

Toppling Democracy

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ABSTRACT *Thailand's 2006 royalist coup is best understood by reference to the historical context of democratisation. The dominant historiography of Thai democratisation is either a simplistic liberal view of anti-military democracy or a royalist one that is ultimately anti-democratic. This article offers a serial history of democratisation that allows us to see the long duration of layered historical processes. As democratisation is fundamentally a break from the centralised absolute monarchy, the monarchy and the monarchists, despite their up and down political fortunes, have probably played the most significant role in shaping Thai democracy since 1932. Despite that, their role and place in history has been overlooked due to the perception that they are "above politics." This article argues that, since 1973 in particular, the monarchists have assumed the status of the superior realm in Thai politics that claims the high moral ground above politicians and normal politics. With distaste for electoral politics, and in tacit collaboration with the so-called people's sector, activists and intellectuals, they have undermined electoral democracy in the name of "clean politics" versus the corruption of politicians. The 2006 coup that toppled democracy was the latest effort of the monarchists to take control of the democratisation process.*

KEY WORDS: Thailand, democracy, new royalism, monarchy, *coup*, elections, politicians, vote-buying

Right after the military *coup d'état* on 19 September 2006, the international media reported with fascination its peaceful nature. On the streets of Bangkok flowers and warm greetings showered over tanks and armed soldiers. Well-known academics and social critics argued in chorus that the coup was a necessary step backward in order to go forward to genuine democracy. For such people, the Thaksin Shinawatra government was "the worst crisis in the world."¹ Thus, a day longer under Thaksin was like a day closer to the abyss. To prolific Thaksin critic Kasian Tejapira (2006b: 230), the Thaksin regime was an "elected capitalist absolutism" that had committed grievous crimes, namely: the extra-judicial killing of over 2000 people during the "War on Drugs;" the deaths of several thousand more due to the mishandling of the crisis in the Malay Muslim region of southern Thailand; and Thaksin's manipulation of the media and the supposedly independent regulatory bodies.

Kasian's extended analysis of the political crisis, entitled "Toppling Thaksin," tried to provide a balanced view of the political crisis that led to Thaksin's ousting (Kasian, 2006a). While critical of Thaksin, Kasian pointed to the role of royal

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hegemony, saying that the monarchists were taking advantage of the political crisis. His suggestions nevertheless focused solely on toppling Thaksin and cleaning up the remnants of the regime: “[the] immediate task [is] to remove the linchpin of the corrupt and criminalized system” (Kasian, 2006a: 37). Thaksin should be toppled, he suggested, and made accountable for all that he did, then Thaksin’s cronies in the political and bureaucratic system must be purged, and finally Thaksin’s connections to his rural political base through policies and programmes should be cut off. Toppling Thaksin’s regime was the priority in this view because the perils of global capitalism – with Thaksin as its conduit – were more dangerous to the country than any other devil. Indeed, the tasks Kasian set out show no wariness on his part that the palace’s intervention might derail democracy. To be fair, Kasian hoped that Thaksin’s fall might have been achieved by political and legal means and he might not have foreseen a royalist coup. Nevertheless, the *coup* regime proceeded to do exactly what Kasian had proposed.

As the title of my article hints, this piece may be viewed as a companion piece to Kasian’s. The pieces share some views, but our different political interpretations will be clear. The Thai intelligentsia has been polarised as never before regarding the Thaksin regime, the anti-Thaksin movement and the *coup*. Having been engaged in many debates among this intelligentsia on these issues, I do not pretend to be objective. Rather, the article reflects my politics and perspective as a witness and participant in the course of the events.

This article tries to put Thaksin, the political crisis and the 2006 *coup* in a historical perspective that focuses on democratisation. It argues that the conventional historical view of the progress of Thai democracy that informed the thinking of the anti-Thaksin movement is inadequate, misleading and, in several instances, simply wrong. This conventional view of democratisation, this article will show, led to an anti-democratic politics. Ideas and ideology based on misleading history are responsible for the misguided movement against Thaksin and the misconception that the *coup* was a necessary step for democracy.

This article offers an entirely different interpretation of Thai democratisation. In this view, the *coup* is a step further in an undemocratic and dangerous direction. Since the revolution against the absolute monarchy in 1932, there has never been a time when calls for royal intervention and aristocratic dominance against an elected government were so overt as they were during the political crisis in 2006. The article explains the history of the monarchists’ efforts to embed a royalist democracy and understands the *coup* in this light. It elaborates their strategic discourses during the past thirty years, showing how these paved the way for the 2006 royalist *coup*.

The History of Democratisation

It is generally understood that Thai democratisation is a progressive story spanning from King Chulalongkorn (r. 1867-1910), the 1932 revolution, and the October 1973 and May 1992 uprisings (Figure 1). Credit is given to the absolute monarchs for preparing the country for democracy. The 1932 revolution that established constitutional monarchy is recognised, although its place and meaning in history remains debatable owing to a common view that it was also the beginning of military rule lasting, with brief breaks, until 1973 (see Girling, 1981: 104;

Absolutist kings → 1932 *People's Party Revolution* → 1973 *Uprising* → 1992 *Uprising* →

Figure 1. Conventional historiography and the path of democratisation

Wyatt, 1982: 232-50). The uprising in 1973 is seen as the beginning of “true democracy,” despite the tragic setback of the October 1976 *coup* that followed the massacre at Thammasat University. Then, after a number of abortive and successful *coups*, it was widely believed that the 1992 uprising against a reimposition of military-backed government had finally put to rest military rule. This schema of the history of democratisation is simplistic and rather linear (albeit bumpy). It suggests that power moves, step by step, from absolutism to militarism and finally to the people. The next task for democratisation, in this view, is to fight the super-corrupt politicians and their money politics. The 2006 *coup* proves this schema to be wrong.

The Conventional Historiography of Democratisation

The school of history that dominates this conventional view credits the absolute monarchs, particularly King Prajadhipok or Rama VII (r. 1925-35), for the foundation of democracy but argues that by the 1930s Thais were not yet ready for democracy. The revolution was premature, a mistake that resulted in subsequent military rule. As we shall see below, this view emerged with the rise of the royalists after the Second World War and became established by the scholarship of the early 1970s (Prajak, 2005: 492-501).² In the past two decades or so, historians in Thailand have challenged this royalist history.³ They show how the absolute monarchs tried to retain power and obstruct democracy amidst growing discontent and calls for change, and how the 1932 revolution was not premature but was more widely supported by urban people than previously acknowledged (Baker and Pasuk, 2005: 110-12, 116-21). The monarchists, in this revised approach, were active in trying to regain political prominence many years after the revolution and were critical in shaping democracy long after 1932.

Democratisation processes in various countries were shaped by the particular conditions of power relations among social and political forces. Democratisation in Thailand is fundamentally about the transition from absolute monarchism. Over 70 years after the 1932 revolution, the legacy of this fundamental historical condition and the spectre of the monarchy in politics remain strong. This fact, however, has eluded many views of democratisation partly because the current generation of Thais mostly grew up after the Second World War when they no longer lived with the memories and experiences of the 1932 revolution. Instead they have lived through military rule and the struggle against it, and through the time when the monarchy has been elevated to a sacred and inviolable status. The role of the monarch and the “network monarchy”⁴ in past or present politics are also beyond public discussion, due to the *lèse majesté* law that would penalise anybody who defames the monarch with up to fifteen years in jail. The lack of conceptualised narratives that explain how the monarchy remains a critical element in Thai democratisation further contributes to overlooking the political role of the monarchy.

Here I would like to propose a schema of the history of Thailand's democratisation that, I hope, will help explain the 2006 *coup*. Instead of a linear

chronological change, I suggest a history of three overlapping series in the same chronological frame. An overlapping moment or period means one in which more than one historical process converged and was unfolding, thus one event may impact on those processes at the same time. The central issues of democratisation in each series will be discussed. This schema by no means claims to deal with every historical element. The impact of the communist movement and the role of the USA, for example, are not discussed even though they were a crucial part of history. The emphasis will be on the third series, especially on the monarchy.

