

# Thailand: Why I don't love the King? - "As soon as I could open my eyes I saw the picture of the King..."

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## *Why I don't love the King?*



### *Junya Yimprasert*

Why are Thai people issuing orders to the Royal Thai Army to kill Thai people? Why is the Royal Thai Army being engaged to prevent Thai people from expressing their legitimate grievances on the streets of their capital - the City of Angels?

What and where are the root cause of the madness that has overtaken Thailand at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

To all conscious Thai, and to all non-Thai people, the recent issuing of orders that allow Thai to kill Thai was just further shocking evidence of the impact of 64 years of 'Love the King' propaganda.

After the military crackdown on red-shirt protesters in April (2010) and the street battle that

followed, Thailand's mainstream TV channels screened interviews of Bangkok people crying for their burning buildings and largely ignored the scenes of human carnage in the streets, where 88 people lay dead.

There came no words of sorrow for the bereaved from the Prime Minister, his government or their followers. It became clear to the whole world that in deed their material values stood above their concern for the lives of ordinary Thai. The state violence that killed 88 people in April was a terrible exposure of Thailand's class divisions.

There are 3.4 million Thai Face Book users comprised mainly of the educated elite. Although the Thai Government has blocked tens of thousands of websites critical of the monarchy, Face Book stays open as a forum for each side to throw accusations at each other. Here's a classic statement from the 'Protect the King' camp:

"We knows who we are. We insist for our monarchy. We are not dependency like other countries in Asia, bcoz we have king. We are proud that we have a most sincere king. The money of our king use for his people. He exemplify to not extravagant and etc. I prefer to respect my King instead of respect the greedy political. I shall better ask you why you keep coming to the topic relevant of Thailand which was raised by Thai people???"

Since 2008 the King of Thailand has been nominated by Forbes as the richest royal in the world, owning property worth 35 billion USD.

In a ceremony to accept a Best Supporting Actor Award on 16 May 2010, in the middle of the military crackdown, a well-known Thai actor said (in Thailand):

*" . . if you hate the father, don't love him anymore, please leave, because this is the home of the father, this is the land of the father. I love the King, and I believe that every one of us here love the King, we are the entire same colour. My head is belonging to the King."*

This magical speech was followed immediately by an internet attack on another actor - for walking-out in the middle of the speech. Also at the ceremony, his unfortunate daughter had been captured on TV not singing a song with lyrics composed by the King. She was also attacked. Overnight both father and actress daughter were bombarded with accusations and contract cancellations, and pressured into stating that they were loyal monarchists.

The speech was then printed on the website of the Centre for Resolution of the Emergency Situation, the Government set-up that issued the orders to use live ammunition against the people.

Just recently an 18-year-old student was refused entry into two government-funded universities, because she participated in red-shirt demonstrations and criticised the monarchy. An internet witch-hunt was mounted to coral this girl into bowing before a picture of the King. She was rescued from physical danger by a scholarship to study abroad.

When students who have passed exams to enter a university are prevented from doing so, hunted down and victimised, because they dare criticise the King, it is necessary to speak-out even more strongly.

These are but minor examples to illustrate the huge madness that is engulfing the Thai public at the start of the this century.

All people have their limits and I write this letter to let people know why it is becoming impossible for me to love the King.

## **Born to love the King and Queen**

Old pictures of the young and beautiful King and Queen, and of the prince and princesses, were always on the empty wall of our family's house. No matter how many times we had to build or rebuild our home, these pictures were always with us, and always returned to the highest spot of the wall. They were still there on the empty wall when I last visited my home, colours faded and stained at the corners by rain drops.

As soon as I could open my eyes I saw the picture of the King, as soon as I could understand a few words I was told that we must love the King and Queen because they are our King and Queen.

We were made to believe they are the greatest of all Kings and Queens, and in those days TV was saturated with programmes about royal projects and charities to prove it. No one in my family had ever met the King, but we all loved the King because everyone said he is a good King.

When I was very small we used to go to the neighbours to watch TV. My grandmother and mother were addicted to the regular 8 pm news about the Royal Family. Making sure they watched the royal news was part of their code of practice for being a proper citizen. When the Government said light a candle for the King they did so without question, and they really did love the handsome King and the beautiful Queen, the young prince and the princesses, and never stopped commenting on how graceful they looked. Never-the-less, as small children we couldn't wait for the royal programmes to pass, so we could continue watching the regular Thai soap-operas.

My village is an old, collective, rice-farming village of around 200 households. In the 1960s into the 1980s it was a very lively village. Everyone knew everyone and half the village were relatives. Almost everyone participated in everyone else's household ceremonies - from birth to death.

For nearly half the year our village was flooded and many houses were linked by shared, raised, wooden walkways. For us small children it was easy and fun to skip along from house to house without having to negotiate ladders. We could enter everyone's kitchen with ease and see what food they had, and we would eat together according to each other's ideas about how and what to cook. But usually there was not much, just rice, noodles, chillies, vegetables and fish. Because of the floods few houses in our village kept chickens. We had to buy almost everything on credit, and I don't remember having a whole egg just for myself before I entered secondary school.

