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Observations on Bureaucratic Democracy in Thailand*

Anuj Arbhabhirama

What emerged from the ruling system of absolute monarchy after the 1932 Revolution in Thailand was not liberal democracy (as generally practiced in Great Britain or the United States of America), but a so-called bureaucratic democracy system. This system, due to its unique characteristics, could also be called Thai-style democracy or Thai democracy. If we agree with this assumption, these following questions should be asked: what is bureaucratic democracy? how does it happen? and under what circumstances does it develop? what are its roles and functions both nationally and internationally, especially its relationship with the world’s monopoly capitalists? in what-circumstances does this system exist and to what stage has it developed today?

Here, in order to clarify the matter, we will deal with these questions in a simple way so that there will be some deviation from actual facts. Naturally, fact never reveals itself in any simple manner. But, no matter where or when, simplicity is always a key entrance for mankind to fact or truth. This also is one chapter in our basic political lesson.

1. Before the 1932 revolution

In the period before the 1932 revolution, there were so many factors and circumstances which had severe impacts both directly and indirectly on the system of thought and status quo of the ruling absolute

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monarchy that (as will mention later) a change in the ruling system seem inevitable.

Among them were significant internal factors such as the growth of liberal democracy ideas formulated since the reign of King Rama 5. This was represented by T.S. Wannaphoe's ideological campaign and the pleading to the King for the "reformation" of the then ruling system in favour of liberal democracy by a group of royal relatives and some bureaucrats.

Later on, there was the emergence of a so-called "neo-bureaucrats group" who advocated various aspects of democratic thinking. This group intended to be the founder of a democratic system in Thailand which would be none other than the bureaucratic democracy.

Moreover, there were some external factors and circumstances such as:

- the October 1917 Revolution in Russia which conveyed some elements of socialist thinking into Thailand;

- the influence of the Three People's Principles of the Kuomintang Party which was gaining ground among Chinese merchants in Thailand who were playing an important role in the country's economy;

- lastly and most importantly, the influence of Western colonialism which had demolished the Thai "empire" by slicing territory and leaving only what may be called "the genuine Thai." It exerted control both financially and politically over the royal Thai government by means of stipulating tax rates and imposing extra territorial rights: the so-called overwhelming freedom of the press during the reign of King Rama 6 stemmed of partly from problems caused by these rights.

During the period when the state power of the Thai absolute monarchy was challenged by such circumstances, we witnessed several rebellious movements, both in the central and regional areas, aimed directly and persistently at the state power. In the regional areas, there were several rebel groups known under various names of "Peebuun Revolt", the "Saint Revolt", or the "Peasant Revolt" which were sharply and severely suppressed, their leaders executed. But in the central areas, the rebel groups, especially the bureaucratic ones, met less harsh treatment,
indicating that neo-bureaucrats had gained more power and influence in these areas. Undoubtedly, they later became one of the decisive factors in the quick success of the bloodless 1932 Revolution.

In an endeavour to restore peace and stability under new circumstances, the royal monarchic government decided to undertake some administrative restructuring. To this end, it transferred H.R.H. Somdej Krom Phrya Damrong Rajanuparb, one of the most astute veteran administrators, from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Interior, expanded the Royal Army, established the Military Cadet School, which became the first university in Thailand, and sent Thai youths of further studies in military academies abroad. With these measures among others, the new bureaucratic system eventually dominated the old system of absolute monarchy from which it emerged. It was clear that the Revolutionary Initiator Party did not only comprise top people from the armies but also members of the country's best educated intelligensia.

Although authorities dealt with rebellious movements swiftly and severely, the rebels operating in the central and regional areas succeeded to shake the old ruling system by raising doubts on its legitimacy and ruling power. That is why there were no objections, on the contrary some approval from the public, when the change came.

The political instability prevailed as the country suffered the effects of the world's economic depression which, however, troubled bureaucrats more than the majority of the people in remote rural areas. This is why apart from the intention not to mobilize the masses into the movement for fear of the outside power's infiltration it was actually difficult to rally mass participation in this Revolution. Those who are familiar with western bourgeois liberal democracy revolution might assume that this was not a "revolution" because there was no mass involvement. But we have to accept that there are several models of democratic revolution: the ones that evolved in Capitalist countries do not necessarily find exact counterparts in such a colonial, or under-developed, country like Thailand.

