

Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*

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## A HOLLOW CROWN

Royalty from twenty-five nations gathered in Bangkok in June 2006 to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The festivities culminated in a magnificent river ceremony on 9 June, when fifty-two traditional wooden barges, their bows bearing gilded figures of deities and mythical beasts, manned by over two thousand oarsmen, coursed along the capital's Chao Phraya River. Crowds up to a million strong, most of them wearing yellow—Thais colour-code the days of the week; the King was born on a Monday—lined the riverbanks. Many sported special commemorative wristbands with the slogan 'We love the King' in both Thai and English. The world's longest reigning monarch, draped in a shimmering golden robe, was greeted by a twenty-one-gun salute, fireworks, banners and festive music. It was an image of perfect royal harmony; the Thai genius for hospitality and display had captured global media attention, while the King himself was not only loved by all but profoundly respected for his shining virtue, wisdom, sincerity and personal modesty.

Yet much was rotten in the state of Thailand. The spectacle of national unity was itself a move in a bitter and far-reaching power struggle between the Palace and the Prime Minister, controversial telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, elected by a landslide under the new 1997 constitution. Even the ubiquitous yellow shirts were highly political. The fad for wearing yellow had been launched in September 2005, when maverick media baron and former Thaksin apologist Sondhi Limthongkul began mobilizing popular resistance against the Prime Minister at a series of rallies. Yellow shirts proclaiming 'We love the King' and 'We'll fight for the King' became a symbol of the anti-Thaksin movement. Thaksin tried to deflect the symbolism

by adopting the colour himself in late November 2005, calling on all Thais to wear yellow shirts to celebrate the royal anniversary and pledging allegiance to the crown. But his move backfired. During 2006, after Thaksin's scandal-ridden sell-off of the privatized telecoms network to Singaporean interests, much of the nation donned clothing that was an implicit rebuke to the Prime Minister. In February 2006, Thaksin announced on his Saturday radio programme that he would step down if the King whispered in his ear, but subsequently failed to take a number of hints.

Bhumibol's sixtieth anniversary celebrations marked the next step in the legitimacy showdown between the two, one that would lead to the inexorable triumph of the King. On 23 June Thaksin wrote in an extraordinary private letter to President Bush that certain interest groups in Thailand, 'having failed to provoke violence and disorder', were 'now attempting various extra-constitutional tactics to co-opt the will of the people.' On 30 June, he publicly accused an unspecified 'charismatic individual' of manoeuvring to oust him from the premiership—a comment widely assumed to refer to the King himself. The power struggle culminated in the military coup d'état of 19 September 2006 that overturned the constitution to oust Thaksin, amid accusations that his government had showed a persistent disrespect to the monarchy bordering on *lèse-majesté*. Well-wishers tied yellow ribbons to guns and tanks, recognizing that the coup was staged at the Palace's behest. The junta proceeded to install Surayud Chulanont, a member of the royal Privy Council, as interim Prime Minister. Thailand's revered King, the semi-divine Buddhist *dhammaraja*, was a major player in the politics of the country.

Who is Bhumibol? Paul Handley's biography is, remarkably, the first serious, independent study of the King. The book is the fruit of twelve years' work, most of them spent as a Bangkok-based correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. For a credible foreigner—above all, an American—fluent in Thai, to publish a long, meticulously researched account that is critical of the monarch, and with Yale University Press, no less: this is the worst nightmare of the guardians of the Chakri dynasty. Strict *lèse-majesté* laws, carrying a 15-year jail sentence, limit all public discussion of the Crown. The Thai authorities desperately hoped Yale would refrain from publishing the book. Cabinet Secretary Borwornsak Uwanoo travelled to the United States to meet Yale alumni such as George H. W. Bush, and a leading American law firm was contacted. The legal advice was that publication could not be blocked; but as a concession, Yale delayed the release of the book from May until July 2006, when the main royal festivities were over. In publishing it, Handley knows that he will never be allowed back in the country.

Yet his book is cathartic: finally, someone has dared to say the unsayable, and those trying to understand Thai society have a new intellectual

reference point from which to work. Fluently written and grounded in very considerable research, Handley's account draws on insights into the Thai monarchy from a range of scholars and writers, including Christine Gray, Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian and MR Sukhumbhand Paripatra. But his narrative moves far beyond the parameters of these precursors. It has a salience and an urgency well beyond that of any ordinary biography (leave alone William Stevenson's error-strewn 1999 hagiography, *The Revolutionary King*), since its real subject-matter is the re-imagining of Thailand's modern political history.