The flooding meant that we could only cultivate one crop a year. During the floods we became fishermen. There were many local festivals and we travelled mainly in boats. We would spend days preparing food for the festivals and play our own music. Nowadays many of the festivals have disappeared and the simplicity, ceremony and ritual of those that remain have changed, with villagers contracting outside catering and hiring bands with dancing bikini girls.

The 1970s brought some improvements to our village. A dirt road was built to link us to the District Office, and with that there came electricity and a lot of dust. A canal and irrigation channels were dug to limit flooding of the fields. This enabled villagers to plant more than one crop a year, and four of my brothers and a sister now grow rice two and very occasionally three times a year.

At the end of 1990 the road was expanded and covered with asphalt, and less dust blew into our houses. The village did not receive a drinking water supply until the mid-90s. By the time the long-promised telephone line had reached some houses almost everyone had a mobile phone.

My village is 100 kilometres from Bangkok, but hundreds of kilometres away, up in the northeast, the same developments came later.

After the grain was sold and villagers had a bit of money, lines of vendors with baskets of this and that on their shoulders would pass through the village. Many walked from village to village selling all kinds of goods; mosquitoes nets, pots, pans and blankets - and pictures of the Royal Family.

I remember when my Grandma bought pictures of the King and the Queen, each in a flaming, gold-painted frame, and hung them with great pride in the high spot of her house. And I remember how my Mum was down-hearted because we couldn't afford to buy our own.

This is how I loved my village and how we 'loved' the King and Queen, long before I was able to think about the meaning of love.

Our love for the Royal Family was an unquestioning love, a tiny part of the great 'capital of love' that the Thai King and Queen have been so privileged to receive from the Thai people, and become accustomed to taking for granted - as if it were their divine right.

Aside from the fun we small children had with our big space to run around and big water to swim in, with 9 children my family struggled with the low price we received for our grain. In the early 60s my parents decided to move to the mountains 100 km to the north.

Here we worked to clear the forest until we had about 8 hectares of upland ready for planting the cash crops the Government was promoting, but my family had no luck. No matter which of the new cash-crops we planted (cassava, maize, soybean, peanuts, sunflower, cotton, sugar-cane etc.), according to the advice of the Government, by the time we were ready with our harvest the market price had fallen too low to make any profit.

As soon as I could walk and run I worked in the fields with my family. By modern standards what me and my brothers and sisters did would be regarded as child labour. By the time I was nine I was already the family cook and cleaner.

As it was for most farmers like us, the cost of seed, fertilizer, insecticide, farming equipment and general household maintenance meant we never had cash and that our family was never not in debt. We lived in an endless cycle of debt which only ever increased. We ate what the forest and streams could give us. All other items were bought on credit. Since the time when the Green Revolution spread through Thailand, the farming debt of small farm families has never stopped growing. These days the average debt of farming families in Thailand is around 6,000 Euro.

I was a weak and frequently sick child. My mother was constantly running with me to the doctors, actually just paramedics and nurses, but in our village we called them doctors. Then, finally, two of my sisters took me and my parents to the Sirirat Hospital in Bangkok, where both were working as cleaners. It was here, in 1977, when I was 11 years old, that I was first examined by a real doctor, and diagnosed as having been born with Thalassemia, a common genetic ailment. My family had never heard of it, nor one can only suppose had our village 'doctors', and it amazes me to this day that I survived all the treatments they prescribed.

In those days there was not public health service. If a member of a poor family fell ill the cost of private clinics and hospitals often meant they had to sell their land. Many families were pushed into bankruptcy and destitution, and many still are, because few families dare as yet to place their loved ones in the hands of the 'free health-care' system.

When I was a child, Thai families, rich and poor, paid a lot of attention to courting the favour of government officers and politicians. For the poor this was especially important: one child in Government employ meant free medical services for their parents.

The two sisters who took me to their Bangkok hospital for my first proper check-up are real angels. Both had been working at the hospital, around the clock, since they were about 20, to pay for my own and my younger sister's education and ensure my parent's health care.

Often I criticised my Mum for being the most unorganised woman in the world, and that was true, she didn't know how to clean or wash clothes and she was not a good cook, but she was a very handy woman when it came to making nets, baskets and fishing gear, and also to planting. She was much better in the fields than my father, and with the fishing. My father was the opposite, he liked cooking and cleaning.

My mother was a kind and generous person, always giving to those who were poorer than us and always feeding the cats and dogs that came to the house, but, besides her addiction to chewing beetle-nut, she had a habit that often embarrassed the whole family. She could not stop herself chatting to complete strangers. As soon as she had sat down in a bus she would start talking to the person next to her. Most of her talk would be about how bright we were in school and, laughingly, about her drunken husband. None-the-less, whenever I or my younger sister, her ninth child, were sick, she was always there right beside us. She never left me alone in a clinic and often we stayed together over-night.