Such ripe circumstances paved the way to the triumph of the People's Party, however small and close the group may be. They obtained victory by relying only on courage, thorough planning, and a little bit of
luck. Some historians have tried to ridicule this Revolution calling it an act of only a minority group. In so doing, they ignored other relevant factors such as the maturity of economic and political situations at that time. However, to ridicule the small People’s Party is actually to discredit the government in power at the time. This point becomes very obvious if one considers the 1 April 1981 coup which failed even though it was said to enjoy the largest backing ever of the army.

2. What is bureaucratic democracy in Thailand?

Bureaucratic democracy in Thailand is the coalition, i.e. the rivalry or usurpation or profit settlement, among:

1. the old ruling monarchial groups;
2. bureaucrat groups represented, between 1932-1947 by the People’s Party; between 1947-1957 by a military group called the “Coup Party”; between 1957-1973 by a military group called the “Revolution Party”; and in the period after the October 1973 student uprising by two military groups: the “Reformation Party” and the 66/23 Group;
3. internal private sector;
4. the multinational corporations which before World War 2 were represented by British monopoly group and afterwards by the U.S. monopoly.

That is why governments in the Thai bureaucratic democracy inherited a particular skill for reconciling, profit bargaining and building up the balance of power among various interest groups which are the most important factors for the instability of Thai politics, leading to a number of coups which caused the premature downfall of several governments. These situations became more obvious in the period after the October 1973 student uprising when the middle class played a more significant role in politics and cleared the way for ordinary people to become more involved in political activities. In this periods we could see the shattering of the old bureaucratic democracy and its development to a new stage (as to be mentioned subsequently.).

Besides the skills in reconciling, profit bargaining and building up
balance of powers or trying to gain more momentum in balance among various interest groups, governments in bureaucratic democracy also had two unchangeable functions or principle policies. These are:

(1) to modernize the country by seeking models in western countries or later Japan—in other words, to develop (some people decline to use this word) the country which in the long run would encourage the expansion of the internal capitalist elements by relying on the world's capitalism:

(2) to practice an anti-communist policy by all means (now using the policy of Politics before Militarism)

3. Development of bureaucratic democracy in Thailand

There are two big stages of development in bureaucratic democracy in Thailand: first between 1932-1973, period of 40 years, named the old bureaucratic democracy; second by the period after the October 1973 student uprising to the present, named the new bureaucratic democracy. Within these 2 big stages there are several sub stages: 3 sub-stages in the old bureaucratic democracy and other 3 sub-stages in the new bureaucratic democracy. Therefore there are altogether 6 sub-stages or stages in the Thai bureaucratic democracy as follows:

3.1 Stage of strengthening stability and flourishing. (1932-1944)

It is justifiable to assume that the core of the ruling body in this stage was the People's Party (eventhough later on it split into several factions and never used that name again), which had been trying to exert parliamentarism in the ruling system.

In dealing with the system of stability strengthening, we'll firstly talk about the tactics and targets of the revolution. The People's Party, in planning and implementing the plan, tried to avoid, not to affect, the interests of some foreign powers and even not to create any distrustful feelings among them. Therefore we could see that the People's Party chose the lightening tactic in staging the coup. The main target of this revolution was the old ruling monarchy. The internal private sector groups, mostly of
Chinese or Sino-Thai origin which generally lacked a basic relationship with the natives and seemed to be interested in earning their own living rather than in politics, were not their political rivalries. Some western historians observed that because Thailand never became a western colonial country, the expression of nationalism aimed only at the changing of the ruling absolute monarchy. This expression still appears in the National Anthem after the revolution which says Thailand enjoys complete sovereignty because of this revolution.

