

Thailand's hidden republican tradition - Followed by a discussion on Monarchy and Buddhism

Friday 4 November 2016, by [JORY Patrick](#) (Date first published: 19 July 2016).

Despite the intense royalist indoctrination of the Bhumibol era it would be naïve not to imagine that at least some Thais draw inspiration from the country's long republican tradition.



Thailand is typically understood as a deeply royalist country ruled by a highly revered monarch.

The king's image is everywhere. The capital, Bangkok, is strewn with monuments to past kings. Countless streets, bridges, dams, universities, schools, army bases, hospitals, etc. are named after royalty. The calendar is full of royal holidays. Thailand has one of the world's strictest *lèse majesté* laws which forbids criticism of the king and royal family.

Given all this it may come as a surprise that republicanism is deeply ingrained in Thailand's political tradition. In fact, Thailand has one of the oldest republican traditions in Asia.

The first proposal to limit the absolute power of the monarch famously came in a petition to the king in 1885. It was drafted not by the European colonial powers but by a group of Thai princes. Though unsuccessful, this was among the first indigenous attempts to limit monarchical power anywhere in Asia.

In 1912, one year after the Chinese revolution ended 2000 years of imperial monarchy, the Thai authorities foiled a plot involving "thousands" to overthrow Siam's monarchy. It was even said that lots had been drawn to assassinate King Rama VI. The plotters were split between republicans and constitutional monarchists.

As Copeland has shown, the Siamese press at the time mercilessly mocked the monarchy and aristocracy in a way that is unheard of today.

The People's Party finally succeeded in ending Siam's absolute monarchy in a bloodless coup on June 24 1932.

What is not widely acknowledged is the influence of republican thinking on the People's Party, especially the leading intellectual force behind the movement, French-trained lawyer Pridi Phanomyong. It is clearly evident in the famous People's Party Announcement Number 1, issued

after the coup, which Pridi is credited with drafting:

*“On the question of the head of state, the People’s Party does not wish to seize the throne. It will invite this king to continue in his office as king, but he must be placed under the law of the constitution governing the country. He will not be able to act of his own accord without receiving the approval of the House of Representatives. The People’s Party has informed the king of its wish. We await his reply. If the king refuses the invitation or does not reply by the deadline, selfishly believing that his power has been reduced, then he will be judged to be a traitor to the nation. **It will be necessary to govern the country as a republic [prachathipatai]; that is, the head of state will be a commoner appointed by the House of Representatives for a fixed term of office [my bolds].”***

Royalist historiography which dominates the official interpretation of the events of 1932 downplays the role of the People’s Party, instead crediting King Rama VII with granting the gift of “democracy” to the Thai people.

But as the highlighted sentence from the Announcement shows, the term “*prachathipatai*”, normally translated today as “democracy”, originally conveyed the meaning of “republic”.

In fact, as Nakharin has pointed out, in the original 1932 draft of the Announcement to eliminate any doubt the Thai word *prachathipatai* was followed by the English translation, “republic.”

Official dictionaries from this period, both Thai-to-Thai and Thai-to-English, also commonly translate the Thai word *prachathipatai* as “republic.”

Before 1932, Pridi himself had taught his law students that there were two types of “democracy” (*prachathipatai*): a country with a president as the head of government, as in France, or a government in which executive authority lay with a committee, as in the Soviet Union.

So Thailand’s democratic history has distinctly republican roots.

For that reason royalists later coined the phrase, “*prachathipatai an mi phra maha kasat song pen pramuk*” to describe Thailand’s political system. The phrase is officially translated today as “constitutional monarchy”, but its literal translation is “democracy with the sacred, great king as head of state”. Its real purpose is to erase the original republican associations of the word *prachathipatai*. Even the word “constitution” has been sacrificed, since placing the king “under” a constitution violates Buddhist spatial norms about the proper place of the king.

Following the failed Boworadet rebellion in 1933 the royalists were routed. King Prajadhipok went into exile and eventually abdicated. Other princes fled Siam or were imprisoned. The heir to the throne escaped to Switzerland. For a decade there was no king in Thailand. Military strongman Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram, who also had republican leanings, ruled as a virtual president. This was the closest Thailand has come to republican rule.

