

“The Role of the monarchy in Thailand”

Statement

Of

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Privy Councillor and Statesman

At

The East-West Center

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Mr. Chairman (President Oksenberg),

Ambassador Birabhongse,

Distinguished Members of the Consular Corps,

Distinguished Members of the East-West Center and Guests,

Members of the Thai Students' Community in Hawaii.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to be here among distinguished scholars and guests of the East-West Center. This is not the first time that I have been given the honor of being invited to visit Honolulu in this great state of Hawaii. Over the years. I feel privileged to have been associated with the center, a seat of learning of world renown and equally important a bridge linking diverse cultures and peoples through the enhancement of mutual knowledge and understanding. In Thailand itself, evidence abounds of the Center's success not only in its projects of cooperative endeavors with Thai counterparts.

But also in its alumni who have risen to inevitable prominence in their chosen fields and vocations.

Mr. Chairman

The subject of my presentation today “The Role of the Monarchy in Thailand” is truly one close to my heart. It focusses on the modern role of an institution which it has been my honor to serve for the larger part of my working life. It should provide, I hope, and insight into the life of my country as well as the aspirations of our people, both of which are closely interlocked with the institution of the monarchy. The leadership given by the institution of the monarchy. Over some seven centuries from The birth of the Thai nationhood, has enabled us to build up our identity, ensured our survival and guided us as we develop through the ages.

I could perhaps begin by recalling the events in May of last year. The Memory is still as bitter as it is painful. We lived through days of trauma, days which were filled with anger. Compatriots became blind to reason; deaf to cries of hurt and anguish, It took no less than the prestige of His Majesty the King to pull us out from that abyss. HE SPOKE AND THE PEOPLE LISTENED.

Time Magazine wrote at the time of the “marvel” of the “wonder” that was unfolding. In alluding to this episode. I am not seeking to show that somehow a miracle took place, but rather to point out the rather conclusive proof of the relevance of the Monarchy to Thailand of the twentieth century and beyond where political and social changes can take place, changes which without the benign guidance of His Majesty could have proved too costly to contemplate. Indeed, I myself have been on record on many an occasion asserting that the institution of the Monarchy goes much further beyond just remaining relevant. But that it is in itself the key to the survival and stability of Thailand

as well as the key to Thailand's making tremendous strides in political and economic development.

From the time of our forebearers to the present day. The Monarchy has been a pillar of strength for the Thai people. The institution is today and has been for the past forty-seven years, personified by His Majesty Bhumibol adulyadej. The Ninth King of the House of Chakri (and incidentally, the only King to have been born within the shores of the United States. In Cambridge, Massachusetts.)

The Monarchy of today has obviously undergone stages of evolution and changes over the centuries. Whatever the changes, one central aspect remains true to its roots, namely, the concept of kingship as prevailed during the period of Sukhothai, our first truly independent capital of the early thirteenth century. It was a concept which rested on the ideal of a paternalistic ruler alert to the needs and aspirations of his people and conscious of the fact that his duty was to guide them. Thus, it was no coincidence that upon ascension to the throne in 1946. His Majesty took the following Coronation Oath:

“We shall reign in righteousness for the happiness and welfare of the Thai people”

Looking back at the circumstances which then existed. One could well appreciate the formidable challenge facing His Majesty as he began his reign: how to make an age-old institution steeped in so much tradition function in a rapidly changing society. The manner in which he rose to that challenge is truly a mark of his statesmanship and wisdom.

The most arduous task for the Thai people in modern history has been the development of parliamentary democracy. While at that same time maintaining political stability so essential for economic growth. Democracy in Thailand, as you know, is not inherited but homegrown, with a history dating back some 60 years. Its progress and

development has been remarkable by any standard. However it has not been without problems which at times led to situations so precarious that democracy was on the verge of collapse. On such occasions, the Thai people have been fortunate in having the institution of the Monarchy as the CONSTITUTIONAL LAST RESORT, or more precisely, the rallying point for national salvation. If a situation required his intervention, the amount of prestige he brought to bear was indeed immense. The people could always be certain of his impartiality, acting as a restraining influence on any excesses, and more importantly, being seen to have the interest of the nation and all Thais at heart.

