

Kings, Country and Constitutions

Thailand's Political Development 1932 –2000

Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian



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(All illustrations are reproduced with permission)

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book on Thailand's constitutional monarchy turns out to be a sequel to my earlier study on modern Thai politics. Nonetheless, the truth is it was not planned as such. The present book emerges out of my ever-growing fascination with the extraordinary development of the Thai monarchy, in particular over the outstanding socio-political ability of the present occupant of the Chakri throne. Once the thousand-and-one notes and documents were assembled and analysed, and the puzzling pieces put together, the work represents not only the eventful development of the constitutional monarchy itself but also of modern Thai politics from 1932 to the close of the twentieth century.

It should be noted that this book is not a run-of-the-mill biographical story of the present king. There are too many such books in circulation, both in Thai and English, to require yet another addition. The story told here is about the successful adjustment of the Chakri monarchy to the new socio-political environment. The central questions posed and analysed focus on how and why the institution of kingship in Thailand, in spite of the contemporary reverse trend all over the world, has managed to survive the great onslaught of the early democratic phase; revive and effectively cultivate popular support towards the institution; overcome the mighty military junta; and finally make itself the supreme authority in the land, both in theory and practice. The book traces the history of Thailand's constitutional monarchy from the time of the absolutist King Prajadhipok to its pinnacle of the present day. In between, it discusses and analyses the early failure of the Chakri monarchy during the confrontation with the new élite led by the People's Party; the socio-political lowest ebb of that institution during King Ananda's minority; and the determination and struggle of the present monarch to put the monarchy back on the central stage of Thai politics. The account is a reminder to those who take for granted that King Bhumibol Adulyadej's present supreme position was given to him on a gold platter. The throne certainly was his by birthright and consent of Parliament. But the power and authority, the undisputed supreme position and the unheard-of popular affection and reverence bestowed upon him in the present era are the

result of his own untiring efforts. Without doubt, the Chakri monarchy owes a debt of gratitude to its present, most illustrious member.

I would like to record my great appreciation to the Toyota Foundation for its generous two-year research fund. The grant enabled me to conduct in-depth research in England, the United States and Thailand. Without such generous financial support, it would have been almost impossible for me to fulfil my ambition of writing about the fascinating subject of this book. I began writing in 1998 while working at Universiti Tenaga Nasional. My thanks go to my university which provided me, through a reduced academic workload, the required time to complete the manuscript within the planned time-frame.

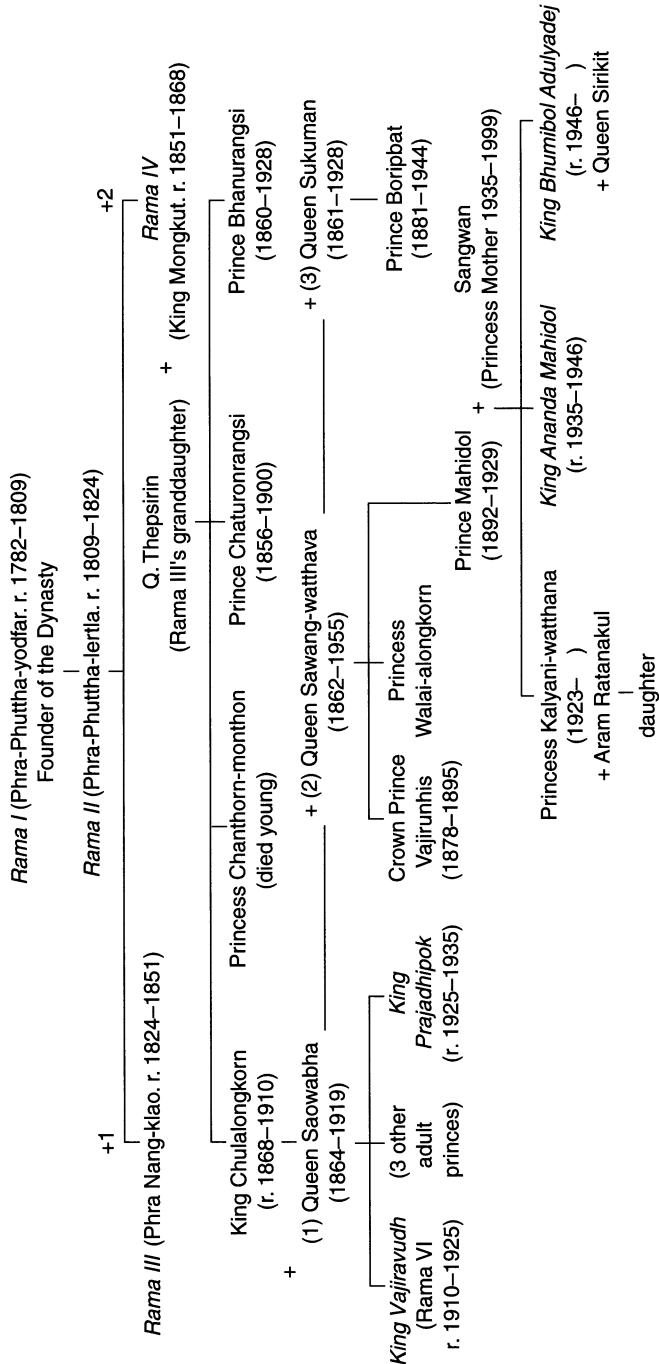
Obviously, I have benefited from the kindness and generosity of many friends and colleagues who offered opinions and comments as well as recommending materials relevant to the research. I particularly wish to single out two of these kind friends and acquaintances. Khunying Mani Siriworasan willingly became my first-hand source on the unhappy period of ex-King Prajadhipok's life and other related topics. I have learned a great deal from both our talks and from certain material she kindly lent me. My life-long friend, Prof. Dr Nidhi Aeusrvongse, is especially generous with his time. He read part of the manuscript, gave valuable comments which, perhaps through my own errors of judgement, I did not always follow. His constant concern and indulgence were an inspiration to me and eventually led to my decision to have the manuscript published.

During the latest stage of the draft, I was much stimulated by the discussion of the panel on Thai politics under Duncan McCargo's competent chairmanship during the 7th International Conference on Thai Studies in July 2000 in Amsterdam. I wish to record my sincere appreciation and thanks to both the panelists and those who participated in the lively discussion, who have meaningfully contributed towards the final draft of the book. Of these generous scholars, I must especially thank Dr Chalong Soontravanich who went beyond the call of participant duty. He took the trouble to send me the official translated copy of the 1997 Constitution. I was deeply touched by his kind gesture.

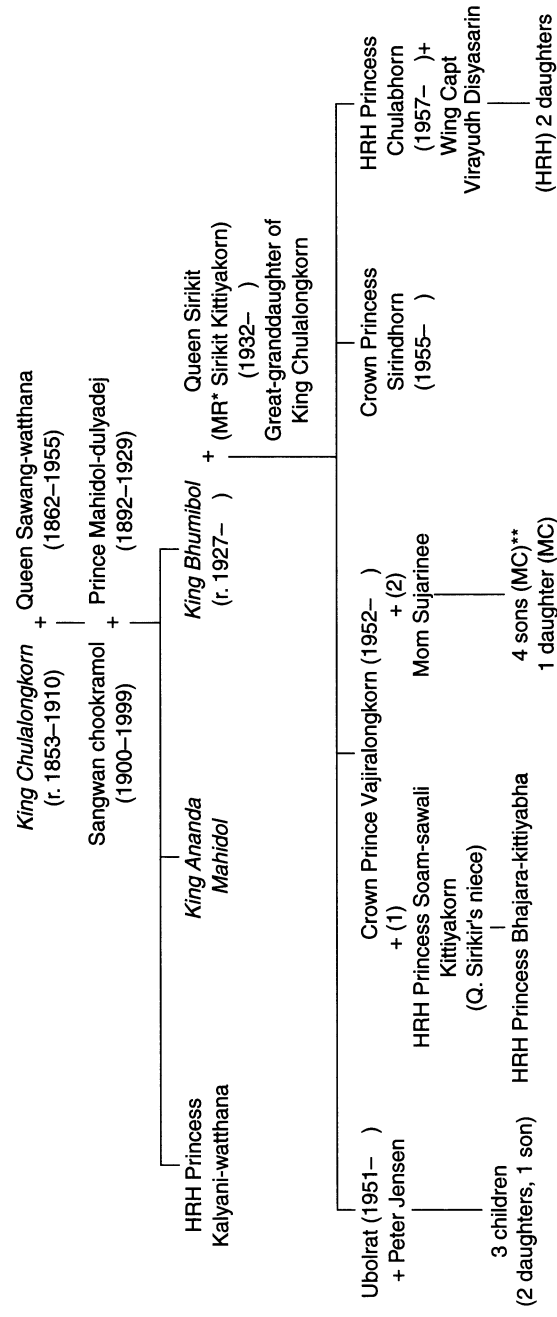
Producing an academic work is not always fun. There were times when I would have liked to have called it a day, particularly when other legitimate demands sharply reminded me that I might have been too ambitious. During such dark moments of self-doubt and despondence, I have often drawn my strength and determination from the life philosophy of my eldest sister who is herself perseverance and determination-to-succeed reincarnated. This book is rightly dedicated to Pii Pawdoo Suwannathat with sisterly affection and pride. It is my great fortune to have her as role model.

