4 Contradictions within the bureaucracy

Introduction

King Chulalongkorn could only establish absolutism when he could exercise control over an efficient bureaucracy. This bureaucracy had to be capable of implementing policy and of transmitting information to and from the king. If absolutism was to endure, it must widen its span of control over all aspects of national life. This demanded the participation of increased numbers of bureaucrats.

Hence, the need for absolute control led inexorably to growing dependence upon a government machine. At first he relied upon a small group of fellow reformers and old-style officials. This gave rise to a number of contradictions, which we examine in this chapter. We first examine the process by which the king attempted to consolidate monarchical power from the aftermath of the *Wang Na* crisis to the early 1890s. The monarchical system appeared to be growing more secure. Education played an increasing part in determining employment and promotion, and old-style patronage relationships were formally superseded. Yet they persisted partly because they enabled senior bureaucrats to build private and informal empires within the system. Besides, the king himself did not want to relinquish the practice when it suited him. This, plus the persistence of traditional attitudes and habits became a source of conflict between the king and his modern allies. During this period, the king also learnt a very painful lesson; modern bureaucracy could turn into a powerful challenge to his monarchical power.

The second part of this chapter deals with the contradictions that developed during the second half of King Chulalongkorn's reign as the elite and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie began to emerge as new social groups. The analysis exemplified the ambiguities inherent in Thai absolutism, and set the stage for the struggles that followed in King Vajiravudh's reign.

The chapter is thus divided into two parts. The first part covers the period from after the *Wang Na* crisis to the end of the century and has the following sections: consolidation contradictions in the absolutist state;

early criticisms of absolutism; the king's relationships with his bureaucrats. The second part deals with the emergence of the modern bureaucratic elite, and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie which posed challenges to the king from the beginning of the century to the end of King Chulalongkorn's reign.

For clarity, three main categories are identified within the bureaucracy developed by King Chulalongkorn and bequeathed to his successor:

- the bureaucratic elite, consisting of departmental heads. They belonged to the highest social rank, and in general were highly educated.
- the middle-level bureaucrats or the "bureaucratic bourgeoisie",[1] signifying a new social class which went through the modern education system and acquired noble status.
- the clerical levels consisting of officials who had less than 400 *sakdina*.

Consolidation and contradictions

In his birthday speech in 1885, the year of the *Wang Na*'s death, King Chulalongkorn proudly announced that he had succeeded in his efforts to extend royal authority to cover all the *muang* in the realm (*phra ratcha anakhet*).[2]

Events appeared to justify this claim. Conservative Siam seemed to have lost its stomach for the fight. The last major political battle between King Chulalongkorn and Somdet Chaophraya had occurred in 1880 when the king tried to consolidate his political power by modernising the First Foot Guard (*thahan na*), a regiment founded by King Mongkut.[3] This constituted the first attempt to replace the corvée system with the standing army, the basis of the absolute monarch's political power in the West.

The soldiers were to be recruited on a voluntary basis from "white wristed" men (non-tattooed men who had escaped their obligations to the state and who were, in many cases, seeking protection from a *nai*). They were to be salaried and to serve for five years, after which they would become reserves, being finally released at the age of fifty. They were promised exemptions from taxes and compulsory labour service. Volunteers were recruited throughout the townships of the inner provinces.

Many recruits came from Ratburi and Phetburi, the Bunnags' stronghold. This created a dual problem: the king was seen to be intruding into the Bunnags' territory, and it was common knowledge that the First Foot Guard was being modernised in order to serve the interests of the king against those of the Bunnags. A crisis flared, and Somdet Chaophraya wrote to Chaophraya Suriwong (his son and also the *Kalahom*) inciting a rebellion. It was rumoured that the *Wang Na* was to be brought forward as the nominal head of a rebellion.[4]

There are three reasons that explain how King Chulalongkorn once again emerged victorious from the conflict with Conservative Siam. First, Chaophraya Suriwong passed his father's letter to the king in order to demonstrate his loyalty. Thus, he showed that he was not prepared to defy the king in his effort to consolidate the monarchy. Second, the king had a legitimate cause in arguing that he was justified in enlisting unregistered *phrai*. Third, he acceded to Somdet Chaophraya's request to enlist the *phrai* at Ratburi, and, thus saved the latter's face.[5]

Although victorious, King Chulalongkorn was yet again reminded that the possibilities of insurrection were not entirely extinguished. In 1881, he created a secret League from a group of trusted officials with the purpose of defending the king, and of ensuring that his still-youthful first son from a high-ranking queen should succeed him. The members of the League swore before the Emerald Buddha (the Buddha image most closely identified with the Chakri dynasty) eternal friendship and brotherhood, and promised that they would neither serve any other *nai* nor seek any personal benefit in carrying out their duties.[6] In so doing, the king identified his political allies.

The king achieved absolute control over the centre by, first, ensuring the succession. The *Wang Na* died in 1885 (two years after his one-time patron, Somdet Chaophraya). The king immediately abolished the office of *Wang Na* and, in 1887, installed his son, Prince Vajirunhis, as *Phra borom orotsathirat* or Heir Apparent. This ancient title dated back to the fourteenth-century palatine law of King Uthong. By reaffirming it, the king brought Siam in line with the "civilised monarchies of Europe and plucked the succession away from princely grasping, ministerial manipulation and foreign intervention".[7]

The king justified the change in Siamese succession by claiming both the traditional justification of palatine law and the modern practice of investing an heir apparent.[8] When Prince Vajirunhis died in 1893, he was succeeded as Heir Apparent by Prince Vajiravudh, the son of another queen.

Second, the king took control of the revenues from the Bunnags. Chaophraya Phanuwong, the *Phra Khlang*, retired in 1887 and Chaophraya Suriwong, the *Kalahom*, in 1888. Thus, all tax revenues passed into the king's hands. His confidence in his new fiscal power is demonstrated by the regulation that all state revenues should be directly sent to the Treasury and the office of Privy Purse, which received a share of 15 per cent of all state revenues for the maintenance of the royal household and royal family.[9]

Third, the king centralised his political power. In 1892, he replaced the Council of Ministers with the cabinet system. This marked the terminal decline of Old Siam and Conservative Siam, and the rise of royal princes prepared to take active roles in the bureaucracy. The cabinet included nine royal princes, all of whom were the king's brothers.[10] Of the three

nobles in the cabinet, only one (Chaophraya Rattanthibet) belonged to Old Siam. The Privy Council was reconstituted and membership was increasingly used to reward members of the bureaucracy. The *Ratthamontri sapha* was given legislative responsibilities and superseded the inactive Council of State. These consultative institutions represented the king's effort to share responsibilities and blame, to stabilise the system by creating institutions that would set the direction of reform, to increase sources of information, and to encourage more participation by trusted aides.

Fourth, the king actively encouraged ideological unity among his officials. For instance, he encouraged the establishment of a library and literary club called the *Wachirayan* Library (*Ho phrasamut wachirayan*). The first stated objective of the library was to be:

> A meeting place which fosters unity among the royalty and high and low ranking officials so that they can be called true official friends and so together they will contribute to things which are beneficial.[11]

Thus, it would provide a forum in which officials could both socialise and internalise shared values. These values would also be transmitted by means of the library's magazine, *Wachirayan wiset*.

This deliberate encouragement of conformity among officials was an important task in an age of westernisation, when traditional values and practices were forced to co-exist with western ones. Members were asked to contribute answers to troublesome problems, and many of these revolved around the issue of deciding which set of values was applicable to a particular situation. For example, they were asked how a new graduate from the West who had committed a blunder by shaking hands with a friend's wife should assuage the wrath of the couple.[12]

Wachirayan wiset also serialised literary works, the most important of which was *Phraratchaphithi sibsong duan* (the *Twelve-Month Ceremonies*), a most extensive and scholarly study of state ceremonies written by King Chulalongkorn. Thus, *Wachirayan wiset* was used as a vehicle for recapturing the past in order to manipulate it. His work on state ceremonies was partly intended to establish the king as an authority on the past, and thus as an interpreter of it; and this role was much in evidence in his drive to centralise the system. It was also intended to reinforce a Thai sense of identity over and against western influences. This became increasingly necessary as the pace of modernisation accelerated, and the feeling developed among the educated that all things western constituted a desirable model, and all things Thai were out of date.[13]

On occasion, the king was forced into explicit denunciations of western things. When the western New Year was celebrated in 1890, the king commented that this borrowed tradition had nothing to recommend it to Thais, but since it was for fun and only once a year, no significant harm

could be done. He then went on to say that there were many good aspects to western tradition, and that the Thais should take care to select only those that were beneficial. Anything which was potentially harmful should be avoided, and only good and beneficial customs should be adopted.[14]

Contradictions stemmed from a range of factors, and the new practices and institutions of the absolute monarchy themselves worked to undermine monarchical power. Take, for example, the separation of the Privy Purse from the Treasury. On the one hand, this allowed the king more freedom over a sizeable chunk of state revenue, and in times of economic expansion, the Privy Purse stood in a strategic position to reap the benefits. For instance, it developed entrepreneurial interests in real estate, rice mills, financial speculation, public utilities and in industry.[15] But on the other hand, this separation also restricted the king's access to the Treasury's fund and helped to quicken the process by which the monarchical and state powers became separated – a process which was eventually to undermine the legitimacy of the monarchy.

