

Thailand

A Short History

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asserted themselves over a budget bill in September 1938 and forced the cabinet's resignation. New elections were called for November, and on meeting in December, Luang Phibunsongkhram now became prime minister, replacing Phraya Phahon, who finally had retired from public life, no doubt weary of incessant battles with ambitious and contentious politicians and soldiers.

By 1938, old Siam already had changed considerably. The monarchy was still present in form, but hardly in practice (though King Ananda visited Bangkok for two months in 1938-39). Few any longer thought of rolling the political clock back to the absolute monarchy, and acceptance of the idea of constitutional rule was widespread. Regional and minority separatism seemed dead. The powerful monthon governments had been replaced by seventy provincial governments, and representative democracy had begun to be implemented at the local level. Popular participation and interest in national politics was growing, and there was at least the germ of opposition to military (by now the People's party was no more than a euphemism) domination of the government. In most ways, however, this was still a government of what we earlier called elite nationalism, though now of a broader elite that was beginning to reach outside the civil and military bureaucracies to solicit support.

Phibun's Nationalism and the War, 1938-1944

Luang Phibunsongkhram is one of only a handful of people who definitively put their stamp on Thai history. His first government, which ran from the end of 1938 to mid-1944, was a period thoroughly shaped by his power and personality, much as absolute kings had done a generation earlier. His ascendancy nearly coincides with World War II, and his policies had a great deal to do with the way in which Thai lived their wartime experience. Most of all, this was a period of mass nationalism, not just elite nationalism, a social and political phenomenon that was more nearly egalitarian in its implications than it could have been earlier under a monarchist psychology. In decades to come, when Thai were to speak of this first Phibun era and use the pronoun *we*, they were to signify a degree of common participation in their nation's life that was sharply distinguished from their experience of earlier decades.

Phibun was born Plaek Khittasangkha, in a humble family, near Bangkok on July 14, 1897. Sent at age twelve to the military academy, he graduated in 1914 and entered the artillery. His fine service record earned him advanced military training in France from 1924 to 1927, during which time he became a leader of the young students then beginning to plot the military overthrow of the absolute monarchy. He returned to Bangkok in 1927 to serve as a major on the army general staff and in 1928 was granted the rank and title, Luang

Phibunsongkhram. (His name.) He had become a powerful figure in the government and the younger military and navy. He had survived assassination attempts, and he had become a national hero. As early as 1934 he had taken leadership in a time of national crisis. This theme and encouraged authoritarian leaders. He had written the writings of Luang Wichitwathana, an ardent popularizer of the new generation, Phibun was a natural. He effectively manipulated them and by making himself a public figure to use the radio for broadcasting to shape public opinion.

Phibun became prime minister in a cabinet of twenty-five, and he kept two portfolios. He kept himself of close control of the government. A month he moved to the National Assembly, and army ministers plotting against the government were executed—perhaps the first in the century.² Phibun also displayed pictures of expropriated property. He had a maximum of twenty thousand. The National Assembly would be appointed by his power for the danger of the government.

Soon Phibun was elected to a new nation (*sang chat*). This was the change of the national flag on the grounds of the Thai as opposed to the European implications. It suggested a speaking peoples outside the Thai-speaking (Siamese) world. The first occurs historically.

Phibunsongkhram. (He was later to take Phibunsongkhram as his family name.) He had become minister of defense in 1934 and rapidly became a major power in the governments of the Phahon period. As the most prominent of the younger military and a power in government, he was the target of repeated assassination attempts, and his survival added to the mystique that surrounded him. As early as 1934 he was a forceful exponent of Siam's need for strong leadership in a time of nation building and world crisis. He wrote frequently on this theme and encouraged the publication of books and articles admiring authoritarian leaders like Mussolini and Hitler, as well as the popular Thai writings of Luang Wichitwathakan (Vichitr Vadakarn), the most prolific and ardent popularizer of the constitutional regime. More than any other of his generation, Phibun was aware of the usefulness and power of the mass media. He effectively manipulated the popular press by controlling the news that was fed to them and by maintaining press censorship, and he was the first Thai public figure to use extensively the government's monopoly of radio broadcasting to shape popular support for his regime and policies.

