My Turbulent Life and 21 Years of Exile in the People's Republic of China

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My Turbulent Life and 21 Years of Exile in the People's Republic of China

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To my wife Poonsuk, my best friend
who shared the most arduous times of my life ...

and to all my loyal comrades.

CHLOROPSIS AURIFRONS PRIDII

Golden-fronted Leafbird
Family: Chloropseidae
Order: Passeriformes
Class: Aves
Phylum/Division: Chordata
Kingdom: Animalia

A new subspecies of bird living in the Himalaya regions to northern Siam, discovered by the Smithsonian Institution, which registered it as number USNM 311538 and named it *Chloropsis aurifrons pridii*, with the following comment: "This subspecies is named in honour of Pridi Banomyong (Luang Praditmanutham), leader of the Thai (Siamese) Resistance movement." (See the Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, volume 106.)

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Foreword

Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang[1]

I. An Awkward Silence and Reawakening

Alas, good people are not welcome in Thailand.

—Anonymous

My introduction to Pridi Banomyong took place in an elementary school library. One afternoon, I discovered a series of biographical comics about famous people. Among Ludwig Von Beetheven, Marie Curie, Lord Buddha and Miyamoto Musashi, the series included Pridi as the only Thai, whom it described as a senior stateman. But the further the story progressed, the more confused I became. The biography told the life of a gentleman who was so profoundly affected by social injustice in Siam that he decided to initiate a major political change. But after that point the storyline became increasingly unclear. The comic recounted rather mysteriously that Pridi ultimately was so disappointed that he was forced to seek asylum, first in China and then in Paris. Unlike other books of the same series, I never revisited Pridi's story.

In retrospect, my confusion when reading the life of Pridi was not coincidental. It was not the fault of the author having failed to narrate in a clear and precise style. Ambiguity about Pridi's lifework was intentional. Were the event taking place elsewhere, the story could easily become that of a national hero. An ambitious,

justice-loving young man liberated the country from the exploitative absolute regime and drove the country into modern constitutional democracy. He renegotiated with Western countries to end unfair treaties and restore Siam's full sovereignty. The same man, while assuming the role of the regent on behalf of the absent king, headed the underground resistance against the occupation of the Imperial Japanese Army during the Second World War. For his services, this young brave revolutionary should have deserved his own national holiday, a monument and perhaps a movie or two. At least, isn't that what the protagonist in every Hollywood movie is like? Pridi is Thailand's equivalent to the Founding Father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk or Sun Yat-sen. But, unlike these figures, Pridi is not a national hero. His portrait is never a household item on display. Even at Thammasat University, where he founded and presided as the first rector, as one professor put it, Pridi is a faded face of a distant past. Students are familiar with his name, but few are aware of the full extent of his lifework.

Why is Pridi Banomyong not a national hero? The silence can be explained by two key reasons. First and most importantly, his story, though exciting and commendable, does not fit with mainstream Thai histography.[2] Thais are supposed to be peace-loving and loyal to their kings. Thailand is the kingdom where Thai monarchs, well respected and loved, help guide the country through the countless perils of war-loving neighbouring empires, Western colonial ambition, communism, capitalism and, lately, perhaps even liberalism. Several other names are familiar from history classes, such as Naresuan, Narai, Taksin, Chulalongkorn and Bhumibol. This Buddhist land was described as a perfect, harmonious community, its subjects obedient, and the ruling class governing according to Buddhist teachings. The 1932 revolution, which was Pridi's masterpiece, was therefore a serious crime. The event reminds an audience that in actuality the traditional regime was full of injustice, that the ruling class was exploiting the subjects, and that the subjects could be defiant and rebellious. Pridi did not simply end the absolute monarchy, but he also desacralized the Buddhist king—an act of blasphemy—thus his story is not welcomed.

The second reason is that there was, unfortunately, no happy ending for the democratic revolution of 1932. The revolution was

not a straightforward and permanent transition from absolute monarchy to democratic constitutional monarchy. That path has been treacherous. Soon after 24 June 1932, the counterrevolutionary forces began their work in earnest. Meanwhile, infighting among the People's Party, the group that led the 1932 revolution, hindered further democratic transition. Participants of the revolution may have shared a common enemy, but they did not hold to the exact same dream. People switched side, and friends became enemies. Pridi was on the losing side. Within fifteen years, Thailand's first democratizing attempt ended, and the country plunged into a long period of military dictatorship. The return of autocratization was aided not least by the death of King Ananda, another mystery in Thai political history in which Pridi was implicated.