Like other absolutist monarchs, King Chulalongkorn faced a major problem in financing the administrative machine – which was intended to enhance royal power. The French monarchy of the "ancient regime" had sold offices to the bourgeoisie and, consequently, weakened its own authority; the *nobless de la robe* had used their offices to earn returns from their investment, and the monarchy could not afford to dismiss them.[16] The enlightened King of Prussia, Frederic William, built his modern bureaucracy from the Junker noble class, and then allowed them to seek profit from their position in the modern army. The end result was similar to the French experience: the Prussian bureaucracy became very powerful at the expense of the monarch's authority.[17]

Determined to turn the old ruling class into bureaucratic bourgeoisie, King Chulalongkorn chose a path similar to that followed in Prussia. During the transitional period before 1892, the old system of resource distribution co-existed with the modern payment of salaries. The old ruling class was allowed to continue conscription and the poll tax replaced the corvée system. During this period, the king was also forced to continue his reliance upon the tax farming system, which ran contrary to the spirit of his early reforms. State revenue was still mainly raised from such taxes, and those imposed on opium, gambling and spirits. Not until the first decade of the twentieth century was there evidence of a shift from indirect to direct taxation, when the head tax on the *phrai* was introduced (at a rate of six baht per year).

The development of the money economy provided new opportunities for the powerful to exploit their positions. For instance, judges exploited their positions for financial gain, and the people had scant hopes of winning impartial justice. The king was daunted by the vast numbers of petitions made to him, and despite his best intentions, could not hope to redress so many grievances.[18] Patronage persisted, and the king

continued to allow his clients to gain from the system.[19] This was partly because it had not been possible to develop a bureaucracy capable of centralising revenue collection, and partly because it was simpler to tolerate some of the old ways than to alienate the bureaucratic hierarchy entirely.

The royal practice of polygamy had the traditional value of cementing relationships between the monarch, the nobles and the tax farmers. King Chulalongkorn's continuance of this practice involved him in extensive patronage networks. (By the end of the reign he had about seventy children.) The returns that could be made from investing in royal connections were so great that tax farmers competed to form relationships with the inner court. Some sent their daughters as concubines; others chose to woo one of the king's wives with presents as a means of gaining royal favours.[20]

As the number of royal dependents increased, the problems of balancing state needs (for a rational bureaucracy) and the maintenance of traditional political support became more complex. In the new political climate, the more radical members of Young Siam were increasingly likely to be affronted by royal patronage when this entailed the use of public resources in order to meet personal and family needs. An illustration is provided by the case of the Master of the Royal Mint who served during the 1880s. It was alleged by Prince Prisadang that the man had been allowed to appropriate the profits of the Royal Mint, then in the region of 700 catties a year, in return for favours performed for the king and his favourite wives.[21] This contrasts with a case a decade earlier when shares of corruption had, in part, led to the then master of the Royal Mint being executed for corruption.[22] At that time, the king had been trying to wrest power from the *Wang Na* and the great nobles, and was trying to demonstrate to the Bunnags that he placed the interests of the state above all else. Now that the Bunnags had lost so much of their power, the king found that he needed to adopt the same tactics as those used by the Bunnags. He differed from them in that he was more committed to the interests of the state, which he identified with his own.

The king's problems arose from the need to rein in what he saw as the excesses of Young Siam rather than to crush opposition from Old and Conservative Siam. The second generation of Young Siam arose during the 1880s. It consisted of young princes and nobles who were fully committed to the king's reforms, but differed from him in perceptions of the nature of the future Thai state. As a political group, they were a source of both royal strength and weakness. On the one hand, they might provide support to the king (as in the case of the League). On the other hand, they took great pride in being "westernised" and derided those who fitted the mould of Old Siam – whose support the king needed until the new system was fully in place. This caused tensions within the bureaucracy, which the king had to deal with. This new elite proved unwilling to compromise

when their interests contradicted the king's desire to contain bureaucratic rivalries. They were frequently impatient with the pace of reform and capable of criticising the system represented by the king even while expressing loyalty.

Members of this elite were drawn from the same group who had joined the League, and in some instances, their memberships coincided. The key member was Prince Devawongse, who was responsible for foreign affairs. Greatly devoted to the king, he was the least critical of him. Other members consisted of Chamun Waiworanat (Chaem Sang-Xuto), one of the most trusted members and second-in-command of the First Foot Guard, and Chamun Sisorarak (Momratchawong Lek Siriwong), Chamun Waiworanat's assistant. The young and radical Prince Sawatdisophon was about to start studying at Oxford. Prince Prisadang, a graduate of King's College London and the first member of the Thai royalty to have a western degree, claimed later to have been a member of the League. He had a close relationship with Prince Pichit, a very able and highly intelligent prince in the judiciary, Prince Phanurangsri, the king's full brother and a former member of Young Siam and with Prince Phutharet.

Some members of this group belonged to the First Foot Guard, and by tracing the development of this regiment, we begin to understand the contradictions that King Chulalongkorn faced in the modern bureaucracy. In 1880, King Chulalongkorn decided to modernise the First Foot Guard, hitherto an insignificant unit, for the purpose of creating a modern army. In so doing, he followed his formula of balancing old and new elements. Phraya Norarat of Old Siam was appointed Commander, and Chamun Waiworanat of Young Siam his second-in-command. The king fully understood the potential for conflict between the two commanders, and they were both required to vow not to clash with each other. Chamun Waiworanat made a reservation that he would be patient for as long as the administration did not suffer.[23]

Through the efforts and initiatives of Chamun Waiworanat, the First Foot Guard was transformed from an insignificant unit into a regiment which proved highly effective in maintaining internal security during the late 1880s. Nevertheless, the Commander soon began to accuse his second-in-command of corruption. At the committee meeting held to investigate the allegations, Chamun Waiworanat became so angry that Phraya Norarat ran away out of fear. In the conclusion to their report, the committee indicated that neither party could be seen as guilty and that the conflict should be forgotten. This suggests that, although Phraya Norarat's aversions were unfounded, they felt that Chamun Waiworanat had violated the Thai golden rule of keeping conflict under the surface.

However, Chamun Waiworanat wanted to press the issue further and, in a royal audience, made accusations against Phraya Norarat. Faced with strong evidence against the latter, the king did his best to resolve the

conflict without alienating Old Siam. Phraya Norarat was not dismissed, and was asked if he could handle the task of running the Guard on his own. The king knew full well that the answer would be negative. Chamun Waiworanat then added further to the king's difficulties. In giving a positive answer to the same question, he could not resist adding that he had been running the show all along, and that Phraya Norarat was only a figurehead.[24]

A far more serious accusation was made against Chamun Waiworanat in 1882. In that year, Gerini, an Italian responsible for training the regiment, brought dynamite into the country from Singapore for teaching purposes, without seeking prior permission from the authorities. He was dismissed from the service, but the incident gave rise to a rumour that the First Foot Guard was planning a coup, and Prince Prachak, the king's half-brother, suggested during the royal audience that Chamun Waiworanat was behind the plot. The latter's friends, Prince Devawongse, Prince Phutharet and Prince Pichit, suggested that he should present his case to the king in order to preserve his record in the royal service. Prince Pichit, a legal expert, agreed to write a letter on his friend's behalf which would force Prince Prachak to apologise for making a false accusation. Upon receiving it, the king was incensed and demanded to know who had leaked news of accusation to Chamun Waiworanat, who had not been present at the audience. Prince Pichit was reprimanded for writing the letter and thus creating disunity.[25] The king then made a public statement that he would not tolerate factional politicking designed to satisfy clique interests at the expense of state interests.

The First Foot Guard faced further trouble in 1884 when the regiment was guarding the king on a royal visit to a religious monument outside Bangkok. A madman was seen climbing near the king's encampment, and a shot was fired at him, the bullet coming to rest within the encampment. Chamun Srisorarak, Chamun Waiworanat's deputy, was commanding the guard, and he was imprisoned for his responsibility for the shooting. The atmosphere in Bangkok was tense, and Chamun Waiworanat believed himself to be suspected of sedition. Suspicions against him subsided when he sought protection from Prince Phanurangsi, the king's younger brother. He also wrote a letter to the king pointing out that his arrest would create unease among his friends, and perhaps a riot among those members of the regiment remaining in Bangkok. The king replied that he had not for a moment entertained the thought that this might be a case of insurrection; he was fully aware of the extent of factional jealousy. But, he pointed out, Chamun Waiworanat was responsible for bringing suspicion upon himself. His opinions were highly subjective; either he really could not distinguish truth from falsehood, or he was prepared to go to any lengths to support his friend. As such he invited criticism, and then failed to distinguish between justifiable criticism and false accusation.[26]

The implication was that Chamun Waiworanat failed to acknowledge that the First Foot Guard had indeed committed blunders, and to distinguish these justifiable criticisms from falsehoods.

