

# How much power does the Thai King really have?

Tuesday 29 January 2008, by [UNGPAKORN Giles Ji](#) (Date first published: 29 January 2008).

**The author of a recently banned book criticizing the 2006 coup discusses the monarchy's role in modern Thailand.**

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## ***Presentation by Asia Sentinel:***

On January 28, Thailand's Special Branch officially banned the sale of "A Coup for the Rich," by Associate Professor Giles Ji Ungpakorn of the Political Science Faculty of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. The book criticizes the 2006 military coup and the liberals who supported it. Ungpakorn says, "The emergence of a PPP government lead by Samak Suntarawej is not encouraging. As Interior Minister in 1976, Samak banned around 100 academic books and ordered their removal from libraries throughout the country. The banning of academic books by governments or bookshops is a gross infringement of democracy and academic freedom." That is a statement with which Asia Sentinel wholeheartedly agrees.

Accordingly, we print the following academic paper by Prof. Ungpakorn, questioning the power of the Thai king.

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The recent increase in academic debate concerning the Thai monarchy is to be welcomed. Not only does it help develop our understanding of this institution, it also helps the struggle to expand Thailand's democratic space. Two events have been particularly influential in raising this debate: the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 coup, which claimed Royal approval, and the publication of Paul Handley's book "The King Never Smiles".

Whatever one may think about Handley's conclusions, his book is a deeply researched book of high academic standard. This book and the debates which followed during the Thai Studies Conference in 2008, along with previous publications by Same Sky Press and Workers' Democracy Press have allowed academics like me to continuously develop and debate our understanding of the monarchy.

In my view, there are three main schools of thought about the power of the Thai monarchy.

1. The Ruling Class School, which wants us to believe that the monarchy is an ancient (Sakdina-Absolutist) institution which is all powerful and never changing.

2. The Neo-Riggsian / Neo-Maoist School, which analyses the monarchy by merely looking at disputes within the Thai elite and sees the main dispute being between a semi-feudal monarch and the rising capitalist class. This school includes both Paul Handley and Duncan McCargo.

3. The Marxist School, which suggests that King Rama overthrew the Sakdina feudal system to build a capitalist state in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This school, which I support, believes that the Thai monarchy is a weak institution, full of contradictions between trying to be a modern constitutional monarchy and appearing to intervene in politics.

## **The Ruling Class School**

This school proposes that the monarchy is an ancient Sakdina-Absolutist institution, confusing the difference between the feudal Sakdina kings and the capitalist absolute monarchy built under Rama V. This elite view is drummed into us at school and through the media. We are strongly encouraged to believe that the king is all powerful and that we are mere serfs (*prai*) under his rule. Royal language, the practice of crawling and the wild promotion of the monarchy all play a part in this.

Even in a modern context, the story is distorted by saying that we should not criticise the king “because he is above the dirt of day to day politics”, while remaining the supreme ruler. This view is neither historically accurate nor scientifically logical. Yet that is not the point. We are made to accept this view in order to believe that there is no alternative but to swear total allegiance to the monarch since he is a semi-god who should be both loved and feared.

Any serious scholar will know from the works of Thongchai Winichakul or Thak Chalermtiarana and also that of Paul Handley that the monarchy has evolved in a constantly changing environment full of political disputes. It can hardly be claimed that the institution remains the same as that which existed hundreds of years ago.

But the lack of evidence to support the Ruling Class School is not important. We are encouraged to love and fear the king so that we accept that we cannot criticise the monarchy. The lèse majesté laws help to “encourage” this belief. After the 2006 coup people like Anek Laothamatas suggested that the best political system for Thailand should be one where elected politicians share power with the monarchy and the military.

In order to understand why this view benefits the modern Thai ruling class as a whole, it is useful to make a study the role of modern monarchies in other countries, which appear to be quite different from the Thai case.

A good starting point is the English Revolution of 1640. This is useful because the English capitalist class brought back the monarchy on a long-term basis, unlike America 1776 or France 1789. Christopher Hill shows that the return of the monarchy after Cromwell’s victory and the execution of Charles I was part of a need to crack down on the radical movements of the poor, such as The Levellers and Diggers, who had been an important ally of the rising capitalists during the revolution.

The new monarchy of Charles II may have claimed to be appointed by God, but was in reality appointed by the new rising capitalist class. There was a need to “reinvent history” to show that the power and privilege of the new ruling class was ancient, “God-given” and not created by revolution from below.

