The Pacific Review, Vol. 18 No. 4 December 2005: 499–519

Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand

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Abstract This article argues that widely used ideas such as bureaucratic polity, constitutional monarchy, transitional democracy and political reform fail to characterize accurately the recent politics of Thailand. Instead, Thai politics are best understood in terms of political networks. The leading network of the period 1973–2001 was centred on the palace, and is here termed 'network monarchy'. Network monarchy involved active interventions in the political process by the Thai King and his proxies, notably former prime minister Prem Tinsulanond. Network monarchy developed considerable influence, but never achieved the conditions for domination. Instead, the palace was obliged to work with and through other political institutions, primarily the elected parliament. Although essentially conservative, network monarchy also took on liberal forms during the 1990s. Thailand experienced three major legitimacy crises after 1992; in each case, Prem acted on behalf of the palace to restore political equilibrium. However, these interventions reflected the growing weakness of the monarchy, especially following the landslide election victories of prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001 and 2005. Thaksin sought to displace network monarchy with new networks of his own devising. This article suggests that conventional understandings of the power of the monarchy need to be rethought.

Keywords Thailand; monarchy; networks; reform; Prem Tinsulanond; Thaksin Shinawatra.

Introduction

On 28 February 2005, Thailand's Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanond made a major public speech in Bangkok about the deteriorating security situation in the Muslim-dominated southern border provinces. More than 500 people had been killed in violent incidents there during the past year. Prem urged prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra to accept advice from the King and

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The Pacific Review
ISSN 0951-2748 print/ISSN 1470-1332 online
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals
DOI: 10.1080/09512740500338937

Queen, adopting a peaceful and cautious approach to the problems of the South, rather than hastily sending in force without a proper understanding of the situation. His speech was given at a seminar entitled 'Joining forces in solving problems in Southern provinces based on royal speeches', and referred directly to a 24 February 2004 royal speech advocating understanding (*khao jai*), accessibility (*khao thueng*) and development (*pattana*). Thaksin had been present at the original speech, but had failed to act accordingly. Prem explained that everyone, ranging from community leaders to state officials, academics and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), should study the royal advice and adopt the same language (Thai Press Reports, 3 March 2005). Within days, the government had created a National Reconciliation Council to deal with the Southern unrest – a complete departure from the previous policy of securitization.

Prem's intervention in the southern crisis was a striking example of a little-remarked form of governance operating in Thailand: network monarchy. That the Thai King sometimes intervenes directly in politics is well known: the most famous example was his intervention following the bloody demonstrations of May 1992, when he summoned an unpopular prime minister and a protest leader and ordered them to settle their differences. But such rare public interventions are only the exposed element of a vast web of royally inspired political moves, most of which are well hidden from the public eye. The phenomenon and development of network monarchy will be examined here.

Defining Thai politics

Classifying the Thai political order has long proved difficult. Fred Riggs (1966) famously argued that Thailand was a 'bureaucratic polity' – in other words, that bureaucrats and military officers ran the Thai state largely for their own purposes. Hewison has rightly criticized this extremely influential model as essentially static, pointing out that it ignored longstanding opposition and resistance, and that it failed to anticipate the emergence of mass politics in the 1970s (1996: 75).[1] Later discussions of Thai politics were often framed in terms of democratic change and political transition (Chai-Anan 1990). Following a 1991 military coup that invalidated simplistic assumptions about Thai democratization, many studies emphasized the changing political economy and the rise of civil society, accompanied by more limited projects of political reform (Connors 1999; McCargo 2002). This article adopts an alternative approach: it argues that Thailand's political order is characterized by network-based politics. From 1973 to 2001, Thailand's leading political network was that of the reigning monarch, King Bhumibol. Since 2001, the primacy of palace-based networks has been challenged by the remarkable rise of the billionaire telecommunications magnate turned prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra.

Since the ouster of the Thanom-Praphas regime in 1973 King Bhumibol of Thailand has been far more than a figurehead, and by no means

a conventional constitutional monarch. Other writers, notably Hewison (1997), Kobkua (2002, 2003) and Kershaw (2001) have sought to examine the political role of the Thai monarchy, by focusing primarily on the King himself. The approach here is different: the monarch will be presented as the central component of a rather novel mode of governance, best understood in terms of political networks. Thailand's 'network monarchy' is centred on Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanond. Network monarchy is a form of semi-monarchical rule: the Thai King and his allies have forged a modern form of monarchy as a para-political institution. Anderson has nicely described Thai royalism as a 'curiously antique' form of rule (1978: 209), but network monarchy is more a part-modernized reproduction than an authentic period piece. Underpinning network monarchy was a certain nostalgia for pre-1932 absolute monarchy, tempered with a reluctant recognition that no modern Thai King could be an absolute ruler. Nevertheless, 'royal myth-makers have been avidly promoting the parallels between Rama V and the incumbent sovereign' (Peleggi 2002: 167) and Peter Jackson has suggested that a sacred cult of Rama IX is already in the making (Jackson 1999: 301–4).[2] Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, twice elected with strong popular support in 2001 and 2005, has sought systematically to displace the palace power network with a new set of connections.

The main features of Thailand's network monarchy from 1980 to 2001 were as follows: the monarch was the ultimate arbiter of political decisions in times of crisis; the monarchy was the primary source of national legitimacy; the King acted as a didactic commentator on national issues, helping to set the national agenda, especially through his annual birthday speeches; the monarch intervened actively in political developments, largely by working through proxies such as privy councillors and trusted military figures; and the lead proxy, former army commander and prime minister Prem Tinsulanond, helped determine the nature of coalition governments, and monitored the process of military and other promotions. At heart, network governance of this kind relied on placing the right people (mainly, the right men) in the right jobs. Allocation of key posts was the primary role of the lead proxy, Prem.