**The First Series: The Transition from the Absolute Monarchy:
Monarchists vs. the People's Party (Commoners)**

1	2	3	4	5	6
Rama 5-7 (1870s-1932)		Phibun I 1938-44	Pridi et al. 1945-47	1947 <i>coup</i>	
	1932 revolution	Pacific War 1941-45	Monarchist revival 1944-51		1951 <i>coup</i>

Figure 2. First historical series

Central issue: role and power of the monarchy in democracy – the monarchy “above” (=out, beyond) politics.

Under the absolute monarchy between the 1870s and 1932 (Moment 1-2 in Figure 2), different forces made several attempts to change to constitutional monarchy and *dimokhrasi*.⁵ Their ideas ranged from a modernised government with an expanded commoner-bureaucratic class, to monarchy under law, to republicanism; their actions ranged from writing newspaper essays to formal petitions to the king, to planning revolt (Baker and Pasuk, 2005: 76-7, 106-12; Wyatt, 1982: 199-200, 225-30, 234-42). Their common aspiration was a regime that was more open as opposed to the rule of the king and princes. Discontent heightened in the late 1920s and 1930s, leading to the 1932 revolution (Moment 2). Conflict among the People's Party revolutionaries and between them and the royalists was common for the first fifteen years after the revolution (Moment 2-5). Arrests, deportations, a civil war, executions, asylum, punctuated the period from 1932 to the end of the Second World War (see Charnvit, 1990: 33-193; Natthapol, 2005; Thamrongsak, 2000). The king abdicated in 1935 only after the royalists saw little hope of regaining power.

The rise to power of Phibun Songkhram (Moment 3) and the military wing of the 1932 revolutionaries in the context of the first historical series was to protect the revolution against the monarchists. The liberal wing, led by Pridi Phanomyong, shared the same ideology with Phibun in this fight, but tension and conflict grew as the regime became authoritarian, nationalist and pro-Japanese. The Free Thai Movement, usually understood to be anti-Japanese resistance, was in fact an anti-Phibun movement (Sorasak, 1991). Pridi and the royalists, many of whom were in exile, became allies. After the war, with the rise to power of Pridi and his people

(Moment 4), the royalists were also revived as a political force. The royalist agony of 1932 and afterward, nevertheless, was not forgotten. They took revenge on Pridi who was framed for the assassination of King Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII) in 1946. Then the monarchists joined hands with a new generation of the military elite in the 1947 *coup* (Moment 5) that ousted Pridi and his people, and put an end to the era of the People's Party in Thai politics (Handley, 2006: 80-9). Pridi remained in exile to the end of his life. The royalists enjoyed political ascendancy again, although short-lived, as the military shoved them aside in the 1951 *coup* (Moment 6).

The central issue throughout this first historical series was the power and prominence of the monarchy under constitutional democracy. The royalists fought for a monarch with as much power as possible and to have such power sanctioned by the constitution. The revolutionaries wanted a king with no power. The defeat of the royalists by the late 1930s meant that the monarch and high-ranking royals had to be "above" politics. "Above" here means beyond, out of, high and away from (politics). In fact, they were banned from participating in politics. The revival of the royalists and their brief ascendancy during 1947-51 proved that they never wanted to be "above" politics as such. Although they did not fight for the return of the absolute monarch any more, they were seeking and formulating a new political role of the monarchy in democracy.

The Second Series: Military vs. Parliamentary Democracy

The rise of the military wing against the monarchists (Moment 3, Figure 2) was at the same moment the beginning of military dominance (Moment 7). Thus the paired Moments 3/7 designate the same event where two processes overlapped, thus numerically placed in the first and second series, respectively. There are several other "paired" moments in 1938-51, including Moments 4/8 and Moments 5/9, also with overlapping effects on series 1 and 2.

The central issue of the second series was the conflict between the elected parliamentary system and military rule. Despite the nationalistic and fascist inclinations of the first Phibun period (1938-44; Moments 7-8), parliament functioned. During the immediate post-Second World War period (Moments 8-9), mostly under Pridi and his people, the parliamentary system also functioned. The 1947 *coup* (Moment 9) that put an end to the People's Party was, in retrospect, the first truly military regime with no democratic agenda. The military dominated Thai politics from then on to 1973 (Moments 9-11), with a few brief intervals of electoral politics between 1949 and 1951 under the royalist constitution that gave power to the Privy Council; between 1955 and 1957 when Phibun tried a more open politics to gain popular support against his military rivals; and between 1969 and 1971 when a parliamentary system was under military supervision. The *coup* in 1957 (Moment 10) led to dictatorship under Sarit Thanarat, Thanom Kittikachorn and Prapas Charusathian from 1957 to 1973 (Moments 10-11).

The most important turning point in the second series was the popular uprising in October 1973 (Moment 11) that ended the Thanom-Prapas regime. It was the beginning of the end of the second series. Although it was followed by the most brutal massacre in Thai history in 1976 (Moment 12) and by several successful and aborted *coups* in 1976, 1977, 1981, 1986 and 1991, parliamentary government

7																			
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16										
Phibun I 1938-44	Pridi 1945-47	1947 <i>coup</i> Phibun II 1947-57	Sarit 1957-63 Thanom-Prapas 1963-73	1973 uprising	1976 massacre	Prem 1979-87	Chatichai 1988-91	1991 <i>coup</i>	1992 uprising										

Figure 3. Second historical series

Central issue: role and power of the military as opposed to parliamentary system.

became the norm of the political system and the military began to retreat. Except for the royalist government after the massacre and *coup* in 1976, every successful *coup* promised a quick return to parliamentary rule. The military retreat was also evident in the growing dissension to an unelected premiership (Moment 13) in favour of an elected leader of the parliament in 1988 (Moment 14). The 1992 uprising (Moment 16) broke out as the 1991 *coup* group (Moment 15) tried to prolong their rule under parliamentary disguise. In retrospect, it was the last gasp of the military rule of the second series and the 1992 uprising was the end of it. A military *coup* was then widely believed to be a thing of the past.

The Third Series: Power Relations Among the M/P3: Money/Politicians, Movements/People, Monarchy/Palace

As the beginning of the end of the military rule in the second series, the 1973 popular uprising (Moment 11) was also the beginning of the third series (Moment 17). In this series, the shape of Thai democracy was the result not only of the military in gradual retreat but also of the power relations among three other political forces: first, the local and national politicians who came to power by elections; secondly, popular organisations, civic movements and the electoral mass; and, thirdly, the palace and monarchists. The overlapping nature of the series becomes clear when one considers that between 1973 and 1992, the same events/moments had effects on both the second series (the military versus parliamentary system) and third series (the MP/3 contests). Hence, the following pairs designate the same event but are numerically placed in the second and third series, respectively: Moments 11/17, 12/18, 13/19, 14/20, 15/21 and 16/22.

The central issue of the third series is the shaping of electoral politics under the influence of conflicts, contests, negotiations and alliances among these political forces, in addition to the military in the period from 1973 to 1992 (but *without* the military from 1992 to 2006). It is too early to say if this series has ended with the 2006 *coup* or if it will continue.

The uprising in 1973 is regarded as the beginning of true democracy in Thailand both in terms of popular democracy and the parliamentary system. The period of 1973-76 (Moments 17-18) was the most liberal and radical one in which popular movements and radical ideologies were influential in politics (Morell and Chai-Anan, 1981). Since then, despite set-backs, repression, and the “semi-democracy” of the 1980s (Moments 19-20) (Anek, 1992; Chai-Anan, 1989; Suchit, 1987), the general tendency has been the extension of open democracy that allows people to organise and voice their demands through politicians, civic organisations and the media. The number and activities of civic groups have increased extensively with relatively less interference from the state than in earlier times. While every government tried to control and interfere with the media, and while the electronic media remains in the state’s hand to the present day, the mass media – especially print media – have enjoyed, relatively, the most freedom in the South-east Asian region. These conditions became a political norm. Every political force has had to take into account support from the public: popular constituency now mattered.

