Introduction
Absolute monarchy, which had prevailed in Thailand for seven centuries, was replaced by constitutional monarchy through a coup by middle ranking military officers on June 24, 1932. Since then Thailand has witnessed periodic political instability, frequent changes of government, coups and counter-coups and shifts back and forth between representative government and authoritarian rule. Only the monarchy has remained stable as it continues to win respect from the populace. Changes of government under the constitutional monarchy have mostly been brought about through coups and mass uprisings rather than elections. However, there has never been prolonged, nor large-scale political violence and, as a consequence, the country has survived. This can be attributed to the unifying role of the monarchy, which is the country's most revered institution as well as a symbol of the traditions and moral core of the nation. This paper attempts to explain the role of the monarchy in helping to maintain peace, stability and unity amidst political turmoil and conflicts during the past three decades.

The King as Head of State
Under the present Constitution, like all the previous ones, the King is the Head of State who is enthroned in a position of reverence and cannot be violated. No one can expose the King to any sort of accusation.

As Head of State the Monarch performs several state functions. All legislative, executive, and judicial functions are conducted under the King's name. He signs bills passed by the legislature, appoints the prime minister on the advice of the legislature, and appoints cabinet ministers and high-ranking government and military officers on the advice of the Prime Minister. The Monarch also appoints the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch and high-ranking Buddhist monks, confers
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honours on officials and other citizens and can grant pardon to those convicted of crimes. The Monarch does not bear any decision-making responsibility in performing these functions. The Prime Minister is responsible for most of the symbolic functions the King performs.

In addition several ceremonial functions are performed by the Monarch. For instance, he receives foreign ambassadors and other foreign government representatives. As the patron of Buddhism he presides over important Buddhist religious ceremonies. The King is also the patron of other religions that have followers in the country.

Another important function as Head of State is that His Majesty is the honorary supreme commander of the armed forces. During the period of absolute monarchy, the King was the real leader of the military and was responsible for all military affairs, including conducting warfare. Since 1932 the Monarch's power and authority has been constitutionally limited. The King has ceased to command the armed forces, but he is still given the position of 'honorary' supreme commander. This position, although there is no real command authority, reflects the traditional bond between the Monarch and the armed forces.

Political Neutrality and the Constitutional Monarch
The King's functions mentioned above are not different from those of the Monarchs in Western constitutional monarchies. They are the functions of the sovereigns who are required by their respective constitutions and tradition to be either politically neutral or above politics. These functions are, by and large, ceremonial in nature. Nonetheless the socio-political situation in Thailand is quite different from those in the Western democracies and, as a result, the role played by the Thai Monarch has not been limited to performing only ceremonial functions. The exercise of his moral authority has sometimes been necessary to help assure the stability and security of the nation.

In Western constitutional monarchies, the governments are relatively stable, efficient, and responsive to the needs of their people. There are a few uprisings or demonstrations, but the governments are able to handle them effectively and hence the sovereigns are not under pressure to intervene. However, in Thailand, there have been military coups, political violence, riots, uprisings and demonstrations, which have often led to political instability. This creates a situation wherein the
Monarch must determine whether or not he should remain politically neutral. Nevertheless the King, since ascending to the throne in 1946, has been mostly effective in maintaining perceived political neutrality while, at the same time, making it known that he was very concerned with any political instability that might lead to violence and bloodshed.

The role of the King in political crises is not stipulated in the Constitution. When the public expects the King to do something to bring the country out of a crisis, what should the King do? In fact, when a crisis breaks out, it is the government's responsibility to resolve it – but the King may give advice if things get out of hand.

Being above politics does not mean that the King cannot be concerned with political problems threatening the country's stability. The King may exercise his moral authority and give advice to the government and political adversaries as to how to solve the nation's problems, but he is always careful not to overstep his duties as stipulated in the Constitution.

In April 2006 when the protests against Thaksin's government became stronger and the government mobilised its supporters to counter the protests, there were calls by several groups for a royally-appointed Prime Minister, but the King did not respond. It was understood that the Constitution did not give him power to do so. In his address to newly appointed judges in April 2006, the King insisted that political problems must be resolved through constitutional means. Even when he intervened in 1973 and once again in 1992 to end bloodshed in Bangkok after clashes broke out between soldiers and anti-government protesters, what he did was not unconstitutional. He gave advice to the parties concerned as to how to end the conflicts peacefully. His words carried weight due to the moral authority he had acquired through his political neutrality, charisma and integrity.