With people these days becoming increasingly hard and cold, when I look back I realise what a beautiful person my Mum was, with her ready, positive energy to connect with other people. For me, my Mum was and is the greatest mum in the world.

When the Government promoted the Queen to be the 'Mother of the Nation', just before the bloody, military crackdown in 1976, I was unable to think of her as a mother. The Queen was the Queen, but my Mum was the greatest woman in my life. This doesn't mean I didn't admire the Queen in all her glamorous dresses and jewellery. The media had long been attempting to proclaim her the most beautiful queen in the world and, since we had never seen any other queen, we had all come to believe that she was.

Well, surely it is not just me that thinks my own mum is the greatest mum in the world.

### **Communists will eat your liver and burn you alive!**

During my first and second year in school, two of my brothers, one sister and I, all four of us, would walk barefoot to and from our primary school, in all about 4 kilometres. The school formed a part of a small temple complex in the middle of the jungle. We walked everywhere barefoot. There was nothing special about that in those days, it was still common for most Thai to go barefoot and for most people throughout Southeast Asia.

When we sold our land in the highlands and moved back to the rice fields I was in my third year in school. That was in 1976.

At my new school we were taught the King's songs and made to feel proud of our talented King for composing such beautiful songs.

For an inter-school competition in 1977 or 1978, I remember we had to practice a couple of the King's songs, for weeks and weeks. When the day came my brother and I were dressed-up in traditional dress and went marching and dancing along a two kilometre dirt road, to a bigger school in a bigger community.

It was a long time ago but that day is vivid in my memory. The whole family was excited but we didn't have any money to prepare for the event, and we had no cooking oil either. So my sisters awoke early to squeeze juice from the flesh of some coconuts and boil it on the fire until the oil came out. With this they fried rice and egg for our lunch, which they wrapped beautifully in lotus leaves, but we went with some feelings of shame that we didn't have nice rice boxes. These days a rice lunch wrapped in lotus leaves might be considered cool, but at that time it was cause enough for kids like us to feel pangs of shame.

We were proud of our part in the activity and had fun with the song called 'We fight' (Rao su), which talks about fighting the enemy to death, but none of us understood what the song was all about.

From the age of seven or eight I was told to "Beware of communists" because "They are devils that will eat your liver and burn you alive", and that "If you are stubborn the communists will come and take you away". I remember how much I was afraid of 'communists' and how that fear entered my dreams.

In my secondary school, Pridi Phanomyong, the father of Thailand's democracy, was openly labelled a 'communist' by our social science teacher, and all events around his life were passed-over with as few words as possible.

Several years were to pass before I learnt that Pridi was no communist, that he was in fact Thailand's first champion of social welfare and social security, and that the Constitution produced by his Government in 1946 was the most democratic constitution that Thailand has ever seen, and that since the royalist coup that kicked-out his Government (in 1947) democracy in Thailand has done little more than stagnate.

I was also interested to learn that there are many countries where communist parties are an accepted part of mainstream life. Wow! How come my Government could get it so wrong?

### **Lucky number 7**

Most of my sisters and brothers did really well in primary school, but the family was too poor to send nine children to high school. Besides, the youngest couldn't be left alone without supervision and the elder ones had to look after them when the adults were out working.

Luck came to me, the seventh child. I was destined to become the first woman from my family and the first from the village to graduate from a famous university, but I didn't know that then.

In my last year in high-school I won a King's Competition Award for my Education Region. My family and school were exhilarated. My name was on the board reserved for students with the highest marks. I couldn't believe it. I had never thought of myself as intelligent. I was a shy, simple student, nothing special. I was dumbfounded. How was it possible that I had won such a big competition?

I managed also to pass the examination to enter the famous Silpakorn University. A couple of months into my first semester at Silpakorn I had to go to Bangkok to receive my King's Award. A senior teacher and my mother were to accompany me to the Palace and I was to receive the award from Princess Sirindhorn, the Crown Princess. My mother and the high-school were highly excited.

The teacher, my mother, one sister and I came together in Bangkok, at some Ministry of Education building, where we spent a full day practicing how to appear before a member of the Royal Family.

All went well with the ceremony. My school took my certificate and hung it on the wall of the Rector's Room, still the only such certificate to be awarded a child from my District Secondary. I received 2,000 Baht in a gold-coloured box, and my mother a picture of the Princess handing me the box. The picture was hung on our big empty wall for the neighbours and visitors. The box still sleeps in the wardrobe.

The expense of going to receive the Award was surely equivalent to my prize money, but the value to my family and the school was much greater, and that 2,000 Baht (Ministry of Education money) helped me through a couple of months at university.

## University

I was not long in university before I began to think about how much the students must be costing the state budget, and realising that only 5% of the student body came from poor families like mine.

It was in the Faculty of Arts, in the Department of Social Sciences and Development, that I learnt about social justice, and quite early on I understood that I must work for the poor, for the small farmers. It was here that I promised in my heart that I will dedicate my life to reducing the gap between the rich and the poor.

I was a very active student and took every opportunity I could to go out to the villages, and I travelled widely, to every region, learning about self-sufficiency, declining self-sufficiency and poverty.

