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THAILAND'S HYPER-ROYALISM: ITS PAST SUCCESS AND PRESENT PREDICAMENT

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ISEAS YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE

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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 EDITORS

Thailand's Hyper-royalism: Its Past Success and Present Predicament

By Thongchai Winichakul

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thailand's political impasse in the past decade is partly attributable to the royalist dominance of the parliamentary system, a dominance developed and strengthened under the cultural condition of hyper-royalism.
- Hyper-royalism is the politico-cultural condition in which royalism is intensified and exaggerated in public and everyday life. It is sanctioned by legislation that controls expressions about the monarchy in the public sphere.
- Hyper-royalism began in the mid-1970s as a measure to counteract perceived communist threats. Despite the fact that these threats had disappeared by the early 1980s, hyper-royalism persisted and was strengthened to support royalist democracy.
- Hyper-royalism generates the concept of the ideology of modern monarchy — a charismatic king who is sacred, righteous and cares for his people, and who is indispensable to Thailand — and the belief that royalist democracy is best for Thailand.
- Hyper-royalism also generates the illusion that the monarchy is divine, thanks to visual performances and objects, especially through television and majestic pageantry.
- Accordingly, the ideal monarch is found in King Bhumibol. Given the mortality of Bhumibol, however, future prospects of hyper-royalism and royalist-guided democracy are grim. Thailand's political future is highly uncertain.

Thailand's Hyper-royalism: Its Past Success and Present Predicament

By Thongchai Winichakul[1]

> "I shall reign by dharma for the benefit and happiness of all Siamese people".
>
> — *King Bhumibol's First Pronouncement at his coronation on 5 May 1950*

Thailand's political crisis which began in the mid-2000s has involved every important institution in the country including the monarchy. But it is not simply the crisis of royal succession as some have argued (Marshall 2014). The succession problem itself might not have become an explosive issue had the real stake not involved the entire political establishment.

Fundamental to the conflict is tension between two structural forces. On the one hand, rural villagers and the urban lower middle class have, as a consequence of rural societal changes and the enhancement of electoral politics since the late 1980s, emerged as a political force favouring electoral democracy. On the other hand, not only has the current political system been unable to accommodate this emerging force, it resisted

[1] Thongchai Winichakul was Visiting Senior Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in the second half of 2015. He is Professor of History at University of Wisconsin-Madison. He would like to thank Eric Kuhonta (McGill University) and Viengrat Netipho (Chulalongkorn University) who organized a conference in Bangkok in 2012 for which the ideas of this article originated. Thanks also go to the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore for its support during that period, and the Inter-Asia cultural studies for the opportunity to present and discuss this article at its annual conference in 2013.

its demands. The obstinate regime is the "royalist-guided democracy" (or royal democracy for short), an ostensibly democratic polity but one which the electorate and elected authority do not have substantive power since true power remains in the hands of the monarchy. Its formal name, "the Democratic Regime with the Monarchy as the Head of the State", is a revealing euphemism for a political system in which the formal parliamentary system is subsumed under the unelected and undemocratic power of the monarchy. But since royal democracy relies heavily on the charisma of the monarch, the coming succession is the trigger of the abovementioned fundamental conflict.

By "monarchy", I mean a social institution and entity that is active in cultural, social, economic, and political life. Duncan McCargo (2005) shows that the monarchy "institution", as it is often called, is a network of non-monolithic groups and people whose varying interests rely on, and who derive legitimacy from their association with the king and members of the royal family. It is a "network-monarchy". The network is not harmonious, as the material and intangible interests of its members, and their ideas and visions for the future of the monarchy may be different. As a matter of fact, factional competition has spilled out into open politics. Yet the groups and people in the network share a common interest in sustaining the royal democracy political system and in the royal hegemony under King Bhumibol. The monarchy, in this sense, is a larger entity than the king. Nonetheless, the charismatic king himself, as shall be made clear in this article, is indispensable and indeed pivotal in the success or failure and the survival of this network-monarchy. Moreover, discourses on the Thai monarchy, be they royalist or otherwise, tend to conflate the individual and the institution. But this is not a mistake. Apart from the longevity of the current reign (since 1946), the allegedly extraordinary institution, as we shall see in this essay, has been built upon the charisma and accomplishments of only one king, Bhumibol (b. 1927). This condition creates the fusion of the "monarch/y" (Thongchai 2014, pp. 81–82). Any attempt to separate them becomes misleading. This article uses the term "monarchy" in this mixed sense throughout, in contrast with the monarch, king, queen, prince, princess and so on for individuals. Another term used, the "palace", is ambiguous but justifiably so, to denote the collective which is represented by its spatial metaphor.

Most Thais believe that the monarchy is truly "above" politics. Officially, the Thai state maintains that the monarchy has nothing whatsoever to do with politics. In fact, the monarchy is a political power bloc that has been very active throughout modern history, characterized by unstable political fortunes until it eventually ascended and established a royal democracy in the mid-1970s (Thongchai 2008). Except for a few scholars, the public and scholars alike either do not notice the political monarchy or do not understand it critically despite the long history of royal democracy. Only in the past decade has the role of the monarchy in Thai politics become a subject of both public and scholarly discussion.

How did the royal democracy become so successful? There are many factors that cannot be enumerated in the limited space of this article. Suffice it to say that the success of royal democracy relies primarily on royal hegemony, that is, consensual leadership and non-coercive compliance. After providing a brief history of royal democracy, this essay will explain royal hegemony and focus on one factor that has been important for the success of royal democracy, namely the cultural and ideological condition that I call "hyper-royalism". What is hyper-royalism? What are its characteristics? How does it support the monarchy and contribute to royal hegemony and royal democracy? How is it produced and reproduced or sustained in the context of Thailand's political history in recent decades? In what ways does it contribute to the crisis? How will it contribute to or affect the prospect of the monarchy in Thailand?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Thailand's democratization process has not merely been a contention between military rule and an elected regime. The power of the monarchy in this democratic era is an equally, if not more, central issue. Ferrara (2015) argues that the haunting problem of the monarchy's power is a legacy of the "unfinished" transition from absolute monarchy after the revolution in 1932. He brilliantly retells how the revolution by the People's Party that ended the absolute monarchy in 1932 began to unravel due to its compromise with the monarchists, allowing the latter

group to reassert its power. This led to counter-revolutionary attempts in many forms, including a violent civil war in 1933 (Ferrara 2012). By 1938, their subversive attempts were quelled. Although the monarchy was not abolished, the king was now "above" politics, in the sense that he must be beyond or separated from, and not involved with politics. The rule of the People's Party, unfortunately, only lasted fifteen years as the monarchists conspired with the army to topple the elected government with a military coup in 1947. The monarchy returned to the power circle, most of the time only as a junior partner in the long military rule that spanned the next twenty-six years.

During this period, the monarchists began a longer-term project for the new monarchy under democracy. In retrospect, the blueprints for royal democracy were created at the beginning of this period. First and foremost was the 1949 constitution that stipulated Thailand's political system as "the Democratic Regime with the Monarchy as the Head of the State". Emulated in every constitution since then, it has become the effective euphemism for royal democracy. Second, the Privy Council, the advisory body of the king, was created by the 1949 Constitution. In recent decades, it has become a key mechanism for the actual operation of royal authority over the elected one. The 1949 Constitution was also a model for the strategic mechanisms to restrain the elected authority, for instance, the appointed and powerful upper house. Third, in 1948, the new legal provision for the Crown Property Bureau (CPB) was created. Control over matters such as management, policy, decision-making, access to wealth, and accountability were removed from the government's purview and put under the governing body and manager, who were to be appointed by the reigning monarch. Fourth, the ideological blueprint for building a monarchy suitable for royal democracy was put forward, as I will elaborate below. Last, but importantly, was the beginning of the reign of King Bhumibol, who turned out to be the ideal monarch, an indispensable element for hyper-royalism in subsequent decades. Without the charismatic Bhumibol, the fortunes of royal democracy might have been different. It was with him that the new era of the monarchy and royal democracy could begin.