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The Chakri Dynasty



The Present Royal Family



* MR Mom Rajwong

** MC Mom Chao

Part I

Analysis of Thai Constitutions

Understanding Thai Democracy

FORM RATHER THAN SUBSTANCE

Much has been said about the failure of democracy in Thailand, which is symbolized by the existence of the political vicious circle.¹ There seems to be consensus among well-informed observers of Thai politics that a great measure of the responsibility for this unhappy development is squarely laid at the door of the military and the People's Party. Yet even when the most-hyped version of democracy lauded by Pridi (the political 'brain' of the People's Party and the 24 June 1932 revolution) and his supporters, was put in place as in 1946, it was quite clear that the essence of democracy as understood by the Western society was very much lacking.² The same could likewise be said of the Constitution drafted by the conservatives and royalists in 1949 which is oft-quoted and lovingly referred to as the most democratic version of all Thai Constitutions, perhaps with the exception of the 1997 Constitution. Thus far, a Thai version of democracy appears to be nothing more than a series of documents written to ensure the power and interest of those who affected its drafting. In fact Thai Constitutions may be used as evidence to support an ongoing power struggle among the various factions of its ruling élite since the version of 27 June 1932 was introduced. The Thai masses, who neither understood nor much cared about the intricacy of democracy, appeared only to function as uninterested lookers-on most of the time.

From a Western vantage, democracy is a political heritage that claimed its roots from the Greco-Roman cradle of civilization. Both Plato and Aristotle are recognized as the philosophical minds behind the basic democratic principles and process practised in the Western world today. From these two great political philosophers originate the two main elements of Western democracy: the principle of democracy (Plato); and the process of democracy (Aristotle).³ Basically, Plato provides the principle that good government is government that can give the most to individuals both for their physical and mental needs without jeopardizing the good of the commonwealth. The stress on the right of individuals

to enjoy life to its maximal level became the primary principle of Western democracy – government that is best is government that least governs – became the prime objective of the state more or less until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the principle of individualism increasingly posed real and dangerous threats to the well-being of society as a whole. Individualism was then tempered by another great principle put forward by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, the principle of utility that emphasizes egalitarianism or ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’. In short, the rights and liberty of an individual must be curtailed or qualified if they are to affect the well-being of others in the same society; it was then the duty of the state to provide some ground rules which would ensure the basic egalitarian rights (greatest happiness) to its citizens (greatest number).⁴ Thus the principle or purpose of democracy is for an attainment of the maximal interest of the people both as individuals and as a part of the whole/society. While Plato talks about a philosopher-king as a means to attain the aim of ‘democracy’, it is Aristotle who basically provides the process by which the principle of democracy could be obtained through individual participation of all members of society.⁵

It is evident that democracy as nurtured and developed in the West can never exist with only one of its main components in existence. Democracy is alive if and when both its principle and process are truly put into practice. The failure of the Thai democracy has, in spite of the reasons given by both scholars and politicians, mostly to do with the fact that, since its introduction by the People’s Party, democracy in Thailand concentrated almost entirely on process and very little indeed on principle or ideology of the system. Thus it came to pass that each time the country gave the appearance of the four main elements of the democratic process – a Constitution, political parties, Parliament and elections – it was generally accepted that the cause of democracy had been well served. For example, the 1933–1938 period, the 1946–1947 period and the 1972–1973 period. It is not surprising that, in such political situations, a written Constitution, regardless of its contents or its countless failures, becomes the first criterion for democracy in Thailand, even though it has been repeatedly proved that a Constitution, no matter how well it is written, offers no realistic resistance against those anti-democracy elements that rampage among the Thai ruling élite.

Examples are plentiful. King Prajadhipok, mindful of the fact that the days of the absolute monarchy were numbered, tried to take the democratic bull by the horns. In spite of his own belief that ‘a real democracy is very unlikely to succeed in Siam ... [and] even be harmful to the real interest of the people’, the King was truly of the opinion that it was a ‘necessity’ that Siam must adopt democracy willy-nilly and ‘*play* that sort of game... *sometime*’.⁶ By taking initiatives and by launching a royal kind of political ‘reform’, Prajadhipok hoped to forestall first the irrational ‘majority of people’ who would through *sentiment* and not through *rationality* ‘clamour for a Parliament’. Second, and of more importance, was the royal desire to circumvent the rule of Western democracy and tailor it to the palate of the court and the ruling conservative élite.⁷ Judging from the draft

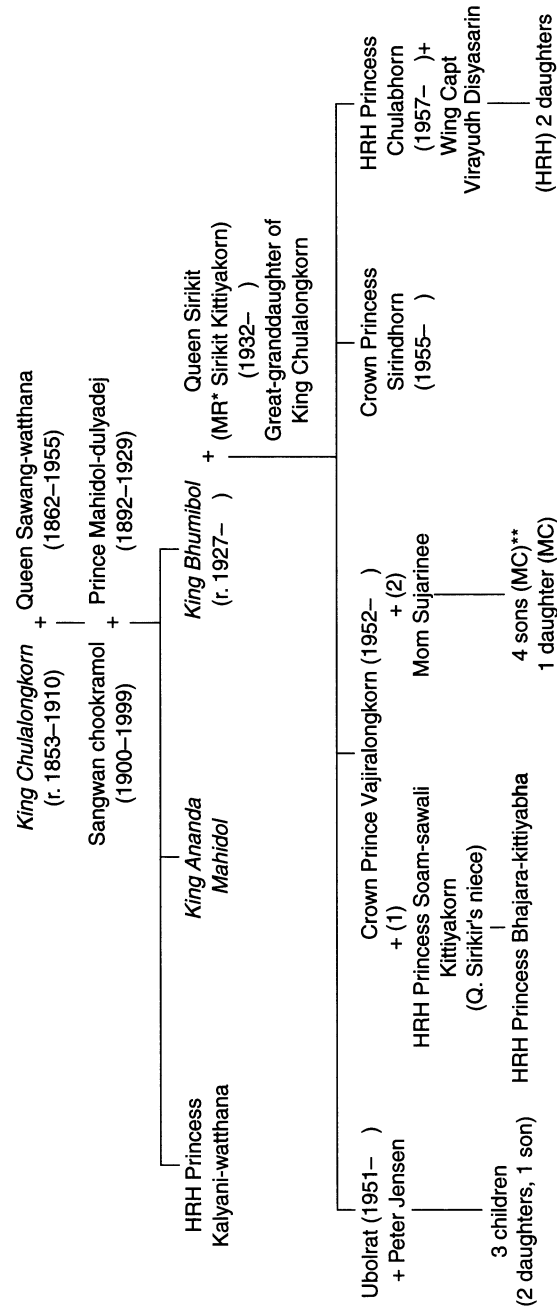
Constitution submitted to His Majesty by the former American adviser, Francis B. Sayre/Phraya Kalayanamaitri which was rejected by the Supreme Council of State as being 'unfit and undesirable', this first-known version of a written Constitution was anything but 'democratic' either in form or in substance.⁸ It was in fact the document of a desperate attempt by a supporter of the old regime to upgrade and strengthen the absolute monarchical institution by institutionalizing certain aspects in the hope of alleviating its self-destructive flaws. Outstanding among the said efforts to institutionalizing the monarchy was the institution of the Crown Prince or heir apparent which had revealed at least one of its serious inherent weaknesses since the ascendancy of King Vajiravudh to the throne.⁹ Sayre's recommendations concerning the said institution aimed to ensure that only a capable candidate ascended the Thai absolutist throne.

Something similar can be said of the Stevens-Siwisanwaja draft in 1931. It recommended a setting up of the post of a premier together with a cabinet and a legislative council, in addition to the Supreme Council already functioning.¹⁰ Both versions were drafted with a mind to save the supreme power and the dignity of the throne and of maintaining the status quo of the ruling élite. The draft documents introduced no significant political changes such as one might expect of a change from an absolute monarchy to a limited monarchy of some sort. Both inserted some cosmetic elements into the existent system with the intention of creating a desired effect for the appearance of a 'democratic' rule: a written constitution, a prime minister and his cabinet (Sayre's draft); a written Constitution, a legislative council with members appointed and elected, prime minister and cabinet (Stevens' and Siwisan's draft).

It was quite clear that none of those involved in the exercises of the political 'reform' during Prajadhipok's search for a new and acceptable political formula to bolster up the position of the Chakri dynasty was aware of the principle of the democratic system. This is even more amazing when one considers that two of the drafters were products of the very system of democracy which proclaimed as its supreme objectives the rights, liberty and happiness of individuals.

It can be stated that, on the whole, the attitude of the conservatives and the royalists towards the rule of democracy has changed very little. Democracy is nothing more than a means to verify the power and position of the monarch. One royalist clearly points out that a written Constitution is but a lifeless document which has failed even to make clear its basic principles. In comparison with the monarchy, which is a permanent and solid institution, a written Constitution carries no weight in Thai society. In his opinion, the monarchy represents the main pillar of the Thai nation in the same manner as the American Constitution represents the foundation of the American nation.¹¹ Maintaining that democracy is not a system but a process of getting things done – another well-known conservative scholar explains that the great King Chulalongkorn ruled in accordance with democratic principles.¹² The confusion and muddled thinking concerning democracy was without doubt a deep-rooted cause of this political system not being able to make any significant headway among the country's conservative élite.

The Present Royal Family



* MR Mom Rajwong

** MC Mom Chao

were talking of how best to safeguard their political and socio-economic power and position, normally through manipulation of the process of democracy. For these purposes, the term 'democracy' was a mere political blanket to cover the political agenda of individual factions. Within this political scenario, a Constitution would more often than not be written to maximize the power of the interested group or faction concerned, and not for the promotion of the common good of the state or for the individual's rights and privileges. It was not surprising, therefore, that every time power changed hands from one faction to another, there was a real need to abrogate the extant Constitution and to write a new one, to find a new method of manipulating the electoral institution and electorate, and to keep an elected Government pliable to the will of the new faction in power. There has hardly been room for the objective of democracy; its place was repeatedly supplanted by the political interests of the ever-changing factions within the Thai ruling class.

