SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE THAI MONARCHY

M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra

Soul of the Nation
The tension, as the cliché goes, was so thick one could almost cut it with a knife. It was the night of Wednesday, 20 May 1992. After three days of street violence, Bangkok was bracing itself for a bloody showdown between troops and demonstrators. Rumours of conflicts within the military abounded. The situation seemed hopeless. More and more people began to pray for the kind of political miracle that had taken place nearly two decades before, during the 1973 student uprising against military rule. At that time, just as the situation threatened to escalate with considerably more violence and bloodshed, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the ninth monarch of the ruling Chakri Dynasty, made a dramatic television appearance, which restored public order and resolved the crisis.

Eventually, their prayers were answered. The main protagonists, Prime Minister General Suchinda Kraprayoon and Major Chamlong Srimuang, the de facto leader of the anti-government protest movement, were summoned to the palace. The royal audience was broadcast worldwide. With the two prostrate on the floor before him, King Bhumibol quietly gave a lecture on the public interest and the need to avoid an impending “catastrophe” and made a “request” that they “sit down and face the facts together in a conciliatory manner, and not in a confrontational manner, to find a way to solve the problem, because our country does not belong to any one or two persons, but belongs to everyone”.1

Once more there was a miracle. The crisis was instantly diffused. The two powerful protagonists backed down. Battle-ready military units returned to the barracks. Demonstrators dispersed. A few days later, Suchinda resigned, and power was peacefully transferred to an interim government under the respected Anand Panyarachun, who later transferred key military leaders and called a general election.

It was extraordinary. In June 1932 royal absolutism was overthrown and replaced by a constitutional monarchy. Since then, the Thai king’s royal powers and prerogatives have been clearly defined and limited in a manner

M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra is a Democrat Party Member of Parliament, and former Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Thailand.
similar to those of constitutional monarchs in Europe. In May 1992, however, with only a few words of royal advice, considerable bloodshed, perhaps even a civil war, was avoided; normalcy returned; a breathing space to restore rationality was brought about; and, soon afterwards, Thai democracy was back on track.

The “Black May” crisis of 1992 demonstrated the unique position of both the monarchy and the present monarch as the “Soul of the Nation”, a term once used by the late statesman-scholar-writer, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj. It reaffirmed the roles of both the institution and the living embodiment of that institution, not only as the most revered symbol of national unity, but also as the nation’s conscience, the most effective last-resort conflict manager, and the most powerful force of national reconciliation.

At the dawn of the new millennium, King Bhumibol’s popularity seems to be higher than ever. He guided a nation, shell-shocked by the sudden onslaught of an economic crisis, through troubled times with words of wisdom and comfort, and his subjects responded with unprecedented demonstrations of love and respect. On the evening of 5 December 1999, on the occasion of his sixth cycle or seventy-second birthday, the whole nation paid homage by lighting candles and singing his praise.

There is no easy explanation for all this. Perhaps one part of the answer lies in history; another in the concept of kingship as developed during the two hundred odd years of the Chakri Dynasty; and the third in the achievements of the present Royal Family.

The Past

King Bhumibol’s special position in the hearts and minds of the Thai people did not grow in a void.

According to Thai tradition, one key attribute of leadership is *barami*, or charisma or grace accumulated through meritorious deeds accomplished by one’s ancestors and oneself in one’s past and present life. The present Thai monarch’s *barami* is partly based on the fact that from the very beginning of the Dynasty, the Chakris were, and were perceived to be, saviours of the realm.

On 7 April 1767, Ayudhya, for over four centuries the capital city of the Thai empire, was sacked by the Burmese army. In one fell swoop, palaces, temples, Buddha images, and almost all the written records of the Kingdom were destroyed, and the empire torn asunder.

Phraya Tak, a commoner, led the arduous but ultimately successful struggle to drive the Burmese from the central plains. He assumed the throne as King Taksin and founded a new capital city at Dhonburi, from where the struggle against Burmese power was continued.

Chao-Phraya Chakri and his younger brother, also commoners, were two of King Taksin’s most successful generals, playing an integral part in the campaigns to restore the Thai realm, both before and during King Taksin’s reign. In 1782, when the king’s mental state went into decline, precipitating an internal
power struggle, the former was invited to take up the throne, as King Ramathibodi, or better known in the West later as King Rama I, the first monarch of the Chakri Dynasty.

The new king and his brother, appointed Maha Uparat or Second King, carried on with the task of restoration. Threats from the Burmese and other neighbours were kept at bay, and Thai imperial influence was reasserted and extended. Bangkok, across the river from Dhonburi, became the new capital city, where as a symbol of the kingdom’s physical rehabilitation, new palaces, temples, and public buildings were constructed on the architectural model of Ayudhya.

Perhaps more importantly, the new dynasty not only helped to restore an empire, but also resurrected a universe. The sack of Ayudhya was more than physical destruction. It must have been a psychologically traumatic experience for a largely traditional society. The city had been a bustling cosmopolitan metropolis of over one million inhabitants. Then, it was no more. After April 1767, only 10,000 remained, having witnessed a nihilistic destruction of their civilization.

