

KING PRAJADHIPOK AND THE APPLE CART

British Attitudes towards the 1932 Revolution

by

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The position Siam occupied in British policy in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century was exceptional. Its position in British policy in the interwar years was exceptional also. In the nineteenth century Siam retained its independence while all around were losing theirs. The major means the Thais used to attain this end was to come to terms with the major power in Southeast Asia, Great Britain. In the Bowring-Parkes negotiations of 1855-6,¹ the Siam of King Mongkut accepted voluntarily what China had been forced to concede—extraterritoriality and tariff restrictions—as the price of maintaining political independence. Too exclusive a connexion with the British was avoided, and connexions were made with other states.² The same principle was followed when, under King Chulalongkorn, the Siamese developed the practice of appointing foreign advisers: Britain had the lion's share, but citizens of other nations held some important posts. Through concessions to the Western powers, and through a degree of westernisation, Siam sought with success to preserve its independence. That independence also depended, of course, on the policies of the great powers, and in particular on Britain's readiness to accept a substantially independent state as the outwork of its empire in India-Burma and Malaya. That readiness existed before the French established themselves in Indo-China, and it was reinforced by that event. The aim of the British was an independent Siam open to British commerce and amenable to British advice. It was on the whole attained, despite the problems caused by Thai claims in the Malay peninsula. Siam's position remained important in the twentieth century: indeed the development of air communications gave the country a new significance.

1) See N. Tarling, *Imperial Britain in South-East Asia*, Kuala Lumpur, 1975, chs. viii, ix.

2) Cf. *ibid.*, p. 228.

The unequal treaties were under pressure in Japan from the 1880's. In China the struggle of the KMT-CCP coalition secured a reorientation of British policy in 1926. The long-term interests of British trade, it was thought, would be better served by coming to an overall accommodation with the new China than by insisting on privileges secured from the old. In Siam there had been no revolution, but the policies and attitudes of King Vajiravudh reflected something of the new spirit abroad in Asia, and the unequal treaties were substantially renegotiated in his reign. Britain still retained the predominant role as supplier of foreign advisers, and more Siamese students went to Britain than to other Western states. Upon such things, the continued influence of Britain indeed appeared to depend. But what they, and thus continued British influence in fact depended upon, was the continuance of Britain's power and prestige in East Asia as a whole. That power had greatly diminished, and the British Foreign Office were trying to sustain prestige without power, a task the impossibility of which was soon to be shown up by the exploits of the Japanese.

Even before the Siamese revolution of 1932, a change of attitude had been noted in 'the governing oligarchy . . . there is no longer the same uncritical and sentimental preference for everything British that so happily existed until quite recently . . .'³ The revolution went further. To some extent it was a reaction against the control of the British financial adviser, E.L. Hall-Patch, who advocated sticking to the gold standard even after it had been abandoned in Britain,⁴ and so hampered Siam's exports and enforced economies in public expenditure. This boosted dissatisfaction within the bureaucratic and military élites, already alienated by the new King's exclusive resort to princely advice. But the dissatisfaction might have been less intense, had not anti-imperial ideas been spread among the élite by education overseas, particularly outside Britain. The challenge presented by the Promoters of the

3) Minute by Mackillop, 22 March 1932, F.O. 371/16261 (F2717/2717/40), Public Record Office, London.

4) Benjamin A. Batson, ed., *Siam's Political Future: Documents from the End of the Absolute Monarchy*, Data Paper No. 96, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1974, p. 72.

revolution—a small group of military and civil leaders, organised as the People's Party—thus went well beyond the financial field.

Yet the People's Party was as anxious to avoid foreign intervention as the absolute monarchy it sought to displace had been. *Luang Pradit* (Pridi Phanomyong), the French-educated lawyer who was widely regarded as 'the brain behind the movement', told ministerial heads on the afternoon of 24 June—the day of the coup—that foreign countries should be notified that the provisional government would observe Siam's current treaty obligations. Prince Tewawong Warothai, the foreign minister, 'enquired whether he was merely to notify foreign Legations of the position or whether he was also to apply for recognition of the new Government. He was told to do both.' He declined to apply for recognition until King Prajadhipok had replied to the People's Party's demands for constitutional change. Eventually it was decided to send a note to the legations, informing them that the new government would seek to preserve order and observe obligations. On 25 June the King accepted the revolution and returned to Bangkok from his summer palace, Klai Kangwol, at Hua Hin. On 27 June he signed the provisional constitution.⁵ A judge, *Phya* Manopakorn, not a coup leader, was invited to head the government, and *Phya* Sri Wisarn Waja, a high foreign ministry official close to the King,⁶ became foreign minister. He told Sir M. Delevingne of the British Home Office that the King's 'wonderful' response meant 'there is no question of recognition of the new government by foreign states'.⁷

The King's 'promptness' in accepting the revolutionaries' demands, it was recognised at the British Foreign Office, strengthened the hands of 'the more moderate elements'.⁸ The British Minister, Cecil Dormer, told *Phya* Sri Wisarn 'that the fact that the movement had been carried out quietly, without violence, bloodshed or demands for victims, had made a good impression in England; to this he replied that its peaceful-

5) Johns to Simon, 28 June 1932, No. 134, F.O. 371/16261 (F5917/4260/40).

6) Thawatt Mokarapong, *History of the Thai Revolution*, Bangkok, 1972, p. 131.

7) Enclosure in Delevingne to Orde, 28 July 1932, F.O. 371/16261 (F5846/4260/40).

8) Minute, 5 August, F.O. 371/16261 (F5917/4260/40).

ness had been due to the King . . . Had His Majesty held back, or escaped, as he could have done, . . . there would have been chaos . . .⁹ At the same time, Dormer felt that 'the fear of "foreign intervention" played its part in bringing about moderation'. Those words, he reported, 'were more than once made use of by the leaders in the first week of the new régime', and he added that Raymond Stevens, the American Adviser to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 'himself told me that he was certain that neither French Indo-China nor British Burma nor Malaya would tolerate widespread disturbances. I was, of course, careful to avoid saying anything which might encourage him in his belief, in so far as the British attitude was concerned, but the fear has probably had a steadying influence.'¹⁰ It apparently continued to do so. A Thai scholar has recently suggested that fear of foreign intervention encouraged the moderates to cooperate with the People's Party.¹¹ But Dormer put it the other way round. 'The fear of British or French intervention is still exercising a salutary influence', he wrote in September, 'and although I have been careful to repudiate the idea as far as we are concerned whenever it was mentioned to me (otherwise the moderate elements might try to precipitate it for their own purposes)', it was probable that the foreign minister and other moderate ministers made use of it.¹²

There were, of course, dangers in this. There was talk of King Prajadhipok's abdication should the definitive constitution be unsatisfactory. Dormer thought that, if the King went in a crisis, it would mean 'the disintegration of the country'. 'I had thought of making a suggestion to you', Dormer told the Foreign Office,

... that a word of advice to the Siamese Minister in London to impress on his Government the importance of observing moderation, might have a steadying effect on the situation here. On the other hand, after further reflection I saw that the moderate members of the Government do not need such advice and that it might not be understood. It is not as if they were in any doubt. All parties are, moreover, so

9) Dormer to Simon, 28 July 1932, No. 158, F.O. 371/16261 (F6563/4260/40).

10) Dormer to Simon, 3 August 1932, No. 160, F.O. 371/16261 (F6564/4260/40).

11) Thawatt, p. 109.

12) Telegram, 13 September 1932, No. 5 R Saving, F.O. 371/16261 (F7009/4260/40).

obsessed, or appear to be, with the idea of the probable intervention of either Britain or France, . . . that unless one can be certain of one's words being correctly interpreted, they might do more harm than good . . .¹³

The Foreign Office took a similar view. It received somewhat alarmist comments from William Nunn, an M.P., previously a Customs Adviser in Siam, about the possibility of French intervention. But it seemed unlikely that the French would act alone, even though they 'would naturally be anxious that the Siamese revolutionary movement should not spread into French Indo-China'. Eden told Nunn that 'the general situation is certainly not too promising but it seems clear that anything in the nature of vigorous representations on our part would tend to upset the present precarious equilibrium. Our Minister loses no opportunity of counselling moderation, and I think that this is all that can be done in the present circumstances, apart from keeping a careful watch on developments . . .'.¹⁴ Dormer also encouraged the English newspapers in Bangkok to praise the moderation of the revolution.¹⁵

There was some relief when the definitive constitution was promulgated and the King accepted the apologies of the revolutionaries for their outspoken words of June.¹⁶ 'The King of Siam', wrote Victor Mallet, 'has succeeded so far in steering a middle course, and has managed to become a constitutional monarch without sacrificing too much dignity'.¹⁷ The apology, which Delevingne thought 'funny',¹⁸ R.J. Bowker saw as 'a significant act, which must have strengthened the position of the king'. 'Both sides seem to have behaved admirably', Mallet added.¹⁹ March 1933, however, brought the crisis over *Luang*

13) Dormer to Simon, 16 September 1932, No. 192, F.O. 371/16262 (F7455/4260/40).