His comments and advice to the antagonists in the May event of last year-already made “on record”, more than confirmed what his subjects already know in their hearts, I quote :

“People everywhere are fearful that there will be a catastrophe, that the nation is heading towards complete collapse and it will be most difficult to stop things going that way.....

Thus I request... that you ... sit down and consider together in a conciliatory manner, a way to solve this problem, because our country does not belong to any one or two persons, but belongs to everyone...

When people get into a state of blind fury and act in uncontrolled violence, they will not even know what they are fighting about or how to solve a problem. They will only know that they must win. But can there be a winner?... There will only be losers... the biggest loser of all will be the nation.

What is the point of anyone feeling proud to be the winner, when standing on a pile of ruins and rubbles...”

The people know that in dire circumstances, they would never be turned away. Overnight, wounds healed, divisions were bridged and the whole nation began to pull together again. It is highly significant that the process of development of democracy more or less coincides with the forty-seven year reign of His Majesty King Bhumibol. It is something which the Thai people will always cherish with a profound sense of gratitude.

How do we account for this respect and devotion which, some may say, appear to border on the unreal? Part of it, of course, is the aura and prestige innate to an age-old institution comprising many past rulers who are still regarded as models of kingship. However, the greater part would seem to be the way in which His Majesty has made the monarchy function with relevance and vitality within a modernizing society. He has made himself a working monarch in the national mainstream, in close touch and deeply involved with his people.

No corner of rural Thailand is too remote for the Royal Family to visit and tend their people's problems. No less than six months of the year would be spent away from the capital in the various regions of the country, where the Royal Family would be tirelessly and selflessly working for the progress and welfare of the people.

On each visit, His Majesty would study maps, aerial photographs, remote sensing data and available materials to learn as much as possible of the topographical and social features of the area. Once there, by talking to local personalities, first-hand information would be gathered. His Majesty would then be able to initiate assistance to address the truly felt needs of a particular community. Such assistance is worked through government agencies, often with his own funds in the initial stages to get the project off the ground.

Over 1,000 small-scale development projects have been pioneered by His Majesty covering an extensive range of rural problems. Some are intended to stave off hunger and poverty through self-sufficiency, from irrigation projects, water conservation, reclamation

of swamps bringing it under cultivation, to the introduction of new cash crops. To tackle the rapid depletion of native forest through indiscriminate logging and population expansion, projects are designed to arrest this alarming trend through reafforestation and conservation of watershed resources. An early project which has become internationally renowned was his effort to find a humane way to help the hilltribes abandon opium cultivation. He weaned them through the introduction of temperate-zone crops such as peaches, apricots, strawberries, lychees and apples which found a ready market in Thailand's burgeoning tourist industry and the growing Thai middle class.

It was in the spirit of his initiatives that the Government in 1981, then in my care and stewardship, was inspired to launch a plan of action designated as the "Decade of Rural Development" which was designed to combat rural poverty and reduce the glaring disparities in income and living standards. On a continuing basis, the greater part of the national budget was given over to development programs for rural areas throughout the Kingdom. Substantial progress has since been made in the improvement of health care, social welfare, education facilities and basic essential services such as water, electricity and roadways.

In our effort to industrialize the economy, there has at times been a natural tendency to give primacy to the manufacturing and financial sectors. True, our path to the newly found prosperity may in large part rest on our performance in those sectors. Thailand has indeed been able to attain high growth rates with work and careful management. Economic strengths which have been built up will continue, with our private sector as the dynamic engine of growth. But it is His Majesty who reminds us through his own conduct of the need NOT to overlook the plight of Thailand's rural majority. Poverty is the fertile soil on which thrives discontent poverty is always a threat to national security. Insurgency and subversion may now belong to the past, but it was not, and could not, be rooted out by force of arms. It was defeated only by the genuine

care and concern which the whole country, following in the footsteps of His Majesty, felt for its less privileged citizens. It is thus most heartening for me to see that rural development, the most effective means of bridging income disparity in Thailand, has once again risen to the top of the current government's agenda.

