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Andrew MacGregor Marshall, *A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand's Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*.

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Reviewed by Lee Jones.

Andrew MacGregor Marshall's *A Kingdom in Crisis* has been eagerly and long awaited by many Thailand watchers. Having resigned from a senior Reuters post in 2011 to publish a [series of articles](#) on Thailand's political crisis based on leaked US diplomatic documents, "AMM" has become a vociferous critic of Thai elites and especially the monarchy, developing a wide following on social media. *A Kingdom in Crisis* was anticipated as the definitive statement of AMM's most controversial thesis: that "an unacknowledged conflict over royal succession is at the heart of Thailand's twenty-first political crisis" (page 3). However, despite its many merits, the book does not quite clinch this argument.

A Kingdom in Crisis is a bold, uncompromising and highly critical survey of Thailand's ongoing political crisis. The focus, however, is squarely on the monarchy, rather than on its place within Thailand's broader polity and political economy. The first nine chapters all relate to the period before 2000, delving into ancient history to underscore the brutality of the absolutist monarchy and the normality of power struggles over the succession. Only three chapters then deal with the current conjuncture and make AMM's central argument. The background is, of course, interesting and useful, and although it may contain little new for Thailand specialists, to collate the truly damning history of the Thai monarchy in an accessible

manner is a worthy endeavour. This is particularly true in a context in which even [mere academic commentary](#) on the monarchy's ancient history risks prosecution and hefty jail sentences under Thailand's deeply obnoxious *lèse majesté* laws.

However, there are serious drawbacks to this focus. First, it means that *A Kingdom in Crisis* is not a truly comprehensive overview of Thailand's present crisis for the uninitiated. Missing, for instance, is any serious consideration of Thailand's socio-economic transformation under rapid capitalist development. This transformation has radically changed the orientation and aspirations of Thailand's lower orders and generated new elite fractions in emerging economic sectors such as telecommunications – the origin of Thaksin Shinawatra himself. It also created the opening – via the Asian financial crisis – for Thaksin's rise. Although AMM actually concedes that the “more significant historic struggle” is that of “Thailand's people to free themselves from domination and exploitation by the ruling class” (page 4), this concern swiftly recedes entirely into the background. And because he maintains that “at the elite level, Thailand's conflict is essentially a [royal] succession struggle” (page 3), all the political specificity of the last 13 years – everything that Thaksin did, and all the reasons why yellow-shirts hate him so passionately – is airbrushed. Indeed, it seems one must do this in order to sustain the argument that the succession is really what the conflict is all about.

This argument is basically advanced in three steps. First, the lengthy historical backdrop implicitly seeks to convince the reader that succession struggles, driven by inter-elite competition for power, are a normal part of Thai history (Chapters 7-8). Thailand's modern monarchs are not seen as personally powerful, but as symbolic figureheads installed and manipulated by genuinely powerful elite factions – an argument already (and compellingly) advanced by [Giles Ji Ungpakorn](#). Second, Thai elites have expressed growing concern about Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn's suitability to succeed King Bhumibol since the 1980s, owing to his womanising,

financial profligacy and diplomatic unreliability (Chapter 9). Third, this concern has been exacerbated by Thaksin's rise and lies behind the conflicts of the last ten years (Chapters 10-12). Essentially, steps one and two are fairly unobjectionable, though the implication that past practices will always repeat themselves is symptomatic of the short shrift given to historical specificity. It is the crucial third step that is more dubious.

The core of AMM's thesis is that royalist elites fear that, unlike the "generally pliable Bhumibol", Vajiralongkorn is "volatile and belligerent" (page 137). Having allegedly thwarted his succession in the 1980s and 1990s, they are now said to fear that if he took the throne, "he would seek revenge", "removing royal patronage from the grandees of the traditional establishment and promoting a new elite" – presumably one aligned with Thaksin – through his control of the lucrative Crown Property Bureau (pages 151-2). However, no proof is ever presented for this central claim, which is an extremely strong one. The argument is not merely that Thaksin would manipulate the new king to entrench his political and economic power, but that Vajiralongkorn *himself* would be an active and independently powerful political player and wreak havoc on the Thai hierarchy. This is a significant departure from Ji Ungpakorn's interpretation and arguably from AMM's own acceptance that the monarchy has historically been a controllable tool of powerful elite factions.

Certainly, it does seem that many royalists have been sceptical of Vajiralongkorn's capacity to elicit popular and elite loyalties since the late 1980s (page 141). But AMM's repeated claims that the elite has consequently tried to "sabotage" Vajiralongkorn's succession are not accompanied by any evidence (for example, pages 141-143, 172-3, 175, 214-217). For instance, an unreferenced claim that the king would retire sometime after turning 60 in 1988, in addition to one public statement made by an aristocrat worried about the crown prince's capacity to match the standard set by his father, is used to claim that "The ruling class had succeeded in keeping Vajiralongkorn off the throne" (pages 140-141).

Perhaps they did. Perhaps AMM has solid, but confidential, sources that have confirmed the scheming – but that is not clear. We are essentially asked to take these claims on trust.