Moreover, from a spiritual and moral point of view, the sack symbolized a breakdown of society and order. The Ayudhyan conception of kingship was a fusion of Hinduism and Buddhism. According to this conception, as two of the best contemporary Thai political scientists pointed out,

The king is not only the political leader of the state but also himself both the state and society. He is the most important centre of the society and is the mechanism of change and development. Any change in society for the better or worse … is dependent on the ruler’s virtues or lack of virtues. One can perhaps say that the ruler is the universe unto himself because he is responsible not only for the consequences of his use of political power but also for changes in nature itself.4

With the fall of Ayudhya, for long the Thai kings’ “celestial seat”, and the destruction of the monarchy, the centre of the Thai cosmos, the source of order, as well as moral and spiritual strength, simply ceased to exist. Thus, the challenge was not only one of physical rehabilitation, but also one of resurrection of a way of life, a civilization and, indeed, an entire universe.

The task was partly begun by King Taksin, but it was addressed in earnest during the reign of King Rama I (1782–1809), and later largely completed by Rama I’s son and grandson, King Rama II (1809–24) and Rama III (1824–51). A new “celestial seat” was built in Bangkok on the model of the old. Royal ceremonies, incorporating both Buddhistic and Brahmanic elements, were revived. Traditional codes of law, tightly structured social hierarchy, and politico-administrative order were reintroduced. Literary arts were revitalized. So were linkages with the outside world, particularly those related to trade.

By the end of the Third Reign, a lost civilization had been retrieved and consolidated. The Thai empire was at its zenith, and at its heart stood Bangkok,
a city of architectural splendour and literary renaissance, home to princes and entrepreneurs, warriors and poets, with the monarchy once more having become the centre and prime mover of the universe, the fount of moral and spiritual strength.

During the reigns of King Mongkut, or King Rama IV (1851–68), and his son, King Chulalongkorn, or King Rama V (1868–1910), the kingdom was faced with another round of threats to its survival. Once more, the Chakri monarchs were, and were perceived to be, the savours of the realm.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Thai empire was for the first time directly exposed to the full might of Western imperialism, spearheaded by France and Britain. Caught, in the words of King Rama IV, between the “crocodile” and the “whale”, the kingdom managed to avoid the kind of fate that befell most other Asians and remained independent. Anglo-French rivalry definitely helped the Thai cause, but perhaps the real keys to survival were diplomacy and reform. It was King Rama IV who formulated the moral and intellectual framework for these, and King Rama V who was instrumental in translating them fully into practice.

At the beginning of the Fourth Reign, power and office had passed to a new generation of pragmatic and progressive leaders, consisting of both royalty and nobility. Acquainted with Westerners, Western thoughts, and Western ways, they were able to gauge the nature and extent of the threat from the West. They understood the need for engagement and accommodation. Among them, foreign policy was not an internal political issue.

With this élite consensus, the Thais set about coping with Western imperialism, giving in when they had to and standing firm when they thought they could. To prevent misunderstanding and to promote a progressive, “civilized” image of the kingdom, emphasis was placed on keeping lines of communication open to Western governments, directly through envoys and indirectly through the practice of employing Western advisers. Accompanying this diplomacy of engagement and accommodation was the introduction of internal measures, designed to reduce conditions for Western intervention, as well as to augment the strength and cohesion of the realm.

The existence of this enlightened élite at a critical juncture was most fortunate. For Western imperialism presented not only an immediate physical threat but also a longer term moral and psychological challenge. The Thais were forced to face a crucial dilemma. On the one hand, the logic of survival required that they sooner or later accommodate Western ideas and become more “modern” and “civilized”. On the other hand, morally and epistemologically, their concept of the universe was self-sufficient and exclusive, embodying fundamental premises concerning man, nature, kingship, and social organization, which were very different from modern Western ideas. The problem was how to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, how to create a fusion between modernity and tradition, which would enable the Thais to benefit from one without destroying the other.
King Rama IV was able to bring about this fusion through his own person and deeds. From early on, he recognized the value of modernism. Before taking up the throne, he was for twenty-seven years a monk, unburdened by the affairs of the state. During this period, the king had been able to widen the horizon of his intellect and knowledge by learning the English language and reading Western newspapers and books on modern science, geography, history, mathematics, and astronomy. He came to see ignorance and foolish pride as twin threats to a people’s survival.

For the king, self-preservation required at least a degree of modernization. The diplomacy of engagement and accommodation was not to be an end in itself but only part of an ongoing process to augment the kingdom’s security by bringing it into greater conformity with the modern world, and projecting it into the arena of modern world politics. Thus, in small but symbolically significant ways, the king personally took the lead. He wrote numerous letters abroad in his unmistakable quaint English, abolished the practice of prostration for Westerners and regularly met with them on both official and private occasions, encouraged the people to take an interest in Western sciences and technology, and provided his children with a measure of Western education.

Yet, however progressive he was for his time, the king was always at pains to demonstrate that he had not lost his perspective or sense of proportion, and that Western ideas and knowledge were only means to an end. Like his predecessors, he spent much of his time on Thai art and culture and educated his children in a predominantly traditional way. Through his actions and words, King Rama IV showed that, far from being a destructive alien concept imposed on a weak and unwilling people, modernism could be made functionally useful with the blessings of the Lord of Life, the Lord of the Realm, the fountain and embodiment of moral and spiritual order itself. As we shall see later, not for the first or last time, the Thai monarchy, by legitimating changes, not only made them more acceptable to the subjects, but also preserved its own legitimacy through these very changes.

