The Thai Revolution, 1923-1933

Section 1
The People’s Party

Section 2
The Great Depression

Section 3
The Thai Revolution

Main Idea
Siam’s absolute monarchy was overthrown by a new group of military and civilian leaders who established a constitutional monarchy.

Why It Matters Now
Thailand is still a constitutional monarchy.

Historical and Political Terms

Absolute monarchy is a form of government. The king or queen’s power is not limited by a constitution or a parliament.

Constitutional monarchy is a form of government. The king or queen’s power is limited by a constitution and a parliament.

The Great Depression was a period in history dating from 1929 to the late 1930s. Starting with the Wall Street Stock Market Crash of October 1929, countries around the world experienced an economic crisis. Businesses went bankrupt and unemployment rose dramatically.

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy. The nation’s head of state is King Bhumibol Adulyadej. In 2006, Thai people celebrated the 60th anniversary of his reign.
Siam in the early 20th Century was a mixture of modern and traditional ways of life. Its population was close to 12 million people. Bangkok was the nation’s capital and a busy cosmopolitan city of 500,000. In the countryside, small land owning farmers grew rice and other agricultural products. Chinese and Western businessmen played an important role in the growing economy. Public transport, clean water, electricity and modern hospitals were available to the city’s inhabitants.

Siam’s political system was less modern. Kings were absolute monarchs who justified their power on the grounds that only they could build a strong and modern nation able to survive in the world. Though the idea of a constitution was first suggested by King Chulalongkorn (Rama 5) in 1910 and again considered by King Prajadhipok (Rama 7) in the early 1930s, little real progress towards establishing a parliament was made.

In Paris, a group of Thais grew increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of democratic reform and they formed the People’s Party in 1927. They made plans to seize power from the royal government. The call for change grew stronger as King Prajadhipok struggled to find solutions to the Great Depression that swept the world after the Wall Street Crash of 1929. By 1932, Siam was on the brink of revolution.

The challenges facing the Thais in the 1920s and 1930s were very different to other Asians. From the start of the 20th Century, the Chinese had struggled to bring order to their nation. The Revolution of 1911 had removed the corrupt Manchu Dynasty and Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Kuomintang (Nationalist) Party, restored order to some extent by the 1930s.

Japan, like Siam, had escaped Western control by modernizing its political, economic and social life. Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 astounded the world. When the Great Depression destroyed much of the economy in the early
1930s, Japanese military leaders were convinced that an overseas empire in Asia was the only way to safeguard the nation’s future. Siam’s close neighbors were all under the rule of colonial powers. The French dominated Indochina, the British controlled India, Burma and Malaya, the Dutch included Indonesia in their empire and the Americans held the Philippines. Asian nationalists in these countries campaigned against colonial rule but their efforts did not bring a great deal of success.

Ho Chi Minh formed the Indo-Chinese Communist Party in 1930, but he spent the next decade in Russia and China. Uprisings against the French rulers were ruthlessly suppressed.

India was much closer to independence. By 1930, Gandhi was the leader of the independence movement. His famous salt march was an open challenge to British control. On the other hand, Burma was a long way from independence and was simply a province of British controlled India. Malaya did not see any real independence movement emerge in the 1930s. In the Dutch East Indies, Sukarno was the most vocal supporter for independence but he was arrested in 1929 and was to spend much of the next decade in prison. In the Philippines democratic reforms were introduced by the US government.

In the 1930s, Japan’s military expansion threatened European empires in Asia.
Section 1
The People’s Party

A political party is a group of people who share similar beliefs. These beliefs include ideas about how political power should be shared between different groups within a nation and how this power should be used to benefit the people of that society. The People’s Party was Thailand’s first political party. It was formed in 1927 by Thais living in Europe. Usually a party gains power through elections, but as we shall see, the People’s Party had to seize power by force.

Pridi Banomyong (see History Makers) was the leader of the People’s Party. He was a brilliant student of law, economics and politics who was studying in Paris on a royal scholarship. He believed that the king should not be above the law and that government should help people achieve economic prosperity and social equality. In addition, he argued that the government should provide education and health services to the people.

Another key member of the People’s Party was Phibun Songkram. He was an artillery officer who had also won a scholarship to study overseas. His views differed from Pridi. As an army officer, he had a strong sense of order and solidarity with other members of the armed forces. All members of this group attended the same military academy and studied the same curriculum which stressed that the military’s most important role was guardian of the nation. He believed that the government should provide strong rule and, if necessary, impose its views on the people.

