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THE FOREIGN PRESS' CHANGING
PERCEPTIONS OF THAILAND'S
MONARCHY

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INSTITUTE

Trends in Southeast Asia

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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The Foreign Press' Changing Perceptions of Thailand's Monarchy

By Puangthong R. Pawakapan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- During the Cold War, well-informed foreign journalists did not naïvely accept the Thai official narrative that the monarchy was strictly above politics. They were well aware of the influence and political power of the palace.
- However, they believed the institution was necessary for Thailand to survive the communist threat, oppressive military leaders and corrupt politicians. For decades, their coverage helped promoted the benign image of the institution internationally.
- The intransigent crisis in Thailand since the *coup d'état* of 2006 inevitably affected foreign press coverage regarding the key players' role in the conflict. Discussions of the role of the monarchy and the royalist elites have appeared more frequently than ever and become increasingly critical.
- The apparent changes in foreign journalists' perceptions since 2006 appear to be the result of the anti-democratic behaviour of the monarchists and of the royalist movement; and the increase in *lèse majesté* charges. The establishment's unnecessary fear of losing power and inability to adapt to socio-political change are viewed as an immense obstacle to Thailand's democratization and to efforts at conflict resolution.

The Foreign Press' Changing Perceptions of Thailand's Monarchy¹

By Puangthong R. Pawakapan²

INTRODUCTION

In comparison to neighbouring countries, Thailand had long had the image of being a stable and unified country. Its monarchy was seen as a vital force behind this happy situation. When the Cold War ended, expectations were high that the kingdom would act as a great driver for regional economic cooperation as well as a model for democratization in the region.

However, the image of Thailand as presented in major foreign press outlets today tells a sadder story: they portray a country that has been in deep crisis since the *coup d'état* that overthrew Thaksin Shinawatra's elected government on 19 September 2006. As yet, a way out of the crisis is not in sight. The latest coup overthrowing the Phuea Thai government in 2014 swept away a fragile opportunity for Thailand to carefully build a functioning democracy. Foreign press coverage and comments regarding the key players' role in the conflict have changed too. Most notable is how the mainstream narrative of the monarchy is increasingly being challenged by foreign journalists. Discussion of the role and objectives of

¹ This article is one of the outputs from my research fellowship at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), Singapore, July 2014 to January 2015. My special thanks go to Michael Montesano, Terence Chong, Thongchai Wininichakul, Tyrell Haberkorn and Patrick Jory for their friendship and comments.

² Puangthong R. Pawakapan is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University.

the traditional elites and the draconian law of *lèse majesté* has appeared more frequently than ever, while news coverage and op-ed articles on the royal institution have become increasingly critical. The titles of articles since the 2006 coup themselves convey the critical tone of the foreign press towards the monarchy, a prospect one could hardly have expected before that coup. Examples of these are many: “As Thai Monarchy’s Power Wanes, King Still Revered” by Associated Press; “Thailand’s King Sees His Influence Fading” by *New York Times*; “Thai Monarch Is a Factor in Dispute” by *Wall Street Journal*; “The King and Its Crisis: A Right Royal Mess” by *The Economist*, and “Thailand, A Coup, the Crown and the Two Middle Classes,” by *The Diplomat*.³

Despite rigorously maintaining a god-like image of traditional Buddhist-Brahmin kingship, the Thai monarchy has simultaneously pitched itself as international and cosmopolitan. Since the time of King Chulalongkorn (r.1868–1910), the institution has been concerned about its international image. Monarchs thus refashioned themselves in line with contemporary European norms: Western-style etiquette, dress, habitation, patronage, and pageantry made their way to the court and were demonstrated in both the domestic and international arena.⁴ The elegant images of the King and the Queen on extensive overseas trips in the early 1960s have been reproduced continually at home. The invitation extended to monarchies from twenty-five countries around the world to join the grand celebration of King Bhumibol’s sixtieth year on the throne in June 2006 also reflects the monarchists’ yearning for global prestige. Moreover, they have shown themselves to be sensitive

³ Grant Peck, “As Thai Monarchy’s Power Wanes, King Still Revered”, Associated Press, published in *Jakarta Post*, 25 May 2010; Seth Mydans and Thomas Fuller, “Thailand’s King Sees His Influence Fading”, *New York Times*, 15 May 2010; Tome Wright, “Thai Monarch Is a Factor in Dispute”, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 2014; “The King and Its Crisis: A Right Royal Mess” and “Thailand’s Monarchy: The King and Them”, *The Economist*, 4 December 2008; Serhat Ünaldi, “Thailand, A Coup, the Crown and the Two Middle Classes”, *The Diplomat*, 23 May 2014.

⁴ Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002).

to negative perceptions from the international community, and have tried to defend the royal institution through publications and interviews. The publication of a big, thick volume on *King Bhumibol Adulyadej: A Life's Work*,⁵ prepared under the chairmanship of former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, is one of the attempts to refute Paul Handley's landmark book *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej*.⁶ When the monarchists learned that Yale University Press was about to publish Paul Handley's work, they sent Bowornsak Uwanno, a royalist legal expert, to persuade Yale to delay the publication until after the celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the King's reign.

This article examines the changing perception the foreign press has had of the Thai monarchy. It argues that Western journalists have become increasingly unfavourable towards the monarchists after the coup in 2006, and looks at how post-2006 coup incidents affected the foreign media's perception and how they have viewed the monarchists' arguments. To begin, it is necessary to compare dominant perceptions of foreign media towards the Thai monarchy before and after the 2006 coup. The sources of this study include articles in major foreign press outlets and interviews with nine Thailand-based foreign journalists and one security expert. Because of the *lèse majesté* law, their identities are kept anonymous.

DISCOURSE ON THE MONARCHY BEFORE THE 2006 COUP

When King Bhumibol marked sixty years on the throne in 2006, most foreign media, if not all, embraced most of Thailand's official narrative

⁵ Nicholas Grossman and Dominic Faulder, eds., *King Bhumibol Adulyadej: A Life's Work* (Singapore and Bangkok: Editions Didier Millet, 2011). In addition, see Suchit Bunbongkarn and Prudhisan Jumbala, eds., *Monarchy and Constitutional Rule in Democratizing Thailand* (Bangkok: Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2012); The National Identity Office, *King Bhumibol: Strength of the Land* (Bangkok: the Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2009).

⁶ Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

on the monarchy. It was common for them to describe the King in positive terms, such as “the most beloved and revered king”, “the embodiment of the nation’s spirit”, “the supreme moral authority”, “the peacemaker”, “the unifying force”, “the development monarch”, “the pillar of stability” and “the democratic king”. They agreed that King Bhumibol’s six decades on the throne have been essential for Thailand’s political stability and development. In short, the devoted monarch was a great blessing for the Thais. These praises prevail in a collection, *The King of Thailand in World Focus*, edited by two veteran journalists, Denis D. Gray and Dominic Faulder, and published in 2006 by the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Thailand to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the King’s reign. It consists of 167 selected news pieces from 56 different media agencies around the world written between 1946 and 2006.⁷ This book was an updated edition of the 1988 edition with the same title, published to celebrate the King’s sixtieth birthday and his status as the longest reigning monarch in Thai history. As the inside of the front cover states, the collection represents “The world’s longest-reigning monarch seen through the eyes of foreign journalists and photographers, spanning nearly eight decades of turmoil and triumph”. These books are clear and collected evidence of the positive view the foreign press corps in Bangkok has long had of the King.

Although the image of the benevolent king has largely prevailed in the foreign press, not all of them agreed with the Thai official narrative that the monarchy was “above politics”. The influence and the role in politics that the monarchy had had did not go unnoticed by Western journalists, especially during the Cold War period when the monarchists manoeuvred to restore their dominant role. Foreign journalists, as early as in the 1960s, pointed out rather openly that royal endorsement was the main source of legitimacy and effective sovereign power for governments, especially military regimes. They apparently had more freedom and space to discuss the monarchy than the Thai media. This

⁷ Denis D. Gray and Dominic Faulder, eds., *The King of Thailand in World Focus* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2008).

was possibly due to the fact that their readers were mostly outside of Thai society or from the Thai elite, and foreign news media penetration was still minimal.

