5 The defence of absolutism

Introduction

When King Vajiravudh ascended the throne in 1910, the political landscape had been completely transformed compared to the mid-nineteenth century. The monarch could no longer base his power on alliances with the great families. The rise of bureaucratic resistance in the later years of King Chulalongkorn's reign had made it obvious that even a powerful king could not solely depend on his own resources to maintain control over the new administrative apparatus, which was showing itself to be a true Frankenstein's monster of royal absolutism. Somehow the king needed to regain the initiative and redefine the world of power so that the monarch was truly at the centre and not just a symbol, legitimising rule by others. Whether from youthful enthusiasm or from an acute sense that the possibilities for this was passing, from the onset of his reign King Vajiravudh embarked on an alternative to the bureaucratically defined world: ideologically, through nationalism and organisationally, through the Wild Tiger Corps.

This chapter deals with King Vajiravudh's attempts to cope with straying bureaucratic loyalties by promoting nationalism. It focuses on his early efforts to defend absolutism, between his ascension to the throne in late 1910 to the 1912 conspiracy. It is hoped to demonstrate that challenges to his authority were inspired less by his difficult personality than by structural factors.[1]

During this period he was busy developing an "official nationalism"[2] to which end he created a paramilitary unit, the Wild Tiger Corps.[3] This brought him into direct conflict with the army, from whom the majority of conspirators were drawn. But the demise of absolutism cannot be solely explained by the short-term consequences of this rivalry. Structural problems had developed under King Chulalongkorn, as we have seen, and events in the reign of King Vajiravudh only helped to quicken the process by which they were brought to a head. The chapter is separated into the following sections: King Vajiravudh and the bureaucracy; his ideology; and the Wild Tiger Corps.

King Vajiravudh and the bureaucracy

King Vajiravudh's problems with the bureaucracy are shown by comparing and contrasting them to those faced by King Chulalongkorn in his early years. Both kings needed to establish control over entrenched and powerful officials. However, in King Chulalongkorn's case, those in power were deeply divided, and he was eventually able to take advantage of their divisions. Whereas King Vajiravudh faced a bureaucratic elite that was generally in agreement on the need for greater autonomy for the bureaucracy. He did not enjoy the assets of charismatic personality, intellect and the superior claims to the throne; and he also faced the fact that claims to power by competing great families had been replaced by a more or less monolithic bureaucracy which could apply modern claims of merit and service to the state to resist any attempt to replace those in office. How was the new king supposed to get a grip on this apparatus?

Thus, the basis of King Vajiravudh's problems in consolidating royal absolutism did not lie in his personality, which was often measured against that of his father. Succeeding so astute, charming and persuasive a personality as King Chulalongkorn posed particular problems for the crown prince who ascended the throne on his father's death in 1910. Vajiravudh had a diffident and aloof personality, and his preference for the company of young males disappointed conventional thinking that he should take a wife. This point has been much discussed by both contemporary and present-day critics, and it is not my intention here to emphasise his personal inclination. However, we do need to deal with the new king's psychological make-up in order to understand how he set about dealing with his problems.

The background

King Vajiravudh was born on 1 January 1881, King Chulalongkorn's eldest son by Queen Saowapha, one of the five royal wives, who later became the first queen. He was appointed Crown Prince while studying in Europe in 1895 when Prince Vajirunhis, the first Crown Prince in Siam's modern history, died.[4] Until then, Vajiravudh, a shy and unassuming prince, had been regarded as one among several royal princes; now he faced the problem of suddenly occupying an exalted position and being compared to Prince Vajirunhis, who had the reputation of great intelligence. It was reported from London that Vajiravudh was considerably affected by his new status. He became insolent and attempted to dictate to his brothers and half-brothers who were studying in Europe at the time.[5] This need to dominate others may have sprung from a sense of being not only the "second best"[6] within this highly competitive royal court, but also from a realisation that he would be measured against his many capable and intelligent siblings.

He spent over three years under private tuition before embarking upon military training, including two years at Sandhurst and a stint as an officer in the Durham Light Infantry. From 1899 to 1901 he studied history, law and administration at Christchurch, Oxford and presented his final dissertation entitled "The War of the Polish Succession", but did not stay on to fulfill the degree requirement.

English education did not suit him. He was naturally introverted and averse to sport, and private tuition had ill-prepared him to mix socially. When not following his favourite literary pursuits, he was deemed lethargic and inconsiderate.[7] However, he was also reported to thoroughly enjoy the military profession and as a Corporal of Cadets at Sandhurst he got on well with his brother cadets who all liked him.[8] It was reported that at Oxford he did not demonstrate the same enthusiasm for academic studies as he had shown for the military profession.[9] His request to spend two years at the staff military school in order to compete with his brothers who were studying at Berlin and St Petersburg, was turned down on the grounds that, as a future king, he needed training in civilian matters.[10]

However, Prince Vajiravudh returned to Siam without any further training and with a strong recommendation that he be assigned to regular and responsible work in order to instil self-restraint.[11] Instead, he was given the position of inspector general of the army which did not offer serious responsibility; and other duties assigned to him also "carried less responsibility than might appear".[12] As Crown Prince, he led a very retiring life in public affairs. Rather than setting an example, he played the role of a distant observer and a trainee. In the seclusion of his residence he pondered how to overcome the problems of an absolute monarch confronted with a modern bureaucracy.

Present-day observers have asked why King Chulalongkorn did not provide more systematic training to the future king. There does not appear to be any data that resolves this enigma, and one can only speculate. It is hypothesised here that King Chulalongkorn realised that he had missed the opportunity to train his own heir in the same manner that he was trained by his father King Mongkut. Thus he had quickly resigned himself to his son's determination to live in relative seclusion and to defy all expectations of how he should behave as Crown Prince. The next section discusses the bureaucratic world which surrounded the Crown Prince.

The bureaucratic world

This section briefly explores King Vajiravudh's perception of the bureaucracy.[13] According to him, most posts in the modern bureaucracy were occupied by the educated, many of whom did not come from a good family backgrounds.[14] They were usually called *khon chan mai* (new social class),

and at times "Young Siam".[15] Culturally, they subscribed to anything modern and western without much taste and understanding, and demonstrated an appetite for "civilisation-at-any-price". This was indicated by the way in which they succumbed to "European Spirits" and Thai "operetta" and execrable translations of European "penny-dreadfuls" and "shilling-shockers", "because we believe we are showing ourselves more civilised thereby."[16] Apart from drinking, they also blindly followed the western practice of womanising.[17]

The bureaucrats were conditioned to believe that their education should be the main criterion determining career advancement. "They aim at getting high grades and a lot of certificates. Once graduated they do not need to work hard for anything; fortunes, honour and money would simply come their way."[18] What they lacked was an ethical system, which meant that it was difficult for them to be nationalistic other than for narrowly selfish reasons. When their expectations were not met they sulked and grew jealous of those who were in a better position. Instead of carrying out their responsibility dutifully they became susceptible to western ideas.