While the civic movement was stronger and popular participation was growing, those who reaped the most benefit from parliamentary politics since 1973 have been

17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	→ ?
1973 uprising	1976 massacre	Prem 1979-87	Chatichai 1988-91	1991 <i>coup</i>	1992 uprising	1997 constitution	Thaksin 2001-06	2006 <i>coup</i>	

Figure 4. Third historical series

Central issue: “democracy” reflects the conflicts, contention, negotiations and alliances between the power of money, people’s power and the royal power.

the local and national magnates who, as politicians, seized the opportunity to rise to power. They are the mediators between the centralised state and local communities, and between the bureaucratic authority and popular participation. This sphere of political mediation turned out to be highly lucrative and powerful, making these people a political force with their own interests, even as they simultaneously represented constituents in the parliamentary system. The most controversial characteristic of Thai democracy since the early 1980s has been money politics. Although corruption, abuse of power for personal gain, and shady electoral finances are common problems in electoral politics in many countries, in Thailand it is believed that the abuses perpetrated by politicians are outrageous and unparalleled. As a consequence, despite being elected, the legitimacy of politicians, the parliament and elected governments is cast into doubt. Distrust of elected governments and politicians in general has grown unabatedly since the 1980s. The *coup* in 1991 (Moment 21) faced little opposition from the public because the ousted government led by Chatichai Choonhavan (Moment 20) – the first civilian premier to be an elected MP since 1976 – was widely believed to be highly corrupt. So was every elected government after 1992, none of which survived a full term due to serious corruption scandals of one kind or another.

The high tide of popular democracy after the 1992 uprising (Moment 22) was combined with public outrage against money politics, and led to the “political reform” that resulted in the 1997 Constitution (Moment 23). One of the priorities of the 1997 Constitution was to end money politics, and to retire corrupt politicians from politics. Apparently, it did not work. Instead, the constitution, which promoted strong executive leadership, was said to be partly responsible for the Thaksin government’s parliamentary dominance and for a government that was said to be the most corrupt and abusive ever (Kasian, 2006a).

What about the palace and the monarchists in this process of democratisation? Indeed, this is one of the least studied subjects despite the high visibility and recognition of the monarch within the country and internationally.

The Return of the Monarchy in Politics

The monarchy’s political role in Thai democracy is not well understood because of the common misconception that the monarchy is “above” politics. To be more accurate, there are a large number of celebratory publications on King Bhumibol Adulyadej that laud him as a saviour of democracy (for example, Kanok, 1988; Nithi, 1999; Pichai, 1996). During the past 50 years or so those who think otherwise have been penalised or under self-censorship in order to avoid trouble due to the serious nature of the *lèse majesté* charge and the threat of rebuke from other people. Because of the misconception and censorship, the monarchy, whose unabated political experience since the 1950s was probably superior to other political actors in Thailand, has been able to escape the attention, let alone scrutiny, by most observers and scholars. It means that most of the time when we study and talk about politics, a most crucial piece is not allowed to be put into place. The number of serious studies of the monarchy and politics is small.⁶ In what follows, a summary is presented of how the palace successfully returned to become an important element in Thai democratisation since 1973 (see also Hewison, 2008).

The monarchist revival after the Second World War began to lay the foundation for the new generation of constitutional monarchy – what we might call neo-royalism and the new monarchy. Important ideological foundations for this project can be found in works by royalist ideologues, such as Prince Dhani Nivat, as early as the late 1940s, before King Bhumibol came to the throne. According to a classic article by Dhani (1947), the Siamese monarchy had always been democratic in its relationship with its people and the monarch's dedication to them was enormous because he was moral and righteous. The age-old Buddhist concept of the righteous king, Dhammaraja, was *reconceived* to serve the constitutional monarchy.⁷

Politically, the monarchy's return to prominence was not unimpeded. An early victory was in the elimination of some of the significant leaders of the 1932 revolution. In 1947, the monarchists finally succeeded in eliminating Pridi from politics and bringing to power a new generation of the military who had no ideological affiliation with the People's Party. However, the success of the monarchists was brief, lasting only from 1947 to 1951. But, in retrospect, it left lasting legacies, one of which was the concept of "democracy with the monarchy as the head of the state," and the legal stipulation that, "no one could charge or bring any action against the king," both of which appeared for the first time in the 1949 constitution. The seeds of the new monarchy were also sown in this period, such as the revival and invention of some royal rituals that would serve to magnify the aura of Bhumibol decades later. Royalists were also involved in Sarit's rise to power, which accounts for the space granted to the monarchy under Sarit and subsequent regimes (Handley, 2006: 135-79; Thak, 1979). The role of the monarchy under military rule, none the less, remained mostly in cultural and developmental activities. King Bhumibol's comments alluding to political issues began to appear in the late 1960s and early 1970s, about the same time that the royalist historiography that credited the absolute monarchs as bestowing democracy began to flourish. The image of Bhumibol as a democratic king grew among those students and the intelligentsia who began to challenge military rule (Prajak, 2005: 464-85).

The breakthrough for the monarchy came with the 1973 uprising. Probably the most important act that symbolically defined the monarchy in Thai politics was on the morning of 14 October when demonstrators who were beaten by police in the street beside the palace climbed over the fence seeking refuge inside the palace ground. Then, the royal family in informal dress came out to meet and expressed sympathy to students. By the evening, the military junta had been forced out, thanks to a rival faction within the military that gained the upper hand, and – it is said – to an agreement between the junta and the palace. A grim-faced King Bhumipol appeared on television and declared 14 October "the Most Tragic Day", and appointed as prime minister the President of his Privy Council.⁸ The new role of the monarchy in democracy began.

The same moment, then, that gave birth to people's power and to the opportunity of politicians in the parliamentary system was also the new beginning for the monarchy in Thai politics. Most importantly, the king became the higher authority "above" normal politics. But being "above" politics no longer meant being beyond or out of politics. It meant being "on top of" or overseeing normal politics. As we shall see below, the notion of being "above politics" for the new monarchy also

means that the monarchy is held to be a moral authority superior to, and on top of, the realm of normal or usual politics. It is the upper realm of the political system, “above” the political but no longer outside the system. This was an overlooked characteristic of Thai democracy after 1973 (Thongchai, 2005).

The New Monarchy

The new monarchy and its politics rest on three important characteristics: being sacred, popular and democratic. Some of the sacred royal rituals were revived after the 1947 *coup* (Handley, 2006: 94-6) and fully flourished in the 1960s under Sarit (Bowie, 1997: 88-91; Thak, 1979). But the huge industry of royal deification was elevated to an unprecedented level following the 1976 massacre, which was seen among the right-wing royalists as a decisive victory over the communism that threatened to end the monarchy. The deification rituals are not necessarily ancient ones. Several traditions have been invented, both by the government and by civil society. The important point is that they enhance the monarchy’s perceived *barami* (virtuous or moral power), an ancient concept of power innate to the righteous king (Jory, 2002). Among the prominent invented rituals is the royal birthday celebration that became a major annual festival for the entire country. The king’s birthday has been designated “Father’s Day” and the queen’s birthday as “Mother’s Day,” and there are grander celebrations every tenth anniversary and every twelve-year cycle for each of them. The birthday rituals reinforce the cultivated notion that they are the parents of all Thais. Grand celebrations for the Silver, Golden and Diamond jubilees for the reign, and so on, have reinforced the idea of King Bhumibol as Dhammaraja. A year hardly goes by without a grand royal celebration for one occasion or another. Any accomplishments were and are celebrated to the highest level. All of this means that Thais who are currently sixty years old or younger grew up under the pervasive aura of an unprecedented royal cult. The righteous king with unusual *barami* finds its modern embodiment in the current monarchy.