The story of the restoration of the monarchy after World War II has been told before. It culminates with the coups of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in 1957 and 1958, following which, with the support of the United States, the monarchy became the figurehead of a virulently anti-communist military dictatorship. As Somsak has pointed out, for the royalists “the threat of communism and the threat of republicanism were one and the same thing”.

From this period monarchy in Thailand became more than just an institution. It legitimised an ideology of submission and servility that lives on today [\[1\]](#).

Under this royalist-military regime the erasure of Thailand's republican tradition from official history was completed.

Following the routing of the Communist Party of Thailand and the end of the Cold War the last traces of republican political thinking were expunged. As a result a generation of Thais have been estranged from their country's republican tradition.

The political conflict that erupted in 2005 between Thaksin and the palace has now entered its eleventh year with no resolution in sight. Royalists repeatedly accuse the Thaksin forces of seeking to lom jao - "overthrow the monarchy". Despite this, or perhaps because of it, pro-Thaksin parties have repeatedly won free elections.

The mainstream pro-Thaksin forces have consistently denied they have a republican agenda. For obvious reasons surveying republican sympathies in Thailand today is impossible. Yet despite the intense royalist indoctrination of the Bhumibol era it would surely be naïve not to imagine that at least some of them may draw inspiration from Thailand's long republican tradition.

Patrick Jory

COMMENTS

[...]

Lleij Samuel Schwartz

20 JULY 2016 AT 2:12 AM

"Even the word "constitution" has been sacrificed, since placing the king "under" a constitution violates Buddhist spatial norms about the proper place of the king."

I wonder if Dr. Jory would be kind enough to expand upon this. By "Buddhist" does he mean Thai Buddhism? Theravada as a whole? All of Buddhism? And from what source are "Buddhist spatial norms" formulated?

In short, the claim that Buddhist norms entail some sort of despotism or absolute monarchy is strange to me considering Buddhism developed in a milieu closer to the classical Greek city-states, where the Shakyas founded an oligarchic republican state known as the Śākya Gaṇarājya. If Śuddhodana is described as a "king", we can only thank the unfamiliarity of Silk Road translators in other lands with the concept of an elected archon.

Patrick Jory

20 JULY 2016 AT 4:49 PM

Thanks for the comment. NM puts a limit on article length, so one can't elaborate on important topics. By Buddhism, yes, I meant Thai Buddhism. By spatial norms, simply that Buddhist monarchs, as beings of supreme merit, cannot be placed "under" a constitution which enshrines the rights of the people, who by definition are beings of low merit. Here there is a clash between the Thai Buddhist theory of monarchy, and Western enlightenment ideas of political and legal rights. I talk

about this point in my book, *Thailand's Theory of Monarchy*:
<http://www.sunypress.edu/p-6222-thailands-theory-of-monarchy.aspx>

On the second point, yes, I do think that Buddhism has been used in the service of despotism and absolutism.

John Smith

21 JULY 2016 AT 10:03 AM

A Buddhist monarch isn't a absolute ruler in the usual sense. Even a 'Cakkavattin' universal monarch is subject to divine law (Dhamma). In theory, Buddhist monarchs are also of a lower status than monks.

polo

20 JULY 2016 AT 4:37 AM

What's the aim here? Saying the country has had republican thinkers is not at all the same as having a republican "tradition". That England had the Cromwell interregnum nearly 4 centuries ago does not mean that they have a republican "tradition". In fact, it sort of proves that they don't have a republican tradition. Ditto for Thailand. The best thing that Jory can say is that there have always been republican thinkers in the country, and that their numbers have always grown when the monarchy is seen as the least oriented toward the people and democracy. And that should be the point.

Patrick Jory

20 JULY 2016 AT 2:13 PM

Tradition is something that is handed down the generations. If you read Natthaphon's excellent edition of the writings of "Mor Leng" and others involved in the 1912 failed coup against the monarchy, the conspirators were honoured by Pridi following the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy for laying the groundwork for what the People's Party finally achieved. If you read Reynolds' "Thai Radical Discourse" he makes the excellent point that movements of the Left from the 1950s onwards defined themselves in relation to Pridi. Red Shirt activists as well as left-liberal academics take much interest in the events of 1932. In other words this is a tradition.

This is the sense in which I meant that there is a republican "tradition" in Thailand. I also noted that a generation of Thais had become estranged from this tradition since the end of the Cold War.

