

REVIEW ARTICLE

A Book, the King and the 2006 *Coup*

KEVIN HEWISON

Carolina Asia Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, USA

ABSTRACT *This article involves an assessment of Paul Handley's important book, The King Never Smiles. A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej. The article begins with a discussion of the supposed threat the book posed to the monarchy and outlines the attempts to prevent publication. It then outlines Handley's evaluation of the involvement of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's palace in Thailand's modern politics. It uses this approach as a way to examine the clash of elites within Thailand's ruling class that led to a royalist campaign against the Thaksin Shinawatra government and the 2006 military coup.*

KEY WORDS: Thailand, 2006 *coup*, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, elites, military, Thaksin Shinawatra

In *The King Never Smiles. A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), Paul Handley, a former Thailand-based correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER), has produced one of the most controversial books in English about modern Thailand. *The King Never Smiles* is also one of the best and most fascinating books on Thailand to be published in the past two decades. In this article, I begin with an examination of the controversy surrounding the publication of this important book, then review its contents and, finally, I attempt to take elements of Handley's analysis further through an examination of the events leading to the 2006 military *coup*.

That Handley's almost 500-page book would be controversial was guaranteed by the subject of this biography. In Thailand, public criticism of King Bhumibol his family, projects and ideas is not permitted (see Thongchai, 2008). In his December 2005 birthday speech, while the king appeared to invite criticism of himself and his work (see Bhumibol, 2005), very few analysts have been willing to accept this invitation, especially as *lèse majesté* charges are commonly invoked in Thailand.

Correspondence Address: Kevin Hewison, Carolina Asia Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, CB#7582, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA. Email: khewison@unc.edu

With more than six decades on the throne, the king is treated as god-like by a public that has not known any other king. The supposed significance of the king and royal family is highlighted in everything from school texts to prime ministerial speeches. The Thai media produces nothing other than obsequious accounts of even the most mundane royal events and portrays them as somehow extraordinary.¹ This fawning attention is often mirrored in the reporting by peripatetic foreign journalists who know precious little about the history of the monarchy in Thailand and do little to dig behind the royal imagery. Writing some two decades ago, one journalist observed:

[S]ince King Bhumibol Adulyadej came into world media focus, aspects of his life and thought have remained shielded by the centuries-old aura of reverence and dignity surrounding Thai kingship, as well as contemporary legal constraints. Probably nothing in Thailand can be as sensitive a subject as the monarchy, and some... have exercised a measure of self-censorship when writing about it" (Grey, 1988: 6).

But, as Handley's study reveals, a full and critical understanding of the palace's political role makes a vast difference in our understanding of modern Thai politics.

The Book, the Threat

Some in Thailand feared the publication of this book. Indeed, *before* the book was even printed, some who claimed to have read the book, wrote reviews for the Amazon website. They argued that the book was poorly researched and full of unfounded rumours. Ironically, some of these same "readers" argued that there was nothing new in these "rumours" and that most Thais and "old Thailand hands" knew it all already. Other "readers" got to work on their keyboards to state that if the book was critical, then that was enough evidence for branding Handley's book evil.

What could be evil about a biography of a monarch? The main fear seemed to be that Handley's independent and critical account might lift the veil on a protected pillar of Thailand's nationalist ideology and that the decades of work that had gone into creating a national mystique and myth might somehow be undone (Connors, 2007: 127-52; Hewison, 1997). For some Thais, their ideological world revolves around the ninth king of the Chakri dynasty, and there was concern that all that was good and great in their world might be revealed as a flawed model. Previous monographs about the monarchy have not always been critical or well researched and have generally been careful to avoid sensitive palace issues (see Kobkua, 2003; Stevenson, 1999). Critical Thai-language discussions of the monarch have appeared in underground publications and pamphlets, often inexpertly produced at unknown presses and circulated surreptitiously. Handley's book was different and more challenging to royal supporters. As a journalist with many years of experience in Thailand, with a reputation for careful reporting, Handley's book was also being published by the highly respected Yale University Press.

As Handley's book went through the academic review processes, rumours began to circulate about it. Ominously, the Thai government and the palace decided that

they needed to protect the reputation of the monarchy as a “national treasure.” As a first step, the government apparently attempted to convince Yale University Press that they should drop the book. In December 2005, however, Yale University Press advertised the book on its website. Some six weeks later, the government banned the book and blocked access to both the Yale University Press and Amazon websites, with a Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs official explaining that the book was likely to be “insensitive to the feelings of the Thai people” (*International Herald Tribune*, 19 January 2006). In response to press questions, a spokesman for the Thai Embassy in Washington DC claimed that he couldn’t respond to any question involving a book that criticised the king, arguing that, “All Thais revere the king and there is a law that he may not be criticized.” He added, “You can’t criticize the king because there is nothing to criticize him about” (*Inside Higher Ed*, 3 February 2006).

Behind the scenes, the palace and the government were hard at work trying to prevent the publication of Handley’s book. A leaked, secret government document indicated that Prime Minister Thaksin attempted to prevent any negative portrayal of the monarchy. The Memorandum details the extensive efforts by the government to stop publication of the book in the USA. Amongst other things, in January 2006, advice was sought on US laws. Not unexpectedly, the advice was that preventing publication through legal intervention was unlikely to be successful given the constitutional protection of free speech. According to the document, US Ambassador Ralph Boyce helpfully advised the Cabinet secretary-general Bowonsak Uwanno and Privy Council chairman General Prem Tinsulanonda to brief journalists and recommended that senior Thais bring pressure on Yale University. In an apparent effort to limit potential anti-American reactions from Thais angry about the book, Boyce advised the Thai government that he would seek a US Joint Congressional Resolution celebrating the king’s 60-year reign (Secretary-General to Cabinet, 2006).²

Influential Thais had also begun to speak against the book. Leading royalist Sumet Jumsai called for an injunction in the US courts to prevent the book’s publication (Case, 2006). At about this time several Thai academics were asked to attack the still-unpublished book, to write articles in the local and international press that would challenge any criticism of the king and praise the monarch. They were also requested to rally foreign academics against the book’s publication (confidential interviews with Thai academics, May-August 2006).³

While acknowledging that they couldn’t possibly have read the still-unpublished book, some university lecturers defended the king, expressing alarm over the book and the timing of publication. Chulalongkorn University’s Thitinan Pongsudhirak was quoted as saying that the book would be “...offensive to the Thai people because this is the year we are celebrating His Majesty the King’s 60th year on the throne” (quoted in *International Herald Tribune*, 19 January 2006). Ignoring the fact that the book was being published by a reputable university press, Thitinan added that the book’s title suggested that it was probably not an academically inclined work.

According to the leaked cabinet document and reports of the Cabinet secretary-general’s US visit in April 2005, Bowonsak sought to garner support for a campaign against Yale’s publication of Handley’s book. He visited Yale to talk with the university’s president and vice president, reportedly accompanied by the president of

the Thai Yale Club, and called on former US President George H.W. Bush for support (see Grossman, 2006). Yale's leaders explained that the university was committed to freedom of expression, apparently matching the legal advice received by the Thai government. However, in an extraordinary concession, the Press permitted Thai officials time to "review the book for accuracy."⁴ A short time later, the government responded that despite "several [unidentified] factual errors," they would not do more to stop the publication of the book in the USA. However, the Press did agree to delay publication until after the king's jubilee celebration, expressing a sensitivity to the accusation that the Press was "... exploiting the king's jubilee to get sales" (Case, 2006). When the book came out, sales surged and, for a time, it ranked in the top 200 sellers on Amazon. No doubt, the furore assisted in promoting interest and sales (in August 2007, sales approached 15,000).