What makes Thai democracy so confusing even among the informed sector of the society is perhaps the habit of an insistent 'holier-than-thou' claim on democracy by the various élitist factions. As we have seen, Pridi and company claimed that the 'perfect' democracy had been attained as early as 1946 with the passage of the May Constitution in that year; the old conservatives and royalists likewise stated that the March 1949 Constitution represented the true spirit of democracy; the new rightists opted for the 1976 Constitution as the best assurance for the rule of democracy; and the post-1988 military leadership strongly supported the Interim Constitution of March 1991 and the Permanent Constitution of December 1991 as ideal charters for the rule of democracy. As could be expected, none of these Constitutions gave much thought to the attainment of the basic rights and liberty of the people. Instead, they have all been written to make supreme the power and authority of the state – for which, read group or faction in power – namely Pridi and his supporters, the Democrats and the court party, the ultra-rightists of the post-1973 era, and the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) – and its supporters of the 1990s respectively.

Conversely, when the Thai élite talked about undemocratic regimes or systems, what was meant most of the time was a rule or administration that favoured their political opponents and, by inference, posed a serious disadvantage to their own political agenda. Democracy practised in Thailand from 1932 to the 1990s is at best the rule of a benevolent despot, and at worst a system of power-sharing among greedy, self-centred and unscrupulous politicians and bureaucrats. Evidently the system had little to do with ordinary people who were allocated only an insignificant part in the overall political scheme of this power-struggling and power-sharing exercise among the ruling élite. There has been neither respect nor compassion for the masses *per se*. The masses would become valuable only during the short period leading up to an election. Even then, they would more often than not be persuaded, manipulated, cajoled or coerced to cast their votes for candidates of the ruling class's choice. Frustration and disillusionment are common among those who keenly wished to see the country free itself from

the grasp of self-serving ruling cliques and their accomplices. One respectable political scientist sums up the political development up to the early 1990s as a political system wherein political parties/*phak kanmuang* have transformed themselves into parties of corruption/*phak kinmuang*; parliamentary elections are conducted 'in violation of the [elections] laws'; and a Government thus formed is 'the Government of the rich/*nai thun*, by the rich, for the rich'. He further concludes that, as a result, 'democracy' thus achieved represents only 'a fully-blown cycle of a sham democracy'.¹⁵

On average, the 'sham democracy' required the service of a new Constitution every four years and that of constitutional amendments every two years. Meanwhile, the people's right to elect their MPs was neutralized by the right of the ruling élite to nominate appointments for membership of the Upper House whose rights and privileges were practically no different from those of the elected members, but whose primary loyalty was with those who selected and appointed them, and not the people. Roughly calculated, the military and the bureaucrats were in control of the political reins for 42 of the 65 years (1932–1973; 1976–1977; 1991–1992); the politicians, scrupulous and unscrupulous, and their self-serving nouveaux riches sponsors and accomplices, with the tacit backing of the military, were in control for about 20 years (1977–1997). So far, the only period when the political legitimacy was derived from the political power of people was the period 1973–1976. Such cold, hard facts typify Thai democracy.

Until the passage of the Constitution in October 1997, it was obvious that democracy in Thailand had been an exercise of process over principle, form over substance. It is also evident from numerous examples discussed that the overwhelming majority of the Thai ruling élite of the pre- and post-1932 periods – rightists, leftists, royalists, liberals, progressives, civilians and the military – practised at best a form of democracy, but never the substance or the spirit of the political ideology that most of them seemed to have promoted and supported. There was no serious attempt to cultivate the Western style of democracy wherein ideology and form go hand in glove in an honest effort to attain the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number'. In short, one may even go so far as to say that democracy has never really been attempted in Thailand. What has been established and seriously cultivated is a reverse form of democracy, a rule of oligarchy, or in Phibun's words, *paramittaya-sithiraj*, a system of absolute power among friends.¹⁶ That system has proved to be a total failure for the aspirations of modern Thailand.

DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY À LA THAILAND

The complete failure of the People's Party version of democracy eventually led to many efforts on the part of the ruling élite to come up with a new political system that would at least be true to the aspirations of its promoters. The main reasons cited and agreed upon by most politicians for the failure of the variable types of

the 1932 democracy are ignorance and the absence of political awareness among the common people. Added to this, is the sociological explanation that puts part of the blame on the socio-cultural traditions and values of Thai society especially those concerning the unwritten yet ever-present 'rule' of the Thai social hierarchy and interrelations based on power and influence.¹⁷ Since the late 1950s, a few policy-makers have come to the conclusion that Western-style democracy could not fulfil the political particulars of a country such as Thailand, whose socio-cultural development was totally different from the West. It fell upon these few to propose alternative forms of government which would not only respect and benefit from the country's past developments but would also bring out the best in both those who governed as well as those who were governed. These alternative forms of government are known collectively as democracy *à la* Thailand. Up until now, there have been three principal versions of Thai-style democracy that took into account Thai socio-cultural and political particulars, to wit:

- i. The *Paw Khun* style of democracy.
- ii. The limited/guided democracy.
- iii. The traditionalist style of democracy.

The *Paw Khun* Style of Democracy/the Thai Buddhist Democracy

When Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat launched a *coup* in October 1957, he not only toppled the elected Phibun/Manangkasila Government but also brought an end to the system of 'sham democracy'. After his second *coup* in the following year, Sarit quickly introduced a new political system and ideology which he claimed was rooted in Thai culture, Thai social and traditional values, and the teachings of Buddhism. The new system was known as Thai Buddhist democracy; later it was given the more popular name, the *paw khun* style of government or despotic paternalism.¹⁸

Sarit deserved the credit for being the first post-1932 leader who saw the futility of the democratic system practised in the country and offered a fundamental restructuring of the existing political system. Though he may very well not be driven purely by the altruistic reasons often cited in his speeches, he was, however, sincere in his attempt to set up a viable political system that would best serve the contemporary requirements of Thailand's socio-political and economic settings.¹⁹ Sarit's version of Thai democracy is in essence a reverse form of democracy preached by the People's Party of which he entertained a rather low and unflattering opinion. Instead of the legislature being given the supreme power, Sarit blatantly claimed unquestioned authority for the executive, which included the power over life and death when required. Sarit's basic assumption was that the Western model of democracy was out of touch with the fundamental socio-political needs of Thailand simply because it was born and developed to suit the political and social climate in the West. Because of this

inherent defect, the various adjustments made to the system were simply political exercises in futility. And the system failed to perform as required. In a metaphor expounded by the spokesman of the 1957 Coup Group, Thai democracy launched by Sarit was likened to an indigenous plant which healthily grows in Thai fertile soil to become a strong and beautiful tree bearing all kinds of fruits to suit the local taste and delight, i.e. 'bananas, mangoes, rambutans, manggis, and durians' and not 'apples, grapes, dates, plums or nuts' as the Western democratic tree implanted in Thai soil appeared to have done.²⁰ However, it seems that even Sarit found the word *prachathipatai* too sacred a word to be dismissed as lightly as he did the system that bore the name. In his pledge to the country, the field marshal clearly had no qualms in stating 'my Government hereby confirms that we will administer the affairs of the state in accordance with the democratic principles and uphold human rights'.²¹

The true causes of Sarit's sweeping aside of the trappings of democracy that were so far strenuously nurtured by the People's Party with the support of the armed forces, sometimes including Sarit himself, lie deeper than the question of the metaphorical tree. In his lengthy and increasingly intense struggle for power against Police General Phao Siyanond and the Ratchakru faction, 'sham democracy' was evidently an obstacle. The system provided Sarit's opponents with both political legitimacy and advantages over the field marshal. For Sarit to take control of the political machinery and decisively forestall any attempt by his rivals to shut him out completely, the Government and the 1952 Constitution had to go. The 1957 *coup* was thus conducted first and foremost to bring an end to the Phibun-Phao-Phin regime and to ensure the political survival of Sarit and his Sisao-Thevet clique.²² That was the cold, hard fact of the Thai politics of his time. Nevertheless, Sarit went beyond the recycled pattern of an abrogation and the rewriting of the Constitution, and took steps to ensure that an incoming Parliament was pliable to his wishes. After an interlude of one year of the old political formula, Sarit bounced back from his medical leave and plunged himself into the restructuring of Thailand's political and socio-economic fundamentals. He declared that the political system introduced by the People's Party was bankrupt because it did not, could not, serve the interests of the nation. Thai people were entitled to a better political system which should provide dynamism to usher in a new era of prosperity and harmony. What Field Marshal Sarit tried to achieve once power was securely in his hands was not simply to hang on to power and exploit it to his and his supporters' advantages – he certainly had that in mind and in fact had no scruples about reaping enormous personal wealth in unseemly ways – but a more ambitious socio-political scheme comparably in the league of Premier Phibun's wartime restructure programme for the 'new Siam'. The new political system finally introduced in late 1958 was rooted in Sarit's political experience, his own political inclination and preference, as well as in social and traditional Thai values and political lessons of its past. It was meant to be the field marshal's everlasting legacy to the nation and to ensure him a proper place in the history of modern Thailand. Historically, the field marshal's Thai

Buddhist democracy lasted roughly from 1958 to 1973. It was most popular and effective during the field marshal's tenure (1958–1963) but gradually lost both its shine and its legitimacy as people became more and more disillusioned with his unscrupulous and inefficient successors. In the end, the Thai Buddhist democracy became a most hated system which was literally torn asunder by a popular uprising led by students in the fateful days of October 1973.

