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Praetorian Kingdom. A History of Military Ascendancy in Thailand

Paul Chambers. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2024.

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BOOK REVIEW

Praetorian Kingdom. A History of Military Ascendancy in Thailand. Paul Chambers. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2024.

Soon after *Praetorian Kingdom* was published, its author was arrested and charged in Thailand under the draconian *lèse-majesté* law. First denied, when Chambers made bail he was required to relinquish his passport and wear an electronic monitoring device.

The complaint against Chambers was made by the Royal Thai Army, the subject of *Praetorian Kingdom*. The Army's complaint related not to this new book, but to a blurb published on the website of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, a research outfit in Singapore. Given that Chambers did not own or operate the website, the suspicion was that the Army, as it had often done, was using the *lèse-majesté* law to silence a political opponent. A month later, the charges were rightly ruled to lack substance and Chambers was hustled out of the country where he had lived, researched, and taught for some 30 years. His accusers in the military probably got their second-best outcome: a knowledgeable critic was gone.

Praetorian Kingdom may not have been the reason for the Army's actions, but there is enough in it to cause the country's opaque and corrupt institution to bristle. From the first page, Chambers is critical, observing that Thailand's top-ranked soldiers "feel that they are privileged as royal protectors to intervene as they please. Thus, the military domination of the Thai polity is masked by the apparent need to guard monarchy, and the Thai armed forces have in many respects become a tool of the palace." In conducting its "mission," thousands of the country's citizens have been killed by the military and other state bodies (see Junya 2011).

This is a big book – over 690 pages in 15 chapters. with an Introduction, Conclusion, and Appendices. In it, Chambers relates a chronology of how a military, "modernised" under a reforming absolute monarchy in the nineteenth century, came to dominate twentieth century politics. He asks broad questions: Why and how has Thailand's politics come to be so dominated by the military? And, why have civilians been unable to curtail the military's political domination? Chambers demonstrates a copious knowledge of the military as a political machine. *Praetorian Kingdom* is something of a handbook, showing how the military, and the men who have led it, have come to dominate the country's politics.

A short review cannot adequately cover all aspects of this encyclopaedic work; it can only provide a flavour of its scope. In it, the author deploys two concepts to organise his work: modernisation theory's "praetorianism" and his own conceptualisation of a "monarchised military." The theoretical discussion in the book is relatively brief and does not impinge on its chronological narrative which gives the book its value. Anyone with a serious interest in Thailand's modern history and its politics will need this book as a "database" for future research.

Chambers begins with a discussion of a military with its roots in the absolute monarchy of the nineteenth century, but which also participated in its overthrow in 1932 (Chapters 1–2). While the 1932 story is well known, Chambers' focus on the military is a useful addition, chronicling the backgrounds of officers who joined the anti-monarchists. But monarchism also ran deep in the military, and it was only a matter of days after the overthrow that intra-military rivalry was being stoked by a disgruntled king and his supporters. Yet it was more than a decade before the royalists could regain control of the military.

The rise of the royalists and the crushing of residual hopes for deeper democratisation is detailed in Chapter 3, covering the years 1944 to 1957. Chambers provides a complex account of competing interests engaged in acts of vengeance, treachery, betrayal, and murder that even baffled some of the participants. The political machinations of competing military leaders and strongmen, royalists, the Americans and the British, and others is worthy of one of Graham Greene's novels. This fascinating chapter adds considerably to existing English-language discussions of the period. What is especially useful is the fleshing out of detail, based in extensive research, as Chambers explains how military leaders of the next generation were involved in the royalist coup of 1947. One significant outcome of that coup and the events that followed was the political and economic resurgence of the palace. Yet the royalists remained divided and the road to a stable relationship between military leaders and the monarchy had many twists and turns. It was only in 1957 that General Sarit Thanarat, with prodding from King Bhumibol Adulyadej, managed to establish a regime that would promote the monarchy and bask in its legitimacy (137–139).

Chapter 4 spans 1957 to 1963. It was, Chambers says, "a period in which Field Marshal Sarit … completely dominated the country, … assisted by King Bhumipol …, the United States, … and right-wing aristocrats" (156). Although Sarit's dominance is well known, *Praetorian Kingdom*'s contribution is the detail provided, much of it drawn from US government documents. The discussion of political competition between Sarit and his on-again-off-again compatriots and eventual successors General Praphas Charusathien and General Thanom Kittikachorn and their rivalry with General Krit Srivara adds to the story. It was Sarit's autocracy, supported by Bhumibol, that gave birth to the "monarchised military." The term reflects the manner in which the military has relied on the symbolism of the monarchy for its political influence (see Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat 2016).

