

BOOK REVIEWS

Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand.
Edited by Soren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager. Copenhagen: NIAS Press,
2010. Softcover: 271pp.

It says something about the state of the academic study of the Thai monarchy that up until Paul Handley's *The King Never Smiles* (2006) there had never been a critical English language biography of the present King of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej. The monarchy was generally regarded as "widely revered" and a stabilizing force for the country's endemically turbulent politics. International media reports about Thailand often use a famous image from the democracy protests of May 1992, when Bhumibol appeared on television with the then Prime Minister, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, and protest leader, Major General Chamlong Srimuang, kneeling at his feet, receiving fatherly advice on how the bloody conflict should be resolved. This comforting image of a benevolent constitutional monarch, above the fray of politics, offering wise counsel in times of crisis to his child-like subjects, has exerted considerable influence on scholarship about the Thai monarchy. A misplaced eagerness on the part of some scholars to conform to feudal codes of respect prevalent in Thailand may also have played a part in enabling Bhumibol to escape the critical scholarly attention that other Asian authoritarian leaders have attracted. Within Thailand, the liberal-republican based attack on the monarchy of the era of the People's Party (the group of civilian and military officers who overthrew the absolute monarchy in 1932) is long gone, and the Marxist critique (which generally avoided attacking the monarchy directly) faded after the collapse of the Left in the early 1980s. Since then the mass marketing of the monarchy to the Thai public through the mass media has produced a whole generation of Thais who have grown up heavily indoctrinated by

royalist propaganda, and who are otherwise forbidden to criticize the monarchy under the country's harsh *lèse majesté* law.

This consensus over the monarchy's place in Thailand has been shattered since the September 2006 coup, in which the monarchy was heavily involved, if not the main instigator. A growing body of critical scholarship, in Thai as well as English, is re-examining every aspect of the Thai monarchy: the *lèse majesté* law which protects its image, the "network" of figures in the Privy Council, the armed forces, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, the parliament and the media, through which the monarchy exercises its political influence, the monarchy's immense business interests, and its real role in the 2006 coup and the political maneuvering in the coup's aftermath to destroy former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's and his support base. The crisis is also leading to a radical revision of the place of the monarchy in Thailand's history since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932.

Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand, edited by Soren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager, is the first edited volume of essays in English devoted entirely to critically examining Thailand's monarchy and the problem it poses to democratization. The essays focus on the subject of how the monarchy's image has been represented and managed. Topics covered include the cult of divinity constructed around Bhumibol (Jackson); the mass media's representation of the relationship between the king and the people (Sarun Krittikarn); the depiction of the monarchy in literature and some contemporary publications (Platt); the use of the *lèse majesté* law in Imperial Germany compared to that in contemporary Thailand (Streckfuss); the place of the monarchy in conservative notions of "Thai-style democracy" (Hewison and Kengkit); the monarchy's struggle against the People's Party in the period 1932–57 (Nattapoll); royalist propaganda in the period following the September 2006 coup (Han Krittian); and Bhumibol's so-called "sufficiency economy theory" (the subject of two essays, by Ivarsson and Isager, and by Walker).

Given the dearth of critical scholarship on the monarchy there is much in the volume that will interest readers. For this reviewer there are a number of highlights. Nattapoll's essay directly challenges two extremely influential themes in Thai historiography: the "bureaucratic polity" thesis, which, he argues, by highlighting the supremacy of the military and bureaucracy, has seriously underplayed the political role of the king and the royalist forces; and the myth of the democratic role of King Rama VII (the King's official moniker is "father of Thai democracy"). In fact, through close study of the

historical evidence, Nattapoll shows that Rama VII and royalist forces fought the People's Party by every means possible in an attempt to restore the feudal privileges of the former absolute monarchy. "Sarun Kittikarn" — the pen-name of a Thai scholar who prefers not to use his real name for obvious reasons — gives a theoretically sophisticated but at the same time highly readable account of the spectacle of Thailand's "entertainment nationalism", in which "... the king assumes the leading role of a rock star, the Nation the stage of his performance, Buddhism [...] the back-up band which is there to guarantee that the rapturous emotion of 'being Thai' will be heightened to the full" (pp. 81–82).

The deconstruction of Bhumibol's "sufficiency economy" theory in the essays by Ivarsson and Isager and Andrew Walker is also welcome. Post-colonial theories of self-reliance are not uncommon in the developing world, but Bhumibol's "sufficiency economy" surely counts as one of the most inane — and politically motivated. It is a mark of the genius of Thai hospitality and manipulation of the international community by the monarchy's image-minders that international organizations like the United Nations Development Programme and an economist of the stature of Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, among many others, can be charmed into lending their support to an economic theory, proposed by an unelected political figure who is protected from criticism by the very people — his countrymen — who are directly affected by the implementation of his theory, on pain of a fifteen-year jail sentence. This appalling, mutually beneficial relationship between the international development bureaucracy and its academic supporters, and an untouchable king heading a post-coup royalist regime, ought to be condemned by those who value academic freedom not to mention basic democratic rights.

The editors are to be congratulated for bringing this collection to publication. Scholarship on representations of the Thai monarchy is probably, however, close to saturation point. What is now needed is a discussion of the political, constitutional and legal issues that will be involved to effect the fundamental reform of the monarchy, which will surely be needed if Thailand is to develop a democratic political order.

PATRICK JORY is Senior Lecturer in Southeast Asian History at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.