scene could be the most wrenching crisis yet. So successful has been his kingship that most Thais have come to take too much for granted what he

has meant to the fabric of national life. His reign has seen Thailand go from a rustic backwater filled with thatch roofed villages to a modern nation with gleaming skyscrapers. His has been a remarkable life... As it stands, the monarchy as embodied by King Bhumibol is at the apex of Thailand's sociopolitical order.

The King's popularity and legitimacy have emanated from his devotion to his people and to leadership by example. Despite his enormous wealth, he has lived a relatively modest life free of the opulence often associated with monarchs. He has worked in far-flung corners of the country in public-works projects, capturing hearts and minds... Above all, he has played the crucial role of final arbiter in a country whose politics are chronically fractious and volatile. King Bhumibol's unsurpassed moral authority has long been Thailand's sheet anchor, the mainstay of national stability and continuity. Once he is gone, the country will be in uncharted waters.

It is common knowledge that none of King Bhumibol's eligible heirs can be reasonably expected to command as much popularity, reverence, and moral authority as he does. Not only will the King leave behind a large gap by virtue of his remarkable personal achievements, but it may also be argued that institutionally the monarchy occupies an asymmetrically important position in a now-modern country where public expectations for representation and demands for a greater share of the pie are rife. Matching up to such a predecessor and crafting a new role for the modern monarchy will be daunting challenges indeed.

In accord with palace law, 56-year-old Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn is first in line for the throne, and has several sons and daughters who may also be deemed eligible. Any succession outcome that bypasses the heir-apparent appears problematic, as its rationale must be justified and his willingness to accede must be assumed. The role of Queen Sirikit, who is closest to the Crown Prince among her four children, is expected to be crucial. Strictly enforced laws against *lèse majesté* deter open discussions of acceptable and workable modalities for royal succession. Unlike their equivalents in most other countries with monarchies, Thailand's *lèse majesté* lawsuits can be filed against anyone by anyone, and not merely by the Royal Household. As long as King Bhumibol is around, the Thai people's conspicuous and paramount regard for the monarch seems likely to discourage forward-looking discussions of the pros and cons of what might happen after the end of the current reign...

Without clearer indications from the King, the palace, or the Privy Council, the royal succession will remain Thailand's biggest and most daunting question mark, with far-reaching implications for political stability. It is clear now that Thailand's democratic institutions are too weak, divided, and politicized to manage the succession effectively. Unless clearer signs appear of what will happen after King Bhumibol, all bets are off as to where Thailand will be headed when the current royal twilight finally fades to full darkness.

On December 5, 2009, almost three months into his stay at Siriraj, Bhumibol was taken from hospital to the Grand Palace for his traditional birthday audience with senior officials. Thais who were already deeply anxious about Bhumibol's health and the looming succession were shocked by what they saw. A cable by Ambassador John captures the emotional events of that day:

No longer able to maneuver in and out of his yellow Rolls Royce, King Bhumibol left Siriraj hospital, where he has been since mid-September, in a wheelchair pushed up the back ramp of a VW van to make the brief trip to the Grand Palace's throne hall for his birthday morning audience. The audience, before a select crowd of several hundred officials, was only the third public sighting of the King in three months...

The King settled into his throne in all his royal regalia, against a spectacular backdrop. The ceremony, normally carried live on TV, ran this year with a 15-20 minute delay, with observers suggesting the delay was designed to avoid any potentially embarrassing moments. Sensing the audience might well be one of the last such occasions, the normally well-behaved crowd was unusually anxious, pushing in the back to get a better view of the King's arrival and requiring the palace police to restore order, according to one of our contacts.

In their greeting remarks, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn and Prime Minister Abhisit both hailed the King's full recovery. What those in attendance and watching on TV saw was something quite different: their beloved monarch leaning markedly to his stronger right side, barely moving his left hand/arm - leading to speculation that he may have suffered another minor stroke while in hospital - and speaking with a soft monotone of a voice. The King's message was a familiar one: urging Thais to join hands to help the country return to normalcy, and to set aside personal benefits for the sake of the national interest, stability prosperity.

At the end of the short remarks, the golden curtain separating Bhumibol from the audience closed slowly, accompanied by a blinding flash of cameras. The moment carried with it the metaphorical feel of a curtain closing on an era - a reaction we heard from many contacts we talked to over the succeeding several days; many Thais cried as they watched the curtain close to the Royal Anthem. Later that evening, hundreds of thousands of pink-clad Thai turned out in downtown Bangkok for a candle-light tribute to the King, mixed with fireworks in his honor...

In his remarks, the Crown Prince also vowed to do his best as a Thai and as a member of the Chakri dynasty to serve the country - with many people seeing that remark as a reminder that sooner rather than later Vajiralongkorn will likely succeed his father as Rama X, the tenth member of the Chakri dynasty...

At a seminar entitled "Thailand in Transition" held elsewhere on December 8, noted Thai scholar (at Madison-Wisconsin) Thongchai Winichakul addressed the sensitive issue of succession and transition in this way: "Transition is not only about the institution of monarchy and royal succession. It is much larger, and the process of transition is well under way, a train that has left the station and cannot be reversed." Even within the narrower confines of the institution of monarchy, the last several days have been rich with symbolism and signals about the transition which is indeed underway. [09BANGKOK3110]

II. "LOVE OF FLYING AND WOMEN"

Shortly before he ended his tenure as U.S. ambassador to Thailand in late 2007, Ralph "Skip" Boyce co-hosted [a gala dinner in honour of King Bhumibol](#), presided over by Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. The Preservation Hall Jazz Band from New Orleans played Dixieland classics to more than 600 guests, and Boyce chatted to Vajiralongkorn's third wife, Srirasmi, seated beside him. She told him she surprising news that Vajiralongkorn's pet poodle, Foo Foo, had been promoted to the rank of air chief marshal in Thailand's armed forces. And while the audience enjoyed the jazz, it was Foo Foo who stole the show:

Foo Foo was present at the event, dressed in formal evening attire complete with paw mitts, and at one point during the band's second number, he jumped up onto the head table and began lapping from the guests' water glasses, including my own. The Air Chief Marshal's antics drew the full attention of the 600-plus audience members, and remains the talk of the town to this day. [\[07BANGKOK5839\]](#)

Thinking the subject of pets might make a good conversation topic with Srirasmi, Boyce launched into a discussion of the royal family's well-known love of dogs. Bhumibol has particular affection for [Thong Daeng](#), a female mongrel he adopted from the litter of a stray dog taken in by a Bangkok medical centre, and in his book *The Story of Thong Daeng* he praises the way she observes valued Thai virtues, including obedience:

Tongdaeng is a respectful dog with proper manners; she is humble and knows protocol. She would always sit lower than the King; even when he pulls her up to embrace her, Tongdaeng would lower herself down on the floor, her ears in a respectful drooping position, as if she would say, 'I don't dare.'

The parable was published in 2002 and became the biggest-selling book in Thai history. A 60th-anniversary Bangkok Post article about Bhumibol's literary works says:

The Story of Tongdaeng, a humble stray dog-cum-royal pet, received overwhelming public response. His Majesty's affectionate descriptions of the canine, his characteristics and those of its mother and puppies provided inspiration to a Thai society fraught with conflicts arising from ever widening disparities in economic and social status

Boyce's conversation about dogs with Srirasmi, however, was not such a success:

I mentioned to Srirasm that, during the state dinner hosted by the King for former President Bush in December 2006, the King had appeared most energized when discussing animals; he had spoken animatedly about his most well-known dog, Thongdaeng, and others. I mentioned having heard Princess Sirindhorn had a large dog, and I asked Srirasm if she knew the breed. Srirasm appeared immediately to freeze up; her body language changed, and she said curtly that she knew nothing of Sirindhorn's affairs.

Crown Princess Sirindhorn is by far the most popular of the four children of Bhumibol and Sirikit. Most Thais would far rather see her succeeding her father than Vajiralongkorn. As Boyce noted of Srirasmi's chilly response:

Her reaction was interesting, given a widespread, longstanding perception that Sirindhorn may somehow edge out the Crown Prince as successor to the King.

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When most journalists and academics write about Vajiralongkorn, mindful of the strict *lèse majesté* law and the crown prince's personal reputation for cruelty and violent rages, most resort to the safe formula of saying the likely future Rama X has yet to earn the same love and reverence among Thailand's people as his father. Several U.S. embassy "scen setter" cables adopt a similar phrasing:

Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn neither commands the respect nor displays the charisma of his beloved father, who greatly expanded the prestige and influence of the monarchy during his 62-year reign. [10BANGKOK45]

While this is true as far as it goes, the fact is that *nobody* commands the same respect among Thais as Bhumibol; certainly nobody alive today, and probably not even any other Thai in history. Even if Vajiralongkorn was liked and respected, he would still have a hard time coming even close to matching his father. But the reality is that the crown prince is “already widely loathed and feared”, in the words of a [March 2010 article](#) in the Economist:

Most Thais try not even to think about his accession. “This reign ends. And then, nothing,” says an academic. The next ruler must fill the shoes of a beatified icon whose achievements have been swathed in a personality cult. The role of a crown prince in an era of great longevity and public scrutiny is tough anywhere. In Thailand it verges on the impossible. “How do you follow someone who walks on water?” asks a senior Western diplomat.

In a 2009 cable discussing the closest friends and advisers of the leading royals, Eric John notes that few people get close to Vajiralongkorn and stay there:

Long known for violent and unpredictable mood swings, the Crown Prince has few people who have stayed long in his inner circle. [09BANGKOK2967]

If anybody doubts the dangers of saying in public what the vast majority of Thais privately believe, the fate of Harry Nicolaides stands as a stark warning. Nicolaides was typical of the thousands of foreign men trying to scrape a living in Thailand after drifting into the country and finding they don't want to leave. True to the stereotype, he wrote bad fiction and dreamed of authoring a book that would make his fortune and free him from the drudgery and relative poverty of life as an English teacher in Thailand, the standard fall-back career for washed-up Westerners. Nicolaides' novel *Verisimilitude: Is the truth, the truth?* was self-published in 2005; he printed 50 copies, of which only seven were ever sold. In one passage, the novel discusses the sexual shenanigans of a Thai prince, unnamed but clearly based on Vajiralongkorn:

From King Rama to the Crown Prince, the nobility was renowned for their romantic entanglements and intrigues. The Crown Prince had many wives major and minor with a coterie of concubines for entertainment. One of his recent wives was exiled with her entire family, including a son they conceived together, for an undisclosed indiscretion. He subsequently remarried with another woman and fathered another child. It was rumoured that if the prince fell in love with one of his minor wives and she betrayed him, she and her family would disappear with their name, familial lineage and all vestiges of their existence expunged forever.

In August 2008, Nicolaides was arrested at Bangkok airport while trying to leave the country to return to his native Australia. He was denied bail. Appearing in handcuffs and leg shackles on the first day of his trial in February 2009, Nicolaides told reporters he had "unqualified respect for the king of Thailand" and had not intended to cause offense. He was sentenced to six years in prison, cut in half to three years according to normal Thai procedure because he had pleaded guilty. Photographs of [a bewildered and weeping Nicolaides](#) clinging to his cell bars, and [his graphic accounts of life in prison](#), gained worldwide attention. On February 21, 2009, after seven months in prison, Nicolaides received a royal pardon - standard practice for foreigners convicted of lèse majesté after they have served some prison time to teach them a lesson - and went home. It probably wasn't much consolation to know that across the world, many thousands of people now knew his name - far more than the seven who had bought his allegedly seditious novel.

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Vajiralongkorn was born on July 28, 1952. As Handley says, "it was a dynastic landmark, the first birth of a celestial prince since King Chulalongkorn's reign". He was the second child of Bhumibol and Sirikit after their daughter Ubolrat.

Stevenson writes that Vajiralongkorn always showed "an imperious sense of destiny":

He defied a reprimand from a courtier by saying "Don't talk like that to your future king!" King Bhumibol tanned his son's backside with the reminder: "You're not the Tenth Rama yet."
[Stevenson, *The Revolutionary King*]

The prince was educated at schools in Thailand, England and Australia , before military training at Australia's Royal Military College in Duntroon. He left Duntroon in 1975, never receiving an official diploma in a sign he failed to make the grade:

By the beginning of the 1970s, he had become a disagreeable young man, lacking any of the intellect, charm, curiosity or diplomatic skills of his parents, much less any adherence to dhammic principles. He treated aides with little respect and women as objects, using his power to get them to sleep with him...

It wasn't a complete surprise. None of Bhumibol's children were raised with the discipline of his own childhood. Vajiralongkorn grew up surrounded by fawning palace women, including Sirikit, who granted his every desire. The king tried in vain to pass on to the prince his own enthusiasm

for hobbies, music or sports. The only thing he and his father seemed to do well together was to go shooting. By his own later recollection, the prince's insulated upbringing kept him from having a normal life and meeting normal people. At 13, the king sent him off to boarding school in England, where it was hoped he might learn some discipline and humility, and mix with his peers. It wasn't too successful. The prince later said he was intensely lonely and couldn't make friends. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

During his time in Australia, the prince fell in love with the daughter of a Thai diplomat there and wanted to marry her. Sirikit insisted instead that Vajiralongkorn marry her own niece, Somsawali Kitiyakara:

The prince didn't like her. He preferred beautiful, clever and forthright women. At 19, Somsawali was plain, dull, timid and not well educated or hugely intelligent. Totally inexperienced with men, she had none of the spark that the prince liked in women. Still, he obliged his mother. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

Stevenson quotes an unnamed royal, a descendent of Rama IV, as saying of Vajiralongkorn:

Queen Sirikit stopped him from marrying a girl with whom he was very much in love. He was a victim of the whole, rotten age-old system of the royal court. He would come and see me and bare his heart. He could not understand why his mother interfered. He became bitter and difficult. [Stevenson, *The Revolutionary King*]

Vajiralongkorn and Somsawali were married in January 1977. During 1978, he stormed out of the palace he shared with his - now pregnant - wife, and never returned. He began a relationship with Yuwathida Pholprasert, an aspiring actress, and was often seen in the company of wealthy godfathers who made their fortunes at the intimate nexus of crime, politics and business in Thailand. Thais began to refer to him as "Sia-O", a combination of the word for a Chinese-Thai gangster and the sixth syllable of the prince's royal title. His wife gave birth to a daughter in late 1978, and then in August 1979, his lover Yuwathida gave birth to a son, Vajiralongkorn's only male heir at that time. Sirikit was appalled. At a news conference in Texas in 1981, she said:

My son the crown prince is a little bit of a Don Juan. He is a good student, a good boy, but women find him interesting and he finds women even more interesting... If the people of Thailand do not approve of the behaviour of my son, then he would either have to change his behaviour or resign from the royal family.

Yuwathida bore Vajiralongkorn three more sons and a daughter. She began to accompany Vajiralongkorn on official trips abroad. The prince repeatedly pressed Somsawali for a divorce, but she refused. In 1986 and 1987 Vajiralongkorn gave [a series of interviews](#) to the high-society magazine Dichan. He acknowledged he was disliked by many Thais, unfairly in his view:

When there is a traffic jam, people immediately say it is because of the Crown Prince's procession. They say so even if they haven't left home or are abroad.

Asked by the magazine if he was hurt by his mother describing him as the black sheep of the family, he replied:

Sometimes black sheep serve a purpose, one of helping others. Black sheep help those not-too-white ones seems whiter.

In September 1987, the prince made a state visit to Japan. It was a disaster. Ahead of the trip, he demanded that Yuwathida accompany him in an official capacity instead of his wife; the Japanese refused for reasons of protocol. Once he arrived, things went from bad to worse, [as Barbara Crosette reported](#) in the New York Times:

A diplomatic storm blew up between Tokyo and Bangkok over what Thai-language newspapers reported as "slights" to the Crown Prince, a pilot and army major general who commands his own regiment, during an official visit to Japan.

A Japanese chauffeur driving the Thai Prince's car apparently stopped at a motorway tollbooth to relieve himself - Japanese officials say the man felt ill and had to be replaced. On other occasions, the Prince was said to have been given an inappropriate chair to sit on and to have been forced to reach down to the floor to pick up a cord to unveil a memorial. The prince came home three days earlier than scheduled, leaving a diplomatic crisis in his wake.

Vajiralongkorn finally divorced his wife in 1993 after court proceedings in which Somsawali was unable to refute his charges against her because of the prohibition against lèse majesté. The prince married Yuwathida in February 1994, and she changed her name to Mom Sujarinee Mahidol na Ayudhaya, signifying she was a commoner married to a prince. The marriage did not last long. With Somsawali still in Bangkok and fighting a determined propaganda campaign against the royal family that had abandoned her, Vajiralongjorn expelled his new wife from his palace in May 1996. The prince accused her of having an affair with a 60-year-old air chief marshal - the same rank to which he was later to promote his poodle:

When it seemed the scandal would die down, the Crown Prince plastered the capital's walls with photographs of his actress wife and the air marshal together: "These two people have been declared persona non grata and expelled from the palace. If anyone sees them, they must be shunned". [Stevenson, *The Revolutionary King*]

Handley writes that Vajiralongkorn also instructed the foreign ministry to strip his wife and the air marshal of their diplomatic passports, and that naked photographs of his wife were sent to foreign embassies and newspapers and posted on the internet. Suddenly Vajiralongkorn started appearing in public with Somsawali again:

But by the end of the year the fairy tale again faded. The prince was no longer seen with Somsawali and he passed his time with choice selections from Bangkok's legion of for-hire party girls. He still lived in his suburban Nonthaburi residence and schemed to evict Somsawali from the in-town palace. Nothing in his behaviour had really changed. He was said to be behind the sacking of the national police chief Pochana Boonyachinda. because Pochana and his wife, a

lady-in-waiting in the prince's palace, allegedly helped Sucharinee flee the country with all her jewelry. It was another sign that the man who would become Rama X remained, at 44, brutal and uncontrollable. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

In 2001, Vajiralongkorn married Srirasmi, his third wife. He [told journalists in 2002](#) that it was time to settle down: "I am now 50 years old and think I should have a complete family." In April 2005, Srirasmi gave birth to a son, Dipangkorn Rasmijoti, known as "[Ong Ti](#)", who became second in line to the throne after Vajiralongkorn.

