VERY THAI? THE MYTH OF A "THAI-STYLE" DEMOCRACY

FEDERICO FERRARA*

> Siam and Europe have taken very different historical courses. Therefore, it is totally mistaken to try to introduce Western ideas as they are. We cannot cultivate rice in Siam using European agricultural textbooks about wheat. Western political institutions, such as parliaments or political parties, are not suitable for Siam where the king traditionally leads a backward population. Even if the radicals could introduce European political institutions, they could not achieve their aims because their political party could not obtain a majority of support in the parliament since the majority of Thai people are conservative. Hence the unity of all Thai officials under the monarchical leadership is the best way for the prosperity of Siam.
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> —King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), *The Royal Discourse on Unity*, 1903.†

King Chulalongkorn the Great reiterated thus his opposition to liberal-democratic reforms in the Kingdom of Siam. Over a hundred years later, his words might appear self-serving enough. Chulalongkorn, after all, is the monarch who introduced European-style absolutism to Siam. He is celebrated as an enlightened ruler and a reformer for revolutionizing the Siamese public administration, for virtually abolishing slavery, for championing the study of science, for completely overhauling the country's legal and educational system, as well as for rationalizing the training, the life, and the teachings of the *sangha*, the Buddhist monkhood. Ever an advocate of the "civilization" of Siam and the repudiation of superstitions blamed for its backwardness, on one thing Chulalongkorn was not willing to compromise: the unfetteredness of his own power. The same king who had embraced countless "Western" innovations to fulfill his vision of progress for Siam now denounced liberal-democratic ideas as un-Thai, incompatible with the country's traditions, and hence necessarily dangerous to the unity, stability, and prosperity of the nation.

Chulalongkorn has scores of disciples among lesser contemporary statesmen — petty dictators who routinely dismiss political competition, representative government, and the free exercise of a basic set of civil rights as much too Western, unsuited for their countries' unique histories and distinctive political traditions. From Vladimir Putin to General Musharraf, from Malaysia's Mahatir Mohamad to Burma's Than Shwe, despots the world over have chosen to hide behind the thick smokescreen of cultural distinctiveness to justify their

*Assistant Professor, National University of Singapore, Department of Political Science, 11 Arts Link, AS1 #04-10, Singapore 117570. E-mail: fed@nus.edu.sg.

†Cited in Eiji Murashima, "The Origin of Official State Ideology in Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19(1988): 80-96.

autocratic rule and assert the prudence of proceeding with deliberation — if at all — in the implementation of even the most limited of democratic reforms. Why this line of reasoning is so popular among self-styled paternalistic rulers is apparent. In contemporary political discourse, "culture" is the only word whose international currency rivals democracy's. To be sure, culture commands more respect than the "dictatorship" and "oppression" it is frequently called upon to mask.

Back home, the culture-based argument against democracy can be made to fit almost any story about the content of national identities and almost any narrative about the imperative to protect traditional values from corrupting alien impositions. *Presto!* Kings, mullahs, generals, and tinpots of all stripes have at their disposal a highly portable piece of rhetorical chicanery to spiritualize their rule, identify their personal interests with those of the nation, and elevate themselves to the role of protector — indeed, possibly the very embodiment — of a rich cultural heritage and time-honored political traditions.

Better still, the argument appeals to a variegated Western constituency numbering conservatives and progressives alike. In some, it evokes the long-standing suspicion that non-Western populations are decidedly unfit for democracy, on account of both their backwardness and the obscurantism of their cultures. John Stuart Mill articulated such a position quite eloquently when he argued that "despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians."[1] In this respect, Chulalongkorn was quite right not to regard liberal reforms as of great strategic expediency when he sought to avert the kind of colonial overlordship that had successively befallen each of the country's neighbors. In 1885, eleven members of the Siamese elite studying abroad had advised him to move gradually in the direction of constitutional monarchy — in their opinion, liberal reforms would have defused the threat of French and British colonization by rendering Siam more respected as a civilized nation in the eyes of the Europeans.[2] It is likely, however, that neither Britain nor France would have been impressed with the introduction of democratic reforms in a place like Siam, whose population at the time was widely considered "at best semi-barbarous."[3]

Nowadays, Mill's position is seldom reaffirmed with either the vehemence or the rhetorical flourish of nineteenth century writers, but it still holds considerable sway over Western thought and public opinion. Whether economic modernization is indeed a pre-condition for the success of democracy has been the subject of a lively debate over the past decades — a market economy, economic development, and high levels of education often being cited as prerequisites.[4] And the existence of grave cultural impediments to the diffusion of democratic values to non-Western societies has been argued most famously in Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*.[5] Huntington contends for the rootedness of democratic ideals in the values of tolerance, secularism, and individual autonomy unique to the Western, Judeo-Christian civiliza-

[1]John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Macmillan, 1956[1869]), 14.

[2]Murashima, "The Origin of Official State Ideology in Thailand," 84.

[3]These are the words of F.A. Neale, whose unflattering characterization of the Siamese people is echoed by many of his contemporary Western observers. For a sampling, see Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 40.

[4]See, for instance, Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Prerequisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53(1959): 69-105.

[5]Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

tion. The prospects of democratic consolidation are said to be much bleaker in non-Western societies; the authoritarian, hierarchical, and collectivist nature of their cultures, in fact, renders most other "civilizations" eminently ill-suited for the internalization of democratic values.

Somewhat improbably, arguments along the lines of King Chulalongkorn's have also struck a chord with portions of the Western political left — self-loathing Westerners whom third world dictators have somehow turned into their apologists, useful idiots persuaded not only that basic human rights are, indeed, "alienable" but also that championing the right of non-Western peoples to speak their minds and otherwise control their own destiny amounts to doing violence to their cultural heritage. Never mind that concepts such as "Asian values" or *kwahm bpen thai* are invariably murky, ill-defined, selectively substantiated, and very much amenable to competing interpretations. And never mind that, unsurprisingly, indigenous perspectives on the compatibility of democracy with local cultural norms can hardly be abstracted from the interests of parties embroiled in bitter fights for political power.

The blind acceptance of the authorities' own version of what is compatible with a country's distinctive political traditions plays right into the hands of rulers who — as any *pater familias* worth his salt no doubt would — arrogate the authority to define what national identities are really about and command the persuasive/coercive apparatus to shove their official ideologies down an entire population's throat. Democracy is then demeaned as another Western "imposition" on venerable non-Western cultures, which are thereby implicitly assumed never to have contemplated such abstruse ideas as tolerance, individual rights, and political participation. The end result is paradoxical indeed: the belief in the equal worth and respectability of all cultures is transformed — through the trivialization of the complexity of those very cultural systems — into an apology for dictators who often have little sympathy for cultural minorities, little time for opinions contrary to their own, and little patience for the plight of their own people.

