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THE FOREIGN PRESS' CHANGING
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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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The Foreign Press' Changing Perceptions of Thailand's Monarchy

By Puangthong R. Pawakapan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- During the Cold War, well-informed foreign journalists did not naïvely accept the Thai official narrative that the monarchy was strictly above politics. They were well aware of the influence and political power of the palace.
- However, they believed the institution was necessary for Thailand to survive the communist threat, oppressive military leaders and corrupt politicians. For decades, their coverage helped promoted the benign image of the institution internationally.
- The intransigent crisis in Thailand since the *coup d'état* of 2006 inevitably affected foreign press coverage regarding the key players' role in the conflict. Discussions of the role of the monarchy and the royalist elites have appeared more frequently than ever and become increasingly critical.
- The apparent changes in foreign journalists' perceptions since 2006 appear to be the result of the anti-democratic behaviour of the monarchists and of the royalist movement; and the increase in *lèse majesté* charges. The establishment's unnecessary fear of losing power and inability to adapt to socio-political change are viewed as an immense obstacle to Thailand's democratization and to efforts at conflict resolution.

The Foreign Press' Changing Perceptions of Thailand's Monarchy¹

By Puangthong R. Pawakapan²

INTRODUCTION

In comparison to neighbouring countries, Thailand had long had the image of being a stable and unified country. Its monarchy was seen as a vital force behind this happy situation. When the Cold War ended, expectations were high that the kingdom would act as a great driver for regional economic cooperation as well as a model for democratization in the region.

However, the image of Thailand as presented in major foreign press outlets today tells a sadder story: they portray a country that has been in deep crisis since the *coup d'état* that overthrew Thaksin Shinawatra's elected government on 19 September 2006. As yet, a way out of the crisis is not in sight. The latest coup overthrowing the Phuea Thai government in 2014 swept away a fragile opportunity for Thailand to carefully build a functioning democracy. Foreign press coverage and comments regarding the key players' role in the conflict have changed too. Most notable is how the mainstream narrative of the monarchy is increasingly being challenged by foreign journalists. Discussion of the role and objectives of

¹ This article is one of the outputs from my research fellowship at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), Singapore, July 2014 to January 2015. My special thanks go to Michael Montesano, Terence Chong, Thongchai Winichakul, Tyrell Haberkorn and Patrick Jory for their friendship and comments.

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the traditional elites and the draconian law of *lèse majesté* has appeared more frequently than ever, while news coverage and op-ed articles on the royal institution have become increasingly critical. The titles of articles since the 2006 coup themselves convey the critical tone of the foreign press towards the monarchy, a prospect one could hardly have expected before that coup. Examples of these are many: “As Thai Monarchy’s Power Wanes, King Still Revered” by Associated Press; “Thailand’s King Sees His Influence Fading” by *New York Times*; “Thai Monarch Is a Factor in Dispute” by *Wall Street Journal*; “The King and Its Crisis: A Right Royal Mess” by *The Economist*, and “Thailand, A Coup, the Crown and the Two Middle Classes,” by *The Diplomat*.³

Despite rigorously maintaining a god-like image of traditional Buddhist-Brahmin kingship, the Thai monarchy has simultaneously pitched itself as international and cosmopolitan. Since the time of King Chulalongkorn (r.1868–1910), the institution has been concerned about its international image. Monarchs thus refashioned themselves in line with contemporary European norms: Western-style etiquette, dress, habitation, patronage, and pageantry made their way to the court and were demonstrated in both the domestic and international arena.⁴ The elegant images of the King and the Queen on extensive overseas trips in the early 1960s have been reproduced continually at home. The invitation extended to monarchies from twenty-five countries around the world to join the grand celebration of King Bhumibol’s sixtieth year on the throne in June 2006 also reflects the monarchists’ yearning for global prestige. Moreover, they have shown themselves to be sensitive

³ Grant Peck, “As Thai Monarchy’s Power Wanes, King Still Revered”, Associated Press, published in *Jakarta Post*, 25 May 2010; Seth Mydans and Thomas Fuller, “Thailand’s King Sees His Influence Fading”, *New York Times*, 15 May 2010; Tome Wright, “Thai Monarch Is a Factor in Dispute”, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 2014; “The King and Its Crisis: A Right Royal Mess” and “Thailand’s Monarchy: The King and Them”, *The Economist*, 4 December 2008; Serhat Únaldi, “Thailand, A Coup, the Crown and the Two Middle Classes”, *The Diplomat*, 23 May 2014.

⁴ Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002).

to negative perceptions from the international community, and have tried to defend the royal institution through publications and interviews. The publication of a big, thick volume on *King Bhumibol Adulyadej: A Life's Work*,⁵ prepared under the chairmanship of former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, is one of the attempts to refute Paul Handley's landmark book *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej*.⁶ When the monarchists learned that Yale University Press was about to publish Paul Handley's work, they sent Bowornsak Uwanno, a royalist legal expert, to persuade Yale to delay the publication until after the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the King's reign.