But scandal continued to follow the crown prince around. In 2007, a video began circulating [showing a birthday party for Foo Foo](#); easy listening classics are playing on a stereo, uniformed servants bring food and drinks, the prince - as usual - puffs on his pipe, and Srirasmi, dressed in just a thong, at one point eats birthday cake from a plate on the floor, like a dog.:

A disturbing video of the Crown Prince and his wife is in wide circulation here, after being posted on website VEOH.com. The video, which is reportedly several years old, shows the CP and his wife at a birthday party in a garden after dark. The wife is wearing nothing but a G-string and a smile as she lights the birthday candles. The video shows servants waiting on the table, and the flash of photographs being taken. According to a number of contacts, this is being passed around on DVD, both in Bangkok and in the provinces; the tawdry incident has provoked more (but whispered) criticism of the CP. [[07BANGKOK5041](#)]

Also in 2007, a trip by Vajiralongkorn to China had to be shelved after the prince made unreasonable demands:

A planned visit by the Thai Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn to take place early this year has been postponed.... The crown prince was "angry" that he was refused his request for "special VIP treatment" while visiting China. This would have been his first trip to the PRC; his sister, Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, visited China a number of times and speaks fluent Mandarin Chinese. [[07BANGKOK680](#)]

Around this time, the prince abandoned Srirasmi and their son, moving to a villa in a spa outside Munich in Germany. Thais privately exchange plentiful gossip about the prince's latest lovers, and it is widely known that since he began occasionally piloting Thai Airways flights, his mistresses have tended to be flight attendants for the Thai flag carrier. Eric John summed up the state of the prince's personal life in 2009 as follows:

Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn has spent most (up to 75%) of the past two years based in Europe (primarily at a villa at a medicinal spa 20km outside of Munich), with his leading mistress and beloved white poodle Fufu. Vajiralongkorn is believed to be suffering from a blood-related medical condition (varying sources claim he is either: HIV positive; has Hepatitis C; is afflicted by a rare form of "blood cancer," or some combination which leads to regular blood transfusions). His current (third) wife Srirasmi and 4 year old son Adityadornkitigun, known as Ong Ti, reside in his Sukhothai Palace in Bangkok, but when Vajiralongkorn travels back to Bangkok, he stays

with his second mistress in the retrofitted Air Force VIP lounge at Wing Six, Don Muang Airport (note: both mistresses are Thai Airways stewardesses; the Crown Prince has shifted from flying F5s to Thai Airways Boeings and Airbuses in recent years. End note). [09BANGKOK2967]

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Vajiralongkorn and his young son Ong Ti are at present the only two legitimate male heirs of the House of Chakri. There are major unanswered questions about the health of both:

Currently, the Chakri dynasty has but two eligible male heirs: Vajiralongkorn and his young son Ong Ti, who appears to suffer from both physical and mental developmental delay issues and reportedly has regular seizures. [09BANGKOK2967]

It is clear the prince is receiving some kind of medical treatment in Europe. Whispers have circulated in Thailand for years that Vajiralongkorn has HIV, and he has regularly - and wrongly - been rumoured to have died. But Boyce noted that the prince looked well in their 2007 meeting, and recounted a bizarre explanation for his previous unhealthy appearance:

The Crown Prince appears healthy. I was recently told by M.R. Pridiyathorn Devakula, former Deputy Prime Minister and Palace insider, that the reason the Crown Prince had looked gaunt and was walking unsteadily a few months ago (which sparked rumors of his failing health) was because he was wearing some kind of constricting apparel under his clothing. The doctors told him to take it off, and he immediately looked more fit and stable. In conversation with me, he was able to engage in easy back-and-forth discussion throughout. [07BANGKOK5839]

Exactly what this constricting apparel consisted of is not specified.

Confusion also surrounds Ong Ti. Despite rumours that the young prince suffers a number of physical and psychological health problems, Boyce heard a different story from Srirasmi when the two were seated together at the November 2007 jazz gala dinner:

Srirasm also described her son, Dipangkorn Rasmijoti, as a bit of a prodigy, noting that he speaks energetically -- mostly in Thai, but also in English (in which he receives instruction). She remarked that Dipangkorn tended to speak like an adult, because he was always in the company of adults. (Comment: If true, this account would appear to put to rest rumors of autism. End Comment.) [07BANGKOK5839]

In a 45-minute audience with Vajiralongkorn at the Amporn Palace in early 2009 - during which "the Crown Prince remarked that it must be difficult for outside observers to fathom the complexity of developments here, adding that even he sometimes found it hard to grasp" - John also met the prince's son and makes no mention of health problems:

At the end of the session, the Crown Prince and his consort brought in their four-year-old son, dressed in an identical suit, tie, and pocket kerchief as his father, and amiably mused about the

difficulties of raising a child in the modern royal environment with constant public scrutiny.
[09BANGKOK206]

Whatever the truth, the question marks hanging over the health of the only two eligible heirs of the Chakri dynasty are a further serious worry for Thailand's monarchy.

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The prospect of Vajiralongkorn succeeding his father as king of Thailand fills most Thais with fear and dismay. The prince's lurid private life and well known association with some of the country's shadier godfathers renders it impossible for him to be portrayed with any credibility as a virtuous and wise *dharmmaraja* monarch. Equally, not even the full might of the palace public relations machine will ever be able to convince Thais that Vajiralongkorn fits the paradigm of the modern monarchy that Bhumibol embodies. Far from being regarded as an ally of the poor and a "democratic" ruler who serves with the assent of his people, the crown prince shows no interest in royal development projects. His disastrous trip to Japan and cancelled visit to China show him to be arrogant, haughty and obsessed with the trappings of power, unlike Bhumibol's image as an ascetic, virtuous ruler with no interest in worldly wealth or in possessing power for its own sake.

The great majority of Thais are deeply reluctant to accept a monarch they regard to be not only corrupt but morally bankrupt. All Thais are aware of the crown prince's antics, even if they cannot discuss the subject in public; most have seen the scandalous video and photographs circulating on the internet. A 2009 cable, written after a trip to Thailand's northeastern province of Isaan, recounts a professor at a university in the region saying:

The Crown Prince is not as popular as his father, and the people would have a difficult time accepting his current wife Princess Srirasmi as their queen, based largely on a widely distributed salacious video of the birthday celebration for the Crown Prince's white poodle Fufu, in which Sirasmi appears wearing nothing more than a G-string in front of other guests and still photographers. [09BANGKOK2903]

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Vajiralongjorn's deficiencies have much more than spiritual significance. In a normal constitutional monarchy, having a less-than-stellar king - inevitable sometimes due to the obvious shortcomings of the hereditary principle as a means of filling key positions - would be regarded as a disappointment but hardly a national disaster. But of course, the frequently-repeated claim that Thailand's monarch is above politics except at moments of crisis is a myth. The king is far more than a figurehead. As Bhumibol [told the New York Times in his 1988 interview](#), he had long sought to involve himself in Thai politics, although he was mindful of the danger of overreaching:

You can stay in the frame of the law. You do what the law says. That is, if you say something, the Prime Minister or a minister must countersign, and if he is not there to countersign, we cannot speak. That is one way to do it - do nothing, just nothing at all.

The other way is to do too much, use the influence we have to do anything. That doesn't work either. We must be in the middle, and working in every field.

Crosette notes that Bhumibol's strategy has been to exercise his power with great subtlety, through hints communicated to a network of loyal royalists throughout the country who would then act on his wishes:

He has, in fact, made a number of important political decisions, not by fiat but through gestures understood by a people sensitive to such subtleties.

The best academic analysis of Bhumibol's method of using the supreme moral authority he has accrued to influence Thai politics is Professor Duncan McCargo's seminal 2005 article *Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand* in The Pacific Review:

Thai politics are best understood in terms of political networks. The leading network of the period 1973–2001 was centred on the palace, and is here termed 'network monarchy'. Network monarchy involved active interventions in the political process by the Thai King and his proxies, notably former prime minister Prem Tinsulanond. Network monarchy developed considerable influence, but never achieved the conditions for domination. Instead, the palace was obliged to work with and through other political institutions, primarily the elected parliament.

McCargo says direct public interventions like those of 1973 and 1992 are only the tip of the iceberg of royal influence in Thailand:

Such rare public interventions are only the exposed element of a vast web of royally inspired political moves, most of which are well hidden from the public eye...

The main features of Thailand's network monarchy from 1980 to 2001 were as follows: the monarch was the ultimate arbiter of political decisions in times of crisis; the monarchy was the primary source of national legitimacy; the King acted as a didactic commentator on national issues, helping to set the national agenda, especially through his annual birthday speeches; the monarch intervened actively in political developments, largely by working through proxies such as privy councillors and trusted military figures; and the lead proxy, former army commander and prime minister Prem Tinsulanond, helped determine the nature of coalition governments, and monitored the process of military and other promotions. At heart, network governance of this kind relied on placing the right people (mainly, the right men) in the right jobs. Allocation of key posts was the primary role of the lead proxy, Prem.

Network monarchy is inherently illiberal, because it advocates reliance on 'good men', and the marginalization of formal political institutions or procedures. Low priority is given to democratic principles such as the rule of law and popular sovereignty; but King Bhumipol's core achievement lay in securing a high degree of relative autonomy for the monarchy within Thailand's increasingly pluralist order. This contrasts with the tight controls placed on constitutional monarchies as conventionally understood.

Prem Tinsulanonda is a former general in the Thai military who was prime minister from 1980 to 1988, during which time he ruled in close cooperation with Bhumibol. When he stepped down as premier, the king appointed him to head the Privy Council, the main formal advisory body for Rama IX. Like the king, Prem likes to portray himself as an incorruptible statesman with no interest in power. In a his "farewell address" to the nation on August 5, 1988, broadcast on television and radio, Prem said:

As for myself, I have always been modest. I have had no political ambition. I never entertained the ambition of being premier. Being a premier is no fun and tiring. But when I was given the responsibility, I was ready to be tired and devote myself to the work, facing all problems with courage and patience.

An effusive English-language biography of Prem, *Prem Tinsulanonda: Soldier and Statesman*, commissioned by his own foundation and written by William Warren, describes him in terms usually reserved for Bhumibol himself:

To ordinary Thais, he had become a trusted father figure, never tainted with a hint of scandal, who could be turned to in times of national crisis or simply regarded as a standard against which to measure other leaders; similarly, to many high-ranking military and political leaders he was a source of wise advice based on long experience.

The book quotes Prem as saying he gladly gave up the prime ministership:

What I felt most on that day I resigned the premiership was profound relief. I had served for so long and worked so hard. I was ready to rest, to let others try their hand at the job.

But despite his advanced age, Prem has shown no sign of taking a rest. He has played a central role in Thai political machinations over the past decade, and in the establishment's confrontation with Thaksin Shinawatra. And he hasn't neglected picking up some well paid but undemanding positions on corporate boards along the way, as John wrote in 2009:

Privy Council Chair GEN Prem Tinsulanonda, PM from 1980-88, has a special title as senior statesman last held in the early 1940s by Pridi. Prem has parlayed his stature into a series of board chairmanships and enduring influence in military reshuffle lists, drawing criticism from many quarters for engaging in inappropriate "ang barami" - borrowing the charisma of the monarch. Because of their presumptive encouragement for the 2006 coup that removed Thaksin from office, Prem and post-coup interim PM Surayud Chulanont have been particular targets of Thaksin and the red-shirts' ire, as part of the red "throw the aristocrat- bureaucrats out" campaign. The spring 2009 red protests called for Prem to resign; in the fall 2009, red-shirts demanded that the Constitution be changed so that the Privy Council Chair could not serve as Regent during the King's incapacitation. [09BANGKOK2967]

The Privy Council, which Prem heads, is made up of staunch royalists and paragons of the Thai establishment, all men. In another 2009 cable, John included a section he entitled: "All the King's (Old)

Men - a brief primer":

The 19 elderly men who comprise the Privy Council have few formal duties apart from advising Thai King Bhumibol when he seeks advice, and playing a critical role during succession, which has not been an issue in Thailand for the past 62 years. Five are former Supreme Court Chief Justices, with a sixth a life-long judge who served as PM; seven are former flag-ranked officers; and the remaining six are five career civil servants and one head of a state-owned enterprise, many with an engineering bent. Having sworn personal oaths to serve the King as public servants throughout their working careers through age 60, they have devoted their retirement years to being his personal advisers. While highly esteemed in society, the Privy Councilors generally shy away from politically-related commentary in public. [09BANGKOK2260]

After the dramatic events of May 1992, as McCargo writes, the nature of Bhumibol's influence and the network monarchy changed, but remained pervasive:

The violence of May 1992 had left the King in an apparently strong position. He emerged as the supreme political referee, following a superficially successful intervention to solve the crisis. Yet the intervention also marked the high watermark of his authority. His consistent support for the military reflected an obsolete understanding of the Thai political and social order....

After May 1992, a new system of monarchical governance was refined, one much less reliant on direct action... For the next nine years, the King and his allies refined a new model that reduced his direct involvement, as he worked through Prem... and others to shape the direction of the country.

The monarchy did not hesitate to undermine elected prime ministers of whom it disapproved, colluding in the ousting of perhaps three or four. [McCargo, *Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand*]

In a review of *The King Never Smiles*, McCargo memorably summarizes Prem's continued influence:

The octogenarian ex-cavalry general is a taciturn bachelor possessed of a peerless list of mobile phone numbers; he continues to exert considerable influence over official appointments. No one can refuse to take Prem's calls, and few dare to deny his requests, since he is generally assumed to be asking on behalf of the King. But Thailand's 'network monarchy' ... extends far beyond Prem, the Privy Council, the military and the bureaucratic elite. It embraces the business sector, academics, journalists and social activists, some of whom have direct connections with the Palace, and some of whom are simply self-appointed guardians of royal interests. [McCargo, *A Hollow Crown*]

The palace may not always be the paramount institution in the country, but quite clearly it is a profoundly powerful player in Thai politics. That is another reason that so many Thais regard the prospect of Vajiralongkorn becoming Rama X with dread.

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Thailand's royalist establishment regards Vajiralongkorn with particular horror. The crown prince is well aware of their contempt for him, and of their efforts over the years to seek a way to promote his younger sister Sirindhorn to replace him as Bhumibol's successor. Given the prince's reputation for eruptions of anger and spite, they are terrified that if he ascends to the throne he will wreak savage revenge on those who had sought to stand in his way.

What makes the prospect of Vajiralongkorn becoming Rama X even more frightening for the monarchist elite is the likelihood he continues to have some kind of alliance with their nemesis, Thaksin Shinawatra. Like the crown prince, Thaksin is vengeful and ruthless. Both men share a loathing of Prem and his network of elderly royalists. The nightmare scenario for the establishment is that upon Bhumibol's death, Thaksin sweeps back to power as Vajiralongkorn takes the throne, and the two men sweep away everything the royalists have fought for and take vicious revenge on those who have crossed them.

In May 2006, Privy Council member Surayud Chulanont, destined to be appointed prime minister by the generals who seized power in a coup just four months later, voiced exactly these fears. Under mounting pressure from the royalists, Thaksin had announced a break from politics. Nobody believed it would last long, but the real worry for Surayud and his elderly establishment friends was what would happen in the longer term:

Privy Councilor Surayud Chulanont told the Ambassador that he is convinced Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra will attempt to reenter Thai politics after a brief hiatus. Surayud agreed with suggestions that Thaksin might be hoping to capitalize on his close relationship with the Crown Prince and resume his political career after the 78-year old King's death. [06BANGKOK2988]

After the coup, those who conspired to topple Thaksin were haunted by the fear that unless they were able to decisively snuff out his political influence once and for all, he could one day recapture power and make them pay for what they had done to him. Borwornsak Uwanno, a scion of the establishment and a former ally of Thaksin who later split with the former prime minister, told Boyce in early 2007 that the members of the Council for National Security (CNS) - as the coup plotters eventually called themselves - were losing sleep over the prospect:

Borwornsak told the Ambassador, "the CNS is not sleeping well at night," and we believe it... Many seem angry and afraid... They find that they may be unable to achieve the goal of their putsch - ensuring that Thaksin cannot return to power again - unless they make, at a minimum, a drastic course change. [07BANGKOK311]

A few months later, CNS Secretary General Winai Phattiyakul, one of the key players in the coup, expressed the same sense of unease:

CNS figures could not rule out the deposed PM returning and wreaking havoc on the country - and possibly acting vengefully against CNS members. [07BANGKOK2280]

From the end of the 1990s, before he had become prime minister, Thaksin was actively investing some of his plentiful wealth on an important long-term project - buying his way into the favour of the royal family. Being an astute businessman, he saw the wisdom of focusing his generosity on the crown prince, who has perennial problems finding the cash to support his lifestyle:

Many well-informed Bangkokians talked of Thaksin having taken on many of the prince's larger expenditures, including the refurbishment of the old palace of Rama VII, which the prince wanted to move into. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

In 2001, the government and palace threatened reporters and editors at the Far Eastern Economic Review with lèse majesté after they hinted at dubious financial links between Thaksin and the prince. With Vajiralongkorn increasingly reliant on Thaksin's largesse, Boyce wrote in 2005 that the prime minister's strategy appeared to be right on target:

The King will not be around forever, and Thaksin long ago invested in Crown Prince futures. [05BANGKOK2219]

In 2006, before the coup, former Thaksin ally Buwornsak told Boyce of an alleged audio recording in which Thaksin boasted of his hold over the prince:

The entire Privy Council was against Thaksin, he asserted, adding that Privy Councilor Surayud Chulanont had a tape recording that featured the Prime Minister talking to members of his entourage about how to "neutralize" (politically) the King, Thaksin asserting also that he exerted significant influence over Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. (In an aside, Borwornsak also complained that Thaksin had spoken of the Crown Prince and written letters to him in a manner that appeared disrespectful of the Crown Prince's royal heritage.) [06BANGKOK5463]

Around the time of the 2006 coup, the relationship between Thaksin and Vajirangorn soured. A few days after the gala jazz dinner at which Air Chief Marshall Foo Foo grabbed everyone's attention, Boyce paid a farewell call on the crown prince:

Despite Thailand's long history of coups and its many constitutions, the Crown Prince said, the Thai people loved democracy and individual freedoms. He said he found it ironic that Prime Minister Thaksin had essentially been able to act as a dictator, although coming to power through elections. (Comment: Early in Thaksin's administration, Thaksin seemed to invest heavily in cultivating close ties to the Crown Prince. The two men later had a spectacular falling-out, prompting the Crown Prince to abandon the Nonthaburi Palace that Thaksin had purchased and outfitted for him, moving to the Sukhothai Palace downtown. Stories vary about a meeting between Thaksin and the Crown Prince in London earlier this year; the version we assess as most likely is that Thaksin sought an audience with the Crown Prince, and, when this was not granted, he inserted himself into the reception line at the Crown Prince's hotel and had a 45-second discussion devoid of substance. End Comment.) [07BANGKOK5839]

The story of Thaksin's desperate effort to get some face time with Vajiralongkorn in London is told more

fully in an earlier 2007 cable, after Boyce's meeting with Winai:

Thaksin also had contacted the Thai Ambassador in London to try to arrange an audience with Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn during the Crown Prince's April visit to the United Kingdom. Winai said that when the Thai Ambassador denied this request, Thaksin waited in the lobby of the Crown Prince's hotel, inserting himself into the receiving line of hotel staff. On arrival, according to Winai, the Crown Prince had a very brief exchange with Thaksin in this public setting. But when Winai later told unspecified figures from Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party that the deposed PM was acting inappropriately, Winai's TRT interlocutor claimed that the Crown Prince had summoned Thaksin for a lengthy audience. Winai claimed this story illustrated an unacceptable effort by Thaksin to force himself upon the royal family -- and then misrepresent his interactions. [07BANGKOK2280]

But there is considerable evidence in the cables that the two men have mended fences since and may, at the very least, form some kind of future alliance of convenience, even if they are not in contact at present.

