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

London: Zed Books, 2014. Pp. viii, 220; note on names, map, notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Patrick Jory.

It is well known that Thailand has been in the throes of a debilitating political crisis since 2005. But what is the real cause of that crisis? This is the question that Andrew MacGregor Marshall attempts to answer in this provocative, much-awaited book, *A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand's Struggle for Democracy*. A clue to the argument is in the book's title: it is a crisis of a "kingdom", or, more specifically, Thailand's monarchy.

Marshall, a former Reuters journalist, has for some years now been the foremost commentator on the taboo subject of the role of the monarchy in Thailand's politics. He has been a particularly active user of on-line media to get his ideas across to the public. He "broke" the story of the Wikileaks cables that dealt with Thailand, in which senior figures in the Thai establishment discuss, among other things, the involvement of Queen Sirikit in the 2006 coup and their antipathy towards Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. He has written and published on-line the extended essays, "[Thai Story](#)" and "[The Tragedy of King Bhumibol](#)", which broach some of the material that is presented in *A Kingdom in Crisis*. His [Facebook](#) page is a go-to site for news on members of the Thai royal family, and he has a large number of followers

on Twitter. *A Kingdom in Crisis* represents the fullest expression of the views that Marshall has been making known in recent years.

His argument is that at the heart of the political crisis that has convulsed Thailand since 2005 is a bitterly fought but undeclared struggle over the succession to the throne. Marshall claims that the “elite” – comprising the Privy Council, the upper levels of the bureaucracy, the military leadership, sections of the powerful Sino-Thai business community with interests tied to the monarchy, and the Thai upper class more generally – are utterly opposed to Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn becoming Thailand’s next king. According to Marshall, Vajiralongkorn is hated and feared. If he were to become king members of this elite believe that he would wreak vengeance on those who have opposed him. They are therefore attempting to alter the succession in favour of his sister, Princess Sirindhorn. The struggle has intensified in recent years due to the deterioration of King Bhumibol’s health. Thaksin Shinawatra’s enduring electoral success since the beginning of the 2000s and his apparent tactical alliance with the crown prince have exacerbated the situation.

While it has long been known that Thailand’s crown prince is unpopular and that the succession would be a difficult period of transition for the country, Marshall is the first person to argue publically that opposition to the crown prince succeeding to the throne is the central reason for the current political turmoil. Indeed, most journalists studiously avoid mention of the succession struggle. A recent example is Richard Bernstein’s lengthy [article](#) on the crisis in *The New York Review of Books* – which strangely references *A Kingdom in Crisis* in a footnote.

The context in which Marshall presents his argument is crucial to understanding its significance: because of the harsh *lèse majesté* law that forbids criticism of the royal family, this conflict cannot be openly discussed in Thailand. (For his pains Marshall cannot enter Thailand without risking being charged with *lèse majesté*, or perhaps suffering a worse fate). Another problem is the effect of intense state propaganda surrounding Thailand’s

monarchy and in particular its “widely revered king”. One of its results, according to Marshall, is that “[f]oreign journalists have tended to become beguiled by Thailand’s fairy tales and intimidated by the repercussions of questioning the official narrative” (page 7). *A Kingdom in Crisis* positions itself as a corrective to the prevailing tendency in academic and media commentary on Thailand’s political crisis to ignore or at best make only oblique reference to the politics of the succession.

Marshall devotes over half of the book to identifying patterns in Thailand’s history, both ancient and modern, that help explain the current situation. For most of its history Thailand’s monarchs have usually been “puppets” of a powerful elite (page 4). This elite is riven by factions, endlessly feuding over power and influence. Struggles over succession have been the norm rather than the exception (pages 107-119). The end of a reign is often accompanied by political disorder and violent retribution. Succession laws are always flexible. If we follow Marshall’s argument, the current attempt by the elite to block Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn from succeeding to the throne has ample historical precedent. While historians may rankle at some of the sweeping generalizations that Marshall makes, reference to Thailand’s history is a useful corrective to some of the ahistorical accounts of Thailand’s crisis that abound in the media.

How convincing is Marshall’s argument? *A Kingdom in Crisis* is based on interviews with “hundreds of highly placed Thai sources” whom for obvious reasons Marshall declines to name (page 8). This data set alone makes the study unique. His book makes extensive use of the critical scholarly literature on the monarchy, which has grown significantly since the crisis began. The leaked cables from the US Embassy in Bangkok released by Wikileaks figure prominently. The circumstantial evidence, in particular the fact that the crisis has intensified as King Bhumibol’s health has deteriorated and the moment of the succession draws near, also appears to support Marshall’s argument. But what makes this question hard to answer is the nature of the subject under examination – the monarchy – and the restrictions on discussing it. Going on the record to confirm Marshall’s

thesis would constitute a *lèse majesté* offense, with a potential jail term of 15 years or longer.

Nevertheless, Marshall is likely to be criticised on the grounds that his argument is reductionist, that it suggests that that everything in Thailand's long-running crisis comes down to the fight over the succession. This criticism is somewhat unfair. Marshall does mention other factors – the demand for greater democracy, and the rising aspirations of the rural and urban poor, whom Thaksin has turned into a potent political force. But these are not the main focus of the book. They have been dealt with extensively by other scholars. Indeed, that is the premise for the book: amidst all the academic and journalistic attention given to Thaksin, Thailand's changing social and economic structure, the colour-coded street protests, and the political interventions of the Thai elite, the factor of the succession has been largely ignored. Journalists and academics write about these things simply because they can do so without negative consequences for themselves. The ultimate effect of the restrictions and policing of what one can write about in Thailand is what David Streckfuss calls “a great black hole of silence at the center of the Thai body politic” (quoted on page 6). *A Kingdom in Crisis* is an attempt to break this silence.

In reading Marshall's account of the Thailand's crisis, and in contemplating the irrationality and even hysteria that attend anything to do with the Thai royal family today, it is hard not to conclude that we are witnessing not only the end of King Bhumibol's reign, but also the death throes of the Thai monarchy itself. Marshall claims that “anti-monarchist sentiment has been growing exponentially since 2006” (page 22). Despite the centrality of the monarchy to modern Thai nationalism, for much of the last 150 years the Thai monarchy has in fact been fighting for its survival. Globally, too, monarchy is a political institution in decline. As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, in the few countries in the world that remain monarchies there will be no new dynasties. The Chakri will be Thailand's last royal dynasty. Whether Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn becomes Thailand's next sovereign or is thwarted by the forces that Marshall describes in his book and

supplanted by someone else, it is hard to imagine that things will go well for King Bhumibol's successor. The persistence of the Thai prophesy that the Chakri dynasty will have only nine monarchs suggests that many Thais think the same way.

Marshall has written a provocative, clearly argued, accessible, timely, and convincing book. Whether one agrees with his argument or not, no one who writes or reports on Thailand's crisis can ignore it. Time will show whether he is correct.

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