"Democracy," Thai-Style

In Thailand, of course, the word "democracy" has been a centerpiece of the state's official ideology since the absolute monarchy was toppled in a bloodless coup staged in 1932.[6] Still, the long series of dictators who have ruled the country for much of its post-absolutist history have most often shrugged off supposedly "Western" interpretations — invoking the amorphous concept of "Thai-style" democracy as an alternative better suited to Thailand's history, values, and traditions.

In 1932, the clique of young, foreign-educated military officers and high-ranking civil servants who usurped King Prajadhipok's absolute powers were the first to announce that Thailand would embrace democracy, the stuff of civilized nations. Their European sensibilities notwithstanding, however, the "Promoters" had good reason to fear that the scarce "readiness" of the Thai people would land them out of power. Not content with merely stacking half of the newly instituted National Assembly with their own appointees, the coup-makers banned political parties from contesting elections. In any event, no form of political organization — nor the most basic freedoms of expression and association for that matter — was needed, given that the governing People's Party (*káná râtsàdorn*) arrogated the role of sole protector of the

[6] See Michael K. Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007).

constitution and true representative of "the people."

As it turns out, the country's transition to democracy under the tutelage of the People's Party took longer than the ten years the new dictators had envisioned it would take them to properly educate the people not to vote them out of office. Not only did the People's Party fail to legalize the formation of political parties and allow for the direct election of the full National Assembly until 1946 — having since extended the interim provisions in the country's constitution that suspended the democratic freedoms guaranteed in the remainder of the document. Even a timid, unorganized opposition was too much for it to bear, judging from the number of critics it had arrested, subjected to show trials, banished to faraway lands, thrown in jail, or summarily executed.

With the end of World War II came new hopes that the promise of democracy would finally be fulfilled. The government led by Field Marshal Plaek Phibulsongkhram (hereinafter, Phibul) — who shared more than passing ideological affinities with the Japanese occupiers he enabled — was jettisoned as Japan approached defeat. In the aftermath of the war, in 1946, a new constitution and a generally more liberal environment spawned the registration of political parties — among them, the Democrat Party — and the election of a new National Assembly finally devoid of appointed deputies. Phibul, however, stormed back onto the scene in 1947, staging a coup that abrogated the new constitution and invalidated the results of the election. In the tumultuous decade that ensued, Phibul survived two violent coup attempts (in 1949 and 1951) and saw his powers curtailed by the 1951 "radio coup" staged by top brass in the military and the police, who sought to thwart the rise of the increasingly vocal National Assembly. While Phibul remained in office, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and Police Director-General Phao Sriyanond forced the re-introduction of the 1932 charter and its system of "tutelary democracy."

Ironically, when Phibul was definitively deposed, in 1957, the pretext for the coup staged by Sarit Thanarat was that the elections held in February had been rigged. Not only did Sarit nominally belong to the same party that benefited from the alleged fraud; Sarit himself had much less of a taste for democracy than Phibul. Phibul, for his part, seemed genuinely ambivalent about democratic reforms. On the one hand, he saw in democratic elections a means to establish a power base outside the military and the bureaucratic elite. It was no doubt the need for legitimation that motivated Phibul to call for a vote upon returning to power in 1947. And it was likely in an attempt to extricate himself from Phao and Sarit that he pushed for a skeletal Political Parties Act (introduced in 1955) and unexpectedly liberalized political speech upon his return from a trip to the United States and the United Kingdom.[7] On the other hand, Phibul was too distrustful of any form of organized opposition that threatened to limit his own power and not confident enough of his pull with the electorate to follow through decisively.[8]

Sarit had no such qualms. In the wake of the 1957 coup, as his own *Cremation Volume* recounts it, Sarit remained deeply dissatisfied over the fact that "there still ex-

[7]Contemporaneous accounts suggest that Phibul was impressed with the degree of independence that leaders like Winston Churchill and Dwight Eisenhower enjoyed thanks to their electoral popularity. See David A. Wilson and Herbert P. Phillips, "Elections and Parties in Thailand," *Far Eastern Survey* 27 (1958): 113-119.

[8]Kramol Tongdhamachart, *Toward a Political Party Theory in Thai Perspective* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Occasional Paper No. 68, 1982), 8-9.

isted a parliament, political parties, a free press system that could criticize the government," and "labor unions that could go on strike whenever they were unhappy with their employers;" in spite of its best efforts, the government could not "do its work properly" under such circumstances.[9] Shortly thereafter, Sarit staged an *autogolpe* that dispensed with these features of "Western-style democracy" — installing a dictatorial regime supposedly more compatible with Thailand's political culture and more appropriate to the country's status as a developing nation. Sarit's coup famously marked the beginning of an era of "despotic paternalism" — a time during which the government's cruelty and heavy-handedness was only matched by its leader's prodigious thievery.

The idea of Thai-style democracy first surfaced in the late 1950s, as a post-hoc rationalization for Sarit's conservative "revolution," and then as the ideological underpinnings of his manifestly undemocratic rule. Its basic principles were not entirely new, but rather echoed the political thought sketched out in well-known writings by King Vajiravudh, Prince Dhani Nivas, and Luang Wichit Wathakan.[10] To be clear, the "Thai-style" in "Thai-style democracy" speaks to the restrictions that should be placed on both the freedoms enjoyed by the country's citizens and the autonomy exercised by its elected officials. Political rights like freedom of speech and association, as well as recurrent legislative elections, were scrapped in favor of a style of "representation" by which the father-leader (*phôr khǒon*) would visit his "children" around the country, listen to their concerns, and suitably reinterpret their demands. Civil liberties like those that guaranteed criminal defendants a measure of due process were abandoned in favor of provisions like Article 17 of the 1959 constitution, which allowed the Prime Minister to order the execution without trial of anyone he deemed a threat to national security.

The ideal of equality championed by some People's Party politicians like Pridi Banomyong, moreover, was superseded by the government's unabashed attempt to perpetuate existing inequalities. The country's most powerful domestic capitalists were nurtured by the state and protected from competition; entire sectors of Thailand's economy were sold off to foreign and domestic oligopolists in exchange for billions of dollars, on the condition that the generals make life difficult for smaller, local competitors and repress any labor movement that might seek better pay and work conditions for millions of Thai workers.[11] Meanwhile, the government insisted that the rural population should be forever content to eke out a simple existence upcountry — the refusal of many to embrace their station in life posing a threat to the "deterioration" of Thai society.[12]

Perhaps most importantly, Sarit resurrected the monarchy as a source of legitimacy, a symbol of national unity, and a "moral check and balance" on the country's government.[13] When the young King Bhumibol — born in Cambridge,

[9]Cited in Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2007[1979]), 95.

[10]For a taste of King Vajiravudh's ideas on the subject, see Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 30-31. A good summary of Prince Dhani's work appears in Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 84-86.

[11]See Suehiro Akira, *Capital Accumulation in Thailand, 1855-1985* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), 179-180.

[12]See Thak, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism,* 105-106 and 122.

