

2 The first stage of state-building

Introduction

In 1868 King Mongkut died of a jungle fever, having caught the disease during a trip to an infested area where he had been taken in order to prove to the Siamese elite and foreign visitors that he could accurately forecast a solar eclipse. Even when he was on his death-bed, the question of succession was unsettled. He had followed the third reign's practice of asking the great nobles to choose their own candidate, hoping that his son, Prince Chulalongkorn, would succeed him, but he was afraid for the young prince's safety since there had been many examples in the past of the assassination of a young king.¹

Phraya Surawongwaiyawat (Won Bunnag) informed King Mongkut that his father, Chaophraya Srisuriyawong (Chuang Bunnag) and the elite had agreed that Prince Chulalongkorn should succeed his father. The king ensured his son's succession by giving out valuable presents to the two Bunnags.² When the old king's death was announced, Chaophraya Srisuriyawong called a meeting of the high-ranking princes, nobles and monks, and his nomination of Prince Chulalongkorn was unanimously accepted.

Chaophraya Srisuriyawong then proceeded to name the successor to the late *Wang Na* (Front Palace) who had died in 1865. The *Wang Na*, or *Kromphraratchawangbowonsathanmongkon*, was the second most important official in terms of control over manpower, and because he was appointed by the king was generally considered the heir apparent.³

Under King Mongkut, his brother Prince Pinklao was appointed not to this office, but raised to the status of the second king. The relationship between King Mongkut and the second king had been strained, and Chaophraya Srisuriyawong's choice of Prince Wichaichan or Phraongchao Yodyingyod (known as George, after George Washington, the first president of the United States), King Pinklao's son, as *Wang Na* was probably calculated to play him off against the new king.

The new *Wang Na*, Chaophraya Srisuriyawong's client, would inherit not only all his father's men and ammunition, which would surpass those

of the king, but also the title of second king. In spite of an objection from Krommun Worachak, the acting *Phra Khlang* (Minister for Trade and Foreign Affairs) that this appointment should be the prerogative of the new king, Chaophraya Srisuriyawong's wish prevailed.⁴ With the new *Wang Na* as his client and with control over trade and taxation, Chaophraya Srisuriyawong seemed almost unassailable. In addition, he was appointed Regent but refused the title of Somdet Chaophraya on the grounds that it was higher than of his father at the same age. (He became Somdet Chaophraya in 1873.)

In comparison, King Chulalongkorn carried very little political weight. He later reminisced about this difficult period:

At that time I was fifteen years and ten days old, without a mother. None of my relatives on the maternal side were particularly able. As for paternal relatives, namely the high princes, they were all under the influence of Somdet Chaophraya and had to look after their personal safety and well-being rather than support me. Some of them just took no interest in affairs of state. As for the officials, some, it is true, were devoted to me, but these were mostly junior. My own brothers and sisters, being minors, could be of no help. As for myself, at that age, I knew nothing of statecraft and was so seriously ill that but few people thought I would survive. At the time of my father's death, therefore, I was like a human trunk, the head of which had just been cut off. I was propped up merely to serve as a figurehead. . . . The crown weighed heavily upon my head.⁵

The quotation reflects the difficult early years of the king's reign. But it does not do full justice to the magnitude of the conflict boiling up between the various political groups, which led to one of the most serious political crises in modern Thai history. This chapter examines the first few years of King Chulalongkorn's reign which marks the beginning of the state transformation process from a pre-modern to an absolutist state. It argues that these conflicts arose principally from the king's efforts to create an absolutist state.

The chapter includes the following topics: political groups within the elite; Old, Conservative and Young Siam; the initiation of the absolutist state that involved early fiscal reforms; the inauguration of the Council of State; the actions mounted against the Bunnags; and the *Wang Na* Crisis.

Political groups within the elite

King Chulalongkorn initially had little power vis-à-vis the great families. One result of this was that questions of royal as against noble power were relatively insignificant to the debate over the course of the Siamese state, in which the king participated as a leader of one faction. This debate has

usually been presented as a cultural–political one between progressive modernisers versus reactionary traditionalists and cautious conservatives.⁶ The approach taken here is somewhat different.

Old Siam, the reactionary faction, consisted of a majority of the noble families. Conservative Siam was a small group of the elite, centred on the Bunnags and their supporters. Young Siam consisted of King Chulalongkorn and his supporters, both in the nobility and the royalty. These labels were used contemporaneously, first by Dr Smith, an American missionary then residing in Siam, and have since been perpetuated by Wyatt and many other scholars.⁷ They accurately reflect the differences of opinion current among the elite, but it must be borne in mind that they also reflect conflicts of interest and a struggle for power which ultimately created a new identity for the monarchy. The struggle was for the control of resources, made more intense by Siam's involvement in the capitalist world economy. As we have seen, this involvement placed an increasing emphasis on money, taxation and trade, as opposed to agriculture and control over manpower as sources of wealth and power.

In the early stages of the conflict, the main split was between Young and Conservative Siam on the one hand and the Old Siam on the other. The former pairing believed that its interests lay in expanding Siam's involvement in the world economy and trade, and thus in modernising. On the other hand, Old Siam saw its interests protected by maintaining manpower and the old value systems as the basis of political and economic power. At the same time, Conservative and Young Siam were divided by their interests in the extent of change towards modernisation, and their differences on this matter soon became acute.

The previous chapter noted that King Mongkut initiated an ideological shift by emphasising the rights of the people; and also that he gave power to the Bunnag family and acted as their client. Because of their status as his patron and their earlier control over trade, the Bunnags stood in a very good position to reap the benefits from the increase in trade after the Bowring Treaty, and they did so at the expense of the Treasury. The Bunnags thus had a distinct interest in increasing Siam's involvement in the world economy. Their immediate strength lay in control over taxation rather than in control over manpower. Nevertheless, they stood to command more money if labour was freed to become full-fledged producers for the world economy, and the bonds between *phrai* and *nai* were broken. They perceived that the old system of manpower primarily benefited Old Siam and those nobles' interests, which obstructed the state's direct access to the *phrai*.

Thus Conservative Siam was interested in freeing labour, and in this respect its interests coincided with those of Young Siam, which wanted to see the state develop more efficient controls over manpower. But because much of its revenue was derived from tax farming profits, and because it feared giving up its capacity as patrons to the state (which would happen if

a fully modern administrative system was implemented), its interests in change were distinctly limited. This was especially true when proposals for change affected state centralisation and fiscal reform.

The king's interests lay not only in developing the economy but also in applying modernising changes to the state administration. This was because a modern centralised state (of the royal absolutist model) would concentrate wealth and power in the hands of the monarch. A modern administration and tax system would strip wealth and power from the great families and remove the noble class as the mediator between the king and people. King Chulalongkorn and his allies therefore pressed for more thoroughgoing modernisation.

In order to legitimise his moves to accumulate power in his hands and to gain support against these vested interests, the king stressed the importance of initiating the same reforms that had made the West strong. He emphasised the need for efficiency and economic development, the importance of social justice and the monarch's role as representative of the nation and the people.

Similar arguments had been advanced in the West by monarchs creating royal absolutist systems in order to harness bourgeois and popular support against feudal interests. In Siam's case, bourgeois support was not important in this early period, but the need to adapt to the western challenge and to make Siam more prosperous made a powerful argument. Moreover, a modernising argument gave the royal faction influential support from western nations.

But the king's interest in modernising change was also limited. He did not want to see power pass to the nation-state, as had happened in Europe when absolutism had broken up. Any move in this direction would push the king into relative conservatism, and away from the more radical members of Young Siam. But like the European monarchs, he unwittingly set in train a process which could not be stopped: royal absolutism in Siam would also act as midwife to capitalist society and the nation-state, born from the dynastic state.

The main body of the old ruling class – the *nai* – did not perceive that modernising change would serve their interests at all. However, they benefited from the change to a cash economy and an increase in trade in two ways. They could sell surplus rice produced by the *phrai* and *that* working for them. They collected payments from *phrai* who went to work in the developing urban sector, for instance as craftsmen, and from *phrai* working full time on estate lands and opening up new farming areas. When required by the government to supply workers for *corvée*, they provided their *that* rather than the money-producing *phrai*.

