

**His Majesty's Role in the Making of Thai History**  
**by Mr. Anand Panyarachun**  
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**of Historians of Asia**  
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In accepting the invitation to deliver the keynote address today at the 14th Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia, I feel duty-bound to warn you all that I am not a historian by training or by inclination. The address I am about to give cannot, by any standard, be viewed as a historical paper. It is not based on any research work or scholastic study of the period.

It is, however, based on the personal perception of an individual who spent twenty-three years in his country's foreign service, thirteen years in the private sector and served twice, albeit for short and limited duration's, as Prime Minister. Hence, I might be deemed somewhat qualified, in an unscholarly manner, to speak of our King, the longest reigning monarch in the world, and his fifty-year reign.

I am sure that all of you here are aware of this historic event in our country. The entire nation joins hands in the national celebrations of His Majesty's Golden Jubilee this year. The outpouring of joy, gratification and pride sees no parallel in the more than 700 year-history of our nation.

It has indeed been a remarkable reign of a Thai king who succeeded to the throne after the abdication of his uncle, King Prajadhipok, Rama VII, in 1935, and the untimely demise of his elder brother, King Ananda Mahidol, Rama VIII, in 1946.

It could well be said that His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej became King Rama IX by accident. He was not born to be King. As such, he had little time to be groomed to be one. When he, a young man of 19 years of age, ascended to the throne in 1946, it was only fourteen years after absolute monarchy, which existed for nearly seven hundred years, had been brought to an end in a relatively peaceful way. The political process was then still fragile and turbulent. The military wing of the "democratic" movement was gaining dominance and losing sight of its initial democratic spirit and goals.

His Majesty began learning his constitutional craft in 1946 at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, where he changed his specialisation from science to law and political science. This academic study was merely a primer - at best a theoretical course.

To understand the present-day Thai monarchy, one needs to go back to the founding of the first central Thai State, Sukhothai, in the thirteenth century. The pioneers of independence chose to elevate the wisest and most capable among

them to be King. The King, having been entrusted with the task, not out of any divine right, but by the consent of his peers, had an inherent obligation to rule the country “with righteousness”, not for the glory of himself or his family, but “for the benefits and happiness” of the people in his trust. The king, being a Buddhist, was in effect a “dharma raja” - that is - a monarch upholding the rule of Buddhist righteousness, ruling in a style of kingship some have summarized as “patriarchal”. The royal code of conduct emphasized the major Buddhist precepts and the Tenfold Practice or Duties of Kingship, which to this day remain the cornerstone of Thai kingship: almsgiving, morality, liberality, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and non-obstruction.

During the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great, the ideal of a paternalistic ruler, sensitive to the needs of his people and aware of his duty to guide them, was already well established. This system was memorably reflected in a famous historical inscription found among the ruins of Sukothai. It describes life in the first capital and contains the following passage.

“(The King) has hung a bell in the opening of the gate over there; if any commoner in the land has a grievance....which he wants to make known to his Lord and Ruler, it is easy; he goes and strikes the bell which the King has hung there; King Ramkhamhaeng, ruler of the Kingdom, hears the call; he goes and questions the man, examines the case and decides it justly for him.”

For more than seven centuries, this concept of a patriarchal and accessible monarch has remained a Thai ideal. The change of capital from Sukhothai to Ayutthaya brought about the Khmer concept of divine Kingship and the Ayutthaya Kings incorporated many of the divine features, with all-attendant Royal rituals and ceremonies, into the function of the Throne. The Sukhothai style of Kingship, nonetheless, has never entirely disappeared from the national consciousness and it was resurrected when the rulers of the Chakri Dynasty ushered in a new era in 1782.

Since 1782, when Bangkok was established as the capital, a succession of rulers of the Royal House of Chakri have contributed to the practice of deeply-rooted Buddhist beliefs and the benevolence of reigning as their fore-fathers. Both King Mongkut, Rama the Fourth, and King Chulalongkorn, Rama the Fifth, - great-grand-father and grandfather of our reigning King - travelled widely throughout the country. They strove to cultivate personal contacts and discourse with their subjects, however common or humble, and in the process and often incognito, learned of their thoughts and problems. The Chakri Kings, well-aware of the changes taking place within the kingdom and the outside world, brought about reforms and opened up the country to external influences and ideas, paving the way for Thailand to become a modern State under a constitutional monarchy.

“Continuity and change” is now an almost cliché’d theme of historical study. Yet the story of the Thai monarchy demonstrates very clearly the continued general validity

of such an approach. Thailand is now a constitutional monarchy and a country aspiring to become a newly developed society, but the traditional principles of righteous Buddhist kingship and kingly virtues remain of paramount importance to the present monarchy. His Majesty has displayed, and continues to display a profound understanding of constitutional kingship as well as the traditional sources and symbols of Thai monarchical tradition.