For example, in a 1960 article, “The King of Siam”, *The Observer*, a British publication, explained to their readers the past tension between King Bhumibol and Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram, who had been an obstacle to the former’s public role, until Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat seized power from Phibun in a coup in 1957. The King’s agreeable relationship with Sarit significantly transformed the role of the constitutional monarchy in that his developing interest in politics and his new appeal to the populace had been increasingly noticeable. The article concluded that “the basis of Thai rule therefore remains the King and the ruling military group”.⁸ *Time* magazine in 1966 also illuminated how the monarchy’s powerful status was important for the country’s security and stability. *Time* explicitly stated that the King had tacitly supported Sarit’s military takeover as premier. As a result, “partly in gratitude, partly [to] rally public support for his own rule, Sarit consciously set out to build up the image of the tall, spare king and his comely queen.” They worked closely together to develop the country. By the time of the military regime of Field Marshals Thanom Kittikhachon and Praphat Charusathian (1963–73), the growing power of the King made him “more than ever the throne behind the power”. The King and the Queen, working as a team, took every opportunity to identify themselves with Thailand and its progress.⁹

Foreign journalists were well aware that the monarchy played an essential role in the United States-sponsored anti-communist operations. King Bhumibol’s tireless visits to the countryside and numerous rural development programmes were vital components of the monarchy’s image. The royal institution became a symbol of “Thainess” resisting the

⁸ “The King of Siam”. *The Observer*, 17 July 1960, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 49–51.

⁹ “A Monarchy Fights for Freedom”, *Time*, 27 May 1966, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 53–56.

communist invasion.¹⁰ The King's endorsement in the form of speeches and overseas trips also assisted in building up popular support for Thai military cooperation with the United States in the Vietnam War. *Time* magazine pointed out that, because of the King's moral authority, his message to the Thai people regarding the importance of Thailand's military cooperation with the United States during the Vietnam War helped alleviate tension between the Thais and the increasing numbers of American soldiers and bases in Thailand. Even officials of the U.S. Information Service (USIS) in Bangkok, who were actively involved in anti-communist psychological operations and propaganda, concluded that "USIS funds could not be better employed than in spreading the likeness of His Majesty".¹¹

In this respect, students of Thailand have learned from the pioneering academic works of Thak Chalorntiarana and Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian¹² of the partnership of the King, Sarit and the United States. However, since the 1960s, foreign journalists also observed how such a relationship transformed the role and power of the monarchy in Thai politics. For example, *The Observer* noted that the King appeared to be happier during Sarit's government than during Phibun's. "Relations between government and king eased. Consultations between them became more frequent. The stifling atmosphere of the past lifted and the King began to loosen up".¹³ Another issue that the foreign press has always emphasized

¹⁰ See study of the role of the monarchy in the U.S.'s psychological operation in Natthapon Chaiching, "Phrabarami Pokklao Tai Ngao Insi: Phaen Songkhram Chittawitthaya Amerikan Kap Kan Sang Sathaban Kasat Pen Sanyalak Haeng Chat [The Royal Benevolence under the Eagle's Shadow: American's Psychological Warfare and the Making of the Monarchy as the National Symbol]", *Fa Diaokan* 9, no. 2 (April–June 2011): 94–166.

¹¹ "A Monarchy Fights for Freedom", *Time*, 27 May 1966, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 53–56.

¹² Thak Chalorntiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism Paternalism* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1979), pp. 309–34; Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *King, Country and Constitutions: Thailand's Political Development 1932–2000* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹³ "The King of Siam", *The Observer*, 17 July 1960, in Gray and Faulder, eds., op. cit., pp. 49–51.

was King Bhumibol's six decades of unfaltering commitment to improve the livelihood of the poor in the remote areas through numerous royal projects.¹⁴ It was seen as a great blessing for the country. *The King of Thailand in World's Focus* devotes an entire chapter to the royal projects.

The generation of foreign journalists covering Thailand during the Cold War period was aware that the Thai monarchy did not strictly fit the Western concept of constitutional monarchy or of being above politics. However, they did not see it as a serious problem. A 1981 piece in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* provided quite a straightforward analysis in unambiguously reporting on how the palace's position was the most important factor for the success or failure of political factions. This article was published after the failed coup by the "Young Turks" military group against the government of General Prem Tinsulanond in April of that year, and analysed the influential role of King Bhumibol in this crisis. *The Review* told its readers that when the Young Turks staged a coup on 1 April, the King departed from Bangkok in the early hours to join Prem in Khorat. The action "spelled the death knell for the Young Turks' coup attempt. Although the King made no public comment during the affair, his mere presence at Korat decisively tipped the balance in Prem's favour, bestowing on him continued legitimacy."¹⁵ Overall, the palace's role in the failed coup of the Young Turks was seen as being supportive of the legitimate government and of democracy.

While *The Review* noted that political interference might possibly have a negative impact on the royal institution, this important issue was not examined critically. The article reiterated that "the King as symbol of the nation could, however, stay far above the political world only so long as there was a person or institution able to provide the country with effective and tolerable government," such as that of Sarit and, later,

¹⁴ The Royal Project is an initiative of King Bhumibol in 1969. It covers a wide range of issues, such as problems of deforestation, poverty eradication in the rural areas, opium production by promoting alternative crops.

¹⁵ David Jenkins and Philip Bowring, "The Power Wielded by a Constitutional Monarchy", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19–25 June 1981, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 96–99.

Prem.¹⁶ But when the military regimes were corrupt and oppressive to an intolerable point, such as those of Thanom-Prapath in 1973 and Suchinda Kraprayun in 1992, the King would intervene. He would be a just and timely arbiter to defuse the bomb before society experienced great damage. The monarchy was impartial and held no personal interests. Unlike constitutional monarchies elsewhere, the King drew authority from his own merit and actions in pursuit of the well-being of his subjects. He had succeeded in achieving a supreme moral authority.¹⁷ In other words, the monarchy may not be strictly above politics but it was certainly not a party to political conflict. Foreign media thus embraced and heralded the justification and the alleged uniqueness of Thailand's constitutional monarchy.

However, there was a discrepancy in the rationalization of the relationship between the palace and the military regimes. On the one hand, the monarchy was always viewed in a positive light and the King's approval was crucial for regime legitimacy. On the other hand, the authoritarian military regimes were critically assessed, despite the fact that the military's royal-nationalist ideology and commitment to protect the institution since Sarit's government provided opportunities for the palace to consolidate its power and prestige. The view was that society could not depend on self-serving military leaders. But the King could "restrain an unscrupulous successor to the marshal. Therefore, the stronger King Bhumibol emerged, the better the guarantee for Thailand's internal equilibrium."¹⁸ King Bhumibol was thus presented as a democratic monarch despite his corrupt and anti-democratic military allies.

Since the popular uprising against the Thanom-Prapath regime in October 1973, the foreign press largely adopted and promoted the idea

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See "King Bhumipol: "Politics is a Filthy Business", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 October 1974; James Walsh, "Democracy Rising", *Time*, 1 June 1992, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 47–49 and 100–103 respectively.

¹⁸ "The King of Siam", *The Observer*, 17 July 1960, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 49–51.

of King Bhumibol as a defender of democracy. The palace's intervention on 14 October, its willingness to shelter people fleeing violent military suppression, and the end of the Thanom-Praphat regime, showed that the King stood by the people and democracy.¹⁹ (However, little is said about the palace's position on the student massacre by right wing groups in 1976.) To reinforce this image, the incident of the royal intervention to end the riot following the May 1992 military suppression of anti-Suchinda demonstrators has become a favourite reference for most of the foreign press. The photo of King Bhumibol reprimanding the two antagonists, General Suchinda Kraprayun and Chamlong Simueang, has been reproduced again and again.

Interestingly, Western academics specializing in Thailand during the Cold War period also had similar perceptions. Benedict Anderson pointed out in a 1978 article that, rather than taking a critical examination of the subject of their studies, Thailand specialists tended to see the role of the monarchy as a case of the uniqueness of Thai society. This was because that generation of Western scholars had a tendency to approach Southeast Asian societies and area studies through the lens of indigenous culture and nationalism in opposition to colonial powers. In the case of Thai studies, the Chakri dynasty was presented as playing a historical role in modernizing and building the Thai nation. Here, Western Thailand specialists were reinforcing what Thongchai Winichakul terms "royal nationalism".²⁰ Western journalists appeared to work along this same line. The *Far Eastern Economic Review*, three months after the student uprising in October 1973, put King Bhumibol in the same league as other anti-colonial nationalist leaders in Southeast Asia: "Southeast Asian has thrown up many remarkable men — Ho Chi Minh, Sihanouk, General

¹⁹ Peter O'Loughlin, "The Students' Revolt", Associated Press, 17 October 1973, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 90–91.

²⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, "Prawattisat Thai Baeb Racha Chatniyom: Chak Yuk Ananikhom Amphang Su Racha Chatniyomma Rue Latthi Sadetpho Khong Kadumpi Thai Nai Patchuban" [Thai Royal Nationalist Historiography: From Crypto-colonialism to New Royal Nationalism or the Cult of King Chulalongkorn of the Present Thai Bourgeoisie], in *Sinlapa Watthanatham* 23, no. 1 (2001): 56–65.

Giap. I wouldn't have dreamed of saying it a few months ago, but King Bhumibol may wind up being remembered as the most remarkable of them all."²¹ It seems that Thailand's experts and foreign journalists in this period reinforced each other's perception of the monarchy.

In the context of corrupt military leaders and the threat of communism, the foreign press in general tended to believe that the newborn democracy needed a benign, authoritative and unifying figure to lead and save Thailand. It was a position that King Bhumibol could fulfil.²² Therefore, they voluntarily assisted in the careful construction of the benign image of King Bhumibol in the international arena. However, they failed to analyse how the monarchy's partnership with military leaders essentially strengthened military rules, a legacy that Thailand still faces.

The period between 1992 and 2006 appears to be a time when the King's power and moral authority reached their zenith: the country was governed by elected governments, and though all elected governments after 1992 except that of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–05) failed to complete its four-year term, the country was relatively stable. Most journalists believed that coups were a thing of the past for Thailand. There were no political crises demanding royal intervention. Foreign journalists arriving in Thailand during this period tended to accept the view that the monarchy was above, or not a key player in, politics. Moreover, the palace's inconspicuous role made it difficult for journalists to find concrete evidence pointing to a significant political intervention. They could only say factually that the King approved military governments, while military governments' policies and practices were separate matters. On the contrary, members of the royal family were mainly involved in development projects.²³ The King's annual speech and advice to

²¹ T.D. Allman, "Bhumibol: Asian Phenomenon", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 17 December 1973, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 156–57.

²² Interview with Dane G., Thailand, 25 June 2015. Dane G. moved to Thailand since the 1970s. He works for the U.S.-based multinational news agency.

²³ Electronic mail correspondence with P. Friendly on 16 and 23 May 2015. P. Friendly arrived Thailand in 1987 to work for a weekly Asian news magazine and left Thailand before 2006.

government leaders and top civil servants on special occasions were not considered an intervention but as acts of caring from the nation's father that politicians must heed.

However, by mid-2006 Thailand's political situation was becoming increasingly volatile: the Constitutional Court had invalidated the elections held in April of that year, and the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD, or the Yellow Shirt movement) attack on Thaksin was increasing in ferocity. All this occurred while the country geared up to celebrate King Bhumibol's sixty years on the throne. The foreign press corps joined in to pay tribute to the King. Many of its members still held a firm belief that the King, as the holder of highest moral authority in the country, would be able to pull the country through its political crisis.²⁴

In all, during his sixty years on the throne, King Bhumibol achieved almost universal admiration. It is what Denis D. Gray summed up in saying that "King Bhumibol has consistently enjoyed the kind of press most world leaders can only command in their daydreams."²⁵ However, things started to change after the coup in 2006.

DISCOURSE ON THE MONARCHY AFTER THE 2006 COUP

Initially, several Western media outlets appeared to view the 2006 coup as a common Thai way of making a swift political change. Some of the analyses sounded like apologists for the junta. For example, the *Financial Times* placed all the blame on Thaksin by citing the King's speech in 2001, which warned of a disaster for the country as it faced arrogance, egotism, conflict and the double standards of politicians. Thaksin had failed to give sufficient respect to the King's warning — an unpardonable

²⁴ See articles by Reuters, the Associated Press, the *Christian Science Monitor*, BBC News and Agence France-Presse in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 198–205; "Thai Celebrating King Bhumibol's 60th Anniversary", *Taipei Times*, 10 June 2006 <<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2006/06/10/2003312645>> (accessed 10 August 2014).

²⁵ Gray and Faulder, op. cit., p. 15.

deed in the eyes of many Thais.²⁶ Similarly, the *Spectator* believed the coup would probably succeed because of Thaksin's repeated errors and because it had the tacit approval of the popular monarch. "The people, like their monarch, understand the limits of democracy and the boundless advantages of flexibility in a turbulent world".²⁷ According to the BBC, the coup happened because of Thaksin's abrasive and divisive leadership. With Thaksin's huge wealth and popularity among rural voters in mind, military leaders saw the coup as the only way to get rid of him, it said.²⁸ Some media sources did not make excuses for the junta, but nevertheless did not show any disapproval.²⁹ They hardly criticized the Yellow Shirts' call for the military to topple the elected government. A Bangkok-based journalist told me frankly that there was even a sense of relief among foreign journalists that the coup had finally put an end to the prolonged street protest, confrontation and impasse.³⁰ *The Economist*, however, disapproved of the 2006 coup and believed the Yellow Shirt protesters' actions had struck a deep blow at a still fragile democratic system.³¹

Right after the coup, the dominant image of Thaksin in most of the foreign press was as an elected leader popular among the poor and rural voters because of his pro-poor and rural development policies. However, his policies alienated the urban middle-class voters and the intelligentsia, who believed that these aimed to benefit his own business empire and

²⁶ Amy Kazmin, "King Bhumibol Adulyadej", *Financial Times*, 23 September 2006, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 114–15.

²⁷ Alex Spilius, "The Thai King's Wish is His People's Command", *The Spectator*, 23 September 2006 in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 116–17.

²⁸ "Q&A Thailand's Coup Impact", *BBC*, 20 September 2006 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5362878.stm>> (accessed 26 November 2014).

²⁹ James Hookway, Patrick Barta and Jay Solomon, "Coup Ousting Thailand's Premier Tests Democracy in Key U.S. Ally", *Wall Street Journal*, 20 September 2006.

³⁰ Interview with Tim Ferdinand, Thailand, 29 September 2014. Ferdinand works for one of the biggest U.S.-based press with circulation of over a million copies daily.

³¹ *The Economist*. "Thailand's Dangerous Coup", 21 September 2006.

his patronage network. Moreover, Thaksin interfered in and disabled the check-and-balance mechanisms of independent agencies. Freedom of expression was compromised because of his intolerance of media criticism. His harsh anti-drug campaign and handling of the three southern Muslim-dominated provinces grossly violated human rights principles. Nepotism in the army in favour of his network further antagonized his opponents among the top brass. These were major factors, many foreign journalists believed, contributing to his downfall.³² It should be noted that the image of Thaksin as an abusive authoritarian and self-serving politician still prevails in most foreign publications.

Although much of the foreign press saw the King's endorsement as granting legitimacy for the junta, it did not mean that they suspected that the royal institution was behind the putsch. They simply viewed royal endorsement as a formality that the head of state was required to grant to the holders of sovereignty. However, later on, more light was shed on the role of the palace and the network monarchy, a term formulated by Duncan McCargo to better conceptualise royal power in Thai politics. Network monarchy is centred on the palace and involves active interventions in the political process by the palace and its proxies, led by Prem, chairman of the Privy Council. It exercises considerable influence through other political institutions, including the parliament, the military and the judiciary.³³

Immediately after the coup in September 2006, the *Economist* identified the role of Prem in an orchestrated attempt to undermine

³² Interview with Marty M., Thailand, 6 September 2014; Interview with Niel G., Thailand, 29 September 2014. Also see Seth Mydan and Thomas Fuller, "With Premier at U.N., Thai Military States Coup", *New York Times*, 20 September 2006; *The Economist*, "Thailand's Military Coup: Old Soldiers, Old Habits", 21 September 2006. Marty M. started covering Thailand in 2001. He works for a non-profit global news agency. Niel G. has covered Thailand since 2002 and works for an Asia-based English language press with a circulation of over 350,000.

³³ Duncan McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand", *Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 499–519.