Niphon Promphan was at school in England with Vajiralongkorn and - unusually - has remained close to the prince ever since:

Boarding school classmate Niphon Promphan... has long tended to the Crown Prince's finances/affairs at the palace... Niphon is widely tipped to be the likely next Privy Council Chair, presuming Vajiralongkorn assumes the throne and cleans house. [09BANGKOK2967]

In a revealing 2009 discussion with Ambassador John, Niphon said he was on good terms with Thaksin and argued in favour of cutting a deal with the former prime minister - a particularly surprising position given that at the time he was chief of staff to Prime Minister Abhisit in the Democrat Party, most of whose members regard Thaksin with undisguised hatred:

Niphon said that although he was one of only several Democrats still on good terms with Thaksin and that Thaksin wanted to talk with him, Niphon's current positions with the PM and the Crown Prince made such a direct conversation impracticable...

Niphon is the only Democrat we know of who advocates cutting a deal with Thaksin, but given his dual positions as PM Abhisit's defacto Chief of Staff and the Crown Prince's chief adviser, his views cannot be discounted...

When the Ambassador asked whether Niphon retained any kind of rapport with Thaksin, Niphon replied that while they remained on good terms -- he was one of only one or two Democrats in that category -- they no longer talked. According to Niphon, Thaksin's intermediaries had made it clear that Thaksin would like to talk with him, but Niphon's current position in the government and especially his proximity to the Crown Prince meant that such a talk would be considered scandalous in the current political context. [09BANGKOK2455]

This chimes with comments made by Thaksin to the ambassador a year earlier:

Thaksin added that he believed that he still had a good relationship with Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. The Crown Prince, however, had explained to Thaksin (at an unspecified time post-coup) that he would be unable to meet with Thaksin for an extended period of time, because of Queen Sirikit's antipathy toward the former Prime Minister. [08BANGKOK2243]

But an unexpected political ruckus in 2009 - the result of a direct and, by all accounts, damaging intervention by Vajiralongkorn - suggests he may retain ties to Thaksin, and also raises troubling questions about his apparent willingness to step beyond the bounds of his constitutional role even before he ascends to the throne.

In the autumn of 2009, Thai police chief Patcharawat Wongsuwan, brother of the defense minister, was due for mandatory retirement. He had been dogged by controversy after a violent clash between police and Yellow Shirt protesters in October 2008 in which police were accused of excessive use of force, and at least one Democrat Party politician openly accused him of taking bribes and selling positions on the upcoming police promotion list. As [John notes](#), the police chief post is a "lucrative money generating position".

Abhisit decided to name a successor himself, and his preferred candidate was Police General Prateep Tunprasert, seen as a relatively clean cop. But his coalition partners in the Bhum Jai Thai party rebelled, backing another candidate, Police General Jumpol Manmai. In an August 20 vote by the Royal Thai Police Office Board, Prateep was rejected by five votes to four.

Despite assurances to the contrary, the vote setback amounted to a political belly flop for Abhisit. At a minimum, the vote demonstrated Abhisit's political naivete and/or inability to count heads before a relatively straightforward up or down vote; he badly miscalculated the support he could expect for his candidate. Embassy contacts from across the political spectrum have privately characterized this latest setback as an alarming repudiation of Abhisit and perhaps an ominous harbinger of things to come for him. The incident made Abhisit look weak the moment most would agree he could least afford it. [09BANGKOK2125]

As Abhisit continued to back his own candidate, more sinister reasons emerged for the preference of Bhum Jai Thai for rival Jumpol:

The Crown Prince, currently in Germany, had recently summoned Niphon Promphan, who handles his finances but is also a Democrat MP and Secretary General of PM Abhisit's office, to Germany to receive instructions to support Jumpol's candidacy, according to a wide array of contacts and press reports. (Note: Phumjai Thai Party Leader Charawat's son Anutin, the Chair of construction giant Sino-Thai, is also seen as very close to the Crown Prince, as a "friend" and financier. End Note.) [09BANGKOK2289]

In a meeting with John, an uncomfortable Niphon conceded that the battle over the police chief could be damaging to the monarchy:

When the Ambassador asked how the issue would be resolved, noting first that it was widely known that Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn was pushing for Police General Jumpol Manmai over PM Abhisit's choice of Police General Prateep Tunprasert... Niphon shifted uncomfortably and initially replied merely that he knew who "his choice" was (note: Jumpol). When the Ambassador asked whether a third choice compromise candidate might be the solution, Niphon agreed that it might be a possibility, though he repeated that "his choice" was the correct choice, adding that he believed the matter should have concluded long ago.

When the Ambassador inquired whether the Crown Prince's direct intervention in the Police Chief selection process had implications for public perceptions of the role of the monarchy in governance, Niphon suggested that it did. Niphon acknowledged that the perceived intervention was unhelpful both for the Crown Prince and the monarchy. [09BANGKOK2455]

Torn between his role working for Abhisit and his loyalty to the crown prince, Niphon eventually resigned from the government. In later cables, John offers an explanation for the prince's support of Jumpol:

Deputy Police Commander Chumpol reportedly served for many years as then PM Thaksin's bagman, delivering funds skimmed from lottery proceeds to the Crown Prince and his staff; more recently, Chumpol is alleged to have been the conduit for Thaksin to "gift" a \$9 million villa in Phuket to the Crown Prince. [09BANGKOK2967]

The crown prince's willingness to launch an intervention in Thai politics that undermined a prime minister backed by the establishment, caused his oldest friend to resign from a senior post in the Democrat Party, and implied continued dubious financial links with Thaksin, has filled Thailand's royalist old guard with foreboding.

In January 2010, Prem said he suspected that the former prime minister had re-established some ties with the crown prince:

Prem acknowledged Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn probably maintained some sort of relationship with fugitive former PM Thaksin, "seeing him from time to time." Prem, clearly no fan of either man, cautioned that Thaksin ran the risk of self-delusion if he thought that the Crown Prince would act as his friend/supporter in the future merely because of Thaksin's monetary support; "he does not enjoy that sort of relationship." When Ambassador asked where the Crown Prince was currently, in Thailand or Europe, Prem replied dismissively: "You know his social life, how he is." (Note: a presumed reference to Vajiralongkorn's preference to spend time based out of Munich with his main mistress, rather than in Thailand with his wife and son). [10BANGKOK192]

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In January 2005, Bhumibol presided over the annual Prince Mahidol awards ceremony, with his daughter Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn also in attendance. Boyce was chatting to the king about the importance

of family.

At one point in the conversation, the King stopped and gestured towards Princess Sirindhorn, who was engaged in a side conversation with the wife of the German award winner. The King quietly said, "I have four children. But she is the only one who 'sits on the ground with the people.' She never married, but she has millions of children." [05BANGKOK868]

Sirindhorn is the third of the four children of Bhumibol and Sirikit, born in April 1955. She is known among Thais as "Princess Angel".

A professor of U.S. studies, among other topics, at Chulachomklao, the Thai version of West Point, Sirindhorn is clearly the most beloved Thai royal after the King, bears the lion's share of royal duties/ceremonies at this point, and serves her father in such personal tasks as recently interviewing and hiring a physio-therapist for him. [09BANGKOK2967]

The people of Thailand have a clear and surprisingly undisguised preference for Sirindhorn to somehow succeed her father and become queen. She is also Bhumibol's favourite among his children, although Handley writes that the relationship is not without strains:

King Bhumibol, on his birthday in 1977, elevated the 22-year-old Sirindhorn to a full celestial ranking, inserting into her title the words *Maha (Great) Chakri*. This was a procedural follow-up to ... 1974 changes in succession rules, ensuring that there was an alternative in case tragedy struck the prince. Nevertheless, most Thais took her promotion as the king's response to his son's reputation, and that she had an equal chance to succeed. Unofficially, it was acceptable to call her "crown princess" in English.

But Sirindhorn wasn't the perfect alternative. She was neither brainy, disciplined and energetic, as Bhumibol would have preferred, nor a sleek and beautiful princess like Sirikit. Simple, youthful, and happily plump and indulgent in her eating, she took no interest in clothes, makeup and jewelry. Her academic talents were mediocre, though the palace machine made sure she registered top marks nationally in examinations, as Ubolrat had done before her. Sirindhorn seems to have been genuinely embarrassed by the pretense. The public grew to love her for her dowdy dress and ready smiles... [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

The eldest royal daughter, Ubolrat, was born in 1951, and was stripped of her royal title by an angry Bhumibol in 1972 after declaring her intention to marry a foreigner, American Peter Jensen. The couple split in 1999:

The King's first child, daughter Ubonrat (often incorrectly referred to as "Princess" in English), returned to Thailand and the Bangkok social scene in 2001 after 25 years as a Californian housewife and a divorcee from a fellow MIT grad. However, the King chose not to restore Ubonrat's royal title of Princess, which he stripped after she married against his wishes. [09BANGKOK2967]

Ubolrat had three children with Jensen: a son, [Bhumi](#), named after his grandfather, and two daughters, Ploypailin and Sirikitya. Bhumi Jensen was autistic, and was killed in December 2004, aged 21, while holidaying with his family in the Thai resort region of Khao Lak, when a massive earthquake in the Indian Ocean unleashed a tsunami that ravaged northwest Sumatra, Thailand's Andaman coast, and eastern Sri Lanka. Bhumi was among the more than 230,000 people killed.

Ubolrat performs some royal duties and has also launched an acting career. She recently starred in a big-budget Thai movie, [My Best Bodyguard](#).

The youngest daughter of Bhumibol and Sirikit, Chulabhorn, was born in 1957. John notes that she "suffers from Lupus, and has cut down her appearances domestically in recent years, but travels extensively in Europe, where she receives medical treatment". She burst back into the limelight in Thailand this year with her [extraordinary televised interview](#).

Handley notes that Chulabhorn has failed to emotionally connect with most Thais, unlike her elder sister "Princess Angel":

Frail, frequently ill, and melancholic, she grew up more in her mother's mold, given to expensive fashions and jewelry, and was the haughtiest and most overindulged of her family... She was highly demanding of her aides and very uncomfortable around peasants, and reluctant to visit the countryside. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

Chulabhorn married Virayudh Tishyasarin, son of the air force chief, in 1981. Virayudh was said to have been persuaded by Prem, who was close to his father, to agree to the match. Stevenson writes that Chulabhorn fell out with Bhumibol in the 1990s:

The king voiced concern that her Chulabhorn Research Foundation was open to criticism for misusing funds. He was baffled and hurt when she wrote him impersonal letters addressed to 'Your Majesty' and signed 'Professor Doctor Air Marshal Princess Chulabhorn'. He never saw her to talk with any more... [Stevenson, *The Revolutionary King*]

With her husband, Chulabhorn moved to Washington, where - according to Stevenson, "she disturbed society dames by making her servants come to her on hands and knees at dinner parties". Handley writes that Virayudh's "main job was to accompany and serve her". After being pressured to marry Chulabhorn, he was eventually ordered to divorce her too, in a meeting in which Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn allegedly left a gun prominently placed on a nearby table as he gave Virayudh the divorce papers to sign.

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Of all his children, Bhumibol is clearly closest to Sirindhorn, his constant companion and assistant. He seems to have very limited contact with Vajiralongkorn. Boyce's farewell call on the crown prince in late 2007 produced telling evidence of this:

I paid a farewell call on Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn at his Sukhothai Palace residence on

November 13. We began by talking about the Embassy-sponsored Preservation Hall Jazz Band event which he and Royal Consort Srirasm had attended on November 10. Interestingly, the Crown Prince was unaware that King Bhumibol had participated in a two-hour jam session with the band the following day (November 11). He was pleased with news of the session, saying it would have been invigorating for the King "after all he has been through" lately. He added that the King often preferred to communicate through music rather than speech, noting that musicians have a common bond that transcends language. (Note: According to the musicians, the King was able to speak normally and showed no sign of serious impairment from his recent mild stroke. End Note.) [07BANGKOK5839]

But while the king cannot be unaware of the overwhelming popular preference for Sirindhorn to succeed him, he has given every indication that he intends his son Vajiralongkorn to become Rama X. As deputy principal private secretary Tej Bunnag told Boyce in late 2007:

Tej explained that the King had very much wanted to participate in the November 5 royal barge procession. Given his medical condition, Palace figures prepared five alternatives for his consideration. When they presented these, however, the King quickly dismissed them. According to Tej, the King said, "I don't need these; the Crown Prince is my representative." (In the event, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn took the King's place on the Suphannahongse barge.) Tej said Palace insiders interpreted the King's blunt decision as the clearest indication yet of his determination to have the Crown Prince retain his current status as the King's designated successor. [07BANGKOK5738]

When Bhumibol was ill in late 2008, Vajiralongkorn and Sirikit appeared together to make a statement on his health, and the prince again took the role of the king's representative:

The rivalry between the Crown Prince and Princess Sirindhorn is well known to Thailand's political class, and we believe this joint appearance sent a deliberate signal of Palace solidarity. While the Princess' briefing on the King's health was justified by her recent meeting with the King, we note that the Crown Prince served as the King's formal representative at the event. [08BANGKOK3585]

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Thailand's royalist establishment seems to be genuinely at a loss to do about Vajiralongkorn. In 2005 Boyce met Surayud Chulanont, a privy councillor who was later to be appointed prime minister of the government installed by those behind the 2006 coup.

I asked Surayud about the heir to King Bhumibol, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn. Surayud replied that he had tutored the Crown Prince some 20 years ago and surmised that "He'll never measure up to the present monarch, but somehow the Thai people will make do." [05BANGKOK1233]

Vajiralongkorn's old friend and advisor Nipon Promphan insists that the prince will step up to the job

and surprise everybody, according to his 2009 conversation with Eric John:

On royal succession, Niphon asserted that when the time came, the Crown Prince would succeed his father, successfully rebrand his image in the mold of the King, and secure the monarchy's future in Thailand. The tricky part would come "in the transition phase." He argued that the Prince had learned from his father's example and would be well-positioned to do the job; Niphon did not offer an explanation why the Crown Prince did not start emulating the King and Princess Sirindhorn's good works activities immediately, only that he could do so. According to Niphon, the Prince enjoyed good relations with Sirindhorn and did not feel threatened by her popularity...

Niphon argued that Thailand was in many ways at a crossroads. Niphon estimated that a majority of Thai -- including nearly all of those over the age of 40 -- still strongly supported the monarchy. According to Niphon, Thai in the 18-40 age demographic in contrast were far more focused on their every day lives and economic well being, without a set view of the monarchy. This group could be swayed either way, though on balance he felt they would ultimately be more inclined to support the monarchy if engaged with a positive message.

According to Niphon, the Crown Prince was well aware that he would inherit the throne at a critical moment in the monarchy's future, and Niphon believed the Crown Prince was ready to rise to the occasion (note: Niphon and Vajiralongkorn were boarding school classmates in England, at Millfield, from 1966-70. End Note). The Crown Prince understood the challenges - particularly the challenges associated with following his father - but he was confident nevertheless. Sharp and perceptive, the Crown Prince had been learning and absorbing lessons from his father since he was a child, claimed Niphon. The Crown Prince also had a great memory; Niphon cited a schoolboy exchange in which the Crown Prince described how, when he was three, he would take note when he overheard members of the Royal Court saying disparaging things about the King or Queen, file the conversations away, and then report them to his parents later that night.

When the Ambassador noted that in some ways the Crown Prince was overshadowed by Princess Sirindhorn's popularity and charisma, Niphon remarked that this dynamic had not in any way negatively affected their close relationship. The Crown Prince was aware of what he needed to do in order to be a successful monarch, and he would change his personality and character overnight in order to fit the demands of the job, Niphon claimed. Such a transformation was not without precedent; Niphon cited General Prem's transition from general to PM. Prior to assuming the PM job, Prem had disliked businessmen to the point that he refused to allow them on his property. After he became PM, however, he started working very closely with the business community and would even fly around the world on road shows with businessmen to help drum up opportunities for them. [09BANGKOK2455]

John's scepticism is clear, and the fact that the most positive anecdote Niphon could think of to relate concerned a three-year-old Vajiralongkorn informing on those he thought had slighted his parents speaks volumes in itself.

Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya, another staunch royalist, also put a brave face on the succession in a 2009 meeting with the ambassador:

Ambassador suggested that if Thaksin thought he could wait out the King and cut a deal after the Crown Prince ascended to the throne, Thaksin's current actions, including his open verbal attacks on the Privy Council, would complicate any such rapprochement. Kasit agreed, noting that his recent discussions with the Crown Prince suggested that the Crown Prince is far shrewder than most people believed. The Crown Prince clearly understood the difficulties his personal habits (love of flying and women) presented, and that he would need to change prior to assuming the throne. While the Crown Prince had promised several years ago to stop flying, he had not yet done so. Kasit remained confident, however, that the Crown Prince could successfully transition from one role to another, and that he would have no use for Thaksin once he became King. [09BANGKOK888]

Given that Vajiralongkorn hates Prem almost as intensely as Thaksin does, it seems optimistic for Kasit to assume that Thaksin's repeated verbal mauplings of the elderly Privy Council president would alienate the prince.

The confusion in the royalist camp is highlighted by the fact that even the rightist, royalist Yellow Shirt PAD movement and the New Politics Party (NPP) it founded seem to be divided on Vajiralongjorn, as a conversation with PAD coordinator and NPP Secretary General Suriyasai Katasila showed:

For a party that was publicly built at least in part on a foundation of loyalty to the institution of the monarchy, the NPP privately is surprisingly schizophrenic on the succession question. Suriyasai revealed to us that the PAD/NPP was split between those who unreservedly supported the institution, and those who merely supported the King personally. He counted himself in the latter group, indicating a lack of support for the presumed heir to the throne: Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. This begs the obvious question of what would happen to the party if - as expected - the Crown Prince inherited the keys to the Kingdom? Suriyasai told us that he personally believed the monarchy needed to be reformed, and even went so far as to characterize some elements of the royalist movement as "dangerous," perhaps even more so than the red-shirt movement backing Thaksin. [09BANGKOK2855]

In December 2009 and January 2010, John made a series of New Year visits to some of Thailand's most influential elder statesmen: Privy Council President General Prem, who was 89 at the time and is 90 now, Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, who had just turned 90, and former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, who was a sprightly 78.

All three had quite negative comments about Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. While asserting that the Crown Prince will become King, both Siddhi and Anand implied the country would be better off if other arrangements could be made. Siddhi expressed preference for Princess Sirindhorn; Anand suggested only the King would be in a position to change succession, and acknowledged a low likelihood of that happening...

ACM Siddhi... noted that the Crown Prince frequently slipped away from Thailand, and that information about his air hostess mistresses was widely available on websites; he lamented how his former aide, now Thai Ambassador to Germany, was forced to leave Berlin for Munich often to receive Vajiralongkorn. Siddhi raised [Thaksin's controversial November Times On-line interview](#), which Siddhi claimed cast the King in a bad light and attempted to praise the Crown Prince as broad-minded and educated abroad, hinting that Vajiralongkorn would be ready to welcome Thaksin back to Thailand once he became King.

