

# **Down with Thai Capitalism! The People Against the Military Dictatorship!**

A Response To Thiti Jamkajornkeiat

Thursday 17 December 2020, by [UNGPAKORN Giles Ji](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2020).

**Thiti Jamkajornkeiat's December 3 article " [1]" in *Spectre* is disappointing because it shows an unwillingness to engage with others who hold opposite views, thereby overlooking their work, and this is an unfortunate trait among Thai academics. I wish to highlight two central problems with his argument.**

Contents

- [Jit Phumisak's "The Face \(...\)](#)
- [The So-Called Power Of The \(...\)](#)
- [Wachiralongkorn Ruling From](#)

First, he relies on Jit Phumisak's mistaken analysis of the Sakdina system being based upon control of land and the claim that Thailand in the late 1950s had not undergone a complete transition to capitalism. In fact, Thailand's state and economy are thoroughly capitalist and have been so for over a century.

Second, Jamkajornkeiat argues that the current Thai king controls the country. That is not the case. Both king Pumipon and his son Wachiralongkorn have no real power. The military and the capitalists have used the monarchy to legitimize their control of the state. The stakes of these arguments are high since they will influence the ideas, strategies, and tactics of the Thai struggle. Today's movement must remain focused on toppling the military, which is the real power behind the throne, by mobilizing the country's working class.

## **Jit Phumisak's "The Face Of Thai Sakdina System" Was Incorrect From The Start**

The Left in Thailand has shown considerable confusion about Thailand's capitalist transformation and this has influenced much intellectual analysis, way beyond the Left, to this day. This confusion results from applying a Marxist model in an extremely mechanical and ahistorical manner, typical of the Stalinist and Maoist tradition. This is not surprising given that the only left-wing organization of any significance, in terms of ideas and numbers of supporters, was the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT).

A prime example of this mechanical analysis is Jit Phumisak's argument that land ownership was central to the extraction of surplus value in the Thai Sakdina system. This is one of many attempts at trying to fit Thai history into a Western model. Marx never claimed that Asian history followed the same exact path as European historical processes.

In the Thai Sakdina system, control of surplus production, over and above self-sufficiency levels, was based on forced labor and the extraction of tribute. This was a system of direct control over humans, rather than the use of land ownership to control labor, and its importance was due to the low population level. One estimate puts the average population density in 1904 as 11 persons per square kilometer, compared to 73 in India.

The majority of common people (Prai) living near urban centers were forced to perform corvée labor for monthly periods. There were also debt slaves (Taht) and war slaves (Chaleay Seuk). This direct control of labor was decentralized under various Moon Nai (bosses), nobles and local rulers (Jao Hua Muang), who had powers to mobilize labor. The result was that under the Sakdina system both economic and political power was decentralized.

Trade played an important part in the economy. Control of river mouths as export centers became more important as long-distance trade increased. Local rulers sought a monopoly on this trade in cooperation with Chinese merchants who ran sailing junks as far as China and the Arab world. War was also important. But war in the Sakdina period was not about controlling territory. It was about gaining war slaves, plundering neighboring cities, and proving power.

Although the increasing penetration of capitalism and the world market into the region had already increased the importance of money and trade, especially in the early Bangkok period, it was direct pressure from Western imperialism and internal class struggle that finally pushed and dragged the Bangkok rulers towards a capitalist political transformation. Evidence for this comes with looking at the effect of the British-imposed Bowring Treaty of 1855. This treaty established free trade and the freedom for Western capital penetration into the area without the need for direct colonization. While the monopoly over trade, enjoyed by the Sakdina rulers of Bangkok, was abolished, vast opportunities were created for the capitalist production and trade of rice, sugar, tin, rubber, and teak.

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The King of Bangkok quickly adapted himself to gain from these opportunities and fought to centralize the state under his own power in the face of internal and external challenges. Thailand’s capitalist revolution was not carried out by the bourgeoisie in the same style as the English or French revolutions. In Thailand’s case, the ruler of Bangkok, King Rama the 5<sup>th</sup> or “King Chulalongkorn,” brought about a revolutionary transformation of the political and economic system in response to both pressure from an outside world which was already dominated by capitalism and class struggle within.

Rama the 5<sup>th</sup>’s revolution was to create a centralized and unified nation-state under the rule of Thailand’s first absolute monarchy. This involved destroying the power of his Sakdina rivals, the Moon Nai, nobles, and local Jao Hua Muang. Politically this was done by appointing a civil service bureaucracy to rule outer regions and economically, by abolishing their power to control forced labor and hence surplus value.