His Majesty's tireless work for the welfare of his subject has not only brought immense benefits-directly and indirectly, to Thailand's rural population but has also added a new dimension and meaning to the Monarchy, linking it more intimately with the lives of ordinary people than ever before. The King and the Royal Family were no longer distant, symbolic figures, but trusted and caring allies who are as involved in their daily lives and their problems as themselves and at the same time are using every means at their disposal to help out.

Two years ago, a distinguished group of U.S. Senators' wives were given an audience by Her Majesty the Queen at Chitrlada Palace, the royal residence in Bangkok. As they were taken on a tour, which Her Majesty herself conducted, they were amazed at what they found on the palace grounds. Parts of the grounds had been given over to rice paddy fields, where His Majesty had been conducting experiments and testing newly developed strains of rice. Along with the paddy fields were herds of cattle and a pilot plant manufacturing powdered milk. In a large dug out pond, His Majesty had stocked with fast breeding variety of fish obtained from Japan. The results of these research projects and specimens would then be made available to government agencies and villagers throughout the Kingdom. Where fish stocks were concerned, today, some 16 fishery stations have reared over 10 millions of the stocks for countrywide distribution, providing needed additions to the provincial diet.

Of particular interest to the group of US Senators' wives was a multi-craft center, also in the Palace compound, where around 200 students attend classes taught by master craftsmen. This undertaking is conducted under the auspices of the Foundation for the

promotion of Supplementary Occupations and Related Techniques (known as SUPPORT), which was established by Her Majesty in 1976. SUPPORT has as its purpose the organizing of women's groups in villages all over Thailand, which are provided with equipment, materials and training in cottage industries. SUPPORT is designed to address a felt need in rural and deprived areas, providing sources of supplementary income in times when fields lie fallow or when crops are destroyed by droughts or floods. Its scope now include some 18 traditional crafts which were crafts in danger of dying out. While addressing a felt-need, SUPPORT also helped to save important part of our cultural heritage.

So impressed by Her Majesty's work, the Senators' wives invited Her Majesty to visit Washington D.C. in that same year, during which she was presented with the "International Humanitarian Award" at the "Best of Washington" Gala Luncheon, and an exhibition of support arts and crafts was held in her honor. Her Majesty's work for the benefit of rural women had previously been recognized internationally when the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United

Nations awarded the prestigious Ceres Medal to Her Majesty. And in 1988, she was awarded an honorary Fellowship by Great Britain's Royal College of Physicians, the highest honor the College confers, for her "deep concern for the health and welfare of the people of Thailand". These awards are in my view fitting tributes to the work the closes attention and devotion Her Majesty has given to the tasks which supports and supplements those of His Majesty.

Mr. Chairman

Distinguished Participants

In my mind, nothing can so eloquently convey the feeling of pride that so firmly embeds itself in our national psyche as two events which we celebrated in all corners of the land towards the end of the 1980's. In December 1987, we celebrated the 60th anniversary of His Majesty's birth and then in July 1988, we commemorated the occasion when His Majesty became the longest reigning Monarch over the entire history of this revered institution. The celebrations served as vantage points to observe the life and destiny of a nation and people. It has been a life to which the institution of the Monarchy became bonded, forming an integral whole. It is a destiny shaped and forged together by a people and their kings achieving a continuity, spanning the centuries. The modern Monarchy as now defined has not only secured, time and again, national stability so essential to economic enterprise but has also lent a benign guiding hand, leading by example, in all areas of national development. It thus comes as no surprise that the Monarchy has come to be revered by the people of Thailand as "the Soul of the Nation."