Ambassador mentioned to Siddhi the Crown Prince's more engaging approach in the early December King's Birthday reception with Ambassadors, shaking each envoy's hand and appearing more at ease than in the 2008 reception. Siddhi stated that succession would be a difficult transition time for Thailand. According to Palace Law, the Crown Prince would succeed his father, but added after a pause, almost hopefully: "if the Crown Prince were to die, anything could happen, and maybe Prathep (Sirindhorn) could succeed."

Ambassador similarly raised the Crown Prince's more confident demeanor with former PM Anand in late December, seeking Anand's assessment of the dynamics in play as succession inevitably drew nearer. Anand's response was similar to Siddhi's, but more detailed and blunt. Anand said that he had always believed that the Crown Prince would succeed his father, according to law. However, there could be complicating factors -- if Vajiralongkohn proved unable to stay out of politics, or avoid embarrassing financial transactions. After a pause, Anand added that the consensus view among many Thai was that the Crown Prince could not stop either, nor would he be able, at age 57, to rectify his behavior. After another pause, Anand added that someone really should raise the matter with the King, before adding with regret that there really was no one who could raise such a delicate topic (note: implied was the need for an alternative to Vajiralongkorn).

ACM Siddhi expressed his personal concern about the declining image of the royal family in Thailand, noting that something as simple as excessive motorcade-related traffic jams caused by minor royals was an unnecessary but enduring irritant. Personal Private Secretary Arsa Sarasin had raised this with the King about eight years ago, according to Siddhi, and the King had agreed, authorizing Arsa to talk to royal family members and to set up new rules limiting entourages and occasions when traffic would be stopped. Nothing had changed; Siddhi noted that he had been caught up in traffic for 45 minutes the previous week returning for a meeting with the Chinese Ambassador, due to a royal motorcade. Stories that the Crown Prince now ordered second story windows closed as his motorcade passed achieved nothing but additional popular resentment, Siddhi added sorrowfully.

As John commented in his cable:

On the two most difficult and sensitive issues of the day in Thailand - Thaksin and the monarchy - the Thai elite appear as unsure about the future as any other sector of society. The stakes are significant for all sides, and resolution of the political divide and royal succession could still be far over the horizon. [[10BANGKOK192](#)]

III. "FEAR AND LOATHING FOR THE QUEEN"

Angkhana Radappanyawut, nicknamed "Nong Bow", was 28 years old when she [died on a Bangkok street](#), the left side of her chest torn open by a blast that lacerated her heart, stomach, spleen, left kidney, and liver, and broke her left arm and all her ribs on the left side.

Yellow Shirt protesters had blockaded Thailand's parliament on October 7, 2008, setting up razor wire barricades defended by PAD guards armed with slingshots, golf clubs, batons and metal bars. Around dawn, Thai police began trying to disperse the protesters, [firing volleys of tear gas grenades](#) at the Yellow Shirt barricades. As the police moved in, hand-to-hand fighting broke out; some Yellow Shirt militiamen threw firecrackers and ping pong bombs. It was the beginning of a day of violent clashes in Bangkok's royal quarter that wounded hundreds of protesters and police and left Thailand more bitterly polarized than ever. Several protesters had limbs blown off, probably by tear gas grenades. One Yellow Shirt in a pickup truck ran down a policeman, and then reversed back over him. Protesters also tried to drive a lorry into police lines. Several police were shot with handguns. A [compelling eyewitness account was written by photojournalist Nick Nostitz](#) who was in the thick of the fighting for much of the day. It was the bloodiest street violence in Bangkok since 1992, at the time.

[Angkhana](#), a business administration graduate from Bangkok's Assumption University and the eldest of three sisters, joined the protests that day with her family, all supporters of the Yellow Shirts. She was dressed in a yellow PAD T-shirt and jeans, with a wristband in the red, white and blue of the Thai flag. She died near the corner of Royal Plaza, at the heart of the battle. Nostitz describes the scene in the first volume of *Red vs. Yellow*, his account of Thailand's political conflict:

Another injured woman was lying in the midst of a heap of debris on the street. At first I did not even realize there was a person there; it was only when army medics attended to her that I realized it was a woman. Not until one month later was I able to confirm that this was... Nong Bow, one of the two people that died that day...

The other fatality was retired police Lieutenant Colonel Methee Chartmontri, head of the PAD guards in Buri Ram province, killed by a blast in or near his jeep a few blocks away.

Great controversy hangs over the events of October 7. The Yellow Shirts accused the police of brutality, pointing to the deaths of two PAD supporters and the shocking injuries suffered by some protesters. They [lauded the two Yellow Shirts who died as martyrs](#). Police said several Yellow Shirts had been armed with guns and bombs, and pointed to evidence suggesting both Methee and Angkhana were killed by explosives they had been carrying which blew up prematurely. Angkhana's family angrily denied suggestions that, either knowingly or unwittingly, she had been carrying a PAD bomb. Nostitz discusses the controversy in *Red vs. Yellow, Volume 1*:

The death of Angkhana Radappanyawut became a huge issue over the following days and weeks. She was portrayed by the PAD as an innocent protester who was simply walking back

to Government House when the police attacked and killed her. A cult of martyrdom and hero worship was created around her death. The UDD called her a naïve person who was being used to carry explosives that went off and killed her.

From the location where she died, there are doubts about her non-involvement in the fighting. She died at the front line of the fighting, and not at the back of Royal Plaza where there were no hostilities, and which would have been the closer and more logical route for a protester to follow when walking back to Government House from Parliament...

The debate about Angkhana continues, and will probably never come to a satisfying conclusion.

Six days later, in an event of seismic importance for Thailand's ongoing political conflict, [Queen Sirikit presided over Angkhana's funeral rites](#) in Nonthaburi province just north of the capital:

Queen Sirikit publicly signaled strong support for the PAD on October 13, when she took the extraordinary step of presiding over the cremation ceremony of commoner Angkhana Radappanyawut, with Princess Chulabhorn, Supreme Commander Songkitti Jakkabat, Army Commander Anupong Paojinda, Privy Councilors, PAD leaders and opposition Democrat Party leaders in attendance. Angkhana was one of two anti-government protestors killed on October 7; the Queen almost never attends funerals of commoners unless they have rendered extraordinary services to the monarchy. [\[08BANGKOK3080\]](#)

Thousands of Yellow Shirts at the funeral chanted "Long Live Her Majesty". Afterwards, Angkhana's father Jinda wept as he told reporters: "Her Majesty said my daughter was a good woman since she had helped the nation and preserved the monarchy."

The Yellow Shirts seized on Sirikit's gesture as proof of explicit royal backing for their cause. But it was a deeply divisive and potentially dangerous move:

Once the Queen signaled her willingness to preside over the cremation ceremony of Angkhana, an extraordinarily unusual development, the PAD had every incentive to let that event dominate the news cycle, which strengthened the PAD's claim to be supporting (and supported by) palace elements. In overtly embracing the PAD, the Queen risks politicizing the monarchy in a manner which may prove especially unwise at a time when challenges associated with royal succession are looming. [\[08BANGKOK3080\]](#)

A later cable made this point even more strongly:

Queen Sirikit, departing from the example set by King Bhumibol over decades, has dragged an ostensibly apolitical monarchy into the political fray, to the institution's probable future detriment...

Queen Sirikit ... made a bold political statement practically without precedent in presiding over the funeral of a PAD supporter from humble roots who died during the October 7 clash between

PAD and the police. Even some figures close to the Queen have expressed their private unease at the overtly political act, since it seems to erode the concept, which the King has long sought to promote, of an apolitical monarchy. After the Queen's funeral appearance, there was a notable increase in public complaints about acts of lese majeste, with many seemingly targeting the Queen; PPP-affiliated politicians have expressed a combination of fear and loathing for the Queen in private conversations with us in recent months. Such politicization of the monarchy at this time appears to create extra uncertainty around the eventual royal succession, and it could well boomerang on royalists when the time comes to redefine the role of the monarchy after the King's passing. [08BANGKOK3289]

After the funeral, the palace was irretrievably tarnished in the eyes of many Thais as having become a player in the political game with explicit backing for one side:

PAD had long benefited from a perception that important "high ranking" figures supported the street movement. Any fudge factor disappeared when Queen Sirikit clearly signaled her backing by attending the funeral ceremony for a young woman killed in the October 7 clash. The move led to an immediate and lasting backlash against the politicization of the monarchy, with even many in royalist circles bemoaning this move. The upsurge of criticism of the monarchy prompted new efforts by the authorities to use lese majeste provisions of the criminal code to crack down on persons who spoke critically about the monarchy. [08BANGKOK3780]

PAD's leaders are themselves seen as acting on behalf of figures at the Palace. Reftel noted rumors of Queen Sirikit's support for the PAD. In late August, Princess Sirindhorn instructed the Thai Red Cross, for which she holds the title of Executive Vice President, to prepare medical teams and supplies to assist in the event of clashes between PAD and the authorities. An expatriate with close ties to the Queen's circle assured us on September 17 that the PAD had "handlers" (presumably people with royalist sympathies) who, with relative ease, would be able to direct an end the PAD's rallies at the appropriate time. [08BANGKOK2856]

Sondhi Limthongkul - founder of the Yellow Shirt PAD movement, friend-turned-nemesis of Thaksin, and described by Eric John as a "[megalomaniac](#)" - explicitly claimed Sirikit's support:

Contacts have told us that Sondhi privately told other Thais that Queen Sirikit directly supported his efforts. [09BANGKOK982]

In a cable on the origins and aims of the Yellow Shirt movement in 2008, John writes:

PAD's 2008 reincarnation largely abandoned its origins as a wide, loose coalition of the working class, royalists, and middle class Bangkokians seeking justice and increased transparency in government in a shift to anti-democratic principles and increasing association with the Queen's circle rather than the King alone.

In the latest round of protests, PAD supporters have also started wearing armbands and other items in light blue, a color associated with the Queen, seen by many in Thailand to support

a more nationalistic approach on issues like the south and a more aggressive opposition to the Thaksin camp, including if necessary with military involvement. Stories that the Queen personally donated 50,000 baht (\$1,700) recently to the PAD are running through the Bangkok rumint mill. Arsa Sarasin, the King's Personal Private Secretary, emphatically rejected this link in an August 29 conversation with Ambassador; while acknowledging the protesters were attempting to associate with the palace, he stated: "It is not true. The King and Queen are not involved." [08BANGKOK2592]

Sondhi gave a speech in the United States in 2007 in which he claimed to have direct financial support from the palace; he later claimed that this caused him problems returning to Thailand. In April 2009, [Sondhi was attacked by assassins](#) firing assault rifles and M79 grenades when his car stopped at a Bangkok petrol station before dawn; one grenade hit a passing bus but did not explode. Remarkably, Sondhi survived, despite bullet fragments lodged in his skull. He later [hinted that people associated with the palace were behind the assassination attempt](#); Thailand's media quoted a [former lady-in-waiting](#), Thanpuying Viraya Javakul, as [denying any role in the attack](#). Viraya is [described in the cables](#) as follows:

One charismatic, divisive figure once very close to the Queen, but no longer, is Thanphuying Viraya, a prodigious fund-raiser who was also Thaksin's chief agent of influence in palace circles until she was expelled circa 2003. [09BANGKOK2967]

Cables [08BANGKOK3350](#) and [08BANGKOK3374](#) discuss in greater depth one of the immediate consequences of Sirikit's actions - a surge in online criticism of the queen, which would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier. Most of the online discussion used coded language to refer to Sirikit: the cables note that among the codewords used are "Q", "Mama Blue" (alluding to allegations the queen is in possession of the fabled blue diamond stolen from the Saudis), "Fat" and "Jie" (from the Chinese word for older sister):

Online and open public criticism of Thai royals, particularly of Queen Sirikit, has increased recently...

The rise in high-profile lese majeste cases, the frequency of online remarks bordering on lese majeste, and the seriousness of the authorities' response indicates that some segments of society are highly dissatisfied with the behavior of some members of the royal family, if not the institution itself. If the authorities were to harshly repress critics of the monarchy, this could prove counterproductive, as quiet discourse in many circles could shift from mere gossip about some royals' distasteful behavior to a more weighty questioning of the monarchy's role after the death of widely-beloved King Bhumibol. [08BANGKOK3350]

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From her childhood years, Sirikit sometimes dreamed of ancient battles, charging into the fray on the back of an elephant. She came to believe that in a previous life she had been another famous warrior queen, [Suriyothai](#):

Queen Sirikit aspired to be not just a complement to her husband but also her own heroic figure. She wanted to be known as a modern incarnation of ancient Siam's official first heroine, the 16th-century Ayuthhaya queen [Suriyothai](#). In legend, Suriyothai was the beautiful consort of the embattled King Chakkrabat who, in 1549, dressed up as a man to go forth on elephant-back to fight Burmese invaders. She died in the battle but saved her husband. There is little historical evidence for the story but, revived by palace historians in the Fifth and Sixth reigns, the Suriyothai tale had become standard history-book fare.

Sirikit was said to imagine herself an avatar of the ancient queen, and Bhumibol went along with it, in 1989 naming his Ayuthhaya water conservation and flood preservation project the Sri Suriyothai Park. For Sirikit's 60th birthday, the king had the park bestowed to Sirikit as her own... The Suriyothai myth grew, propelled by Sirikit's visits to the supposed battle site to make offerings. In his 1995 birthday speech, Bhumibol credited the legendary queen for the success of the Ayuthhaya flood-prevention project. The next year a massive statue of Queen Suriyothai on elephant-back was erected in the park and inaugurated by Sirikit. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

In *The Revolutionary King*, Stevenson describes the young Sirikit's belief she was a reborn royal warrior:

The girl was sure she had been a warrior queen in an earlier life. Her ancestors went back to kings who reigned before the Chakri dynasty, and she dreamt about princesses of her own age who rode war elephants into battle, and who cut their own throats rather than fall into the hands of the enemy. She had the light-heartedness of those who have no fear of death.

He later describes in reverential tones the martial bearing Sirikit acquired after becoming queen:

Sirikit still returned in her dreams to what she believed was her earlier incarnation as a warrior queen. She consulted her own informants, who were full of stories about plots to bring down her husband. She shot at cardboard targets, saying bluntly that Buddha sanctioned the destruction of evil. Her targets represented live enemies. She was not squeamish... Photographs show her with lustrous black hair tied back, bracing herself against the sandbags, her long slim fingers supporting the rifle or curled around the trigger. She looks like a legendary Siamese woman warrior with a white ribbon around her head. These are not publicity pictures. They were snapped by a king deeply in love, and aware of how his wife was giving up so many things she had enjoyed in cosmopolitan Paris for this life of constant anxiety. [Stevenson, *The Revolutionary King*]

Sirikit sees herself as a valiant defender of her nation, and she has taken a special interest in the deep south of Thailand, where a separatist insurgency has smouldered for decades. The provinces are part of Thailand due to the Bangkok Treaty signed by Britain and Siam in 1909 that carved up peninsular Malaya between them. Attacks by ethnic Malay Muslim separatists on security forces and Buddhist villagers have surged since the nearly dormant conflict savagely reignited in 2004. It is an issue that Sirikit feels passionate about; in particular she is angered and distressed by the plight of Buddhist villagers facing

attacks by Muslims. She has spent extended periods staying in the region, at her palace in Narathiwat, and sponsored significant royal projects in the south.

Sirikit's interventions, however, have not generally been welcomed by the Thai officials seeking a solution to the conflict, whatever they may say in public. And the chequered history of the queen's involvement with the south has been another cause of the monarchy's declining popularity.

Numerous Thai paramilitary groups are active in the deep south, and Thailand's other border areas. U.S. officials often warned that the multiplicity of poorly coordinate militias could do more harm than good:

With the potential for sectarian strife in the deep South increasing, both RTG leaders and private citizens in the South are working to boost security through the expansion of non-traditional security units ranging from irregular paramilitaries to private militias. While increased manpower may boost security in some areas in the short term, the use of these poorly trained and managed units - which are overwhelmingly Buddhist - could lead to human-rights abuses and even worse government relations with the Muslim majority in the South. [07BANGKOK1675]

Sirikit has personal connections with two of the militia groups: the Village Scouts, and the Or Ror Bor.

The Village Scouts are a national, all-volunteer, civilian, ultra-nationalist Buddhist organization that played a major role in the counter-communist campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, Village Scouts were involved in a number of human rights abuses, including the infamous massacre of leftist students in Bangkok in October 1976. South-watchers have been concerned for some time that the Scouts would become involved in the fight against the separatists. In April 2005, Queen Sirikit - who is the honorary leader and patron of the group - told Scouts in a nationally televised speech to "pay attention to the South" and take their pledge to defend the country seriously. While the Scouts have not yet played a role in the southern violence, the recent spate of high-profile attacks may finally inspire them to get involved, with nasty consequences. [07BANGKOK1675]

Sure enough, a later cable notes a large Village Scout presence in southern Thailand:

The oldest official paramilitary group in Thailand is the Volunteer Defense Corps (in Thai: Kong Asa Raksa Dindaen, or Or Sor), sometimes referred to as Village Scouts. Formed in 1954, the Volunteer Defense Corps (VDC) are armed, trained, and paid by the MOI and have approximately 20,000 members nationwide...

There were between 4,000-4,500 active VDC in the three southernmost provinces, about 80 percent of whom were Muslim.... Most VDC inductees were in their early twenties and joined after being discharged from the military...

Yala Governor Grisada Boonrach told us the VDC were disciplined and reliable, in large part because they receive a regular salary. [10BANGKOK366]

The cable quotes a separate source saying the Scouts “were the most professional and had the best reputation in the South”; another source reported “there have been few disciplinary problems with the VDC, and it was a group many locals wanted to join”. But the cable adds:

The VDC were not universally venerated, however. A reporter ... based in Hat Yai, alleged to us that many of the VDC had sold illicit drugs and moonlighted as hitmen.

The Or Ror Bor militia is an armed volunteer force set up by one of Sirikit’s key military aides in response to her repeated calls to arm Buddhist villagers so they can defend themselves:

The most recently created, and problematic, militia is the Village Protection Volunteers (in Thai: Ratsadorn Asa Raksa Moobahn, or Or Ror Bor). In 2004, in response to multiple entreaties from Buddhist villagers seeking protection after the upsurge in violence, Queen Sirikit ordered the military to provide training for interested people. Deputy Royal Aide-de-Camp GEN Naphol Boonthap established the Village Protection Volunteers (VPV) and made arrangements to provide each village with shotguns. Members can purchase these shotguns at a 60 percent discount from the original cost, according to Nonviolence International's Southeast Asia report for 2009...