So far as the king could see, the bureaucrats expected to be well-treated by their superiors while free to bully the people. This arose because they misunderstood their role and primarily thought of themselves as the masters of the people rather than as the servants of the king. Their superiors allowed this latitude because of fears that their subordinates might send "correspondence" to the press or write anonymous letters, which could ruin their reputations.[19]

As for his relationship with the bureaucratic elite, the king conceded that he was at a disadvantage because of his lack of experience. After the attempted coup, he thus summed up his position:

> I feel very isolated, without any supporters. Those who are my supporters happen to be powerless. As for those who are in high positions in the bureaucracy, they have less faith in me than they should. Therefore they will not listen to any of my suggestions, but are proud of the fact that they have been in service longer than I, or have more knowledge and better understanding of the people's feeling than I.[20]

Not only did the bureaucratic elite ignore the king, they also worked to command their subordinates' loyalty and to divert it from the king:

> Government officials these days are quite different from the past. The word loyalty has a distorted interpretation, that is it means loyalty to the minister. So anyone who does not commend himself to the minister but seeks my company who is the lord of the land is considered disloyal and sycophantic. The word gratitude has been distorted to mean gratitude to the minister.[21]

According to King Vajiravudh, the bureaucratic elite acted as a building block refusing him access to the lower strata of the bureaucracy. To a confidant, the king lamented the fate of an absolute monarch:

> It is not surprising then that I have been criticised for enjoying myself without being concerned with the suffering of the lesser officials who can no longer rely upon the king as their patron. They can only rely upon their superior who will eradicate their suffering. Once this kind of belief takes hold it is not surprising that lesser officials would not feel the need to be loyal to the king. If something good happens to them then the superior claims the credit that he has asked for rewards and promotions for them. But if it is a punishment such as imprisonment then the king is held responsible. They did not bother to inform their subordinates as to who has appointed them to be the superiors. They have cheated my authority not only by making themselves popular but also by impeding other people from being favourable to me. They have cheated me twice.[22]

It should be noted that King Vajiravudh was making a claim for the kind of loyalty that arose from the fact that the king presumed the role of a patron through the act of homage. The king was not prepared to accept the fact of change. The modern bureaucracy was transformed to the point where the insistence on a role as the supreme patron and the source of the bureaucrat's livelihood was no longer tenable with the new criteria for recruitment and the growing number of officials.

The dismissal of Prince Chumpon, the assistant minister to the navy exemplified the contradictions arising between absolute monarch and modern bureaucracy. Towards the end of King Chulalongkorn's reign, the naval officers had begun to suffer from the budget squeeze. Earlier they had been specially treated on the grounds that they could sail the high seas and thus saved the state the cost of hiring foreigners. They were paid between fifty and 100 baht per month in addition to their salaries. (Salaries commenced at fifty baht per month.) But officers who graduated in 1909 found that this special payment was suspended. By 1911, thirty-five officers had been deprived of a large part of their expected remuneration, and their successors suffered likewise.[23] This had the effect of straining relationships between the regime and the navy. Relationships were also damaged by the distrust that the new King showed for his half-brother, Prince Chumpon. The king chose not to appoint him to the royal guard, as was the custom. And when the naval department was raised to the status of a ministry, he did not appoint him deputy minister, a position for which, as the first western-trained naval officer, he was generally considered qualified. The prince was forced to make do with the rank of assistant minister, without an office but on call by the minister. This was in sharp contrast to his previous post as deputy director-general of the naval department, actively overseeing every unit.[24]

The disenchantment that the naval officers held for the king was shown at a dinner party to celebrate his ascension to the throne. A torpedo was placed in the middle of the dining table, pointed in the direction of the royal presence. This was interpreted as a message that the navy did indeed have muscle.[25] The final blow came when a naval officer quarrelled in public with some royal pages and insulted the king. Prince Chumpon was dismissed and King Vajiravudh's explanation deserves to be quoted at length.

> This is clear evidence that officers who have graduated from the Naval Academy are so full of themselves that they do not feel gratitude to the king. They are drowning in the illusion that they have so much knowledge and capability that the king and the government are so frightened of their power that they are granted anything they wish. A large group of young men, being so full of themselves, would not have been allowed to come this far if those responsible for training them and respected by them had not overlooked [their responsibilities]. But . . . the person who is their trainer and superior fails to control his disciples who . . . become arrogant, feeling that such a behaviour and such an act is pleasing to the superior. This amounts to the superior encouraging them . . .
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> Normally soldiers must consider themselves sole clients of the king [and not of any master]. They cannot make it known either by deeds or by words that they respect anyone more than the king or consider anybody's business to come before official business. This [matter of] the officers setting themselves up as a clique, respecting their own friends more than the king, would eventually bring destruction to the nation, if it were allowed to continue.[26]

This uncompromising attitude contrasts markedly to that taken by King Chulalongkorn in dealing with opponents such as *Wang Na*. It is also interesting to note that he found it necessary to justify loyalty to the king by its utility to the nation. It shows how the concept of the nation became a central point of ideology at the beginning of the twentieth century. We will later see how King Vajiravudh promoted the concept of nationalism.

The crown prince's world

As the crown prince, in the privacy of his residences (Saranrom and Parutsakawan Palaces), Vajiravudh had created a world of which he was in full command. He expected to extend this to the outside world once he became king. It provided psychological comfort and served as the testing ground for his plans to resolve his problems with the bureaucracy.

He had two groups of courtiers. The first group consisted of officials of the Royal Pages' Department whose duties were to serve the prince. The

second group consisted of pages who had personally commended themselves to the crown prince. Some had made this move in the hope of gaining posts in the bureaucracy; this resurrected the old tradition before King Chulalongkorn had insisted that all bureaucrats underwent formal education. Others in this group hoped to continue as pages. This second group came from a mixed background of royal, noble and commoner families. Although many were commoners, the general impression that all shared this inferior status was an exaggeration.[27]

The main responsibility of these children was to keep the prince's company, especially during night time until he retired to bed, around 3 a.m. They were encouraged to attend schools during the day and some of them did. But many did not, and given their late hours this failure was understandable. On the eve of the ascension to the throne, some of the children had graduated and joined the bureaucracy, whereas some gained positions in the Royal Pages Department and formed the most trusted group of courtiers. They were generally not well educated.[28]

At the palace, the crown prince pursued his passion in literary, theatrical and militaristic activities which reflected a mixture of Thai and western culture. He wrote most of the articles published by the monthly journal, *Thawipanya*. Some of his contributions were strictly literary, while others dealt with political and nationalistic themes.[29] The journal was an activity of *Thawipanya Samoson* (Enhancement of Knowledge Club), a social club of the British model. At the beginning, there were some members who were outsiders. However, they soon dropped out and the club served only the courtiers. Apart from writing for the journal, Prince Vajiravudh also published a historical-cum-travel account of his visit to Sukhothai, the centre of power in the mid-thirteenth century. The purpose of the publication was:

> to make the Thais more aware that our Thai race is deep-rooted and is not a race of jungle folk or, as the English say, uncivilised. The ancient Thais had the concepts and the diligence to make structures that were large and beautiful and long lasting. Thais today do nothing but destroy the old things or let them decay because of their infatuation with new things in western style. They do not know how to choose what is appropriate for our country.[30]

In his theatrical activities, the Prince introduced western-style theatre from England, which he admired and practised, to the Thai society. He wrote the plays, directed and performed in them. However, since this activity did not allow the participation of his young flock, he introduced the *khon* (Thai masked drama) which involved young courtiers. Again, one of the purposes of *khon* was to remind the Thais that there were not only western dancing performances; Thai dancing was a traditional art which ought not be allowed to fall into ruin.[31]

The last activities, war games, directly involved young courtiers and would be developed into the Wild Tiger activities. They were carried out both in Bangkok and in Nakhon Pathom, the next town to the south. It was thus described:

> There were two teams, each headed by a command staff, which planned the strategy to be carried out by the commissioned and non-commissioned officers and the men. Each side wore a distinguishing colour, red or green. And the various grades of soldiers wore appropriate insignia. Firecrackers were used to help produce realism. The games were taken seriously, and the operations were judged by referees. The Crown Prince usually served as the principal referee, although on occasions he commanded one of the combatant team instead. . . . In Nakhhon Pathom the games took place during the day; the uniforms were more elaborate; "artillery" units with teak-log cannon were added; and the whole operation was even more strenuous and serious.[32]

The crown prince thus led a fairly secluded life, surrounding himself with a small group of trusted officials and young courtiers who were to become future bureaucrats and royal pages. Some of these court activities were frowned upon by critics. However, such practices were not unusual at the time, as King Chulalongkorn's court had also been lively with play-acting and fancy-dress parties. But the difference lay in the participants. Whereas King Chulalongkorn's parties involved his inner-court and royal princes, who also constituted the power elite, King Vajiravudh's activities involved mostly young men who were not part of the administration. Superficially, this was the way in which King Vajiravudh created his social life. But essentially, he tried to create a special group which was personally loyal to him and would embody his ideas and defend him, the Wild Tiger Corps being the prime example. King Chulalongkorn did this too, with the early Young Siam, the League and the First Foot Guard.

Both kings' efforts brought trouble, in King Chulalongkorn's case because these groups' ideology took them further than he proposed to go and in King Vajiravudh's case, as we shall see, because the Corps faced the united challenge of the regular army and civil bureaucracy. The young King Chulalongkorn faced a situation in which the need for government was still growing, and he was able to take advantage of this. It was in his later days that he experienced difficulties and he tried to stop the clock when the new bureaucracy and its ideology were already well-entrenched. King Vajiravudh inherited this developed bureaucracy; could he have succeeded in asserting royal power over it when his predecessor's grip was already loosened quite aside from his personal problems? He was very isolated from the real world, which was dominated by a bureaucratic elite that was not about to let him play a meaningful part in governing the country.

Setting the stage

This section discusses two different ways in which the new King dealt with challenges to his authority by the bureaucracy. First, he tried to produce ideal officials for the future by setting up his own school. At the beginning of the reign, he made a declaration that he would not follow his predecessors' example of building new royal temples as an act of merit making. Instead, he would build schools, with funding from the Privy Purse. In June 1911, he established a boarding school according to the British public-school model. Since the purpose of the school was to cultivate future members of the bureaucracy who were steadfast in the traditional relationships between the king and the ruling class, it was natural that the school should be given the name "the Royal Pages College" (*Rongrian mahadlek luang*). The original Royal Pages School under King Chulalongkorn, which principally aimed at training officials for the Ministry of the Interior, was enlarged to serve all ministries, was renamed King Chulalongkorn's Civil Service College.

The king was very direct as to the objective of the school and told the Ministry of Education that he considered education a waste of time if it did not

> succeed in producing the sort of citizens we want for our country. . . . I do not want walking schoolbooks. What I want are just mainly young men, honest, truthful, clean in habits and thoughts. . . . Please let me have a fair trial with my idea. Don't try and make my teachers "toe your line"; let them "toe mine", because they are running in my "sports", in which I am giving the "cups".[33]

The king took a personal interest in the college's teachings, sport, as well as religious activities. He frequently visited the school, especially on Wisakhabucha Day, an anniversary of Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death, when he would lead the chanting as well as give sermons. Students came mainly from backgrounds similar to those who were sent to his earlier court.

In this way, King Vajiravudh laid the foundation for the future bureaucracy. Soon after founding the Wild Tiger Corps, he also established the Boy Scouts. The Scouts had the objective of disseminating nationalism through the education system.

In a further way, King Vajiravudh aimed to turn the clock back to the carefree days when he was crown prince. One of his activities on ascending the throne was to publish a handbook on the role of the royal pages and to distribute copies to students of the Royal Pages School. This was intended to ensure that these future officials should understand the special positions of the royal pages. According to the handbook, the school was a very special institution because it was close to the king, and offered the most

appropriate training to serve him – far superior to modern schools and colleges – because he himself did the training. He also claimed that royal pages came from good social backgrounds and for this reason he could trust them. King Vajiravudh argued that it was a mistake to consider them the king's personal servants; rather, they were being trained as future bureaucrats.[34]

In this treatise, King Vajiravudh talked about royal pages as though his father had not introduced changes to the system. He misrepresented their true status, and also understated the lavish rewards paid them. These errors reflected the king's lack of solid base in the bureaucracy and his dependence on a small group of courtiers. By treating them with extreme generosity, the king ensured himself of their devotion and loyalty, which he could not hope for from his recalcitrant bureaucrats. They commanded the king's complete trust; after all, they had committed themselves to a type of patronage relationship that had previously existed between king and the nobility and was rapidly disappearing in the bureaucratic world. So, he accepted their rowdiness with a degree of tolerance that was almost beyond comprehension.[35] The only crimes that invoked punishment were failure to keep him company while he was writing or to retreat to bed before him.[36]

These crimes were punished severely. Otherwise, though, Prince Vajiravudh's indulgence towards his courtiers was extreme and had already become an issue towards the end of Chulalongkorn's reign. King Chulalongkorn had this to say to his son, and it is likely that it was his last teaching on the topic:

> For someone of a superior position he cannot afford to act as a patron to a particular group of people, but he has to be the patron of all people. Rewards can be given to those who are specially favoured according to the merit of the receivers. But a leader cannot withdraw from the role of the patron of the people in general. This is a characteristic of a leader who will be successful in all activities.[37]

But the lesson was not learned – King Vajiravudh's relationship with his pages became an issue in the attempted coup of 1912 – as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

King Vajiravudh's ideology

Although nationalism became an important concept in late nineteenth-century Siam, it was only under King Vajiravudh that the ideology of "official nationalism" was fully developed as a weapon to defend absolutism. King Vajiravudh's notion of nationalism rested upon particular values ascribed to monarchy, nation and religion. These ideas were fully worked out at the beginning of his reign in a series of lectures called *Plukchai sua pa*,[38] given between 26 May to 4 July 1911.

However, instead of dealing with the three components of King Vajiravudh's nationalism, we shall look at the oath the Wild Tigers had to take upon joining the Corps in order to establish the ideological content that the king endeavoured to inculcate in his nationalist movement. First, they promised to be loyal to the king. Second they made a pledge to fight against internal and external enemies in order to protect the nation and the religion. Third, they would observe commands given by their Wild Tiger superiors, and would refrain from behaviour likely to damage the interests of the Corps.

The monarchy

The king's ideology built upon values developed under his predecessor, but it served a slightly different purpose. As we have seen, the legitimacy of absolutism was threatened by the modern bureaucrats, who were beginning to question its essential contradiction; if the authority of the monarch derived from the people, then who was the ultimate source of sovereignty, and was the monarch really central to the nation? King Vajiravudh's answer was that the monarch could remain central only if he succeeded in representing the nation. In this respect his conception illustrates Anderson's notion of "official nationalism".

King Vajiravudh identified the nation with the dynastic state, which he perceived as an organic whole. Unlike the monarch of Central Europe, the king showed little interest in the idea of the nation as a cultural community. Only by working in the national interest (which meant the royal interest) could individual's satisfy their sense of being; the individual could survive only for as long as the nation survived.