14) Minute by Mallet, 26 October 1932; Eden to Nunn, 27 October, F.O. 371/16262 (F7668/4260/40).

15) Dormer to Orde, 29 September 1932, F.O. 371/16262 (F7732/4260/40).

16) Minutes on Dormer to Simon, 21 October 1932, No. 216; 19 November, No. 234, F.O. 371/16262 (F8136, 8719/4260/40).

17) Minute, 19 January 1933, F.O. 371/17174 (F396/42/40).

18) Delevingne to Orde, 30 December 1932, F.O. 371/16262 (F8720/4260/40).

19) Minutes, 20 January 1933, F.O. 371/17174 (F451/42/40).

Pradit's economic programme, and April a royal decree dissolving the Assembly and State Council. A new State Council excluded the 'extremists', and an anti-Communist law was issued.²⁰ The 'moderates' were backed by Col. *Phya* Song Suradej, a Promoter previously thought a Communist, and by Colonel *Luang* Pibul Songgram, 'who has become the most important military personality'. Dormer was pleased. 'If the moderates who are now in power can consolidate their position, as they should be able to do, there is more hope in the future for Siam than there has been at any time since the revolution of last June...'²¹ But late in June he had to report a new coup, led by Col. *Phya* Phahol Pholpayuha Sena and *Luang* Pibul Songgram, designed to restore the Assembly and recall *Luang* Pradit.²²

The references to foreign intervention reappeared. The Siamese Minister called at the Foreign Office, and assured Sir Victor Wellesley, the Deputy Under-Secretary, that the new coup was not a revolution. 'The fear of British or French intervention may help to keep developments within bounds', minuted G. Harrison.²³ The new administration insisted it had no 'communistic' tendencies. Dormer referred to an 'unfounded' rumour that he had protested against *Luang* Pradit's return. 'The Government is evidently very afraid of British and French intervention. I am hopeful they will prove moderate.'²⁴ A letter from H. Christiansen, manager in Bangkok of the East Asiatic Company, a Danish firm that had been very influential, referred to the same question. 'The greatest fear possessed by all is the danger of foreign intervention, and even the extremists are expected to diminish their aspirations if it should appear that such an event is possible.' According to Christiansen, the British Minister had said that the situation was 'of quite an internal nature', but that if it led to 'disturbances in which foreign property becomes endangered, someone would have to intervene'.²⁵

20) Thawatt, pp. 139 ff.

21) Dormer to Simon, 4 April 1933, No. 60, F.O. 371/17175 (F3113/42/40).

22) Telegram, 20 June 1933, No. 13, F.O. 371/17175 (F4097/42/40).

23) Minute, 24 June 1933, F.O. 371/17175 (F4170/42/40).

24) Telegram, 23 June 1933, No. 16, F.O. 371/17175 (F4194/42/40).

25) Enclosure in Gurney to Oliphant, 15 July 1933, F.O. 371/17175 (F4780/42/40).

Whatever use was made of the fear of foreign intervention, however, the British saw that a threat could be counter-productive. Indeed when Dormer called on *Phya Phahol*, leader of the new government, and his adviser on foreign affairs, Prince Varnvaidyakorn, before going on leave, 'there seemed to be an atmosphere of nervous expectancy as to the object of my visit . . .'. Dormer declared he was happy to go away 'knowing that there were no clouds, large or small, overhanging our relations . . .'. *Phya Phahol* said the government intended to act with moderation and to be friendly to foreign interests. 'I thought it a good moment to say that I had often been annoyed, as he, *Phya Phahol*, probably had been, at the foolish rumours which had been circulating during the past year as to our supposed attitude and intentions—I did not use the word intervention. They had, of course, been pure imagination. I never had, as I reported home, any anxiety that our interests were in jeopardy.' Nor had Dormer believed that Siam would turn away from 'the old path of friendship with England . . .'.²⁶

One reason for playing down any such threat was apparent: 'it was bound to arouse, unnecessarily, resentment', as Dormer put it;²⁷ it would provoke frustrated extremists, even turn their attention elsewhere. A newspaper in August reminded readers that Siam had abstained from voting at the League of Nations over Manchuria. It reported that, at a dinner on 2 August, *Phya Phahol* had expressed fears of foreign intervention, and that the Japanese minister had said his country would help to stop it. The report was officially denied. The British Foreign Office thought it might contain 'an element of truth'.²⁸ But the chargé d'affaires, John Bailey, suggested that the predominant Siamese attitude to the Japanese was still one of distrust and fear.²⁹ 'Some of the young bloods may be inclined to look to Japan as an ally in case of European intervention—of which the Siamese are mortally afraid—but the Siamese in general . . . are under no illusions . . .'.³⁰

26) Dormer to Simon, 10 July 1933, No. 114, F.O. 371/17175 (F5573/42/40).

27) Dormer to Simon, 25 January 1933, No. 21, F.O. 371/17178 (F1558/1558/40).

28) Minute by Harrison, 13 September 1933, F.O. 371/17175 (F5889/42/40).

29) Bailey to Simon, 11 August 1933, No. 133, F.O. 371/17175 (F6241/42/40).

30) Bailey to Orde, 11 September 1933, F.O. 371/17176 (F6721/42/40).

The right-wing Bowaradej rebellion of October the King refused to support, but, against the wishes of the government, he declined to go to Bangkok, and indeed shifted from Hua Hin to Songkla. Bailey reported that he seemed anxious for advice, and suggested that Dormer should break his journey back to Bangkok to visit him.³¹ But Dormer was 'doubtful of desirability of going to Senggora lest visit should be misrepresented . . . and compromise us'. The Foreign Office agreed.³² Bailey's own inclination—if the local vice-consul had to give advice—was that he should tell the King 'that I was quite without authority to commit His Majesty's Government at all and was most desirous not even to appear to interfere in the country's affairs but that as an old and true friend of the dynasty of Siam, I felt that the only possible course open to the King was to come to Bangkok and rule, for he alone could pull the country together and guide it'.³³ In the event, elections were held according to plan, and the King opened the new Assembly in Bangkok in December.

Bailey had thought the crisis might worsen. 'Should the King remain where he is, abdicate, or cross the border into Kedah . . . the only certainty is that His Majesty and the Royal Family would be utterly discredited, if they are not already, and the probability is that the Government would be, too.' What would happen in Bangkok? If the rank-and-file got out of hand, he would recommend that a man-of-war from Hong Kong be brought on to the scene.³⁴ This idea reached the Foreign Office first through an Admiralty telegram: 'ships actual presence at Bangkok might be needed not so much for actual as for the moral protection and influence it could afford'.³⁵ The Foreign Office sought a full report. Bailey said it was a warning not a recommendation: a ship might be needed eventually, but there was 'no likelihood of this at present'.³⁶ The Foreign Office remained sensitive on the subject of

31) Telegram, 31 October 1933, No. 45, F.O. 371/17176 (F6858/42/40).

32) Telegram, 2 November 1933, No. 47, and reply, F.O. 371/17176 (F6906/42/40).

33) Bailey to Simon, 31 October 1933, No. 182, F.O. 371/17176 (F7534/42/40).

34) Bailey to Simon, 21 October 1933, No. 171, F.O. 371/17176 (F7426/42/40).

35) Telegram, 28 October 1933, No. 269, F.O. 371/17176 (F6847/42/40).

36) Telegram, 2 November 1933, No. 46, F.O. 371/17176 (F6907/42/40).

intervention. Undoubtedly it was an ultimate possibility—even given the state of British power in the Far East—at least in the sense of a naval presence. But it was to be avoided if at all possible, and hints about it had to be given in the most limited way. The aim was to encourage restraint, and not to promote further tension between ‘extremists’ and ‘moderates’.

This attitude is summed up by Dormer’s remarks when, on his return to Bangkok, he saw the foreign minister, *Phya Abhibal*. They discussed the Bowaradej rebellion and the flight to Songkla.

He said that mischief-makers had been active, spreading rumours about British intervention and the presence of warships in the Gulf, to which I replied that I hoped that the Government had dealt severely with them. If we intervened it would be because the Siamese had forced our hands, and in self-protection. He knew, I said, how much I disliked this pretence that we were standing over them with the big stick. *Phya Abhibal* assured me that our attitude was well understood and highly appreciated in responsible circles.

