

BOOK REVIEW

Rama X: The Thai Monarchy under King Vajiralongkorn

By Pavin Chachavalponpun. Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2024.
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Pavin Chachavalponpun's *Rama X: The Thai Monarchy under King Vajiralongkorn* presents a provocative and comprehensive examination of Thailand's current monarch and the institution he heads. As a scholar in exile and vocal critic of the Thai royal family, the author brings a unique perspective to this sensitive topic, challenging the carefully cultivated image of the Thai monarchy and providing insights into the significant changes occurring under the reign of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, also known as Rama X.

The book enters a field of scholarship that has long been constrained by Thailand's strict *lèse-majesté* laws, which criminalise criticism of the monarchy, at least within the country's borders. While works like Paul Handley's *The King Never Smiles* (2006) broke ground in critically examining the reign of the previous king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, Pavin's book is among the first to offer a comprehensive analysis of the current monarch's rule. In doing so, it builds upon and extends the work of scholars like Thongchai Winichakul (2016), who examined the historical development and contemporary challenges of Thai royalism.

The transformation of the Thai Monarchy

The central argument of this scholarship is that, under Vajiralongkorn, the Thai monarchy has undergone a dramatic transformation, moving away from the model of "network monarchy" described by Duncan McCargo (2005) towards a more direct and personalised form of royal power. McCargo's concept of network monarchy emphasised the indirect exercise of royal influence through a network of loyal proxies. Pavin contends that this shift represents a significant departure from the reign of Bhumibol Adulyadej and has profound implications for Thailand's political future.

In comparing Vajiralongkorn's reign to that of his father, Pavin offers a nuanced critique of the widely held narrative of Bhumibol as a universally beloved figure. While acknowledging the late king's popularity, he argues that this image was carefully constructed over decades and obscured more complex realities. This perspective aligns with the work of Serhat Ünalı, whose *Working Towards the Monarchy: The Politics of Space in Downtown Bangkok* (2016) examined the spatial dimensions of royal power and image-making in Thailand.

The author's analysis goes further, however, by exploring how Vajiralongkorn actively dismantled much of the symbolic and institutional architecture that supported his father's reign. This includes changes to royal ceremonies, alterations to the physical landscape of Bangkok, and shifts in the relationship between the monarchy and key institutions like the military and the Buddhist sangha. In

doing so, Pavin provides a compelling case for viewing Vajiralongkorn's reign not as a continuation of his father's but as a fundamental reimagining of Thai monarchy.

The monarchy and the military: a shifting balance

The book's treatment of the monarchy's relationship with the military is especially valuable. It builds on the work of Paul Chambers (2016), who examined the intricate connections between Thailand's royal family and its armed forces. However, where Chambers' work often focuses on institutional relationships, Pavin provides a more personalised account, emphasising Vajiralongkorn's direct involvement in military affairs and his efforts to build a loyal power base within the armed forces.

The analysis is particularly insightful when placed against the backdrop of Thailand's history of military coups. While previous scholars have often viewed the monarchy as a stabilising force in Thai politics, Pavin argues that Vajiralongkorn's more direct approach to military affairs has upset the delicate balance of power between civilian government, military, and monarchy. This perspective challenges conventional wisdom about the role of the Thai monarchy in the country's political system and invites a re-evaluation of theories about civil-military relations in Southeast Asia more broadly.

The personal is political: royal behaviour and institutional change

One of the most controversial aspects of the book is its discussion of Vajiralongkorn's personal life and behaviour. Pavin argues that the king's private conduct has significant public implications, influencing both his popular image and his approach to wielding royal power. While some readers may find this focus salacious, the author makes a compelling case for its relevance to understanding the broader dynamics of contemporary Thai monarchy.

In this context, Pavin's work can be seen as an extension of the growing body of literature on the intersection of private lives and public power in Southeast Asian politics. For instance, it shares some thematic similarities with Calvin Cheung-Miaw (2021) examination of political dynasties in the Philippines, though Pavin's focus on a constitutional monarchy rather than an electoral democracy necessitates a different analytical approach. This book goes further, however, by explicitly linking personal behaviour to institutional change, arguing that Vajiralongkorn's lifestyle choices are not merely a matter of public image but have concrete impacts on the structure and function of Thai monarchy. While private matters of the royal family might typically be considered inconsequential to governance, the author's work argues that in the case of King Vajiralongkorn, personal behaviour and choices have had profound effects on Thailand's governing institutions. The book demonstrates how the King's lifestyle decisions and personal conduct have led to concrete changes in the management of royal assets, military relationships, application of *lèse-majesté* laws, and the use of constitutional powers. These changes have reshaped the balance of power between the monarchy and other institutions, altered the legal and political landscape, and impacted the monarchy's role in Thai society. Thus, the focus on the King's personal life is not merely sensationalism but a crucial lens through which to understand the evolving nature of Thai governance and the monarchy's role within it.

