

# **State Formation and Pre-1932 Institutional Order:**

**Monarchy, Bureaucracy, and Modernization**

# I Thai Politics and Government in the Sukhothai Era

# Historical Context and Dynastic Origins

- Early historiography of the Sukhothai Kingdom relied almost exclusively on the First Inscription (Sukhothai Inscription No. 1), which led to the prevailing belief that the polity was ruled solely by the Phra Ruang dynasty. Subsequent examination of the Second Inscription (Wat Si Chum Inscription) challenged this narrative, revealing that the Nao Nam Thom dynasty had governed the Sukhothai region prior to the emergence of the Phra Ruang line.
- The accession of Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao—later known as King Si Intharathit, the first monarch of the Phra Ruang dynasty—occurred through the defeat of Khom Samat Khlon Lamphong. This episode has been interpreted in two distinct ways. The traditional interpretation regards it as a war of independence, in which the Siamese liberated themselves from Khmer political dominance in the region. A revisionist perspective, however, argues that Khom Samat Khlon Lamphong, despite his Khmer title, may not have been ethnically Khmer; the conflict may thus have represented an intra-Siamese struggle for sovereignty rather than anti-Khmer resistance.

# Political Zenith and Monarchical Succession

- The Sukhothai Kingdom's political and cultural zenith spanned approximately B.E. 1762–1981 (1219–1438 CE), corresponding to the reigns of nine successive monarchs of the Phra Ruang dynasty. The apogee of its prosperity occurred under King Ramkhamhaeng the Great.
- Succession during this era was largely stable, with royal authority passing smoothly within the dynasty. Only on rare occasions—such as King Lithai's accession and the succession dispute between two princes following the death of King Maha Thammaracha III (Sai Lue Thai)—did conflicts arise. Even these episodes did not result in dynastic change, though they contributed to the weakening of the polity during the rise of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. Ultimately, Sukhothai's status diminished, and it was incorporated as a provincial city under Ayutthaya.

# Political Structure and Governing Philosophy

- The early Sukhothai polity was characterized by the pho khun model—often described as “paternal governance”—in which the ruler maintained close, quasi-familial relations with his subjects. This is reflected in the use of the title “Pho Khun” for early monarchs such as Si Intharathit, Ban Mueang, and Ramkhamhaeng.
- As the kingdom’s central authority weakened and vassal cities exhibited growing autonomy, King Lithai (Maha Thammaracha I) introduced Buddhist statecraft principles, including the Thotsaphit Rachatham (Ten Kingly Virtues), Chakravattiwatt (Duties of the Universal Monarch), and Ratchachanyanuwat (Royal Conduct). This transformation shifted the political model from paternalism toward the ideal of the dhammaraja—a righteous ruler whose legitimacy derived from moral authority and religious patronage.

# Trade and Elite Economic Policy

- Commerce in Sukhothai operated at two levels: domestic trade, conducted in markets and fairs, and external trade with neighboring and distant polities. The latter was primarily controlled by the royal court and high-ranking nobility rather than commoners.
- The kingdom's most notable export was sangkhalok ceramics, which gained prominence in overseas markets, particularly during periods of political instability in China. However, the scale of international trade was limited by modest agricultural surpluses and infrastructural constraints. Elite economic policy sought to stimulate commerce through free trade measures, selective tax exemptions, investment incentives, and infrastructure development—part of a broader strategy to attract human capital to the kingdom.

# Belief Systems and Religious Patronage

- Sukhothai society was religiously and culturally pluralistic, integrating animism, Brahmanism-Hinduism, and Theravāda Buddhism. The First Inscription documents local spirit worship, particularly reverence for guardian deities believed to protect the city if properly venerated.
- Theravāda Buddhism of the Lankan tradition, transmitted via Nakhon Si Thammarat, became the state religion during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng. The king invited the Lankan Sangharaja resident in Nakhon Si Thammarat to establish and propagate the faith in Sukhothai. Public sermons, delivered at the Manangkhasila Asana stone throne in the larn tham (preaching ground), fostered widespread lay observance of Buddhist precepts and merit-making, reinforcing both moral discipline and monarchical legitimacy.

