CHAPTER – V

Monarchy, Democracy and King Bhumibol’s Political Interventions in Thailand

This chapter attempts to understand the two important institutions of monarchy and democracy, taking into account the reign of King Bhumibol and his political interventions. While trying to understand the monarchy under King Bhumibol, the chapter also discussed about his philosophy of self-sufficient economy, and its applicability to development plans of Thailand. The chapter further concerns the institution of constitutional monarchy, and how the people attribute to this institution. Dealing with these aspects, the chapter also analyses the place of Sangha in Thai politics.

Thai people have been paying tremendous respects to their monarch, and the monarch has significant influence in Thai politics to maintain stability. In this regards, Sumet states, it is difficult to conceive of Thai politics without “His Majesty,” the Lord of Life, who is revered by his subjects. Such kind of respects is very few among the modern monarchs. Even today, he is the national symbol of the kingdom, the Supreme Patron of all socio-cultural activities, and the leader of the Buddhism, (Sumet 2007:82 in Thai). About King Bhumibol, and how he has become an important public image through the institution of Thai monarchy, Lamb mentions that he is the world’s longest reigning monarch. Much beloved and deeply revered by the Thai people, he is the symbol of unity, social harmony, and stability, (Lam 2007). Bowornwathana also observes that the king has guided Thailand through many critical events; such as the cold war, the U.S. – Vietnam War, numerous domestic military and political upheavals, and also through various phases of Thai democracy. So, King Bhumibol has proven himself to be a truly benevolent monarch, selflessly dedicating himself to the welfare of the Thai people (Bowornwathana1999:87-88).

As cited on the previous chapter, King Bhumibol has traveled all over the country to meet the people, and introduced countless numbers of social and economic developmental projects. The monarch has helped Thailand to survive in many severe political crises as mentioned above, the bloody 1973 pro-democracy uprising, and a similar uprising in May 1992 (Anand 1996: 1-7).
This section will analyze more details about the King’s role in the Thai politics.

To begin with the event of pro-democracy uprising event in October 1973, Ungpakorn and Race analyzed that it was an intersection between the decreasing popularity of autocracy and the increasing incompetence of the regime, resulted one of the political mysteries of Thailand. The uprising was followed some most fortuitous events, like secular changes in Thai society. After the Thailand’s October revolution, the long-delayed and long-overdue institutional changes were taking placed. Ratifying these inevitable trends; there is a new spirit of optimism about the country’s political future; and King Bhumibol has enjoyed a boost in political influence and, if possible, an increase in prestige as well, (Race1974:192; Ungpakorn 1997:98).

In that event of 1973, he (King Bhumibol) ordered to open the gates of Chitralada palace to students, who were being shot by the army (King Bhumibol: 1992). Another event was in May 1992, there was a mass demonstration for democracy, in this bloody May event, many people particularly the middle class, demonstrated for several days against the Prime Minister General Suchinda. The event turned violent, and the undemocratic leadership was overthrown with the King’s intervention, (Ganesan 2007:6). As Bunbongkarn observes about the event, the movement started in early May, three weeks after General Suchinda’s appointment as prime minister. The parties actively involved in the protest were the Palang Dhamma, New Aspiration Party, and Democrat Party. General Chamlong Srimuang, former Bangkok governor and leader of the Palang Dhamma Party, led that protest movement, (Bunbongkarn 1993:220).

The main cause of the movement was Suchinda’s controversially assumption of prime minister’s office. The movement lasted from 8th April to 24th May, which was the largest protest in terms of number since the 1973 uprising, estimated half-million people participated in the demonstrations in Bangkok and other urban areas, (Chio 2002:18-19; Phongpaichit 1997:28). As Bungbongkarn states, instead of giving the demands of the protesters, General Suchinda and his military decided to use force against the demonstrators. Then, on May 17th and 18th, the army units under the supervision of General Issarapong Noonpakdi, crackdown the protests, which results heavy casualties, more than a hundred people were reportedly dead or had disappeared, and several hundreds were injured, (Bunbongkarn 1993:220).
large number of protesters were arrested, including General Chumlong Srimuang. On 20th May, King Bhumibol appears with Suchinda and Chamlong on the television broadcast, instructed both of them to end the conflict, and to reconciliation without the use of force. The royal advice is read as such, (McCargo 1997:260-261):

"I would request especially the two of you, General Suchinda and General Chamlong, to sit down and consider together in a conciliatory manner, and not in a confrontational manner, a way to solve the problem, because our country does not belong to any one or two persons, but belongs to everyone. They were not the only losers and in fact, every one is a loser, each side in the confrontation is lost, and the biggest loser of all will be the nation (Royal Advice by His Majesty the King 20 May 1992/2535 at 21.30).

After this royal advice, Suchinda had resigned, and it can be noted that Chamlong’s determination and political acumen had also been a crucial factor in the removal of a military strongman from the office of prime minister. So, the unstable condition of Thai politics is term as “ungovernable” or “institutionalized anarchy,” where the military leaders are opposing forces. There is no single dominant power centre, not even the most powerful army general. However, King Bhumibol is still considered the only foundation of legitimate authority in Thailand, (Samudayavanij 1995:245). As long as the monarchy continues to be legitimate and strong, it can act as the force that holds these opposing factions together.

As Chamnan (1990:289) comments, King Bhumibol tried hard to find a practical solution to the problems, and he has been offering many suggestions on how to improve difficulties like floods, droughts, Bangkok’s traffic jams, and economic hardships. Such moves made him guardianship to the ordinary Thais, and they feel moral supports at the time of economic despair and political turmoil. In an interview by National Geographic magazine, His Majesty said:

"In my case, the people know me as King. But in fact, the real duty is far from the role of the King as known in the past. My job now is to do anything that is useful. I don't know what is going to happen in the future. But whatever happens, I will do what is useful."

Thai Kings practice the Ten Virtues which are based on the Dhamma principle. The kings do not exercise their royal power through might or weapons, but rely on the Dhamma of the Lord Buddha to look after the welfare of the Thai people. On one occasion, His Majesty gave an interview to the BBC, he said:
"Somebody used to say that a kingdom is like a pyramid, with the king on top and the people at the base. But for Thailand, everything is in the opposite. That's why I feel pain at my neck and my shoulders." The King also seeks to look after the plight of the common people. "I try to keep a neutral stance and cooperate peacefully with all parties. Being impartial is necessary to me," he told the BBC. "The people might be attached to political groups or have their own interests to protect. But the majority of Thais do not have that. They can't make their wishes known clearly. Therefore, I should pay attention to these people." (Werayuth and Thanong: The Nation, 5 September 2005).

Nelson points out, in the broadest terms, the monarch exercises his royal authority as defined by law and also the royal traditional principles based on Thai Buddhism. It was King Bhumibol, who had to assume an unexpected role of guiding the construction of democracy, appointing an assembly comprising members from all sections of the society, and made a drafting committee of the constitution to rebuild democracy (Nelson 2008:7-8a).

