

## 6. The Rise of Absolutism in Siam

### Topics

- Centralising the tax system
- Building a new group of nobles
- The building of the modern (absolutist) state
  - Defining the borders
  - Building forces
  - Constructing ideologies
  - Building bureaucracy

With Rama V able to establish his power. His reform to make Siam a modern state took place, leading to the rise of Absolutism in Siam. This lecture looks into the various aspects of Rama V reform.

### 6.1. Centralising the tax system

Rama V's centralisation of the tax collection enabled him to build his absolutist state centering in Bangkok. With institutions including the full-time military, policemen, bureaucratic system, sangha, and the education system. A large amount of funding was attained from the expanding group of cultivating peasants.

After his second coronation, Rama V gained control over taxes from Bunnags. The leading members of Bunnags were old and started to pass away. Rama V gained control over Phra-Klang, and expanded Phra-Klang control over taxes. The reformed tax system produced enormous wealth for Rama V. In 30 years (from 1890s), government income from taxes increased 35 times.

The structure of the taxes also changed. Initially the taxes on liquor, gambling, and opium were not under control by the government. As the government felt strong enough to challenge the Chinese, it made gambling illegal. Opium tax farm was abolished, but the government continued to sell opium through concessionaire system. The newer bases for taxes were the production and income of peasants. Capitation tax (ratchupakarn) and land taxes. Other sources of government's income were from logging and mining concessions.

### 6.2 Building the new group of nobles

Rama V's centralisation of taxes led to the loss of power by the nobles, especially the governors in the provinces. These nobles were already losing their share of benefits from trade. The capitation tax also made them lose control over manpower.

Rama V started building his own new group of nobles to replace the older generations. Members of the Royal family were sent for education abroad. Younger group of nobles from families such as Saeng-Xuto and Bunnag became Rama V's loyal supporters. Together they formed a group called "Young Siam"

Rama V reformed the country's administration by adopting the Western system of ministries. The control of the ministries was given to members of royal family, who at this point had expanded in large number.

### 6.3 Building the modern (absolutist) state

#### *Defining the borders*

At first, the Bangkok government did not understand the significance of drawing the borders. They eventually realised the importance of borders, especially in relations to trade. By 1880s, Bangkok enthusiastically started drawing borders and expanded control over the enclosed areas.

In the mid 1870s, Thesapiban (protection over territory) system was created especially to protect the frontier. The system was created after studying the colonial systems in Malaya, India, Java, and Singapore. Bangkok appointed commissioners in the frontier areas. Most commissioners were Rama V's military trained relatives.

From 1870-1900, Siam engaged with France and Britain over the drawing of borders. Competing ownership of areas that had multiple allegiance, or belonged to no-one. Britain was kept as alliance to Rama V, most borders with Britain done through negotiation. But the relationship with France was more difficult. The clashed between Siam and France led to use of Maekhong as the border line.

As borders were defined, the new form of direct rule was created over the local rulers of the tributary state, and eventually the governors of provinces. Commissioners sent from Bangkok to control local revenue.

Rama V gained control over Kalahom and Mahatthai and reformed the two major ministries. The reformed Mahatthai became the Ministry of Interior under Prince Damrong, and controlling all the provinces.

With Bangkok sending the commissioners, benefits were exchanged to local rulers and old nobles to make them accepting the new system. They were allowed to hold on to their titles, given high salaries, and allowed a share of the government's revenue. Their descendants were sent for education in Bangkok, and eventually became part of the newly formed bureaucratic system.

The reform of the governance had gradually extended until the new centralised system was completely established.

Mahatthai became the new governmental system, replacing sakdina. Mahatthai controlled the police, forestry, health, judicial, port. The governance of the provinces adopted a pyramid structure from the center down to the villages.

#### *Building the state's forces*

Bangkok faced resistances to its expansion of control and centralisation. Peasants rebelled against the rise in taxes and the control. Rebels arose in Isan, the North, and the far South. Many of the rebels were actually supported by the ousted local rulers or nobility. Some rebels tried to assert allegiance to rulers other than Bangkok.

Phu-mi-bun rebels in Isan and Phaya Phap rebel in the north reflected the clash between the rural world and the intruding central authority. The leaders of these rebels acted as local moral leader to liberate

the locals from external oppression. Mo-lam was adopted as means to communicate the story of imminence catastrophe followed the rise of savior.

In fighting the rebels, the government saw the need to establish a full-time military forces. Prior to the period, the army was lacking personnel and training. Rama V had his own siblings leading the reform of the military, facing the resistance from the nobles and the financial constraints. The earlier attempts in fighting the French, using force from the corvee' system, ended in a humiliating failures. This resulted in the perception among the nobles that Thai military would never match the West.

But the task of the newly formed military was more about repressing the rebels and the protests by the Chinese and the peasants. Siam military was created more to deal with internal affairs, not to fight external threats. Military units were created to function in the rural areas. Conscription system was proposed. Full-time military finally in place as the government's finance improved.

The centrally controlled police force was also developed. Policemen had earlier existed in Bangkok and some provinces, but they were considered to be full of low quality nak-leng. Early proposals to create the police were opposed. But as Phra-Klang needed force to help close down gambling den, the use of police became more necessary. The Police Department was finally created.

Along with the creation of the police, a new centralised judicial system was created. Earlier, judicial roles were decentralised to nobles and local rulers. The new centralised judicial system brought all citizens under one system. Courts that used to be under different ministries were all brought under the newly created Ministry of Justice. Law school and bar association were formed.