The illusion of royal adoration

The book's treatment of popular attitudes towards the monarchy under Vajiralongkorn is another area of both strength and potential weakness. Pavin argues that the new king has failed to cultivate the same level of popular adoration enjoyed by his father, pointing to examples of muted public enthusiasm for King Vajiralongkorn's reign and the changes he has introduced to the Thai monarchy. This analysis builds on work by Tyrell Haberkorn (2018), whose research has examined forms of everyday resistance in Thailand. However, given the severe penalties for expressing criticism of the monarchy in Thailand, assessing true public opinion remains challenging.

Pavin acknowledges this limitation but could perhaps have engaged more deeply with methodological discussions about studying public opinion in authoritarian contexts. The work of Lisa Wedeen on politics in Syria (2022) or Timur Kuran's concept of "preference falsification" (1998) could have provided useful frameworks for analysing public attitudes towards the Thai monarchy in a context where open expression is severely constrained.

Modern monarchy: blending traditional and contemporary tools of power

One of the book's most significant contributions is its analysis of how Vajiralongkorn has leveraged both traditional and modern tools of royal power. Pavin details the king's use of constitutional amendments, royal decrees, and control over key institutions like the Privy Council. At the same time, he examines how the monarch has adapted to the digital age, discussing both the palace's official use of social media and the challenges posed by online dissent and the circulation of unflattering information about the king.

This dual focus on traditional and modern aspects of royal power provides a nuanced picture of how monarchy functions in 21st century Thailand. It builds upon Herzfeld (2004), which examined the intersection of traditional hierarchies and modern governance in Thailand, while bringing this analysis firmly into the digital age. The author's work extends these insights by showing how Vajiralongkorn has attempted to modernise royal power while simultaneously reinforcing traditional hierarchies, creating a hybrid form of monarchical rule that defies easy categorisation.

The gilded throne

Pavin's discussion of the economic dimensions of royal power is another strength of the book. He provides a detailed account of changes to the management of the Crown Property Bureau and other royal assets under Vajiralongkorn, arguing that these moves have further concentrated wealth and economic influence into the king's hands. This analysis contributes to ongoing scholarly debates about the role of monarchies in modern economies, as explored by Porphant Ouyyanont's (2008).

The book's economic analysis could have benefitted from more engagement with broader literature on the political economy of Southeast Asia. While Pavin effectively demonstrates the significance of royal wealth in the Thai context, comparison with other regional monarchies or with the economic roles of powerful political families in neighbouring countries could have strengthened his arguments about the uniqueness of the Thai case. The work of Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker on Thailand's political economy (1999), or Edmund Terence Gomez (2002) on political business in Southeast Asia, could have provided useful comparative perspectives.

Lèse-Majesté laws and freedom of expression

The book's treatment of Thailand's lèse-majesté laws and their application under Vajiralongkorn is particularly valuable. Pavin argues that these laws have been used more aggressively and more broadly since the new king's ascension, contributing to a climate of fear and self-censorship. This analysis builds on the work of scholars like David Streckfuss, whose "Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason, and Lèse-Majesté" (2011) provided a comprehensive examination of Thailand's speech laws. However, Pavin extends this analysis to show how these laws have evolved and been applied in the current reign.

Pavin's work in this area is especially significant in the context of broader debates about freedom of expression and authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia. By detailing the expansion and intensification of lèse-majesté prosecutions under Vajiralongkorn, Pavin provides a case study of how ostensibly traditional institutions like monarchy can be leveraged to reinforce modern authoritarian practices. This analysis invites comparison with other contexts where traditional institutions have been mobilised

in service of authoritarian rule, such as Brunei's invocation of Islamic law or the use of traditional leadership structures in parts of Africa.

Royal Hubris: Thailand's monarchy between cult and critique

One potential criticism of the book is its sometimes-polemical tone. While Pavin's position as a critic of the monarchy is clear from the outset, there are moments where his personal views and experiences may overshadow his scholarly analysis. This is particularly evident in passages discussing the king's personal behaviour, where the line between relevant political analysis and more sensationalist critique can become blurred.

That said, the author's unique perspective as both a former insider and current scholar in exile also lends the book a depth and urgency that more detached academic treatments might lack. Pavin's personal stake in the subject matter is clear, and while this may raise questions of objectivity for some readers, it also provides valuable insights that would be difficult to obtain from other sources. In this sense, Pavin's work can be seen as part of a tradition of engaged scholarship in Southeast Asia, following in the footsteps of academics like Benedict Anderson whose work in Indonesia was deeply informed by personal experience and political commitment.

The book's engagement with broader theories of monarchy and authoritarianism is another area of both strength and potential for further development. Pavin effectively situates the Thai case within discussions of "*sultanistic*" rule, drawing parallels with other personalistic authoritarian regimes. This framing provides a useful lens for understanding Vajiralongkorn's style of rule and its divergence from his father's approach.