Where Handley excels is in his understanding of Bhumibol as a political actor, as the primary architect of a lifelong project to transform an unpopular and marginalized monarchical institution—on the verge of abolition more than once—into the single most powerful component of the modern Thai state. As a journalist, Handley's strength has always been his coverage of Southeast Asian business, his brilliantly intuitive grasp of the seedy interplay between money and power in both Indonesia and Thailand. The sections of the book that will most disturb attentive Thai readers are those focusing on the extensive business activities of the royal family through the asset-rich Crown Property Bureau. While preaching a homespun philosophy of the 'sufficiency economy', the King owns the freeholds of many of the prime Bangkok locations leased to leading real-estate developers and shopping mall proprietors. *The King Never Smiles* is not on sale in Thailand and has never been openly discussed in the Thai media, although numerous copies are circulating privately among the Bangkok intelligentsia. Conversations about the monarchy will never be quite the same again.

Bhumibol Adulyadej—the name means 'Strength of the Land, Incomparable Power'—was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1927, making him a rare example of a foreign monarch who is technically eligible to become President of the United States. The Chakri dynasty was then at a low ebb. Absolute monarchy reached its peak during the long reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910), Rama V, who emulated European powers by subordinating his subjects under a centralized modern bureaucracy, and was popularly credited with averting the direct colonization of Siam. But the vagaries of primogeniture then threw up the fickle and profligate Rama VI, who frittered away the monarchy's financial and political capital, while failing to produce an heir. When he died in 1925, his successor King Prajadhipok, Bhumibol's uncle, proved at best a half-hearted *dhammaraja*. Modernization was generating new political demands. As early as 1885, members of Siam's Western-educated elite had petitioned for a parliamentary constitution. In the 'revolution' of 1932 the absolute monarchy was challenged head on. In its wake the 42-year-old Prajadhipok, unable to grasp

the nature of Siam's changing society, abdicated—a year before Edward VIII—and retired to Surrey.

The unprecedented abdication abruptly elevated Bhumibol's older brother Ananda to the throne. The boys were only half-royal, since their doctor-father Prince Mahidol had married a commoner. After Massachusetts, they spent much of their early life in Switzerland, receiving a European education at an elite Catholic school in Lausanne. They learnt French, English, Latin and German, but could barely speak Thai. Handley describes photographs of Ananda and Bhumibol showing 'two slight, cheery and curious boys', though Bhumibol's robust health contrasted with Ananda's frequent illnesses. As they entered adulthood, he notes, 'both were better suited for the life of well-heeled *bon vivants* in Europe than golden-robed, sacral princes in an impoverished tropical Asian state.' Handley offers some nice images of Bhumibol's pre-lapsarian youth after the family returned to Bangkok for Ananda's coronation in December 1945:

Outside the palace, the Mahidol brothers attended sports matches and went on holidays to Ayutthaya and Hua Hin. Inside the Bangkok palace, they had recent American movies to watch and a collection of musical instruments to play. The Free Thai [Movement] gave Ananda a US Army jeep, which he and Bhumibol would spin around the many throne halls and chapels inside the Grand Palace's high white-washed ramparts. Some evenings, too, they drove around the city incognito.

Bhumibol's life of leisured frivolity was brought to an abrupt end in June 1946, when Ananda was found dead in Bangkok's Grand Palace, killed by a single bullet to the head. The incident has never been satisfactorily explained, and though Handley lays out various theories he concludes that there is insufficient evidence to support any of them. From the outset, the reign of Rama IX has been framed by tragedy—perhaps one reason why the King of Asia's 'land of smiles' is rarely seen to smile in public.

Bhumibol assumed the throne at a difficult political juncture. None of the modernizing forces—the nationalist militarists grouped around Field Marshal Plaek Phibun Songkhram, or the left-liberals led by Pridi Bhanomyong—had much use for the monarchy. Not until the 1950s did Bhumibol find a real role for himself: serving as a legitimating force for an American-backed military regime that saw Thailand as a bulwark against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. In 1956 he began testing his political muscle against Phibun Songkhram in radio broadcasts and speeches. Senior courtiers such as Privy Councillor Srivisarn Vacha began articulating the idea that, as Handley paraphrases, 'constitutionalism aside, only the blue-blooded Chakris could ever truly serve the needs of the Thais. To them, this was real democracy.'