It was Silpakorn that taught me that, in order to bring justice, harmony and development to our society, the privileged must stop exploiting privilege and lower their consumption. It was here that I realised we should all be working for the exploited and marginalised, for justice and equality, and here that I learnt about freedom and democracy, and developed my passion for working for the poor.

I was grateful for what I learnt at Silpakorn. When I heard it was my university that had refused to admit that 18-year-old girl, the university that had taught me why our society is divided by classes, I was shocked: my own beloved faculty refusing to admit a bright, female student because she practiced her right to freedom of expression! This came as a blow and yet another wake-up call.

The greatest gift of my life has been education, and I thank my family from deep within my heart for their decision to send me to school. I thank and cannot thank enough my parents and sisters and brothers - for starving themselves so that my sister and I could go to the university. I don't want more from my family.

## Uniforms

On entering university I found the Sotus Ceremony unnecessary. The SOTUS Ceremony (Seniority, Order, Tradition, Unity, Spirit) is becoming an increasingly common, and frequently ugly and cruel practice in higher education institutions in Thailand. It is designed to humiliate students and further accustom them to accepting hierarchical inequality.

I disliked the university uniform and rarely wore it. I felt disgusted that, though we were over 18 and had the right to vote, the university policy-makers supposed that we didn't know how to dress and that they knew what clothes were good for us.



More and more Thai universities and colleges have adopted rules governing what students may or may not wear, and many are forcing their students to wear uniforms, thus deepening and strengthening divides within the class system. What other country orders their university students to wear uniforms? In most countries not even primary school children are made to wear uniforms. Only in a country as hypocritical as Thailand could university authorities pretend that they know better than the students what students should wear for their own good.

The increasingly compulsory use of uniforms in Thailand goes hand-in-glove with the state machinery for suppressing freedom of expression, and freedom to think, analyse and generate new ideas.

No wonder the educated classes are the most royalist and most cruel, and most unable to identify and correct their own fallacies. No wonder they stand behind the military against their own people and encourage their Prime Minister to use live ammunition against the lower classes that dare set foot in their precious shopping centres.

I was told recently that I don't love the country, don't have faith in any Thai institutions and that I am not justified to call myself a Thai etc.

Thailand's so-called educated classes are making the mistake of linking the legitimate struggle of the poor for democracy and justice with not loving the King and 'anti-monarchy'. This is a serious, tragic and extremely dangerous mistake - the result of an education system that is deprived of good human reason.

Most of the clothes I wore during my four years in university were given to me by my sisters. My hair was cut by friends who learnt hair-dressing as a hobby. If I'm not mistaken I was to the cinema only once in my four years in university. I received money from one of my sisters, about 40% of her salary. This provided me with three simple meals a day and occasionally the bus fare to my hometown. Another 40% she gave to my parents. To be able herself to live she would take whatever extra work she could get. She is a bright woman, but being before me in age she had no chance to go to university. It was me, the seventh child, with elder brother's and sisters at work, who was the first to get that possibility, and I shall live with the guilt of this all my life.

Studying and living on a very tight budget I tried to work through every summer holiday, selling noodles or conducting field surveys for the professors. On three occasions I applied for and received a university stipend (2-3000 Baht) and managed to graduate in 1989. Who paid for my education? My poor family and the tax-payer.

### **Facing life as an activist**

For a serious student with no experience of sex, my first job was a tough one: to work as a research assistance for a PhD student on the 'Impact of tourism in Koh Samui'.

Koh Samui is the third largest island in Thailand, well-known to tourists and back-packers around the world, especially from Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia, as a sex paradise, not only then but still also today.

In 1989 Koh Samui was going through a critical period. Big hotel chains were moving-in to purchase coastal property, at a pittance, to build luxury resorts. The local farmers and fishermen were pushed to the mountains of the mainland, where they attempted to start again, for instance with growing coffee.



There were about 250 hotels and guesthouses in Koh Samui and my task was to go around interviewing local people and proprietors and their staff.

Da was my first friend on Koh Samui, a girl from the same Province as myself that had sold her virginity for 10,000 Baht. When I asked her why she answered quickly: "The poverty at home", the poverty that I knew so well.

Jan was a cook, a middle-aged woman well-connected to the bar owners. Like many women in Koh Samui she was searching for a foreigner to carry her away from her misery. She is a beautiful and generous woman, one of the most charming and honest women I have ever met. I will never forget her generosity and her efforts to guard me from the crazy tourists. When they insulted us with sentences like: "I can buy any women I want in Thailand", I would fight back: "Not true" I would yell.

Nui, a local bungalow-owner, was a 'good woman' who lived her life with pride and integrity. Her restaurant was one of our favourite hang-outs at the end of Lamai Beach. The busiest sex bars were at the other end, just a 10-minute walk, but only once did I manage to drag her there.