This article examines the changing perception the foreign press has had of the Thai monarchy. It argues that Western journalists have become increasingly unfavourable towards the monarchists after the coup in 2006, and looks at how post-2006 coup incidents affected the foreign media's perception and how they have viewed the monarchists' arguments. To begin, it is necessary to compare dominant perceptions of foreign media towards the Thai monarchy before and after the 2006 coup. The sources of this study include articles in major foreign press outlets and interviews with nine Thailand-based foreign journalists and one security expert. Because of the *lèse majesté* law, their identities are kept anonymous.

DISCOURSE ON THE MONARCHY BEFORE THE 2006 COUP

When King Bhumibol marked sixty years on the throne in 2006, most foreign media, if not all, embraced most of Thailand's official narrative

⁵ Nicholas Grossman and Dominic Faulder, eds., *King Bhumibol Adulyadej: A Life's Work* (Singapore and Bangkok: Editions Didier Millet, 2011). In addition, see Suchit Bunbongkarn and Prudhisana Jumbala, eds., *Monarchy and Constitutional Rule in Democratizing Thailand* (Bangkok: Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2012); The National Identity Office, *King Bhumibol: Strength of the Land* (Bangkok: the Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2009).

⁶ Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

on the monarchy. It was common for them to describe the King in positive terms, such as “the most beloved and revered king”, “the embodiment of the nation’s spirit”, “the supreme moral authority”, “the peacemaker”, “the unifying force”, “the development monarch”, “the pillar of stability” and “the democratic king”. They agreed that King Bhumibol’s six decades on the throne have been essential for Thailand’s political stability and development. In short, the devoted monarch was a great blessing for the Thais. These praises prevail in a collection, *The King of Thailand in World Focus*, edited by two veteran journalists, Denis D. Gray and Dominic Faulder, and published in 2006 by the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Thailand to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the King’s reign. It consists of 167 selected news pieces from 56 different media agencies around the world written between 1946 and 2006.⁷ This book was an updated edition of the 1988 edition with the same title, published to celebrate the King’s sixtieth birthday and his status as the longest reigning monarch in Thai history. As the inside of the front cover states, the collection represents “The world’s longest-reigning monarch seen through the eyes of foreign journalists and photographers, spanning nearly eight decades of turmoil and triumph”. These books are clear and collected evidence of the positive view the foreign press corps in Bangkok has long had of the King.

Although the image of the benevolent king has largely prevailed in the foreign press, not all of them agreed with the Thai official narrative that the monarchy was “above politics”. The influence and the role in politics that the monarchy had had did not go unnoticed by Western journalists, especially during the Cold War period when the monarchists manoeuvred to restore their dominant role. Foreign journalists, as early as in the 1960s, pointed out rather openly that royal endorsement was the main source of legitimacy and effective sovereign power for governments, especially military regimes. They apparently had more freedom and space to discuss the monarchy than the Thai media. This

⁷ Denis D. Gray and Dominic Faulder, eds., *The King of Thailand in World Focus* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2008).

was possibly due to the fact that their readers were mostly outside of Thai society or from the Thai elite, and foreign news media penetration was still minimal.

For example, in a 1960 article, “The King of Siam”, *The Observer*, a British publication, explained to their readers the past tension between King Bhumibol and Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram, who had been an obstacle to the former’s public role, until Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat seized power from Phibun in a coup in 1957. The King’s agreeable relationship with Sarit significantly transformed the role of the constitutional monarchy in that his developing interest in politics and his new appeal to the populace had been increasingly noticeable. The article concluded that “the basis of Thai rule therefore remains the King and the ruling military group”.⁸ *Time* magazine in 1966 also illuminated how the monarchy’s powerful status was important for the country’s security and stability. *Time* explicitly stated that the King had tacitly supported Sarit’s military takeover as premier. As a result, “partly in gratitude, partly [to] rally public support for his own rule, Sarit consciously set out to build up the image of the tall, spare king and his comely queen.” They worked closely together to develop the country. By the time of the military regime of Field Marshals Thanom Kittikhachon and Praphat Charusathian (1963–73), the growing power of the King made him “more than ever the throne behind the power”. The King and the Queen, working as a team, took every opportunity to identify themselves with Thailand and its progress.⁹

Foreign journalists were well aware that the monarchy played an essential role in the United States-sponsored anti-communist operations. King Bhumibol’s tireless visits to the countryside and numerous rural development programmes were vital components of the monarchy’s image. The royal institution became a symbol of “Thainess” resisting the

⁸ “The King of Siam”. *The Observer*, 17 July 1960, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 49–51.

