

Reflections on the Sarit Regime and the Process of Political Change in Thailand

—Some Conceptual and Theoretical Reassessments—

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Previous authoritative works on modern Thai politics have failed to give adequate stress to the importance of historical and cultural constraints on the nature of its development.¹⁾ They tend to concentrate upon functional aspects of the modern political system and misjudge conceptually the central idea of modernization and development in the Thai context which should be subsumed under the traditional concern for the consolidation of power and leadership position.²⁾ Thai politics should be considered and understood from the historical perspective involving a study of traditional political values which were faced with stresses and strains from the impact of modernism. On the paradigmatic level, the main characteristics of modern Thai politics could be briefly listed as follows—authority is patrimonial and absolute; political behavior is affected by the interplay of royal, military, and bureaucratic power relations; the traditional political structure is hierarchical and segmented; the rigidity of the political structure persists in the face of rapid social change which causes tension and eventual political instability.³⁾

Historically, the development of the concept of power, authority and legitimacy took two forms. Firstly, the “traditionally” Thai reification of the patriarchal system was argued and substantiated by the now famous stone inscription attributed to King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai through which the ruler was idealized as the father-figure (*phokkhun*) who rules over his domain in a paternalistic yet autocratic manner.⁴⁾ This basis for power and authority

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- 1) Examples are David Wilson, *Politics in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962); Frank C. Darling, *Thailand and the United States* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1965); Fred W. Riggs, *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966); and William J. Siffin, *The Thai Bureaucracy: Institutional Change and Development* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966).
- 2) For an exception note the iconoclastic Norman Jacobs, *Modernization without Development: Thailand as an Asian Case Study* (New York: Praeger, 1971).
- 3) The future of this paradigm is at present in doubt. The politics of the post-1960's is marked by the emergence of new socio-economic groups and conflicting ideologies. These forces have created a great impact upon the prevailing structure of Thai politics, threatening to replace it with a socio-economic and political structure defined in terms of class and cross-cutting interests transcending traditional boundaries of political segmentation. For an interesting study reflecting this change see Benedict Anderson, “Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, IX (July–September, 1977), pp. 13–30.
- 4) See Damrong Rachanuphab, “*Laksana kanpokkhong prathet sayam tae boran* [Ancient Siamese Administration]”, a speech delivered before the Samaikhayachan Samakhom, Bangkok, October 8, 1927.

was to be replaced during the Ayutthaya period by the *deva raja* cult influenced by court Brahmins of the Khmer civilization.⁵⁾ Through the process of Khmerization or Hinduization, the king laid claims to be a personification of cosmic values and hence deriving power and legitimacy from the religio-cosmological interpretation. This framework of royal authority was transferred to the early Ratanakosin period where changes were made during the Chakkri Reformation of Rama IV, and particularly later in Rama V's reign.⁶⁾ As *deva raja*, the king had become increasingly isolated from the public and deviated from the phokhun ideal type. However, during the reign of Rama IV several measures were instigated to bring the position of the king closer to his subjects. Taboos against looking at or touching the king were removed, and his subjects were allowed to directly petition the king, reminiscent of the practices described in the Ramkhamhaeng inscription.⁷⁾ Rama V went one step further by releasing his subjects from the obligation of prostrating themselves before the king. Nevertheless, the monarch still retained the aura of the absolutist god king.

The Revolution of 1932, while effectively depriving the royalty of its centrality in the process of politics, did not in effect bring about a revolution in the modern political sense. What is significant seems to be the stress exerted upon the concept of power and legitimacy heretofore invested in the personage of the monarch. The new leaders had to present an alternative legitimizing source. The foreign idea of constitutionalism was apparently weak because of the fact that it was secular and not thoroughly appreciated by the general public. There were attempts to disregard the historical and traditional position of the throne as a legitimizing institution, even to the point of suggesting a republican form of government. In the end, as their predecessors of 1911 had done before them,⁸⁾ the leadership within the People's Party backed down and retained the monarchy, asked for its forgiveness and allowed it to exercise sanctioning prerogatives of legitimization. The constitution became not the work and toil of the people but a royal gift from a benevolent king. And being a royal gift, the throne maintained a moral superiority over the leaders of the People's Party.