Soon after the book's release, in mid-July 2006, it was picked up by Sondhi Limthongkul, a self-styled royalist and anti-Thaksin campaigner, and used in his attacks on the Thaksin government. Sondhi criticised Thaksin for failing to take strong action against Handley's book. Sondhi considered that Thaksin was disrespectful of the monarchy in numerous ways (see below), and he added the government's alleged failure to stop the book's publication as further evidence of this. Sondhi asserted that the government had known about the book for months but hadn't done anything. He tied the book and the Thaksin government together by alleging that Handley and Thaksin's chief policy advisor Pansak Vinyaratn were good friends and had worked together. In addition, Sondhi made personal attacks against Handley (Ogan, 2006). The alleged links between the government and Handley were concocted for political purposes. Indeed, it was actually Sondhi and Pansak who had a close working and personal relationship, at least until Sondhi fell out with Thaksin (see below). In any case, the leaked Cabinet document shows that the government did take action against the book, but unlike Sondhi, the government appeared to accept the legal advice it received. Even so, the book was banned in Thailand.

These events surrounding *The King Never Smiles* are remarkable. That a government – claimed by some to be disdainful of the monarchy – should expend so much effort in trying to prevent publication and should then encourage supporters to denigrate the book and its author is astonishing. That the book and its author could then be used by Thaksin's opponents in their attacks on his government borders on the bizarre. Why did this book engender such reactions?

The King Never Smiles

Handley's book is a biography of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the ninth king of Thailand's Chakri dynasty. Because it is a biography, the king is placed at the centre of events. For a reader with limited background on Thailand's history and politics, it would be easy to conclude that the king and his coterie of court advisers have been *the* principal players over the past 4-5 decades. Such a conclusion is perhaps inevitable in a book that seeks to direct attention to a little-studied political institution. In the discussion that follows, the reader should not imagine that the palace is being portrayed as the only significant political player. There is no doubt that the king and palace are important. At the same time, there are other significant

political institutions and it needs to be remembered that the palace does not always get its political way and its political interventions have often been contested.

Handley begins his book with what has become an iconic image associated with King Bhumibol. This is the May 1992 scene of a prime minister and his leading opponent crouched at the seated king's feet as he admonishes them to end the violence that had seen troops shooting unarmed civilians on Bangkok's streets (Handley, 2006: 1-2). During the 1992 political crisis, the question asked by some Thais was not why it was that a constitutional monarch should intervene in politics, but why it took so long for the king to intervene to end the political standoff and bloodshed. This intervention underlined the fact that the constitutional monarchy, established in June 1932 when King Prajadhipok was overthrown, and which had been sidelined for a number of years, had again become a powerful political institution.

This image of a prime minister and one of his opponents appearing subordinate before a constitutional monarch may seem odd to overseas observers but, for many Thais, the king's intervention was interpreted as a part of the palace's role; that is, stepping in to save the country when it faced a crisis. One recent hagiography explains this canon of the palace propaganda:

His Majesty is a constitutional monarch in a democratic country. He appears neither to seek nor want a political role. But sometimes the government and the people are truly in difficulties and do not know where to turn. That is when they turn to His Majesty. He is the most respected and trusted in the land. He is their Lord of Life (Danai, 2006: 103).

This last phrase – the idea that a constitutional monarch remains a *chao chiwit* or lord of life – is startling for the way it harks back to a time when the monarchy was absolute. That the present king can now be considered by some in a manner of the kings of earlier centuries is reason enough to read Handley's book.

Handley's book focuses on the present king and the critical role he has played in restoring the throne's political fortunes and, to a lesser extent, its economic wealth. But it does far more than this. By focusing on the palace's comeback from its dark days of 1932, Handley charts the course of modern Thai political history. For students of Thailand, Handley completes a long-neglected task: he writes the monarchy back into the political events from 1932 to 2005. Indeed, he allocates a central *political* role to the palace.

Identifying this political role for the monarch is controversial. The palace spinmeisters regularly assert that the king is above politics and that he carefully maintains his constitutional position. Indeed, flying in the face of the mass of information in the book and presenting no contrary evidence, Grant Evans (2006: 61) argued that Handley misunderstands the king's role, stating: "...Handley overestimates the political power of the monarchy. But as in all constitutional monarchies, the Thai king is strictly constrained." In fact, one of the great values of Handley's study is that he demonstrates that this particular argument, borrowed from palace propaganda, can no longer be accepted by serious scholars. Handley's position will be challenging for palace "true believers" who uncritically accept and vigorously maintain the "standard total view" of the monarchy (see Hewison, 1997: 59-62).

Of course, many Thais realise that the king and his palace officials and advisers regularly intervene in the affairs of government. The problem is that it is exceptionally difficult to discuss these interventions, not the least because *lèse-majesté* laws continue to be used against critics (see Handley's references to cases and uses of the law; and Streckfuss, 1993). But this doesn't adequately explain why foreign observers – especially academics – have been reluctant to analyse the monarchy's political role. It seems that many scholars consider that the monarchy is indeed above criticism, while others were caught up in Cold War efforts to counter communism, and were thus supportive of the anti-communist symbolism of the throne. The resulting self-censorship means that critical material on the current monarch has been ignored (see Hewison, 1997: 59). Few of the major works on modern Thai politics show the monarchy playing a major political role.⁵ With the publication of Handley's book, there is no longer any excuse for ignoring the palace's political role.

In this article, while I will focus on this political role, *The King Never Smiles* does far more. Handley's study attempts to locate the institution of the monarchy and the king himself in a number of important stories. The great success of the book is the manner in which these stories are carefully interlaced in a coherent and convincing account of the ninth reign. The first story is about how the monarchy is traditionally viewed in Thailand. Handley details various beliefs about the position and role of the monarchy, ranging from Hindu-Brahman ideas about the "god-king" (the *devaraja*) to Thai conceptions, said to originate in ancient Sukhothai, about a good and great king, drawing on Theravada Buddhist principles (the notion of the *dhammaraja*). A second story is that of Bhumibol and his family. Handley reports on Bhumibol's early life, his loves and education, and his family's trials and tribulations. In this, Handley does a good job. As might be expected, accessing this kind of information is not easy and the author has excavated an extensive range of sources from the royal family's carefully composed books and reports, funeral volumes and popular magazines that get access to the palace. Handley also reports many interviews, often with sources that prefer to remain anonymous. This kind of serious research is evident throughout the book. While rumours are sometimes reproduced – this is the way information about the palace often circulates in Thailand – Handley manages to avoid the more salacious gossip that could easily have been trawled up. Another remarkable and previously untold story is of how the royal family has been able to build a colossal reputation for good and charitable works through the use of public donations and government funds. This iconic representation of the charitable "developer king" has been crucial to the king's persona and public reputation and is a triumph of palace image-building.

For me, though, the most interesting story in *The King Never Smiles* is the account of how the king and his group of supporters (courtiers, members of the royal family, loyal civil and military bureaucrats and assorted royalists) managed the remarkable resurrection of the palace as a political institution.

Handley (2006: Ch. 3) reminds readers that the monarchy was under greatest threat in June 1932 when the absolute monarchy was overthrown and a republic briefly considered. While King Prajadhipok, his princes and some conservative members of the new government managed to maintain a constitutional monarchy, it was considerably weakened. Even so, competition between the royalists and the new

government was intense and continued for many years. The royalists attempted to discredit the country's new rulers, even calling for foreign intervention to restore the monarchy. The failure of a royalist-inspired military *coup* in 1933 (Handley, 2006: 52-3) eventually led to the king's abdication and the passing of the crown to Ananda Mahidol, the present king's elder brother, who resided in Switzerland with his mother and siblings.

The beginning of Bhumibol's reign coincided with the shooting to death of King Ananda while he was visiting Bangkok in 1946. This tragic event not only brought Bhumibol to the throne, but also provided a focus for royalist opposition to the post-1932 regime. None the less, royalists used the event to discredit their principal enemy, Pridi Panomyong. Pridi had been the civilian leader of the 1932 Revolution and author of early attacks on the throne's political and economic power. Pridi was exiled, the royalists regained some influence, formed a political party – the precursor to the present-day Democrat party – and began replacing the government-appointed bureaucracy in the palace and royal household (Handley, 2006: 74-6). From this time, it was military leader Phibun Songkhram who became the main obstacle to a royalist political reincarnation.