Foreign media sometimes criticised the military coups, arguing that they are not legitimate, including the one on September 19, 2006. These critics pointed out that when the palace accepted the coups, it was going against the principle of political neutrality and, in doing so, it gave the coups legitimacy. Let us look at the concept of political legitimacy. Every political system must have legitimacy to ensure political stability and to maintain its political integrity. The political legitimacy of a political system is related to the political culture of the people in that system. According to Lucian Pye, political culture is a set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments that
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gives order and meaning to a political process and that provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in the political system" (Pye 104-5). With that definition, one can see the relationship between the political culture and political legitimacy. If the people's political beliefs or ideology are consistent with the political processes and the scope of power and authority of the rulers, then the political leaders and process would have political legitimacy.

Regarding the question of the legitimacy of a military coup, in the case of Thailand, one has to look at the acceptance of the public. As long as there is not a large-scale public protest, one can say that the military takeover is accepted and thus legitimate. Since 1932, there have been a number of successful coups and they were acceptable to the public if the coup leaders made sure that they would not be in power for long. Therefore, whether a military coup can be legitimate or not depends on the public acceptance, not the King's. In fact, the King, being above politics, cannot express his views on any coup. At any rate, there is now a sign of growing discontent on the part of the public against a military coup, which would make any coup in the future very difficult to undertake and be deemed legitimate.

Political Polarisation and the Monarchy
At the moment we are witnessing an increase of political awareness among Thais both in urban and rural areas. The conflict between the pro-Thaksin and the anti-Thaksin movements that has divided Thai society is an indication of the increase of political awareness. Some Western press and scholars have analysed the conflict in terms of class struggle between the old elites or the urban rich against the rural poor. They have argued that old elites are against Thaksin because he had worked against their class interests by helping the poor. They have further argued that the poor have been Thaksin's supporters because the former Prime Minister was the only leader who really helped them to get out of poverty.

To analyse the conflict in terms of class struggle may not be correct. In Thai society the class system is not rigid as social mobility is rather fluid. One can move from the lower stratum to an upper one without difficulties. Thus Thailand has not witnessed any class conflicts that led to involved political violence or a mass uprising. In addition those who are in anti- and pro-Thaksin movements have come from various social and economic strata. Although the urban middle class people are in the anti-Thaksin group, there are also a number of rural people in it. Regarding the pro-Thaksin movement, despite the fact that a large number of
supporters came from rural areas in the North and Northeast, the movement is able to draw support from some urban middle class people too. The issue involved in the conflict is not class interests, but rather a political one centred around Thaksin. Those who are anti-Thaksin believe that Thaksin is corrupt, anti-monarchy, and likely to become an authoritarian ruler if he is able to come back. The objective of the pro-Thaksin group is to bring the former prime minister back to power. The attack on General Prem Tinsulanond, the President of Privy Council, and the present political system, which the pro-Thaksin movement’s leaders have labelled as a ‘bureaucratic polity’, may be ideologically inclined, but most of the rural supporters joined the movement because they simply want Thaksin to come back so as to respond favourably to their “mouth and stomach” concerns.

Where does the King stand in this conflict? The Monarch has been very careful not to do anything unconstitutional. At the peak of the crisis from October to November 2008 when there was a violent suppression of the anti-Thaksin protesters in front of the parliament and their occupation of Suvarnaphumi airport (where there was no government suppression), some wanted the King to intervene. The King did not indulge their wish, but let the constitutional processes run its course.

**The Thai Concept of the Monarchy**

Despite the introduction of the constitutional monarchy system in 1932, Thais continue to respect the King much as they did in the absolute monarchy period. This demonstrates that the institution of monarchy is deeply-rooted in Thai society, and the concept of kingship prevailing in that period was not greatly affected by the 1932 revolution. Although the legal authority of the Monarch has been substantially curtailed to that of a Head of State, the people’s reverence of the monarchy as an indispensable traditional institution is still prevalent.

The system of absolute monarchy in Thailand can be traced back to the Sukhothai period when King Sri-Intraphit established a kingdom at Sukhothai in 1238, freeing itself from the control of the Khmer Empire. The patriarchal kingship was founded in that year based on the original Thai concept of the father-child relationship. It was believed that the Sukhothai people referred to their king as Pho-klue or "revered father". As Prince Dhani put it, “The Monarch was of course the people's leader in battle; but he was also in peace-time their father whose advice was sought...” (Prince Dhani 162) The monarchical rule was firmly established
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during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng. The Indo-Buddhist influence on the conception of the kingship become more prevalent thereafter when the kings were referred to as Dharmaraja or the righteous ruler. In fact King Ramkhamhaeng himself had set a model of the righteous ruler abiding by the dictates of Buddhist morality.