It is the fear of revolution from below, getting out of hand, that made the capitalist class more and more reluctant to stir up revolution among the masses in order to overthrow the feudal order. It was

also the weakening of such feudal forces and the growing strength of both the capitalist class and working class which tipped the balance. By 1848, as Karl Marx explained with disappointment, the capitalists in Europe had come to an accommodation with the old order, but under the terms of the new capitalist class.

The English capitalists brought back the monarchy in a different form, while claiming an ancient continuity, in order to use the monarchy as a modern capitalist institution for enforcing conservative views against the rising working class.

In the case of Thailand, Thak Chalermtiarana, Thongchai Winichakul, Kasian Tejapira and Niti Eawsriwong have all explained how Royal political and social traditions, including the so-called “traditions” of the constitutional monarchy, have been invented. Therefore this is not really a disputed area. What is open to debate, however, is the proposal that the monarchy is a tool of the modern Thai capitalist class, designed to stifle debate and any challenges to the authority of the modern capitalist class.

By the “modern capitalist class” I mean both the private capitalists, like Thaksin, the head of CP corporation or the heads of the banks, but also the monarchy as a capitalist and the top military and civilian bureaucrats as state-capitalists. All sections of this ruling class control the means of production via capitalist relations — the military and civilian bureaucrats having significant control over the state sectors, including the media.

Those academics who disagree with my view that Thailand became a capitalist state, both politically and economically, under King Rama V, use the old Maoist analysis that under-developed countries like Thailand have yet to complete their bourgeois revolutions and are therefore “semi-feudal”. This analysis sees a major confrontation among the elites as being between the old feudal order and the new rising capitalists. Set into the context of the 2006 coup, the coup is the result of a conflict between the monarchy and Thaksin. This position has been proposed in detail, since the coup, by Kasian Tejapira.

### **The Neo-Riggsian / Neo-Maoist School**

Many people might be surprised that I include a number of authors, many of whom have never been on the Left, under the term “Neo-Maoist”. I also include authors from the Left, such as Kevin Hewison and Michael Connors or even Niti Eawsriwong under the banner “Neo-Riggsian,” despite the fact that they have strongly argued against the “bureaucratic polity” analysis of Thai society in the past.

The common position of this school is to study the monarchy by totally ignoring the people’s movement or struggle from below. Thai politics during the coup crisis of 2006 is therefore about an inter-elite conflict where the monarchy is seen to be in conflict with Thaksin. This conflict is explained as a conflict between the old (semi- feudal) order and the new capitalists. Both the role of the organised people’s movement and the electorate are of minor importance.

**1. Neo-Riggsian.** This school ignores the role of class struggle from below or the role of the Peoples’ Movement. In Handley’s case, he insults the poor as being weak and stupid. This patronising attitude fits with the excuses for the coup made by the Tank Liberals. According to them, the poor were bought by Thaksin and do not really understand democracy. That is why the majority vote could be dismissed so easily.

In the case of Duncan McCargo, the elite view is clear when discussing the causes of the southern

conflict. For him it is not about oppression of the Muslim Malay population by Bangkok, but it is about a conflict between “network monarchy” and “network Thaksin”. The elite-centred analysis is nothing less than a revival of Fred Riggs’ theory of the Bureaucratic Polity. This Riggsian view is accepted by authors such as Hewison and Connors when discussing the monarchy. What is also accepted by this school is the ruling class idea that the King is the most powerful figure in Thai politics today.

**2. Neo-Maoist.** As mentioned earlier, the Maoist (and Stalinist) analysis of under-developed countries characterised them as being “semi-feudal”, since the “National Democratic Revolution” or bourgeois revolution had yet to be achieved. Unlike the analysis of Marx or Trotsky’s theory of Combined and Uneven Development, capitalism still needed to be established by a grand patriotic coalition of leftists and capitalists in order to fight the feudalists. This explains why many ex-communists in Thailand support Thaksin. This school denies that the ruling class networks which support the Monarchy also include capitalists like Thaksin. They therefore believe that Thaksin and Thai Rak Thai are crypto-Republicans. This is the logic of McCargo’s network conflict and the logic of those who believe in the 2006 “Royal coup”.

The analysis put forward by this school has played an important and beneficial role in developing our understanding of the Thai Monarchy because it raises the question about the King’s power and the nature of his power. Handley seems to stress the King’s individual power. McCargo points to a more collective, network power. Network politics is undoubtedly part of the Thai political scene. More questions remain to be answered. Is the King the most powerful person within “network Monarchy”?