### *Constructing the state's ideologies*

In order to create the longer-term stability to the new governmental system, other institutions were needed. Siam was actually a very diverse society. Tributary states had different races and identities. Their rebels emphasized the differences. To create cultural integration and allow the government to govern, state's ideological apparatuses were needed. The state's ideological apparatuses were religion, language, education, and the new concept of "nation"

Buddhism reform already started from Rama IV with his reform leading to the creation of Thammayut Sect. The center of the Thammayut was in Bangkok, and the governance of Sangha resembled the Mahatthai pyramid. Monks rose through hierachical ranks; exams used to qualify them to higher position in the hierarchy.

As temples also functioned as schools, education was reformed in the same way as Buddhism. From the differentiated system, using various languages, a standardised system was developed. A standardised syllabus focused on teaching a standard Thai language, arithmetic, and Buddhism. The control of the schools was eventually handed to Mahadtai. The school system expanded rapidly, and played a crucial role in establishing the more unified Thai culture.

A new idea of one nation under one King was also developed. Rama IV actually started establishing the historical roots to the dynasty. Prince Damrong furthered the task by developing the concept of the "Thai" or "Siamese" people. The Siamese history traced back to Sukhotai and their tradition of Kingship can be traced back to the beginning of their history.

A new idea of Tai race glossed over the ethnic diversities of Siam comprising of Lao, Khmer, Mon, Vietnamese, Malay, and Chinese. Facing the challenge over borders from the Western powers, the notion of "Thai-ness" was broadened.

Laotian, Shan, and Thais considered to be of same race, and all respected the King. Older names of provinces that signified non-Thainess, such as Lao, Khmer, and Malay, got replaced.

The new concept of "Chat" was invented. Chat previously meant an idea of birth, race, and ethnic identity. But a new concept of chat meant a "nation", a population enclosed within a given territory, owing allegiance to a single authority (King).

This shift reflect a change in relationship between King and the people. The relationship between the King and the people became direct. This differs from under the sakdina where people only related to the King via nobles. Royal rituals, for example, were changed to make them more accessible by the people.

This provided the basis for Rama VI to subsequently consolidate the new idea of Thai nationalism through the concepts of "Nation, Religion, and King". Allowing the King to become the embodiment of the Thai nation.

#### *Building the state's bureaucracy*

The centerpiece of new absolutist state was the civilian bureaucracy. Bureaucracy was created and directed to perform their tasks "in the service of the King". The head of system were new aristocrats defined by the Royal blood. The large size of the royal family allowed the members to attain all important positions at the core of the system. With limited competition for its power, the bureaucrats in Siam became exceptionally powerful.

The lower ranks positions of bureaucracy were more opened for wider social segments. Between 1890 and 1919, the number of salaried officials grew from 12,000 to 80,000. Modern education system was expanded to accommodate the training of bureaucracy, especially for the higher ranks. Civil service training school and the military academy were founded. But most of the attendances to these institutions remained members of royal family and aristocrats' families.

Recruitment to higher-ranks was carefully limited to "phu-di". Outside the royal and aristocrat families, the other two groups who can access higher-ranks were descendants from the rich Chinese families and those from provincial nobles' families.

Nonetheless, some provincial nobles were overlooked. Those from Isan were not trusted and their local rulers not seen as powerful. Malayu seen as too different, and Bangkok did not put much emphasis in the region.

But as the bureaucratic system eventually expanded, a divergent of ideas occurred. The core of royal and aristocratic bureaucrats shape the culture and ethos of "Kha-ratchakarn" (the servant of the King). But some started to attach rather to the idea of them abiding texts and rules (lak-wicha). The contradiction between lak-ratchakarn and lak-wicha would later create crucial tensions in Rama VI period.

The formation of the full-time military also led to the development of “military caste” and “military families”. The senior-ranking military commanders put their sons in the army. The military started developing its independent power.

The newly created bureaucrats also contained a number of old culture from sakdina time such as; (1) the culture of self-renumeration (kin-muang), and (2) the culture of patronage

1. The culture of self-renumeration continued from earlier time when the nobles took commission from revenue passing through them. Under Rama V such practices were actually allowed to continue as the salaries system was incomplete. Kin-muang also helped attract people to lower-ranks positions and the positions in far-away provinces.
2. The culture of patronage also continued from sakdina. Nepotism dominated promotion. Lower ranks officials sought senior patrons to help them rise. Higher ranks bureaucrats gathered followers to secured their position. The system of “phak-phuak” caused fragmented bureaucracy.

Patrimonialism continued to be the core of Thai bureaucracy. System worked through patronage and exchange of favors, and the power from civil society did not exist.

### **Evaluating the success of Rama V’s reform**

While Rama V had great success in introducing centralised bureaucracy, his achievements also came at costs. Rama V more than often used compromise as the strategy. The old local rulers and nobles continued to earn benefits even under the new bureaucratic system where they have little roles. This led to an oversized and inefficient bureaucratic system from the start

The modern bureaucrats was not yet developed, preferring to let the old culture persisted. This explain the persistence of the culture of corruption in Thai bureaucracy. The aim to have blood-line underpinning access to high-ranking position contradicted the eventual development of professional bureaucrats. This led to tensions facing subsequent Kings.

### **Reading**

- Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2002). *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, KL: Oxford University Press. (Chapter 7)