

6 The 1912 revolt

The first great challenge to absolutism

Introduction

The previous chapter explained why the establishment of the Wild Tiger Corps caused so much dissatisfaction within the bureaucracy. However, it should be emphasised that the decline of absolutism's legitimacy had already started in the previous reign. This chapter argues that the challenge to the absolute monarchy reflected significant structural problems within the system and has less to do with dissatisfaction against any particular king.¹ By the end of King Chulalongkorn's reign, there already existed a group of bureaucrats who criticised the court's spending.² New-comers to the bureaucracy were demanding that their western-styled education be treated as the most important criteria in determining promotion and advancement.

Their frustrations were partly fuelled by revolutions in other absolutist states and empires such as Turkey and China. Furthermore, they were increasingly frustrated by the activities of the Wild Tiger Corps. This discontent was expressed in a conspiracy by a group of young army officers to overthrow the absolute monarchy. It was uncovered by the authorities in March 1912 and is generally known as *Kabot R.S. 130* (revolt in the Thai year equivalent to 1912). To understand the thinking of these people, we shall examine the conspirators' ideology as expressed in their testimonies to the investigating committee. A supplementary source of documentation is a memoir written by two key members of the conspiracy, Rian Srichan and Net Phunwiwat. This was compiled forty years later, in a different political situation, and thus needs to be handled with care. It was first published in 1950 under the title *Patiwat Khrang Raek Khong Thai R.S. 130* (The First Thai Revolution Year 1912).³

Chapter 4 (pp. 123–125) showed that many young army officers had stronger reasons for discontent than other professional groups because they had suffered greater social discrimination and slower promotion. The budget cuts had affected the army more than other ministries. So, it was not surprising that almost all of the ninety-one conspirators put on trial were junior army officers of the ranks of sub-lieutenant and lieutenant.

They perceived the new recruitment policy and the growing number of officer corps to threaten their career prospects. The conspiracy also included some civilians and naval officers trained in the legal profession who had personal relationships with Sub-Lieutenant Charun, one of the core leaders. The nominal leader of the conspiracy was Captain Khun Thuayhan (Leng) of the medical department, and this revolt was popularly known as the *Kabot Mo Leng*. (Dr Leng's revolt). He was invited to join the conspiracy both because he was the elder brother to Sub-Lieutenant Rian, another core leader, and also because he had a reputation for knowledge of world affairs.⁴

According to the memoir, the two army officers who started planning the *kanpatiwat* (revolution) back in 1910 during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, were Rian and Charun. Both had graduated from the Royal Cadet Academy in 1909. The use of the word *patiwat* by the authors was deliberate. They claimed to be working towards a revolution rather than a coup d'état. However, the evidence suggests that they were considerably less radical than their successors who, in 1932, abolished the absolute monarchy. In terms of aims and social participation, this *Kabot R.S. 130* appeared to have been relatively narrow, being conceived almost entirely in terms of bureaucratic career prospects. Absolutism may have been in decay, but its opponents had not yet created a vision of a coherent alternative. These "revolutionaries" may have talked about a republic, but probably envisaged it under the leadership of their princely patrons. They aimed at creating a progressive form of government, but the practical implications were obscure.⁵ This chapter has the following sections: the conspirators; the recruitment; lecture arguing against absolutism; the conspirators' proposal; and their repression of interests.

The conspirators

This section focuses on the social characteristics and interests of the conspirators. After the *R.S.130* conspiracy had failed, one army officer testified at his trial that, when recruited in January, he was told that there were 300 members. The government's intelligence report put the number as being as high as 800.⁶ Many documents tell us that the authorities felt that the conspiracy was more widespread than they wanted to acknowledge.⁷ They may have decided to exercise prudence and arrest only those who were definitely implicated by paper evidence. On the other hand, the government may have lacked confidence in its ability to press charges on all concerned; the full membership list was supposedly destroyed before it reached the authorities.⁸ In either event, King Vajiravudh was lenient in dealing with the persons who were found guilty. Thirty people were acquitted, and the death penalty imposed on the three core leaders was reduced to life imprisonment.⁹

There were many other government officials who knew of the conspiracy but did not want to be involved. One officer testified that every officer in the First Regiment (stationed in Bangkok) seemed to have heard of the conspiracy.¹⁰ Another testified that it seemed to be an open secret that a group of army officers were conspiring to overthrow the absolute monarchy.¹¹ The fact that so many officials knew of the plans, even if they did not take part, yet chose not to report their knowledge to the authorities, suggests that they felt that the conspirators' cause was legitimate. Prince Phitsanulok summed up this attitude in a letter to King Vajiravudh:

I am not sure if anybody has informed you that, according to the public opinion, nobody questioned the conspirators' rationale but only disagreed with their method. This is generally known, you can ask anybody. Therefore, with my loyalty, I venture to tell you that, as long as the people are dissatisfied, law and order cannot prevail. We might all be heading towards disaster.¹²

That is, some bureaucratic bourgeoisie were not yet ready to resort to force in 1912.

The social characteristics of the conspirators were as significant as their number. Some high-ranking officers may have been sympathetic.¹³ It was mentioned at a recruitment lecture that there were many highly educated and high-ranking government officials who felt that a constitutional monarchy should replace the absolute monarchy.¹⁴ Prince Phitsanulok seemed to have some sympathy for the interests of the conspirators within the army. When teaching military cadets, he also added lectures on world history, including the world political system.¹⁵ These classes significantly influenced the political attitudes adopted by the conspirators (see pp. 168–169).

The prince's position was ambiguous. He may have chosen these topics out of a realisation that the absolute monarchy was an anomaly at the turn of the twentieth century and was bound to disappear, and, therefore, he had a responsibility to prepare his students for likely changes. He may have envisaged himself and aristocrats of a similar mind as leaders of change, and perceived the students to be a natural political base. He may have been primarily interested in acquiring political power in order to settle personal disputes; previous chapters have shown that the royal family was rent by not only ideological but also personal rivalries. In any event, it is not surprising that his stance as a teacher was interpreted by the officers, rightly or wrongly, as that of a liberal at heart and that he was perceived as supportive of the plan to overthrow the absolute monarchy.

An assumption of aristocratic support was reflected in the suggestion, by core leaders, that one of the royal princes should be made president in the likelihood of the abolition of the monarchy.¹⁶ We cannot simply write that off as a ploy to seek legitimacy for a new regime. Such an element is

undeniable, yet the respect that the army had for royal princes such as Prince Phitsanulok and Prince Ratburi was genuine.