[13]For a concise overview, see Kevin Hewison, "Crafting Thailand's New Social Contract," *The Pacific Review*, 17(2004): 503-522. See also Kevin Hewison, "'Thai-Style Democracy:' A Conservative Struggle for Thailand's Politics," paper presented

Massachusetts and raised on the shores of Lake Geneva — unexpectedly ascended the throne in 1946 after the tragic death of his elder brother, the monarchy was in a state of disrepair. Over the previous decade, it had been stripped of many of its possessions and almost all its power, so much so that King Prajadhipok had left the country and abdicated in the years that followed the 1932 coup. Sarit Thanarat saw in the restoration of the monarchy's mystique an opportunity to entrench his rule.[14] To paraphrase Dostoevsky, Sarit had plenty of "authority;" he just needed a little mystery and a few miracles to make sure his regime would endure.

To be sure, Sarit has been dead for almost a half century. And, thanks to the sacrifice made by the bravest among them, the good people of Thailand now enjoy many of the political rights and civil liberties Sarit reckoned they did not deserve. Yet, the idea of "Thai-style democracy" and its variant, "democracy with the King as head of state,"[15] are alive and well. The monarchy remains inviolate and immune from even the most benign criticism. Unelected institutions can still impose their will on the people's representatives; when elected politicians refuse to play along, they are accused of being "corrupt," "immoral," and hence worthy of removal via coups d'état promptly endorsed by His Majesty the King.[16] Sarit, moreover, remains the patron saint of the Thai elites. Having conveniently forgotten the fact that the great dictator pocketed public funds to the tune of billions of bàht, elite writers still long, with poetic nostalgia, for the order, stability, and social harmony that Sarit guaranteed by keeping the little people in their place.[17]

at the Faculty of Political Science of Chulalongkorn University on June 26, 2009.

[14]The classic statement on Sarit's motivations and strategy is offered in Thak, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism.*

[15]Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*, 135-142.

[16]For a contemporary apology, see Pattana Kitiarsa, "In Defense of the Thai-Style Democracy," Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, October 12, 2006.

Dictatorship of the Big Men

Thailand's 2007 constitution begins with a tawdry, obscene fabricaton. With Orwellian audacity, its preamble states that "Thailand has been under the rule of democratic government with the King as head of state for more than 75 years." No mention is made of aborted transitions and military takeovers. No significance is granted to the decades of repression Thailand experienced under the thumb of ghastly military dictators — men who governed the country with a level of savagery only exceeded by their greed. No meaningful role is attributed to the hundreds of brave young Thais who died in the mass protests of 1973 and 1992, just so that others would have a say on how they should live. Not so much as a footnote is reserved for pro-democracy students at Thammasat University, whom paramilitary death squads raped, murdered, and hanged from trees — their eyes ripped out of their sockets, their mouths stuffed with old shoes — in October 1976. The official, comic-book version of Thai history that the government routinely rams down the throats of millions of schoolchildren nationwide has no place for the Thai people's painful struggle for democracy. Those who died, lost limbs, went to jail, or fled to the jungle for the cause did all this for no reason whatsoever.

To be sure, plenty of elections have been held in Thailand since the 1930s, at a frequency which has at times surpassed that

[17]Pridiyathorn Devakula, "Missing Field Marshal Sarit and Professor Sanya, I Am," *The Nation,* January 5, 2009.

of countries with rather more distinguished democratic records. But many such elections took place under conditions of severely limited competition, had their outcome predetermined by fraud or massive deployment of state resources, or in any case turned out to be irrelevant to the exercise of real political power. For much of the intervening time, moreover, government alternation has typically been accomplished through coups, not elections. And though introducing, restoring, or otherwise saving democracy has reliably served as the rationale for many of the plentiful coups that have forcibly, if often bloodlessly, removed a succession of Thai governments, most of the "permanent" constitutions that have cyclically been promulgated, suspended, and unceremoniously repealed were designed as a way to provide the regime of the day with the veneer of a legal foundation more than to regulate anything vaguely resembling democratic competition. Government propaganda notwithstanding, Thailand has only been a "democracy" in any meaningful sense of the word for a relatively small portion of its post-absolutist history. In each such instance, the military had to step in to "restore order," "protect the unity of the nation," and dismantle the "alien institutions" responsible for the day's crisis.

In the foreign press, Thailand is often referred to as a "constitutional monarchy" — at the very best a misleading characterization. Thailand is no doubt a monarchy. But whereas the country has had a host of constitutions since 1932, the institution and the authority of the monarchy exist quite independently from what the constitution *du jour* happens to provide. This should be a rather uncontroversial point — perhaps especially among Thailand's staunchest royalists. Certainly, few in Thailand would dare argue that the position of the King as head of state could be subordinated to something so readily disposable as a Thai constitution. In a constitutional monarchy, a king ceases to be king when the constitution is rescinded — the institution, that is, exists only insofar as a constitution sanctions its existence. This is hardly the case in Thailand, where His Majesty the King reigns by something more akin to natural right than positive law. Noted royalist Pramuan Ruchanaseri said as much in a book written in 2005, where he argued — correctly, as a matter of empirical observation — that "The constitution is not above the King in any way. [...] The status of the King does not come under the constitution."[18]

The idea of constitutional monarchy is also misleading in the sense that constitutions in Thailand have historically been little more than the exterior facade of a regime whose structure precedes the laws chosen either to justify its rule or masquerade its existence behind the rhetoric and institutions of civilized nations. And, at least for the last three decades, Thailand has functioned less as a "constitutional monarchy" than an "extra-constitutional oligarchy." Whereas the composition, organization, and internal hierarchy of Thailand's "Inner Party" — to borrow an expression from George Orwell — have evolved throughout this time, the basic idea has not. In Thailand, real political power does not rest with elected officials. It is rather concentrated in the hands of a network of high level bureaucrats, judges, top military officers, aristocrats, and business elites led by Privy Council President Gen. Prem Thinsulanonda. Other than their wealth and power, the one thing these people have in common is that nobody ever elected them to anything. In academic circles, this clique is known as the "network monarchy;" the expression typically employed in Thailand is *ammâhttàyahthípàthai* (rule of the *am-*

[18]Cited in Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009), 256.

mâht, or bureaucrats), which sanitizes the idea of its most incendiary connotations.[19]

Essentially, the "network monarchy" is a contemporary adaptation of Thailand's old "bureaucratic polity" — the dominant style of government from the 1930s to about the late 1960s, when political power was largely monopolized by the civilian and military bureaucracy.[20] In its latest incarnation, it reflects the rise of a new, powerful business community that was integrated — not without causing some strain in the old order — into Thailand's ruling class. And it benefits tremendously from the legitimacy conferred upon it by the precipitous rise in royal prestige over the past five decades.