Another example of the King's intervention is in March 2005, the Thai Rak Thai Party's second time landslide victory, seemed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra invincible. Then, he was facing a call for impeachment; Thaksin dissolved Parliament on 24th February 2006, and called a snap election on 4th April 2006, which were boycotted by the opposition (Thailand Polity IV Country Report 2006). However, while his rural support remained strong, his popularity in the urban centers quickly waned following a series of financial scandals and protests against his rule became commonplace in late 2005 and early 2006. The situation had changed completely in March 2006. According to Phongsudhirak (2008:143a), street demonstrations against the Thaksin government began in Bangkok in September 2005, and markedly expanded in late January 2006 after the tax-exempt US$1.9 billion sale of a Thaksin-owned telecommunications conglomerate (built up by lucrative state concessions) to the "sovereign wealth fund" of the government of Singapore. Social and political activists were dejected, even intimidated, by this result, (Pye 2008:38).

At this time, the main crusader attempting to bring down the prime minister was Sondhi Limthongkul, a media mogul who owns a media conglomerate anchored around the Manager Group, and Asia Times new papers. Regarding this crisis, Pye and Wolfram analyse that the events prior to Sondhi Limthongkul and his PAD (People Alliance for Democracy), formed in early 2006, was not simply a royalist and middle-class plot to overthrow Thaksin, but was a much more broadly based movement promoting a range of oppositions to TRT policies. At the same time, in
May 2006, it was clear that those within PAD who considered pursuing a radical strategy to challenge the dominant call for palace intervention in ousting Thaksin were lacking of support base. This strategic failure saw the elite element of PAD gain the upper hand, leading to royal intervention and the coup, (Pye and Wolfram 2008:5-6; MacCargo 2009:12-13). Contrary to this comment, Tejapirak states that the King had sent a message to Thaksin concerning the crisis, and displeasure at his intransigence. Thaksin’s opponents demanded his resignation, but he refused. He boasted on radio that the only person who could remove him from his office was the King. “If his Majesty whispers in my ear, ‘Thaksin, please leave, I’ll go, (Tejapirak 2006:10). On the next day he was invited to an audience in the Royal Palace. Following this, he went on television and, close to tears, announced his resignation.

The then, Deputy Prime Minister Chidchai Vanasathidya, long time associate with Thaksin, since days in the police, took over as head of a caretaker government. Here, Nelson emphasizes that with the April election having deepened the impasse, the King Bhumibol again intervened, declaring his repugnance over the way in which the contest had been conducted, thereby pressing the courts to annul it. The Constitutional Court obliged the king, prompting the Election Commission to order a new election within the year. But as it appeared, Thai Rak Thai again won this election too, the country’s ‘traditional elites’ began to denounce Thaksin even more forcefully (Nelson 2008:6b).

On 25th April the King intervened again in a televised speech to the country’s judges, which he posed the question:

_Should the election be nullified? You have the right to say what’s appropriate or not. If it’s not appropriate, it is not to say the government is not good. But as far as I’m concerned, a one-party election is not normal. The one-candidate situation is undemocratic. When an election is not democratic, you should look carefully into the administrative issues. I ask you to do the best you can. If you cannot do it, then it should be you who resign, not the government, for failing to do your duty . . . I was watching TV a while ago; a ship weighing several thousand tons was hit by a storm and sank 4,000 metres under the sea. Thailand will sink more than 4,000 metres under the sea, irretrievable. We would not be able to rescue it. So you would also sink, and innocent people would also sink below the ocean . . . You have to think carefully how to solve this problem . . . Thank you for doing your duties well._

(His Majesty addressed the Administrative and Supreme Courts’ 26th April 2006 at Klai Kangwol Palace on Tuesday at 5.42pm).

The judges decided that the election was inappropriate and annulled. It was charged as grossly improper conduct, and the Democrat Party with unconstitutional
behavior had boycotting the election. New elections had to be called, but these would have to be postponed until these legal issues were resolved (Rowley 2006). Finally, senior TRT figures, facing banned from politics, if the party was successfully prosecuted for misconduct. Democrats, the only major opposition party were also faced dissolution by the courts, and other smaller political parties were little more than an assortment of discredited personal cliques. As Pongsudhirak (2008:152) comments, never before had the politicians been held in such low regard in Thailand. Unsurprisingly, Thaksin's supporters and what remains in his regime want to amend the 2007 Constitution to save themselves from legal prosecution and party dissolution.

Despite the problems surrounding, king Bhumibol began making speeches about the deploring condition of the time, reminding Thais to retain the traditional Buddhist virtues of moderation and restraint. He told, what people should aim was not unlimited wealth, but modest self-sufficiency, happiness and virtue. This put him at odds with the embodiment of the Thaksin Shinawatra's unrestrained pursuit of wealth. Thus, the first sign of disagreement appeared as early as 2001, but it was 2006 that the two really fell out. Meanwhile, the following section will analyze perspectives on the contemporary view on Thai Monarchy.

Contemporary View on Thai Monarchy

The monarchy is now an important central institution of politics. Earlier, the institution did not have much role in Thailand politics. However at present, monarchy, under the present incumbent monarch, King Bhumibol, has come into prominence. As discussed in the above section, the king intervened in many of the nation's political affairs, which has altered the course of events considerably. Therefore, an understanding of modern Thailand's politics and the future of democratization must consider the position of the monarchy as an institution.

The contemporary view on the Thai monarchy is a product of the present incumbent's own image. In fact, there is "standard total view" of the monarchy derived from the king Bhumibol's own personality. He is seen to be a great man. There is no dearth of statements praising the present king. If we look at the history of Thailand, the country from the very beginning had powerful kings. Since the earliest historical times, Thailand has 'continuously' had a king on the throne. The avoidance of direct colonialism is also credited to the good kings of the period. Such
a belief leads to the observation that monarchy is a natural institution and the country is deeply monarchical, (Tongnoi 1990:156, Blofeld 1960:17).

Thus, the Thai Monarchy has immense stature, and it would be wrong to assume that this institution is fundamentally different from normal Constitutional Monarchs in a modern democracy. The function of such an institute is to be a centre of national unity, serving as an institution of last resort to protect the stability and status quo of the state in times of crisis. In Thailand, the monarchy has stepped into the political arena many times in periods of deep political crisis. But, the monarchy has only acted after consultation with elder statesmen and representatives of the elites, much the same as any Monarchy would do in the European countries. The next section attempts to explore the dynamics of Thai political system in relation to the democracy and military rule.