As a result, a comic had to be mindful of what it was practical for it tell a young audience about this volatile period and this controversial figure. Pridi's importance is too great to ignore, yet his story finds no good place in the official narrative. The Thai state thus deals with him with an awkward silence, similar to the silence it has given to such other unconventional events as the 1976 massacre or the 1992 uprising. Recognition is kept to the minimum and details are not to be discussed. For some time, Pridi was simply ignored. It was only shortly before his death, in 1984, that the events of his life could be discussed openly. Still, interest in the 1932 revolution was very limited.

Things changed recently. Since 2020, there seems to have been a surge of interest in the 1932 revolution and the parties involved. The year 2020 was remembered as one of protest, where tens of thousands of young men and women, fed up with the authoritarian but dysfunctional government of General Prayuth Chan-ocha—who staged a coup in 2014 and planned a sham election in 2019—refused to go gently into the night. They took to the streets for months, demanding major reforms. On the cultural front, the large-scale protest revived interest in political history. Non-fiction accounts of the 1932 revolution and the subsequent events topped the best-selling list, and it became a common sight to see a long line of political history enthusiasts queueing up at a book fair. In addition to books, there have been comics, musicals and a lot of internet memes.

It is worth noting that the new generation of democratic activists feel more connected with the 1932 generation. For those of previous generations, when it comes to democratic figures, we would normally think of the Octobrists, a group of university student activists during the 1970s. Thailand was then under the right-wing military dictatorship supported by the United States. In the context of the Cold War, these students inevitably leaned left towards socialism. Many of them were affiliated with the Communist Party of Thailand. The Octobrists faced two massacres in the month of October—in 1973 and 1976—hence their name. Many eventually were forced to join the insurgency in the ongoing civil war. Several of them, upon their return, became social critics and public intellectuals—familiar faces representing the liberal democratic dream of their country.

But that was not the case in 2020. The youth preferred to associate their movement with the People's Party of 1932, even to the point of naming themselves the People's Party Mob—Mob Kana Ratsadorn. It is not difficult to understand why Gen Z see themselves in the individuals of 1932; there is a sense of a shared unfinished mission and fate.

The Octobrists fought the military dictatorship of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn. For a long time, when the political struggle in Thailand was all about the struggle between civilian politicians and the military, the mission of the Octobrists made a lot of sense and provided inspiration. But since 2006, the conflict in Thailand has taken a different turn. After two coups, in 2006 and 2014, and several instances of deadly unrest, the people have come to realize that the conflict is much deeper than a military-civilian struggle, and that the military is probably a proxy for someone else. For many, that someone else was the monarchy, who has allegedly been involved in Thailand's political illness. It is obvious that the two most recent incidents of unrest were driven by a strong royalist ideology.[3] In other words, young people now identify the monarchy as obstructing progress for the country—a view similar to what Pridi would have held over eight decades ago. All of a sudden, the protesters felt that the mission of 1932 was incomplete, and they took up the responsibility to "end it within our generation", which became the unofficial motto of the 2020 movement.

The democratic activists share more than just this sense of mission; they share the same plight. In order to marginalize the People's Party, the Thai state has resorted to a smear campaign, false accusations and fake news, coupled with police brutality and lawsuits, to tarnish the lifework of Pridi and other members of the movement. Similar tactics are also being applied to today's activists. Many of them will feel even more connected after they are forced to go into exile. Unfortunately, Thailand does not seem to have moved far forward from Pridi's time.

In Buddhist cosmology, time is never linear. There is no looming end times or judgement day. Time is cyclical, as it repeats itself. When time ends, it is born again and everything begins anew. Similarly, Thailand seems to be stuck in that recurring cycle. Pridi's lifework and the ongoing political developments show surprising similarities. This foreword draws some parallels between Pridi Banomyong and the contemporary democratic movement in Thailand. It is not meant to be a comprehensive biography of the man, but an introduction, highlighting certain episodes in the hope that contemporary readers will find some relevance between themselves and this generation of the past.