To the extent that the members of the "network monarchy" — not just those who wield actual power, but also opinion makers in Thailand's media as well as its poor excuse for an academic community — ever acknowledge the tension between elected and unelected institutions, the continued hold on power of the military and the bureaucracy is justified by the need to protect the monarchy from the threat posed by the ineptitude, lust for power, and supposed republican ambitions of the country's elected representatives. To be sure, since at least the 1980s, elected representatives and ministers drawn from their ranks have enjoyed ample freedom to use their positions to get rich, help their protégés get ahead, and repay contributors for their support by plundering state coffers with impunity. What elected officials cannot do under the present circumstances is place the military under civilian control, take charge of the machinery of government, and set national policy — especially of the kind that redistributes some of the country's wealth to the provincial masses. In fact, whether or not an elected government acts within the constitution is immaterial. It's when it begins to operate outside the confines set for it by the "network" that the country's elites spring into action. If they can, they will use their control of the courts to overturn the results of elections through means that have the appearance of being legal. If they need to, they will send gangs of paramilitary thugs into the streets to castrate the government and paralyze the country, all the while guaranteeing that the nation's laws will not apply to them. And, if they absolutely must, they will roll out the tanks and the special forces — formally taking power just long enough to write a new constitution capable of insulating them from the nuisance posed by elected officials.

The putsch that ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006 is the latest in a string of successful coups staged during Thailand's tumultuous post-absolutist history. But though the country had already taken a sharp authoritarian turn under Thaksin's leadership, Thaksin was done in less by his efforts to establish an "elected dictatorship" than by his attempt to dismantle the network monarchy — in all probability, not out of disrespect or ideological distaste for the old order but out of a desire to project his government's power deep into institutions traditionally impervious to encroachments by elected officials. As he was readying his guns for entry into politics, Thaksin had been at least as keen to ingratiate himself with Thailand's unelected rulers as he was to pummel the elected leadership of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai and the Democrat Party. Among other things, he helped the cash-strapped Crown Property Bureau, whose holdings had been vastly diminished by the Asian Crisis, by buying out its share of ITV for $60 million — an investment he reportedly had no ambition to re-

[19]The term "network monarchy" was coined in Duncan McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand," *The Pacific Review* 18(2005): 499-519.

[20]Fred W. Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1966).

cover.[21] The network monarchy, at first, appeared rather satisfied with the new Prime Minister. In 2001, Prem saved Thaksin's job — pressuring the Constitutional Court to acquit Thaksin of corruption charges he had scarcely bothered denying. The Court obliged, acquitting Thaksin in a close 4-3 ruling, albeit not without some of its more disgruntled judges complaining to the press, anonymously, about the interference.[22] But it didn't take long for Thaksin to turn on those he had once sought to please, or in any event, find the restrictions they placed on his government a bit too stringent for his taste.

It was in the well-established idea of "Thai-style democracy" that the network monarchy and its supporters among Bangkok's upper-middle-classes grounded their campaign against Thaksin. Case in point is the so-called People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) — the most vocal, best organized opposition to the former Prime Minister and his surrogates. In truth, it is hard to decide whether the PAD is less about "democracy" or "the people," for whom it has consistently exhibited little more than paternalistic condescension. It is certainly an alliance, though, or better yet the bastard child of a long, unholy marriage of privileged constituencies. For the rich, the noble, the armed, and the powerful, the very idea of elected government is fine as long as they call the shots; it is when their influence is on the wane that the drumbeat for military intervention invariably begins to sound in the distance. When the case can be made with a straight face, they will invoke the need to restore "true" democracy — to pry the reins of government away from the hands of corrupt politicians. When that argument is no longer serviceable, they will abandon all pretense of bourgeois propriety and argue that Thailand cannot afford democracy — not so long as the majority of its citizens remain bumbling imbeciles eager to sell their votes to all manners of murderers and thieves.

Formed in early 2006, at first the PAD based its crusade to remove Thaksin's elected administration on the least controversial of these claims — the need to reestablish the kind of real democracy that Thaksin's populism, corruption, and taste for human rights abuses all but foreclosed. After his bone-crushing victory in the 2005 elections, though, Thaksin was much too strong to be cajoled, bullied, or undermined through the relatively subtle, inconspicuous means the network monarchy had employed to keep many of his predecessors in check. And so the military had to step in, not merely to unseat Thaksin, but perhaps especially to lay the groundwork for his prosecution, confiscate his assets, dismantle those provisions in the 1997 constitution that protected his dominance, and put new safeguards in place against his return.

The PAD virtually disappeared from the scene when the army moved in and seized power on September 19, 2006. After just over a year in office, however, the military beat a rather bashful retreat to the barracks, roundly ridiculed for the glacial speed with which the old geezers appointed by the junta had gone about conducting the nation's business. As the December 2007 elections loomed, it became increasingly clear that the generals had accomplished little. To be sure, Thaksin had been removed and subjected to a number of judicial probes. But even though his immediate re-entry into politics appeared unlikely, Thaksin was preparing a triumphant return to Thailand in the wake of a resounding public relations victory abroad. The PAD stormed back onto the scene in 2008, following the election of Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej. Though

[21] "Royal Wealth," *Asia Sentinel*, March 1, 2007.

[22] McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises," 513.

not quite the marionette Thaksin supporters may have wanted, Samak himself embraced the label of "Thaksin's nominee."[23]

The failure of the military-led restoration of "democracy" to prevent the return of forces loyal to Thaksin backed the PAD into a corner. The new government had come to power through elections organized and overseen by the junta under rules designed by a military-appointed Constitution Drafting Assembly that included prominent PAD sympathizers and supporters. Moreover, while the PAD could well accuse key government figures such as Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and Interior Minister Chalerm Yubumrung of being loathsome in their own right, the politicians who had won seats under the banner of the People Power Party were those who had survived the ban from politics handed down concurrently with the dissolution of Thai Rak Thai. It's at this point that the PAD abandoned all pretense of fighting for democracy. Its leader, media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul, now argued that "Western-style" democracy was useless in Thailand, where most voters lack the "intelligence and wisdom" to know what to do with their political rights.[24] Sondhi's words reflected what has long been a widely shared belief in Bangkok. In the wake of the coup, National Legislative Assembly President Meechai Ruchuphan famously compared ruling the bovine people of Thailand with a democratic constitution to using a Rolls-Royce to plow a paddy field.[25]

In July 2008, the PAD advanced its boldest, most sweeping proposal yet — the "New Politics," a hodgepodge of reactionary measures drawn from a variety of historical periods whose unifying trait is the political primacy of the Bangkok elites. Perhaps the most controversial among its propositions called for the establishment of a legislature composed by 70 percent of appointed members — something reminiscent of the system of "tutelary democracy" Thailand lived under for much of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, when the bureaucracy and the military arrogated the right to rule with minimal interference from elected representatives until the day the Thai masses would prove "ready" for democracy. Another was that the constitution explicitly recognize the military's right to intervene and take over the reins of government every so often a civilian administration is judged incompetent or corrupt, fails to act upon *lèse majesté* allegations, or is perceived to have jeopardized the country's sovereignty — in other words, when it runs afoul of the PAD's agenda.