Dynamics of Political System: Representative Democracy and Military Rule

This section looks the dynamics representative democracy and the military rule in Thai politics. It also attempts to understand the roles of the monarchy in the change of governments since 1932 coup. Concerning the idea of democracy that began in 1932 has sometimes ambiguous meanings to the concept of democracy. The early days of constitutional governance, enthusiasm for democracy was not dampened by the fact that people had no clear idea of the meaning of constitution and democracy. In modern context, the debate over “Asian values of democracy” suggests that there are significant semantic differentials in understanding of democracy, between those who hold essentially procedural views of democracy and those who hold more substantive ones, (Thawilwadee Bureekul and Robert B. Albritton 2004:6).

As Muthiah suggests, in Thai from 1932 successive military regimes have used the label of national security to justify the usurpation of political power and their subsequent political actions. In this connection, the recent attempt to institutionalize the dominant role of the military in Thai politics under the mantle of national security. The military is now not only assigned the traditional role of national defense, but is also assigned the custodial role of the traditional institutions, and a leading role in defining and building a “democratic” framework suitable to Thailand. The lack of consensus over the exercise of state authority makes it
exceedingly difficult to differentiate normal political intercourse from activities that
can be considered as threats to national security, (Muthah 2001:188-189). Scholars
like Kitiarsa analyses about the “Thai style democracy,” which have re – examined
the national historiography of modern Thailand, and pointed out the national
memories are written based on the elitist heroism. It was very difficult to build
strong democratic structures (Kitiarsa 2006:6).

As mentioned above, the 1991 takeover inaugurated a period of military
authoritarian rule that boasted the usual features of a technocratic caretaker cabinet,
a military appointed legislative assembly, a new charter, and a scheduled return to
the election. But the process dissolved into violence when troops killed civilian
protestors near old Bangkok’s Democracy Monument in May 1992 (Phongsudhirak
2008:142-143).

As Robert points, a broad – based movement for political reform gathered
pace over the next five years. Its aims were to end corrupt “money politics” and find
a permanent way out of the vicious cycle of frequent coups, constitutions, elections,
and self – dealing that had long dominated Thai public life. The much – touted
outcome, which arrived just as Thailand became caught up in the East Asian
financial crisis of 1997, was a new constitution (Robert B. 2008:3-4). Manit states
that, the 1997 constitution was designed to promote the transparency and
accountability of the political system and the stability and effectiveness of
government as well. In another word constitution was designed to prevent the
military rule and corruption (Manit 2005:85-86).

Some scholars went deeper; arguing that the reformist constitution of 1997
had created a series of independent institutions to limit money politics. In particular,
Thaksin was accused of undermining the anti – corruption commission that was
meant to guard against the excesses of money politics. He was also accused of
manipulating the electoral commission and the Supreme Court [despite these
complaints the Thai judiciary sent several Thaksin loyalists to jail during mid-2006
for electoral legal violations], (Thomson 2007:10-11). In February 2001, Thaksin
took the New Aspiration Party (NAP) as his main coalition partner and is now
absorbing NAP into his own Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party. The NAP has a main
leader, namely General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, and he is the last active survivor of
Thailand’s aged of military politics. Since the anti-communist campaigns of the
1970s and 1980s, he has been dedicated to expanding the role of military in society

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as a conservative force. Under Thaksin, he has gained the military a bigger role in many activities from drug suppression to anti-poverty campaigns. Many surplus generals have been employed as government advisers. Chavalit believes, the military has a special task to bring an idealized “harmonious” society. This, of course, means suppressing dissent. On becoming prime minister in 1996, Chavalit revived the internal security apparatus and centralized it under his own command, (Phongpaichit and Chris Baker 2002:1-3: M G, Piti 2008:4).

Regarding the turbulent May 1992 events, and as a consequence the military reluctantly withdrew to the barracks, leaving the governance of Thailand to a series of unstable coalition administrations based on alliances between politicians, business interests, technocrats, and prominent criminals. Liberal elements of the elite, pressing for a cleaner and more responsive political order, led the political reform movement that culminated in the 1997 constitution (Choi 2002:5-10). Reasons behind any military interventions are multi-dimensional, complex, and heterogeneous phenomenon made more so by differences in the underlying historical, geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic settings.¹ But there is a common feature, where the military intrude into politics and decides to remain on the political stage, a reconfiguration of state-society relations by the military’s chief — and — ruler. The military’s role in politics has become more complex. Samudavanija comments that the military has to seek new “linkages” for itself, both as an institution and as individuals, through new patron — client networks, (Samudavanija 1997:57). Institutionally, they must pledge support to democratically elected governments, while personally the military elite has been using General Prem as the link to the new power elites of party leaders, (Warren1997:127-156). The chronology of military dominance in Thailand might be divided into the following sub-periods:

1 1932-44: The period of military dominance (Wilson1968:15-22)
2. 1945-47: The constitutional interlude (Venkataramani1992:253-274)

¹ One of the problems of democratization in Thailand has been that, because of a long period of bureaucratic and military domination, a democratic regime often has difficulty establishing legitimacy in relation to the traditional political culture. Economic and social changes in recent years have produced a new urban, educated middle class which subscribes to the principles of democracy; but the possibility of an effective democratic government could hardly be expected.
7. 1989-97: The period of democracy soldiers (Gunn1989: I8)

The democratically elected government in Thailand came into being on 19th September, 2006, after fifteen years as it was 1991, on the pretext of “corruption in government.” Whether “corruption” warranted such a drastic remedy has yet to be determined, but what is clear is that the Thai aristocracy is still willing to sacrifice democracy when they find control of government slipping from their grasp.

However, Thailand’s democratic political system is still finding its feet though the military remains as a strong influential factor. An additional uncertainty relates to the succession to 56 years of age General Sondhi on 19th Sept. 2006. For optimists and pessimists respectively, it is said that Thailand’s coup of democracy is either half full or half empty. It also implied that Thai politics would go back to the old formula of having a military leader at the helm supported by political parties and the army, (Winchakul 2006:2-4). It has become apparent from these studies the global democratization trend is hopeful, it is not so easy to get a politicized military to go back to the barracks, (Waddell 1972:266).

Regarding the coup of 2006, Charoenin-o-larn comments that all evidence points to an increasing role for the military in Thai society and politics, aimed at restoring democracy, would end up containing democracy under military control. The past seventeen coups show that military interventions are never a good solution to the problems of democratic politics. The use of force to attain the desired goal has proved futile. History has proved that soldiers, once they get a taste of power, tend to hold onto it, (Charoensin-o-lam 2007:28-29). One reason why the Thai military was able to retain political dominance for so long was its organizational attributes and its virtual monopoly of the instruments of violence.

According to Paribatra, the periods since those bloody events of the 1970’s, be sufficient to permit a more or less sober examination of the crisis in the context of Thailand’s past and present democratic experiences, as well as a reasoned prognosis of what the future holds for the kingdom’s political development. One can argue that one of the processes, if not the process, central to contemporary Thai political development is the evolution of relations between state and society. And that the
crisis of May 1992 and its aftermath is a crucial turning point in the evolution of the relations between state and society, and hence also a crucial turning point in the development of Thai democracy, (Paribatra 1993:879-882).