Dormer told the foreign minister that he had decided against going to Songkla so as to avoid embarrassing either King or government.³⁷

Dormer also spoke to the foreign minister about the lectures on Siam Yatabe, the Japanese minister, was giving in his own country. *Phya Abhibal* said they resulted from Siam’s abstention over Manchuria. ‘The attitude of Siam on that occasion, he said, was intended to mark her neutrality [between China and Japan], but Japan insisted on regarding it as showing support for her case.’ The lectures, Dormer felt, pointed to Japan’s interest in Siam,

and perhaps to a desire to be regarded as its champion against ‘foreign aggression’. I am told that there are some Siamese who affect to believe that if we did not send ships to intervene during the recent troubles it was because the Japanese stopped us.

37) Dormer to Simon, 10 November 1933, No. 195, F.O. 371/17176 (F7921/42/40).

Among the Siamese of the older generation I have never found anything but fear and dislike of Japan, but they were evicted last June, and I should not be surprised if the youthful elements behind the Government today, obsessed as they are with the bogey of 'foreign (British or French) domination', are looking to Japan to hold us back in the event, as they think, of our interfering in their domestic disputes. It is a frame of mind that the Japanese might easily wish to encourage, although I have seen no signs of their carrying on any such propaganda in Siam³⁸

Early in 1934 the Foreign Office were still inclined to play down the actual role of Japan, if not the potential. Prince Purachatra, in a conversation with W.A.R. Wood, former consul-general at Chiangmai, had alluded to irredentism 'amongst the younger members of the new Government', who counted on Japanese support. Such ideas, Dormer noted, were put forward before the revolution, for instance by Bowaradej himself. These had, he agreed, made some impact on the new generation, too. 'But I give them enough sense to realise that they have more urgent tasks to think about than extending their present frontiers. They must learn to work and to hold their own against a Chinese population; and they must learn how to live in harmony with each other' Prince Purachatra, commented C.W. Orde, head of the Far Eastern Department at the Foreign Office, was trying to 'make our blood curdle'; and Sir R. Vansittart, the Permanent Under-Secretary, suggested that it did not need to be taken 'very seriously, though the idea of the decadency of the West—no new one—is interesting in its frequent manifestations'.³⁹ Dormer did not think 'this new friendship for Japan which inspires the younger Siamese' would last long 'because its benefits are so one-sided': Japanese imports swamped the market, but Japan closed the door to Siamese rice. A.W.G. Randall believed Japan was 'more after trade than anything else. The movement needs watching, however'.⁴⁰

38) Dormer to Simon, 10 November 1933, No. 196, F.O. 371/17176 (F7922/42/40).

39) Dormer to Simon, 11 January 1934, No. 13, and minutes, F.O. 371/18206 (F1185/21/40).

40) Enclosures in Dormer to Foreign Secretary, 6 February 1934, No. 33, and minutes, F.O. 371/18210 (F1691/1691/40).

Luang Pradit, cleared of Communism, was alleged to have declared Japan 'the first Asiatic Power', and spoke of its plan to build a Kra canal. Becoming minister of the interior, he might, G.W. Harrison thought, 'cause us some trouble'.⁴¹

James Baxter, the Financial Adviser, somewhat beset by what he regarded as the virtual breakdown of administration, spoke of an 'active pro-Japanese campaign Young Siam is convinced that an Anglo-Japanese war is imminent; that Japan will have a walk-over; that Siam should have an active part in the war on the Japanese side . . .'.⁴² Dormer himself became more concerned. In May—after the Amai declaration—he told Randall of 'a distinct tendency on the part of the younger Siamese to look to Japan. The idea that Great Britain might be involved in war with Japan had increased Siamese self-confidence almost to the point of annoyance . . .'.⁴³

Dormer's successor, Sir Josiah Crosby, an old hand who had gone to Bangkok as student interpreter in 1904,⁴⁴ noted that 'the gang in power' were 'secretive' and reluctant

to entertain direct relations with the foreign community The aloofness of Ministers is, I fancy, due to an inferiority complex, combined with the idea that Foreign Powers favour a restoration of the old state of things. It may be feasible to remove both of these factors; I have at least made it abundantly clear to all those with whom I have spoken that I have not come out with a big stick behind my back, that there need be no fear of interference on our part, and that Britain wishes the new Siam all success in the process of working out her destinies The restoration of confidence in our attitude and intentions should of itself help to correct any tendency on the part of the Siamese to orientate themselves towards Japan

41) Dormer to Simon, 9 March 1934, No. 59, and minute, F.O. 371/18206 (F2261/21/40).

42) Baxter to Cook, 17 April 1934, F.O. 371/18207 (F3420/21/40).

43) Minute by Randall, 9 May 1934, F.O. 371/18210 (F2731/2202/40).

44) Josiah Crosby, *Siam: The Crossroads*, London, 1945, p. 1.

This Crosby felt he could not take too seriously, since, 'temperamentally' and 'racially', Japanese and Siamese were 'poles apart'; and the Siamese were 'at once too astute and too proud to derive from Nippon—at second-hand—their instruction in the knowledge and sciences of the West; they are more likely to prefer the original article procured at its source' Crosby ascribed the initiative in these developments more to Japan than to Siam. 'It seems to be all part of the big drive, inspired largely by economic motives, in which Japan has been engaged in the Far East during the past two years or so' ⁴⁵

A few weeks later, Crosby modified his view of the Siamese attitude to Japan. What he had said applied to

the older generation of Siamese, but I have since discovered that the young men of today are less fastidious than their forbears, and that the facilities for technical education offered in Japan are likely to attract them on the ground of cheapness I am now disposed to regard Japanese rivalry with us here as a thing which should not be taken too lightly. Japan is underselling us all along the line and I must confess I cannot see a remedy for the evil . . . ⁴⁶

True, with the fading of the idea that Britain and France would intervene against the revolution, there was 'even a dawning recollection of the threat to Siam's independence—always so present to the mind of her late rulers—which would arise if the Japanese should ever succeed in obtaining for themselves an absolutely free hand in Asia' But as a result of its industrial and military activities, Japan had attained a 'predominant position' in Asia, and Siam was bound to take it into account as 'one of the pivotal points around which her foreign policy must turn' Furthermore, Siam might seek more Japanese advisers, who would be cheaper than the Europeans, and, for a similar reason, might send more students to Japan.

45) Crosby to Orde, 18 August 1934, F.O. 371/18207 (F5730/21/40).

46) Crosby to Orde, 29 September 1934, F.O. 371/18210 (F6579/3035/40).

Randall thought that this despatch confirmed the view that any marked move towards the left in Siam would increase the rapprochement between Siam and Japan, and that the latter are steadily pursuing peaceful penetration there. Unless this, however, is done with great discretion, the suspicion of the Siamese is likely to be aroused and an anti-Japanese reaction would occur. Direct methods of counteracting the Japanese penetration are hardly possible but it may be suggested that if our general prestige in the Far East is clearly maintained, the danger of our influence in Siam being destroyed would be obviated.

'It illustrates the kind of thing that will happen to an even greater extent', Orde echoed, 'if we do not resist Japanese pretensions to behave as they like in the Far East.' Wellesley thought the Japanese held the 'trump cards They are determined to become, and will become, the dominant power in the Far East. I don't see how we can prevent it.' Lord Stanhope, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary, suggested Japan could be kept lean. 'Japan's finances are far from being in a flourishing condition. She depends on China for a large part of her trade, and China is not prepared to eat out of Japan's hand unless she is urged by other Powers to do so ' 47

The debate on Siam thus merged into the debate on Japan. Britain, it was recognised, had few means of resisting Japan, if any, but the role of China could be important. It was also important to uphold British prestige so far as possible. For that, too, might influence the attitude of others, such as the Siamese. Britain must at least remain one of the pivots of Siam's foreign policy. So far as their policy towards Siam itself was concerned, the British had sought to appear neutral in the revolution and after it. They had many ties with the old regime. But they recognised that the best hope of retaining an influence in Siam—aside from retaining prestige in the Far East as a whole—was to maintain good relations with the new régime. It was necessary, therefore, not to be identified with opposition to it. On the other hand, anti-foreign or 'extremist' or 'Communist' policies would be unwelcome, and 'modera-

47) Crosby to Foreign Secretary, 25 September 1934, No. 200, F.O. 371/18210 (F6575/3035/40).

tion' was preferable. It could, however, be counselled only cautiously, and the use opponents of the extremists made of alleged British readiness to intervene was somewhat embarrassing and might even be counter-productive. The best solution was a constitutional monarchy. For that, it would seem, King Prajadhipok was working. But he could make only limited use of a British threat to intervene. His other resources were limited, too.

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King Vajiravudh had employed favourites. Seeing himself as recapturing the spirit of King Chulalongkorn, King Prajadhipok had displaced them with princely ministers. But this was to hamper him when he came to believe that Siam must move in the direction of constitutional monarchy. On his visit to the U.S. in 1931, he told the press he intended to grant a constitution.⁴⁸ But the plans drawn up for the inauguration of a constitution on the 150th anniversary of the Chakri dynasty were not carried out because of opposition from the princes.⁴⁹ The King gave way, although, according to Prince Tewawong Warothai, warning them 'that the inevitable result would be a coup d'état and a military dictatorship'.⁵⁰ Granting a constitution might have averted the revolution; certainly it would have affected its course.

