

8. The Fall of Absolutism and 1932 Revolution

Topics

- The fall of absolutism
- Opposition to absolutism and 1932 revolution
- The shifting political landscape after 1932 revolution

1. The fall of absolutism

It only took less than 2 decades for absolutism to fall. The bureaucratic reform and the change in economy led to the new social groups that resented the royal monopoly of power

The challenges faced by absolutism stemmed from the two main factors; 1) the monopoly of power by royal clan and their close associates; and 2) the mismanagement of the economy

The monopoly of power

In early 20th century, top positions in the state were given only to the members of royal family and top aristocrats' families. Rama VII seemed to want to lessen the royal hold of power by establishing the Supreme Council of the State, and more importantly the Prime Minister. Yet, he did not envision the members to these positions to come from anyone except those in the royal inner circle

Members of Supreme Council of the State consisted only senior members of royal family. Rama VII ideas in appointing the PM was opposed by all sides. Prince Damrong thought it would reduce the authority and prestige of the King. For the BKK based newspaper, such an attempt seen as the effort to protect benefits of upper class

Rama VII's Constitution did not perceive Siam as ready for having representatives. From both drafts (1926 and 1932), the King held legislative power, and power to appoint PM. Parliament members came from appointments and indirect elections. King also held veto power over the parliament.

The mismanagement of the economy

The monopoly of power by the King and his close associates also meant they had the responsibility in managing the economy. They had to make decisions on taxation, government expenditure, and international economic policies. And they were not seen as capable in the management, especially when faced with economic recession.

Since the King controlled the spending. Rama V richness led to a large royal expense by Rama VI. Although Rama VII restrained the spending, he had to face a difficult challenge of managing the great depression. Trade value was in decline. Siam stayed with the gold standard in managing its currency, only to find its currency over-inflated, and export declined.

Rama VII decided to manage the fall by increasing taxes and reducing expense. Taxes were raised from salaries of bureaucrats and employees of private firms. But taxes were not raised on profits from trade and land, signifying the bias for nobility.

Military budget cut to one-third. Leading to lay-off and resentment from military. There was also a continuation of taxation on farmers even during recession

Economic recession exposed the King's role as the manager of national economy. He carried the responsibility in selecting who will bear the negative impacts. This responsibility destabilised absolutism

2. Oppositions to absolutism and 1932 revolution

Oppositions to absolutism

From 1900-1930, two main lines of resistance to absolutism developed in Bangkok. The first came from the urban-based businesses who were frustrated by the advantages held by Western businesses, and saw such an advantages as caused by the Royal Family. They asked the government to provide more support to domestic industries.

The second from the middle-level bureaucrats. The new group of bureaucrats came from commoners or minor nobles.

They rose through education. Got chances to go abroad for professional training. This group bureaucrats found contradictions between the values of merit, service, and achievements in modern administration VS the subordination of bureaucracy to absolute monarch

To the middle ranks bureaucrats, they were the importance principles and rules, and expects returns for their professional capability and efficiency. But they were disappointed to find that the priorities were given rather to birth, patronage, and loyalty. They faced the contradiction between "*lak-wicha*" and "*lak-ratchakarn*"

Resentments of absolutism also came from the ideas of "humanism" and "nationalism". Aristocratic domination seen as resulting in the lack of emphasis on human talents and education. This held back Siam development, and its ability to compete with other nations.

Oppositions to absolutism found its space in the growing circles of Bangkok educated elites, especially through newspaper. Criticism of the focus on birth and absolutism found also in popular writings such as the novels of Kularb Saipradit. Nationalist sentiments provoked the perception that Thailand needed modernisation to match its status as world's major nations.

1932 Revolution

Resistances to absolutism led to a number of attempts to overthrow absolute monarchy. The 1912 Rebel consisted of mostly military officers. The core of the group was junior officers. They resented royal monopoly of power. The 1917 rebel was also from military

1932 revolution had a wider network of supporters. Although started by young bureaucrats, the movement drew in established members of bureaucrats and military officers, businessmen, intellectuals, and organised labour.

The core of 1932 movement was French-educated young civilian and military officials "Pridi Banomyong", a young lawyer with some Chinese blood, came from a mixed of peasants and bureaucrat background. "Plaek Kitisungka" (Phibulsongkram) came from farmers background, but excelled in his time at the military academy.

Khana Ratsadorn ideas combined economic nationalism with humanism. They sought to change absolutism to Constitutional Monarchy. Absolutism seen as barrier to realisation of nationalism and economic nationalism
Guarantee equality for all. Rejected privilege by birth. Promote well-being of everyone.

Khana Ratsadorn made connection with senior military officials who helped provide the required force for the coup

The senior military officials were also dissatisfied with royal's hold of power in military, and the cut on military spending and pay. With the absolutist power held in limited hands, 1932 revolution was made easier.

3. The shifting political landscape after 1932 revolution

Following the coup senior royal princes either fled or withdrew from politics. Senior bureaucrats and military officials from old regime removed. Provisional constitution limited the King's power. The first constitution, drafted 6 months after the revolution, and barred anyone above the rank of *phom jao* from membership of assembly or government.

On the other hand, the merchants and labour group sought participation in reforming the economy. Proposals made such as property taxes on aristocrats, promotion of domestic industries, and government supports to rice farmers.

But the old power also tried to counter the changes. Many bureaucrats only sided with the people's party due to their dissatisfactions with the monopoly of power by the royal family. But they still want to maintain the bureaucrats' power.

They were also not totally opposed to the monarchy as the ideological cornerstone of bureaucracy's power

Khana Ratsadorn understood the need to gain cooperation from the monarchy, in order to gain acceptance from the bureaucrats. They showed their respects to the King, sought pardoned for the revolution. They allowed some high-ranking figures from previous administration to take leading positions in the new government. The notable one was Phraya Manopakorn, a member of Privy Council with some relations to the queen.

Khana Ratsadorn's accommodation of the King and conservative bureaucrats provided opportunities to reverse the revolution. Phraya Manopakorn and other senior bureaucrats sought alliance from senior generals who supported the 1932 revolution only with short-term discontent, and not due to ideology. The seniors bureaucrats also distrusted the young members of Khana Ratsadorn. Rama VII backed this alliance.

Accusations of Khana Ratsadorn for being "communists" were spreaded through conservative newspaper. The clash between Phraya Manopakorn and Khanaratsadorn reached height when Pridi proposed his economic plan. Phraya Manopakorn accused Pridi for being communist. The Assembly was closed. Pridi had to leave the country. Manopakorn passed law against communism, with communism associated with attempts that affect property ownership. Manopakorn also brought back generals from the old regime

In 1933, Pahol and Phibul staged another coup to sustain the revolution. Pridi was called back. Prince Baworadet staged a major rebellion in 1933, but failed. Rama VII left Siam after the Baworadet rebel. And after refusing to sign a number of bills especially those limiting his power, Rama VII abdicated in 1935. The government chose Ananda Mahidol as the new King. But Thailand would be without the King residing in the country for 15 years.

Attempts to oppose the People's Party government remained. But the defeat of Baworadet rebel allowed Phibul and Pridi to attain commanding positions.

10 years after 1932, Thai politics became dominated by 2 fractions; 1) Phibul and his military fraction; and 2) Pridi and his bureaucrat fraction. They cooperated against the royalists. But actually had different ideas. Under the political volatility of WWII, the two fractions would start to openly clash.

Reading

- Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2002). *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, KL: Oxford University Press. (Chapter 8)