Thaksin's government. Prem's famous speech to military cadets in early 2006 asserting that the armed forces served the King and not the government was clear evidence of this. Even then, the *Economist* was uncertain about the palace's role on the coup.³⁴ By December 2008, it became very explicit in pinpointing the conflict between the popularity of Thaksin among rural people, and the palace, which felt threatened by his popularity. It believed that the monarchists, including the Queen, were behind the anti-Thaksin movement. The magazine was the first to touch upon the crisis of succession. It suggested that Thaksin's financial generosity to the Crown Prince, which explained his influence, caused distrust among the network monarchy. In contrast to the celebrated term "the democratic monarch" commonly used to describe King Bhumibol, his role in Thailand's delayed democratization suggested otherwise.³⁵ It challenged the fairy-tale version of a history in which the King never did wrong, stayed above politics and only ever intervened on the side of democracy.³⁶

In April 2009, the *Economist* published an article entitled, "The Trouble with the King", with the subtitle "Nobody can say it in public, but the Thai monarchy, invisible during the latest crisis, is at its heart".³⁷ Then, in March 2010 the magazine reiterated that the crisis of succession and the monarchists' anxiety over Thaksin's expansive role was the real reason for the coup.³⁸ Similarly, when the latest coup took place on 22 May 2014, the *Economist* boldly suggested that the coup was a collaborative move by the Democrat Party's Suthep Thueaksuban, the

³⁴ "Thailand's Military Coup: Old Soldiers, Old Habits", *The Economist*, 21 September 2006; "Thailand's Dangerous Coup", *The Economist*, 21 September 2006.

³⁵ "The King and Its Crisis: A Right Royal Mess", *The Economist*, 4 December 2008.

³⁶ "Thailand's Monarchy: The King and Them", *The Economist*, 4 December 2008.

³⁷ "The Trouble with the King", *The Economist*, 16 April 2009.

³⁸ "Thailand's Succession, As Father Fades, His Children Fight", *The Economist*, 18 March 2010.

street-level embodiment of the civil service, the army, the judiciary and the court surrounding King Bhumibol.³⁹

Following the *Economist*, other foreign press outlets started to discuss the role of the network monarchy and of the monarchy itself more openly. The *New York Times* in May 2010 suggested that the 2006 coup had the tacit approval of the Privy Council and other members of the elite who saw Thaksin and his popular support as a challenge to their power.⁴⁰ The *Wall Street Journal* pointed out that the King was a factor in the dispute because the two feuding political factions — one representing the urban establishment and the other a populist movement with roots in the rural heartlands — tried to publicly court the palace’s support and sought to use his name to their advantage.⁴¹

The increasingly unsympathetic assessment of foreign journalists and commentators towards the monarchy evidently gathered momentum after the 2006 coup. It was a result of several factors and incidents. These are discussed below.

NEW GENERATION, NEW SOURCES

Many of the foreign correspondents currently based in Thailand started their coverage of Thailand only after the 1997 economic crisis. During that time, they were witnesses to Thaksin’s abuse of power. He was and still is perceived as an authoritarian leader. At the same time, before the

³⁹ “Thailand’s Coup: The Path to the Throne”, *The Economist*, 24 May 2014. A similar analysis can be found in Tabatha Kinder. “Who Will Succeed Thailand’s King Bhumibol?”, *International Business Times*, 7 August 2014 <www.ibtimes.co.uk/who-will-succeed-thailands-king-bhumibol-1460220> (accessed 5 September 2014); Jonathan Head, “Where is Thailand Heading after Protests?”, BBC News, 7 March 2014 <www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26467100?print=true> (accessed 5 September 2014).

⁴⁰ The *International Herald Tribune* merged with the *New York Times International* on 14 October 2013. See the two cited articles as follows: Seth Mydans, “Thailand Reinterprets the Rules of Democracy, Again”, *International Herald Tribune*, 21 September 2006; Seth Mydans and Thomas Fuller, “Thailand’s King Sees His Influence Fading”, *New York Times*, 15 May 2010.

⁴¹ Tome Wright, “Thai Monarch Is a Factor in Dispute”, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 2014.

2006 coup, they recognized how much reverence and love the Thai people had for the King. However, they appeared not to be under the spell of the traditional elites, especially when events have challenged the prevailing narrative. All nine journalists and one security analyst interviewed for this article pointed out that, after the 2006 coup, they had focused more on the monarchy simply because there were numerous incidents making the royal connection to events increasingly visible. These incidents aroused the curiosity of journalists, leading to more questions, and they subsequently questioned the legitimacy of the royal institution. In the face of unfolding events, a refusal to address the significant role of the monarchy would have made their reports implausible.

The information sources of the foreign press are today more diverse than those of the Cold War period, when key informants tended to be Bangkok elites. Today, the foreign press reflects the differing voices of politicians, academics, mass leaders, and people of both the Red and Yellow camps in Bangkok and other provinces. These various voices, opinions, aspirations and even resentments have shown foreign journalists that Thailand is no longer a unified society; and that major political institutions and elites are facing a crisis of legitimacy.

The more open discussions, diversity of opinions and availability of information on the monarchy are important factors as well. A landmark publication — Paul Handley’s *The King Never Smiles* — in 2006 profoundly challenged the conventional view of the role and power of the monarchy. Its ban in Thailand aroused the interest of many journalists. Handley’s book offered insights into an institution that thrives on secrecy. He succeeded in connecting the dots and giving a background that explained the workings of an institution that dominated Thailand’s political landscape.⁴² It broke a taboo on critical writing about the monarchy. The book became an important source of historical background on the monarchy for many foreign journalists.⁴³

⁴² Interview with Marty M., Thailand, 6 September 2014.

⁴³ Interview with Sim L., Singapore, 14 November 2014. Sim L. started covering Thailand in 1995 for the U.K.-based weekly magazine, which has a circulation of over 1.5 million in print and another 100,000 in paid digital subscribers.

The work of Andrew MacGregor Marshall, a former reporter from Reuters, had an impact on the discussion of the monarchy as well. In June 2011, he resigned from Reuters after the agency refused to run a series of articles that he had written. Soon after, he self-published *Thailand's Moment of Truth*, which analysed the role of the monarchy in Thai politics and was based on hundreds of leaked U.S. diplomatic cables. Later, WikiLeaks released these cables to the public. The material confirmed the elite's anxiety over the succession and the palace's political position.⁴⁴ In 2014, Marshall published another book *A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand's Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century* which was banned by the Thai police for containing anti-monarchy sentiments.⁴⁵ The leaked classified information confirmed what journalists had long suspected. Marshall's extensive use of social media also stimulated interest in and provided an open venue for discussion of the monarchy. The rise of the Internet and social media has broken the monopoly of conventional news media on reporting on Thailand. These outlets provided intriguing material and ideas that were difficult to publish in the mainstream media. Their content often excited the public and thus made it impossible for mainstream media to ignore them. Marshall's use of social media at times became a disruptive force for the monarchists. In addition, many foreign reporters have increasingly published critical assessments by Thai specialists, namely Duncan McCargo, David Streckfuss, Michael Montesano, Patrick Jory, Thongchai Winichakul and Pavin Chachavalpongpun, in the form of op-ed articles and interviews.⁴⁶ It has become common for the foreign

⁴⁴ Brian Rex (pen name), "Monarchy in spotlight: tensions that threaten new turmoil in Thailand", *The Independent*, 23 June 2011.

⁴⁵ "Thailand Police Chief Bans Book; A Kingdom in Crisis", *Bangkok Post*, 13 November 2014.

⁴⁶ "Thai Princess Uses Social Media to declare War", *The Independent*, 11 February 2014; Serhat Ünalı, "Thailand, A Coup, the Crown and the Two Middle Classes", *The Diplomat*, 23 May 2014 <<http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/thailand-a-coup-the-crown-and-two-middle-classes/>> (accessed 10 October 2014).

press to write that the crisis of succession is one of the root causes of the country's protracted political turbulence.⁴⁷

THE YELLOW SHIRT MOVEMENT

The anti-Thaksin campaign, led by the media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul and the right-wing retired Lieutenant General Chamlong Simueang under the flag of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) was the first to shine the spotlight on the royal institution. Even though, before the 2006 coup, some journalists began to doubt the PAD's credentials, they still saw it as a legitimate popular movement against the authoritarian government of Thaksin. But when the coup took place and it declared that it had accomplished its goal, the PAD's actual political objective became crystal-clear to foreign journalists.⁴⁸

The PAD's constant references to the monarchy in speeches and symbols as it sought to build legitimacy against Thaksin's faction served as invitations for foreign media to scrutinize its link with the palace. PAD members donned yellow shirts, a colour used to symbolise King Bhumibol's birthday, and later light blue scarfs, used to symbolise the Queen's birthday, which Sondhi claimed were given to him via palace connections. Moreover, in the name of defending the monarchy, PAD's leaders always employed the divisive rhetoric of "us" against "them", so that anyone who disagreed with them was considered an opponent of the monarchy. This implied that the opponents of the monarchy were the Red Shirts or those sympathetic to the Red Shirts. While most of the Thai media refrained from analysing PAD's claim of having royal support, it was necessary for foreign journalists to explain why the monarchy had become connected to the campaign against the elected government. By making the monarchy the symbol of their movement, PAD leaders

⁴⁷ Interview with M. Winner, Thailand, 28 November 2014. M. Winner is a political analyst for an advocate non-profit organization, working in Thailand since 1993.

