

Thongchai Winichakul

Royalist Guided Democracy in Thailand

GRIPS, 24 Apr 2017

From love to fear: The rise of King Vajiralongkorn

By Claudio Sopranzetti

Aljazeera, 11 April 2017

- Thailand's new king started his reign wresting more power from the junta
- The [amended constitution] provides the King with complete control over the appointment of a regent in his absence, cancel the need for a parliamentary counter-signature to royal orders, and re-establish royal crisis powers... including the ability to impose executive and legislative vetoes and the right to dissolve the legislative assembly.
- **With the new constitution Vajiralongkorn will wield more power over the parliament than his father ever did.**

In Thailand: A King's Coup

By David Streckfuss
New York Times, APRIL 9, 2017

*Vajiralongkorn... maybe trying to wrest some power from the junta...
So is [he] trying to redefine the monarchy's relationship with the
military... or is he simply reasserting a few royal prerogatives so he
can keep on living as he pleases? Either way, what are the
implications for the prospects of democracy in Thailand?*

**What political condition
allows the king to do this?**

The monarchy and politics

- The “monarchy” -- not as an individual king, but a political force of royals and non-royals whose interests are tied to the strong royal institution and whose legitimacy derives from the association with the reigning monarch.
- The conventional view of democratization in Thailand overlooks the monarchy because of the common misunderstanding that the monarchy is “above” politics.
- **The truth is the contrary.** The monarchy has been one of the most significant political factors in Thailand’s history of democratization

The 2006 & 2014 coups took place at the critical moment due to the looming succession, given King Bhumibol’s deteriorating health.



Why does the succession matter?

- The succession would not matter much in a country where the monarchy is truly above politics.
- The succession in Thailand is an explosive matter because it tremendously affects the “Royalist Guided Democracy” – the current political system in Thailand



Guided Democracy

An ostensibly democratic polity but one in which the electorate and elected authority do not have substantive power because true power remains in the hands of the dominating oligarchy/ autocrat/ group which is not elected.

Royalist guided democracy

("Royal democracy" for short)

- Formally called, "The Democratic Regime with the Monarchy as the Head of the State", a euphemism for a political system that is ostensibly democratic but in fact the formal parliamentary system is under the domination of the "monarchy" (as a collective term), or the "palace".
- Also called "Thai-style democracy"



History of royal democracy

Its history has intertwined with democratization in Thailand.

- Since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the monarchists remained a political force.
- In 1947-1951, the monarchists laid down the foundations for their political ascendancy in the longer term: ideas of the new monarchy, royalist constitution, the crown property bureau, and so on.

The monarchy rose under the palace-backed military regimes in the 1960s.

History of royal democracy

- * Since the 1973 popular uprising against military rule, the monarchy has become the sole source of political legitimacy.
 - * Hyper-royalism since the mid-1970s to the present
- * Since 1992, the military retreated → the domination of the monarchy over the parliamentary democracy
- * Conflict with the elected authority in the 2000s → two royalist coups in 2006 & 2014 to sustain royal democracy beyond Bhumibol.

Conditions for the rise and the success of royal democracy

- Royal hegemony under a charismatic king for the democratic period
- &
- Hyper-royalism

Royal hegemony under King Bhumibol (r.1946-2016)

- The Ideal Monarch for the democratic polity: **sacred, righteous, and caring for people**
- "Barami" – charisma/ moral authority thanks to high accumulative merits
- The making of the cult of King Bhumibol started in 1960.