King Rama V inherited the throne from his father as a minor. It was a turbulent time. Outside the kingdom, Western imperialism became even more aggressive. Inside the kingdom, power struggles took place, which could have changed its destiny. It was only well after he came of age in 1873 that he began to stamp his vision and authority on the processes of diplomacy and governance.

In many ways, King Rama V was a creation and mirror-image of his father. Intelligent, open-minded, and pragmatic, he continued with the diplomacy of engagement and accommodation as a means of managing the threat of Western imperialism. However, the king was also different from his father. He was convinced to the point of passion that the only way for the kingdom to achieve security and progress was to modernize and, in order to modernize, far-reaching reforms in both the central government and provincial administration had to be brought about. By the end of the Fifth Reign, the kingdom had undergone
A transformation in the ways it was governed, its taxes collected, its armed forces organized, its infrastructures developed, its people educated, and its laws applied to foreigners. To be sure, the process of modernization was far from completed, but the Thai people were moving firmly towards the modern era.

These reforms were crucial in helping to alleviate external dangers. They made the kingdom more centralized, hence stronger and better prepared to face the outside world. They prevented weakness and disorder, which might have induced more Western interventions, perhaps leading to the loss of independence. They created an image of the kingdom as being responsible and progressive and of its king as being civilized and benevolent, which made it possible to deal with the Western powers on a more equal footing.

King Rama V could not prevent secession of certain key territories to France and Britain, with the losses to the former being especially bitter, but arguably the kingdom could have easily lost much more, including independence. Equally important for the longer term, by the end of his reign, the kingdom was a fully-fledged member of the society of “civilized” nations. On his visits to Europe, the king was received by crowned heads, and later, the coronation of his son and successor, King Vajiravudh or King Rama VI (1910–25), was attended by twenty-five representatives from fourteen foreign governments, including all the great powers.

During his lifetime, King Rama V dominated the political stage as no Chakri king had done, and when he passed away, as in Victorian England, people mourned not only for him but also for the passing of an age. King Rama VI and his younger brother, King Prajadhipok or King Rama VII (1925–35), never attained the kind of power and prestige that their royal father did. By the late 1920s, when the economic depression set in, the monarchy was in visible decline, but somehow, the institution retained the special place that it had in the hearts and minds of the Thai people.

This was evident in June 1932. A group of military officers and bureaucrats staged a coup d’état to wrest power from the monarchy. However, the “Promoters” of the so-called revolution did not do away with either the ruling monarch or the monarchy. Indeed, they sought to consolidate their position by “co-opting” King Rama VII as the source of legitimacy for their new Constitution and continued to call themselves “Kha Rajakarn”, or “servants of royal affairs”. For some, it was undoubtedly a question of loyalty, especially those who had once taken the Oath of Allegiance. Perhaps more importantly, however, it was realized that, while the power arrangements had changed, the relationship between the sovereign and his subjects had not, and that “in the eyes of the man in the street or the rice field, his king was still there, the object of his ultimate respect and love”. Much later, this relationship was to be confirmed by the spontaneous outpouring of public affections for King Ananda Mahidol, or King Rama VIII (1935–46), even though both before and after inheriting the throne, he spent almost all his life abroad and therefore was a virtual stranger to his subjects.
The monarchy’s special position in the hearts and minds of the people was also evident in the fact that, after the dust of the 1932 Revolution had settled, King Rama VI and King Rama VII were perceived by most Thais, including the “Promoters” themselves who had no special affections for the monarchy or things royal, to have played important roles as “saviours” of the realm.

The former was given credit for beginning the process of negotiation to rid the country of the burden of extra-territorial treaties, through his decision to enter World War I on the side of the Allies, and subsequently to join the League of Nations as a founding member. Moreover, when in the late 1930s some of the “Promoters” sought to use Thai nationalism as an instrument for ensuring the country’s survival and progress in an increasingly turbulent world, they acknowledged the pioneering work done in this area by King Rama VI, and considered him the father of modern Thai nationalism.

King Rama VII was widely praised for his selflessness in readily giving up absolute power, which spared the country the horrors of a civil war in 1932 and facilitated the transition to constitutional monarchy. He was also admired for his democratic spirit in conferring legitimacy upon the newly introduced democratic system. These contributions earned the last absolute monarch recognition as the “Father of Thai democracy”. Like his grandfather, King Rama IV, by legitimating changes King Rama VII helped to preserve the legitimacy of the monarchical institution.

The anomaly of an absolute monarch being acknowledged as the father of democracy may seem less surprising if one understands the concept of kingship as it developed during the era of the Chakri dynasty.

As pointed out earlier, in order to reconstruct the Thai kingdom and to strengthen the new dynasty’s legitimacy, the founders of the Chakri dynasty recreated a new Ayudhya at Bangkok. The central part of this process was the restoration of the Ayudhyan conception of kingship, which was a fusion of Hinduism and Buddhism. While the main thrust of reconstruction was directed towards reviving the Ayudhyan past, it would be wrong to conclude that this involved no initiative or flexibility within the traditional framework, or that Bangkok was a mere replica of Ayudhya.