In 1957 Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat assumed power in a coup d'état that—like many subsequent putsches—received swift approval from the throne. In Sarit, as Handley puts it, the palace had finally found its strongman; the dictator acted as 'royal enforcer', strictly applying *lèse-majesté* laws, while the palace turned a blind eye to Sarit's corruption. Whereas Sarit saw the monarchy as a junior partner that could underpin military dominance, Bhumibol collaborated with Sarit to enhance his own standing, and expand the scale of royal charitable and business activities. The King toured the countryside accompanied by his beautiful consort, Queen Sirikit, who presented him with four children in quick succession. This model family won admiration from the rural masses, as did the King's intense involvement in the micro-management of socio-economic development, informed by a fascination with agriculture and irrigation. In a spirit of *noblesse oblige*, Bhumibol devoted considerable energies to such ideas, which he was to refine in the 1990s into a 'new theory' of 'sufficiency economy' that envisaged contented peasants largely withdrawing from modern capitalism to tend their plots. The sufficiency economy is to this day regularly lauded by bureaucrats, politicians and business leaders, while in reality Thai capitalism grows ever more rampant.

As the bloated armed forces became increasingly isolated from Thailand's rapidly changing society, Bhumibol gained greater political clout. Fuelled initially by agribusinesses capitalizing on the amazing fertility of the central plains, the Thai economy expanded rapidly from around 1960 onwards, though at the expense of traditional farmers. Bangkok mushroomed, while ex-farmers from the Northeast and other frontier regions poured into the cities in search of work. Foreign investors opened factories. A growing university sector catered to socially mobile youngsters open to anti-American, leftist ideas. Bhumibol worked hard to maintain Thailand's forward role in the Cold War. Handley describes a trip to Washington in 1966, where the King 'lobbied the United States to escalate its war against Hanoi, even criticizing Washington for pausing in its air strikes on North Vietnam.' He fervently endorsed the counter-insurgency against the Communist Party of Thailand. The country's politics during this period was framed by wider events in Indochina:

For the palace, the final straw was the abolishment of the monarchy in Laos by the Pathet Lao on December 2, 1975, three days before Bhumibol's 48th birthday. He and most of the extended royal family were horrified, for the Thais saw the Laotian monarchy as a sister throne sharing the same traditions, history and even bloodline. Vientiane's fall was the final catalyst that sent Thailand back to military rule.

The Palace had become ever more closely identified with far-right elements such as the Village Scouts and Red Gauris in the turbulent years after October 1973, when a popular uprising removed the ruling generals. Handley gives detailed attention to this heady period, and to the events of October 1976, when the King backed the return to Thailand of Thanom Kittikachorn, one of the generals ousted in 1973. Described as ‘a personal favourite of the king’, Thanom was immediately ordained as a monk at a royal-sponsored temple. His arrival helped inspire a violent backlash against the leftist student movement, culminating in a massacre at Thammasat University led by Palace-backed groups. The collusion of the Palace in the October 1976 violence gives the lie, he argues, to the myth of Bhumibol as benevolent democrat. During the following three decades, the King regularly poured scorn on the corruption, incompetence and greed of elected politicians, in contrast to the dedication and sincerity of the monarchy and armed forces.

Handley describes the 1980s as marking ‘a new era of adulation for the throne’, fostered above all by ex-general Prem Tinsulanond, who served as Prime Minister from 1980 to 1988, despite never being elected, and subsequently as the King’s principal fixer; he is currently President of the Privy Council. A series of scandals and pro-democracy protests eventually pressed Prem into resigning, but Bhumibol frequently criticized the civilian government that succeeded him, and in February 1991 approved yet another military coup. Handley devotes an entire chapter to the stand-off in the spring of 1992 between the generals and protesters calling for democratic and constitutional reform. In May, the government called in troops to disperse the demonstrations, killing several dozen. After an ambiguous silence, Bhumibol summoned both the military dictator Suchinda Kraprayoon and the leader of the Confederation for Democracy, Chamlong Srimuang, for a televised audience that led to Suchinda’s exit and brought the violence to a halt—a monarchical *deus ex machina*.