The young King Bhumibol returned to Switzerland, leaving it to senior princes to continue the royalist struggle for increased power and the revival of royal rituals. Handley (2006: 96-9) explains how the royalists regained control of the throne's assets and business affairs. Meanwhile, Bhumibol dropped out of university, preferring to concentrate his energies on fast cars, European society events, his new wife and preparations for his return to Thailand in late November 1951.

Bhumibol's return began inauspiciously, with a *coup* launched just prior to his arrival. Handley (2006: 114) argues that this *coup* was "...no less of a blow to the monarchists than...1932." The *coup* rolled back many of the palace's hard-won gains, and the relationship between the palace and the government was frigid (Handley, 2006: 116-7). The lesson for palace advisers was that they needed to develop military, bureaucratic and business allies.

The palace also knew that to challenge Phibun they needed to develop the young king's public appeal. Simply put, this involved the creation of an image of King Bhumibol as a remarkable person. He was variously shown as an outstanding artist, photographer and musician, a champion yachtsman and a talented scientist (Handley, 2006: Ch. 7). The image of Bhumibol as great and gifted has become a powerful force in promoting the monarchy. Later, as the Cold War alliance between the USA and Thailand developed, US government agencies also promoted the king's image, viewing the throne as a bulwark against communism (Grey, 1988: 47).

Even so, as Thak Chaloematiarana (1979) has shown, the most important event in the revival of the monarchy was General Sarit Thanarat's 1957 *coup*. Handley (2006: 139) observes that "Sarit's *coup* had a giddy effect on the palace. After 25 years of struggle, the men behind the 1932 revolution, Phibun and Pridi, were both exiled and never to return." The period of military domination from 1958 to 1973, was an incubator for the palace. Sarit revived the court. He reintroduced the use of royal language, provided funds for the palace and identified the king with many government activities. The king, fearful of communism and of anti-royal sentiment, became a strong ally of a military that now gave him the deference he required. He dressed in military uniform and positioned himself as a natural leader of the military

and country. In return, the military relentlessly promoted the royal family, celebrating its exploits in the media and making royal ceremonies high-profile public events.

To this point, the palace was following the military. This began to change in 1968, when US press criticism of Thailand as corrupt and dictatorial caused the king to worry about the country's international image. Believing that a constitution and a parliament might limit corruption and lead to a better international press coverage, he began to pressure the military leaders. The result was a short constitution that kept the military in control and introduced a weak parliament. While this innovation was barely liberal, the king came to be identified as a proponent of liberal politics. This was reinforced when the king criticised the government's approach to rural development and encouraged university students to oppose corruption (Handley, 2006: Ch. 11).

The king's supposed liberal credentials were tested when the military killed off its own parliament in 1971. The king gave no signal that he was irked by a return to authoritarianism, with David Morell (1974: 803-4) explaining that while the king had pushed for a constitution in 1968, he "did little to enhance the legitimacy and status of the elected parliament, participant politics..., or the institutions created to implement Thai-style democracy [sic]..., leaving the parliament exposed and vulnerable to... the military." This outcome can be seen as one that becomes a pattern of royal political intervention: the king apparently gives his support to democratisation, but then comes to see political activity as corrupt, disorderly and messy, and supports a military intervention. This cyclical pattern is seen again in 1973.

In that year, a student-led uprising against the military government, demanding a constitution, saw troops attack the demonstrators. The king had been mildly critical of the military government and had suggested that university students be more engaged in social and political affairs. Vasiit Dejkunjorn, the Chief of the Royal Court Police, reports that when students began demonstrating, the king was not comfortable with their calls for democratisation. He states that the demonstrations were "unsettling," with student leaders making "heated and violent" speeches. Vasiit says that the king then intervened to stop the rallies, initially to support the military government. When some students continued to demonstrate and fighting broke out, Vasiit remembers this refusal to accept the king's advice as the cause of the violence of 14 October 1973 (Vasiit, 2006: 93-5). Handley (2006: 211-2) correctly observes that it wasn't the king's intervention that was critical in ending the demonstrations and violence, but a split within the military. But a legend grew: "In official histories, ... it was the king who single-handedly restored constitutionalism and democracy. Rather than credit the popular uprising, later books and articles overwhelmingly emphasised King Bhumibol's intervention against the dictators, saving the country from disaster" (Handley, 2006: 212).

The outcome was the short-lived 1973-76 democratic interregnum. Handley's account of this period is important (Ch. 12). The king, on the throne through three decades, was now making his own decisions. With the military's leadership sent into exile, the king selected an interim prime minister, appointing one of his own Privy Councillors, Sanya Dhammasakdi. Sanya then nominated a constitution drafting committee dominated by palace loyalists and, when an assembly was appointed to

vet the draft, the king selected its members. The resulting constitution was not a democratic triumph, but these interventions seemed to build the king's democratic credentials.

In fact, the palace very quickly became worried that democratic politics was leading to political instability and it established links with a resurgent political right. The palace's support for the increasingly violent right-wing included the military, the Border Patrol Police, extremist Buddhist monks and paramilitary nationalist groups that called for the blood of leftists. When the Lao monarchy was overthrown in late 1975, the palace mobilised all its resources and allies to support the right's push to destroy the left (Bowie, 1997). The outcome was a bloody massacre at Thammasat University, where students were attacked, beaten, raped, lynched and burned alive by the forces the palace supported. Handley (2006: 237) documents the palace's role in encouraging these grisly events, arguing that the "palace's hand was everywhere...stirring up the frenzy." In Thailand, the palace's involvement in these horrific events is now whitewashed.

As thousands fled a brutal military crackdown, the king appointed right-wing royalist judge Tanin Kraivixien as prime minister. Tanin's year in power is remembered as Thailand's "Dark Ages." Handley (2006: 259) explains that the left was punished, any vaguely liberal idea was repressed and the *lèse-majesté* law was regularly used. Books were burned and all political activism was banned. Even the military found this iron-fisted approach too strong, and the king's selected prime minister was thrown out.

The king was not amused, for this was a throwback to a time when the military intervened without first consulting the palace. General Kriangsak Chomanan, the new prime minister was snubbed by the king, while Tanin was made a Privy Councillor (Handley, 2006: 267-8). When it seemed that Kriangsak might give more power to parliament, political manoeuvring saw him replaced by the palace's favourite general, Prem Tinsulanonda.

Prem was a staunch royalist and politically conservative but, most importantly, he understood that he worked for the throne (Handley, 2006: Ch. 15). He was willing to throw himself at the king's feet in acts of submission and to promote the king as a great leader. From 1980 to 1988, Prem did more to promote the monarchy and its interests than any previous premier. He poured government funding into royal development projects, splurged funds on every conceivable royal event and anniversary and vigorously promoted the Crown Property Bureau's (CPB) economic interests.

Never elected, Prem continually refused to defend himself or his government in parliament and treated parliament as a nuisance. As a result, parliament and political parties remained weak, with the military and palace continuing to control the appointed Senate. In cabinet, Prem and his technocrats controlled all of the important ministries. The only threats to Prem and his government came from within the military, with two attempted *coups* in the mid-1980s, both of which were defeated with explicit palace support. In 1988, when Prem was replaced by Chatichai Choonhavan, it was only after a highly-charged campaign by intellectuals for an elected premier. As his reward, Prem was appointed to the Privy Council.

Chatichai's advisers challenged and dismantled Prem's administrative system and attempted to reduce the military's political influence. Chatichai led a corrupt

government that saw a number of his business cronies investing in areas considered the preserve of the CPB. The political backlash was predictable, and the February 1991 military *coup* was no surprise. A palace involvement in the *coup* was evident, with King Bhumibol making speeches and publicly snubbing the premier, making it clear that he was ready for Chatchai's ouster. As he had done in the past, the king also expressed his view that Western-style democracy had again proven unsuitable for Thailand (Handley, 2006: Ch. 17).