The rule of Thanom and Praphas from 1963 to 1973, initially unsteady, but bolstered by the USA, is discussed in Chapter 5. Again using US documents, Chambers discusses this period as one of deepening Thai engagement with the USA's Indochina wars and the rise of the Communist Party of Thailand's domestic insurgency. For Thailand, there was copious military and economic assistance, strengthening the military and enriching the families of senior military leaders. For the USA, Thailand was a critical base for its Indochina wars, and so it sustained the military dictatorship, even clandestinely creating the military's political party in 1969 (222).

Domestic dissent eventually brought the dictatorship down, and Chapter 6 discusses the important 1973–1976 effort to establish electoral democracy. Rightists and royalists associated with the military stymied that effort, resulting in the 6 October 1976 massacre of scores around Thammasat University and another military coup that re-established a conservative, royalist regime. But this was no straightforward takeover for the Army's most significant figure; General Krit wanted, Chambers argues, to want to give democracy a chance (261). At the time Krit:

> was … more powerful than the king; though Krit declared his loyalty to King Bhumipol, he controlled the monopoly on state violence and the king's guards, and he was wealthier than the palace. Though the legitimacy of monarchical endorsement was important for Krit, he possessed a competing ideology … Thus, despite swearing allegiance to the monarchy, early on Krit already appeared to be a potential danger to the king (259).

In Chambers' account, it is Krit who is the pivotal figure in this turbulent period, but with the king shaping political alliances and considering options for a coup (286–291). Amidst turbulence, the US again supported the military, rightist political parties, and extremist thugs (294). It was Krit's death in April 1976 that opened the way for a coup.

Yet as the author shows in Chapter 7, the military was divided. It was Bhumibol who "was able to hold overwhelming sway across the new administration" (350). That government was led by the reactionary and unpopular judge, Thanin Kraivixien, a palace favourite. Bhumibol maintained his support for Thanin and his repressive royalism to the day the military threw him out in October 1977 (362–364). General Kriangsak Chomanan took over but was "disdained by the monarch" (373), with the king apparently irritated that his preferred leader had been deposed.

It was another palace favourite, General Prem Tinsulanonda, who next took the premier's seat (374). Prem and his supporters took control of most military positions and with Kriangsak facing foreign and domestic challenges, on February 28, 1980,

> the king called Kriangsak and Prem to visit him in Chiang Mai, purportedly to discuss the growing chaos in the kingdom. Upon their return, on 29 February, Kriangsak suddenly resigned … Then … [Social Action Party leader and leader of the parliamentary opposition and royalist] Kukrit [Pramoj] … nominated Prem for the post [of prime minister]. Parliament unanimously agreed … and the king endorsed it immediately … (396).

Chambers refers to this as a "royal coup."

Prem's period as prime minister (1980–1988) is discussed in Chapter 9. Prem, of course, had a longer career as a royal servant, being an influential privy councillor from 1988 to 2019. His penchant for political meddling on behalf of the monarchy during his long career remade Thailand as a royalist state. Prem's links with the palace can be traced to his service as royal aide-de-camp in the late 1960s and early 1970s (405). Yet as Chambers highlights, Prem's time as prime minister was marked by several coup attempts. Prem's survival owed something to his capacity for political dealing but much also to the palace support he received (410–412).

When Prem was pressured to leave the premiership, the king immediately appointed him to the Privy Council. That appointment was pivotal for Thailand's politics for the following three decades. As Chambers summarises, over three decades, it was through "the efforts of King Bhumipol and Prem, [that] the armed forces became much more thoroughly connected with the monarchy: the armed forces became a 'monarchized military', accruing legitimacy as a result of guarding the palace from any threats … " (430).

For all of its focus on domestic politics, the military did have an interest in borders. Over several chapters, *Praetorian Kingdom* discusses the military's interference in Cambodian affairs. Given the 2025 outbreak of border confrontations between Thailand and Cambodia this discussion is of contemporary interest. In Chapter 10, which discusses the 1988 ascension of elected prime minister Chatichai Choonhavan to his overthrow in a military coup in 1991, foreign policy features. The military was alarmed that Chatichai's government wanted control of foreign policy free of the military's influence. On Cambodia, Chatichai's government diverged from the military's position of supporting forces opposed to the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penh (440, 455). The military had isolated that regime and it controlled the border region and its lucrative trade and the funds that supported anti-Phnom Penh forces and the thousands of refugees in camps near the border. The policy shift paved the way to the 1991 coup. The huge corruption that permeated the military's support for Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge has long been acknowledged, but Chambers provides details of what the United Nations described as a Mafia-like control of the border (470–472).

Of course, Chatichai's government had other problems including conflicts of interest and corruption (443). Chambers observes, "Chatchai did not act as beholden to the king as Prem had, and that apparently grated on the palace" (438). It seems Chatichai's government did too little to protect the economic interests of the military and the palace

(442). When the coup came, it was led by members of Class 5 of the Chulachomklao Military Academy, said to be "ultra-conservative and arch-royalist," and headed by General Suchinda Kraprayoon (445). The discussion of the rise of this group is emblematic of similar discussions in other chapters of the intricacies of military promotions, infighting, and alliances, sometimes with civilian politicians, increasingly with business leaders.