Phibun was not alone in believing that military leaders had a duty to take control. In Italy, Spain, Germany and Japan, strong military leaders also argued that they were the rightful rulers of their nations. As we will see the military was to play a crucial role in Thai history during the 20th and 21st Centuries.

Pridi and Phibun met in Paris and together with a small group of other Thais pledged to seize power in Siam and replace the absolute monarchy with a constitution and a parliament. They planned to return to Siam and find more supporters. The People’s Party especially needed the help of senior officers in the military if their revolution was to be successful. Many of these soldiers were not members of the royal elite and were unhappy that all the high ranks in the government and the military were occupied by prince and nobles.
As the People's Party grew in size, it was able to provide the leadership needed to plan and stage the overthrow of the absolute monarchy. Progress was slow at first with less than 100 people becoming members by 1930. It was not until the Great Depression that the People's Party was able to significantly increase its support.

**History Makers**

Pridi Banomyong was born in 1900 to a prosperous and influential family of rice farmers. His mother was half-Chinese, his father Thai. Pridi was a child prodigy and educated at the prestigious Suan Kulab College. At the early age of 19 he was a barrister defending clients in court. When he won a royal scholarship to study law in Paris, King Vajiravudh said that Pridi would be an asset to the country. He was a founding member of the People's Party and a cabinet minister in the new constitutional monarchy. He believed that a government should provide laws, education, health and help to the economy so that individuals could develop and prosper. He modernized the Thai legal system and established Thammasat University. Pridi was appointed regent in 1941 and set up the Free Thai Movement to resist the Japanese during the Pacific War. He was appointed “Senior Statesman” for life by Rama VIII. In 1946 he served briefly as prime minister before resigning after the assignation of Rama VIII. After the failed Palace Rebellion of 1949 he never returned to Thailand and lived in China and France. He died in Paris in 1983.

**Section 2**

**The Great Depression**

All economies go through periods of high and lows but the Great Depression was the most severe economic downturn in history and it impacted on practically all countries in the world. The crisis which started in 1929 when the Wall Street Stock Market collapsed lasted throughout most of the 1930s. During this period many businesses went bankrupt, prices fell, unemployment rose and world trade slowed. Though the USA
and Europe were the most severely impacted, Asia also experienced an economic crisis. As we have seen, Japan was severely affected and its military leaders started a course of overseas expansion. Hitler’s rise to power was also assisted by the Great Depression as millions of unemployed workers turned to the Nazi Party for an end to their misery.

In Siam, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) who became king in 1925, struggled to solve the economic problems facing his country. His immediate challenge was to restore the economic health of the kingdom when he realized that his treasury was close to bankruptcy. He decided to save money by cutting spending on education and firing thousands of government workers. He also raised taxes. When the economy was hit by the Great Depression, the King reduced salaries even further. These decisions were very unpopular.

The most troubling consequence of the Great Depression was the rapid fall in the price of rice. From 1930 to 1932, the price dropped by two-thirds and land values also fell. The income of farmers was severely affected because rice farming was the most important section of the economy. Farmers could not pay taxes or pay back loans. Though misery was widespread, at least Siam avoided starvation as most rural people owned their own land and could grow enough food to feed themselves.

Rama VII was deeply concerned that his subjects were experiencing miserable living conditions. He did not know how to solve the problems caused by the worst economic depression in history.

In 1932 he complained that solving these problems was like a war:

> The financial war is a very hard one indeed. Even experts contradict one another until they become hoarse. Each offers a different suggestion. I myself do not profess to know about such matters and all I can do is to listen to the opinions of theirs and choose the best. I have never experienced such a hardship: therefore if I have made a mistake I really deserve to be excused by the officials and people of Siam.

Section 3
The Thai Revolution

A revolution is a sudden political, economic or social change in society. The 1932 Thai Revolution was one of many revolutions that have taken place in history. Another example of a political revolution was the French Revolution of 1789 which transformed France from a monarchy into a republic. The Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century was primarily an economic revolution as it changed the way goods were made and people earned their living. As a consequence of this revolution, a modern society of cities and factories replaced traditional rural life.

Revolutions can be violent and result in upheaval and chaos. Up to 40,000 people were executed during the French Revolution including the king and queen. It is claimed that millions died as a result of the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. As we will see, Thailand was very fortunate to have a bloodless revolution. Some revolutions are supported by a majority of people, but others are the work of a small band of revolutionaries. Many of the most famous people in history have taken this crucial role. For example, George Washington, Maximilien

*The French Revolution overthrew the absolute monarchy of Louis XVI. These dramatic event inspired revolutionaries throughout modern history and may well have influenced Pridi who studied in France during the 1930s.*
Robespierre, Karl Marx, Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Che Guevara are all considered revolutionaries.

