

Bhumibol Adulyadaj: The Making of a Great King
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On 9 June 1996, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadaj will reach another milestone in His Reign - the Golden Jubilee of his accession to the throne.

The last fifty years have indeed been a remarkable reign for the Thai King, who succeeded to the throne in 1946 by accident. He was not born to be King; the untimely demise of his brother, King Ananda Mahidol, catapulted him to the position at the young age of 19.

To understand the present-day Thai monarchy, one needs to go back in history to the founding of the first central Thai State, Sukhothai, in the thirteenth century. The King, at the time, was entrusted with the task of ruling, not out of any divine right, but by the consent of his peers. He had an obligation to rule the country with "righteousness", not for his personal glory, but "for the benefit and happiness" of the people in his trust. The royal code of conduct emphasized the major Buddhist precepts and the Tenfold Practice of Duties of Kingship, which to this day remain the cornerstone of the Thai Kingship: almsgiving, morality, liberality, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and non-obstruction.

For more than seven centuries, the concept of a patriarchal and responsive monarch has remained a Thai ideal. In his Oath of Accession to the Throne, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej pledged, as his ancestors had done, to "reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people. "The focus of his reign centers around three main themes: the well being of his subjects, the security and stability of his country, and the unity of his nation.

His Majesty's dedication to the improvement of the quality of life of his people is renowned. He has traveled extensively to every part of the country, meeting his subjects from all walks of life. He has personally initiated nearly 2000 royally-sponsored projects for the economic and social well being of the people.

These activities do not formally fall within the domain of a constitutional monarch. The fact that His Majesty has persevered in these activities for the benefit of the Thai people has greatly endeared him to his subjects - so much so that the Thais, in general, unreservedly accord him the respect, confidence and trust that no other monarch in our history, nor for that matter the world, has ever enjoyed.

In a constitutional monarchy, The King does have certain powers and responsibilities. He may dissolve Parliament and appoint the Prime Minister and high-ranking officers and civil servants. All legislation approved by the National Assembly is presented to the King for signature. This is not just a formality. The King has discretionary power to withhold his assent. In private consultations with the Prime Minister, as Head of Government, the King's views, be they be in the form of "encouragements" or "warnings", provide an important input for the Prime Minister's decision-making process. In exercising his

constitutional power, the King must be ever conscious of his responsibility and objectivity. His Majesty has, as a general rule, kept to constitutional proprieties.

There have, however, been a number of “extraordinary” political situations which have demanded that the King resort to his “reserve power”, outside any constitutional provision, to defuse national crises.

One occasion was the student uprising in October 1973, when demands were made for a permanent constitution and an end to government by martial law. The arrest of student leaders by the military provoked a massive popular demonstration, which led to the tragic deaths of a number of student activists and innocent bystanders. The King, responding to the suffering of the people, intervened in a dramatic television appearance to reassure the people that action was being taken to resolve the crisis. The King then took the unprecedented step of appointing one of his Privy Councilors as the new Prime Minister. Normalcy was soon restored, much to the relief of the people.

The other occasion was His Majesty’s intervention in the May 1992 tragedy, a classic case of a government out of touch with the times and the sentiments of the masses. The attempt by demonstrators to topple the government had gained momentum outside parliamentary confines. The senseless shooting of demonstrators by the military precipitated an outbreak of mob mentality, resulting in a horrifying showdown.

The King, closely following the increasingly tragic developments and accurately assessing the country’s mood, summoned the two antagonistic instigators to the Palace in full view of national television. He quietly, but sternly, admonished them for their actions and counseled them to resolve the confrontation. The whole Kingdom, as well as international viewers of CNN and BBC around the world, witnessed with much amazement on their television screen how a national crisis had been resolved by His Majesty’s reserve power.

The bloodshed stopped immediately afterwards. The Prime Minister resigned from his post. Some two weeks later, a new civilian Prime Minister was nominated and appointed by Royal Command.

The interim Prime Minister was entrusted by Royal Command to restore peace and stability to the country and to hand power back to the people. A general election was held on 13 September 1992, and a newly-elected government was formed. The peaceful transfer of power was effected. Since then, another general election has been held in Thailand on 2 July 1995, reaffirming the country’s commitment to the constitutional transfer of power. The military has retreated to the background, refraining from interference in national politics, and succeeding in regaining its prestige as a professional armed force.

On those two occasions, the King demonstrated clearly the extent of his influence and moral power. His sense of justice, his over-riding concern for the well-being of the people, his wisdom and his pragmatic approach to life, have had a profound impact on the course of the country’s development. Without his guiding hand, Thailand would not be where it is today - a nation, which has

consistently demonstrated its inner strength, political resilience, social harmony and economic dynamism.

To the Thai people, the present monarchy is not an abstract or irrelevant concept, but a responsive, caring and indispensable institution that is an integral part of their lives.