King Rama I and his successors, in fact, broke away from the heavily Brahmanic-divine tradition of Ayudhya, with kings as gods presiding over a divine cosmic order. Partly out of their personal beliefs and partly out of the realpolitik need to broaden the base of support for a dynasty originating from commoners, they placed greater emphasis than before on Buddhism and the Buddhist conception of kingship. In the Thai context, this had its origin in the Sukhotai period around the thirteenth century.

According to this conception, the monarch is to rule as a father to his children and in accordance with the law of Buddhist Thammasat. The ideal ruler, among other things, must abide steadfast in the Ten Kingly Virtues. These are: Charity, Moral Rectitude, Sacrifice, Honesty, Compassion, Self-restriction, Non-anger, Restraint from Harmful Behaviour, Forbearance, and
Rightful Conduct. In this tradition, the king must rule for the benefit and happiness of his subjects; he must provide both justice and freedom; and his legitimacy is dependent upon his own conduct and meritorious deeds, and his righteousness reflected in the well-being of the people in his charge.

This conception of kingship was later to be developed to a fuller extent by King Rama IV. To him, a king was a king because the people wanted him to be; he once said, “a person becomes King only because the people raise him so that he can protect them, externally against foreign invasion and internally against their own tendency to take advantage of one another”. When he acceded to the throne, he was to revive the Sukhotai practice whereby the common people had the right of direct petition to the King, and also to break a 500-year-old custom by making the ceremony for drinking the Water of Allegiance a reciprocal one: in return for his subjects’ sworn allegiance, the King was to pledge his own loyalty and devotion to them and their welfare.

It was significant that even King Rama V, the most powerful king of the Chakri dynasty, emphasized the need for leadership based upon morality and righteousness. He once wrote: “The power of the king of Siam is not defined in any law, for it is considered overwhelming, and no law, thing, or person can stand in its way. But the truth is that when the king does something, it must be right and just.”

The early Chakri kings’ emphasis on and development of the Sukhotai-Buddhist conception of kingship was of crucial importance. To be sure, many of the Brahmanic-divine elements of the monarchical structure during the Ayudhyan period, including ceremonies, were retained and remain to this day. However, in strengthening the Buddhist-moral elements and restoring the concept of “king as father”, they not only consolidated the dynasty’s legitimacy, but also laid down the foundations for the monarchy’s survival through long years of change and challenge.

Through their inspiration, the institution once more emphasized moral leadership, rather than divine rights, which would have made it far more vulnerable to Western rationalism and its proponents, both foreign and indigenous. It became more human, more connected with the people, more public service-oriented, and thus better prepared to face a more democratic and egalitarian world that was to emerge in the twentieth century. The institutional outlook became more flexible and open-minded, to the point that at several critical moments in the kingdom’s history, it was the kings, rather than their subjects, who more readily accepted, co-opted, or initiated changes. As pointed above, this was particularly evident during the Fourth, Fifth and Seventh Reigns, when the moral challenge posed by Western imperialism was successfully coped with, the task of modernization begun, and the transition to democracy made.

Part of King Bhumibol’s success, as we shall see later, was based upon the fact that he had inherited this conception of kingship and clearly subscribed to it.
Like his ancestors, perhaps even more so, he emphasizes the human dimension of kingship. In 1987, before a gathering of all families descended from the Chakri kings, he made it clear that he considered kingship something created, not by divine beings for divine purposes, but by the people, to be depended upon by the people and to act for the good of the people.

Like his great grandfather, King Rama IV, he considers himself an “elected” king; he said in another interview, “I am really an elected king. If the people do not want me, they can throw me out, eh? Then I will be out of a job.”

Like his grandfather, King Rama V, he stresses the need for leadership based upon morality and righteousness; he said, “sometimes it can be understood that the king can do no wrong… The king is, perhaps above the law but, in fact, is under the law which is the Tenfold Practice or Duties of Kingship.” In a later interview, he made it clear that the essence of kingship is to serve and to give.

To be human is important … One must make the things that are best for the nation or fellow humans. If we do things that are best for fellow humans then it will be better for us since we have achieved something. We are here to be human, to make money so we have money to spend, and to make good names for ourselves so that we are praised. But … if we have money we will spend it and in the end we will lose the money. What is left is the pure soul. That is what we must attain — the pure soul. But if we want to attain the pure soul, we must give … The leaders of the world should … give more, and take less.

Inheriting the Chakri dynasty’s flexible and open-minded outlook, he believes that change is inevitable and the monarchy must adapt itself to it. At the same time, however, it must continue to discharge its traditional responsibilities. In the same interview, he said: “A constitutional monarch is a symbol of the country and … (to be) successful he must become a living symbol of the country. He must change with the country but, at the same time, he must keep the spirit of the country … the soul of the country … (The) common character of the people must be embodied by the king.”

Long years of dynastic success and perceptions of dynastic success, together with the inherited concept of kingship, provided the necessary context for King Bhumibol’s success, but the past alone does not provide a sufficient explanation of the present.

For a lengthy period after King Rama VII’s abdication, the monarchy was in eclipse. Power was mostly in the hands of a succession of military leaders. Royal ceremonies were neglected or abandoned. King Rama VIII inherited the throne as a minor and spent most of his time abroad. He did not take up permanent residence in the kingdom until 1945. The next year he was dead, found killed by a handgun under mysterious circumstances. The throne passed to his younger brother, Prince Bhumibol, who had never expected to rule and who till then had also spent most of his life abroad. In the early years, the new
monarch was no more than an onlooker in the topsy-turvy world of Thai power politics. However, just over a decade into his reign, the monarchy was in full resurgence, on its way towards becoming once more the most powerful institution in the realm. The present royal family’s achievements were a crucial factor in this process.