But these benefits existed only because the *nai* could legitimately command a source of labour. If labour were freed, they could not see how they could raise the capital to employ labour in the household and in production, at least not in the manner to which they were accustomed.

Replacing the labour-service system with a direct taxation system would free them from the obligation to provide the state with the labour of their *phrai*, but it would also render them redundant as organisers of labour. Consequently, they were opposed to all changes which implied a move away from the old system of hierarchy and labour control. They bitterly opposed reforms ending slavery and the marking of the *phrai* which sustained that institution.

This question of manpower control was the main issue which ignited political conflict among the three groups. It had been a recurring problem in the pre-modern Thai state. It was now immensely complicated by Siam's entry to the European world-economy, which shifted the major source of state revenue from the Chinese labourers, who had been the major force behind Siam's involvement with the Chinese world-economy, to the Siamese producers. Those concerned with trade and taxation were beset with questions of whether the present manpower organisation served the new economic order best, and of how the so-called "modern" taxation system, aimed primarily at tapping resources from the Chinese community, should be adjusted.

Chapter 1 made clear that during the early Bangkok period, control exercised over manpower had shifted more and more towards the *nai* at the expense of the king. And the number of *phrai som* was growing. When corvée was commuted to money payment, revenues tended to be monopolised by the *chao mu* (head of the manpower unit) and did not pass to the state in spite of many efforts to reform the system. During the reign of King Rama III, the service fees paid by the *phrai som* and for the *that* (by their *nai*) were commuted to three, and one-and-a-half bahts respectively. When this failed to guarantee state revenue, a new formula was implemented. This formula calculated fees according to the time of service each person owed the government. Thus *phrai luang*, who had to perform three months' corvée, had the option of paying eighteen baht; *phrai som* who owed one month paid six baht; *khun mun* (petty officials) paid four baht for twenty days' corvée, whereas *that* could pay one-and-a-half baht in lieu of eight days' corvée.⁸

Early in King's Mongkut's reign, arguments for abolishing the systems of corvée and hired labour were discussed by the king and Chaophraya Srisuriyawong. They noted that the state did not benefit financially, and there were not enough *phrai luang* to perform royal service.⁹ But Siam had just joined the European world-economy, and the question of paying officials' salaries as an alternative to allocating manpower was premature since the economy had yet to generate adequate money revenue. The problem was temporarily solved by writing off the *nai*'s arrears in paying their service fees. A plan to reduce the *phrai luang*'s obligation to the same level as that of the *phrai som* (that is, serving a month in a year) was also deemed impractical because the state needed the service of the *phrai luang* on a more continuing basis.¹⁰

There was also a tendency for the *phrai* to enter slavery. In negotiating the terms of servitude they could strike a bargain with the *nai* that was to the advantage of both parties. Second, the *nai* systematically turned members of the *phrai*'s family to slavery by refusing to acknowledge the *phrai*'s death or illness and demanding that the family pay for his absence either with their property or their freedom.¹¹ Third, the *phrai* fell into debt by succumbing to vices such as gambling and drinking, and these constituted a substantial source of state revenue.

Thus, King Mongkut was unable to implement reforms in the organisation of manpower, while the *nai* class reaped greater benefits than ever from the status quo. The state might be able to derive income from the labour of the *phrai* once they were freed from their obligations to the *nai* and, as free producers, were liable to pay the head tax. However, this was not possible until the *nai* class was salaried and hence able to draw revenue from an alternative source. The first step in breaking the vicious circle was to end slavery, a measure which Conservative Siam eventually ventured to implement, setting off a major political conflict among the three political groups.

In the early years of King Chulalongkorn's reign, the state's situation deteriorated as the economy expanded and the *nai* saw their *phrai* as their cash earners. Apart from exacting higher payment than the official rate, the *nai* kept most of the service fees paid by their *phrai* to themselves.¹² Eventually the new king would realise that the question of labour reorganisation could not be solved unless the state structure was also transformed. He would see how he could use the issue both to develop the economy and to centralise power in royal hands.

Keeping in mind this background to the three groups' interests and the problems associated with the manpower system, let us look in greater detail at these factions and the ideological positions they assumed. This will be done against the backdrop of the events between the first coronation and May 1873, when the king made his first move to establish the absolutist state.

Old Siam

Old Siam believed that it could best protect its interests by keeping the old order as intact as possible. Its members stressed the maintenance of traditional customs, values and structures. Thus, they felt threatened by plans to reform the manpower system. Since the proponents of Young Siam openly identified themselves with westernisation and later publicly discussed plans for change (in their magazine, *Darunowat*) Old Siam saw them, and not Conservative Siam, as its arch-enemy.

Since Old Siam represented the bulk of the official class through which the king needed to rule until the system was changed, it was potentially in a very powerful position. Its members appeared to have the support of the

sangha (the Buddhist order), which had been estranged from the monarchy by King Mongkut's establishment of a new religious sect, the *Tham-mayuttinikay*, and which shared Old Siam's apprehension over westernisation. Old Siam's main weakness was that it had no real leadership of its own.

The Old Siam group tended to centre around the current *Wang Na*, who controlled the resources necessary to seriously challenge the king. He had inherited from his father the title of second king, modern ammunition, and a large number of men, and was in an unusually powerful position. King Mongkut had calculated that his cousin controlled between 2,600 and 2,700 soldiers, 2,000 of whom were newly recruited; King Mongkut had been able to count on only 1,500 soldiers.¹³ His revenue, mainly derived from tax farms, amounted to, in principle, 5 per cent of state revenue.

Given these resources, Somdet Chaophraya's support, and his popularity among the official class, the *Wang Na*'s position was formidable. He was also well received by the diplomatic community, especially by Thomas Knox, the British Consul, who had been recruited by his father to teach modern military practice. The community knew him as the son of one of the most westernised members of the elite, and on King Mongkut's death had presumably preferred this mature candidate to the throne over the young and unfamiliar Prince Chulalongkorn. These factors, rather than the depth of his conviction, made the *Wang Na* the natural leader of Old Siam.

King Chulalongkorn found himself in a very delicate position when dealing with Old Siam; he did not want to alienate its members, yet he was being pushed by Conservative Siam to endorse policies that attacked the interests of Old Siam. This is illustrated by the events surrounding a proclamation read during the second coronation in 1873.

The proclamation abolished the practice of prostration, and for the first time the audience stood up and bowed to the king. But it had far wider implications than merely regulating court etiquette. It also applied to relationships between the *nai* and the *phrai*. The proclamation was worded ambiguously; the king stated that he wanted to abolish oppression of the people, and prostration was oppressive because the inferior had to suffer the fatigue of prostration in order to honour the superior.¹⁴ Rather than calling directly for the abolition of the *phrai* and *that* system, he focused on the symbolic action which underlined their relationship. This can be seen as a cautious first step towards abolition, which would satisfy Conservative Siam, but was couched in terms that were not sufficiently specific as to antagonise Old Siam.

The king also took positive measures. He emphasised the symbiotic relationships between the royal and the noble families. On the same occasion, he announced the creation of the Family Order, designed to reward those noble families who had loyally served kings of the Bangkok dynasty.¹⁵ The move borrowed a western practice and was intended to

guarantee the adherents of Old Siam a place for themselves and their descendants in the westernisation process. Thus the old families were shown that there would be places for them in the reformed state.

However, it is uncertain how far Old Siam was moved by the appeal. The king did not always calculate well in this respect, and when he tried to keep Old Siam ideologically off-balance by appealing to traditional sources of authority, he faced a serious rebuff. When he attempted to secure the *sangha's* endorsement of the anti-prostration decree, thirty senior monks responded that they considered that the abolition of prostration would be incongruous (save in monasteries), and that the king should give more thought to what he was doing.¹⁶

Old Siam's major weapon was to limit the participation in their relationships with the king, at its most drastic doing so publicly, and thus demonstrating the king's lack of authority. This occurred most notably when only a small minority of the nobles attended a reception that the king gave for the Spanish ambassador. King Chulalongkorn was incensed and issued a proclamation pointing out that it was in the interests of all the families (royal and noble) to foster good relations with foreign countries; they brought progress to the country and protection to the families (implying that bad relations might damage Siamese independence and consequently endanger the families). He concluded that a future breach of discipline such as this would bring expulsion from the service.¹⁷

Thus, the king used both carrot and stick in dealing with Old Siam. The traditionalist nobles sometimes behaved badly, as in the case of the Spanish ambassador; but we will see that when Siam's integrity and independence were seriously threatened they closed ranks and gave the king their support.