The widely-held perception on the ground is that the VPV answers to GEN Naphol, with a secret budget from the military... [[10BANGKOK366](#)]

One of the sources cited in the cable, a Thai journalist, says:

VPV members were most likely to view the insurgency as a religious issue, something he said was very frightening. He also claimed to us that most villagers associated the group with the Queen and not solely GEN Naphon; while this damaged the Queen's reputation in the South, it did not appear to affect local reverence for King Bhumibol, in his view. [[10BANGKOK366](#)]

A [2009 article in Time magazine](#) looks at another - much smaller and more specialized - local militia: the Iron Ladies. They are sponsored, of course, by Sirikit:

Jiranan Phedsri confesses that she has "one true friend." The 51-year-old Thai housewife strokes the object of her affection, caressing its cool curves. The recipient of the devout Buddhist's ardor? A .38-caliber Smith & Wesson pistol Jiranan carries wherever she goes in Thailand's troubled deep south, where a Muslim insurgency has resulted in roughly 4,000 deaths since it gained momentum in 2004. The handgun, though, isn't Jiranan's only trusted companion. As a volunteer in the Iron Ladies, an all-female civilian militia designed to protect Buddhists from Islamic extremists, she received military training on how to wield rifles and machine guns. Jiranan is such a sure shot that she was chosen to show off her target practice for Thailand's Queen Sirikit, who has personally sponsored the Iron Ladies. "I am ready to die for my Queen and for my country," says Jiranan, her fuchsia-painted lips breaking into a wide smile. "That's why I need my little friend."

The article also discusses Sirikit’s central role in the creation of the Or Ror Bor:

Nearly all of the 25,000-strong Or Ror Bor operating in the three provinces are Buddhist, and their corps was inspired by no less an authority than the Queen of Thailand. In late 2004, after three Buddhists were brutally beheaded by militants, Queen Sirikit gave an impassioned speech advising the military to teach villagers how to defend themselves with firearms. Facing the cameras, she announced that even she "would learn to shoot guns without my glasses on."

A cable from 2007 discusses some of the Queen's projects in the Thai south in detail, and also captures the grim impoverished and besieged atmosphere in some parts of the region:

On November 26 Poloff and the Army Attache accompanied General Naphon Boontub, Aide-de-Camp to Queen Sirikit, on a visit to projects funded by the Queen in Narathiwat and Pattani provinces. The Queen has funded Ban Rotan Batu, a village for widows of victims of the southern violence, and a teachers village for teachers from throughout Thailand who volunteer to teach in the South.

We were greeted on our arrival at the widows village in Narathiwat by Buddhist teachers from throughout the province and by residents of the village. Neat rows of homes and small agricultural plots cover most of the village, which is located approximately sixteen kilometers from Narathiwat city. Queen Sirikit began funding the widows village in 2004 and now approximately 150 families live in an area of about 300 acres. The Queen created the village to provide a means of making a living to families who have lost family members in the southern insurgency. The advanced state of development of the village was noticeable on arrival as the two-story concrete homes contrasted with the typical one-story wood construction found in many rural Thai areas. General Naphon said that population of the village was split almost evenly between Buddhists and Muslims who live together peacefully.

Villagers raise fish, chicken and ducks, in addition to growing rice and other crops. In addition to promoting King Bhumibol's theory of sufficiency farming, the village project also offers residents training in arts and crafts so that the villagers can produce ceramics and other items for sale in Bangkok. The village was not yet complete as there were no schools, recreational facilities such, or library.

We unexpectedly visited a village of fifty-eight families in Narathiwat's Cho-airong District that General Naphon described as the last stand of Buddhist people in rural, southern Narathiwat. Muslim communities encircle the village because other Buddhists who had lived in surrounding areas had moved away, Naphon said. The villagers practice sufficiency farming methods and produce vegetables and fish for sale in a local market.

The villagers hastily assembled to greet Naphon on our arrival and we readily observed the effects of the southern violence. Two of the women we met had been injured in bombings while selling produce at a market outside the village. One woman had lost a leg while another had lost most of her fingers on her right hand the week before our visit. The second woman had returned to the village from a local hospital the day before we visited and she had to be summoned to

come back from the same market where she had been injured and now was back selling produce. Some of the children who were too young to go to a school within the village showed signs of malnutrition, a condition not often found in Thailand. Naphon said he decided to make the surprise visit in order to lift the spirits of the villagers and to let them know that they had not been forgotten by the Queen.

General Naphon said Queen Sirikit plans to fund teachers villages in each of the three southern Thai provinces that are affected by the insurgency. The villages would provide teachers and their families with houses and the teachers would commute to schools throughout the province from the teachers village if the security situation provided for safe travel. If the security situation did not allow for safe travel, teachers would stay at the school where they teach during the week and travel back to the village to be with their families during the weekend.

The effects of the violence in southern Thailand on local people were readily evident and quite moving during the visit to the South. With the insurgency's impact on Thai people so sobering, the intention of the Queen's projects to provide safe havens within the South may reflect a view within the Royal family that the Thai government will not soon solve the southern insurgency. The teachers villages, however, could have a positive impact if the project is able to help keep schools open in the South. [[07BANGKOK5991](#)]

Sirikit's speech in November 2004 that led to the formation of the Or Ror Bor militia followed the murder of two officials linked to the queen's palace in Narathiwat:

The monarchy had long taken a special interest in the area – the Queen normally spent several weeks each year at their palace in Narathiwat – and was horrified by the turn of events. On 13 October, two officials in a palace car were murdered in Narathiwat, apparently while buying fruit for the Queen herself. Addressing over 1000 people at Chitrlada Palace in November, the Queen said she felt compelled to break her silence following a two-month visit to the South, her longest in many years. She denounced Muslims 'she had never known' as the brutal killers of many government officials and ordinary citizens. She called upon the 300,000 Thai Buddhists in the region to stand firm and not leave the area. Thais could defend themselves by learning to shoot, added the Queen. [McCargo, *Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand*]

She delivered the speech to an audience that included a sizeable contingent from the Village Scouts; cable [05BANGKOK2837](#) notes that her "emotional remarks... suggested that direct action needed to be taken to protect the local Buddhist population". For appearing to explicitly side with Buddhists in the south, and telling them to learn how to shoot, Sirikit attracted muted criticism from foreign human rights organizations. The cables include some private complaints as well, not least from patrician privy councillor - and future prime minister - Surayud Chulanont:

Commenting on HM Queen Sirikit's speech in November 2004 where she spoke about the plight of Buddhist villagers in the South, Surayud said that he had suggested to the Queen before the speech not to go into too much detail about the South. I told Surayud that the Queen's remarks seemed to reflect general views of most Thai people about Thai Muslims in the South. Surayud

agreed, adding that her comments had not been helpful. Furthermore, Surayud surmised that the King's silence on matters in the South in his December 5 birthday speech was one result of the Queen's remarks. The King had different views on the South than did the Queen, but was not about to make that publicly evident. [05BANGKOK1233]

In another conversation the same year, Surayud was equally condescending about Sirikit's grasp of what was going on in southern Thailand:

On November 10, Privy Counselor Surayud... briefed the Ambassador and DAS John on the situation in the South. Surayud had returned the day before from six weeks with Queen Sirikit in Narathiwat. He suggested that, although some progress was being made in reaching out to Muslim clerics and elders in the troubled region, Muslim youths continued to be disaffected and posed ripe targets for agitators. Surayud admitted that the Queen had shown a lack of understanding about the South in the past. Now, however, after spending more time interacting with residents in the region, he believes she now understands that the violence is being pushed by only a fringe of Muslim society. Surayud said that the Queen was in the south to promote agricultural and local handicraft projects and that, during the course of these promotions, she had many opportunities to meet with local residents, especially housewives, to hear their concerns. In conversations with southern leaders and ordinary citizens, the Queen and Surayud urged prominent clerics and political figures to lead by example, to speak out against violence, and to organize local self-defense groups in cooperation with the security forces. [05BANGKOK7091]

Less than six months after her call to arms in November 2004, Sirikit made another major speech on the southern violence:

On April 23 Queen Sirikit gave a stern, at times passionate, 40-minute speech from the Chitralada Royal Palace in Bangkok on the violence in southern Thailand. Her remarks, broadcast simultaneously nationwide by all of Thailand's television stations, were delivered in front of nearly 1,200 members of the Village Scouts and members of other voluntary civil defense organizations from across the country.

In her remarks, the Queen said that Thais should not "sit idly by" while violence escalated. She called for Thais to unite in a common effort against those responsible for southern violence, saying that citizens shouldn't expect the government alone to solve the problem. She stressed that she was not asking for Thai citizens to take up arms, but was calling for all Thais to work with the government and serve as "eyes and ears" for security forces. The Queen, echoing recent statements by Prime Minister Thaksin and other RTG officials, suggested non-violent methods be used to restore peace in the South.

The government's response was, predictably, complimentary of the Queen, with officials promising to heed her advice. Prime Minister Thaksin praised the Queen's remarks, saying that Thais, "should take the Queen's words to heart, and cooperate with Thai authorities by passing on useful information." Interior Minister Chitchai said the Queen's remarks "will be the light to guide our work." Other officials echoed the praise, while urging southerners to provide

information about militants.

COMMENT: It has been extremely rare for a member of the Royal Family to speak publicly about an ongoing situation in the country. Historically, the Queen's formal public speeches have been limited to her birthday, yet this is the second time in less than six months that the Queen has made formal remarks about the situation in the South. More unusually, the Palace did not announce ahead of time that the Queen would deliver the remarks or that the audience would be televised.

The Queen's remarks -- which we would characterize as reserved, but resolute -- were quite different in tone from her highly emotional November 16, 2004 speech... where she indicated that direct self-defense measures were required to protect Buddhist Thais living in the South. This time she did not single out the embattled Buddhist population, but instead focused on all the innocent victims of the "brutish" militants, and the potentially devastating economic impact of the violence.

While the tone for the Queen's speech was different, her immediate audience for her remarks was the same - the Village Scouts. The Scouts are a nationalist organization, originally organized by the government in the 1970s as a means to mobilize the rural population against the communist insurgency. The Scouts, with over 6.7 million members nationwide, organized a large rally in support of the Government following the Queen's November remarks. Some local observers have expressed concern that the Scouts -- who have a history of violence towards those seen as opposing the government -- could aggravate the situation in the south by encouraging nationalist sentiment among the Thai populace, while further alienating southern Muslims. By keeping the Scouts in the picture, the Queen runs the risk of doing just that.

The most striking line of the speech seemed to be delivered directly to the Scouts; "I still remember the pledge of allegiance that all of you have uttered before His Majesty the King and myself that you will be loyal to the Nation, the Religion, and the Monarchy, and will defend the country." To Thai ears "the Religion" means one thing, Buddhism. While not explicitly doing so, the Queen could be interpreted by some as again having issued a call to action -- to defend Buddhists. END COMMENT [05BANGKOK2837]

In mid-March 2007, a particularly shocking attack in the south shook Thailand, and a series of events led one embassy source to warn "the specter of sectarian violence is approaching":

In a story that landed on the front pages of Bangkok's newspapers the next day, a commuter minibus carrying passengers from Yala to Songkhla on a small rural short-cut was ambushed by suspected insurgents at approximately 8: 00 am on March 14. While hundreds of people have been killed in drive-by shootings and official vehicles (i.e. those with uniformed military or police escorts) have taken fire in similar circumstances, this appears to be the first case where suspected militants blocked the road, forced passengers out of the vehicle and executed them on the spot. Eight people were killed and one was critically injured - all were Buddhists. According to initial press accounts, the driver of the vehicle was spared after the gunmen determined that he

was Muslim...

The van ambush was followed by two separate attacks on Malay-Muslims on the evening of March 15. According to Yala police, at 8:30 pm, a grenade was thrown into a shelter outside of the Almu Baroh mosque in Yaha district, Yala. Twelve Malay-Muslim men, ranging in age from 25-73, were wounded. One hour later, unidentified suspects in a sedan threw at least one grenade and fired several shots into crowded tea house in Katong sub-district, Yala. Two men were killed and another 12 were injured. All were Malay-Muslim.

All three incidents inspired public outrage. According to press reports, Buddhists as far as away as the Northeastern provinces of Si Sa Ket and Roi Et protested the attack on their co-religionists...

These vicious attacks in Yala were preceded by a disturbing event in Pattani on March 11. For the first time, a group of Malay-Muslims protesting the recent arrests of suspected insurgents was challenged by a Buddhist counter-protest. According to local police contacts, six local Malay-Muslims came to the Na Pradu police station on the morning of March 11 to discuss the recent arrest of their relatives. Soon after their arrival, almost 100 Malay-Muslims--mostly women, some from Pattani, some from Yala--arrived to protest the arrests. In response, a crowd of approximately 100 Buddhists soon gathered, with many verbally challenging the Muslim crowd. Security forces--including the all-female Ranger unit--were able to keep the two sides apart, but according to local police and press contacts who were at the scene, both sides exchanged heated words. One elderly Buddhist man attempted to attack the Muslim side, but was held back by the Rangers. According to the local chief of police, the counter-protest was not exclusively Buddhist, but included local Malay-Muslims as well. (Note: we cannot confirm this. End Note.) After several hours of peaceful--if boisterous--protest, both sides dispersed at 11:45 am. [07BANGKOK1572]

The worsening sectarian animosity and the grim toll of atrocities did not go unnoticed in the palace:

The 14 March attacks--and a subsequent attack on workers at a Royal project on March 19--prompted an expression of concern from the palace. In a speech over the weekend, an aide to Queen Sirikit explained that the Queen is "deeply concerned" about the violence in the South and does not want to see any more innocent civilians--whether Buddhist or Muslim--killed. According to this aide, the Queen has vowed to do what ever it takes to help protect local residents. (Note: the Queen has provided funding for self-defense training and even weapons to villagers in the South, and we expect these efforts to increase. End Note.) In late 2004 and early 2005, the Queen delivered remarks... that were widely interpreted as calls to action to defend Buddhists in the South. [07BANGKOK1675]

On June 8, 2009, several masked gunmen with shotguns and M-16 assault rifles walked into the al-Furqon Mosque in Cho Airong district in Narathiwat during evening prayers. They opened fire on the congregation, killing the imam and 10 others, and wounding 12. The mosque attack followed a surge of violence in the south sparked by the results of an inquest into the deadliest single event of the

southern conflict: the infamous 2004 Tak Bai incident, in which at least 78 Muslim men arrested after a protest suffocated to death in army trucks. In late May 2009, the court in Songkhla handling the inquest announced it had found no evidence to blame the security forces. Most Malay Muslims in southern Thailand were incredulous and enraged. A cable written less than a month later gives the grim toll from the ensuing violence:

According to press sources, some 40 people have been killed and at least 100 injured in southern Thailand since May 29, when a Songkhla Court declined to assign responsibility for the deaths of 78 Malay Muslims who died while being transported to a military detention facility in Pattani in 2004, the so-called Tak Bai incident. [09BANGKOK1508]

Incredibly, Thai authorities initially tried to claim that the gunmen who massacred worshippers in the mosque were fellow Muslims:

Thai government officials told us they suspect the attackers were Malay Muslim insurgents; NGOs and others believe that they were militant Buddhists seeking revenge for recent attacks that targeted teachers and others in the South.

Cho Airong is among the most violent districts in southern Thailand. We visited a small village in the district in 2007... and noted a sense of high tension. The Buddhist villagers we met were heavily armed and had constructed bunkers alongside their homes to defend their enclave against possible attacks by Malay-Muslim insurgents. Several of the 20 or so people we met had lost limbs to the ongoing violence. General Naphon Boontub, Aide-de-Camp to Queen Sirikit and host for the trip, told us then that Buddhists in the area were making a last stand against insurgents in rural Narathiwat. [09BANGKOK1388]

The claim that Malay Muslims had massacred their own - and in a mosque of all places - turned out, unsurprisingly, to be nonsense. The truth was much more troubling, and potentially explosive. In the wave of attacks on Buddhists that followed the Tak Bai verdict, a rubber tapper was murdered in a particularly vicious incident, setting off another cycle of revenge:

Militants killed and mutilated Buddhist Thai rubber tapper Chuaj Nadee in the nearby village of Ba Pae the day prior to the mosque attack. Chuaj's slaying was meant as a trap for responding security forces... though a planted bomb intended to kill the responders failed to detonate....

Chuaj's outraged cousin, an ex-tahaan praan (para-military rangers who serve under commissioned army officers), allegedly gathered several of his fellow ex-tahaan praan friends now serving in Rengae district's volunteer defense force (called Or-Ror-Bor in Thai for the acronym for "Volunteer Citizens for Village Safety Protection") to attack the mosque the next day in revenge for Chuaj's death... The al-Furqon mosque's imam was a known insurgent leader, with some army intel sources claiming he had actually participated in killings..., and many of those who attended prayers were suspected to be associated with the insurgents - leading Chuaj's cousin and friends to target the mosque...

Several embassy contacts claim that the gunmen involved in the mosque reprisal were associated with a volunteer defense organization formed and armed by a deputy Royal Aide-de Camp of Queen Sirikit. Insurgents reacted with particularly brutal fury in the two weeks after the mosque attack, targeting teachers, rubber tappers, Buddhist monks, and commuter buses with bombings and beheadings. Local authorities in Narathiwat and national leaders in Bangkok are aware of the identities of the perpetrators of the June 8 attack, according to our contacts. [09BANGKOK1508]

The mosque gunmen were members of a militia formed and armed by a military aide to Sirikit, with the queen's personal sponsorship and following her impassioned call in November 2004 for Buddhists in the south to be given help in defending themselves - by force if necessary. Even though there was no suggestion that the queen's aide General Naphol had any prior knowledge of or involvement in the massacre, officials were aghast. The mosque attack was exactly the kind of incident Thai officials and military and police officers dread the most; not because of the death toll or sectarian implications but because it was somehow entangled with the palace. Dealing with such cases tends to throw officials into paralysis from terror and uncertainty: they are fumbling their way in the dark through issues they don't begin to understand, the most celestial matters of the kingdom, and one wrong move could have catastrophic consequences for their career. In such circumstances, people in Thailand generally behave in one of two ways: they do nothing, or they do whatever it is they think that the palace wants them to do. (Often of course, they conclude that doing nothing is what the palace wants, so it is a much easier choice):

The "Or-Ror-Bor" connection of several of the mosque gunmen is deeply unsettling to those in the know, according to a range of contacts, because the project's sponsor is GEN Naphon Boontap, Deputy Royal Aide-de-Camp, who has armed village self defense groups in the south with shotguns under the patronage of the Queen. There is no indication the gunmen acted on instructions or informed anyone before attacking the mosque, but the connection to Naphon and indirectly to the Queen makes any effort to bring the perpetrators to justice complicated.