II. An Overripened Revolution

> *Let all people know that our country belongs to the people—not to the king, as has been deceitfully claimed.*
>
> —The People's Party Declaration No. 1

To defeat a revolution, the reactionary must convince the public that the revolution has nothing to do with them, that only a minority is involved, that a major change is unnecessary, and that the revolution is both premature and immature. A common accusation is that the People's Party was but a small band of naive and reckless bourgeoisie, self-centred Western-educated alumni who wished to impose their ill-conceived ideas of governance on Siam. In the view of the counterrevolutionaries, the citizens of the country were perfectly happy, but the People's Party was influenced by their experience while studying abroad—especially in France, the land of the great revolution—and they lacked a thorough understanding of the local context. In brief, the 1932 revolution was a mistake. That is

why the revolution is immature. Also, so the accusation goes, King Prajadhipok had already been contemplating granting his subjects a constitution. He was just waiting for the right moment for the majority of Thais to be sufficiently educated to be able to handle their newly founded rights and liberties. That is why the revolution was premature. The People's Party did not wait. They stole King Prajadhipok's thunder.

The 2020 youth protesters faced similar accusations. The government dismissed the protest as a tantrum from a handful of self-centred individuals of Gen Z who could not wait for the military junta to complete their promise of political reform. The call for monarchical reform reflected the youth's lack of understanding of a unique and intricate relationship between the monarchy and the people and of the majority's reverence for the Chakri kings. Worse is the conspiracy theory that these youths were being manipulated by some politicians or even foreign assets. A convenient culprit would be the CIA.

Historical accounts paint a very different picture of the pre-1932 situation. Siam was experiencing greater discontent than we can now imagine, and the mood was one ready for major change. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the Siamese monarchy has repeatedly been challenged.[4] Early in his reign, King Chulalongkorn's brother, Prince Pritsadang, together with a few other princes and civil servants, submitted a petition that suggested that Siam needed to transform into a constitutional monarchy to save the country from the growing threat of colonization. Chulalongkorn's reaction to the suggestion was mixed. In his letter of reply, he did not argue with the idea, but he stated that he did not believe it was the right time. Chulalongkorn was more concerned with administrative reform than a constitutional one. Later, a similar call was made by Tianwan, one of Siam's early journalists and a commoner intellectual, who wrote extensively about Siam's backwardness. Among a list of his demands, he called for the abolition of slavery, the promotion of women's rights, and, most importantly, a parliamentary form of government. However, the reception of his ideas was less than ideal. He was jailed and even sent to an asylum. In 2020, one political activist was sent to a mental hospital for wearing a T-shirt saying that he had lost his faith in the monarchy.

But the call for further liberalization of society was set in motion. Ironically, Chulalongkorn's reform liberated slaves and vassals, creating a new class of proto-middleclass. And it soon became obvious that Chulalongkorn's reform was not enough for the newly liberated population, who found that their ascension was obstructed by the embedded traditional hierarchy. From a small circle of noblemen, the same demand soon spread among the commoners. A freer populace yearned for greater freedom to express their ideas and dreams. There was much anger about privileges and hierarchy embedded in the structure of the recently modernized public administration. Moreover, the longer the government ignored such pleas, the more radical the ideas became. In 1912, Leng Srichan and other army officers attempted, unsuccessfully, a plot to topple King Vajiravudh. The writings of Leng Srichan reflected ideas similar to those of Tianwan. We are perhaps safe to assume that ending the absolute monarchy was a general sentiment of the era.

Pridi's memoir captures this sentiment well. As he grew up, slavery and the corvee labour system were abolished, but they were replaced by a heavy tax burden. He learned about Siam's backwardness from his high school teacher in Ayutthaya Province, who referred to Siam as the last nation under absolute monarchy after China and Russia had successfully brought down their ancient kings. This episode in his memoir showed that the matter of revolution and the backwardness of the country were commonly held ideas and not controversial back then. The Siamese in fact paid considerable attention to world politics, especially the Chinese residents who were drawn by the activities of Sun Yat-sen. The Siamese government was so concerned about these developments that King Vajiravudh wrote to counter such sentiment. His writing ridiculed as well as criticized those who wished for a parliament as being naive and blindly copying foreigners without fully understanding the magnitude of such action.[5] Prajadhipok was more compromising as he felt the status quo was not viable. He had even prepared a royalist constitution resembling that of the Weimar-style constitutional monarchy, but his senior relatives discouraged him until it was too late.[6]

The 1932 revolution was not a spontaneous act initiated by a small band of egoistic individuals. It was the homegrown culmination of years of discontent about social and political inequality. Pridi

justified his action by declaring that Siam's absolute monarchy had ripened, and that a ripe fruit would naturally fall and wither, only for a new shoot to bloom. Nothing lasts forever, as the Buddha's law of impermanence said.[7]

The 2020 protest was also the result of years of discontent. Since the 2006 coup, as liberal democracy in Thailand continued to decline, royalism had been on the rise as an ideological substitute.[8] Freedom of expression was severely limited by the use of the *lèse-majesté* law. Criticism of the king was strictly forbidden. All government mechanisms were captured by the royalist conservatives. Judicial independence was compromised. The situation had only worsened since the 2014 coup. Prayuth Chan-ocha, who claimed his loyalty to the king as justification to rule, engineered a new constitution to help him win the 2019 general election. Unfair electoral rules and the impartial constitutional court punished his opponents while letting Prayuth rig the game.

