



*Thai Politics in Translation: Monarchy, Democracy and the
Supra-constitution* ed. by Michael K. Connors and Ukrist
Pathmanand (review)

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***Thai Politics in Translation: Monarchy, Democracy and the Supra-constitution.* Edited by Michael K. Connors and Ukrist Pathmanand. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2021. Softcover: 248pp.**

Since 2006, political polarization in Thailand has led the military and monarchy to dominate national politics, pushing scholars to pose questions about the ensuing conflicts that have arisen. As suggested by its title, *Thai Politics in Translation: Monarchy, Democracy and the Supra-constitution*, offers a compilation of existing academic texts translated from Thai into English. These texts, as noted on the back cover, “invite readers to refrain from quick judgment and instead engage with the conservative norms of sections of the middle class, military, intellectuals and state ideologues”.

The book includes seven articles, almost all of which have been translated for the first time. Although some translations of historical documents (from Thai into English) have been made available over the years, English translations of Thai academic texts are quite rare. This book is therefore of great value to English-speaking scholars who study modern Thai political ideology.

While the introductory chapter offers contemporary debates on the era of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946–2016) and Chapter One provides summaries and contexts of each contribution of this volume, the subsequent chapters are translated texts covering other key aspects of contemporary Thai politics. These chapters are structured according to historical periods in the country’s modern politics.

The introductory chapter provides fresh insights into current debates surrounding the concepts that characterize the Bhumibol era. One of the most interesting points is Kasian Tejapera’s notion of the Bhumibol Consensus, explaining how the consensus among elite and social groups has been shaped by the king’s hegemony. The chapter develops Kasian’s concept of the periodization of consensus. As the chapter points out, before the 1970s, “the monarchy’s position was subject to competing forces” (p. 8). Later, during the consensus period between the 1980s and the early 2000s, the King became “central to political life and enjoyed broad legitimacy” (p. 8). This chapter also suggests that to understand the Bhumibol Consensus, one should analyse the multiple political projects pursued by groups that contested each other under monarchical hegemony.

Chapter Two provides a translation of Somchai Preechasilpakul’s article published in 2007 which outlines the concept of a “supra-

constitution". This concept serves as an organizing framework that links together the other chapters in the book. Somchai attempts to answer the question of why countless Thai constitutions have been discarded. He concludes that there is a hegemonic force he calls the "supra-constitution" in which the military and the monarchy are leading agents, functioning as constituent powers whose authority supersedes the official constitutions.

Chapter Three, a translated article by Nakharin Mektrairat published in 1990, focuses on the contested political discourses after 1932. As the author notes, there were differences between the traditional Thai school of thought and the Western school of thought because the latter focused on ideologies surrounding liberty, equality and fraternity, while the former emphasized the idea that there was already democratic rule by the monarchy long before the 1932 Revolution.

Chapter Four highlights the work of Kramol Thongthammachart which was published in 1983. His article discusses the rehabilitation of the Thai national ideology which emphasizes the ideas of nation, religion and monarchy after the loss of faith in such ideas due to the 1976 Massacre in Bangkok. As a champion of Thai national ideology, Kramol proposes that this tripartite ideology should redeem its weaknesses by connecting itself to the voices and concerns of the people. Chapter Five is a translated extract from Chalermkiat Phiu-nuan's 1992 book, which provides a conservative worldview of the Thai military derived from the classic Thai Buddhist text, the *Three Worlds Cosmology of Phra Ruang*. This worldview has led to what he called "Thai-style democracy", which in turn legitimized the role of the Thai military in protecting the state.

In Chapter Six, Pasuk Phongpaichit's 1999 article addresses political activism in a liberal atmosphere during the 1990s, when there were reforms leading to the drafting of the 1997 People's Constitution which helped strengthen Thai civil society. Chapter Seven is a translation of *Royal Powers*, a well-known book written in 2005 by Pramuan Rujanaseri. His book is not a scholarly work. Instead, it was written to spur political mobilization against the controversial Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–6) for alleged corruption, authoritarianism and disrespect of the monarchy. As such, this work should be read as a historical source that reflected royalist sentiments at the time.

In the last chapter, Chapter Eight, Saichon Sattayanurak analyses the contemporary politics of the anti-Thaksin movements, which were dependent on royal power and judicial intervention.

Her historical perspective discusses various conservative discourses prevalent among the Sino-Thai urban middle class.

Thai Politics in Translation provides English-speaking readers with an overview of Thai thinking on the country's modern politics, covering various political actors over different periods of time. However, as the selection of works is based on the editors' preferences, it might not be suited to readers who may have different interests and expectations. In addition, given the multi-faceted nature of Thai politics, it might not be useful to centre the book around "supra-constitution" as a single key organizing concept. On the whole, however, the book offers well-translated works which will serve as must-have references for scholars and others interested in Thai democracy and conservatism.

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