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NATIONAL POLICE CHIEF, THAILAND

ANDREW MACGREGOR MARSHALL

A KINGDOM IN CRISIS

**THAILAND'S STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

**BANNED IN
THAILAND**



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A KINGDOM IN CRISIS

Thailand's struggle for democracy
in the twenty-first century

second edition

ANDREW MACGREGOR MARSHALL



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A note on names

Thai names can be spelled in multiple ways in English. There is no universally accepted system of transliteration, and English-language spellings sometimes bear no relation to how Thai names are pronounced. This book uses the most commonly used spellings for public figures and historical personalities. When there is no consensus, it uses the spelling that conforms most closely to phonetic pronunciation.

Thailand was commonly known as Siam by foreigners until 1939, when it changed its name. It reverted back to its old name from 1946 until 1949.



Preface to the second edition

A Kingdom in Crisis was published on 9 October 2014. Just over a month later, on 12 November, a proclamation in Thailand's official *Royal Gazette* announced that the book had been banned. 'The content insults, defames and threatens Thailand's monarchy', declared General Somyot Poompanmoung, chief of national police. 'The book is a danger to national security and peaceful and orderly society' (Jha, 2014). Anybody caught bringing *A Kingdom in Crisis* into Thailand or distributing it within the country faces up to three years in prison and a fine of 60,000 baht, and any copy of the book found in Thailand must be seized and destroyed.

According to his proclamation, the police chief had banned *A Kingdom in Crisis* without even reading it. His statement in the *Royal Gazette* said the decision was based on two newspaper articles – a review of the book in the *South China Morning Post* by journalist David Eimer, and an analysis in Britain's *Independent* newspaper by Andrew Buncombe. Both articles discussed the main thesis of *A Kingdom in Crisis* – that to make sense of the turmoil that has engulfed twenty-first century Thailand, a suppressed narrative about secret struggles over royal succession must be restored to the story. 'Marshall throws a harsh light on the political role played by the royal family in a country where it has long been allowed immunity from criticism, and that is a unique achievement', wrote Eimer (2014). Mere mention of the fact that *A Kingdom in Crisis* tackles the taboo issue of succession after the looming death of the decrepit King Bhumibol Adulyadej

was, it seems, enough to convince Thai police that the book was intolerably dangerous.

Depressingly, the banning of *A Kingdom in Crisis* was no surprise, given the paranoid and oppressive character of the military junta that seized power in Thailand in May 2014. Thai dictator Prayuth Chan-ocha and his army cronies have dragged the country backwards into a dystopian dark age in which dissent is forbidden, debate is outlawed and Thais are ordered to be happy and obedient – and detained for ‘attitude adjustment’ if they are not. The junta’s terror of criticism and scrutiny has prompted one absurd overreaction after another. Students have been arrested for innocuous acts of protest like mimicking the three-fingered rebel salute from the *Hunger Games* movies, or reading George Orwell’s novel *1984* in a public place. With political gatherings of more than five people prohibited, some protesters organized picnics where they would meet just to eat sandwiches together, leading the authorities to declare that anybody eating a sandwich ‘with political intent’ would be arrested. Leaked documents from June 2014 showed that the Thai authorities were monitoring British comedian John Oliver as a threat to national security after he lampooned the junta and the monarchy during an episode of his US cable TV show *Last Week Tonight* (Marshall, 2014). In this climate, it was inevitable that my book would be banned. Indeed, Zed Books had anticipated the decision, and never even attempted to distribute *A Kingdom in Crisis* in Thailand.

On 9 December 2014, a formal criminal complaint was filed against me by a Thai lawyer working for the so-called People’s Democratic Reform Committee, the ultra-royalist anti-democracy movement that had helped bring down the elected government earlier in the year. Wanthongchai Chamnankit

accused me not only of *lèse-majesté* – a crime that under Thai law I have undoubtedly committed, and which carries a sentence of three to fifteen years in jail – but also several other offences, including fomenting an uprising against the state, which is potentially punishable by death via lethal injection. There is no credible prospect of me ever being extradited to Thailand to face imprisonment or execution – other nations refuse to recognize the Thai laws barring freedom of speech. But I remain exiled from Thailand, and can never safely visit the country again until democracy is restored and the infamous *lèse-majesté* law is abolished. I hope it happens during my lifetime. It would be wonderful to go back.

Banning *A Kingdom in Crisis* had completely the opposite effect, of course, to what the Thai authorities wanted. In the twenty-first century, clumsy attempts to suppress information only succeed in drawing more attention to what you are trying to hide. The ban was widely covered by Thai and international media, ensuring many more people learned about the book and the arguments it makes. My thesis that conflict over the next monarch is a crucial element of Thailand's chronic instability is no longer considered controversial – it has become widely accepted. After decades of self-censorship, journalists and academics – outside Thailand at least – now routinely reference the once taboo subject of royal succession. The misguided consensus that the despised Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn will inevitably be crowned the next monarch has been shattered. The momentum towards telling the full truth about Thailand has become unstoppable, and the ongoing failure of some media – including, unfortunately, my former employer Reuters – to discuss this issue has become deeply embarrassing to them.