Again, the book could have benefitted from more extensive engagement with comparative literature on monarchies in transition. While Thailand's political system is in many ways unique, comparison with other cases of shifting monarchical power - such as Bhutan's move towards democracy or the evolution of monarchies in the Middle East - could have provided additional context for understanding the Thai case. The works of Michael Herb on dynastic monarchies in the Arab world (2016) or Alfred Stepan et al. (2016) on the role of monarchies in democratic transitions could have offered valuable comparative perspectives.

Thailand's monarchy and the fragile future of nationhood

One of the book's most thought-provoking arguments concerns the future of the Thai monarchy. Pavin contends that Vajiralongkorn's approach to royal power, while effective in the short term, may be undermining the long-term stability and legitimacy of the institution. He argues that by dismantling many of the checks and balances that characterised his father's reign, the current king risks provoking a backlash that could ultimately threaten the monarchy's survival.

This analysis raises important questions about the sustainability of different models of monarchical rule in the 21st century. It invites comparison with other cases where monarchs have attempted to reassert or expand their power. The author's seminal work here could be productively placed in dialogue with broader theories of authoritarian durability, such as those advanced by scholars like Milan Svoblik (2012). While these theories often focus on non-monarchical authoritarian regimes, the author's analysis suggests intriguing parallels and differences in the case of authoritarian monarchies.

The book's treatment of the relationship between monarchy and national identity in Thailand is another significant contribution. The author argues that Vajiralongkorn's reign has strained the carefully constructed narrative of the monarchy as the embodiment of Thai nationhood. This analysis builds on the work of scholars like Thongchai Winichakul (1997), who explored the historical construction of Thai national identity.

However, Pavin takes this analysis further by examining how this relationship is evolving in real-time under the new reign. He provides examples of how traditional symbols and rituals of royal-national unity have been altered or diminished under Vajiralongkorn and speculates on the long-term

implications of these changes for Thai national identity and social cohesion. This perspective invites comparison with other contexts where traditional institutions have been central to national identity, such as Japan's imperial system or the role of monarchy in nations like Cambodia and Malaysia.

Royal power and diplomatic dissonance: Thailand's monarchy in the global arena

The book's discussion of international dimensions of Vajiralongkorn's reign is another area of both insight and potential for further development. Pavin examines how the new king's approach has affected Thailand's international relationships, particularly with Western democracies. The author argues that Vajiralongkorn's more overt exercise of power has complicated Thailand's diplomatic position, making it harder for international partners to maintain the polite fiction of Thailand as a constitutional monarchy.

This analysis contributes to broader discussions about the role of monarchy in international relations. Once again however, the author could have benefitted from more extensive comparison with how other monarchies navigate their international relationships in the modern era. The experiences of Gulf monarchies in balancing traditional rule with international engagement, or the diplomatic strategies of monarchies like Bhutan or Brunei, could have provided useful points of comparison.

In terms of methodology, the book relies heavily on document analysis and the author's own observations and insider knowledge. While these sources provide valuable insights, the sensitive nature of the topic inevitably limits the range of data available. Pavin acknowledges these limitations, but future research might benefit from innovative methodological approaches to studying sensitive political topics in restrictive environments. The work of a scholar like Eva Bellin (2012) on authoritarianism in the Middle East could offer useful methodological insights for future studies of the Thai monarchy.

Conclusion

To conclude, the book represents a significant contribution to the study of contemporary Thai politics and broader discussions about the role of monarchy in the 21st century. Pavin Chachavalpongpun provides a detailed and insightful analysis of the dramatic changes occurring under Thailand's new king, offering a compelling argument for how these shifts are reshaping the country's political landscape.

The book's strengths lie in its detailed documentation of Vajiralongkorn's actions as king, its nuanced analysis of the changing nature of royal power in Thailand, and its thought-provoking arguments about the future of the Thai monarchy. It effectively builds upon existing scholarship on Thai politics and monarchy while providing fresh insights into the current reign.

However, the book also has limitations, including its reliance on public sources for insight on a notoriously opaque institution, its sometimes-polemical tone, and its limited engagement with supportive perspectives on the monarchy. Additionally, while the book provides valuable analysis of the Thai case, it could have benefitted from more extensive comparison with other contemporary monarchies and deeper engagement with broader theoretical literature on authoritarianism and political transitions.

Despite these limitations, *Rama X* stands as an important and timely work that will likely spark further debate and research. It offers a crucial perspective on one of Southeast Asia's most significant political institutions at a time of considerable change and uncertainty. As Thailand continues to navigate the challenges of the Vajiralongkorn era, Pavin's book will undoubtedly serve as a key reference point for scholars, policymakers, and anyone seeking to understand the complex dynamics of power in contemporary Thailand.

The book's significance extends beyond its immediate subject matter, offering insights into broader questions about the role of traditional institutions in modern politics, the challenges of studying sensitive topics in authoritarian contexts, and the complex interplay between personal rule and

institutional power. As such, it should be of interest not only to scholars of Thailand or Southeast Asia, but to anyone concerned with the dynamics of power, legitimacy, and national identity in the contemporary world.

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