Network monarchy is inherently illiberal, because it advocates reliance on 'good men', and the marginalization of formal political institutions or procedures. Low priority is given to democratic principles such as the rule of law and popular sovereignty; but King Bhumipol's core achievement lay in securing a high degree of relative autonomy for the monarchy within Thailand's increasingly pluralist order. This contrasts with the tight controls placed on constitutional monarchies as conventionally understood. The Thai monarchy may be best seen, in Robert Dahl's terms, as an organization or a 'subsystem' (Dahl 1982: 27–8), rather than an institution. An important outrider of network monarchy is the Privy Council, which meets twice weekly, reviews all legislation, and makes recommendations on a wide range of issues to the monarch (Hewison 1997: 72). The King may also consult party

leaders in times of crisis (1997: 73). As Hewison puts it, 'the King and his advisors feel that he should intervene in the political process... The King often appears to be acting outside the limits normally considered appropriate for a constitutional monarchy' (1997: 72–3). 'Far from being "above politics", this king is intimately involved. His involvement means he is an "activist monarch" (1997: 74). The King himself described his political role quite clearly in a rare 1989 interview with the *New York Times*:

> 'I think it is a good technique that we have found', he says, adding that in his position there are two extremes to be avoided: complete subservience to politicians and royal wilfulness.
>
> 'You can stay in the frame of the law', he says. 'You can do just what the law says. That is, if you say something, the Prime Minister or a minister must countersign, and if he is not there to countersign, we cannot speak. That is one way to do it – do nothing, just nothing at all.
>
> The other way is to do too much, use the influence we have to do anything. That doesn't work either. We must be in the middle, and working in every field.'
>
> (Barbara Crosette, 'King Bhumibol's reign', *New York Times*, 21 May 1989)

'In the middle and working in every field' is a neat summary of network monarchical governance, as it operated in Thailand after 1973. For the palace, power sharing was the logical response in a political order where royal control was necessarily limited: as Olson puts it 'a leader who cannot become an autocrat has an incentive to cooperate with others in establishing a nonautocratic government' (2000: 33). Olson argues that under these circumstances, leaders will generally prefer to create a representative government. For the Thai monarchy, however, the best option was to permit the formation of apparently representative governments, while employing political networks in order to undermine and subvert them. Ironically, this approach was supported by prominent liberal royalists, such as Dr Prawase Wasi[3] and Anand Panyarachun,[4] who created extra-bureaucratic networks within which individuals distinguished by their personal virtue (in effect, mini-kings) could exercise power and influence. Because formal politics was dominated by money-oriented actors, liberal monarchical networks offered an alternative way of promoting progressive political agendas. For liberals, network monarchy was a transitional form of tutelary rule, appropriate for the crafting of a liberal polity. At the same time, by no means all elements of Thailand's monarchical networks were liberal: the monarchy retained intimate ties to highly conservative groupings associated with the military, the Interior Ministry, and bodies such as the Village Scouts. Monarchical network governance was not associated readily with a particular political perspective, as it was inherently flexible and ultimately pragmatic. In David Knoke's terms, the Thai monarchy enjoyed considerable influence, but was unable to ensure

domination. Accordingly, network monarchy had to operate cautiously: its relational power was a 'situation-specific continuum' (1994: 2). The core aim of the network was to promote the power and prestige of the throne. That prestige, in turn, served to underpin national identity, creating broader legitimacy for those associated with it. Understanding network monarchy is made difficult by Thailand's strict *lèse majesté* laws and the associated climate of censorship surrounding the royal institution (Streckfuss 1998). This censorship is related closely to what Connors terms 'the insider knowledge complex', a politics of knowledge production that allows privileged insiders to communicate to outsiders their inability to interpret events authentically (2003: 130–1).

The development of network monarchy

Network monarchy is not a fixed system, but a fluid *modus operandi*, adapting constantly to changing circumstances. Because it defies ready political characterization and classification, it has often been overlooked or ignored. During the Sarit Thanarat era (1958–63) the military dictatorship systematically boosted the monarchy in order to legitimate the Thai state, Sarit's own power and the anti-communist struggle (Thak 1979: 310–25). The once unpopular monarchy gradually returned to prominence. By the late 1960s, the King was making regular public statements touching on political issues, and by the early 1970s was the most powerful figure in Thailand (Morell and Chai-Anan 1981: 66–8). He even expressed support for the 1972 student-led campaign against Japanese goods (Prizzia 1985: 51). Even before the events of 1973, some Thais believed the King was 'in a unique position to foster a variety of urgently needed governmental and social reforms' (Reynolds 1978: 108). Frustrated with the shortcomings of the military, bureaucratic and political leadership, he played an important role in supporting the ouster of strongmen Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphas Charusathien in 1973. By this time, he was already 'a unifying symbol of popular aspirations' (Bowie 1997: 97). The King counselled student leaders before the events of October 1973 (Connors 2003: 130).

Kobkua has speculated that the King's displeasure with their regime partly reflected Praphas's criticisms of Sarit, whom the King regarded as his great mentor and partner (Kobkua 2003: 177). After 1973, Thailand could not return to an absolute monarchy, pre-1932 style; but monarchists hoped for an alternative mode of operation, one in which the palace could operate through a mixture of direct and indirect interventions to influence Thailand's political direction. Instead of hierarchical monarchy, could the country not develop a network-based form of monarchical rule instead? In a hierarchical monarchy, the throne would gain credit for successes – but would also be blamed when matters went wrong. In a network monarchy, the throne would gain credit for successes, but the failures of a 'decadent system' (Morell and Chai-Anan 1981: 315) would be blamed on others – primarily on corrupt and

allegedly self-serving politicians. Morell and Chai-Anan cautioned in 1981 that 'the increasing politicization of the royal institution in recent years has dealt another shock to the nature of traditional Thai culture' (1981: 313). By working through networks, the monarchy appeared, for public purposes at least, outwardly depoliticized. Connors is rightly critical of conservative royalist attempts to portray King Bhumibol as a 'mediating power between hostile social forces', but this image does offer a selective take on the idea of network monarchy (Connors 2003: 131). How far the creation of network monarchy was a deliberate elite project, and how far it simply evolved incidentally and contingently, must remain a matter for debate. The balance of the evidence suggests a significant degree of planning and calculation.