# Conclusion: Political Legacy

- The Sukhothai era represents a formative period in Thai political history, marked by the evolution from paternal governance to moral kingship rooted in Buddhist principles. Its political institutions were closely interwoven with agrarian economic structures, demographic constraints, and religious legitimacy. While eventual political decline and absorption into Ayutthaya marked the end of Sukhothai's autonomy, its governance philosophy and cultural achievements continued to influence subsequent Thai statecraft.



**II**

# **Thai Politics and Government in the Ayutthaya and Thonburi Eras**

# Historical Overview and Dynastic Continuity

- The Ayutthaya Kingdom, founded in 1350 (B.E. 1893) by King Ramathibodi I (King Uthong), endured as Siam's royal capital for 417 years until its fall to Burma in 1767 (B.E. 2310). During this period, 33 monarchs reigned across five royal dynasties: Uthong, Suphannaphum, Sukhothai, Prasat Thong, and Ban Phlu Luang. The Ayutthaya polity emerged as a successor to earlier political orders—particularly Sukhothai—but departed from the paternal *pho khun* and *dhammaraja* models by adopting, from its inception, a more autocratic style of rule. Over time, this evolved into a fully centralized absolute monarchy influenced by Khmer statecraft, particularly the *Devaraja* cult derived from Indian Brahmanic traditions, which deified the king as a divine being above commoners.

# Patterns of Succession and Political Stability

- Succession in Ayutthaya was shaped by royal custom but punctuated by frequent disruptions. In 17 reigns, the throne passed from father to son; in three reigns, from elder brother to younger brother; and in one reign, from younger brother to elder brother. However, Ayutthaya's long history also witnessed 15 episodes of usurpation. Ten of these were intra-dynastic struggles—such as the posthumous crisis following King Chairachathirat's death or the 1611 (B.E. 2154) deposition of King Si Saowaphak, leading to the enthronement of King Songtham. The remaining five cases involved deposition by powerful nobles (*praphaat da phisek*) and the establishment of new dynasties, as seen when Chaophraya Kalahom Suriya Wong became King Prasat Thong in 1630 (B.E. 2173), and when King Petracha ascended the throne after King Narai's death in 1688 (B.E. 2231).

# Ideological Foundations of Kingship

- Early Ayutthaya kingship retained elements of the *dhammaraja* ideal, but the capture of Angkor in 1431 (B.E. 1974) brought a large influx of Khmer elites and commoners into Ayutthaya. This transfer of human resources also carried political and social concepts embedded in the Khmer *Devaraja* ideology, amplifying the monarch's divine status and transforming the institutional structure of governance. This ideological shift reinforced centralized authority and sacralized the monarchy as the apex of the political order.

# Administrative Reform and the Consolidation of the State

- The most significant transformation of Ayutthaya's political-administrative system occurred during the reign of King Borommatrailokkanat (1448–1488 / B.E. 1991–2031). The reforms were driven by four interrelated factors:
  - **Territorial Expansion and Complexity** – The enlargement of the realm required a new bureaucratic hierarchy and functional differentiation of offices.
  - **Military Pressures** – Prolonged conflict with the Lanna Kingdom necessitated administrative restructuring to support military mobilization.
  - **Manpower Control** – The economic, political, and military order depended on a stable and controllable population, prompting reforms to maximize state control over labor.
  - **Social Stratification** – The institutionalization of the *sakdina* and *phrai* systems formalized social hierarchies, codifying class relations and defining rights and duties between rulers and subjects.
- These reforms strengthened the central government's authority over provincial cities, enhanced economic extraction, and stabilized governance. The *sakdina* system became a key instrument of political control, balancing civil and military authority while ensuring the monarchy's supremacy. The framework established under Borommatrailokkanat persisted as the backbone of Siamese governance until King Chulalongkorn's administrative reforms in 1892 (B.E. 2435).