On republicanism in Britain, I like Bageot's description from his book, *The English Constitution*, written in the 1860s, that in Britain "a republic has insinuated itself beneath the folds of a monarchy". Britain was a "disguised republic". That was in the 1860s. Today it's even more republican with a celebrity royal family.

R. N. England

20 JULY 2016 AT 10:13 PM

I don't think polo understands Britain at all. The last 300 years of British political history is dominated by the rise of the republican tradition and its de facto victory over monarchism. What is

called constitutional monarchy has monarchy only as a facade. The only politically meaningful words the monarch is allowed to utter in public are decided by the parliament. All that remains of monarchy is a pantomime of bows, curtsies, and excruciating small talk. But I think it could be argued that the republican tradition itself has now become a facade, as the shopkeepers of little England retake the nation, and the people abandon the last of their civic responsibilities to modern Toryism- the absolute rule of money.

Patrick Jory

21 JULY 2016 AT 9:14 AM

I think the last part of your post is "on the money" for the advanced economies. The monied elite, who go to the same schools, universities, live in the same suburbs, eat at the same restaurants, go to the same holiday resorts, and whose children marry each other, are a kind of new aristocracy.

John Smith

21 JULY 2016 AT 9:53 AM

Elizabeth II blocked a parliamentary bill in 1999 by refusing consent. She is immune to both civil and criminal prosecution. Crown assets are also protected, as are her household staff. No legal action of any kind can take place in her presence, or in any of her residences. She also owns all the swans, sturgeons, dolphins and whales in UK waters.

Prince Charles, as Duke of Cornwall pockets the assets of anyone in the Duchy who dies intestate and his estates are not subject to any legislation of any kind. If he wished, he could even legally detonate nuclear weapons in Cornwall.

chris b

21 JULY 2016 AT 8:39 PM

He does not pocket the assets of anyone who dies intestate. Only of those who die intestate AND have no living relatives.

Chris Beale

20 JULY 2016 AT 10:42 PM

The question of "THAI Buddhist tradition" is an interesting one, especially in view of the fact that the LAO monarchy employed similar indoctrination techniques of subordination and servility, but were overthrown. Today, of course the Lao PDR official position is : that there exists no contradiction between Buddhism and Lao Republican "Marxism". And the question still remains to be answered : how much do the majority of Lao people - who actually live on Thailand - NOW see themselves forcefully first and foremost as "Thai", Royalist, Lao, Republican, or some sort of in-between Thaksinite lao khao strange brew mixture. Only time will tell.

Patrick Jory

21 JULY 2016 AT 3:41 PM

The question of the relationship between Buddhism and republicanism is an interesting one. Of course, modern republicanism emerges out of the Enlightenment tradition, as well as its classical

origins in ancient Greece and Rome. This is of course why republicanism can be criticized by conservatives as having foreign origins not “suitable” for the Thai context. Pridi and others tried to develop theories of Buddhist socialism, but the republican element was not pronounced. As far as I know, there is no real attempt to develop a Buddhist theory of republicanism that might be comparable to, say, Khomeini’s theorization of the “Islamic republic” in Iran. But even Khomeini was actually heavily influenced by Western political philosophy.

John Smith

21 JULY 2016 AT 6:33 PM

As they are interdependent, it doesn’t matter whether the ruler is a monarch or an elected parliament. If the populace lack virtue and merit the quality of their leaders will reflect this fact.

If a monarch genuinely embodies the virtues of a Dhammaraja then they become a kind of holy man of worldly affairs. They would therefore be entitled to use wrathful measures when required for the good of the people (Buddhadasa’s ‘righteous despotism’). However, the virtues of a sacred king are equivalent to those of an arahant, so it is not very likely to occur. In the case of ordinary kings with ordinary virtue, they can be removed when required, just as in the West. The preference for monarchy in Buddhism is to leave the door open for potential Dhammarajas, even though they are very unlikely to occur, especially in a degenerate age. Apart from this traditional preference, Buddhism is naturally very socialist.

Patrick Jory

21 JULY 2016 AT 9:30 PM

I think actually in Buddhism, at least Thailand’s Buddhist tradition, it does indeed matter if the ruler is a monarch or an elected parliament. This relates to the current political conflict.