The next thirty years may be seen as a series of attempts to get network monarchy right, developing a system that 'acknowledges the positive and proactive role of the monarch' (Kobkua 2002: 62–3) – albeit one protected by a wall of censorship – while operating within a notional framework of representative politics. Whereas Kershaw suggests that monarchies in Southeast Asia can provide 'special assets' to support democratic transition (2001: 159–60), it is argued here that the Thai monarchy was long dedicated to resisting democratic change, embracing the cause of political reform only belatedly and reluctantly. Indeed, it could well be argued that by 'rescuing the country' in times of crisis, the monarchy was simply underwriting a series of inept governments, and delaying Thailand's day of political reckoning. From 1973 onwards, just at the juncture when Thailand was supposedly inaugurating a competitive pluralist regime (Dahl 1971: 40–7), the monarchy was reintroducing itself into the political order as a leading player. Directly or indirectly, the palace sought to set its own conditions for political pluralism. As Bendix argues, 'sacred authority is more easily destroyed than reconstructed' (1978: 17–18); but for three decades Thailand's monarchy successfully countered this general trend, reconstructing its power through the judicious management of networks.

Looking back, the October 1973 events have been overlaid by the myth of benevolent monarchical intervention as a means to effect political change. The King also intervened in 1974, blocking the inclusion of some royal prerogatives in the draft constitution (Connors 2003: 130; Kobkua 2003: 59). By 1976 the palace had swung to the right, and gave at least tacit support to the bloody events of 6 October. Former dictator Thanom Kittikachorn was permitted to return to Thailand, was allowed to enter the monkhood in a royal temple, and was visited by the King and Queen (Bowie 1997: 129; Kobkua 2003: 172). Two days after the massacre of students, the King made a radio broadcast expressing strong endorsement for the military coup of 6 October. Queen Sirikit and the royal princesses even visited Thammasat University, offering food to the Village Scouts camping out in the grounds (Kobkua 2003: 174). This was a dangerous strategy; as Bowie argues, the King was on relatively safe ground when he supported 'the sentiments of the national majority' in 1973, but 'jeopardized his position when he later

became identified with a controversial minority faction' (1997: 14). In a new experiment, the King personally selected Thanin Kraivixian as prime minister, hoping that this little known, highly conservative Supreme Court judge – and favourite of the Queen – could serve as his proxy. The experiment failed hopelessly: a monarch could not operate through such a controversial and isolated figure. Thanin was ousted in 1977, and was immediately elevated to membership of the Privy Council: a standard palace operating procedure, indicating displeasure at the way a royal favourite has been treated (Kobkua 2003: 175).

The royal family continued to display an excessive partiality for the military, rather than promoting reconciliation and unity. Nevertheless, the King gradually learned an important lesson: network monarchy needed to assume the outward form of polyarchy, so as to coopt and incorporate a range of political actors. Network monarchy had to be based on compromise, accepting Thai society in all its complexity. In other words, network monarchy had to involve pragmatic compromises with sleazy politicians, had to employ a degree of structural violence, and had to involve the politics of alliance building. However, building these alliances was no job for a royal head of state. The King needed a proxy who could manage his network. Indeed, there was no need for the monarch to have much direct involvement in the running of the country. With the right manager in place, the network would run itself; the monarch need only intervene personally in times of crisis, or when he had a particular message to communicate. One element of network monarchy was the rightist Village Scout movement. Bowie notes that those who joined had 'the vague hope that, should overwhelming problems arise, they might have a better chance of having their letter read by the king and thus receive special assistance' (1997: 253). Joining a monarchical network brought considerable benefits, ranging from enhanced prestige to expectations of preferment and improved access to information and power.

Hewison has noted that the King has referred to himself as an 'elected king', and suggested that people can throw him out if they are unhappy with this performance (1997: 60). Network monarchy is based on various sources of legitimacy, including the fact that the monarchy's enormous popularity gives the palace a license to make extra-constitutional interventions in the political process. In effect, the King claims a 'super-mandate' from the people, one that trumps the electoral mandates of political leaders. He has little regard for what Morell and Chai-Anan call 'the political noise of representative processes' (Morell and Chai-Anan 1981: 271). Nevertheless, as Hewison also argues, the monarchy 'has not indicated any fundamental commitment to democratic reform' (1997: 63). The political reform process of the 1990s had the potential to undermine the royal super-mandate. So long as electoral politics in Thailand were seen as corrupt, tainted and flawed, the monarch was needed to exercise emergency veto powers; ultimately, the King provided an escape clause, allowing Thailand to find a way out when the conventional political order broke down. However, if Thailand were

ever successfully to firm up its political system, creating other institutional mechanisms for managing crises and ensuring stability, the special role of the monarchy would be reduced. In other words, the palace had a degree of vested interest in preserving a partly dysfunctional political order, one that permitted just the right degree of monarchical intervention to maintain royal prestige. The King consistently argued in favour of ideas of national unity that involved compromise (Hewison 1997: 65), rather than the clear-cut resolution of contentious issues. This was illustrated, for example, by the royal pardon granted to all those involved in the May 1992 demonstrations: a decision which prevented a full judicial review of the dozens of murders committed by the military. As protest leader Chamlong Srimuang said after receiving a royal dressing-down on 20 May 1992, 'when the King gives royal commands, you have to bow your head and carry them out' (*Matichon*, 22 May 1992). Network monarchy involved a politics of fudge and obfuscation, helped by the fact that royal actions were above public criticism. An important aspect of network monarchy was the issue of language, as highlighted by Prem's February 2005 speech: it was essential that public discourse used royally ordained and prescribed language to frame, delineate and define issues and problems. This royal control over language was an important form of political power, and was asserted in regular speeches – especially the annual 4 December speeches, given the day before the King's birthday. Such speeches 'constantly returned to the theme of unity, and the need for good men to rule the country' (Baker and Pasuk 2005: 237).