This aspect of the genesis of modern Thai politics must be understood clearly. As the

- 5) James N. Mosel, "Thai Administrative Behavior", in William J. Siffin, ed., *Toward a Comparative Study of Public Administration* (The Department of Government, Indiana University, 1957), p. 284.
- 6) The traditional roots of this change came during the period of king Trailok of Ayutthaya in the 1450's whose administrative reforms created functionally specialized ministries. Under Trailok, rationalization of the *sakdina* graded hierarchization of the social structure was also carried out.
- 7) King Mongkut or one of his sons would appear at the palace wall four times a month to give alms to the poor and receive petitions from the people. See Royal Proclamations of 1856, 1858 in *Prachum Prakat Ratchakan thi si* [Collected Royal Proclamations of the 4th reign], 1851-1857, pp. 263, 264.
- 8) The Revolt of 1911 or Kabot R. S. 130 was an attempt made by young army officers to overthrow absolute monarchy to find new political means to modernize Thailand. They were distressed with the situation in Siam compared to other countries especially Japan in Asia. The plot never got off the ground as the secret was leaked. Arrests were made. Correspondence smuggled out of prison indicated how the plotters were later grateful to the king for dealing with them fairly. For this, several of the plotters confirmed their allegiance to the throne. See Lieutenants Rian Sichan and Net Phunwiwat, *Kabot R. S. 130* [The Revolt of R.S. 130] (Bangkok: National Student Center of Thailand, 1974).

gracious donor, the monarchy retained a foothold in the Thai constitutional adventure. The image of the patriarchal king 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.⁹⁾ 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 fact the “subject” of politics.¹⁰⁾ 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.

The tension between the monarchy and the leadership of the People’s Party remained throughout the period from 1932 to 1957. In particular, Marshal Phibunsongkhram who took over real control of national leadership from the mid-1930’s tried first to ignore and undermine the throne’s precarious position as the traditional legitimizer of political power by imposing upon the Thai society modern concepts of the state and the leader. This tension between king and minister was not satisfactorily removed until the coming of age of Marshal Sarit Thanarat who staged a coup against Phibun in 1957 and subsequently took power in 1958.

The dualism between the authority of the king and his chief minister, and the traditional dualism inherent in the rival concepts of king as *deva raja* and *phokhun* became the central concern of the new leadership under Sarit.¹¹⁾ The traditional concepts of power and leadership were conceptually and pragmatically secularized to accommodate the two spheres of leadership where the king retained his cosmological and historical links with legitimation symbolism while the *de facto* non-royal leadership derived its legitimacy from both the above institutional symbolism as well as the more mundane aspect of secular patriarchy. Thus in this modern sense, the Sarit period was significant for the position of the prime minister became the preponderant part of national leadership having tapped both cosmological sanction through the close association with and receiving active/tacit support from the throne while also deriving legitimacy and support from the public through Sarit’s own systematic promotion (by demonstration) of the atavistic concept of the national leader as *phokhun*.¹²⁾ This development could be viewed as the normalization of conflicting concepts of leadership

9) For an account of the promoter’s dealings with Rama VII after the 1932 coup see Lt. Gen. Prayoon Phamonmontri, “The Political Change of 1932,” in Thak Chaloemtiarana, ed., *Thai Politics, 1932-1957* (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, 1978), pp. 36-50. Also note Rama VII’s detailed criticisms of Pridi’s Economic Development Plan in *Ibid.*, pp. 193-236. The king labeled the plan as communist-inspired which led to the temporary exile of Pridi.

10) See Benedict Anderson’s argument in his “Studies of the Thai State,” a paper submitted to the Conference on the State of Thai Studies, Chicago, March 30, 1978, pp. 20-27.