More problematically, perhaps, when evidence *is* presented for the succession being “the heart” of Thailand’s present crisis – largely from 39 Wikileaks cables – it is also contestable. Because no one ever goes on record saying that he or she wants to prevent the crown prince from taking the throne, AMM’s basic argumentative strategy is to tack Vajiralongkorn onto any statement of concern about Thaksin. For example, in 2007, he writes that the elite

feared [that] Thaksin and the crown prince would seek vengeance for the establishment’s efforts to undermine them. A worried senior general told [US Ambassador] Boyce in April 2007 that he “could not rule out the deposed PM returning and wreaking havoc on the country...” (page 169)

Note that this is a concern about Thaksin; the general does not even mention Vajiralongkorn. Similarly, a claim that General Prem Tinsulanond’s circle was seeking to “ruin [Vajiralongkorn’s] chances of becoming king” (page 170) is only backed by a US cable reporting that palace elites were trying to undermine his consort. When elites’ private remarks betray no evidence of a conspiracy against Vajiralongkorn, AMM simply says that they are lying and selectively quotes their more negative sentiments about the crown prince (page 188).

Since the original documents are all online, readers can judge AMM’s interpretations for themselves. In the [cable just mentioned](#), General Prem “cautioned that Thaksin ran the risk of self-delusion if he thought that the Crown Prince would act as his friend/supporter in the future merely because of Thaksin’s monetary support”. This does not seem to express fear of a Vajiralongkorn-Thaksin condominium. Former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun states that he “had always believed that the Crown Prince would succeed his father”, and Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila had

identical expectations. Anand lamely notes that while Vajiralongkorn is not ideal, and “someone should raise the matter with the king... there was really no one who could raise such a delicate topic” – hardly suggestive of an active plot. The point is not necessarily that AMM is wrong – merely that these cables can be read in different ways, and there is no really firm evidence presented, let alone a “smoking gun” that definitively proves his thesis.

Fundamentally at stake here is the basic explanation of the last ten years of Thai history. Was an extant concern with the royal succession merely “catalys[ed]” by Thaksin’s rise (page 155)? Would that concern have caused political conflict whenever Bhumibol died? Or is the concern of the Yellow Shirt faction primarily with Thaksin’s mobilisation of the masses into Thai politics and his growing monopolisation of political and economic power? From the latter perspective, the king’s looming death is problematic not because traditional elites fear radical *personal* retribution from Vajiralongkorn as a powerful *individual*, but because, as Thaksin increasingly colonised the state apparatus, they came to fear losing direct control of yet another *institution* – an extremely important one – that they had long manipulated for their benefit. Crucially, this concern would have been minimal in the absence of the political movement headed by Thaksin. He was, as AMM notes, seeking to “flush out the ghosts” (page 219), to thrust aside rival networks and colonise the state apparatus with his own cronies. Elites have always done this. What made Thaksin uniquely dangerous was his colossal popular support and unprecedented parliamentary majorities. Power no longer alternated among rival factions, with venal elites horse-trading in parliamentary coalitions to carve up the spoils of office between them. Thaksin’s faction appeared to have found a winning formula for permanent control of state power. Unable to defeat him at the polls, anti-Thaksin elites were forced to rely upon institutions that they manipulated or controlled: the courts, the election commission, the army and, of course, the monarchy – both to whip up the Yellow Shirt protests and to legitimise judicial and military coups. In other words, it is

Thailand's violent and bitter social conflict that has lent such importance to the succession, not the other way around.

This perspective explains why, even in private discussions, anti-Thaksin elites are primarily concerned not with Vajiralongkorn, but with Thaksin. It also explains why their primary efforts have not been directed at altering the succession – despite having an opportunity to do so under the 2006-2007 military regime when, as AMM notes, Prem indirectly controlled the state, yet mysteriously made no “arrangements with Bhumibol to keep Vajiralongkorn off the throne” (page 167). Instead, they have overwhelmingly concentrated on rigging the Thai constitution and state apparatus to prevent Thaksin-aligned parties from regaining their popular majorities. That is, after all, the clear goal of the current military regime. If the elite clustered around the palace are really so fearful of Vajiralongkorn, why, since they have twice been able to use the king to endorse their armed seizure of power, do they not also use him to install their allegedly preferred heir, Princess Sirindhorn, at least as regent? According to AMM, precedents and legal procedures enable a female succession, and Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit are now physically and mentally incapacitated (page 199) – so they could not resist. The only reasons can be that these elites are not sufficiently concerned or that they fear a split within the security forces, since several army units are technically commanded by Vajiralongkorn. Even if the latter were true – and I have seen no compelling evidence for it – it would again be a case of potential social conflict – a possible civil war – shaping the succession crisis, not *vice versa*.

So is the monarchy an important element in Thailand's political crisis? Undoubtedly, and we are indebted to Andrew MacGregor Marshall for revealing the sordid soap opera of the succession. But is the succession really “the heart” of Thailand's crisis? I, for one, remain to be convinced.

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