Even more significantly, the junta's heavy-handed attempts to silence criticism and debate have prompted many more academics and journalists to make a stand against the archaic strictures of the *lèse-majesté* law. Dozens of leading scholars have fled Thailand to seek asylum elsewhere. Unable to return to their country, they have nothing left to lose by telling the truth. Many of the most respected Thai scholars are now openly saying the same things I said in *A Kingdom in Crisis*. As exiled academic Pavin Chachavalpongpun wrote in an article for the *Nikkei Asian Review* in December 2014: 'the royal succession is clearly dictating the fate of Thai politics' (Pavin, 2014).

The events of 2014 and 2015 allow me to belatedly credit the work of several exceptional scholars whom I could not thank earlier, for their own safety. Somsak Jeamteerasakul is probably the most brilliant and beloved Thai historian of our era. Thanks to the forensic clarity of his insights into Thai politics, and his honesty, courage and humanity, he has become a hero to many Thais. Somsak has faced shocking intimidation, including gun attacks on his home, and following the coup he had to flee Thailand to escape being incarcerated. Somsak walked for hours to cross the border with Laos, and has since managed to reach a European country. He made huge sacrifices to tell the truth, and he is now separated from his family and may never see them again. He has inspired and energized the younger generation of Thai intellectuals, and has done more than anybody to challenge the damaging myths of the old elite.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun, a Thai diplomat who became an academic, is another extraordinarily courageous man who has consistently put his principles above his personal safety. He was the first Thai scholar to take my work seriously and help

promote it, and he has been a wonderful friend. Pavin has also been forced to exile himself from Thailand, and is now based at Kyoto University.

Finally, Christine Gray, by far the most insightful Western scholar of modern Thailand, has been unfailingly supportive – as a friend, a mentor, a voice of sanity and wisdom, and a marvellous teacher. Christine’s brave and pioneering work on Thailand in the 1970s pushed the boundaries far further than anybody had dared, and she suffered for it. She was vilified and dismissed by some academics, and they wounded her so badly that she retreated from the debate for more than two decades. When she first contacted me, in 2011, she was wary of re-entering the fray, and although I cited her work in *A Kingdom in Crisis*, I downplayed the immense contribution she made to my own research. In July 2014, Christine took the courageous decision to begin explicitly violating the *lèse-majesté* law and rejoin the debate about Thailand. ‘It’s time for everyone to step over the line’, she wrote in a Facebook post. ‘It’s neither honorable nor justifiable for us to remain selectively silent’ (Gray, 2014). This means I can now give Christine the thanks she deserves. All of us studying modern Thailand are in her debt, and she is working on a new project that is likely to be the most significant study of Thailand so far this century.

It’s important to make clear that while I have learned a huge amount from Somsak, Pavin and Christine, and many others I cannot yet safely name, they do not necessarily agree with or endorse all of my opinions, and rightly so – Thailand needs more debate, not less. Any errors of fact or interpretation in *A Kingdom in Crisis* are my responsibility alone.

Meanwhile, the events of the past year have shown more clearly than ever that Thailand’s elite are obsessed with the conflict over

the next monarch. In this updated edition of *A Kingdom in Crisis*, I discuss the latest developments in Chapter 12. There is no doubt now among most credible analysts of Thailand that conflict over the throne is fuelling Thailand's turbulence. The debate is no longer about whether succession is a key element of the Thai crisis, but how important it is relative to other factors. Paul Handley, who wrote in a review of my book that he was sceptical about whether the crown prince could be denied the throne, nevertheless agrees that succession is at the heart of the Thai crisis:

The fact remains that Thailand's elite have violently wrested control of the state from the elected government in order to manage succession, and yet have not convinced anyone that they have a viable plan. That is frightening for Thai people, red shirts and yellow shirts alike. (Handley, 2014)

I wrote *A Kingdom in Crisis* because I wanted to promote debate and discussion, and smash the routine self-censorship that journalists and academics have imposed on themselves when writing about Thailand. I'm very happy to have achieved what I wanted to do, and I salute my editor Paul French and the team at Zed Books for helping me do it. The issue of royal succession is no longer ignored, and, as a result, those among the Thai elite who want to deny democracy to their country's people have seen their room to manoeuvre shrink dramatically. The world is watching now, and the desperate efforts by the junta to suppress the truth will not succeed – they are only making themselves look ridiculous.

When King Bhumibol dies, it will be impossible for the Thai junta to control the narrative. Enough international media are now willing to reject self-censorship to ensure that the real story of Bhumibol's reign is told. The efforts of the Thai elite and military government to suppress the truth cannot succeed, and

media organizations that try to evade their responsibilities will be left looking foolish. A Thai proverb says: ‘You can’t hide a dead elephant with a lotus leaf.’ In other words, truth can’t be hidden forever. The harder Thailand’s ruling elite tries to suppress reality, the harder they will fall after Bhumibol dies.