⁹ “A Monarchy Fights for Freedom”, *Time*, 27 May 1966, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 53–56.

communist invasion.¹⁰ The King's endorsement in the form of speeches and overseas trips also assisted in building up popular support for Thai military cooperation with the United States in the Vietnam War. *Time* magazine pointed out that, because of the King's moral authority, his message to the Thai people regarding the importance of Thailand's military cooperation with the United States during the Vietnam War helped alleviate tension between the Thais and the increasing numbers of American soldiers and bases in Thailand. Even officials of the U.S. Information Service (USIS) in Bangkok, who were actively involved in anti-communist psychological operations and propaganda, concluded that "USIS funds could not be better employed than in spreading the likeness of His Majesty".¹¹

In this respect, students of Thailand have learned from the pioneering academic works of Thak Chaloemtiarana and Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian¹² of the partnership of the King, Sarit and the United States. However, since the 1960s, foreign journalists also observed how such a relationship transformed the role and power of the monarchy in Thai politics. For example, *The Observer* noted that the King appeared to be happier during Sarit's government than during Phibun's. "Relations between government and king eased. Consultations between them became more frequent. The stifling atmosphere of the past lifted and the King began to loosen up".¹³ Another issue that the foreign press has always emphasized

¹⁰ See study of the role of the monarchy in the U.S.'s psychological operation in Natthapon Chaiching, "Phrabarami Pokklao Tai Ngao Insi: Phaen Songkhram Chittawitthaya Amerikan Kap Kan Sang Sathaban Kasat Pen Sanyalak Haeng Chat [The Royal Benevolence under the Eagle's Shadow: American's Psychological Warfare and the Making of the Monarchy as the National Symbol]", *Fa Diaokan* 9, no. 2 (April–June 2011): 94–166.

¹¹ "A Monarchy Fights for Freedom", *Time*, 27 May 1966, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 53–56.

¹² Thak Chalormtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1979), pp. 309–34; Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *King, Country and Constitutions: Thailand's Political Development 1932–2000* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹³ "The King of Siam", *The Observer*, 17 July 1960, in Gray and Faulder, eds., op. cit., pp. 49–51.

was King Bhumibol's six decades of unfaltering commitment to improve the livelihood of the poor in the remote areas through numerous royal projects.¹⁴ It was seen as a great blessing for the country. *The King of Thailand in World's Focus* devotes an entire chapter to the royal projects.

The generation of foreign journalists covering Thailand during the Cold War period was aware that the Thai monarchy did not strictly fit the Western concept of constitutional monarchy or of being above politics. However, they did not see it as a serious problem. A 1981 piece in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* provided quite a straightforward analysis in unambiguously reporting on how the palace's position was the most important factor for the success or failure of political factions. This article was published after the failed coup by the "Young Turks" military group against the government of General Prem Tinsulanond in April of that year, and analysed the influential role of King Bhumibol in this crisis. *The Review* told its readers that when the Young Turks staged a coup on 1 April, the King departed from Bangkok in the early hours to join Prem in Khorat. The action "spelled the death knell for the Young Turks' coup attempt. Although the King made no public comment during the affair, his mere presence at Korat decisively tipped the balance in Prem's favour, bestowing on him continued legitimacy."¹⁵ Overall, the palace's role in the failed coup of the Young Turks was seen as being supportive of the legitimate government and of democracy.

While *The Review* noted that political interference might possibly have a negative impact on the royal institution, this important issue was not examined critically. The article reiterated that "the King as symbol of the nation could, however, stay far above the political world only so long as there was a person or institution able to provide the country with effective and tolerable government," such as that of Sarit and, later,

¹⁴ The Royal Project is an initiative of King Bhumibol in 1969. It covers a wide range of issues, such as problems of deforestation, poverty eradication in the rural areas, opium production by promoting alternative crops.

¹⁵ David Jenkins and Philip Bowring, "The Power Wielded by a Constitutional Monarchy", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19–25 June 1981, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 96–99.

Prem.¹⁶ But when the military regimes were corrupt and oppressive to an intolerable point, such as those of Thanom-Prapat in 1973 and Suchinda Kraprayun in 1992, the King would intervene. He would be a just and timely arbiter to defuse the bomb before society experienced great damage. The monarchy was impartial and held no personal interests. Unlike constitutional monarchies elsewhere, the King drew authority from his own merit and actions in pursuit of the well-being of his subjects. He had succeeded in achieving a supreme moral authority.¹⁷ In other words, the monarchy may not be strictly above politics but it was certainly not a party to political conflict. Foreign media thus embraced and heralded the justification and the alleged uniqueness of Thailand's constitutional monarchy.