Interpretations of the King's conduct after the revolution vary, both in contemporary reports and among historians. But the interpretation that seems to make most sense suggests that the King's aim continued to be a constitutional monarchy, and that he struggled with such means as he possessed to bring it about. The revolution, once begun, had to be accepted. Immediate abdication, or the encouragement of right-wing reaction, had to be avoided; they might only precipitate chaos and foreign intervention. It was necessary to proceed to constitutional monarchy from the revolution, instead of from absolutism.

48) Chula Chakrabongse, *The Twain Have Met*, London, n.d., p. 135.

49) Batson, pp. 82-85.

50) Johns to Simon, 29 June 1932, No. 137, F.O. 371/16261 (F5918/4260/40).

The Promoters were a minority of civilian and military leaders. Extremism might be modified by fear of foreign intervention, though the British denied they would intervene, and the threat could rebound on those who used it. Extremism might also be modified perhaps by threats of abdication. But some of the left-wing would have found that welcome, particularly if it could be made to seem the result of the King's own decision, so that they did not incur blame from peasant masses loyal to the King. The best check on extremism and the best route to constitutional monarchy, King Prajadhipok believed, would be free elections, which might at once make Siamese politics more democratic and more conservative. Yet the Promoters, entrenched in Senate and Executive Committee, believed this, too. The King had only the same limited means to bring them round. The threat of foreign intervention was unhelpful. Threats of abdication had some value, but ultimately the bluff was called. The King's 'main thesis' was 'that he had given up his absolute power to the whole Thai people and not to any group'.⁵¹ His function would be purely ceremonial only when Siam was truly democratic.⁵² His pre-coup constitutional plans resembled those of the Promoters in their gradualist approach to democracy. But there were significant differences. The King had planned meantime to retain a real veto power on legislation and to choose the nominated members of the Assembly. With the Promoters installed, those plans were difficult to realise. If they proved impossible, the King would have lost his powers to the Promoters, not to the people. Earlier and freer elections would become essential.

Contemporaries were often impatient with the King, and historians have misunderstood him. He should have mobilised popular support in the conservative cause, it is implied. His poor eyesight—he had cataracts in both eyes—and his fear of physical violence contributed to his failure to do so. He was, as he himself admitted, indecisive: 'he himself once told me that he saw both sides of every question, which quality made him a philosopher but not a resolute monarch'.⁵³ But surely the fact

51) Chula Chakrabongse, p. 185.

52) Thawatt, p. 251.

53) Chula Chakrabongse, p. 156.

tion' was preferable. It could, however, be counselled only cautiously, and the use opponents of the extremists made of alleged British readiness to intervene was somewhat embarrassing and might even be counter-productive. The best solution was a constitutional monarchy. For that, it would seem, King Prajadhipok was working. But he could make only limited use of a British threat to intervene. His other resources were limited, too.

* * *

King Vajiravudh had employed favourites. Seeing himself as recapturing the spirit of King Chulalongkorn, King Prajadhipok had displaced them with princely ministers. But this was to hamper him when he came to believe that Siam must move in the direction of constitutional monarchy. On his visit to the U.S. in 1931, he told the press he intended to grant a constitution.⁴⁸ But the plans drawn up for the inauguration of a constitution on the 150th anniversary of the Chakri dynasty were not carried out because of opposition from the princes.⁴⁹ The King gave way, although, according to Prince Tewawong Warothai, warning them 'that the inevitable result would be a coup d'état and a military dictatorship'.⁵⁰ Granting a constitution might have averted the revolution; certainly it would have affected its course.

Interpretations of the King's conduct after the revolution vary, both in contemporary reports and among historians. But the interpretation that seems to make most sense suggests that the King's aim continued to be a constitutional monarchy, and that he struggled with such means as he possessed to bring it about. The revolution, once begun, had to be accepted. Immediate abdication, or the encouragement of right-wing reaction, had to be avoided; they might only precipitate chaos and foreign intervention. It was necessary to proceed to constitutional monarchy from the revolution, instead of from absolutism.

48) Chula Chakrabongse, *The Twain Have Met*, London, n.d., p. 135.

49) Batson, pp. 82-85.

50) Johns to Simon, 29 June 1932, No. 137, F.O. 371/16261 (F5918/4260/40).

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was that he saw more clearly than others that royal identification with reaction would have been the way to civil war, not to constitutional monarchy. Some, by contrast, imply that he should have identified himself more closely with the Promoters' régime. He should not have spent so much time out of Bangkok at Hua Hin or, after the Bowaradej outbreak, at Songkla or, ultimately, abroad. Perhaps, indeed, he needed an especially clear head to follow out his own hard-won policy among old-fashioned counsellors and courtiers. But on the other hand, he believed, with some justice, that he could have no influence on the Promoters if he simply endorsed all their actions and became their king.

King Prajadhipok lost his battle, but it is hard to be sure that he made major mistakes in strategy or tactics. If the revolution was not to be followed by major bloodshed, then political power was almost certain to remain for a long time in the hands of the civilian-military oligarchy that had seized power; among whom, too, the military would have a strong, even increasing, influence. The country is still working out the implications of the revolution. It is searching, rather as the King searched, for an Assembly that will share power and behave moderately, diminishing the role both of civilian extremists and of military politicians.

The fear of intervention helped to induce moderation among the Promoters, and the King made use of it. He accepted the revolution, but hoped to affect its outcome. His attitude, the Foreign Office recognised, was important as a stabilising factor, although a representative of Vickers, who noted the importance in the coup of the armoured cars the firm had been selling, also noted that the King 'seemed to have no desire to make a fight of it nor did any of his advisers appear to have much in the way of guts';⁵⁴ and Dormer relayed a report 'that the main reason which prompted the King to accept the revolutionaries' demands, and return to the capital was the fear of what might befall the royal princes', held as hostages.⁵⁵ Dormer reported in August that relations between King and Executive Committee were 'perfectly amicable', but

54) Enclosure in Birch to Foreign Office, 13 July 1932, F.O. 371/16261 (F5547/4260/40).

55) Dormer to Simon, 28 July 1932, No. 158, F.O. 371/16261 (F6563/4260/40).

that King Prajadhipok did not wish to receive foreigners, as he had lost face; and that, although he appeared 'contented with the way that things are now going', he wished to abdicate, and preparations were being made for him to live abroad.⁵⁶ Such comments are not inconsistent with the overall interpretation of the King's strategy. Receiving foreigners would add to distrust and undue fear of intervention. The abdication threat had to be kept alive as the Promoters proceeded, on the King's insistence, to draw up a definitive constitution.⁵⁷ Dormer added that, when the People's Party denigrated the Royal Family after the coup, the King announced his intention of leaving the country at once, and was only persuaded by the Queen to revert to 'his former intention of returning to Bangkok'. But such a hesitation could easily occur in carrying out such a difficult policy as the King was substantially set on.

In September Dormer reported a conversation with Prince Tewa-wong Warothai. 'It was perhaps only natural that he should regard the political outlook with misgivings, but it was news to me when he said that the King intended to make the new Constitution the deciding factor whether he should stay or go ' Other hints to the same effect had appeared elsewhere.

It would seem that the King knows what is in the wind and that his decision is being divulged either in order to act as a brake against the extremists, who would deprive him of any power under the Constitution, or as a warning to the moderates of what to expect if they cannot assert themselves. That His Majesty intends to act up to it is, I think, clear, for he has been preparing for the eventuality of living abroad. . . .

The moderates, Dormer noted, 'in addition to wishing to give the King his proper place at the head of the Constitution with a due measure of authority', insisted that the elections be free, and that candidates should not require the prior approval of the Executive Committee. Dormer thought the King would not 'act precipitately, although he is

56) Dormer to Simon, 20 August 1932, No. 178, F.O. 371/16261 (F6860/4260/40).

57) J.K. Ray, *Portraits of Thai Politics*, New Delhi, 1972, p. 69.

prepared to come to acceptable terms with the régime, King Prajadhipok did not wish to place himself in its power. The difficulty was that he appeared to be in the power of the reactionaries who surrounded him. The outbreak of the Bowaradej rebellion made that difficulty still greater.

Even in August King Prajadhipok had outlined the situation in rather depressing terms to James Baxter, the Financial Adviser. The People's Party aimed 'to hold on to power through fear. It cannot tolerate the idea of any other party coming into power . . . ' Only *Luang Pradit* had a policy.

