

# Thaïlande: Absolute monarchy in disguise?

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**Seminal historian Thongchai Winichakul argues that Thailand's many constitutions have progressively torn power from the people to be placed back in the hands of the King — a process seen most clearly in the latest charter.**

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Misgivings over democracy have given rise to forms of guided democracy that rely overwhelmingly on the monarchy. The concentration of power in one person creates a self-sustaining regime of 'royal hegemony': any change gives rise to instability and feelings of insecurity across society.

## Charismatic monarch, unstable institution

King Rama VII himself said that a system of absolute monarchy relies on having a good king. However, nobody can guarantee that monarchs will invariably be good. So absolute monarchies, democracies where the monarchy is above politics and systems like this rely too much on monarchs who are good or who have prestige. But nothing can guarantee that there will invariably be a monarch who is good or who has prestige

Political systems that try to build institutions that do not rely on individuals in this way, such as democracy, have the chance of lasting stability for decades and centuries because they are not excessively reliant on an individual. The failure today comes in part from the failure of our political system to create lasting institutions that do not rely on individuals. Our political system relies on individuals, which is just too unstable.

The change from King Rama 5 to King Rama 6 was one of the few times where it went smoothly if you look at the initial period, because there were no challenges and everything was arranged in advance. But if you look at the succession with the hindsight of five to ten years, it was not smooth because the new King in the end was not suitable for the system at that time, so the elite started arguing among themselves and withdrawing in dribs and drabs.

While the shadow of the revered late King still lasts, this shadow is a double-edged sword. On the one side, it creates a 'honeymoon period' where the people are happy to give the new King time, believing that he will continue the greatness of the monarchy. But the other edge is that when the honeymoon period has passed, citizens will compare the new King with the old King, and when that day comes, everyone will grumble because it is not at all possible for the new person to rise to a comparison with the one person, because unrealistic enchantment with the late King causes him to become super-human, resulting in the emergence of dissatisfaction or conflict  
Or do we still live under an absolute monarchy in disguise?

I think that people in general believe that succession has really affected their lives. What does this mean? It means that a great number of Thai people share a certain understanding that we do not allow to be expressed or we are fooling ourselves and lying to ourselves. Though we may think that and know that, we also say the opposite: that the King is not involved in politics, just important to our lives. Yet the fact that everybody is so concerned and questioning shows that the succession to the throne affects life, society and politics more than Thai people will openly admit.

I want to ask everybody reading this to please ask yourself this question and answer it: What do you think is the importance of the King and how is his role important to the life of the country? If he has little importance and his role has little importance, then he doesn't have to adapt much, because he doesn't much affect us. But the fact that everybody is concerned is because he has a large effect. So, please answer yourself: what influence does he have and why does he such an effect?

The next questions I want to pose are: hasn't Thailand been under a system beyond absolute monarchy a long time? What kind of socio-political system are we in now? What is the actual role of the monarch, such that it creates the possibility of the King having such a large effect on the life of society and politics? Or are we still living under an absolute monarchy in disguise?

The monarchy in the sense of being an institution has one important characteristic which people refer to as the 'network'. When we speak of the monarchy and its role in politics, we are using a broader meaning than the individual or the monarch because it refers to the many people who benefit, have an interest, and have an ideological belief tied having a strong monarch. Many of these people and this network are not part of the lineage. They are ordinary people just like us, but with an ideology, beliefs, good intentions, bad intentions, obsessions, material interests, whatever. But it makes this group need a monarch who is strong and is involved in the political system.

If we try to explain it goes as follows. If the King does not have sufficient prestige, does not have the behaviour, actions, or personality to give people sufficient faith in the prestige of the King, there is no royal prerogative. There is no anchor to build on. The network monarchy has no foundation on which can be built the legitimacy to increase the political power of the monarchists. Looking at it this way once again links back to the individual and makes us understand why the succession is increasingly important. It is not just because of personal behaviour alone, but because personal behaviour is linked to the system of politics, institutions, etc. To sum up, the succession would not be critically important because of the change in individuals if this change did not occur in the context of the system or conditions as exist in Thailand today.

## **The king and the constitution**

I believe that the latest constitution makes it blatantly clear that this is a system of governance that is what Rama VII wanted, but which the People's Party did not accept. What should we call this system? (laughs). More than 80 years from the era of Rama VII, he finally achieved success.

Going back to the earlier point, a system like this depends on a monarch with high prestige. This constitution depends greatly upon the King, based on the belief that the King must be good. But nobody can guarantee this. As such, there is an inherent contradiction. Will this inherent contradiction erupt? It certainly will, one day. But nobody can say when.

**Thongchai Winichakul**

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**P.S.**

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This is an excerpt from an interview published in Prachatai's new book *A Molten Land: The Mandatory Transition*. The book can be purchased here: <https://www.prachataistore.net/book>

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