The ambiguities in Prince Phitsanulok's position deepened in the aftermath of the failed coup when he took responsibility for rounding up the conspirators. Not surprisingly, their attitudes towards him changed and they became disillusioned with him. Prince Phitsanulok may have genuinely felt that it was his duty to protect absolutism, but it also seems that he believed in the necessity of a change to a limited monarchy and gave an interview to a newspaper to that effect. This perplexed many, even a British diplomat commented that it bordered on indelicacy.¹⁷

Prince Phitsanulok's objectives in (sometimes) seeming to support the issues of political and ideological change are uncertain. The identities and interests of any other aristocratic sympathisers are obscure. But we do know the identities and proclaimed objectives of the core conspirators.

Even though the conspirators included a few civilians, almost all belonged to the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. Some of them were officers in the navy; however, the overwhelming majorities were junior officers in the army. Twenty years later, in 1932, the number of the bourgeoisie outside the bureaucracy was big enough for the 1932 revolutionaries to be described as "a group of military officers, government officials, and civilians". But this was not the case in 1912.

Although King Vajiravudh was not the main issue in the conspiracy, he faced such deep animosities among subordinate levels of the officer corps because, as crown prince, he had undergone military training (the first Thai king to be so trained) which led to early speculation within government circles that as king he would favour the military rather than civilians.¹⁸ This must have raised hopes in the officer corps that they would be close to the king, and at the centre of political power.

However, in practice, his relations with the army were always ambiguous. We have already seen that, when he was the crown prince, he tried to win influence in army circles by loaning his *khon* drama troupe to perform on the occasion of the opening of the Royal Cadet Academy's new building. On this same occasion, he wrote in the programme explaining that he had decided to sponsor the performance because the officers belonged to his class of people, meaning the ruling class.¹⁹ In fact, many did not, and were most probably left feeling self-conscious about their family background.

Soon after his ascension to the throne, it became obvious that he would rather build up his own paramilitary corps than rely upon the army. One of his first few acts as monarch was to detach himself from the Royal Guard Regiment, the first military organisation created by King Chulalongkorn to train the ruling class for service within the bureaucracy.²⁰

Under King Chulalongkorn, the regiment became the most prestigious in the army and enjoyed a very close relationship with the monarch, acting as his bodyguard. However, King Vajiravudh changed its name, which had

the symbolic effect of showing that the regiment was linked to his father only, and that unlike his father, he would not be its commander-in-chief. The post was given to his brother, Prince Phitsanulok.

He went on to create a new bodyguard regiment, called the Palace Guard Regiment. Originally, the regiment was set up to protect his palace at Nakhon Srithammarat in the south. In private, officials explained that this was intended to place a military unit in an area which was free of any military presence, according to the secret treaty with the British (1896).²¹ Yet, the Palace Guard Regiment was soon moved to Bangkok and was given responsibilities that had previously belonged to the other regiments.

The junior officers resented the establishment of the Wild Tiger Corps. As noted in Chapter 5, one of the responsibilities of the Wild Tiger Corps' Royal Company was to give personal protection to the king, which the junior officers felt infringed upon their privileges and demonstrated the king's distrust towards them. It seems likely that not only members of the Royal Guard Regiment, but the officer corps in general felt rejected by the king. An army officer told the conscripts that the king did not love the Royal Guard soldiers any more; he loved the Wild Tiger Corps alone.²² At recruitment meetings, the king's behaviour towards his army was contrasted with that of the Emperor of Germany who reportedly spent one week in every month in German army barracks.²³

Moreover, we have seen that, initially, army officers were not permitted to join the Wild Tiger Corps, which denied them the opportunity to be close to the king. A letter written by an army officer (after his arrest) to his superior asked why the king did not give any honour to the soldier.²⁴ Another army officer told the investigating committee that his only memory of what Captain Thuayhan had said at a meeting was that they were to ask for a limited monarchy and that the soldiers should be given more honour.²⁵ This particular officer seems to have been a hard-liner; he refused to give any other information. Therefore, it follows that he would only say what he considered to be legitimate.

The incident of the fight between the army officers and the king's pages and the subsequent floggings (discussed in Chapter 4, pages 123–124) demonstrated to many officers that the king had ceased to act as supreme patron in the traditional sense, and that they could no longer expect his protection. This left a very sour impression and was presented in the memoir by Net and Rien as the genesis of *Kabot R.S.130*.²⁶ Yet, changes in how patronage was bestowed went beyond the vagaries of a single individual. The development of the absolutist system had affected the structural basis of rule, and as a consequence, these officers were the losers. In the traditional system, patron–client relationships had been legitimate and were the bases of social organisation; in the modern bureaucracy, they lost their legitimacy and eventually became a source of social injustice. Thus, the young officers might see Prince Phitsanulok as their patron but, in reality, there were only a limited amount of positions to which they could

be promoted. He was inclined to promote any of those with whom he had personal contact.

The family background of most army officers placed them at a disadvantage in the search for patrons among the bureaucratic elite, who came from the ruling class. However, due to their western-style education, they expected to be treated precisely like others with similar education. Under these circumstances, those who were unable to secure places in patron–client networks would inevitably feel lost and would be unlikely to advance satisfactorily in their careers.

Although many of the conspirators had Chinese blood, they tended to distance themselves from the Chinese community. They were born in Siam and, because of their socialisation through education, they identified themselves more with the bureaucratic bourgeoisie than with the Chinese community. Rather than agitate for the well-being of the Chinese community, they worried about how far it posed a security problem as a result of harsh government treatment. An intelligence report by the government stated that they considered themselves to be Thai, and expressed strong dislike for Siew Hud Seng, a Kuomintang member then active in Siam. This aloofness from the Chinese identity explains why the conspirators made only references to events in Europe and none to the events in China which must have influenced their thinking.

The core conspirators exploited the fact that many of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie were forced to cope without a patron in recruiting support. It was testified that Captain Thuayhan started one of his recruitment lectures by remarking that being in government service was difficult if one could not find any patron. No matter how educated one was, one would certainly fail to advance without a patron.²⁷

The evidence suggests that, in the main, the impulse to revolt stemmed from a strong sense of anxiety among the bureaucratic bourgeoisie over their prospects. An item of correspondence presented as evidence in the trial demonstrated that they were preoccupied with their careers. A Khun Phasasrirat wrote to Lieutenant Chalo encouraging the latter to join in the conspiracy because he was young and had much to gain if it turned out to be successful, whereas the writer said that it was difficult for him since he was known to be antagonistic.²⁸ And, perhaps to boost his respondent's courage, he mentioned a dream in which he saw Chalo wearing a captain's uniform.²⁹

However, the *Kabot R.S.130* cannot be evaluated entirely in terms of a revolt by a group who perceived themselves to be victimised. It expressed a real sense of indignation at the principle of patronage. This is shown by the fact that some of the conspirators were firmly established in fruitful relationships. Captain Thuayhan was client and family doctor to Prince Phitsanulok – and the prince was stunned to discover his role in the conspiracy. Another example was Lieutenant Man, who served in the Royal Guard Regiment and was personally supported by the king himself.³⁰