His aim is a Socialist republic. He realises that a Republic is not possible at the moment but wants it as soon as possible. His policy is highly to the taste of the lazy Siamese intelligenzia which wants to break the monopoly of the Chinese and their foreign commercial enterprises. They are too lazy and incapable of doing it themselves, and appeal to the State to do for them what they ought to do by their own efforts.

The *Luang Pradit* faction spread 'scabrous' stories of the Royal Family with a view to bringing its members into disrepute. Unless there were 'some organised counter-action', it would succeed. 'The only politically conscious class is inclined to Communism.' The People's Party aimed at a monopoly of government jobs, and indeed the princes had had too long a spell. Most of the Party were loyal to the throne, but they feared that the King, persuaded by his relatives, would seize power. The extremists wanted to displace the King, and hoped 'to manoeuvre in such a way that the King will abdicate of his own free will'. The loyalty of the Army and Navy was limited. 'They will not tolerate the King taking active command . . . '

Most of the people were monarchists, the King continued, but they were quite unorganised. The 'hardened conservatives . . . live in hopes that the magical and supernatural powers inherent in the person of the King will one day confound all his enemies . . . ' Such hopes inhibited their action: indeed they expected the King to act, not themselves. The 'constitutional monarchists' shared something of the same view, and were

lost without the leadership of the Princes. They are not desperate enough to face death for a cause They support the Constitution as a whole but they would like to see more conservative people at the helm. They think vaguely of making a coup and hope to goodness that someone would get up and do it. They think that the King ought to do something about it and are rather fed up because he does not. They vaguely hope that foreign intervention will save the country from Communism It is unfortunate that in the circumstances, the Princes cannot lead them. If the Princes were to attempt to lead the Royalists, it would be the end of the Monarchy. If the Royalists are to do anything they must find a leader from their own ranks. A real menace of Communism may perhaps drive them to action—possibly too late.

Finally there were a few 'diehard absolute monarchists', whose idea was 'to make a coup and wipe out the whole lot of the Revolutionaries. They hope that the King will call upon his loyal troops, make war on Bangkok, execute the Revolutionaries, and reassert his personal rule. All this is sheer madness. It is said that many of the foreigners are of this opinion.'

'There is no turning back. All efforts must be concentrated on making the Constitution work' The King had some influence on the *Phya Mano* government. 'With the change of Government his influence can only be a negative one.' To ensure even that

he must have a certain liberty of action. He must not put himself into a position where he could readily be coerced. His strongest weapon is the threat to abdicate—effectively used several times already. To be really effective there must be some chance that he could put the threat into execution, that is, to be able to go away, or to retire to some safe place, and await events. To make the same threat while he is in Bangkok is not half so effective since he lacks liberty of action. The revolutionaries have only to get hold of his person effectively to stop any kind of movement on the part of the Royalists

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Furthermore, the King's presence in Bangkok 'gives false hopes to the Royalists and makes them more content than ever to leave things to the gods. It is really a misfortune that the people place too much hope in the King. He cannot help them much. The sooner they realise that they must help themselves, the better.'

In a covering letter to Baxter, the King admitted he did not see much hope. I wish people would not expect too much and would think out some way of defending themselves . . .

The chief fight is against Communism. Perhaps you and other foreign advisers can still help by threatening to resign en bloc. They are still afraid of the bogey of foreign intervention. One must use that bogey to the last even if there is no chance of foreign intervention taking place . . .

Bailey criticised this suggestion, and also the King's references to Communism. Indeed he criticised the King himself. 'The letter is pathetic and has a ring about it of Richard II.' The King underrated 'his influence with the people. His reasons for not coming to the capital are specious but not sound. His Majesty is notoriously terrified of violence to his person.' Bailey believed that the sovereign could rally the people. 'But the King's constitution is very feeble; his self-esteem has had to suffer many shattering blows; he is surrounded by suspicious and narrow-minded old men and by ignorant and bumptious young ones, from whom nobody in his senses could imagine that any good advice could be got . . .'

At the Foreign Office Harrison shared Bailey's attitude and referred to 'the King's vacillating and defeatist attitude'.⁷² But Orde thought King Prajadhipok had 'few illusions'.⁷³ Indeed, though he was clearly depressed, his analysis was apt. The constitution had to be effectively operated. Rallying the people, or calling upon the Army, was unlikely to work. What was needed was conservative political action, but it was hard to elicit. Meanwhile the King could do little but use threats of abdication and foreign intervention and talk of

72) Bailey to Simon, 10 October 1933, No. 165, enclosures and minute, F.O. 371/17176 (F7281/42/40).

73) Minute, 16 November 1933, F.O. 371/17176 (F7061/42/40).

Communism. Not all of this was wise; but the policy behind it was thoughtful, and not simply, nor even substantially, the result of personal or political cowardice. The note contains some obscurities. Does it suggest at one point a royalist coup rather than political action? The general tone seems to be against it. Certainly no prince should lend himself to such a venture.

Was the King aware of plans for the Bowaradej rebellion? Bailey thought that the Baxter memorandum indicated that he was.⁷⁴ But it would seem that if he were aware of it, he would have wanted to stop it, even if he were unable to do so. Bailey also reported hearing that the King wanted a non-princely leader for it.⁷⁵ But it might have been more accurate to say that he did not want a prince involved. In any case he repudiated the rebels, though some of their professed aims were his also. But his absence from Bangkok and his court contacts made him suspect, and his flight to Songkla—perhaps indeed influenced by the physical fear of a half-blind man, though also, no doubt, by a rumour that the government planned to seize him at Hua Hin⁷⁶—only increased the suspicion. As Harrison put it, ‘while the Government is convinced that the rebellion could not have taken place without the connivance of the King and the Royal Family, his Royalist supporters are aggrieved at his precipitate flight to Senggora, . . . where he remained throughout the trouble’⁷⁷

On his return Dormer called on the foreign minister.

He expressed openly, to my surprise, his conviction that the King was aware that the rising was to take place, because Prince Bowaradej would never have moved if he had feared His Majesty’s disapproval. This remark I ventured to doubt, and asked why should the King wish to see the Government overturned which contained several Ministers who enjoyed his confidence, including *Phya Phahol*, and with whom I understood he had been cooperating in a friendly manner

74) Bailey to Simon, 15 October 1933, No. 166, F.O. 371/17176 (F7213/42/40).

75) Bailey to Simon, 21 October 1933, No. 171, F.O. 371/17176 (F7426/42/40).

76) Enclosure in Gurney to Orde, 11 November 1933, F.O. 371/17176 (F7296/42/40); Newbould to Bailey, 25 October 1933, F.O. 371/17176 (F7534/42/40).

77) Memorandum, 31 December 1933, F.O. 371/1716 (F7350/42/40).

Phya Abhibal agreed, but said the King was embittered by attacks on him and on the royal family. 'He then said that the King was surrounded by evil counsellors (which is perfectly true), and that even if His Majesty himself was left in ignorance that the rising was to take place, the Court must have known about it....' Dormer concluded that the King's position was 'shaken on all sides', suspected as he was by some of connivance, by others of weakness. 'I am not so sure that there is nothing to be said in his defence'; his situation had been 'exceedingly difficult'. Dormer thought abdication was likely.⁷⁸

Conflicting reports from Songkla in November suggested both that the King was 'very depressed'⁷⁹ and 'very cheerful'. Both came from the vice-consul, the latter following a long conversation with the King during the elections. Both were present at the election for the *changwat* of Songkla. The King

commented on the fact that most of the Tambon representatives were village headmen and elders . . . men of experience.

He said that he had had quite a fight to persuade the Government to agree to as many as half of the members of the Assembly being elected, since the Government wished two-thirds to be appointed. But he had insisted that, with half of the Assembly elected, the Government ought to be able to maintain a working majority and that, if they could not, they ought not to remain in power and he had had his way.

Referring to the non-elected members, His Majesty said that these would be chosen by the Government but the list would be submitted to him and he would raise objections to any whom he considered unsuitable. He hoped that, by a certain amount of 'bargaining', he would be able to ensure that the non-elected members would be fairly representative. He had warned the Government that, if they selected unsuitable people and insisted on their appointment, there would be a great deal of feeling against them throughout the country, which might lead to further bloodshed, and he hoped that they would take his warning to heart.

78) Dormer to Simon, 10 November 1933, No. 195, F.O. 371/17176 (F7921/42/40).

79) Newbould to Dormer, 17 November 1933, F.O. 371/18206 (F21/21/40).

The candidates had all so far declared themselves in favour of Constitutional Monarchy and he hoped that this fact too might have a moderating influence upon the more extremist members of the Government.

