

เอกสาร Monarchs and men.

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Monarchs and men

By David Steinberg

King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand has twice deftly forced compromise to defuse crises in the wake of the March general elections. First, he brought together the two opposing leaders, one of whom had been arrested by the other. The 20 May meeting, broadcast on national television, showed then prime minister Suchinda Kraprayoon and opposition leader Chamlong Srimuang kneeling before the king, in accordance with Thai protocol. By his very presence, the monarch sought and achieved a compromise, defusing the violent confrontation in the streets following Suchinda's appointment as premier.

On 10 June, the king appointed a civilian (Anand Panyarachun) as interim prime minister, though an elected former military official had been expected to be picked. The king thus assuaged public concern over the military wielding power through either an elected or unelected head of government. While this did not resolve the fundamental issue of the political power of the Thai military, it did avert bloodshed and another potential political crisis, and was a victory for the Thai civilian political process.

The Thai king has played the role of the moral arbiter many times in the past. Thailand is fortunate. The king is not only the head of state, but also revered as the symbol of national unity and defender of the Buddhist religion. And he has remained above politics. He has been able to command the loyalty of the elite and the people as a whole. It is true that this role has been consciously fostered for decades by the Thai elite, but as a means to national unity, it is remarkably effective. Political legitimacy or the exercise of power is dependent on ratification of that role by the monarch. How much that role resides in this particular king or in the position of any Thai monarch is a critical question for the future.

But what happens in countries that have no equivalent moral and political force, and no unifying presence nor ideology? What, in other words, makes a state into a nation? What person or institution can play the role that brings together and virtually forces opposing groups to resolve, at least temporarily, the crises of power?

In some societies, that role might theoretically be played by the judiciary — for example, the Supreme Court in the US. Yet, even that court, dogged by controversy, has severe limitations on its political neutrality and prestige. In most Asian states,

the judiciary has been a close appendage of the government and does not even have that limited moral authority.

Religious leaders should be more acceptable. Yet, in Thailand, even the supreme patriarch of Buddhism does not have the authority of the king. In the Philippines, the involvement of the Catholic Church in politics, for both better and worse on different occasions, has diminished its temporal authority and limited its effectiveness as arbiter. Islamic clerics outside of the Middle East do not seem to have the necessary authority.

Gone too are the secular leaders who brought independence to their countries and on whom the masses might have relied in such a crisis. The cachet they garnered as independence fighters (for example, Aung San, Sukarno, Ho Chi Minh and Gandhi) or as revolutionaries (Mao) ended with their deaths or the diminution of respect in the light of post-independence crises.

How, then, are confrontations in other states adjudicated? What individual or institution stands above partisanship in politics? Who will the military respect and the opposition or ethnic minorities trust? The lack of an accepted symbol of authority and respect exacerbates the crises in some other Asian states.

Burma is a case in point. It shares a common Buddhist tradition as well as a long and porous border with Thailand. Some ethnic groups straddle the frontier. The military establishments of the two countries have been in close contact over the past few years. Yet two countries could not be more different.

Despite of some ethnic and religious differences — hill tribes in the north, Lao and Cambodians in the east and Muslims in the south — Thailand has been able to rally behind a monarch who has used his moral authority to adjudicate during crises.

Burma lacks all of the above. Many in the Burmese Buddhist clergy have been engaged in politics, beginning in the anti-colonial struggle which they actually led for a period. They are widely respected as a group, but no single individual towers above the society to command complete moral acceptance. There is no religious or secular Burmese figure in whom absolute trust and respect resides.

There are no institutions that are politically untainted or above power. The Burmese presidency, whether held by civilian or military leaders, was symbolic only to the external world. It had little influence internally, except when held by military strongman Ne Win. He had the power but lacked the moral authority. He was feared rather than trusted.

In Thailand the king is the symbol of national unity. Burma lacks such a symbol. In Burma's era of civilian rule, former prime minister U Nu tried to use Buddhism for this purpose, but with limited results. The military in 1962-88 tried "the Burmese way to socialism" as a secular means to rally the state around a national ideology. Ineptly managed, it failed and was discredited. Since 1988, the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council has tried to use the armed forces as such a symbol and Burmese culture as a means. They have not succeeded. Whether Indonesia will succeed with its *pancasila* ideology as a unifying force is an unanswered question.

In a broad sense, the tragedy of Burma in both

its civilian and military incarnations is that it has lacked an institution or individuals who were above partisanship, and a national symbol that would turn the territory of the state into a nation with a common sense of identity.

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The king steps in.

The lack of an accepted symbol of authority [like the king in Thailand] exacerbates the crisis in Burma