# Transition to the Thonburi Era

- The fall of Ayutthaya to Burma in 1767 marked a rupture in Siam's political order. King Taksin's campaigns restored independence and established Thonburi as the new capital, as Ayutthaya was too devastated to rebuild. The Thonburi period (1767–1782) was brief—lasting only about 15 years—and defined by military consolidation, defense against external threats, and efforts to reestablish the kingdom's administrative and ceremonial institutions. King Taksin recruited former Ayutthaya nobles and Brahmins to preserve court traditions and restore the machinery of governance.
- Thonburi's political history featured only one monarch, and succession occurred solely through usurpation: King Taksin's own rise marking the era's beginning, and his deposition by Chao Phraya Chakri—who ascended the throne as King Buddha Yodfa Chulalok (Rama I) in 1782—marking its end. Rama I's accession inaugurated the Chakri dynasty and established Bangkok as the new capital, laying the foundations for the political order that would endure until the constitutional transformation of 1932.

# Conclusion: Ayutthaya–Thonburi in the Arc of State Formation

- The Ayutthaya and Thonburi eras were critical in the *longue durée* of Thai state formation. Ayutthaya consolidated monarchical authority through centralized administration, codified social hierarchy, and ideological sacralization of kingship. Thonburi, though brief, ensured institutional continuity between the fallen Ayutthaya and the emerging Bangkok polity. Together, these periods cemented the pre-modern institutional order—monarchy, bureaucracy, and socio-political stratification—that structured Siamese governance for centuries and set the stage for modernization and reform in the late nineteenth century.

# III

## **Thai Politics and Government in the Rattanakosin Era before 1932**



# Monarchical Succession and Dynastic Continuity

- The Rattanakosin era, from the accession of King Buddha Yodfa Chulalok (Rama I) on 6 April 1782 (B.E. 2325) to the constitutional revolution of 1932 (B.E. 2475) during the reign of King Prajadhipok (Rama VII), spanned approximately 150 years. Throughout this period, succession to the throne followed the royal tradition of coronation, without interruption by extra-dynastic usurpation. Four reigns saw succession from father to son—Rama II, Rama III, Rama V, and Rama VI—while two reigns witnessed succession from elder to younger brother—Rama IV and Rama VII.
- The monarchy remained the apex of political authority, exercising absolute control over the state. Yet by the late nineteenth century, pressures from Western imperial powers—manifested in unequal treaties and encroachments on Siam's sovereignty—necessitated structural reforms to preserve independence.

# Modernization and the 1892 Administrative Reform

- King Chulalongkorn's (Rama V) reforms in 1892 marked a decisive turning point in Siam's state formation, representing a conscious adoption of Western models of centralized governance. The reforms abolished the dual chief ministership (*Samuhanayok* and *Samuhakalahom*) and the traditional *chatusadom* system, reorganizing the administration into 12 ministries, each headed by a *senabodi* (minister). Key ministries included Interior, Defence, and Agriculture.
- In local administration, the previous tripartite classification of inner cities, outer cities, and tributary states was replaced by a uniform hierarchy of *monthon* (circle), *mueang* (province), *amphoe* (district), *tambon* (subdistrict), and *muban* (village). This was accompanied by the establishment of the Bangkok and Tha Chalom sanitation districts as the first local municipalities, as well as the creation of the Council of State and the Privy Council—institutions that evolved into the modern Cabinet and Privy Council.
- These measures were part of a broader modernization agenda, which also encompassed the abolition of slavery and corvée labour, the introduction of military conscription and compulsory education, and the formation of the Supreme Sangha Council. King Chulalongkorn's reforms were informed by first-hand study of Western states and reflected the urgent need to strengthen Siam against colonial encroachment.