Handley (2006: 338-62) shows how King Bhumibol supported the *coup* leaders while demonstrating disdain for constitutional rule. Following the *coup*, the military's draft constitution was faxed to the king, and was returned in the same manner, with minor alterations (*FEER*, 14 March 1991). This nonchalant attitude was also reflected in various debates over the new constitution. The king stated that constitutional debate should end and that the draft document was "good enough" (*mi khunnaphap pho chai dai*). If there were problems, he said these could be fixed later (Bhumibol, 1992b). For the king, the constitution was little more than an instrument for avoiding political instability (Bhumibol, 1992a: 46).

However, when conflict persisted, the king intervened to get recalcitrant political parties to support the military's constitution while royalists and palace insiders labelled the demonstrators as anti-monarchy (Handley, 2006: 351). Even when the military put troops on the streets and gunned demonstrators down, the king ignored pro-democracy groups and sided with the military. In fact, the imagery of the meeting of the king with the crouching figures of Chamlong Srimuang and General Suchinda Kraprayoon was an expression of the king's view that democracy activists had provoked disorder (Handley, 2006: 356-7). Handley asks a series of pointed questions that challenge the widely held view that the monarch intervened to end the 1992 crisis and concludes that King Bhumibol was disdainful of democratic processes and constitutionalism, while exhibiting a preference for military strongmen. This same pattern is seen in the following years as the palace promoted military men into the Privy Council and worked to ensure conservative constitutional arrangements (see Handley, 2006: Chs. 19-21).

Chapter 22 of *The King Never Smiles* is the last, where Handley essentially summarises the uneasy relationship between Thaksin Shinawatra, the first prime minister elected under the 1997 Constitution, and the palace. This chapter was completed without the benefit of the interviews and in-depth research that distinguishes the earlier chapters, and the story ends prior to the 2006 *coup*.

It is at this point that I wish to take up Handley's broad approach, showing that the 2006 *putsch* fits neatly into the schema that Handley has established in his study of earlier periods. As I will show, the most recent *coup* sees direct palace involvement in what is arguably the clearest expression of the palace's political role.

The 2006 Coup

On 19 September 2006, tanks rolled through Bangkok, with armed troops occupying Bangkok's television and radio stations and staking out strategic buildings, including the parliament. The military set up roadblocks on the city's outskirts; declared martial law; revoked the 1997 Constitution; controlled the media; arrested a handful

of politicians; threatened opponents, particularly in poor rural areas and the city's slums; and announced an investigation of "unusual wealth."

Interestingly, many considered this a "good *coup*." It was asserted that Thais "wanted" the *coup* and that there was "no other way" to be rid of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his corrupt and increasingly authoritarian government (see Pye and Schaffar, 2008). In fact, one argument was that the military was somehow restoring democracy (see Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006; Levitt, 2006).

Significantly, the commanders of the troops that carried out the *coup* chose to identify their men by having them sport yellow armbands or patches; the king's birth colour,⁶ marking them out as the "royal military" (see Ukrist, 2008).

In 1992, Bangkok's citizens had been prepared to die in the streets to oppose the military's continued domination of politics. In 2006, many of these now older citizens welcomed the troops with flowers. How could this be? One answer to this puzzle is to be found in the core analysis of Handley's book.

The King Never Smiles is an account of a palace-centred elite re-establishing privilege and political hegemony. This is a political struggle that has continued since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932. More than seven decades on, the palace's struggle pitted them against Thailand's most popular elected politician and wealthy business tycoon, Thaksin Shinawatra. It is important to state that understanding the effort to resurrect the political fortunes of the king and palace is not the only story of modern Thai politics. Obviously, there have been other significant forces at work. However, Handley's analysis opens a window on a story that has not been told. As argued above, the palace's political role can no longer be ignored. Its role was critical in ousting Thaksin through the military *coup*.

Following Handley's account, it can be argued that the 2006 *coup* resulted from a clash of elite interests – economic, political and ideological – that emerged under Thaksin. To understand this contestation it is necessary to begin with Thailand's 1997-98 economic crisis. This crisis – the first time the Thai economy had contracted in five decades – unleashed the forces that caused an uneasy arrangement of power within the Thai ruling class to unravel.

The Economic Crisis and the Rise of Thaksin

Before the crisis, Thailand was East Asia's hot economy. Business confidence brimmed, employment opportunities grew and poverty declined. At the same time, inequality increased as the capitalist class expanded. As the economy grew, there seemed plenty of space for both the oligarchs of the past and the brash new entrepreneurs born of the boom. Praised by the IMF and World Bank for adopting the "right" economic policies, globalisation was remaking Thailand, sweeping aside economic and social anachronisms. In the political sphere, while parliamentary politics became a competition between corrupt but elected politicians, there was considerable confidence that democratic progress was possible after the May 1992 uprising had freed the country of its military ballast. With so many positive indicators, when the economic crash came, it was a huge shock.

The economic crisis began with a run on the baht and the Bank of Thailand's hugely expensive but failed defence of the currency. Facing massive capital flight, the

government accepted a US\$17 billion IMF bail-out, for which the IMF demanded a more thoroughgoing neo-liberal revolution: financial restructuring, accelerated privatisation, massive state and corporate reforms and huge inflows of foreign investment. This IMF medicine resulted in a deep recession. The greatest negative impacts were borne by farmers and workers as poverty ballooned, unemployment skyrocketed and wages declined (see Hewison, 2002).

The crisis also damaged the domestic business class severely. As businesses collapsed, domestic business people, fearing social and political chaos, began to organise against IMF policies. The incumbent Democrat party-led government was accused of destroying domestic capitalism by ceding sovereignty over economic policy making to outsiders and engaging in a fire sale of Thai assets to foreigners. The local capitalist class worried that IMF-sponsored reforms might so weaken their political control and reduce their wealth that the demise of the class was possible.

Conservatives clustered together, with the king speaking for them. Ever fearful of instability, King Bhumibol promoted ideas of a “sufficiency economy,” arguing that Thais should make do with less, consider de-linking from the export economy and be satisfied with enough to get by (Bhumibol, 1998). This call drew the royalist elite into an alliance of convenience with big domestic capital. While never particularly comfortable with the rising capitalist class, the king’s localist response drew support from intellectuals, workers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the business elite and politicians and became a powerful nationalist alliance. Its political outcome was to cede political leadership to the domestic business elite that wanted direct control of the state (cf. Hewison, 2000).

Enter telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra. One of the few local businessmen to come through the crisis in good shape, in 1998 Thaksin founded the Thai Rak Thai (TRT, Thai Love Thai) party as domestic capital’s political vehicle (for background on Thaksin, see Pasuk and Baker, 2004). When TRT was formed, Thaksin recognised that the 1997 Constitution demanded a different politics. Previously, political parties relied on vote buying and influential local figures to deliver votes and power. TRT hit on a different strategy, deciding to get its votes by appealing directly to voters. With an inclusive message, laced with nationalist shibboleths, TRT caught the mood of an electorate distressed by the economic crisis. Its policy manifesto for the 2001 election promised to support business but, more significantly, to pour government money into rural areas – soft loans for every community, a three-year debt moratorium for farmers, a universal health care programme and a “people’s bank” (see Hewison, 2005).

This was a radical approach. The ruling class, more used to ignoring or suppressing farmers and workers, was not their natural ally and Thaksin was not a natural populist (Pasuk and Baker, 2008). However, the crisis and the fear of social conflict convinced the Bangkok-based ruling class that they needed a new social contract with the potentially unruly masses. The historic compromise was a tacit agreement that advanced social welfare as a trade-off for restoring the ruling class’ wealth and political power (Hewison, 2004). The outcome of this alliance was a stunning electoral victory for TRT. In power, Thaksin implemented his party’s policy promises, delivering TRT a resounding re-election in early 2005, with overwhelming support from the poor.