As mentioned above, the conditions of success of this revolution are the maturity of the political situation, courage, thorough management, deliberate planning and a little bit of luck. Actually, the revolutionaries lacked real political, military, social and economical powers. Therefore, after the overthrow of the old regime, it was necessary for the People’s Party to consolidate its powers in order to enforce their policy guidelines and survive. More than that, it had to replace the old ruling positions with their own newly appointed personnals, a necessary move whenever there is a political change. Here we will talk about two political and economical operations undertaken by the People’s Party which are still basic criteria for bureaucratic democracy. The first one concerning political operation calls for an appointed legislature or the second type of MP in parliament. This means that the People’s Party actually didn’t believe that liberal democracy itself would be operational in Thailand. It needed a parliamentary system only to legitimize its own ruling power. Some of the prominent figures in the People’s Party itself pointed out that the 1932 Revolution was only a change from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy with the king under the constitutional law. They did not mention the word democracy for fear that it might mislead to liberal democracy.

However, the implementation of this option had both advantages and disadvantages in itself. Its advantages include the ability to strengthen the power of the new regime and preserve bureaucratic democracy until today. Its disadvantages include its vulnerability to the attack from the old ruling regime including liberals and big capitalists.

Emphasis on constitutional monarchy from the beginning has always caused much trouble to the constitution in Thai politics. Whenever
there was a coup, a draft constitution had to be prepared in advance, some of them even hidden under a jar. Even though during the Sarit regime, no constitution was enforced, there was an interim constitutional law and an assembly assigned to function as the legislative body. Currently there is a problem whether the constitution should be amended and how. But this might become a big problem.

The other operation concerned economic criteria. In order to build a solid base for the bureaucratic democracy regime, the People's Party, largely composed of bureaucrats, were not only alien to private capitalists but also harboured some distrust toward them, undertook two operations. Firstly, it confiscated the former regime's property and took possession of some. Secondly, it established state enterprises. Up to this point, one could say that the type of economic base of the bureaucratic democracy then was state capitalist, not bureaucratic capitalist, as has been said. Bureaucratic capitalism, if it ever existed, played an insignificant role in the Thai economic system. Therefore the ratio of state enterprises vs. capitalist enterprises is significant in the measurement of the degree of bureaucratic democratic stability.

Even though the old ruling groups were the target of this revolution, the People's Party chose to reconcile with them instead of dealing decisively with them. From this, we could see that the first prime minister in Thailand was Phrya Manopakorn and the ministers called “Rathamontri” (ones who give advice to the State, not who govern).

The most prominent expression of the bureaucratic democracy regime in this period was nationalism (whether it is serious or not, enough or not, remains controversial). Later on, this expression became one of the government's weak points, it emphasized the survival rather than the country's prosperity. The expression of nationalism was most highlighted during the P. Phibulsongkram regime, before and during the World War 2 period.

During this period there was an interesting expression of socialist oriented trend, without real actions, though, while the important role and policy of the government expressed the nature of bureaucratic democracy. This expression was shown in the draft economic program proposal written
by Pridi Phanomyong who received severe reactions from the old ruling group. He was accused of a communist crime and was banished from the country until the accusation was proved false. Another incident concerning this trend occurred during the 1983 constitutional crisis, when M.R. Kukrit Pramoj called on the public to illuminate the regulation No. 66/23 in his infamous quotation “You can't scare me!”

The old bureaucratic democracy in Thailand reached its peak during the period from 1938-1944 in the P. Phibulsongkram government, when nationalism expressed itself so clearly and completely. Some of these expressions could be seen in both internal and external moves, such as the expansion of territory, the endeavours to eliminate influences of old colonialism e.g. British and French (supporting by the new Japanese colonialism); the campaigning of anti-Chinese or Chinese-origin capitalist influences while building up national cultural pride and promoting Thai nationalities to take career opportunities in “Agro-industrio-commercial” fields, instead of bureaucracy. The golden era of bureaucratic democracy regime ended shortly before the end of World War 2.