Phibun became prime minister on December 26, 1938, presiding over a cabinet of twenty-five, of whom fifteen were military men. Quite remarkably, Phibun kept two portfolios himself—defense and interior—thus assuring himself of close control over the military and over provincial governors. Within a month he moved to quell all possible opposition by arresting some forty members of the royal family, old bureaucratic nobles, elected members of the Assembly, and army rivals, including Phraya Songsuradet, on charges of plotting against the government. After trials of dubious legality, eighteen were executed—perhaps the first clearly political executions in Siam in more than a century.² Phibun also moved against the monarchy, prohibiting the home display of pictures of ex-King Prajadhipok and suing him for misuse of crown property. He had amended the constitution to extend from ten years to a maximum of twenty the period of political tutelage during which half the Assembly would be appointed. All these actions confirmed and strengthened his power for the dangerous times he saw ahead.

Soon Phibun was exercising this power to build, not a new country, but a new nation (*sang chat*). The most immediately visible aspect of these attempts was the change of the name of Siam to Thailand in 1939. Phibun argued for this change on the grounds that it would signify that the country belonged to the Thai as opposed to the economically dominant Chinese, but it also had broader implications. It suggested a more than linguistic kinship with Thai- (or Tai-) speaking peoples outside the borders of old Siam, and it downplayed the central Thai-speaking (Siamese) role in the life of the nation. *Siam*, it was pointed out, first occurs historically as the name other countries (Champa, China,

Cambodia) gave the Tai of the Chaophraya valley. In the light of subsequent policies of the Phibun government, the first of these meanings was the most telling, though all in one way or another are reflected in the history of the period.

One particularly strong thrust to the Phibun government's policies was their economic nationalism, "Thailand for the Thai." The issue had become increasingly important to the elected members of the Assembly over the previous few years. In part this derived from the still frustratingly slow economic development of the countryside and the tendency to blame the apparently more prosperous Chinese, for example, with the myth of the usurious Chinese middleman and moneylender. In addition, however, there were at least two new elements in the situation that fueled anti-Chinese sentiment. The first was growing awareness of the large amounts of money remitted each year by Chinese in Thailand to their relatives in China, which constituted a formidable drain on the Thai economy. The second was the growth of Chinese nationalism in Thailand. This flared particularly when the Sino-Japanese War began in 1937 and Siam's Chinese organized anti-Japanese boycotts and thereby harmed both the Thai economy, for which Japan had become the major trading partner, and Thai foreign relations. That Thai-Chinese relations were worsening was signaled when in 1938 Luang Wichit in a public lecture compared the Chinese in Siam to the Jews in Germany and implied that Hitler's policies toward them were worth considering.

In the course of the first nine months of Phibun's government, a comprehensive series of anti-Chinese (or, as the government put it, pro-Thai) enactments were put into effect. The government formed a state corporation to compete with Chinese in the rice trade and virtually took over the salt, tobacco, petroleum, and pork business. Numerous occupations were forbidden to noncitizens. A new revenue code sharply increased taxes on the commercial (i.e., Chinese) class, and all noncitizens were required to pay an alien registration fee. Chinese schools came under close inspection to limit the use of the Chinese language to two hours a week, and all the Chinese newspapers save one were closed down. Throughout, the government was careful to explain that it was discriminating only on grounds of citizenship, not race, and some of its acts of economic nationalization affected Western multinational corporations as much as they affected Chinese enterprise (for example, tobacco and petroleum). But no one was fooled. These were anti-Chinese measures, which, from Phibun's point of view and that of many other Thai, were necessary in order to give the Thai control over their own economy and society.

As antforeign and even xenophobic as some of these acts were, it is paradoxical that some measures taken during the same and subsequent years to

define a new Thai identity. A series of twelve Cu... 1939 and 1942, "ai... nation and instilling... addition to adoptin... instead of April 1, ... national anthem, ... language (as opp... encouraged to li... appropriately, and... country. They w... products; and the... coats, trousers, shi... in shoes. People w... pay their taxes wi... the interest of pro... was a modern na...

Through 193... of the leader. Ph... plastered on news... the content of hi... however unwilling... life of the state, ev... common experie... in the face of a w... them in other wa... through the Yu... the Junior Red...

Thai mobil... the Thai war w... perhaps still ha... subsequent loss... chance to aven... 1940 when Fra... seriously threa... beginning to m... Vichy governm... with Vichy Fra... Vietnam. Over... to secure the r...

define a new Thai identity were in many respects as much Western as Thai. A series of twelve Cultural Mandates were issued by the government between 1939 and 1942, "aimed at uplifting the national spirit and moral code of the nation and instilling progressive tendencies and a 'newness' into Thai life."³ In addition to adopting the Western calendar with New Year's Day on January 1 instead of April 1, these dicta required Thai to salute the flag and know the national anthem, stay informed on current affairs, and use the national language (as opposed to local dialects or foreign languages). They were encouraged to live their lives along modern lines, to eat and sleep appropriately, and to engage in a full day of productive labor for the good of the country. They were encouraged to forswear imports and buy only Thai products; and they were required to dress in a modern fashion—the men in coats, trousers, shirt, and tie; women in skirts, blouses, hats, and gloves; and all in shoes. People were forbidden to board buses or to enter government offices to pay their taxes without wearing hats. All this, Phibun argued, was necessary in the interest of progress and civilization that the world might see that Thailand was a modern nation.