According to the doctrine of merit, “the people” have low merit, while the ruler, princes, officials, have high merit. Men have higher merit than women. The powerful conservative idea in Thailand today of rule by “*khon di*” derives partly from this doctrine (that’s why they are so intensely loyal to the monarch, since this whole moral-political order depends on him).

But an elected parliament overturns the ideal order of things, since in a republic, with a representative parliament, low merit people rule over high merit people. “Bad people” rule over “good people”. The King made a famous speech to the Village Scouts in the 1970s precisely on this topic, which is endlessly quoted even today. Every Thai person knows it
(“.....” ...)

It’s of course true that historically you can have “bad” kings (ie. low merit, failing *barami*), but the solution is to replace them with a good King, not a republic.

That’s why “*prachathipatai*”-democracy is incompatible with monarchy, as the early Thai dictionaries correctly understood.

The modern conservative idea that the people are ignorant or stupid also derives partly from this doctrine. Gray discusses this point in her great thesis. Because of their superior morality, derived from their good deeds, the King and other high merit people can see and understand things which low merit people can’t. They are mired in delusion and ignorance. So government needs to be entrusted to people who can see clearly and understand things. Of course, the epitome is the Buddha, who understands everything, because of his absolute moral purity, that was built up, over countless incarnations. “Enlightenment” is really a totalitarian doctrine: the idea that one being has

total knowledge, and his authority (power-knowledge as Foucault would say) is based on that.

Kings, as bodhisattas, or future Buddhas, as beings of immense merit (*barami*) according to this doctrine, also have immense intellectual powers. You can see the legacy of this theory in the way the King and members of the royal family are lauded in state propaganda as geniuses in various fields, or how the modern disciplines like history, medicine, law, etc. were “fathered” by Thai princes. It sounds funny and bizarre to us today, but there is in fact a serious Buddhist intellectual foundation to this idea.

So the political, moral, and intellectual order are closely related.

In this way it's quite clear that at the level of theory, Buddhism lends itself very well to despotic rule. In practice of course a lot of other factors come into play. But the modern historical experience of the four Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, would seem to bear this out.

John Smith

22 JULY 2016 AT 2:39 AM

Modern Thai Buddhism contains some serious distortions of Buddhist doctrine. Thailand's elite are not actually putting into practice any Buddhist doctrines, any more than the West is spreading 'democracy' around the world. Just because they prefer to dress their despotism in pseudo-Buddhist clothing does not make this an inherent quality of the Buddhist religion.

Politicians achieve power by their force of merit, just like those born into a royal family. However, this is no guarantee of a continuation of their past virtue or even of their present good fortune. Thailand may have little choice but to continue with their bogus mandala/galactic polity but this is again not an inherent aspect of Buddhism. Any political system that upholds morality and serves the greater good is compatible with Buddhism.

One of the distortions that is common in modern Thai Buddhism is to confuse merit and accomplishment. Merit is simply potential momentum, like being born with a full tank of petrol and this is not the same as actually driving somewhere. So even the most meritorious monarch can have no special abilities unless they also pursue a spiritual practice, equivalent to that of a forest hermit.

Lastly, the achievement of fully enlightened Buddhas is not 'knowledge' or 'intellectual power', it is awakening into a state of perfection which exists in all living creatures. Their purpose is simply to guide others to this ultimate freedom. This hardly seems like a 'totalitarian doctrine'.

Guest

22 JULY 2016 AT 1:17 PM

Buddhism, like other religions, also is subject to different interpretations. Unfortunately, in Thailand, the elites and the palace's propaganda machine sabotage the true teaching of the Buddha for its own benefit.

Mikel

21 JULY 2016 AT 1:49 AM

Very Good information. this should be made public to the European Union. So, that All Citizens there would understand what Thailand is really all about

polo

21 JULY 2016 AT 4:27 AM

RN England simply points out the reality of constitutional monarchy in the modern age: the monarchs are symbols and governments and the societies mostly behave as republics. The fact is, though, that there are three things here, not two — absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy (however active or inactive the monarch) and republic. If “republican” is defined as “no monarchy at all” then Britain doesn’t have the tradition, in the way I spoke about it; its tradition is constitutional monarchy. (Jory’s explanation makes it clearer he refers to handed-down ideology, not the practice of, if I can simplify.)