⁴⁸ Interview with Marty M., Thailand, 6 September 2014.

were the first to drag the institution into the centre of the conflict. They themselves undermined the official narrative of the monarchy being above politics.⁴⁹

In addition, PAD's behaviour after 2006 began to destroy its democratic credibility. This included actions such as the seizure of Government House and Bangkok's international airports, the threatening and harassing of journalists, calls for the military to overthrow the Thaksin-supported governments of Samak Suntharawat and Somchai Wongsawat respectively, and the idea of a 70:30 ratio of appointed members of parliament from professional groups to elected MPs. The foreign press began to describe PAD as an anti-democratic force, "a loose coalition of businessmen, academics and royalists who want to scrap Thailand's one-person, one-vote democracy in favour of a system where the majority of parliament is appointed by professional and social groups";⁵⁰ a not-so-peaceful "right-wing protest movement" which "has a political agenda that contradicts its name" and "the impunity it enjoyed to break the law";⁵¹ a group that wanted to return Thailand to "old, pre-democracy politics with a mostly unelected parliament and power for the army to intervene";⁵² a group that "[d]espite the name, ... is actually campaigning for an end to democracy".⁵³ When those who claimed to be the King's men behaved like villains, the damage inevitably spilled over onto the institution itself.

⁴⁹ Interview with Marty M., Thailand, 6 September 2014; Interview with Niel G., Thailand, 29 September 2014; Interview with William G., Thailand, 6 September 2014. William G. arrived in Thailand in 2001 and works for a European-based newspaper, the daily circulation of which is above 140,000.

⁵⁰ Patrick Barta, "Thai Protests Heighten Crisis", *Wall Street Journal*, 26 November 2008.

⁵¹ Marwaan Macan-Markar, "Thailand Government Falls as Court Bans Ruling Party", *Albion Monitor* <<http://www.monitor.net/monitor/0812a/copyright/thaigovernmentfalls.html>> (accessed 29 October 2014).

⁵² "Thailand under Siege", *The Economist*, 26 August 2008.

⁵³ "Thai Protesters Want New Coup", BBC News, 26 August 2008 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7581565.stm>> (accessed 29 October 2014).

THE DEMOCRAT PARTY/THE PDRC

The Democrat Party's founding political ideology was royalist-conservative. Its founder Khuang Aphaiwong considered Pridi Phanomyong, the intellectual leader of the 1932 revolution, an arch-rival. The party conspired to make the public believe that Pridi was the mastermind behind King Ananda Mahidol's death in 1946 by having a party member shout out in the middle of a crowded theatre that Pridi had killed the King. However, by the 1990s, under the leadership of Chuan Leekpai, the Democrat Party became an icon of democracy when Chuan became an outspoken opponent of the "National Peace-Keeping Council" junta, which seized power from the elected government of Chatchai Chunchavan on 23 February 1991. Chuan's "Mr Clean" image as an educated, well-mannered man with a strong commitment to parliamentary politics, became the new image of the party in local and foreign media. Such an image was perfectly maintained by Abhisit Vejjajiva. His quasi-aristocratic background helped to retain the party's middle-class supporters.

However, with the rise of Thaksin, the Democrat Party became the favourite ally of the royalists and the military, representing the royalists' ideology and interest via parliamentary politics. Abhisit's and other Democrat leaders' behaviour and actions after 2006 led the *Economist* to point out that "the Democrats, the parliamentary opposition, are opportunists, cheering on the PAD while seemingly hoping for another royally approved coup to land the government in their lap".⁵⁴

The Democrat Party appeared to reach its lowest point in the eyes of foreign journalists when its leaders decided to abandon parliamentary politics and practise street politics, often associated with undemocratic plans and sometimes violent methods to overthrow its arch-rivals. The opportunity for the Democrats arose in early November 2014, when the Phuea Thai Party blindly pushed for a blanket amnesty bill, which

⁵⁴ "The King and Its Crisis: A Right Royal Mess", *The Economist*, 4 December 2008.

proposed to pardon many people and political groups for various charges made against them since 2004, including Thaksin. The bill caused outcry from across the political spectrum. The Democrats and the Yellow Shirt leaders immediately organized demonstrations.⁵⁵ Even when the Phuea Thai Party quickly dropped the bill, the protests continued, with the new objective of removing Prime Minister Yinglax Shinawatra's government. Demonstrations under the auspices of the self-styled "People's Democratic Reform Committee" (PDRC) led by Suthep Thueaksuban, deputy leader of the Democrat Party, gained massive support from the Bangkok middle class and southerners. Suthep announced his plan to create an unelected "People's Council", to replace the existing parliamentary system. Its members were to be chosen by Suthep himself. With the aim of creating a failed state situation, PDRC demonstrators occupied many government offices, blocked major road intersections, held daily mass rallies in Bangkok and in that city and in some provinces in the South obstructed polls held in February 2014. On stage, many celebrity speakers openly insulted rural voters for being ignorant, easily bribed and unqualified to make political decisions via the ballot box. The one man one vote principle was, therefore, deemed unsuitable for Thailand. The PDRC's armed security guards arbitrarily took the law into their hands, carrying weapons, harassing and injuring members of the police and passers-by. The fierce gunfight in the Laksi suburb of Bangkok allowed the public to witness how heavily the PDRC guards were armed. The Democrat leaders tried to claim that the PDRC was a different entity with no relation to the Democrat Party since Suthep and some of the PDRC leaders had resigned from the party prior to the creation of the PDRC. The party still claimed to have a strong commitment to democratic principles, but foreign media obviously did not buy into this flimsy cover-up.

Time magazine summed up the Democrats' behaviour with an article entitled "Thailand's Democrat Party is Hilariously Misnamed", while

⁵⁵ "Phuea Thai says Amnesty Bill Lawful; Other Disagree", *Bangkok Post*, 3 November 2013.

the *Sydney Morning Herald* used a similar headline, “Thai Elections: Opposition are Democrats in Name Only”.⁵⁶ Time added that when it came to democracy, the Democrat Party was among its worst practitioners. An editorial in *Forbes* slammed the PDRC’s Yellow Shirt protestors for acting like Mussolini’s Black Shirts. The article said that the party did not have the capability to formulate good policies to win the hearts and minds of the rural voters in the North and Northeast of Thailand, and it ruthlessly called upon powerful allies, such as the military and judiciary, to undermine its rivals.⁵⁷ The *Wall Street Journal* strongly criticized the Democrats for their actions, saying that “their path to power lies through street demagoguery and lawyers rather than the ballot box”.⁵⁸ *Associated Press* saw the Democrats’ boycott of the 2014 election as a recurrence of its 2006 boycott, which “helped destabilize the government and paved the way for a military *coup* that ousted the then-Prime Minister Thaksin.”⁵⁹ It can be said that this has become a shared perception of the Democrats.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Charlie Campbell, “Thailand’s Democrat Party is Hilariously Misnamed”, *Time*, 28 November 2013; Peter Hartcher, “Thailand Elections: Opposition are Democrats in Name Only”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 2004.

⁵⁷ Charlie Campbell, “Thailand’s Democrat Party is Hilariously Misnamed”, *Time*, 28 November 2013; Boug Bandow, “In Thailand Opposition Assaults Democracy As Voters Reelect Government: ‘Yellow Shirt’ Protestors Act Like Mussolini’s Black Shirts”, *Forbes*, 3 February 2014.

⁵⁸ “Thailand Votes for Democracy”, *Wall Street Journal*, 3 February 2014.

⁵⁹ “Thai opposition to boycott 2014 election”, Associated Press, printed in *Al Jazeera America*. 20 December 2013 <<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/12/21/thai-opposition-toboycott2014election.html>> (accessed 10 December 2014).