Field Marshal Sarit's version of Thai Buddhist democracy, the *Paw Khun* system, also received its inspiration from the thinking of Luang Wichitwathakan, who acted as Field Marshal Sarit's political and intellectual adviser and confidante.²³ According to Wichitwathakan, there was a necessity to change the country's political system to suit the requirements of the Thai society at that time. As far as Wichitwathakan was concerned, from a survey of all the systems ever practised since the beginning of Thai kingdoms the most suitable form of government which would answer the socio-political needs of the country was a system of democracy from above, i.e. from the top of the societal hierarchy to the masses whereby an enlightened and most capable leader would 'willingly sacrifice himself for [in the service of] the common good'.²⁴ It was Wichitwathakan who named the new system 'Buddhist democracy' since one of its main ingredients was the Buddhist teachings of unity and affection. This concept, explained Wichitwathakan, in practice requires a setting up of a united front within the ruling élite. Opposition parties to the Government are irrelevant. The Thai democracy based on unity and affection cannot by definition be divided against itself; once it breaks up into government and opposition it would cease to function. Moreover, following Wichitwathakan's line of argument, according to the teachings of the Lord Buddha, a true opposition already exists within oneself – i.e., in this case, the government. Individual components within the Government would act and counteract or check and counter-check each other to bring out the very best for the nation. Following this line of argument further, as the executive branch of the Government represents the collective will of the people; sovereign power could thus pass from the people to the executive through consensus and not through election.

Both Sarit, the founder, and Wichitwathakan, the ideologue of the *Paw Khun* system, made much of the patriarchal administration of the Sukhothai period (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries) as the source and the foundation of their political restructuring model. The Sukhothai style of administration was singled out because it successfully brought order, social justice, harmony and prosperity to the old kingdom. In Sukhothai, especially during the time of the great King Ramkhamhaeng, everybody knew their place, their rights and their responsibility under the rule and guidance of a capable and just ruler who acted as a father to his people in accordance with Thai socio-cultural tradition. People loved, trusted and obeyed their ruler in the same manner that they loved, respected and obeyed their fathers. Sarit himself was never tired of pointing out the true nature of this ancient Thai administrative system.

I am a confirmed upholder of the principle of the ancient Thai administrative system of paternalistic rule. I love to refer to the fact that a nation/*chat* is like one big family. The ruler is none other than the head of that big family who must regard all the people as his own children and grandchildren. He must be kind, compassionate and very mindful of their well-being in a similar manner he would to the lots of his very own sons and grandsons. I myself have made efforts to reach that level [of responsibility]. I try to see to the hardships of the people myself. I always try to be close to the people and take care of them as if they were my own family...²⁵

From the Sukhothai model came the rule of the *Paw Khun* or the greatest father of all fathers, reflecting the very nature of paternalistic authority embedded in Thai culture from personal to the political levels.²⁶ Sarit emphasized the fact that the supreme power of the father/*paw* over his children/*luk* was natural, beneficial and worked well within the context of the socio-cultural upbringing of the Thai, both during the Sukhothai period as well as during his own time. More important it was democratic, since the authority exercised by the father figure was accepted willingly without the use of force. Sarit somehow assumed that the *Paw Khun* or the number one leader would always be equipped with, apart from the unconditional love of and devotion to his flock, all necessary virtues required of a capable and responsible leader who would put the collective interests of his people before his very own. History has amply proved the contrary to this expected 'norm'. In the case of Sarit and his military successors who took up the mantle of the *Paw Khun*, history has sadly been proved right one time too many.

The two basic pillars of the *Paw Khun* system – the Buddhist teachings and the ancient Thai administrative system of paternal despotic rule – firmly support the argument that Thai democracy needs no popular universal election as a source of its political legitimacy for the ruling élite, nor do they accord significance to the system of political check and balance between the legislative and the executive branches of the Government. Because the executive was by right – either by natural right of a father or by consensus as representative of the common will of the people – it follows that the supreme leader is more powerful than the legislature which only acts as a part of the indivisible system. In short, the *Paw Khun* system so conceptualized and put into practice by Sarit was simply a dictatorship of a benevolent despot. The system expected, in fact demanded, that the people accepted their leader without question as the latter knew what was best for them, individually and collectively, even better than the people themselves. It also demanded as a right support, loyalty and obedience from the people. To legitimize their political authority over the people, Sarit and his supporters presented the new political ideology as a natural outcome of Thai tradition, Thai socio-political culture and even Thai political ethos – all of which aimed to puff up Thai pride and patriotism at the expense of personal rights and freedom.²⁷

In an attempt to analyse the *Paw Khun* ideology, it has been argued that Field Marshal Sarit was very much a creature of his time whose socio-political horizon was permanently fixed by the lack of international exposure during his formative years. As a result, Sarit and most of his colleagues and supporters attached little value to the democratic concept of liberty and individual rights which appeared to them as a Western political hotchpotch of much ado about nothing.²⁸ This dismissive attitude towards democracy was also deepened by their military training and experiences that stressed power, authority, obedience and fraternal relationship to be of the utmost significance. It was natural that these home-grown, home-trained officers would be more at home with, and thus value more the traditional Thai socio-political structure whereby the patronage system of patron and client, social hierarchy based on seniority, and the rule by the élite appeared the basic strengths of the nation. They therefore had no qualms whatsoever about dismissing the Western-based democracy, which also happened to be an obstruction to their political ambition, as irrelevant to the Thai understanding of power and the socio-political relationship. Of equal importance was the fact that the new system of despotic paternalism of the *Paw Khun* kind appeared tailored to their own political agenda as it gave preference to the political claim of the armed forces and also sanctioned the latter's legitimacy to rule. The Interim Constitution of 1959, which embodies the *Paw Khun* ideology, reflects the desire of Sarit to bestow political power on the executive and military on the grounds of national security and political stability which were, in turn, fundamental to the survival of Thailand as a sovereign and independent nation.

It is most evident that of all the political innovations introduced by the *Paw Khun* system, its understanding and its policy towards the monarchy was by far the most successful and long lasting.²⁹ Having rid themselves of the political ideology of the People's Party which had, thus far, been the prime source of political legitimacy for the post-1932 ruling élite, Sarit and his supporters who came to power by pure superior physical force, were in dire need of providing themselves with something that would render their right to rule more palatable. The swift manoeuvre by the *coup* leaders, who in the early hours of the *coup* claimed their legitimate right to topple an elected government, a popular call of the people, to present themselves as acting under the approval of the monarch, indicated their intention to ally themselves closely to the monarchy. In fact the need to stage the *coup* was also explained as a move to protect sacred Thai institutions namely *chat*/nation, *satsana*/religion and *pra mahakasat*/monarchy from communist subversive acts which were gaining momentum even among members of Parliament.³⁰ The King-military partnership was apparently sealed when on 27 October 1958, the Revolutionary Party (the official name of the Sarit Coup Group) issued the famous Announcement no. 17 making *lèse-majesté* a media offence. Sarit followed this with a full dress parade of Guards for the King's birthday on 5 December at which, in spite of his poor health and apparently against doctor's orders, the field marshal attended and led the swearing of the oath of allegiance to the young monarch. The grand parade was but the first of several rehabilitation processes to

return the monarchy to the central stage of national affairs from where it had long been almost a *persona non grata*. The greatest political partnership in modern Thai history was thus launched.

Sarit's choice of the monarchy as the source of political legitimacy for the *Paw Khun* regime was very much in line with the regime's basic political belief. Unlike the leaders of the People's Party, Sarit and his lieutenants (most of whom were not directly involved in the overthrow of the absolute monarchical system) entertained no negative attitude towards the monarchy and therefore never regarded the institution as their political rival or threat. On the contrary, their conservative and disciplinary upbringing made them more appreciative of this traditionally anointed institution. To them, the monarchy represented the greatness of the nation, its sacred and glorious past, its solidarity, culture, tradition and unity. As such, the monarchy was vital to the stability and well-being of Thai society, a bulwark against communism and other dangers which threatened to disintegrate the nation. Since they had rejected Western democracy as a source of political legitimacy, Sarit and the Coup Group chose to look upon the monarchy as the depository of that sovereign power which by His Majesty's approval of the 1957 and 1958 *coups*, had been bestowed upon the military under Field Marshal Sarit's leadership.