The Government had promised him that, after the elections, they would allow the Royalists to form a political party and he hoped to be able to make them keep this promise. He regarded this as very important, since, if people were not allowed some outlet for the expression of their political views, they were liable to resort to violence⁸⁰

The King was obviously still hopeful: he used the rebellion as an argument with the People's Party for giving conservatives a political role. *Phya Devahastin* was elected for Bangkok.⁸¹

The King saw Baxter and Sir R. Holland, the Judicial Adviser, in December. He referred to

the recent upheaval There were two movements in progress at the same moment: one within Bangkok, the other outside. The first, which represented genuine discontent with the methods of *Phya Phabol's* party, would have won if it had not been forestalled and hampered by the effort of Prince Bowaradej. No movement which had for its apparent object the restoration of the old régime could possibly succeed. It was foredoomed to failure, and for that reason I was strongly opposed to Prince Bowaradej or any other member of the princely order heading such a movement. If Prince Bowaradej had abstained, the forces of the moderate party would certainly have gained the upper hand in Bangkok, and recent history would have been different.

The King's own part was 'one of great difficulty. I was bitterly reproached for not having come to Bangkok and placed myself at the head of the so-called Royalist party. What good would that have done? I should have been a pawn in the hands of any party that could control my movements. I should have descended into the arena of politics. I might have imperilled the existence of the monarchy.' The government, on the other hand, suspected his decision to go to Songkla, a decision taken at a moment's notice, but proved right by events.

80) Newbould to Dormer, 26 November 1933, F.O. 371/18206 (F283/21/40).

81) Dormer to Simon, 14 December 1933, F.O. 371/18206 (F556/21/40).

King Prajadhipok thought that 'what has happened has cleared the air'. Even the fanatics surrounding *Phya* Phahol perceived 'that at the moment the King is a necessary feature in the Constitution, and I think that the belief is gaining ground that I am absolutely opposed to any attempt to reinstate the absolute monarchy. That is quite impossible. There are elements of hope The elections were fairly conducted Those elected were 'not animated by extreme democratic views'. *Phya* Devahastin had attracted a following from the nominated as well as the elected. The outlook had 'improved' since the Assembly was elected. The aim of the People's Party was to stay in power. 'Unless they are turned out by force through some counter-movement within the army, they will continue in power until the Assembly representing public opinion is capable of indicating its will in a manner which must command obedience.' From this account it seems clear that the King still put his trust in a democratic assembly.

There was one difficult issue which he put forward. He wanted death sentences on those involved in the rebellion commuted, and hoped the hotheads in power would be influenced by the unfavourable effect executions would have on foreign opinion. Again the King's attitude was open to misconstruction. Again, however, his explanation rings true. 'Vengeance would be exacted in the long run from those responsible, and one can only envisage, as a result, a vista of revolutions, each more sanguinary than the last'

The King gave no interview to Dormer, but wanted his comments passed on to him. Dormer felt that King Prajadhipok's account of the revolution was 'absolutely authentic'. The flight to Songkla, decided on 'in a moment of panic', was 'fully justified by results'. At the Foreign Office, Randall concluded that the King made out 'a good case for himself', and that his view was on the whole 'balanced and clear-sighted'.⁸²

Even before the revolution, the King had contemplated a visit to Europe during 1933. He had had an eye operation in the U.S. in 1931, but needed further treatment. The tour was put off, but the idea

82) Dormer to Simon, 17 January 1934, No. 17, enclosures, and minutes, F.O. 371/18206 (F1194/21/40).

remained current and, combined with talk of abdication, prompted speculation. At the end of 1933, the King determined to go in the New Year, though the government wanted him to remain until the close of the Assembly in March.⁸³ One reason was his health. There were political reasons, too, of which he told the vice-consul at Songkla.

Many people, he said, thought he ought not to leave his Kingdom at so critical a period, but he himself thought it would be better for the country if he went away for a time. Some members of the Government could not rid themselves of the idea that he was anxious to regain absolute power and his going away might help to persuade them that such was not in fact the case. Moreover his absence from the country might help to calm down the more hot-headed of the extreme Royalists. If the Government could not keep the country peaceful while he was away, they would thereby show themselves unfit to govern and, also, if any reactionary movement manifested itself during his absence, it would be clear that the country itself desired a change and people could not say (as some have said recently), that he had inspired it. He hoped that by the time he returned from his trip abroad the country as a whole would have made up its mind as to what form of Government it wanted⁸⁴

The same sort of statement was made to Holland and Baxter.

I feel that the situation will be eased if I absent myself for a time from Siam. If I remain in the country, but am away from Bangkok, I can exercise hardly any control or influence, and my name may be taken in vain by conspirators against the present Government. If I stay in Bangkok, I am a target for complaints, and discontented persons will try to focus their intrigues upon me. If I go away for a time, there may be a chance for things to settle down And, as a matter of fact, I feel that I cannot stand much more of it. The strain of the past two years has been terrible. My eye must be operated on shortly for cataract⁸⁵

83) Telegram, 29 December 1933, No. 63R, F.O. 371/17174 (F7983/38/40).

84) As note 80.

85) As note 82.

The King left on 12 January 1934, after a radio speech in which he reaffirmed his belief in the constitution and his support for *Phya* Phahol.⁸⁶ But the Assembly was to prove a disappointment, and the rift between King and government grew rather than declined. The Assembly passed bills over the King's veto, including one abolishing his prerogative over death warrants; and the government undertook legal proceedings against *Phya* Devahastin. The King, though it seems he expected to do so, did not return. He used his threat of abdication in negotiations with the government, and when these negotiations failed, nothing remained but to carry it out.

* * *

The King's visit raised some issues of protocol in England. He travelled as the Prince of Sukhodaya, not as King, but some notice had to be taken of him.⁸⁸ In fact he lunched with George V and the Prime Minister, dined with the Lord Mayor and the Foreign Secretary, went to Ascot and Aldershot, and was seen off by Prince George at Victoria.⁸⁹ He returned from the Continent in September and went to stay at Knowle, Cranleigh.⁹⁰ It was at this Surrey house that the crucial negotiations were to take place. They risked carrying embarrassment beyond matters of protocol, especially in the context of those Siamese suspicions of Britain's attitude to the revolution which Crosby was seeking to disperse.⁹¹ There were, in fact, some episodes of tragedy-comedy.

86) Telegram, 12 January 1934, No. 2 Saving, F.O. 371/18207 (F479/115/40).

87) Crosby to Simon, 12 October 1934, No. 211, F.O. 371/18207 (F6886/21/40).

88) Siamese Minister to Simon, 7 June 1933; Memorandum by Monck, 3 October, F.O. 371/17174 (F3870, 6383/38/40). Conversation with Siamese Chargé, 5 January 1934, and minutes, F.O. 371/18207 (F115/115/40).

89) Foreign Office to Coultas, 19 July 1934, F.O. 371/18208 (F4063/115/40).

90) Siamese Minister to Orde, 3 October 1934, F.O. 371/18208 (F5936/115/40).

91) Enclosure in Gurney to Orde, 22 November 1934, F.O. 371/18207 (F7046/21/40). Crosby to Orde, 2 February 1935, F.O. 371/19377 (F1649/296/40).

In mid-October the Siamese Consul in London, R.D. Craig, told Orde that the King had telegraphed his abdication to the Regent. 'The King wishes to remain in England, and to live an entirely quiet life here. He is anxious to know whether he would be allowed to live here. I told Mr. Craig that I could not imagine there would be any difficulty.' 'It is a pity we spent so much time and money on this poor little man', the Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, cruelly commented. 'Will there be any political reactions?' Orde thought that there might be an interregnum, since the King had no son. Possibly 'republican and quasi-communist elements' would 'get the upper hand This would be unfortunate and not free from repercussions on foreign policy, since the radical elements in the Siamese Government are critical of the employment of foreign advisers, anxious to try risky experiments with Siamese currency (against which the present British Financial Adviser has stood firm), and [may] possibly yield to the blandishments of Japan, who has recently been paying particular attention to Siam and encouraging the thought of herself as a protector of an Asiatic people against European exploiters.' But this was 'perhaps the most remote possibility'. Harrison thought the army would prevent the proclamation of a republic; but Randall suggested that 'the coming into power of Left politicians (with pro-Japanese sympathies)' was 'not to be entirely discounted'.⁹²

Crosby then telegraphed that the abdication was not definite. The Siamese Minister in Paris was being sent to interview the King, and later the government would probably send over an emissary to England who would 'endeavour to dissuade His Majesty from abdicating'.⁹³ Already the King's secretary had told Special Branch officers that there might be 'reprisals' if the King refused to return to Siam. The proposed emissaries were said to be *Luang* Pradit and *Luang* Thamrong Nawa-swasdi. The secretary said that the King did not wish to see them, and indeed was in some apprehension of them. The recent assassination of King Alexander in Marseilles came to mind, and the Home Office asked if the emissaries should be allowed to land in England. Harrison thought *Luang* Pradit an unlikely emissary and an unlikely assassin. He could

92) Minute by Orde, 16 October 1934, and others attached, F.O. 371/18208 (F6130/115/40).