⁶⁰ See Jonathan Head, “Where is Thailand Heading after Protests?”, BBC News, 7 March 2014 <www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26467100?print=true> (accessed 5 September 2014); “Thailand’s Disloyal Opposition”, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 December 2013; “The Future of Thailand’s Elite: Helplessly Hoping”, *The Economist*, 6 May 2014; “Democracy in Thailand, Interrupted”, *New York Times*, 3 February 2014.

THE PALACE

The constant allusion to support from the monarchy on the part of Yellow Shirt leaders in itself would not have been credible in the absence of actual, tangible support from the palace and its inner circle. On 13 October 2008, Queen Sirikit, accompanied by her youngest daughter Princess Chulabhorn Walailak, attended the funeral of twenty-eight-year-old female PAD protester Angkana Radappanyawut. Angkana was killed in a clash with the police when PAD supporters tried to block access to the parliament in order to obstruct the new Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law, from delivering a policy statement. The Queen reportedly told Angkana's father that "Angkana was a good girl, she helped protect the country and the monarchy." Her Majesty also reportedly said that "the King was informed of the matters and the donation to the family was the King's contribution."⁶¹ Reuters promptly asserted that the Queen was "giving explicit royal backing to a five-month street campaign to oust the elected government."⁶² While the Red Shirts termed the incident the "National Awakening Day" (*Wan ta sawang haeng chat*),⁶³ it was also an eye-opener for many foreign journalists.⁶⁴ The Queen's attendance of the funeral and her unambiguous message to the family of the deceased made obvious to the press the palace's position towards PAD and its views on the

⁶¹ "Queen Attends Slain Protester's Cremation", *The Nation*, 14 October 2008.

⁶² Reuters, "Thai Queen Weighs in with Anti-government Protesters", 13 October 2008.

⁶³ See discussion on the significance of the National Awakening Day for the Red Shirts in Thongchai Winichakul. "The Monarchy and the Anti-Monarchy: Two Elephants in the Room of Thai politics and the State of Denial", in *Good Coup Gone Bad: Thailand's Political Developments since Thaksin's Downfall*, edited by Pavin Chachavalpongpun (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), pp. 79–108.

⁶⁴ Interview with journalist Marty M., Thailand, 6 September 2014; Interview with Niel G., Thailand, 29 September 2014; Interview with William G., Thailand, 1 October 2014; Interview with Kran P., Thailand, 1 October 2014.

political divide. Since then, the foreign press has frequently referred to the funeral incident as evidence of the palace's position in the conflict that polarized Thailand.⁶⁵

The role of the network monarchy in the 2006 coup and the claim of protecting the monarchy made by the leaders of the coups in 2006 and 2014 have altered significantly foreign journalists' view of the relationship between the monarchy and military. The relationship is now seen as symbiotic. Defending the monarchy has become the military's *raison d'être*, and, in return, the army is the monarchy's most powerful apparatus since Sarit's rule. As the *Economist* puts it, "The army is a big part of the country's predicament. Its generals believe they have a right to remove any government that incurs its, or the palace's, displeasure — taking its cue from the monarchy that has approved so many of its coups. These two obstacles to Thailand's democratic development are inextricably interlinked."⁶⁶

Furthermore, what foreign journalists term "a judicial coup" and the politicization of the judiciary were linked to the palace's intervention. In April 2006, the King gave a speech asking the judges of the Administrative and Supreme Courts to help resolve the political impasse and growing tension in the streets. Within weeks, the Constitutional Court annulled the results of the recent parliamentary election, which Thaksin's party had won. Since then, Thailand has seen the court decide consistently against Thaksin's factions. It invalidated the elections, banned Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) and Phalang Prachachon (PPP) Parties, banned over a hundred executive committee members of TRT and PPP and other small political parties from politics for five years, obstructed attempts to amend the 2007 constitution by the Phuea Thai party, sacked Prime Minister Samak Suntharawat for his television cooking programme and dismissed Yinglak for removing the head of the National Security Council. As a

⁶⁵ For example, "Monarchy in Spotlight: Tensions that Threaten New Turmoil in Thailand", *The Independent*, 23 June 2011.

⁶⁶ "The King and Its Crisis: A Right Royal Mess", *The Economist*, 4 December 2008.

result, the foreign press views Thailand's judicial and independent organizations, including the National Anti-Corruption Commission, as institutional tools of the monarchists against electoral democracy.⁶⁷

It is noteworthy that, before the 2006 coup, some Western press outlets viewed the King's advice to the judges in April 2006 to help resolve political impasse in a very positive light. The *Washington Post* quoted the royalist Anand Panyarachun: "When there is a political void, when there is a real imminent threat to democratic rule, then he would use his reserve power to show the way, to provide the guiding light or possible answer to a crisis".⁶⁸ The *Financial Times* praised the King's role for having "denounced bizarre April election — boycotted by the opposition — as 'undemocratic', which prompted the courts to annul the vote".⁶⁹

The unpopularity of Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn was frequently brought up by the foreign media after the 2006 coup, but not because of the colourful scandals surrounding him. They needed to explain that the country's most important institution was now facing a big challenge. The monarchy's role in politics had been possible because the majority of Thai people accepted King Bhumibol as the supreme moral authority but the heir to the throne lacks his father's level of authority. With the ailing health of the King, the succession issue has caused anxiety, especially for the entrenched royalist elite. For the network monarchy to be able to benefit from a palace connection, it is vital for them to protect the high moral authority of the royal institution in relation to politicians. The monarchists' claim of protecting the monarchy from rowdy republican-

⁶⁷ Ibid.; "Thailand's Aristocratic Dead-Enders", *Wall Street Journal*, 7 May 2014; "Thailand Votes for Democracy: A Judicial Coup would reward the Democrats for Bad Behavior", *Wall Street Journal*, 3 February 2014.

⁶⁸ Alan Sipress, "As ever, the Last Word in Thailand: Resolution of Election Crisis Affirms Enduring Influence of Long-serving King", *Washington Post*, 28 May 2006, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 112–13.

⁶⁹ Amy Kazmin, "King Bhumibol Adulyadej: The Reserved yet Revered Monarch is Seen as the Turbulent Country's Spiritual Authority", *Financial Times*, 23 September 2006, in Gray and Faulder, op. cit., pp. 114–15.

leaning politicians remains a powerful weapon only when they have a king who can command people's reverence. An unpopular king will affect the power of the institution and is likely to tip the balance of power in favour of the pro-Thaksin faction. The monarchists' believe that Thaksin's attempt to build his influence over the crown prince is one of the causes of the conflict. Many foreign journalists are well aware of this.⁷⁰

Princess Chulabhorn is another member of the royal family attracting foreign media scrutiny of the palace's political position. The leaked U.S. cables indicate that it was she who persuaded the Queen to attend Angkana's funeral. Also, while the palace had been quiet regarding the Yellow Shirts' anti-government protests, she told a television host that the burning down of the country during the Red Shirt protest against the government of Abhisit in May 2010 brought great sorrow to the King and the Queen.⁷¹ In addition, during the PDRC protest to topple the government of Yingluck Shinawatra in early 2014, Princess Chulabhorn posted several photographs of herself on social media. One of them showed her with hair braids of red, blue and white, and another showed her wearing a similarly coloured bracelet. These colours of Thailand's national flag are closely associated with the PDRC. Her action prompted the *Independent* to title its analysis "Thai princess uses social media to 'declare war': Photos posted by Princess Chulabhorn were widely interpreted as a sign of her support for anti-government protesters".⁷² Her photographs were circulated widely by both the anti-government and pro-government elements. The anti-government side happily convinced themselves that the palace was on their side.

⁷⁰ Interview with Marty M., Thailand, 6 September 2014; Interview with Niel G., Thailand, 29 September 2014; Interview with Tim Ferdinand, Thailand, 29 September 2014; Interview with William G., Thailand, 1 October 2014; Interview with Kran P., Thailand, 1 October 2014.

⁷¹ "Princess: Country burning last year brought great sorrow to the King and Queen", *Prachatai*, 4 July 2011, <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/node/2406>> (accessed 10 October 2014).

⁷² "Thai Princess Uses Social Media to 'Declare War'", *The Independent*, 11 February 2014.

While actions by members of the palace and the network monarchy thrilled the Yellow Shirts, they inevitably disappointed the Red Shirts. Journalists started to pick up the collective disappointment expressed discreetly in various forms and at various venues. Such increasingly explicit sentiments exacerbated the monarchists' anxieties. Even though most journalists interviewed believe that the majority of Red Shirt supporters still hold the King in the highest regard and dismiss the monarchists' fear of republicanism as paranoia, they admitted that the violent crackdown of the Red Shirts in 2010 by Abhisit's government devastated the Red Shirts. Many Red Shirts had expected the King to mediate in order to end the crackdown, as had happened in 1992. They were disappointed.