As Paribatra observes that the role played by the monarch in 1992 demonstration shows both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Thai political system. During that time, the king acts as a reminder of the Thais’ good fortune in having a traditional institution. And also serves as a guardian in times of trouble to help the nation at the political conflict. On the other hand, many thought that after 60 years of attempting to build democracy, the Thais have not been able to develop new institutions, instead of the king, which have effective frameworks and mechanisms to conduct of their own political life. In the 61 years or more, after the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, the Thais still depend on the central institution of outdate ancient times for their present political welfare and progress, (Ibid.p.890). Considering importance of the moderating role of the Monarchy in the current politics, a critical question arise that how long the Thai monarchy would take such responsibility to maintain stability in the future of political development in Thailand. The answer is vague for a foreseeable future. The next section would elaborate the role of the two institutions, namely monarchy and democracy in Thai politics and society.

Monarchy and Democracy

The section discusses about the two important institutions of monarchy and democracy in Thailand. There is a larger paradox with regard to the relation between these two institutions. Sometimes, they are seen not as contradictory, while at the same time, there are inherent contradictory elements in both the institutions. King Bhumibol considers himself as “an elected” king, arguing that if the people are unhappy, he can be overthrown. Considering this, the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy is now portrayed not as a defeat of monarchy, but as part of an historical process of democratization fostered by then Chakri dynasty. King Prajadhipok is credited with having presided over Thailand’s historical transformation from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, (Tongnoi 1990:156: Mahidol University 2000: 1-20). Thus, the monarch believes that he has strong connection to the common people.
The present king Bhumibol is now seen as the logical successor of this line, providing the stability required to steer Thailand along its path to constitutional democracy. And this role of the king is seen to be greatly enhanced by the king's egalitarian views and his link to the people. As such, king Bhumibol is portrayed as a true constitutional monarch and as a force for democratization. Ockey (2005:115) explains that because of its popular base going back hundreds of years, Thai monarchy didn't find much of a problem in the whole democratic setup. In other words, the institution is seen as crucial to political stability and the paramount institution of the nation, the people and the country. He is seen as the nation personified.

According to Surin (1992:334), the king does not have any political or administrative power under the system of constitutional monarchy, his role in times of political crisis has been crucial. The Thais view the king as sacred and as a spiritual leader who serves as a symbol of unity. Because of this, the monarch remains above all conflicting political groups. Support of the monarchy remains an indispensable source of political legitimacy. The monarch and his family have an important stake in the development of the political system and the manner in which the position of the monarchy has, and will be, defined will be critical to the path of democratization.

As the royal official discourse, the King has been playing a crucial role in development of Thai democracy. The monarch's role has carefully explained in various government publications, both in English and Thai. One of such major publications is the Public Relations Department's publication on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the monarch's ascension to the throne. It spelled out the role of King Bhumibol in normal times, and also states about his achievements and virtues. In addition of his faith to the people, the King's neutral role in politics makes him highly accepted among the public.

As Niti points, the King is the only person who possesses continuous political experience, his governing knowledge is incomparable. He also often gives political comments to the leaders and publics on various matters, both in officially and unofficially at critical times. In normal circumstances, he takes the social responsibilities, delivering lectures to the private audiences, elected authorities, or even to the high-ranking officers, (Niti, 1999: 98–99). Thus, during normal times,
the King supports democratic values, based on free discussions with the politicians on several national issues.

Above the King’s mentioned activities, he tries to maintain his position ‘above’ politics, it is inevitable, given the monarchy’s and his own popularity, that what he and members of his family think, do, or say, have in political implications. And hence, it becomes inevitable that questions arise regarding the monarchy’s political impartiality. Royal support and approval is seen by some as a necessary source of political legitimacy, even for a democratically elected leader and government. Without it, some say, no one can stay in power for long, (Paribatra 2003:305).

Regarding the interaction between the institutions of monarchy and democracy, whether it is convergent or divergent, Ockey observes that the current monarch came to the throne with little institutional support; any future monarch will come to the throne with the assistance of large numbers of personnel, a stable budget, and a council of powerful and experienced advisors. But, it would be clear that the informal power of the monarch will remain, that is not necessarily harm to democracy. Rather, certainly it would help in democratic participation, and to maintain stability. And, historically in Thailand, since a less democratic system may ultimately prove less stable, more prone to crisis, and less able to alleviate conflict (Ockey 2005: 122-123). So people will turn against any form of undemocratic institutions in Thailand, whatever existing political system, either monarchy or democracy. Since, we have discussed dimensions of Thai politics, the next section concerns about the monarchy as a symbol of political conservatism in Thailand.

**Monarchy and Political Conservatism**

Darling (1960:347) believes that the King would be liberal and democratic monarch with an interest in preserving freedom. However, this optimism was misplaced. There are views which believe that the present King’s legacy has been to define a conservative monarchy, supporting stability and order, authority and tradition, developmentalism, unity and solidarity, and national security and anti-communism. Because of its conservatism, the monarchy has not indicated with any fundamental commitment to democratic reforms. The monarchy has only been prepared to support reforms which have been congruent with its conservatism, and
have not challenged its increasingly pivotal political position, (Morell and Chai-ana: 1979:315).

One of the major philosophical elements of conservatism is the opposition to the idea of radical change and a preference for the conservation of values and traditions considered essential to society. For others, there is a desire to conserve particular social and political institutions. These elements are well – represented in the monarchy and its relationship to Buddhism, (Tambiah 1973:3-6). The King has indicated a strong opposition to revolutionary change, arguing that if all members of society know their roles, then radical change will be unnecessary. He has also noted the importance of existing institutions, especially in political life, stating that he opposed the idea that “the destruction of old established things for the sake of bringing about the new would lead to entirely good results, since surely there must be some good in the old-fashioned things, which, according to the theory, must be destroyed” (King Bhumibol Addresses 1974)

As mentioned above, the King himself is clear that he has greater power than the constitution permits. When asked about his role in choosing political leaders, he replied as such:

“**In the constitution it is written that the king appoints the prime minister. This is a system in which, perhaps, the experience of the king can be of use in looking for people who would be suitable for prime minister. The president of parliament will come and have a consultation, but the king may have more power because the people have faith in their king. It is exactly the same as any constitutional monarch when there is a constitution which says the monarch or chief of the state appoints the prime minister. If the chief of the state is not good they will make him into a rubber-stamp. As a constitutional monarchy pursuing political power in competition with the modern elected government, King Bhumibol is something unique in the 20th century.**” (See Appendix for His Majesty Speeches-xi).