One distinctive characteristic of King Vajiravudh's nationalism was its secular and western approach. Having been educated in Great Britain, he was inevitably influenced by the British nationalistic trinity of "God, King and Country". He was also exposed to conservative European nationalism of the late nineteenth century. He was influenced by western racism, although his later prejudices against the Chinese were not yet developed during the period under consideration here.[39]

The king and the modern bureaucrats held in common the modernist assumption that the West was a source of powerful, efficient principle. But this similarity was superficial. The modern bureaucrats had learned from liberal, not conservative, nationalism, and voiced their dissatisfaction with absolutism in demands for a "civilised" way of life, by which they meant the freedom to imitate western lifestyles and liberal democracy. They held that Thai society needed to be thoroughly restructured, whereas the king insisted that only certain aspects of western culture needed to be adopted.

In addressing the Wild Tiger Corps on the monarchy, King Vajiravudh did not rely upon traditional explanations based on Hinduism or Bud-

dhism or both. Rather, he justified his stand for absolutism in Hobbesian terms. He explained:

> when human beings first began to live in groups such as clans, a leader became a necessity because of the impossibility of members of the group thinking or acting in harmony when faced with important matters such as fighting against an enemy. By consensus the leader was given powers to take decisions for the group, and so he was naturally selected among the elders, who had most experience in defending themselves against external danger. But besides this there arose differences of opinion which could threaten internal security. Chaos would result if every person was allowed to think and act to advance his own happiness and benefit. As in the case of external threats, a need was felt to assign someone in the group to take decisions for all.[40]

He then said:

> In principle those persons assigned to make decisions in defence of the group and in arbitration on internal disputes were given authority which they exercised over all members of the group. Since it would seem that authority was divided into two parts if these two functions were placed in the hands of two different persons, it was argued that there should be only one person who exercised authority within the group. In different societies, this person was given different titles – for example, patriarch.
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> Initially, this position was rotated. But it was realised that frequent changes of ruler impeded the smooth running of affairs. Thus there emerged a practice of electing a ruler to stay in his position until he lost power or died. Such a person with permanent authority was known as a king.[41]

King Vajiravudh then drew the logical inference as to why the people should be loyal to the monarch:

> The king is the person who has been given the authority of the community, and he exercises such authority for the benefit and the happiness of the community. Therefore the respect paid to the king is the same as that paid to the authority of the community, each member of which owns a share of the authority which has been collected and given to the king. It follows that the respect paid to that authority is respect paid to oneself. Those who look down upon the king also look down upon the authority given to the king which he is holding on behalf of themselves; and thus they look down upon themselves.[42]

A quarter-of-a-century earlier a similarly western explanation of the role of the king was given by Phraya Phatsakorawong, a member of the Council of State who became Chaophraya in 1892. In an article in the journal *Wachirayan Wiset*, he wrote:

> It is understood that all the land of the kingdom belongs solely to the king. The king abides by the royal customs set out by our ancestors who came together to establish a nation [*chat*]. This man was very able and intelligent and one on whom the people could rely to be their protector. This chosen leader guarded both internal and external security and brought happiness to the people. This had not been brought about by the opinion of the majority; rather it had been through the leader's own authority. The people who were organised into the nation were loyal to him and followed his every advice. They renounced their natural rights, whether public or private. Therefore the leader [that is, the king] received full freedom and power which was set forth in the royal customs that the people had enacted.[43]

The theories of kingship adopted by Phraya Phatsakorawong and King Vajiravudh are similarly Hobbesian and display the ideological contradictions arising from the confusion of western and traditional systems. They differ in that Phraya Phatsakorawong followed Hobbesian theory to its end; the people gave up their natural rights to the king. But King Vajiravudh did not make such a claim. According to him, the king is the person elected by the people, but sovereignty still resides with the people. Thus, the role of the king was subordinated to the principle of nation.

This conformed to conservative European nationalism. But in Europe, such belief reflected the gradual retreat of religious and monarchical institutions in the face of bourgeois pressure, which was setting the terms for the debate on nationalism. King Vajiravudh's defence of nationalism was not simply imitative. At the core of his reaction was a profound doubt, perhaps first in his own ability to rule, but ultimately in the viability of the monarchy in its own right.

Thus far, we have seen the king explaining the emergence of the monarchical system and the necessity of giving loyalty to the monarch. He went further than this, and identified the monarchy with the nation.

> As for loyalty to the king, it is the same as loyalty to oneself, because the king has duties to defend the country from external threats and from disputes that are detrimental to internal peace and order. If individuals, who constitute parts of the nation, alienate themselves from their supreme lord and refuse to succumb to his authority, then the supreme lord will not be able to carry out the duties assigned to him. If all people are loyal to the king then he can carry out the task as is expected of him, no matter whether it is great or small. No kind of

> work is likely to be accomplished without a leader. If one wishes to sail the seas, then one must delegate power to one person to be a captain. Other people in the ship must always obey the captain's orders. If they do not, the ship might be wrecked and the people in the ship in danger of losing their lives. This applies to paying loyalty to the king. The nation and the country are analogous to the ship, the king to the captain, and the people to those in the ship.[44]

However, the way in which the monarchy was identified with the nation was functional. The king was a national leader because he had certain duties to perform. Loyalty bestowed upon the king enabled him to perform his duties. King Vajiravudh did not claim that the people owed their loyalty directly to him as embodiment of the national spirit. The establishment of the Wild Tiger Corps expressed an attempt to reach beyond the bureaucratic elite to the bureaucratic bourgeoisie but not to the people at large. The latter step might have been too radical a step for him to take, and he hardly had the personality suited to the role of charismatic leader. In the end, he made a plea to the Wild Tigers:

> I would like to persuade and plead to you all. You and I are Thais just the same. Can we for once think along the same lines? Please do not consider me not a human being. Please think of me as a Thai human being who has been authorised by you to maintain the power of the Thai nation. May you help me to continue to maintain the power and the independence of the Thai nation. I am not asking you to do anything that I am not willing to do at all. If I am willing to sacrifice my pleasure, my body and my life for the benefit of the nation and if you are willing to sacrifice just the same then we can be certain that the Thai nation will be secured. But if you do not make a resolution to make such a sacrifice then I do not see how the Thai nation can survive and escape from disaster. Therefore, I ask you to keep it in your minds that you and I are in the same boat and cannot be separated or escape from each other. If we sink we sink together, if we survive, we survive together. . . . If it is our *karma* not to make it across the ocean then do not try to escape, let us die together.[45]

Nation and religion

The second oath of the Wild Tigers was to defend the nation and religion. The king conceded that, at a superficial level, the concept of nation and religion differed. However, he argued, they were interrelated.

Although central to the notion of official nationalism, King Vajiravudh's concept of the nation was surprisingly underdeveloped. In *Plukchai sua pa* he restricted himself to discussing the linguistic usage of the word. *Chat* (nation), he explained, originally meant "birth", and was

only later used with the sense of "community": "A person who belongs to the Thai nation is somebody who has been born as a Thai among a community, which call itself *Thai*."[46]

The king showed little interest in the nation as a cultural identity and made no attempt to define it in terms of cultural components – whether of historical experience or shared heritage. His few references to Thai history served only as an anecdotal support. He showed greater interest in the concept of the nation-state, expressed in the term *chat banmuang*. Apparently the first mention was made in the *Plukchai sua pa* series of lectures.

