



THAILAND'S POLITICAL HISTORY

From the Fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 to Recent Times

B. J. Terwiel

River Books

choosing of Phahon's successor. Phibun was the candidate sponsored by most of the military. In late 1938 his enemies organized two further attempts on his life. Both the shooting and the poisoning failed to remove him from the scene and in December 1938 he was elected Prime Minister.

The Military Regime

Phahon's resignation and Phibun's rise to power marked a distinct change in Siam's government. The new Prime Minister emulated Phahon in that he maintained Pridi and various other liberals in the cabinet. However, the chief ministries were given to his personal army friends, whilst at first he retained his old Defense portfolio. Within a month of coming to power there were rumors of widespread discontent with the new government and Phibun ordered a large number of arrests. Some members of the royal family, Assembly members, and Phibun's army rivals were charged with treason. After a rushed court-martial, eighteen were found guilty and executed, another twenty-six were condemned to life-imprisonment and others, including *phraya* Songsuradet, were exiled.⁵³

The young King Ananda Mahidon had meanwhile come of age, and late in 1938 returned to Siam. However, in January 1939 he went back to Europe, probably because there was no significant role for him at that particular time. The new government had dismissed many royalist officials with the Ministry of the Royal Household being downgraded to a simple Bureau.

An outspoken critic of the autocratic regime was ex-King Prachathipok. It retaliated in 1939 by accusing him of having misappropriated some six million *baht*. The subsequent court procedures were not yet concluded when Prachathipok died in May 1941. Eventually a court declared him guilty, and his Siamese possessions were confiscated. The government decided to prohibit any display of Prachathipok's image.⁵⁴

Phibun's ideas about leading the nation became visible in a series of measures which were intended to stimulate pride in the nation, its military might and its leader. In 1939 the name Siam was dropped in favor of Thailand.⁵⁵ This name change was formally part of a campaign to foster values that would be recognized as 'cultured' in the international world: 'We must be as cultured as other nations otherwise no country will come to contact us. Or if they come, they come as superiors. Thailand would be helpless and soon become colonized. But if we were highly cultured, we would be able to uphold our integrity, independence, and keep everything to ourselves.'⁵⁶ In reality, the name change also reflected the idea of the country being the land of all Thais, also those living beyond the borders.

⁵³ Charnvit Kasetsiri, 'The First Phibun Government', p. 36.

⁵⁴ These measures were rescinded after World War II.

⁵⁵ In the local vernacular, the name of the country was changed from Sayam to Mu'ang Thai. The change became effective on 24 June 1939, the seventh anniversary of the 1932 *coup*.

⁵⁶ From the minutes of the cabinet meeting, 30 August 1939, as cited in Thamsook Numnonda, 'Pibulsongkram's Thai Nation-Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence, 1941-1945', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (September 1978), p. 234.

A government-sponsored program to create a new, civilized Thailand began. During the latter half of 1939 six 'cultural mandates' were announced by the Prime Minister's office. They dealt with the name of the country, warned the people against endangering the nation's security, abolished the names for regional groups of Thais, stipulated paying respect to the national flag and the anthem, advocated the use of locally made consumer goods and proclaimed the new words of the national anthem.⁵⁷ Almost every night government policies were discussed over the radio by two fictitious characters, Man and Khong, whose dialogues were designed and often directed by the Prime Minister himself.⁵⁸

Another six cultural mandates followed between March 1940 and January 1942. They stressed the need to work hard, announced a minor change in the national anthem, emphasized the unity underlying all Thai dialects, told the populace that they should be decently dressed in public, presented a healthy daily routine of work and relaxation and asked all Thais to be quick to assist aged people or invalids. Naturally, the unprecedented interference with regard to private habits met with some resistance. The proclamation that loose shirt-tails, or lack of a shirt, was not proper and not in accordance with cultured Thai behavior must have been greeted in some circles with disbelief. However, in October 1940 the National Cultural Development Act was promulgated, in which it became the duty of all Thai people to comply with the aspirations of the national culture (as determined by the government) and to foster and promote national progress.⁵⁹ Orderliness in dress, good etiquette, efficient use of time and an appreciation of Thai culture could now be enforced, and people convicted of disobeying the law could be fined. In 1941 it became unlawful, among other things, to make unnecessary noise, to use improper language, or to ridicule those who attempted to promote national customs.⁶⁰ In the same year a campaign was launched to persuade people to wear hats in public.⁶¹ The nationalistic program also encompassed the fine arts. Fiercely nationalistic plays and films were sponsored by the government. Often these depicted a glorious past when Thai warriors fearlessly gained freedom for the country, defended their honor, or sacrificed themselves.⁶² Patriotism was taught in schools and was a recurrent theme in song and dance.

The Confrontation with France

In August 1939, when political tension in Europe was high, the French government proposed to Phibun that France and Thailand should conclude a mutual non-aggression pact.⁶³ In reply to this overture, the Thais suggested that the two countries

negotiate a border revision of islands in the Mekong. The French minister at Bangkok was sympathetic to the Thai request. In June 1940 the Thais expressed their interest in the border question. The French enclaves on the Luang Prabang and Pakse rivers, which were returned in 1904, would be returned. However, Paris was seized by the Germans and negotiations thus fell upon Phibun. Men committed to the idea of a border revision and resisting Thai encroachments.

In August 1940 Phibun visited London, British, American, and Japanese officials were recovering territories for Thailand and American government and Italian views were taken into account. Japanese saw the overture as a move to bring Thailand into a much closer relationship. To gain territorial concessions Phibun proceeded to reschedule the pact of friendship. In late September Phibun knew that he wished to expand on the pact. In 1940 he expanded on the pact. He knew that Japanese troops would be necessary and he would return he expected Japanese territories. This agreement Phibun did not discuss in detail.

While these secret negotiations were in publicity was being given. Throughout October and November French airplanes entering Thailand provoked acts of aggression. In November two bombs were dropped on Nakhon Phanom. The Thakhek and Savannakhet provinces along the Mekong River. From 1940 Phibun became commonplace.⁶⁴ Phibun reported to have attacked the border. This gave Phibun an invasion of French Indochina. The Thai armies had taken the western side of the Mekong. Cambodian territory. A French offer to arbitrate in the border was under great pressure was brought to Phibun's intervention. Eventually

⁵⁷ For the text in translation, see Thina-phan Nakhata, 'National Consolidation and Nation-Building, 1939-1947', in Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thai Politics*, pp. 245-50.

⁵⁸ Charnvit Kasetsiri, "The First Phibun Government", p. 39. Several of the dialogues have been published in Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thai Politics*, pp. 260-316.

⁵⁹ Prince Wan Waithayakon, 'Thai Culture', *JSS* 35, pt 2 (1944), p. 140.

⁶⁰ Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thai Politics*, p. 258.

⁶¹ Prem Chaya and Alethea, *The Passing Hours: A Record of Five Amazing Years*, taken from the weekly features in the Bangkok Chronicle between 1941 and 1945. The entry for 23 July 1941 refers to the hat campaign.

⁶² Some extracts of plays are given in Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thai Politics*, pp. 317-22.

⁶³ The details of the treaty negotiations and Phibun's secret alliance with Japan can be found in E. T. Flood, 'The 1940 Franco-Thai Border Dispute and Phibun Songkhram's Commitment to Japan', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10, no. 2 (1969), pp. 304-25.