Hyper-royalism



- Began 1970s for anti-communism.
Since mid-1980s, for political ascendancy of the monarchy

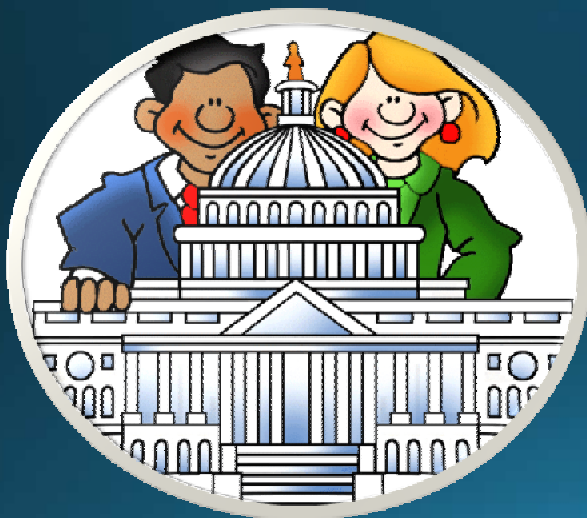
- Intensified royalism as public culture in which the cult of the semi-god Bhumibol has permeated the everyday life
- Royalism becomes a form of religiosity; violation is blasphemy.





Hyper-royalism
=
the emperor's
magical clothes

How does royal democracy operate?



Establish the legal framework (constitution + other laws) that limits the elected authority but allows the exercise of power from "above" through the normal political & administrative system.

- * The privy council
- * The military, esp. the army
- * The government administration
- * The judiciary
- * Other mechanisms to keep the government in check
- * Direct interventions occasionally as needed.

How does royal democracy operate?

THE ARMY

Since 1973, the monarchy has risen to political dominance, whereas the army lost its political legitimacy.



Post-1992, the military has vowed to be the guardian of the monarchy – in their own words, the “soldiers of the king”.

How does royal democracy operate?

GOVERNMENT

- * The elected authority must be limited and kept in check. A fragmented and unpopular government is preferred.
- * Key positions in government agencies must be approved by the palace.
- * Limited room for new policies by an elected government while regular programs/projects in ministries include thousands of the royal projects



“Thaksin’s ambitious reforms ... were too radical and too speedy for ... the royalists, the military, government officers, as well as conservatives” (Suehiro 2014).

How does royal democracy operate?

THE JUDICIARY

* Usually obedient and serve the supreme power of the time (military or else).

* Under the royal hegemony, judges believe that they are superior to the elected authority and ordinary people – hence, complete independence from the government. Instead, “the judiciary acts in the name of the monarch” (Sanya Thammasak)



How does royal democracy operate?

The Privy Council

- Officially, they “deliberate and submit its views on all matters in which the government requests the king’s signature ...”
- In practice, the Privy Council works with the government, judiciary and legislature regularly including “giving advices” to them in order to avoid any case that “might irritate His Majesty”.
- It is the key mechanism to oversee the operations of the power from “above”.



Achievements

Political stability
especially during the Cold War in the 60s-70s, and
during the contest between popular sovereignty
and military rule in the 70s-80s.

Royal dominance
the rule by the "clean" and "good" people
(as opposed to the corrupt and dirty politicians).

Adverse effects

accumulative over time but become apparent at the time of crisis



1. Undermine the
development of popular
sovereignty and democratic
institutions.

2. Undermine the rule of law:

To prevent 'corrupt' people from power & to promote good people,

- Impunity and privileges for some
- Selective applications of the laws (double standard)
 - From selective cases to become legal norms
- From selective moments to become part of everyday life
 - From the constitution to the ordinary laws

Result: Exceptions become the norms

→ legal inequality

→ the justice system & the judiciary are damaged

→ Rules, regulations, and professionalism are weak in the
institutions and professions for public services.



Prospects of Royal Democracy 1

The new constitution perpetuates the royalist-guided democracy.

- Fractured/ weak government with unstable parliament
 - Control by military
- * Increase power of the king and allow his political interventions

Prospects of Royal Democracy 2

Can royal democracy last long after K Bhumibol?

- Can the new king be the sole source of political legitimacy?
(*Barami* is not transferable from father to son)
- How long will the military remain "soldiers of the king"?
Or how long could the new king continue to rely on the military?
(*Was the conditional approval of the new constitution a sign of the palace-junta relations in the future?*)

Prospects of Royal Democracy 3

In the long term ...

The weak rule of law continues.

The damaged justice system is the hardest to rebuild.

No stable democracy without the strong rule of law, and vice versa.
No democracy without the trustworthy justice system, and vice versa.