There was a sense of urgency among the younger generation—the fear they were being set up to fail. As democracy regressed, public education was becoming all about indoctrination about patriotism and royalism. Critical thinking skills were not encouraged. Meanwhile, wealth inequality in the country was among the highest in the world. A few families with political connections controlled a significant portion of the nation's wealth. Thai youths saw no future in either their education or their employment prospects.

The rise of royalism eventually invited the return of a crypto-absolute monarchy, where the king enjoyed unrestrained power within a legal enclave. For example, in 2016, after the public referendum, King Vajiralongkorn delayed the signing of the draft constitution until the government agreed to amend it in line with his comments. The government later passed laws that transferred the Crown Property Bureau to the king's personal coffer and established his own army. Many royal proclamations were issued without being countersigned by the government as they were deemed personal matters of his majesty. Obviously, that legal enclave is expanding and the king enjoys growing impunity in exercising his power.

There has been resentment that the monarchy has been trying to undermine democracy. A considerable number of Thais believe the king has been sympathetic to recent coups and even the crackdown

on democratic protests. The beginning of Vajiralongkorn's reign saw a mysterious and systematic destruction of the legacy of the 1932 revolution. A brass plaque commemorating the 1932 revolution disappeared, and a new plaque that pledged allegiance to the Chakri dynasty was found in its place. The monument commemorating the defeat of the 1935 royalist counterrevolution was removed. Places named after members of the People's Party had their signage removed. All these developments have led to serious concern that the 1932 revolution was being undone.

By 2020, people no longer believed Prayuth's lies that he was returning Thailand to democracy. Covid-19 hit, and a promising opposition party was dissolved. All these things took place while Vajiralongkorn was living in Germany. The protest erupted.

III. Loyalty and Treason

> *I am willing to surrender the powers formerly mine to the people as a whole, but I will not hand them over to any individuals or any groups who would only exercise it autocratically and without heeding the voice of the people.*
>
> —King Prajadhipok's abdication statement

The 2020 protest was born under peculiar conditions. Prayuth Chan-ocha had recently transformed from a military dictator into the head of an illiberal yet democratic government. King Vajiralongkorn had taken the throne in 2016 and had yet to consolidate his hegemony. Prayuth announced a moratorium of the *lèse-majesté* law. The government was distracted by Covid-19. The initial protest was joined by mostly middleclass youths from leading universities and was non-violent, so the government was not sure how to deal with the sons and daughters of their very own supporters. This created a political vacuum that spawned the mob.

The mood suddenly shifted on 3 August 2020. That evening, Arnon Nampha, a human rights lawyer and activist, showed up on stage and read aloud his criticism of Vajiralongkorn's behaviour and the need for monarchical reform. This was, for the first time, a direct address to the huge elephant in the room. The moment was decisive. While the crowd clapped and cheered the government was finally able to decide on how to handle the protest. The anti-Prayuth protest had become treason, and Prayuth would treat it as such. Over the next few months,

protests would face brutal riot police armed with rubber bullets and teargas, among other crowd control devices. The government intentionally escalated the protests. Right-wing conservative elements flooded the informational space with a royalist campaign to smear the protesters, and *lèse-majesté* was once again invoked.

A visitor to Thailand can attest to the country's excessive expression of overwhelming love and respect for the Chakri dynasty. Wherever one travels, in public spaces there are always portraits, banners, photos and statues of kings—first Bhumibol, and now Vajiralongkorn and other royal members. Given such fervent love, disloyalty is a convenient weapon to destroy a political enemy. Pridi was among the first to test such a weapon. Not only did he participate in the People's Party, but he was also one of its masterminds. He even wrote the first manifesto condemning Prajadhipok himself. His action made him a perfect target for the counter-democratic campaign, which, surprisingly, has lasted until the present day. By late 2021, several social media accounts were disseminating a smear campaign against the 1932 revolution as part of the anti-2020 protest operation.

It is true that, ultimately, despite the best efforts of the People's Party to reach a compromise with Prajadhipok, the amity broke down and Prajadhipok abdicated. Upon his departure, he left the memorandum quoted above, which has since been used repeatedly to attack the People's Party. But although Pridi might have been hostile to an absolute monarchy, he was not at all hostile to the monarchy.