The partnership also fell in nicely with the *Paw Khun* ideology. As far as Sarit was concerned, the role of *Paw Khun* was designed for a political leader who was endowed with an ability and dedication to serve the people. In spite of his moral weaknesses, Sarit truly believed that he was such a leader and assumed without hesitation the role of a *Paw Khun*. The King was, in Sarit's own words, 'the palladium of the nation'.³¹ However, this did not mean that the King had no part in the affairs of the country; on the contrary, the *Paw Khun* system saw the monarchy as a significant contributor. The monarch was given a somewhat proactive role in strengthening and supporting the power and position of the executive. Thak points out that within the context of the *Paw Khun* system, there were two main functions earmarked for the monarchy: the function of political legitimizer of government and various policies undertaken by the regime; and the function of contributor to the paternalistic programmes of the regime such as those involving public donation for charity work.³² The new role and functions were far different from the time of Phibun's second administration, 1948–1957, during which young King Bhumibol was only a titular Head of State, very much confined to the capital and its environs, and performing only the ceremonious functions of state. He had little say in the running of the country and his expressed wishes on these matters often encountered negative responses from his more experienced Prime Minister. Most important was the fact that in the 1932 democratic structure, the monarch was a mere decorative part of the system with little real power if any; the legitimacy of an administration came not from the monarchy but from the written Constitution and the people through elections, either direct or indirect, or even through appointment. There was no meaningful room for the monarch to maintain or enhance his traditional prestige within the

confines of the 1932 political structure. It was not therefore surprising that King Bhumibol, who certainly had no personal nor dynastic grudges against these new military leaders, willingly played the part prescribed for him by Sarit and the new political ideology. In no time, Sarit managed to earn his monarch's trust and clearly became the favoured Prime Minister of the King. There was between the field marshal and his royal master a mutually genuine bond of affection, respect, understanding and willingness to give and take not witnessed since 1932, and never to be repeated again perhaps until the emergence of General Prem in the 1980s. It seems Sarit also earned his monarch's gratitude and loyalty which the young King amply demonstrated during the field marshal's posthumous scandal concerning his abuses of power, corruption and personal weaknesses for the fair sex.³³

Democracy *à la* Thailand of the *Paw Khun* type for all its virtuous intents and purposes was in practice the rule of military dictatorship. It was popular and very much accepted by Thai society during the life of Field Marshal Sarit. Even to this day, an average Thai would look back with nostalgic longing for the good-old days of the Sarit regime, whenever he is faced with an indecisive or law-abiding leader who refuses to take legal shortcuts or adopt force as a means to find quick solutions to the problems at hand. However, the field marshal's political and socio-economic achievements suffered a serious setback and the credibility of the *Paw Khun* rule as a viable political system was shaken to the core after it was revealed that Sarit had grossly abused his absolute position and power for the enrichment of himself and his family. His successors, Field Marshals Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphat Charusathien, proved no different in terms of corruption and nepotism. They were, to make matters worse, of a definite lower calibre of leadership, and eventually were forced out of office by the first nationwide student protest. By October 1973, the *Paw Khun* system came to a long-awaited end.

The Limited/Guided Democracy or *Prachathipatai Kbreung Bai*

Of all forms of democracy *à la* Thailand, the limited or guided democracy appears the least favoured by politically aware Thais. The limited democracy was put in place after the failures of the supposedly full-fledged democratic system of October 1973–October 1976, and the Thanin ultra-rightist 'democracy' of 1976–1977. The generally unfavourable sentiment is captured by the pejorative Thai label, *prachathipatai kbreung bai*/half-a-page democracy, bestowed upon the system. The name 'guided democracy' could also be misleading to the reader as it reminds one of the more famous 'guided democracy' of Indonesia. However, unlike the Indonesian version, Thailand's guided democracy claims no legalized *dwi fungsi*, i.e. twinning of political and military roles and privileges for its military institution. The 1978 Constitution, mother of Thailand's guided democracy, possesses no articles for such purposes. Yet on closer scrutiny, the Thai guided

democracy reflects certain practices of its Indonesian counterpart. For example, the political role of the military was so readily accepted by Thai people and the civilian ruling élite that once the political leadership was handed back to the politicians and an elected prime minister, as happened in 1988, the system soon found itself in serious trouble. Neither the Prime Minister nor Parliament was able to manage its powerful armed forces. Less than three years later, the Government fell victim to a military *coup* led by the generals whose grouses against the Government the elected Prime Minister Chatchai had failed to pacify.

Basically, the system is a total sum of the failures of its two immediate predecessors. It was quite clear to the 1976 Coup Group leaders³⁴ that with rapid and enormous socio-political and economic changes throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, which had resulted in an emergence of vocal generations of students and a politically aware urban community, there was no place for a regime with ultra-leftist or ultra-rightist sentiments in the Thai citadel of power. To ensure longevity of the system they had selected as a channel for the military to regain certain political power (lost since the Day of Great Sorrow in October 1973), the 1976 Coup Group, *Khana Patiroop Haeng Chart*, which proposed a political compromise. The compromise came in the form of a political system which would fundamentally accord due respect to the requirements of the Western-based democracy clamoured for by Thai intellectuals and new generations of the politically vocal youths; such requirements included a written Constitution, parliamentary elections and political parties wherein people were given a platform to air their views and protect their own and public interests. The compromise would ensure at the same time the security and stability of the country as required by the traditional élite, through the active participation of the traditional ruling class – namely the bureaucrats, military and technocrats who normally spurned the lowly rough and tumble of the political process of elections, yet regarded their active participation in the national affairs as almost their sacred and inalienable birthright, a kind of *noblesse oblige* of their class.³⁵ The Thai limited/guided democracy meant in practice an acknowledgement of, for lack of a better word, the ‘right’ of these élite to be active in politics, and to enjoy to the full the process of decision-making and implementation without having to be answerable to Parliament. In this scenario, the elected representatives of the people were assigned only a secondary role in the running of the country. Added to this was also a realization of the people that as Thai guided democracy progressed, this privileged élite, which, after 1985, would substantially include new breeds of entrepreneurial and corporate personalities, influential persons/*chao paw* whose self-made immense wealth became topics of speculation and concern. In fact the Thai ruling élite underwent a dramatic transformation.³⁶ The real reins of government steadily changed hands from those of the traditional élite whose claim to rule was founded on their knowledge, expertise and often questionable high moral ground, to those of the new élite who literally bought their way into Parliament, the highest political institution, through often ill-

begotten wealth either of their own or of their patrons. The traditional élite, in spite of numerous shortcomings, were men who, when the chips were down, could claimed to have the interests of the nation at heart. However, this could hardly be said of the new breeds of the Thai ruling élite whose apparent purpose was to make use of their power and position for their own benefits often at the expense of the nation.³⁷ By the closing years of the 1980s, it was evident that wealth had overtaken physical force as the power underpinning the limited democracy system. Since then, political scientists often refer to Thailand's half-a-page democracy as a plutocracy, or the rule of the rich, by the rich, for the rich. Meanwhile, the word 'limited' or 'guided' which would normally apply to both the elected politicians and the Thai masses, have come more and more to apply only to the Thai electorate as the new elected élite and their associates effectively assumed the reins of power.

Basically, the guided democracy is an updated version of the 1952 system, with the military now forced to share its absolute political power of the *Paw Khun* regime with the elected members of Parliament. According to the 1978 Constitution (promulgated on 22 December), there was a bicameral Parliament, the House of Representatives and the Senate. Members of the Senate, whose total number was not to exceed three-quarters of the total number of elected members of the House, were appointed. The Prime Minister need not be an elected member of Parliament but he must have a command of the majority in the Lower House. Ministers, however, could not simultaneously hold a portfolio and remain active civil servants. The Constitution, nevertheless, allowed serving government officials and military officers to be appointed as senators. These clauses were obviously inserted for the benefits of those influential ruling élite, military and technocrats who could leap-frog into positions of power without much trouble.³⁸ Many of these were men and women who thrived on proving themselves dexterous in the power-game once they were placed in the position of power. Since Thai political parties, perhaps with the exception of the Democrats, the oldest party founded by former Prime Ministers Khuang Aphaiwong and M.R. Seni Pramoj, were mainly based on personality rather than on solid socio-political principles, it was well-nigh impossible for any single party to command a simple majority in the House. As events were to prove, it was very hard for a party to win even a third of the total numbers of MPs, or/and to keep its own elected members from jumping to other parties if that would improve their chances of becoming a minister. The result was easy to predict: political instability and often short-lived coalition Governments ensued. More often than not, these member parties of the coalition, normally four and above, would engage in endless squabbles for the political spoils of cabinet positions and other patronage that would only end in the break-up of the coalition concerned. Whether it was because politicians could not come to an agreement of selecting one of their own as Prime Minister or because they were apprehensive of an unfavourable response from the powerful military, the result was the same, namely an acceptable influential outsider – for which, read military bigwig – would be invited to become Prime Minister.

As elected members came more and more under the patronage of influential persons/*chao paw*, particularly after the constitutional amendment of 1985 which substituted single-member constituencies with multiple-member ones, it was often the local *chao paw* and not the major political parties or the military élite, who called the important political shots. In 1988 this unhappy political turn of events was worsened by Prime Minister Prem's decision to step down. For the first time since the heyday of the liberal democracy of 1973–1976, an elected premier took over government. It should have been a time of great rejoice for democracy supporters. Yet this was not the case. Visionary and decisive though he was in his approach to the country's economic and foreign relations problems, Prime Minister Chatchai proved to be a part of the chronic and discredited aspect of the limited democracy. Under his premiership, corruption, cronyism and nepotism became the order of the day. His own party, the Thai Nation/*Chart Thai*, was one of the infamous perpetrators. Clique and faction interests seemed to take priority over national ones. At the nadir of its popularity, the Government decided to take on the military leadership and hoped to outmanoeuvre the latter in a struggle for supremacy over the armed forces. The military leaders went on an offensive and brought down the Chatchai Government in February 1991. It cited as its main reason for staging a *coup* the failure of the Government to curb corruption and abuses of power committed by its own members and MPs. The curtain fell on the first act of the guided-democracy drama.