THE LÈSE MAJESTÉ LAW: WHEN CONSTRAINT BECOMES AN INVITATION

The number of *lèse majesté* cases witnessed an appalling increase from less than ten cases per year before 2006 to more than 400 cases in 2010.⁷³ Of all the issues since 2006, the *lèse majesté* charge has been the number one reason for the Thai monarchy to appear in international headlines and thus draw international attention. In early March 2009 and again in February 2012, over a hundred acclaimed international scholars and dignitaries, such as Noam Chomsky, signed letters to Prime Ministers Abhisit and Yinglak, respectively, calling for a reform of the law. The United Nations Human Rights Commission, the European Union, the United States and rights groups have issued public statements about harsh punishment, raising concerns that the law is undermining freedom of expression. In recent years, Western embassies have also engaged Thai authorities behind the scenes on how the law should be reformed.⁷⁴ The

⁷³ Streckfuss, op. cit., p. 119.

⁷⁴ Shawn W. Crispin, "Royal Contradictions in Thailand", *Asia Times*, 13 December 2011 <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/ML13Ae01.html> (accessed 13 November 2014).

establishment has shown no signs of yielding. Thai academics and social activists who campaigned for reform have been accused of carrying out an anti-monarchy conspiracy.

In response to worldwide criticism that the law has violated the freedom of expression and has been abused for political gain, Bowornsak Uwanno diligently produced a number of English-language articles. He argued that Thailand is special; its culture is unique; its monarchy above politics and an essential part of Thai history and culture; King Bhumibol is the righteous king who tirelessly devotes himself to the well-being of the Thais; the law carries a harsh sentence because it is rooted in Thai culture; the love that Thai people have for the King is unquestionable and incomparable; the King is like a father to all Thais and therefore Thais would never allow anyone to unfairly criticize the King, and thus want to maintain the law. He even claims that having the world's harshest *lèse majesté* law is Thailand's cultural right which other democratic countries must respect. He accused Westerners who criticized the law and called for a reform of the law as being an "ethical dictatorship", imposing their own beliefs and global standards onto Thai society. He said that such "ethical absolutism" was unacceptable to Thai society.⁷⁵

Bowornsak's culturalist argument is a familiar one. It has been the standard argument of Thai monarchists for many decades. The difference is that, in the past, the number of people facing *lèse majesté* charges was small and thus did not attract much international attention. However, after the 2006 coup, the enforcement and exploitation of the law by political groups made it difficult for foreign journalists to buy into the

⁷⁵ See his three-part series of articles, Bowornsak Uwanno, "The Law of Inviolability in Thailand"; "Thai Culture and the Law on Lese Majeste"; "Lese Majeste: Abuse and Benevolence", *Bangkok Post*, 7–9 April 2009. Also see, Bowornsak Uwanno, "Ten Principles of a Righteous King and the King of Thailand", *Thailand Today*, 3 April 2014; Suchit Bunbongkarn and Prudhisan Jumbala, eds., *Monarchy and Constitutional Rule in Democratizing Thailand* (Bangkok: Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2012); The National Identity Office, *King Bhumibol: Strength of the Land* (Bangkok: Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2009).

culturalist claim. The monarchists seem unable to come to terms with the fact that their culturalist argument has lost its spell, and that it is no longer convincing to liberal-minded people.

The problems of the *lèse majesté* law has been thoroughly studied by David Streckfuss.⁷⁶ This article will only highlight the dimensions of the problem relevant to the discussion at hand. In legal terms, Thai authorities argue that the *lèse-majesté* gives protection to the rights of the monarchy just as libel law protects private individuals.⁷⁷ However it is well-known that under the *lèse majesté* law, defendants are not allowed to prove if the allegedly defamatory content is factual.⁷⁸ The enforcement and interpretation of the law simply falls short of international legal standards, which is why liberal journalists find it hard to respect. The increasingly severe punishments reveal the merciless treatment of people who are seen as being disloyal because they challenge the royal institution. The majority of people charged with *lèse majesté* are connected in some way to the Red Shirt movement, Thaksin, and people who oppose the coup and military regime. It is difficult not to perceive such acts as exploitation of the law by the monarchists to silence their opponents and critics.

The lack of transparency of the Crown Property Bureau's management is another issue that foreign journalists highlight. The claim in *Forbes* that King Bhumibol was the richest monarch in the world in 2008 stirred up considerable international interest. It is natural for sceptical journalists to ask questions concerning asset ownership, legal status and management, etc. But again, these questions are hampered by the *lèse majesté* law. The response provided by the book *King Bhumibol: The Life's Work* failed to clear up this enigma.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Streckfuss, op. cit.

⁷⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, "The Use of the Lèse-majesté Law in Thailand" <http://www.thaiembassy.sg/press_media/news-highlights/the-use-of-the-l%C3%A8se-majest%C3%A9-law-in-thailand> (accessed 7 November 2014).

⁷⁸ See case of Ekachai Hongkawan in Pravit Rojanapruk, "Court Defers Les Majeste Case, Defence Advised", *The Nation*, 20 July 2012.

⁷⁹ Simon Montlake, "In Thailand, A Rare Peek at His Majesty's Balance Sheet", *Forbes*, 20 January 2012.

As a result, it has become usual for the foreign press to describe Thailand's *lèse majesté* law as a draconian legal code, the most severe punishment of its kind among constitutional monarchies and the most abused and politically motivated law in the country. In the view of foreign journalists, the most frightening feature of the law is that it allows any citizen to file a complaint with the police anywhere in the Kingdom. Anyone can exploit the law for political reasons or purposes of personal vengeance.⁸⁰ Foreign journalists became fully aware of how dangerous the law is, after Jonathan Head of the BBC faced a charge filed by a Thai police lieutenant colonel in May 2008. Again in 2009, a female Yellow Shirt supporter filed a complaint charging the board members of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand in 2009 for selling a digital video disc (DVD) recording of a speech by a former leader of the Red Shirts' United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship Chakkrappop Penkhae, allegedly defaming the King.

The law is seen to curtail freedom of expression, a principle close to the heart of journalism. It is in that way the biggest constraint that journalists covering Thai politics experience. Long before 2006, generations of foreign journalists learned quickly from their colleagues and contacts that writing critically about the monarchy was off limits. Moreover, big news companies have always worried about being closed down or expelled from Thailand, which would affect their business and undermine their ability to access and report on Thai news. However, the heavy use of this law and the increasingly obvious actions of the network monarchy since 2006 became an invitation for foreign journalists to pay great attention to the problems of the law, to question its legitimacy and the institution it claims to protect.⁸¹ While rumours and gossip surrounding

⁸⁰ Interview with Marty M., Thailand, 6 September 2014; Interview with Niel G., Thailand, 29 September 2014; Interview with Tim Ferdinand, Thailand, 29 September 2014; Interview with William G., Thailand, 1 October 2014; Interview with Kran P., Thailand, 1 October 2014.

⁸¹ Interview with Marty M., Thailand, 6 September 2014; Interview with Niel G., Thailand, 29 September 2014; Interview with Tim Ferdinand, Thailand, 29 September 2014.

the palace are intangible and difficult to report on, *lèse majesté* cases are real and tangible facts that should be examined. The role and power of the monarchy have become crucial factors for understanding the country's long-running conflict. Yet the law prohibits free and open discussion. The challenge for journalists is how to include the monarchy in the story without being prosecuted under the strict defamation law. They are looking for ways to challenge these limits by consciously pushing the boundaries, and carefully taking more risks. While they have to be very tactful in making reference to the palace, coverage on the monarchy has appeared more frequently and the analyses have become more straightforward than before 2006.⁸²

Many foreign journalists are perplexed by the failure of Thai authorities to heed the words of the King, who pointed out in a 2005 speech that he was not perfect and was open to criticism and that charging people under the *lèse majesté* law troubled him. His Majesty was well aware of the negative image of the *lèse majesté* law in the eyes of the international community: "Foreign countries see Thailand as a country where people cannot criticize the King; otherwise they will go to jail. This puts the King in trouble."⁸³ Many foreign journalists believe that these words were sincere. However, this speech had no impact on the number of *lèse-majesté* cases. Foreign journalists have thus attributed the heavy use of the defamation law by the network monarchy and the Yellow Shirt politicians to those groups' determination to advance or defend their own interests. They believe the palace had not given tacit consent to the levelling of the charges, though they admit that the institution clearly benefitted from the law, which is vital for its survival and vital to the power of leading courtiers.⁸⁴ However, it is worthwhile to point out that the conditions in 2005, when the King made such a startling speech, were

⁸² Interview with Marty M, Thailand, 6 September 2014; Interview with Tim Ferdinand, Thailand, 29 September 2014.