Conservative Siam

The driving force behind this small yet powerful group was the Bunnag clan, first of whom was Somdet Chaophraya Borommaha Srisuriyawong, the former Chaophraya Srisuriyawong who had done so much to conclude the Bowring Treaty. Other important members were Chaophraya Suriyawongwaiyawat, the *Kalahom* and Somdet Chaophraya's son, and Phraya Ahanborirak, the Minister of the *Krom Na* (Ministry of Land) and Somdet Chaophraya's nephew. One minister who would have seemed typical of Conservative Siam had he not defected to join Young Siam was Chaophraya Phanuwong, the Minister of *Krom Tha*. Other lesser members came from the Bunnag clan and served in those ministries that the family controlled. There are also indications that some of King Mongkut's sons forged a close relationship with Somdet Chaophraya Borommaha Srisuriyawong.¹⁸

The strength of Conservative Siam lay in its members' involvement in trade and taxation. With their ministry portfolios, the Bunnags exercised

control over major tax farms such as opium, spirits and the import and export tariffs. Land tax also brought in considerable revenue. In their official capacity and in accordance with the practice known as *sib lod* (taking a tenth), they earned 10 per cent from these taxes. As we saw in the previous chapter, they used their politically powerful positions in the reign of King Mongkut to hand over to the Treasury a constant revenue irrespective of the expansion of the tax base, and to reserve the excess for their own purposes.

They enjoyed not only direct wealth, they also controlled patronage. Chinese tax farmers paid large sums to a few high-ranking nobles and their relatives (such as the Bunnags) who were in a position to grant them concessions to tax farms.¹⁹ Members of Conservative Siam controlled vast capital resources which they exploited for their commercial activities or lent at interest to tax farmers.²⁰ Because nobles and tax farmers between them controlled about 30 per cent of Siamese foreign trade, the British were antagonistic to such close relationships between “the Siamese government” and the Chinese tax farmers.²¹ Conservative Siam would soon find that it had to pay a high price for unpopularity in the British community.

British disfavour hardly seemed likely from the outset. Somdet Chaophraya belonged to the first generation of the Siamese elite to perceive advantages in belonging to the European world-economy, and he greatly benefited from his prescience. It was therefore logical that he should wish to see westernised reforms, which would enhance British commercial interests and activate more trade and, hence, taxation. Indeed, a generation before, he had played the leading role in a group known as Young Siam in opposing to King Rama III and his supporters who, in those days, were labelled as Old Siam.²² He had brought about many changes inspired by western practice, such as building steamships and roads, and developing a police force for Bangkok. Members of the Bunnag family were regularly sent to study in England well before the royal family started the same practice.²³

Members of Conservative Siam wished to introduce such reforms, as they would help Siam reap increased benefits from its participation in the European world-economy. The main task was to reform the manpower system, which they considered detrimental to production. They perceived that the state benefitted very little either from *corvée* or from the commutation of *corvée* to labour dues, which was in the interest of Old Siam. By abolishing the *phrai* and the *that* system, an efficient and productive labour market could be created, and Conservative Siam could benefit from the expansion of trade and taxation.²⁴ Its advocates argued that the state should be given a slice of the economic pie, replacing *corvée* by household registration and a head tax. Arguing for the interests of the state, Conservative Siam pressed its own interests; but the two would not always coincide.

In line with this approach, manpower reform was the main item on Somdet Chaophraya's agenda. Right at the beginning of the reign, he appointed as head of *Krom Suratsawadi* (the office responsible for *phrai* registration) a noble of a commoner background named Phraya Burut (Pheng Penkun). He had been a client of King Mongkut, whom he had faithfully served during his monkhood and later as a senior official in the Royal Pages Department, achieving the title of Phraya Ratchasuphawadi.²⁵ Somdet Chaophraya's choice of this loyal but humble servant reflected his concern to appoint somebody who did not share the traditional ruling class's vested interest in preserving the old manpower system.

During the brief regency interregnum (1868–1873), Somdet Chaophraya initiated moves toward the abolition of slavery by proposing a law that would have forced the *nai* to pay the sum of two baht per month for each *that's* service, and would have effectively abolished slavery within five years. Such a drastic measure incurred the opposition of Old Siam, and was roundly defeated.²⁶

As a result of this setback, the Conservative Siam leaders drew back from open innovation and let Young Siam take the lead in introducing reforms. We do not know all the initiatives that were discussed at the time, but it seems likely that one of the reforms proposed by Young Siam was the abolition of gambling, the tax farm which had been in the king's hands since 1870. This proposal closely fitted with Conservative Siam's campaign, because gambling was considered a major cause of debt and slavery.²⁷ Young Siam could be relied upon to urge change, and its vanguard role gave Conservative Siam the freedom to ally with Old Siam if the changes proposed ran counter to conservative interests in the manpower and financial reform desired by Conservative Siam. As we shall see, Conservative Siam's early relationship with Young Siam had not always run smoothly; the conservatives, and particularly Somdet Chaophraya, were loath to approve efforts, favoured by young Siam, which might overmuch enhance the king's position.²⁸ But some time after the second coronation, the two groups appear to have forged a marriage of convenience, one offspring of which was co-operation on the gambling issue.

In addition, members of Young Siam had publicly shown their commitment to the manpower and financial reform desired by Conservative Siam. As we have seen, the king, who was identified initially with Young Siam, attacked the traditional labour system through the law abolishing prostration. He also opposed the rounding up of unmarked *phrai*, arguing that this would seriously interrupt a great number of producers in their planting, would further prolong the stagnation of commerce and would mean a serious loss of revenue to the government.²⁹ He introduced many revenue-earning financial reforms, as we shall see, making royal income from the gambling tax dispensable. These initiatives met the needs of Conservative Siam, and it was not surprising that, in return, it consented to Young

Siam's efforts to establish such western-styled bodies as the Council of State and the Privy Council.

Young Siam

The Young Siam Society consisted originally of the king's party: half-brothers, followers and fellow-westernisers, most of them very young.³⁰ The two most prominent and probably most outspoken members were Phraya Phatsakorawong and Phraya Krasapkitkoson, both of whom were very active in the Council of State.

Phraya Phatsakorawong was Somdet Chaophraya's much younger half-brother (the age difference was forty years); he had been sent to study in England for a few years and had returned at the end of King Mongkut's reign. He had held a position in the Royal Pages Department, and later served as the Royal Secretary to the young king and an officer in the Bodyguard. In spite of his Bunnag connections, he was a very active and able member of Young Siam and an enthusiastic westerniser. He was responsible for the translation of the French Second Empire Constitution and may also have been involved in other translations of constitutional models, including the Indian administrative structure and the oath taken by the British Privy Council.³¹ Phraya Phatsakorawong was also a prolific and controversial writer for the journal *Darunowat*, an occupation which later landed him in trouble.

Phraya Krasapkitkoson belonged to a noble Ayudhyan family, the Amatyakul, one of the few noble clans that identified fully with Young Siam's cause. He was joined by his brother, Phraya Charoenratchamaitri, who also served in the Council of State, and his son, Phra Prichakonlakan, who helped his father develop gold mines, the king's pet project. Phraya Krasap was one of the first members of the Thai elite to study western science, and this earned him the post of head of the Royal Mint Department.³² In the Council of State, Phraya Krasap was responsible for drafting a section of the new legislation concerning opium farms, a delicate task because the farms were an important financial resource under the control of Somdet Chaophraya.³³ His active role would eventually make his family the target of political attack and bring it into disgrace.

