

Obituary

## Thailand: Kraisak Choonhavan (1947-2020)

Saturday 24 October 2020, by [HEWISON Kevin](#), [LIMQUECO Peter](#) (Date first published: 15 July 2020).

**Kraisak Choonhavan, a *Journal of Contemporary Asia* author and long-time friend of the journal, passed away on June 11, after a long fight with cancer. He was 72.**

Born in Bangkok, Kraisak attended the elite Saint Gabriel's College in Bangkok before his father, Chatichai, and his family, were sent into a kind of political exile shortly after General Sarit Thanarat seized power in 1957.

Before this, Chatichai had risen fast in the Army, helped along by his father, Field Marshal Phin Choonhavan, who had led the royalist coup in 1947. It was Phin who built the family's business interests, especially in the northeast and focused on Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat). Phin's brother-in-law, the powerful and corrupt police chief General Phao Sriyanonda, grew wealthy trading opium and dealing with the USA's Central Intelligence Agency (see McCoy 1972 [1]). Phao also managed the repression of accused Leftists and murdered the regime's political opponents, especially those associated with Pridi Banomyong and from the northeast (Hewison 2020 [2], 7). Known as the Soi Rajakhru clique, Phao and Phin were accused of depositing millions in Swiss bank accounts (Stowe 1998 [3]).

Chatichai was sent as ambassador to Argentina. When asked what he did there, Chatichai laughingly said he was supervising Thai students – his son and daughter. He added that, as a cavalry man, he also did a lot of riding. Later moving to Geneva, the family reconnected with the Princess Mother Srinagarindra – a relative of Kraisak's mother – and the royal family.

The themes of his early years and the fate of his family shaped Kraisak's future: Chatichai and domestic politics, Korat, royalism, the military and the Left.

Overseas, Kraisak continued his education on the US's east coast, eventually completing a degree in international relations at George Washington University, where he experienced the campus turmoil associated with the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. Like many, Kraisak's student radicalism increasingly drew him away from his family's right-wing politics.

The 1970s saw a radicalisation of students, workers, farmers and intellectuals in Thailand, vigorously opposed by the military and its allies. After a period of tumultuous democratic politics from 1973, in October 1976, Rightists and the military crushed political dissent, driving thousands to the Communist Party of Thailand's (CPT) jungle bases. At the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) for a Master's degree, Kraisak absorbed a regional radicalism and anti-imperialism involving students from Thailand, Malaya, Singapore and beyond. He also met several radical scholars close to the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, including editor Malcolm Caldwell, who was his mentor at SOAS. Malcolm's death in Cambodia in 1978 resulted in Kraisak abandoning ideas for doctoral studies.

In the aftermath of the murderous events of 1976, Kraisak was involved with opposition groups and contributed to the journal's 1978 special issue on "Thailand in Crisis" that responded to those

events. He was also one of our authors. Using a pseudonym, he observed the crucial role played by the king and royal family in these events, fomenting fear and mobilising Rightists and the military (Mallet 1978 [4]). Kraisak lamented what had been lost and worried that the future promised more military rule and repression.

By the end of the 1970s, radicalism filled Kraisak's political sails. Like others of his generation, he was drawn to a Leftism defined by opposition to military-backed regimes and the feudal values of the ruling class (Yuangrat 1982, 1). Writing about the CPT in 1980, Kraisak and former student activist Nopporn Suwanpanich recognised the party's internal ideological struggle and the difficulties its rigid Maoism and hierarchical organisation posed. Yet they held out hope for the CPT and its revolution, declaring it "still represents the only real opposition to the monopoly control of political power of the Thai ruling classes" (Nopporn and Kraisak 1980, 44). Yet the party splintered and many of those who joined in 1976 returned to mainstream society. Even if some embraced grassroots activism to stay with "the people," most had to re-start their lives, while some re-connected with mainstream politics (Gawin 1990, 72).

In the 1980s and 1990s, while Kraisak was teaching at Kasetsart University (1977–1993), he connected with many of these CPT returnees and was recognised as a self-declared socialist at a time when such a profile was dangerous. He also became a special friend to the journal and especially to then editor Peter Limquenco and future editor Kevin Hewison. His support for the journal went beyond comradeship, even providing the journal with a Bangkok home in some of those years. Dinners at his house in the family compound on Soi Rajakhru saw all kinds of Thai and foreign Leftists collected for conversation. The military and police guards along the street seemed to get used to such events and to the later establishment of non-governmental organisation shopfronts in some of the compound's buildings.

In those days, in a haze of cigarette smoke, there were inevitably disagreements about politics, strategy and events, but always lubricated with beer and whisky and accompanied by simple Thai food. Kraisak was always rushing off to various good causes, with farmers, workers and the environment high on his list. In 1984, he again wrote for the journal, analysing the significance of the expansion of Thai domestic capital. He concluded that the "contribution of foreign investment was to accelerate the forces of production and to pave the way for the Thai bourgeoisie itself to extract surplus from Thai workers through its own industrialisation efforts and its own control over labour" (Kraisak 1984, 145).