The construction of the new monarchy began in the early 1960s under the royalist military regime of Sarit Thanarat (1958–63) and Thanom Kittikhachon (1963–73). Crucially, the United States also recognised

the monarchy as the most potent politico-cultural weapon for counter-insurgency in Thailand (Handley 2006, pp. 135–79). Together, they built up the profile of the monarch as being active in non-political public affairs such as anti-narcotic programmes, caring for upland-minorities, agricultural and rural development, education and welfare for people in rural areas, and so on. One of the telling actions regarding the promotion of royalism was the change in 1960 of Thailand's National Day from 24 June, the day of the revolution in 1932, to 5 December, Bhumibol's birthday. During the 1960s to 1973, the popularity of the king and the royal family grew immensely, and even among the urban educated who did not support the military regime efforts (Prajak 2005, pp. 464–85).

The turning point further upwards for the monarchy was the popular uprising against military rule in 1973. This triumph for popular democracy also marked the monarchy's ascendency to political power. An important act that symbolized such a turning point was the royal family appearing in casual dress to show support for the demonstrators who had sought refuge inside the palace grounds. Later on that same day, the king's intervention to stop the violence also became emblematic of his claim to be a democratic monarch and benevolent stabilizer — even though he did not intervene in two subsequent massacres in 1976 and 2010. The new era of royalist-guided democracy had begun.

Between 1973 and 1992, parliamentary democracy was established, despite it remaining under the powerful military (Chai-Anan 1989; Anek 1992). Overlooked by most observers of Thai politics was the role of the palace "above" the contention between the military and popular democracy, for it became the sole source of legitimacy and the determining factor in major political issues. Even the success or failure of a coup depended on the palace's blessing. The political leverage of the monarchy rose continuously while that of the military went in the opposite direction. If the 1991 coup was the last feat of military dominance in Thai politics, the 1992 popular revolt against it marked its end. The picture of the king on a sofa preaching to the leaders of the junta and the revolt movement, with the latter prostrating obediently at his feet, speaks of the power relations that had been in place since then. The military's dominance was over; the monarchy had succeeded. Since 1973, especially after 1992, the network-monarchy has wielded

its power above the ostensibly democratic government, exercising its superior authority and influence over the administration and the state's mechanisms including the army, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and the budget system. However, I will explain the monarchy's operation concretely elsewhere, not in this article.

As Connors (2007) observes, royalism and liberalism appeared to have grown together throughout the 1980s and1990s in Thailand. He calls this royal liberalism. In fact, electoral democracy was under the benevolent guidance of the monarchy as long as the former did not pose a threat to the latter. Once liberalism became critical of the monarchy, royal liberalism faded (Connors 2008). The relationship proved to be an unstable marriage, if not a mirage.

From the historical events recounted above, three observations which are particularly necessary for the discussion on hyper-royalism that follows below may be made. First, royalism has not always been strong in Thai history. Serious challenges and widespread dissatisfaction, even mockery in public, occurred in the past (Copeland 1996; Nakharin 1992). Contrary to the general misunderstanding in Thailand, the high reverence of the monarchy as seen in Thailand today was not a norm, but peculiar to the current generation.

Second, since the 1960s, royalism gradually became part of Thai public life. The intensification of royalism in the mid-1970s was due partly to the political ascendency of the monarchy and partly as a reaction to threats made to the monarchy on two fronts: first, the communist revolutions in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos in 1975, and second, the rise of the radical leftist movement after the uprising in 1973 that was seen as the urban proxy of the communists. In this situation, the military and the monarchists cooperatively employed royalist nationalism as an ideological weapon to fight the leftists (Morell and Chai-anan 1981). To the Thai public, thanks to Cold War propaganda, the communists were not opponents of capitalism, but the evil enemy who wanted to destroy Thailand by abolishing the monarchy and everything that was Thai. The fight against these communist threats was the beginning of hyper-royalism.

Third, despite the end of the communist movement in Thailand in the early 1980s, hyper-royalism did not subside. On the contrary, it morphed into another phase, became intensified and unprecedentedly pervasive.

The raison d'etre for hyper-royalism after the Cold War was the dominance of the monarchy in politics, i.e. royal democracy. Certainly, political power entails material benefits for the monarchists, both royals and non-royals, which this article cannot adequately address. In short, the rationale for hyper-royalism in the two phases differed: it emerged out of the fear and anxiety over the survival of the monarchy, and since the 1980s has had political supremacy as its objective.

CHARACTERISTICS

Hyper-royalism is intense, excessive royalism with the following characteristics. First, since 1975, royalism has increasingly occupied the space and time of public life in Thailand. The monarchy — images, rituals, sayings, praises, etc. — has been omnipresent. Apart from the annual celebrations of the king's and queen's birthdays, old and invented royal ceremonies, special occasions and anniversaries have multiplied. Here is a list, albeit incomplete, of special royal occasions since 1976, all of which were grand public events and mostly celebrated nationwide for the entire year. The public sphere is royal; and so is the Thai calendar.

1976	The celebration of the new National Mother's Day on 12 August (the queen's birthday)
	The first year of the "5th December — the Great King", an extravagant public event to celebrate the king's birthday
1977	The 50th birthday of the king
1977	The (first) marriage of the Crown Prince
1980	The celebration of the new National Father's Day on 5 December (the king's birthday)
1982	The Bicentennial Anniversary of Bangkok and the Chakri Dynasty
1982	The 50th birthday of the queen
1985	The government's proclamation to honour the king as "Bhumibol the Great" (an honorific title for only specific kings in Thai history)
1985	Celebrate the king as the Grand Artist
1985	Princess Sirindhorn's birthday is declared the annual "Thai Heritage" Day

1987 The 60th birthday (the fifth 12-year cycle) of the king
1988 The celebration of the longest reign in Thai history
1988 The 36th birthday (the third 12-year cycle) of the Crown Prince
1991 The 36th birthday (the third 12-year cycle) of Princess Sirindhorn
1992 The 60th birthday (the fifth 12-year cycle) of the queen
1995/96 The death, commemoration and the funeral of the Royal Mother Princess Srinakharin, the king's mother
1996 The Golden Jubilee, 50th anniversary of the reign
1997 The 70th birthday of the king
1999 The 72nd (the sixth 12-year cycle) birthday of the king
2000 The 50th anniversary of the royal marriage (the king and the queen)
2002 The 50th birthday of the Crown Prince
2004 The 72nd (the sixth 12-year cycle) birthday of the queen
2005 The 55th anniversary of the royal marriage (the king and the queen)
2006 The Diamond Jubilee, 60th anniversary of the reign; the grand celebration by the gathering of royals from all over the world for Bhumibol as the world's longest-reigning monarch
2007 The 75th birthday of the queen
2007 The 80th birthday of the king
2008 The death, commemoration and the funeral of Princess Naradhivas, the king's sister
2010 The 60th anniversary of the royal marriage
2011 The 84th (the seventh 12-year cycle) birthday anniversary for the king
2012 The 85th birthday of the king
2012 The 80th birthday of the queen
2012 The 60th birthday (the fifth 12-year cycle) of the Crown Prince
2015 The 60th birthday (the fifth 12-year cycle) of Princess Sirindhorn
2015 Bike for Mom to celebrate the queen's birthday
2015 Bike for Dad to celebrate the king's birthday

Secondly, exaggerated exaltation of the royals is a norm. The king, the young princes and princesses are the best at everything they are involved in, from sports, fashion design, acting and singing, to scientific research,

languages, writing, painting and the arts, to social services in poverty alleviation, narcotic eradication, health, irrigation and education. They finished top of their class in high school and in university and have received innumerable honorary degrees and awards. Even the king's dog is superior to a common canine, and to a human being.[2] Eulogies become facts; hyperbole becomes the norm; performative royalism becomes normative.