Thus, the monarchy is an important element in Thailand’s conservative polity. Hewison argues that while the monarchy is constitutional, the present King is an “activist monarch.” He suggests that the problem for the royal institution is; it preferred conservative polity which has increasingly challenged by the emergence of parliament, popular elections and the constitution, (Hewison 1997: 62). For obvious reasons, it is not easy to gauge with any degree of confidence about the monarch’s perspectives on the subject, but perhaps, on the basis of his numerous speeches and writings over the years, a number of observations can be made. It can concludes, the king has a very clear and consistent conception of what is good for his subjects, a
conception which is very much based on tradition. The following section explores about the Thai monarchy and democratization at deferent time frames.

The Monarchy and Democratization

The political circumstances during the time in which the present monarch came to the throne were unstable. Intense political competition revolved around two axes: first, between royalists and anti-royalists; and second, between civilians and military. Royalist was in the minority and had been largely ineffectual in parliament, does Winichakul observes. He describes them as a “court in miniature (which) lingers on in a corner of parliament,” where at that time, the royal family feared republicanism, and it is clear that this has been a concern for the present monarch, especially in his early years on the throne. The king has often expressed his dislike for the cut and thrust of politics, stating that when he was 18 he learned that politics is a “filthy business.” This did not pre-dispose the king to support parliamentary politics. That the monarchy has played a central role in determining the path of parliamentary politics and in defining, the role of the constitutional monarchy is clear, (Winichakul 2008; 21-22).

In addition to his conservatism and personal dislike of party politics, the king has identified party politics as divisive, setting people against each other than uniting them. It is no surprise, then, the king would view authoritarianism as potentially attractive. His strong support for Sarit’s strict authoritarianism can be understood in this context, with the king providing Sarit with legitimacy and receiving the “veneration and honour,” the monarchy needed in return, (Tilak 1978). The little enthusiasm of the king has had for party politics has been limited to the view of parliaments and constitutions as a means to restore order after authoritarian governments have failed. Referring to democracy, King Bhumibol said,

"we Thais... need not follow any kind of foreign democracy and should try instead to create our own Thai style of democracy, for we have our own national culture and outlook and we are capable of following our own reasoning "(Office of His Majesty; Principal Private Secretary: 1987). The King has argued, “Democracy need to be modified to meet Thai customs and values.”

This perspective is also applied to the constitution. While the King has not been vocal on this topic, his trusted servants have a clear position. For example, Thongnoi challenges the idea that “democracy” is represented by having a constitution implying that these are unimportant documents (Thongnoi 1983:15).
In Thailand, he contends, constitutions have been the “brain-children of French-centred civil servants and US-influenced political scientists, and are therefore French in foundation and American in ideal,” (Ibid.p.18). When constitutions have been written, he suggests, this has been to address short-term circumstance, and not to match the needs and understanding of the people.

In the pursuit of a democratic form of governance, it is important for the Thais to develop their own system. “We need not follow any king of foreign democracy and should try instead to create our own Thai style of democracy, for we have our own national culture and outlook and we are capable of following our own reasoning (Office of His Majesty’s Principal Private Secretary, A Memoir of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej: Bangkok: 1987:47). According to Hewison:

“Thai social and political life has reached a watershed. In period of rapid change a new ‘logic, a new amalgam. Of social and political forces is emerging to reshape the Thai state... These changes have produced new ways of thinking and organizing in all areas of Thai life” (Hewison 1997:9).

The king has commented that there are many ways to organize government, and that even in democratic countries there are unelected heads of government. He also expressed a view on “real democracy,” pointing to the 1973 National Convention with its representatives from all parts of the country and all walks of life as a useful example. During the constitutional debates of 1992, King Bhumibol agreed that representation was important in government, but that the system of elected representatives “usually... does not work... because the system is deficient,” (Royal Advice by His Majesty’s the King 2992). Such views are reflected in king Bhumibol’s ambivalence towards constitutionalism. For example, the king gave exceptional support to unelected Prime Minister General Prem Tinsulanonda during the Young Turks’ challenges to his prime ministership. While palace sources portray this as support for constitutional government, when elected MP and prime minister was overthrown by the military in 1991, there was no hint of support from the palace, (Bunbongkarn 1991:131-133). Another example was when the coup of 1971 happened. Regarding this event, Morell notes that following the coup, his lack of commitment to the constitutional rule was demonstrated when he celebrated constitution’s day less than a month after the coup which had torn up the constitution. It might be that the king’s attitude reflects his belief that when a constitution is abrogated, “the people’s mandate returns to me,” (Morell 1973:166b). Tongnoi (1990:159) argues that “Thai-style democracy” is intimately relayed to the
monarchy that “Democracy is essentially a method of government in which the rights of an individual citizen should be as fully protected as possible.” Not surprisingly, he sees that the answer to protecting rights is to be found in the monarchy. He states our monarchy is far too deep rooted and thoroughly involved in the protection of the individual’s rights to be done away with....and continues to grow in usefulness and involvement in democratic times. The next section concerns facets of the Thai constitutional monarchy and its relevance.

Is Constitutional Monarchy Desirable?

It is interesting to consider the position of the constitutional monarchy, if in fact, constitutions are unimportant. Prudishan argues that Thailand is fortunate, because traditional institutions have considerable influenced, and “constrained by the constitutional nature of the monarchy.” He adds that it is the constitution which sets the limits and conditions under which the monarch operates, (Prudishan 1987:122). The king, commenting on the role of the constitutional monarch, states that the basic principle of the monarch cannot do wrongs, and his position is symbolic of the nation as a whole. In this respect, the Thai monarchy is often compared to its English counterpart.

However, as Heiecke (1977: 28) notes, this is a false comparison, as the Thai monarch has far more real power than the English counterpart. This has often been demonstrated, with the king’s political interventions during the 1973 and 1992 events and his role in a border dispute between Thailand and Burma in 1992 being well known examples. The king often appears to be acting outside the limits usually considered appropriate for a constitutional monarch. This propensity to be involved in the political and legislative processes is not seen in the English monarchy, (Hewison 2003:13-15). Norton (1982: 6) points, the English monarchy’ royal prerogative is determined by convention. Although, Stern argues that the basic elements of a constitutional monarchy are that the sovereign should be above parties and politics; the prime minister and government appointed from parliament should be received rather than designated by the monarch. The civil service should be apolitical, show allegiance to the crown, but should be subordinated to party government. And the prime minister is the undisputed head of the executive, with the monarch having no role in the choice of the chief minister. This does not appear
to be case in Thailand. It is also true that majority of the Thai population desires to have a constitutional monarchy It is manifested in the strong connection seen between the king and the people (Stern 2006: 127:141).

It is interesting that the Constitution does not spell out the principle of acting on government advice. However, the provisions which give the King a power or duty to act make it clear either that he acts in the exercise of prerogative; or that his act is ministerial or mandatory, involving no exercise of discretion or that he acts on specified advice such as that of the Prime Minister or the Senate, or the National Assembly, (Thawilwadee Bureekul, and Stithom Thananithichot 2003-14).