The Present
Changes of fortune often begin under fortuitous circumstances. This was the case with the revival of the Thai monarchy.

In September 1957, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat staged a successful coup d’etat. Needing to enhance the legitimacy of the authoritarian system he was building, he turned to the monarchy for support. Once more, the king was treated with extreme veneration, as evident from the annual military parades of allegiance and Sarit’s many speeches extolling his virtues and comparing them to King Rama V’s. Once more, the monarchy became the focus of the nation’s attention, as he and the royal family were allowed to travel freely both at home and abroad, with state visits being given extensive media coverage. Again, the monarchy was given an opportunity to be a working institution, as royal involvement in social welfare and rural development activities, conferment of royal decorations for services to “King and country”, and sponsorships of marriages and cremations for non-royal subjects, markedly increased.

Assisted by the rapid expansion of communications technologies and television media in the 1960s, King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit were able to gain access to the hearts and homes of their subjects, in a way that their predecessors in a less advanced age had never been able to do. News of the royal family was given pride of place in all media and thus was unchallenged as a subject of popular attention, and the people loved it. Together, the king and the queen made a handsome and fitting couple, he a picture of goodness, piety, and devotion to duty, and she, an image of charm, beauty, and simplicity itself.

However, while a convergence of favourable circumstances made the monarchy’s revival possible at the beginning, there was little that was fortuitous about the way the institution thereafter increased its strength and popularity. After long years of dynastic achievements, the reservoir of popular love, respect, and goodwill was already there, and the young monarch, when given an opportunity to work for his subjects, rapidly deepened and expanded it by doing just that — working for his subjects.

With the beautiful Queen Sirikit at his side, he launched himself into the job with a vigour bordering on obsession, taking increasingly close interest in economic development and social welfare. He roamed the length and breadth of his kingdom, walking among his people, showing concern with their well-being, and touching them with his human and yet god-like presence. He personally began to initiate many royal development projects, mostly concerned with improving and managing water, land forestry, and human
resources, to uplift the fortunes of the rural poor. These initiatives were extended to the highlands and the hill tribes inhabiting them, where his pioneering crop replacement programmes performed miracles in reducing the cultivation of opium and hence the production of heroin. Pictures of him with his trademark camera around his neck, two-way radio on his hip, and folded 1:50,000 scale map in his hands, became the symbol of what was the best and noblest about both the kingdom and the institution that led it. By the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, the resurgence was in full bloom. The monarchy once more became a living and relevant institution, the symbol of national unity, the “Soul of the Nation”.

The king continued to work hard well into the 1990s, until health curtailed his activities. The queen or their son, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, and daughters, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn and Princess Chulabhorn, usually accompanied him, as he continued to roam the kingdom, tirelessly following up on work in progress, initiating new projects and reaching out to his adoring subjects.

Underlying this passion for work is King Bhumibol’s belief in the concept of kingship, which had evolved during the long years of the Chakri dynasty. As explained before, he perceives his task as to serve and to give. Since he considers his kingdom to be besieged by a number of grave challenges, he sees it as his duty to help resolve them through the monarchy’s active leadership of and participation in the country’s development process.

One challenge is poverty, especially in the countryside, and the gap between the rich and the poor. Queen Sirikit pointed this out very succinctly “Misunderstandings arise between people in rural areas and the rich, the so-called civilized people in Bangkok. People in rural Thailand say they are neglected and we try to fill that gap by staying with them in remote areas.”

To address the challenge, the king acted as the catalyst of development, following both his own and the government’s development projects tirelessly with an eye for detail, and encouraging, and advising government officials in their work. For the king, the key is not to draw up “macro” plans which may be irrelevant to the people, but to bring to the developmental process the human dimension, the balanced touch, and the patient gradualism that are generally lacking in national economic strategies.

His concerns with the rural poor were very much in evidence after the 1997–98 economic crisis: he introduced his “New Theory” economics, stressing the need to help small-scale farmers and communities achieve a level of “self-sufficiency” and hence a measure of immunity from external and internal economic turbulence. Central to efforts to introduce such self-sufficiency are attitudinal adjustments: everyone must try to be reasonable and not want too much, and government officials, planners, academics and businessmen must learn to work with one another in harmony, with honesty, patience, circumspection, and sense of morality.
Indeed, the question of individual adjustment and improvement is a major theme emphasized by King Bhumibol, for he perceives another grave challenge to the kingdom to be the Thai people themselves. “The danger! The publicized danger,” he said, “is communism. But the greed of our own people is more dangerous. If we clash among ourselves it will destroy us and we will become the slaves of what I call the ‘new imperialism’, be it communist or dictatorship or whatever.”