Thirdly, as shall be discussed below, the royals have become sacred beings and royalism a religion. Over the years, public expressions showing loyalty became more prescriptive with many invented requirements and taboos including how to speak and behave regarding the royals. Failure to show loyalty results in severe punishment and social sanctions. Prostrating in front of the royals as holy beings (and their pictures as holy images) has been revived despite the fact that King Chulalongkorn abolished the practice in 1873 (Pavin 2011). Faith and unquestioning loyalty to the monarchy is assumed for all Thais. Royalism demands absolute adherence, even more than religion, since the Thais have religious freedom but do not have the freedom to not believe in royalism.[3]

Fourthly, hyper-royalism is not simply the state's top-down propaganda. Civil society — private businesses, since the monarchy is a capitalist conglomerate with interests across business sectors (Gray 1986), educational institutions, healthcare professions, the arts and culture circle, and mass media — also participates in the production, reproduction and innovation of excessive royalism. These nodes of

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[2] His name is "Thongdaeng" and he was always addressed with "Khun", a royal honorific title. There are several publications about him, including one written by the king himself, and a number of stories "inspired by the story of Khun Thongdaeng".

[3] In Thailand, people also rise when the picture of the king is projected onto the screen of a public theatre before a movie begins, even though this practice is not legally required. In 2005 two young people refused to do so. Other audience members in the theatre were angry and assaulted them. Instead of being considered victims of assault, they were charged for *lèse majesté*. The attackers were not charged because their actions stemmed from loyalty to the monarchy.

hyper-royalism are not necessarily linked to the palace. However, they love royal connections. In Ünaldi's words (2016), they voluntarily "work towards the monarchy", out of their ideology and for their own material benefit. Hyper-royalism is not exclusively a state project, but exists in public culture too.

Public culture has become increasingly conservative since the mid-1980s. The public has become overly conscious of behaviour appropriate for addressing the royals, even the minor ones. Excessive sensitivity has become the norm. Excessive performance of loyalty has been palpable in many institutions in the past few decades, including those concerned with higher education. Since 1997, for instance, new students at Chulalongkorn University have to perform the ritual of *thawai sat patiyan ton* to Kings Rama V and VI.[4] This is the taking of an oath to become loyal servants of the monarchy, said to be the revival of an old ritual that students used to perform in the early years after the university was founded as a school for civil servants under King Rama VI (r. 1910–1926), during the period of absolute monarchy. New faculty members at Chulalongkorn also have to perform the ritual "*phithi thawai tua thawai chai*", literally offering oneself and one's mind (to the monarchy).[5] This ritual was invented only a few years ago. Some new students and new faculty members resent this but are obligated to take part. Most seem however delighted and proud to join the ceremonies.

Fifth and finally, it is royalism sanctioned by a dubious law that is used freely to control public discourse and suppress critics. Article 112 of the criminal code, commonly known as "the 112 law", stipulates that "whoever defames, insults or threatens the King, Queen, the Heir-apparent or the Regent…" will be punished severely by imprisonment for

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[4] See the news report 'ถวายสัตย์ปฏิญาณตน' ก้าวสำคัญนิสิตจุฬาฯ ['Giving an Oath': an important step for students at Chulalongkorn University], Voice TV, 25 July 2015 <http://news.voicetv.co.th/thailand/237000.html>. The ceremony is reported every year in จุฬาสัมพันธ์ [Chula Relations], the newsletter of Chulalongkorn University.

[5] See for instance, "ปฐมนิเทศอาจารย์ใหม่ รุ่นที่ 2" [Orientation for new faculty members, the second group of the year] in จุฬาสัมพันธ์ [Chula Relations] 52:19 (1 June 2009), p. 8.

three to fifteen years. The law is problematic in every aspect — in its legal basis, procedure, enforcement, severity of punishment, and interpretation (Streckfuss 2011, pp. 187–205). One does not know unequivocally what or why it is not permissible to speak or act in certain ways. The definition is never clear. In the past few years, the violation of the law has not been limited to defamation or threats. It has come to include any remark or act that is not proper about the monarchy, such as sharing news that the stock market plunged because of false rumours of the king's death. Criticism of the law is also deemed a violation of that law. The coverage of the law also includes, for instance, previous kings and the royal pet. A terrible flaw of the law is that any violation is considered a threat to national security. Thus, most suspects are refused bail and their trials are often conducted in secret. The punishment is severe because the offence is not considered a defamation but a danger to national security. And worst of all, since national security is involved, anybody can report another's violation to the authorities.

As we shall see below, the law has been used heavily against political opponents and dissenters of hyper-royalism since the 2006 coup. In effect, instead of protecting the monarchy, the law is a measure to control public culture concerning the monarchy by stipulating the boundary of what may be expressed and acted upon. The unpredictability of enforcement and the dubious interpretations serve this purpose even more effectively than a clear and consistent application of the law because the former induces self-censorship and a climate of fear.

Under hyper-royalism, self-censorship has become pervasive in academia, media, the arts, and other intellectual activities. It exists in public culture too. Silence and self-censorship are the flipside of the chorus of exaltation. Criticism thus seeks alternative space and finds alternative forms of expression. This is why rumours and gossip about the monarchy are so pervasive in private conversations and in cyberspace.

CONCEPT: THE IDEAL MODERN MONARCHY

In the ancient Hindu-Buddhist world, a king is divine. He possesses high virtuous power or "*barami*" in Thai (*parami* in Pali or *paramita*

in Sanskrit).[6] Generated from his utmost moral practices, *barami* is the innate power of an extraordinary person, endowed in him without the need for office, law, social contract, or any social relations (Jory 2002). It enables the king to accomplish what an ordinary person cannot. As Siam dramatically changed in the modern era that began in the nineteenth century, the monarchy, too, has been transformed. Unlike the monarchy in pre-modern times, a modern monarchy is now a public institution, a part of the modern polity, operating in the public sphere, accountable to people to varying degrees, and even obliged to "serve the people". Despite these fundamental changes, the idea of the divine kings possessing *barami* has survived. King Chulalongkorn (r. 1888–1910) is still worshipped as an exemplary monarch who was both a divine king and a modernizer of Siam (Stengs 2009).