Forced labor was also abolished in response to class struggle from below, since Prai had a habit of trying to escape corvée labor and both Prai and Taht would often deliberately work inefficiently. Forced labor was replaced by wage labor and private property rights in land ownership was introduced for the first time. Furthermore, investment in production of agricultural goods for the world market became more important than the simple use of surplus production for consumption and trade.

The shortage of labor for capitalist accumulation was initially solved by recruiting labor from China in the early part of the twentieth century. Much later, beginning in the early 1960s, a large surge in “indigenous” wage labor occurred as a result of poor peasants being pulled off the land, often from the north-east, into more productive workshops and factories in urban areas, especially around Bangkok. Later still, Thai capitalism started to depend on migrant labor from Burma and other neighboring countries.

The capitalist transformation and the construction of the first Thai nation state, a product of continuous change, occurred at a time when similar transformations were taking place throughout colonized Southeast Asia. In the neighboring colonies belonging to Britain, France, and the Netherlands, state centralization and the development of a capitalist economy, based upon wage labor was also taking place.

In fact, we should view the process of Thai state formation as the “internal colonization” of the north, south, and northeast by the Chakri rulers of Bangkok. Certainly, the various northern and northeastern revolts against Bangkok indicate this to be true. The civil war today in the Muslim south also has its roots in this process. The main point to bear in mind is that the changes taking place in “un-colonized” Thailand were not very different from the rest of colonized Southeast Asia.

### **The So-Called Power Of The King Today**

Many activists in Thailand believe that they live under an absolute monarchy, but nothing could be further from the truth. Since the 1932 Revolution the monarchy has had little power in itself. Instead, it acts as a willing tool of the military and conservatives. Although criticism of the monarchy can weaken the junta and hasten the long overdue day that Thailand becomes a republic, the military dictatorship remains the main enemy.

Elites have ruled Thailand for decades through a conservative-royalist network that cultivates an image of the king as an all-powerful god. Yet the previous king, Pumiwon, was always weak and characterless, and his power a fiction. Over the years, Pumiwon was happy to play this role, benefitting from all regimes, whether military dictatorships or elected governments. Under the elected Thaksin Shinawatra government (2001-6), for instance, the king praised the government’s extra-judiciary killings in its “war on drugs”, in which many hundreds of people were murdered. Pumiwon’s rambling speeches used obscure language and were reproduced by the elites like sacred texts, but the words contained little substance until they were interpreted in the media by the conservative members of the ruling class in order to suit their own interests.

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The people with real power among the Thai elites are the army, high-ranking state officials, and business leaders. They prostrate themselves on the ground and pay homage to the king on television, but it is they themselves who exercise the real power, using it to enrich themselves. This is ideological theater acted out in order to fool the public. The fact that it is in any way believable is a good example of what Karl Marx called alienation. When people feel powerless, it is easier to believe the nonsense fed to them by their rulers.

According to ruling class ideologues, the Thai monarchy is an ancient “Sakdina-Absolutist” (feudal-absolutist) institution, yet it is simultaneously argued that the country is a constitutional monarchy.

Students of Thai history will know from the works of historian Thongchai Winichakul, political scientist Thak Chaloemtiarana, and journalist Paul Handley that the Thai monarchy evolved in a constantly changing environment full of political tensions. It cannot be claimed that the institution remains the same as that which existed centuries ago.

What all modern monarchies throughout the world have in common is their ideological role in supporting the status quo. After the Thai absolute monarchy was overthrown in the 1932 Revolution the country was ruled for a period by anti-monarchy civilians and generals. In the 1950s, during the Cold War, the monarchy was revived and promoted by military dictatorships. This “return” of the monarchy mirrors Christopher Hill’s description of the restoration of Charles II in England after the English Revolution: “Charles was called ‘king by the grace of God’, but he was really king by the grace of the merchants and squires.” Similarly, one could say that the Thai king is king by the grace of the generals and capitalists.

Many intellectuals rely, consciously or unconsciously, on the old Maoist analysis, originating with the Communist Party of Thailand, that underdeveloped countries such as Thailand have yet to complete their “bourgeois revolutions,” which would pave the way for the full development of capitalism. According to this view, these countries are therefore “semi-feudal.”

However, as Neil Davidson has explained, bourgeois revolutions can take two main forms. There are revolutions from below, as was the case of England, the United States, and France, and revolutions from above, led by a section of the old feudal order and common in late-developing countries such as Germany, Italy, Scotland, and Japan. Thailand’s revolution can be counted among the latter and took place in response to European colonial encroachment into South East Asia. This process includes, but did not end with, King Rama the 5<sup>th</sup>’s revolutionary transformations in the 1870s. However, the absolute monarchy stage of this transition proved to be an unstable one, leading to the 1932 Revolution and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy under capitalist control.