From 1980 onwards, the manager of Thailand's network monarchy was in place: Prem Tinsulanond, handpicked by the King as army commander and later prime minister. His installation as prime minister might have appeared democratic, but was actually a 'royal coup'.[5] Prem could never replace his beloved Sarit, yet the King trusted Prem absolutely, seeing him as an incorruptible figure who shared his soft and understated approach, but who was a skilled alliance-builder and wielder of patronage. For the next twenty-one years, Prem served effectively as Thailand's 'director of human resources', masterminding appointments, transfers and promotions. Prem's power was never absolute, though it was always considerable. He served as prime minister until 1988, then immediately became a privy councillor and senior statesman, succeeding to the presidency of the Privy Council in 1998. In April 1981, the King and Queen accompanied Prem to Korat to show their support for him during a coup attempt; the Queen even made a radio broadcast backing him. As Kobkua argues, royal support for Prem in 1981 marked a new stage in the development of monarchical governance: from his earlier passive or active involvement in politics, the King began acting as a 'proactive participant' (2002: 67). Prem and the palace remained firm allies thereafter, their partnership serving as an attempt to institutionalize a form of royal government.[6] Chai-Anan Samudavanija described Prem as a 'surrogate strongman' (1997: 56): by implication, he served a stand-in for the King himself.

Prem and the monarchy were major beneficiaries of the fractious multi-party system of the early 1980s, which allowed them to retain the upper hand. Prem consulted the King weekly, setting a precedent for other senior officials and political leaders. When Prem faced severe criticism over the baht devaluation in 1984, the Crown Prince personally piloted Prem's plane to Bangkok and then drove him to Government House, another clear sign of royal favour.[7] Democrat leader Bichai Rattakul unaccountably agreed to allow Prem to remain prime minister after the 1986 election, probably after a royal intervention.[8] Prem finally lost power in 1988, having spent his eight years in office 'struggling to retain power and protecting the monarchy'.[9] At each crucial juncture – 1980, 1983 and 1986 – royal backing was the key to Prem's securing the premiership. Prem emerged from this period as a broker, a pragmatist willing to make any deal that advanced the interests, image and influence of the palace. These qualities made Prem the ideal royal proxy, the architect of network monarchy.

The 1988–92 period was a tricky one for the palace. Prem's successor as prime minister, Chart Thai leader Chatichai Choonavan, was rather too independent-minded: 'Chatichai tried to dismantle the machine the King and Prem had built'.[10] Hewison suggests that the King regarded Chatichai as unable to control the government, that the palace supported the coup, and that the King even gave his approval to the coup-makers in advance (1997: 70). Certainly, some of the coup makers' complaints – about the level of corruption and the rise of 'parliamentary dictatorship' – strongly resonated with royal themes. The King openly supported the problematic 1991 constitution. Opposition to the new draft constitution had been growing in Bangkok during November 1991, mainly because it permitted a non-MP to become prime minister. However, public criticism of the draft was effectively halted when the King made his December birthday speech, urging people not to fall out over the constitution, which could always be amended later (McCargo 1997: 241). In fact, the King was a major beneficiary of the 1991 constitution, which increased his powers in numerous ways.

While the May 1992 protests were clearly not scripted by the palace, the belated and fuzzy royal intervention that ended the bloodshed and led to Suchinda's resignation was subsequently mythologized into a triumph for the monarchy. The three-day delay in the king's actions was never explained convincingly.[11] The most likely reason was the King's fear that Suchinda would refuse to resign. Indeed, Suchinda did not resign immediately after his televised dressing-down, but waited for another four days. As Kobkua puts it, it was essential that when the King acted, his intervention was successful (2003: 179). Despite the general view that the violence of May 1992 signalled it was time to stop relying on the military and the monarchy, and highlighted the need for a process of thoroughgoing constitutional and political reform, all the evidence suggests that the King himself failed to understand this.[12]

The throne's enhanced prestige was illustrated by the King's second intervention that year, the appointment of Anand Panyarachun as interim prime

minister in June 1992; the appointment seemed to epitomize the rising power of the monarchy and a popular mood of dissatisfaction with political parties and institutions (Kobkua 2002: 65). When Chuan Leekpai's safe, cautious Democrats formed the core of the September 1992 government – rather than the troublemaking Chamlong Srimuang and his Palang Dharma Party – the King's will appeared to have been done. Chuan Leekpai declared openly in a September 1992 campaign speech that he had contacted Prem on 18 May 1992, asking him to call upon the King to intervene to stop the violence surrounding the anti-Suchinda protests.[13] In an article published just after that election, *Khao Phiset* argued that the Democrats had won because they had mobilized successfully support and financial backing from groups previously loyal to Anand, including business associations, government officials and intellectuals (*Khao Phiset*, 25 September–1 October 1992; Surin 1992: 43). The article implies that the Democrats were being backed tacitly by the palace. Campaigning in the South, Chuan compared himself directly with Prem, inviting voters to support Thailand's second southern prime minister: Prem has been the first.