In his Oath of Accession to the Throne, as his ancestors had done, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej pledged to “reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people” In his fifty-year reign, he has not deviated from that pledge. Indeed, he has earned the love, admiration, and trust of his people in a manner that cannot be fully comprehended by foreigners.

The significance of his reign relates to three main themes: the well being of his subjects, the security and stability of his nation, and national unity.

In the fifties and sixties, he travelled to every nook and corner of the country, meeting with the people, especially farmers and the poor in rural and remote areas as well as the hill tribes. Gathering information, personally assessing the farming and agricultural areas, experimenting his new concepts and applying appropriate technology at his palace ground in Bangkok, he began a series of Royally initiated projects.

His nearly two thousand projects to date deal with such areas as irrigation, water-resources management, forest and fishery conservation, soil-erosion and improvement, crop-substitution, reforestation, land development, rural and community development, primary health care, eradication of leprosy, education, flood control, urban traffic and environmental protection. His wide-ranging interests, combined with his self-acquired technical knowledge and pragmatic approach based on local culture and wisdom, have enabled the poor, the under-privileged and the dis-enfranchised to lead a more hopeful and constructive life, thereby strengthening the social fabric of our society and fortifying our national cohesion and identity.

His work in all these development areas stems from his conviction that the well being of the people is tantamount to the well being of their sovereign. The two are inseparable and inter-related.

His concern for the security and stability of the Thai nation is reflected in the innumerable trips and lengthy visits he, the Queen and other members of the Royal family, have made to the sensitive areas of the country which were, at one time, confronted with communist insurgency movements or separatist, ethnic and religious-inspired bands of rebels and bandits. His frequent visits were a morale booster to the populace. His royal projects to uplift the living conditions of the people in those areas underline his own personal commitment and dedication to the people. He has proven by his deeds that he has an over-riding interest in his

subjects.

After a State visit to a foreign country, His Majesty inspired the then government to embark on the first national economic and social development plan, laying the foundation for the country to move in a more systematic manner from an agrarian society to an agro-industrial one. He also built up close personal relations with other monarchs and Chiefs of State of major powers and neighbouring countries which, on many occasions, helped to avert potential conflicts and reduce tensions along the border. His personal diplomacy, exercised judiciously and unobtrusively, has contributed to the harmonisation of national interests and consolidation of ties of friendship and international cooperation.

I have so far dwelled on the varied activities that His Majesty initiated, developed and implemented. These activities do not normally fall within the domain of a constitutional monarch. The fact that he has persevered in these activities for the long-lasting benefit of the Thai people has very much endeared him to his subjects - so much so that the Thais, in general, willingly and unreservedly accord him the confidence and trust that no other monarch in our history, or for that matter, any other monarch in the world, has ever enjoyed. The King has, in the process; gained the "reserve powers" which he has put to good use, whenever circumstances require.

Now I shall deal with the King's constitutional role and how he has discreetly and deftly influenced the course of our political history. We must bear in mind that the young King, after his accession to the Throne in 1946, had to tread cautiously through the shoals of political and military bedrocks. Political intrigues and military machinations were the order of the day and His Majesty, while widely loved and respected, was still relatively a figurehead of a people who had yet to know their own sovereign.

As I stated previously, the King embarked early in his reign on a journey to know his subjects and, in the process, allowed his subjects to get close to and know him. At the same time, he used his time wisely to accumulate "constitutional" experience. He has been through 15 constitutions, 17 coups d'etat, and twenty-one Prime Ministers. He has an acute grasp of constitutional rule. He remains detached from politics, playing a non-partisan role in the country's political process and development.

As a constitutional monarch, however, he possesses "the right to be consulted, the right to encourage and the right to warn." Under normal circumstances, he exercises these rights through private audiences he grants to the Prime Minister of the day. What transpires during these meetings remain private and confidential, and even after statutory silent periods, parts of the consultations may not be made known.

In a constitutional monarchy, the King does have certain powers and

responsibilities under constitutional provisions. In exercising this power, he must be ever-conscious of his responsibility and objectivity. All bills approved by the National Assembly are to be presented to the King for signature. This is not just a formality, as the King retains discretionary power to withhold his assent temporarily. In private consultations with the Prime Minister, the King's comments, be they "encouraging" or "warning", provide an important input for the Head of Government, if he wishes, to reevaluate the government's position and direction. His Majesty alone possesses continuous political experience and has always kept to constitutional proprieties. His remarks, whether made privately or publicly, have always been listened to with great attention and circumspection. His indirect influence on government's policies and measures cannot, therefore, be underestimated.

A constitutional monarch may dissolve Parliament, appoint a Prime Minister, high-ranking officers and civil servants. There have, however, been a number of "extraordinary political situations" where the King has had to draw on his "reserve power" to defuse national crises.

