



Politics in Thailand

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PREFACE

THAILAND is not an important nation in terms of international power. It has a small population (perhaps 25,500,000). It can muster only a small army. It commands no important trade routes. Its economic potential does not appear to be very great and remains little developed even though Thai farmers contribute over 1,000,000 tons of rice to the international market each year. The kingdom's gross geographical product in 1950 has been estimated to have been only about one and a quarter billion dollars, of which 57 per cent originated in agricultural and extractive industry.

From the point of view of the Southeast Asian peninsula, however, Thailand is a nation of importance. Its size and potential are not out of proportion to those of its major neighbors—Burma, Vietnam, and Malaya—and are considerably greater than those of Laos and Cambodia. Given the strategic importance of this area south of China, east of India, and north of Indonesia, the study of Thailand has an extrinsic and immediate interest. As a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and an avowed adherent of the Western side of the Cold War, Thailand's nature and future are of particular interest to the United States of America and its allies.

As a political phenomenon Thailand also has genuine intrinsic interest. The fact that of all the nations of South Asia,

Thailand was the only one which retained most of the attributes of sovereignty during the century of European imperialism in that part of the globe is the kingdom's most prominent claim to political fame. But while this state of affairs symbolizes certain truths about Thailand and Thai leaders, it has, I think, tended to obscure others. The kingdom has been considered *sui generis*, impenetrably exotic, and inherently inexplicable. Much of the slim library of works on the subject has carried this message.

In fact, Thailand has been relatively neglected by Western scholarship until quite recently. This deficiency is particularly obvious in regard to politics. Most books published on Thailand before World War II were of the nature of general reviews of a variety of aspects of the country and society in which some discussion of politics formed a part. These works were most often the by-product of visits to Thailand for reasons other than deliberately planned research. Notable among such books are Sir John Bowring's *The Kingdom and People of Siam* (1857), Ernest Young's *The Kingdom of the Yellow Robe* (1898), and Cecil Carter's *The Kingdom of Siam* (1904). Probably the most valuable book of this kind is Walter A. Graham's *Siam*, particularly the second edition (1924). None of these early books makes more than a survey of the government, however.

The decade before World War II saw the publication of several more scholarly works touching on the politics of the kingdom, notably Kenneth P. Landon's *Siam in Transition* (1939), the same author's *The Chinese in Thailand* (1941), and Virginia Thompson's *Thailand: The New Siam* (1941). Two books by H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies* (1931) and *Ancient Siamese Government and Administration* (1934), also gave some insight into the kingdom's traditional forms of government.

In the post-World War II period, particularly the past decade, there have been a number of serious studies made of various aspects of Thai history and society. Most noteworthy among these are James C. Ingram's *Economic Change in Thailand since 1850* (1955), John E. deYoung's *Village Life in Modern Thailand* (1955), G. William Skinner's two studies *Chinese Society in Thailand* (1957) and *Leadership and Power in the Chinese Community of Thailand* (1958), and Walter F. Vella's *Siam under Rama III, 1824-1851* (1957). There have also been several short political studies, including W. D. Reeve's *Public Administration in Siam* (1951), John Coast's *Some Aspects of Siamese Politics* (1953), Walter F. Vella's *The Impact of the West on Government in Thailand* (1955), and James Mosel's essay, "Thai Administrative Behavior" (1957). None of these makes any attempt to analyze more than a few of the elements which make up the Thai political system.

My purpose in writing *Politics in Thailand* has been to analyze the general characteristics of political relationships there. I have sought to present them at a level of generalization appropriate to the fundamental, concrete experiences of Thai politicians and also to show them as a universal human phenomenon. My study is not at least three things which some readers might expect it to be. It is not a political history of Thailand, although all things discussed are given a historical dimension. It is not an exegesis of Thai legal statements as to what the institutions of politics are to be, although legal texts have been considered as evidence of intent and perception. It is not an effort to unravel the details of the incredibly intricate web of personal and clique relationships which are so apparent in Thai politics, although the nature of such relationships is considered as they have meshed and clashed with other forces and influences.