11) For a detailed account see Thak Chaloemtiarana, “*Khwan khithang kanmuang khong chomphon Sarit Thanarat lae rabob kanmuang baeb phokhun uppatham* [The Political Thinking of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and the politics of paternalism]” in Sombat Chantornwong and Rangsan Thanaphonphan, eds., *Rak muangthai* [Love Thailand] (Bangkok: Thai Textbook Project, 1976), pp. 35-82.

12) The argument of political atavism was first used by Toru Yano, “Sarit and Thailand’s Pro-American Policy,” *The Developing Economies*, VI (September 1963), pp. 284-299.

based on historical, cosmological, and patriarchial ideals and the ahistorical and socially alien concept of modern constitutionalism. Lip service was given to constitutionalism and democratic processes while the actual practice of politics became in reality one of despotic paternalism fashioned from converging historical heritages of patrimonialism and the leadership's militaristic background.

The Chakkri Reformation or modernization has yet to be fully understood. However, several implications of the reformation could be isolated. Firstly, while it is facile to view the reformation from the standpoint of a traditional society adjusting to the encroachment of Western colonialism and the need to clearly demarcate Siam as a territorially and administratively distinct nation-state, one must not lose sight of the position of the monarchy during the early part of Rama V's reign where the king needed the machinery as well as the structure to consolidate his eroded hold on actual political power which had been under the control of several powerful aristocratic families.¹³⁾ Modernization in this sense could be viewed as attempts of the monarchy to establish means to consolidate its own weak position.

Secondly, it is perhaps misleading to view the modernization of the Chakkri Reformation as "national" modernization, although there are certain grounds for this line of theorizing. But more meaningful perhaps, one should see that this consolidation had led to the creation of two institutional power structures which would ultimately compete with the throne for national leadership.¹⁴⁾ By these I refer to the establishment of the modern bureaucracy and the modern army.

Nothing illuminates better the nature of such modernization than an examination of the historical development of the Thai military. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Siam's traditional enemies had been pacified and colonized. The creation of a modern and professional army seemed a moot issue in view of the military potential of the Western powers in the area. Siam was in no position to resist militarily against Western designs if the case ever arose. I will not go into the controversial subject as to how Siam escaped direct colonization. Suffice it to say, the modern army was created not so much for external warfare or the defense of national integrity, but for the purposes of supporting and extending royal authority over a traditionally loosely-held realm.

Traditionally, the armies serving the Chakkri kings in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were composed of foreign personnel.¹⁵⁾ And by this time the external security of the kingdom was guaranteed by the Western imperial powers. Siam's traditional rivals had been neutralized by the colonial powers, and by this mere fact, the role of the modern Thai army took on the character of an internal army to be deployed internally for

13) For further discussion see Thak Chaloemtiarana, "The Evolution of the Monarchy and Government: Institutional Conflicts and Change," in Lauristan Sharp, ed., *Asia* (Asia Society, N.Y.), (Spring 1976), pp. 41-56.

14) *Ibid.*

15) Noel Battye, "The Military, Government and Society in Siam, 1868-1910," Ph. D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1974, pp. 20, 21.

consolidation purposes, a function that has endured to the present time. One of the earliest moves of king Chulalongkon along matters of the military was to create a special royal bodyguard unit which was well-equipped and professionally-trained which could be seen as an important base for support for the king's faction in trying to wrest power from the aristocratic families.¹⁶⁾ Noel Battye states that Chulalongkon was aware of the importance of the army in political terms as to provide adequate force to "put down unlawful persons within the country".¹⁷⁾ In this respect, the decree for military conscription of 1905 could be better understood from the perspective of a state requiring enforcement firepower to maintain internal stability threatened by the Holy Man and Shan rebellions in 1902 to which Battye notes that the rebellions prompted and supported the argument "for a national conscript army as an essential instrument of internal governance".¹⁸⁾ Thus under these un auspicious conditions of birth, the modern Thai army was a political instrument of the state, and precisely because it did not have external functions, it followed logical steps of development to eventually dominate the domestic political process.¹⁹⁾ The coup of 1932 marked this turning point.