Thus, the favours given to members of the Palace Guard Regiment (at the expense of the Royal Guard Regiment) and to the Wild Tiger Corps were interpreted to mean that merit now counted for little, western-style education was disregarded and that officers could not hope to advance their careers. One officer complained that members of the Wild Tiger Corps seemed to get all good things whereas the soldiers, who sweated themselves nearly to death, received nothing.³¹ Another told the conscripts that the king refused to sign ten *sanyabat* (appointment documents for commissions) for officers on the grounds that there were too many, but he signed any number of Wild Tiger *sanyabat*.³²

Perhaps one of the least offensive criticisms of the Wild Tiger Corps came from Sub-Lieutenant Charun, one of the core leaders: "I have to accept that the idea is good. But the time is not yet suitable for *chat doe i siang dang* (nation-building through ballyhoo), ... it wastes the country's time and impoverishes the government."³³

The distance between junior officers and their nominal patron, the king, is exemplified by his failure to appreciate why the establishment of the Wild Tiger Corps was interpreted as a rejection, and why it had generated so much criticism.³⁴ His incomprehension was shared by other members of the elite. A senior army officer summed up his evaluation of the core conspirators as those who were *noi chai* (feeling hurt because they did not get what they felt they were entitled to).³⁵

The mutual incomprehension meant that the junior officers overreacted to every apparent slight. They were shaken by the sight of the king engaging in amateur theatricals as producer and actor. They were even further agitated by the creation of an amateur *khone* troupe by some ministers, presumably to please the king. They were not ready to see their respected bureaucratic elite demean themselves in the same manner as the king. Again King Vajiravudh was baffled at the furore generated by this scheme.³⁶

The core conspirators originally intended to spread the conspiracy throughout the army. They planned to spend ten years recruiting other army officers and indoctrinating the conscripts under their command so that these soldiers would propagate the word among their families. These soldiers came from the peasantry, the majority class. According to the authors of the memoir, these conscripts would be taught lessons of general good: to believe in humanity (*manutsayatham*), earn their livings as good citizens, act rationally, reject superstition and have self-respect. They would also be taught about world affairs, geography, history and worthy legends (*tamnan*).³⁷ How this programme might be applied to social revolution was not spelled out. Nevertheless, the *R.S. 130* conspirators appealed to it as a support for their claim that they had attempted revolution rather than a coup.

This original planning was abandoned. Rather than spending a decade in preparation, the conspirators decided to stage a coup at the ceremony

of taking water for the oath of allegiance in April 1912. The change of plan can be explained both by King Vajiravudh's character and lack of legitimacy when compared to his predecessor, and by the unexpected furore against the Wild Tiger Corps in the bureaucracy, and especially within the army. The opportunity was seized, and recruitment was massively increased. Between December 1911 and February 1912, eight meetings were held to recruit officers in Bangkok. By February, it was agreed that recruitment should be extended to army officers stationed outside Bangkok. This move proved to be fatal; it was an officer soon to be sent to the north who reported the conspiracy to the authorities.³⁸

We now go on to see how the conspirators expressed these demands in their recruitment lectures.

The recruitment lecture

The recruitment meetings held in Bangkok always started with Captain Thuayhan, or Mo Leng, or some other core leader lecturing a group of army officers on the importance of recruiting new members.

The testimonies tell us that all lectures followed the content of a document seized from Captain Thuayhan's house. The title of the document was "On Forms of Government: the Decline and Progress of a Country".³⁹ The framework of this analysis will be based on this key document. In addition, some core leaders also lectured on the same theme to the soldiers under their command in order to prepare them for the seditious act. The conspiratorial rhetoric is illustrated by the text of the basic lecture used to recruit, and the testimonies given by conspirators show what they remembered of what was said. An examination of these texts helps in analysing the issues raised by the conspirators.

The main theme of the lecture was the merit and demerit of three forms of government: absolute monarchy, limited monarchy and republic. It argued that whether the country was progressing or declining depended upon its form of government, and this in turn determined whether or not the people enjoyed freedom (NA R6 L2/3):

If any country knows how to govern by using just law and tradition which does not oppress the people, that country will have more progress and be more and more civilised. This is because all the people have freedom and there is no one to play the master who feels free to demean others. This is the case of countries in Europe and America. These countries used to have kings who were above the law and fully exercised absolute power in order to oppress the people as they pleased. But later on, when the people became more educated and intelligent they managed to get rid of the king's wicked tradition and set up a new system of government. Some countries forced the king to be under law, some abolished the monarchy, that is to say they

went as far as setting up a republic. Consequently, there are three types of government; the absolute monarchy, the limited monarchy, and the republic.

We now examine three main arguments pursued in the lecture. This discussion makes clear how far the conspirators were driven by their personal ambitions and frustrations with problems of securing patronage.

The argument against favouritism

The strongest attacks against absolutism were made with regard to favouritism. The king's favouritism at court, his support for his Wild Tiger Corps, and the behaviour of its members, all came in for particular criticism. The criticism appears to reflect the contradictions between the traditional and the modern.

Borrowed western concepts necessarily played an integral and central part in the new bureaucracy. At the same time, they were contradicted by the persistence of fundamental principles of the traditional social structure. The text touched on this problem in its discussion of different types of sycophants (NA R6 L2/3):

there are two types of sycophants. The first type are those who directly serve the king, such as his pages. The second type are those who serve in the government but spend most of their time in pleasing their superior at the expense of their responsibility to the work.

The first type was not given any further elaboration, yet the second type of sycophantic behaviour was considered to be unpatriotic (*mai rak chat*). This further supports the analysis made in the previous two chapters that the real target was favouritism in the bureaucracy rather than at the court (NA R6 L2/3):

As for the other type, although they are appointed to work for the government, they spend all their time in being sycophantic. They do not care how much damage is done to the office work, they only want to be close to their master. How can rewards escape them? Soon enough they get windfalls and titles. However, those who fully occupy themselves with office work starve and they are even reprimanded for being lazy and not seeking to be in the company of their superior. Anyone can please [*prachop*] his superior, but making one happy does not contribute to the nation, or the country. If one makes the nation and the country progress, then the people who belong to the same nation will be altogether happy. Therefore, he who feels gratitude to the nation should avoid seeking his own advancement by pleasing his superior. He should only think of the way to contribute to the country.

He simply wastes his time in unnecessary activities by pleasing his superior.