The 1991 *coup* stage by the NPKC against the political party-dominated guided democracy did not, none the less, mean an end to the system. It only meant a temporary end to the political parties as the principal drivers of Thai politics. Apparently uppermost in the mind of the NPKC clique was the reinstallation of the military unchallenged power over the guided democracy. A 'truly guided democracy' whereby the military would be able to intervene and dictate the trend of Thai politics as and when it thought required. In other words, the NPKC intended to re-establish the military claim as the ultimate custodian of political power, in a similar manner it had during the time of the *Paw Khun* rule. The glaring difference between the two was the ambitious scheme of the NPKC to have its role inscribed as a feature of 'democracy' into the Permanent Constitution which was then being drafted by the NPKC-appointed constituent assembly.³⁹ The plan to perpetuate the military's political clout would probably have worked out, had it not been for a bizarre turn of events which deprived the NPKC-sponsored premier-designate from being appointed by the King.⁴⁰ Ironically, the failure of the NPKC proved beneficial for both the armed forces and the country. In response to negative public sentiments against the armed forces acting as political instruments against the wishes of the people, on the one hand, and genuine concerns and desire within the Forces themselves for professional reform and redirection of military priority, on the other, the military decided to withdraw and disengage itself from active politics. Since the Bloody May event of 1992, Thai military leadership has been more concerned with upgrading professionalism and inculcating social awareness within the armed

forces. However, it is still too early to say whether the generals have entirely relinquished their influential political clout. For instance, the military still effectively wields political respect whenever it chooses to exact it. The recent events which saw the generals successfully block attempts to have a clause written in the 1997 Constitution making a *coup d'état* a constitutional offence, and its quiet intervention to prevent the then Premier, General Chavalit Yongchaiyuth, from declaring a curfew and reintroducing strict media censorship, definitely illustrate not only a profound change in military thinking vis-à-vis politics, but also its political big stick.⁴¹ Under the two commanders-in-chief of the Army, General Wimon Wongwanich and his successor, General Chettha Thanajaro, the military had chosen to play a supporting role for the attainment of democratic rule while conducting reforms to make the Army more professional and efficient.

In spite of military reform and the great sacrifice made by the people in May 1992, there appeared little substantial change in the system of guided democracy. The 1991 Constitution with all its amendments confirmed the return of professional politicians, minus the serving military officers and the bureaucrats, to the helm of national politics. Administrative transparency and honesty remained rare commodities for elected political leadership. The Democrat-led coalition Government, which prided itself on its clean and transparent record, foundered because of a land scandal involving a charge of misuse of power and nepotism involving a minister from its own party. In fact the years 1992–1997 can be seen as a good illustration of Thailand's shallow understanding of Western democracy, i.e. form rather than substance. By September 1992, every feature of a democratic process which would guarantee the country a democratic form of government, were in place: a written Constitution, Parliament, political parties, elections with universal suffrage, and a Government led by an elected Premier and commanding a majority in Parliament. Yet no right-minded Thai would deny that it was during this very period that the country possessed a most degrading political system whereby the rights and interests of the people were bought and sold by those who claimed to champion their cause. All agreed that Thailand was in reality ruled not by a truly democratic Government but by an oligarchy of the rich and the greedy whose apparent sole purpose was an insatiable desire for an aggrandisement of wealth and power for themselves. The principle or ideology of democracy which never really gained genuine support from the Thai ruling élite since 1932, became the principal casualty of the politicians' version of 'guided democracy'.⁴² What made this political rule most revolting was the fact that it claimed to rule with popular mandate directly from the people. These politicians paraded themselves as the people's choices. The fact that a great number of the Thai masses, particularly in the countryside, exercised no free choice – either because of their economic or/and social limitations or simply fear for their lives – made this amoral claim more abhorrent and unacceptable than the pure, unpretentious 'might is right' approach of the military. The latter was at least honest in its claim.

Democracy *à la* Thailand of the guided-democracy school officially came to its inglorious end with the passage of the most recent Constitution, the October 1997

Constitution. However, as the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. And the 1997 Constitution pudding has yet to be tasted. Until then, even if this new charter appears to have plugged all the loopholes found in the practice of the Thai version of democracy, only a general election can tell whether the system has actually returned the power to the people by enabling them to exercise their right to vote of their own free will. When that happens, it is hoped that the members of Parliament so voted in will live up to the principles of Western democracy. If the present Constitution can achieve all these, perhaps democracy may yet have a chance to bloom in the kingdom of Thailand.

The Traditionalist Style of Democracy

It is now accepted among scholars that the impact of a sudden political change wrought by the 1932 revolution on the monarchy and the country was profound.⁴³ To mention but one example, the power and position of the reigning monarch had become tightly defined and contained by the new ruling élite to such a degree that the result was most devastating to the royal institution that was once the life and soul of all national activities. Even diehard royalists despondently admitted as much. Ex-Premier Khuang Aphaiwong, for instance, in the early 1950s likened the King to the Buddha Image which ‘can exercise little effective influence’ in the affairs of the nation, though he might be loved and still venerated by his subjects.⁴⁴ Since that traumatic psychological and political transformation, ‘democracy’ has become a part of Thailand’s political life. Since then also, it has become a preoccupation of the court and its supporters to delve deep into Thai history and tradition in order to justify and advance their updated theorization on the monarchy and its position vis-à-vis the democratic political ideology. Some scholars have traced the correlation between the monarchy and the intrinsic values of democracy back to the time of Great King Chulalongkorn himself.⁴⁵ Others have successfully disseminated the traditional Thai concept of kingship and proffered proof that within the Thai traditional political set-up, Thai monarchs had not strayed from the ‘democratic’ principle, not during the traditional, nor during the modern 1932 democracy era and its aftermath. In fact, democracy and the traditional Thai kingship were very much two sides of the same coin.⁴⁶

Prince Dhani, in his much referred to work on Thai kingship, may be taken as the front-runner proponent of the discourse on the traditionalist style of democracy, which is loosely defined as one and the same as the Thai democratic system with the King as the Head of State.⁴⁷ In the main, the arguments put forth rely heavily on the traditionalist interpretation of Thai political history. It goes something like this. Fundamentally, Thai kingship is based on the Buddhist socio-political concept which requires a ruler to be always mindful of the *dharmā*, i.e. the teachings of the Buddha concerning the worldly responsibility of a leader in a society, as the principal guidance of his rule. Theoretically, Thai kingship

since the Sukhothai time was grounded in the concept of *dharmaraja* or an ideal King of righteousness who rules by the *dharm*a/merit or virtue in accordance with the prescribed precepts for Theravada Buddhist kingship. As such, he is the chief patron and protector of the Buddhist faith. He is also a ruler who provides, through his own great store of merit, the harmony, prosperity and well-being of his kingdom and religion.⁴⁸ Since the Sukhothai period, Thai monarchs have endeavoured to live up to the claim not only of a *dharmaraja* but also of the highest of the Buddhist ideal rulers, a *cakravartin*/the Universal Ruler. The Buddhist ideal Universal Monarch possesses two diagonal characteristics which signify his great achievements: the ruthlessness of a military conqueror and the humane, just and compassionate aspects of a virtuous ruler. Following the teachings of the religion, the status of a *dharmaraja* and a *cakravartin* is not something attainable in this life but an achievement possessed by a ruler as a consequence of his merit accumulated during his previous existences. This means the legitimacy of a Thai ruler is derived from his superior store of merit and he confirms it by behaving like a *dharmaraja* or a *cakravartin*. Thus, theoretically, a Thai King cannot but perform his duties in accordance with the prescribed precepts of Buddhist kingship; otherwise he risks losing his throne and being branded as unworthy of his exalted position. The principle of *dharmaraja/cakravartin* argues for the traditionalist thesis that Thai kingship is theoretically a limited monarchy as the ruler would always be required to live by the great 'rules' which effectively prevent him from being an absolutist. Socio-culturally, the thesis concludes, Thai kingship has been practising the principle of 'constitutional monarchy' since ancient times, only of course under a different political label. It follows that the 1932 revolution has succeeded merely in highlighting this aspect of Thai kingship in a written Constitution. It did not by any means introduce the limited nature of monarchy to Thai kingship.

In political terms, the theoretical harking-back to the ancient past aims to identify and establish the 'democratic' yet paternalistic credentials of the Thai kingship from Sukhothai to the present-day Rattanakosin period. Scores of traditionalist proponents – outstanding among them include of course Prince Dhani, Phraya Siwisanwaja, MR Kukrit Pramoj, Thanin Kraivixian, and MR Tongnoi Tongyai – successfully argue that Thai kingship which was born out of Buddhist political philosophy and indigeneous Thai socio-cultural values, has always been a limited monarchy, i.e. the rule of a *dharmaraja*, as opposed to an absolutist portrait of the monarchy which was widely and effectively disseminated during the People's Party political ascendancy. The gist of the traditionalist theory is as follows: as a ruler, a Thai King ruled with the supreme power/*ayasit* of the one whose great store of merit claimed for him the unquestionable right to rule over those within his kingdom. Yet his supreme power was always tempered by the Buddhist political ideology of the *dharmaraja/cakravartin*, who constantly abided by the ten kingly virtues/*dasabidha-rajadharma*. Thus, fundamentally, the power and authority of a Thai king has never been absolute; it is limited by the prescribed principles of Buddhist kingship.

As a provider for and protector of his people, a Thai King is traditionally regarded as the father of his subjects. This was pointed out by Prince Damrong-rajanubhab, who took great pains to differentiate the relationship between the Thai King and his people from that of his Khmer counterpart and the latter's subjects: a father–children as opposed to a Khmer master–slave relationship.⁴⁹ As the father of his people/*Paw Khun*, the King would base his authority on the culturally paternalistic nature of their relationship.⁵⁰ Thai Kings ruled over their subjects with the affection, care, discipline and responsibility of that of a father who knows better and who only wishes to protect his children from harmful ways. As their father, the King therefore claimed to know what was best for the child-subjects themselves. It was the duty of the children to love and obey their father-King with all the natural trust and gratitude a child has for his natural father. Kingship during Sukhothai period has repeatedly been upheld as a truly authentic evidence of the benevolent patriarchal rule of Thai society.