A further incident demonstrated that the guard's loyalty to the king was not always paramount. In 1882, the king imprisoned a lawyer, Thianwan (who later became a prominent intellectual), because a petition written on behalf of a client was not based on what the monarch regarded as firm grounds. The king believed that Thianwan simply wanted to challenge royal authority. Chamun Sisorarak of the First Foot Guard openly criticised the verdict as oppressive and stated that Thianwan was unjustifiably punished; he implied that Thianwan had been punished for having highly progressive ideas.[27]

These incidents concerning the First Foot Guard might appear to be a storm in a tea cup. But we deal with them in detail because they illustrate two basic problems facing the absolute monarchy: how to guarantee that primary loyalty was directed to the monarch and not to an immediate superior or to friends, and how to prevent insurrection in the modern army, the most organised element in the bureaucracy. This regiment constituted a modern organisation functioning in the old system, and had interests directly contradictory to those of the standing army associated with the corvée system. The success of its bureaucratic leadership gave its members an awareness of their political weight. Their pride in their positions led some of the regiment's officers to become arrogant when dealing with other members of the bureaucracy, openly criticising those who did not share their own values and perceptions. As a result of this, the king began to be aware of a potential threat from his own creation.

Furthermore, during the same period, the king also began to be aware of the contradictory nature of the modern bureaucracy. Whereas it played a central role in modern state-building, it could also work to undermine the king's power.

A man of strong personality, King Chulalongkorn was determined to push through the reforms he thought necessary. His formative years had been spent in conflict with leading officials who opposed him. It is scarcely surprising that he was not inclined to trust others with responsibilities he saw as his own. So he was highly sensitive to behaviour of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie that might be viewed as even an indirect challenge to his status. An incident in 1883, nearly ten years before the formal restructuring of the bureaucracy, makes this point. When Chaophraya Mahin of *Krom Suratsawadi* had his subordinate write to the king on routine matters, the king was greatly annoyed by this apparent slight on his dignity. He referred back to the traditional system in which all officials reported verbally to the monarch. Even though much of the bureaucracy's work was not conducted in writing, only departmental heads should enjoy the privilege of writing directly to their monarch, and all other levels were expected to report in person. Departmental heads had been excused from

making personal reports in order to save the time they would spend in attending royal audiences. But the king said he could not entirely approve of this dispensation. He remarked that:

> this makes things terrible because it allows officials to assume that they are in an exalted position. With this conviction plus their laziness, the officials do not feel the need to come to the royal palace. They turn into independent states sending only letters to uphold a friendly relationship. Later on these states develop so that the former capital i.e. the royal palace, turns into a tributary state which is not suitable to be written to directly and the writing is done by the *Chakri* [Minister of the North] and the *Kalahom* [Minister of the South]. This is the same as when the heads of departments have their nobles write to the King. . . . And the king has to make contact with the lowest kind of servant. Thus, this is an infringement upon, and an abolition of, the King's authority.[28]

The incident shows how, within the context of the modern bureaucracy which gave less emphasis to the face-to-face relationship between the monarch and his elite, King Chulalongkorn feared losing personal authority. He needed the observance of bureaucratic hierarchical values in order to exercise power.

This perception, that bureaucratic routine threatened his authority, was mainly responsible for his failure to allow the consultative bodies more power. This point is illustrated by the case of the *Ratthamontri sapha*, the legislative advisory council. The *Ratthamontri sapha* was instituted by King Chulalongkorn in 1894 as a way of securing consensus among the governing elite.

At the inception of the *Ratthamontri sapha*, Rolin Jacquemyns, the Belgian General Advisor who had considerable experience of colonial systems, had proposed that some form of popular participation in this body should be promised "when the people were sufficiently educated". Despite the vagueness of this wording, the king ordered its excision from the official proclamation. *Ratthamontri sapha* had power only to advise, and the king's approval was needed for any decision to come into force as law. But, more significantly, the council's fifty-six members were drawn from the upper echelons of the bureaucracy: cabinet ministers, members of the royalty and high-ranking officials. These people did not have the time nor the inclination to sit down to the daily meeting, which took excessive time to agree on a single point. During the "active" working life of the *Ratthamontri sapha*, it agreed on drafts of only twelve laws.[29]

The king apparently realised that its members felt burdened, and they were not required to meet again after 1896. The process of legislation did not suffer, for draft laws were agreed upon in cabinet meetings. But the damaging effect of the council's extinction was that the regime was seen to

be unwilling to allow participation, and this perception grew as time went on.

King Chulalongkorn attempted to counteract the pressures for bureaucratic autonomy and participation by emphasising those older values which stressed the centrality and sanctity of the monarch. Suspicious of anything that seemed to reflect a waning regard by those who served him, he placed an increasing emphasis on ritual and hierarchical observance among his officials. He phrased his opposition to recalcitrant subordinates not in terms of modern ideology or bureaucratic principles, but in terms of other tensions between *chao* (monarch) and *nai* (noble).

In the traditional system, ceremonies had linked the monarch with his officials, and King Chulalongkorn now emphasised the importance of ceremonies that created symbolic links between him and members of the modern bureaucracy. The bureaucrats responded according to their relationship with him. High-level officials had no alternative but to attend, but lower-level officials, who did not belong to the elite and were not the king's direct clients, were unable to appreciate their symbolic importance and increasingly absented themselves.

In 1900, many senior officials were absent from the "topknot" ceremony (a rite of passage into adulthood) of one of King Chulalongkorn's sons. This was considered one of the most important ceremonies involving the royal family, and was held on a Sunday when officials could not claim the pressure of work as an excuse. In response, the king ordered that all ministers whose subordinates had not attended to be fined one month's salary. In a letter to the Minister of Finance, the king explained his action by saying that officials no longer had any respect for their monarch. They appeared to feel it sufficient that they should be loved by their superiors. They had not bothered to attend this Sunday ceremony, which lasted for only one-and-a-half hours, "because respect for the *chao* (monarch) had ebbed, the *chao* cannot compete with the *nai*". But it was not these absentee subordinates who should be punished, he argued; they were newcomers (*khon mai*) who did not understand the custom. Punishment should be reserved for their departmental heads, who were responsible for their subordinates' loyalty and good behaviour.[30] They must dutifully accept their traditional obligations.

The king's response to this absenteeism seems to have stemmed from his concern that bureaucracy might transform an absolute monarch into a mere figurehead, with real power in the hands of the departmental heads. These heads, and not he, enjoyed most contact with the lower-echelon bureaucrats. True, this had also been the case in the traditional system; but in the greatly expanded modern bureaucracy, the lower echelons constituted the most dynamic force. Because they were the first generation of modern officials, they had high expectations of rewards and promotions. For instance, clerks expected that after one year in the service they should be given the title *luang*, which ranks immediately above *khun*, the lowest

rank in the *nai* class. When rewarded, they showed gratitude to their bureaucratic heads and not to the monarch. This did not please the king, who aimed to establish the ideology that all officials were his clients and that they should accordingly treat him as their supreme patron.

It was not only lesser bureaucrats who did not welcome the state ceremonies; high-ranking officials had also begun to question their obligations to contribute not only time but also resources to the ceremonies which were so important to the pre-modern state. Even Prince Devawongse, one of his most faithful officials, is said to have sighed and wished that nothing significant should occur when any important member of the royal family was ill, because he knew that then the king would be unavailable for discussions.[31] Thus, the king's insistence that high-ranking officials should attend both state ceremonies and ceremonies involving the royal family was perceived to be excessive and to intrude upon the day-to-day running of the administration. To quote a contemporary observer: "Few weeks pass without the occurrence of some new festival or ceremony which exacts the whole of his time and energies while it lasts."[32]

The king's insistence that bureaucrats participate in ceremonies may have been successful in the short term. But in the eyes of the younger and most ambitious officials, he began to represent all that was old-fashioned and detrimental to progress – the reverse of his image in his younger days. And, in the long run, he failed to compel attendance and to create the symbolic links that he wanted.

In sum, the first part of his reign saw King Chulalongkorn confronted by a dilemma faced perhaps by all enlightened absolute monarchies. He wanted progress and modernity, understanding that he needed to regularise his new system if it was to survive his reign; hence, he needed to involve others in its administration. But he was incapable of letting control out of his hands or of admitting any principle of rule save that of "all power to the ruler". This incapacity perhaps sprang from a wish to ensure dynastic interests above all. It may have been influenced by difficulties of securing agreement to his programmes and by doubts as to whether the elite possessed the necessary qualifications and concern for the country.

Early criticism of the absolute monarchy

Even in this period when absolutism was still being developed, contradictions were visible. The point is illustrated by the opinions of early critics, both inside and outside the bureaucracy. The former consisted of well-placed royal officials who saw that their interests would be better advanced in a system which allowed greater participation. The latter were crusaders for "civilisation", led by Dr Smith, an American missionary and one-time supporter of the king's reforms. We will conclude this section by noting how the king responded to such criticisms.

Critics from within the bureaucracy spoke in terms of a "constitution", and "people's participation". But their real concern was the degree of decision-making power to be given as of right to leading officials – generally the king's close relatives – in their capacities as heads of office or spokesmen for particular public interests. This point is exemplified by the princely authors of a memorandum submitted to the king.