The launch of the New Politics coincided with the adoption of an increasingly confrontational, violent approach. In late August, thousands of PAD supporters — some of them armed with guns, sticks, knives, and small explosives — occupied the Government House, laid waste to key Ministries, stormed the offices of the National Broadcasting Services of Thailand (NBT), and temporarily shut down the airports in the southern cities of Phuket, Hat Yai, and Krabi. On October 7, skirmishes outside the Thai parliament building left at least two people dead and scores injured. And, on November 25, thousands of PAD supporters spearheaded by the customary militia of strung-out ruffians stormed Thailand's two major international airports — Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang. The government reacted by imposing a state of emergency, but army Commander-in-Chief Anupong Paochinda predictably refused to enforce it. With every passing day, the prospect of re-taking the airports by force looked certain to end in a bloodbath and massive property damage. The PAD was

[23] Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin*, 308.

[24] Jaimie Seaton and George Wehrfritz, "Crackdown," *Newsweek,* September 2, 2008.

[25] "Blame People, Not the 1997 Charter," *The Nation,* October 29, 2006.

not only heavily armed and continuously re-stocked — its gun-toting vanguards having successfully broken through police roadblocks on the way to the airport. It was now abundantly clear that its leaders were confident enough in their own righteousness to have little reservation about sending men, women and children to their deaths in the service of the noble cause — restoring Thailand to its filthy rich rightful owners.

It was in this context of protracted stalemate that, on December 2, the Constitutional Court staged its widely anticipated "judicial coup" — dissolving the ruling People Power Party for relatively trivial infractions committed by one of its executives in the 2007 elections. A week later, after days of feverish negotiations, senior establishment figures engineered the defection of key components of the governing coalition and paved the way for Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva's rise to the prime ministerial post. By some coalition politicians' own admission, General Anupong went as far as to organize a meeting at his own home on December 6 to "advise" those who still wavered. It did not matter that Thai voters had repeatedly rejected Abhisit when they were given a chance to choose their Prime Minister for themselves. Aside from the explicit coup threats, what sealed the deal was that Anupong made it clear he was "conveying a message from a man who could not be refuted.[26]"

***Crimethink*, and the Illusion of Exceptionalism**

That "Thai-style democracy," with the oversized role it has historically conferred upon unelected institutions, would amount to little more than a bastardization should be transparent enough by now. Perhaps less obvious is the notion that, in principle as well as in practice, "Thai-style democracy" has even less to do with Thai culture than it has with democracy. In this sense, advocates of democratization tend to defer much too readily to the sniveling apologists of the current regime on the true content of Thai culture. And those fancying themselves the proud defenders of Thailand's cultural heritage — that is, those for whom cultural discourse is more than a cheap trick to justify a privileged elite's monopolization of power — often betray a rather cartoonish view of both the "culture" they seek to defend and the alien cultures whose encroachments they so stalwartly oppose.

The idiocy of juxtaposing "Thai culture" and "Western values" is perhaps most readily apparent in the debate raging on in the local and international press about the inadequate protection that Thailand affords to the expression of political views critical of the state's carefully crafted, jealously guarded, and systematically propagated official ideology. The most obvious sticking point on this count is the obscurantist *lèse majesté* legislation, designed to land those responsible for even the most cautious criticism of the monarchy in jail for a period of three to fifteen years (Article 112 of the Criminal Code). The recent arrest, legal harassment, prosecution, and in some cases the imprisonment of politicians (e.g., Jakrapob Penkair — case pending, fugitive), pro-democracy activists (e.g., Darunee Charnchoensilpakul — multiple counts, sentenced to eighteen years in prison), novelists (e.g., Harry Nicolaides — sentenced to three years, since pardoned by the King), journalists (e.g., the BBC's Jonathan Head — three cases pending), college professors (e.g., Chulalongkorn University's Giles Ji Ungpakorn — case pending, fugitive), and bloggers (e.g., Suwicha Thakhor — sentenced to ten years) for statements that cannot be reported here because the mere description of the offenses is

[26] "Democrat Govt a Shotgun Wedding?," *The Nation*, December 10, 2009.

itself grounds for prosecution, attests to an inescapable reality. Thailand is a country that takes political prisoners. It's a country where those who object to the way the state is organized go to jail. For three to fifteen years, possibly more if the current government eventually passes legislation that has been proposed before.

In Thailand, no one can safely criticize the monarchy — not in the intimacy of one's own family and circle of friends, much less in public. The Thai government actively encourages its citizens to snitch on their neighbors. The law, moreover, compels the police to investigate any report, however flimsy or dubiously motivated, filed by any citizen. Of course, fear of appearing to condone this most abominable of crimes is strong enough motivation for any police officer to pursue the cases that land on his desk to the fullest extent of the law — even simple acts of civil disobedience such as failing to stand for the royal anthem and accompanying propaganda video ritually played at the cinema before every movie.[27] In turn, the media's unwillingness to report on the content of the offenses — for fear of either running afoul of the law or diminishing their royalist credentials — not only prevents any real debate about the legislation itself, but also leaves the population at large effectively unaware of the infractions for which people are going to jail. Most recently, in a move that brings to mind the institution of the "Bocche per le denunzie segrete," the stone-carved lion's mouths where any citizen in the old Republic of Venice (697-1797 CE) could drop secret missives accusing neighbors and public officials of the most disparate offenses, the Thai government set up websites encouraging the public to report any comment, picture, video, or story on the World Wide Web critical of His Majesty the King or the monarchy.[28] The anonymous reports are then used to either initiate prosecutions or block access to thousands of internet pages. In flagrant violation of the law, most such websites are blocked by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology without a court order.

Stock defenses of *lèse majesté* are grounded, by turns, in the exceptionalism and unexceptionalism of Thailand's "democracy." Some argue that there's really nothing special about the way Thailand protects the institution of the monarchy — that the infamous provisions in the country's Criminal Code are no different from the regulation of political speech commonplace in the most democratic of nations. It is often noted, in particular, that many countries typically described as democracies have laws that protect heads of state from vilification. In most such countries, however, these laws do not protect heads of state from criticism of the kind leveled by Ji Ungpakorn or Jonathan Head — mere descriptions, accurate or not, of the role they allege the monarchy has played in Thai politics — but only from slander and name-calling. Nor do such laws extend to the criticism of policies such as the royally-endorsed idea of the "sufficiency economy." Nor do they apply to works of fiction like Harry Nicolaides' — writings of the kind that Geoffrey Chaucer could get away with in fourteenth century England.

To make matters worse, whereas in most democratic countries someone accused of defaming a public figure must be shown to have more or less intentionally disseminated

[27] "Moviegoer Faces Prison For Sitting During Anthem," *New York Times*, April 24, 2008.