I moved around the bars talking to the bar girls, sometimes helping them with translating or writing letters in English. My English was not good but far better than theirs. If Jan and Da didn't find anyone they liked we would all hang around together. Some nights I would keep them company until early morning, and I have some beautiful memories of just the three of us lying on the beach after the noisy bars had closed, listening to the waves and talking about our lives and dreams while waiting for the sun to rise.

I wanted some experience of working in a bar myself, so Jan got me a job as a waitress in a lively bar with a boxing ring. After two days I quit because I couldn't stand seeing old sex-workers, who couldn't hook a customer, going onto the floor to fight each other for a 100 Baht. Two women fighting like enemies for a 100 Baht. What kind of life is that?

In 1990 the NGOs that studied the situation were stating that Thailand had over a million sex workers. The families of these poor girls took their money to build bigger and better houses and temples. So long as their daughters sent money they might still be welcomed home, but when they failed to send money, or find a foreigner that would send their parents money, the 'bad woman' stigma grew stronger and unbearable. I witnessed many girls that needed drugs and alcohol to perform their bikini go-go acts. Many had wounds on their wrists and arms, every slash a mark of deepening hatred.

The person I worked for got his PhD, and somehow I managed to escape the whole 8 months without losing my virginity.

These days Thailand's sex trade has a turn-over of 4 - 5 billion USD / annum and employs around 2.5 million workers. What kind of country lives on the body and soul of women and sex tourism?

After two month stay in Australia learning about democratic freedom with students from Sydney University, I took a job in Hong Kong with the Asian Migrant Centre, a regional NGO. My job there was to help Thai migrant workers who had run away from evil bosses report to the police, to file their complaints at the Hong Kong Labour Office, and to help women process new employment contracts at the Immigration Office, if they could find new employment. Sometimes I would find myself at police stations late into the night.

It was tough work, but once again I met many beautiful, hard-working women. Women who had been sacrificing their lives for years in Hong Kong to be able to send money to meet the never-ending demands of their families in Thailand - for a brother's education or motorcycle, for their father's

hospital bills or, even, for their nieces to go to school. Many of these women had never had a chance to start their own families, and the middle-aged women could only hope that, when they returned home for good, their brothers and family would take care of them.

I could not believe that a little over one year after leaving university I was in contact with thousands of Thai women who, for the sake of their families, were sacrificing their own lives and happiness to shoulder social responsibilities that had been classified as 'communist' by the Kingdom of Thailand since the 1940s.

## **Santhana**

Just here we can raise the story of Santhana, the 30-year-old woman from Northeast Thailand who was shot dead like a wild animal, and her boyfriend seriously wounded by military gunfire, when they were passing the Bangkok battle zone on 14 May this year (2010).

Santhana had worked in a garment factory in Taiwan for three years and then done another three years in Japan, all the while teaching herself, until she was able to get a job as a tourist guide for a Japanese company, and later as a shipping manager for an export-import company. She was a self-made woman shot by the Thai military in her peak of time. The family lost their breadwinner. By way of compensation they received 50,000 Baht (1,200 Euro) from the Palace. As usual, this family had no choice but to accord their loss to bad karma.

The story of Santhana is terribly familiar, and I was deeply angered when the Government labelled the 88 people it murdered on the streets of Bangkok last month, as armed, anti-monarchy terrorists.

In my 20 years of activism, I have met hundreds of thousands of women like Santhana, not just from Thailand but from dozens of other countries, wonderful women carrying huge responsibility for the well-being of their families, and the economy of their country.

After all our previous uprisings and bloody crackdowns, the bloody events of April-May this year, that saw 88 people murdered by our power elite, presents ghastly evidence of how the class system in Thailand has been allowed to develop unchecked.

## **Growing doubts**

In 1992 I participated in the Bloody May uprising. The sound of empty plastic drinking bottles beating on the asphalt of Ratchadamnoen street still echoes in my mind, a sound that chilled the heavens with the determination of the will of the citizenry to kick out dictatorship.

After 48 people had been shot dead by the Royal Thai Army, the uprising was ended through the intervention of the King, who gained popularity in being seen to talk down the military generals and protest leaders.

All were accorded amnesty. This is the customary practice in Thailand for solving political conflict - to seek, over the bodies of a few dead citizens, the forgiveness of the King. The King's word is the justice and that's it - no more talk of justice. The general that commanded the military that killed 48 people was pardoned and allowed to continue to live in luxury. Like all our previous tyrants, before and after, he, nor anyone else, was ever taken to a court of justice.

I began to feel seriously disturbed. Far, far behind time the people of Thailand were pleading, once

again, for participatory democracy, and what did they receive? 48 murdered working class heroes and a royalist Prime Minister appointed by the King (not just once but twice) - a CEO from the clothing business with a long record of union-busting. He was welcomed by middle-class academics and royalist NGOs. 1992 was yet another juncture in the institutionalisation of political corruption.

After 20 twenty years of working to lessen the gap between rich and poor all that could be observed was a continuous widening of the gap. And violent suppression of those who struggle for justice and democracy, or just think differently, appeared to be never-ending.