Under the normal circumstances of an open democratic political system with roots deeply embedded in corresponding social values, the professionalization of the military corps could have evolved. However, such was not the case. Democracy was an alien principle, authoritarianism was traditional, thus indigenous. Leadership of the People's Party vacillated between the urge to nurture the seeds of a democratic system and/or reverting to old authoritarian values. In this struggle, the military faction was superior and proceeded to pursue its basic function of an internal army, only now, it became the political instrument of its own officers bent upon seeking and maintaining their own power status.²⁰⁾ In this sense, the

16) *Ibid.*, p. 133.

17) *Ibid.*, p. 132.

18) *Ibid.*, p. 430. Battye posits that "there is no reason to disbelieve the report of the British Consul that the army, a novelty on the Siamese scene, was created for 'internal rather than external military purposes.'" *Ibid.*, p. 226. Regarding the army's domestic role, Ben Anderson cited Battye and Benjamin Batson, "The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam," Ph. D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1977, that in the mid-1880's young reformers with European education strongly supported the modernization of the military in order to push through domestic reforms against conservative opposition and the provinces. At the same time they realized the futility of organizing a modern army to defend the country against the West. (Battye, pp. 263f.) He noted that Batson (p. 202) brings to attention an issue raised by Prince Boworadet before Rama VII that subversive propaganda could turn military officers against the monarchy. This was discussed in 1928, perhaps reflecting on the events of 1911. See Anderson, "Studies of the Thai State," footnote 23.

19) For studies on the Thai military consult David Wilson, "The Military in Thai Politics," in John J. Johnson, ed., *The Role of the Military in Underdeveloped Countries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 253-276; Claude E. Welch Jr. and Arthur K. Smith, *Military Role and Rule* (North Scituate: Duxbury Press, 1974); Moshe Lissak, *Military Role in Modernization: Civil-Military Relations in Thailand and Burma* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976); and Fred von der Mehden, "The Military and Development in Thailand," *Journal of Comparative Administration*, II (November 1970), pp. 323-340.

20) The best example of this is the 1947 coup d'état. For an account see Suchin Tantikun, *Rathaprahan Ph. S.2490* [The 1947 Coup] (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, 1972).

growth of parliamentary democracy became stunted by the antiquarian concerns of military leaders who inherited the old concepts of the Thai political system dictated from a hierarchical and segmented perspective. Taking the segmentation of the Thai political structure as *a priori* suited the authoritarian nature of military leaders. Politics seem from this framework was clearly conjugal with the leaders' military socialization and the army's traditional role in national administration.

The third consequence of the Chakkri Reformation was the effect it had upon the structure of the political system. Toru Yano forcefully argued that the reformation of Chulalongkorn caused the "segmentation" of the Thai political structure. The gist of his argument was that "a segmented society emerged within the formal framework of a unified nation-state—a segmented society that was clearly a product of the conscious efforts made to establish a rigid hierarchical order under absolute monarchy."²¹ The functions of the royal house became more important in policy-making as Chulalongkon encouraged princes to study abroad and gain knowledge and competency to help the king administer the country. In this way, the previous monopoly of power of the highly influential aristocratic families were negated. In addition to this, the bureaucrats were reduced to strictly neutral functions. Their role and behavior were closely regulated by law and ordinance. As members of a modern functional administrative structure, they became privileged servants of the throne, constituting a political stratum next in prestige to the royal house but quite removed in status from the general public. The third segment was the peasantry who were given the status of free citizenship but whose quality of life was not given much due official notice.²²

Pursuing this line of argument, highly authoritarian rule was thus necessary to maintain national integration and political stability. This system could be controlled as long as the vast peasantry was not subjected to social and economic stresses. Demands on the administration were to be minimized (although they were never any real threat in the past). Tight authoritarian rule was however needed to control the bureaucracy, both civilian and military, as the nature of the modern functional bureaucracy was one which laid stress upon meritocratic values, as opposed to the ascriptive norms prescribed by the royal house and which were inherent in the absolute monarchial system.