The concepts of kingship and the government authority during the Ayudhya period were a mixture of Hinduism and Buddhism. The absolutism of the kingship during this period was based on Hindu theory which considered the King as god, or Desaraja. But this absolutism was constrained by Buddhism, which provided the concept of Dharmaraja, or the righteous King. Therefore, as David Wyatt pointed out, "the Brahmanical concept of the Desaraja, the King as god, was modified to make the King the embodiment of the law, while the reign of Buddhist moral principle ensured that he should be measured against the law" (Samudavanija 8). The late Prince Dhani in his article on "The Old Siamese Conception of the Monarchy", also reflected on the nexus between Hinduism and Buddhism in the Thai concept of kingship. He pointed out that the rule and duties of the King was based on the Thammastat, or Dharmasatra, which "describes its ideal of a Monarch as a King of Righteousness, elected by the people". The ideal Monarch, as the prince noted, abides "steadfast in the ten kingly virtues" (Prince Dhani 163).

The Ten Royal Virtues, or Torapitrjadharmaditthi, were drawn from both Hindu and Buddhist thought. King Asoka of ancient India who, in Somdej Phra Buddhajinavamsa's words, personified the Buddhist ideal of kingship, tried to establish a Buddhist welfare state. He was known to be the one who observed the Ten Royal Virtues, which included charity, good conduct, sacrifice, honesty, gentleness, simplicity, freedom from anger, non-violent behavior, tolerance and inoffensive nature (Buddhajinavamsa 92)

The influence of Buddhism on the Thai concept of kingship not only can be seen in the concept of Dharmaraja mentioned above, but in the belief that the King is a Bodhisattva or incipient Buddha (Wales 31). According to Hinayana Buddhism, since the accumulation of merit is rewarded by rebirth to a better life, the King must be the one who had accumulated an abundance of merit in his former lives. In other words, he must be the one who has barami. The word barami can be translated loosely as "charisma". But, in fact, it means more than "charisma". Barami often refers to personal character or a disposition of benevolence and
compassionate use of power. As William Klausner, a well known expert on Thai culture and society stated, "for barami one should also possess a certain gravitas which connotes a weighted dignity and seriousness of purpose. Barami is earned by a serious dedication to performing beneficial works and by doing so with dignity, wisdom and vision" (Klausner 6). Not every king in the Ayudhya period observed the Ten Royal Virtues or used his barami to wisely maintain his political legitimacy. Palace coups often were carried out to overthrow the King when his officers lost faith in him.

Under the present system of constitutional monarchy, the theory of the Devaraja is no longer accepted, but the people continue to respect the present King as their 'revered' father. This is because of the barami that he has accumulated throughout more than sixty years of his reign. He is considered the Dharmaraja who has strictly observed the ten royal virtues, and this is where his moral authority comes from. His charisma, or barami, as a Dharmaraja, as William Klausner rightly notes, "is personal and not transferable" (Klausner 3). The extent of one's barami depends on the possession of the Ten Kingly Virtues and the ruler's righteous behavior. These attributes are personal and are not related to one having the title of Devaraja or Dharmaraja.

The King's Rural Development Projects
The King's barami has been strengthened through his concern for his people's well-being. He has been working tirelessly for the welfare of the Thais, particularly those in rural areas.

Political problems and crises have not distracted the King from his commitment to promote the wellbeing of the Thai people. He saw the need for rural development before the introduction of the first economic and social development plan in 1961. His first rural development program began in 1952, when he launched a project to build the Huai Mong-Kol road in Hua Hin district, Prachub Province. Then he initiated rural development projects that have been spread out all over the country. These included land allotments for farmers, rice and buffalo banks, and agricultural cooperatives. The King established several experimental programs on padi-growing, animal husbandry, the production of new rice seeds, and a dairy industry. He played a significant role in encouraging hill tribes in the North to stop deforestation, and to substitute other crops for the opium poppy. Several irrigation projects were suggested by him to help farmers in barren areas and to prevent
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flooding. Recently, he introduced the philosophy of a sufficiency economy in order to sustain the country's economic development. Together with the prestige and traditional continuity of the monarchy, the King's contribution to the welfare and wellbeing of the people has strengthened the bond between the Monarch and his subjects, and reinforced his role of Head of State and Dharmaraja.

Conclusion

Thailand's democracy has been very fragile and whenever the country was in crisis, the people hoped the Monarch would intervene. But the King, although very concerned with political fragility, always resolved crises through democratic and constitutional means. In the past, the military often intervened when there were political crises, but they failed to launch political reforms to consolidate Thailand's democracy. A military coup is now becoming less and less acceptable, and the military knows very well that a military coup is not a solution to the country's political problems. Therefore, democratic development in Thailand will depend on the people themselves. The monarchical institution, which has been a force unifying the Thai people, will play a major role in helping to reconcile conflicts through the process of democratic development that, as a result, will make such development more peaceful and sustainable.

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References