[28] The first such website, "protecttheking.net" (see "Thai Website to Protect the Monarchy," BBC *News,* February 5, 2009) is now defunct, owing to the government's failure to renew its domain registration (see "Official Forgot to Relist Protecttheking Site," *Bangkok Post,* December 7, 2009.). The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, however, operates a similar webpage at http://www.mict.go.th/re_complaint.php.

falsehoods or distorted the truth, it's well-established legal precedent in Thailand that the truth of one's statements, their grounding in fact, is not a defense in *lèse majesté* prosecutions.[29] The offense is therefore less akin to defamation than it is to Orwellian *crimethink*. The law does not merely prohibit the slander of the royal institution, but rather proscribes the very act of thinking ill of it. In a recent article that gloats over Darunee Charnchoensilpakul's conviction, *The Nation*'s columnist Avudh Panananda characterized Darunee's offense as tarnishing "the reputation of Their Majesties with malicious intent to sway the crowds to lose their reverence and trust in the monarchy."[30] As Avudh describes it, the real crime is not slander or defamation, but the loss of the "reverence and trust" that Thai subjects (and, increasingly, foreigners) are expected to offer the institution no matter what the circumstances. Quite possibly, a statement's grounding in fact will only serve to make the crime more heinous, to the extent that it might pose a greater threat of turning others into thought criminals.

Sometimes, the notion that there is nothing out of the ordinary about the *lèse majesté* legislation is accompanied by the assertion, if not really much in the way of argument, that the laws protect "national security."[31] This is why, for instance, the government insists that the trials be held in secret.[32] Justice Minister Pirapan Salirathavibhaga recently argued that the *lèse majesté* legislation imposes restrictions on personal liberty akin to security screening protocols requiring passengers in the United States to remove their shoes and belts and walk through a metal detector before they can board a commercial flight. Said restrictions, then, are supposed to be acceptable in that they protect the security of the population from the unspecified calamities that might befall the country if Thailand's highest political institutions were subjected to the same scrutiny they receive in, say, England. It goes without saying, however, that a country prohibiting the mere discussion of political reform can hardly be called a "democracy." Democracy, the real thing, is founded upon freedom of speech precisely because it is believed that citizens have a right to demand political, economic, and social change. And, of course, most in need of legal protection are those minority viewpoints that the majority of the population might resent.

Because the extraordinary protection that the country's legal code affords the monarchy finds no equivalent in any democratic nation, the case for Thailand's "democratic unexceptionalism" is laughable on its face. As a result, the veritable army of propagandists and third-rate academics tasked with the public defense of *lèse majesté* frequently revert to arguing the opposite case. The legislation, that is, is often championed on the grounds that it embodies that which makes Thailand *different* from other countries — that special relationship between the Thai people and their kings which no foreigner can truly comprehend. Thus, *lèse majesté* laws are characterized as the last line of defense protecting the institution that lies at the very heart of Thailand's exceptionalism — an institution besieged by enemies foreign and domestic eager to trample on the country's time-honored traditions in their long-standing

[29]See David Streckfuss, "Kings in the Age of Nations: The Paradox of Lese-Majeste as Political Crime in Thailand," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37(1995): 445-475.

[30]Avudh Panananda, "Da Torpedo's Downfall a Warning to the Like-Minded," *The Nation*, September 1, 2009.

[31]"Thailand Vows to Stem Tide Against Royals," *Reuters,* January 10, 2009.

[32]Pravit Rojanaphruk, "Closed Door Lese Majeste Trial for Daranee Makes Lawyer Despair," *The Nation,* June 25, 2009.

quest to remake Thailand in the image of the West.

Alas, well-intentioned people on both sides of this debate have a tendency to ignore the fact that no "culture" is really specific enough to mandate a single regime type, a single form of government, or a single configuration of institutions. This is true of "Thai culture" as much as it is true of the miscellany of cultures crudely lumped together under the all-encompassing "Western" label. Lest we forget, it's in the country with arguably the proudest republican tradition in Europe — France — that the model of royal absolutism originated. Indeed, it is from French-style absolutism that King Chulalongkorn borrowed heavily in his attempt to build the kind of modern state that Thailand still lacked in the mid-nineteenth century. Is republican government any more compatible with French culture than monarchical rule? To be sure, few would have argued as much in 1790.[33] The fact is that "French culture" prescribes neither. French culture has given rise to, and has in turn been re-shaped by, royalist and republican ideas alike.

Lest we forget, moreover, most places in Western Europe have lived under more or less absolute monarchs much longer than Thailand has — not to mention much longer than they themselves have been "democratic." Liberal democracy, in this sense, may indeed be a Western achievement. But it is certainly a recent accomplishment — one that marked a sharp break with an overwhelmingly authoritarian past, as opposed to a seamless extension of its distinctive political traditions. Democratization not only constitutes a very recent development in countries like Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece; as recently as four or five decades ago, it was common to suspect that democracy was destined to fail in countries distinguished by the "parochial" and "subject" political cultures prevalent in southern Europe. Participatory, pluralist institutions, it was thought, are unlikely to work properly in contexts where citizens are generally passive, uninvolved, and deferential to elites.[34] Interestingly, these are more or less the same arguments made in support of Thailand's supposed incompatibility with "Western" democracy.

Just as there is nothing innately "democratic" about Western culture, it could be argued that Thai culture is not quite as unfriendly to so-called "Western" democracy as it is often made out to be. In this respect, there are at least two inconvenient facts undermining the notion that *lèse majesté* is the legal expression of values more integral to Thai culture than would be the unfettered expression of political ideas.

The first is that no such thing as Thailand existed, whether as a political entity or even merely as an idea, as recently as two centuries ago. Not only is present-day Thailand essentially a negative construct — it includes contiguous territories in mainland Southeast Asia left over from French and British colonization. Prior to the nineteenth century, the rulers in Ayutthaya and then Bangkok never really controlled much territory beyond the Chaophraya basin, the country's eastern seaboard and parts of the Malay peninsula. When they did come to administer what is now Thailand's upper north, deep south, and vast sections of the outer northeast, it was not by plebiscite or popular insurrection that these territories gave their allegiance to the King of Siam. It was rather by conquest and skillful political maneuvering that Siam prevailed. Parts of northern Thailand, for instance, were brought under Siamese control in ex-

[33] For perhaps the most prominent example, see Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Penguin Classics, 1986[1790]).

[34] Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1965).

change for bailing the Lanna rulers out of the debts they had incurred with European trading companies. How much sense, then, does it really make to speak of a single Thai culture? How can whatever Thai national identity the people of Udon Thani, Chiang Mai, and Nakhorn Si Thammarat share be understood without reference to the homogeneity enforced by the authorities in Bangkok through sustained propaganda and a good deal of violence — not to mention the most careless disregard for the plentiful local customs that were stamped out in the name of cultural homogeneization? And how "natural," "sacred," or otherwise worthy of insulation from domestic debate — to say nothing of "foreign" ideas — should we presume that single, national identity to be?

The other fact that has escaped many on both sides of the debate is that the *lèse majesté* legislation as it is currently interpreted and enforced is not something that has existed in Thailand from time immemorial. In fact, at least with respect to the monarchy, the Thai press was immeasurably freer a century ago than it is today. For much of their reign, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) and King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) — whose job description, it should be noted, was "absolute" monarch — were subjected to vicious criticism and a good deal of ridicule by the local press. And though repression was intermittently applied, the Thai journalists of the time could afford to be much more than the neutered bunch of sycophants they have now become. By the standards of our obscurantist times, when restrained, almost apologetic articles in the *Economist* pass for mortal affront, the cartoons and editorials routinely printed in the pages of early twentieth century Thai newspapers are positively shocking.[35] In this sense, those in Thailand and abroad who defend *lèse majesté* on cultural grounds would do well to read some Thai history before they accuse foreign observers of ignorance and Thai dissidents of apostasy.