For King Bhumibol, the key is moral leadership. The monarch acts as the nation’s conscience and teacher. He urges his subjects towards self-improvement by stressing the importance of education and knowledge and by extolling such traditional values as unity, harmony, loyalty, discipline, honesty, sincerity, compassion, charity, sacrifice, moderation, and patience. This is usually done through speeches, especially on the eve of his birthday, when tens of thousands of people gather at the royal palace to pay respect and many millions more watch the nationwide broadcast. Sometimes, however, the medium of exhortation is less conventional. One recent example of this is the king’s retelling of the story of Mahajanaka, one of the lives of Lord Buddha, where he pointed out the virtue of “perseverance without the desire for reward”. Another is a book on his favourite pet dog, Tongdaeng, which he praises for being “different from many others who, after having become an important personality, might treat with contempt someone of lower status who, in fact, should be the object of gratitude”. It is no small measure of the king’s popularity that both the books and shirts with a Tongdaeng logo were instant sell-outs when introduced.

For the king, self-improvement through the attainment of knowledge and traditional values is a crucial factor in bringing progress to the country. Once he advised: “There are both good people and bad people. No one can make everyone a good person. Therefore, making the country contented and orderly is not about making everyone a good person, but about promoting good persons, so that they can govern and prevent bad persons from having power and causing trouble and disturbance.”

This brings us to the third challenge: continuity and quality of governance, or the lack thereof. Since 1932, the kingdom has gone through fifteen Constitutions, seventeen coups, and fifty-five Cabinet changes. It could hardly have escaped King Bhumibol’s notice that a great deal of his subjects’ time and effort has been spent in searching for the most durable and beneficial system of politics and governance and that this search has often ended up in failure, with adverse consequences for the country. For obvious reasons, it is not easy to gauge with any degree of confidence the monarch’s perspectives on the subject, but perhaps, on the basis of his numerous speeches and writings over the years, a number of observations can be made.

Firstly, the king has a very clear and consistent conception of what is good for his subjects, a conception which is very much based on tradition.
The first thing is security, that is, the security of the people. The Thai people have to fight for their freedom, for their independence ... and then after that ... law and order ... At the same time we must have enough food to eat, enough facility to have a good home, to have shelter. These are essential things. And then we must have the social order and more things of the heart, that means that we must be good people, so that there won’t be disorder because people who are good don’t create trouble so much. So we must have religion (emphasis added).17

Secondly, he seems to believe that to achieve what is good for the country the form of governance is less important than good intentions. He once advised a new government after taking its oath of office, “Whatever form the government takes, if (its members) do according to the oath, no problem will arise, because it is not the form of government or governance that is important. The important thing is the intention to discharge (one’s) responsibilities well in accordance to the objectives which have been set” (Emphasis added).18

Thirdly, to him democracy is good, but again the achievement of progress is dependent on those who practise it. He said to another new Cabinet:

Democracy is the form of government that should be the best in governing a country because the people have a say in decision-making and the right to show what course the country should take ... But democracy is a living thing; it must develop constantly. It may not be the most outstanding system, but it all depends on those who practice it. If the ones in charge practice it in the right manner, then the democratic system could be built up progressively toward the ultimate goal which is the prosperity of the nation with the consent and approval of the people all over the nation.19

In the pursuit of a democratic form of governance, it is important for the Thais to develop their own system. “(We) need not follow any kind of foreign democracy and should try instead to create our own Thai style of democracy, for we have our own national culture and outlook and we are capable of following our own reasoning.”20

Fourthly, for the king, no matter what form of governance the country chooses, politics does not always provide the cure for the country’s ills. In fact, if it is too conflict-ridden or divisive, it may aggravate problems. For the nation is like a human body.

Each person has body organs. Each body organ is different, looks different and has different functions. But they all have functions and are constituent parts of us, of our bodies. If a part of the body fails to discharge its duties, other parts of the body will be troubled. If (it) ... wishes to function in place of another part of the body, there will be confusion, because it is not suited for the purpose ... If each organ discharges its own duties, it will make the body live happily.21

© 2003 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore
Because politics cannot be relied upon to contribute to the good of the country, it is important to have apolitical or politically impartial institutions and leaders. He said: “One day it would be very handy to have somebody impartial because if you have in the country only groups or political parties which will have their own interest at heart, what about those who don’t have the power...who are just ordinary people who can not make their view known? They must look up to somebody who is impartial.”

And lastly, King Bhumibol seems to believe that for the good of the country there should be a constructive interpretation of the constitutional monarch’s role.

For reasons of realpolitik, as just mentioned, the king sees the need for a politically neutral institution. Moreover, he is fully aware that, as a matter of principle, his duties as a constitutional monarch require him to be “above” politics and that his political prerogatives are confined to the three rights, that is, the right to be consulted, the right to warn, and the right to encourage. Thus, he assiduously tries to avoid any words or deeds which may be perceived as intervention in political affairs. Former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun confirmed that on the basis of his experience in government, he had never seen the monarch overstepping the constitutional boundary. However, the king also recognizes that in real political life there are “gray areas”, where the law is ambiguous or silent and that in such areas it is possible or even desirable to exert his moral leadership upon the political process. In answer to a journalist’s observation that he had the power to choose his own prime ministers, the king replied that whatever influence he had in this area was based, not on the use of power, but on suasion, “because the people have faith in their king.” He went on to say, “if the chief of state is no good they will make him into a rubber-stamp. But if the chief of state is better they will perhaps ask for his opinion because the opinion is respected — that is the difference. But how can I have the respect of the people? It is because I don’t use the power as you describe. If there is a rule I go by the rule. But if there is no rule then my opinion would be heard (emphasis added).”

