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A SOLDIER KING

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A SOLDIER KING

**MONARCHY AND MILITARY IN
THE THAILAND OF RAMA X**

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First published in Singapore in 2022 by
ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg

Website: <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Supalak Ganjanakhundee, author.

Title: A soldier king : monarchy and military in the Thailand of Rama X / by
Supalak Ganjanakhundee.

Description: Singapore : ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022. | Includes
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: ISBN 9789814951548 (soft cover) | ISBN 9789814951555 (pdf) |
ISBN 9789814951562 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Monarchy—Thailand. | Thailand—Armed Forces—Political
activity. | Thailand—Politics and government.

Classification: LCC DS586.15 S95

Photograph of His Royal Highness The Crown Prince of Thailand,
Vajiralongkorn Mahidol, 1972, on the book cover courtesy of the National
Archives of Australia. NAA: A6135, K19/6/72/1.

Book cover concept by author and executed by Lee Meng Hui

Index by Raffaele Nahar

Typeset by International Typesetters Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

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PREFACE

Monarchy and military have sat at the centre of Thai politics for a long time—since a king first created the armed forces to protect the crown and national interests at the beginning of the country's modern history. The Thai military claims that it helps the monarchy fight for the survival of the nation; many historians and other scholars think otherwise. They have in innumerable works explained that the military in fact acts mostly to ensure its own survival and maintain its power and leading role in domestic politics, since Thailand has rarely faced external threats or wars. Two military coups in the first two decades of the twenty-first century have confirmed the fact that Thai politics is manipulated by the union of monarchy and military. These two institutions manipulated politics to ensure their own security and maintain the status quo of a hierarchical regime during the transition period before the ascension of a new sovereign to the throne.

As King Vajiralongkorn's succession has been achieved smoothly under the military's guardianship, exploring how the nexus of the crown and the armed forces will operate to maintain the status and roles of the two institutions is important. The new monarch, who took the throne after his father, King Bhumibol, passed away in late 2016, took many steps to secure his reign and ensure his own safety. Like many other kings in the past, King Vajiralongkorn badly needs to win over the men under arms, who present what is potentially the greatest danger to the new reign. There is no reason to expect that armed men will obey an unarmed one, or that an unarmed monarch will remain safe and secure when his servants are fully armed.

In this book I look into the relationship between, and interplay of, monarchy and military during the first five years of King Vajiralongkorn's

reign, but I have been able to see only some parts of the picture since this nexus is opaque. Not many people are willing to open their doors to discuss the matter openly and candidly—for fear of legal consequences as Thailand has draconian laws and regulations to prohibit free expression on matters relating to the royal institution. Ongoing political struggles and division are also major obstacles to the study of the monarchy, as rightist-royalists seem easily to smear anybody who tells unflattering stories about the palace with allegations of disloyalty or anti-monarchism. In the meantime, the military claims that it has a duty to act against what it deems offences to the monarchy.

However, discussion of the monarchy is no longer a taboo, as the royal institution's fairy tale has been over for a long time—since the 1932 revolution to bring it under the constitution. Like other political institutions, the monarchy and military in Thailand also are accountable to the people since they obtain huge budgets from public coffers. It is therefore my obligation to shed some light on the monarchy-military nexus, and this is the reason that I have compiled this book. Mistakes and errors, if any, are all my responsibility.

*Supalak
June 2020, Singapore*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would never have become a tangible reality without the assistance and contributions of many people. May I express my gratitude first and foremost to Puangthong R. Pawakapan, who has inspired me to work on the most important issue in Thai politics and also helped shape my ideas and approach, and to Thongchai Winichakul, who kindly helped shed light on the historical background. The book would never have appeared without the time and energy over days and nights that Michael Montesano devoted to working with me on this project, from the initial draft through to the final manuscript. I also thank Kittipong Soonprasert, Thanapol Eawsakul, Yiamyut Sutthichaya, Sarayut Tangprasert, Bhatchara Aramsri, Fahroong Srikhao and Chularat Saengpassa for providing me with materials, documents, contacts and many other kinds of assistance. General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, Lieutenant General Pongsakorn Rodchompoo, Nattawut Saikua and a number of anonymous informants who shared information on military affairs deserve my special thanks. The leadership of, and my colleagues at, the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute provided resources and support of all kinds during my visiting fellowship in 2019–20 and thus made it possible for my ambitions for this project to be realized, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Singapore severely. Last but certainly not least, I owe all members of my family, friends and colleagues much for their moral support and for logistical assistance in making my work go smoothly.

A NOTE ON THAI NAMES AND TERMS

The romanization of Thai terms in this book follows the Royal Thai General System of Transcription set by the Office of Royal Society, Thailand, with the exception of proper names. Some of the latter, used here in the individual's preferred or most common form, may seem inconsistent although they are the same in the Thai language (as in the case, for example, of the surnames of Plaek Phibunsongkhram and Pradap Pibulsonggram, who are closely related). In referring to the king's favourite aides and his bodyguard units, the book follows the palace and military in using the romanized form *rajawallop* in place of *ratchawanlop*.

The ranks of military officers mentioned in the book are given only the first time that they occur in the text of each chapter; these are the ranks that officers carried at the time of writing. An exception in this regard is the case of General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, whose rank is repeatedly mentioned to distinguish him from the civilian of the same given name whose full name is commonly transliterated as Sondhi Limthongkul.

Names of military units also change from time to time, and the English names of a unit and the position of its commanders may not be the same. For example, the Supreme Command has been renamed the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, but the position of its chief, previously known in English as Supreme Commander, is now Chief of Defence Forces.

Kings of the Chakri dynasty are often also known as "Rama" in numerical order of their respective reigns. For example, Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok, the founder of the House of Chakri, is also known as Rama I and King Vajiralongkorn as Rama X. The book generally refers to Thai kings by their given names, which are already well known internationally.