In 1885, a group consisting of royalty and junior officials serving at the Siamese legation in London and Paris ventured to present proposals in a memorandum advocating changes in the political system.[33] By that time, the Bunnags were clearly in decline, but had yet to disappear from the political scene. Great Britain had just annexed Burma, while France under Jules Ferry was posing a serious threat to the region. The question of whether Siam could maintain its independence was acutely pertinent. Prince Prisadang, then serving as the minister in Paris, intimated to the king that there was only one way by which to escape French influence, but he was afraid to suggest it. The king implored him to speak for the good of the country. In the Prince's own words (in English):

> The permission was taken advantage of and he [the writer] got all his disciples, whose radical ideas he initiated and whose political views were the same, to assemble night after night to discuss and work out a memorial to the Throne.[34]

In the eyes of the Young Siamese elite stationed in the West, the Siamese system of government and law was still backward and needed to be radically transformed before it could gain acceptance in the West. They proposed, as the most important change, to follow the European and Japanese examples of moving from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. The authors of the memorandum hastened to add that by no means did they suggest that Siam was yet ready to adopt a parliamentary government. The reforms they had in mind would shift power from the king to high-level members of the bureaucracy. But this proposal was presented as in the interests of Siamese independence and of all the people.

The memorandum argued that the king should delegate power to cabinet ministers who would take full responsibility for their own departments, but he should keep the final say. Other suggestions included paying fixed salaries to officials, standardising people's obligations to the state, granting freedom of speech for officials and the people, recruiting only those who were educated and of good reputation and behaviour, and abolishing any laws and traditions which caused criticism of the traditional practices that the authors of the memorandum most wanted to see abolished – such as polygamy. Given the number of King's polygamous relationships, they dared not make this point openly.[35]

Once the reforms were carried out, European commercial interests would be protected and the European powers would be given no cause for

conflicts which might give them reason for colonising the country. Thus, the authors of the memorandum saw that building up the Siamese army against external threat was futile.[36]

The significance of the memorandum lies chiefly in the fact that, for the first time, the cause of nationalism was argued by people other than the king. The authors urged the need for changes in order to withstand external threats and to bring justice and happiness to the people, which would, in turn, lead the people to identify with the nation.

However, they contradicted themselves by proposing that Siam should develop a modern army that could be used against both external and internal aggressors. In practice, it was intended mainly to block the great families who had most to lose from reform and who might still offer armed opposition to the king. And, since open rebellion would present the major western powers with justification to intervene in Siam's internal affairs, internal and external threats were linked. They urged that, once the army became effective, further reforms should be undertaken which would remove from the political scene those great nobles who did not serve the interests of the king. However, their suggestion that the existing military units be modernised under the command of their *nai* showed that they did not aim to antagonise the general ruling class, which still had a vested interest in the control of manpower.

Modernisation should follow western models:

> In sum, the changes will essentially conform to the European pattern in that old laws and traditions will be abolished and new ones will be added and care will be taken to make sure that these changes will be beneficial to all in the country. They will make the people realise that Siam belongs to its people and that they need to mature in order that happiness and justice reaches [sic] everybody generally. And once the people are confident that the happiness and justice that they are enjoying is [sic] as much as or more than is [sic] enjoyed by the people of other countries, they will turn to love [the country] and will determine to create wealth and earn their living in legitimate ways. And when the enemy approaches they will be concerned and try to help in the defence of the country.[37]

Despite their apparent altruism, these arguments were advanced to meet the interests of the future ruling elite. Prince Prisadang and Prince Sawat were both members of the League. Prince Narit, the king's half-brother, and Prince Sonnabundit, a prince from *Wang Na*, belonged to the new elite, poised, as they saw, to take a greater role in the bureaucracy.[38] On the one hand, they saw their careers threatened by the great nobles who would lose no time in cutting them down should rebellion arise. This must have powerfully influenced their recommendation that old-style ministers be removed. On the other hand, the king's drive towards absolute

control placed serious restrictions on their authority. Under a constitutional monarchy, the power base of senior officials would be considerably broadened.

Their arguments concerning bureaucratic appointments and promotions reflected the priority they gave to merit above birth. Whereas previous ministers had secured their positions "because of family background", they perceived themselves to be a new bureaucratic elite, occupying their posts by virtue of their merit. The importance of administrative efficiency was used to support these arguments for a meritocracy (at least at a senior level):

> If you make it known among the officials that you are determined to organise the administration in such a way which will favour equally those who are well-born and those who are ill-born, and that they are to be rewarded or punished on the same terms, then everything will be successful. This is because the officials will seek only to perform their duties correctly.[39]

King Chulalongkorn's letter answering the memorandum was controlled and rational in its reaction. He told the authors of the memorandum that he was fully aware of the change from the absolute monarchy in other societies, and he was not going to stand in the way of change. However, he implied that the time was not yet right and what Siam needed immediately was government reform in two specific areas. He agreed with the authors that ministers who refused to go along with the king's reforms should be replaced. This had not previously been possible, but now the time had come and he would do something shortly. Second, he agreed with the need for a legislative reform. But, he said, he was faced with an almost impossible task, given the manpower at his disposal, because much future legislation would involve the interests of foreigners and hence foreign legal experts were needed. Their services were not easily obtained.

The king concluded by asking the authors to help him to think further along these lines. He assured them of their future roles by encouraging them to help him solve immediate difficulties. But in effect, he would not accept their proposals.[40]

He hid his displeasure. But it was known that he was incensed by the insolence of these diplomats and especially by Prince Prisadang. The prince had been asked to present his personal suggestions which should have been submitted privately. Instead he had involved other diplomats. Furthermore, the memorandum had been sent to all other members of the League so that they could join in its presentation.[41] In fact, Chamun Waiworanat was the only other member to react. He presented the king with his own version, elaborating upon the original.

The memorandum threatened royal absolutism. The episode shows a group of elite officials employing the language of nationalism in order to

argue their own case for political power. Moreover, they had been hand-picked by the king for higher office, and several belonged to the League, and so had vowed to defend him and not to seek personal benefit in carrying out their duties.

The question is why they thought they could present the king with an argument which would essentially reduce his power – one that spoke in terms of the country rather than the throne. There are several explanations. First, the memorandum can be interpreted as the work of men who were fundamentally loyal and genuinely concerned with the king's interests. They shared his perception of Siam's future and his belief that the state should be transformed in order that it might serve both the well-being of the people and the economic interests of the western powers. They perceived the great families to be a source of opposition, and could not afford to embark too hastily upon action which might spark off just the catastrophe that they all feared.

A second explanation is that the memorandum was an act of naive opportunists who believed that the king fully intended to carry out reforms but lacked experience of the outside world, which they ventured to provide. They may have thought themselves so well placed that they need not worry that their opinions would be construed as seditious. Prince Sawat, who was responsible for the most radical contributions, was a younger brother of Prince Devawongse and three queens (one of whom drowned, one was the mother of crown prince, and the third the mother of King Vajiravudh). Prince Prisadang was only a little less well-connected. As King Rama III's grandson and a *momchao* (the lowest rank of royalty), he was one of the best-educated men in Siam, and had risen exceptionally fast in his career. He considered his suggestion that Siam adopt a constitutional monarchy to be self-evidently correct. Two years later, he wrote to King Chulalongkorn confirming his loyalty and his belief in King's good intentions; he had this to say about the memorandum:

> As evidence of my belief in His Majesty's good intentions, I refer to the memorandum which I initiated and had sent from abroad. . . . I ventured to make suggestions in the memorandum because I believed that His Majesty would agree with them and would plan to gradually implement them.[42]

The prince's memorandum exemplified criticisms directed from inside the bureaucracy. The magazine *Sayamsamai* crusaded from outside. This magazine had been published by Dr Smith between 1881 and 1885. It served to propagate his Christian evangelism, and also ferociously criticised the king's absolutist policy. It proposed a concept of nationalism very different from the ideas offered both by the king and the writers of the memorandum, and sowed seeds which were to germinate a generation later.

Its articles placed the well-being of the people above all else. Embarrassingly, the magazine pressed for social reforms that the king had promised in his reforming zeal a decade earlier but had failed to deliver. The continuation of slavery was perceived as against national interests (*mai rak chat*), and the plight of the *phrai* had not improved significantly. The magazine was increasingly used by the *phrai* as a means of airing their grievances, since they believed that it reached the king and they had no hope of redress through the bureaucratic machinery. The ruling class was severely condemned for turning a blind eye to their abject condition.[43]

A despairing article submitted by a supposedly *phrai* reader related how the *phrai*, after being tattooed and paying for the corvée, were subjected to so much taxation that they had to sell their children into slavery. And when a *nai* died, his *phrai* then became *phrai luang* and were subjected to taxation at a higher level and to various kinds of enlistment. It concluded that the only way to escape this predicament was to make merit so that one would not be reborn as a *phrai*.[44]

A related problem was exploitation by royal and noble officials. *Sayamsamai* discussed it in terms that did not differ markedly from the rhetoric employed by the king; the happiness of the people was desirable. The people were compared to the goose that laid the golden eggs, and as such it was not in the national interests that they should be exploited by officials. The problems could only be resolved when officials were properly salaried; in return they should respect their obligations to the people who, indirectly, paid their salaries.[45]

Sayamsamai also addressed the issue of taxation. Criticisms were particularly directed against the continuation of "vice" taxation, such as that on opium, gambling and lotteries, which were seen as the source of the people's hardship, slavery and banditry. The issue of the special relationship between government officials and Chinese tax farmers, which permitted the latter to run deeply into debt to the state, was also raised.[46] One recalls that a decade earlier the king had raised the same point to justify consolidating his power against the great nobles.