To date, the conflict in the South has not taken on the character of sectarian violence, with most of the victims local Malay Muslims attacked by the (Malay Muslim) insurgents; but the mosque attack and a lack of a clear RTG effort to pursue justice could give the insurgents additional traction in the wake of the Tak Bai ruling... [09BANGKOK1508]

It was a nightmare scenario for officials right up to the level of army chief Anupong and Prime Minister Abhisit - an incendiary sectarian massacre linked indirectly but undeniably to the queen, which had unleashed a new tide of anger and reprisal attacks in Thailand's most troubled region. To make matters worse, everybody knew the government's fumbling efforts to blame Muslim militants or shadowy foreign provocateurs for the attack were just a pack of lies:

Comments about "outsiders" playing a role were likely designed to deflect attention to a possible link to the Queen-sponsored project. [09BANGKOK1508]

The insurgents were well aware of the royal link. The cable says that at the site of a subsequent commuter bus bombing, security forces found "insurgent pamphlets ... which specifically mentioned the Or-Ror-Bor connection and their protection by the Queen, though this information has not been shared with the

media”:

GEN Anupong, PM Abhisit, DPM Suthep, and a series of other RTG officials traveled to the deep south in the week following the mosque attack, amidst gruesome insurgent attacks on non-security forces, including a rubber tapper who was beheaded, his head impaled on a spike, his body quartered and burned. One insurgent leaflet left at the site of the commuter bus bombing read: "You attack our innocents, we attack yours." [09BANGKOK1508]

The police and security forces faced a dilemma. If they failed to bring the mosque gunmen to justice, the savage cycle of resentment, violence and atrocities in southern Thailand was bound to accelerate; lawlessness would worsen and more bodies would pile up from revenge killings. But if they arrested the perpetrators, the consequences might be even more dreadful. Rightly or wrongly, police were terrified of the risk of incurring Queen Sirikit's wrath:

Part of the delay in arresting those known to be involved in the June 8 shooting is the perceived connection of the participants to the Village Defense Force project sponsored by Queen Sirikit and administered by Royal aide-de-camp GEN Naphol. [09BANGKOK2149]

The police did their utmost to do as little as possible in the months after the massacre. They issued arrest warrants for only two of the six suspects, ringleader Sutthirak Kongsuwan, and the team's spotter and getaway driver Lukman Latehbuering, who happened to be a Malay Muslim. Senior policemen explained there was simply not enough evidence to issue arrest warrants for the remaining four members of the gang; later they announced one of the four had committed suicide in the interim, reducing the number of suspects they were not going to arrest to three.

Despite their best efforts, however, police achieved an unwelcome breakthrough in January 2010 when the chief suspect surrendered himself to them:

Sutthirak Kongsuwan, the prime suspect in the June 8, 2009 shooting at the Al Furqon mosque in Narathiwat, turned himself into Thai police on January 14 after months of pressure from Democrat Party politicians on security forces for progress in the case. [10BANGKOK147]

Stories quickly began circulating that the suspects had been protected by security forces after the mosque attack, on the explicit instructions of Sirikit's aide General Naphol. One of the sources interviewed by U.S. embassy officials, a Thai journalist, said "his sources alleged that five of the six suspects were detained by police shortly after the shooting, but that GEN. Naphol intervened to have them released from police custody and then moved them to a safehouse in Bangkok". A journalist for another publication added that "Sutthirak had been protected by the military after the shooting and stayed at Chulaphorn Camp in Narathiwat Province after his involvement became known".

While the police claimed to somehow lack sufficient evidence to issue more than two arrest warrants, the insurgents had no such qualms in leaflets proclaiming bounties on the heads of those involved:

In October 2009, insurgents issued bounties for the six people presumed associated with the Al

Furqon mosque attack. The leaflets included information such as home addresses and national ID card numbers, information that Narathiwat MGEN Surachai claimed to us at the time was leaked from the local police station. The insurgents placed a price of one million baht (US\$30,400) on Sutthirak and bounties of 500,000 baht (US\$15,200) for five other people, including Lukman. [10BANGKOK147]

There is absolutely no indication that Sirikit ordered, supported or was even aware of the efforts to protect those responsible for the mosque attack and cover up their indirect royal link, or the corresponding lack of effort expended by police on investigating the massacre and bringing the perpetrators to justice. On the contrary, a palace source says the queen explicitly sent a message to Prime Minister Abhisit and his deputy Suthep that decisions on the case should be based purely on the evidence in accordance with the law:

the Queen conveyed a ... message to PM Abhisit and DPM Suthep in late summer in regards to ensuring accountability for the June 8 mosque massacre, in the face of concern about the connection of the suspects to her aide de camp GEN Naphol: do what is right based on the evidence and legal norms. [09BANGKOK2967]

And yet the incident highlighted with unusual clarity some of the negative consequences of Thailand's frantic obligatory reverence for the royals - enforced not only through social pressure and propaganda but also harsh and actively enforced laws. The flipside of the widespread and heartfelt adulation of the monarchy, or at least of Bhumibol, in Thailand is a deep-seated instinctive terror of doing anything with a perceived risk of causing offence within the palace. Acting without any orders from the royal family, but just because they think it is what they are expected to do, Thais at all levels of society are usually prepared to go to extraordinary lengths in the name of protecting the monarchy, even if it means breaking the law, suppressing the truth, or undermining the proper functioning of key institutions. The worst fate many people can imagine is facing punishment and shame for failing their royal family in some way. This has long-term consequences for the rule of law in Thailand and the country's ability to evolve into a genuine and stable democracy.

On August 12, 2009 - Sirikit's 77th birthday - professionally printed vinyl banners appeared all over the province of Pattani with slogans attacking the queen, written in flawless central Thai - the language of native Bangkokians:

The posting of the anti-Queen banners on her birthday, a national holiday, was both unusual and significant, but the fact that the banners were professionally printed on vinyl, written in perfect central Thai rather than the local Malay dialect, and touched on issues which don't resonate in the south suggests those behind it were not local but national actors. Most in the know blame the red-shirts seeking to take advantage of inaction in the mosque attack case to undermine the Queen in particular and the monarchy in general.

Contacts reported seeing banners in every district of Pattani, written in mistake-free central Thai, blaming her for problems in the south -- specifically her sponsorship of the Village Defense Force project -- as well as her involvement in politics and her alleged ownership of an infamous

large blue diamond stolen by a Thai housekeeper in Saudi Arabia in 1989. The latter issues are commonly raised by red-shirts and anti-monarchists in the north and northeast of Thailand, but are not on the southern agenda.... pamphlets and banners written in Thai by the Malay Muslim insurgents are usually homemade and invariably strewn with poor spelling.

We had heard about the anti-Queen banners from a separate NGO source during our August 16-19 visit to the southern provinces. Yala Vice-Governor Gritsada appeared surprised when we mentioned these banners to him on August 19, but he confirmed that the banners were written in perfect central Thai and mentioned issues that do not resonate down south, like the blue diamond. Gritsada said Pranai Suwannarat, the director of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) had agreed these banners were the likely work of the UDD, not the insurgents. Sunai told us that the widespread presence of the banners indicates the strong organization and funding available to the UDD in Pattani province. [[10BANGKOK147](#)]

Whoever was behind the incident, it was an astonishing development that in a nation which places so much importance on respect for the royals, and where disrespect is a criminal offence punishable by several years in jail, somebody had gone to the time, effort and expense of producing scores of anti-Sirikit banners and placing them all over Pattani.

Another cable discusses a related phenomenon - vandalism of portraits of Sirikit in the northeastern province of Isaan, a traditionally rebellious area from the perspective of rulers in Bangkok:

Queen Sirikit and Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn clearly do not command the same level respect in Isaan as King Bhumibol... Senator Pradith from Sakon Nakhon said the resentment many in the Isaan felt towards the Queen was plainly evident in their discussions; it was not as harsh as the criticism from neighboring Udon Thani Province, however, where he said some of her portraits had been spray-painted. [[09BANGKOK2903](#)]

The surge in online criticism of the queen is, of course, another symptom of the same trend: the precipitous decline in popularity suffered by Sirikit in recent years. As the monarchy approaches the end of Bhumibol's reign amid deepening doubts about the long-term survival of the House of Chakri, Queen Sirikit's spectacular fall from grace is the last thing that Thailand's monarchists needed.

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Bhumibol and Sirikit were the world's favourite fairytale royal couple in the 1950s and 1960s. A visit to the United States in 1960 was a roaring success, with Time magazine sparing no superlative - or *King and I* stereotype - in [its coverage](#):

The King of Siam, as any heart-wrung fan of *The King and I* knows, is likely to be a fellow whose love for Thailand is matched by a thirst for the best of the West. The reigning King, grandson of Anna's princely Chulalongkorn, comes by it naturally: he was born in Cambridge, Mass. 32 years ago while his father was studying medicine at Harvard, and slakes his thirst with a special passion for clarinet and sax. Last week King Bhumibol Adulyadej (pronounced Poom-

i-pon A-dool-ya-date), who looks half his age, and his almond-eyed Queen Sirikit, who looks like mandolins sound, landed in Manhattan on their four-week swing through the U.S. And all the ticker-tape parade, the ride in the subway, the view from the Empire State Building faded into nothing when His Majesty went to dinner with the King of Swing Benny Goodman (and 94 others) at the suburban estate of New York's Governor Nelson Rockefeller.

For 90 minutes after dinner, Bhumibol and Benny led a foot-stomping, starch-melting jam session. Next day the King toted a sax up to the 22nd-story roof garden above Benny's Manhattan House apartment for the fulfillment of a jazzman's dream. With Bhumibol and Benny were Gene Krupa on the skins, Teddy Wilson on the piano, Urbie Green on the trombone, Jonah Jones on trumpet, Red Norvo on vibes. The King stood them toe-to-toe for two hours, paid his royal respects to The Sheik of Araby (in 17 eardrumming choruses), savored Honeysuckle Rose, swung low On the Sunny Side of the Street. Near session's end, Benny decorated him with a new Selmer sax. The King will use it in his own dozen-man modern band, in which he stars (with a onetime Thai Premier and minister to Washington as sideman) in U.S.-style swing sessions that are broadcast from the palace over the Thai radio every Friday night to his 22 million subjects.

The King's romance with jazz is pleasantly tolerated by Queen Sirikit. For one thing, Bhumibol is monogamous, unlike most of his celebrated ancestors (his father was the 69th child of King Chulalongkorn). "He doesn't need any more wives," Sirikit once said with a smile. "For him, his orchestra is one big concubine."

In 1962, Time ran an exuberantly chauvinist photo-feature on nine “[Reigning Beauties](#)”: the most attractive wives of kings or presidents around the globe besides America’s own Jackie Kenedy. Sirikit, of course, was on the list:

The first First Lady by tenure is Thailand's exquisite Queen Sirikit, 29, who has been on the throne since 1950 and once even ruled the country during her husband's retreat to a monastery. A dark-eyed, diminutive (5 ft. 3¾ in.) porcelain beauty with upswept blue black hair and lotus-petal skin, shapely (34½-23-36½) Sirikit was placed again in the world's best-dressed women list this year—after Jacqueline Kennedy and her sister, Princess Radziwill. She almost always wears traditional Thai gowns, has influenced most other fashionable Thai women to forgo their preference for Western clothes.

Sirikit, whose father was a prince and Thailand's Ambassador to Britain, was schooled in Europe, where she met King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the only reigning monarch in the world to have been born in the U.S. (at Harvard, where his father was studying medicine), and a great-grandson of the reformer-King Mongkut, who was Anna's King of Siam. The Queen, mother of four children, is given much of the credit for her husband's transformation from an insecure, taciturn youth into a serious, socially conscious monarch. Sirikit, by contrast, is supercharged with sanouk, as the happy-go-lucky Thais almost reverently call the joy of living. Once, when asked why he never smiled, Bhumibol waved to his Queen. Said he: "She is my smile."

In 1965, [the magazine wrote](#) that “one of the best advertisements for Thailand's soft, nubby silk cloth is

the country's delicately beautiful Queen Sirikit, who has her gowns designed by Balmain”;
in 1967 it reported that she was spending half a million dollars a year on Balmain alone.

But by the 1970s, Sirikit was no longer regularly appearing in society magazine lists of the world's most beautiful and best dressed women, and Thailand's royals felt increasingly vulnerable as Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam fell to the dreaded communist menace. By the early 1980s, she was approaching a personal crisis:

Sirikit had spent the first two decades in the palace celebrating her fairy-tale queenship. As her beauty faded in the 1970s, she built a large court founded on competition for her patronage, which was manifest in her involvement with the rightist politics of 1976. She was a political force of her own, and *Parade* magazine in the United States labeled her a beautiful, ambitious “dragon lady”.

Outwardly, Sirikit was a dynamic mirror image of the king. Her principle vehicle for aiding the underprivileged, the Support Foundation, brought health care to poor village women and children and helped them develop sources of extra income, like traditional handicraft production. Through charity balls and other sources she regularly raised tens of millions of dollars a year, which sustained her personal staff of 50 and many more in the Support Foundation bureaucracy. She made frequent, ritualized visits to the countryside. With a heavy army escort, Sirikit would emerge in front of peasants, adorned in modern fashions and a generous array of large diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and pearls. In the 1980s she often wore harem pants and a turbanlike hat that must have appeared to villagers as bizarrely foreign. [Royal spokesman] Tongnoi explained: “She fears she will disappoint her subjects if she is not dressed well... The people have their own idea that the queen is an angel with blessings.”

In the villages, she would meet with a preselected handful of diseased and crippled women and their infant children. She would give them medicine and tell them to take care of themselves, speaking slowly and simply like a mother giving instructions to a four-year-old - the way she talked to everyone outside the palace. Afterward her entourage dispersed more goods and health treatment and paid Support Foundation enrollees for their products, to be taken by the truckload back to distant markets.

This confident display concealed the fact that Sirikit was entering a period of personal crisis over her diminishing beauty, her busy husband's inattention, her controversial son, and criticism of her political meddling - all of which she sought to surmount through greater acclaim. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the government helped to arrange a series of international awards and degrees for her, with U.S. assistance.

She desperately fought the aging process, dieting and exercising furiously and undergoing regular aesthetic surgery. “I jog and do yoga and when it rains I run up and down three stories, nine times.... I could afford to put on a little weight. But my husband says he hates me to be fat,” she said. She also took various diet and energy pills, and then sleeping pills to counter their effects, hardly a sustainable regimen. Tongnoi explained that, because of her intense dedication to royal

duties, she suffered from insomnia, going to sleep only at three or four in the morning and waking just two hours later...

Sirikit also generated ugly rumours for surrounding herself with young army officers, mostly the elite majors and colonels of a special queen's guard, recipients of the royal Ramathibodi decoration for bravery. She was especially smitten by one, the handsome Colonel Narongdej, indiscreetly making him her companion in travel and at parties. "He was the son the queen never had, everything the crown prince wasn't," recalled one military officer. People presumed they had a more intimate relationship, and the court was scandalized. [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

Sirikit was also hurt and upset by Vajiralongkorn's public rejection of his wife Somsawali, the queen's niece. It was a serious loss of face for her, and a blow to her own family's dynastic ambitions. In 1985, the queen suffered a serious breakdown and vanished from public view for months:

In May 1985 came the news that Sirikit's favourite Colonel Narongdej had died while in the United States. Supposedly he had a heart attack, but the queen pursued rumors that he was murdered. Her mourning became an embarrassment. For his funeral, which all top officials in the military and government had to attend, she issued a commemorative volume bearing photographs of the two together. Afterward a glorifying television was made on Narongdej, and it also conveyed their special relationship...

These events and the mysterious September 1985 coup finally pushed Sirikit over the edge. At the end of the year she had a massive breakdown, entering the hospital for what was called a "diagnostic curettage". She disappeared from public view for six months, reportedly isolated by Bhumibol personally from her courtiers and held to a healthy diet. Gossip spread that she was terminally ill, or might even have died. She finally emerged in July 1986 for the consecration of the new Bangkok city pillar. Sombre and unsteady, she disappeared for another three weeks, even skipping her birthday celebration. Instead, Princess Chulabhorn went on television to praise her as a woman of supernatural dedication. "Since her majesty underwent an operation in 1985, she has been getting much better. Now she constantly exercises and even though I am 25 years her junior, I can hardly keep up... If the people are going to get angry because of her disappearance from the public view, it is us [her children] who should be blamed since we always insist that she rests instead of making public appearances... Normally everybody has holidays, but her majesty never had one." The queen wakes up at 10 or 11 a.m. each day, Chulabhorn added, and works more than 12 hours a day, "If she can't go to sleep, she will continue working until the next morning... [R]ight after waking up, she never has time for anything else but work.... I have never heard her say that she is tired." [Handley *The King Never Smiles*]

In *The Revolutionary King*, Stevenson describes Sirikit in the 1990s as being lost and miserable, surrounded by scheming and sinister ladies-in-waiting described by one member of the king's network as "barracuda ladies":

The queen retreated into an informal court of her own. She was lonely and vulnerable...

Within his own royal court, Bhumibol had to deal with divisions... Silence about majesty had been cracked open by modern technology. Whispers in the darkness of cinemas were now shouted over the Internet which carried stories that Queen Sirikit, fighting age, had fallen under the influence of a 'female Rasputin' who prescribed medications that were hallucinatory in large doses. Sirikit had for so long been an astonishingly svelte and lovely woman, and courtiers either flattered her to get her help and favours, or told mischievous tales...

Queen Sirikit had difficulty coping with the rumours, the intrigues, the court chatter which cut her off from normal intercourse. "She feels she missed out on chances to educate herself," her principal private secretary... Suprapada Kasemsant, had once told me. "She has more common sense in her little finger than anyone around here, but she suffers from this feeling of inadequacy." [Stevenson, *The Revolutionary King*]

Suprapada was killed along with two of Sirikit's ladies-in-waiting and 10 of the queen's staff when their Super Puma transport helicopter crashed on the way to one of the royal projects in southern Thailand in 1994. Afterwards, Sirikit was even more vulnerable to the intrigues of the court. In one passage of purple prose, a clearly smitten Stevenson nevertheless describes Sirikit as being "on another planet":

The queen said to me one day, "Thank you for helping my husband". Members of the royal court were keeping their distance, forming a wide circle around her like benign captors who were also held captive by what she might do for them. Her words were softly spoken. Her eyes were moist and almost pleading. In her early sixties, she kept the style and grace of someone who had made it her life's work to do what seemed right. Her hand trembled in mine. She wanted someone from the outside world to reinforce her husband. She was now marooned on another planet. She could watch distant events through images beamed through space from distant places on earth. Without interaction, these marvels only contributed to her sense of isolation. It was increasingly difficult for her to see things for herself. [Stevenson, *The Revolutionary King*]

Following her breakdown in the 1980s, Sirikit became estranged from Bhumibol. The two led separate lives, although they frequently appeared together for public events to try to prevent further damage to the royal family's image, already tarnished by Vajiralongkorn's antics.