# Provincial Reorganization and the *Monthon Thesaphiban* System

- Before 1892, the relationship between the capital and the provinces was based on loose personal ties, reaffirmed through oaths of loyalty at each royal accession. Provincial rulers (*chao mueang*) exercised considerable autonomy, including taxation rights and judicial powers under the “*kin mueang*” system. Tributary states retained internal self-government but were obliged to provide tribute and military support.
- The 1892 reforms aimed to tighten central control over the provinces, driven by the threat of Western colonial expansion. The *kin mueang* system was abolished, and four key laws between R.S. 116–120 codified a uniform provincial administration. The resulting *monthon thesaphiban* system integrated traditional and charismatic local leaders into the state apparatus as *kamnan* (subdistrict chiefs) and *phu yai ban* (village headmen). Former tributary territories such as Lanna, parts of Lan Chang, and the southern Islamic polities of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat were incorporated into this centralized administrative framework, with population censuses registering diverse ethnic groups as Siamese nationals.
- While this reorganization created a cohesive, centralized state, it provoked resistance—most notably the *Holy Man* uprisings in Phrae, the Northeast, and the South—which were ultimately suppressed, reinforcing central authority and national unity. In the reign of Rama VII, the *thesaphiban* system was replaced by the provincial (*changwat*) system, with governors appointed by the Ministry of Interior.

# Legal and Judicial Reform

- Parallel to administrative restructuring, the legal and judicial systems were overhauled along Western lines. Modern legal codes were drafted, the judiciary was reorganized, and Western-style evidentiary procedures were adopted. These reforms extended rational–legal authority throughout the state apparatus, complementing the centralized bureaucratic system.
- The monarchy's modernization project also included investment in human capital: members of the royal family and high-ranking officials were sent to study abroad, and the king undertook state visits to Europe and Asia to observe governance models.

# Political Thought and Early Constitutional Proposals

- From Sukhothai through early Rattanakosin, political authority had been rooted in traditional legitimacy. The 1892 reforms shifted the basis of governance toward rational–legal principles, yet democratic ideas in the Western sense entered Siam more gradually. From the late reign of Rama IV, exposure to Western education fostered among the elite an awareness of concepts such as liberty and constitutional governance.
- One early expression of constitutional thinking was the 1887 (R.S. 103) petition by princes and senior officials proposing to limit absolute royal authority and introduce a constitutional monarchy. The proposal envisaged a hereditary monarch as head of state, advised by a cabinet of ministers responsible for governance, and aimed to ensure an orderly succession while preventing political instability. Although it did not call for popular participation, it marked a significant step toward institutional power-sharing.

# Experiments in Democratic Governance

- Under King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), democratic concepts were tested—albeit in a highly controlled environment—through the Dusit Thani project. Established in 1918 within the royal Dusit Palace grounds, Dusit Thani was a miniature city designed to simulate a self-governing community. It featured its own constitution, municipal regulations, judicial system, and symbolic public services. Two political parties—the Blue Flag Party and the Red Flag Party—competed in regular local elections, and citizens (drawn from the king’s close circle of courtiers, officials, and military officers) could participate in governance by voting, serving on councils, or standing for office.
- While the town’s scale was small and its participants carefully selected, Dusit Thani represented a pedagogical experiment aimed at familiarizing the Siamese elite with the mechanics of representative governance, parliamentary procedure, and the rule of law. Newspapers and official bulletins published within the model town provided a controlled forum for political debate. Although the initiative remained symbolic and its principles were not implemented at the national level, it reflected King Vajiravudh’s recognition that modern statecraft might eventually require popular participation—albeit within a framework guided by the monarchy.

# Reform Proposals in the Final Years of Absolute Monarchy

- In the final years of absolute monarchy, mounting fiscal pressures, political discontent, and a global environment increasingly receptive to constitutionalism prompted tentative discussions about reform. In 1931 (B.E. 2474), King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) received a formal proposal entitled An Outline of Changes in the Form of Government, jointly drafted by American advisor Raymond B. Stevens and senior Siamese official Phraya Sri Visalwacha. The document outlined a series of political and administrative reforms, the most significant of which was the establishment of a legislative council (sapha niti banthuk) that would include elected members representing various sectors of the populace.
- The proposal sought to retain the monarchy as head of state while introducing mechanisms of shared governance, greater ministerial accountability, and limited representative participation. It reflected both the cautious reformism of the royal court and the influence of Western political models, aiming for an incremental transition rather than abrupt change.