Beyond the selective and self-serving readings of history upon which they are often based — interpretations that, ironically, tend to be bought wholesale only by those who have little appreciation for the complexity of any such "culture" — cultural defenses of authoritarian provisions such as Thailand's *lèse majesté* laws tend to be fairly circuitous. In particular, if it's the very sanctity of "culture" that confers legitimacy upon a government or institution, one might reasonably ask the following: Given that every cultural system constantly undergoes some form of change, do we concede that the institution in question is legitimate only to the extent that it reflects a people's current worldview and current collective identity? And, if so, what to make of dissenting voices? On the one hand, if the institution is truly reflective of cultural values that remain so deep-seated that most people could not imagine dispensing with it, then dissenting views will be rejected by the population at large, with no damage done to either the country or its traditions. On the other hand, what if dissent reflects a real, ongoing cultural shift? Surely no government would want to muzzle the expression of something so sacred as to justify its existence. Either way, to repress dissent makes no sense — unless, that is, repression is needed to protect from corrupting alien influences the very cultural values that have supposedly caused the institution to come into being. Come to think of it, that might be the reason why Robert Mugabe, Than Shwe, or Vladimir Putin routinely brand their domestic opponents the instruments of foreign conspiracies —

[35]For a number od especially compelling illustrations, see Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2002).

it makes repression not only justified, but crucial to the survival of the cultural heritage they ostensibly personify.

Generally speaking, however, political institutions are less about culture than they are about power. To be sure, the language and repertoire of values, rituals, and leadership styles that give every country's political life its unique, distinctive flavor is the product of that country's history — having characteristically evolved over a long period of time. But culture does not make social or political hierarchies. It is rather more often the case that hierarchy makes culture — or better, those legitimizing ideologies that the state habitually camouflages as culture. And, much like the "Thai-style" democracy it is designed to protect, *lèse majesté* as it is currently defined and enforced is neither "democratic" nor really all that "Thai." In point of fact, *lèse majesté* is but a quintessentially modern — and decidedly European — instrument of repression that twentieth century dictators like Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat instituted to stifle political debate about the very content of Thai cultural values and identity. It exists not to defend Thai culture, but to enforce the cheapened, comic-book version of Thainess the military and bureaucratic elites have produced and propagated to advance no cause greater than their own aggrandizement. Having elevated themselves to the role of protectors of the monarchy — in an attempt to legitimize their extra-constitutional, corrupt, violent rule — Thailand's elites have in *lèse majesté* a powerful instrument to defend their own hold on power.

Thailand's *lèse majesté* legislation is less a mechanism to protect the monarchy than it is an instrument for politicians to punish, harass, and muzzle their critics. Indeed, it is by design that the law is so open-ended, ambiguous, and susceptible to abuse. That anyone can file a complaint, that the definition of what constitutes injury to the monarchy is so expansive, that the incentive is strong for the police to pursue the pettiest of offenses, and that no accused can ever really mount a genuine defense — in court or the public square — is all to the great benefit of Thailand's ruling class of generals, bureaucrats, aristocrats, and rich urbanites. So long as their actions are presumed to have the King's blessing, to have been undertaken in His Majesty's name, or at least to have been motivated by the desire to advance the interests of the monarchy, nobody can safely challenge the elites without running the risk of being accused of either criticizing the monarchy or compromising its defense.[36] So it's no coincidence that the elites who rule Thailand have sought to identify themselves ever more closely with the institution of the monarchy. It's no accident that leaders of the PAD like Sondhi Limtongkul use the royal pronoun *prá ong* to refer to Privy Councillors, or that conservative politicians have long floated the idea that the shield of *lèse majesté* should extend to members of the Privy Council themselves. And it's no wonder that, whenever large opposition demonstrations are held in Bangkok, elite-backed governments invoke the Internal Security Act — announcing, to great fanfare, that hundreds of soldiers will be deployed to Chitrlada Palace to guard His Majesty the King against the demonstrators' nefarious designs.

Democracy, the Real Thing

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen famously argued that democratization does not equal Westernization.[37] Democracy has global

[36]See, for an example, Don Sambandaraksa, "What Is Praise Worth When Criticism Is Forbidden?," *Bangkok Post,* September 30, 2009.

[37]Amartya Sen, "Democracy and Its Global Roots: Why Democratization is Not the Same as Westernization," *The New Republic*, October 6, 2003.

roots — its seeds having been sown in the foundational texts and embedded social practices of a variety of cultures outside Western Europe. In Thailand, a frequently cited illustration is the venerable Ramkhamhaeng inscription (dated 1292 CE). At a time when most Westerners lived as serfs — essentially the property of feudal overlords — King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai had these words inscribed on his throne:

> In the time of King Ramkhamhaeng this land of Sukhothai is thriving. There is fish in the water and rice in the fields. The lord of this realm does not levy toll on his subjects for traveling the roads; they lead their cattle to trade or ride their horses to sell; whoever wants to trade in elephants, does so; whoever wants to trade in horses, does so; whoever wants to trade in silver or gold, does so. [...] When commoners or men of rank differ and disagree, [the King] examines the case to get at the truth and settles it justly for them. He does not connive with thieves or favor concealers [of stolen goods]. When he sees someone's rice he does not covet it; when he sees someone's wealth he does not get angry. [...] When he captures enemy warriors, he does not kill them or beat them. He has hung a bell in the opening of the gate over there: if any commoner in the land has a grievance which sickens his belly and gripes his heart, and which he wants to make known to his ruler and lord, it is easy: he goes and strikes the bell which the King has hung there; King Ramkhamhaeng, the ruler of the kingdom, hears the call; he goes and questions the man, examines the case, and decides it justly for him. So the people of this *muang* of Sukhothai praise him.[38]

The Ramkhamhaeng inscription contrasts sharply with contemporary accounts of life in medieval Europe as well as with the model of political and social organization that became dominant in Siam with the rise of Ayutthaya. It describes a society ruled by an accessible king, one who is confident enough of his own position to routinely lower himself to the level of his subjects to adjudicate their disputes. The king is accorded praise and respect not simply *qua* inherently superior being, but because of what he does for his people. At the same time, the king's subjects are portrayed as remarkably equal under the law and free to pursue economic activities of their own choosing.