A further important nationalist argument centred on the question of merit. It was pointed out that the education system offered unequal opportunities, and that only the sons of royalty and nobility were sent abroad to study. Class discrimination was perceived to have arisen from the religious belief that people who were low-born suffered for their past bad deeds and thus were born to be ignorant.[47] But those in high positions had sprung from families that had once been *phrai*; thus intelligence could not be inferred from social class.[48]

Nationalistic ideas were most strikingly expressed in the self-identification of the *phrai*. One article appeared from two readers claiming they were the people in "service" and not "gentlemen" (both words were written in Thai transliteration).[49] They insisted on the right to freedom of expression. This was in reaction to an earlier letter from Chaophraya Mahin, the head

of *Krom Suratsawadi* (Manpower Department), who wrote that if the *phrai* had any grievances, then they should complain to him and not to the magazine.

Sayamsamai was considered subversive, both because it criticised the absolutist system and because it proposed alternatives.[50] For instance, it discussed the French system of government, which had changed from an absolutist to a parliamentary system with the president as the head of the state. The message sent by *Sayamsamai* was that whether the head of state was king, emperor or president, that person must have the support of the people in order to govern. The potential power of the people was noted. If a government impeded economic development or failed to preserve law and order, then it should not be surprised if the people rioted.[51] And popular consensus, upon which government depended, might also demand a change of system.[52]

Sayamsamai constituted a forum for the expression of social tensions which had developed after King Chulalongkorn's first reforms. Perhaps it only reflected the view of a small, Bangkok literate, minority, but it implanted those ideas which would eventually undermine the legitimacy of the regime.

The king was determined to guard his authority and did not take criticisms lightly. His responses were influenced by the critic's status, and his relationship to the throne. We have seen that perhaps the most ferocious criticisms were made by *Sayamsamai* and its publisher, Dr Smith. Dr Smith's foreign status gave him some protection. The king could not punish him directly without imposing stress on diplomatic relations with the United States, so indirect tactics were used. The king strongly reprimanded a royal prince who used the magazine to air his grievances. An attempt was made to set up a competing publication edited by another foreigner, but this did not materialise.[53] *Sayamsamai* was most severely damaged when it lost the services of Girini, the Italian officer dismissed from the First Foot Guard who had then started to work for Dr Smith. A scholar and former member of the bureaucracy, Gerini contributed so energetically to the magazine that Prince Devawongse instructed Chamun Waiworanat to recruit him again to the regiment.[54]

Those members of the elite who ventured criticisms were treated cautiously, but not by repression which might incite them to close ranks and form an organised opposition. The cases of Prince Pichit and Prince Prisadang show that key critics were singled out and left in the cold as a general warning. But a person of lower birth, such as the lawyer Thianwan, could be punished with impunity. Tried under the traditional system (which did not provide fixed terms of imprisonment), he was only released seventeen years later when a new legal code, based on a western legal system, was introduced.

Others were expected to learn from such warnings and to restrict their energies to advancing their careers. In general, the warnings were heeded.

Following the incarceration of Chamun Sisorarak, Chamun Waiworanat's deputy in the First Foot Guard (see pages 109–110), and no further direct challenges were made by members of the bureaucracy until almost the end of King Chalalongkorn's reign.

The emergence of the modern bureaucratic elite

We will now go on to deal with contradictions that arose within the bureaucracy, and between King Chulalongkorn and his bureaucrats, in the last years of his reign.

The second half of the reign saw the emergence of a group of highborn and highly educated officials who valued western ideas and bureaucratic professionalism. Frustrated by the king's refusal to permit the development of consultative institutions, they began to call for more attention to their professional needs and to the interests of "the people". By this, they intended, first of all, a greater voice for themselves, but the demand also served to reverse the absolutist claim that the king alone represented the nation and people. Although, at this time, the debate was largely restricted to the top echelons of the ruling elite, the basis for a modern ideological opposition to absolutism was laid.

Two cases in point involved Prince Ratburi and Prince Chumphon, King Chulalongkorn's sons. They graduated from British establishment; Prince Ratburi read law at Oxford University and Prince Chumphon studied at the Royal Naval Academy. Upon their return to Siam, each established a school to teach his professional skills. They went on to be revered by their subordinates as mentors and patrons.

In order to understand the special relationships developed between the westernised bureaucratic elite and their subordinates, we need to understand how their teachings were disseminated. Prince Ratburi was inspired by the conviction that it was only possible to establish a unified legal system if there were qualified judges to lead it, and he began by giving legal training to a group of officials in the Ministry of Justice. Classes were originally organised in the dining room next to his office; this school became so popular that it was moved to larger premises. In the first year, more than 100 students enrolled. The prince provided English textbooks ordered from the West and Thai books written by himself and published at his own expense. The classroom atmosphere was lively, and the teacher showed himself willing to answer the many questions thrown at him.[55] One student wrote of the atmosphere in the first year:

> It was evident that he had the character of a good teacher.... Apart from his daily class, he wrote many legal textbooks that year and both the teacher and students were exhausted. He was very kind and considerate to the law students. He wanted us to be able to practise the profession and he encouraged us to practise as lawyers. When students

> could not find a case, he arranged for them to represent convicts in prison. When it was the King's birthday anniversary he gave a lavish dinner at his own expense so that high-ranking officials had the opportunity to meet his students.[56]

Biographies of Prince Chumphon tell the similar story of a young prince dedicated to professional training.[57] He was reputed to be conscientious, strict, quick-tempered and paternalistic. He designed a syllabus which raised standards at the Royal Naval Academy to the point where naval officers graduated with the skill to sail the high seas.

Initially, he taught all the classes himself, and spent over twelve hours a day running the academy. The students were trained to be courageous and to cope in bad weather conditions. They had to learn manual occupations, and a programme of physical training pushing them almost beyond their limits. He did not hesitate to inflict corporal punishment on those who could not cope with this physical training and who failed to maintain his standard of cleanliness and tidiness. But he also shared their hardships, the miserable diet and, in times of crisis, their work. He acted as a mentor to the commissioned officers. At night in field training, he joined their groups around the campfire and regaled them with stories of his experiences in the West. He was adored by his officers, who fondly invented titles for him such as *Chaopho* and *Sadettia*, which showed their respect for him as a member of the royal family and as though he were their father.[58]

These two princes reflect the development of an elite who had devoted groups of subordinates with extraordinary loyalty to their leaders. On occasion, this personal loyalty led to conflicts with the monarch, and the latter insisted unsuccessfully that his claims to loyalty should prevail.

This is illustrated by the case of Prince Ratburi, King Chulalongkorn's favourite and first son who graduated with a law degree from Britain. He, as the Minister of Justice, argued that his code of professional ethics overrode his commitment to the king's perception of absolutism. The conflict between the king and his Minister of Justice revolved around the question of jurisprudence. The king, Prince Damrong and some other cabinet ministers considered the judiciary to be an arm of the absolutist state, existing in order to serve state interests. But Prince Ratburi and his disciples perceived that their duty was to establish the judiciary as an autonomous body independent from the executive.[59]

The prince and his disciples reasoned that other ministers did not understand him, and that he therefore preferred to spend his time dealing with his responsibilities rather than wasting time in cabinet meetings. During his frequent absences from meetings, he was represented by the Under-secretary of State – which greatly irritated his fellow ministers when they needed to discuss matters that directly concerned his ministry. It is ironic that, in fighting for "modernisation" and "professionalism", the prince appeared to his cabinet colleagues to be contravening these same

principles, and to be behaving as though his royal status licensed him to indulge his whims.

He further alienated the king and his colleagues by publicising cabinet disagreements over the issue of jurisprudence. *Khao san* (*Law Court News*), a magazine read in judicial circles, published a letter from King Chulalongkorn to Prince Ratburi commenting on a particular judgment by the Supreme Court, to the effect that it was too severe. The king conceded that the judge had the right to deliver his judgment, but in this case, it seemed to be against the interests of the administration. Because judgment had been found against a Chinese, the Chinese community might find it difficult to accept the authority of the legal system, particularly in provinces adjacent to Siam's neighbours under the colonial rule. In these provinces, the majority of the Chinese community might consider the punishment to be excessive, and this might lead to trouble. The king then requested that the prince should not attempt to uphold the freedom of the judiciary regardless of the consequences, but should be very careful in allocating judges to difficult cases.[60]

The following issue of *Khao san* contained three related items. The first was a letter written by the king to Prince Ratburi a year later, complaining on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior that sometimes judgments were so lenient that witnesses dared not go to court to testify lest they should become the victims of revenge attacks after the accused had secured release after a short prison sentence.