⁸³ See King Bhumibol's Speech on 4 December 2006 at the following link: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DZD17stiHI>>.

⁸⁴ Interview with Tim Ferdinand, Thailand, 29 September 2014; Interview with Marty M., Thailand, 6 September 2014.

very different from those after the 2006 coup. In 2005 the King was at his zenith and the number of *lèse majesté* cases was still low. Thai society had not yet been polarized, and the stance of the members of the palace and the network monarchy was not obvious. However, after the 2006 coup, it was impossible to imagine politicians or senior courtiers having the courage to attempt to reform the law.⁸⁵

For foreign journalists, various post-2006 coup incidents are indicators of the changing landscape of Thai politics. The aristocrats can no longer claim that Thailand is a unified country or that the monarchy is universally adored. But they are still in complete denial that the grassroots are increasingly pushing for democracy and politico-economic participation. They simply view Thaksin's popularity and the Red Shirts as threats to their power and privilege. In order to protect their power, they refuse to abide by the rule of law and democratic values and heavily exploit the *lèse majesté* law against their perceived enemies. Their over-reaction conversely brings harm to the monarchy.⁸⁶ King Bhumibol's reign is fraying while Thai society is no longer a happy unified one. Even though the majority of Thais still revere the King, no one is beyond criticism. No single institution or individual holds the loyalty of people from various sides, and at the same time, the aristocrats cling to power and refuse to cede power to the majority. Thai society is much more complex than it was before 2006.

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS

News reports are recognized for their influence on policymakers, and the international community's perception of Thailand's traditional elite is likely to be affected by them as well. Throughout the Cold War period, the United States considered Thailand's traditional elite as their trusted allies in the struggle against communism. But the foreign media coverage since 2006 has informed American policymakers of the anti-

⁸⁵ Interview with Tim Ferdinand, Thailand, 29 September 2014.

⁸⁶ Interview with Niel G., Thailand, 29 September 2014.

democratic behaviour and objectives of the monarchists. Thailand is in a state of political impasse because of the coup-prone monarchists and their intransigent position on majoritarian democracy, which has become a hindrance to reconciliation and economic development. This concern will likely convince the Western community to reconsider their future positions vis-à-vis the conservative elites.

Perhaps the consequences of Thailand's political crisis are already evident. Comparing the reactions of the international community to the 2006 and 2014 coups, one can observe a change of attitude. In 2006, a spokesman for the U.S. State Department said that the U.S. "look[s] to the Thai people to resolve their political differences in a peaceful manner and in accord with the principles of democracy and the rule of law".⁸⁷ The U.S. position was not harsh at all. In fact, it was standard practice applied to its long-term ally in the East. But the latest military coup appears to draw stronger criticism from foreign governments. Most vocal have been the United States, the European Union and Australia, urging the military junta to restore civilian government immediately. Washington announced that it had suspended US\$8.2 million in security-related funds to Thailand as well as a U.S.-sponsored firearms training programme and a study trip to the United States for senior Thai police officers.⁸⁸ While in 2006 the United States froze military aid to Thailand until the junta held an election a year later, the 2014 coup prompted strong reactions and criticisms from Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel. The State Department even threatened to move Cobra Gold, one of the biggest annual U.S. military exercises and a key element in the U.S. strategy in Asia, to Australia. In January 2015, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Russel drew fierce reactions from Thai monarchists and nationalists when he boldly criticized judicial unfairness and undemocratic practices

⁸⁷ "Thai Military, Police Say They Have Seized Bangkok", Bloomberg, 19 September 2006 <<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aaiOh9GgOtL4&refer=asia>> (accessed 10 September 2014).

⁸⁸ "Washington Considers Moving Cobra Gold", *Bangkok Post*, 25 June 2014.

against Yingluck.⁸⁹ In a similar vein, in 2006, the European Union and Australia did not impose any punitive measures against the junta at all. But in 2014, the European Union suspended high-level official visits and postponed the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, while Australia downgraded its diplomatic and military ties with Thailand, imposing a travel ban on the leaders of the National Council for Peace and Order junta and cutting defence cooperation.⁹⁰ Eventually, the United States, Australia and the European Union refrained from imposing further serious sanctions against the military government for fear of losing their interests and influence in Thailand to China.

Some analysts see the Western nations' reactions against the Thai junta as part of their obligation to champion democratic values, despite their inconsistent application of such values to other non-democratic regimes.⁹¹ In fact, the stronger positions of the Western community reflect a change in perception towards the old establishment. Years before the 2014 coup, the international security community had already begun to develop a deep concern over the role of Thailand's old establishment, the colour-coded conflict and the impact it would have on regional stability and development.⁹² Most notable is the view of the U.S.'s then-ambassador to Thailand, Eric John, regarding Queen Sirikit's attendance of the funeral of the Yellow Shirt supporter in 2008 that the institution would lose its moral authority.

⁸⁹ "U.S. warns on political 'fairness'", *Bangkok Post*, 27 January 2015.

⁹⁰ "Australia downgrades ties with Thailand after military coup", *The Guardian*, 30 May 2014.

⁹¹ Simon Tay, "Why ASEAN Hasn't Condemned Thailand", Singapore Institute of International Affairs, 8 August 2014 <<http://siiiainline.org/page/commentariesDetails/id/276/ArticleCategoryId/4/#.U-RTBeOSwnB>> (accessed 8 August 2014).

⁹² For example, Joshua Kurlantzick, "The King and US", 16 November 2012 <<http://www.cfr.org/thailand/king-us/p29509>> (accessed 15 September 2015).

CONCLUSION

Up until 2006, well-informed foreign journalists did not naïvely accept the official Thai narrative that the monarchy was above politics. They realized that the institution did not conform strictly to the concept of constitutional monarchy. Their coverage clearly pointed out how King Bhumibol had manoeuvred to restore the institution's political power, which had been lost since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932; how the monarchy's position can mean legitimacy or lack thereof to different military and elected civilian governments and could lead to the stability or downfall of a regime in Bangkok. King Bhumibol's decades of hard work, especially his royal projects and his frequent rural visits, charmed foreign journalists and led them to abandon critical investigation. They tended to believe that only the King and Thai-style constitutional monarchy could protect Thailand from the communist threat, corrupt military leaders and politicians. Thus, they helped construct a benign image of King Bhumibol in the international arena.

In other words, they themselves became complicit in promoting the power and the role of the monarchy in Thai politics. While this article has no intention of pointing fingers or seeking anyone to blame, it is important for foreign journalists, like every other group, to learn what went wrong, what conditions they have created for the country they covered and where they have been misled. Sadly, the *lèse majesté* law has emerged as a major obstacle for critical-minded journalists investigating the palace's role.

After the 2006 coup, the general perception among foreign journalists began to change. They began to see the monarchy, especially the closest courtiers, as a crucial factor in the conflict that has engulfed Thailand for a decade. While the monarchists often blame Thaksin and the Red Shirts for undermining the legitimacy of the monarchy, foreign journalists have since 2006 pointed to the anti-democratic behaviour of the royalists. The establishment's fear of losing power and its inability to adapt to socio-political change are viewed as an immense obstacle to Thailand's democratization and conflict resolution. Their actions eventually shaped foreign journalists' perceptions towards the royal institution and the

network monarchy. The decades-old culturalist defence of the uniqueness of the monarchy has become untenable. Despite the risk of facing the draconian defamation charge, foreign journalists have continuously challenged the boundary of this once-taboo topic. They recognize that the eminently positive image the monarchy has enjoyed since the Cold War period is no longer a universal one. Various positive terms used to describe the role of the monarchy in the pre-2006 era hardly appear in the post-2006 coverage of major foreign press agencies. With King Bhumibol's ailing health, the view of the monarchy as a stabilizing and unifying force is in great doubt. Undoubtedly, foreign press coverage since 2006 has contributed to that doubt.

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