## **Destruction and chaos**

Once again in 2006 the tanks of the Royal Thai Army rolled bravely into Bangkok to rob Thailand of what little democracy it had managed to achieve.

The coup was hatched when Prime Minister Thaksin was in New York. He never returned to Thailand, but did he ever have any real interest in supporting participatory democracy? Immediately after the tanks rolled into Bangkok I sent out a statement condemning the coup, and participated in several anti-coup demonstrations. I protested the coup not through any interest in Thaksin, but because I felt that the coup was an insult to our struggle for democracy. And it was. Since 2006 we have seen zero democracy and nothing but non-stop, violent, political turmoil. [1]

If the last four years can be said to have a positive aspect it is that debate about Thailand's double-standards can never again be contained. Now out in the open the debate is stimulating a new, far more critical political consciousness. Despite the imposition of Emergency Laws and massive Government censorship, more than ever before, rural and urban workers are discussing the role of their monarchy and the involvement of the King, Queen, Palace and royal regiments in Thai politics.

Tens of thousands of web-sites have been blocked by the Government, although many have re-opened under altered addresses.

Under Thailand's draconian Lèse Majesté law (Article 112 of the Criminal Code), which states that: 'Whoever defames, insults or threatens the King, Queen, the Heir-apparent or the Regent, shall be punished (with) imprisonment of three to fifteen years.'

Many people are already facing 6, 10, and 18 year jail sentences for expressing their views on-line, and also in public places. The manager of the on-line newspaper Prachatai ([www.prachatai3.info](http://www.prachatai3.info)) was arrested. Out on bail she is facing some 50 charges, and websites have been created to follow these cases [2]

Alongside the official criminalisation of those who are critical, and their victimisation by the 'Love the King' and 'Protect the Monarchy' factions, open criticism of the role of the monarchy continues to grow. Millions have started to doubt that their love for their King is worth the insults and scars they receive in return.

## **What role for the monarchy in Thailand?**

Instead of trying to listen to their critics, the royalist Government and Palace institutions attempt to shut them down.

When I look at Thailand as a Thai and visit countries which retain a monarchy, and when I reflect on

the situation in Nepal, I cannot but feel amazed that the Thai royals do not learn from these examples.

I remember one dinner in a small restaurant in Oslo. A woman was leaving the restaurant and my friend said: "She's a princess". The woman drove herself away alone, nobody followed her. And again on a walk with friends I found myself in a beautiful garden. What a surprise, I was standing in a garden of the residential Palace with not a soldier in sight.

In Copenhagen I was walking with a friend past the Palace gate when the Crown Prince drove out, followed by one car. There was no road block to clear the traffic for his passage.

In Thailand, when members of the Royal Family are on the move, in Bangkok or to some royal destination like Chiang Mai, streets and foot-bridges are cleared by police for 10 minutes or even 30 minutes before the fleet of royal cars comes streaking through at twice the speed limit, a law unto themselves. We used to count how many cars. A convoy of 30 expensive cars, all the same colour, is quite usual for senior members of the Thai Royal Family.

Take the story of Bouquet in July 2009, a 6-year-old who died because she was delayed one hour by a royal road block on her way to hospital, because a member of the royal family was visiting a Spa. The father requested that the soldiers inform the princess that his daughter was very sick. His call was refused so he detoured to another road and found that blocked too. As his daughter lay dying in hospital, he wrote to the Samesky web-board. We all prayed for Bouquet but, as her father said, "She died so that a 'singer' could go to the spa".

On 13 October 2008 a civilian yellow-shirt protester, a woman that died fighting the Royal Thai Police defending Parliament House, was given a royal cremation attended by the Queen, the youngest Princess, the Privy Council, Abhisit & co., and much military top-brass.

In May 2009 the commander of an infantry division that died in the crackdown on red-shirt protesters on April 10 was also given a royal cremation, attended by the Queen and Crown Prince. The wife of the dead soldier was made an Advisor to the Prime Minister. The families of the 88 protesters who died were granted 50 000 Baht (1 200 Euro) by the Palace etc.

Where is there any justice in all of this? There is no justice in any of it.

There must be an independent investigation into Thailand's most recent state violence against civilians, and the investigation cannot stop at the Abhisit Government, the role of the monarchy in the crackdown, and in the four years of political chaos that preceded it, must also be investigated.

With all of the 'love' that the Royal Family claims, why is the Thai monarchy behaving in a such a paranoid fashion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Why does the Palace refuse to allow open discussion of how the Thai see the role of their beloved Monarch? Could it be that the Palace itself is so sunk in scandal that it is afraid to open the doors?

The fear of communism that pushed the Thai Royal Family into becoming strong allies with corrupt generals is understandable. Why Thailand fell into the USA's anti-communist war is well known.

Why the Royal Family befriended tyrants like Marshal Thanom, and why they helped him and others avoid criminal charges and provided them with soft beds and royal cremations is also understandable.

Why the Royal Family did not support Pridi Phanomyong, the father of Thai democracy, why in 1947

the Royal Family supported the general that kicked him out, why the Royal Family did not pardon Pridi, why the royal family did not allow him to return home as an old man, even if only to console his family - is not understandable.