However, there was a discrepancy in the rationalization of the relationship between the palace and the military regimes. On the one hand, the monarchy was always viewed in a positive light and the King's approval was crucial for regime legitimacy. On the other hand, the authoritarian military regimes were critically assessed, despite the fact that the military's royal-nationalist ideology and commitment to protect the institution since Sarit's government provided opportunities for the palace to consolidate its power and prestige. The view was that society could not depend on self-serving military leaders. But the King could "restrain an unscrupulous successor to the marshal. Therefore, the stronger King Bhumibol emerged, the better the guarantee for Thailand's internal equilibrium."¹⁸ King Bhumibol was thus presented as a democratic monarch despite his corrupt and anti-democratic military allies.

Since the popular uprising against the Thanom-Prapat regime in October 1973, the foreign press largely adopted and promoted the idea

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See "King Bhumipol: "Politics is a Filthy Business", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 October 1974; James Walsh, "Democracy Rising", *Time*, 1 June 1992, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 47-49 and 100-103 respectively.

¹⁸ "The King of Siam", *The Observer*, 17 July 1960, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 49-51.

of King Bhumibol as a defender of democracy. The palace's intervention on 14 October, its willingness to shelter people fleeing violent military suppression, and the end of the Thanom-Prapat regime, showed that the King stood by the people and democracy.¹⁹ (However, little is said about the palace's position on the student massacre by right wing groups in 1976.) To reinforce this image, the incident of the royal intervention to end the riot following the May 1992 military suppression of anti-Suchinda demonstrators has become a favourite reference for most of the foreign press. The photo of King Bhumibol reprimanding the two antagonists, General Suchinda Kraprayun and Chamlong Simueang, has been reproduced again and again.

Interestingly, Western academics specializing in Thailand during the Cold War period also had similar perceptions. Benedict Anderson pointed out in a 1978 article that, rather than taking a critical examination of the subject of their studies, Thailand specialists tended to see the role of the monarchy as a case of the uniqueness of Thai society. This was because that generation of Western scholars had a tendency to approach Southeast Asian societies and area studies through the lens of indigenous culture and nationalism in opposition to colonial powers. In the case of Thai studies, the Chakri dynasty was presented as playing a historical role in modernizing and building the Thai nation. Here, Western Thailand specialists were reinforcing what Thongchai Winichakul terms "royal nationalism".²⁰ Western journalists appeared to work along this same line. The *Far Eastern Economic Review*, three months after the student uprising in October 1973, put King Bhumibol in the same league as other anti-colonial nationalist leaders in Southeast Asia: "Southeast Asian has thrown up many remarkable men — Ho Chi Minh, Sihanouk, General

¹⁹ Peter O'Loughlin, "The Students' Revolt", Associated Press, 17 October 1973, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 90–91.

²⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, "Prawattisat Thai Baeb Racha Chatniyom: Chak Yuk Ananikhom Amphang Su Racha Chatniyommai Rue Latthi Sadetpho Khong Kadumpi Thai Nai Patchuban" [Thai Royal Nationalist Historiography: From Crypto-colonialism to New Royal Nationalism or the Cult of King Chulalongkorn of the Present Thai Bourgeoisie], in *Sinlapa Watthanatham* 23, no. 1 (2001): 56–65.

Giap. I wouldn't have dreamed of saying it a few months ago, but King Bhumibol may wind up being remembered as the most remarkable of them all."²¹ It seems that Thailand's experts and foreign journalists in this period reinforced each other's perception of the monarchy.

In the context of corrupt military leaders and the threat of communism, the foreign press in general tended to believe that the newborn democracy needed a benign, authoritative and unifying figure to lead and save Thailand. It was a position that King Bhumibol could fulfil.²² Therefore, they voluntarily assisted in the careful construction of the benign image of King Bhumibol in the international arena. However, they failed to analyse how the monarchy's partnership with military leaders essentially strengthened military rules, a legacy that Thailand still faces.

The period between 1992 and 2006 appears to be a time when the King's power and moral authority reached their zenith: the country was governed by elected governments, and though all elected governments after 1992 except that of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–05) failed to complete its four-year term, the country was relatively stable. Most journalists believed that coups were a thing of the past for Thailand. There were no political crises demanding royal intervention. Foreign journalists arriving in Thailand during this period tended to accept the view that the monarchy was above, or not a key player in, politics. Moreover, the palace's inconspicuous role made it difficult for journalists to find concrete evidence pointing to a significant political intervention. They could only say factually that the King approved military governments, while military governments' policies and practices were separate matters. On the contrary, members of the royal family were mainly involved in development projects.²³ The King's annual speech and advice to

²¹ T.D. Allman, "Bhumibol: Asian Phenomenon", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 17 December 1973, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 156–57.

²² Interview with Dane G., Thailand, 25 June 2015. Dane G. moved to Thailand since the 1970s. He works for the U.S.-based multinational news agency.

²³ Electronic mail correspondence with P. Friendly on 16 and 23 May 2015. P. Friendly arrived Thailand in 1987 to work for a weekly Asian news magazine and left Thailand before 2006.