It was not difficult to find evidence for the first type of sycophancy, favouritism at the court. A personal letter from King Vajiravudh to one of his favourites, Chaophraya Ramrakhop (at the time titled *Cha Yong*), on the occasion of the latter's birthday, was passed on to the conspirators by a sympathetic official at the Ministry of the Palace. In the letter, the king expressed his appreciation for *Cha Yong*'s services and indicated that the amount of 100 changs (8,000 baht) was given as a birthday present.⁴⁰ The letter was later surrendered to the authorities by the "traitor". It was used to increase support for the conspirators. The leaders made a special effort to gather further information from the palace as soon as they had decided to take action to abolish the absolute monarchy.⁴¹

Evidence of favouritism within the bureaucracy tended to be circumstantial and was thus difficult to substantiate. The conspirators argued that merit was not sufficiently recognised in deciding promotions. They inferred this from knowledge of how favouritism operated at the palace. Their attitude was reflected by Phraya Wisut, the king's guardian in Europe and the Minister of Education. Perhaps trusting his previous status as the king's guardian, Wisut ventured to voice to the king an unsolicited opinion on what he gathered to be the conspirators' rationale. He pointed to the people's poverty as a result of the recession, and also due to discontent in the bureaucracy:

As for government officials, they had endeavoured to be educated using much time and energy, but they did not feel they got anywhere. On the contrary, those who did not have any education, but only served as servants carrying this and that, appeared to be doing well; owning motor cars and big houses. This was the reason why they sought a constitution guaranteeing a limited monarchy or a republic.⁴²

There were many other variations on the same theme, perhaps reflecting the envy of those fortunate enough to secure favour rather than any great national aspiration. Testimony given by an officer reported the following statement at a recruitment meeting: "We have to suffer so much these days, having to work very hard day and night and earning very little. But those who do little work make a lot of money."⁴³

The traitor reported another army officer attempting to recruit him by recounting his pain that *Cha Yong* had been awarded as much as 8,000 baht when he had contributed nothing to the government service, whereas he, the officer, had worked hard and been awarded nothing.⁴⁴ Yet another army officer testified that a colleague had solicited his support with the words:

The King only supports his own men. There are many people who played *likay* [Thai folk theatre] and see what happens to them now. They are given houses, land, and money. What do we get when we are exhausted to death with dust on our faces?⁴⁵

This supports the point made in the previous chapter that King Vajiravudh's favouritism, which was awarded to only a small group of government officials and was unlike that generally exercised in the bureaucracy, was attacked by the bureaucratic bourgeoisie as a reflection of favouritism in general. Now, it was used to justify revolution.

Accusations of bureaucratic favouritism and the desire to come to the king's notice seem to have gone hand-in-hand. One is bound to suspect that "favouritism" was often the complaint of those who had failed to become favourites. Yet the fact that this complaint may have expressed envy rather than nationalistic idealism does not diminish its importance as a reflection of social instability, with all that means in terms of possibilities for advancement and the clash of values.

The argument that absolutism was intrinsically vicious

The recruitment lecture argued that absolute monarchy was the most vicious form of government because the king had full power and was above the law (NA R6 L2/3):

he is capable of committing the most wicked crime, since there is no one who can stop him. He can oppress and molest the people for whatever reason. Innocent people can be flogged or killed or imprisoned at the king's pleasure. The king can, with no limit, seize the people's wealth and land or kill anyone as he pleases. For example, he can expel people from their land so that he can build his palace.

It was not difficult for the lecturers to find examples to support these statements. As for the allegation of flogging, the public in general, and army officers in particular, remembered the relatively recent incident when Vajiravudh, as crown prince, had demanded that two army officers who had scuffled with his pages be flogged in public (as discussed in Chapter 4, pages 123–124). He had also threatened to give up his position if this punishment was not enforced. To their discomfort, King Chulalongkorn and his bureaucratic elite, who had largely adopted western practices and had stopped imposing traditional forms of punishment, were forced to concede.⁴⁶ The complaints against land eviction were also likely to strike a chord. It was not uncommon for the owners of prime land in Bangkok to be subjected to a forced sale by the Privy Purse. This behaviour had been acceptable under the traditional system, when land ownership, at least in theory, rested ultimately with the king. The exposure of

royal misdeeds is less interesting than the unequivocal espousal of bourgeois values of individual rights and private property.

When he acceded to the throne, King Vajiravudh indicated that he would not restrain himself from punishing government officials who caused him displeasure. He would determine both the offence and the appropriate punishment. This was illustrated by the case of Luang Raksanat. The official took his wife away from a rehearsal for a play planned for the coronation ceremony in December 1911 so that she could tend to their sick baby. The king was deeply offended and Luang Raksanat was flogged thirty times and expelled from the bureaucracy.

This incident was cited by the core leaders at their meeting as an example of the king exercising his absolute power in an unjust manner.⁴⁷ The case of Phraya Narong, punished for criticising the Wild Tiger drill, provided a further example of a high-ranking official suffering severe punishment for behaviour which had nothing to do with his official function and was seen as an abuse of power by the king.⁴⁸ Thus, the conspirators could take advantage of King Vajiravudh's character to argue that the absolute monarchy was intrinsically vicious. The soldiers were also told that the king was capable of taking their lives.⁴⁹

The argument that absolute monarchy disregarded the people's interests

The third main point argued by the conspirators was that the king aimed at fulfilling his personal pleasure and disregarded the people's needs (NA R6 L2/3):

He spends the country's revenue for his personal use as well as those of his family and his servants. He can spend money on his sycophants as much as he likes. Therefore there is no money left to develop the country because the king has spent it on himself, his family, and the sycophants.

An army officer told the conscripts that the king wanted the tax revenue for building up *khone* theatre. Furthermore, he granted all his pages' requests. If they should need a motorcar, the king would buy it for them, and if he did not have enough money then he would extract it from the people.⁵⁰

The king, indeed, appeared to the public to squander public revenue on his own amusements, giving money away, setting up a traditional dancing troop, spending on the Wild Tiger Corps. Almost all of these expenses were covered by the Privy Purse (established, as we have seen, by King Rama I from the profit of the royal Sino-Siamese junk trade). As Siam played an increasing role in the world economy, its capacity to earn revenue increased and the Privy Purse grew richer.⁵¹ The Privy Purse thus

served as a mechanism for protecting royal economic interests and, perhaps more importantly, for designating state earnings as the private property of the throne.

The text of the lecture argued that the absolute monarch was not entirely unconcerned whether the people and the country suffered, but he only gave priority to his own pleasure and his family. The text did not further elaborate on this point, but it was apparently developed in at least one lecture given to conscripts, with the aim of making them antagonistic towards the king. The lecturer asked his audience about how the trees in their orchards were taxed and the soldiers (who mostly came from peasant families) competed with each other to answer.