If in 1973 Pridi's Economic Plan had been adopted as proposed, and not rejected as 'communist', Thailand would not now be facing, at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the ugly diversion of a medieval battle between the people and the monarchy. Thailand by now would be fully concentrated at all levels on the essential task of advancing democracy for sustainable development.

Pridi's Economic Plan was aimed at achieving a state of net happiness through development of cooperative activities, social welfare, state support for domestic, social economies, barter trade, equal education for all with maximum engagement of the rural work force, support for state enterprise, as well as taxation of the rich and the introduction of a people's wage etc.

Quite recently the [www.weareallhuman.net](http://www.weareallhuman.net) chat board reviewed two letters written by the King, one to Marshal Pibun and royalists after they had ousted Pridi, and the other to Marshal Thanom after he had staged the 1971 military coup. The 1947 coup destroyed the most democratic constitution Thailand has ever seen. It returned huge powers to the monarchy, and all Crown properties. Since 1947 Thailand has remained in the clutches of the Royal Thai Army. Why?

In Spain transition to democracy during the late 70s (after decades of dictatorship under General Franco that began in 1939 and ended with his death in 1975) was generating considerable animosity within the Spanish armed forces. This culminated in an attempted military coup on 23 February 1981. The coup was thwarted by an unambiguous television broadcast by King Juan Carlos, in the uniform of the Supreme Commander of the Spanish armed forces. He called on the public to support their legitimately elected Government. The leader of the coup was sentenced to 30 years in jail. The King's action led to a strengthening of Spanish democracy and to renewed respect for the monarchy.

In contrast, since 1947 the King of Thailand has personally approved 7 successful military coups.

At any time during the last 60 years the Royal Household of Thailand could have stood-up for the people's struggle for democracy and ended Thailand's endless string of military coups and violent crackdowns.

The violent crackdown by the Royal Thai Army on the people in April 2010 has pushed Thailand further down the slippery road to the ignoble status of 'failed state'.

It is long past time for the Thai to engage in wide-open public debate on the role of Thai royals, their Palace institutions and the huge military force they command, and on the problems that emerge from their absolute powers and extremely expensive absolute privileges, that absolutely do not promote the 'sufficiency economy' promoted by the King himself.

By opening real space for public criticism, the Royal Family could still rescue itself and become a real player in the work of preventing further domestic violence and bringing internal justice to Thailand - without the use of the military or para-military gangs, who can have no role in the civilian life of a country like Thailand in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Palace must allow all Thai people to freely air their feelings on what they feel about their monarchy and the Palace must order an end to the 'Love the King' and 'Protect the Monarchy' propaganda.

From the day I was born the Royal Family had my love, but slowly they have been losing that love. If the Palace makes me choose between loving the Royal Family and loving the Thai people I can only

choose the latter. Nothing and nobody can compete with my love for the people of Thailand.

When it comes to the institutions of monarchy there are issues that the public must be able to debate, without fear of years in prison, for example:

- v The wealth of the Thai King has been increasing steadily for the last 60 years. With property worth 35 billion USD, in 2008 Forbes anointed the Thai King with the title of Richest Monarch in the World. With the glaring gap between rich and poor in Thailand, the Thai public must be allowed to analyse and discuss the vast wealth of their monarchy .

- v During the last 20 years the Palace Budget has been increased 20 times, from 3 million Euro (141 million Baht) to 65 million Euro (2.6 billion Baht). (Note: The poor English Queen has hardly seen a rise in her Palace Budget in 20 years and has to manage with a meagre 8 million Euro.)

- v The use of the 150 million Euro (6 billion Baht) that is paid-out annually from the State Budget to finance Thailand's 'Royal Projects' must be subjected to public scrutiny, debate and evaluation.

- v Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code that covers Lèse Majesté must be removed for the good of the nation and of the monarchy.

- v The Privy Council's ability to intervene in Thai politics must be outlawed.

- v The Thai people do not need 60 military units with over 30,000 soldiers to guard a monarchy that claims all people love the Monarch.

In June this year, the Thai Ministry of Interior, specifically the Director-General of the Department of Provincial Administration, started a project entitled 'Volunteers to Protect the Monarchy', to recruit volunteers from villages across the country, including youth. The initial target is to raise 1,000 volunteers from each District.

The idea is to unify all people under the banner of His Majesty the King. Volunteers are to protect the monarchy with their lives and ensure that the King's philosophy of Sufficiency Economy is put into practice across the country.

On 8 June, the Director General presided over the opening ceremony of the project for the southern border provinces, in Yala, with the participation of over 2,000 people, including villagers and local officials. Identification cards were issued to representatives of volunteers from 33 districts and participants took an oath of allegiance before a photograph of His Majesty the King.

Needless to say assassination of village leaders who participated in the red-shirt demonstrations has already begun.