It is also important to bear in mind that the traditionalist idealogues promote as much the significance of another traditional concept of Thai kingship, namely its origins. According to the explanation provided by the *Traibhumikhattha* on the origins of kingship, the first King was an *anekchonnikon samoson-sommuttithep* or an elected King by the people's consensus. The principle of the Thai King being elected co-exists with the principle that he is King by the virtue of his great store of merit from previous existences. In fact they are closely related; being one (the great merit accumulator) would lead to the other (elected ruler-leader). To the present, the Thai King is regarded as '*anekchonnikon samoson-sommutti*'. As King by the choice of the people, a Thai monarch is democratically elected. His rule is therefore democratic since he represents the general will of the people.

From the traditionalist perspective, the nature of Thai kingship embodies all ingredients required in the context of modern-day Thai democracy. Apart from the ancient attributes abovementioned, the fact that Thai Kings of old also upheld *Phra Thammasat*/ the Universal Law of Theravada Buddhism as the fundamental legal instrument in the administration of the state, is a further remainder of the limited-monarchy thesis. *Phra Thammasat* ensured that a Thai King would rule within the context of his ten kingly virtues and would dispense justice with reference to the Universal Law. These principles – traditional rule of patriarch-king, Buddhist concept of '*anekchonnikon samoson-sommuttithep*', *dbarmaraja/cakravartin*, and *Phra Thammasat* as equivalent to the modern-day Constitution – have often been used most particularly during the time when the monarchy came under pressure for change. On the eve of the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy, King Prajadhipok himself made reference to the nature of Thai kingship when His Majesty talked to a group of Western journalists during a press conference in the United States.

In Siam, the King doesn't recognize in himself any divine right. From olden times the King of Siam has been the father of his people ... [i.e.] Po' Muang [*Paw Muang*] ... the King is the father of his people, and that he treats them

as children rather than subjects... The obedience that the King receives is the obedience of love, not of fear ... And I assure you that it works like that in Siam, even in the modern day.⁵¹

Prajadhipok, at the same function, also revealed that, as far as he was concerned, 'the best form of government... is the one which suits the people who live under it'. Probably the King was implying that the Thais were happy with the absolutist rule of the Chakri dynasty since 'obedience of love' was rendered to the King by his subjects 'even in the modern day'.⁵² If Prajadhipok was cautious not to reveal publicly his reservations concerning the rule of democracy and took refuge in the traditional and benevolent rule of Thai kingship, King Vajiravudh, Prajadhipok's brother and immediate predecessor, was more forthcoming. In his efforts to defend the Chakri absolutist rule, which he had inherited from his illustrious father, King Chulalongkorn, Vajiravudh declared himself in favour of absolute monarchy: 'to be ruled under [sic] absolute monarchy is the *nititham* [*nitidbarm*] of our country from the past'. Under pressure from the young, progressive and liberal groups both inside the armed forces and among the public at large, Vajiravudh went on the offensive. Democracy, declared King Vajiravudh, had harmful effects particularly if the people were not well-educated enough to rule themselves; moreover it was quite clear that neither a limited monarchy nor a republic could solve the problem of corruption. Vajiravudh also branded those who believed in socialism as people who suffered from a jealousy syndrome. He did not believe that a democratic government would work well for the country. In sum, he wanted his subjects to be united in defending and upholding the absolute monarchy which had successfully provided stability and acted as defender of the country's past and valuable heritage. To ward off undesirable political influences and to strengthen absolute monarchy as a form of government, Vajiravudh introduced a campaign of nationalism from above. Thai people were extolled to rise in defence of the most precious institutions, the bulwarks of Siam's survival as a nation: *chart, satsana, lae Phra Mahakasat*/Country, Religion and King.⁵³ In short, Vajiravudh had no use for democracy; neither did he mince his words in advocating absolute monarchy as the most suitable form of government for Siam.⁵⁴

Since the 1932 revolution and the temporary eclipse of the monarchy from the central stage of Thai socio-political life, there have existed consistent and successful efforts mostly by conservatives—royalists, and to a smaller degree academics, to revive the 'democratic' and limited credentials of Thai kingship in the context of the post-1932 era. The main objective, it seemed, was to prove that Thai kingship was compatible, nay, pro-democracy even before democracy became an operative word for legitimacy in Thai politics. Kukrit Pramoj, for example, has no difficulty in pointing out that the democratic system is of no threat to the people's love for and loyalty to the King. Conversely, he argues, Thai monarchy not only represents no danger to a democratic rule, but also 'promotes democracy and acts as a bulwark for the well-being of the democratic system in Thailand'.⁵⁵

Based on the works of Prince Dhani, as mentioned above, Thai monarchy was born out of the political ideology of Theravada Buddhist. As such, Thai kingship was, from its very inception, popularly elected, limited in its power dispensation by the concept of the ten kingly virtues and the Universal Law or *Phra Thammasat*, and it was by tradition benevolent as it was founded on an ancient Thai socio-cultural tenet of the father–children relationship. There was, during no period in Thai history, a rule of an absolute monarch, though there was most of the time a benevolent rule of a supreme monarch (*rajathiraj*).⁵⁶ The seizure of power by the People's Party and the promulgation of a written Constitution affected very little, if at all, the basic power and position of the monarch, or so the argument goes. Why? Because traditional Thai society already possessed such supreme law, namely the Universal Law, an equivalent to the modern version of Constitution. Other traditionalists stress that whatever changes did occur after 1932, were therefore only in appearance rather than in the basic socio-political structure of Thai society. The King remains as in the olden days the representative of all his subjects, the nation personified. He is the sovereign, and all powers reside in him. The difference is that the monarch now chooses not to exercise those powers directly but delegates them to other institutions which act on his behalf. In the final analysis, all powers would return to the King when these institutions failed to perform. In fact, as the prestige and influence of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the present reigning monarch, increases in proportion to the decrease of that of other political institutions, the traditionalist portfolio of the royal democratic credentials becomes bigger and more impressive. Tongnoi Tongyai, the King's private secretary for foreign affairs, claimed in 1990 that Thai monarchy was on par with 'the constitution in the United States or Marxism in communist countries'. This, Tongnoi explains, was because of the disillusionment of the people towards the Constitutions, the military and the politicians. To this royal adviser, the written Constitution is but a 'lifeless' document of practically no value, particularly when compared with the enlivened dynamism of the monarchy in the person of the reigning King.⁵⁷

History, tradition and culture aside, the rise of the post-1932 monarchy as a political institution of a most prominent standing began with Sarit's *Paw Khun* regime. As argued earlier, Sarit and his 1957 Coup Group entertained no grudges or socio-political prejudices against the institution. On the contrary, they were quite amenable to the traditional prestige and influence of the monarchy, which, to Sarit in particular, could be put to good use for the benefit of the country generally, and to bolster up the image, the political strength and the legitimacy of their regime especially. With the setting up of the *Paw Khun* dictatorship under Sarit, the parliamentary democracy, truncated though it might have been, was completely abandoned by Sarit. Together with it was of course Sarit's rejection of the sentiment that the people were the ultimate source of power and legitimacy of Thailand's political system. The regime made no pretence of emulating a Western model of democracy, guided or otherwise. Yet Sarit and his supporters realized that any regime that was based simply on superiority of physical force

alone could not long survive. In a political partnership with the monarchy, Sarit saw an answer to the socio-political weaknesses of his regime and the political system he wished to establish as a viable alternative to the People's Party version of democracy.

The partnership between an unsophisticated, hard-drinking, hard-playing military dictator and a young, well-educated and culturally polished sovereign seemed unlikely. Yet there could be no denial that strong chemistry existing between these two pole-apart characters, once the partnership was sealed by the quick turn of events during the September 1957 *coup d'état* against the Phibun Government, was real and proved lasting. The young King, after an early pang of doubt and uneasiness concerning Sarit's intention, swiftly learned to appreciate and admire his knight in shining armour.⁵⁸ The royal trust and appreciation were returned in full. Sarit never failed to extol his unconditional loyalty and devotion to the throne and the person of the King who occupied it.⁵⁹ In sum, it was Sarit who launched the monarchy on the political path that eventually saw King Bhumibol reaching the pinnacle of the traditionalist concept of constitutional monarchy.

Within the parameters of the *Paru Khun* regime, the monarchy was allotted a vital socio-political role. It was recognized as the sole legitimizer of a political regime post 1957-*coup*; it was upheld as a representation of all that was the best of the Thai nation: its culture, tradition, unity, respectability, honour, and more besides. As symbol and unifying force of the nation, the King and his consort, the beautiful and charming Queen Sirikit, were sent on country trips in the north and south in an apparent effort to drum up loyalty, unity, national pride, patriotism and support among the rural folks for the country, the monarchy and the Government. These trips were also aimed at strengthening the people's resolve against the subversive influence of communism.⁶⁰ It was also during this period that the significance of Thai democracy with the King as the Head of State had tirelessly been emphasized. The monarchy was in fact firmly established as the unchangeable institution amidst the ever-changing formula of the Thai political system. Within this context, the 1959 Interim Constitution which remained in force until 1972, can be seen as an embodiment of both the ideology of Sarit's *Paru Khun* regime and of the traditionalist fundamental role of the monarchy.