Meanwhile the monarch has been highly praised for his dedication to royal development projects that aim at helping the poor, particularly the rural and highland people. Beginning in the 1950s, the breadth and scope of the royal projects expanded enormously especially during the Cold War and after 1973 (Chanida, 2004). Several of them began as non-governmental but eventually most of them were integrated into government bureaucracies and budgets. The truth about these projects, and their successes and failures, will probably remain unknown for years to come, given that public accountability and transparency for royal activities is unthinkable. Suffice it to say that the endlessly repeated images of the monarch travelling through remote areas, walking tirelessly along dirt roads, muddy paths and puddles, with maps, pens and a notebook in hand, a camera and sometimes a pair of binoculars around his neck, are common in the media, in public buildings and private homes. These images have captured the popular imagination during the past several decades. Bhumibol is portrayed as a popular king, a down-to-earth monarch who works tirelessly for his people and, we may say, has been in touch with his constituents for decades long before any politicians in the current generation began

their career. Moreover, the king's brand of populism cannot be replicated by politicians and he never gets criticised, thanks to the *lèse majesté* law and to the perception that he is absolutely depoliticised and his works are a manifestation of his moral power or *barami*. The law and social taboos against criticism of the deified monarchy, both of which are effective in the reign of King Bhumibol and not an old tradition as generally believed, are instrumental to the rise of the new monarchy.

“Democratic Royalism”

The third characteristic of the new monarchy is being democratic. A typical account would say that although the monarchy is “above politics,” the monarch has provided stability for Thai democracy. His interventions to stop bloodshed in 1973 and 1992 in particular are always highlighted as the marks of the democratic king.⁹ Handley (2006) has offered an entirely different account of the politics of the monarch (see Hewison, 2008). The monarchy, like everyone else in a political society, is engaged with politics in various ways for his own interests. King Bhumibol actively intervened in politics from the 1970s to the present. It is unfortunate, in Handley's view, that the monarchy's politics are not transparent but cloaked in the illusive aura of Dhammaraja, placing the monarchy beyond criticism and accountability.

Instead of evaluating the monarch's democratic credentials, this article would like to shift to a related issue that has been largely overlooked so far, namely the discursive conditions that have facilitated and paved the way for the monarchy's return to prominence. There are two sets of discourses that this article will discuss. The rest of this section will deal with the historiography of the democratic monarchy. The discourse of “clean politics” will be examined in the next section.

The seminal scholarship in Thai on the history of democracy was produced in the late 1960s to early 1970s. Scholars of that generation grew up after the People's Party was banished and its legacies cleansed and twisted. The experience of the first historical series was long gone. They came of age under the military rules of Sarit and Thanom-Prapas. Their perceptions of Thai democratisation were framed by the second historical series and by the rise of the new monarchy. In this intellectual context, they produced the royalist historiography described earlier in this article. In the early 1970s but especially after 1973, several writings by the royalists of the late 1930s were reprinted as works by people who fought for democracy but became victims of the People's Party dictatorship (Prajak, 2005: 501-9).

The most important emblem of the royalist democracy discourse is a passage from the abdication letter by King Rama VII in 1935. The “life” of this passage is telling in how the royalist discourse evolved from a misunderstood history to historiographical orthodoxy (Prajak, 2005: 488-96, 515-9; Somsak and Prajak, 2001). The passage was originally written in the context of a humiliating failure to regain power. In the king's view, of course, the revolution was merely the grab for power by a small group of disgruntled military leaders. The famous paragraph reads: “I am willing to surrender the powers I formerly exercised to the people as a whole, but I am not willing to turn them over to any individual or any group to use it in an autocratic manner without heeding the voice of the people” (cited in Batson, 1984: 317).

Since the late 1960s, the royalist historiography has made the passage, devoid of its original context, a democratic declaration against authoritarianism. It appeared in several scholarly as well as political publications against military rule. The most important printing was the front page of the historic booklet that helped trigger the 1973 uprising (Prajak, 2005: 515). It has been reproduced innumerable times as an emblem of democracy and eventually it was etched in stone at the monument of King Rama VII in front of the national parliament building. Thanks to his misunderstood passage, the last absolute monarch who was overthrown by the People's Party was posthumously honoured as the "Father of Thai Democracy." The king, whose legacies were negligible, finally earned a prominent place in history in the 1980s. The historiography of this king and the royalist democracy reinforce one another. The well-funded King Prajadhipok Institute (KPI) for research in government and administration, along with a grand museum of the king who "gave" democracy to the country, are, literally, the establishment for the discourse of the democratic monarchy.

The creation of King Rama VII as the fount of Thai democracy shapes the Thai perspective of the entire democratic period. It gives credit to the absolute monarchy for delivering democracy. The People's Party is reduced to a group of mere opportunists whose premature *coup* disrupted and ruined the royal democratisation process. The People's Party, so the story goes, then turned into a dictatorship, exemplified by the allegedly fascist Phibun whose republicanism was conveniently forgotten. The royalists who fought the People's Party for the greater power of the monarchy are considered democratic fighters. The royalists also made Pridi a forbidden figure in Thai politics for alleged regicide.¹⁰ He was almost unknown to later generations until the last few years of his life in exile. The most important and lasting effects of the royalist historiography is the belief that the monarchy is democratic and that the king is on the people's side in their struggle against military rule and against corrupt governments (see Thongchai, 2007: 43-5). The conditions that facilitated the posthumous creation of Rama VII as the Father of Thai Democracy were the rise of the sacred and popular monarchy under King Bhumibol, and the historical perspective framed by the second series. At the same time, the concept of royalist democracy facilitated the making of Bhumibol as the living democratic monarch. The episode on the palace grounds on 14 October 1973 concretely exemplified the democratic king.

A notable recent piece of evidence of the discourse of the democratic king is an official volume published by Thammasat University (Nakharin, 2006), entitled *Phra phu song pokklao prachathippatai* [*His Majesty who Protects Democracy*]. The title is a clever design that combines part of the King Rama VII's name in Thai (*Pokklao*) and the word *prachathippatai* (democracy) for an official publication to celebrate King Bhumibol as a democratic king. The book presents him as the great balancing and stabilising factor among volatile forces during the democratisation process. Interestingly, the book was undoubtedly part of Thammasat University administrators' politics to provide intellectual justification for the monarch to intervene in the 2006 political crisis against Thaksin. There are many "clever" interpretations and arguments that incorporate the critiques of the royalist historiography in order to make a royalist narrative. When it is too hard to handle, such as the 1976 massacre, the account is vague and skimpy.

The Discourse of “Clean Politics” and its Effects

In the context of the third historical series of democratisation, the prominence of the monarchy was built up by engaging in the development of the parliamentary system. It was so, however, by being the moral authority “above” – on top of, higher than, superior to – the normal political institutions that are considered extremely corrupt. The royalists and the civic movement and intelligentsia, the “people sector” as they called themselves, shared a distrust of politicians. Their implicit alliance generated stronger distrust. They put forward the discourse of “clean politics” that proved to be detrimental even to a powerful politician like Thaksin.

Amidst the struggles against military rule in the late 1970s and early 1980s, electoral politics began to take root. Retired military leaders whose appetite for power remained strong would usually set up or join a political party to run for an elected office.¹¹ As the second series was running its course, the third historical series unfolded with the rapid rise of money for power and power for money. It is said that the rise of money politics and vote-buying to an unprecedented level occurred when General Kriangsak Chomanan, a former military chief and prime minister after the 1977 *coup*, ran for an election in 1979 in a north-eastern province which he hardly visited. This signalled that a seat in the national parliament was worth heavy investment despite high risks, and that electoral politics was blossoming (Anderson, 1990). The electoral constituency became a battlefield among local and national magnates whose firepower was the ability to spend to win votes.