Opposing Thaksin

In maintaining and expanding TRT's political power, Thaksin did not rely on nationalist rhetoric exclusively. With supporters in the military and the police, Thaksin attacked critics, neutered independent agencies, controlled sections of the media and managed news, and organised mergers with smaller political parties. When criticised, Thaksin was ruthless in his counter-attacks, brazen in his use of state power and treated opponents with disdain.

As TRT's rule continued, the economy recovered and domestic capital was strengthened, the "nationalist" Thaksin transmogrified into a "neo-liberal" Thaksin. The government moved on privatisation. This shocked the state enterprise unions that had initially supported TRT precisely because it had opposed the IMF's privatisation crusade. The unions organised rallies, protested corruption and accused Thaksin and his allies as benefiting by the sale of state enterprises (see Brown and Hewison, 2005). These workers provided strength to critics who had been silenced by the increasingly repressive government.⁷

However, by this time, the TRT leadership was so powerful that arrogance had set in, as demonstrated in reprehensible actions against the democratic system and human rights. For example, there were more than 2000 extra-judicial killings in an anti-drugs campaign and sometimes brutal efforts to control southern separatism (see Human Rights Watch, 2004; McCargo, 2007). A number of human rights activists also disappeared or were killed in this period (US Department of State, 2006).

Even so, Thaksin remained popular. Rural voters continued to appreciate TRT's policies, the middle class seemed to support tough actions in the south and against alleged drug dealers, and business leaders appreciated Thaksin's priorities. Always contingent democrats, capitalists evinced little concern for human rights; it was Thaksin's economic policies that mattered.⁸

With the parliamentary opposition missing in action and much of the media controlled or cowed, it was no surprise that the movement to oust Thaksin was initiated by former Thaksin supporters. Some of these opponents claimed to have "seen the light," recognising that Thaksin was now bad for the country; others seemed to have had their egos bruised by Thaksin (Kasian, 2006: 5-10).

Most significant amongst these opponents was fellow businessman, Sondhi Limthongkul. His media empire had collapsed during the Asian Crisis but, when Thaksin came to power, Sondhi received the government's support. He and his associates were important Thaksin allies, with Sondhi associates Chai-Anan Samudavanija and Pansak Vinyaratn taking important positions and the co-founder of Sondhi's Manager Media Group, Somkid Jatusripitak, holding several cabinet positions, including deputy prime minister. Sondhi lauded Thaksin as Thailand's best-ever prime minister and this coincided with a remarkable comeback by Sondhi's businesses – investigative reports claim that a state-owned bank reduced Sondhi's outstanding debts from US\$42 million to under US\$5 million (see *The Nation*, 9-11 April 2002). Thaksin and Sondhi fell out when the government acted on Bank of Thailand advice and sacked a banker who had overseen Sondhi's bankruptcy workout (*The Nation*, 30 November 2005).

Sondhi began attacking Thaksin through a television show he hosted and in his newspapers. When the government took his show off the air, Sondhi launched public

rallies. Sondhi surprised many by standing up to the government as he complained about authoritarianism, conflicts of interest and corruption. Most strikingly, Sondhi declared that his anti-Thaksin movement was to protect the monarchy. Linking the king to political squabbles was a precarious political strategy. On the one hand, Sondhi was claiming the moral high ground, but on the other, the palace's position is that the king is not involved in politics. Sondhi was gambling that his opposition to Thaksin would be seen as a patriotic act.

At the time, everyone claimed to be loyal to the king. As the 60th anniversary of the king's reign approached, royal fever was reaching a new high, with displays of loyalty demanded. Indeed, in addition to the secret attempts to prevent the publication of *The King Never Smiles*, the Thaksin government acknowledged royal ideas, such as the sufficiency economy and – like previous governments – supported the massive campaign to promote the monarchy. To do otherwise would have invited political defeat. Thus, for Sondhi's gamble to pay off he needed a public sign of palace support. This came in a speech in December 2005, when the king proclaimed that the government should accept criticism. At this point, Sondhi and his supporters appear to have had only limited connections with the palace, but following this speech, they could more confidently declare their anti-Thaksin campaign a fight for the king.

The event that finally tipped the political balance in favour of the anti-Thaksin movement was the January 2006 sale of Shin Corporation. Shin was sold to Singapore's government-linked Temasek in a deal worth almost US\$1.9 billion. That the family paid no tax on the sale caused considerable middle-class moral outrage, seeming to encapsulate the nepotism and cronyism of the Thaksin administration.

In February 2006, the opposition also got a voice, with the formation of the People's Alliance for Democracy or PAD (see Pye and Schaffar, 2008). A large number of middle-class-led NGOs provided support, and tens of thousands joined the demonstrations. These rallies initially attacked Thaksin for corruption. Soon, however, Sondhi was proclaiming Thaksin's disrespect for the throne. Many of the specific accusations were unverifiable and some were fabrications, but the mud stuck. Lacking any alternative strategy, PAD leaders repeatedly called for the king to intervene and replace Thaksin. Arguing that the king was the moral and political centre of the country, they wanted him to appoint his own prime minister (see Connors, 2008; Pye and Schaffar, 2008).

In response to the continuing stand-off, Thaksin called a snap election for April 2006, but the main opposition political parties accepted PAD's demand that the elections be boycotted. In the one-horse race, TRT triumphed and, for a moment, it seemed that Thaksin had out-manoeuvred his opponents. However, amid allegations of electoral fraud, King Bhumibol declared the election undemocratic and called on the judiciary to sort out the "mess" (*The Nation*, 27 April 2006). The judges followed the king's advice and annulled the election, with a new poll scheduled for October 2006. The 19 September *coup* short-circuited this process.

The Palace and the 2006 Coup

From the time of the king's declaration on the April election, the centre of the opposition moved from PAD to General Prem Tinsulanond, the octogenarian

president of the king's Privy Council. PAD apparently accepted this, seeing Prem's close relationship with the king as a powerful political weapon against Thaksin. There were no more big street demonstrations and PAD's last rally – a couple of days after the king's pronouncement – was small.⁹ With Prem making highly-publicised speeches criticising Thaksin, it was clear that the palace wanted Thaksin out.

The anti-Thaksin campaign then became a struggle for control of the military (see Ukrist, 2008). Supported by other Privy Councillors including former military commander General Surayudh Chulanond, Prem dusted off his uniform and boots and visited military bases, demanding that officers be loyal to the king (*The Nation*, 15 July 2006). Thaksin had known that the military was a potential threat to his government, especially as Prem and the palace maintained a network of supporters in the armed forces, and he had worked to limit the palace's control (McCargo, 2005). Taking up Prem's call, some generals called for Thaksin's ouster, with 3rd Army Region Commander Lt-General Saprang Kalayanamitr announcing that he would die for the king in his fight against Thaksin (*Thai Day*, 22 July 2006), and launching a campaign to oust the premier (*Bangkok Post*, 16 August 2006).

As the political temperature rose, unlikely alliances formed as palace insider Prem and royalists were cheered by so-called democracy activists. For example, PAD's Suriyasai Katasila of the Campaign for Popular Democracy, donned yellow shirts and met aristocrats to oppose Thaksin (*Bangkok Post*, 4 July 2006). The hatred of Thaksin saw political activists embrace former rightist enemies, while alliances of progressives that had stood since the student uprising in October 1973 crumbled as those supporting Thaksin were attacked by former comrades aligned to PAD and with royalists. Self-identified leftists made themselves available to the palace in its manoeuvring against Thaksin (interview, anonymous informant, Bangkok, 20 July 2006).

By August 2006, a *coup* seemed the only likely outcome of the deepening split between the palace and Thaksin. The political temperature was raised to boiling point as Prem claimed his phones were tapped (*Bangkok Post*, 1 August 2006) and there was an apparent attempt to assassinate Thaksin (*Bangkok Post*, 25 August 2006).¹⁰ Further complicating matters was an impending military reshuffle that might have benefited Thaksin. Indeed, Thaksin seemed confident, predicting a TRT election victory. Conservative royalists would not permit this; there was to be no election until the possibility of another Thaksin win was eliminated.