This seemed to be the only issue which prompted the conscripts to relate their personal experiences of the regime. Other thorny issues, in the eyes of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, failed to draw many reactions from the conscripts. We can imagine them sitting in a state of stupor while their commander droned on and on complaining about the Wild Tiger Corps, slow promotions, low salaries (a private soldier was paid six baht a month and an officer sixty baht), the king's expenditures on his pages and the lack of budget for the Ministry of Defence (among other issues).⁵²

The text argued that the absolute monarchy inevitably led to the decline of the country. This explained why so many countries had changed their forms of government and consequently became more civilised. The example given was Japan, which had become as powerful as those countries in the West. The main reason for the decline of the absolute monarchy was explained in terms of the relationship between the king and the government officials (NA R6 L2/3):

The system discourages good government officials to deter or obstruct the king from doing something bad. At the same time those who think only of their own happiness and do not feel gratitude to the nation will seek the opportunity to satisfy the king and to keep him happy.

The proposals for political changes

After the conspiracy was discovered, Prince Phitsanulok reported to the king that he had talked with the army officers and that they seemed to have calmed down. The general attitude among the army officers then was that they had not aspired to a constitutional monarchy, and certainly not a republic. They had merely wanted to bring about a few changes such as the king giving audience to government officials at least twice a week, and a regular issue of *sanyabat*. Furthermore, that the king should give less emphasis to the Wild Tiger Corps because: "even the Wild Tiger themselves found the Corps' activities to be tedious. Lastly, they complained that it was not suitable for aristocrats and ministers to be in the *khone* production."⁵³

Two points arise here. First, given the circumstances, it is not to be expected that the arrested conspirators would willingly admit to their more radical demands. Second, if we suppose that these demands really did correspond to their real aims, it is clear that they were very narrowly conceived, relating only to access to the king and promotion. They suggested that the mass of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie would have happily accepted only piecemeal reforms.

The political changes discussed during the recruitment meetings were certainly more liberal. Although the practical implications do not appear to have been discussed in any depth, and they cannot be said to constitute a revolutionary political programme, they did introduce topics which would become the demands of the revolution in 1932. Hence, they mark an important stage in the long-term development of Thai liberalism. Here, we examine proposals apparently calling for a limited monarchy, for a parliament and for a republic.

The text of the recruitment lecture argued that the problem of favouritism would be dispelled if the country became a limited monarchy. Under this system, power would be transferred from the monarch to *thi prachum* (literally, a meeting). We cannot assume that the conspirators intended this to mean a parliament or even that they understood the concept of parliament. The text explained:

The *thi prachum* will adequately award those who have contributed to the country. As for the sycophants, they will definitely receive neither title nor position for giving personal service and not contributing anything to the nation. This means the *khone* dancers and those who empty garbage bins in the royal palace will not have a chance to become nobles. Once sycophantic behaviour ceases to yield rewards, everybody will be conscientious in helping the country and the nation to progress. The country's revenues will be enough for its development because the *thi prachum* will not allow anyone to continue wasting [resources]. The people will be happy because they have freedom and will rid themselves of all oppression.⁵⁴

The text referred to other countries which had already abolished absolute monarchies and become limited monarchies. Britain was mentioned as the first country to have done so and consequently had developed to the point of becoming a superpower, owning colonies all over the world. Other countries had followed suit, including Asian powers such as Turkey, Japan and China. The writers claimed that Siam was the only country in Asia which still had a barbaric form of government.⁵⁵

In one lecture given to the private soldiers, a limited monarchy was portrayed as the system in which a monarch could do nothing on his own but had to consult with government officials; and in a presidency, the president shared power with government officials.⁵⁶

An army officer who testified on his role in the conspiracy claimed that he had joined the conspiracy in order

to ask the government to give the opportunity to some *khon chan tam* [lower class people] who were intelligent enough to be able to have voice in the administration so that it might be beneficial to the country.⁵⁷

However, there is no evidence to suggest that the conspirators intended to go so far as turning political power over to an electorate, and it was probably deliberate that the lecture text did not elaborate on this point. By this time, the word “parliament” (transliterated) had been introduced into Siam and was so widely used that Prince Vajiravudh wrote an article to denounce it.⁵⁸ Perhaps the lecturer was merely presenting what he considered to be an accurate Thai translation. Instead, the notion of change was expressed vaguely, in terms of the country adopting a constitution.

The conspirators did make some remarks which might be construed as referring to parliamentarianism. An army officer testified that he had joined the conspiracy because he wanted to be regarded as one of those who had asked for *thi prachum ratsadon* (the people’s meeting).⁵⁹ Another told the soldiers under his command that, in a limited monarchy, the king had to consult the people all over the country before he could do anything.⁶⁰ Yet, these references are too vague to allow us to conclude that the conspirators wanted to introduce a parliamentary system. Although some individual members might have sympathised with parliamentary ideas, in general they did not express these feelings explicitly.

A plausible explanation is that the conspirators did not want to commit themselves to transfer political power to an electorate. They referred to the people only very generally, in the sense of the mass, and their attitude scarcely differed from that of the ruling elite, who considered the people ignorant and uneducated. By implication, the people were unfit to govern themselves. A conspirator told the investigating committee that, when it was argued that there should be a change to a republican form of government, he disagreed because he felt that the country was full of ignorant and cowardly people.⁶¹ Similarly, another army officer told the committee that he also believed that such a radical change was yet not possible, because the people were still backward and did not know anything about government. Still another was reported to have said “the people in our country Siam still know very little about civilisation and are very ignorant”.⁶²

The conspirators’ attitude towards the people differed from that of the authorities only in that they believed that the lack of popular political sophistication was not natural, but resulted from government policy.⁶³

So, when a core leader told a clandestine meeting that changes in the form of government would allow *khon chan tam* to participate in the administration, he was not proposing the participation of ordinary people.

Khon chan tam here meant those who were already in the bureaucracy but were not part of the ruling class. That is, the term referred to the bureaucratic bourgeoisie from commoner stock. Thus, the proposal to change from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy reflected the needs of the new social group who had just become part of the administration and who were anxious that their class interests should be protected. The bureaucratic bourgeoisie were struggling to become an integral part of the decision-making process, but we have no textual evidence that they had yet worked out how that system should operate.

The third alternative explored by some conspirators was republicanism. A republic was presented by Captain Thuayhan in the lecture text as most desirable because “the people will all become members of the same *trakun*”.⁶⁴

The literal meaning of *trakun* is “family”, or lineage, but here the term was apparently intended to mean a “social class”. This interpretation is supported by the following statement, in which the speaker discussed other countries which had different forms of government (NA R6 L2/3):

The people are divided into many *trakun*. The highest is royalty, next comes the noble *trakun*. The others are commoner *trakun* and, lowest of all, the *trakun* of servants and slaves. To sum up, the king has raised his own people to the highest class [*chan*] as divine beings, and placed the people into the lower class as though they are animals. And even those who have been raised to the *khunnang* [noble] status are simply the king’s servants and slaves. The *trakun* division of people into high and low classes denies justices to the people and allows those who belong to the higher class to be arrogant and condescending to the lower class and to take liberties to oppress them.