Royalists have persistently sought to portray Bhumibol as an asset in Thailand’s long and tortuously winding road to democracy, resting their case primarily on his interventions ‘on the side of the people’ in October 1973 and May 1992. On both occasions, belated royal moves contributed to the departure of military-aligned governments. But Handley’s close scrutiny of these episodes suggests that the King’s actions were ultimately self-serving, promoting his image as a god-like *dhammaraja*. He offers compelling arguments that Bhumibol persistently favoured weak governments of doubtful competence, inept and usually short-lived regimes that left his own influence and mystique unchallenged. Regarding the events of 1992, he contends that ‘Bhumibol’s skill in saving the day . . . helped to hide his

consistent bias against protesters and popular movements'. Handley's core argument, in fact, is that he was never much of a democrat:

efforts to depict the monarchy as innately democratic faced an important challenge: Thais understood democracy to involve elections of the people's representatives, a qualification that eluded the king. In response, the palace simply maintained that all Chakri kings were popular kings, who would not have stayed on the throne had they not maintained the people's support or been guilty of misrule. By that logic, Bhumibol and his predecessors on the throne were essentially elected. As he told an interviewer, 'I am really an elected king. If the people do not want me, they can throw me out'.

The question will be posed with renewed intensity under Bhumibol's successor. Handley is no Kitty Kelley, but he does not flinch from dealing with the Thai royals' messy family matters, especially the various marriages and liaisons of Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn and two of his sisters. Though not much to the taste of this reviewer, chapters 16 and 20 contain more than mere tittle-tattle. The outcomes and offspring of these—mostly failed—relationships testify to the core problem afflicting the Thai monarchy. Thais generally despise the notoriously mercurial and meddling former King Norodom Sihanouk of neighbouring Cambodia; but for all his faults as a ruler, Sihanouk abdicated in 2004 in favour of his son Sihamoni, arguably the best-qualified candidate for the job. Despite his success in restoring the lustre of the throne, Bhumibol has failed to address the fact that Vajiralongkorn commands scant respect among the populace, and the prospect of his accession fills most of his subjects with dread. As Handley puts it: 'Thais recognize these weaknesses in the prince's kingly credentials. No one puts Vajiralongkorn's picture on their wall, and few seek out his amulets or want to donate to his charities'.

A problem that plagues all attempts to analyse the roles of the Thai monarchy is the question of agency: how far is the King himself responsible for the way he is presented to the public, for the political adventurism carried out on his behalf, or for the business deals of the Crown Property Bureau? Handley arguably focuses too much on the person of Bhumibol, underestimating the extent to which—certainly by the 1990s—the interests of the monarchy worked largely on auto-pilot, managed by a loose network of figures such as Privy Council President Prem, dubbed the King's 'surrogate strongman' by one Thai scholar. The octogenarian ex-cavalry general is a taciturn bachelor possessed of a peerless list of mobile phone numbers; he continues to exert considerable influence over official appointments. No one can refuse to take Prem's calls, and few dare to deny his requests, since he is generally assumed to be asking on behalf of the King. But Thailand's 'network monarchy' (my own coinage) extends far beyond Prem, the Privy

Council, the military and the bureaucratic elite. It embraces the business sector, academics, journalists and social activists, some of whom have direct connections with the Palace, and some of whom are simply self-appointed guardians of royal interests.

Handley seems reluctant to accept that it was the ‘network monarchy’ that, with other political actors, agreed the deal to broker the 1997 ‘people’s constitution’. The new constitution amounted to an important elite bargain, designed to subordinate politics to rules of the game in readiness for the inexorable crisis in which Bhumibol’s reign must terminate—that of the succession. Unlike its predecessors, the 1997 constitution—legislated in the wake of the Asian financial crisis of that year—generated immense public interest and enjoyed a high measure of legitimacy. Prominent royalists such as former premier Anand Panyarachun and social reformer Dr Prawase Wasi, who might be dubbed the ‘liberal wing’ of the network monarchy, played a key role in negotiating this elite pact. On 2 November 1995, I heard Prawase declare to a crowded Bangkok ballroom that Thailand urgently needed a new constitution, to help avert the potential calamity of political violence following Bhumibol’s death. None of the media outlets represented in the room dared report this highly sensitive speech, one of the few occasions on which network monarchy raised a head above the Palace parapet.

In this alternative reading, by 1997 Bhumibol may have recognized and implicitly accepted the limitations of the *dhammaraja* model and the need for greater democracy. The subsequent rise of Thaksin Shinawatra, whose 2001 and 2005 landslide election victories fuelled his hubris, encouraging him to challenge the power of the Palace, may have inspired a renewed royal mistrust of electoral politics, and provided a green light for the coup. More than any other prime minister, Thaksin apparently saw the position of the monarchy as an obstacle to Thailand’s development, and sought to roll back royal authority. Handley notes that Thaksin ‘was willing publicly to snub the throne, as well as play royal family members off against each other’. In an article published since his book appeared, Handley has argued that the September 2006 coup reflected Bhumibol’s fears that Thaksin could not be trusted to handle the delicate royal succession. Yet by abrogating the 1997 constitution, the military intervention left the monarchy a dangerously isolated pillar in a landscape otherwise bereft of legitimating political institutions.

