

Kings, Country and Constitutions: Thailand's Political Development 1932–2000. By Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian. Richmond: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. 276 pp.

Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian's latest book is a detailed yet readable overview of Thailand's political evolution since the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932. As her title indicates, she is particularly interested in the two institutions of the monarchy and the constitution. There have been sixteen of the latter during the last seven decades, and the figure is actually twenty-eight if one counts all of the interim and amended versions (p. 30). Essentially the book seeks to explain why the first institution has been so durable and the second so fragile.

The book is divided into two parts; the first two chapters analyse Thai democracy — and the frequent lack thereof — and the various steps backward and forward which it has taken through successive constitutions. The other four chapters focus on a chronological narrative of the constitutional monarchy — two each on the period before and after 1952, a watershed represented by the present King Bhumibol's (r. 1946–) assumption of his role as an adult monarch after his return from Europe in late 1951. The first two chapters concentrate on his uncle (Prajadhipok, r. 1925–35) and brother (Ananda, r. 1935–46), while the last two are devoted to his own reign, which Kobkua terms the “Coming of Age of Thai Constitutional Monarchy”.

The first section, focusing on constitutions and democracy in Thailand (the two are by no means synonymous), provides a lucid and articulate analysis of the fits and starts which have characterized the country's political evolution since 1932. The author discusses the various constitutions which have come and gone over the years, with particular reference to their treatment of the monarchy. Although previous authors have traced Thai constitutional history in more detail, Kobkua's book will probably be more widely accessible than these other studies (Pornpibul 1978; Thak Chaloemtiarana 1978). Her analysis emphasizes the frequency with which constitutions have been drafted, adopted, and shelved by successive regimes in order to “maximize the

power of the interested group or faction concerned, and not for the promotion of the common good of the state or for the individual's right or privileges" (p. 7).

The story is not a pretty one, and Kobkua is unsparing in her criticism of the various forces all along the Thai political spectrum which have collectively deprived the country of a permanent charter. She is cautiously optimistic about the most recent (1997) constitution, which she feels represents at least a partial reversal of the tendency for Thai democracy to be "an exercise of process over principle, form over substance" (p. 8). Her arguments will resonate with most students of Thai political history, though many would perhaps take issue with her generally sceptical stance towards Pridi Phanomyong (1900–83), who is lionized in Thai liberal circles for his contribution to the country's democracy. To be fair, in this respect Kobkua is being faithful to her own royalist views and to her sympathies for P. Phibunsongkram (1897–1964), who was Pridi's most prominent political and ideological opponent (Kobkua 1995).

The book switches gear as we move into the second and third sections focusing on the monarchy. Here the author is particularly interested in chronicling the waning and subsequent waxing of the throne as a political force — ultimately the political force — in Thailand. She first looks at the struggle for power between Prajadhipok and the People's Party regime, which stripped him of his power in 1932 and eventually drove him to abdicate in 1935. Next is a good discussion of Ananda's reign (during most of which he lived abroad as a "minor monarch"), a topic which has frequently been overshadowed by the dramatic developments inside Thailand, notably the (first) rise and fall of Phibun. Finally comes what is really the psychological and emotional core of the book, the history of the present reign and the "success story" of King Bhumibol. Drawing heavily on American and British diplomatic archives, Kobkua provides a detailed narrative of his reign and the vicissitudes of his life as Thailand's longest-reigning monarch.

The book provides a wealth of interesting details and makes a number of important and insightful points about the monarchy. However, its overall impact is weakened by several significant problems. The first

is organizational. Unless the reader is fairly conversant with Thai political history, the first two chapters on democracy and constitutions will be quite confusing. It is not at all clear why these have been placed at the front of the book, particularly since much of the more straightforward chronology is found in the subsequent chapters on the monarchy, where it sometimes detracts from the thrust of the arguments. A single introductory chapter with an overview of developments since 1932 would have helped frame the rest of the book and bring the author's points more clearly into focus. (It would also have been good to integrate more material from the lengthy endnotes into the main text or else use footnotes for the more important information.)

A second problem is the relative lack of contextualization of the events of 1932, which did not happen in a vacuum. Any discussion of the end of the absolute monarchy needs to be grounded in a consideration of Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), who both made it truly absolute and sowed some of the seeds of its eventual destruction by packing the government and military with princes. There is some discussion of the reign of Vajiravudh (r. 1910–25), who gets off fairly lightly considering the level of dissatisfaction engendered by his years on the throne. Incorporating the work of Matthew Copeland and Scot Barmé, who have studied in detail the social and political changes of the Sixth and Seventh Reigns, would help the reader understand more clearly just why the coup took place (Barmé 1997, 2002; Copeland 1997). As it is, the book tends to give the impression that it was largely due to the ambitions of a small group of men and does not deal with the deeper frustrations among the non-royal Siamese elite; a clear picture of these problems would show all the more convincingly just how remarkable the subsequent renaissance of royalism really was.

The third and perhaps most serious weakness is a general lack of critical distance *vis-à-vis* the monarchy, a problem which becomes more acute the deeper we get into the present reign, and at times the discussion is much more hagiographical than analytical. Kobkua herself acknowledges the difficulties involved in writing about such a hallowed institution and promises “to chart an academic course as carefully and as [*sic*] humanly possible” (p. 145), but the results of this effort are

frankly mixed. Certain very important issues are touched only briefly, notably the relationship between the monarchy and the political Right after 1973 and the abuse of *lèse-majesté* laws against critics and political opponents. Almost nothing is said about the King's willingness to sanction both the abrogation of the 1968 constitution only three years later and the violent end to the more genuinely democratic experiment of 1973–76. A balanced study of the modern Thai monarchy absolutely has to give due consideration to these realities, unpalatable though they may be.

Moreover, the book's treatment of constitutions/democracy and monarchy as more or less separate subjects begs the question of the relationship between the two. Is the uneven development of Thai democracy since 1957 — when strongman Sarit Thanarat (1908–63) came to power and forged what Kobkua labels “the greatest political partnership in modern Thai history” (p. 14) with the young King — due to the strengthening of the monarchy, or, conversely, is the evolution of the throne's extra-constitutional authority attributable to the general failure of the constitutional system? How should we interpret the King's closeness to Sarit and to Prem Tinsulanond (1920–), who enjoyed a long tenure as prime minister and a close relationship with the Palace but only really promoted democracy when he agreed to hand over power to an elected successor in 1988? Ultimately the relationship between “kings” and “constitutions” would seem to be more closely intertwined — and more problematic — than this study suggests.

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