The violence of May 1992 had left the King in an apparently strong position. He emerged as the supreme political referee, following a superficially successful intervention to solve the crisis. Yet the intervention also marked the high watermark of his authority. His consistent support for the military reflected an obsolete understanding of the Thai political and social order. The troubled 1991–92 period had left a number of important political actors chastened. Losers included former premier Chatichai Choonavan, several key Chatichai advisers led by Pansak Vinyarat and ex-Bangkok governor and protest leader Chamlong Srimuang. It is no coincidence that Pansak and Chamlong later joined forces with Thaksin Shinawatra, along with some former student activists and Communist Party members from the 1970s: for all of them, network monarchy was part of the problem with Thai politics, rather than part of the solution. After May 1992, a new system of monarchical governance was refined, one much less reliant on direct action. Royalists such as Anand and Prawase worked hard to reinvent network monarchy as a more liberal construct, not paralysed by anachronistic military and bureaucratic preferences for stability and order. Anand and Prawase were liberals by comparison with many of the King's closest confidantes, yet objectively speaking, they were also deeply conservative. For the next nine years, the King and his allies refined a new model that reduced his direct involvement, as he worked through Prem, Chuan and others to shape the direction of the country. A 1993 article in *Naeo Na* nicely illustrated the relationship between Prem and the first Chuan Leekpai government of 1992–95:

> Even if there is no formal disclosure, everyone can observe General Prem Tinsulanond. . . . Because if we look closely, from the time when Chuan's government came into office, Prem has been an important person to whom the Democrat Party pays respect and constantly asks

> for advice. No one can deny that every military transfer and promotion has to be seen by Prem before it is publicly announced.
>
> (Raingan Naeo Na 1993)

This is not to suggest that the King or Prem actively liked Chuan or the Democrat government, simply that they offered the 'least worst' alternative face for Thailand's political order. Nor could Prem's behind-the-scenes role ensure the stability of the Chuan government. In December 1994, the Democrat-led Chuan Leekpai coalition government faced collapse when its largest partner, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's New Aspiration Party, withdrew in protest, purportedly over controversial local government reforms.[14] Just as the dissolution of parliament seemed inevitable, Chatichai Choonavan's Chart Pattana Party – which had previously refused to bail out the Democrats – replaced New Aspiration, allowing Chuan another six months in office. Democrat Party secretary-general and political fixer Sanan Kachornprasat claimed that he had initiated the move without Chuan's knowledge, hinting that he had been encouraged to do so by important figures in Thai society (Kotchasi 1994).[15] Many believed that Prem orchestrated the coalition realignment to please the King, whose strong distrust of Chavalit led him to favour Chuan.[16]

When Chuan was forced out in May 1995, another difficult period followed. The King was visibly distraught at the new Banharn Silp-archa government, the creation of which coincided with the death of his mother. The Banharn government was a delayed political reality, the rise to the premiership of a low-class Chinese provincial businessman. As an elaborate royal funeral was planned, the King appeared almost nightly on television during August 1995, denouncing the country's politicians for their venality and self-interest. Bangkok's traffic woes and flooding were the two major themes of his criticism, but underlying them was a fear and loathing of ambitious, corrupt politicians. The rise of Banharn demonstrated that the monarchy lacked the power to block such politicians from becoming prime minister. Nevertheless, the monarchy did not hesitate to undermine elected prime ministers of whom it disapproved, colluding in the ousting of perhaps three or four.[17]

Network monarchy and legitimacy crises since 1992

Thailand has faced three major political crises since 1992, all of them crises of political legitimacy. The first was the Chavalit government's legitimacy crisis following the July 1997 baht devaluation. How could any government continue in office, when it had just presided over the creation of the Asian economic crisis? The second was the 2001 Thaksin assets declaration case, which almost saw a recently elected premier banned from politics for five years. Ideas of electoral legitimacy were pitted against the provisions of the 1997 constitution, under which powerful individuals were supposed to be

subordinated to explicit 'rules of the game'. The third was the 2004 collapse of state legitimacy in the Southern border provinces. For the first time in decades, Bangkok was losing control of an important sub-region of the country. In each of these three cases, Prem was the primary instrument of network monarchy, engaged actively in backroom management. The Southern crisis demonstrated that network monarchy was assuming new forms: as mentioned above, Prem used a major public speech to rebuke the government and challenge its policies.

Prem and the legitimacy crisis of 1997

When Banharn was ousted from power in October 1996, the new regime was no better: Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, often rumoured to be unsympathetic to the monarchy, became Thailand's prime minister. On Chavalit's watch, the country's economic position worsened, culminating in the devaluation of the Thai baht in July 1997. No one appears to have warned the palace about the devaluation, and the Crown Property Bureau lost much of its wealth: Siam Cement was left with losses of USD 1.9 billion and a debt of USD 4 billion, and Siam Commercial Bank held almost USD 5 billion in non-performing loans (Kobkua 2003: 261, note 30).

Several other developments were important. One was the way in which, after the crisis, Prem was deployed to shore up the legitimacy of the Chavalit government in the eyes of the IMF, on the basis that the survival of the country and the economy had to come first. For a time Prem was discussed openly as a possible interim prime minister (*Bangkok Post*, 16 October 1997). On 6 October 1997 Prem summoned newspaper editors to his house, to float the idea of forming a government of national unity. In effect, network monarchy would take over direct control of the country. Ultimately, Prem did not become prime minister, although he did ask close confidantes and advisers such as former finance minister Virabongsa Ramangkura to join Chavalit and add credibility to his administration (see *The Nation*, 15 August 1997; *Bangkok Post* 24 August 1997). But when Chavalit began to talk of declaring a state of emergency, and summoned military commanders to discuss what amounted to staging a coup against himself, network monarchy quickly wound up his administration.[18] The military declined the offer, and in November Chavalit found himself replaced swiftly by Chuan Leekpai. Power changed hands as a result of a complex and somewhat bizarre elite pact (Prudhisan 1998: 280–9). Chuan returned to Government House without benefit of an election, supposedly on the basis of a backroom deal conducted by a disgruntled and discredited faction of a minor party, Prachakorn Thai. The move – carried out largely by Democrat secretary-general Sanan Kachornprasart (*The Nation*, 6 November 1997; *Bangkok Post*, 17 November 1997) – had Prem's fingerprints all over it, yet somehow the entire episode was forgotten rapidly in the mood of national gloom that followed the crisis. Prem had pulled off another silent, bloodless coup, easing out a discredited government and replacing it

with an administration far more acceptable to the palace. Whereas in the past the military had rarely resisted the opportunity to stage a coup, this was no longer so viable an option in the changed post-1992 political conditions. Surayud Chulanont, at the time Commander of the Second Army (Prem's old power-base) argued in a 1996 interview that military chiefs had now to form pragmatic alignments with politicians, while presenting themselves as non-political or non-partisan (Chai-Anan 1997: 55).[19]