The framework for the new monarchy in the post-1932 era was articulated by the royalist ideologue, Prince Dhani Nivat, in 1946 (Dhani 1969).[7] Dhani had been a key member of the monarchist circle since the 1930s. Later, he was the longest serving President of the Privy Council, the first time in 1949 and then for several more times until he died in 1972 (Thanapol and Chaithawat 2015, p. 53). He was briefly also the Regent in 1951 and a mentor of Bhumibol during his formative years. In his 1946 lecture on the Siamese monarchy, Dhani reinterprets the ancient Hindu-Buddhist concept to suit the modern democratic polity. First, he describes the ancient Hindu concept of divine kingship as a pillar of the monarchy. Second, he elaborates on the Buddhist ideal king, Dhammaracha, literally the righteous king, who assumes power by

[6] *Barami* is often translated as "charisma". As useful as this translation may be, the difference between these two words remains significant in the context of this article. *Barami* is performative power derived from righteousness and moral virtue. Thus Gray (1986, 1992) and Stengs (2009), among many others, translate it as royal virtue or virtuous power. Charisma is based on different notions, and not necessarily religious ones. Despite that, Ünaldi (2016) adopts the term "charisma" but explains its Weberian notion to cover the Thai Buddhist context. This present article chooses to use *barami* without translation.

[7] The lecture was presented to King Anand (Rama VIII), only a month before his mysterious death.

popular consent (*Mahasammati* or the Great Elect) but who must observe the ten virtues of kingship in order to attain high *barami*. While these first two interpretations are not new, the next one is anything but old, namely, the assertion that the ancient Thai king was typically benevolent by referring to an alleged thirteenth century stone inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai who, according to the inscription, cared for his people like a father would for his children.[8] In a nutshell, the ideal modern monarchy should be sacred, righteous and benevolent or caring of its people.

At the coronation on 5 May 1950, Bhumibol performed traditional Hindu rituals in the closed palace compound to transform himself into an incarnation of Vishnu. He performed the Buddhist rituals too to elevate himself to the highest *barami* to assume kingship within the Buddhist conception (Waraporn 2007). The king vowed to observe the Buddhist *dharma*, the Hindu cosmic law (*dharmasastra*), the Ten Principles of a Righteous King (*dasarajadharma*), and so on. Then royal regalia were bestowed on him (Dhani 1946). After that, the procession of the new king on a palanquin took place through the crowds who were allowed into the courtyard of the Grand Palace. Later that day, Bhumibol and the Queen appeared on the balcony of a palace building to address the huge crowd below. It was at that moment that Bhumibol made the historic First Pronouncement quoted at the beginning of this article.

In recent years, pictures of him on the palanquin and of his appearance on the palace balcony have been displayed innumerable times on television and in public spaces. The dictum was made a song in 2011, disseminated on YouTube and broadcast repeatedly on royal days. All the elements that constitute the modern ideal monarchy were in fact featured in the coronation ceremony. He is sacred, righteous, and cares for his people. In subsequent years, the making of Bhumibol the ideal king ultimately used this framework.[9]

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[8] This inscription is considered the first and most important one in Thai history. However, since the late 1980s its authenticity as a thirteenth century artefact has been cast in doubt (see Chamberlain 1991).

[9] I have previously articulated the ideal modern monarchy slightly differently (see Thongchai 2014). Stengs (2009) also presents a similar view.

SPELLS: THE RIGHTEOUS MONARCHY FOR ALL PEOPLE

Bhumibol's coronation was the first one in history that featured the new king addressing the public. In his First Pronouncement, note the words righteousness (*dharma*) and people or the masses (*mahachon*, lit. people at large) in the same sentence. It was as if he made a pledge, which a king never had had to make, in front of his subjects. The words "*khrong phaendin*" were striking too. Literally, they can be translated as "to rule" or "to reign" over the land. Legally speaking, a constitutional monarch does not actually "rule" over the country. Despite that fact, but given the context of the planned monarchical revival at the time of his coronation, it is not farfetched to suppose that the words were carefully chosen. During the past ten years of crisis, the statement has been brought to notice repeatedly in public. It becomes the foundational spell of Bhumibol's reign.

The spells — the hyper-royalist discourses — exaggerate the importance of the monarchy to the extent that it is believed that Thai society cannot survive without it. There are three main spells operating in tandem, generating many more spells: (i) the royal-nationalist historical ideology, (ii) the king working tirelessly for his people, and (iii) royal democracy being most suitable for the Thai condition.

First, formulated some time in the 1900s and 1920s, the royal-nationalist history tells repeated stories of the monarchy building a civilized nation, saving it time after time, and leading it to prosperity (Thongchai 2011). Despite challenges, this ideology remains the bedrock of Thai historical consciousness. Thai history is a collective hagiography of great kings who were leaders and exemplars in military, statecraft, diplomacy, trade, arts and literature. Many of them are celebrated as the "Fathers" of almost every aspect of the life of the nation. This history reinforces the belief that the making of the Thai nation is impossible without the monarchy. Bhumibol is the latest and the supreme one in the glorious line of extraordinary kings of the nation. Present royalism renders the past more glorious, which in return amplifies the brightness of the present. For this reason, glorifications of the past Chakri kings are

quite common under hyper-royalism. The surge of glorification of King Chulalongkorn in the 1980s coincided with hyper-royalism. Both kings lend glory to one another, enhancing the *barami* of a king in the past and that of the one who is still active (Stengs 2009, pp. 220–22, 242–56). Thai nationhood is not an imagined community of non-hierarchical citizenry — the kind of nation suggested by Benedict Anderson. Rather, it is the defined space of the subjects of the Thai monarchy in a hierarchical society. It is the king's nation (Strum 2006). It is not difficult today to find a Thai national who would say that the country belongs to the monarchy or that they are living in the monarchy's country.

The idea that the Chakri kings were founders of Thai democracy is a significant basis for royal democracy. This is constructed cleverly by a plot that credits the Chakri kings from the nineteenth century for gradual preparation for democracy. King Rama VII, an absolute monarch (r. 1927–35), was to grant a democratic constitution at a time when the Thai people were ready for it; this would have resulted in a stable transition to real democracy (Chai-anan 1980). Unfortunately, in this view, the 1932 revolution was a premature disruption of the Chakris' plan for democracy, consequently resulting in an unstable democracy and leading to the beginning of military rule. This royalist history of Thai democracy becomes conventional knowledge that has only been recently challenged (Prajak 2005, pp. 476–519). Today, King Rama VII is regarded as the Father of Thai Democracy, celebrated with a monument in front of the parliament building. In addition to Bhumibol's democratic credentials, this royalist historiography enhances his virtue even more. For this reason, any blemishes, such as the palace's role in the 1976 massacre, has had to be silenced (Thongchai 2002).

The second discourse is about the tireless king who works hard for his people. Over his long reign, the king has initiated thousands of royal development projects aimed at helping the poor, particularly rural dwellers and the minorities (Chanida 2007). These projects are the basis for his reputation as the people's monarch. Although people may not know how many royal projects there are, let alone the specifics, approbation of the royal projects is widespread. Today, the royal projects are emblematic of Bhumibol's reign. They are typically used as evidence

to rebut the monarchy's critics at home and abroad (see, for example, Grossman and Faulder 2011).[10] For most Thai adults, the benefits of these projects seem assured because they have seen innumerable pictures and heard news of the king's dedication to his projects throughout their lives.

The king's dedication to his people is often cast in sharp contrast to the corruption and selfishness of elected politicians. The more that political corruption is magnified and becomes an everyday discourse, which it has since the late 1980s, the stronger Bhumibol's virtuous aura becomes. The significance of this discourse on the royal projects, therefore, lies in the contrast between the moral power of the monarchy and the immoral power of elected authorities. Moral power is fundamental to the idea of Thai-style democracy.