Thus, one may conclude that the monarchy is fundamental to Thai constitutionalism both symbolically and in terms of the prerogative powers which the King can exercise, which allow for the exercise of discretion to a somewhat greater extent than in European constitutional monarchies, (Constitution of Thailand 2008 Section 12).

From the above discussion, it can be said that there is a monarchy centered on the definition of democracy, which has become a most powerful discourse, threatening all other political definitions. Here, Paribatra observes, the king is not only the political leader of the state but also of the society. He is the most important centre of the society and is the mechanism of change and development. Any change in society for the better or worse is dependent on the ruler's virtues or lack of virtues. One can perhaps say that the ruler is the universe unto himself, because he is responsible not only for the consequences of his use of political power but also for changes in nature itself, (Paribatra 2003:293-303). In his approach to politics, the King is inherently conservative, and from this position he has attempted to define a conservative polity. Such a polity would preserve and further extend the power of the monarchy. To do this, the King has to become increasingly involved in politics. As Hewison mentions, King’s involvement means he is an “activist monarch,” quite innovative yet, when it is considered that most other constitutional monarchies have increasingly been withdrawn from direct political activity over the last century (Hewison1997:74).

Thus, at present, the kingdom continues to be blessed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s Paribatra, but no blessing lasts forever. The monarchy will remain, but its future capacity to act as the guardian angel of Thailand’s political process may not necessarily be the same, (Paribatra 1993: 891). The question is how and how far
the nation can build up strong political institutions for the long run to ensure a stronger democracy, and a stronger constitutional monarchy, without having to impose upon the monarchical institution the burden of under, unrealistic, and ultimately unfulfilled expectations. Thus he observes.

Concerning the King’s intervention in economic activity, it can be mentioned his “Philosophy of Self Sufficiency Economy,” during the “1997 Financial Crisis, in Thailand, the government adopted the policy of “Sufficiency Economy,” in the government National Economic and Social Development Plan (2002-2006), where the philosophy of “Self – Reliance” bestowed by His Majesty the King to his subjects as the guiding principle of nation based on adherence to the middle path, is advocated to (a) overcome the current economic crisis that was brought by unexpected change under the conditions of rapid globalization, and (b) achieve sustainable development, (NESDB 2002-2006:48).

Over the past three decades, His Majesty has graciously reminded Thai people through his royal remarks on many occasions of a “step – by – step and balanced approach to development,” which is now known as the Philosophy of “Self – Sufficiency Economy.” The philosophy provides guidance on appropriate conduct covering numerous aspects of life (Thossaphol 2007). The following is an example from His royal speech in 1974:

"Economic development must be done step by step. It should begin with the strengthening of our economic foundation, by assuring that the majority of our population has enough to live on. ... Once reasonable progress has been achieved, we should then embark on the next steps, by pursuing more advanced levels of economic development. Here, if one focuses only on rapid economic expansion without making sure that such plan is appropriate for our people and the condition of our country, it will inevitably result in various imbalances and eventually end up as failure or crisis as found in other countries.” (Royal Speech 1974, p.12)

4. ข้าราชการ 2517 ณ ศาลากลางจังหวัดปทุมธานี พระราชทานพิธีพระราชทานรางวัลพระราชทานวิทยุศิลปิน ( 4th December 1974 at Sala Dusidalaiy jitalada laho dhan Palace Bangkok)

After the economic crisis in 1997, His Majesty has reiterated and expanded on the concept of “Self – Sufficiency Economy,” in remarks he made in December 1997 and the following years. The concept points the way for recovery that will lead to a more reliance, balance and sustainable development, better able to meet the challenges arising from globalization and other changes, (Thailand National Economic and Social Development Board 1998).
After the launch of "Self-Sufficiency Economy" policy, the King has been involving in many developmental works. In this regards, Hewison states that King Bhumibol had become intensely involved in rural development projects and was seeking new directions. What was needed, he said, was "wisdom and intelligence coupled with honesty without any thought for financial gains. Anyone who wants to make money had better resign and go into business." His attacks on capitalism and greed seemed to echo the leftists, but were informed by Buddhism, (Hewison 2001:12-15). On the reflection, it is no surprise to find a king advancing a premodern – inspired critique of capitalist modernist, (Paul 2006:213). Yet, the king’s appeals to social and natural harmony, simplicity, and morality were paradoxically radical and conservative at the same time. The government also promoted an inspection tour by the King to rural areas and regional development projects by the royal family. It was decided that at the graduation of national universities that were newly founded in rural areas, the King personally hand out graduation diplomas directly to all the graduates as well.

As mentioned above, the King’s “Philosophy of Self – Sufficiency” has made the government to carry on the plan and included Buddhist Sangha to organize for the rural development. Under this new development orientation, emphasis is placed on fostering supportive linkages between urban and rural economies. It distributes economic and social opportunities equitably, so that, in the long run, people living in rural areas will have the same opportunities as urban residents to enjoy a good quality of life. Local people will become the focus of development as a result of priority emphasis given to participatory processes, based on empowering communities in rural and urban areas. As a result, the majority of Thai people will be given opportunities to upgrade their skills and develop their potential, sharpening their competitive edge, and enhancing their self-reliance. As the future course of development, the middle path remains critically needed, particularly now with the process of pursuing economic and social development to keep pace with globalization. The next section analyze about the role of Buddhist Sangha in developmental activities in Thailand (Pantasen 2006: 2-6; Walker: 2007:86-87).

The idea of “self-reliance” can be equated with the concept of moderation or Buddhist idea of “middle path.” In other word; it means that “not too little and not too much,” but having “self-sufficiency.” It can be easily understood that if a person have enough or be able to live moderate condition, a person can easily achieve self-
reliance. With self-reliance, a person will have strong immunity against external shocks. It can be seen also that self-reliance can also reinforce moderation, which is in part, the way of life.

Monarch and Thai Politics

This sections attempts to explore on how King Bhumibol and Thai politics engages. The first extensive analysis concerning the role of the current monarch was published as an article by Thak Chaloemtiarana in the journal of “South East Asian Studies” in 1978 during the Sarit era. Thak noted that the Sarit regime is lacking democratic institutions to provide legitimacy, sought to use the Monarch for that purpose. That meant raising the profile of the Monarch and in return legitimizes his regime, thus the King began to involve actively in politics (Thak 1978: 400-405).

Since the Sarit era, King Bhumibol had been involving and maintaining his authority over elected politicians through the so-called ‘monarchic networks’ of royalists, strategically positioned inside the bureaucracy, including the highest military officials. But the coup of Sept. 2006 is also a reminder to the scholars who repeatedly have claimed that the bureaucratic polity was over, and had been replaced by a different model in response to the bargaining strategies employed by big and local business associations and representatives of big capital (Schmidt 2007:3-5).