Through 1939 and thereafter, Phibun and Luang Wichit built up the cult of the leader. Phibun's photograph was everywhere, and his slogans were plastered on newspapers and billboards and repeated over the radio. Whatever the content of his leadership, Phibun was not to be ignored or avoided, and however unwilling they may or may not have been, people participated in the life of the state, even in the most trivial day-to-day ways. This participation, this common experience, was the basis upon which Phibun mobilized a population in the face of a war that most now were certain was coming. He also mobilized them in other ways as well—in stepped-up military conscription and training, through the Yuwachon military movement for adolescent boys, and through the Junior Red Cross and the Boy Scouts.

Thai mobilization bore its first, and in many ways most satisfying, fruits in the Thai war with French Indochina in 1940–41. The Thai had not yet, and perhaps still have not, forgiven the French for the Crisis of 1893 and the subsequent loss of Siamese suzerainty and control of Laos and Cambodia. The chance to avenge this defeat, and to correct a historical wrong, arose in June 1940 when France fell to Hitler's armies. The Western democracies appeared seriously threatened, perhaps even doomed. Meanwhile the Japanese were beginning to move into French Indochina, which now was controlled by a Vichy government aligned with Germany, and in September, by agreement with Vichy France, Japan secured military base and transit rights in northern Vietnam. Over the preceding four years, the Thai government had been trying to secure the retrocession to Siam of the portions of Laos west of the Mekong

River, but these negotiations broke down on the fall of France. The Phibun government now feared that the Japanese soon would extend their power into Laos and Cambodia and forestall any Thai moves to regain their lost territories. Amidst a barrage of nationalist propaganda, Thailand invaded both the disputed Lao territories and western Cambodia in November 1940. Though the country suffered a serious naval defeat in the Gulf of Siam, land forces soon occupied the contested areas. The Japanese thereupon stepped in to mediate between Thailand and Indochina and forced a settlement by which Lao Sayaboury, west-bank Champassak, and the Cambodian provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap (now renamed Phibunsongkhram province) were annexed by Thailand.

In the course of this crisis, Thailand's relations with the major Western powers rapidly deteriorated. Late in 1940, the U.S. government had halted the sale of sixteen aircraft to Thailand, and by March and April 1941, the United States was holding up petroleum supplies, relenting only in May after being assured of continued access to Thai tin and rubber. War in the Pacific clearly was coming soon, and all the major powers put Thailand's security understandably low on their priorities. The Americans decided their aircraft could better be used in the defense of the Philippines, and the British could supply no more than field guns, ammunition, and some aviation fuel. The Thai were convinced that Japan would invade Thailand next, and on August 28 the National Assembly passed a bill calling for mass popular resistance in the event of an invasion.

Late on the evening of December 7, 1941 (local time), the Japanese ambassador to Thailand appeared at Phibun's residence to inform the Thai that Japan had declared war on the United States and Britain and to request passage for Japanese armies through Thailand. Phibun was away from Bangkok, touring the new Cambodian provinces, and his foreign minister, Direk Jayanama, refused the request, while urgently summoning the prime minister back to Bangkok. A few hours later, just before dawn on December 8 (local time), the Japanese invasion began. In addition to the well-known, virtually simultaneous Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Aleutians, Midway, Guam, the Philippines, and Hong Kong, the Japanese also invaded Siam at nine points: across the land frontier in Battambang, by air against the Don Müang airfield outside Bangkok, and by amphibious landings at seven points on the gulf coast. The main Japanese attack was intended to secure the Thai airfield at Songkhla in order to provide air support for the conquest of British Malaya and Singapore. The British in Malaya had a contingency plan to check the Japanese advance by sending troops into then-neutral Thailand to stop the Japanese at Songkhla; but when they placed it into operation, a party



Field Marshal Phibun receiving a decoration on a soldier.

of Thai border provinces was fighting.⁴ Elsewhere in Bangkok at 7:30 a.m., the Japanese agreed that to fight, they had to agree to allow Japanese assurances.

As the whirlwind of military elements, especially the Japanese, win the war, and the military alliance expanded with a British. This was far as to ally the leadership either