

King Rama V and King Rama IX

Upon a close examination of the history of Thailand's monarchy, two of the Kingdom's monarchs truly stand out as being difference makers in their noble efforts to serve the Thai nation and people: King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) and King Bhumibol (Rama IX).

Although the two monarchs ruled the nation during different periods and under different circumstances, Their Majesties' reigns shared many common features, particularly in their efforts to modernize the country.

The importance of a quality education was instilled in King Chulalongkorn by His father, King Mongkut (Rama IV). King Chulalongkorn shared this ideal with His son, H.R.H. Prince Mahidol, who in turn passed it on to His son – King Bhumibol. Both grandfather and grandson embraced the value of education and proceeded to pursue further studies in science and political science.

King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol both inherited the throne at relatively young ages – 17 and 18 years old, respectively. However, instead of immediately acceding to the throne, both took time to travel overseas to learn about Western civilization, modern technologies and systems of governance - information which they believed will enable them to not just carry out their duties as Head of State effectively, but will also contribute to the greater good of the country in the long run.

Adopting the vast knowledge and expertise accumulated from their travels, King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol were determined to modernize the nation in order to keep up with the global standards of their respective eras. Their Majesties shared a common ultimate goal of improving the people's lives by enabling the country to become self-sufficient, sustainable and prosperous.

Before the reign of King Chulalongkorn, the most common modes of transportation used throughout the Kingdom were simple river boats or 'beasts of burden'. King Chulalongkorn recognized the limitations of this and sought to ease the inconvenience by rapidly developing the country's railway system. This significant improvement in the country's transport infrastructure helped prepared the nation to face the challenges of the early twentieth century.

When King Bhumibol took the throne, the country's infrastructure was growing rapidly within the central region and in major cities throughout the Kingdom. However, as with most developing economies, much of the benefits of the economic growth failed to reach the nation's rural grassroots population. In the country's most remote zones, access to these people was virtually impossible. Yet, King Bhumibol made it His personal mission to travel to all regions within the Kingdom in order to reach His loyal subjects regardless of their location. Throughout His travels His Majesty initiated projects to build roadways to the country's most remote and isolated regions.

To improve the quality of life for His subjects, King Chulalongkorn built the country's first hospital, which was based upon medical institutions and practices He had witnessed during His travels to Europe. King Bhumibol then went on to create the Kingdom's first medical school and established a national education system.

Similarly, King Bhumibol also understood the importance of achieving a higher quality of life for His subjects. To help improve their lives, His Majesty established a vast number of royal projects that helped to expand knowledge and innovation in areas as diverse as health, welfare, and agriculture. The late King Bhumibol was also involved in setting up numerous scholarship programs, including the Ananda Mahidol Scholarship Foundation, which was supported directly by the King's private funds. Since its inception, the foundation's scholarship program has expanded significantly. Originally focused on the field of medicine, the program now covers eight fields of study: medicine, science, dentistry, agriculture, law, veterinary science, art and engineering.

As well as enhancing the country's infrastructure and improving the well-being of the Thai people, both King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol used their wisdom and diplomatic skills to protect the country's sovereignty from negative external influences.

During the late 1800s, the major European powers were aggressively colonizing Southeast Asia and most of Thailand's neighbors had already been colonized. King Chulalongkorn was very careful in His dealings with foreign countries. While He understood the importance of the innovations and technologies these countries could offer the Kingdom, King Chulalongkorn was very careful in terms of how much influence He would allow each of them in relation to any projects undertaken. It is fair to say that King Chulalongkorn's knowledge, diplomacy and negotiation skills ensured that the country avoided any form of colonization by foreign powers during that period of history.

Likewise, King Bhumibol faced challenges posed by the spread of communism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. King Bhumibol paid several state visits abroad and established stronger relations with several key countries. His Majesty helped to see Thailand through this difficult period, enabling the country to reemerge stronger with its constitutional monarchy still intact.

There is no doubt to the fact that King Chulalongkorn and King Bhumibol Adulyadej epitomize great leadership by demonstrating actively how benevolent but powerful heads of state can contribute to the betterment of their country and people.

* * * * *

David Smith is a part-time lecturer at Devawongse Varopakarn Institute of Foreign Affairs.