Contrary to this line of argument, the impact of the coup really implies that the importance of the King to maintain peace and stability in Thai politics. Unlike other nations, Thailand is a nation where the Monarch’s ideological disciplines are taking tremendous role of every social and political life. For instance, the rural population respect and obey the Monarch’s idea self-reliance, national security and moral selfhood. After all, the monarchy remains a key force for integration among the fragmentation and competition between the state and the bourgeoisie. This affairs is observes by Connors as “the dual position, as an agent of political and economic interests, and as a symbol transfigured as the soul and destiny of the nation, requires an iron regime of controlled imagery, given the glaring disparity between the rich and the poor,” (Connors 2003: 1-21).

King Bhumibol Adulyadej often communicates through parables, stories and signs from which his subjects are expected to infer his message. And, there was no mistake in the meaning of his December 2001 birthday speech that he commits Thailand to be a strong and confident nation. It was just a year after Thaksin
Shinawatra, had swept to power with an unprecedented electoral mandate. He had persuaded Thai voters that he was nothing short of a national savior ready to lead the country, then still reeling from the humiliations of the 1997 Asian financial crisis – into a glorious future. And indeed, the country was already showing signs of a hopeful economic recovery, (Kazim 2007: 211-213).

Any scholars of Thai politics, Winichakul, or Hewison are always critical about the Monarch and the role of institution of Monarchy in Thai politics. They believe that the Monarchical institution has evolved in a constantly changing environment full of political disputes. But scholar like Hewison stresses that it is hard to claim 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, Hewison suggested that the best political system for Thailand should be one where elected politicians share power with the Monarchy and the military,(Winichakul 2006; Ungpakorn 2008: 34; Hewison 2008:190-191).

As Thak has mentioned, the genesis of modern Thai politics must be understood clearly. The monarchy retained a foothold in the Thai constitutional adventure, its image of the patriarchal nature was retained by this action under which both king and subject continued to maintain interlocking moral obligations to guide and determine the future of constitutionalism in Thailand (Thak 1978: 407). Thus the Thai monarchy, unlike those in other constitutional systems retained a special position in the new political system, whereby the throne was not merely the object of politics, but in the “subject” of politics.” Thus any true political understanding of modern Thai politics must take into account that the special position of the monarchy is a requisite of the political system in Thailand.

In April 2006, the King had given a major speech in which he tasked the country’s judges with resolving the country’s ongoing political crisis. The results were seen in decisions ranging from the dissolution of Thai Rak Thai in 2007, to Samak Sundaravej’s ouster from the position of prime minister for constitutional violations (Samak was swiftly replaced by Thaksin’s brother-in-law, retired judge Somchai Wongsawat). In principle, the PAD supported this process of “judicialization” of Thai public life, and called upon politicians to respect the rule of law and face due legal process. This did not apply, however, when arrest warrants
for insurrection were issued for nine leading PAD figures; for several weeks, PAD leaders refused to give themselves up, and the police were unable to apprehend them without entering the crowded Government House compound, (McCargo 2009: 7-19). Thus the King helps to resolve the political issues at the time of the crisis.

Besides, King Bhumibol’s intervention at the time of political crisis and other developmental program like “self sufficiency economy,” he also often give advices to the Government officers to be careful, and not too much impose their own ideas but to encourage people to think by themselves. He encourages the principle of “helping people to help themselves.”

It has been also his efforts that the minority communities, whatever religious or ethnic in Thailand could have to identify themselves with the Thai nation and participate in its development. King Bhumibol had expressed his idea about politics in an interview in 1989 to the New York Times; part of it is read as:

‘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: Cited in McCargo 2005:501-502)

The statement prefers to adopt “middle path” as a political stand. And, such idea helps to accommodate and adjust difficult situations into normalcy.

But, there are some criticisms about the Monarch as well, scholars like McCargo, states that King Bhumibol’s political intervention in politics, like in the events of October 1973, or May 1992 is terms as the “crisis in legitimacy.” He further argues that the Thai King has “worked through proxies,” seeking to expand his political influence, yet ultimately unable to achieve domination, (McCargo: 2004:504).

Justifying his argument, Macargo stresses that after May 1992, the pattern of royal interventions changed, from direct personal interventions to indirect. Thus, “legitimacy crises” were addressed primarily through interventions by Prem and other members of the Privy Council. He thought that people like Thaksin came to power, and then the network of 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. It tied 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, thus, he reasoned, (McCargo 2004: 504-505).

Handley’s also observes details about the King in his controversial book, “King Never Smiles,” identifying the King’s political role for the monarch is questionable. He argues that the palace people regularly assert that the king is above politics and that he carefully maintains his constitutional position. But, Grant Evans disagreed with Handley, stating that the mass of information in the book and presenting no contrary evidence, (Grant Evans: 2006: 61).

Grant argued that Handley misunderstands the king’s role, stating: “Handley overestimates the political power of the monarchy. But as in all constitutional monarchies, the Thai king is strictly constrained.” In fact, one of the great values of Handley’s study is that he demonstrates that this particular argument, borrowed from palace propaganda, can no longer be accepted by serious scholars. Handley’s position will be challenging for palace “true believers” who uncritically accept and vigorously maintain the “standard total view” of the monarchy.

Contrary to the above arguments, Danai Chanchaochai gives a brief account concerning the Thai Monarch in his book entitled, “By the Light of Your Wisdom. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, A Wise and Righteous King.” He writes as such:

“His Majesty is a constitutional monarch in a democratic country. He appears neither to seek nor want a political role. But sometimes the government and the people are truly in difficulties and do not know where to turn. That is when they turn to His Majesty. He is the most respected and trusted in the land. He is their Lord of Life, (Chanchaochai, 2006: 103 Qouted in Hewison 2008: 194-195).

It can be concluded that the political liberalism such as democracy and its relationship to the monarchy is an enduring social base, which helps each other for the sustenance and well functioning of the country. Owing to the above scholarly arguments, it is clear that there are no mutual agreements among them. But, the Monarch is very important figure in Thai politics. Over the period of 62 years that King Bhumibol has been the monarch of Thailand, he has intervened in Thai politics only a few times. His interventions in politics have been aimed at diffusing crisis, restoring stability and consolidating democracy and as soon as things are normal, he
withdraws from the scene. Not having to look after the daily affairs of the state has meant that he could concentrate his energies to the spheres for the well-being of the nation in the longer term. The forthcoming section will analyze about the mode of the Monks’ protest in Thailand.

**Buddhist Monks’ Protest in Thailand**

Usually, the Buddhist monks were not silent spectators in any Thai social, economic or political issues, not only this; it is also a strong pressure group. The issue for the inclusion of Buddhism as a ‘state religion’ has been a long request from Buddhist Sangha. Such requests have denial several times by the state, but in April 2007, thousands of Buddhist monks demonstrated outside Parliament, demanded to enshrine Buddhism as the ‘state religion’ at Thailand’s new constitution. As Rungrawee observes, in January 2007, the Buddhist Sangha had formally submitted their first memorandum of the inclusion of Buddhism as the state religion, with opinion polls conducted through 12 public agencies to the Constitution Drafting Committee (appointed by the coup leader, General Sondhi). And, the Sangha also submitted the memorandum to the Cabinet, the interim Parliament, the Council for National Security, and the Government Advisory Board, comprised of the 19th Sept. 2006 coup leaders. (Rungrawee 2007: April 26 Associated Press).