The second item consisted of Prince Ratburi's reply to the king's earlier letter. He explained the principles of jurisprudence which, he pointed out, were still a matter of debate in the West, and he stated that punishments varied according to the crimes committed. One could not expect all judges to reach the same decisions. The king apparently wanted to systematise the judicial system to a degree that was all very well in theory, but could not be put into practice. The prince then exemplified the conflict between theory and practice by citing the ongoing corvée system which affected different people differently, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Thus, Prince Ratburi attacked the king's weak point, the delay in reforming the manpower system, as a counter-argument. The third item was a letter from King Chulalongkorn stating his satisfaction with the reply.[61]

It appeared that Prince Ratburi had won this round in the conflict. That the private correspondence between the king and his Minister of Justice was made accessible to officials in the ministry indicates that the prince meant to make the matter public, perhaps to garner support. The contradictions between the king's first and second letters strengthened the prince's argument alledging executive interference. The prince used this dispute to show that, as the Minister of Justice, he was obliged to uphold principles of both judicial and departmental independence. The king might disagree with how the ministry conducted its business, but this did not justify his interference.

However, the real cause of conflict lay in the prince's attempt to establish the judiciary as an autonomous body. This caused tension between the king and Prince Ratburi to persist, and was responsible for the delay in completing the Criminal Code, which was under the supervision of Prince Ratburi. In 1904, King Chulalongkorn attempted to break the stalemate by appointing a new committee headed by the French legal advisor, Dr Padoux, to work on the original draft. When the revision was completed in 1906, King Chulalongkorn appointed another committee, headed by Prince Damrong, to make a final revision before its promulgation (the code was finally promulgated in 1913). In the meantime, Prince Ratburi continued to sulk, and gave little attention to work at the ministry for many years. He disassociated himself from the Code by accompanying the king's second visit to Europe at the time of its promulgation. He returned when the king appointed a deputy minister, Prince Charun, but even then only attended to those tasks that interested him.[62]

Prince Ratburi made his disagreements known to his disciples, and claimed that the Code had been produced to meet Prince Damrong's needs. He felt that Prince Damrong had a vested interest in any issue that involved administrative procedures, and that his main purpose in revising the Code was to create procedures by which the accused who confessed would be promised a reduced punishment. This might simplify the business of the courts, but, the prince said, it violated principles of jurisprudence and was unacceptable.[63] However, the real reason for his displeasure might have been that the revisions overturned his plans to separate judicial and executive powers. As Minister of Justice, he had attempted to establish a precedence for this separation by giving his judges full autonomy. He had planned that the Code should recognise this separation, but it had been squashed by Prince Damrong's revisions.

Perhaps intending to lay the issue to rest, in 1910 the king announced at a cabinet meeting that the plan to separate judicial and executive powers was premature. This decision greatly disappointed the prince. He wrote to the king, asking for permission to resign from his position on grounds of ill health, but the king refused to acknowledge the letter either to the prince or any other person.[64] Although the Prince had failed to achieve a reaction, he found another opportunity to argue for the judiciary's greater freedom when a play, called *Phraya Raka*, implied Prince Ratburi's intimate relationship with one of Prince Narathip's minor wives, whom Prince Ratburi had taken under his legal guardianship. (The author, Prince Narathip himself, was a former Minister of Finance, who pursued artistic interests after being dismissed from the service on a corruption charge.)[65]

This accusation was generally known to have no foundation, but it gave Prince Ratburi an opportunity to challenge the old judicial system as well as defend his honour. He proposed to take the case to court. (This would have been a special court (*san rapsang*) for members of the royal family; no ordinary court was empowered to hear a case brought against a royal

prince.) He was dissuaded by his mentor, Chaophraya Yommarat, the Minister of the Capital and his tutor in Great Britain. Prince Ratburi then claimed he had no legal means by which to defend himself against the libel charge; this indicated serious defects in the system which he had been trying in vain to reform. He insisted that the conflict could not be resolved by conciliation – which would have been the normal means of settlement under the old system. He told Chaophraya Yommarat that he wished to resign from the ministry, and asked him to present his formal complaint to the king.

Although addressed to the king, this document was intended for general publication at a later stage. In it, Prince Ratburi characterised Prince Narathip's libel as insulting both to him and his fellow judges. Their inability to try the case in a common court justified his fight for greater judicial powers. He challenged the government to give the judiciary greater protection against both verbal and physical abuse.[66] Written in English, the document said in part:

> We of the Bench have seen with approval the severity the Government has visited on the errors of judges, but it still remains to be seen that the Government is solicitious for the protection of those of us whose conduct and object has been for the impartial administration of justice both to prince and pauper. We, the members of the Bench, commend our reputation to the public for the protection.

The day after presenting his case to Chaophraya Yommarat, Prince Ratburi called a meeting of his ministry's senior judges and informed them of what had happened. He told them that they would no longer see him at the ministry, and that they should consider that to be the day on which he had died as far as they were concerned. He then left Bangkok, informing no one – including the king, from whom, as a royal prince, he was supposed to ask permission when planning to leave the capital.

This event shows Prince Ratburi using his special relationship with his disciples to elicit their support in his fight for judicial power and independence. He later conceded in a letter to Chaophraya Yommarat that his real motive in making his complaint was "to draw attention to several difficulties which required serious attention", and that Prince Narathip's play was not of much importance. His meeting with the judges had been calculated to win their support in his struggle with the king.

To this extent, he had succeeded. The day after the meeting, twenty-four senior judges (or twenty-eight, according to Chaophraya Mahithon's biography) wrote to the king saying that their service up until then had depended both upon the king's gracious kindness and upon guidance given by the minister, Prince Ratburi. The incident had damaged the ministry, in so far as it had caused the minister to resign, the country which they served, Prince Ratburi's interests, and their own interests. In the

circumstances, and given Prince Ratburi's absence, they felt that they could no longer serve as in the past and hence felt obliged to tender their resignations.

This shows the judges distinguishing between their loyalty to the state and their own corporate interest and loyalty to the monarchy. It greatly annoyed the king, and apparently he put the judges' names at the end of his bed and cursed them.[67] But he had prevailed in tougher conflicts with the great nobles, and would not give into pressure from these young bureaucrats. He issued an order calling them to continue their duties at the ministry, arguing that they had no reason for their action. First, the prince's resignation had not yet been accepted. Second, a special court was investigating the case. Third, the judges had taken an oath of allegiance and should not take what had happened to one person as an excuse to abandon this oath. Fourth, their behaviour did not fit the role model of officials who were loyal to the king and upheld the state's best interests. In other words, the king insisted on the identification of the state with the monarch.

The judges realised that they had been too rash, and asked for the king's forgiveness. But one of their members, Khunluangphra Kraisi (Nai Thiam), Director of the International Court, added an explanation for his behaviour to his plea for forgiveness. He claimed that his responsibilities at the International Court (deciding cases that involved foreigners who had extraterritorial rights) were as arduous as those of the Foreign Minister, and that he could only perform his duties with the guidance of Prince Ratburi, who had been available at any time of the day. He had served the prince as a judge for fourteen years and had not once seen him in tears – as he had been in the latest crisis. This, plus his sense of loss, had prompted him to take the initiative in calling his colleagues to present their letter to the king.

This letter demonstrated Khunluangphra Kraisi's sense of pride in his profession (he was the first Thai official who had received his legal training at Gray's Inn), to the point of arrogance in intimating to the king that Prince Ratburi and these high-ranking judges were indispensable to the Ministry of Justice. It also exposed him as the main spokesman of the rebellion, and the king did not hesitate. Because he had admitted to being unable to serve without guidance, the king argued, Khunluangphra Kraisi was clearly incompetent and so was dismissed. He was also stripped of his title, on the grounds that he had led other judges to commit a blunder, which proved that he was *fungsan*. Literally meaning "someone with wild ideas", this new term was increasingly used of those who blindly followed the West. The king's message was that nobody was indispensable, and in particular someone who functioned as an agent provocateur.

Prince Ratburi had been unaware of the contents of Khunluangphra Kraisi's letter; independently, he made the same points in a further letter

to the king, suggesting that unless judges were able to perform with the freedom enjoyed by western judges, Siam's independence was at stake, and not during the next reign but the next year. But, by now, the prince had alienated all supporters, bar those in the ministry. Realising his situation, he asked for a private appointment to see the king instead of turning up at the daily audience, as was normal. But the king had suffered the prince's manoeuvrings long enough and, upon the recommendation of Prince Phitsanulok, accepted the letter of resignation submitted earlier.

This incident showed a modern minister challenging the king's authority in the name of professionalism. It also confirmed the king's worse fears, that the practice of modern bureaucracy could be detrimental to his authority. Officials now regarded their ministers rather than the king as patron. He was seen to be removed from the bureaucratic processes of recruitment and promotion, and so his claim to be prime patron lost credibility. When advising the king to accept Prince Ratburi's resignation, Prince Phitsanulok had this to say:

> If there is a change [in the minister] then the influence of the patronage network is lessened. The network has influence because ministers tend to stay in their positions for so long that they are the persons responsible for nurturing, advising, and seeking royal approval for promoting subordinates from lower to high positions. This leads subordinates to think that they have established themselves because of their minister and forget your gracious kindness and the water of the allegiance.

This case also shows the second expressions of nationalism by officials. Khunluangphra Kraisi knew that by speaking out, he was risking his life, but he insisted that all his actions stemmed from his loyalty to the nation. He felt that judicial power was so vital to the people's lives and properties, and his official function was so important to the country's independence, that he had no alternative. He argued that people in other countries had already sacrificed their lives for saying what they believed, but this was a new experience in Siam. His argument represents an attitude held among the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, a new and growing social group, which made the nation the focus of loyalty. We now turn our attention to this group, which later grew to challenge the absolute monarchy.