- v It is nothing less than sickening to witness that every time ordinary people attend meetings to bring worker's and villager's problems to the attention of the authorities their mouths are shut with statements from the authorities like: 'I am the servant of the King. I work for the King'. Such phrases are used by the authorities as a spiteful weapon to suppress the development of the people, the authorities that the people pay to serve them - not the King, who has more than enough servants. Use of such statements by municipal and government authorities prevents real discussion of real, necessary and urgent issues, and must be banned.

- v Many grass-root environment protection groups and local community development programmes point-out that if a project does not have a sign saying 'This project is under the patronage of this or that member of the Royal Family' they will not receive the co-operation of government officers, not

to mention financial support.

Without direct royal patronage, many local community development programmes and environmental protection initiatives are, in this way, conveniently ignored or outlawed by the authorities, however sensible and well-organised.

v The Royal Family has highly developed and sophisticated mechanisms for collecting huge sums of money from corporations and through public donations. All collections and donations to the Royal Family, and the use of collections and donations, should be transparent and accountable to the public.

v There are many other established, royal practices and customs that need to be reviewed and largely eradicated e.g. the Royal Family's expectation that public money will be used to block roads for their convoys of shiny cars; that people who go to a Charlie Chaplin movie must stand to bless the King before it starts; that millions of Baht from much needed local budgets must be spent on building temporary palaces for visiting royals; that when they meet the King or Queen they must crawl before their feet and recite some hocus pocus like: "May the power of the dust on the soles and the dust under the soles of your royal feet protect my head and the top of my head."

□ □

*'Tai-Fa-La-Onq-Thu-Lee-Pra-Bart-Pok-Klao-Pok-Karmom.'*

No person on this planet today is dust under the feet of any other person. Even the great Lord Buddha gave up his kingdom to be equal with everyone else.

These are some of the reasons that make it difficult for me to love the King.

The current 'Protect the Monarchy' mobilisation for a 'Sufficiency Economy' is leading us to civil war not peace. When will the monarchy and it's institutions be kind enough to accept, welcome and support our struggle for equal rights, justice, democracy, the results of free and fair elections and our basic rights of Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Association?

# Junya Yimprasert

Revised and amended 12 June 2010 / 2553

### Footnote

## On the word “medieval”

The adjectival form of the term “Middle Ages”.

The Middle Ages refers in general to European history from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century - roughly speaking from the end of antiquity to the first visions of future nation-states.

There is at least some congruence between the historical events of the Middle Ages in Europe and those of a roughly similar period in Southeast Asia - from the exit of the Yuan Dynasty (Mongol) from Cambodia and Burma to e.g. the first awakenings of the idea of a Tai nation-state; from, say, the late 13<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

East and West these “middle ages”; saw rulers competing and warring over the key to power, namely the control and ownership of labour. Sooner or later the clever ones realised that hanging onto power depended on their ability to institutionalise control over as great a number of labourers (potential men-at-arms) as possible. This meant developing a bureaucracy of trusted servants.



Thus was born the “golden age”; of Ayutthaya in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Comparable or not, West and East, the incessant territorial wars, that were the hall-mark of nation-state building, meant that ordinary people were constantly fleeing to the forests to avoid dying under the banner of ambition of this or that, invariably mad-hat, would-be king-emperor.

Already in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, in Europe, the theologian Thomas Aquinas was attempting to point-out that natural wealth is not infinite - because at a certain point nature is satisfied and asks no more, but appetite for unnatural wealth is the slave of desire - and fast becomes infinite.

From this humble logic, it is not difficult to understand that - the pursuit of consummation of desire for sufficient profit cannot lead to sustainable development, it can only lead to poverty and, sooner or later, a forced ending.

And what is sufficient? Is the death of 88 people sufficient to quell the rabble?

According to Aquinas, there is no natural way to arrive at “sufficient” profit. This was his message about sustainable development 700 years ago. There have been a great number of similarly wise messages since then, but it seems that the human appetite for unnatural wealth is in deed the slave of desire, not least in Bangkok.

We have only history to teach us.

We have also community theatre to help us reflect on our mistakes, but that’s difficult without freedom of assembly and without freedom of speech.

Knowledge of history is critical. Why? Because it sharpens our senses, so that when we feel we are being pulled backwards we know it is time to move on – before we get stuck in the past.

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## **P.S.**

\* From Time-up Thailand:

<http://timeupthailand.blogspot.com/2010/06/why-i-dont-love-king.html>

\* Posted on June 13, 2010 6:50 PM;:

[http://www.globallabour.info/en/2010/06/why\\_i\\_dont\\_love\\_the\\_king\\_by\\_ju.html](http://www.globallabour.info/en/2010/06/why_i_dont_love_the_king_by_ju.html)

\* Junya Yimprasert is the director of the Thai Labour Campaign, a labour support NGO, and the leader of the Migrant Workers’ Union of Thailand.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See: [http://www.networkideas.org/focus/may2010/fo31\\_Thailand.htm](http://www.networkideas.org/focus/may2010/fo31_Thailand.htm)

[2] e.g. <http://thaipoliticalprisoners.wordpress.com/>