Royal authority is clean and righteous, in contrast with the elected one. Thus, the notion of "democracy" in Thailand has been shaped by its royalist history. "Thai-style democracy" is not so much a participatory political system of equal citizens as a benevolent rule by a moral authority for the benefit of ordinary people in a hierarchical society. According to the royalists, the thirteenth century Ramkhamhaeng Inscription was the Thai Magna Carta (Seni 1990), serving as a constitution in Thai society long before a modern constitution per se. Ramkhamhaeng's rule served as the model for a benevolent ruler, as Dhani suggests. Even a military dictator has claimed to have followed Ramkhamhaeng in establishing Thai style-democracy (Thak 2006). As one royalist intellectual puts it,

> [Paternalistic governance in Thai culture] is unknown in Western countries which are developed materially but spiritually deteriorating. They do not understand because they never live in a country where the ruler and the ruled have warm relationship like father and children. In the West, the ruler is a politician, who is equal to his citizens. The relationship between politician and those who elect him is political… The latter can criticize and scold

[10] This biography of the king, collectively written under the auspices of former Prime Minister Anand Punyarachun, makes the royal projects emblematic of Bhumibol's reign. In my view, the book is a response to Handley (2006) and to the rising criticism of the monarchy outside Thailand since 2006.

> at their ruler in any way, thanks to freedom of expression. Thai people, however, love and revere their "Father" and will never let anybody else unfairly criticize the king who is their "Father"… (Bowornsak 2006, p. 74).

Under hyper-royalism, the spell of Thai-style democracy intensified, claiming special Thai conditions to curb people's rights, freedom and power. The notion of "cultural constitution", has been articulated to support royal democracy, arguing that the true constitution in Thai culture that provides the framework for the Thai state is rule by a virtuous monarchy (Tongnoi 1990; Bowornsak 1994).[11] Unlike a written one, this cultural constitution cannot be torn down by a coup. In 2005–06, given the widespread dissatisfaction with the elected government, a popular royalist movement called for the monarch's intervention. The movement believed that the king could legitimately intervene, sack the elected prime minister, and take power "back" since he still "owns" the sovereignty (Bowornsak 1994, pp. 24–29). The notion of constitutional monarchy seems to have been lost. In its place are the spells of hyper-royalism.

For decades, enormous resources and efforts have been invested in public relations to nurture the image of a dedicated royal family in service of its people. It would be a mistake, however, to simplistically equate or compare reverent loyalty to the monarchy with the popularity or fame of politicians like Thaksin. The former is based on the hierarchical relations between a king and his people which has accumulated immense cultural capital, whereas the latter is not. The former is religious-like; the latter is profane. Long before any politician thought to do so, King Bhumibol had been traversing the land, even to remote villages, to meet with his people.

The spells of the monarchy are cast not only on the disadvantaged but also on those with privilege and power, among them, the army, the judiciary, and university graduates. The relationship between the monarchy and the armed forces is profound. Bhumibol, for instance, has maintained a tradition since 1928 that every graduate from the various

[11] Ironically, the best explanation of this concept is provided by Nidhi (1995), a critic of the monarchy. Bowornsak 1994 uses Nidhi's articulation of the concept to fit Dhani's framework.

military schools of the armed forces receives a sword from the king. Even when he was not in good health, the practice continued. Princess Sirindhorn was a professor at the army cadet school from 1980 to 2015. Most, if not all, of the current army commanders were once her students. Since the ascendency of the monarchy in the mid-1970s, the military has been promoted as its guardian, thanks to the ideology that the nation and monarchy embody one another. When the political crisis between the elected government and the monarchists occurred in 2006, the military declared publicly and bluntly that they were the "soldiers of the king".

The judiciary, too, believes in its special relationship with the monarchy which no other branch of the state can match. As Sanya Thammasak, a former President of the Supreme Court who went on to become President of the Privy Council, put it in 1963, "the judiciary acts in the name of the monarch" (Wimonphan 2003, p. 128). This influential maxim has been taken to heart by all judges as the definition of their relationship with the monarchy. A confirmation of such privilege is the tradition that every judge has an audience with the king at the start of his or her career, a special honour that no other state agency receives. This privilege continues every year without exception even with the king's illness. As a consequence, the judges believe that they are superior not only to other bureaucrats but also to the elected and to ordinary people.

The king has also presided over the graduation ceremonies of every public university, handing out the diploma to every single graduate every year since 1960.[12] This is probably unique to Thailand. When this custom began, graduating with a bachelor degree was a privilege rather than a norm. Every one of these future members of the elite had the honour of having the monarch preside over his or her rite of passage. Now that the number of graduates has grown enormously and the king is older, the tradition is continued by other royals who act on his behalf. It is therefore fitting that the most precious token from the graduation rite is often not the diploma, but the photograph of the monarch handing the diploma to the graduate. This picture is one of the most common articles in the household of college graduates in Thailand.

[12] The ceremony took place for the first time in 1949 and was presided over by the Regent at the time.

Since the early 1980s, these spells have been pervasive in everyday life: on television and other media, billboards, posters, in theatres, public malls, conference halls, offices, and so on. Pictures of particular emblematic moments and keywords are presented repeatedly. People are able to recite them by heart. This phenomenon is officially taken as indisputable evidence of the people's overwhelming devotion and loyalty to the monarchy. On the contrary, it could be seen as a sign that society, at least its public sphere, is under the potent spell and powerful grip of hyper-royalism. It should be noted that the hyper-royalist spells are so potent that they could lead to brutal violence such as the massacres that occurred in 1976 and 2010.

Rappaport (1999) identifies a key aspect of a ritual as redundancy. Redundancy is communicated in three forms: (1) exact repetition; (2) formulaic expression in themes, motifs, rhythms, and so on; and (3) promised expectancy. Redundancy is unnecessary in normal utterance. But for a myth or a religious belief, redundancy in acts and utterances is necessary. It is an assurance that the story and its meaning are true since such a religious utterance is supposed to be, in one way or another, a representation of truth of the higher order. Hence the invariant act or utterance confirms the definitive truth. Hyper-royalist spells are the ritualized discourses whose repetition, formulaic stories, themes and messages, and the assured expectancy presumably represent the truth about the monarchy; and that those stories, themes and messages about the monarchy are truthful. The hyper-royalist spells induce respect and obedience from the audience, and can form a community of believers. They form an enclosed rationality with their own reasoning, logic, assumptions, and sensibility that may be deemed unreasonable to non-believers of the Thai royalist faith. Only the Thais can understand the magnificent monarchy and appreciate the opportunity to live in His blissful country. Reasons and criticism by outsiders are not reasonable to Thai royalists either. Those who do not understand or are not grateful must, logically, be foreigners or un-Thai, and, as often said by royalists, they should then live elsewhere. Royalism is religious; violation of it a blasphemy.

To put the spells in perspective, amidst the hatred of military leaders and elected politicians, the First Pronouncement appears to be the catch-all magical spell. As Bowornsak describes it,

> … [the First Pronouncement] is the source of democracy in Thai culture. This one sentence [reflects] the entire [unwritten] constitution according to Thai tradition and culture. It connects the monarchy to all the Siamese people with ultimate purpose, namely benefits and happiness of people. This is what the King [Bhumibol] has firmly held as his principle from that moment (Bowornsak 1994, p. 13).