As mentioned, the usual spin from Thailand is that the king is "above politics." Even a doyen of the left and long-standing anti-Thaksin activist, Kraisaak Choonhavan stated in a webcast, "King Bhumibol will only intervene in politics in... a subtle way..." (School of Oriental and African Studies, 7 October 2006). The fact is that, in these events, there was no subtlety and the palace's footprints litter the trail to the *coup*. Prem's critical role has been noted and it is impossible that he would act without palace approval. Indeed, through Prem, the palace knew of the *coup* well in advance: "The *coup* plot was known within a tight circle of people, among them Gen Prem Tinsulanonda... and his close aides..., Air Force Commander... Chalit Pukkasuk and Lt-Gen Anupong Paochinda, commander of the First Army Region" (Wassana, 2006). Royal support for the *coup* leaders was important. As one columnist stated,

His Majesty's support is crucial...[I]t helped consolidate [General] Sonthi [Boonyaratglin]'s position and win the support of the rank and file from various

regions and headquarters... It is not wrong to say that without Royal support, troops commanded by Sonthi and... Anupong... would have encountered fierce resistance. The outcome would have been uncertain (Kavi, 2006).

Within hours of the *coup*, the king gave it his blessing, granting the *coup*-makers a number of audiences (CNN.com, 2006). By publicising these meetings, opposition to the *putsch* became more difficult. That the junta named itself the “Administrative Reform Group under the Democratic System with the King as the Head of State” showed its support for the palace. Even so, the military issued statements declaring the king had no personal role in the *coup* (*The Irrawaddy Online*, 20 September 2006). Indeed, the junta directed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to act against foreign journalists who commented on the role of the monarchy in the *coup* and blocked websites that mentioned the monarchy and the *coup* (*The Nation*, 23 September 2006). This strategy was unconvincing, especially as the king’s closest advisers maintained their high profile as mentors to the *coup*-makers (see Crispin, 2006).

The Clash of Elites

Understanding how the palace got so deeply involved in this *coup* requires an analysis of the economic, ideological and political interests involved. While this discussion revolves around Thaksin and the king, it is important to understand that their clash was representative of different elite elements within the ruling class.

In the many criticisms made of Thaksin, one has been that he has attained great wealth through cronyism. Already fabulously wealthy when he became prime minister, Thaksin used his office to benefit his supporters and family, and seemed unable to distinguish between personal interests and those of the nation. Thailand’s capitalists clustered around him, hoping to benefit from his political and economic power (see McCargo and Ukrist, 2005; Pasuk and Baker, 2005). While there had been some grumbling about the economic impact of the ongoing political crisis, it was the Shin Corp-Temasek deal that saw some businesses complaining that Thaksin was neglecting the general interests of the domestic capitalist class in favour of his own wealth (see Ukrist, 2008).

A neglected aspect of the Shin Corp deal was the involvement of the Siam Commercial Bank (SCB), one of the CPB’s flagship enterprises in the royal family’s huge business empire. The CPB has a history of investments with Singapore government-linked corporations, and Temasek is a shareholder in SCB. That the bank became a co-investor in the Shin takeover was no surprise (Temasek Holdings/SCB, 2006). The fact that the anti-Thaksin movement was reluctant to criticise the SCB’s involvement in a deal it considered corrupt is a telling marker of the nature of the movement. While the movement attacked Thaksin’s wealth, it ignored the special position of royal businesses. Indeed, as Porphant (2008) reveals, the secretive royals are extraordinarily wealthy, with the CPB worth some US\$28 billion in 2005, overshadowing the Shinawatra clan. The CPB and other royal enterprises are “special businesses” in Thailand and receive state support. They do not usually pay tax and are accustomed to privileged treatment.

Soon after the economic crisis hit in 1997, the two jewels in the CPB’s business crown – Siam Cement and SCB – were in deep trouble (Porphant, 2008). In fact, the

SCB was essentially rescued by the Democrat-led government. According to Christmann and Sriaporn (n.d.: 15), the CPB could not meet its recapitalisation requirements. The SCB was unique amongst the private banks when the Ministry of Finance became its major shareholder, essentially bailing the bank out. It later sold its shares back to the bank basically interest-free and through a property-to-share swap (see *AFX – Asia*, 31 January, 2002; 4 April 2002; *Global News Wire*, 10 April 2004). One insider described the special nature of these transactions: “This was a deal where failure was not an option. Everything had to be perfect, because in this transaction we had SCB, the Ministry of Finance, the Bank of Thailand, the Crown [Property] Bureau, and virtually the whole country as our clients” (Christmann and Sriaporn, n.d.: 15).

As royal businesses recovered from the crisis, the CPB became involved with Shinawatra enterprises, while remaining competitors. Some of the competition was about how Thai businesses should be managed. The CPB was keen to maintain the honour and integrity of royal patronage (see Young, 2002), while Thaksin’s businesses often favoured a faster approach and quick profits.¹¹ But it was the combination of Thaksin’s wealth and political power that was most challenging for the managers of royal businesses. With Thaksin controlling the government, the conflicts of interest involved could not have escaped palace scrutiny, as Thaksin and TRT rewarded their supporters handsomely (Kasian, 2006: 27-34; McCargo and Ukrist, 2005). Shinawatra businesses not only competed economically with CPB firms, but Thaksin challenged the CPB by apparently failing to protect its special status.

Perhaps, more importantly, Thaksin and the palace competed in the political arena. As Kasian (2006: 19) noted, the palace has recruited “. . . government officials, police and military officers and civilians in a personal network of contacts. A special team was assigned to keep a card index of this monarchical network, which was estimated to include some 6,000 people by the mid-1970s.” Thaksin was well aware of the political challenge this network posed for his government. A number of Thaksin’s advisers had been involved with Chatichai Choonhavan’s government ousted by the military in 1991. They realised that one of that government’s failures was that it had not established control over the military and bureaucracy. On coming to power, Thaksin moved quickly to shake up the organisations linked to the palace’s network, promoting those who supported TRT. This brought Thaksin into conflict with the palace’s network, maintained by Prem, Surayudh and fellow Privy Councillors.

The king appeared to personally dislike the arrogant Thaksin. In 1995, when briefly a government minister, Thaksin was criticised by the king (*FEER*, 31 August 1995). Each year of his premiership saw another critique by the king. The relationship between the palace and Thaksin deteriorated throughout 2005 and, on 23 June 2006, Thaksin took the extraordinary step of writing to US President George W. Bush claiming that highly influential extra-constitutional people were plotting against his government (see *Asia Sentinel*, 26 January 2007). Thaksin did not identify names, but observers guessed that he meant either Prem or the king (see *Bangkok Post*, 1-7 July 2006). As the political stand-off with Sondhi, PAD, Prem and the palace developed, it was clear that Thaksin intended to challenge the palace’s authority, outraging the royalist elite (see Meechai, 2006).

Arguably, the most significant contest between Thaksin and the palace was for the hearts and minds of the masses. A central ideological component of the monarchy's position is the portrayal of the king as a champion of the poor, with the palace's rural development projects the symbol of King Bhumibol's connection to the masses. Many of these projects began as a way to wean the peasantry away from the Communist party and they expanded significantly when Prem's government allocated budget and support to the projects (see Handley, 2006). After 1997, the king's rural development ideas – sufficiency economy – became elements of the nation's official development plans (Chaipattana Foundation, 2000). The palace portrayed itself as *the* saviour of poor peasants, through notions of sufficiency – doing better with what one already has – and palace charity.

Thaksin, the Porsche-driving modern entrepreneur, offered a different approach to the same constituency. Far from urging a return to the farm and being content with rural “sufficiency,” Thaksin's policies emphasised “getting ahead,” producing for the market and promoted entrepreneurialism (Pansak, 2004). As noted, TRT also established elements of a social welfare system that were immensely popular. Government-sponsored welfare was a significant challenge for the palace that had long spoken against state welfare (see Bhumibol, 1992b). Of course, Thaksin had to appeal to the poor as they voted for TRT (Pasuk and Baker, 2008). Clearly, the palace was uncomfortable with Thaksin's mix of social welfare and grassroots capitalism and feared his immense appeal to what they saw as the monarchy's rural constituency.