93) Telegram, 25 October 1934, No. 49, F.O. 371/18208 (F6326/115/40).

not identify the other emissary. It was agreed that they could land, but that they must be kept under surveillance.⁹⁴ A partially reassuring telegram from Crosby confirmed this view.⁹⁵ The delegation in fact included *Chao Phya* Sri Dharmadhibes, ex-Minister of Finance, the president of the Assembly; *Luang* Thamrong Nawaswasdi, who was secretary-general of the State Council; and *Nai* Direk Jayanama, secretary to the foreign ministry.⁹⁶ Immediately after a telegram from Crosby had brought this information, the Home Office rang up to say that an individual called Thamrong had already arrived and gone straight to Knowle. Another worried telegram to Crosby: but this was another Thamrong, from the King's own secretariat.⁹⁷

The Foreign Office considered that the idea of a plot against the King's life was, as Harrison put it, likely 'to be a figment of the King's own imagination, stimulated by his ill-health and the recent assassination at Marseilles'. But certain elementary precautions had to be taken.⁹⁸ In fact the idea seems rather to have originated with the King's secretary and Scotland Yard.⁹⁹ The arrival of the delegation itself, respectable as it had turned out to be, still, however, required further precautions. Scotland Yard reported the delegates' reaching Genoa at the end of November. They were expected to attend a reception for students at the Legation in London on 10 December 'before attempting to seek audience with their King'. Two Special Branch officers would be with the King when the reception was held. Harrison told S.J. Baker of the Home Office 'that we were a little disturbed at the idea of two police officers being present when the King of Siam received the delegation, unless it were at H.M.'s own request'. Baker said Scotland Yard were satisfied that the delegation was 'more or less reputable, but were afraid

94) Hoare to Harrison, 24 October 1934, and minutes, F.O. 371/18208 (F6349/115/40).

95) Telegram, 26 October 1934, No. 51, F.O. 371/18208 (F6390/115/40).

96) Telegram, 6 November 1934, No. 56R, F.O. 371/18208 (F6608/115/40).

97) Memorandum by Harrison, 7 November 1934; telegram, 8 November, No. 57, F.O. 371/18208 (F6653, 6654/115/40).

98) Minute, 5 December 1934, F.O. 371/18208 (F7146/115/40).

99) Cf. Crosby to Simon, 4 January 1935, No. 10, F.O. 371/19376 (F924/142/40).

that some Siamese students might accompany them to the reception. . . .’ He admitted ‘that it would be awkward if the sensational press got hold of the story that the detectives had insisted on being present at a discussion . . . on an internal Siamese affair, but he said that the King’s Private Secretary was rather a scare-monger’ He thought the detectives could be in a room nearby, and only attend the reception if specially invited by the King.¹⁰⁰

The King’s secretary sought the end of the Special Branch surveillance on 13 December. The previous day King Prajadhipok had met the delegation. According to the police officers, he had ‘weakened in his determination to abdicate. His demands have been acceded to almost in full. The outstanding question in contention is that of constitutional reform in the way of democratic election’ The King wanted a fully-elected Assembly. This point, Harrison believed, was new to the Foreign Office.¹⁰¹ In fact the Siamese chargé had already complained to the Foreign Office about an article in *The Times*, emanating, Orde thought, from someone in the King’s entourage, which put the contest in this context.

A conflict has arisen between King Prajadhipok . . . and the Assembly over the Bill passed by that body which deprives him of his power to review death sentences. The King . . . refused to sign the Bill until it had been submitted to a plebiscite, or had been made the issue of a General Election. The Assembly vetoed the proposal, whereat the King felt bound to offer his abdication as a protest against their action.

The conflict cannot fairly be interpreted as a quarrel between a ruler anxious to preserve the last vestiges of his once autocratic power and a representative Assembly voicing the political aspirations of a people. It is between a King who has surrendered to revolution as much as, or perhaps more than, a conscientious and liberal ruler should have done and on the other side an Assembly which represents at a generous estimate perhaps one-twentieth of the people of Siam

100) Baker to Orde, 7 December 1934, and minute, F.O. 371/18208 (F7294/115/40).

101) Baker to Harrison, 18 December 1934, and minute, F.O. 371/18208 (F7519/115/40)

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101) Baker to Harrison, 18 December 1934, and minute, F.O. 371/18208 (F7519/115/40)

The King believed in representative government. But cooperation with the present government had been almost impossible. 'It was given power by an Assembly half of whose members were nominated not because they represented the nation, but because they were sympathetic to the mixture of Radicalism and Socialism which inspired the first revolution. The other half consisted of members returned by an electorate in which the Government allowed no organised opposition, and not more than a fifth of the electors voted . . . ' The government's folly was shown by its continued espousal of plans as infantile as *Luang Pradit's*; its injustice by its merciless treatment of those who took part in or sympathised with the Bowaradej rebellion. 'When the King's refusal to give up his right to review death sentences is considered in the light of the fact that at least six men have been sentenced to death who sincerely believed that they were fighting for the King against a communistically-inclined Government it is easy to see why the breach has been opened and why it will be difficult to close . . . ' The King should, perhaps, have made his stand earlier. Ill-health and physical weakness helped to explain why he had not. But his sense of duty was an additional factor. 'He would even now be loth to leave his position if there was any real hope that he could save the Siamese from any of the troubles that lie ahead of them. Evidently he feels that there is little hope of this and that by remaining in his position he would only allow the Government to use his name and influence in impressing on his people a policy which they neither understand nor like . . . ' ¹⁰² Prince Varnvaidyakorn told Crosby that he thought the article was by Craig, 'who must have been inspired by the Court'. ¹⁰³

Early in 1935 the Foreign Office heard of an 'ultimatum' by the King which put the question rather differently. He would abdicate, unless satisfied on four points: that the constitution should be altered so that a two-thirds majority was required before the Assembly could override the royal veto; that the King should have an effective share in

102) Conversation, 20 November 1934, F.O. 371/18211 (F6922/6922/40). *The Times*, 19 November.

103) Crosby to Orde, 12 December 1934, F.O. 371/18211 (F7671/6922/40).

selecting the non-elected members; that there should be an amnesty for political prisoners; and that the cabinet should not disband the palace guards.¹⁰⁴ It soon appeared, however, that the 'ultimatum' was only a basis for discussion, and the premier complained of the 'vacillation' of the King, swayed by his entourage.¹⁰⁵ Early in February Crosby reported the Assembly's opposition to the King's conditions.¹⁰⁶ At the end of the month, the Foreign Office heard, first from the police, and then from Craig, that the King was expected to announce his abdication on 2 March.¹⁰⁷ A telegram from Crosby on 3 March confirmed it.¹⁰⁸ The young prince Ananta Mahidol succeeded, and a Council of Regency was named.

One of the last 'unofficial' services of the Special Branch officers was to pass on to the Foreign Office a summary of the King's demands and the government's replies, and a translation of his letter of abdication. 'The Siamese Govt.', wrote John Chaplin, 'do not seem to have been particularly accommodating; on the face of it most of the demands are reasonable'. The government refused the King's demands that the nominated members should be elected by all the officials, active and retired, and not appointed by the government, and that Army and Navy officers on the active list should not take part in politics. It also refused his demand that his veto should be overridden only by a two-thirds majority or by plebiscite.¹⁰⁹ The abdication letter was a strong statement of the King's desire for 'true democracy',¹¹⁰ and is deservedly famous. But over the years he had taken this stand more consistently than his government, or the Foreign Office, had recognised.

104) Telegram, 4 January 1935, No. 1, F.O. 371/19376 (F142/142/40).

105) Telegram, 8 January 1935, No. 3, F.O. 371/19376 (F179/142/40).

106) Telegram, 1 February 1935, No. 1 Saving, F.O. 371/19376 (F965/142/40).

107) Baker to Chaplin, 27 February 1935, and minutes, F.O. 371/19376 (F1361/142/40).

108) Telegram, 3 March 1935, No. 18, F.O. 371/19376 (F1455/142/40).

109) Baker to Chaplin, 8 March 1935, enclosures, and minute, F.O. 371/19376 (F1625/142/40).

110) Batson, pp. 101-02; Thawatt, 249-51; K.P. Landon, *Siam in Transition*, London, 1939, pp. 257-9.