### **Wachiralongkorn Ruling From His Harem In Germany?**

One important question needs to be answered by those who advocate that Wachiralongkorn is all powerful: Is there an example anywhere in the world, now or in the past, where a powerful ruler can exercise his power while spending most of his life abroad? Think of Bashar al-Assad in Syria or Kim Jong-un in North Korea today or various tyrannical kings in the past. Wachiralongkorn lives permanently in Germany, either in his Bavarian palace or in a 5-star hotel during lock-down, along with his servants and harem. He only makes short trips to Thailand.

Tyrants are very wary of leaving the country where they rule for fear of being deposed while abroad. To argue that Wachiralongkorn is an exception is just banal “Thai exceptionalism.” In other words, it means closing your eyes to comparative studies and the scientific study of history and immersing oneself in mysticism. The idea that Wachiralongkorn has been increasing his power is parroted by some Thais in articles published by mainstream new outlets. When talking about “power,” it is important to understand that it is a concrete thing, not some abstract concept, as claimed by historians such as Somsak Jeamteerasakul. Political power comes hand in hand with the “power to shape society and politics.”

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There was never any evidence that former King Pumphon ever had such power. He never shaped Thai foreign policy or had any influence on the direction of domestic political policies. He could not order military coups because he did not control the military. Pumphon always went with the flow, at

times praising Thaksin and his government. Pumphon shared his right-wing conservatism with most of the military and bureaucratic elites. It wasn't his ideas that influenced events. He had no influence on the policies used by the Thaksin government to dig Thailand out of the 1996 economic crisis. The anti-Thaksin movement which emerged much later was not his creation. The conservatives merely claimed they were monarchists in order to try to obtain legitimacy among conservatives. Pumphon once told the military not to buy submarines because they would "get stuck in the mud of the Gulf of Siam," but no one took any notice of him. His "Sufficiency Economy" ideology was repeatedly quoted by the elites, but never acted upon by anyone.

Wachiralongkorn is much less politically aware than his father, being completely uninterested in Thai society and politics. There is zero evidence that he is trying to wrestle power from the military in order to influence domestic political policy or foreign policy. As I have previously written, "Wachiralongkorn wants the Crown, but not the job." He isn't interested in the slightest in Affairs of State. His only interest is in his own "affairs" with numerous women, some of whom have been promoted to high army ranks. He also once promoted his former dog to an air force rank.

Wachiralongkorn's so-called "power" is much more akin to that of a petty local Mafia boss who wishes to protect his wealth and his patch. It must be frightening for those in his immediate household circle to serve such a self-centered, vicious and erratic boss. But a WikiLeaks episode some years ago exposed the fact that many high-ranking generals viewed Wachiralongkorn with irritation, even bordering on contempt.

In order to be able to use the present and past king as a legitimizing figure in their class rule over the population, the military and elites have to give them something in return. Since the image of the monarchy is there to protect the elites, the monarchy acts like a guard dog with all bark and no bite. But guard dogs need to be thrown a bone every day to keep them in line. The bone thrown to the Thai monarchy is the immense wealth given to them, the freedom for them to live their lives as they please, and the willingness of the elites to pamper the royal ego by groveling on the floor in front of them and pretending to be dust under their feet. This latter bit of theater is only for the benefit of ordinary citizens while real power is in the hands of the military.

Just like the top bosses of most religions who claim to speak on behalf of non-existing gods, the military claim to speak on behalf of the monarchy. But in order to make this trick work well, the monarchy needs to appear to be worthy of some respect. Yet Wachiralongkorn's personal lifestyle makes this difficult. The military are unlucky because Wachiralongkorn has no idea how to behave in civilized society and he risks turning the Thai monarchy into a laughingstock with all his scandals. The generals who are running the present "parliamentary dictatorship" are demanding that Thai citizens grovel to this nasty infantile king. The monarchy is dysfunctional and rotten to the core and many, many Thais know this.

Those who focus on Wachiralongkorn let the military junta and their anti-democratic allies off the hook because they ignore the need to build a mass movement to overthrow the military and instead concentrate on an abstract symbol, which they claim is too powerful to even overthrow. The urgent task for the Thai democracy movement today is to get to grips with how to harness the power of workers' strikes and how to build a mass movement with democratic structures instead of pretending that there are no leaders.

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**Giles Ji Ungpakorn** is a Thai academic in exile in Scotland. He was charged with *lèse-majesté* in

2009. His blog on Thailand is at <https://uglytruththailand.wordpress.com/>.

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**P.S.**

Spectre Journal

<https://spectrejournal.com/down-with-thai-capitalism-the-people-against-the-military-dictatorship/>

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**Footnotes**

[1] Availale on ESSF (article 55937), [Thailand: Down with Feudalism, Long Live the People!](#).