It has become increasingly clear that Thailand’s military government is floundering, desperately trying to shut down criticism and debate, and failing to comprehend that in the twenty-first century, opposition cannot be silenced. The banning of *A Kingdom in Crisis* just showed the weakness and absurdity of the junta. And, as Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has observed, when ordinary people lose their fear of laughing at the ridiculousness of authoritarian regimes, dictatorships can quickly crumble:

When an authoritarian regime approaches the final crisis, its dissolution tends to follow two steps. Before its actual collapse, a rupture takes place: all of a sudden people know that the game is over, they are simply no longer afraid. It is not only that the regime loses its legitimacy; its exercise of power itself is perceived as an impotent panic reaction. We all know the classic scene from cartoons: the cat reaches a precipice but goes on walking, ignoring the fact that there is no ground under its feet; it starts to fall only when it looks down and notices the abyss. When it loses its authority, the regime is like a cat above the precipice: in order to fall, it only has to be reminded to look down. (Žižek, 2011b)

The Thai junta has walked past the precipice. Change is inevitable in Thailand – the country’s people no longer believe the fairy tales of the elite, and want their voices to be heard. Bhumibol’s death will be the catalyst for profound change. I hope it happens peacefully, although I fear there will be bloodshed. But in the end, sanity will prevail. Propaganda and lies always fall apart eventually. It’s just a matter of time.

INTRODUCTION

Telling the truth about Thailand

Twenty-first-century Thailand is convulsed by an intractable political conflict that nobody seems able to explain. The traditional ruling class is locked in a destructive battle to crush the political influence of former telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, the most popular prime minister in Thai history, who lives abroad in self-imposed exile after being overthrown in a coup in 2006 and convicted of corruption in 2008. The escalating crisis has inflicted severe collateral damage on Thailand, enfeebling the economy, eroding the quality of governance, and undermining the rule of law. Yet there appears to be no end in sight. Instead of seeking compromise and reconciliation, Thailand's political, business and military elite seem hell-bent on securing absolute victory whatever the cost.

Hanging over the increasingly divided country is the looming trauma of the death of the widely revered Bhumibol Adulyadej, King Rama IX of the Chakri dynasty, who has reigned as monarch since 1946. For decades, most Thais and foreign observers have been convinced that the royal succession and its aftermath will be a particularly perilous period. A stark indication of this anxiety was the collapse in the Thai stock market in October 2009 on rumours that Bhumibol's health had deteriorated. The main index lost 7 per cent over two days, wiping US\$13 billion off share prices.

But the accepted wisdom is that succession has little to do with the current political struggle, because it is assumed there is no significant conflict over who will be the next monarch. The king's only son, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, is widely expected to become Rama X when Bhumibol dies. Most academic and journalistic analysis of Thailand's conflict leaves out the succession altogether, and foreign correspondents often struggle to characterize exactly what is going on and why – 'Thailand's political turmoil defies concise explanation', according to Thomas Fuller of the *New York Times* (Fuller, 2014). Some observers acknowledge that succession concerns play a part in the conflict because the traditional elite are alarmed about the prospect of Thaksin being in control of parliament when the transition from Bhumibol to Vajiralongkorn takes place. Paul Handley, whose biography *The King Never Smiles* is among the bravest and most illuminating works on Thailand's modern history, made this argument after the 2006 coup: 'There was a clear meeting of minds between the crown and the military ... that they did not want Thaksin in a position to exert influence on the passing of the Chakri Dynasty mantle to Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn' (Handley, 2006b).

But viewed in these terms, much about Thailand's chronic political conflict simply doesn't make sense. Why is the royalist establishment so desperate to prevent Thaksin influencing the succession if it is a foregone conclusion that the crown prince will become the next monarch? Why have they done so little to prepare the ground for an orderly transition? Given the widespread concern that Bhumibol's death will be profoundly destabilizing, why have the elite relentlessly roiled Thailand with their struggle against Thaksin when surely they should be seeking

to calm the turbulence? What makes Thaksin so different from and more dangerous than all the corrupt political strongmen in the past whom the palace and establishment found a way to work with? Why are some royalists allied with Thaksin? And why are the traditionally pragmatic and unprincipled Thai elite so implacably opposed to finding some accommodation with him, and obsessed with wild notions of impending catastrophe and existential doom? Most journalism and academic research on Thailand struggles to answer these questions.

This book argues that the consensus is wrong. An unacknowledged conflict over royal succession is at the heart of Thailand's twenty-first century political crisis. More than three decades ago, in a game-changing analysis, Benedict Anderson coolly overturned decades of accepted wisdom and showed that many of the most cherished assumptions of scholars were entirely incorrect. He proposed four 'scandalous hypotheses' that profoundly redefined our understanding of Thai history (Anderson, 1978). In this book, I set out four hypotheses of my own, which I believe are essential to understanding Thailand's turmoil:

1. At the elite level, Thailand's conflict is essentially a succession struggle over who will become monarch when King Bhumibol dies. In particular, most of Thailand's elite are implacably opposed to the prospect of Vajiralongkorn succeeding his father, and are prepared to go to extreme lengths to sabotage the succession.
2. The assumption that Bhumibol's death will unleash a period of upheaval and instability misses the point that this era has already begun. The long-feared end-reign conflict has been in full swing since 2005.