My study isolates and brings into relief those elements of Thai politics which constitute recurrent patterns of institutional behavior. In this sense my work is an examination of Thailand's constitution. I have also tried to bring forward the more prominent dynamic aspects of the structure of institutional behavior. I have emphasized the theme of the interplay of cultural, social, and legal forces which, unforeseen by the participants, has resulted in both gradual and sudden changes.

Throughout, the analysis is focused on the structure of power rather than on the development of policy. In this analysis ideological and policy matters enter as determinants of motive in the relationships of power. Thus adherents to a particular political group or organization may well be moved by the policy of that organization. Policy issues and ideological questions are considered in the following pages not on their merits but in terms of their effectiveness in strengthening power relationships.

Fundamentally, however, issues of politics are moral issues, and power has no ultimate meaning apart from its uses for good or evil. Therefore I would like to disclaim a moral fallacy which is often dangerously implicit in an analysis and description of behavior. It is the notion that what is, is right. This is not true, and no ascription of regularity to social relations is intended to demonstrate that there either cannot be or ought not to be change.

Behind this work lies my hope that it will contribute to a fuller understanding of politics in a certain type of socio-cultural situation. I have tried to avoid treating Thailand as a quaint, exotic, and fundamentally irrelevant accident of history. With perhaps a suggestion of paradox, however, I believe the politics of Thailand has several peculiar characteristics which make it useful for comparative study.

First of all, Thailand's society is relatively simple. For example, it is for the most part ethnically homogeneous. It is located in a compact geographical area. It has no complex and rationalized system of castes or classes. Secondly, Thailand's society has been relatively stable. For almost two centuries it has not been disrupted by the intrusion of foreign rulers, wars of liberation, or any of the varieties of civil strife prevalent in the world of the 1950's. Finally, Thailand's politics is *prima facie* both sophisticated and successful. The government of the kingdom rules a substantial population of high civilization and maintains peace and other conditions conducive to humane livelihood. Moreover, the government has faced in its recent history a number of external challenges which to other peoples have proved overwhelming. These three aspects of Thailand's politics recommend it as a manageable and worth-while object of study.

The study is based on literary sources, personal observation, and systematic investigation. I spent about four years in the country at two different times between 1952 and 1958. During that time I had a variety of experiences including teaching, newspaper work, and scholarly investigation which provided some different viewpoints of Thai life. The interpretation that follows is the result.

I now turn to the gratifying task (though one difficult to express adequately) of acknowledging the help and inspiration of others. This work would not have been possible without the free gift of time by many Thai politicians and officials with whom I talked, some repeatedly and some at great length. I would like to thank them all. I would also like to acknowledge the help received in obtaining information from the National Library, the Chulalongkorn University library, the Secretariat of the National Assembly, the Department of the

Interior and the Election Division of the Ministry of the Interior, the Institute of Public Administration, and other offices of the government of Thailand.

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Finally, to my wife, Marie, for many contributions, my loving thanks.

It is perhaps fortunate for all the afore-mentioned that I alone am responsible for the weaknesses and mistakes.

D. A. W.

Los Angeles

May 1962



Note on the Transliteration of Thai

THAI names (with certain exceptions), publication titles, and terms have been transcribed according to a phonetic system based on that recommended by the Library of Congress Orientalia Process Committee which in turn is based on the "General System of Phonetic Transcription of Thai Characters into Roman" recommended by the Royal Institute of Thailand and outlined in the *Journal of the Thailand Research Society* of March, 1941. I have not distinguished long and short vowels, and I have changed the transcription of those central unrounded vowels transcribed ú to ü.

Briefly the system is as follows. The voiced unaspirated stops are written *b* and *d*; the voiceless unaspirated stops are written *p*, *t*, *čh*, and *k*; the voiceless aspirated stops are written *ph*, *th*, *ch*, and *kh*. The glottal stop is, in principle, not transcribed but occasionally a hyphen appears in its place between vowels for clarity. The voiceless spirants are written *f*, *s*, and *h*, and the voiced nasals, *m*, *n*, and *ng*. The nine vowels are written thus: front unrounded, *i*, *e*, *ae*; central unrounded, *ü*, *oe*, *a*; back rounded, *u*, *o*, *o*. In the initial position, the voiced semivowels are written *y* and *w*. In the final position, they are respectively written as *i*, and as *o* when following *a* or *ae* or as *w* when following *i*.