Lastly, we come to the most ambiguous member, Chaophraya Phanuwong (Thuam Bunnag). He was president of the Young Siam Society when it was officially established in 1875, but as the head of *Krom Tha* and a member of the Bunnag family, he enjoyed control over some tax farms and thus shared in some of the interests of Conservative Siam. He was half-brother to Somdet Chaophraya, and it is likely that Somdet Chaophraya gave his blessing to his association with Young Siam in order to guarantee protection for Bunnag interests.³⁴

Nonetheless, the Bunnag brothers did not always see eye-to-eye, for Chaophraya Phanuwong wished to pursue his own economic interests.

This gave the king room to manoeuvre on behalf of Young Siam, and to lure Bunnag family members into joining his faction. In line with this, in 1870 the king transferred export taxes under royal jurisdiction to the *Krom Tha*, which already administered the rice export tax. This move gave *Krom Tha* control over all export taxes;³⁵ it was administratively rational, but perhaps more importantly, it served to convince Chaophraya Phanuwong that if the king's reforms were successful he might be in a position to gain a greater share of the pie than if he unswervingly supported the Bunnag interests.

In the final analysis, it is likely that Chaophraya Phanuwong shared some of Young Siam's ideals and wanted to be seen as a modern man. He belonged to a small group of the Thai elite who had visited Europe under King Mongkut, and in his capacity of the *Phra Khlang* he accompanied King Chulalongkorn to Singapore and Java in 1871. When Somdet Chaophraya opposed the king's plans to visit Europe, Chaophraya Phanuwong approached Thomas Knox, the British Consul, and asked him to negotiate with the Regent so that the king might be allowed to visit India, on which trip he also went.

King Chulalongkorn appears to have made Chaophraya Phanuwong the President of the Young Siam Society in 1875, precisely because of his conservative connections, for, as we will see in the next section, King Chulalongkorn's policy was to avoid alienating the great families by bringing their members into organisations which he controlled. But this did not guarantee Chaophraya Phanuwong's loyalty in all situations: during the *Wang Na* crisis he acted very much in concert with other Bunnags against Young Siam. The king then found it necessary to remind him that, as a member of Young Siam, his loyalty should be to the king's position.³⁶

Young Siam had some valuable foreign allies, two of whom were long-term expatriates in Siam. Mr Henry Alabaster entered the king's service after resigning from his post as British Vice Consul in Bangkok under King Mongkut's reign because of a conflict with Somdet Chaophraya. It is likely that he proved ideologically useful to Young Siam, expounding liberalism and giving the faction full support for its reform efforts. His advocacy considerably helped to raise the group's stature among the western community in Siam. He also acted as a link between Young Siam and Dr Smith, an American missionary who ran an English and later a Thai newspaper.³⁷ Some of Dr Smith's writings were translated and published in the Young Siam magazine, *Darunawat*.

Another source of foreign support for Young Siam came from the British Governor of the Straits Settlement, Sir Andrew Clarke. He was most impressed with the abolition of prostration during the second coronation ceremony, described to him by his representative. To quote this report:

One incident of the coronation was remarkable. The chief ceremony took place in the hall of audience, the foreigners standing in the

background and the Regent – about to yield the authority he had exercised since the death of King Mongkut in 1868 – and all the courtiers kneeling or lying prostrate on the ground before the golden curtain. At a given signal the curtain was raised disclosing the King sitting on his throne, magnificently dressed wearing the crown and the royal jewels; but striking as was this picture, a more sensational incident was reserved a denouement. The King delivered an address and at the end of it he announced the abolition of the practice at his Court of kowtowing and lying down in the royal presence. As the words passed his lips the recumbent figures rose, and the effect was described by those present as most impressive. To change a practice of abject servility into one of reasonable and dignified Court etiquette was not a bad commencement for a reign of progress and reform. It was at least an occurrence that inclined the mind to give sympathetic consideration to any proposal or request emanating from the then young King of Siam. Fifteen months later the occasion arrived.³⁸

The king was well aware that British representatives in Siam were not well disposed towards him, and he used the coronation as an opportunity to build a relationship with British authorities in the Straits Settlements. After the coronation, he wrote to Sir Andrew Clarke expressing the hope that goodwill would long continue between Siam and the British Colony, and offering him the order of the White Elephant of Siam. He wrote a second more formal letter thanking him for sending a mission to attend the ceremony and referring to Siam's position concerning future reforms, and making the point that means for achieving these reforms were limited:

in making changes for the development of its resources we can only proceed step-by-step according to our strength, and we cannot make very rapid changes. Only by the support of a powerful country can a weak one be rapidly developed, and therefore we beg that Your Excellency, appointed by H.M. Queen Victoria to govern a British Colony which is very close to Siam, will suggest and advise us as to whatever is likely rapidly and largely to develop our resources.³⁹

Thus the king sent the representative of the British Government a signal that his future reforms would suit British interests because they would bring more trade. His plans for reform went further than those proposed by Conservative Siam in that he called not only for the abolition of slavery, as we have seen, but also fiscal reforms. Because Conservative Siam was unwilling to identify itself with further change, the Governor perceived the king and Young Siam to be the sole agents of reform, and the king was later able to reap the political benefits.⁴⁰

Young Siam reached a peak of influence with the establishment of the Council of State and the Privy Council in 1874, and its mouthpiece,

Darunawat. This journal was designed to orchestrate reforms and to speak out against the established powers.⁴¹ The first edition was published just ten days before the establishment of the Council of State, the king's instrument for spearheading his reforms. Its tactic was to bring home to the ruling class how the great nobles abused their power and, therefore, how Young Siam's cause should be supported.⁴²

The Young Siam Society was not officially formed until 1875, when the drive for reform led to political crisis. Its formalisation probably reflected the king's determination to forge ahead despite the opposition. Young Siam was closely identified with the king at this time, and he was most likely involved in the *Darunawat* project. We can take the Young Siam attitude as generally reflecting his own, although he tended to be more cautious in dealings with Old Siam and Conservative Siam, and at a later stage it seemed to him that Young Siam was going too far.

Young Siam's spokesmen argued along two lines. First, they stressed the need to improve the people's prosperity through economic development, especially through trade and commerce. This extended the line of thought pursued by King Mongkut, and in this context, ideas of progress, justice and happiness were discussed.

The second argument stressed the central role of the state in achieving progress; the idea of *thamnu bamrung banmuang hai charoen* (developing the country). This was understood as changing Siam's social, economic and political structure in order to stimulate progress. It set the state against the old institutions, in particular the *nai/phrai* (manpower) system, which was perceived to discourage industriousness and the pursuit of happiness, and the administrative system which gave officials the opportunity to use their offices for personal profit and benefit. It also meant that the state should take responsibility for developing trade, promoting justice, providing security and education and abolishing bad habits such as gambling.⁴³

The emphasis placed by Young Siam on a close relationship between the interests of the state and the interest of the people laid the ground for the development of the idea of the Thai nation-state, the state as the embodiment of the community of the people. More immediately, it served King Chulalongkorn's intention to build an absolutist state. His efforts at state reform had two goals: the first was to strengthen his immediate position against the power of the noble class and the great families; the second was to permanently strengthen the central state and royal power.

The launching of the absolutist state

In 1869, during the Regency and well before the first major reforms were implemented in 1874, the king showed an early inclination towards absolutism by instigating a survey of how modern states raised and distributed their resources. He had the constitutions of Britain, British India and the

Second Empire France analysed, and out of these it appears that of France seemed the most appropriate.⁴⁴ The French Consul reported that the king asked to borrow a copy of the “Code Napoleon”.⁴⁵ The translation, made at the royal behest, told the king how an absolutist state with full control over its resources and territories functioned. It then went on to explain how power in the absolutist state was concentrated at the centre and how the centre controlled the periphery; the centre was to have full control over the collection and distribution of resources.⁴⁶ This section deals with the steps which King Chulalongkorn took to achieve this goal.

The early fiscal reforms

The king’s first step in the campaign to create an absolutist state was to initiate fiscal reforms. These were designed to strengthen the state and to create the pre-conditions for other reforms such as reform of the labour and taxation system.