Basically, the Interim Charter accorded the throne almost the same royal prerogatives as the Provisional Constitution of 1947. The prestige and dignity of the throne was clearly spelled out in the Charter while His Majesty's complete authority over officials of the Royal Household and chief aide-de-camp was assured. In addition, the field marshal identified two active roles for his royal master by which His Majesty would exercise the royal prestige in support of his regime. According to Thak, the two specifically mapped-out functions were the function of legitimizer of the regime in power and of the latter's policies; and the function of contributor to the paternalistic programmes of the regime especially those dealing with charity and private contribution through the royal participation and patronage.⁶¹ In the context of the first function, the monarchy in

the person of King Bhumibol was able to transform itself into an independent and influential political institution at the end of Sarit's regime to such a degree that any regime that came to power through 'undemocratic means' was required to obtain the royal approval as a hallmark of its legitimacy. The last successful overthrow of a Government by force without prior royal approval occurred in 1977. It was however obvious that the regime had to resort swiftly to the democratic concessions as a means to shore up its sullied image and to gain popular support.⁶² Since then no *coup* was successful or long-lived without His Majesty's overt approval and support. By the early 1990s, the monarchy firmly installed itself at the centre of Thai politics. It has repeatedly exercised its political power as legitimizer to help shape the political system of the country in accordance with its own political philosophy.⁶³

If the role of political legitimizer has put the monarchy back as the throne behind the power, the active participation of the monarchy in the paternalistic programmes led to a solid bonding between the Royal family and the budding but ever-enlarging Thai middle class. As the Thai economy expanded and prospered, the Thai *nouveaux riches* became more conscientious of their (not-yet-arrived) social status, good connection and respectability. The link with any of the royally patronized charity programmes became a coveted channel by which to achieve such desirable social upward mobility. For his part, King Bhumibol, and the Royal family, took his royal responsibility seriously. The upcountry trips offered the King valuable first-hand experiences on the impoverished nature of his people, which the King has admirably put to good use. Various royally initiated and sponsored projects for the economic improvement or introduction of basic amenities, vocational skills and knowledge were launched nationwide. It was a familiar sight to see the royal couple trekking unbeaten tracks to remote, almost unreachable and often forgotten villages in their ongoing attempts to bring assistance and facilities to the countryside. Through government and royal paternalistic programmes, the King succeeded in strengthening and fostering a solid personal tie with his people, middle class in the urban areas and downtrodden simple people in the countryside. They have become, in democratic jargon, his steadfast constituency, his independent socio-political power-base. King Bhumibol and the Chakri monarchy have in fact taken back the political power taken from them by the 1932 revolution.

What is then the traditionalist style of democracy of the present? Is it a rule of an all-powerful monarch whose power is unbridled by either the Constitution or universal suffrage, an updated version of the absolute monarchy of the pre-1932 revolution? Perhaps the most relevant question of all: is the traditionalist style of constitutional monarchy a tailor-made system for His Majesty King Bhumibol or is it an institutional one? If we are to take the traditionalist view as recently expounded by M.R. Tongnoi, the monarchy is the personified, dynamic and everlasting Constitution of the nation. Written Constitutions come and go; the monarchy is always with the people, representing their will, protecting and defending their interests selflessly, and guiding them along the right socio-political

path which will assure them of a better life within the context of their own socio-cultural and historical development.⁶⁴ In fact there appears to be no requirements for a Western-style democracy. Conversely, it seemed that Thailand would be better off without these Western democratic trappings. Tongnoi, echoing the stand of all traditionalists before him, appears to argue that the strength of the monarchy derived from the institutional nature of the now all-powerful monarchy. Recent history, however, presents a different picture.

Though it is true that a general analysis of kingship always puts great emphasis on the institutional rather than the personal aspect of the monarchy, yet an explanation concerning its greatness and weaknesses is, more often than not, dwelling on the personal capability and positive attributes of a particular ruler. The best example is the Chakri absolute monarchy set up by King Chulalongkorn in the 1880s. The system was an unqualified success under the capable guidance of Chulalongkorn, but proved ineffectual and even a threat to the survival of the monarchy itself when it was in the hands of a less able ruler. The inherent weakness of this absolute monarchy was the failure of the system to develop into a strong and impersonal institution that could independently withstand, adjust and reinvent itself in the face of socio-political challenges, regardless of the personality occupying the throne. In fact the Chakri absolute monarchy depended almost entirely on the strength and ability of its occupier for it to be successful and effective. History proves beyond doubt that the system was most lauded during the reign of King Chulalongkorn basically because of the King's ability as a visionary ruler, his strong personality, his great sense of responsibility, his statesmanship, and his untiring dedication to the administrative routine. Chulalongkorn was both a skilled administrator and a visionary and decisive policy maker. He was the powerful dynamo that propelled the country through the dangerous, mine-littered political battlefields of the nineteenth century and guided the country to a safe destination. The great King himself was aware of the weaknesses of the system he had set up, and in fact began a process of institutionalizing it. Chulalongkorn's outstanding attempt in this direction was the introduction of the institution of the Crown Prince in 1886. However, the great King seemed hesitant to move towards a separation of the monarchy as a political institution from the monarch who occupied it. For example, he balked at the idea of a political reform that would open the socio-political door to include qualified 'outsiders' and thus afford the monarchy a political shield protecting it from the negative effects of an incompetent ruler.⁶⁵ When the King passed away in 1910, Crown Prince Vajiravudh was systematically proclaimed the new monarch. Soon it was evident even among the Chakri princes that Vajiravudh, in spite of his long years understudying the kingly role performed by his renowned father, failed to live up to the expectation of a benevolent but competent absolute ruler.⁶⁶ In fact the prestige and dignity of the throne took a great beating under his irresponsible rule. Vajiravudh only succeeded in exposing the weaknesses of the Chakri absolute monarchy. His reign became a nightmare for those who had spent their lives in strengthening and serving the monarchy. Yet during Prajadhipok's short reign,

various proposals for a political reform to set up certain institutional safeguarding features within the absolutist system were turned down for one reason or other. They were proof of the inability and inflexibility of the Chakri absolute monarchy to accommodate the much-needed innovations.⁶⁷ With all the good intentions and readiness to introduce a political reform to save the absolute monarchy, King Prajadhipok found his actions being constrained in all directions by senior conservative Princes, officials and advisers who refused to accept even nominal changes to the socio-political status quo. The King himself failed to come up with a workable reform programme that might not substantially reduce the absolute power of the monarchy yet would yield sufficient ground to allow certain informed groups some participation in the affairs of the nation. Prajadhipok was also too susceptible to advice given by those whose opinions he valued and thus easily gave in to their objections to the proposed reform apparently against his own better judgement. Approximately forty years after its emergence, the Chakri absolutist monarchy was still unable to install the sorely needed institutionalized features into its system. Conversely, the weaknesses of its personal aspect were exposed and exploited by the socio-political challenges of the time. On 24 June 1932, the absolute monarchy was forced to pay the price for its political tardiness and failure.

Within the historical context, it is therefore difficult to accept the traditionalist claim that the power and prestige of their version of the constitutional monarchy derives from the institution of kingship rather than the personality of the King regnant. It should be remembered that when the young King Bhumibol returned to begin his personal reign in 1951, the power and prestige of the monarchy was perhaps at its lowest. It was Premier Phibun and the 1947 Coup Group who tightly held the reins of political power. Until the first Sarit *coup* in 1957, the King could do very little, and exercised practically no influence on national affairs. The Government positively discouraged His Majesty from taking too prominent a part in public life. When the first of a planned series of royal trips around the country, the royal tour of the northeast, proved successful, the series was promptly discontinued. In sum, for twenty-five years since 1932, Thai monarchs were powerless vis-à-vis the military/politicians who moulded and shaped the monarchy to suit their own interpretation of 'constitutional monarchy'. King Bhumibol and his brother inherited the monarchy when its dignity and credibility were overshadowed by those of the executive and Parliament. During those years, Thai constitutional Kings – and King Bhumibol was no different at the onset of his personal reign – did what they were told to do or abdicate. The monarchy as an institution provided no inner force or protection to the ruler against executive and legislative encroachment.

Simply stated, the institution of monarchy only yields such great power and prestige as a result of the personal achievements of King Bhumibol, and not the other way around. And there resides the fundamental weakness of the traditionalist style of democracy. Would the enormous political and social prestige, powers and reverence enjoyed by the monarchy survive beyond the time

of King Bhumibol? Presently, what is apparent is the fact that the traditionalist version of a constitutional monarchy that emphasizes the extra-constitutional and traditional powers of the monarchy, relies very heavily on the personal greatness of the occupier of the throne. Surely, this cannot be reassuring for a monarchy that, not so long ago, lost most of its socio-political powers because it depended too much on the personality of the monarch.

In conclusion, the survey of democracy *à la* Thailand confirms beyond argument that, since 1932, Western-style democracy has never been practised in the country. This by itself is not a 'bad thing' – after all, Western democracy was created and developed to suit the socio-political requirements of a Western society. It begins on premises quite foreign to the understanding and socio-cultural norm of the Thai society then as much as now. It is not simply the question of the Thais not having yet reached an educational level required for the system. Many other countries with a considerably large number of its citizens uneducated, India is an outstanding example, seem to have managed Western-style democracy well enough without having to resort to the use of physical force or other extra-constitutional powers. Evidently, it is the condition of the mind that has made undiluted Western democracy impractical in Thailand. The Thai population, educated as well as uneducated, as amply demonstrated through various efforts discussed above to find alternatives to the Western model of democracy, find it almost impossible to accept fully the principle of sovereignty of the people. The Thai mindset reveals a strong preference for more tangible but extra-constitutional sources of power – the military collective and individuals, manipulated and appointed Houses in Parliament, and the monarchy – all of which claimed, with some justification no doubt, to know what was best for the people than the people themselves. What is not so good about these alternatives, as has already been proved in the case of the military and manipulated Parliaments, is their glaring failure to provide a truly viable political system that could withstand the changes of time and personalities, maintain political stability and longevity, effectively safeguard the public interests and well-being, and keep corruption, nepotism and cronyism at bay.