Class 5's move against Chatichai had Bhumibol's support. According to Chambers, "Suchinda and Class 5 sought and obtained the endorsement of the palace" (448–449). The junta's justification for its coup included claims that became familiar in subsequent coups: corruption, politicians getting above themselves and using parliament for their own benefit, belittling the military, and threats to the monarchy (450).

Again following a pattern, Class 5 established a proxy political party and won enough seats to form a government led by a military figure, in this instance, Suchinda (457). Public opposition eventually moved onto the streets and the familiar violent military crackdown in 1992 led to another period of military shame. Interestingly, Chambers notes that two future military-backed prime ministers were involved in the brutal repression of protesters:

> soldiers forced their way into the Royal Hotel, which was being used as a medical refuge for injured protestors. These troops were under the command of General Surayud Chulanond, then commander of Special Forces. Future coup leader Sonthi Boonyaratklin was a member of Surayud's Special Warfare Unit, [and these] forces … were seen kicking and pointing weapons at injured … (458).

They beat injured protesters, walked on their bodies, and dragged them out to the pavement. It thus seems misleading that anyone would consider Surayud as "a new professional military man for Thailand" (483). A Prem loyalist, Surayud became army commander in 1998 and on his retirement became a Privy Councillor. He was later recalled to "service" when, following the 2007 coup, he was appointed prime minister by a military junta led by Sonthi.

That brutality sent the military back to the barracks and civilian politicians, albeit in a series of fractious coalitions, took over. Chapters 11 and 12 discuss the military's penance and eventual return. It was while the military was sidelined that Bhumibol's efforts to shape politics expanded (466). His man Prem was the main conduit for palace influence, controlling military transfers and promotions and dealing with prime ministers and other political leaders (467–468).

Military brutality resulted in another effort to embed a more democratic politics. The military's reaction and its political reconstruction are the focus of Chapter 12. By 2001, the democracy wave brought Thaksin Shinawatra to the fore. Prem and his supporters became alarmed by Thaksin's rise and his popularity, and they worked to limit his influence within the military (508). The result, following a period of anti-Thaksin street protests, was the 2006 coup, stoked by Prem's activism within the military. This chapter reminds readers how intense the military and palace manoeuvring against Thaksin was.

Chapters 13 and 14 detail how, from 2008 to 2023, parliamentary politics was again permitted but in stunted forms as the military and palace worked to stymie a fuller flowering of democratic politics and associated reformism. The result of that determination is now apparent. The establishment's preferred regime is one where parliament barely matters as prime ministers come and go, electorally popular parties are regularly dissolved, reformist politicians are banned, and so-called independent institutions work to maintain a deeply conservative political system intolerant of even modestly reformist parties and

governments. When that arrangement faces a threat, as in 2010, troops are deployed to violently enforce the status quo.

In his Conclusion, Chambers reiterates the military's alignment to the monarchy but also emphasises the "camaraderie and brotherhood of the corps" (648). This results in "informal hierarchies" where "fraternal codes or norms of trust have superseded a formal hierarchy of rules-based legitimacy" (648–649). Senior military figures "see themselves as the guardians of the monarchy, intervene in politics to protect the palace as they see fit, and believe they deserve special privileges as coercive servants of the royalty" (649). Those privileges include impunity to engage in nepotism and political repression, opaque management and budgets, and personal and family enrichment.

The result is what Chambers identifies as a "praetorian kingdom." Constructed by the military and the monarchy, this arrangement has produced a contemporary government that is corrupt and incompetent, making royal whims paramount while the real challenges facing Thailand's society and economy are ignored. With this, the wealth and power of the "loyalists" in the military, bureaucracy, and business elite is preserved. For anyone wanting political reform, it is a bleak picture, and with King Vajiralongkorn a trained soldier, "the monarchy, which depends upon the military to protect its dominant political and economic clout, has no reason to reduce the power of the armed forces" (655).

In its encyclopaedic coverage, including the biographical details of numerous military figures, *Praetorian Kingdom* provides data that will be useful to researchers for years to come. It also emphasises how small the political elite has been and remains in Thailand. Family, classmates, and close friends remain central to the military and in politics. Yet even these close alliances do not necessarily produce durable trust.

The book has shortcomings. One is that Chambers says little about regional and international developments. Related, the historical narratives presented are histories of the military, and a broader context in society and economy is sometimes lost. The book says little about relationships between military leaders and Thailand's tycoons, unless they are engaged in politics. There are also some errors of fact, some persons introduced to readers lack context and occasionally family names and some names do not follow regular renderings. Yet these problems may be forgiven in such a big and complex book.

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