R. N. England

21 JULY 2016 AT 2:15 PM

The other extreme of constitutional development is Thailand’s fake constitutional monarchy, where Bhumibol has kicked one constitution after another into the fire. He is probably set to approve the next one, insofar as he is capable, because it disenfranchises the Thai electorate, who dared to re-elect a prime minister he thought he had the right to depose. It could be argued that he did that out of personal vanity, but it was a vanity fed for many years by the grovelling snake Prem and others. There was a pressing need to return power to his impatient toadies, whose bank balances were being threatened, both by the rise of the Thaksin clique, and by the evolution of less corrupt constitutional practices.

All this provides a good lesson on absolutism. The absolute monarch also acts largely on advice, but the power to give it is diffused through the clique that has managed to attach itself to the monarch, and down through the hierarchy of crawlers beneath. Absolutism is the form of government that is natural to a stratified society.

Chris Beale

22 JULY 2016 AT 12:55 AM

I don’t see the point of Jory’s Khomeini red herring (note : “red”). This might have some relevance to Pattani. But it’s’ almost totally irrelevant to the rest of Thailand. What on earth is Jory talking about here ?

Patrick Jory

22 JULY 2016 AT 9:54 AM

Thanks for this comment because it gives me a chance to mention one of my favourite hobby-horse themes. I would almost say that Thailand shares more similarities with Iran than with any other country – especially the historical experience of their monarchies in the twentieth century, but even dating back further than that.

But my reason for mentioning Khomeini is that, for every old country with a monarchy that is centuries or millenia old, republicanism presents an intellectual problem. How can you fit it into the indigenous tradition, which has known only monarchy? Well “revolution” is one way of doing it, an apocalyptic idea of entering an entirely new age. Eg. France after 1789, or the Khmer Rouge’s “Year Zero” in Cambodia after 1975. Muslim countries faced the same problem, eg. ending the Caliphate for Turkey. A massive intellectual rupture. Where Khmeini is interesting (and others like Ali

Shariati), is that they try to develop a theory of republicanism which can be integrated into the Shia Islamic tradition. Read his “Islamic Government”, or the Islamic Republic’s Constitution, or Shariati’s work. Even though Western political philosophy is very useful and influential, it’s not enough, hence the attempt to develop a Shia Islamic republicanism to justify the removal of a Shah and the imperial system, which could be constructed as dating back to Xerxes et al. in the 5th and 6th centuries BCE.

In the Thai case, as the most advanced Theravada state in the world, there has not been the same attempt to try to integrate republicanism with Thailand’s intellectual tradition, predominantly Theravada Buddhism. Basically, Thai republicans reference the French and Russian revolutions (to a much lesser extent England’s “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, and Western political philosophy almost exclusively. I think this is a problem for contemporary republicans as it’s easy to accuse them of “importing” a Western political idea that is “not suitable” for Thailand’s situation. It’s harder to dismiss if you can show that Thailand has a “republican potential” based on its own intellectual tradition.

So, maybe Thailand needs a Khomeini!

John G.

22 JULY 2016 AT 3:45 AM

There is an article in the December issue of *Art & Culture Magazine*, “รัฐธรรมนูญไทย: สัญลักษณ์ที่ถูกบิดเบือน” (The Thai Constitution: A Distorted Symbol, 2558). It is worth a read, if you can find it. The article makes it clear that the constitution, a reification of republicanism, was for a while a key symbol manipulated by post-revolutionary nationalist governments to claim legitimacy. It was used in this way in the absence of a king — my interpretation — in effect as a substitute for a king. So that was pretty radical, in today’s terms.

That it didn’t take hold in popular imagination is perhaps attributable to the lack of cosmological fit between the notions of constitution and monarch, as Dr. Jory suggests. It is also surely abetted by the total disregard for the fact of existing constitutions on the part of an 80 year parade of coup leaders. Also, recognizing that it was the image, not the fact, of republicanism that was what was being manipulated, it became clear in the mid 1950s that the monarchy had returned as a viable symbol of nationhood, one that carried no implicit challenge to the existing status quo.

Patrick Jory

22 JULY 2016 AT 10:04 AM

Thanks. I agree that it is a very interesting article. Actually this point relates to my reply to Chris Beale. Because republicanism is foreign to most Thais, apart from the Western-educated elite, how can a nationalist government “sell” the idea to a Buddhist population? By turning it into a sacred symbol that must be worshipped, in the manner of a Buddha image. Clumsy and not so effective, but in a way you can feel for the new govt. in its attempt to popularise this new political idea. This gulf between a tiny, Western-educated nationalist elite, and their religiously-inclined populations is a problem you see repeated all over the postcolonial world.