This conflict of values became critical within the confines of the bureaucracy as it began to mature by the first half of the twentieth century. The Revolution of 1932 could be seen as a manifestation of the conflict between the standards of "merit" and "blood."²³ The

21) Toru Yano, "Political Structure of a 'Rice-Growing State'," in Yoneo Ishii, ed., *Thailand: A Rice-Growing Society*, Monographs of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, English-language Series, No. 12, 1978, p. 122 and ff.

22) Yano points out that the benefit of education was not fully extended to the public. On a different level he argues that "In modernizing, Thailand did not seek to encourage division in its political system. In actuality, however, the Chakkri Reformation produced a system in which each stratum maintained its own broad cultural pattern, which embraced political culture as well as lifestyle." *Ibid.*, p. 123.

23) Cf. Thak, "The Evolution."

Chakkri Reformation while considered as modernizing could be understood clearly from the viewpoint earlier stated that it was for power consolidation of the royal house. While it did create non-royal bureaucrats on a grand scale, the top echelon was to remain within the grasp of the royal family members. As long as the bureaucracy was in its nascent state and that the royal princes were clearly capable administrators, the system continued to persist. However, this condition became exacerbated with the passing of time where civilian and military officials reached bureaucratic maturity and the royal house was not able to generate adequate capable members following the death of Rama V.²⁴⁾

While it is widely considered that the situation became endemic during Rama VII's reign, the malady was the result of the policies of king Chulalongkon—policies which were strikingly against professional and meritocratic standards. Again, policies regarding the military best illustrates this observation. After the law on conscription was passed, civil servants who were conscripted were given equivalent military ranks to the ones they had held in the civilian bureaucracy. In 1906, for purposes of maintaining a grip upon the expansion of the national army, rules of admission to the Military Academy were adjusted so that candidates must be children of reputable parents who were sponsored and guaranteed by commissioned government officials. Furthermore, by 1909 entrance to the three preparatory grades of the military academy were limited exclusively to the sons of the royal house and military officers. Also, a special class was set up for sons of royalty with the rank of Serene Highness and above and male off-springs of military officers with commissioned or warrant rank. Examinations were waived for this special class.²⁵⁾

However, royal nepotism ran deeper and more pervasive in the General Staff of the War Ministry. In 1910, only members of the royalty held the ranks of General and Lieutenant General; and six out of thirteen Major Generals were of royal birth. More than half of the Divisional Commanders were from royal families. Many of these generals were extremely young.²⁶⁾

The 1932 Revolution while allegedly was an attempt to “revolutionize” the political system in fact accepted it as more or less on its own grounds and proceeded to modify it. However, it should be conceded here that attempts were made by the civilian sector within the People's Party under the leadership of Pridi to seriously contemplate representative democracy; nevertheless, in the final analysis they had to give in to the political preconditions of the system which grew out of the reformation years. Yano expresses the opinion that

An important point to keep in mind here is that internal impetus toward modernization was lacking in the Thai social structure. This meant that

24) The monogamous Rama VI and Rama VII did not leave any male heirs.

25) Battye, pp. 494, 495.

26) *Ibid.*, p. 519.

political modernization had to be artificially devised and imposed from above, and also that the establishment of an authoritarian dictatorship accompanied by expansion of the bureaucracy (*kharaatchakan*), and the practice of a formalistic constitutionalism, became inevitable.²⁷⁾

Political reality and constitutional idealism clashed in the end and the People's Party had to make adjustments which ultimately forced it to rely more and more upon the experience and insight of its leaders—itsself a form of paternalism, and eventually paving the way for a return to authoritarianism.

Political segmentation after 1932 took on new characteristics. The centrality of the royal house in the decision-making arena was replaced by the new bureaucratic leaders who constituted the government which in turn was responsible for the destiny of the state (*rat*). On the second tier on the hierarchy, the bureaucracy rapidly expanded as an instrument of the state and its bureaucratic leaders who sprang forth from within its own ranks. This particular feature led to the formulation of the Riggsian concept of Thailand being a bureaucratic polity.²⁸⁾ Peasants were transformed into citizens of the state with rights and privileges, not just merely having duties as before, under the new constitution. This aspect of citizenry was also expressed in the proposals of Pridi in his Economic Plan of 1933.