The Thai Revolution took place on 24 June, 1932 when the People’s Party seized power in Bangkok and demanded that the King accept a constitution. The plot was well planned. Members of the royal government were captured and arrested and a declaration made that the absolute monarchy was ended. To gain support for the revolution, the People’s Party issued statements that contained harsh accusations against the royal government claiming that it had failed to bring about economic recovery and that it did not listen to the voice of the people.

To avoid bloodshed, the King accepted the demands of the People’s Party. On 10 December 1932 the King signed into law a constitution that ended centuries of absolute monarchy in Siam. The bloodless Thai Revolution had successfully brought about a constitutional monarchy. Pridi, Phibun and the other leaders of the Thai Revolution claimed that power now belonged to the people.

At first the People’s Party hoped that they could work with members of the old royal government and they appointed Phraya Monopakon, a respected judge, as Siam’s first prime minister. It was soon clear however that he did not truly support the goals of the People’s Party and he worked against the new government. Conservatives also began to attack Pridi who was accused of being a communist and as a result he was forced into a brief exile overseas. Eventually Mano was removed and Phahon Phonphayuhasena, the military leader of the People’s Party, became prime minister.

The most serious challenge was a counter-revolution led by the king’s cousin, Prince Boworadet. In 1933, he organized troops outside of Bangkok to march towards the capital and demand the return of the royal government. His forces reached Don Muang and prepared to enter the city. Though neither side wanted a bloody conflict, negotiations failed and Phibun launched a counter-attack on 13 October. Both sides distributed leaflets to gain support. Most of the army stayed loyal and did not join Boworadet’s forces.

After days of fighting and with Bang Sue in flames, the exhausted rebels retreated. Phibun gave chase by troop train but the rebels were able to escape by sending an empty locomotive speeding down the track to collide with the government train. In total, approximately 230 people were killed and most of the rebel leaders fled to Indochina.
Phibun was rewarded with the position of minister of defense. In 1934 King Prajadhipok went to England to receive medical treatment. He wanted the monarchy to have a much greater role in government but his suggestions were rejected.

In March 1935 King Prajadhipok abdicated and Prince Ananda Mahidol, one of his nephews, was selected as the next king of Siam. At the time, the prince was only a 10-year-old schoolboy studying in Switzerland.

\* abdicate: give up your right to be king

**History Up Close**

Like all revolutions, the Thai Revolution was a dramatic moment in history. The People’s Party consisted of only about 100 members and they had to plan well or be defeated. A key event took place at the Royal Plaza when the military leader of the Party, Colonel Phraya Phahon Phonphayuhhasena, announced that Siam was now a constitutional monarchy. He had assembled 2000 troops and after making his speech asked the soldiers to take one step forward if they agreed with his actions. At first there was silence. Then to the relief of the revolutionaries, cheers of chai-yo (bravo) filled the plaza as soldiers stepped forward forever changing Thai history.

Another dramatic incident took place at the King’s summer palace at Hua Hin. By the night of the 26 June 1932 the capital was securely in the hands of the revolutionaries. Soldiers and tanks occupied important locations and leading members of the royal government were held as hostages at Anantasamakom Throne Hall. The King was sent a letter requesting his return to Bangkok and the granting of a constitution. He was warned that if he refused, he would be replaced by a minor prince who would agree. Fearful that his refusal would result in bloodshed, King Prajadhipok agreed to return to Bangkok but by rail and not on the ship that had been sent to collect him. On 27 June he met with the leading members of the People’s Party at the Sukothai Palace and agreed to consider the constitution written by Pridi. In a symbolic gesture, he ordered the traditional dynastic flag of the Chakri coat of arms that was flying over the palace be replaced by the Thai national flag.
Review

Terms and Names
1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance in the context of the Thai Revolution: absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, Great Depression, counter-revolution, abdicate, Mano, Phahon, Pridi.

Main Ideas
2. What do you consider to be the most important event surrounding the Thai Revolution?
3. What role did the People's Party play in the revolution?
4. Why were people unhappy with the royal government?

Critical Thinking and Writing
5. During the Boworadet counter-revolution both sides wrote leaflets to gain supporters. Write a leaflet for either side of the conflict.
6. Do you think the political changes that took place in 1932 was a revolution similar to other revolutions in history?
7. Think of a suitable heading for the two images found on page 11. Explain your answer.

Sources and Further Reading

Tanks in the street 1932

Tanks in the street 2006.