While his subjects continue with their search for the most durable and beneficial system of politics and governance, King Bhumibol acts as the nation’s conscience, last-resort conflict manager, and promoter of national reconciliation, when the need arises.

He first played this role during the 1973 crisis, not only preventing the military from further using force against demonstrators, but also helping to establish a civilian government under a widely accepted leadership. On several occasions between 1973 and 1991, the palace “positioned” itself in such a way as to restrain certain actions of military groups, which would have toppled the ruling government, caused bloodshed, or precipitated unpredictable crises. In turn, this role created a balance — precarious at times to be sure — among power groups: the military, bureaucracy, political parties, and business interests. In 1992, he once more saved the nation from a crisis and gave democracy
another chance to be back on track. One can only speculate what kind of political turmoil might have engulfed Thailand during the economic crisis in the late 1990s, had the king not been there, constantly providing words of wisdom and comfort to a troubled populace and lending moral support to a democratically elected government seeking to address the economic crisis in a democratic way.

Although King Bhumibol tries to maintain his position “above” politics, it is inevitable, given the monarchy’s and his own popularity, that what he and members of his family think, do, or say have political implications. Because what they think, do, or say have political implications, it is also inevitable that questions arise regarding the monarchy’s political impartiality. Royal support and approval is seen by some as a necessary source of political legitimacy, even for a democratically elected leader and government. Without it, some say, no one can stay in power for long.

There is no simple answer to such questions. However, a number of pertinent points should be made.

First, perceptions of the royal family’s political partisanship seem to be largely influenced by the longevity of General Prem Tinsulanonda’s premiership. His close ties with the palace both before and during his eight years in office cannot be denied. Significantly, almost immediately after stepping down in 1988, he was appointed to the Privy Council, which he was later to chair.

However, there were also other factors which contributed to Prem’s success. One was the state of the political parties. For most of this period, they were weak, lacking in the kind of leadership which could present a serious challenge to Prem, and yet anxious to be in power. It was these political parties that time and again competed for his favours and invited him to be Prime Minister. Another was Prem’s own political skills. Although he denied that he was a politician, he was a politician par excellence and a political leader with a masterful touch. The third and perhaps most important factor was Prem’s personal honesty and incorruptibility. This won him widespread support, from the highest institutions of the realm to the common man in the street and the poor farmer in the rice fields.

This suggests that Prem’s case was an exception rather than the rule. Indeed, if one examines the list of twelve prime ministers since Sanya Thammasak, who was personally appointed by the king in the aftermath of the October 1973 crisis, one can see that almost all of them, including Anand Panyarachun, were not close to the palace before assuming the premiership. Moreover, apart from Prem, the two who had been closest to the palace, namely, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj and Thanin Kraivixien, were in office altogether for less than two years. If royal political partisanship had always been a clear, present and decisive factor in politics, then the pattern of premierships would have been very different.

However, to deny the monarchy’s political partisanship is one thing, but to say that King Bhumibol and the royal family have no political preferences or
opinions at all is quite another. As evident above, for a very long time the king has consistently held on to a set of political beliefs and values. Therefore, it would indeed be “unnatural” for him not to have political preferences and opinions.

If one examines Thai history over the last half century and extrapolates from his speeches and writings over the years, the “composite” picture of a “preferred” political leader which emerges is that of a good, honest, well-intentioned and loyal person, who works hard to maintain the security of the realm and the unity of the people, bring economic prosperity to the country without allowing it to live beyond its means, reduce poverty and the gap between the rich and the poor, and inculcate in the society, especially the younger generations, some of the traditional values, such as discipline, compassion, and moderation.

Nor has the king been reluctant to express his opinions, when the need or the occasion arises, although, as Anand pointed out, he has to be careful and refrain from speaking in too specific terms. Such opinions can be about persons, governments, or problems, which he deems important but have not been sufficiently well addressed by those responsible. One recent example was his birthday speech in December 2001. With the Thaksin Shinawatra Cabinet in attendance, he warned that the country was heading for “decline” and “catastrophe” and, without naming names, talked about problems of arrogance, intolerance, and double standards. A year later, he focussed on the perils of drugs and urged greater efforts to address the problem.

King Bhumibol’s political beliefs and values have prompted some to consider him a conservative. However, while these beliefs and values can be fairly described as conservative, it would be both inaccurate and misleading to call him a “conservative”.

The king sees it as his duty to serve and to give. If he thinks that in the discharge of this duty there is a need to expound, preach, and teach traditional or tradition-based beliefs and values, then he would do it. If the very same task requires new thinking, new ideas, new approaches, then he would be equally willing to initiate, innovate, and experiment. His considerable achievements in rural development and crop replacement bear testimony to the progressive side of his nature. So do his lifelong work for the common people, and his constant contacts with them make him more “human” and keep him in closer touch with his subjects than other contemporary monarchs. His interventions in politics may be considered by some to be acts beyond the bounds of the Constitution, aimed at preserving the political status quo, but they also saved lives, prevented catastrophes, and made him unique.

