

Thailand & Ideology: Anti-democratic Thai Academia. Thai Kingship as an “invented tradition”

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Contents

- [Elections postponed while](#)
- [The “tradition” of Thai \(...\)](#)

Elections postponed while anti-reformist show their true colours

While the dictator Prayut was huddled with the Chinese and Japanese representatives in Italy, he had previously told reporters not to “speculate” when elections would be held again in Thailand. Many analysts are predicting that elections will not take place at least until 2016, thus rubbing the initial promises of the junta to hold elections next year.

Meanwhile a panel of anti-reformist junta lackeys were pontificating about the legacy of the 14th October 1973 uprising against the military and how this would “influence” the present anti-reform process.

This academic meeting was not banned by the junta, unlike pro-democracy seminars.

Kamnoon Sitisamarn, former military appointed senator, said that having parliamentary elections with political parties nominating their own candidates for elections, was the same as the Chinese government’s insistence that it has the sole right to select the candidates for “elections” in Hong Kong. Now most of us would see the parallels between the Chinese dictatorship and Kamnoon’s masters in the Thai junta, but Kamnoon believes that MPs should not belong to political parties and should be “independent”. Independent of democratic accountability no doubt! So, all western democracies are really dictatorships, according to this anti-reformist. We can see what kind of future system these people have in mind.

Anek Laotamatas, well known academic who glorified the Thai middle classes in his writings, tried to rewrite history by claiming that he represented the views of the October heroes from 1973. This mealy mouthed ex-communist said that in those days the students were against dictatorship, but the most important thing was that they loved the king! Anek is well known for despising the rural people who he believes are trapped in a patron-client relationship. We can only guess that for Anek, only the middle-classes, who called for the coup and wrecked the February elections, can be trusted to develop democracy.

One of the problems with Thai academia is that they shy away from debate, even when there isn’t military rule, and therefore academics are used to just spouting any old rubbish and expecting their students and the general population to just listen obediently.

Manit Suksomjit, a retired media professional, claimed that Thailand had suffered from a “parliamentary dictatorship” and that the biggest problem was the stupidity of the people who elected crafty intelligent politicians. No doubt it would be better if the lower classes were denied the vote or maybe if good people like Manit could veto election results.

Finally, Tawatchai Yongkitikoon, rich banker and secretary of the Thai Bankers Association, said that the real problem in Thailand was corruption. He waxed lyrical about “wonderful” corruption-free Singapore. “No one in Singapore complains about the lack of democratic rights”, he declared. Maybe so, because you risk losing your job, your flat or even risk jail if you are too forthright in Singapore. What is more, the top politicians, who manipulate elections, pay themselves higher salaries than the U.S. president. Nepotism is rife in the island state. Yet, all this cannot possibly be corruption, of course!

What a shower of excrement now inhabit the National anti-Reform Committee.

Giles Ji Ungpakorn, October 16, 2014

The “tradition” of Thai Kingship

It should come as no surprise that Thai Kingship is an “invented tradition”, just as Eric Hobsbawm described the British monarchy as an invented tradition. In fact “Thai” as something to do with “Thailand” is also an invented concept, corresponding to the state centralisation and nation-building that took place in South-East Asia in the late nineteenth century.

The idea that the Thai king is “revered” by Thais is a doubtful and invented “fact”. Firstly, such reverence is enforced by the *lèse-majesté* law and the Communist suppression law in the past. Secondly, there is severe peer pressure on people to say that they revere the king. But most importantly, the degree to which people support the monarchy has fallen and risen at different times in recent history. During the height of the Communist Party’s struggle, many Thais hated the monarchy. Today the monarchy is also hated by many red shirts. This is why the military junta are so manic about fitting people up with *lèse-majesté* charges.

The idea of a king as a deity or absolute ruler is a very recent phenomena in Thai history. Before the 1870s the kings of Bangkok or Ayuttaya had limited power. Under the Sakdina feudal system they had to share power with the rulers of other towns and with the recruiters of *corvée* labour. *Corvée* labour was a system where local villagers were forced to work for a local boss, ruler, temple authority or king. Villagers were also forced to become soldiers during war time and the main aim of warfare in the region during this time was to seize war slaves and loot rival cities.

Given that forced labour of one kind or another was the base of much wealth production in the Sakdina system, the local rulers and recruiters of forced labour had political power to match that of the king. Trade and taxation were also important sources of wealth, but both trade and taxation were subcontracted to private merchants who also held power.

As far as the local ordinary folk were concerned, kings and local rulers were “bad news”. When they arrived with their armed tugs they dragged off the men to work or fight and dragged off young women for their pleasure. The general response of ordinary folk was to try to live as far away from

kings and local rulers as possible and if they turned up on your door step, the sensible thing was to run away and hide in the forest. Some villagers even used to smear shit on their daughters to make them less attractive. So people in those days feared kings but certainly did not revere them at all.

All this devolved power made the Sakdina kings weak. This is why King Chulalongkorn waged war on the Sakdina system, eventually abolishing forced labour and the power of local rulers and bosses. His establishment of the Absolute Monarchy was a necessary step towards building a centralised Thai state in the new capitalist world order.

The Absolute Monarchy only lasted 60 years. It was overthrown by the 1932 revolution and the king lost all power. Today's king still has no power, but the military and the capitalists have invented the myth of "traditional Thai kingship", where the king is both an absolute monarch and a constitutional monarch at the same time. The left-wing British historian Christopher Hill once wrote that after the English revolution in the 1640s, the English capitalist class restored the monarchy following Cromwell's death, by claiming that the king was anointed by God, when in fact he was appointed and used by the capitalists. There are strong similarities with Thailand.

Finally, if the power and nature of Thai kingship can change so much in recent history, it is not beyond imagination that we shall soon get rid of the monarchy all together.

Giles Ji Ungpakorn, October 18, 2014