The discourse of clean politics emerged alongside this trend from the 1980s. It is widespread especially among the urban middle class who claim to be champions of democracy and whose views are represented by the mass media. Campaigns by civic groups against corruption are common. The successful ones, especially against powerful politicians, became national accomplishments celebrated by the public and in the media. Many national public figures – among them former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, a former Prime Minister and the President of the Privy Council General Prem, and the king himself – called corruption the most devastating plague of the country and the top national agenda. In 2000, one of the king’s most trusted associates, Dr Sumet Tantiwechakul, also the Chairman of the Chaiphattana Foundation that oversees the royal projects, established the “Foundation for a Clean and Transparent Thailand” (FaCT), with himself as the Chairman and Prem as the Honorary President. The purposes or “ideals” (*udomkan*) of the foundation are to fight corruption and to promote morals and ethics in every sector of the society. It launched several campaigns, held regular talks and engaged in other activities.¹² Although corruption is as widespread in the bureaucracy and private corporations as in politics, politicians are portrayed as and believed to be the bigger fish and the origin of more serious corruption. Morals and ethics are, in this view, the only solution to the “plague.” From the 1980s, clean politics was used to define desirable democracy: clean politics and democracy became synonymous. People’s power took a back seat.

The fight against corruption and money politics seems indisputably a good cause. It should contribute to democracy with no harm whatsoever. In the context of Thai democratisation of the past thirty years, however, the repercussions and consequences of clean politics against elected politicians significantly contributed

to the *coup* in 2006. Whether or not this project and its consequences were conspiratorially anticipated by any political force remains a question that this article cannot answer. It suffices to say that most people had not foreseen and probably not yet understood this issue well. To understand the effects of the discourse of clean politics on democratisation, I shall elaborate its four constitutive discourses and point out how each of them has ramified to become anti-democratic. They are (i) politicians are extremely corrupt; (ii) politicians come to power by vote-buying; (iii) an election does not equal democracy; and (iv) democracy means a moral, ethical rule.

Extremely Corrupt Politicians

Corrupt politicians and the excess of money in politics are neither new nor unique to Thailand. What is unique is the public perception of its severity, that Thai politicians are the most corrupt, that the situation is unparalleled, and that Thailand is in danger of destruction because of corruption. Needless to say, none of these perceptions has been verified. Allegations against politicians have been common in daily news reports and the public has tended to assume their guilt. Except for the first Thaksin government (2001-05), no elected government has run a full term; more often than not they fell because of corruption scandals. The Chatichai government (1988-91) was dubbed the “buffet cabinet” for the alleged “all you can eat” behaviour among the cabinet ministers. If a “communist threat” was the usual reason for many military *coups* during the Cold War, corruption has been the usual reason for *coups* after the end of the communist threat in Thailand since the early 1980s.

Vote-buying

Central to the discourse of extremely corrupt politicians is the belief that they ascend to power by buying votes and that while in power they need to recoup the investment and to prepare for the next election. While it is undeniable that vote-buying is widespread in Thai elections (McVey, 2000), the discourse of clean politics exaggerates its extent and presents a biased view of its cause, resulting in unexpected consequences (see Somchai, 2008).

From the 1980s, people have believed that vote-buying is rampant at every level of election. It is considered a political pandemic. Public calls, campaigns and measures to fight vote-buying reached every corner of the country in every election. The blame usually falls on the less educated and poor voters, mostly in rural areas, who allegedly sell their votes in exchange for short-term and petty material benefits. They lack the proper understanding of democracy, it is said, and lack good morals because they are ignorant and uninformed due to their lack of education.¹³ They are held to be partly responsible for the failure of democracy. Most of the education campaigns against vote-buying target the rural population and the urban poor. They are held to be infected by the disease, while the urban educated middle class are less so or not infected at all. The latter are champions of democracy whose task is to clean up politics. Certainly, the discourse on vote-buying is not groundless, and there are people who care for nothing but petty material gains. But the discourse is a gross

generalisation based on the urban middle-class bias against the provincial-based electoral majority (see Walker, 2008).

The urban bias against the electoral mass is extensive, and not restricted to criticism of direct forms of vote-buying. When popular politicians can win an election because they have delivered on the promises made to their constituencies during their tenure, especially by getting a good share of the budget for local development projects, the urban bias considers this to be a sophisticated and hidden form of vote-buying (Girling, 1996: 38, fn. 41, for example). When politicians delivered health care benefits and funds for local communities, these were considered “populist deception” or bribes for narrow benefits improper to democracy (see Pye and Wolfram, 2008). This urban bias view never understands the differences between the collective votes by rural communities, regardless of cash incentives, to politicians who made and kept their promises and the vote-selling for cash (Arghiros, 2001: 256-9). Democracy, according to the advocates of clean politics, seems highly purified, uncontaminated by the local and rural interests. On the other hand, promises of tax benefits, industrial parks, more electric trains in Bangkok and measures to solve Bangkok’s traffic jams, export promotions and investment stimuli are seen in the urban-biased view as national interests and legitimate policies.

It is rarely recognised that the urban bias embedded in Thailand’s development, politics and administration is a root cause of vote-buying. The parliamentary system and politicians become the channels through which people who are peripheral to the centralised power structure and centralised decision making express their grievance, put forward demands, voice their views and, perhaps most importantly, get things done for their benefit. Thai bureaucracy and centralised politics have, for a long time, proved to be unresponsive to these people. This by no means implies that politicians always serve people’s interests and do not serve their own. Personal gain is part of a politician’s agenda and the bureaucracy often colludes in this. None the less, politicians have proved to be more responsive to their constituency than the bureaucracy. In many cases, politicians can make the bureaucracy function effectively (Nishizaki, 2006). This is exemplified in the well-known case of former prime minister Banharn Silpa-archa, who academics and Bangkok-based journalists call a mafia boss. Indeed, the rural constituents are very rational in their dealings with politicians (Arghiros, 2001; also see Walker, 2008). They expect no purified politics but one that works for them. Clean politics may well be an elitist-biased fantasy.

Moreover, while cash changes hands during elections, the presumptuous notion that money determines election outcomes is disputable. In the earlier years of vote-buying, voters might feel obliged to vote for those whose money they accepted as a moral obligation (Arghiros, 2001: 261-4) and since the outcome in national politics rarely mattered to them. Vote-buying was a short-term contractual relation. Over the years, as politicians mattered more to their lives, voters took into account other factors far beyond the petty material gains to decide who would serve them best. The power of money was weakened and vote-buying became increasing fruitless in recent elections. The assumption that voters still care for nothing but money or that cash means the same as it used to decades ago is evidently wrong (Arghiros, 2001: 265-6; Callahan, 2005). The urban middle class, in general, are uninformed and ignorant; their bias robs them of the opportunity to learn about their rural counterparts.

Rural citizens are more or less informed and conscious of their interests like their urban counterparts (see Walker, 2008). Money remains dominant in politics for campaigns, advertisements and shady deals and so on. But the cries of foul play over vote-buying are misleading. Yet, the vote-buying discourse that puts blame on the rural and poor people remains very strong in the media and among the urban middle class. As Callahan (2005: 108) said long before the 2006 *coup*, vote-buying is not good but the preoccupation with vote-buying is perhaps more dangerous to democracy.

An Election Does Not Equal Democracy

Given the distrust of politicians and parliament's assumed lack of legitimacy due to vote-buying, Thailand's democracy has been seriously undermined. The public as well as many intellectuals question the legitimacy of the election as a trustworthy means to democracy.