Before the decade ended, the nature of political segmentation took another shift which ironically prepared it for a return to pre-1932 authoritarianism. In 1939, through the dictates of Phibun, the relationship between the state and the citizenry was again readjusted. Under the *ratthaniyom* or State Convention/Preference Movement, the position of the state and its representative, the government, was elevated to a paramount position above all other social and political elements.²⁹⁾ The concept of the state changed from that of a more legalistic term to encompass a wider meaning with ideological implications. It became similar to such ideas that became currency in Europe underlying the philosophical foundations of modern totalitarianism. The position of the citizenry was relegated to secondary importance having duties to perform for the glory and survival of the state. With this movement emerged the strongman-savior concept of *phunam* who became the guardian of the national will and whose decisions were to be unquestionably followed and obeyed by a grateful public. Phibun was well-suited for that role, having tapped the support of the army which performed its traditional political role as the base for power and instrument for controlling internal unrest.

From the absolutism of the Thai monarchs legitimized by historical and cosmological sources, the *phunam* era brought forth the spectre of a non-royal and secular authoritarian style of leadership which in its fundamental essence approximated, but yet alien to, traditional Thai political values. The position of the monarch in this system was considered

27) Yano, "Political Structure," p. 127.

28) Riggs, *Thailand*, *op. cit.*

29) For documents of this period in the English language, see Thak, *Thai Politics*, pp. 244–316.

spurious and inconsequential. As a promoter who was responsible for the demise of royal authority, Phibun did not want nor permitted any rivalry to his recently acquired status. This aspect of Phibun's relationship to the monarchy would continue throughout his career. And as the throne remained the "subject" of politics and the ultimate source of traditional legitimization, Phibun deprived himself of its support. This weakness in Phibun's political armour was to be exploited by his successor, Sarit.³⁰⁾

The rathaniyom campaign and the phunum cult faded out of the scene of Thai politics following the defeat of Japan in World War II.³¹⁾ The interregnum of civilian rule between 1944–1947 was marked by attempts to institute democratic government. It proved however to be short-lived as the army staged a coup d'état in 1947 and brought back Phibun as Prime Minister. For the next ten years, Phibun danced to a different tune as his power base within the army was severed, having fallen into the hands of younger and more aggressive officers. From dictator, Phibun turned democrat. He was able to maintain his position with the support of the army whose younger generation of leaders were not ready to assume political leadership. In addition, a facade of formalistic constitutionalism was maintained—party politics was allowed, accompanied by parliamentary elections, "Hyde Park" speeches, and regular "press conferences" orchestrated by the Prime Minister. In reality however, Phibun used the police to harass his political enemies and to rig ballot boxes. At first, the army was a tacit partner in this political repression and democratic farce, but as institutional rivalry with the police intensified, and when the new army strongman, Sarit, saw his chance of breaking away from Phibun "gracefully" and taking over power himself, the army withdrew its support from the government. Exploiting public outcry against police corruption and brutality, and Phibun's tampering with election results in 1957, the army staged a coup and appointed a civilian caretaker government. By the following year, Sarit staged a *coup de main* and proclaimed Thailand's second "Revolution". This marked the beginning of Thailand's neo-classical authoritarian period, a time for despotic paternalism.

The leaders of the 1957 coup differed fundamentally from those of the 1932 group by the fact that most were army officers who had had no real foreign educational experience. Their political outlooks had been shaped almost exclusively by what had happened in Thailand. They were naturally much less impressed than their predecessors with the ideas that Western democracy was the final goal of political modernization. It was the members of the Sarit 1957 coup group who were responsible for shaping a new format of Thai politics which endured until October 1973. Under Sarit's leadership a formal rationalization of "democracy in the Thai context" took place, a development that presents students of Thai politics with a most challenging analytical problem.

With the exception of the Japanese scholar Toru Yano, no foreign academics have shown

30) See Thak, "Khvam khitthang kanmuang."