It may be doubtful whether life in Sukhothai was quite as idyllic as the inscription suggests — or whether, as conservative scholar Sulak Sivaraksa has claimed, Thai society really did embody the ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" five hundred years before the French came up with that slogan.[39] Surely, Sukhothai cannot be described as "democratic" in the contemporary sense of the word.[40] Still, that Ramkhamhaeng would choose to eulogize his reign based on his commitment to individual freedom, equality before the law, government accountability, and the provision of services speaks to the centrality of these proto-democratic values to Thailand's cultural heritage. And although Ramkhamhaeng's explicit acknowledgment of liberal values does not make Thailand more ideally suited to democracy than any other country, the fact that these ideas have such deep roots in the country's history illustrates that there is nothing "unnatural" about some of democracy's most elemental principles. Indeed, the point is that no culture or civilization is inherently "friendly"

[38]Translation in David K. Wyatt, *Studies in Thai History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), 54-55.

[39]For some perspective on this subject, see radical Thai writer Jit Poumisak's *The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today,* originally published under the pseudonym Somsamai Srisudravarna in 1957. In Craig J. Reynolds, *Thai Radical Discourse: The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, 1987), 71-75.

[40]For that matter, nor could Athens circa 500 BC.

or "unfriendly" to democracy. Its adoption, in Thailand and elsewhere, will invariably mark a departure from some established political traditions, and continuity with others — just like it did in the West, where it won out over more traditional, more oppressive forms of government through much blood, sweat, and tears.

This, incidentally, is as true of democracy as it is of every innovation that dictators are blithe to embrace if it furthers their own power or renders their lives more comfortable — from the plough or the wheel, all the way to a commercial agriculture, an industrial economy, a standing army, a centralized bureaucracy, a modern educational system, or the gold-plated sit-down toilets where they read the morning papers. Thailand is no exception. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the man known as the "father of Thai history," famously claimed that Thai culture is defined by its extraordinary ability to assimilate aspects of foreign cultures. With pride, Prince Damrong wrote: "The Tai knew how to pick and choose. When they saw some good feature in the culture of other people, if it was not in conflict with their own interests, they did not hesitate to borrow it and adapt it to their own requirements."[41] And so they did. Everything from *devaraja* rule to *sakdina*, from Theravada Buddhism to royal absolutism, from nationalist ideology to developmental policy was borrowed and adapted from abroad, such that the key organizing principles of modern Thai society are no less foreign than the Western "impositions" its elites now so vehemently resist.

Consider what are known today as the three pillars of "Thainess" — nation, king, and religion. Theravada Buddhism comes from Sri Lanka; its imposition from above, in the words of a well-known Thai scholar, "amounted to a direct historical assault on the local spirits of village and town."[42] Thai nationalism was fashioned during the reign of King Vajiravudh after European nationalism, just as the absolutist institutions his father introduced some decades earlier were cast in a European mold. And the concept of *devaraja* rule — with its Brahmanical rituals, its mandated prostration, its rigid social hierarchy and exaltation of kings to the status of gods — was intentionally modeled by Ayutthaya's rulers after the great Khmer kingdoms of the time. Earlier on, historian David K. Wyatt suggests, King Ramkhamhaeng had self-consciously defined the administration of the Tai kingdom of Sukhothai in contrast to the more hierarchical, more unequal, more obsessively ritualistic Khmer kingdoms ruled by self-styled "gods."[43] And yet, with the rise of Ayutthaya, the Khmer practices Ramkhamhaeng deemed antithetical to Tai culture rapidly won out.

As Damrong noted, the only criterion that guided the introduction of these innovations — and countless others — was simply whether their adoption was "in the interest" of "the Tai." More plausibly, the real standard was the interest of those who happened to be in charge at the time. King Chulalongkorn himself, who questioned the wisdom of looking to European governments as models for Thailand — something as ill-advised as it no doubt would be to "cultivate rice in Siam using European agricultural textbooks about wheat" — showed no such reservation when it came to organizing a bureaucracy that could raise his taxes and implement his decrees. On this count, the King was keen to defer to Western ideas: "The administration needs to rely upon the models set by Westerners

[41] Cited in Maurizio Peleggi, *Thailand: The Worldly Kingdom* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 10.

[42] Chatthip Nartsupha, *The Thai Village Economy in the Past* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 14.

[43] Wyatt, *Studies in Thai History*, 52.

who have acted upon them hundreds of times. We need people with a knowledge of Western administration to set a model for us."[44] Pre-existing local practices having posed no obstacle to innovations that advanced the interests of many a dictator, it is curious that they should be considered such a grave impediment to reforms that, at long last, promise to liberate and empower the people.

It is perhaps natural that Thailand's real power holders and their vile propagandists in the local press would want to cloak their "dictatorship of the big men" in the benign, legitimizing language of culture and democratic development. Culture, after all, is now the first refuge of dictators. But it is important to recognize that "Thai-style democracy" does not amount to anything more glamorous or exotic than your average European-style dictatorship. Notwithstanding the lip service frequently paid to the customs, practices, values, norms, and beliefs that cumulated over centuries of Thai political development, there is nothing "Thai" about lining up dissidents against the wall of a Buddhist temple and mowing them down with machine guns. There is nothing "Thai" about the shameless hypocrisy required to praise a military dictator who stole billions and murdered hundreds, with the blessing of the country's highest authorities, and in the same breath adduce "corruption" and "human rights violations" as justification for staging military coups against elected leaders guilty of a fraction of those offenses. There is nothing "Thai" about turning religion into an instrument of political legitimacy. There is nothing "Thai" about cults of personality. There is nothing "Thai" about the enlistment of mass media and schools in the dissemination of propaganda. And there is nothing "Thai" about repressing the poor to benefit the rich. These are not the hallmarks of culture, Thai or otherwise. These are rather the attributes of authoritarianism — the main features of which were pioneered, for the most part, by generations of Western dictators.

Whatever the constitution might say, the real story of the last 75 years is not the "development" of democracy. It is rather the methodical sabotage of any meaningful democratic development, the routine hijacking of democratic institutions, and the continued suffocation of Thailand's democratic aspirations orchestrated by an unelected ruling class in an attempt to entrench its power — all the while, rendering itself increasingly unaccountable to the Thai masses and the international community. Far from having been exposed to too much democracy, as some *sakdina* intellectuals conveniently allege, what little democracy Thailand has experienced since 1932 has been systematically undermined and then subverted whenever it produced results its unelected masters didn't like. In this sense, the real hindrance to Thailand's democratization is not Thai culture; it is rather the interest of elites who are otherwise eager to borrow from abroad what can be used to entrench their power at home. Accordingly, to reject democracy on cultural grounds is not to protect Thailand from Western impositions. It is rather to acknowledge the authority of pompous, inbred big men to define what is compatible with tradition and what is not. Beyond that, whether or not democracy is of any use to a country like Thailand remains very much a matter of taste. At the very least, though, there is nothing "un-Thai" about the freedom to control one's own destiny, to speak one's own mind, to form or join political organizations, to read materials other than a regime's propaganda, or to

[44] Cited in Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism* (New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2004), 68.

hold one's government accountable for its failures. Apparently, the hundreds of people murdered by the authorities in Thailand for their audacity to demand greater political rights weren't fooled either. Purely as a matter of taste, I am rather more inclined to stand with them than their executioners.