The *coup* derived from these elite clashes. While the momentum for ousting Thaksin built over a number of years, the immediate impetus was the royalist's fear of another TRT election victory. In 2001, TRT won 248 of the 500 parliamentary seats, with more than 40% of the popular vote. In 2005, TRT won more than 60% of votes and a huge majority in parliament. While the April 2006 election was deeply flawed, it was clear that TRT retained the support of a majority of voters. Even after the election was annulled, opinion polls showed strong support for TRT. With another election scheduled for October 2006 and Thaksin holding on as caretaker prime minister, the royalist elite was not about to risk another TRT victory.

Concluding Comments

This article began with a review of *The King Never Smiles*, arguing that this important book was initially feared in Thailand because it lifted the veil on an icon of nationalist ideology and the decades of propaganda that had gone into creating a grand royal mythology. That that mythology had been transformed into a national culture of royalism made a critical assessment dangerous. For palace protectors like Prem, the book's publication was lamentable: “I don't like it. The nation doesn't like it. It's a hearsay book and is not based on the fact. We are worried [about] the foreigners who read it. My suggestion is – please ignore that book. It's useless.”¹²

Prem might well have preferred that foreigners didn't read the book for, at the time he spoke, he was involved in planning a *coup* that validated Handley's broad analysis of the palace's political role. Palace representative Prem had been at the centre of the actions that opposed Thaksin's elected government and had galvanised a royalist military. By his actions and words, Prem had urged that the government be

thrown out. Whatever one thinks of Thaksin and his time in power, this scheming against a legal government is not the role of a constitutional monarchy.

More than this, Prem became the mentor of a military junta and its appointed government. Even the timid Bangkok press has acknowledged Prem's role in the *coup* and in forming the new government, with *coup* apologist Thanong Khanthong stating: "Privy Council President General Prem Tinsulanonda . . . has . . . had a huge influence over the formation of the Cabinet" (*The Nation*, 9 February 2007). As in 1976, the palace now has its preferred government in place. This time, however, perhaps learning from the failure of the extremism of that earlier period, and reconsidering its previous disdain for the constitutional arrangement of political activity, the plan is to develop a constitution and other legal mechanisms that represent the political ambitions of the military and the royalist elite. While the 1997 Constitution was an elite compromise (see Connors, 2002), this time the royalists have maintained tight control over the drafting of the new constitution.

Handley ends his study with a call for the monarchy to be transformed into an institution that promotes a more democratic Thailand. He also affirms that King Bhumibol "...has sealed his own reputation, and it is unlikely to be undone" (Handley, 2006: 448). Handley is probably correct, but the palace's involvement in the *coup* indicates that the king's 60 years of work is not complete. Certainly the palace's *coup* participation is an attempt to establish a government that ensures the monarchy's continuation and its hugely significant ideological position (see Ukrist, 2008).

The problem for the king and his advisers is that they have now placed the monarchy at the centre of ongoing political struggles. This is a risky strategy and means that everything royal now has a political meaning. As such, nationalist strategies with the king at their centre have become *de rigueur*. Symbols of the monarchy – yellow shirts and the sufficiency economy – are also symbols of loyalty to the military-backed government and *any* criticism is a dangerous – if not unpatriotic – act.

The conservative royalist elite probably sees the *coup* and its reinvention of politics as a triumph and hopes that loyalty, both freely given and demanded, will overcome opposition and produce a "Thai-style democracy" that protects their interests (which they see as the national interest). This may work, at least in the short term, but this conservative approach depicts Thaksin supporters as corrupt traitors or, worse, anti-monarchy. The masses who voted for TRT are portrayed as ignorant, bewildered, bought off or coerced, leading to an argument that the poor, the dispossessed, the working class and rural people are not ready for democracy (see Walker, 2008). The emergent "Thai-style democracy" is unlikely to be a democracy that is inclusive and will be dominated by the conservative monarchy, military and bureaucracy.

Notes

¹ This sycophancy became absurd when one of the royal dogs became a media and public sensation (see Drummond, 2002).

² On 22 June 2006, the US House of Representatives and Senate approved a Joint Congressional Resolution to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the king's reign. See Press Release, Thailand's Ministry

- of Foreign Affairs, 23 June 2006, <http://www.mfa.go.th/web/1839.php?id=16820> (downloaded 4 December 2006).
- ³ There was also an attempt to denigrate foreign authors seen as critical of the monarchy. A scurrilous paper, circulated amongst foreigners in Bangkok, claimed a conspiracy. The anonymous paper asserted that certain foreign analysts had assessed the king's reign in unacceptable ways. These academics, the paper claimed, were in Britain and Australia, and produced studies that "for the most part, [are] accusatory in tone and substance." In short, they were dealing in "exaggerations and factual inaccuracies, as well as omissions of relevant information . . ." to denigrate the beloved monarchy (from an anonymous paper, in English, circulated in 2006).
- ⁴ Ambassador Boyce emailed Handley in late January 2006, asking for details of the book's contents. Later, Yale University Press provided two copies of the manuscript to the State Department (interview, Paul Handley, Washington DC, 18 February 2007). Within weeks, photocopied versions were circulating amongst journalists and academics in Thailand (confidential interviews with academics and journalists, August 2006).
- ⁵ Ockey (2005: 117) argued that there are a number of works analysing the monarchy. Until Handley's book, however, few of these works have been critical (see Thongchai, 2008).
- ⁶ Thais attach a colour to each day of the week. For King Bhumibol, born in the USA on a Monday, yellow is his colour.
- ⁷ As Pye and Schaffar (2008) observe, a number of NGOs also rejected TRT's neo-liberal policies in a range of areas, including free trade agreements.
- ⁸ On general business confidence in Thaksin's government, see the Bank of Thailand's (2006) private investment index.
- ⁹ Sondhi continued to attack Thaksin through his ASTV station and his *Phujatarn* [Manager] and *Thai Day* newspapers. His most significant and unsubstantiated claim was that Thaksin had a plan – the Finland Plan – to establish one-party rule, overthrow the monarchy and create a republic (*The Nation*, 25 May 2006).
- ¹⁰ Anti-Thaksin activists claimed the assassination bid was staged by Thaksin. However, those implicated in it were military officers associated with the forces that carried out the 2006 *coup*.
- ¹¹ The flavour of this "royalist" business ideology is presented in the UNDP (2007: 50-2) where Siam Cement is presented as an example of an ethical and socially responsible company. For TRT's economic approach, see Pansak (2004).
- ¹² The interview with Prem is available at the FEER website, <http://www.feer.com/articles/2006/0609/free/prem.html>, downloaded 20 January 2007.

References

- Australian Broadcasting Corporation (2006) "Coup leaders to continue governing role in Thailand," ABC Online, 26 September, <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2006/s1749489.htm> (downloaded 26 September 2006).
- Bank of Thailand (2006) "Revision of the Private Investment Index," http://www.bot.or.th/BOTHomepage/DataBank/Econcond/econind/Investment/index_eng_i.asp (downloaded 31 January 2007).
- Bhumibol Adulyadej (1992a) *Royal Advice by His Majesty the King 20 May 1992/2535 at 21.30*, Bangkok: Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary.
- Bhumibol Adulyadej (1992b) *Royal Speech Given to the Audience of Well-Wishers on the Occasion of the Royal Birthday Anniversary*, Wednesday 4 December, no publication details.
- Bhumibol Adulyadej (1998) "Phraratchadamrat yut lak setthakit baep pho phieng" [Royal speech on the sufficiency economy], in Ministry of Interior (eds), *Setthakit chumchon phung ton eng: naew khwankhit lae yutthasat* [*The Self-Sufficient Community Economy: Thoughts and Strategies*], Bangkok: Ministry of Interior, pp. 2-14.
- Bhumibol Adulyadej (2005) "Phraratchadamrat phraratchathan kae khana bukkhon tang tang thi khao faow thawai chaimongkon nai okat chaloem phrachom phansa," [Royal Speech Given to the Audience of Well-Wishers on the Occasion of the Royal Birthday Anniversary], Suan Dusitalai, Chitralada Palace, 4 December, <http://kanchanapisek.or.th/speeches/index.en.html> (downloaded 1 February 2007).