The emergence of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie

The conflict between King Chulalongkorn and some of his senior officials was further complicated by the emergence of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, who were beginning to argue that merit and education gave them a claim to bureaucratic positions and advancement. These people viewed education as the main avenue towards a bureaucratic post. "Merit" appeared to

signify neither experience nor demonstrable ability, but the fact of sacrificing in order to obtain an education. They viewed their relationship with the state as contractual; by obtaining a modern education, they became clients of the absolutist state, whose reciprocal duty was to reward them with posts.

This new social class, fully emerging in the last years of King Chulalongkorn's reign, is termed here the "bureaucratic bourgeoisie". They were educated up to the level at which they won freedom from the *phrai* status, and (almost all) worked for the bureaucracy, within which they comprised the middle level. It had not been the intention of the elite to create a new social class; they had merely planned to extend and modernise the existing ruling group. In other words, the absolutist system was expected to preserve the old social structure consisting of only the *phudi* (*nai* class), the Chinese mercantile middle class and, at the bottom of society, the *phrai*.

When the bureaucratic bourgeoisie made their presence felt, members of the elite experienced difficulty in placing them within the structure. They were described as persons in the middle who were "neither *phudi* nor *phrai*". They were sometimes termed *phuak sode* – the word *sode* being a bastardised form of the English word "sophisticated", and intended to be derogative of someone who had become westernised to the point of criticising things Thai.[68]

We are talking of a very small group, concentrated principally in Bangkok; but by the turn of the century, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie made themselves felt by their lifestyle, which harkened back to the quasi-European cosmopolitan culture of the earlier generation of the westernised Thai elite. King Chulalongkorn and a small band of his followers, Young Siam, had first adopted western-styled dress. In the 1880s, it was Thianwan, the archetypal Thai intellectual and nationalist, who, moustached and wearing trousers and shoes, must have presented an unusual spectacle to the masses who had not observed similar dress among either westerners or their own elite. But by the end of the century, the sight of a man dressed in a suit, shoes and socks was normal. Another popular form of attire was a beribboned panama hat. This fashion alone inspired many young men to set their minds on obtaining a modern education and joining the bureaucracy as clerks.[69]

The bureaucratic bourgeoisie also had an impact upon metropolitan lifestyles. Whereas the ruling elite socialised exclusively among themselves, these young men frequented bars and restaurants selling Chinese or western food, whisky and brandy. To quote a contemporary observer:

> Once they start earning twenty baht salaries, they frequent *Ratchawong* Road [Chinatown] eating soft-boiled rice, taking the trishaw to Japanese films, drinking *lao rong* [Thai liquor] and wearing woollen hats. When earning more they slide up the status scale by dining at

> *Phrachan lao* [a Chinese restaurant], travelling in a carriage, going to see *lakhon Pramothai* [the most popular operetta group], drinking brandy and wearing beribboned panama hats.[70]

The expanding economy and increased recruitment to the bureaucracy both contributed to the ease with which persons of *phrai* background might achieve *nai* status. The new bureaucrats' culture was egalitarian in the sense that there were no barriers of birth limiting certain kind of dress, behaviour and entertainment. The new culture attracted so many in part because it did not admit hierarchy. Further, upward mobility was restricted only by financial factors, which posed a significant stumbling block to many members of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie who did not come from the old ruling class, and whose families could not support them. They frequently overspent and ran into debt. Their lifestyles were later to present King Vajiravudh and his high officials with an effective point of criticism in their frantic efforts to save the regime from further inroads by these social parvenus.[71]

Members of this new social group professed new values which were markedly egalitarian, and which they had learned at school. The development of schooling significantly influenced the values espoused by this new class. Both traditional religious studies and the modern system stressed the possibility of enhancing individual merit by examination success. King Chulalongkorn presided over school ceremonies in which prizes were awarded to those who had passed with merit. Nai Laor (later Phra Worawetwisit) described the recognition he received when he came first in the *proyok nung* (primary) examination. He was given a money sack filled with coins totalling ninety baht. (At that time a clerk's monthly salary was twenty baht.) A lady millionaire was so impressed by this country boy's achievement that she donated money for erecting a building dedicated to him at his school.[72]

The culture established in the education profession significantly motivated the performance of high-school teachers. The first generation of teachers, trained at the Teacher Training College, had been brought up in the traditional system, and had received their early education from monk teachers. However, they were motivated by the new opportunities for career advancement rather than by a desire for spiritual development. In the Ministry of Education, Luang Phaisan (later Chaophraya Thammasakmontri) organised weekly teachers' meetings to discuss problems and develop projects. These turned into popular forums, where lectures were given on a range of topics, and debates conducted. They drew officials from other ministries, and, on his return from Great Britain where he had served as Ambassador, Phraya Wisut (Pia Malakhun, later Chaophraya Phrasadet) developed these meetings into an organised professional and social association called *Samakkayachan* with a magazine, *Witthayachan*. *Samakkayachan* drew members from the teaching profession, other

ministries and the general public. It was an extremely popular association; failure to gain an invitation to its lectures reputedly drew tears from the eyes of ladies. These regular lectures, the magazine and a library second only to that of *Wachirayan* were invaluable inspirations to the profession, providing knowledge and inculcating professional ethics among teachers.[73]

The age was marked by growing recognition of merit achieved by mastering new knowledge. This new value was fostered by the newly educated, who prided themselves as the chosen few who had succeeded against the odds. The Siamese education system may not have compared favourably to its equivalents in the West, but it served to promote those who were determined to enjoy a new lifestyle and social status. The school examination failure rates demonstrate that those who had passed through the system did indeed have reason to congratulate themselves.[74]

Schooling now emphasised not only the values of merit, but also of social equality. Laor, a prominent educationist, claimed that during his early career a pupil from a very high-ranking family was surprised and angered to be punished, but later came to respect his teacher for refusing to give up his principles.[75] Laor's biography, written at a much later date, perhaps reflected contemporary values rather than those prevalent at the time of the incident; nevertheless, it does show that principles of equality had begun to be established, and it was no longer possible to treat individuals solely on the basis of their social backgrounds.

Writing early in his reign, King Vajiravudh captured the mood of the period (despite some exaggeration):

> We all realise these days that education is more developed than in the past, and there are textbooks teaching all sorts of subjects. As a result, some people assume that nothing is more important than knowledge. And this assumption leads them to believe that they have one very important responsibility; that is, to earn high grades in all examinations at school, and to obtain many diplomas. Once they have left school, they do not need to exert themselves again; and in time, fortune and positions will inevitably flow their way.[76]

Thus, the bureaucratic bourgeoisie developed a perception that their careers involved a contract; they viewed *nai* status and a place in the bureaucracy as a right earned by study, and believed that they should be advanced on the basis of (their own estimation of) their abilities. A manual by Chaophraya Phrasadet, a leading educationist, known as *Tuan phuan* was written principally to argue against this contractual perception among the bureaucratic bourgeoisie.[77]

So the term "merit" took on the primary meaning of achievement in mastering new knowledge as opposed to moral merit or merit earned by loyal service. The influence of this new value in the thinking of the modern bureaucrats is attested by the autobiography of one of King Chula-

longkorn's clients, Phraya Thephatsadin who had been sent to study abroad on a scholarship. He felt it necessary to apologise for the fact that, having achieved little at his school, Suan Kulap, he had "no merit" (*khun khamdi*) other than being *khaluang doem* (the king's client before the accession to the throne).[78]

The rapid advances made by the first generation of bureaucratic bourgeoisie nurtured the belief among their successors that they could advance by securing educational qualifications, although lacking a ruling class background. This is reflected in a saying of the period, "doing well not because of who your parents are but because of what you have achieved", a principle which Prince Damrong himself reportedly emphasised.[79]

However, the situation was complicated by the fact that the king still paid attention to family background when making promotions, and members of the new social group could not advance far without support. Those without connections to noble families discovered that they needed to be adopted as clients by senior bureaucrats. Bureaucrats who failed to secure the support of a well-placed patron stood at a grave disadvantage. Amidst these failures, patron–client relationships were increasingly perceived to be particularistic and discriminatory, and they started to lose their legitimacy.

The term *prachop*, meaning "pleasing those in higher positions", reflects this sense of moral distortion. Within the traditional patronage system, this term had no negative connotations. But now it was regularly used in conjunction with a second term which had negative connotations in both the traditional and modern systems – *sophlor*, meaning trying to please by employing flattery. By the early 1900s, the concept of *prachop* had become a major polarising issue. Thianwan, the leading intellectual and nationalist who suffered lengthy imprisonment for his criticisms, was largely responsible for formulating an argument about the deleterious effects of *prachop* and *sophlor*.[80] Thianwan taught that sycophancy was mainly responsible for problems in the bureaucracy:

> Since this is the case, we are therefore of the opinion that those who practice the art of flattery [*sophlor*] and who can be called sycophants [*hua prachop*] are not confident of their own merit and justice, and have to observe their superiors and masters [*nai*] in order to discover what can please them so that they can vary their behaviour depending on who is their leader, their master and their patron [*thi phung*]. That is to say, they have to keep an eye on the flag in order to see in which direction the wind is blowing.[81]

The legal profession crusaded against the practice. *Khao san* (*Law Court News*), an in-house journal of the legal profession, published an article observing that apparently three qualities guaranteed success in society and bureaucracy: professional qualifications, sycophancy and family connections.[82]

Discontent was fuelled by the confusions that arose when both traditional and modern bureaucratic criteria were applied in evaluating performance. Officials discovered that, in practice, they could only be secure if they met both sets of criteria. Such contradictions still arise, 100 years later, but at least some compromise has evolved. At the time, there was no accepted middle ground, and junior officials felt very vulnerable.