MAGIC: VISUAL ILLUSION OF SACRED MONARCHY

As a matter of fact, Dhani's 1946 lecture began with a quote from Malinowski about the value of sacredness.

> A society which makes its tradition sacred has gained by it inestimable advantage of power and permanence. Such beliefs and practices, therefore, which put a halo of sanctity around tradition, will have a 'survival value' for the type of civilisation in which they have been evolved … They were bought at an extravagant price, and are to be maintained at any cost (Dhani 1969, p. 92, citing Malinowski, *Science, Religion and Reality*, as it was cited in Wales 1931, p. 5).

Sacredness has been a quality of the monarchy since ancient times. The modifications of royal rituals in modern times from the mid-nineteenth century onwards were not intended to eliminate it (see Wales 1931). The coronation, as mentioned earlier, was an example of modification by incorporating the public but making the sacred aspects even more elaborate. Aside from Dhani, royalist intellectuals like Kukrit Pramoj (1975) and critics alike are aware of the power of sacredness. Anthropologists have observed the return of magic and sacredness — the "re-enchantment" — even as society becomes more modern. For Thailand, and many other societies, sacredness and magic have never been removed from social life no matter how modern it has become, as Pattana (2012) illustrated clearly. Buddhism has always been associated with magic, the supernatural and superstition. The

Buddhist rationalization since the nineteenth century did not eliminate them (Reynolds 2016, pp. 338–40). Many Brahmanic royal rituals were revived and promoted from 1960 onwards (Thak 2006). During the long reign of King Bhumibol, the monarchy has become even more sacralized while the country turned more modern and capitalist. Christine Gray (1986, 1991 and 1992) explains how the sacred royal rituals and performance benefitted royal wealth. Sacredness and capitalism go hand in hand for the monarchy. Peter Jackson (2009) similarly argues that the sacred Bhumibol is a prosperity cult in the time of neoliberalism.

Nonetheless, our understanding of this subject remains very limited. Many questions remain. For this article, the interest is in the connection between the sacred monarchy and royal democracy. Such a connection is related to the question of "how" sacredness is produced.

A visitor to Thailand never fails to observe the pictures of King Bhumibol almost everywhere in public space and in private homes. Some are his portraits, others emblematic pictures that deliver the spells, for example, the picture of him bending down to listen to a poor old woman sitting on the ground, or the one of him with a camera, map, pencil and a bead of sweat (Stengs 2006, pp. 224–26). It is common for people to treat these royal pictures as they would other holy beings such as venerated monks or the Buddha. Gray (1992) observes that in Theravada Buddhsm, as in Thailand, "the idiom of [virtuous] power is the idiom of sight … the sight of the king is believed to confer merit and luck on his subjects" (p. 452). She quotes a palace official who noted that "People from all walks of life … [were encouraged to] … feast their eyes on the royal virtue (*dai chom phrabarami*)" (p. 450). The monarch's mystique engenders the visual feast, which, in return, reinforces the mystiques of the monarch.

Working independently of Gray and with a primary focus on the cult of King Chulalongkorn, Stengs (2009) similarly illustrates how visual materials — portraitures, coins, medallions, statues, monuments, magazine covers, billboards and so on — mediate between the devotees of the cult and the sacred presence of the divine king. She argues in the final chapter of her book that the same mediation is applicable to the cult of King Bhumibol. Following these pioneers, I would add that for the cult of King Bhumibol, television and frequent public pageantry

under the hyper-royalist condition are even more effective in mediating the public and the sacred king. I would also go a step further to note that these materials are not merely the visualization of the discourses, but their visual effects themselves are the magical illusion of the sacred king.

The rise of royalism since the 1960s coincided with the media boom in Thailand. In particular, it was the beginning of Thailand's television age. First broadcast in 1955 to only one thousand sets, television rapidly expanded its audience. By 1989, 80 per cent of the population above the age of six watched television especially from 4–8 p.m.; and the medium was the primary source of news and information (National Statistics Office 2008, pp. 7, 11).[13] It is fair to say that television broadcasts reached remote villages in almost every corner of the country, and has become the most powerful media, far more effective than print capitalism, for the imagined Thai community during the hyper-royalist period. It should also be noted that, from the beginning, all television broadcasts in Thailand — in fact all radio airwaves too — were the state's property, although private companies are licensed to operate some channels. The first two channels in the country were owned and operated by the army and the government, and both remain among the main channels today. Hence, the state retains control of programmes, with the authority to censor as needed.

One of the daily broadcast programmes is the 8 p.m. news which typically begins with "news from the palace". It has been a staple programme since the early years of television when broadcasts only lasted a few hours each day. After the 1976 massacre, it was more tightly controlled by the military. A rigid format was imposed on the 8 p.m. news segment, i.e. it had to start with news about the royals, from the king, the queen, to the prince, princesses, and other royals according to their royal ranks, then the prime minister, the army chief, followed by others. This format is still in place today. Thais are reminded every day of the hierarchical social order. Every night, for many decades, Thais learned about the public activities of these royals, especially the king's royal

[13] The number increased to 95% by 2003 and started to decline very recently due to the internet.

projects and his visits to remote areas. As Gray puts it, "(the) primary purpose of the king's visits to his projects was not to give speeches… but to see and be seen by his subjects. The men who participated … were blessed by the sight of the king-deity" (1991, p. 55). Now people can "feast their eyes on royal virtue" without having to participate. Even if they no longer care to watch the news from the palace every day, they are assured that the king and the royals will still repeat their roles, dedications, and appearances because this truth would be repeated, with expectations fulfilled and normalcy assured — the three forms of redundancy for a ritualistic discourse, as suggested by Rappaport (1999).

The 1960s was a period when print mass media — daily newspapers and magazines — grew in number, circulation, and influence. People could expect similar pictures of the King and his family on the daily news and in magazines. Pictures of Bhumibol, for example, working tirelessly with a camera or binoculars around his neck, a map, a notebook and pencil in his hands, were continuously circulated. People witnessed the ideal modern monarch with their own eyes, regularly throughout their lives. The pre-modern kingship was unapproachable for the public and the awe of its aura was engendered by its invisible exclusivity. A king was under the gaze only of the Holiness and celestial beings, not the public. The modern monarchy is quite the opposite. It is a public institution that needs to care about its popularity. Its veneration grows on the basis of visible exclusivity — the spectacle of the unparalleled majesty. The more frequent and more special, the higher the reverence it receives.

The spectacle of Bhumibol was elevated to another level from the mid-1970s by frequent majestic pageantry. Before the hyper-royalist period, apart from annual events such as royal birthday celebrations, a royal pageantry that took place in public space was infrequent. During the entire reign of King Chulalongkorn, for instance, the public and extravagant pageantries took place only twice — after his return from Europe in 1897 and in 1907. In the reign of Bhumibol, the First Plough Ceremony and the Royal Barge Ceremony were added to the regular grand spectacles for the public and television. Since 1975, as special royal occasions such as those mentioned earlier were invented, pompous pageantry became more frequent and majestic. Besides, they are often broadcast live simultaneously on every main television channel.

Pageantry of the monarchy is important statecraft because the spectacle produces the aura of sacralized monarchy (Fujitani 1996). The sacred aura of the monarchy is conveyed through awe and amazement either by physical attendance or through television. Participants "feast their eyes on the royal virtue" and are awed by the visual effects. Thus the most important activity for them is taking photographs which they can use as visual feasts and as items to share with others.

