

***The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumipol Adulyadej.* By Paul M. Handley. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006. Hardcover: 499pp.**

The King Never Smiles is the third book (to be banned) on the life of Thailand's King Bhumipol Adulyadej published by a non-Thai. The others are Rayne Kruger's *The Devil's Discus* and William Stevenson's *The Revolutionary King*. Written by a journalist who resided in the Kingdom for thirteen years, it is exceptionally well written and reflects a deep knowledge of Thai politics and history. Handley begins the story impressively by detailing the sacral ideology of Buddhist kingship, juxtaposed between the traditions of *dhammaraja* (king by virtue of the ten principles of a virtuous Buddhist king) and *devaraja* (a Brahmanic-oriented god-king). The setting commences with a coup against absolute monarchy in 1932, the abdication of King Rama VII, the attempted annihilation of Thai royalism, the suspicious death of his successor King Rama VIII and the accession to power of 18-year-old Bhumipol (Rama VIII's brother) in 1946. The monarchy was then at its lowest ebb and Thai democracy was finally beginning to flower.

Handley argues that amidst this situation, resolute royalists began a campaign to restore a strong Thai monarchy, an endeavour Bhumipol totally supported. The strategy involved promoting a King-centred ideology, as well as allying with military factions supportive of Thai monarchy. During the Cold War, Bhumipol viewed communism as inimical to the survival of the monarchy and he was instrumental in forging an anti-communist alliance with the United States in support of right-wing Thai governments. But according to Handley, Bhumipol did more than simply make the monarchy a major player in Thai politics. Rather, he eventually began selecting leaders, planning national development and directing military programmes. By 1976, nation and religion truly revolved around the King. The nation-state of Thailand, officially deemed a constitutional monarchy, had actually become a country where constitution was increasingly under the monarchy.

Handley usefully emphasizes Bhumipol's abhorrence for a full-fledged liberal democracy. As his uncles had taught him, it was most important to protect the monarchy above all other institutions. Bhumipol's low esteem for democracy led him to only reluctantly support constitutional reform or a diminished role for the military. Indeed, the king allied with pro-royalist military prime ministers

and eventually installed one of these, Prem Tinsulanonda, as chairman of his Privy Council.

Though the book is a *magnum opus*, there are some flaws. While Handley uses a tremendous number of citations to support his arguments, there is still an incredible dearth of references in too many places. This deficiency compels readers to either take Handley at his word or doubt the veracity of some of his contentions. For example, in his chapter entitled *Family Headaches*, he describes Princess Sirindhorn as “neither brainy, disciplined, and energetic” while projecting “the image of an unmindful schoolgirl” (pp. 304–5). Princess Chulabhorn is meanwhile described as “melancholic”, “haughty” and “petulant” (pp. 306, 395). Nowhere do we find citations for these assertions. Or is this Handley’s own opinion? Handley’s methodology here seems to be based on “reportedly” or “it is said” or what “knowledgeable Thais and diplomats say....” But who is he to know the correct measurement of “knowledgeable?” So unless we assume that Handley knows the truth, we are left wondering whether *The King Never Smiles* is a quilt partly composed of rumour and innuendo.

Handley classifies his book as “an initial perspective from which other Thai specialists can work in the future” and “a case study” (p. x). Is it then academic in nature? Though trained as a journalist, Handley has dabbled in academic writing (e.g. Handley in Hewison, ed., *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, 1997, pp. 94–113). But for this book, is he wearing the hat of a journalist, an academic, or both? Handley states in the preface that “a lot of people helped me with my research, not always knowing the full aim of it” (p. xi). Academic works (if this is to be taken seriously by academics) are not supposed to leave interviewees in the dark about the nature of the research investigation — despite the topic.