These were people whose aspirations were high but whose connections were low. They (and their families) had assumed that education would guarantee them placement and promotion, but they had fallen victims to an economic downturn and perhaps to educational productivity. One possible escape was to seek the king's attention outside the bureaucratic hierarchy; for instance, many chose to enter King Vajiravudh's Wild Tiger Corps, discussed in the next chapter. A second escape was the very human response of condemning all patronage networks, especially those in the traditional system under royal protection, expecting only such opportunities were available to one's self.

That feature of the old value system that most constrained members of the new class was the old-fashioned insistence that orders were to be obeyed without question and without appeal, however arbitrary they might seem. Phraya Satchaphirom's biography makes clear the sense of outrage he felt from the way he was treated by Prince Maruphong, his superior and patron in the Ministry of the Interior. On one occasion he found himself transferred without warning to another district and a lower position. Only later did he discover that he had been accused of corruption by a tax farmer, also the prince's client. As he was not informed of the charge, interrogated or given a chance to defend himself, he found himself disgraced and isolated because other officials dared not associate with him. After a year of this treatment, he was promoted to a higher position and was indirectly informed that the prince had now discovered the charge to be unfounded. This injustice had arisen because he had insisted on fully implementing official regulations in his dealings with the tax farmer, regardless of the prince's warning of his relationship with the man. He had not paid heed to the warning because "I was proud of my education and of my being the favourite of the Prince".[83] This case shows an official stumbling when he presumed on both his patron's favour (behaviour reflecting the old values) and on his competence as an educated official (reflecting the new).

Phraya Satchaphirom gave a second example involving the same prince, this time unreasonably exercising his whims during training conducted by the Wild Tiger Corps. After a misunderstanding over the point at which his troops should be halted, Phraya Satchaphirom was ordered to repeat the movement again and again, but was given no reason why. When he could stand it no longer, he asked to resign from the *Sua pa* (Wild Tiger Corps). The prince later discovered that Phraya Satchaphirom had merely been following the orders of another commander in his initial action, and

made amends by taking Phraya Satchaphirom to a department store to choose pieces of winter clothing as a gift.[84]

The aggravation suffered by Phraya Satchaphirom and other officials in the Ministry of the Interior was severe, but did not reach the levels of dissatisfaction manifested in the army. More than any other department of the bureaucracy, the army had recruited its junior officers from the educated *phrai* class, and discipline was given greatest emphasis. An incident occurred in 1909 which reflected the stress. Pages belonging to the crown prince, Prince Vajiravudh, and some soldiers fell into conflict over a female betel nut vendor. One soldier was beaten up by the pages, and he sought help from Captain Som, his superior, who with another officer and three more soldiers chased the pages up to the gates of the crown prince's palace.

After the investigation, in which Captain Som admitted responsibility, the crown prince requested that all five soldiers be flogged, the punishment laid down by customary law. On taking advice from Prince Ratburi (in his capacity of legal advisor, following his resignation from the Ministry of the Justice), the king was unwilling to permit this. But he was forced to give in by the crown prince's threat to abdicate if the flogging was not carried out. The two officers and the three soldiers were clapped in irons and flogged before the ranks, the crown prince, and some of his pages.[85]

Assuming the accuracy of the chroniclers' description of this event and of the emotions that it generated, we can identify considerable evolution in the values of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. The day on which the punishment was executed was described by a member of the attempted coup in 1912 as "very sad"; the army, the civil service, the law students and the public in general were shocked to see "the army officers, and the nation's soldiers, being flogged for an unjustifiable reason".[86] This statement reflected two new values. First, it showed rejection of royal privilege, which was seen as arbitrary and unjust. The educated members of society now disapproved of unjust and savage punishment. Second, it demonstrated the emergence of the concept "nation" as the new focus of loyalty. Captain Som was described as "a nation's soldier" and someone who had earlier saved the nation by putting down the Shan rebellion.

This incident also showed the bureaucratic bourgeoisie still clinging to the old values of adaptation within the patronage system. The cadets reacted to the incident by going on strike, and some were so incensed that they openly criticised the punishment.

Prince Phitsanulok defused the conflict by calling a meeting and arguing thus:

> The King has the prerogative to punish the citizen in the same way as the father who punished his son. He considered flogging the citizen an instruction given to his children and therefore he does not bear any grudge against you and does not punish you according to the law.

> Especially for the soldiers, he considers you to belong to the same family, therefore he gave flogging in order to give a lesson. It is likely that he will continue to *chup liang* you [give protection and take you as a client] in the future.[87]

This promise of opportunities for patronage was a calming influence. But what were the real chances for advancement within the bureaucracy? When King Vajiravudh made no move to prove Prince Phitsanulok correct, many in the army believed that he continued to feel vindictive against them. They pointed out that, while his courtiers might be appointed to the *luang* ranks, soldiers never were.[88] This dissatisfaction contributed to the 1912 conspiracy, discussed in Chapter 6.

The aspirations of all commoner officials, and in particular those who had been professionally trained, were very high because they were very conscious of how well the first generation of commoner officials had been rewarded. It is normal for a new organisation, such as the Thai bureaucracy, to experience rapid upward mobility in the early years, and then later to slow down. In then early years of King Chulalongkorn's reign, lawyers had been in great demand by the Ministry of Justice and other ministries and had enjoyed high salaries, but in the last years, this demand fell off and they suffered a sense of deprivation. This worry and frustration began to affect the other professions, and in particular the army. The policy of expanding the corps of officers so that conscription could be enforced on a national scale meant that the number of officer recruits had originally risen very rapidly. This meant that competition for promotion to senior ranks in the future was going to be fierce. The frustrations that arose were expressed in the 1912 conspiracy, the participants of which were almost all junior officers – as is discussed in Chapter 6.

Economic factors also explain why opportunities for advancement seemed much less rosy than before. In 1907–1908, for the first time, the state budget was in the red. Siam had experienced a succession of bad harvests; interest paid on railway loans had incurred new debts; and the rapid expansion of the bureaucracy and modern educational system meant that salaries accounted for nearly 40 per cent of the state budget.[89]

Thus, financial reasons dictated the need to restrict recruitment and promotions. The question then arose: on what basis were these restrictions to be imposed? Given the proclaimed desire for "modernisation", the pool of high-fliers should have consisted only of those with the best educational qualifications and examination results. But in practice, the lack of opportunities for advanced education and the political significance of patronage meant that patronage was often the decisive factor.

A foreign advisor first raised the issue of financial constraints in 1899, when the cost of salaries accounted for nearly 22 per cent of the bureaucratic budget.[90] It was agreed to set up a committee to work on job description and salaries. This committee would be empowered to test offi-

cials' qualifications and to make unannounced inspections at various ministries. The scheme was obviously over-ambitious; it would have seriously infringed upon the ministers' autonomy and influence within their own empires. Consequently, it was agreed that the committee's powers should be limited to advising on job descriptions and salary scales. But even this was too much for such powerful ministers as Prince Damrong, of the Ministry of the Interior, who asked the committee to trust his judgement in appointing his own advisors, whose salaries he would recommend to be commensurate with their formal qualifications.[91]

By 1908, it was recognised that all departments were overstaffed and a decision was reached to cut the bureaucratic budget by 3 per cent across the board. This decision caused most pain in fast-growing organisations such as the army and the navy. In the army, the cut severely affected both recruitment and promotions. The Cadet School had increased admission by 200 per cent during the last ten years of King Chulalongkorn's reign. Thus, the cadet strike, triggered by the incident between Captain Som and the pages, also reflected justified concerns over career prospects. Prince Phitsanulok's assurances may have calmed the cadets temporarily, but he could not alleviate their underlying insecurities. And these explain why the army would continue to be a source of unrest in the future. Indeed, this explains why such strong anti-monarchic sentiments developed within the army by the end of King Chulalongkorn's reign, and were so well-rooted within the school graduating class of 1910. The crisis was to come to a head in the form of the attempted coup in 1912, which is discussed in Chapter 6.

We have discussed contradictions and tensions in the Thai absolutist state. It is obvious that the king faced many constraints to his authority. Apart from the fact that the state machinery had yet to extend his power to the periphery, at the centre it started to act according to its own interests. The cause of contention rested on the fact that, as any absolutist state, the Thai monarch chose to keep old practices when it suited him while also introducing modern practices. One of the old practices maintained by King Chulalongkorn was the patron–client relationship. As we shall see, this is the most controversial issue, leading to an attempt to dismantle the absolute monarchy in 1912.