As Crosby rightly implied, King Prajadhipok's policy had failed. He had, after all, agreed to the constitution; he had appended his signature to the list of nominated deputies; his demands were not approved even by the elected deputies.¹¹¹ The King's explanation was that he had signed the constitution 'merely in order to tide over the critical period', and accepted nomination of half the Assembly 'in order to smooth matters over'.¹¹² When the situation failed to improve, he was faced with the task of amending the constitution, using still the weak, if not two-edged, weapon of abdication. He sought changes not because he wanted more power, but 'because there should be a safeguard against legislation contrary to the will of the people'.¹¹³ The government declined to alter the constitution which he had himself earlier accepted.¹¹⁴

Back in September 1932, Dormer had reminded Prince Tewawong of Shaw's play *The Apple Cart*, 'which he might do well to read just now'.¹¹⁵ King Magnus, indeed, used the threat of abdication to deal with the politicians, but he coupled it with the threat of entering electoral politics in competition. King Prajadhipok's threat of abdication was designed to bring in a system of electoral politics, which he believed would guarantee moderation. If there were a Thai equivalent of Proteus and Boanerges, they did not give in. There was no Shavian equivalent of *Luang Pibul Songgram*.

* * *

If he were out of the country, the King had remarked before leaving, no one would be able to say that he was responsible for any anti-government outbreaks. In his abdication letter, he insisted that no one should now cause trouble. 'Should anyone make use of my name for this purpose, let it be clearly understood that it will be without my consent

111) Crosby to Simon, 13 February 1935, No. 60, F.O. 371/19376 (F1935/142/40).

112) Memorandum, 26 December 2477, enclosed in *ibid*.

113) *ibid*.

114) Government reply, 9 January 2477, also enclosed in Crosby to Simon, 13 February 1935, No. 60.

115) As note 13.

or support’ Seeking to stay in England, the King assured Sir John Simon that he would ‘not abuse its hospitality by engaging in any kind of political activities schemes or plots whatever’.¹¹⁶ But the disturbed political history of Siam after 1935 once more raised suspicion of his involvement.

Even early in 1935 Crosby and others had forecast struggle within rather than against the government: they expected ‘an attempt on the part of *Luang* Pibul to oust from power *Luang* Pradit and his radical following’.¹¹⁷ Given the absence of democratic politics, it was not surprising that conspiracy followed conspiracy, though in a more complex way than Crosby anticipated, and that *Luang* Pibul became dominant. Early in 1939, it was alleged that *Phya* Song Suradej and others had plotted to recall the ex-King or the exiled Prince Boribhat, and planned an uprising rather along Bowaradej lines. Strong action was taken against the conspirators.¹¹⁸ The ex-King, interviewed by *The Daily Mail*, declared that they had not approached him.

‘I am accustomed to hear reports of plots against the present régime almost every fortnight’, he said.

‘The reason for the periodic attempts at rebellion is that the present régime does not allow the formation of political parties through which the public can air grievances’¹¹⁹

But Prince Chula Chakrabongse told Crosby that he was not quite certain of King Prajadhipok’s innocence. ‘The ex-King, he said, had become “desperate” and it was his nature to shut his eyes to unpleasant things which were likely to fall out to his advantage . . .’ Prince Chula, Crosby commented, was ‘no lover of the ex-King . . .’ but what he said tended to confirm the suspicion, amounting to conviction with the members of the Government, that the ex-King has all along maintained in secret an active interest in Siamese politics and that he has never ceased to work underground against the new régime’ Crosby hoped that resentment against the ex-King would not revive the suspicion

116) Prajadhipok to Simon, 20 March 1935, F.O. 371/19376 (F1957/142/40).

117) Crosby to Simon, 4 January 1935, No. 10, F.O. 371/19376 (F924/142/40).

118) Crosby to Halifax, 7 February 1934, F.O. 371/23586 (F1658/43/40).

119) *Daily Mail*, 31 January 1939.

'that we were on the side of the absolute monarchy and of the old régime ' He hoped, too, that the Siamese government would still send the young King to be educated in England.¹²⁰

Prince Athitaya, the President of the Council of Regency, had already put some pressure on a visitor from his old university, another friend of Prince Chula's, Steven Runciman of Trinity College, son of the Lord President of the Council. He had declared that the government was 'certain' that the plots against *Luang Pibul* were 'partly organised and financed by the ex-King. . . . ' Following a military coup, the ex-King would return by air, and the boy King would become Crown Prince. The model was King Carol's return to Rumania. Would Britain turn King Prajadhipok out on grounds of 'strong suspicion' alone? Prince Athitaya 'considered it to be very important that the ex-King should be removed from England, because that would please the Siamese Government very much and because there is a belief in Siam that Britain was in favour of the old régime and never liked the Constitutional Revolution, and because it would greatly simplify the question of the boy King's education ' The Foreign Office decided that no such 'drastic' step could be taken without proof, whatever the immediate political advantages of taking it might be.¹²¹

In March Prince Varnvaidyakorn told Crosby that *Luang Pibul's* government was 'exercised' by the way the ex-King was seeking to influence Siamese students in Britain, so that they returned home full of sympathy for him. Matters had been made worse by the discovery of the recent plot, 'to which the Cabinet is convinced that the ex-King was to some extent privy', and it had discussed not sending Siamese students to Britain.

We agreed that, in the absence of proof positive that the ex-King has been conspiring against the existing Government in Siam, His Majesty's Government could not well be expected to invite him to leave England. But we both of us came to the conclusion that good might be done if His Majesty's Government could at any rate see their way to requesting the

120) As note 118.

121) Hendriks to Harvey, received 18 January 1939, enclosure, and minutes, F.O. 371/23593 (F598/403/40).

ex-King to furnish them with an assurance that, so long as he remained in the United Kingdom, he would abstain from any activities that might be construed as interference in the present-day politics of Siam.

Prince Athitaya said the government was hesitating over sending the young King to Britain for his education. Crosby, who also broached the subject with *Luang* Pibul himself, asked the Foreign Office to take 'tactful steps'. Sending students to Britain was essential to uphold the 'good understanding' between Britain and post-1932 Siam.¹²²

At the Foreign Office, M.J.R. Talbot felt that the 'suggested approach to King Prajadhipok, although rather ticklish, is probably the best we can do'. Nigel Ronald thought that, if a chance could be found, the Foreign Office could indicate that the allegations had been made, and, without going into their factual basis, indicate that Anglo-Siamese relations would benefit if the King would give an assurance that he would not lend himself to such proceedings while in the United Kingdom. Asked to seek precedent, the Treaty Department pointed out that the British Government had asked ex-King Carol to leave Britain when he was engaged in plans to return to his throne. A 'channel' was found in Craig. He saw Sir George Mounsey, Assistant Under-Secretary. The ex-King, he said, had entertained the Siamese students at the request of the Siamese Minister. As for the conspiracy, he was sure there was no evidence against King Prajadhipok, and thought the allegations had been trumped up to justify cutting off his allowance. He could, he believed, easily obtain the ex-King's assurance, though he did not think it would stop the allegations; and indeed the assurance was promptly forthcoming.¹²³ But Crosby was still not entirely convinced of King Prajadhipok's innocence, and thought that his adherents had compromised him. The ex-King was 'notoriously weak, and has always been in the hands of those who are most closely in contact with him. It is not impossible that he may have had an idea of what was going on and preferred to ignore it—something like the attitude of our King Henry II in the affair of Thomas a Becket. That is the view which Prince Chula is inclined to take'¹²⁴

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122) Crosby to Halifax, 9 March 1939, No. 128, F.O. 371/23586 (F2695/61/40).

123) Minutes on *ibid.*; Craig to Mounsey, 26 April 1939, F.O. 371/23586 (F4062/61/40).

124) Crosby to Howe, 7 June 1939, F.O. 371/23586 (F7140/61/40).

The ex-King broke his public silence in 1941, at the time of the Thailand-Indo-China peace conference in Tokyo. *Luang Pibul* complained that his statement was not consistent with the Thai policy of 'equal friendship with all friendly powers'. King Prajadhipok had in fact denied that Siam's policy was dictated by Japan, but suggested that the protestations of friendship that Japan made had earlier been made to China too.

'Siam does not want to be under the direction of any nation. I am sure that this is the policy of the present Government. It has been the traditional policy of all the Kings of Siam to be friendly with Great Britain and the British Empire. That is the keystone of all Siamese foreign policy

'To me it would seem that Siam would be behaving almost suicidally if she were to make herself Britain's enemy.'¹²⁵

The two parts of this statement had become more contradictory than they had been in the heyday of Britain's power. Then it had been possible to be friendly with all, more friendly with Britain than with others, but not under Britain's direction. Now Thailand, like the rest of the world, was adjusting to the decline of British power. That decline had indeed accelerated while Thailand was still working through the changes begun by the 1932 coup. Britain had met these changes by acceptance, encouraged by its weakness, and that acceptance had extended even to the Pibul régime. That had not prevented Thai politicians, including the King, from invoking or suspecting its influence. The future of Thai politics was more profoundly affected by the advent of Japanese and later of American power. In domestic politics King Prajadhipok had failed to overturn the apple cart. In foreign policy he could not inhibit jumping on the bandwagon.

125) Telegram, 1 March 1941, No. 151, F.O. 371/28135 (F1467/438/40). *Daily Telegraph*, 26 February 1941.