

Thailand monarchy and government overview



BACKGROUND OF MONARCHY

The current king of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej, is part of the Siamese-cum-Thai monarchy and has reigned since 9 June 1946. This has made him the world's longest reigning current monarch and the world's longest serving head of state (). In accordance with the constitution of Thailand, most of the king's power is divulged to his elected government whereby the king is considered above partisan affair and uninvolved with the decision-making process (). As ceremonial head of state, however, the king still retains power in being the head of the Royal Thai Armed forces, the prerogative of royal assent and also in having the power of pardon.

The current concept of Thai kingship has evolved through 800 years of absolute rule. The Siamese-cum-Thai monarchy dates back to the founding of the Kingdom of Sukhothai, by the first king of a unified Thailand: King Sri Indraditya in 1238 (). This early kingship showed signs of the religious influence that is still present in today's monarchy and was said to be based on two concepts derived from Hinduism and Theravada Buddhist beliefs: the Vedic-Hindu caste of " kshatriya" (" warrior-ruler") and the Buddhist concept of " Dhammaraja" (" kingship under Dharma") after Buddhism was introduced to Thailand somewhere around the sixth century A. D (). " Kingship under Dhammaraja" essentially means that the king should rule his people in accordance with the Dharma and the teachings of the Buddha, thus showing early signs of the stronghold that Buddhism has had over the Thai monarchy from such an early stage.

In 1279 the concepts behind Thai kingship were somewhat altered at the entrance of King Ramkhamhaeng to the throne (). The past traditions were replaced by the concept of “ paternal rule” in which the king governs his people “ as a father would govern his children ().

However these changes lasted briefly as the Kingdom of Sukhothai was eventually supplanted by the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, which was founded in 1351 by King Ramathibodhi I (). The Ayutthaya period of kingship brought with it changes, re-establishing the former Hindu and Buddhist concepts along with a third, older concept of “ Devaraja” (“ Divine-King”) borrowed by the Khmer Empire from the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Java (). The concept was based on the idea that the king was an incarnation (Avatar) of the god Vishnu and that he was a Bodhisattva (enlightened one). This essentially meant the king had religious and moral power and purity of blood.

State interests portrayed the King as a semi-divine figure which started to develop his image - through rigid cultural implementation - as an object of worship and veneration to his people. This broke away from the early concepts of kingship which emphasized strong bonds between the king and his subjects (). The monarchy from then on was largely removed from the people and became an absolute ruler and universal lord of his realm (). Kings demanded that the universe be envisioned as revolving around them, and expressed their powers through elaborate rituals and ceremonies. Although far less exaggerated, this notion of divinity and higher status of the monarchy is still present in Thailand today, where the king remains widely revered and serves as a spiritual leader to the state. Despite this seemingly ludicrous adoration of the monarchy in these early periods however, the <https://assignbuster.com/thailand-monarchy-and-government-overview/>

kings that ruled over Ayutthaya for four centuries experienced some of the greatest periods of economic, cultural and military growth in Thai history ().

King Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke (or Rama I) established a new dynasty in 1782 and moved the capital from Thonburi to Bangkok. King Rama I also founded the House of Chakri, the current ruling house of Thailand (). During this Rattanakosin period the Chakri kings tried to re-establish the concepts of the Ayutthayan kingship and emphasize the connection between the sovereign and his subjects, but at the same time would not relinquish any power or authority from the throne. Most notably, Kings Buddha Loetla Nabhalai (Rama II) and Nangklao (Rama III) created a semblance of a modern administration by creating the supreme council and appointing chief officers to help with the running of the government (). This was a turning point in Buddhist influence within the monarchy and government giving the religion a firmer grip on the decision making processes ().

BACKGROUND OF THE GOVERNMENT

In June 1932 the influence and power of the monarchy was eventually challenged. After 150 years of absolute Chakri rule, King Prajadhipok was confronted with a group of foreign educated students and military men called “ the promoters” who carried out a bloodless revolution, seizing power and demanding that the king grant the people of Siam a constitution (). The king agreed and in December 1932 the people were granted a constitution in which the power of the monarchy was divulged to the elected prime minister and national assembly, removing the political authority of the crown and founding a nascent ‘ democracy’. ().

1946 saw the first direct elections held in which the people of Thailand voted for members of a bicameral legislature (Senate and House of Representatives) to be presided over by a Prime Minister representing the executive branch (). The Judiciary, including a Supreme Court, acts independently of the executive office and the legislature, though it was not until the 1996 constitution that more effective checks and balances were instituted ().

From its inception “ democracy” in Thailand has been turbulent, with 17 coup d’etats passing power back and forth between leaders of the military and an elite bureaucracy that borders on plutocracy (). Seventeen different constitutions have governed the country; the Kingdom’s current constitution the result of the most recent coup d’etat; a bloodless overthrow of then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawattra in 2006 (). Currently, Thailand is embroiled in political wrangling over the implications of that coup and the subsequent legislative shake up caused by mass protests both against and in favour of the former Prime Minister. Nevertheless, the Thai people are extremely politically active and value their freedom regardless of their tenuous democracy ().

Under the 2007 Constitution (drafted by a military appointed council, but approved by a referendum) the present structure of the Government of Thailand was established (). Despite the seventeen constitutions, the basic structure of the government has remained the same. The government of Thailand is made up of three branches; the executive, the legislative and the judiciary, a system of government similar to that of the Westminster system of the United Kingdom. Along with the monarchy, this essay will pay special

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attention to both the legislative and judicial branches of this political system, and how they interact with Buddhist influences in the form of the sangha council.