

Book Review: Marshall's "A Kingdom in Crisis" - The "elite-gazing school"

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Andrew MacGregor Marshall, "A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand's Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century", Z Books.

Andrew MacGregor Marshall's book "A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand's Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century" is misnamed because it has nothing to do with Thailand's struggle for democracy. The reason for this is that Marshall is of the "elite-gazing school" and mass movements from below do not feature in his book.

The book is a tabloid account of gossip about the dysfunctional and parasitic Thai royal family, with the aim of trying to prove that the political crisis is all about the "succession question" after King Bhumibol dies. It will be a book which offers much entertainment to those who enjoy reading "Hello!" magazine.

Even in terms of analysing the Thai monarchy, Marshall fails to grasp the fluidity of support for the king throughout his reign. Popular support for any national leaders, anywhere in the world, rises and falls with circumstances. Support for the Thai king is no exception to this phenomenon, unless one believes that the majority of Thais are too brainwashed and stupid to think for themselves. Marshall is often in danger of sounding patronising towards ordinary people due to his tone throughout the book.

Marshall's concentration on the "secrets" and cosmology of the royal family means that he also fails to grasp the changes to the monarchy throughout history and the Bourgeois Revolution against feudalism staged by King Chulalongkorn. He merely quotes Duncan McCargo who mistakenly believes that Chulalongkorn's "reforms" were designed to "prevent change".

By claiming that the anti-monarchy sentiment observed on the streets of Bangkok in September 2010 was a novel and momentous event, Marshall sweeps away the fighting history of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the 1960s and 1970s and ignores the fact that in that era millions of Thais opposed the monarchy. The only academic references to the CPT that he quotes come from out of date right-wing academics.

Marshall ignores progressive Thai writers, failing to engage in any argument with them. He does not have the courage to admit that the king's power is a matter for debate. He relies almost entirely on mainstream writers, writing in English. So for him the 1932 revolution is merely a coup by a small group of bureaucrats and soldiers. This has been the conservative line for decades. Marshall has clearly not read Nakarin Mektrairat's research into this period of history.

Readers hoping for a better understanding of Thai politics will gain nothing from this book. Marshall totally ignores what I regard as the real cause of the crisis; Taksin's unbeatable electoral alliance with the majority of the electorate through his concrete pro-poor policies, introduced immediately after the 1996 economic crisis. Universal health care is obviously not one of Marshall's interests.

Marshall's tabloid account of royal gossip is one thing. But the worst part of the book is when he absolves Abhisit and Prayut of any wrong-doing in killing 90 redshirt protesters. He allows himself to get carried away with the myth about "Taksin's armed Men in Black", but fails to offer a single shred of evidence, including photographs or reliable eye-witness accounts. Yet we know that no soldiers were killed or wounded by these Ghosts in Black throughout May 2010. This is an important issue today since the junta leader Prayut, who was in charge of the soldiers at that time, denies that soldiers killed anyone. Marshall is myopic in looking at the big picture of a military coup eventually installing an unelected Abhisit government, which then proceeded to use heavily armed soldiers and "free fire zones" against un-armed pro-democracy protesters.

Marshall seems to show little interest in the struggle for democracy and the necessary strategies and tactics we need to use. He seems to be only interested in selling royal gossip and Z Books seems to go along with this commercial enterprise. Marshall's easy success in getting Z Books to publish his work speaks volumes about his publishing connections and the deteriorating standards of this so-called "radical" publishing house.

Giles Ji Ungpakorn