Kraisak's engagement with the institutions of Thailand's politics deepened when his father unexpectedly became prime minister in 1988. While he had been estranged from his father for some time, Kraisak recognised that his father needed an advisory group. Known as the Ban Phitsanulok advisers, the iconoclastic group of his mainly academic friends and acquaintances often took on powerful bureaucratic interests and promoted reforms on the environment and local development. They also promoted a foreign policy rapprochement with the Indochina countries, bringing the advisers into conflict with the military. Those clashes saw Kraisak and dissident Army figures accused of involvement in a 1982 assassination plot targeting Queen Sirikit (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 28, 1991).

Chatichai's government was accused of corruption and thrown out by the 1991 military coup. With a *lèse majesté* accusation still hanging over him – later ruled false – Kraisak fled the country. When he returned, his political career was reignited when he became an adviser to the Bangkok governor from 1996 to 1999. Kraisak had responsibilities for urban pollution, arts and culture. But it was as a senator that he achieved his highest profile. Kraisak was elected a senator in 2000 and chaired the Senate's Committee on Foreign Affairs until the military coup in 2006. He represented Korat, where his father had been popular and his grandfather had established the family connection.

As a senator, Kraisaak became part of a group of parliamentarians and fellow travellers who opposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, often clashing with him on issues around free trade agreements, investment, corruption, the bloody war on drugs, minority rights and more. This experience was a political turning point for Kraisaak. He developed a deep and personal hatred of Thaksin that coloured his politics for the rest of his life. That colour was a deep yellow. In Thailand's politics, this was the king's colour, adopted by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), formed in February 2005.

Kraisaak was one of the first speakers on the PAD stage on February 11, 2006 (Pye and Schaffar 2008, 42). At the time, opposing Thaksin had considerable support on the Left, but PAD's control by conservative royalists soon caused disputes among civil society organisations. These disputes deepened when PAD called for royal intervention to oust Thaksin (Connors 2008 [5], 159). Even so, Kraisaak remained with PAD. He also became an important interlocuter for the US Embassy. Many of the leaked cables regarding PAD and anti-Thaksin activities, authored by Ambassador Ralph Boyce, reflected his personal relationship with Kraisaak.

Still regarded by many as a radical, Kraisaak's deep loathing of Thaksin saw him adopt curious political positions. For example, he opposed the popular and successful universal health care system introduced by the Thaksin administration (BigChilli 2019 [6]). More curious was his support for the 2006 coup, expressing even more hawkish attitudes than the coup plotters themselves. When speaking with the US Embassy, Kraisaak criticised the coup leaders who he said "were not moving fast enough to freeze Thaksin's assets and dismantle his power structure" (Wikileaks 2006 [7]). In particular, Kraisaak pushed the post-coup government, led by former Army commander and Privy Councillor General Surayud Chulanont, to investigate the extra-judicial killings of Thaksin's "war on drugs." Ironically, when an investigation committee was formed, and included Kraisaak, it failed to find Thaksin legally responsible.

When an election approached in 2007, Kraisaak joined the royalist Democrat Party, won a lower house seat in Korat and became a deputy leader of the party, further cementing his positioning in the conservative fold. He moved closer to the royal family, accepting a high-ranked royal decoration and using royal connections for political purpose (Wikileaks 2009 [8]). His nationalist attacks on foreign journalists shocked some (Roughneen 2010 [9]), but few were surprised when Kraisaak threw his support behind the Rightist-royalist People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) that privately plotted with General Prayuth Chan-ocha for yet another military coup in 2014 (see Veerayooth and Hewison 2016).

Over the past two decades, Kraisaak's transition from the radical Left to the royalist Right meant a political schizophrenia: he supported military coups, but disparaged military regimes at home and abroad; he broke ranks with the Democrat Party and criticised several of its policies, especially on Burma and the insurgency in the south; and, while supporting the overthrow of elected governments in Thailand, was a founding member of ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights.

With a celebrity status, Kraisaak featured several times in Thailand's version of *Hello!* magazine, feted as a radical who had come back to the fold. His commitment to the arts, environment and minorities continued until his passing, but such issues were now much closer to the mainstream. For example, his documentary, *Citizen Juling*, produced with yellow-shirted iconoclasts Ing K and Mani Sriwanichpoom, presents southern violence as a social conflict embedded in poverty and military repression, yet it is approvingly contextualised in a royalist and nationalist narrative that is at the root of that social conflict.

The schizophrenia that characterised Kraisaak's political travels followed him to his death and beyond. His funeral saw its first day dominated by royalists, anti-Thaksin activists and like-minded

Rightists, including the president of the Privy Council and former prime minister General Surayud, former prime ministers Anan Punyarachun, Chuan Leepai and Abhisit Vejjajiva, PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban and others. A second day saw academics and activists, mostly from his pre-PAD days, representing groups supporting workers, democracy and human rights.

We at JCA did not see Kraissak much over the last decade, and while his politics had diverged significantly from our views, his appreciation of academic work and the journal's articles on Thailand, the environment and people's movements was maintained. And his hospitality was undiminished.

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**Kevin Hewison**  
**Peter Limqueco**

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**P.S.**

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## Footnotes

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[2] Hewison, K. 2020. "Black Site: The Cold War and the Shaping of Thailand's Politics." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 50 (4). DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2020.1717115. [\[Taylor & Francis Online\]](#), [\[Web of Science ®\]](#), [\[Google Scholar\]](#)

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