It was pointed out that republican government abolished divisions between high and low classes (NA R6 L2/3):

Everybody belongs to the same class and has freedom. Since nobody belongs to high or low classes, contempt and oppression disappear, and nobody is a slave or master as in the other forms of government. Therefore, everybody wants to see the change to a republic. At the moment most countries, both big and small, all over the world, have already been transformed into republics. Examples in Europe include countries such as France, Portugal, and more. France started this form of government before any other country, and Portugal has had it since the last century. At the moment serious fights and killings are occurring in China with the objective of changing to a republican government.

The author of the lecture text made clear his preference for a republic over a limited monarchy. Some other key leaders shared his opinion. In

order to win support for such a radical idea, they acted as devil's advocates, some of them arguing for a limited monarchy. The testimonies tell us that there were lively debates on the issue, and some of those who attended the meeting expressed concern that if the monarchy were abolished chaos might follow.⁶⁵ Those who advocated a republic appeared to have more convincing arguments, because whenever a vote was taken they always won.⁶⁶ There is rather a large step from advocating the overthrow or abdication of an individual king and advocating a republic. In any case, republicanism was not really so far-fetched then, especially given events in China.

Those who supported the concept of republicanism were reported to be mostly of Chinese blood.⁶⁷ This explains why the main argument for a republic was the abolition of social class. We have already seen that the original recruitment policy adopted at the Royal Cadet Academy meant that most army officers were of commoner background. However, they were part of a bureaucratic system which was still very class-oriented and which offered little scope for those of Chinese descent and of petty bourgeoisie background. Pages 128–129 above showed the king's class-consciousness; and after the 1912 conspiracy he did not hesitate to show his contempt for low-born officers. Some conspirators attempted to rally sympathy from the common soldiers through appeals to class. The conscripts were told by one officer that once the republic was established everyone would be a citizen of the same class and honorific titles would be used only in office hours.⁶⁸

Although class divisions in the absolutist state were sometimes condemned, we cannot conclude that class antagonism was a central element in the conspiracy. At most, it seems that the attitude of the modern bureaucrats towards the aristocrats was ambivalent, as we saw in our discussion of Prince Phitsanulok's role (pp. 156–157). On one hand, there was an awareness that aristocratic domination of the bureaucracy worked to their disadvantage in the long run, and some commoner officials had first-hand experience of autocratic idiosyncrasies and whims. On the other hand, they looked up to these aristocrats because of their birth, educational qualifications and social positions. Furthermore, we have seen that in many professions there were strong personal ties between the bureaucratic elite and their subordinates because of the tutelary relationship between them, in which the latter acquired both professional skills and also knowledge of the world.

When the absolute monarchy was deposed in 1932, class antagonism was much fiercer. This can be seen in the 1932 proclamation of the People's Party, in which the aristocrats were savagely denounced.⁶⁹ The significant differences were that, by 1932, the aristocracy had succeeded in regaining their political pre-eminence at the expense of the monarch. By then, it appears that in any dispute, the aristocracy always won out over other social classes. Moreover, the struggle for financial resources was

fiercer, particularly over control of the army budget. Consequently, the resentment of those who felt mistreated was directed overwhelmingly against the aristocratic class.

In sum, the proposals made by the 1912 conspirators were ill-defined and vague. They reflect political inexperience, and perhaps a lack of genuine commitment to radical change. However, we should not consider their political ideas simply as window-dressing for a bid to improve their material prospects. The next section examines their appeals to the army and national interests in greater detail, and demonstrates some attachment to principle.

The expression of interests

The evidence presented thus far suggests that the conspirators were primarily motivated by their personal and group interests. Indeed, they were well aware that their attempts to recruit conscripts might be interpreted as self-serving, and many private soldiers remembered an officer's categorical denial of personal interest.⁷⁰ Instead, the call for a coup was justified partly in terms of corporate army interests and mostly in the name of national interest or nationalism. Now we will examine the testimonies to see how these interests were expressed. First, we deal with perceptions of the army's corporate interests, and then of national interests.

The conspirators directly linked the king's lavish expenditure on his personal pursuit of pleasure with the lack of development in the army and the low salaries paid to soldiers. It was pointed out that the money the king spent on his pages could otherwise have been diverted to the Ministry of Defence for the army.⁷¹

These general criticisms were simplistic, but one comment touched on the issue of the civil list – which amounted to 15 per cent of the annual budget – and suggested that it could be more constructively spent: “Whatever his pages want he will sign the approval. Even he himself has a salary of 700,000 baht. The money would be more constructively spent on buying guns and gunboats in case of war.”⁷²

The Wild Tiger Corps provided further evidence of infringement upon the army's corporate interests, and was also seen to compete for national resources. An army officer told his soldiers that the king did not invest in weaponry for the military, but spent only on the Wild Tiger Corps.⁷³

It is worth noting here that another study of the *R.S.130* conspiracy has argued that the cut in the army's budget was one of the main causes of the conspiracy.⁷⁴ It is true that the cut did constrain the army. The conspirators explained the shortage of funds by pointing to the resourcing of the Wild Tiger Corps. In fact, the Corps was essentially funded by the Privy Purse; nevertheless, the accusation demonstrates the mood of the junior officers.

The Wild Tigers were also perceived to infringe upon army corporate interests because they were seen to play at being soldiers. A conspirator

asked his audience at a meeting whether the Wild Tigers would be able to perform as soldiers in time of war. To quote one officer:

I cannot see any advantage to the Wild Tigers. If a war should break out will the Wild Tiger soldiers be able to fight? Not at all. It [the responsibility] will have to be ours.⁷⁵

We now turn to how the conspirators captured the language of the age, that of nationalism, to justify the coup. We have already seen from the lecture notes that the basic argument advanced by the conspirators for the abolition of the absolute monarchy was the backwardness of the country. So, like King Chulalongkorn, the conspirators called for changes in the name of progress. To quote Rian and Net, the authors of the memoir: "The most important reason for the revolution stems from the desire that the country should join the era of general progress which is going on throughout the world."⁷⁶

What did they mean by progress? They seemed to share Thianwan's broad meaning of being westernised. Indeed, westernisation was an integral part of Thai liberal nationalism. And this was opposed to King Vajiravudh's official nationalism, which denounced westernisation (discussed in Chapter 5). A senior army officer observed that, apart from officers who had Chinese blood, those who joined the conspiracy seemed to be *ko* people. (*Ko* means fashionable, and the adjective was used here in the sense of being westernised.) An army officer testified that he was approached by a friend who asked if he wanted to be a modern man (and so, by implication, join the conspiracy), or an old-fashioned man.⁷⁷

That the conspirators were western-oriented could be seen in some modern symbols concerning the conspiracy. At the ceremony of the oath of allegiance to the movement, the traitor who reported the conspiracy to the authorities was struck by the fact that, instead of asking, in the traditional Thai manner, for the spirits to break their necks if the oath was not observed, the conspirators shared a drink which had a bullet in it.⁷⁸ Compared to an appeal to spirits, the symbolism of the bullet was secular and western, and thus the ceremony conveyed modern imagery.