As early as 1869, the king had started asking all those departments responsible for tax revenues to prepare financial statements. The Bunnags did not bother to respond, but other department heads who were formally responsible for tax revenues submitted reports. The reports made dismal reading; tax revenues were meagre, and many tax farmers were in arrears.⁴⁷

The king responded by tightening his control over tax farms. In 1870, those under the Royal Warehouse Department and supervised by Prince Wongsa were transferred to the king upon the prince’s death.⁴⁸ They consisted of many important revenue earners such as gambling and lotteries, spirits in Bangkok and the timber farm.⁴⁹ The king then rearranged those tax farms under his control so as to increase their revenue. For example, he turned the gambling tax into two separate farms of gambling and lotteries, which doubled their revenue to the state.⁵⁰

At this early stage, King Chulalongkorn had already begun to adopt western methods in his fiscal reform. In 1870 he established an audit office to oversee the revenue and expenditure of the tax farms under royal control. According to the official figures, in 1872 the revenue from the Treasury and the Royal Warehouse Department amounted to more than 50 per cent of total revenue from taxation.⁵¹ A further important step in westernising the fiscal system was taken in 1873 when a Finance Office known as *Ho Ratsadakonphiphat*, was established modelled on western-styled ministries of finances. Staffed by salaried officials who were expected to keep office hours, it centralised the administration of taxes, which had previously been the prerogative of the tax manager (*chao chamnuan*) who approved the bidding of tax farms. This person was delegated power by “the great noble” who supervised the tax farms. The edict establishing the *Ho Ratsadakonphiphat* required that bidding for tax farms

be carried out in its office and that tax farmers make monthly payments, thus further limiting the possibility of personal accommodation between tax farmers and the tax controller.⁵²

The king justified this new institution on the grounds that there were so many tax arrears, most of which dated back to the previous reign. This, he argued, was because the tax farmers tended to keep the tax revenue for their commercial purposes. Once they were pressed to hand it in, they had to draw money from their trading enterprises, which affected their trade and brought accusations that the government was responsible for the decline in commerce.

This was an effective argument, acceptable to the Bunnags so long as the new tax office did not affect their interests. It seemed unlikely that it would, for the wording of the edict was ambiguous as to the extent of the *Ho Ratsadakonphiphat's* power,⁵³ and the Bunnags were not directly involved in tax farmers' arrears. In any event, the Bunnags were so well entrenched in their privileged positions that any move to dislodge them probably seemed unimaginable.

This early fiscal reform paved the way for more drastic measures in two ways. First, the *Ho Ratsadakonphiphat* set the model for the Ministry of Finance, which would later be developed by the Council of State to regulate all state revenues. Second, the consolidation of royal control over state revenue helped the king to win more supporters for his reforms. He strengthened the role of Phraya Sriphiphat and Phraya Phiphitphokhai, respectively the head of the Royal Warehouse and the Treasury, both of whom were previously impotent because they did not have actual power in controlling tax farms. They were also members of the Council. They would now actually control the tax farms within their jurisdictions. The king also transferred the timber tax to the *Mahadthai* (Ministry of the North) under the control of Phraya Ratchawaranukun, the Under-secretary of the Ministry. This was a rational step because teak forests were concentrated in the north, but it also won for the king's party the support of Phraya Ratchawaranukun, whom the king later appointed to the Council of State. The Bangkok spirits tax, another lucrative source of income, was transferred, and by so doing he expanded his political backing beyond Young Siam and those who had been loyal to his father. Those nobles who supervised tax farms were rewarded with 5 per cent of the tax revenues; some were also made members of the Council of State, a body whose importance we will discuss later. This drove home the lesson that, by serving the state under King Chulalongkorn's leadership, a noble could enhance his own economic position.

Having thus consolidated his fiscal position, the king felt strong enough to attempt to take control of all other resources. This effectively meant changing the rules of the political game. In order to secure acquiescence, and especially to prevent a combination between Old Siam and Conservative Siam against him, King Chulalongkorn did two things.

First, he presented arguments in terms of increasing economic progress, an approach to which Conservative Siam would agree. He argued:

The city these days is quite different from that in the past when the Kingdom did not earn revenue from trade. Formerly, trade was restricted to the Chinese, and there was little flow of imports and exports. Since trade with the West began there have been a heavy traffic of ships, and many more exports. Money flows into the city, and consequently the Kingdom enjoys progress and wealth. Since King Mongkut allowed exports, the country has prospered, and this is clear to everyone. [But] little has been done to promote more trade, and it cannot expand further, consequently the country cannot achieve progress rapidly. It is necessary to promote more trade because when more revenue flows into the city the Kingdom will definitely prosper. Trade can be promoted by digging canals which will increase the flow of goods and provide irrigation so that water will be available in time of drought. There are many other things which require promotion. When trade is busier than now a telegram service between ports will become necessary so that [ships] can be quickly dispatched to carry goods. In order that all these things are done, a large amount of investment must be found.⁵⁴

Second, King Chulalongkorn introduced structural reforms aimed at involving others in changing the rules of the political game, so that they found themselves engaged in serving his purposes. We shall see this approach in the strategy he followed in developing the Council of State.

The Council of State

On 8 May 1874, King Chulalongkorn established a Council of State, later given the Thai name of *Sapha thipruksa ratchakan phandin*, but generally referred to as 'Council'. Its members consisted of twelve nobles of *phraya* rank. Its function, stated vaguely, was to help the king to introduce reforms which would bring Siam into line with those modernised countries that he had visited.⁵⁵ In fact, it was meant to be a legislative and administrative vehicle by which King Chulalongkorn would establish an absolutist state.⁵⁶

The fact that the French system of government was studied suggests that the king borrowed the idea from the French *Conseil d'État*, whose functions were similar. The *Conseil d'État* had been created by Napoleon Bonaparte to draft and interpret laws and regulations and resolve administrative difficulties.⁵⁷

The king won Somdet Chaophraya's acceptance of this project by agreeing to place the abolition of both the *phrai-that* system and gambling, the main culprit for slavery on the Council's agenda. Next, he persuaded Somdet Chaophraya to endorse the financial reforms as the prerequisite to

labour and tax structure reforms. The king's letter to Somdet Chaophraya later explained how he pulled off this coup:

Formerly I considered that the state's revenue was so crucial that it needed to be administered properly as a prerequisite. Thus I invited Your Excellency for a private consultation. Once it was agreed . . . [torn document] the Council of State's meeting was called in order that the statement was read. And I had claimed that I had already consulted Your Excellency so that it appeared that there was a consensus in developing the country.⁵⁸

Somdet Chaophraya's lack of suspicion regarding the potential of this instrument for aggrandisement of the monarch's power can also be explained by the king's choice of the twelve members of the Council. Its composition appeared to guarantee Bunnag interests, for all members but one came from the old noble families, including three Bunnags.⁵⁹ The only exception was Phraya Ratchasuphawadi, who, as we have seen, had been appointed by Somdet Chaophraya himself and, having responsibility for manpower, held a key position in Conservative Siam's vision of reform. Phraya Ratchasuphawadi was given an unenviable job of "dismantling the manpower system as commanded by Somdet Chaophraya".⁶⁰ However, all these councillors had their own reasons for accepting reforms that would restrict the Bunnag power.

This is exemplified by the three Bunnag representatives. We have already seen that one, Phraya Phatsakorawong, was naturally a progressive and committed to the king's reforms. The other two, Phraya Sripiphat and Phraya Kalahomratchasena, were the sons of the Phraya Sripiphat, whose role under Rama III we discussed in Chapter 1. After his death, his control over tax farms had passed not to his sons, but to Prince Wongsā, most probably with the connivance of Somdet Chaophraya himself. It is, therefore, not surprising that the sons did not see Somdet Chaophraya's interest as their own.

