

CHULALONGKORN

Thailand's beloved monarch reformed his ancient land and opened it to the West, without surrendering its sovereignty

**By Mr. Anand Panyarachun
Former Prime Minister of Thailand**

September 21, 1853 in Bangkok, Succeeded his father, King Mongkut, to the throne. Death of the regent who restricted his reforms. First railway line completed. Established Chulalongkorn University to train a corps of provincial administrators. Abolished slavery. Met with European leaders to ensure Thailand's sovereignty October 23, 1910.

Every night, throngs of Thais of different backgrounds and ages congregate in-groups large and small at the Royal Plaza in Bangkok. In the serene atmosphere of this vast public space, they set up altars with candles and joss sticks to pay homage to their beloved, long-deceased monarch, King Chulalongkorn, Rama V of the Chakri Dynasty. They solemnly show their respect to the equestrian statue, ensconced at the center of the plaza, that symbolizes his majestic reign. It is a moving and impressive sight.

The King ascended the throne in 1868 and reigned for 42 years until his death in 1910. During that time he became one of the world's best-known monarchs, celebrated in literature and drama. Thais remember and revere him as a paragon of learning, accomplishment and dynamism, the man who more than any brought their ancient nation into the modern world.

When he succeeded to the throne of Siam, as the country was then known, on the demise of his father King Mongkut, or Rama IV, he was a mere boy of 15 in feeble health. Even though Siam was nationally an absolute monarchy, the power he inherited was limited. Real authority lay in the hands of a small oligarchy of noble families. Their control of the nation's purse, the forced labor of the peasantry, the provincial administration, the legal system and the line of succession imposed enormous constraints on the young monarch. In fact, it was a sign of the oligarchs' power that they succeeded in placing on the throne such a young and seemingly sickly king, who was not expected to live very long.

This was not an auspicious climate for any new ruler. The only factor in the boy's favor was the invaluable training he had received from his father. Chulalongkorn was the beneficiary of a superb and balanced education that combined both classical Thai and modern Western elements. He had also enjoyed a valuable apprenticeship at his father's side. Otherwise, the deck was stacked against him. In the initial period of his reign, King Chulalongkorn had to function under the guidance of the regent - the foremost noble-man and other members of the regent's family who held powerful administrative positions. The King realized that the reforms he wanted to introduce,

especially to the monarchy itself, would be greeted with hostility by the oligarchs, whose power and vested interests would inevitably be threatened.

Why was the young monarch so intent on reform? One obvious reason was to shore up his insecure throne. Also lurking in the King's mind was an external threat. European ambitions in the region were becoming overt and aggressive in the late 19th century. The colonial expansions of Britain, France and other powers were in full steam. A way had to be found to resist European imperialism, in both political and commercial terms. To confront the colonial powers openly would have courted disaster; to shut off his kingdom from the outside world and oppose foreign concepts and thinking would also have led to catastrophe.

King Chulalongkorn decided on a third option, constructive engagement with the colonial powers. He did this by opening up the country to the West through skillful diplomacy, yielding concessions without giving up sovereignty. The King was also buying time to consolidate his power through a modernization drive. He experimented with innovative changes in his own household by up-dating the dress code, sponsoring Western-style education for his younger brothers and associates and filling the court with open-minded young men who shared his vision. He also studied various models of European colonial administration during visits to Dutch and British holdings in Java, Malaya, Burma and India in 1871 and 1872. He was slowly and quietly laying the ground-work for the centralization of administration in Siam.

The conservative nobility did not at first grasp the significance of King Chulalongkorn's activities. Their complacency enabled him to embark on a series of reforms at his second coronation on November 16, 1873. It was a sort of coming of age, as the king was now 21. A start was made in the abolition of slavery. The practice of prostration in public and at ceremonial events was discarded. Some major financial and legal reforms were undertaken. The Privy Council and the Council of State, bodies that acted like a cabinet and a panel of advisers, respectively, were set up. Before long, though, these moves generated anger and defiance from the nobility. Sensing an imminent confrontation with the old guard, the King temporarily retreated and let the reform measures lie dormant.

He knew time was on his side. By the early 1880s, the ranks of the regency began to dwindle. The end of the chapter came with the death in 1883 of the regent and in 1886 of his designated successor. The King named his eldest son as crown prince. Chulalongkorn's enthusiasm for reform was revived, but he was still constrained by a lack of competent and trusted bureaucrats to implement his program. So the King turned to his younger brothers, whose modern education he had helped to guide and whose minds were imbued with a spirit of innovation. He appointed them, some still in their early 20s, to positions of authority. He also recruited a number of foreign advisers in various fields of expertise.

What the King did next touched nearly every aspect of the lives of his people. Provincial administration was brought under centralized direction and

augmented by specialized functional ministries. Modern law codes and other judicial reforms were decreed, and these went a long way toward pacifying the European powers' discontent with the legal system. Fiscal administration was centralized and modern accounting, budgeting and auditing procedures were adopted. Roads and bridges, railways, telegraph lines, irrigation canals and water gates were constructed. Mining projects were launched. Mapping was introduced. The King also vastly expanded educational and medical services. The military forces were upgraded through conscription and the founding of a military academy.

King Chulalongkorn never forgets that his kingdom's economy was based on agriculture. To benefit the rural population, he introduced land title deeds, as well as a more equitable land tax and collection system. The King also developed unexploited land by the intensification and extension of agriculture, forestry and mining. Those and other economic reforms helped bring unprecedented industrial growth and increased foreign trade.

The King championed education and the teaching of ethics and morality. Education, in his view, was not only an instrument to serve national needs, but the means to ensure a better quality of life for his people. He established a primary education system by making full use of Buddhist monasteries over the entire kingdom, and he introduced a formal curriculum for the training of teachers. Furthermore, he established vocational and trades schools and a civil service institute, which subsequently became Chulalongkorn University, to prepare young men and women for public service. By increasing the knowledge and worldliness of the people, this "popular education" policy would, ironically, lay the seeds for an anti-monarchical movement in the 1932 revolution.

The direction, substance and comprehensiveness of King Chulalongkorn's reforms were startling. He almost single-handedly ushered in a new order to replace the old one. While he succeeded in restoring absolute monarchy to the throne, he was not in search of personal power. He was seeking power as a means to effect progressive change and advancement for Siamese society. He was convinced that fundamental change was right and necessary, from both a Buddhist and a Western perspective.

The miraculous preservation of Siam's independence and sovereignty, in contrast to the experience of other Asian countries, was due in large measure to the King's reforms, diplomatic skills and ability to consolidate central authority. These were the qualities that endeared him to his subjects - to such an extent that the Thai people donated money to erect the King Rama V equestrian statue at the Royal Plaza to commemorate the life and deeds of a king whose legacy left a permanent imprint in the hearts and minds of his people. King Chulalongkorn was indeed a symbol of an enlightened age in Siamese history. Through his leadership and vision, a traditional Southeast Asian kingdom was transformed into a modern nation.