In so far as the conspirators spoke for the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, the new social group was demanding political changes in the name of westernisation. How progress could be achieved via the abolition of the absolute monarchy was explained by Sub-Lieutenant Rian, who bravely spoke his mind to the investigating committee. His testimony is worth quoting at length:

The reason we form our group was to ask the government to open up opportunities for the *khon chan tam* [lower-class people] to have some voice in the administration so that low ranking government officials and the people in our country would become informed and able to understand the country's political system and to be more nationalistic.

If that came about, our country would be as developed and powerful as the major powers. I have compared our country with Japan, which is no larger in size. I think that the reason Japan became so powerful, to the puzzlement of other major powers, was because its government officials and people are very intelligent in understanding what was going on in the country. Therefore, they are nationalistic and contribute to the country to the best of their energies, and consequently their country have progressed quickly. If our government officials and people understand what is happening in the country, they will be more nationalistic and will willingly contribute to the country, and our country will soon become as developed as the major powers. The fact that we have formed a group does not mean that we intend to harm the King or the nation. Neither do we want to seek personal gains. We only want to contribute to the country's progress. I am Thai, therefore I aim at the progress of the Thai nation, and to seek power for the Thai nation so that it is not humiliated or oppressed by other nations.⁷⁹

The last sentence captures two elements of Thai liberal nationalism: the need for progress and a response to threats from western powers. This notion of nationalism was, thus, not much different from King Vajiravudh's official version, which was also expressed in the name of progress and the need to fend off external threats. However, the conspirators argued that King Vajiravudh's personal behaviour posed a threat to national security.

In the quotation above, nationalism is expressed in two ways. On one hand, the officer exploited the concept of nationalism to justify a seditious act. On the other hand, he argued that the Thai people needed to be more nationalistic, and they could develop this characteristic by participating more fully in the political system. Notwithstanding its confusion, the passage makes clear the success of absolutism in establishing the nation as the centre of loyalty.

This success is also exemplified by the extent to which the conscripts had internalised the essentials of the official form of nationalism which was systematically inculcated in their textbooks.⁸⁰ When asked at recruiting lectures what they considered to be important in their lives, they typically answered "nation, religion, native land, parents and king". On one occasion, they were quizzed on the Wild Tiger Corps motto, "It is better to lose life than honour". They answered:

one must be true to the king, the nation and the country in every way and not betray them at any time. Losing life means willingness to sacrifice life to fight against external enemies who intend to harm the king, the nation and the country.⁸¹

It was testified that in response to this answer the lecturer fell silent for a while. After the conspirators' standard exposition of the three forms of

government, the conscripts were asked which was most desirable; they answered in favour of the absolute monarchy.⁸² One wonders whether the lecturer's suggestion that, in a republic, an old farmer picked from the rice field might become president influenced their answer. Also, when asked where their salaries came from they initially answered "the king". The officer must have shown that the answer was not satisfactory, and "the government" was suggested.⁸³ The conscripts' answers suggested that there was some truth in the opinion of one of the conspirators, a medical doctor, that a republic was not desirable on the grounds that the people still paid high respect to the king.⁸⁴

Thus, we can conclude that the state was very successful in inculcating official nationalism among the conscripts who came from the lowest stratum of society. Among the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, the state's success was only partial. Undoubtedly, the phrase *rak chat* (being nationalistic) was commonly used and considered a virtue. One army officer informed the investigating committee that he was told by another officer that if he was *rak chat*, he should attend a recruitment meeting.⁸⁵

As was reported in Chapter 5, the king was officially identified with the nation as a means of maintaining loyalty in the absolutist state. When the bureaucratic bourgeoisie perceived that their interests lay in the abolition of absolutism, they began to leave behind their earlier acceptance of official nationalism. Their loyalty was transferred from the king and the nation to the nation only, and it was in the name of the nation that they began to demand changes in the political system. An example of how the bureaucratic bourgeoisie perceived that their personal interests corresponded with those of the nation is provided by the letter from Khun Phasasrirat in which he urged his friend to join the conspiracy but, not to be too deeply involved with it because:

keeping two options open is the way to serve both personal and public interests. If we were to act only for personal interests then we should not get involved. We must make the *prachumchon* [community, or society] our prime concern.⁸⁶

However, we need to establish to what extent the transfer of loyalty was complete. Although the bureaucratic bourgeoisie perceived that it was in their interests to distinguish between monarch and nation, they found it difficult to rid themselves of loyalty to the king in the traditional sense.

This traditional idea of loyalty rested on the personal relationship between the monarch and nobility. The nobility was supposed to be loyal to the monarch both because he provided their livelihood and because some monarchs had made very obvious contributions to the well-being of the country. We saw in Chapter 3 that, in modern nationalism, the state tried to blend the new entity, the nation, to the old bonding between the king and the people by emphasising King Chulalongkorn's modernisation.

This fitted snugly with the traditional role of the king, and the people's loyalty was demanded because of his contributions.

The sense of gratitude that the people felt for the monarchy in general, and in particular for King Chulalongkorn, was strong and genuine. Yet, even before his death, it had become obvious to the bureaucratic bourgeoisie that absolutism obstructed their participation in the political process, and had to be discredited. Thus, the movement to abolish the absolute monarchy started in King Chulalongkorn's reign. The conspirators' original plan to spend ten years in indoctrination reflected their initial perception of the difficulty in persuading sufficient numbers of people to see the kingship as an obstruction to progress.

Therefore, transference of loyalty from the king to the nation was generated by institutional rather than personal factors. This was well expressed in the letter from an army officer to his superior after his arrest, in which he asked if a person who loved the nation and the country was better than those who loved an unjust king.⁸⁷ In their lectures to the conscripts, the conspirators were kept busy trying to disentangle the notions of monarchy and nation. The lecturer typically told the conscripts that soldiers' salaries did not come from the king but from the government, which in turn, was financed by the people who paid taxes on such things as housing and land. They were also taught that their uniforms were similarly paid for by the people. However, because the class interests of these conscripts differed radically from those of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, it is difficult to suppose that the officers were entirely successful in propagating their point of view.