In short it was only during the first stage that Thai bureaucratic democracy expressed itself very clearly. After that there were only its adaptations according to changing situations

3.2 Stage of maintaining the status quo (1947-1957)

The world after World War 2 changed tremendously. World Colonialism was demolished, the Socialist camp expanded, the Chinese Communist Party triumphed, the United States of America became leader of the Free World and eyed Thailand as one of the most important strategic areas for imposing a blockade on Communist China. Then anti-communism became the most important policy of the Thai Government. From this period up till 1973, the concept of “democracy” was misinterpreted as any ruling system which was not communist. The misinterpretation led finally to the complete disappearance of Parliament during Marshal Sarit regime.

By the 1947 coup d'état, Pridi Phnomong had been banished from the political circle. As the brain and spirit of the People's Party in the Thai ruling power was exhausted with the fall of Pridi, the old ruling group was
successfully rehabilitated and Thailand obtained her first legal political party in 1955. From then on it was accepted that bureaucratic democracy in Thailand had military core, or could be otherwise called military democracy.

Apart from its anti-communist policy, another important move undertaken by the government was the rehabilitation of the war-torn country. Though Thailand was not as severely affected as some European countries, it suffered considerable damages, especially in financial affairs. The era of the 3-4 satang-bowl of Chinese noodle had passed and Thailand had to compensate the alliance countries, especially the British, for a great deal of war damage. It is remarkable that the second P. Phibunsongkram regime tended to promote state enterprises as a tactic for rehabilitating the national economy while maintaining its nationalist and anti-Chinese policy, albeit in a considerably low key.

Although during this stage the government was inclined to adopt irrationally an anti-communist policy and several of the People’s Party principles which were formulated in the first period fell in declining, some of the most important principles such as a parliamentary system with some appointed legislators, the promotion of state enterprises as a solid foundation for the national economy and spirit of nationalism still remained. Unfortunately these remaining elements died during the regime of Marshal Sarit.

3.3 Stage of declining (1958-1973)

Compared with the aforesaid period, the influences of the old ruling group and the U.S. increased considerably during this period. What we should pay special attention to is the American intention to use Thai integrated territory as a new strategic area to blockade communist expansion in this region. The vulgar interpretation of the concept of “democracy” (or the free world) as any system opposite to communism had now overstretched to the point of dissolving parliament and changing military democracy into military dictatorship. These mean the end of Thai bureaucratic democracy’s will to exert the 6 principles of the People’s Party. Even though subsequently Marshal Sarit was acclaimed by several people as a strong leader and the originator of theory and practice of
"Thai-style democracy", as time went by, one realized that his policy was none other than self-destruction in economic, political and social aspects. There is only one substantial observation which we could make from such policy guidelines, that is its consequences had accelerated complete deterioration of the old bureaucratic democracy or, in a more accurate term, the practising military dictatorship regime.

Why is the Sarit era here identified as a declining period of bureaucratic democracy while there is a belief, or propaganda elsewhere that it is the golden era of bureaucratic democracy in Thailand? To elaborate on the idea: the former identification is not groundless, this government conducted several self-destructive policies. Politically, there were the dissolution of Parliament, depriving the majority of people of their basic democratic rights, e.g. suspension of labour unions, mass arrest of farmer's leaders, etc., widening the gap between soldiers and the people, and particularly creating misunderstanding between bureaucratic democracy and military dictatorship, or even worse, an understanding that military is equal to dictatorship, which still impresses a lot of people today. Economically, self-destructive policies came in the abolition of the policy promoting state enterprises and the inclination to support the infra-structured building designed to serve the development of private capitalist sector, according to the motto: "Sufficient Water Supply, Electricity, Communication and Occupations", etc. - said to originate from the U.S. - dominated World Bank's recommendations. This pattern of economic development was recognised 20 years later by the government as an imbalanced development. Its legacies in terms of social and economic problems remain for us to be solved today. Socially, the self-destructive policies widened the gap between the rich and the poor. At the same time national culture was not appropriately promoted so that it became vulnerable to the overwhelming influence of foreign cultures. Instead of indoctrinating morality and nationalism, the policies allowed consumerism to occupy people's minds.

It is obvious that the U.S. government played a part in such a misleading course of actions. The superficial prosperity and incredible durability of the Sarit-Thanom-Prapas regimes cannot be separated from
consistent support from the U.S. government in both finance and personnel. This is not unusual because money is always a good painter and bargainer that can turn ugliness into beauty and falsehood into the truth. It can bargain for needed time and constitute a tactic which certain people in power have been using for a long time.