A widely circulated meme during the 2020 protest depicted Pridi and Field Marshall Plaek Pibunsongkram, another member of the People's Party. In it Plaek says to Pridi, "This would all be over if you had listened to me."

Plaek was Pridi's "frenemy". A young French-educated artillery officer, he was sympathetic to Pridi's cause. He was, however, a hardliner, and he eventually grew into a nationalist authoritarian republican. Plaek was remembered for holding a less-than-stellar attitude towards the monarchy compared with his authoritarian successors; for example, Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikachorn, who were ardent royalists. In one of his famous quotes in his capacity as prime minister, while commenting on the 1940 draft of the constitution, he predicted, "Through our lifetimes, and perhaps the

lifetime of our children, we will experience the struggle between the old and the new regimes."

What exactly Plaek's plan was for the monarchy is a question I shall not discuss here, but the meme suggests how the youth see Pridi. It implies that Pridi made a huge mistake in not eliminating the monarchy. Pridi was too nice and indecisive.

The People's Party chose not to turn Siam into a republic. They begged for pardon from Prajadhipok and invited senior figures from the previous regime into the government. When Prajadhipok raised an objection to the 27 June 1932 constitution that Pridi had drafted, Pridi relented by establishing a joint drafting commission, which produced the 10 December 1932 constitution. This allowed Prajadhipok to upend the meaning of Thai constitutionalism.[9] Thai constitutionalism was not the product of the popular struggle for the government under law. At best, it was the result of the king's generosity, with him voluntarily delegating some of his prerogatives to a group of his subjects to experiment with a new form of government. At worst, the People's Party was seen as stealing the king's power.

In hindsight, the People's Party might have saved the Chakri dynasty from a worse fate. Prajadhipok inherited a troubled kingdom from his brother, Vajiravudh.[10] The mood of the times was troubled, and the regime was fragile to the point of being at risk from the rise of communism in Southeast Asia. The awful end of the Romanov and Qing monarchs was a cold reminder of those who failed to adapt in time. Many members of the royal family already sensed the end of their privilege and welcomed the change.[11] Some princes co-operated with the new regime without much fuss.

Similarly, the 2020 protest leaders insisted that the call for monarchical reform was not to sabotage the Chakri dynasty but to modernize and save it. Since 2006, the royal family has been facing growing criticism, both from within the country and abroad, about its involvement in politics.[12] Such criticism peaked during the 2010 Red Shirt protests and after the 2014 coup. Moreover, Vajiralongkorn's ascension brought new criticism over his aggrandizement, which upset the public. Regrettably, the well-intended criticism fell on the deaf ears of the royalists, who perceived any criticism of the monarchy as amounting to desecration and, ultimately, treason.

IV. Death and Mystery

Pridi was not successful in his political career. His proposal for economic reform was rejected for its resemblance to socialist ideas, so he was forced into his first exile. He was able to return to Thailand in 1933, but his feud with Plaek during the Second World War resulted in Pridi being appointed the regent for King Ananda, who was then studying in Europe. The position was prestigious, but it also barred him from being involved in politics.

During his regency, Pridi took care of the remaining members of the royal family, who had to face the frequent air raids of the Allies. Eventually, his sincerity, mild manner and pleasant personality earned him trust and won over any scepticism that many princes and princesses may have held against him.[13] Pridi was also able to use his regency to cover up his underground resistance, forming the Free Thai movement and connecting it with the movement abroad. It was his service in this that allowed Thailand to annul Plaek's declaration of war against the British and the United States. Plaek fell from power and Pridi's faction returned to it. Unfortunately, his dedication in the service to the royal family would not save him from the upcoming disaster.

On 9 June 1946, King Ananda was found dead in his bed in the Grand Palace with a gunshot wound to his head. It was unclear whether it was a case of suicide, murder or an accident. Ananda's death remains one of the greatest mysteries in modern Thailand.

If anything is worse than the overthrowal of an absolute monarchy, it is the crime of regicide. Ananda's death presented a crisis to Pridi, who was the government at that time. Although his government announced that the death was an accident, his political opponents saw an opportunity to tarnish his name. They criticized the Pridi government for prematurely concluding the investigation. They questioned whether this haste indicated a coverup for the true perpetrator. The opposition implied that Pridi was involved in a plan to usurp royal power. Some politicians from the Democrat Party hired people to shout out in a movie theatre that, "Pridi murdered the King!" The government arrested those doing this, but it was too late to regain public trust and stop the rumour.[14] Pridi resigned in the face of mounting political pressure. The new government would execute three royal aides for murdering King Ananda, but it is

generally understood that they were simply scapegoats. The Ananda trial showcases the brutality of the Thai police that is still a fact today. The case is officially closed, but any discussion of it is taboo.