Labels do not easily fit great men. Certainly, the “conservative” label does not do him justice. To pay tribute to a modern-day king, who has revived an ancient institution thousands of years old and made it popular, loved, respected, and relevant in an age of rapid change and restless scepticism, a far more fitting title would be the “People’s Monarch”.

© 2003 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore
The Future

The world does not stand still. All men and institutions go through processes of change and transformation. King Bhumibol has achieved a great deal for both his country and the institution he inherited without forewarning. But his very success has inevitably sown seeds of apprehensions about the future.

The line of succession is clear. The 1997 Constitution, like its predecessors, requires that “succession to the Throne shall be in accordance with the Palace Law B.E.2467, together with approval of Parliament” (Article 22). The Palace Law of B.E. 2467, or 1924 A.D., in turn stipulates that “in this era the time has not come for a royal female to ascend the Throne as Reigning Queen with the full powers as the Monarch of Siam. Therefore, it is absolutely forbidden to place any royal female in the Line of Royal Succession” (Article 13). Thus, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn is the first in line to succeed to the throne.

During the last half a century or so, King Bhumibol, the world’s longest reigning monarch, has considerably enhanced the barami of the monarchical institution. This is a tremendous asset for the future. However, if the history of the Chakri dynasty is any guide, the legacy is not absolute; his successors will have to earn their own barami as well in order to make a success of their inheritance. Because the king has set a very high standard of achievement, the challenge of earning their own barami will be all the more difficult for his successors. The Crown Prince is under no illusions about the scale of the task facing him. “I have lots more to learn, lots more to improve in every field”, he confided to journalists in 1987. “This great man has kept this country together over a period of 40 years. That’s more than words can describe”. 26 Over the longer term, his ability to learn and win the people’s affections will be a crucial factor in shaping the future of the Thai monarchy. Also vital will be the contributions of the popular Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who has already been entrusted with key responsibilities related to education, development, art and culture.

The inherent difficulty in following a great man’s footsteps is compounded by the fact that Thailand and the world are likely to continue to undergo rapid and far-reaching changes. Life will change, traditions will die, and new values will emerge. How well will the Thai monarchy and the inheritors of the institution cope with such changes?

The kingdom’s political scene is likely to become even more complex. Up to now, the pace of political reform has been uneven at best, but the process of democratization is certain to continue over the longer term. The problem is that democracy can be a lottery. It can generate a variety of conflict situations. It can also produce a variety of political leaders: some may be die-hard royalists, others may have their own agenda to pursue; some may be traditional in their values, beliefs and political orientations, others may be socialists, communists or populists; some may remember history, others may conveniently forget it. How well can King Bhumibol’s successors cope with such bewildering
complexities? Can they continue to act as the nation’s conscience, last-resort conflict manager, and promoter of national reconciliation? How far and how effectively can they respond to competition, say from socialist, communist, or populist leaders, to win the hearts and minds of the rural populace, who provide the backbone of loyalty to the monarchy in the present era? In a future-oriented age of fibre optics, cyber and e-knowledge, can they still encourage the people to remember the past, to remember that once upon a time in their history there were brave kings and warriors, wise princes and nobles, who had saved the kingdom, helped to bring to it no small measures of peace and prosperity, and laid down many of the foundations necessary for its further progress and development?

The successful role of the monarchy in resolving the May 1992 crisis should be a source of both joy and apprehension. On the one hand, the king’s acts should serve as a reminder of the Thais’ good fortune in having a traditional institution and a living embodiment of that institution to provide guidance in times of trouble and help lead them out of quagmires of political conflict. On the other hand, the episode should be a cause for serious self-reflection.

Well over half a century has passed since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932, and the Thais have yet to find new institutions to act as frameworks and mechanisms for the exercise of reason in the conduct of their political life. Instead, they still have to rely upon the central institution of that ancien regime for their political well-being and progress.

At present, the kingdom continues to be blessed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s barami. No blessing lasts forever. The monarchy will remain, but its future capacity to act as the guardian angel of Thailand’s political process may not necessarily be the same. The question is how and how far the nation can build up strong political institutions over the long run to ensure a stronger democracy, and a stronger constitutional monarchy, without having to impose upon the monarchical institution the burden of undue, unrealistic, and ultimately unfulfilled expectations.

NOTES
The perspectives contained in this paper are the author’s only and do not represent the viewpoints of any institution with which he is connected.

2. In the BBC’s television documentary, Soul of the Nation (London: British Broadcast Corporation, 1979).
3. The kingdom was originally known as “Siam”, and the name was not changed to Thailand until the late 1930s. Purists will not like it, but here, to simplify the matter, only the words “Thai” or “Thailand” will be used.
4. Sombat Chantornvong and Chai-anan Smudavanija, Kwamkid Tang Karnmuang lae Sangkom Thai [Thai Political and Social Thoughts] (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Suksa, 1980), p. 38. (author’s translation). All the translations from Thai texts in this article are by the author, unless stated otherwise.


8. Denis D. Gray et al., eds., *The King of Thailand in World Focus* (Bangkok: The Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand, 1988), p. 54. The volume contains interviews of the king and members of the royal family conducted by several foreign journalists. To make things simpler, in this article no reference will be made to specific interviews.


10. Ibid., p. 136.

11. Ibid., p. 135.

12. Ibid., p. 119.

13. Ibid., p. 108.


17. BBC, op. cit.


24. Ibid., p. 135.