31) For the most recent study of this important period, consult Thamsook Numnonda, *Thailand and the Japanese Presence, 1941–1945*, ISEAS (Singapore), Research Notes and Discussions, No. 6 (October 1977).

interest in a systematic study of the important political implications of the period between 1957 to 1963, the Sarit years. Although Sarit's system was carried on after his death by Marshal Thanom Kittikhachon, I feel that the above period laid the essential basis for the system, and its study should thus provide a good understanding of the form and character of modern Thai politics.

Although Sarit's ideas were never systematically formulated, it is nevertheless possible to reconstruct the basic ideological tenets of his regime. In their most elementary form, they revolved around Sarit's notion of *pattiwat*—loosely translated as revolution—and *phatthana* (development/modernization). Sarit always argued that his coup in 1958 was historically unique in that a revolutionary government was installed to carry out *pattiwat* and *phatthana*. Yet Sarit's *pattiwat* (and *phatthana*) had their own peculiar meanings for him, very different from Western concepts of revolution and development which involve major social, political, and economic changes. Sarit's *pattiwat* was actually "reactionary" in the sense that it encouraged political atavism, for Sarit's idea of a truly Thai political order was based on the three-tiered segmented socio-political system defined in terms of *raja/ratthaban* (state/government), *kharatchakan* (bureaucracy), and *prachachon* (people). With such view of the political system in mind, Sarit's policies and programs were aimed at maintaining the boundaries between hierarchical sectors while the process of *phatthana* was applied; and that *phatthana* was meant to reinforce *pattiwat*. Development and modernization were to be extensions of regime paternalism and great care was to be taken to see that change did not undermine the integrity of traditional boundaries of the political system.

The difficulty inherent in Sarit's ideology lay, of course, in the fact that his conception of the political system was essentially static, and thus vulnerable to rapid social change. While Sarit's *phatthana* was initially devised as a paternalistic program of controlled change, the real consequences were hard to contain and predict. Sarit's ideology, which assumed that socio-economic and political systems are naturally compatible and can be easily juxtaposed in one entity, basically denied the dynamic interaction between the two. The incongruity of economic development and political traditionalism built up growing tensions in Thai society, especially after Sarit's death. For either the political system would have to adjust itself to socio-economic change or the regime would have to employ coercive measures to suppress such change. The dramatic events of the 1970's in Thailand are indicative of the tensions between the two systems.

Sarit's impact on Thai political development is not one which could readily receive accolade. His rule was harsh, repressive, despotic, and inflexible. Yet we must make clear assessments of his position in the development process of modern Thai politics. It is necessary that scholars answer the questions regarding Sarit's popularity which transcended his distasteful tight-fisted rule; we must also note the system's limitations and built-in flaws which eventually led to its own disintegration. By answering these questions we would be able to understand the nature of modern Thai politics and glimpse at certain aspects within

the system which had been inherited from the past and passed on to the present.

Criticisms have been raised regarding the study of the so-called Sarit system. Most critics have been concerned with normative issues of Sarit as a despicable individual, that his regime was an intolerable experience, and that the scholar should discharge his debts to society by exposing Sarit for what he was—a greedy and selfish dictator—to help prevent further recurrences of this pattern and style of leadership. While I share many of their concerns, as a scholar, one must not attempt to indict or eulogize the subject under study. One should attempt to try to study what Sarit had implemented politically that made him effective as a political leader who was respected, hated, obeyed, and above all, feared. It is easy for us to attribute compliance to fear of dictatorial powers alone. There appears to be that “elusive quality” in the Sarit leadership, enough to raise the issue of whether Sarit was an anachronism, for it is still common even today to hear remarks that political uncertainty in Thailand could be stabilized by a leader like Sarit. He remains a controversial prototype upon which political leaders are measured. This enigma needs and dictates academic exploration.³²⁾

On the theoretical level, one should not merely search for the uniquely Thai aspect of the Sarit leadership. I believe that an understanding of the politics of this period in Thailand would contribute to a wider knowledge of modern patrimonial systems—societies which have been affected or infected by modernism while their recent past political values and traditions have been paternalistic, militaristic, and authoritarian.

32) See Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: the Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, forthcoming).