Handley’s glance at Thai history may also need to be modified. He states that King “Prajadhipok publicly acceded to the constitutional regime” (p. 16). Then in the following chapter, Prajadhipok is presented as fighting tooth and nail to hang on to his throne from 1932 to 1935. Handley likewise does not mention the King’s role in preventing the Democrats from forming a coalition with Social Action in 1976 (see Morell and Chai-anan, *Political Conflict in Thailand*, 1981, pp. 272–73). Handley further fails to mention that the 1997 resignation of Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh did not merely lead to “opening the way for Chuan to take power” (p. 413). Actually, Chavalit’s coalition still possessed more members of parliament than the Democrat-led opposition. Once Chavalit resigned, his coalition

planned to have former Prime Minister Chatchai Chunchavan assume office. This failed and a faction of “cobra” MPs from Prachakorn Thai (a party in Chavalit’s coalition) moved to the Democrat-led opposition coalition, paving the way for a new balance of power to emerge. Was Chuan’s 1997 assumption of the premiership partly the result of royal intervention? The role of the monarchy, through the king’s chief privy councilor, was most assuredly influential (see McCargo, *Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 510). Handley is quite ambiguous on this issue. With regard to the King’s “New Theory” (evolved from a 1974 speech), Handley sees it as “withdraw[ing] from the global economy” (p. 415). But the king is not advocating autarky. In a 1997 speech, he himself said that such an interpretation “is going too far”. Rather, the King advocated “relative self-sufficiency” (Government of Thailand, “The King’s Sufficiency Economy and the Analyses of Meanings by Economists”, 2003, p. 12). As for the King’s apparent distaste for democracy and support for pro-royalist military factions, one could argue that the king equally supports pro-royalist (democratically-elected) prime ministers. Chuan Leekpai is a good example. Finally, the book seems to imply that Bhumipol (as taught by his uncles) empowered the Thai monarchy back to be the topmost political institution in the country. Still, another factor was the genuine and intense love by the overwhelming majority of Thai people for their king. In other words, the Thai populace actively sought royal re-empowerment.

Bhumipol’s paramount control over Thailand forced Handley to write about quite recent events — right up to the date of publication. Though there is so much more that could have been written about the palace’s relations with Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Handley cannot be expected to touch upon everything given the time factor. He should be commended for doing his best considering how he describes events in 2006, though the book was published the same year. Unfortunately (due to its publication date) the book does not describe circumstances after early April 2006. Thus, it does not describe Bhumipol’s intervention with Supreme Court justices to annul the 2006 Lower House election; the ability of Prem’s Privy Council to build an anti-Thaksin alliance in the Thai military (led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin); Thaksin’s ambiguous references to an “extra-constitutional charismatic figure” who was trying to push him from power; Sonthi’s coup against Thaksin on 19 September 2006 (legitimated by Bhumipol); the legal destruction of Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai party; Prem’s push for the enshrinement of a less pluralistic constitution; and the re-emergence of an anti-Thaksin,

pro-royalist Thai military as a major player in Thai politics for the foreseeable future.

Though Handley does not mention these post-April 2006 events, his book facilitates our understanding of how the monarchy has evolved in stature post-World War II to allow for the coup against Thaksin to succeed. It also illustrates once again the partnership between Bhumipol and the pro-Prem military in maintaining control of Thailand (the new Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont was chosen from the Privy Council). Finally, after reading this book, one can better understand why the palace might advocate a reactionary constitution rather than the liberal 1997 document. As Handley implies, Bhumipol, late in life, was *going into seclusion* (title of Chapter 22), and “couldn’t relinquish his duties completely” (p. 427). But the Thaksin phenomenon forced him to make an about-face. Many are clearly hoping to see Handley update (or write a sequel to) his original work.

Despite some scattered glitches, *The King Never Smiles* is a daring, landmark work, clearly based on extensive research, which deserves much praise. It joins a small but growing body of proactive literature relating to kingship and politics in Thailand today and is certainly the most critical of anything previously published. As such it should compel future writers on Thailand to pay heed to the contemporary role of monarchy in Thai culture, society and politics.