The death of the young king allowed the counterrevolutionary force to relaunch its attack on the 1932 revolution. The royalists therefore joined hands with Plaek to stage the 1947 coup. Pridi fled. The 1947 coup marked the end of the fifteen years of Thailand's first experiment with democratization. Pridi attempted another coup, but it was completely crushed.

V. Exile

> *Power came to me before I knew how to use it well;*
> *the experience came only after I no longer could.*
>
> —Pridi Banomyong

China might seem an odd choice for a democratic figure to seek asylum in, at least from the point of view of the young generation. The 2020 protesters identified themselves as part of the Milk Tea Alliance, the loose network of anti-CCP movements in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand. But the situation was different in the 1950s. Throughout his political career, Pridi was a foreign minister, a prime minister and the regent. He had an opportunity to travel widely and he met with several foreign dignitaries, many of whom he recalled fondly their friendships. But these friendships were of little use when Pridi escaped from Thailand. Against the backdrop of the looming Cold War, the Free World did not view him favourably. Pridi was associated with a socialist economic plan, and he was sympathetic to nationalist movements in Indochina. In his memoir, he often showed disapproval of "jingoistic" Western powers. Unsurprisingly, Pridi recorded his disappointment with the CIA's intervention in his escape plan to Mexico and the harassment of his family. He was forced to travel to China.

It was a long time before he could reunite with his wife and children. Finally, in 1970, he received permission to move to France, where he stayed until his death in 1983. From abroad, he commenced lawsuits to redeem his reputation in the case of King Ananda's death and to claim pensions from his service to the Thai government. But he was not yet retired into the shadows. Over the decade or so of his

residence in France, friends, admirers, scholars and journalists paid him visits. He wrote several books and commentaries, which were well received by student activists in Thailand. But sadly, that interest was short-lived. The massacre of 6 October 1976 marked again the rise of the authoritarian conservatives, crushing the budding liberal movement and censoring any free discussion.

By November 2020, the protests had become dangerous. The use of brute force successfully intimidated casual protesters. Only the brave risked attending the protests, which were increasingly violent. The Thai police, whose brutality was known to the world, were not hesitant in employing batons, chemical spray, high-pressure water cannon and even rubber bullets. It was common to see police deliberately shoot rubber bullets at the heads of protesters or to kick them in plain sight. But worse was when the police conveniently charged protesters with a barrage of offences, from *lèse-majesté* to public littering, from treason to infringing Covid-19 safety measures. Political prisoners were known to undergo trials without receiving any due process. The court denied bail and dismissed key evidence. Judges ordered trials in secrecy. The conviction rate has therefore been unusually high. Without hope for justice or a fair trial, activists fled the country. It has been heart-wrenching to bid farewell to some of Thailand's best and brightest, and the mass exodus has continued until this day. Even non-activists are leaving as they feel the country no longer needs their skills or knowledge.

It is not difficult to see why protesters in the twenty-first century feel connected to Pridi's lifework. They share a similar dream of creating a fair and just society—a plan that is dismissed as premature and immature. They endure the same accusations of disloyalty and committing treason. The police that beat, shoot at or falsely accuse them are the very same that sent the three scapegoats to the gallows and harassed Pridi's wife, Poonsuk, and his eldest son, Paal, with the sham accusation of treason. The 1932 revolution, which was later defeated by the royalist-military alliance, resembles the 1997 People's Constitution, which was killed by the 2006 royalist coup. Pridi's plight was probably in the mind of many activists when they left Thailand or sent their comrades off. Many would never return. Thailand has changed very little in this respect.

Thus, Pridi is being born again from the current political crisis. Stories are being retold, and, gradually, the old accusations are being debunked by new scholarship. Moreover, he and the members of the People's Party have been popularized by new books, comics, plays and internet memes. When the progressive, anti-dictatorship Move Forward Party was dissolved in August 2024, they established the new party, the People's Party, signalling their shared sense of commitment with those of 1932. The founders of the Move Forward/People's Party have never hidden their admiration of the statesman in exile. Recently, Thanathorn Jungrungrruangkit, one of the founders, bought Pridi's last home in Antony, France, with a plan to transform it into a museum.