Patrick Jory

22 JULY 2016 AT 1:42 PM

Rep to “Guest”: there will be endless debates about what “the true teaching of the Buddha” is. In

practice it's an intellectual resource which lots of different people can use for different agendas. But the Buddhist doctrines I talk about here are very old, widely held, and deeply ingrained in the Thai Buddhist tradition. I discuss this at length in my "Thailand's Theory of Monarchy" book.

As an admittedly gross generalization, I think much of the study of Buddhism, especially Thai Buddhism, tends to suffer from a comparatively uncritical starting point, especially when compared with the academic study of other religions. If Buddhism is associated with unpleasant things like despotism or violence it has been "misinterpreted". It's a distortion of "true Buddhism", which is all about peacefulness and awakening and enlightenment. This starting point is not always helpful for understanding how this religion actually works in practice.

John Smith

22 JULY 2016 AT 8:07 PM

'True Buddhism' is in accordance with the fundamental teachings of Buddha. There are some fuzzy areas around the edges but every Buddhist agrees on the core principles. I know that academic Buddhology likes to use the 'many interpretations' tool, but this is not actually the reality for Buddhists.

When Christianity is turned to violence and war and Buddhism is turned to slavery and elitism it is pretty clear that they have departed from the script.

The author is quite correct in his conclusions about the contemporary political situation in Thailand and I am grateful for this interesting article. My only concern is the confusion between Thai state 'Buddhism' (post 1902) with actual Buddhism. The former is a modern distortion that is only nominally related to the ancient tradition.

Patrick Jory

23 JULY 2016 AT 12:20 PM

Arguably Buddhism has always been "elitist", especially compared to Christianity (a Jewish carpenter's son challenges the Roman Empire) or Islam (an illiterate merchant challenges the Arab elite).

The Buddha was the son of a king. In the popular Jataka stories, where most SEAsian Theravadins traditionally learnt much of their Buddhism, the bodhisatta-hero of the story is almost always a prince, king, brahman, or merchant. As I've argued, the theory of merit easily lends itself to elitism. Powerful and wealthy people can make more merit than poor people because they have greater resources at their disposal.

Re. "many interpretations", but isn't this precisely the reality of practising Buddhists? Apart from state Buddhism we have the Buddhadasa followers, the Dhammakaya, Santi Asok, the Northeast forest monk tradition, cults like the one around Luang Pu Thuat, and the myriad local Buddhist practices, which McDaniel talks about in his Lovelorn Ghost book. And that's just Thailand.

John Smith

23 JULY 2016 AT 8:09 PM

McDaniel is also one of my favourite authors. Although there are a few varieties of Thai Buddhism, and hundreds of varieties of Buddhism across the world, there is actually a surprising consensus

between them. If one were to ask a hundred different types of Buddhist whether something was correct and in accordance with the Buddha's teaching their answers would be remarkably consistent.

For example, the idea of a worldly military leader controlling the government of a monastic Sangha is incorrect for every variety of Buddhist.

The merit of a poor farmer, who can ill afford to spare any food, giving a humble donation to a wandering forest monk, immeasurably exceeds that of a Bangkok celebrity donating millions on camera to a celebrity abbot.

Unfortunately, this distinction is lost on many Thais. A century of state interference has replaced the great depth and diversity of Thai Buddhism with a moribund uniformity.

I accept that Buddhism was originally pitched at the Indian warrior caste, and later to the merchants, but I would argue that this was to break the monopoly of Brahmanism. Buddha discarded his royal heritage for the superior life of a penniless ascetic, so I dispute the assertion that Buddhism is uniquely elitist. I suspect the answer is that all religions are inherently elitist.

R. N. England

22 JULY 2016 AT 2:41 PM

If we cut through to what makes a constitution and a king polar opposites, we should ask, "What is the difference between people who are inclined to obey abstract public rules, and those who are inclined to obey a king or patron?" The answer is literacy. Those who read critically are more comfortable with abstract rules which can be carefully analysed and tested by anybody with the capacity to do so; and those who don't read critically are more likely to be swayed by the body language, vocal rhetoric, family connections, fancy dress, and personal power of an individual. It's the difference between text and television, email and Facebook, culture and non-culture. It's why lectures are a better medium for spreading crap than text, and why Trump appeals only to the functionally illiterate.