3.4 Stage of low profile (1974-1976)

During this period the influence of the old ruling group increased while that of the U.S. declined. Actually, it was a significant turning point in Thai bureaucratic democracy: its ascent to a new stage. The term ascending to a new stage doesn’t mean that military groups have now changed their minds or that a “Democratic military group” emerged later on. This is because minds can easily change and, in fact, people are always reluctant to change unless there are no alternatives. But this big change occurred under certain conditions, especially the involvement of the big capitalist group in government administration and the escalating influences of the middle class, including the increasing roles of the ordinaries in politics, such as in elections and in being members of political organizations. Under these conditions, we saw the whole system of bureaucratic democracy ascending to a new stage.

However, before it really steps up to the new stages, military groups have been playing a low profile by hiding themselves behind a civilian government for three consecutive years. Meanwhile, they tried to control situations, adapted themselves and prepared to resume power. It is widely accepted that this period is the only one since the 1932 Revolution that witnessed a full democracy and real execution of the highest degree of free democracy constitution. This stage culminated in the toppling of the unstable civilian government in the coup after the bloody October 6th 1976 incident.

3.5 Stage of supporting pillar (1976-1977)

This stage could well verify that a military group had actually resumed its power but still remained behind the scenes of the civilian government of Mr. Thanin Kraivixien who, after another coup, was appointed to the King’s Advisory Committee.
3.6 Stage of power resumption or regulation No. 66/2523 (1977-)

This period started when General Kriangsak Chommanand was chosen prime minister with his well-known policy: "we have no time to quarrel". During this period, we often heard about "democracy with the King as head of state" as if it were the solution for Thai democracy. However, the term "democracy" here doesn't seem to mean liberal democracy, but rather bureaucratic democracy with bureaucrats, instead of capitalists, as the core of the country's administrative and developing activities including distribution of interests to various interest groups in the country. Moreover, we also heard the term "people's democracy" through a government agency's radio program, implying an increasing awareness of ordinary people's involvement in democracy in Thailand. Since the task of building up liberal democracy in the country had never been mentioned since the 1932 Revolutions, it is not thoroughly accurate to call the present constitution "semi-democratic."

4. The forked routes of bureaucratic democracy in Thailand

Given the present situation, there are four alternative forked routes in the future development of bureaucratic democracy in Thailand.

4.1 Returning to the old military dictatorship which is now generally frightening or made frightening through newspapers. However, the return is not easy. The prerequisite conditions are that the U.S. resumes extending consistent support and that private capitalists and military groups revive their pact. The realization of these prerequisites seems unlikely now but the situation might change if the country had faced the problem of "communist threat" again in future. The consensus of the middle class cannot be ignored at then.

4.2 Phasing out bureaucratic democracy and bringing in liberal democracy. This route has good prospects if the country continues to develop at a steady pace. It seems that the U.S. which has been our consistent patron would support this route. Recently, there have been many suggestions for the sale of more states enterprises to the private sector.
4.3 The ability of bureaucratic democracy to develop, to survive and finally to turn to ‘democracy for the people’. This route does not have such a prospect as the former one because there are several concrete problems. To obtain consensus from bureaucrats on regulation No. 66/2523 alone is extremely difficult, not to mention the requirement to reform the whole system of bureaucracy. How can we ask bureaucrats to refrain from threatening and playing the role of master over the people, how can we increase work efficiency and how can we restore state enterprises etc?

4.4 Taking the socialist route, promoting a new industrial order if there is stagnation in the bureaucratic democracy development.

There have been a lot of arguments on whether liberal democracy is suitable for Thailand. The supporters of this idea have been fighting stubbornly, trying to put bureaucracy under the command of political parties and wealthy groups (among these headstrong fighters, some of them do not even know which corner they belong to on the Thai political stage). But the important or more important problem which requires much more prudent consideration here is which route Thai bureaucratic democracy will take in the foreseeable future.