But for all this, much is not known about the man. For example, his years in China have not been well studied. Pridi seemed to live there comfortably, even during times of turmoil. In this memoir, he seemed very interested in China's history, its people and the government. He mentions very little about the Cultural Revolution. Yet it is possible he felt trapped and a need to censor himself. A chronicle of one Thai woman who stayed with him in China for nine years led to a defamation lawsuit in which he asked the Thai court to bar distribution of her books.[15] This memoir may shed light on a lesser-known side of Pridi.

At the same time, the revival of interest in the 1932 revolution has intensified the royalist conservatives' hatred of Pridi. It is hatred but also fear. Pridi is hated for "stealing" the royal prerogative from the Chakri dynasty. Pridi has been feared because—although he seemed like a gentleman, as he withheld many names in his memoir—he might yet hold some secrets, especially ones damaging to the moral high ground of the conservatives. Such a secret could be stored somewhere, only to be unearthed by investigating historians. This hate and fear has led to a state of paranoia among the conservatives, causing them to renew their efforts to erase his legacy. They organize social media and news outlets to offer an alternative narrative. Pseudo-scholars are funded to disseminate their works, which belittle the 1932 revolution and praise Prajadhipok. The struggle, as Plaek predicted, is far from over.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank Mr Peerawat Navicharoen for his help with translation.
2. See Thongchai Winichakul, โฉมหน้าราชาชาตินิยม [The face of royalist nationalism] (Same Sky Books, 2016), pp. 5–7.
3. Federico Ferrara, "The Logic of Thailand's Royalist Coups D'etat", in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, edited by Pavin Chachavalpongpun (Routledge 2020), pp. 71–80.
4. See Thanet Aphornsuvan, สยามปฏิวัติ:จากฝันละเมอสมัยสมบูรณาญาสิทธิราชย์ สู่อภิวัฒน์สยาม 2475 [Siamese revolution: from dream under absolute monarchy to the 1932 revolution] (Bookscape 2021).
5. Nakarin Mektrairat, การปฏิวัติสยาม พ.ศ. *2475*, 5th ed. [The revolution of Siam in 1932] (Same Sky Books, 2010), p. 58.
6. Benjamin A. Batson, อวสานสมบูรณาญาสิทธิราชย์ในสยาม, 2nd ed. [The end of absolute monarchy in Siam] (Foundation for the Promotion of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2004), pp. 212–20.
7. See Pridi Banomyong, ความเป็นอนิจจังของสังคม, 9th ed. [The impermanence of a society] (Pridi Banomyong Institute, 1999).
8. Thongchai Winichakul, "Toppling Democracy", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (2008): 11–37.
9. Borwornsak Uwanno, กฎหมายมหาชน เล่ม 2: การแบ่งแยกกฎหมายมหาชน-เอกชน และพัฒนาการกฎหมายมหาชนในประเทศไทย, 3rd ed. [Public law 2: separation between private and public law and the evolution of public law in Thailand] (Winyuchon, 2004), pp. 255–59; Thongchai, "Toppling Democracy", p. 23.
10. In general, see Batson, อวสานสมบูรณาญาสิทธิราชย์ในสยาม.
11. Nakarin, การปฏิวัติสยาม พ.ศ., pp. 44–63.
12. See Puangthong Pawakapan, "The Foreign Press and its Changing Perceptions of the Thai Monarchy", in *After the Coup*, edited by Michael J. Montesano, Terrence Chong, and Mark Heng (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), pp. 308–34.
13. Kasidit Ananthanathorn, "เรื่องของสมเด็จพระพันวัสสาอัยยิกาเจ้า กับ นายปรีดี พนมยงค์ ในช่วงสงครามโลกครั้งที่ 2" [Queen Savang Vadana and Pridi Banomyong during the Second World War], Pridi Banomyong Institute, 1 December 2021, https://pridi.or.th/th/content/2021/12/908.
14. Barren J. Terweil, *Thailand's Political History: From the 13th Century to Recent Times* (River Books, 2011), p. 276.
15. Civil Court Decision 2535-2536/2511 (1968), the case against Nongyao Phrapasatit's *My 9 Years in Peking* (Phrae Pittaya, 1966).

Editor's Note

I was raised intermittently by my grandparents in their house in Antony, outside Paris, France, when my parents had to leave to work abroad. The first time was between 1972 and 1975, when I was starting primary school. I had been named after my grandfather's wartime code name (pronounced "Root") when he was leader of the anti-Japanese underground, the Free Thai ("Seri Thai") movement in Thailand. As "Ruth", my grandfather had established contact with the Allies and Thai resistance organizations in Britain and the United States.