As civic groups became more active in campaigns against corruption and abuses of power, politicians often brushed them aside, slandered them in public, or discredited, intimidated and suppressed them. Media faced heavy interference. Every elected government has acted similarly, but Thaksin may have done so more viciously than others (see Pasuk and Baker, 2008). His government and allies often tried to shut down critics and public opposition, calling on the public to ignore critics and to channel their voices only to elected parliamentarians. Democracy in this view strictly means ballots and politicians. It is none of the civic groups' business.

In response to such a self-serving and misguided democracy of politicians, several public intellectuals in the 1990s countered with their advocacy for "people's power" through organised civic movements. At the same time, they rhetorically called the politicians' narrow notion of electoral democracy, "electocracy" (*luaktang-thippatai*), implying that the existing rule in Thailand was not democracy (Kasian, 2006a: 12-14, esp. fn. 8). Thaksin's regime in particular was called an "elected capitalist absolutism" (Kasian, 2004).¹⁴ In retrospect, the name-calling was a double-edged sword against the narrow "electocracy" and against the legitimacy of electoral democracy at the same time. The rhetoric was well received and was integrated into the discourse of clean politics.

While these public intellectuals may support civic movements or people's power, the supporters of clean politics adopted the rhetoric to undermine the electoral and parliamentary system. During the political crisis in 2006, the royalists and the anti-Thaksin activists alike often called the Thaksin government an "electocracy" and his rule "monetocracy." After the *coup*, as critics of the *coup* insisted on electoral legitimacy in democracy, the *coup* defenders and apologists, including the royalist activists, military leaders and many leading intellectuals, kept repeating that the staging of an election does not equal democracy. Such a statement in a vacuum is not falsifiable. But in the context of Thai democratisation and the recent political crisis, it helped undermine electoral legitimacy and, regardless of intention, helped to open the door for non-democratic intervention.

The distrust of elections in fact goes a long way back and is deeper than the rhetoric above. It is rooted in the nationalistic conservatism that distrusts democracy for being alien to Thai culture which honours hierarchical relations and venerates the monarchy as the highest authority in the land. This idea can be found as early as

King Chulalongkorn's response to the critics of the absolute monarchy in 1903. His apt metaphor was that one cannot cultivate rice on the Thai soil the same way wheat is cultivated in Europe (Chulalongkorn, 1989: 128). These conservatives often remind us that a constitution, thereby democracy as well, is merely a Western object. It is not necessarily good for Thai political culture.¹⁵ On the other hand, the monarchy has always been the ultimate authority and source of legitimacy in Thai culture, like a constitution is to Western democracy (Dhani, 1947; Seni, 1990; Tongnoi, 1990). As Nidhi (1995) aptly put it, in the royalist's view, there is an unwritten "cultural constitution" in parallel with the written one that remains alien to Thai political culture (see Walker, 2008). In 2005 and 2006, the anti-Thaksin movement called for the return of power to the monarchy, arguing that it fits Thai political culture, unlike electoral democracy, which is an alien political system. The book that inaugurated this campaign was endorsed by the king himself (Pramuan, 2005: 6). Not only could politicians and elections not be trusted, but democracy itself is also suspect. This is the ideological basis for the royalist distaste of elections. It is compatible with the anti-electocracy discourse of liberal intellectuals, thanks to their shared distrust of the existing "democracy."

Democracy as Moral Rule

In retrospect, it is not quite clear what democracy means to Thai people. Against the absolute monarchy, *dimokhrasi* meant the opposite of that political system. Against military rule, democracy meant the opposite of it. But what do such oppositions imply? Democracy as a political framework by which a complex society with conflicting interests and individuals with equal rights can move along and people can muddle through together perhaps has not been understood as such in Thailand.

Ideologically speaking, in Thailand's predominantly Theravada Buddhist culture a good polity is rule by the righteous king. Moral or righteous rule would bring order, prosperity and peace to the society. It is a moral politics. It appears that such political culture remains strong in Thailand. While democratisation since 1932 has increasingly expanded the demographic base of political participation, the spirit of the new rule was perhaps not truly for contested interests among the public and the sanctity of individual rights as much as to allow the wider public to choose a moral ruler.

The discourse on clean politics is embedded in and reinforces moral politics in a twofold manner. On the one hand, it challenges and undermines politicians and the electoral politics. On the other, it acknowledges moral authority as the superior and ultimate legitimacy. In Thai democracy, the moral character of a leader is usually the point of scrutiny by the public rather than policies, ideas, leadership ability or public participation (McCargo, 2002: 5). As disillusion and distrust in electoral politics grow, people seek refuge not so much in the legal process or accountability mechanisms within the political system as in the higher moral authority.

In Thailand, the intelligentsia not only performs the role of critic but also assumes the voice of morality. The television programmes and newspaper columns of these public intellectuals have assumed prominence in the past few decades. This phenomenon is the result of a conjuncture of the relatively open politics since 1973, the boom of media business since the 1980s, and certainly the public appetite

for moral voices that are seen as incorrupt, impartial and wise. A unique phenomenon is that a few retired academics, among them Dr Prawase Wasi and Professor Saneh Chamarik, have been recognised widely as the moral voices of society. They once called themselves *Ratsadon a-wuso* in making political comments to the public. The term literally means “a senior citizen.” They often preach and give sermons on secular matters (politics, corruption, crisis, dangers of capitalism, consumerism, globalisation, and the like) in moral tones. With Theravada Buddhism in mind and given how they are revered among intellectuals, I suggest a better translation would be the “Elder citizens,” or simply “the Elders.” There are many more Elder-like academics and public figures with highly regarded careers and reputations, although they do not call themselves the Elders.

None the less, the highest moral authority with legitimacy equal to or surpassing that of an elected government is the monarchy. Occasionally, the king comes out in public criticising politicians or bypassing them and directly works with bureaucrats to tackle problems.¹⁶ From the early 1990s, the king’s televised birthday speech has become a new royal ritual the public look forward to as he usually puts politicians on trial in front of the national audience. The monarch’s criticisms are usually mild and often presented in a light-hearted manner. Most of the time, there are no specifics and no names named. But the targets are clear. The media and the public always get satisfaction from the royal reprimand of politicians. Even when the king’s words are unclear or even when they are not criticisms, people enjoy reading between the lines and direct their interpretations at politicians. The birthday speech becomes a ritual to display the hierarchy of moral authority and to reaffirm the monarchy’s place “above” the normal realm of politics. At the same time, the ritual draws the public to identify themselves with the moral authority of the king. It is one of the cleverest political rituals, with the impact probably many times that of an electoral campaign. As the current monarch has reinvented the institution’s place in democracy “above” politics, and elevated it to an unprecedented stature, the monarchy becomes an alternative source of legitimacy to the electoral democracy. According to the royalist-inspired “cultural constitution,” the monarch’s moral authority is far superior to the elected ones. Many people surrounding him are also considered as having some share of moral authority as well, for example, the privy councillors, and those involved in royal projects.

Liberals and royalists joined the chorus singing the praises of the superlative democratic king. In 1995, after the 1992 bloodshed led to a campaign for political reform, the royalists of various political camps called for the return to power of the monarch in order to restart democracy. The campaign was intellectually underwritten by a public law scholar, Dr Amorn Chantharasomboon, who put forward in public that only the monarch, “particularly the current king,” and not any elected body, can launch the reform as he is the highest source of legitimacy (Amorn, 1994; 1997; the quote is on p. 64 of the latter). The result was the 1997 constitution, acclaimed as the “people’s constitution” for its inclusion of more provisions guaranteeing rights and freedoms than any previous ones in Thai history.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it was publicly announced that the top agenda of the charter was to design a system that would phase out corrupt politicians and clean up Thai democracy. In retrospect, the 1997 charter was a major signpost of the alliance between the civic movements and the liberal royalists against the elected but corrupt

politicians. The public faces of political reform and the Constitution Drafting Assembly were known liberal royalists such as – apart from Amorn – the former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun and Prawase Wasi, one of the Elders. The constitution received strong support from several quarters of society, including the civic groups in the “people’s sector,” liberal and royalist intellectuals, the urban public, the media and, implicitly, the palace.