At this protest, more than 3,000 Buddhist monks and other Buddhists demonstrated in front of Parliament to pressure the drafters to include a clause recognizing Buddhism as the national religion. They pledged to continue their protest until their demands are met. Many of the monks took part Wednesday in an eight-hour march from the central province of Nakhon Pathom to Bangkok. Protesters rode nine elephants in the march. They said that Buddhism followed by more than 95 percent of Thailand's 64 million people has been under threat and the recognition will guarantee it will continue to be the main religion in the country (Thongchai 2007: Jundee 2007:24 in Thai).

A separatist insurgency in the country's Muslim-dominated southern provinces has claimed the lives of more than 2,000 people since 2004. Southern Muslims have long complained of discrimination in the Buddhist – dominated country. The first draft of the constitution, made public last week, does not name Buddhism as the national religion, and says the state will protect all faiths.
In this regards, Harding (2007:8) comments that the view is commonly held that Theravada Buddhism is the state religion. Buddhist foundations, for example, often proclaim on their webpages that Buddhism is the state religion because 95% of Thai are Buddhist (which is true) and that the King is a Buddhist (which is also true), but the conclusion does not of course follow from the premises. Historically there is much truth in the statement that Buddhism is the state religion, as we have seen. However, as a statement of contemporary constitutional law is simply incorrect. The next section will discuss about the monarchy and Buddhism as a Thai cultural identity.

Monarchy and Thai Cultural Identity: Buddhism as State Religion

"On the occasion 10th May 1984(2527), where King Bhumibol Adulyadej had welcomed Pop John Paul II at Phra thi Nung Jukklee Mahaprasath, (Jukklee Palace) he had said that most of Thai people are good Buddhist, whereas “Buddhism as a State religion.”

Phra Promkhunaporn in his book "เจ้าพระยาภูมิพล เรื่องศาสนะประจัญาติ" To specify the Truth Buddhism as a State Religion, he states that the pillars of Thai cultural identity and the institution of monarchy are based on Buddhism. The institution of monarchy has been in Thai society for more than 700 years, without any interruption. The king has been much respected, loved, and revered. In the time of crisis he is the one who would come and solve the problems. The king is indeed the symbol of Thai identity. It is a force that culturally binds the hearts and the thoughts of the Thai people together. Thailand has so far 18 constitutions, since 1932, but none of them mentions Buddhism as state religion (Phra Promkhunaporn 2007: 5-7 in Thai).

Scholars such as Klausner and McCargo have commented that, since Thaksin Shinawatra become prime minister, he began to play with the idea of a new constitution, considering more space for Buddhism into it to enhance his status. This has long been sought by the country’s Buddhist priests, but has not found much
favor from the political classes in the past. The movement to declare Buddhism as the state religion of Thailand is rooted in feelings of insecurity on the part of those involved. This is especially true for the monks and their leadership. There is both a conscious and subconscious realization that Buddhism is on the wane as respect for the Sangha declines and the faith’s relevance is increasingly challenged, (Klausner: Bangkok post 27 May 2007; 2009:1-10).

McCargo considers that Buddhism in Thailand has been a “revolutionary” force, where rational Buddhist teachings offer considerable popular support for progressive and democratic political ideas. Besides, such progressive ideas, at present Thai Buddhism have been captured by the state to meet its own end, so that its inherent progressive radicalism neutralized with the state. This symbiotic relationship between the state and Sangha has effectively limited the true essences of Buddhism, and remains it as a legitimating institution of state power. Due to this, the universalistic teachings of Buddhism have been subordinated to nationalistic state ideology. As a result, the overall numbers of monks are falling, and commercialized folk Buddhism has gained the upper hand without the true Buddhist values, (McCargo 2004:155).

Besides, the nexus between politics and Buddhism, Thais are mostly Buddhist, accounted around 95%. But, any of its past constitution has ever specified that Buddhism is actually the state religion, all have stated that the king professes the Buddhist faith. And, the Thai bureaucratic order is intimately tied to the Thai state, which has rooted in Buddhist teaching too, so state and Buddhism are inseparable in Thai politics. Though, numerous political measures over the past two centuries have attempted by the state authorities to bring Buddhism under state control in the name of secularism. But, still Thai Sangha has long been an uncritical collaborator with the state, and the Thai state always using Buddhist Sangha as an instrument to legitimize their power (Keyes 1989: 130-131).

Thus, it is likely that underlying the monk’s support for this declaration is their hope, and perhaps expectation, that such a constitutional provision will divert attention from the present reality of the perilous state of Thai Buddhism, the Sangha, and particularly the established Buddhist Church, and, thus, help restore the significant loss of status, dignity and prestige suffered by the Thai Sangha in recent years. The request to make Buddhism as state religion comes at a time when the military-backed government seeks to pass a constitution, hold elections and restore
democracy in the country by the end of this year (Reports the International Herald Tribune: 4 June, 2007).

Aoesrivong argues that whether or not it is written in the constitution that Buddhism is the national religion, Buddhism is undeniably the Thai national religion, and this is openly inscribed in the cultural constitution. Such a step would be a victory for the Buddhist monks who have been holding public rallies to press their demands (Aoesrivong 1991:11-12). But it could also lead to further divisions in the already violent southern regions which have a large Muslim population. The protest is the latest in a series of demonstrations by monks. It revives a debate dating back to the adoption of the previous constitution in 1997, when a campaign to make Buddhism the national religion was dropped amid concerns that it would divide the country.

However, the national monastic order strongly supports the state, there have been instances of monks, who have resisted pressures by the state towards standardization of monastic education and practice. These points to what Suksamran has described as a "continuous dialogue" between the country's Buddhist order and the state. At the heart of the interlocution is the question of whether Buddhism is, or is not, the state religion. Buddhism is known in Thailand as the *sasana pracham chat*, that is, the 'inherent' national religion, (Suksamran 1977:7).

Thus the constitutional position of Buddhism is open to the interpretation and its public role open to debate. Hence the Thai seem to pay more attention to changing laws after a coup, because currently the provisions of the constitution have more real impact on their lives than before. The Sangha seeks to preserve and honour ancient traditions, and to live without being encumbered by an excessive number of conveniences. In this way, the Sangha challenges others to adopt a frugal lifestyle, to respect what is ancient, to honour and revere the natural environment. Some may find this contention startling since the institutions of the Thai monarchy and the Buddhist church, the Sangha, which are still so basic to political life in Thailand today, have deep roots in the premodern past.