I returned during my high school years to be with my grandparents from 1981 to 1986. My grandfather passed away on Monday, 2 May 1983. On the day before his death, I was at home for the weekend, taking care of him before going back to boarding school that evening. I didn't know it would be my last time seeing him alive.

A number of people have asked me, what was he like? My answer is that the late Pridi Banomyong was like any grandfather. He was quite fond of his grandchildren and wanted them to be good citizens of Thailand. When I lived in his house, each morning before school, we would listen to BBC radio together while my grandmother would go out to buy ficelle bread (a thin baguette) for

our breakfast. We would discuss the ongoing geopolitical situations in Southeast Asia, and sometimes he would take me to a bookstore to purchase volumes on military science so that we could discuss these issues with references. His perspective, as someone who during the Siamese revolution of 1932 had helped Thailand evolve from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, which it remains today, was always enlightening.

I still remember when my grandfather was working on his memoir. The moment the first draft was ready, everyone living in the house received a copy to proofread. I was in my first year of primary school and had just learned to read, but I wanted to contribute. At six years of age, I duly received a copy, read the book without understanding much, but proudly found an error. The numbering for one of the chapters was missing, and it was duly added in the final version of the book.

The book, entitled *Ma vie mouvementée et mes 21 ans d'exil en Chine Populaire*, was first published in French, and it was then translated into Thai in 1986. Strangely enough, the full book had never been translated into English. This omission came to my attention, and I decided it was important to share this vital period of my grandfather's life. I would like to thank Benjamin Ivry, who translated the book from French to English, as *My Turbulent Life and 21 Years of Exile in the People's Republic of China*.

The resulting book opens a window into the life of Pridi Banomyong, my grandfather, whose tenure as a statesman and his exile spans one of the most complex eras of modern Thai history. Through the trenchant recounting of his experiences, readers are offered an unparalleled glimpse into the heart and lucid mind of one of Thailand's most influential political figures, a champion of democracy, and a voice for peace and progress.

My grandfather was born on 11 May 1900, in Ayutthaya, Thailand, into a world teetering on the brink of change. His journey from law studies in Paris to the pinnacle of Thai politics and subsequently to a life of enforced solitude in China offers a rare perspective on the global forces and local dynamics that shaped the twentieth century. His autobiography is not merely a personal narrative but also a canvas portraying the struggle for national independence against a backdrop of international geopolitics.

It must not be forgotten that this book was published in 1974, four years after Pridi Banomyong left China to become a political refugee in France. The perspectives offered reflect the Cold War context and his own personal experience. In this book, he does more than chronicle the events that defined his public life; he offers insights into the philosophical underpinnings of his actions and decisions. His reflections on the interplay between power and principle, sovereignty and subjugation, are particularly poignant, echoing the perennial conflicts faced by nations.

His narrative is rich with descriptions of clandestine meetings, ideological confrontations, and the unyielding pursuit of a vision for a liberated Thailand. His accounts of interactions with historical figures, ranging from dictators to diplomats, reveal the complexities of international relations and the personal dimensions of political diplomacy.

His memoir also serves as a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit. It captures his resolve to return to his homeland, although this remained an unrealized dream, his philosophical musings on exile, and his undiminished hope for Thailand's democratic future. Each page resonates with his belief in the power of education, the importance of economic independence, and the need for political reform as pillars for building a just society.

This book is dedicated to my grandfather's legacy of intellectual rigor, moral courage and an unwavering commitment to human dignity. My grandfather's centenary was included in UNESCO's list of anniversary celebrations for 2000–2001 of great personalities and historic events. This is a testament to his contribution to Thailand and the world at large. But for me, he was my grandfather, with whom I enjoyed watching football on the TV, listening to news in English, reading French newspapers from different political spectrums, and discussing world affairs. He inspired me to pursue knowledge continuously, and my small contribution to his legacy has been to serve as dean at a faculty in the university he founded, to inspire future generations of Thai citizens.

Readers, whether scholars of Asian history, enthusiasts of political biographies, or general admirers of enduring human courage, will find in my grandfather's memoir a narrative that is not only historically significant but also deeply inspiring.

This book is not just a reflection of the past; it is a beacon for those who continue to strive for democracy and human rights across the world.

—Ruth Banomyong

The editor, Ruth Banomyong, in his youth, with his grandfather, Pridi Banomyong.