1997 also saw the passage of the new constitution, largely as a result of pressure from leading figures such as former royal physician Dr Prawase Wasi and former premier Anand Panyarachun. Prawase has described how he set out to create a movement for reform by a process of 'social empowerment', publicity-seeking, and unashamed personal lobbying (2002: 22–4). This included what he termed the 'family and wife strategy' – pressuring prime minister Banharn Silpa-archa to move ahead with political reform by appealing to his sense of family values. Prawase also noted that the new constitution became a battleground for defining the role of monarchy: conservatives claimed that the reformers wanted to undermine the position of the monarchy, even threatening to mobilize the Village Scouts to oppose the draft constitution (2002: 25). Along with former prime minister Anand Panyarachun – widely rumoured to have been asked by the King to chair the Constitution Drafting Committee (Connors 2003: 130) – Prawase was the main figure behind a liberal network of reform activists that paralleled and overlapped Prem's monarchical governance network. Although rarely assuming formal positions of power, Prawase was the driving force behind a whole range of projects and campaigns during the 1990s, including education reform, health reform, tobacco control and reform of academic research. Prawase's modus operandi resembled Prem's, as it was based largely on a politics of personal connections. As a rare syncretistic figure who commanded considerable respect both within the bureaucracy and among NGO leaders and social activists, Prawase was a master of interest group politics and coalition building. Because of his status as a former royal physician, it was often assumed that Prawase was acting on behalf of the palace (McCargo 2001: 94–8). In one unreported speech, Prawase had made it clear that institutionalizing Thailand's political order was essential, if the country was to avoid a violent crisis at the time of the royal succession.[20] Anxiety about the succession question grew during the 1990s, given the king's age and poor health. As Hewison put it 'A developed constitutional system can protect a weak or unpopular monarch' (1997: 74), hence the imperative for political reform in the 1990s. As Kobkua argues, Thailand has a 'traditionalist version of a constitutional monarchy that emphasizes the extra-constitutional and traditional powers of the throne', one which is heavily reliant on 'the personal greatness of the occupier of the throne' (2003: 29). On one level, the new constitution was a pre-emptive measure to protect the monarchy.

The political reform project illustrated the workings of network monarchy; the palace and Prem were initially lukewarm, yet a broad coalition of

interests was assembled. It is even possible to see the 1997 'people's constitution' as a 'palace constitution', a document drafted to help ensure the survival and future stability of the Chakri dynasty (McCargo 2001: 97–98). Arguably, Prawase sold political reform to the palace by emphasizing the need to find ways of raising the quality of political life, notably by allowing good people (such as Prem and Anand, for example) to enter politics. Prawase's vision sought to institutionalize the best features of network monarchy, creating opportunities for talented and capable individuals to enter politics without dirtying their hands with vote-buying and other activities. The creation of the party list system was a clear example of this idea, as was the notion of an elected Senate of non-political wise elders (see McCargo 2002). It was Prawase's belief that Thailand was rich in capable people of reformist instincts: if these people could be placed in the right positions of power, political stability would be ensured, and progressive projects could be advanced. By creating new institutions – such as the Electoral Commission and National Human Rights Commission – the presence of these virtuous individuals could be secured within the political order. In other words, network monarchy could be reorganized on a firmer basis, transcending the informal subsystem that had existed until now. The political reform agenda reflected a struggle between liberals and conservatives for the soul of network monarchy. In late 1997, the liberals appeared to have won.

Instead of money-free politics, the economic crisis and the new constitution paved the way for the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra. In the January 2001 general elections, the Democrats were trounced by the newly formed Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thai) Party led by billionaire communications magnate Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin's victory was based partly on simply dumping money; partly on his image as a decisive 'CEO' leader who would act quickly to solve problems; and partly on his manipulation of populist rhetoric, and policies designed to appeal to the rural masses (McCargo and Ukrist 2005). Thaksin represented the epitome of the new money-based political forces that were unhappy with the polyarchy of network monarchy. While other recent prime ministers not backed by the palace – Banharn Silpa-archa and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh – had lasted only a year or so in office, Thaksin was much too strong to be readily ousted. Thaksin set about systematically to dismantle the political networks loyal to Prem in a wide range of sectors, aiming to replace them with his own supporters, associates and relatives. Thaksin was seeking to subvert network monarchy, and to replace it with a political economy network of the kind described by Cartier Bresson (1997): a network based on insider dealing and structural corruption. The core struggle of the 1990s was one between conservatives associated with the military and bureaucracy, and liberal reformers seeking to strengthen civil society and political institutions. But Thaksin, the policeman turned tycoon turned prime minister, was playing according to completely different rules and ideas, favouring a toxic mode of leadership which left little space for rival players (Lipman-Blumen 2005).