> As for our Thai nation, in the former times there was neither nation nor language. However, there was a certain group of people who were courageous, the characteristic of the *Sua Pa*, and who so hated being oppressed as slaves that they endeavoured to form a separate community. They named it Thai, because they had full independence and were not anyone's slaves.[47]

He only later recognised the importance of shared language as being basic to the culture of the community. He observed then that most Europeans perceived a common language to be a characteristic of a nation, and implied that those Chinese who spoke Thai belonged to the Thai nation.

King Vajiravudh's main concern in using the concept of nation was to build loyalty to the monarchy at a time when absolutism was being questioned. The Wild Tigers were told that there were two types of threat: external and internal. The latter was more serious and had three causes. Danger arose first from people who were oppressed and unjustly treated, second from foreigners who stirred up trouble and third from people who staged unrest in their own interests. Those who caused disturbances and unrest were national enemies, not because they were acting against the king but because they invited invasion by external powers. It was the responsibility of all members of the nation to suppress unrest.[48]

The king compared the nation to a leaky passenger ship. It was the duty of not only the sailors but also of the passengers to save it.

> This is the same for a country. If there is disturbance or riot in the country and everyone remains indifferent and says that suppressing riots is the soldiers' responsibility, then they behave just like passengers who leave the sailing to the sailors. And this will even be more damaging if the threat of foreign war looms large. Therefore it is the responsibility of all who consider themselves part of the nation to quickly suppress those bad people who cause disturbances. When the maintenance of national security is accomplished then one can claim that he has fulfilled his responsibility as a man. An individual cannot detach himself from the nation. When the nation founders so does the individual.[49]

This shows again the subordination of monarch to the principle of nation. The people had a duty to help suppress unrest because it harmed the nation rather than the king. King Vajiravudh even conceded that in some circumstances unrest might be justified. But he argued that seeking justice in a way that opposed the ruler's authority is not the best solution. Outsiders who loved justice and hated oppression could not respect those who did nothing to help their government suppress unrest.[50] Here the king appeared to be saying that he must defend his dynastic rule in the name of the nation.

Religion is the last element of King Vajiravudh's nationalism. His initial treatment of religion suggests that he was not confident in handling it as an ideological concept. He included it in his nationalism because of "God, King and Country" in western nationalism and also because he felt that undesirable behaviour of the educated Thais could be explained by their becoming more and more secular.

His initial treatment of religion was similar to his treatment of nation, in that the specific cultural component was disregarded. This was partially derived from the general secularism of contemporary European nationalism – an emphasis on the established religion as good for instilling discipline in the masses – and also from the fact that stressing Buddhism's virtues would seem to challenge the modern, western values which the king endorsed but was not prepared to share with the bureaucratic bourgeoisie.

In his lecture, he reasoned that morality was imperative for both individuals and the nation. Without morality a person would seek to do what he liked, regardless of the trouble it caused others. This would lead to endless fighting and quarrels, which meant that people could not live peacefully and happily. The nation would then disintegrate, even without the agency of external powers. Thus, it was important that all people observed moral principles so that they did not cause disturbances that would lead to internecine strife.[51]

Given that he did not closely associate religion with Buddhism at this early stage, it was only later on that he appeared to have seen value in doing so.[52] At this point he valued religion as a means of keeping in line those educated Thais who were showing increased signs of restlessness. His main target of criticism was the new Thai social class (*khon thai chan mai*) who entertained western ideas to the point that they agitated for drastic reforms along western lines.

He claimed that these *khon thai chan mai* shared the fault of atheism. He gave three reasons for this. First, those who had studied in Europe and wished to be considered as knowledgeable as white men, had been influenced by western atheists who considered that religion served only to dupe the foolish and the ignorant. Second, Thais who visited Europe tended to go when they were very young, and so their Buddhism was insufficiently developed to withstand the assaults of western critics. As they dared not convert to Christianity for fear of being reprimanded at

home, the easy way out was to profess atheism and keep quiet to hide their ignorance.

Thus, the spread of atheism among the *khon thai chan mai* resulted from the bad influence of the West. In addition, however, he discovered an internal cause:

> There are people who want only to pursue their personal happiness and convenience, and they justify doing whatever they like with agnosticism. Those with no religion think differently from others, therefore they can do and say anything they like. When criticised, they justify their behaviour by saying that, not being religious, they do not have to follow moral principles and to behave in the same way as those who are bound by their religion.[53]

Such people, he charged, became role models for those educated Thais who had not left Siam but entertained ideas that threatened the regime:

> Even some Thais who have not been abroad and do not aspire to follow the ways of white men are quick to pick up any practice that is convenient, and it suits them to give up religious observation. This is because atheism justifies one doing as one likes. Thus when they have seen that those who come back from abroad do not have religion, they gladly follow their example and then allow themselves to entertain fanciful ideas. As a result, the number of those who are atheist is not decreasing but increasing as time goes by. This is especially the case among youngsters. They are in favour of atheism because they are at an age that entertains fanciful ideas.[54]

According to him, atheists had one crucial character flaw, that was lack of tolerance and courage:

> They can only think of their own happiness and convenience at a particular time. Whenever something becomes an impediment to happiness and convenience they will lose courage and tolerance to endeavour on the task. In other words, they do not have the spirit of the *sua pa*. . . . A *sua pa* will not hesitate to perform any task no matter how difficult or inconvenient, he will carry it through. . . . Religion makes people courageous because steadfastness to it dispels any fear of danger.[55]

Dedication to the corps

Whereas the second oath was obscure in terms of the goal of resolving problems in the bureaucracy, the third was clear as the king's intention for the Wild Tiger Corps. The Corps was presented as an organic entity which required unity among its members:

> The reason for disunity is usually that some individuals consider their personal interests to be above those of their peers. They only choose to do what is beneficial to them and do not give careful consideration to whether such behaviour might bring about any disadvantages to the corps [*khana*]. They only think of themselves, concentrating only upon their own work and positions. This leads them to feel that their responsibilities are far heavier than their capability. They do not stop to consider that they are only a small part of the group. Their responsibilities are only a small part of those entrusted to the corps. [Nor do they feel that.] If the work of any one part of the organisation stalls then the work of other parts will also be jeopardised. If we make the comparison with a body, a group is a body and individuals are various organs of the body. If one organ stops functioning, this does not at all mean that that particular organ will benefit. It will most probably decay along with other organs. . . . This is also true for the corps; a selfish individual who does not take the interests of the corps into account must be considered a short-sighted person who cannot look after his own long-term interests. This amounts to destroying oneself. Any person who neglects those duties that will be beneficial to the corps will be thought to be bringing harm to the corps and leading the group towards possible destruction. And when any group is destroyed, then each individual who forms parts of it also has to face destruction.[56]

The king then argued that, if the group was destroyed, then the nation could also face the same fate. In so doing, King Vajiravudh turned back to history to find lessons that taught the perils of selfishness and disunity. He pointed out that the history of the *Banphuluang* (the last dynasty of Ayudhya) had been so scarred by revolts and murders because the kings of that particular dynasty had come to the throne by force. And because they could not claim the throne legitimately, they had been obliged to deal drastically with any potential threats. It was natural for the monarch to put down any threat to his throne if it was in the interests of maintaining law and order. But if he were motivated only by personal interests, then his repression would create disunity among government officials and the people. Thus, all in the kingdom would be forced to watch out for their own interests, and this was precisely what had happened in the case of the *Banphuluang* dynasty. Everybody had thought only of their own interests before those of others, and all the time safeguarded their own survival. As a result, there had been no unity among the Thais, and when the Burmese army invaded there was nobody to rally others, and instead each tried only to survive on their own. The final outcome was a Burmese victory, which was very shameful. This clearly demonstrated how disunity could cause the destruction of the nation.[57]