From the 1960s, stories have circulated that Sirikit was the real power in the palace, and that she and Bhumibol were in conflict, particularly over whether Vajiraongkorn or Sirindhorn should inherit the throne. One of Sirikit's foreign friends was Clare Booth Luce, an American journalist, diplomat, socialite and wife of the founder and publisher of Time-Life magazines. Luce also shared information with U.S. intelligence agencies. Lieutenant General Eugene Francis Tighe, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, later summarized what Luce had said about Thailand:

Clare reported that the queen wore the pants and wanted her son to become the next king, but the king favours one of his daughters. [Quoted in Stevenson, *The Revolutionary King*]

In her Thai television interview in August 1986, following Sirikit's breakdown, Chulabhorn felt the need to explicitly deny that the palace was split, and that the queen was the dominant character:

The princess used the occasion to address some of the long-festered stories and the popular picture of a dysfunctional royal family. Denying rumours that the queen controlled the palace, she insisted: “We all work for his majesty because of our loyalty towards him. Nobody in our family wants popularity for themselves. Everybody is sharing the work and we work as a team... But again, there are people who say that our family is divided into two sides, which is not true at all.” [Handley, *The King Never Smiles*]

Chulabhorn was quite right in one respect. It is not true at all to say that the royal family is divided into two sides. The palace is split into at least three competing factions, centred around King Bhumibol and “Princess Angel”, Queen Sirikit, and Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. And this internal conflict is a fundamental but unreported element of Thailand’s current crisis.

Eric John's remarkable cable [09BANGKOK2967](#) discusses the intrigues, shifting alliances, and fevered gossip and rumour that define life inside Thailand’s royal court:

Cambridge, Massachusetts-born King Bhumibol Adulyadej turns 82 December 5, by many accounts beset long-term by Parkinson’s, depression, and chronic lower back pain, and short-term by an extended brush with pneumonia in September-October that caused him to lose weight and, for now, be wheelchair bound... As a result, his current companions are most likely to be doctors and physio-therapists from Siriraj hospital, along with his second daughter Princess Sirindhorn, who often seems to act as his defacto personal assistant, and Queen Sirikit.

Until relatively recently, it was much different. The King has lived nearly all of the past decade at his seaside Klai Kangwon Palace (appropriately titled “Far from Worries”) in Hua Hin, having abandoned habitual residence in Bangkok in 2000 as his health worsened. Queen Sirikit only rejoined him full time in Hua Hin in mid-2008, concerned about his declining health and with an eye towards more firmly managing the transition to come. Prior to mid-2008, the King and Queen had lived most of the past 20 years largely apart, joint public appearances excepted. This unpublicized reality started after the Queen disappeared from public view in 1986 for about six months to recover from emotional exhaustion, in the wake of the King dismissing her favorite military aide de camp. Their social circles diverged sharply from then on, with very few figures spanning both camps...

As the King withdrew from Bangkok-based public life over the past decade, Queen Sirikit rose in prominence, and she is expected by most to play a crucial role in the succession transition, before and after the King’s passing. The Queen long maintained an active social life, with her tradition of twice weekly dinners that would start near midnight and last to dawn only ending with her move to Hua Hin. Based mainly out of Bangkok’s Chitralada Palace, she regularly spent extended stretches at palaces in the north (Chiang Mai), the deep south (Narathiwat) and the northeast (Sakon Nakhon) through 2004, years after the King stopped his provincial travels. A 1994 Puma helicopter crash tragically robbed Sirikit of her most valued and respected advisers who could steer her away from trouble.

The ladies-in-waiting who are left, the closest of which are Thanphuying Charungjit Teekara, head of the Queen's Support Foundation, and Thanphuying Chatkaew Nandhabiwat, appear to reinforce the Queen's tendency to be more nationalistic than the King. Those sentiments have led her astray in forays into political issues in recent years, both her attitudes towards the Malay Muslim deep south/promotion of Buddhism as the constitutionally- enshrined state religion in 2006-07, and the 2008 People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) yellow-shirt protests. The latter culminated in her disastrous decision to attend the October 13, 2008 funeral of a young female PAD supporter killed by a police tear-gas grenade, a move universally seen as dragging the monarchy, which is supposed to remain above politics, into the partisan fray. [09BANGKOK2967]

Without doubt, the key palace player in Thailand's ongoing political crisis is the queen. Whatever the truth of talk that Sirikit has always been the dominant personality in the palace, she has clearly become so during Bhumibol's recent years of poor health. Over the past half-decade, with Rama IX mostly mute and often hospitalized, Thailand's royalists have rallied around Sirikit:

The Thaksin machine faces off against a mix of royalists, Bangkok middle class, and southerners, with Queen Sirikit having emerged as their champion, as King Bhumibol largely fades from an active role. The two sides are competing for influence and appear to believe, or fear, that the other will use the political power it has to marginalize (if not eliminate) the opposing side. They are positioning themselves for what key actors on both sides freely admit to us in private will be Thailand's moment of truth - royal succession after the King passes away. [08BANGKOK3289]

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Very prominent among those identified by the U.S. embassy as Sirikit's closest confidants is [General Prayuth Chan-Ocha](#). The general, a hawkish tough-talking career officer virulently opposed to the Red Shirt movement and obsessed with fighting perceived threats to the monarchy, was appointed chief of the army - the most powerful of all the country's military posts - in 2010.

The men currently closest to the Queen include GEN Prayuth Chanocha, Army deputy Commander and expected successor to GEN Anupong as the country's most powerful military figure as of October 2010; and Grand Chamberlain/head of the Crown Property Bureau Chirayu Israngkul. Apart from cousin M.R. Thep Devakul, the Privy Councilor closest to the Queen is Palagorn Suwanrath. Two others in her inner circle as recently as early 2009--businessman Piya Malakul and deputy Royal Aide de camp GEN Naphol Boonthap, have now been largely pushed aside with the Queen's assent, though not entirely out of her outer orbits. Charungjit and Chatkaew (in the case of Piya) and Prayuth (with Naphol) intervened, after the Queen accepted the views of her closest associates that Piya and Naphol had damaged her standing due to their freelancing/claims to act on her behalf -- Piya vis-a-vis the PAD, and Naphol, who oversees a Village Defense Force (VDF) project associated with the June 8 mosque massacre in the south. [09BANGKOK2967]

Prayuth is the leading figure in an army clique from the Queen's Guard, the 21st regiment of the 2nd Infantry Division or "Eastern Tigers" based in Prachinburi on the Thai-Cambodia border. The regiment,

unsurprisingly given its name, is explicitly aligned with Sirikit; it was transferred to royal duty in 1959 by Field Marshal Sarit with the queen as honorary commanding colonel. The Eastern Tigers have come to dominate the military hierarchy in recent years, and some officers outside the clique are widely said to be seething with discontent over [alleged favoritism shown to Prayuth and his allies](#). His predecessor, General Anupong Paochinda, was also aligned to the Eastern Tigers but was regarded as more willing to compromise than Prayuth. Both men were key members of the military faction that overthrew Thaksin in the 2006 coup.

In a [Bangkok Post article in 2010](#), Chulalongkorn University's Thitinan wrote:

The promotion of General Prayuth Chan-ocha as Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army marks the logical outcome of the military coup from four years ago, and ushers in a crucial stage in Thailand's ongoing endgame.

On taking over as army chief, Gen Prayuth has stated that his two-fold mandate will be to maintain Thailand's sovereignty and to protect the monarchy. This pledge is now set to determine political direction in Thailand because of its external and internal security implications.

While he is eligible to serve at the top of the high command for the next four years before mandatory retirement, Gen Prayuth's rise has been meteoric. He has set a record in modern Thai military annals for moving up from a deputy commandership of an army region to army chief within the space of merely four years...

While the Eastern Tigers are now ascendant and assertive in the army's nexus of command positions, the Queen's Guard regiment is its vortex. Gen Prayuth is a through-and-through embodiment and personification of this regiment, whose select officers have undergone specialised training that includes classroom academic curriculum over the past two decades. They now dominate the army and, in turn, Thai politics.

Not since two decades ago has the army's command structure been so dominated by a fast-track cohort of this sort. More often than not, the army's commander-in-chief hailed from the 1st Infantry Division. Typically, the army's high command in the past was spread out among different units and class lines, rarely concentrated under one...

Gen Prayuth's ascendancy has changed all that. He now presides over a high command unusually filled by either former 21st Regiment standouts or his classmates from the Armed Forces Military Preparatory School, Class 12.

When such a concentrated command structure took place in the past, as with Class Seven and Class Five or the Ratchakru clan and Si Sao Theves group, it invariably led to political trouble. Army commanders felt emboldened to assert politically. Politicians and their routine corruption and cronyism were marginalised while the military's own graft and nepotism became salient.

Moreover, concentrated power sources in the military also led to attempted or successful coups

by rival cohorts and disgruntled officers.

It is still early days for Gen Prayuth, but past experience with so much military power in the body politic does not bode well. The past has shown that powerful military cohorts do not return to the barracks voluntarily. A catharsis of crisis and clash between the military and civilians was always required, while challenges from within the military were not uncommon...

Yet his ascendancy is unsurprising. Gen Prayuth spearheads the coalition of interests and individuals who lined up behind the Sept 19, 2006 putsch that deposed a regime which was seen as corrupt and violent, headed by Thaksin Shinawatra. The first half of the past decade was underpinned by the Thaksin regime that was laden with blatant conflicts of interest and gross human rights violations, notwithstanding the policy innovations and responsiveness that still enabled it to play a large political role. Except for two short-lived post-election spells in government in 2008, Thaksin's forces have been kept at bay.

The latter half of this past decade, harking back to the anti-Thaksin protests which reached critical mass in late 2005, has been dominated by Thaksin's opponents. His shortcomings and flaws were on display then. Those of his opponents are in full view now.

Gen Prayuth's intended maintenance of sovereignty is to be expected. It presumably alludes to territorial integrity in reference to the Malay-Muslim insurgency in the deep South as well as overlapping claims and simmering tensions with border neighbours. His other goal of protecting the monarchy merits observation for its internal rather than external security implications. That the new army chief has brought up the monarchy appears to indicate internal challenges that he has not elaborated. And by doing so, Gen Prayuth, like many of his backers, may have unnecessarily drawn a line in the sand and defined the fault line of Thai politics around the monarchy.

In 2008, Jakrapob Penkair, a spokesman for Thaksin who later fled Thailand after being charged with lèse majesté and formed the anti-monarchist Red Siam group, discussed Sirikit's close links with General Prayuth in two discussions with U.S. diplomats:

Jakrapob did not hide his disdain for the Queen when talking to us, and said that he was counting on her to overreach and overreact. [08BANGKOK3350]

We also asked Jakrapob about the widespread rumors that First Army Commander General Prayut Chan-ocha would have a leading role in the event of a military coup d'etat... Jakrapob explained this view by referring to a close personal bond that Prayut had reportedly formed with the Queen during his service with the Queen's Regiment. Jakrapob alleged that this close relationship had allowed Prayut to maintain direct contact with the Queen, who is widely thought to support a confrontational approach to the current government. The Queen fueled this perception when, accompanied by Army Commander Anupong Paojinda, she visited the "War Victory Temple" (Wat Channa Songkram) on the May 19 Buddhist holiday. That temple is not the traditional venue for the royal family on this holiday, but is normally a place where people

pray before going into a battle of one sort or another. [08BANGKOK1879]

Clearly, if Sirikit does choose to ride into battle, she can count on the loyalty of the most powerful general in the country, and most of his key lieutenants. But discontent in the military, among officers not from the queen's faction who have been overlooked for promotion, and among the many soldiers known as "watermelon" troops because they have Red Shirt sympathies under their green uniforms, remains a dangerous and potentially highly destabilizing issue for Thailand.

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Sirikit's emergence as the champion of Thailand's most die-hard royalists is not merely the inevitable consequence of an old and frail Bhumibol gradually shuffling off the stage. The cables contain significant evidence - as well as testimony from senior figures in Thaksin's camp and from one key Democrat Party politician - that the queen's actions have not had the king's support, and that in many cases Bhumibol has been explicitly opposed to them. Several sources say Sirikit played a central role in encouraging the 2006 coup while Bhumibol was either ambivalent or against it.

In June 2006, three months before the coup, palace insider Piya Malakul boasted of having turned the queen against Thaksin. Piya, a blue-blooded media tycoon who had advised Bhumibol on public relations, had been an enemy of Thaksin even before his landslide election victory that propelled him to the premiership in 2001; the two men had fought over control of television channel ITV, and Piya was forced off the board after he criticized Thaksin's use of ITV to support his political ambitions:

The Ambassador met on June 30 with Piya Malakul Na Ayutthaya... a close associate of the Queen and a very knowledgeable palace insider... He felt that the PM was trying to attack the King himself through Prem. He described the many ways in which Thaksin and his associates had been working to undermine the King and the royal institution...

Piya said he had spent three days with the Queen right before the 60th anniversary celebrations earlier last month "explaining" to her what the PM was up to. He gave her hundreds of pages of printouts from the anti-monarchy website. (Comment: The Queen was long considered a Thaksin supporter in the Palace, perhaps beholden to the PM for funding and for his support for her rather unpopular son. Piya's story corroborates what we have heard from other sources, that the Queen may no longer be a fan of Thaksin. End comment.) [06BANGKOK3916]

Piya Malakul had also hosted a dinner for several senior establishment figures in May 2006 at which - according to later accusations by Thaksin - the coup plot was hatched. Thaksin said one of those present at the dinner, retired General Panlop Pinmanee - a slithery character who has changed sides with dizzying regularity throughout Thailand's years of political crisis - had told him all about the dinner. An outraged Piya insisted it was "just a dinner among friends".

The late Samak Sundaravej, Thaksin's proxy as prime minister after the 2007 elections until he was toppled by the judiciary for accepting nominal payments for appearing on "Tasting and Grumbling", a TV cookery show, was considered to be a staunch right-wing royalist, and indeed to have been close to Sirikit

in the past. But a bitter Samak told Ambassador John after his ouster that Sirikit had actively worked to undermine him:

Samak told the Ambassador September 26 that he believed Queen Sirikit, working through Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, supported the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protest movement. Samak viewed himself as loyal to the King, but implied that the Queen's political agenda differed [sic] from her husband's.

Samak described to Ambassador the political pressure against him during his seven months in office. He showed disdain for Queen Sirikit, claiming that she had been responsible for the 2006 coup d'état as well as the ongoing turmoil generated by PAD protests. He alleged the Queen operated through Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda who, along with others presenting themselves as royalists, worked with the PAD and other agitators. Citing his own regular meetings with King Bhumibol, Samak claimed he - rather than his opponents - was sincerely loyal to the King and enjoyed the King's support. [08BANGKOK2977]

Interestingly, Democrat Party Secretary General Suthep Thaugsuban - a hate figure for Thailand's Red Shirts - also claimed a rift between Bhumibol and Sirikit over the coup:

Suthep ... said King Bhumibol had not favored the 2006 coup. Suthep claimed that, on the night of the coup, the King had resisted meeting with the Generals who overthrew Thaksin. In the end, the King gave in to the entreaties of Queen Sirikit, but he publicly signaled her role in the coup by approving the release of a photograph of that audience which showed the King, casually dressed, in profile, while the Queen faced the camera. [07BANGKOK2304]

When the coup proved to be a disaster, and a proxy party loyal to Thaksin was poised to sweep back into power once the generals allowed elections, Sirikit tried but failed to stand in the way, the cables suggest:

The 2007 election provided a useful indicator of the limits of Palace influence. Plausible rumors in the period leading up to the election claimed that Queen Sirikit sought actively to block the return to power of pro-Thaksin forces. We may attribute the failure of such efforts to divisions within the royal family, or to the lack of mechanisms to effectively convey Palace views to the public while maintaining plausible claims that the Chakri dynasty plays an appropriately apolitical role. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the monarchy carries enormous influence but, even when some of its core interests are at stake, lacks full control over the course of events. [08BANGKOK1293]

In October 2008, after going back into exile as legal cases piled up against him, Thaksin phoned Ambassador John from abroad:

In a rambling but spirited exposition of his views, Thaksin recalled how his Thai Rak Thai party had won the 2005 election in a landslide, only to be evicted by the 2006 coup d'état. Thaksin affirmed that he remained popular and said "my party" (now the People's Power Party, but presumably he also referred to any subsequent incarnation) would continue to win elections by a

significant margin...

Thaksin told the Ambassador that Anupong did not want to launch a coup, but Queen Sirikit was pressing him to do so. Thaksin also asserted that Anupong knew that King Bhumibol did not favor a coup. Thaksin highlighted that, at the same time when the Queen presided over the funeral of a PAD protestor, the King granted an audience to PM Somchai, sending a more positive public message than the Queen's. [08BANGKOK3191]

Another coup did not materialize. Instead, after a Yellow shirt mob seized control of Bangkok's airports in 2008, the judiciary dissolved the ruling People's Power Party loyal to Thaksin, paving the way for the formation of a pro-monarchist government led by Abhisit Vejjajiva. There are intriguing indications in the cables that people close to Sirikit were directly involved in what unfolded, and at the very least were aware of what was going to happen.

U.S. Charge d'Affaires James Entwistle heard hints of what was brewing in mid-October 2008:

The Charge d'Affaires met on October 16 with former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, one of Thailand's elder statesmen who retains close ties to the Palace. Charge emphasized to Anand the USG's concern about the direction of developments in Thailand, and the strongly negative response the U.S. would have in the event of a coup. Anand offered assurances that there "would not be a coup in the traditional sense of the word," but said the next three weeks were perilous for Thailand, which "never in history had been so deeply divided." [08BANGKOK3119]

A day later, an official directly linked with Sirikit offered more details:

Anuporn Kashemsant, a foreign liaison officer for the Queen in the Principal Private Secretary's office, remarked to us October 17 that various political maneuvers were ongoing. He said "a coup like what happened September 19, 2006 is not one of the options" for resolving Thailand's political crisis, because the military had proven it was incapable of running the country. His qualification evoked the remark of former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun on October 16 to Charge that there would not be "a coup in the traditional sense of the word." Anuporn hinted that significant developments likely would take place in the coming days, but refused to predict what might occur, beyond saying there were two possible paths forward. [08BANGKOK3143]

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems likely that the two paths were judicial intervention and the dramatic escalation of the Yellow Shirt street-level (and runway-level) campaign of disruption.

In early November, in a conversation with Ambassador John, a close advisor to Sirikit "predicted that the current turmoil would not result in a military coup":

He said that the King, speaking with Army Commander Anupong Paojinda, had referred to the 2006 coup and made a statement to the effect that there should be no further coups. [08BANGKOK3317]

In January 2009, after the pro-Thaksin government had been thrown out of power and replaced by Abhisit's royalist coalition, Anand dropped another hint that Bhumibol had resisted pressure from Sirikit for tougher action:

Former PM Anand Panyarachun remarked to Ambassador in a January 23 office call that the political situation seemed to have stabilized. A peaceful change of government was the outcome he had long hoped for, with no need to resort to military power. Anand said he gave great credit to Army Commander Anupong -- in the past, military leaders interpreted the King's or Queen's remarks in a way that furthered their selfish interests. But Anand believed Anupong had correctly understood a "signal" from the King that no coup should take place.