By encouraging literacy, the kings of Thailand have made their people wiser, but have set the clock ticking for the time when they become an obvious nuisance and need to go out and get a real job. It is a development that a wise king like Frederick the Great would have welcomed with all his heart. Bhumibol, on the contrary, has fought against the inevitable for the whole of his reign, which makes him the opposite. The time has come to stop admiring him for successfully advancing his own status, and to reflect on what that has done to his country.

Patrick Jory

23 JULY 2016 AT 10:36 AM

I'm not so sure this argument works. Thailand has had comparatively high rates of literacy for a long time, yet a rather despotic monarchy. Also, initially kings only wanted modern education for a small elite of royal officials. They were quite resistant to the concept of mass education (including education for women btw) for precisely the reason that a highly-educated population would upset the social order (absolutely right).

The real expansion of education in Thailand takes place after 1932, I.e. after the end of the absolute monarchy and the establishment of a nationalist, semi-republican regime. By the time the monarchy is "restored" in the 1950s the argument for mass education has been won - and there are

international pressures from Western international agencies like UNESCO etc. as part of the US-led discourse of “development” to educate the populations of “developing countries” to boost economic growth.

Lastly, it is true that in Thailand for a long time governments and the King discouraged the English language (except for the elite), and heavily promoted the Thai language. One of the legacies of this policy is the comparatively low standards of proficiency in English in Thailand compared to many developing countries. “Thai Language Day” was set up during the period of the restoration to campaign for the importance of Thai to national survival. The King gave a lot of attention to “Thai language day”. He gave many speeches about how important it was to preserve the Thai language, otherwise the nation would *“lom jom”* (“collapse”. This word occurs frequently in the kings speeches. It is a good example of how he conflates dangers to the monarchy with dangers to the nation). There is an obvious political agenda here. Royalist regimes can control discourse in the Thai language, but they can’t control the English language, well, not very much.

Actually, one of the reasons for the current political crisis is the role of the English language in Thai political discourse. Nowadays the ease of international travel for all Thais, not just the elite, + Thai workers overseas, Thai wives of foreigners living overseas, the jump in the numbers of Thais going overseas for their education, etc. know and read English better than ever. The Internet has put this process of engagement with the English language on steroids. When the international media was very pro-monarchy, before 2006, the royalist regime actually benefitted because the international media in a way did their propaganda for them. Their stories would all begin with “Thailand’s deeply revered King...” or “Buddhist kingdom”, as though these were good things. The general presumption in the Western media was that Thailand was a constitutional monarchy like the UK, but much more exotic and much more popular. But since the international media has turned quite viciously against the monarchy Thailand’s openness is now a big problem for the royalists. That is one reason for the rise in anti-Western, anti-US sentiment among the Thai elite, who used to be among the most pro-Western, pro-US elites in the developing world.

R. N. England

23 JULY 2016 AT 1:55 PM

Thanks for a detailed and persuasive comment. I still think the argument about critical literacy applies generally, but with modifications and limitations for different régimes.

The excessively authoritarian Thai public education system reflects the tight control of the elite. It has crippled science for Thais because they can’t think inductively: they can’t invent new rules to fit data because inventing rules is strictly for their masters, never for them. Rules are always handed down from above.

There is a link here between science and democracy which explains why they evolved together. In science, everybody is allowed to have a go at finding rules to fit the data. It’s whether the rule works when tested by others that counts, not the status of the person who proposes it. In a democracy that is working well, an electorate which can think critically has to be persuaded by evidence which laws (rules) operate best, and gives their elected representatives the job of shaping them.

Patrick Jory

23 JULY 2016 AT 10:09 PM

In my time in the university system in Thailand I was very impressed by the scientists. I worked with a few of them closely. Of course, like in many places they tend to be better funded than academics in

the humanities and social sciences. But their disciplines also have the advantage of being less subject to political limitations on what you can research and teach than the humanities and social sciences. I mean, lese majeste has no effect on what you can research in tropical medicine or molecular biology, for example, but it severely handicaps the study of history, political science, philosophy and law.