The core Council members included supporters of the king's westernisation policy. Others were senior officials and departmental heads who controlled resources, but whose powers, limited under the old dispensation, would be greatly augmented by the king's proposed reforms. For instance, Phraya Phiphitphoka's power certainly increased when fiscal reforms turned his department, the Treasury (*Krom Phraklangmahasombat*), into the powerful Ministry of Finance. Other senior officials, including those from the *Wang Na*, lent credence to the king's initiative and were swayed by his early successes in strengthening the Treasury. King Chulalongkorn described how he developed this power base:

Once the number of the people who shared rightful thinking increased we started to expand our power by sticking to the right cause and

fighting against the wrong. When we won once or twice those who remained neutral became uncertain and turned to give us support. Our popularity increased so much that even our enemies had to become our friends, save for those who were determined and could not turn around and had to go ahead. But it was apparent that they were weakening all the time.⁶¹

The king bestowed personal financial rewards and honours upon the councillors as incentives to join this revolutionary project. They were promised an annual income of between forty and fifty catties, a sum which might be increased, depending upon the positions they occupied within the bureaucracy. Thus we learn from the obituary of Chaophraya Sripiphat that he earned as much as seventy catties a year.⁶² They were also entitled to a life pension if they served the council for five years or longer.⁶³ The political rewards were also substantial: councillors were subordinate only to ministers (*senabodi*). The king later issued a proclamation ordering that they should be addressed in the same manner as ministers. They were also awarded the Family Order, the initials of which, for a time, it became the practice to set behind one's honorific name, in imitation of British custom.⁶⁴ Having established the Council of State, King Chulalongkorn moved very rapidly to persuade the councillors to support his fiscal reforms. He had targeted these as the key to shifting the strategic balance between himself and the great families.

At the first meeting on 8 May 1874, attended by councillors and ministers, King Chulalongkorn argued for economic progress and presented the fiscal reforms as if they were making only technical changes. He pointed out that there were backlogs in forwarding state revenues to the Treasury, and the fact that tax farmers were allowed to deduct their expenses or be reimbursed in kind made account-keeping confusing. Thus, there was no way of totalling state revenue, which greatly hindered the Treasury's attempts to budget. And there were inadequate funds to pay for economic development. The king then presented principles for draft legislation which would centralise state revenues and expenditure at the Treasury.⁶⁵

It is uncertain whether Somdet Chaophraya realised at this stage how his power was about to be curbed.⁶⁶ Fiscal reforms were necessary if the king was to give up the gambling tax farm which, in 1872, produced 13 per cent of all revenue derived from taxation.⁶⁷ But when the draft legislation concerning taxation was presented, he knew that he had been tricked into accepting a policy of reform which would significantly reduce his family's autonomy. This was evident because the draft legislation proposed that the Treasury control not only revenue and expenditure, but also the granting of tax farms, the main source of power over tax revenue.⁶⁸ This meant the transfer of tax farms distributed among various departments to the Treasury, and the end of the great nobles' control of state resources. It also meant the end of the trickle-up system in which nobles were allowed

to take their cuts before passing on the resources to the king. Somdet Chaophraya showed his displeasure by offering to return the management of the opium tax back to the king; and, arguing that the measures to be effected by the fiscal reform were impractical, he refused to let officials from the *Ho Ratsadakonphiphat* vet tax farm managers on the grounds that he lacked confidence in their judgement.⁶⁹

At this point the king decided to place all his cards on the table. He confessed to the great families that he did mean to centralise state finance, but argued that their interests would be secured by their being paid an agreed percentage of the revenue. Ideologically, King Chulalongkorn shifted ground from the “technical” argument to the larger one of the state’s interest, Siam’s survival and prosperity, thus implying that opponents to his reforms were placing their family fortunes above the interests of Siam. Behind closed doors, the king bargained for the passing of the fiscal bill by assuring Somdet Chaophraya that he would be allowed to manage the opium tax in his own way despite the legislation.⁷⁰

In spite of the compromise offered, the fiscal reform still meant the destruction of Conservative Siam’s power. Worse, the proposed reform of the labour system and abolition of gambling did not go as far as Somdet Chaophraya had wanted – and had been led by Young Siam to believe would be enacted. The king’s strategy for reforming the manpower system was to abolish slavery slowly, initiating measures that would take effect only in the next generation. The law eventually passed on 21 August 1874 abolished slavery for anyone born after 1868, and set new regulations for freeing existing slaves from bondage at the age of twenty-one.⁷¹ It was later said that because of the long-term effect of the measure, no one seemed to have shown either approval or objection to it.⁷²

As to the question of *corvée*, indexes to Council minutes refer to deliberations on the abolition of marking the *phrai* and on the introduction of a poll tax. Unfortunately, the minutes have been destroyed by fire and we do not know the precise reason for the failure to promulgate this legislation. A document indicates that the king wanted to see the standardisation of the people’s obligations to the state.⁷³ If we accept that King Chulalongkorn’s tactic was to introduce manpower reforms slowly, then the Council would not have introduced any drastic change in the *phrai* system.

A supporter of Conservative Siam who wrote an article in Singapore’s *Straits Times* clearly stated that Young Siam had failed to carry out its promised manpower reforms, which suggests that the original intention was to go further than was effected.⁷⁴ The wording of the *Royal Gazette* on slavery also gives the impression that the king was in no hurry to change the labour system radically. It stressed rather that the law was intended to stop commoner children from falling into slavery, and to give freedom to all at the age of twenty-one, which would allow ex-slaves the opportunity to join the wage labour market. As wage labour became more popular, it was argued, the use of slaves would decrease. At the same time, a school

was planned to be established so that freed young slaves could be educated and join the clerical class.⁷⁵

The failure to abolish gambling was another source of disappointment for Somdet Chaophraya's priorities and Young Siam ideals. Although evidence suggests that the king gave the problem serious thought, and *Darunowat* remarked that the personal interests of a member (or members) of the Council (most probably referring to Phraya Sripiphat, since he supervised the tax) posed an obstacle, it is unlikely that the king would easily give up a source of revenue which brought in more than 11,000 catties annually without finding a substantial compensation. Such compensation had to come from the centralisation of revenue, an issue delayed by resistance from Conservative Siam. Finally, the king made a gesture in this respect by prohibiting gambling within monasteries, so that the gambling spirit was not inculcated in the children who spent their spare time there.⁷⁶ But it was far from what Somdet Chaophraya had wanted to see.

In spite of these compromises, the draft legislation on fiscal reform made Old Siam suspicious and Conservative Siam acutely angry; and so criticisms of Young Siam and the reforms were rife. The king's strategy was to separate the two groups of his opponents and to win noble class support through arguments expressed in the *Royal Gazette*. There he argued that the happiness and progress of the people, who were the blood of the state, guaranteed the progress of the country and benefit of the ruling class. Such a satisfactory situation could only be achieved, however, if the king had the financial resources to develop the economy. Only those who had previously misappropriated state revenues would be negatively affected by the proposed reforms. In effect, he persuaded Old Siam that members of Conservative Siam – in particular the Bunnags – placed their own interests above these of the state.⁷⁷

Moving against the Bunnags

The king's strategy for discrediting the Conservative grouping was to publicise how its members had abused their positions. He began by targeting Phraya Ahanborirak (Nut), the Minister of *Krom Na* (Ministry of Land), who had extensive responsibilities for collecting the land tax, one of the main sources of state revenue since the Bowring Treaty. It was not coincidental to the king's purpose that Phraya Ahanborirak was also Somdet Chaophraya's nephew. In addition, the king picked the land tax as a test case because the revenue it raised could easily be checked by calculating internal consumption of rice and the quantities exported.⁷⁸

When the deliberations on fiscal reforms started in May 1874, Phraya Ahanborirak was asked, along with other ministers, by the Council of State to comment on the draft legislation pertaining to the land tax. And, like the others, he responded negatively. He pointed out the impracticali-

ties of the proposed changes, and argued that they would incur losses in revenue. Faced with this reaction, the king asked to see the accounts of the *Krom Na*. When they were presented, it was evident that Phraya Ahanborirak's accounts of revenue received and the actual sums passed on to the Treasury failed to correspond significantly.

The king then put Phraya Ahanborirak on trial, thus publicly establishing that a great noble had abused his power without directly confronting the two senior Bunnags. He intended that the great nobles should be frightened into accepting his reforms while those members of the noble class who had no direct interest in state revenue would sympathise with his effort to end abuse. The king set up a committee consisting of nine of the twelve members of the Council of State to try Phraya Ahanborirak and two assistants for suspected corruption in the *Krom Na*.⁷⁹ Confronted by the massive amounts of paper constituting the *Krom Na's* accounts, the committee was augmented by six further members, all privy councillors. The committee elected Phraya Krasap, one of the most active councillors of state, as chairman.