Since a nation is composed of many groups, the destruction of a group could lead to national destruction. It was imperative that each individual

member of a group observed morality because his mischief would be like disease in a person's body, which could lead to losing an organ or life. Therefore, a bad person could destroy his corps. Such bad behaviour was identified as jealousy of persons in higher positions, which made it obvious that he was advocating the Wild Tiger's acceptance of the line of command no matter who the superiors were:

> For example a high ranking government official. . . . when he travels on a ship he will have to allow the captain of the ship being in command. Thus a member of a group has to observe the command of his superior of the group regardless of his rank during the normal time.[58]

An ideal *sua pa* was someone who was sufficiently courageous to do his duty by following the command of a superior to the point of sacrificing his family, body and even life. The king then ended his sermon by reminding the Wild Tigers that they had made a pledge to strictly observe the oath and this corresponded with the Wild Tigers' motto of "It is better to lose life than honour".[59]

Along with a nationalist ideology, King Vajiravudh established a nationalist organisation, which was an attempt at an end-run around the bureaucracy and its ideology of modernity and meritocracy, justifying royal pre-eminence in terms of the nation. Appeals in that direction had already begun in Chulalongkorn's time, and King Vajiravudh, educated as he was in Europe when "official nationalism" was much in vogue, was probably as much convinced of this argument as utilising it as a tool. The problem was that he had no way of reaching the nation except through the bureaucracy, which was not about to allow him to create parallel organisations. Having said this, the fate of the Wild Tiger Corps was almost written on the wall. We now turn to an analysis of the organisation to see how it was meant to be an ideological movement, and to identify its failure as a precipitating factor leading towards an attempted coup in 1912.

The Wild Tiger Corps: a failed nationalist movement

We have dealt with King Vajiravudh's nationalist ideology. We now turn to the main vehicle by which this ideology was transmitted, the Wild Tiger Corps. Soon after the coronation, the king turned his attention to the establishment of a paramilitary organisation whose members consisted of volunteers from the civil bureaucracy. He planned that the Corps should devote itself to drills and parades, listening to lectures given by the king himself, and preparing for annual manoeuvres. Members were required to take an oath of allegiance, the ceremony more elaborate than that taken in the bureaucracy. This expression of personal loyalty was reinforced by the motto, "It is better to lose life than honour".

This project was most dear to the king's heart and was developed and changed constantly throughout his reign. Here we concentrate upon its development leading up to the attempted coup in 1912.

When the Wild Tiger Corps was inaugurated with the ceremony of taking the oath of allegiance on 6 May 1911, it had 141 members who could be roughly divided into two major categories and one minor category. One major category consisted of courtiers, starting from the very seniors to the very young ones, plus some members of royalty who were not part of the bureaucratic elite. It was from this category that the commanders of the Corps came. The second major category was made up of the heads and members of the bureaucracy, who were mostly of the private rank. The minor category consisted of leaders of the armed forces; their membership was treated as special, and initially the Corps was for civilians only.[60]

The king needed the blessing of the bureaucratic elite whose power the king wanted to curb. Their inclusion was explained:

> the Siamese as a people are ready to follow an example of a leader. His Majesty therefore explained his plans to the Ministers of State and high officials, and they gave their hearty approval.[61]

The Corps reminds one of King Chulalongkorn's Council of State and Privy Council as the way in which the new king circumvented bureaucratic power. A lack of response to the royal-sponsored scheme could be interpreted as an act of defiance, an openly defiant position being difficult for any bureaucratic head to take at the beginning of a new reign unless one was in such a powerful position as Somdet Chaophraya and the *Kalahom* under King Chulalongkorn's reign.

However, there were some bureaucratic heads who gave the Corps their heartfelt support. One of them was Phraya Wisut (later Chaophraya Phrasadet), the Minister of Education and a former diplomat who also acted as the king's guardian in England. He and his assistant, Phraya Phaisansinlapasat (later Chaophraya Thammasakmontri, see Chapter 3), who were members of the former *Thawipanya Samoson*, established by King Vajiravudh as the crown prince, were at the top of the list, and Phraya Wisut acted as a master of ceremony during the inauguration.[62]

The next step was to start recruiting from the middle layer of the bureaucracy. In order to join, a candidate had to be a Thai citizen, at least twenty years of age, a civilian and a Buddhist. Although non-officials were welcomed, the Wild Tiger Corps at this stage essentially aimed at recruiting from the bureaucracy. Official guidelines for identifying desirable recruits called for "those who had suitable station in life", which implied those who had the rank of the *khunnang* class of *sakdina* 400 upwards. Besides, an application had to be recommended and seconded by members of the bureaucracy.[63]

It was obvious that, initially the image of the Wild Tiger Corps was elitist and cosmopolitan. Considerable expense was involved, fifty baht for initial membership and thirty baht for annual fee. In addition, Wild Tigers had to pay for their fanciful uniforms and social activities. It was reported that, by July, anyone of any importance had joined. This elitist image prompted Phraya Wisut, initially an ardent supporter, to bar his subordinates in the Ministry of Education from joining. Most had only recently moved up to the noble class. He argued that because all established members seemed to come to meetings on horseback, his officials would suffer embarrassment arriving in Chinese-drawn carts. He relaxed this prohibition only when membership rules were revised to accommodate less well-off officials, requiring them to pay an annual fee of only six baht.[64]

The initial response from members of the bureaucracy was beyond expectation. By mid-June 1911, the original company was expanded into two companies, each consisting of about 200 members. By July, membership had reached 800. In December, the two companies were replaced by four. These consisted of the First Royal Bodyguard Company (referred to by contemporaries and hereafter in this text as the Royal Company) and the Second, Third and Fourth Royal Bodyguard Companies.

The strength of the Corps during the first six months could be seen in the fact that the Second Coronation ceremony in September was attended by 4,230 Wild Tigers. The two main factors attracting membership were that it was something "modern" and was sponsored by the king.

At this time the notion that nationalism could be inculcated through military discipline was taken seriously by European nationalists. How far Siamese bureaucrats were aware of this fact cannot be discerned, but the Wild Tiger Corps was certainly aimed at the appearance of modernity, with its dashing uniforms and members' club. It also offered the opportunity for middle-rank bureaucrats to hobnob with the king and high-ranking personalities. Indeed, this was an appeal put out by the king as a selling point. They inevitably entertained the possibility of attracting the king's attention for want of a more powerful patron or for a patron at all. Besides, their bureaucratic heads had already given either overt or tacit approval.

Expansion of the corps

Pressure to expand Corps membership beyond its original plan came first from the lower echelon of the bureaucracy, those who did not belong to the ruling class. If the issue of modernity appealed to the urbane, cosmopolitan modern bureaucrats, it had even greater appeal for those who were not fortunate enough to fully participate in the modernising process of education. The Wild Tiger activities also filled the gaps in their lives after work since they lacked resources to enjoy the sweet lives of the

bureaucratic bourgeoisie. The proposal to expand membership was welcomed by the king because it would establish the Corps as a more widely based movement than he had originally planned.

On 27 May 1911, only three weeks after the first ceremony of taking water of allegiance, Chaophraya Yommarat proposed to the king that membership be extended to include first-grade clerks – that is, bureaucrats one degree lower than the noble class.[65] In the first few months, the Corps was generally popular and this proposal reflected genuine interest within the bureaucracy, or at least a desire to win the royal favour.