Also, as is well known, the “*keng*” students at school are under heavy pressure to choose science stream subjects, due to the way that science is seen as crucial to national economic development. So you get smart, self-confident science students graduating from school and university who often have quite limited social and political awareness. The political views of each discipline can differ, interestingly. For some reason, people in medicine seem to be the most conservative.

In recent years this has started to change. The value of a more rounded education is better recognised than before. Many Thai educationalists are well-aware of these kinds of problems in the education system. But like everything else, the political conflict of the last decade makes implementing change difficult.

Chris Beale

23 JULY 2016 AT 3:23 PM

Well a big thank you to Professor Jory for clarifying what he's on about re. Khomeini. That's certainly an interesting exercise : compare and contrast Iran to Thailand. Mossadegh to Pridi ? There's actually a lot of angles to Jory's very insightful comparison. From a historical point of view – for starters – Khomeini's rabid anti-socialism (anti-Marxism) would have to be factored in, and terms such as republicanism (of WHAT VARIETY ?) very clearly defined. During the Cold War it was noted by scholars such as Frank Knopfelmacher that Islam appeared to be THE most Marxist-resistant thought system (ditto socialist resistant ?), but Khomeini adapted this in a HIGHLY CONSERVATIVE republican direction, coming to power on the one thing the vast majority of Iranians could agree on, i.e. Islam. I would n't think Buddhism is anything like as resistant to either republicanism per se, or its' socialist variants, given how many Buddhist majority countries have adopted either outright republicanism or very constricted constitutional monarchy. Plenty of food for thought in Jory's very intriguing comparison.

Patrick Jory

23 JULY 2016 AT 7:39 PM

I love the comparison between Mossadegh and Pridi. To be honest I hadn't thought of that one. Thanks, it makes my Thailand-Iran theory stronger hahaha. Jit Phumisak as an Ali Shariati, both leftist anti-regime intellectuals murdered by the regime. Btw Khomeini was more of a rabid anti-monarchist than an anti-socialist. The Shah had eliminated most of the Left anyway. It's really after the Revolution that Khomeini moves against the remainder of the Left, many of whom had supported the Revolution. Ali Shariati was heavily influenced by Marxism and if you look at the Iranian Constitution brought in after the Revolution (you can google an English translation easily) there are a lot of socialist ideas dressed up as Islam.

I'm not sure any particular religious tradition is more suited to republican regimes. In the case of Sri Lanka and Myanmar their monarchies were abolished by the British, so they don't count. The cases of Laos and Cambodia are complicated because of the Indochina War.

In fact I think Muslims have gone much further than Buddhists in theorising republicanism. Muslim republicans often reference the period of the first four “Rightly Guided Caliphs” who were chosen by

the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet as an example of a democratic / republic society. Then it gives way to dynastic monarchy of the Ummayyad Caliphate. Khomeini used to compare the Shah to Muawiyah, who he held responsible for the death of Hussein (a key figure in Shia Islam) and the establishment of the Ummayyad Caliphate, which in an Islamic republican reading is despotic monarchy.

Modern monarchies in the Middle East survived in large part due first to the protection of the British Empire, then the Americans – again, similar to the Thai experience. This is actually one of the root causes of modern political Islam – which is republican. Yikes.

Dave Carter

28 JULY 2016 AT 1:23 AM

“Yet despite the intense royalist indoctrination of the Bhumibol era it would surely be naïve not to imagine that at least some of them may draw inspiration from Thailand’s long republican tradition.”

An interesting historical artifact, but it seems unlikely that anybody in Thailand will be inspired given that it’s against the law even to discuss these matters openly.

P.S.

* <http://www.newmandala.org/thailands-hidden-republican-tradition/>

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* Patrick Jory’s new book, “Thailand’s Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jataka and the Idea of the Perfect Man”, has just been published by SUNY Press. For details, including how to order the book, see this link: <http://www.sunypress.edu/p-6222-thailands-theory-of-monarchy.aspx>

For the full article on which this summary is based see, Patrick Jory, “Republicanism in Thai History”, in Maurizio Peleggi ed., *A Sarong for Clio: Essays on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Thailand—Inspired by Craig J Reynolds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 97-117.

Footnotes

[1] Patrick Jory, available on ESSF (article 39417), [History: Understanding Thailand’s Monarchy Problem](#).