In 2006, a mass gathering at the huge Equestrian Plaza was the climax of the Diamond Jubilee celebration for Bhumibol. Hundreds of thousands of loyal subjects in yellow jerseys showed up for an audience with the king and the royal family. The king appeared on the balcony of the Marble Palace at the end of the Plaza. It was a rare sight of the monarch in such a magnificent public event, perhaps a grander version of the public appearance on coronation day. Everyone, it seems, took pictures. The royals also took pictures of the people as seen from their vantage point from the balcony. The next day, every daily newspaper published spectacular pictures. From the above occasion, an observer commented that royalism had become commodified and an entertaining form of nationalism (Sarun 2010). In my view, it was a moment in which the spectacular visual effects (re)produced the magical illusion of the sacred and popular monarchy. This moment showed how visual mediation sacralized the monarchy, in this case, with popular participation, thanks to digital technology. The commodification of royalism facilitated the participation of people in the production, circulation and consumption of the sacralized monarch. Sacred monarchy is successful partly because the spectacles are commodified, with the exclusivity being visible to all.

Guy Debord asserted that "the spectacle is the main production of present-day society… the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images" (1983, pp. 14, 15). In an era when "politics has become (visually) representational" (Morris 2009, p. 124), not only the omnipresence of the monarchy but also the spectacle of royal pageantry contributes to the making of the divine Bhumibol. Thailand is an imagined community under the sacred monarchy mediated and constructed by visual effects. Unlike the Orwellian Big Brother which operates instrumentally by surveillance and central control, the omnipresence of Bhumibol and frequent displays

of his awesomeness are the visual spell of the sacred monarchy. It is not instrumental. Pictures cannot watch us, but they can cast spells on us. Sacredness operates through ritualized practices and visual effects that are partaken by people and subscribed to by self-act and self-control, and through peer surveillance by ordinary people.

CRISIS AND DISENCHANTMENT

The root of the political turmoil that began in 2006 is the structural conflict between a changing society and political demography on the one hand, and an obstinate political system that refuses to accommodate changes and tries to resist them on the other hand. The same conflict also appears between the rural and semi-urban population that supports electoral democracy and the mostly Bangkok-based upper classes that favour royal democracy.

Since the 1980s, rural and semi-urban regions of the country have changed rapidly (Walker 2012). Rural villagers, who traditionally form the lowest strata of this hierarchical society, have become urbanized, better educated, and politically astute (Naruemon and McCargo 2011; Keyes 2014). To them, even with the continued presence of corrupt politicians, electoral democracy has provided better opportunities and is more responsive to their dynamic needs than the inefficient bureaucracy. Electoral democracy is "edible," for it brings concrete benefits and improvements in material life, especially to the rural and semi-urban classes who make up the majority of the country's population. This is particularly clear in the North and the Northeast, which are sites of recent rapid and massive change. Thaksin Shinawatra did not create the conditions of change described above. Rather, his party was successful because it recognized those changes and took advantage of them. Since 2001, Thaksin's parties (under different names) have won every election by a landslide. Their policies were designed to benefit the lower strata of society in order to shore up support from the ascendant political demography. Supporters of Thaksin and his haters alike agree that no other political figure has commanded as much popular loyalty as he has.

On the other hand, the upper class in Bangkok has access to resources, opportunities, state mechanisms, and mass media outlets for their benefit

without the need to rely on elected politicians. The economic boom that brought them prosperity from the late 1980s onwards took place under the political rise of royal democracy and the culture of hyper-royalism. In contrast, under the policies of Thaksin's administration, their material interests were at stake because the state's resources, which for decades had been distributed in favour of the urban sector, were redirected to serve the majority of the population. This tension erupted as the elected authority increased its power and tried aggressively to reform the bureaucratic system. In the words of Suehiro (2014), "Thaksin's ambitious reforms ultimately collapsed because they were too radical and too speedy for all the people including the royalists, the military, government officers, as well as conservatives" (p. 299). Hence, they were a threat to the status quo of royal democracy. Several stark battles among these elite groups throughout the 2000s, often seen as disputes between politicians and "good" bureaucrats reflect this fundamental conflict. Even the royalists' obsessive abomination of Thaksin reflects this deeper problem. Democratization and decentralization have challenged and weakened the authority of a highly centralized bureaucratic state. Ultimately, what the recent political upheaval shows is that electoral democracy is incompatible with, or even antagonistic to royal democracy.

Meanwhile, King Bhumibol's health has deteriorated since the early 2000s. Royal democracy is only possible because of him. It is not an exaggeration to say that without him, royal democracy might not survive. Not many people hold the Crown Prince in high regard (Handley 2006, pp. 248–50, 301–304). For Thais, his character is far from that of an ideal monarchy. In fact, regardless of his character, hyper-royalism makes it impossible for a successor to succeed. By making Bhumibol super-human or a semi-deity, hyper-royalism sets up the failure of the successor. So far, this point has been overlooked since it means the blame should go to the monarchists and their projects. The succession becomes a problem not because the rules and laws of succession are uncertain. They are clear; the Crown Prince is the only legitimate successor. The indisputable succession, however, puts royal democracy in a critical condition. The king's failing health is probably the prelude to the crisis for royal democracy from within. The conjuncture of the threat to royal democracy due to the structural conflict, and the crisis

within royal democracy have created a "perfect storm". The succession problem triggers the explosion of the structural conflict. The coups in 2006 and 2014 thus were the efforts of the monarchists to take control of the state and country so as to rid themselves of perceived threats to royal democracy, namely the Shinawatras and all other critics of the monarchy.

It was an open secret that the 2006 coup was engineered by the palace's inner circle, including the President of the Privy Council. To supporters of Thaksin, most of whom were ordinary Thais who had revered the monarchy all their lives, the palace's involvement with the coup was shockingly disappointing, as reflected in the speech of a leader of the Red-shirt movement in 2008 (Thongchai 2014, pp. 92–94). Since then, there has been abundant evidence not only of the palace's anti-democratic politics but also of the injustice inflicted upon Thaksin supporters and those who opposed the coups. Widespread disappointment turned into derision, then disillusion with the monarchy. The continuing suppressions of these people since the 2006 coup, especially the brutal killings in 2010, have intensified their bitterness and anger against injustice by the royalist state. The royalist spells that held sway over a massive number of ordinary Thais were broken.

Although dissension vis-à-vis royalism is not new, the current wave — known among dissenters as the "*Ta Sawang*" phenomenon (literally cleared-eyes or brightened-eyes, i.e. disillusioned), is unlike earlier ones. First, where the previous anti-monarchist efforts originated from a radical ideology, the *Ta Sawang* is primarily the reaction to the monarchy's politics and hyper-royalism. Hyper-royalism itself produces dissension and breeds anti-monarchy. Second, the earlier anti-monarchists were limited to the radicals while the current one is spread across various sectors of the population and regions. Third, the *Ta Sawang* survives by open politics and operates in the public sphere; it is not a clandestine operation like the anti-monarchy radicals of the past. The online sphere is their home and refuge, where they vent their frustration, mock the royalists, and coordinate their activities. At times, dissension has found its outlets on the streets of Bangkok too (Ünaldi 2014). Dissension towards royalism has become a subversive public sub-culture in parallel with haughty hyper-royalism.