The Royalist *Coup* of September 2006

Undoubtedly the tension between Thaksin and the military was a factor in the 2006 *coup* (see Ukrist, 2008). But, perhaps, unlike any previous *coup*, this one was carried out by the military but probably not for the military themselves. As it is widely known now, the *coup* was engineered by Prem, the President of the Privy Council (see Hewison, 2008). It was a royalist *coup* with support from the “people’s sector” movement.

The anti-Thaksin movement was very royalist in many facets. One of the most divisive issues was its campaign to return power to the monarch, urging his intervention to topple Thaksin and appoint a new government. The movement, a conglomeration of the royalists and the “people’s sector” activists and intelligentsia in the name of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), shouted the slogans, “We love the King,” “We fight for the King,” and called themselves “the guards of the land.” Its most important leader, Sondhi Limthongkul, is a royalist who had, since mid-2005, called for the use of a so-called royal prerogative that he considered allowed the king’s intervention. Furthermore, a number of blue-blooded aristocrats and minor royals explicitly organised and took action in public, even hosting a New Year’s party after the *coup* to which key PAD leaders were invited. This is indeed a rare occasion in Thailand. Given this royal-liberal alliance, and the nature of monarchical moral authority, it is not surprising that the movement called for morals and ethics in politics. Finally, apart from the corruption and tax evasion allegations, Thaksin also faced several accusations of *lèse majesté*. The royalists alleged that his acts on many occasions verged on disrespect to the monarchy. These allegations reflected real concerns among the royalists that, in the words of a high-profile royalist at a meeting I attended in June 2006, Thaksin might be “privatising” the royals. Many believed that Thaksin was putting himself in an advantageous position for the future, given that the monarch’s health was failing. The royalists felt that they could not afford having Thaksin as the next kingmaker. This, in my view, is the ulterior motive of the *coup*, no less important than Thaksin’s corruption and abuse of power – a quiet quake that will have huge impacts on Thai democracy (see Ockey, 2005; Tasker, 2006; Ukrist, 2008).

To most supporters of the PAD, Thaksin was the epitome of corrupt politicians. A few months before the *coup*, Prem jumped into the political ring and overtly expressed his distaste for Thaksin. Using a horse-racing metaphor, he told a military gathering that the elected government was merely a jockey assigned to ride the horse but not the owner of it. The military was reminded that they belonged to the monarchy, not to the jockey. Several judges seconded Prem, saying that they too belonged to the king. Thaksin was steadfast, as he repeated at every opportunity, that he had the electoral mandate. Every time he was countered by the discourse of

clean politics that politicians were extremely corrupt, who came to power by vote-buying, therefore the electoral mandate was a fraud.

The role of academics in the whole crisis was phenomenal. To them, the military was probably no worse than the Thaksin regime (see Anek, 2006b). Many argued that Thaksin had already destroyed democracy and the 1997 constitution, that the *coup* was not anti-democratic but the only solution to resume democracy.¹⁸ Khien Theeravit, a senior political scientist who also supported the 1991 *coup*, wrote an article in support of the military's "right to stage a coup" (Khien, 2006). Many intelligentsia and democratic activists took this stance. One of the prominent groups was from Chulalongkorn University named, the "Chula to Promote Morals as Guide to Democracy Group." This academic group visited Prem a few days before the *coup*, asking Prem to intervene to solve the crisis. The moral and clean politics advocates guided Thai democracy by toppling the elected government.

The prominence of the monarchy in Thai democracy that was nurtured since the end of the Second World War and which blossomed in 1973 reached another significant milestone in 2006. It was not the first time that a royal intervention was called for by the public – it was so in 1973 and 1992. It was not the first time that the accomplice was the military – it was so in 1947 and 1976. It was not the first time that an elected government was the target with corruption the reason for a *coup* – it was so in 1991. The 2006 *coup* was not the first royalist *coup* either, as were the ones in 1947, 1976. But this time it took place after fourteen years of continuous parliamentary democracy and against one of the most popular regimes in history that had won three elections, two of them in a landslide.

Being "above" politics during the first historical series of democratisation, the monarchy suffered enormously. Now in the third series, being "above" politics is probably the best place to which the monarchy can aspire. The role of the monarchy as the highest moral authority behind the *coup* was hinted at in the words that the *coup* group chose to name itself, the "Council for Democratic Reform under the King as the Head of the State."¹⁹ A month after the *coup*, one of the best known academics and social critics in Thailand, Thirayuth Boonmi, who was also a key leader of the 1973 uprising, made a public comment endorsing the *coup* as a necessary step for democracy. He proposed that for the democratic regime in the future, there should be a "council for moral security" [*Khana montri phua khwam mankhong thang silatham*] acting like an upper house above the elected parliament and government. Members of this council should be selected (*not elected*) from incorruptible people, such as the privy councillors, military leaders, judges, the Elders, anti-globalisation activists and academics from well-known institutions. The new constitution, he suggested, should not follow the West, but should be based on Thai intellect and culture (Thirayuth, 2007; from a speech made in 2006). In response, I called Thirayuth's view "nakedly aristocratic," with the aristocrats (*aphichon* – literally the superior or higher people) flocking onto the upper level "above" politics (Thongchai, 2006). In response to my critique, another high-profile academic, Anek Laothamatas, offered his account of the desirable form of democracy that fits Thai conditions. In his view, the democratic force, like the elected ones, must learn to live with the necessary role of the *aphichon* and the monarchy. Democracy for Thailand should not copy the West, but, in Anek's words

that echoed the ones by King Chulalongkorn 103 years earlier, it must grow on Thai soil because Thais eat rice, not wheat (Anek, 2006a; 2006b).

Among the *aphichon* mentioned by Thirayuth, two groups that appear representing the monarchy more or less directly are the privy councillors and the judiciary. The role of judges during the 2006 crisis is unprecedented. During the early phase of the crisis, they were absent, as they always are. Despite allegations of corruption, tax evasion and abuses of power, the judicial process was not recognised as a viable mechanism for accountability. The anti-Thaksin people argued that the judicial process was not a viable option because the court was under Thaksin's influence, implicitly suggesting that the judges were bought by him. They often cited the 2001 case in which Thaksin was charged for hiding his assets in the names of his house maids, chauffeurs, gardeners and distant relatives and so on. He survived the constitutional court ruling on this by only one vote, allegedly by investing in a few judges. But I would argue that the distrust in the judiciary was deeper and held long before Thaksin. Although it cannot be dealt with extensively in this article, it suffices to say that the judicial system has a long and solid record of siding with whoever is in power. But they do so quietly, rarely engaging with politics overtly. They always know the winds, so to speak. Heroic actions were not impossible but are rare. Its undistinguished history suggests that the judiciary is not at all an independent body to counter abuses of power. Indeed the lack of an independent judiciary is probably one of the most serious problems of Thai democratisation that has escaped serious attention. To my knowledge, there is no significant critical study of the politics of the judiciary.

All of this changed when the king intervened in an unscheduled televised event on 25 April 2006 urging the judges to take action to solve the crisis. Suddenly the judiciary was overly active. Instead of exercising their power by adjudicating court cases, the top judges in the land held press conferences, hinting at taking swift action against Thaksin even before a suit was filed. Later the court removed and jailed the supposedly independent Election Commissioners for their support of Thaksin. The judges were hailed by the anti-Thaksin people as the fortress of democracy, or as Thirayuth put it, the beginning of the *tulakanphiwat* ["judicialisation"] to rescue democracy (Thirayuth, 2006). Shortly after the *coup*, the high court chief offered recognition of the *coup* group, saying that the latter's order would be taken as one by the king. This reasoning seemed to follow the king's acknowledgement of the authority of the *coup*.²⁰ Judges are over-represented in the *coup* regime. They are in the junta-appointed government and prominent in the national assembly. They lead the drafting committee of the new constitution. They formed the new Election Commission, and they are in the committees investigating Thaksin's corruption. In a way, absolutely nothing has changed; the judges are simply acknowledging that they know which way the winds are blowing.