The trial exposed embezzlement⁸⁰ of state and Privy Purse revenues, involving not only Phraya Ahanborirak but also his clients and his patron Somdet Chaophraya. They had helped themselves to loans from tax revenue to pursue their personal trading enterprises, and it was an open question as to how much they had repaid.⁸¹ For example, it was established that Phraya Ahanborirak, even before he became the Minister of the *Krom Na*, had annually taken from 300 to 400 catties from the land tax revenue for his enterprises, and indeed had once borrowed a lump sum of 2,000 catties.⁸² Chaophraya Phonlathep had borrowed from 500 to 700 catties annually to buy foreign currency for imports.⁸³ A Chinese client who had obtained the export tax farm (including rice) had been allowed to use the land tax from a particular town to finance his business.⁸⁴ It was also disclosed that Phraya Ahanborirak had taken liberties in distributing the state's rice to his family and to his patron, Somdet Chaophraya.⁸⁵

When it came to examining the account of *Krom Na* receipts, the committee encountered further corruption. The only accounts that came to light were those made by officials responsible for collecting the land tax, and there was no authentication from the town governors. Many of these accounts were found to have been deleted, so that the sums delivered to the Treasury were less than those received by the officials, the difference being diverted to Phraya Ahanborirak and his assistants.⁸⁶ The account of money paid into the Privy Purse was also found to have been forged, making Privy Purse accounts appear healthier than they actually were.⁸⁷

But the most embarrassing aspect of this trial from the Bunnags' point of view was the committee's discovery of how Phraya Ahanborirak, in his role as manager of the Bunnags' opium tax since 1871, had abused the responsibilities delegated to him. It was established during the trial that he had bought and sold larger quantities of opium than the official record

showed.⁸⁸ This caused the Bunnags to lose face because Somdet Chaophraya had earlier argued that he could not accept the king's suggested reform on the grounds that his overall responsibility for the opium tax farm was so weighty that he could not afford to be hamstrung by finance office regulations.

The final verdict was delivered in November 1874. Phraya Ahanborirak and his two assistants were found guilty of abusing their positions in the *Krom Na*. He was removed from his position, and his property was confiscated.

But the king did not wish to rub salt in the Bunnag's wounds. The question of corrupt dealing in the opium tax farm was treated as the Bunnags' personal affair, to be resolved by them. Upon Somdet Chaophraya's request for pardon, the king placed the deposed Phraya Ahanborirak and his two assistants under the care of the *Kalahom* without further punishment. They were required to pledge not to leave the country, to earn their living honestly, and not to co-operate with anyone in any enterprise that might run contrary to the law and to the interests of the state.⁸⁹ This relatively light verdict demonstrated the king's desire for reconciliation, for it was not yet time for all-out confrontation with the Bunnags. A month later, however, matters came to a head.

The *Wang Na* crisis and its aftermath

At this time Siam, had no law of succession. As we noted earlier, the *Wang Na*, or second king, who occupied the Front Palace, was commonly seen as the leading claimant, but he had no assured right to the throne. Tradition had dictated that the succession and the appointment of the *Wang Na* were matters for the king and the great nobles to agree on. But the current *Wang Na* had not been appointed by the king, and there was no tradition that his status as the former *Wang Na*'s son gave him the right to succeed. He was, furthermore, Somdet Chaophraya's own creation, having been elevated to this post in 1868 largely as a result of the Bunnags' effort.

Bent on consolidating royal power, King Chulalongkorn had used the Privy Council, another western organisation set up to consolidate royal power, to deprive the *Wang Na* of any claim to the throne. In their speeches at the inauguration of the Privy Council in 1874, and no doubt at the king's instigation, the forty-eight Privy councillors pledged their loyalty to the king and to his son, who was deemed to be his successor.⁹⁰

The *Wang Na* was the only person who could seriously challenge King Chulalongkorn, for he controlled a large number of men and weapons, and apparently he had the support of Old Siam and the British Consul in Siam. Moreover, the *Wang Na* not only felt threatened by the question of succession, but also by the financial reforms, which were bound to affect his share of state revenues. Already his revenue had declined (though, as

we shall see, less because of the reforms than because of a failure to pass on the revenue due to him).

The *Wang Na's* sense of grievance provided Somdet Chaophraya with an excellent opportunity to redress the balance between himself and the king. The crisis was sparked by an anonymous letter sent to the *Wang Na*, which seemingly threatened his life.⁹¹ In early December 1874, nearly a month before the crisis actually started and evidently before the letter was received, Somdet Chaophraya had asked the British Consul what position the British government would take in the likelihood of a conflict between the king and the *Wang Na*. This suggests that Somdet Chaophraya seriously anticipated a conflict, and that he may have inspired the letter. He stood to gain if conflict between the king and the *Wang Na* generated a political crisis, for this would require a man of his stature to resolve it. A successful resolution would increase his authority, and hence present him with the opportunity to put an end to the king's reforms.⁹²

In response to the anonymous letter, the *Wang Na* mobilised up to 600 of his men in his palace. To allay the king's suspicions, he used an upcoming religious ceremony as a pretext for this. Nonetheless, the move underlined the disquieting fact that the *Wang Na* had more palace guards and better weaponry than the king; and King Chulalongkorn also began to mobilise his guards.

Then, on the night of 28 December 1874, a mysterious fire broke out in the Royal Palace (the Middle Palace). The *Wang Na's* guards, stationed in the Front Palace, as dictated by custom, went to help extinguish it; but because it was thought the fire might have been set to provide them an excuse for entry, they were turned away. The *Wang Na* himself chose to remain in his palace, rather than enter the Royal Palace with his men. Giving the excuse that tradition required the *Wang Na* to take an active role whenever a crisis threatened any part of the royal compound, the king ordered his guards to place the Front Palace under siege.

Once the conflict had started, the king and his ministers agreed that Somdet Chaophraya, absent for the moment, was the only person who could effectively handle the matter. The king sent for him at Ratburi, the Bunnags' stronghold, commenting privately that he was forced to "swim to the crocodile".⁹³

Somdet Chaophraya's first message to King Chulalongkorn advised him that since the king was unhappy with the *Wang Na*, he should either reduce the *Wang Na's* current titular status from second king to his traditional one of *Kromphraratchawangbowonsamongkon*, the title of the *Wang Na* before the office of the second king was invented by King Mongkut, or confiscate his men and weapons, or execute him. King Chulalongkorn recounted later that these proposals were more than he had hoped for. He apparently asked the ministers to inform Somdet Chaophraya that all he had wanted was to curb the *Wang Na's* control over men and weapons.⁹⁴ Somdet Chaophraya told him this delicate

matter would take time to resolve. He did not say what price should be paid in return, but he did hint at his displeasure with the Council of State and the Privy Council.⁹⁵ Thus, Somdet Chaophraya was able to determine both the issues in dispute and the timing, and could turn the conflict to his advantage.

Meanwhile, the acting British Consul (the British Consul having returned to the United Kingdom) was informed by Somdet Chaophraya of the alternatives being considered by the king with regard to the *Wang Na*, implying that the situation was so bad that the British should send a gunboat to protect British lives and property.⁹⁶

This was unusual. The Siamese leaders generally took care not to involve foreign powers in Siam's internal affairs. But the situation was also unusual: the king was still not capable of openly challenging the great nobles (as he needed to if he were to satisfy an important condition for the emergence of a modern state; the ability of the monarch to prevail over the nobility). But he had managed to outwit them, to the extent that Somdet Chaophraya attempted to improve his position by involving the British and the French. Mutually jealous of the other's influence in Siam, each of these foreign powers would balance the other.

From Somdet Chaophraya's point of view, the British were not ideal allies, for they thought him a serious impediment to their commercial interests. However, the British Consul, Thomas Knox, had considered that both the former and the present *Wang Na* were more suitable candidates for the throne than either King Mongkut or King Chulalongkorn; the first attracted by virtue of his outgoing personality and savoir-faire, and the second both because he was King Pinklao's son and because of his own maturity.