Prem and the Constitutional Court Crisis of 2001

Thaksin was initially supported by many political reformers linked with network monarchy, notably Prawase Wasi himself. It was especially ironic that Prawase supported Thaksin – who epitomized the interface of money and politics – in his 2001 Constitution Court case. In August 2001, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (who had been elected by a parliamentary landslide that January) was facing allegations of assets concealment. If found guilty by the Constitutional Court, he would have been barred from political office for five years, and kicked out of Government House. Thaksin made little attempt to deny the substance of the charges, but he was riding a wave of popularity and many people saw him as the most suitable leader for Thailand at a difficult juncture, both economic and political. In the end, Thaksin was narrowly acquitted in troubling circumstances (for details, see Nelson 2002: 380–8; Klein 2003: 71–6; Surathian 2003). The verdict was questioned widely; the *Bangkok Post* cited one source as saying that two judges had only acquitted Thaksin 'at the request of a person who has considerable clout'. It quoted one of these judges as saying 'I was forced to swallow my blood while writing this' (*Bangkok Post*, 4 August 2001). It was generally assumed that this referred to an intervention by Prem, to avert the political uproar of a guilty verdict. A leaflet campaign during the trial had accused Prem of cutting a deal to ensure that Thaksin was acquitted (AFP, 2 August 2001). While claims that Prem had arranged payments were far-fetched, one more plausible leaflet suggested that Prem had agreed to lobby for Thaksin's acquittal, in return for keeping Prem loyalist Surayud Chulanont in the post of Army Commander for a further year (*Bangkok Post*, 2 August 2001). Prem and Thaksin were known to be in contact; when Thaksin visited Prem on 1 June, Prem urged him not be distracted by the court case (*Bangkok Post*, 2 June 2001). It is impossible to be certain whether Prem did exert any influence over the assets case, but pervasive rumours indicated that many observers expected him to get involved. The apparent intervention reflected the pragmatism that animated network monarchy: Prem wanted ultimately to defuse a crisis by protecting Thaksin, even though Thaksin's ousting might have given Prem some personal satisfaction. Prem must have assumed that Thaksin would repay this intervention by preserving his own highly privileged position in the political order – notably his control over key military appointments and bureaucratic posts, including governorships in the South; but Thaksin had no intention of following these gentlemanly rules of the game. With the assets declaration case out of the way, Thaksin proceeded to freeze Prem out of key decisions, demonstrating his determination to create a new supernetwork, centred entirely on himself, and characterized by a more hierarchical structure. Surayud did gain another year as Army Commander, however. The episode illustrated how the supposedly 'by-passed' military had actually been woven into an ingenious web of patronage by Prem, with

support from the palace and the Democrats (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 156–7).

The monarchy and the South

Thailand's Muslim majority southern border provinces experienced a serious upsurge in political violence from January 2004, linked to a longstanding separatist movement as well as increasing religious intolerance. At the same time, domestic political factors also played a central role (McCargo, 2006). Thaksin saw the deep South as hostile territory for his Thai Rak Thai Party, a sub-region dominated by officials loyal to Prem, the palace and the Democrats. In 2002, he dismantled the existing Army-led security structures, notably the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre created by Prem and his allies in the early 1980s – arguing that the old insurgency had degenerated into mere banditry – and put the police in charge of maintaining order. Although ostensibly motivated by a desire to rein in the excesses of the Fourth Army, which had long been a law unto itself in the deep South, Thaksin's actions undermined a delicate local social contract, and quickly precipitated a wave of extra-judicial killings and disappearances. More than 850 people were killed in violent incidents in the deep South between January 2004 and mid-2005 (see International Crisis Group 2005). The most serious incident took place on 28 April 2004, when 108 lightly armed militants and five security personnel were killed during and after coordinated attacks on checkpoints. The day's bloodshed culminated in a siege of Pattani's historic Krue Se mosque, where 32 Muslim men were shot dead at point blank range. Tensions reached a peak on 25 October 2004, when eighty-four Muslim demonstrators were killed at Tak Bai, most of them suffocated after being piled into army trucks.

The monarchy had long taken a special interest in the area – the Queen normally spent several weeks each year at their palace in Narathiwat – and was horrified by the turn of events. On 13 October, two officials in a palace car were murdered in Narathiwat, apparently while buying fruit for the Queen herself (Xinhua News Agency, 15 October 2004, 17 November 2004). Addressing over 1000 people at Chitrlada Palace in November, the Queen said she felt compelled to break her silence following a two-month visit to the South, her longest in many years (*Bangkok Post*, 17 November 2004). She denounced Muslims 'she had never known' as the brutal killers of many government officials and ordinary citizens. She called upon the 300,000 Thai Buddhists in the region to stand firm and not leave the area. Thais could defend themselves by learning to shoot, added the Queen, saying that 'even at the age of 72, I will learn how to shoot guns without using my glasses'.

The following day, the King granted an audience to 510 newly promoted police and army officers. In a speech also broadcast on radio, he called for greater unity and cooperation between the police and the army, declaring that such cooperation could have avoided some of the 'unrest and

disorder' Queen Sirikrit had witnessed during her stay in the South (AFP, 18 November 2004; AP, 18 November 2004). These unusual public statements by the King and Queen illustrated the extent to which the deteriorating situation in the South posed a threat to the legitimacy of the Thai state.

Given Thailand's tradition of extra-constitutional interventions by the monarchy, some leading Buddhist and Muslim activists began to call for such an intervention to address the problems of the South (Croissant 2005: fn. 62). Some hoped that the King might create a caretaker government of national unity, such as the one formed after May 1992. In October 2004, the *Bangkok Post* carried a front-page story headlined 'Muslims to ask King to change govt' (29 October 2004). According to the story, Dato Nideh Waba, chairman of the private religious school association in the Southern border provinces, as well as deputy chairman of the Islamic Council, was behind a proposed appeal to the King to establish a royally appointed government. He was quoted as saying: 'We have no alternative apart from asking our beloved King, who is our father, to give us a royal government to tackle problems down here . . . In a critical time like this, who could we turn to if not our fatherly King who is our sole hope since all Muslims down here regard him with the utmost respect' (*Bangkok Post*, 29 October 2004). While the petition plans came to nothing, both Muslims and Buddhists continued to talk privately about the desirability of a royal intervention.

