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AIRGRAM

POL 15-1 THAI

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TO : Department of State

E.O. 11652: XGDS
TAGS: PINR, PGOV, TH

FROM : Amembassy BANGKOK DATE: Nov 30, 1973

SUBJECT : The Thai Monarchy and How the King Uses His Influence

REF : A. Bangkok 17069; B. Bangkok A-260 of 14 July 1972

Attached as an enclosure to this airgram is a slightly modified version of a short paper on the Monarchy prepared for Ambassador Kintner's briefing book. While it does not contain much in the way of new, previously unreported information, we believe its brevity and current relevance will make it useful to Washington readers.

KINTNER

Attachment:
As stated.

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Date of Action 12/11/73

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THE THAI MONARCHY AND HOW THE KING USES HIS INFLUENCE

Background: Successive Kings of Thailand have been constitutional monarchs since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in June 1932. As such the King reigns but does not rule. The King's one real lever is his function of legitimating the governments of Thailand. He has used this to telling effect over the years to influence particular decisions and the moral and ethical tone of government. He is always extremely careful to husband his influence, and not to expend it too often or to push too hard lest he overstep his somewhat ambiguous bounds, or otherwise sow seeds of resentment among political leaders that would lessen their tolerance for, or the effectiveness of, the occasional Royal interventions.

Bhumibol's Accession: It is important to realize that the present King, Bhumibol Adulyadej (pronounced Pumeepon Adunyadet), has rebuilt from scratch the institution of the Thai Monarchy. He started in 1951 when he returned from school in Switzerland, and took up full time his duties as King. Until then there had not been a Thai King resident in Thailand since the abdication in 1935 of the present King's uncle, Prajadhipok (Rama VII). At that time, the present King's older brother, still a school boy in Switzerland, came to the throne, but remained in Switzerland throughout World War II. In 1946, during a brief visit to Thailand, the young King died under mysterious circumstances that have never been clarified. The present King continued his studies in Switzerland. In 1950 he returned briefly to Thailand to marry and be crowned, and then returned again to Europe to continue his studies. In 1951 the Regent died, and King Bhumibol returned to reign full time.

The government in power during the early 1950's was extremely corrupt and highly suspicious of the King. He used his limited prerogatives sparingly, but adopted the practice of summoning his ministers for briefings on their work and the current situation. During these sessions, he posed rhetorical questions and managed to parley what he was being told into a working grasp of the

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subject under discussion. In this way he was able to make felt his moral and ethical views on government behavior. In 1955 he made his first trip out of Bangkok to the impoverished and neglected Northeast. The tremendous outpouring of love for the King, and the sorry conditions he witnessed at first hand, so frightened the government that it forbade him from leaving the capital again. Realizing that this was an indicator of his strength rather than weakness, His Majesty bided his time and continued to press when and where he could for improved government services and official honesty.

The public outrage at the blatantly rigged elections of February 1957 gave the impetus for Sarit Thannarat to promise His Majesty to do a better job of governing Thailand. The King gave his tacit approval for Sarit's September 1957 coup that sent the former Prime Minister, Field Marshal Phibul Songgram and Police General Phao Siriyanond into exile.

Increasingly Prominent Role: The November 1971 putsch abolished the 1968 Constitution, disbanded the elected Parliament, and created the National Executive Council (NEC). The King was extremely displeased that the military leaders had not given him prior notice of their intentions, together with reasons to justify their actions. Throughout the 13 months of NEC rule, the King maintained cool but (barely) correct relations with the NEC leadership, but never actually gave his approval to what they had done.

In December 1972, when the NEC was preparing to return to constitutional rule, the NEC leadership promulgated a decree that placed the Court system under the Ministry of Justice. This decree prompted considerable outrage in judicial and student circles. It also went against the King's very strong feelings in favor of democractic rule and separation of powers. The King let it be known that the new temporary constitution, and the new cabinet, had to be announced and installed prior to the Investiture of the Crown Prince on December 28, 1972, but refused to sign the Royal Decrees effecting this unless the NEC rescinded the controversial decree affecting the courts. The King got his way.

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The King has retained exceedingly close relations with Thai students, especially university students. Every year he personally hands out the diplomas to every one of Thailand's some 7000 university graduates. He also plays with them in jazz concerts.

During the past year, His Majesty has played a significant role in trying to defuse the successive confrontations between the students and the government by counseling reasonableness to the students and strict avoidance of violence to the government. He went so far as to set up tents and soup kitchens for the students on the palace grounds to prepare for the eventuality that they might have to take refuge there if the demonstration became violent.

His role in the recent change of government was pivotal, and has been described in Ref A.

The King has many other important facets which are described in Ref B.

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