Somdet Chaophraya hoped to portray the *Wang Na* as stronger than he really was, in order that the king would accept his own advice. At the same time, he hinted to the *Wang Na* that the king might be wanting the second king's execution, which was calculated to render the *Wang Na* amenable to his influence. Thus, he attempted to create a situation in which, by becoming an essential mediator, he could demand an end to those reforms of which he disapproved. However, he misjudged the *Wang Na*'s character, for the second king became so alarmed that, in the early hours of 2 January 1875, he fled to seek protection from the British Consulate.

This unexpected turn of events meant that Somdet Chaophraya could no longer use the *Wang Na* as a bargaining pawn in his political struggle with King Chulalongkorn. His efforts to persuade the *Wang Na* to return to his palace failed, and the western consuls expressed their support for the *Wang Na*'s action in seeking refuge. Somdet Chaophraya was then forced to request certain high-ranking officials (ministers, councillors and those *phraya* entitled to use the golden tray as their insignia) to deliberate on the *Wang Na*'s action.

The language in the memorandum which Somdet Chaophraya prepared for these worthies was harsh. Presumably it was calculated to swing sympathy away from the *Wang Na* and to isolate him so that he would be forced to rely upon the good graces of Somdet Chaophraya. The *Wang Na* was accused of using a foreign power to enforce his wishes to the detriment of royal authority.⁹⁷ At a meeting between Somdet Chaophraya and the officials, an indictment of the *Wang Na* was drawn up. King Chulalongkorn then intervened and suggested that instead they should try inviting the *Wang Na* to return to the palace. The invitation was, however, declined by the *Wang Na*, whose refusal to accept reconciliation helped to improve the king's position.⁹⁸

Documents suggest that at this point Somdet Chaophraya requested the French Consul to approach the king over the question of the Council of State and the Privy Council and their authority. This was intended to put the king under pressure; but the king indicated strongly that he would not abolish the Councils but would be willing to expel any member proved to be unworthy.⁹⁹ It is likely that the French Consul dropped the question of the Councils in his discussions with the king and concentrated instead on working for an agreement between the king and the *Wang Na* that could be guaranteed.

The agreement eventually drafted by the ministers respected the *Wang Na's* status generally, but reduced his title from that of the second king to the traditional *Kromphraratchawangbowonsathanmongkon*.¹⁰⁰ This proved to be unsatisfactory to the *Wang Na*, however, since the question of his manpower and tax revenue allocations had not been resolved. In his counter-proposal, he asked for reassurance that he could keep his men and that he would be entitled to the tax revenues that he enjoyed in the past. But his most important demand was that the British and French Consuls should act as guarantors.¹⁰¹

King Chulalongkorn was under pressure from the ministers to compromise with the *Wang Na*, but he was saved the embarrassment of acceding to this demand by a vote of the high-ranking nobles and princes against the requirement that the consuls act as guarantors, lest it be interpreted by them as licence to meddle in the affairs of the Siamese state.¹⁰²

The crisis dragged on, mainly because the warm support expressed by the acting British Consul persuaded the *Wang Na* that the British government was on his side. He thus waited for British intervention, and rejected point-blank the note offering reconciliation. Once it appeared that stalemate had been reached, the acting British Consul was advised by Somdet Chaophraya that he should seek the assistance of an influential person; and, in response, the acting Consul invited Sir Andrew Clarke, the British Governor in Singapore, to come to Bangkok, presumably to mediate.¹⁰³ However, King Chulalongkorn himself had earlier contacted Clarke, who was very sympathetic to the king's reforms, and presented his version of the crisis in an effort to rally foreign support for his cause.¹⁰⁴ Clarke was

anxious to come and advise the young king, but it took London a long time to make the decision. Once it did, the king was certain that he had the upper hand. In Bangkok, Sir Andrew Clarke allowed King Chulalongkorn to dictate his terms of agreement and forced the humiliated *Wang Na* to accept them.¹⁰⁵

It was now agreed that the *Wang Na* could not pretend to the status of second king. He was allowed to keep 200 guards with small guns; they were confined to the Front Palace and were at the king's disposal. The king was to enjoy a monopoly on all ships, arms and ammunition. In return, King Chulalongkorn pledged to look after the *Wang Na's* financial rights and interests once he had "placed the Finances of Our Kingdom on a more secure and firmer basis, so as to lighten the burden of our people, and prevent the waste of our resources".¹⁰⁶

In effect, the agreement gave the king a significant political victory over both Old Siam and Conservative Siam. The *Wang Na* was no longer in a position to challenge the king, and Old Siam had lost its leader. The provision of the clause assuring the *Wang Na's* financial security gives the impression that it was intended as a message to Conservative Siam that the king did not intend to backtrack on his intention to pursue financial reforms until he gained full control over resources. That Somdet Chaophraya saw the outcome of the crisis as a defeat is witnessed by his continuing attempts to reinterpret the agreement concerning arms and ammunitions allotted to the *Wang Na*; eventually the king had to employ the good offices of Clarke to gain the Bunnag's acquiescence.¹⁰⁷

Yet, within a year of this signal victory, King Chulalongkorn wrote to Sir Andrew Clarke that he had decided: "to defer the prosecution of further plans of reform until I shall find some demand for them among the leaders of my people. I have not relinquished them, but act according to my opportunities."¹⁰⁸

It would appear that after the crisis it became obvious to the king that, in order to carry out such a grand reform, he needed more allies than he had at the time. Furthermore, he came to realise that he could not rely entirely on those who had hitherto been his political allies. When he had appointed two council members, Phraya Sriphiphat and Phraya Ratchasuphawadi, to the ranks of Chaophraya Sriphiphat and Chaophraya Mahintharasakthamrong respectively, he had been unpleasantly surprised by an article in *Darunowat* which suggested that the latter had only been promoted out of favour to his daughter, the king's concubine.¹⁰⁹ The author of the offending piece was the young Phraya Patsakorawong, a member of Young Siam who presumably objected because these two nobles represented the more conservative elements in the Young Siam faction.

In fact, there were already signs that the more radical members of Young Siam had gone too far in pressing for changes and in alienating the conservative elements. In *Darunowat* they openly ridiculed Somdet

Chaophraya, whereas the king's strategy was to avoid direct conflict. They criticised senior monks in the *sangha* for not doing a proper job,¹¹⁰ which aroused unnecessary resentments. Like radical supporters of reforming rulers elsewhere, they grew impatient of their leader's compromises and were quite unrealistic in their expectations. Thus members of Young Siam argued that in the five years following the abolition of the gambling tax farms the increase in other taxes would adequately cover the loss.

Young Siam's enthusiasms could become dangerous if they caused a split in the king's faction, or if they obliged him to move more rapidly than was wise.

Another potentially dangerous political ally was the influential missionary Dr Smith, who had hitherto supported the king's reforms. Unlike the king, whose reforming vision was largely limited to strengthening the monarchy, his ultimate aim was to have Siam completely transformed into a western-type society. There was a danger in encouraging Dr Smith to assume that the process of change would go as far as he wished; the more so because the missionary equated the condition of being civilised with Christianity. The king was well aware that giving too free a hand to proselytising westerners would arouse Buddhist resentments.

Thus the king may have found it useful to use the recent political crisis as a reason for pausing in the pursuit of fiscal reforms. The king and Dr Smith soon parted company, and the latter's publications actively crusaded for those reforms which he felt the king had failed to deliver. He championed the plight of the *phrai*, criticised the Thai ruling class for polygamy, and pointed out that it was only during the reign of King Chulalongkorn that opium smoking had become widespread. All of this proved a considerable embarrassment to the king.¹¹¹

Another reason for checking the pace of fiscal reform was that the king came to realise that he did not need to go much further. By consolidating his authority over those resources which he already controlled, in particular tax farms under the supervision of the Treasury, the Warehouse and the *Mahadthai* he would have sufficient power to lay the foundations of an absolutist state. In 1875 he promulgated a law on the Ministry of Finance which westernised and rationalised the Treasury. Although its jurisdiction was limited to those tax farms, it meant that the Treasury could now raise sufficient revenue to allow the king to carry on reforms in non-controversial areas such as education, defence and communications.

In the meantime, the Bunnags retained their power in the *Kalahom*, *Krom Tha* and the southern provinces; it would be another decade before the king could destroy the Bunnag Empire. But end it he did: after Somdet Chaophraya's death, the Treasury confiscated his house on grounds of tax arrears.