

Pridi Banomyong – A Short Biography*

From Ayutthaya to the Sorbonne

Born on 11 May 1900 in Ayutthaya, Thailand, to rice farmer Siang and Lukchan Banomyong, Pridi progressed from temple schools to the Ministry of Justice Law School in Bangkok. A government scholarship then sent him to France, where he earned his doctorate in law and a higher diploma in economics.

The Spark of 1927

In Paris, Pridi and six compatriots founded the Khana Ratsadon (People's Party). Five years later, in 1932, he helped end absolute monarchy and usher in a new political era for the country.

Law, Policy and Nation-Building

Pridi served as a judge, legal draftsman and lecturer, introducing administrative law to Thai legal education. After 1932 he became the first secretary-general of the People's Assembly, helped draft the 10 December 1932 constitution, and proposed an ambitious “Economic Plan” to link growth with social justice—an early blueprint for state responsibility in welfare and development.

* Translated from Thai and adapted from <https://pridi.or.th/th/about/pridi/biography>.

Reformist at Heart

- As the Minister of Interior (1934–35), he expanded local democracy via nationwide municipalities, empowered village and sub-district elections, and pushed for practical works, clinics, irrigation and rehabilitation schemes.
- As the Minister of Foreign Affairs (1937–38), he negotiated away unequal-treaty constraints, restoring full legal sovereignty, and resolved boundary issues in Thailand's favour.
- As the Minister of Finance (1938–41), he abolished archaic poll and land levies, established the first Revenue Code, shifted the tax burden towards ability to pay, nationalized the tobacco monopoly, and prudently built gold reserves to shield the currency during global turmoil.

A University as a “Marketplace of Ideas”

In 1934 he conceived and drafted the law founding the University of Moral and Political Sciences, today's Thammasat University, so working people and officials could study law, economics and public administration. As founding rector for eighteen years, he cultivated a generation that thought critically about rights, duties and public service.

War, Resistance and Statecraft

During the Second World War, Pridi served as regent, and he became a principal civilian leader of the Free Thai movement, under the code name “Ruth”. He coordinated with Allied commands and worked on safeguarding Thailand's post-war standing. His diplomacy helped ensure the country re-emerged with its sovereignty and international relationships intact.

Constitutional Stewardship

After the war, he was recognized as an elder statesman, helped bring in the 1946 constitution, and served brief terms as prime minister, prioritizing institutional stability over personal power.

Exile and Endurance

The 1947 coup forced Pridi abroad, first to Asia, spending twenty-one years in the People's Republic of China, and later to France. He

continued to write, teach and give advice from exile, maintaining an unwavering commitment to democratic governance and the rule of law.

Legacy

Pridi Banomyong was not just a jurist and politician; he was also a builder of modern Thai institutions. He restored sovereign rights, modernized finance and taxation, founded a university that expanded opportunities, and guided the country through wartime peril and constitutional transition. His life's work speaks to the simple idea that a fair legal order and an educated citizenry are the bedrock of national progress.

Chronology of Pridi's Life

| | | |
|------|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1900 | 11 May | Born in Ayutthaya |
| 1917 | | Enters law school |
| 1920 | May | Becomes barrister |
| | August | Leaves to study in France |
| 1925 | Oct/Nov | Clash with Thai ambassador over unpaid monthly student stipend; almost sent home |
| 1927 | February | First meeting of People's Party in Paris |
| | March | Returns to Siam |
| 1928 | 16 November | Marries Phoonsuk na Pombejra |
| 1932 | 12 April | Leaves for France |
| | 24 June | Leads the Siamese Revolution by the People's Party |
| | 29 September | Returns to Siam |
| 1934 | 14 March | Establishes Thammasat University |
| | 21 March | Becomes Minister of Interior |
| 1935 | August | Trip to Europe for loan negotiations |
| 1937 | 9 August | Becomes Minister of Foreign Affairs |
| | 13 November | New treaty signed with the United States (agreements with twelve other nations follow) |
| 1938 | 20 December | Becomes Minister of Finance |

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| 1939 | 29 March | Tax reforms and revenue code passed |
| | 29 September | National Banking bureau bill passed |
| 1940 | | Published the English-language novel <i>The King of the White Elephant</i> and produced an English-language movie of the same name, an historical drama to express goals of neutrality and peace amid threats from imperialism and fascism. The film was cast with amateur actors from among students and instructors of the University of Moral and Political Sciences, Bangkok (later Thammasat University). |
| 1941 | 6 December | Removed from cabinet; named a regent |
| 1942 | | Created an anti-Japanese underground, the Free Thai Movement (Seri Thai) in Thailand. Code named "Ruth", he established contact with the Allies and Thai resistance organizations in Britain and the United States. |
| 1944 | 1 August | Becomes sole regent |
| 1945 | 8 December | Awarded title of senior statesman by the king |
| 1946 | 24 March | Becomes prime minister until 3 June |
| | 8 June | Becomes prime minister until 10 June |
| | 11 June | Becomes prime minister until 21 August |
| | 3 November | Leaves Thailand for world tour |
| 1947 | 20 February | Returns to Thailand |
| | 8 November | House attacked; hides at Sattahip Naval Base |
| | 20 November | Escapes to Singapore |
| 1949 | January | Returns secretly to Thailand |
| | 6 August | Escapes to Singapore |
| | 21 September | Arrives in China |
| 1970 | 8 May | Arrives in Paris |
| 1974 | November | Self-publishes in French his longest non-fiction work, the present memoir, <i>My Turbulent Life and 21 Years of Exile in the People's Republic of China</i> |
| 1983 | 2 May | Dies in Paris |