- Bowie Katherine (1997) *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brown Andrew and Kevin Hewison (2005) "'Economics is the Deciding Factor': Labour Politics in Thaksin's Thailand," *Pacific Affairs*, 78, 3, pp. 353-75.
- Case David (2006) "Thais Protest Royal Biography," *Yale Alumni Review*, September/October.
- Chaipattana Foundation (2000) "Sufficiency Economy: Direction of the Ninth National Economic and Social Development Plan. In Pursuit of His Majesty's Philosophy," *The Chaipattana Foundation Journal*, December, http://www.chaipat.or.th/chaipat/journal/dec00/eng/e_economy.html (downloaded 1 February 2007).
- Christmann Petra and Mark Sriaporn (n.d.) "The Siam Commercial Bank: Weathering the Asian Storm (A)," UVA-BP-0443, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=907936> (downloaded 31 January 2007).
- CNN.com (2006) "Thailand's king gives blessing to coup," 20 September, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/asiapcf/09/20/thailand.coup.ap> (downloaded 20 September 2006).
- Connors, M.K. (2002) "Framing the 'People's Constitution'," in Duncan McCargo (ed.), *Reforming Thai Politics*, Copenhagen: NIAS Publishing, pp. 37-56.
- Connors, M.K. (2007) *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Connors, M.K. (2008) "Article of Faith: The Failure of Royal Liberalism in Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38, 1, pp. 143-65.
- Crispin Shawn W. (2006) "Thailand: All the King's Men," Asia Times Online, 21 September, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/HI21Ae02.html (downloaded 21 September 2006).
- Danai Chanchaochai (2006) *By the Light of Your Wisdom. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, A Wise and Righteous King*, Bangkok: DMG Books.
- Drummond, Andrew (2002) "Palace bitch from slums wins the heart of a nation," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 December, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/12/03/1038712938788.html> (downloaded 8 October 2007).
- Evans, Grant (2006) "Review: *The King Never Smiles. A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 169, 7, pp. 58-62.
- Grey, D. (ed.) (1988) *The King of Thailand in World Focus*, Bangkok: Foreign Correspondent's Club of Thailand.
- Grossman, Nicholas (2006) "Govt, author dispute Sondhi's allegations," *Thai Day*, 19 July.
- Handley, Paul M. (2006) *The King Never Smiles. A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hewison, Kevin (1997) "The Monarchy and Democratisation," in Kevin Hewison (ed.), *Political Change in Thailand. Democracy and Participation*, New York: Routledge, pp. 58-74.
- Hewison, Kevin (2000) "Resisting Globalization: A Study of Localism in Thailand," *Pacific Review*, 13, 2, pp. 79-96.
- Hewison, Kevin (2002) "Thailand: Class Matters," in L. Tomba (ed.), *East Asian Capitalism: Conflicts, Growth and Crisis*, Annali della Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, no. XXXVI, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2002, pp. 287-321.
- Hewison, Kevin (2004) "Crafting Thailand's New Social Contract," *The Pacific Review*, 17, 4, pp. 503-22.
- Hewison, Kevin (2005) 'Neo-liberalism and Domestic Capital: the Political Outcomes of the Economic Crisis in Thailand', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 41, 2, pp. 310-30.
- Human Rights Watch (2004) *Not Enough Graves: The War on Drugs, HIV/AIDS, and Violations of Human Rights*, New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Kasian Tejapira (2006) "Toppling Thaksin," *New Left Review*, 39, pp. 5-37.
- Kavi Chongkittavorn (2006) "When is the abhorrent practice of staging a coup justifiable?," *Nation*, 22 September.
- Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian (2003) *Kings, Country and Constitutions. Thailand's Political Development, 1932-2000*, London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Levitt, Connie (2006) "Lesser of Two Evils," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 September, <http://www.smh.com.au/text/articles/2006/09/22/1158431897997.html> (downloaded 25 September 2006).
- McCargo, Duncan (2005) "Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand," *Pacific Review*, 18, 4, pp. 499-519.
- McCargo, Duncan (ed.) (2007) *Rethinking Thailand's Southern Violence*, Singapore: Singapore University Press.

- McCargo, Duncan and Ukrist Pathamanand (2005) *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Meechai Ruchupan (2006) "Khwaam rapitchop khong naiyok ratchamontri," [The responsibilities of the prime minister], MeechaiThailand.com, 4 July (downloaded 8 July 2006).
- Morell, David (1974) "Power and Parliament in Thailand: The Futile Challenge, 1968-71," unpublished PhD thesis, Princeton University.
- Ockey, James (2005) "Monarch, Monarchy, Succession and Stability in Thailand," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 46, 2, pp. 115-27.
- Ogan, David (2006) "Sondhi claims Thaksin's next move may be violent," *Thai Day*, 16 July.
- Pansak Vinyaratn (2004) *21st Century Thailand. Facing the Challenge. Economic Policy & Strategy*, Hong Kong: CLSA Books.
- Pasuk Phongpaichit and C. Baker (2004) *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand*, Chiangmai: Silkworm Books.
- Pasuk Phongpaichit and C. Baker (2008) "Thaksin's Populism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38, 1, pp. 62-83.
- Porphant Ouyyanont (2008) "The Crown Property Bureau in Thailand and the Crisis of 1997," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38, 1, pp. 166-89.
- Pye, O. and W. Schaffar (2008) "The 2006 Anti-Thaksin Movement in Thailand: An Analysis," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38, 1, pp. 38-61.
- Secretary General to Cabinet (2006) "Raingan kan doenthang bai saharat amerika phua damnoenkan kiawkap nangsue 'The King never smiles'," [Report on the Trip to the United States of America Regarding the Book 'The King Never Smiles'] Memorandum, Nor.Ror. 0501/929/Thor, 10 April, marked "Secret".
- Stevenson, William (1999) *The Revolutionary King*, London: Constable.
- Streckfuss, David (1993) "Slander in the Highest Degree: Cases of *Lèse-majesté* in Thailand," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Los Angeles, 25 March.
- Temasek Holdings/SCB (2006) "Temasek-SCB Led Investor Group Acquires Shinawatra and Damapong Families' Stakes in Shin Corp.," Media Release, 23 January, http://www.temasekholdings.com.sg/news_room/press_speeches/ (downloaded 7 February 2007).
- Thak Chaloeintiarana (1979) *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism Paternalism*, Bangkok: Thai Khadi Institute, Thammasat University.
- Thongchai Winichakul (2008) "Toppling Democracy", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38, 1, pp. 11-37.
- Ukrist Pathamanand (2008) "A Different *Coup d'Etat*?" *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38, 1, pp. 124-42.
- UNDP (2007) *Thailand Human Development Report. Sufficiency Economy and Human Development*, Bangkok: United Nations Development Programme.
- US Department of State (2006) "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Thailand, 2005," Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 8 March, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61628.htm> (downloaded 31 January 2007).
- Vasit Dejkunjorn (2006) *In His Majesty's Footsteps. A Personal Memoir*, Bangkok: Heaven Lake Press.
- Walker, Andrew (2008) "The Rural Constitution and the Everyday Politics of Elections in Northern Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 38, 1, pp. 84-105.
- Wassana Nanuam (2006) "Timing could not have been better, says army source," *Bangkok Post*, 21 September.
- Young, Stephen B. (2002) "Family Businesses and Reforms in Corporate Governance," Paper presented at the Caux Round Table, Singapore, The Institute of Policy Studies, 12 July.