"Democracy with the Monarch as the Head of the State"

This article has offered a new historical perspective on Thai democratisation and demonstrates how the 2006 *coup* can be understood from such a perspective. It is too early to say if democracy has entered the fourth series and what it is, or if the third historical series continues. The question is whether or not or in what ways the power

relations among political forces have been shaken and realigned after the 2006 *coup*. First of all, although the military acted on behalf of the royalists, it might not be easy to “put this genie back into the bottle.” Was the 2006 *coup* a turning point that brought the military back into the equation? How their particular political interests and their relationship with other political forces develops remains to be seen.

The current and future monarchy needs no absolute power. It needs only to remain “above politics.” Every political institution and power will then fall into place, that is, precisely under it. But the realm “above politics” may actually be more uncertain than the monarchists would like because it has been overly dependent on the charisma of King Bhumibol. To what extent is it institutionalised regardless of the individuality of the monarch? Will the royal hegemony evaporate after Bhumibol? Who would be, literally, the kingmakers?

In the medium term, the new constitution will design a structure of institutional relations reflecting the discourse of Thai cultural democracy. Freedom and rights guaranteed in the 1997 constitution should not be at risk since the so-called people’s sector was not the target of this *coup*. The key issues remain, I believe, the role, place and power of the monarchy in Thai democracy and how to rein in elected authority. A government after the 2006 *coup* most likely will be obedient and mindful of its proper place and behaviour in the hierarchical political system of Thai cultural democracy.

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Notes

- ¹ This phrase was from the King’s address to the judiciary on 25 April 2006, apparently meaning the political crisis since early 2006 was one of the worst in the world. The anti-Thaksin movement interpreted the king’s words to refer to the Thaksin government.
- ² The scholarly work that represents this view best is Chai-Anan (1980). Chai-Anan produced several works that propagated these ideas since 1970, following many royalist writers before him who were not academics. This royalist view is also adopted and implied in Batson (1984) and Wyatt (1982: 231), which states that “many would have agreed with [King Rama VII’s] judgment that the move towards democracy in 1932 was premature.”
- ³ Charnvit (2000: 25-8) acknowledged this historiographical shift. The revisionist historiography includes many books, articles and theses, mostly in Thai, that this article cannot list fully. Among the important ones are Nakharin (1992), Thamrongsak (2000) and Copeland (1994).
- ⁴ Duncan McCargo (2005) used the term “network monarchy” to refer to the political force and players that rely on, attach to, or claim authority and legitimacy on certain relations to the monarchy but whose political operations may or may not be linked directly to the monarch.
- ⁵ This word is drawn from the English; the Thai word *prachathippatai* was coined around the late 1920s, originally for “republicanism.”
- ⁶ The royalist works that asserts the importance of the king in politics are mostly conceptual rather than embracing a narrative or analysis of actual history (e.g. Dhani, 1947; Seni, 1990; Tongnoi, 1990; Tongthong, 2005). Critical studies in Thai are limited to Somsak (2001), while in English, they include Marks (1978), Hewison (1997), Kershaw (2001), Bowie (1997), Streckfuss (1995; 1996) and Handley (2006).

- ⁷ Prince Dhani was a key member of the royalist leadership during 1945-51, later a Privy Councillor, Regent and personal teacher of King Bhumibol. The most important leader for the royalist revival at that time was Prince Rangsit, the Regent. Handley (2006) provides excellent accounts of the importance of both.
- ⁸ A recording of events on the 14 October 1973 as described here was recently reproduced and distributed in VHS tape, VCD and DVD formats by Charnvit Kasetsiri, titled “14 October 1973.”
- ⁹ Academic works typical of this approach include, for example, Kobkua (2002; 2003). The same kind of account is also common in Thai mass media as well as in the world’s leading newspapers including the *New York Times*. Every time an anniversary of this monarch is reported or there is coverage of one of Thailand’s political crises, the king has been praised as the key element that stabilised democracy. The two events in 1973 and 1992 are always mentioned as evidence for this assertion; the 1976 massacre is usually omitted. The writers probably realise that the 1976 massacre would negate their entire reports.
- ¹⁰ The death of King Ananda (Rama VIII) in 1946 remains mysterious even today, whether it was an accident or a murder; if the latter, by whom and in what circumstance. But the royalists were determined to blame Pridi and to have a pretext for getting rid of him as one of the last influential figures of the 1932 revolution. Pridi went into exile in 1947 and remained defamed for regicide, despite no charges being laid or any evidence produced, to the end of his life in 1983 (Handley, 2006: 77-87, 93, 125 and 421). He was posthumously rehabilitated from the 1980s, but never returned to Thailand.
- ¹¹ A striking exception is General Prem Tinsulanonda. His eight-year premiership owed more to the palace’s support than to electoral support. On stepping down, he was appointed to the Privy Council. He is living evidence of the palace route to power. His role in the 2006 *coup* (see Hewison, 2008) is additional evidence of the tension and antagonism between the two routes to power.
- ¹² See <http://www.fact.or.th/> for the Foundation’s background, boards and committees, list of members, projects, activities and several essays. Recently, after the *coup*, the king’s philosophy of Sufficiency Economy also became a major issue for the Foundation.
- ¹³ This allegation has been raised since the late 1980s and was a reason for the *coup* in 1991 (Arghiros, 2001: 260). It was repeated frequently by the anti-Thaksin movement and the mainstream media during the 2006 crisis and again since the *coup* (see Walker, 2008).
- ¹⁴ Kasian’s own English, from his own word in Thai, *somburanayasitthithun*, to make an analogy to *somburanayasitthirat* – the absolute monarchy.
- ¹⁵ To counter the critics of the 2006 *coup* who insisted in the legitimacy of electoral system and the 1997 Constitution, the *coup* defenders, including many leading academics, remind us repeatedly that Thai democracy has to fit Thai conditions. Democracy and a constitution are alien things (see, for example, Thirayuth, 2006 and Anek 2006a; 2006b), and the words by Pramuan Rujanaseree, a royalist propagator, as reported in Fuller (2006).
- ¹⁶ For instance, several years ago, under the Banharn government, a meeting between the king and those bureaucrats responsible for flood control was televised with no advance announcement. At that table, there was not a single politician in charge of those agencies and ministries. It was a silent rebuke of them.
- ¹⁷ Critical studies of this reform and constitution are Connors (2002), who viewed it as elitist project, and McCargo (1998; 2002: 37-56), who concluded that the reform is undemocratic.
- ¹⁸ See the interviews of many academics, public intellectuals in *Krungthep Thurakit* [*Bangkok Business*], a daily newspaper, 21 September 2006; and the interview of Saneh Chamarik, Chairman of the National Commission on Human Rights on *Prachatai.com*, a web-based news service, 20 September 2006.
- ¹⁹ In an ingenious move shortly after the *coup*, the *coup* group announced to the international community that it had cut the phrase, “under...State” from its name in English because the phrase caused “misunderstanding” among foreigners that the king was behind the *coup*. But the Thai name remains intact, implying either that Thais do not misunderstand or that Thais need to be reminded that the *coup* is for a particular kind of democracy.
- ²⁰ The words of Jaran Phakdeethanakul, the Secretary of the Supreme Court Chief at a press conference on 21 September 2006, published the following day in several daily news reporting including *Matichon*, *Krungthep Thurakit* and *Prachatai.com*.

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