It is public knowledge that there were two occasions when His Majesty used this reserve power. The first time was the student uprising in October 1973, when demands were made for a permanent constitution and an end to government by martial law. Arrests of student leaders provoked a massive popular demonstration, which unfortunately led to the killing of a number of student activists and innocent bystanders. The situation was threatening to erupt into a destructive national confrontation. The Government had lost control. The King, sensing the suffering of the people, intervened in a dramatic television appearance. His Majesty was able to reassure the people that the crisis had subsided and that the three key military figures had decided to leave the country.

The King then took the unprecedented step of appointing one of his Privy Councilors as the next Prime Minister of Thailand. Normalcy was soon restored, much to the relief of the people. A new era of democracy was brought into being, but the process remained fragile and tentative. It came to an abrupt end in October 1976.

The period between 1976-1991 saw the "ups and downs" of our national efforts to develop democratic institutions, oriented towards stability. Progress was made gradually and steadily until a bloodless coup took place in February 1991. There was, thereafter, a period of national reconciliation and consensus building. Success eluded us and we as a nation succumbed to one more traumatic episode.

The May 1992 tragedy was a classic case of a government out of touch with the times and the sentiments of the mass. The attempt by demonstrators to topple the government gained momentum outside parliamentary confines. There again, senseless shooting precipitated the outbreak of mob mentality, resulting in a horrifying showdown.

The King, closely following the increasingly tragic developments and accurately assessing the country's mood, summoned the two antagonistic leaders to the Palace in full view of national television. He quietly, but sternly, admonished them for the dire consequences of their actions. The whole kingdom, and international viewers of CNN. And BBC around the world, witnessed on their TV screen how a national crisis had been resolved by His Majesty's reserve power. His sense of timing was of decisive importance. A premature intervention might not have produced the desired result and could have exacerbated the already explosive situation. Hence, it can be said that the timing of His Majesty's actions is determined by the gravity of the State of affairs of the country; in other words when he senses that total breakdown is impending or that the country is on the verge of a political vacuum.

The bloodshed stopped immediately thereafter. The Prime Minister voluntarily resigned from his post. Some two weeks later, a new civilian Prime Minister - a non-member of the House of Representatives - was nominated in the afternoon of June 10, 1992, by the President of the Parliament and appointed by Royal Command that evening.

It is a matter of historical footnote that during the morning Parliamentary session of the same day, Parliament had already approved an amendment to the constitution to the effect that the Prime Minister would have to be chosen from the elected members of the House of Representatives. Since the adopted amendment would not become law until it was published in the Royal Gazette the following morning, this technical loophole enabled the President of the Parliament to submit the name of a non-member as the new Prime Minister to the King for his approval.

The interim Prime Minister was entrusted by the Royal Command to restore peace and stability in the country and to give power back to the people - meaning to arrange and supervise a free and fair general election in the not too distant future. The mandate given was carried out swiftly and peacefully by removing military leaders who, according to the investigation of the Ministry of Defence panel, were politically and morally responsible for the May tragedy.

A general election was held on 13th September 1992. Despite some irregularities, the election was perceived on the whole to be free and fair. A new Prime Minister, an elected Member of Parliament was appointed and a cabinet was formed. Peaceful transfer of power was effected. Since September 1992, another general election was held in Thailand on July 2, 1995, reaffirming constitutional change of power. Throughout this period of four years, the Thai military retreated to the background and became true servants of State - not allowing themselves to be involved in any manner in the democratic political process. They have indeed gone back to the barracks and remained there, thus enhancing their prestige as professional armed forces.

To what extent our arrival at this juncture has been due to His Majesty's non-

partisan guidance during his fifty-year reign needs to be fully assessed and analyzed by historians. As a layman, I have no doubt that his sense of justice, his overriding concern for the well-being and security of his people, his sense of history as well as his pragmatic and gradualist approach, have made a highly significant impact on the politics, economic and social development of Thailand. He has the skill and integrity to influence politics without being political.

Without His Majesty's guiding hand, we would not be where we are today - a nation which has consistently demonstrated its inner strength, political resilience, social harmony and economic dynamism - a trait which has enabled the Thais to survive many a threat and misfortune in their long history.

The course of modern Thai political history will run smoothly and peacefully if and when the Thai political system pursues the middle path and a balance is achieved between freedom and stability. His Majesty's adoption of the balanced approach during his fifty-year reign serves as an inspiration for the governance of Thailand.

To the Thai people, the monarchy is not an abstract concept, but a real, tangible, human and caring institution.

His Majesty the King personifies positive elements of our national characteristics and he is the very embodiment of the common character of the Thai people of all-ethnic groups, religion and culture. He is our inspiration toward a stronger, more secure and prosperous destiny. He has deservedly earned the respect and trust of his people to the point that his BARAMEE (in the Thai language) would overcome all adversities.

**HE IS THE SOUL OF THE THAI NATION.**

**LONG LIVE HIS MAJESTY.**