The King signalled his disapproval of Thaksin's policies by elevating government critics to the Privy Council, and by urging the prime minister privately to adopt a conciliatory stance. Instead, Thaksin backed hard-line measures, including the use of martial law, which further inflamed the situation. Finally, following the February 2005 election, Prem made the remarkable public intervention discussed at the beginning of this article. The outcome was Thaksin's surprise decision to establish a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) to address the Southern crisis. The new body was chaired by Anand Panyarachun, with the ubiquitous Prawase Wasi as vice-chair. The episode demonstrated that once an issue became sufficiently serious, even a prime minister with Thaksin's formidable powers and resources had to bow to royal pressure. As Thaksin's popularity fell in the months following the February 2005 election, the NRC came almost to symbolize an alternative government for Thailand, comprising the wise men of network monarchy, dedicated to keeping alive the spirit of the 1997 constitution. This contrast was seen vividly in a pivotal 28 July 2005 televised discussion on the South between Anand and Thaksin, broadcast live from Government House: two prime ministers (one past, one serving), two approaches to the South (peace versus security) and two contrasting political styles (discursive versus dominating). Yet following Thaksin's hasty promulgation of draconian emergency powers by Cabinet decree in July 2005, suspicions increased that he was not sincere in seeking reconciliation in the South. Rather, Thaksin had created the NRC simply to neutralize his critics, while using state power to regain the upper hand over a resurgent network monarchy.

Conclusion: transforming network monarchy

Most discussion of monarchical interventions in Thailand focuses on direct actions by the King, notably the events in October 1973, April 1981 and May 1992. This article has highlighted the limitations of this approach, and suggested the need to understand royal power in Thailand as a form of network governance. The Thai King has typically worked through proxies, seeking to expand his political influence, yet ultimately unable to achieve domination. After May 1992, the pattern of royal interventions changed. As he grew older, the King appeared less inclined to make direct personal interventions. Legitimacy crises were addressed primarily through interventions by Prem and other members of the Privy Council. Even before Thaksin came to power, network monarchy was in trouble. The frequency of monarchical interventions after 1992 testified to the difficulty of sustaining the influence of the palace during an era of boom and bust, coupled with new political demands and newly assertive politicians and tycoons. Prem himself was eight years older than the King and was increasingly reliant on an elderly circle of associates, whose military backgrounds had limited their horizons, insights and influence.

During the Thaksin government, Privy Council appointments were politicized further. In three cases, senior government figures who had problems with Thaksin found themselves elevated to Privy councillor status immediately upon leaving office: Kasem Wattanachai, Thaksin's first education minister, Palakorn Suwannarat, director of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre and Surayud Chulanont, former army commander and supreme commander. Kasem and Surayud were deployed in undermining Thaksin's policies in the South, backing up Prem and repeating the same language – language scripted directly by the palace. This was a new, concerted and highly organized approach on the part of network monarchy, an approach that reflected Thaksin's very strong political position.

Faced with a prime minister whose power and mandate were unprecedented, network monarchy had to pick its challenges carefully, and to mobilize all available resources to mount those challenges. Since 1992, royalist liberals such as Prawase and Anand had sought to reorient network monarchy, rescuing the palace from the clutches of ultra-conservatives and using it as a vehicle to promote political reform. However, the unintended consequences of that reform movement – the rise of an amazingly wealthy and powerful prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra – compelled network monarchy to reinvent itself from a position of profound weakness. Despite the apparent successes of the palace in addressing crises of national legitimacy in 1997, 2001 and 2005, these achievements were tentative, and were won at a growing cost. By the beginning of Thaksin's second term of office, the informal political system of network monarchy that had operated in Thailand for three decades looked close to exhaustion.

Notes

1 Thai politics were transformed by a student-led popular uprising against the then military government on 14 October 1973, which ushered in a more open political order. The period of openness ended abruptly with a violent crackdown on the student movement on 6 October 1976. For the best account of this complex period, see Morell and Chai-Anan (1981).
2 Rama V was the dynastic title of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), generally seen as Thailand's greatest king, and in certain respects a model for King Bhumipol (Rama IX).
3 Dr Prawase Wasi is a remarkable figure, popularly dubbed one of the 'elder statesmen' of Thai society. A medical doctor and researcher who won a Magsaysay Award, he has an extraordinary range of networks within Thailand's non-governmental sector and bureaucracy, and was the prime mover behind the 1997 constitution.
4 Anand Panyarachun, a former Thai ambassador to the United States and to the United Nations, twice served as an unelected prime minister during the troubled 1991–92 period. He later chaired the Constition Drafting Committee in 1996–97, and headed Kofi Annan's international working group to propose reforms of the United Nations in 2004.
5 This point comes from a forthcoming book on the Thai monarchy by Paul Handley, to be published by Yale University Press. I am very grateful for his permission to refer to the book here.
6 Handley book.
7 Kobkua 2003: 257, note 104, citing Agence France Press, 26 November 1984.
8 Handley, forthcoming.
9 Handley, forthcoming.
10 Handley, forthcoming.
11 Violence began in the night of 17 May, but the palace did not summon the protagonists until 20 May.
12 Handley, forthcoming.
13 Author's fieldnotes from viewing the speech live on TV Channel 7, 2 September 1992. There was some scepticism about Chuan's claim that this led directly to the royal intervention of 20 May, as Chuan was not exactly the only person to have advocated such an intervention.
14 It seems likely that New Aspiration simply hoped to trigger a general election the party might be well placed to win.
15 For an analysis that attributes the move largely to a direct intervention by Prem, see the *Nation Weekend* cover story by Kotchasi. Sanan confirmed to me in April 1995 that he had never consulted Chuan about the move.
16 Chavalit was formerly a leading figure in a military faction known as the 'Democratic Soldiers', a grouping regarded by the palace as harbouring republican sympathies.
17 It seems clear that the palace was implicated in the ousting of Chatichai (1991) and Chavalit (1997), and very probably also in the case of Banharn (1996). Some believe the palace also supported the removal of Chuan in 1995, although I would disagree.
18 For details, see 'PM pulled back from the brink', *Bangkok Post*, 22 October 1997; Michael Vatikiotis, 'Democracy first', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 November 1997.
19 These comments are now especially interesting, given Surayud's subsequent rise of the post of Army Commander and then his appointment as privy councillor immediately following his retirement. Unfortunately, Chai-Anan offers only a

one-sentence summary of the views he expressed in the interview, and gives no verbatim quotations.

20 I attended this speech in Bangkok on 2 November 1995.

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