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I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THAI kingdoms in the valley of the Čhao Phraya River have held sway over great areas of central mainland Southeast Asia since the fourteenth century.¹ The fertile alluvial plain of the river basin is superbly suited to the irrigated cultivation of rice. Therefore it has been able to support the population and provide the surplus of sustenance needed to maintain a formidable state.

¹ The terminology used in reference to the Thai and Thailand is a source of some confusion. The language and culture group (Thai, T'ai, or Tai) lives in Thailand, Laos, northern Vietnam, southwest China, and northern Burma. In various places, these people are known as Thai, Shan, Lao, and, in the case of those living the Čhao Phraya Valley, Siamese. The present kingdom of Thailand was officially named Siam (Prathet Sayam) until 1939 as well as from 1946 to 1949. In 1939 and again in 1949 the name Thailand (Prathet Thai) was adopted. There is a suggestion of nationalism and even irredentism in this name.

The most illustrious capital of the Thai kings before the Bangkok period was Ayutthaya (founded in the fourteenth century A.D.), located on the west bank of the river about 50 miles from the present mouth. The dynasties of Ayutthaya fell on evil days in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The last king was overthrown and the city sacked by its traditional Burmese antagonists in 1767. The kingdom then fell into disorder, and several aspirants contended for the throne. The dominions were finally reunited in a number of hard-fought campaigns by King Tak Sin of Thonburi, who reigned until 1782. He was deposed by his senior general, Čhao Phraya Čhakkri, the founder of the present Čhakkri dynasty of Bangkok.

The first three reigns of the Čhakkri dynasty² which ended in 1851 constitute a period of reconstruction of the glories of the traditional kingdom and the expansion of the domains of the kingdom. When Rama III died, the dominion extended

² Čhakkri, the dynastic name, is derived from the title held by the founder before he ascended the throne. The dynasty is also known as Rathanakosin, an honorific for Bangkok, the capital. The kings have elaborate honorifics, but it is convenient to refer to them as Rama followed by a Roman numeral designating the reign. This style was adopted by Rama VI for himself and his predecessors and is, in fact, precisely correct only for the first six reigns. Thai names and titles are a constant matter of confusion. Thai names are usually preceded by a title implying rank. It is convenient to refer to members of the royal family as Prince (e.g., Prince Damrong). Under the absolute monarchy nonroyal officials had one of the following titles, arranged in descending order—Čhao Phraya, Phraya, Phra, Luang, and Khun. Under the constitutional system no further titles of this kind have been conferred, and it has become customary to use either the title Nai, meaning mister, or a military rank. Older men still use their pre-1932 titles, however. Following the title is the given name and then the family name. People are best known by their given names and are customarily addressed by it plus a title. Such usage is generally followed in this book.

over present-day Thailand and in addition made claims in Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, and several other small Malay states; in Cambodia; in most of Laos; and in the hill country west of Chiangmai up to the banks of the Salween. The government was in a splendid state of vitality as it faced the power of Western nations which intruded their domination over Southeast Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The kingdom remained autonomous within the makeshift structure of empire.

Thailand's successful response to the challenge of Europe is largely a credit to the wit and will of three Čhakkrī kings—Rama IV (Mongkut), Rama V (Čhulalongkōn), and Rama VI (Wachirawut)—the wit to understand the changing place of the kingdom and the will to act accordingly. During the years of their combined reigns (1851–1925) the difficulty which overwhelmed all other public matters was to find the way to maintain the independence of the kingdom. The policy followed by all three was one of yielding the necessary concessions while at the same time reorganizing and consolidating what remained. It was a policy conducted with honor but without false pride and, as the course of events proved, it was a wise and realistic one.

Rama IV came to the throne at the age of 46. Throughout most of his previous adult life he had been a scholarly Buddhist monk, a student of European languages and science as well as of Buddhism and the traditional culture of Thailand. During the late years of the third reign, he was the center of an up-to-date (i.e., receptive to the West) group at court which after his enthronement became the nucleus of his administration.³ This group appears to have been aware of the perilous meaning of European expansion in Asia and to have

³ Prince Damrong Rachanuphap, *Prawat bukkhon samkhan* ("Lives of Important People"; Bangkok: Phrae Bhithaya Co., 1953), p. 115.