# Reform Proposals in the Final Years of Absolute Monarchy (2)

- However, when the plan was presented to the Supreme Council of State in March 1931, it was rejected on grounds that the time was not yet ripe for such political transformation. The council favored maintaining existing structures and argued that broader political participation might destabilize the kingdom. This decision effectively stalled constitutional reform. Before any further initiatives could be pursued, the People's Party (Khana Ratsadon) staged the revolution of 24 June 1932, ending 150 years of Chakri absolutism and inaugurating a constitutional regime—thus accomplishing, by revolutionary means, the transition that reformers had sought to achieve gradually.




# Conclusion: The Rattanakosin Foundations of the Modern Thai State

- The pre-1932 Rattanakosin era consolidated the absolute monarchy within a centralized, bureaucratic nation-state. The reforms of Rama V integrated provincial territories, standardized administration, and modernized law, while also introducing limited constitutional ideas that foreshadowed the political transformation of 1932. In this sense, the period represents both the culmination of the pre-modern institutional order—monarchy, bureaucracy, and centralized authority—and the threshold of Thailand's modern political era.

# **IV**

## **Concluding Reflections: Continuity, Adaptation, and the Threshold of Constitutionalism**

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- From the thirteenth century Sukhothai polity to the constitutional revolution of 1932, Siam's political order underwent a long and complex process of state formation, marked by both enduring institutional continuities and significant structural transformations.
  - Across these centuries, the monarchy remained the central pillar of governance, yet the form and ideology of kingship evolved in response to shifting geopolitical, economic, and social contexts.

- The **Sukhothai era** established the foundational idioms of Thai political legitimacy. The *pho khun* model emphasized paternalistic care, personal bonds between ruler and ruled, and governance framed by Buddhist moral kingship (*dhammaraja*).
- The **Ayutthaya Kingdom** redefined these foundations through centralization and the adoption of Khmer-derived *Devaraja* ideology. Kingship became increasingly sacralized, supported by codified hierarchies such as the *sakdina* system and an integrated bureaucratic structure capable of mobilizing manpower, extracting surplus, and sustaining a large military apparatus.
- The **Rattanakosin period** before 1932 represents both the consolidation and transformation of this inherited order. The Chakri monarchs, particularly Rama V, modernized state structures through the *thesaphiban* administrative system, rational–legal codes, and the professionalization of the bureaucracy.

The pre-1932 historical arc reveals three enduring dynamics of Thai political development:

- **Centrality of Monarchical Authority** – Across all periods, the monarchy adapted its ideological foundations—from paternalism to sacral kingship to modernizing stewardship—while maintaining ultimate authority over the state.
  - **Institutional Resilience and Reform** – Bureaucratic and administrative structures evolved through incremental reform, with Ayutthaya's centralization and Rattanakosin's modernization representing key turning points.
  - **Negotiated Engagement with Global Currents** – From Theravāda Buddhism's transregional transmission to nineteenth-century diplomatic balancing, Siamese rulers selectively adopted external models to reinforce sovereignty and internal control.
- By 1932, these centuries of adaptation had produced a centralized bureaucratic state with deep historical roots and a legacy of strong monarchical governance. The constitutional revolution marked a decisive institutional rupture, but it did not erase the inherited political culture or administrative framework. Rather, it initiated a new phase in which the pre-modern institutional order—monarchy, bureaucracy, and centralized authority—would continue to shape the trajectory of Thai politics well into the modern era.

# Recommended Further Readings

- Baker, Chris, and Pasuk Phongpaichit. A History of Thailand. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
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