Are there over-lapping and competing networks which all support the Monarchy? Michael Connors suggests that the Monarchy is one Power Block in Thai politics. Somsak Jeumtirasakul argues that since 1992 the King has become the head of the Thai ruling class. But in what way? An all powerful head or a symbolic Head of State?

Yet there are serious weaknesses with the Neo-Riggsian and Neo-Maoist analysis which I shall discuss below.

- *Power is not abstract.* Power can only be explained and seen in practice. It is related to economic interests. If the Monarchy is powerful, to what purpose does it exercise that power? To just say it uses power to maintain itself as the most powerful institution, is to say nothing. What are the Monarchy’s aims in terms of economic policy, the role of the free-market and the development of politics and democracy? How are these aims different from the capitalists like Thaksin? It is difficult to see any clear vision held by the monarchy that has played any part in developing Thai society. Instead we see a society shaped by politicians, technocrats and the Peoples’ Movement.

Anyone listening to the annual birthday speeches given by the King would be reminded of a rather forgetful grandfather speaking to his grandchildren. Recently, in December 2007, the King warned against buying submarines because they might “get stuck in the mud in the Gulf of Thailand”. Is this the powerful and visionary national leader that this school seems to believe in?

- *The Neo-Riggsian model* ignores the role played by the Peoples’ Movement in important events like the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973, the rise of the Communist Party, the May 1992 uprising, the role of trade unions and N.G.O.s. Thaksin’s Populism was about buying social peace in response to possible struggle and of course the mass protests of the Peoples’ Alliance for Democracy opened the door to the coup by calling on the King to solve the crisis.

Without the struggles of the Peoples’ Movement would the democratic space have been opened up in the Seventies and Nineties? Would there have been a compromise with the Communists in the

Eighties? Would the 1996 Constitution have come about? Could the King have engineered the removal of the Generals in 1973 and 1992 on his own? Would he have wanted to do this? Why did he not just remove Thaksin before the rise of the P.A.D.? Each time the King has intervened, it has not been as an early initiative by one who holds power.

The Neo-Riggsian model when applied to the violence in Southern Thailand totally ignores 200 years of state oppression from Bangkok and the history of struggle against this oppression.

- *If the King is powerful why is the Monarchy being manically promoted?* The billboards and coloured shirts indicate that a manic campaign is being organised in order to promote the Monarchy. But why do this if it is such a powerful institution already? If it were a campaign to attack Thaksin, why would it have started well before his rise to power and was not Thaksin and Thai Rak Thai a willing player in this Royalist promotion?

Why has all caution been thrown to the winds over the serious problem (for the ruling class) of the succession? There now seems to be unanimity about the support for the Crown Prince among Thaksin, the military and the Palace. Yet, the King's position on this was different in the 1970s and 1980s.

Is all this the best way to preserve the institution of the Monarchy? Can the Royalists not see the dangers of promoting the Sufficiency Economy when the Royal Family is surrounded by luxury and wealth? What kind of vision guides these policies? It only makes sense as part of an unscientific, a-historical ideology for the consumption of the masses.

- *What possible benefit could Thaksin and other capitalists gain from reducing the power of the Monarchy?* As already mentioned, to prove this, one needs to point to serious economic and political differences in policy. Yet the junta's government, which claimed Royal authority, was just as neo-liberal as Thaksin's. Thaksin's Populism might be cited as a difference in policy, yet it was not a burden on capitalist profits, including those of the Crown Property Bureau and Thaksin received support from all quarters, including the Monarchy, in his early years.

Given the history of Thailand, it certainly cannot be said that "network Monarchy" opposes corruption, either. This has been claimed by coup supporters. So what issues are at stake here? Thaksin and other modern capitalists have much more to lose by attacking the Monarchy and encouraging a general questioning of elite status and power.

- **The Peoples' Power Party victory.** Does the victory of the P.P.P., headed by a Royalist conservative politician, signal a loss by "network Monarchy" and a victory for Thaksin or a compromise? Is it not true that Samak Sundaravej was working with Thai Rak Thai even before the coup? Isn't it more the case that the election result is a loss for the junta and its supporters, including the Democrats, but the Monarchy can adapt to all regimes?