In proposing the expansion of the Corps to the clerks, Chaophraya Yommarat might genuinely have wanted the Corps to become a nationwide movement. Or possibly he foresaw a damaging conflict of interests for the bureaucratic bourgeoisie in serving both the Corps and the bureaucracy. An increased enrolment of clerks was likely to dampen the enthusiasm of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, and thus propel them into dropping their membership and reverting to prioritise their bureaucratic loyalties. The clerks were more dispensable than officials with *sanyabat*, especially in view of the upcoming annual manoeuvre, which lasted the whole month.

In mid-July 1911, the Corps began to be expanded into the provinces. This had not been originally planned, but now the aim was to establish at least one Corps Circle Company in each *monthon* (administrative circle consisting of a number of provinces). Quite likely the initiative for this new recruitment drive came from Prince Damrong, the Minister of the Interior, who was eager to exploit his expertise and official networks in expanding the Corps and was now given the responsibility of supervising the provincial companies. In so doing, either he was simply humouring the king, expecting the whole thing to be a passing royal fancy, or he was worried about the Corps and thought that putting it under bureaucratic and army influence in the provinces would be a better way of bringing it under control rather than rejecting it outright.

The administration of the provincial companies was decentralised, each circle having financial autonomy and its own clubhouse. They were left very much to their own devices so long as they followed the guidelines issued by the Central Command.[66] They maintained enthusiastic memberships, and this factor contributed significantly to maintaining the existence of the organisation until the end of the reign.

At the same time, the Corps enrolled a new type of member called *kong kern* (supplementary unit). This meant that officials of even lower rank than first grade clerks could now enrol. No entrance fee was imposed on them, and they were to pay a membership fee of only six baht a year. These associate members did not have the same status as ordinary members; for instance, they were expected to honour the latter at the Corps' social functions.[67]

The decision to include *kong kern* members marked a significant departure from the original perception of how the Corps should be structured.

In the provinces, where mid-level bureaucrats were in relatively short supply, it was necessitated by the need to increase membership. In Bangkok, the Corps' numbers were threatened by the fact that the bureaucratic bourgeoisie was increasingly unwilling to make the required commitment of time and effort. The new membership category was created only two days after a lengthy regulation designed to prevent idleness was issued.[68] However, the king justified the move by citing a supposed need to satisfy demands from the lower strata of the bureaucracy.[69] Eventually, Bangkok-based higher-ranking officials were to become an insignificant element, and the Bangkok Companies (Royal Company and Bangkok Circles Company) depended most heavily on courtier and *kong kern* membership.

The creation of *kong kern* coincided with the establishment of the Bangkok Circle Company by Chaophraya Yommarat, the Minister of the Capital, who commanded the Corps in Bangkok and those provinces directly abutting the metropolis. The Bangkok Circle Company recruited from Bangkok officials below the first-grade clerical level and was structured like companies in the provincial circles rather than the four Royal Bodyguard Companies. It was intended for young and physically able members in Bangkok who could participate in drills. Like other provincial companies, the Bangkok Circle Company had lower social status than did the Royal Bodyguard Companies. Its members were restricted to their own clubhouse. Nevertheless, it was an immediate success, and by September 1911 claimed over 1,000 members – to the king's great satisfaction. The establishment of the Bangkok Circle Company meant that there were two main categories of memberships in Bangkok.

Pressure to expand Corps membership also came from the army. The original exclusion of combat officers caused considerable consternation among them. It seems likely that, first, they wished to participate in a modern organisation and that they considered their original exclusion to be discriminatory. Second, they might have perceived the Corps to be a potentially rival organisation in which they must play a role in order to protect their interests, for instance as a paramilitary hierarchy that did not follow the military chain of command. This could very well have been the position of Prince Phitsanulok, the Army Chief of Staff, who had shown little support for the project.

Initially, limiting membership to civilians had probably been the king's response to the objection that inviting an army membership would have been enormously disruptive to army discipline. But discontent in the army was so high that the king was forced to broadcast an explanation that the main purpose of the Corps was to instil militarism – something that the military already possessed. Yet, this was not enough to placate them and the king eventually surrendered to the growing pressure by agreeing to accommodate the military officers in the Corps as "extraordinary" members; this entitled them to the use of the clubhouse but did not require them to drill.

Objectives of the corps

Now let us analyse the objectives of the Wild Tiger Corps, and evaluate how the Corps fared up to the time of the attempted coup. The point here is that King Vajiravudh was motivated by conflicting objectives in establishing the Corps.

The first objective was to create an alternative hierarchy to the bureaucracy which would allow the king to bypass the bureaucratic heads and establish direct contacts with the middle echelon of the bureaucracy. This explains why the main target group for recruitment after the inauguration was the modern bureaucrats. The clubhouse and the lecture hall were the venues in which, in principle, the king could establish personal contacts with his officials. Thus, he aimed to break the patronage network which pushed bureaucrats to be loyal to their bureaucratic superiors rather than to the monarchy.

The king's plans for the Corps defied the bureaucratic hierarchy in the second way by putting the bureaucratic heads at the bottom of the new hierarchy and initially having them commanded by some young courtiers of much lower ranks. For example, the second number after the king in the First Company was Cha Yong (the king's closest confidant and who later became Chaophraya Ramrakhop) who was under twenty years old. This justified why members positioned in mid-level of the bureaucracy might be ranked above their bureaucratic heads should the latter decide not to participate actively in the Corps.

This situation explains the two extreme responses taken by the bureaucratic elite. On the one hand, a senior bureaucrat might absent himself from Corps activities – and this was the response taken by Prince Phitsanulok for the reasons suggested above (p. 145). On the other hand, he might take the plunge with the hope of directing Corps activities in a desirable direction. This was the strategy chosen by Prince Damrong, the Minister of the Interior. He became very active in organising the Corps' provincial units.

King Vajiravudh's second objective in establishing the Corps was to build an ideological movement that would inculcate correct attitudes among the modern bureaucrats with the hope of inhibiting them from destabilising his absolutism; as we have already noted, members of the modern bureaucracy tended to pay greater loyalty to their organisational heads to the king. Furthermore, the bureaucracy had grown to the point that competition for higher places became intense and the persistence of the patron–client relationships made the mid-ranked officials restless. The way in which to address these two negative tendencies was to set up an ideological and militaristic movement.

We have analysed official nationalism as expressed in the literature of the Wild Tiger Corps. We now examine the message given by Prince Wachirayan, the Supreme Patriarch, at the ceremony of the Wild Tigers

Corps' inauguration and taking of the oath of allegiance. The sermon summed up the ideological content of the Wild Tiger Corps.

As in King Vajiravudh's official nationalism, the nation was placed at the centre of the ideology, and this priority was justified by an organic theory of the state. The nation was compared to the body; each organ had a specific function that should be performed properly and soundly so that the body was virtuously maintained. The individual was required to function so that he preserved the unity of the whole. Unity among individuals, each of whom alone was an unimportant entity, was the key factor to the nation's progress. Therefore everyone should consider the nation's interests above their own.