Anand said it was a pity there was not sufficient appreciation that the King helped to usher in this peaceful change -- in his "shrewd, diplomatic" manner, the King had resisted attempts to pressure him to send a signal he favored change. (Comment: Anand may have been referring to widespread stories that the Queen pressed for a coup, but he was not explicit. End Comment.)
[09BANGKOK208]

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The events of late 2008 were a textbook example of the network monarchy in action. The question is who the network was working for. Events in the 21st century began to depart from McCargo's paradigm in one crucial way: as splits in the palace widened, more than one royal network was in play in Thailand. This issue is explicitly discussed in the epic cable "[CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE INSIDE THE INSTITUTION OF THE MONARCHY IN KING BHUMIBOL'S TWILIGHT](#)":

While many observers often refer to the Thai monarchy as if it were a unified, coherent institution, and use "the Palace" as short-hand in the same way "the White House" or "10 Downing Street" is employed as a metaphor for a clearly defined and located nexus of power, neither description is particularly appropriate in the current Thai context.

There are in fact multiple circles of players and influence surrounding the Thai royal family, often times with little overlap but with competing agendas, fueled by years of physical separation and vacillating relationships between principals. Separate centers of influence/players focus around: King Bhumibol; Queen Sirikit; Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn; Princess Sirindhorn; and the Privy Council, though the latter has less access/influence than many suppose. In addition, there are supporting bureaucratic entities such as the Office of Principal Private Secretary, the Royal Household Bureau, the Crown Property Bureau, and the Privy Purse, which employ thousands and manage assets in the billions, as well as a bevy of minor royals whose motorcades routinely clog Bangkok's roads. [09BANGKOK2967]

The key network player in Bhumibol's circle has long been assumed to be Prem. As McCargo says:

Network monarchy had to involve pragmatic compromises with sleazy politicians, had to employ a degree of structural violence, and had to involve the politics of alliance building. However,

building these alliances was no job for a royal head of state. The King needed a proxy who could manage his network. Indeed, there was no need for the monarch to have much direct involvement in the running of the country. With the right manager in place, the network would run itself; the monarch need only intervene personally in times of crisis, or when he had a particular message to communicate...

From 1980 onwards, the manager of Thailand's network monarchy was in place: Prem Tinsulanond, handpicked by the King as army commander and later prime minister. His installation as prime minister might have appeared democratic, but was actually a 'royal coup'. Prem could never replace his beloved Sarit, yet the King trusted Prem absolutely, seeing him as an incorruptible figure who shared his soft and understated approach, but who was a skilled alliance-builder and wielder of patronage. For the next twenty-one years, Prem served effectively as Thailand's 'director of human resources', masterminding appointments, transfers and promotions. Prem's power was never absolute, though it was always considerable. He served as prime minister until 1988, then immediately became a privy councillor and senior statesman, succeeding to the presidency of the Privy Council in 1998. In April 1981, the King and Queen accompanied Prem to Korat to show their support for him during a coup attempt; the Queen even made a radio broadcast backing him. [McCargo, *Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand*]

Yet Eric John's cable argues that other, far less well-known figures have been the king's real confidants over the past decade, and that he is no longer particularly close to Prem at all:

The King's decade-long sojourn in Hua Hin starting in 2000 significantly limited the amount of interaction he had not only with the Queen but also those whom many outsiders (incorrectly) presume spend significant amounts of time with him: Privy Councilors; as well as officials of the office of the Principal Private Secretary, all of whom are Bangkok-based and do not have regular access to the King. That limited access apparently has not changed during the ongoing hospitalization in Bangkok, with M.R. Thep Devakul the only Privy Councilor allowed into the King's room, and that solely by virtue of his being a cousin of the Queen.

Those few whose counsel the King has sought in recent years, according to various sources, are neither household names nor political players, but associated with his charitable development foundations or his closest staff. These include the sharp-tongued Thanphuying Butrie Viravaidya, his deputy Principal Private Secretary (DPPS) and wife of NGO activist Meechai "the Condom King" (Butrie is currently ensconced at Siriraj Hospital); Wud Sumitra, another DPPS; Sumete Tantivejkul, head of the Chai Patana Foundation; Disathorn Watcharothai, Chair of the Rajanukhrai Foundation and son of the Lord Chamberlain; and Pramote Maiklap, former director of the Royal Irrigation Department. The Privy Councilor closest to the King is likely Air Chief Marshal Kamthon Sidhvananda, former long-time head of State Electricity Giant EGAT, whom the King credits for electrifying much of rural Thailand. His most regular social interaction in recent years came in weekly late-Saturday night jam sessions with his pick-up jazz band, whose geriatric members have played with the King for decades...

The Privy Council is comprised of 19 elderly men, ranging in age from their mid-60s up to early 90s, who serve at the pleasure of the King. Statutorily they exist to offer advice to the King if he solicits it, review petitions on his behalf, act as ceremonial stand-ins for the King at various royally-sponsored ceremonies, and play a critical role in succession. One-third were flag-ranked officers; a third were Supreme Court justices, and a third were high ranking civil servants, particularly in development fields. Three spent an additional stint as PM (Prem, Thanin, Surayud). All have spent their entire adult lives in sworn service to King Bhumibol, both before and after retirement at age 60...

Yet the Privy Council plays a far smaller role than the red-shirts claim and many presume. Privy Councilors have only sporadic direct access to the King and can only offer advice or proposals if the King requests it, as several Privy Councilors have told us in the past year. Of note, GEN Prem is not particularly close to the King, as it turns out. While the Embassy has seen many instances of this over the years, perhaps the most notable came during the December 2006 visit to Thailand of former President George H.W. Bush. When King Bhumibol offered to host a dinner for former President and Barbara Bush, Prem did not make the initial guest list drawn up by the Royal Household Bureau on the King's behalf, despite having worked with the former President as Thai PM from 1980-88. [09BANGKOK2967]

John's cable delves inside the multiple layers of palace bureaucracy, where Thai officials - almost invariably male and usually elderly - perform their arcane duties and hatch their plots. Beneath the Privy Council, at least in theory, is the Office of the Principal Private Secretary, another den of intrigue, run by an establishment stalwart who wants to quit but can't until he has been released by the king, and where the queen and Prem have key allies in place:

The Office of the Principal Private Secretary employs about 200 staff operating out of the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Its formal roles include preparing paperwork to be signed by the King, who endorses all passed legislation and high-ranking government/military/police appointments, reviewing petitions to the King (aided occasionally by the six former Supreme Court justices on the Privy Council), and supporting foreign guests of the King/Queen. The current PPS, Arsa Sarasin, younger brother of Pong, has long made clear his desire to leave the position to focus on managing his family's business, but he serves at the pleasure of the King. Arsa, his predecessor Bhira, and his deputy Krit all served as diplomats -- and all as Ambassadors to the U.S. Krit, in turn, is known as one of "Prem's boys," having served as the MFA's PM liaison/interpreter for Prem's entire PM stint.

The Office of the PPS does not have clear lines of authority, with certain employees' informal roles/influence more significant, such as Mom Butrie's, than their titles might suggest. Another such informal player is the Queen's foreign liaison officer within the OPPS, M.L. Anuporn "Joe" Kashemsant, son of the King's now deceased cardiologist and the former National Counter Corruption Commissioner, Thanphuying Preeya, who indicted Thaksin on a false assets declaration in 2000 and is a regular at the Queen's dinner table. Once the number of the Queen's foreign visitors slowed dramatically in recent years, Anuporn started freelancing more in political intrigues. [09BANGKOK2967]

In early 2010, after giving John an update on Bhumibol's health that was perhaps designed create the impression he had recently seen the king, Prem admitted he had not met Bhumibol at all since the king was hospitalized on September 19 the previous year - further evidence that if the two men were close in the past, they are not any more:

Regarding King Bhumibol's health, Prem indicated that the King was exercising 30 minutes a day on a stationary bicycle at Siriraj Hospital and passing a medicine ball with a physical therapist to build up strength and regain weight. Prem acknowledged that he had not seen the King since the hospitalization, but that the Queen and Princess Sirindhorn saw the King daily. When Ambassador asked about the Crown Prince's involvement, Prem repeated: the Queen and Sirindhorn visit him daily. [[10BANGKOK192](#)]

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The most revealing incident of all, in terms of illuminating the hidden world of palace power struggles and shifting ascendancies, was King Bhumibol's apparent attempt to intervene as Yellow Shirt protests brought increasing chaos to Thailand in the autumn of 2008, and the contemptuous ease with which it was ignored and defied by those most loudly proclaiming their devotion to the monarchy.

It was a fraught and dangerous time for Thailand. Yellow Shirt protesters had occupied Government House since August, and the violent events of October 7 in the streets around parliament shocked most and dismayed most Thais. A bitter propaganda war over the events of that day added fuel to the smouldering tensions in Thai society, and Sirikit's decision to attend Nong Bow's funeral rites fanned the flames.

It was at this perilous juncture in Thailand's crisis that some of those closest to King Rama IX launched an apparently coordinated effort to defuse the crisis and persuade the Yellow Shirts to step back from the brink and seek dialogue instead of confrontation. Eric John describes what happened:

In late October 2008, the King directed two of his proxies to carry his water for him, Sumet Tantivejakul, the Secretary-General of the King's Chai Pattana Foundation, and Disathorn Wathcharothai, Chair of the Rajanukhrai Foundation. Speaking October 26 before a group of academics closely associated with the yellow shirt movement laying siege to Thailand at the time, supposedly in defense of the monarchy, Sumet called on protesters to "stop violence and secure peace via dialogue."

Disathorn was even more direct three days later, on October 29 at a seminar in Chumphol. "No matter whether the PAD or UDD, I wish to say that if we love the King, please don't go farming at Government House. Don't go to show forces anywhere....If you love the King, go back home. Showing your power over there makes no benefit at all. Worse, it just creates disunity. I dare to say it here because I am a real man and a real voice. I carry the King's message." [[09BANGKOK2167](#)]

Sumet and Disathorn may not be household names even in Thailand, but political insiders are very well aware that Bhumibol trusts them to carry his messages; their public comments were a very clear signal to the Yellow Shirts from King Rama IX. Lest there be any doubt, Princess Sirindhorn also distanced the palace from the PAD:

The anti-government PAD has consistently portrayed itself as a defender of the monarchy, and a reasonable belief by many Thais that important royalists support the PAD has likely been critical in saving the group from harsher treatment by the authorities - and the mainstream media - than it has received to date. That may change in the wake of several recent signals sent by two figures seen as close to the King: Princess Sirindhorn in Connecticut October 9 stated that the PAD was acting on its own behalf, not the monarchy's; and Chairman of the King's Rajanukhroo Foundation Disathorn Watcharothai told an October 29 seminar: "If you love the King, go back home." [08BANGKOK3289]

Yet not only did their signals go unheeded by the Yellow Shirt movement, but the group's founder Sondhi Limthongkul added insult to injury by [denouncing](#) both [Sumet](#) and [Disathorn](#) from the PAD stage at the Makhawan bridge near Government House where he gave regular vitriolic speeches to inspire his increasingly fanatical followers.

Inner circle proximity to the King may ultimately mean little when it comes to influence/impact... In the late 2008 political crisis caused by the occupation of Government House, and ultimately Bangkok's airports, by the yellow-shirt PAD activists claiming to be defending the monarchy, both Sumete and Disathorn joined Princess Sirindhorn in October 2008 in publicly stating that the King did not consider the yellow-shirts to be acting on his behalf. Disathorn went so far as to tell a seminar: "if you love the King, go home." Instead, PAD leader Sondhi Lim denounced both men from the PAD stage with curses; Sondhi repeated his criticism of Disathorn at the November 15 PAD rally. [09BANGKOK2967]

Sondhi Limthongkul was knowingly and explicitly defying messages from three of King Bhumibol's most trusted allies. He must have been well aware that in doing so he was explicitly defying the king. And yet he didn't stop there: he publicly cursed and insulted them. In one speech, using his usual apocalyptic and messianic language, he said Thailand was divided into two: the righteous, and the unrighteous. Sondhi said contemptuously of Sumet that: "Instead of siding with the righteous, he preached unity."

Within a month, the Yellow Shirts launched their dramatic escalation of the political conflict, proclaiming their "Final War" involving operations codenamed [Hiroshima](#) and Nagasaki, and storming Bangkok's airports:

Instead of responding positively to the King's message... PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul denounced Sumet and Disathorn's "meddling." Three weeks later, the yellow shirts escalated their activities by seizing the airports. [09BANGKOK2167]

It seems inconceivable that Sondhi could have behaved with such swaggering insolence towards Rama IX unless he was very confident that he had the backing of the queen.

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A further development in the internal struggle within the palace, with highly significant implications for how the succession may play out, helps make sense of recent political machinations. Queen Sirikit was long seen as Vajiralongkorn's chief defender, insisting that her only son should succeed Bhumibol as Rama X. But according to the cables, that has changed:

For many years, Queen Sirikit actively promoted Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn's interests and was seen as his greatest backer in the face of widespread public opposition and open preference for Princess Sirindhorn. For instance, she was the driving force behind the Crown Prince's 2003 trip to Washington, which she intended as a cornerstone effort to rehabilitate his image in the eyes of the Thai people as an acceptable future King, one who had recently remarried and would soon produce an acknowledged male heir.

The mother-son relationship suddenly changed in 2007 for two reasons: the appearance of video and still photos of Vajiralongkorn's wife Srirasmi in the nude on the internet/CDs then widely available in Bangkok; and a noisy row over the amount of time the Crown Prince was spending outside Thailand. In 2008, the Queen and the Crown Prince had a shouting match at a hospital during the Queen's brief hospitalization, with the Crown Prince angrily berating her in front of ladies-in-waiting... Several of the key ladies-in-waiting reportedly now refuse to be present when the Crown Prince visits the Queen. [09BANGKOK2967]

Their hostility worsened during the 2009 struggle over naming Thailand's next police chief. After Vajiralongkorn intervened to demand the appointment of a candidate with links to Thaksin, Sirikit sailed into battle against him in support of Prime Minister Abhisit's choice:

The simmering feud over the National Police Chief position continues to exacerbate the bad blood between the Democrats and Phumjai Thai and expose the Abhisit-Suthet fissures. Though PM Abhisit routinely asserts that he will forward Police General Prateep Tunprasert's name for consideration again as the nation's top cop, there are indications that Phumjai Thai will not easily fall in line. This time, however, they are looking to hide behind the apparent desire of Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn to see Police General Jumpol Manmai appointed Chief (Note: It is widely believed former PM Thaksin, while in office, used Jumpol as a bag man to deliver funds skimmed from the state lottery to the Crown Prince's office to fund his lifestyle. End Note.)

Intriguingly, the Crown Prince may not be the only member of the Palace interested in shaping the race for the Police Chief position. Deputy Democrat party leader Kraisak Choonhavan told us September 5 that he had appealed to several influential members in court circles to have Queen Sirikit trump the Crown Prince's support for Jumpol. The Queen had conveyed her support to Abhisit for Prateep, Kraisak claimed; Supachai acknowledged to us September 4 that they had heard the Queen may indeed be backing Prateep. According to Kraisak, with the Queen's support in hand, Abhisit would be able to push Police General Prateep through at the next Royal Thai Police Office Board. Niphon's overt promotion of the Crown Prince's desires was dangerous for

Niphol and the party, Kraisak fumed. [09BANGKOK2289]

A later cable in 2009 says of Sirikit and Vajiralongkorn:

Relations were further strained in late 2009 over the Police Chief struggle, with the Queen, supporting Acting Police Chief Pratheep, telling the Crown Prince to back off his support of GEN Chumpol, and he defiantly refusing to do so. [09BANGKOK2967]

It was one of the most blatant instances in recent times of so-called “hidden hands” at work in Thai politics: the queen and the crown prince fighting over the choice of the country’s next police chief, and the Thai media unable to report what was happening except with the vaguest of hints.

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Sirikit’s rift with her son has fundamentally altered the power dynamics underlying the country’s political crisis. Besides having to accept their worst case scenario of Vajiralongkorn acceding to the throne, or finding a way to persuade Bhumibol to name “Princess Angel” his chosen successor in an unprecedented departure from centuries of royal tradition, the monarchist establishment has a third option: supporting Sirikit to rule as regent after Rama IX’s death. If a way could be found to formally declare Vajiralongkorn unfit to be monarch, Sirikit could seek to rule on behalf of the prince’s young son Ong Ti. John wrote in 2009 that rumours were already circulating in well-connected circles that this is what Sirikit wants to do, and even that Bhumibol was contemplating resigning to hand over to a Sirikit regency on behalf of his grandson Ong Ti.

Sirikit has ruled as regent once before: in October 1956, when Bhumibol spent a fortnight as a monk, a common rite of passage for all young Buddhist Thai men. The possibility that she may be seeking to do so again for an extended period after Rama IX’s death helps explain many unclear aspects of Thailand’s political turmoil. Several analysts have remarked that Thaksin’s apparent impatience - almost desperation - to grab back a dominant role in Thai politics makes little sense if he is really confident of having a good relationship with Vajiralongkorn: it would be far more sensible for Thaksin to just sit back, bide his time, and wait for Bhumibol to die. But if Thaksin and the prince fear that Sirikit will seize control of the succession and freeze Vajiralongkorn out, everything changes: it becomes imperative that they act now or risk losing their chance forever.

The dynamics in the ultimate end game/last days of King Bhumibol would likely differ considerably depending on who was the Prime Minister, the governing coalition, the army chief, and the leading Privy Councilors at that time, and whether the King passed away suddenly or lingered in an incapacitated state for a long period of time. Various different political actors shape their short and medium-term plans accordingly. [09BANGKOK2488]

Meanwhile, the royalists see a chance to outwit their two biggest enemies. Even if the fading Bhumibol stubbornly insists that his son must succeed him, the elites who fear that Vajiralongkorn as Rama X would ruin the country and fatally undermine popular support for the palace - not to mention punish them personally and brutally for their betrayal of him - may believe have a way out of their predicament if they

throw their support behind Sirikit. This also helps explain some seemingly contradictory views in the monarchist camp, not least the fact that some key Yellow Shirt leaders have said that not only do [they not support Vajiralongkorn](#), they regard him as even more dangerous than Thaksin. They are royalists only insofar as this means backing the queen.

There is a further reason that even those with many years of loyal service to the king may now be acting on Sirikit's instructions: with Bhumibol old and frail and confined to Siriraj Hospital, he seems to be taking less and less of an active role providing leadership to his network. In the absence of instructions from Bhumibol, those royalists long used to doing the bidding of the palace may feel obliged to serve the queen.

And the network monarchy has put Sirikit in an exceptionally strong position. The hardline army chief is an acolyte of the queen. The establishment, by all accounts, will continue to do all it can to prevent Thaksin regaining any political influence: if his proxy Peua Thai party wins the July 3 elections it remains highly likely the royalists will try to block its path to power, either through judicial interventions or, if necessary, another coup. If she wishes to rule as regent if Bhumibol dies in the next few years, Queen Sirikit has certainly placed herself in the driving seat for achieving this.

The biggest problem she faces, one that many in the establishment perhaps do not yet fully realize, is that as the surge in online criticism of her shows, Sirikit has become extremely unpopular in Thailand. She has somehow achieved the improbable feat of becoming as widely feared and disliked as her womanizing, corrupt black sheep of a son.