The coup cast Thailand alarmingly adrift. The new Prime Minister, General Surayud, apparently believed that royal backing and his own moral standing would place his interim government above criticism. Instead, the administration watched Thailand’s violence-stricken, Muslim-majority southern provinces—where almost 2,000 have been killed since January 2004—move closer towards civil war. Work on drafting yet another



constitution was soon enmeshed in intractable politicking. Thaksin terrorized the government merely by giving an interview on CNN; his political allies regrouped. Foreign investors were spooked by new capital controls that seemed to imply a return to economic nationalism, and bombs exploded in Bangkok on New Year's Eve. The Palace-backed coup had quickly proved calamitous.

The greater calamity of the succession lies ahead. The elderly King is in poor health, and spends most of the year as a semi-recluse at his seaside palace in Hua Hin. The *dhammaraja's* powers are waning; in 2006 the royal whisper proved insufficient, and it took a crude military intervention to remove Thaksin from office. Paradoxically, Bhumibol is a victim of his own success, having created unrealistic expectations of Thailand's throne. Existing monarchical networks are not sufficiently well institutionalized to outlive the current king. Handley observes that:

with Bhumibol's eventual passing, the monarchy's desacralization will probably begin. His heirs are not conditioned to act as incipient Buddhas, nor do their personalities fit the mold. They must evolve and remake the throne themselves before they are forced to do so by the media and a generation of better-educated Thais.

Handley has written an important book, one that has already generated considerable debate, both inside and outside Thailand. For many Thai readers, and for a certain kind of foreigner, Handley has transgressed simply by authoring a biography that treats Bhumibol as an ordinary figure who has spent much of his life securing his own position and reshaping the politics of his country. Indeed, a number of reviews were posted on Amazon before the book was published, by people who had yet to read a word of it; bizarrely, Handley has even been accused of writing at Thaksin's instigation. Many responses have been emotional and (often unselfconsciously) political, rather than critiques of the book *per se*.

Such attitudes are not restricted to conservative Thai royalists. In a 1972 article, anthropologist Herbert Philips explained that American scholarship on Thailand was 'a scholarship of admiration'; reverence for the Thai monarchy has underwritten virtually all international commentary and analysis. Despite or because of their republican history, Americans appear to have a special weakness for monarchies. The *lèse-majesté* laws notwithstanding, the cult of personality that surrounds the King rarely requires legal enforcement. Even casual visitors to Thailand are warned not to make any disparaging comments about the monarchy, while foreign journalists and scholars are tipped the wink early on by their local contacts and counterparts. In this context, Handley's moves to undermine decades of propaganda and mystique surrounding the royal institution border on sacrilege. If it

seems extraordinary that Handley's is the first independent study of King Bhumibol, stranger still is the extent to which, in an era of unprecedented openness, royalist hegemony has assumed a form of global reach. Thailand badly needs more free debate about the role of its monarchy, including the relative merits of *dhammaraja* and democracy. Suppressing the expression of collective anxieties about the succession only makes the impending crisis more likely.

Whatever some readers may prefer to believe, Handley's book is not a hatchet job; in many passages, the author displays an evident empathy with his subject. Writing of the May 1992 crisis, he observes: 'the modern constitutional king's most important role is to mediate in insoluble circumstances and take up leadership when it is absent. Bhumibol did this with unquestionable skill'. Although Handley seems distinctly sceptical about the prospects for a full-blown royal makeover, he ends by calling for a monarchy that is 'socially engaged', and recognizes achievement instead of rewarding loyalty. His preference is for a more 'modern' and 'inclusive' kingship, in effect, a 'people's monarchy' to match the now-lost 1997 people's constitution. Perhaps such a transition might be more feasible if Bhumibol were to follow Sihanouk's lead, by naming his own successor before he departs.

The ever-more-vocal cult of Bhumibol, meanwhile, seems intended to drown out anxious mutterings about the succession. When millions of Thais donned yellow shirts in June 2006, their euphoria ill masked a mode of collective denial concerning the future of the monarchy, the unstable political order and the country as a whole. In a kingdom where violence lurks just below the surface—violence that the King helped quell in 1973 and 1992, but tacitly supported in October 1976—Bhumibol's passing threatens to inaugurate a new episode of civil strife. In the post-Bhumibol era, the monarchy may no longer offer a source of stability and continuity. No political order can safely invest its long-term stability in a single individual, however skilled, and however wise.