The army officers genuinely gave their loyalty to the nation, a fact that cannot be merely treated as a rationale for the coup. An officer testified that the reason he went along with the other conspirators was because he considered himself to be paid by the people, and if the people were poor, then he asked where the government could find the money to pay their salaries.⁸⁸ The fact that the conspirators gave their loyalty to the nation rather than the king is nowhere better illustrated than by their motto: "It is better to lose one's life than one's nation."⁸⁹ This paraphrased the motto of the Wild Tiger Corps; "It is better to lose life than honour," but the meaning was diametrically opposed. This thesis has already defined the Corps' concept of honour as adherence to the pledge to be loyal to the king, whereas the conspiracy symbolised the transference of loyalty to the nation. This transference is of great importance in understanding liberal nationalism; and the linguistic similarity of the two mottoes should not be interpreted to indicate conceptual similarity, as Vella and Vella suggest.⁹⁰

How far the conspirators distinguished between monarchy and nation, and how far they had transferred their loyalty to the nation, is demonstrated by their attitudes towards King Vajiravudh. He was criticised for both personal and institutional reasons. For the latter, he represented an institution for which they had increasingly less sympathy. Some complaints

suggested that his personal behaviour constituted the main reason for wishing to abolish the absolute monarchy. His public image as a swindler of state revenue, his close association with unsuitable company, his circle's open pursuit of pleasures unfitting to the role of a monarch, and the unpopularity of the Wild Tiger Corps presented the conspirators with a more generous public relations gift than they could have hoped for. His behaviour was portrayed as a threat to national interests. One lecturer argued that the king's behaviour led foreigners to belittle Siam to the point that they might decide to invade.⁹¹ Another argued that it was not difficult to find a king, because anybody could do the job. But a country was less easy to create; once it fell into foreign hands, they would all become slaves.⁹²

Yet, there is also evidence to support the suggestion that criticisms made against the king were motivated by problems associated with absolutism. A confiscated document, listing the king's vices, mentioned his building palaces and chophouses, keeping many wives (which required considerable money), using the people's labour for building roads and pavilions, favouring sycophants, using palace laws to punish those who were innocent and keeping many servants.⁹³ It is clear that not all items on this list accurately reflected King Vajiravudh's behaviour, and some could be applied to King Chulalongkorn. However, the recruitment lectures reserved these criticisms for the present King, perhaps because the conspirators appreciated the extent to which the people gave their loyalty to his predecessor. The memoir reports that the conspirators felt gratitude to King Chulalongkorn for what he had done for the country.

In 1932, when absolutism was abolished, the existence of a king was no longer perceived to obstruct the interests of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. This explains why, after the absolute monarchy had been the target of so much criticism, the new military regime turned around to adopt King Vajiravudh's ideology in order to support their regime after their failure to introduce popular democracy. This should not surprise us; King Vajiravudh's official nationalism nicely incorporated both the old and the new symbols of monarchy and nation.⁹⁴

By 1912, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie had not yet developed to the extent that they had made themselves felt by the authorities as a major social force, capable of staging a challenge to the regime. At best, this social group was perceived by the bureaucratic elite to conveniently provide them with the justification to demand such change as they needed from the king. The noble officials were taken by surprise when the officers' dissatisfaction was sufficiently strong to lead them towards rebellion and the use of force.

Among the elite, King Vajiravudh was unaware that a major social force was in the making. Even when the conspiracy was exposed, he still felt that he could fight against the liberal nationalism, expressed in the demand for a constitution, by waging ideological warfare through the Wild

Tigers and his journalism (as we saw in Chapter 5). Throughout his reign, the king refused to change the treatment of his entourage. This was confirmed in a letter he wrote to Prince Phitsanulok after the conspiracy, stating in justification that the courtiers usually received very low salaries, in comparison to ministry officials, and in particular to army officers. Since he could not reward his courtiers with money, they should instead be rewarded with titles. King Vajiravudh argued that, by doing so, he only followed an old tradition, and that in general the status and privileges enjoyed by the courtiers should not be compared with those enjoyed by other officials.⁹⁵

However, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie were unconvinced. And as the king continued to support his courtiers, the issue became increasingly contentious within the bureaucracy throughout the 1920s. When King Prajathipok succeeded King Vajiravudh in 1925, he conceded that the monarchy was then at its lowest point. The issue of favouritism had contributed significantly to the erosion of the legitimacy of the absolute monarchy. One only had to open a newspaper to see that this issue earned the most damning criticism, and the word *prachob* (sycophantic) was one of the most commonly seen.

Among measures for restoring monarchical legitimacy, King Prajathipok contemplated adopting the fascist system of education in order to guide popular thinking. The scheme was dismissed on the grounds that it was too late to introduce such a time-consuming measure as indoctrination through the educational system.⁹⁶ Instead, the regime chose to concentrate power in the hands of few aristocrats who constituted the bureaucratic elite. This defence turned out to be ultimately futile. When, in a desperate final bid, King Prajathipok suggested voluntarily abolishing the absolute monarchy and adopting a constitutional monarchy, this same group of aristocrats blocked the proposal.⁹⁷ From that moment onwards, absolutism was doomed.

The issue of royal favouritism in the bureaucracy increasingly affected the attitudes of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie as their numbers grew. Most scholars have focused on budget cuts and redundancies among government officials in order to explain the 1932 coup. However, it is argued here that contradictions within absolutism played a much more fundamental role.

This chapter has analysed the attitudes and interests of the 1912 conspirators, both as indicated by their social attributes and as expressed in the recruitment lectures. At a superficial level, the data suggests that they too were primarily interested in forcing through limited reforms by their sense of injustice and need to build successful careers, and perceived that only drastic measures would suffice. However, we should not overlook the deeper ambiguities. They were in advance of many of their Thai contemporaries in that they attempted to distinguish between loyalty to the monarch and loyalty to the nation, and they chose the latter. They

formed a vanguard of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie which, over the succeeding decades, would develop further. A Thai scholar, Lae, has shown that, by 1932, a new type of bureaucrat had emerged, and played a crucial role in piloting the course of change.⁹⁸

In this respect, then, the 1912 conspiracy needs to be treated as an indication of the problems rooted in the structure of the society, for which King Vajiravudh could not be entirely blamed. When King Chulalongkorn introduced a western system of education to Siam he had also planted the seed of absolutism's destruction, and his successor was unable to uproot the growth. King Vajiravudh's mistakes hastened the demise of the absolute monarchy, but in the long term, its eventual demise was probably inevitable.