### 3. The Marxist School

Over the years the Monarchy has never shown any serious power in practice. It is an institution that has derived mutual benefit from all regimes, be they military dictatorships or elected governments. Under Thaksin, the King even praised the government's extra-judiciary killings in the war on drugs. Over the Southern question, both Prem (head of the Privy Council) and Thaksin opposed any suggestion about autonomy and the use of the local yawee language along side Thai.

At this stage it is necessary to talk about the differences and similarities between the "Monarchy" as an institution and the "King" as a person. This is because I have tended to use the two terms as

though they mean the same thing and that is not really the case.

Among the general population, it is clear that a large proportion of people love and support the King. But it is obvious also, that this does not automatically apply to the Monarchy as an institution, especially if occupied by an unpopular figure in the future. This contradiction between Monarchy and King is due to the contradiction between the image of an ancient-style and modern-style Monarch. In the former, it is the person that matters most because he is a semi-god. In the latter, it is an institution.

Marxism bases its analysis on “historical materialism” and “the dialectic”. Historical materialism helps us look at changes taking place within society which have economic roots. This is why we can say that power struggles are about economic interests and not some abstract idea of power. The dialectic raises the slogan: “truth is in the whole picture”. This means that we cannot understand the Monarchy and inter-elite conflicts without looking also at the Peoples’ Movement and the class conflict between the exploiters and the exploited.

I have already mentioned the King’s intervention during times of political crisis. Another example is the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 blood bath. Here, the Monarchy, as an institution, was invoked by the ruling class as a whole, as an important symbol for rallying the Right to attack the Left. Naturally the King was a willing participant in this. But he was not the central coordinator of the crack-down. In fact would argue that he has never been the central coordinator of any initiative.

There is no doubt that the image of the Monarchy and the King is that of a very powerful institution and person. But the Marxist theory of alienation helps us to understand that appearances are not often the truth. The capitalist ruling class boosts its power by getting us to believe that the market or the family are “natural”. This socialisation is helped by a feeling of lack of power among the working class. It is this feeling of fear and lack of status and confidence in Thai society which is encouraged by the ruling class because it helps to make us believe that the Monarchy and King are all powerful.

Yet it is an instrument to strengthen, not the Monarchy, but the rule of a modern capitalist class. This is why both Thaksin, the army and the civil bureaucracy support the Monarchy.

At the heart of the nature of the Thai Monarchy is a contradiction between promoting the image of an ancient institution with an authoritarian nature and promoting an image of a modern democratic Monarch. This is a reflection of the continuing argument among the Thai ruling class about dictatorship and democracy, both of which are used under modern capitalism throughout the world. The argument is not really about democratic principles. It is about the best way to create “Stability”.

The Structural Functionalist School in main stream political science is all about building stability and Fred Riggs was part of this school. Thaksin supported democracy because he saw it as a more efficient means to rule Thailand and allow for maximum profits. Populism was part of managing class conflicts. The military junta and coup supporters, many of whom supported his project at the beginning, later felt that Thaksin was losing his ability to create stability.

But they could not compete with him in electoral terms without offering more left-wing policies. Hence the coup. Other issues were also involved, such as the opposition to high government spending and rivalries to get to the feeding trough.

Because of the continuing class struggle for democracy, which takes place on a global scale, it has become more difficult to claim legitimacy for military dictatorships. Thus legitimacy has to be attempted by citing “a crisis” or by claiming “Royal approval”. The use of the Monarchy in order to

justify military rule encourages a tendency to project the Monarchy as an ancient powerful institution. But it is only a tendency. Even those wishing to promote a modern democratic Monarch have to reinvent history.

The Monarchy in Thailand can cope with either a democratic regime or a military junta. As an instrument of modern ruling class power, the King is neither a victim nor the most powerful man in society. On occasions the King has supported modern democratic methods. The latest example is the refusal to use Section 7 of the 1997 Constitution to sack Thaksin in 2006. Another example is his statement that Thais should be able to criticise him. Yet he has also supported coups and goes along with the myths of ancient powers.

The argument between Thaksin and the coup supporters was never about reducing or increasing the power of the Monarchy because both sides have constantly claimed Royal legitimacy in order to strengthen their rule over us. They have also used lèse majesté laws against their opponents. The 2006 Coup was not a Royalist coup against a republican Thaksin, it was a conflict between two sections of the Thai ruling class, both of whom wish to use the Monarchy as an instrument of class rule.

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**P.S.**

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