Members must be prepared to sacrifice their lives because they were mortal whereas the nation was not. They must not do anything that caused national disunity because it led to national destruction. The sense of devotion to the nation should also be extended to the king, who was the grace of the nation:

> Those who give importance to the nation should also give importance to the king. Although ants are small animals they could provide lessons to human beings in their unity and following their leader. Therefore, you who are the king's subjects should be loyal to him, be attentive in serving him with gratitude to your best ability. [You] should obey his command and not put your personal interests before his. When the time comes you should be willing to spare your lives. As for the king, he is like the head of the nation, the subjects are like other organs such as hands and feet etc., if these organs become injured then damage affects the head. Thus one who thinks that the subjects are important should also consider the king important.[70]

Furthermore, the nation should also observe the *dhamma* because it is the basis of national well-being. The main idea is to observe the rightful behaviour.

A further sermon by Prince Wachirayan throws light on the meaning of the Wild Tigers' motto of "It is better to lose life than honour". According to him, honour meant observing the oath taken by the Wild Tiger; that they would always be loyal to the king, the nation and the religion. He ended the sermon by citing all blessings one would get from not committing any harms to one's friend.[71]

Thus, by joining the Corps, the Wild Tigers were put under a binding moral obligation of loyalty to the king. Their sense of loyalty would be reinforced by lectures given by the king which the members from the Royal Bodyguard Companies had to attend.

The other means employed to mould the bureaucratic bourgeoisie was militarism. The official justification for military practice was that Thais were formerly warriors but the long absence of warfare had alienated them

from their true nature. The king explained that, in the past, there already existed the Wild Tigers who acted as an intelligence unit. Since Siam was threatened from both internal and external sources, it was necessary to revive this military spirit of sacrificing oneself to the safety of the nation.[72]

This claim to be turning Thais back to their true nature overlaid the true ideological aim of the Corps of instilling discipline among the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. The General Advisor responded in English to a diplomatic query on the nature of the Wild Tiger Corps:

> this is not primarily a military movement. It only means that, in the light of their [Thai] history, there has been thrown into a military form of teaching of the people that the interest of the individual is to be sunk for the higher interests of the state; and the highest good of the nation will in turn benefit the individuals who compose it.[73]

Thus, military training in a modern organisation would drag modern Thais away from pursuing personal pleasures such as drinking and womanising. The Wild Tiger Corps provided an alternative to such individualistic pursuits of pleasure typical of western culture.[74] At the same time rigorous military training would help to break the bureaucratic bourgeoisie who were enjoying such a sweet life, which sapped their willingness to share goods in common and to accept the imposition of higher authority.

> Military training instils discipline. It is the way to train oneself to accept the leader's command which will be to one's advantage. This is because if one knows how to be under command then one can become a good leader.[75]

Furthermore, military training would solve one crucial problem in the bureaucracy; lack of co-operation among various departments. The king commented that:

> formerly, unity among government officials in various ministries was lacking. This is because each individual concentrated on seeking rewards within his own department and was loyal only to his own superior. There had been many complaints [about divided loyalties] during the last part of the fifth reign, but nobody had prescribed the right medicine.[76]

Thus, the king intended to use the Wild Tiger Corps as a means of placing himself at the head of a modern, militaristic organisation preaching a nationalist ideology. In so doing he would reclaim a central position for the monarchy, which was losing relevance as a result of bureaucratic and ideological modernisation. In the final analysis, he wished to continue King Chulalongkorn's drive towards a strong and modern Thai state while correcting the principle faults that seemed to have arisen in this process –

the marginalisation of the monarch as leader and the loss of cultural and social coherence. At the height of the Wild Tigers's popularity he expressed his feelings thus:

> seeing the increasing popularity of the Wild Tiger Corps and the Boy Scouts makes me incomparably happy. I feel that whatever happens I have written my name, at least one line, in the chronicles of the Thai nation. My life is not wasted because my name prevailed so long as do the Wild Tigers. Successfully establishing the Wild Tigers had made me happier than any other accomplishment. This is because I feel that I have led the Thais to be nationalistic and to understand the virtue of unity. This is a sufficient reward. It provides me with a more solid monument than any costly object.[77]

The third objective of the Wild Tiger Corps was to institutionalise his personal social life so that he could surround himself with those he trusted most. It was amongst his close courtiers on the royal yacht that he proposed the idea of the Corps and set up basic regulations, and it was there that he recruited the first group of members. The courtiers heavily dominated the original structure of the Corps and when it was expanded to four companies later in the year, most of the original courtier members stayed with the first (or Royal) Company of the Corps. The rest were given commanding positions in the other companies.

The privileged position of the Royal Company was symbolised in a number of ways. The king personally commanded it, and supervised its drills himself. He led a selected few officers of the Royal Company in formulating and revising the constitution of the entire Corps. The Royal Company, with more elaborate uniforms, contributed towards the royal guard, and took precedence over the guard provided by the army. That the king planned to arm the Royal Company later on indicates that he also entertained the prospect of turning it into a security force, but at best during the period studied it could only act as a security blanket.

When the king presided, the Corps clubhouse was the most important centre in Bangkok and its members were expected to socialise with the king there. It was:

> his child, his delight. Its members were his comrades, his fellow "club" members, his companions at arms, his students. The atmosphere harkened back to Saranrom Palace and the Thawipanya Club atmosphere, where the war manoeuvres of the pages and the courtiers, with the King as absolute director and manager, although in a "democratic", that is comradely way.[78]

However, there was a strict line drawn between the Royal Company and the rest. The king was seldom found at the clubhouse outside the

khanaphot, the Royal Company dining club. Only the leaders of the Royal Company could join this, and they were then expected to dine together nightly.[79] Thus, within the Corps, the king surrounded himself with courtly favourites, and made no attempts to cultivate relationships with outsiders to his circle. As a result, he lost what opportunities the Corps presented for extending his influence beyond the regular bureaucratic apparatus.

At the same time, he alienated those members of the nobility and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie who felt he was neglecting the affairs of the state in preference for play-acting and military games. It seemed that he spent his working hours issuing promotions (*sanyabat*) for the Wild Tigers and ignoring bureaucratic promotions.[80] Increasingly, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie perceived themselves to be treated as second-class citizens – and we see in the next chapter that the leaders of the 1912 conspiracy made much play of the king's obvious favouritism.

As a result, members of the Royal Bodyguard Companies who were not courtiers found the daily drills irksome, especially when these were conducted by the courtiers. Corps and bureaucratic line of command often did not coincide, which caused confusion, embarrassment and loss of face. The Corps competed for their attention with such attractions as the new western-styled restaurants, operetta performed by the *Pramothai* troop, and professional clubs such as *Samukkhayachan* and the Bar Association. And so the Corps could not claim to be alone in offering "modernity". Hence it is not surprising that those members who later claimed happy memories of the Corps were mostly based in the provinces rather than in Bangkok.

To conclude, the unplanned and haphazard growth of the Corps reflects the king's confusion about his interest in establishing it, and his uncertainty about what response it would elicit. He was unable to design a structure and regulations that embraced the needs of the different groups from which the Corps recruited – principally from both courtiers and bureaucrats, but also from the bureaucratic elite within Bangkok and the provinces, and bureaucrats at different levels.

King Vajiravudh had loosely intended the Wild Tiger Corps as an instrument of "official nationalism", to build upon King Chulalongkorn's absolutist system. But he lacked his father's talents and patience, and did not have the skills to interpret the nation in terms that appealed to his different constituencies. The Wild Tiger Corps failed to resolve the problems of absolutism and instead mirrored and aggravated them. It convinced a group of young officers that the time was ripe to put an end to absolutism. Thus, we see that the deliberate cultivation of official nationalism failed to protect absolutism from the bureaucratic bourgeoisie in 1932.