However, monarchists have never thought of hyper-royalism itself producing dissension to the monarchy. Instead, they see it as a conspiracy organized by a network of wicked people, masterminded by Thaksin. Their understanding was illustrated in a hoaxed flowchart of the network for "Dismantling the Monarchy" (*lom chao*) that was publicized as a pretext to the killing in May 2010 (Askew 2012, pp. 80–81). In their view, hyper-royalism and stronger suppression are needed even more to quell the dissension. The 112 law is used as their main deterrent to rising discontent. Since the 2006 coup, the number of people charged with the 112 law has skyrocketed from a few to more than a hundred per year. The enforcement of the law has become more indiscriminate while the interpretations have become more outrageous (Streckfuss 2014, pp. 119–30). To make matters worse, the Computer Crime Act enacted in 2007 includes provisions to protect national security. Hence the law has been used to target spiteful remarks on royalism in cyberspace as a matter of national security. Thousands of political websites have been blocked by the government agency since then.[14] Civil society and the royalist public are actively involved in the suppression of dissension towards the monarchy. In July 2010, volunteers were recruited by the government for the "cyber-scout" project.[15] A few vigilante groups, such as the *Ongkon kep khaya phaendin* (Organization for Eliminating Trash of the Land) were formed, to track, hack and hunt critics of the monarchy online. Due to these measures, the climate of fear remains pervasive while hyperbolic royalism becomes the norm. There have been more demands on people to conform so as to confirm their loyalty. To the royalist public, royalism is religious; violation of it therefore a blasphemy.

However, these measures are likely to backfire. As the enforcement of the *lèse majesté* law becomes more frequent and increasingly

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[14] See the statistics and analysis of the websites blocked by Thai government 2006-2008 from Freedom Against Censorship in Thailand (FACT) <http://facthai.wordpress.com/data/blocked/> (last accessed 31 December 2015). Information, data, analyses and other resources related to the attempts by Thai governments to block and censor the internet can be found on <https://thainetizen.org/docs/> by the Thai Netizens group.

[15] This is probably named after the "Village Scout", the ultra-royalist popular movement that was the culprit of the 1976 massacre (Bowie 1997).

outrageous, it has generated more discontent and negative reactions instead of eliminating critics of the monarchy. Strong criticism and anti-monarchy remarks are communicable in the form of metaphors, codes, insinuation, jokes and allusions that are understood among the *Ta Sawang*. Like the users of social media, the *Ta Sawang* community has produced its own language, forms of expression, and literary genres for their communication and circulations of ideas, views and feelings — all in the open.

PREDICAMENT

Born in December 1927, King Bhumibol was 72 in 2000 when Thaksin came to power, almost 79 in 2006 when the coup took place, and 86 at the time of the 2014 coup. He has been almost permanently in hospital since 2005 with serious deterioration in his health from time to time. The palace has kept his true health condition confidential, prompting frequent rumours of his death or near-death since he was hospitalized. To be sure, the possibility of his passing has been looming since the mid-2000s when Thaksin was in power.

King Bhumibol assumed the throne in 1946 after his brother was shot dead in his bed. The incident remains shrouded in mystery because, fairly speaking, questions about Bhumibol's involvement in the incident remain. The royalists are aware of this, and thus have offered their accounts in his defence even years later (Sanchai and Wimonphan 1974). Since there must have been somebody responsible for the regicide, three palace attendees were swiftly executed for assassinating the king, despite flimsy evidence, absence of motive, and the impossibility of circumstance. They were scapegoats needed to put the case to a close. We may say that, even putting aside the regicide, the deaths of three innocent victims, not including many more political casualties (Somsak 2006) were the silent prelude to Bhumibol's coronation and his First Pronouncement. In retrospect, this moment at the beginning of his reign was a forewarning. The beginning of royal democracy and hyper-royalism in the mid-1970s also involved the brutal massacre in 1976 at Thammasat University that brought an end to the democratic period of 1973–76 (Thongchai 2002). The 2010 bloodshed, the 2014 coup and the harsh suppression afterwards, and the reckless use of the 112 law against

dissenters in preparation for the messy succession, all took place in order to protect the status quo of royal democracy.

Hyper-royalism is a factor for the success of royal democracy and Bhumibol's indispensability. Bhumibol, in return, is the key factor of hyper-royalism. They rely on one another. Unfortunately, his mortality implies the unsustainability of hyper-royalism. To make the matter worse, the Crown Prince's moral character stands in opposition to that of his father's and many signs in recent years suggest that the heir might be more terrifying than previously thought. In 2015 alone, there were two purges in his inner circle, the first of his wife and her entourage, and the other of his own entourage. Both involved corruption and large-scale abuse of power. As the wrongdoings were committed by invoking the name of the Crown Prince, these royalists were charged with the 112 law too. Later, a few of them committed suicide and two mysteriously died in custody. As the purges and their wakes took place in the public eye, people did not fail to recognize that all of them had committed crimes of such scale under the Prince's jurisdiction. Despite the inability to speak out, the public also noticed barbaric medieval justice.

The unpopularity of the Crown Prince is common among Thais despite their political polarization today. Even the military, it is said, does not support him. In spite of that, the military has come to terms with the Crown Prince as the next king. The latest coup in 2014 was intended to prepare for this transition. On the other hand, although some people in the anti-junta movement and some critics of the monarchy may have been seen donning the "I love the Crown Prince" t-shirt in public after the 2010 massacre, such actions were probably satirical reactions to the monarch who was believed to be behind the atrocity.

Meanwhile, the Princess' stature is higher than that of her brother's. The making of the cult of Princess Sirindhorn as an intelligent, scholastic, diplomatic, and caring princess who is beloved by everyone, is under way as an alternative. For quite some time now, rumours of the Crown Prince's contemptuous character and behaviour have been widespread alongside the rumours or wishful thinking in support of Princess Sirindhorn as the next monarch. For Thais in general, they prefer a monarch with high

moral authority. For the Thai elite and the monarchists in particular, they hope to prolong the royal hegemony and royal democracy for their own benefit.

Despite the above conditions, and contrary to widespread misunderstanding, as of now, the Crown Prince is the only legitimate successor since he is the only one appointed heir to the throne. The Princess is not. The only possibility of her becoming the next monarch is either an extremely unusual situation that would prevent the Crown Prince from assuming the throne, an abrupt change of the law, or her appointment as heir to the throne. The dilemma of the succession crisis is that the proper, legitimate transition would produce the outcome the monarchists do not like, but the outcome they favour is possible only by illegitimate or illegal means. Neither scenario warrants a peaceful and stable transition.

The anxiety over the succession is not due to the uncertainty over who the successor is, but due to the certainty of an unpopular successor. But such a successor would not have been a problem if the monarchy had not been so pivotal in the entire political system of royal democracy. Power and material and intangible benefits are at stake if the successor is unable to sustain hyper-royalism. Barring an unusual situation, hyper-royalism after Bhumibol is precarious. Hence, royal hegemony and royal democracy face precarity as well. In any scenario, it is difficult to predict how long and how strong the impact of hyper-royalism will be in the next reign. It is not even certain if the long shadow of Bhumibol will be good for the next monarch, whoever that may be, as s/he would be constantly compared to his/her divine predecessor. No heir can fill the ideal monarch's shoes; s/he can only suffer in comparison.

The weakening of the monarchy after Bhumibol will likely bring about an intensification of the fractures and contentions among the various factions of the kingmakers within the network-monarchy. Their conflicts may well be severe given the high stakes under a different reigning monarch and given the likely unstable royal democracy after Bhumibol. On the other hand, the two coups have already opened the door for the return of Praetorianism (Montesano 2014). The prospect for the monarchy, and hyper-royalism, looks grim.

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