

A Brief History of Thailand

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The Thais migrated from southern China via northern Laos during the first millennium AD, and established the first Thai kingdom in 1238 at **Sukhothai**, overthrowing the Khmer empire. The kingdom reached its peak during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng, who invented the Thai alphabets; but later fell into decline and became subject to the Ayutthaya kingdom in 1365.

The kingdom of **Ayutthaya** existed for 400 years from 1350 to 1767, absorbing Sukhothai in 1376. It expanded to become the nation of **Siam**, and by the end of the fourteenth century was regarded as the strongest power in southeast Asia.

Thai kings were **absolute monarchs**, regarded as being “the lord of the land” and “divine king”, a concept adopted from the Khmer tradition. The king stood at the apex of a highly stratified social and political hierarchy that extended throughout the society.

The king allotted rice fields to governors, military commanders, and court officials in payment for their services to the crown, according to the **sakdi na system**. The size of each official's allotment was determined by the number of persons he could command to work it. The amount of manpower a particular local lord could command determined his status relative to others in the hierarchy and his wealth. At the top of the hierarchy, the king, who was the realm's largest landholder, also commanded the services of the largest number of **phrai** (servants), called phrai luang (royal servants), who paid taxes, served in the royal army, and worked on the crown lands. With ample reserves of

land available for cultivation, the viability of the state depended on the acquisition and control of adequate manpower for farm labor and defense.

Ayutthaya never lacked a rich food supply. Peasants planted **rice** for their own consumption and to pay taxes. Whatever remained was used to support religious institutions. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, however, rice cultivation in the floodplain of the Chao Phraya River began to produce a surplus that could be sold abroad, mainly to China.

Ayutthaya was friendly towards **foreign traders**, including the Chinese, Indians, Japanese and Persians, and later the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British and French, permitting them to set up villages outside the city walls.

But with its **neighbors**, Ayutthaya had to fight constant wars for territories – with Chiangmai in the north, with the Vietnamese, the Cambodians, and the Loatians in the east, and with the Malays in the South.

Its strongest enemy is **Burma** in the west. Burma defeated Ayutthaya twice. The first time in 1569, after which King **Naresuan** drove the Burmese out and restored independence.

In the second defeat in 1767, the city was ransacked and left in ruins. The Thai were saved from Burmese occupation by a Thai military commander, who later became King **Taksin**. In 1769, he moved the capital to Thonburi, across the Chao Phraya River from the present capital, **Bangkok**.

King Taksin later developed a mental disorder and in 1782 was deposed by his top general, Chaophraya Chakree, who became **King Rama I**, the first king of the present Chakree dynasty. He decided to move the capital across the river to the village of Bang Makok on the island of **Rattanakosin**, which soon became the city of **Bangkok**.

The period during the first three reigns was a time of consolidation of the kingdom's power, punctuated by periodic conflicts with Burma, Vietnam and the Lao states. The later period was one of engagement with the colonial powers of Britain and France, in which Siam managed to be the only southeast Asian country not to be colonized by a European country.

King Rama IV, or **King Mongkut**, came to the throne in 1851, determined to save Siam from European colonial domination by forcing modernisation on his reluctant subjects. In 1855 a mission led by the Governor of Hong Kong, **Sir John Bowring** arrived in Bangkok with demands for immediate changes, backed by the threat of force. The King readily agreed to his demand for a new treaty, which restricted import duties to 3 %, abolished royal trade monopolies, and granted extraterritoriality to British subjects. Other western powers soon demanded and got similar concessions. The king hoped that, by giving the economic concessions they demanded, the British would help save Siam from the French, who already occupied southern Vietnam and eastern Cambodia.

King Rama V, or **King Chulalongkorn**, continued his father's reform by turning an absolute monarchy based on relations of power into a modern, centralized nation state. He abolished slavery, built railways and telegraph lines, tied the currency to the gold standard, and established a modern taxation system.

Despite being a “buffer state” between British Burma and French Indochina, Siam lost some of its territories to both powers.

Lost to the French: Lao territories east of the Mekong, the west bank of the Mekong opposite Luang Prabang and around Champasak in southern Laos, as well as western Cambodia.

Lost to the British: the Tai-speaking Shan region of north-eastern Burma, and four states of Malaya (Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis and Terengganu).

King Rama VI (Vajiravudh), being educated in England, carried on his father's modernization program, by making primary education compulsory, and founded Chulalongkorn University. He promoted nationalism by establishing the Wild Tiger Corps, a paramilitary organisation of Siamese citizens of good character willing to make sacrifices for the king and the country. In 1917 Siam declared war on Germany, mainly to gain favour with the British and the French. As a result the U.S., France and Britain agreed to Siam's request to repeal the unfair treaties signed in the nineteenth century. His death brought his younger brother to the throne in 1925.

The Great Depression in 1930 worsened the situation. The king managed to restore stability to the economy, although at a price of making a significant amount of the civil servants redundant and cutting the salary of those that remained. This was obviously unpopular among the officials, and was one of the trigger events for the coup of 1932.

On **June 24, 1932**, while the king was holidaying at the seaside, the Bangkok garrison revolted and seized power, led by a group of 49 officers known as "**the Promoters**." Thus ended 150 years of absolute monarchy during the Rattanakosin era. The military came to power in the bloodless coup d'état of 1932, which transformed the government of Thailand from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. King Prajadhipok initially accepted this change but later surrendered the throne to his ten-year old nephew, **King Rama VIII**.

The history of Thailand from 1932 to 1973 was dominated by the military dictatorship which was in power for much of the period.

The new government carried out some important reforms. The currency went off the gold standard, allowing trade to recover. Serious efforts were made to expand primary and secondary education. Elected local and provincial governments were introduced, and in 1937 democratic development was brought forward when direct elections were held for the National Assembly, although political parties were still not allowed. Thammasat University was founded, at the initiative of **Preedee Phanomyong**, one of the “Promoters”.

After some conflicts among the Promoters, **General Phibunsongkram** (better known as Phibun) emerged as Prime Minister in 1938. His regime soon developed some fascist characteristics: arresting political opponents, a campaign against the Chinese businessmen, closing Chinese schools and newspapers, and building up the cult of the leader. He also changed the country's name from Siam to Prathet Thai, or Thailand, meaning "land of the free".

During the second World War, he allied the country with Japan, but was ousted from the office towards the end of the war. In March 1946 Preedee became the first democratically elected Prime Minister, but only briefly before he was forced to resign amid suspicion that he had been involved in the sudden and mysterious death of the young king Rama VIII. The army seized power and made Phibun Prime Minister, starting another round of political suppression. The regime was greatly helped, however, by a postwar boom which gathered pace through the 1950s, fuelled by rice exports and U.S. aid. Thailand's economy began to diversify, while the population and urbanization increased.

By 1955 Phibun was losing his leading position in the army to younger rivals led by **General Sarit Thanarat** and **General Thanom Kittikachorn**. The army staged a bloodless coup in 1957, ending Phibun's career for good. Thanom became Prime Minister until 1958, then yielded his place to Sarit, the real head

of the regime. Sarit held almost absolute power until his death in 1963, when Thanom again took the lead.

The regimes of Sarit and Thanom were strongly supported by the U.S. Thailand had formally become a U.S. ally by sending troops to Vietnam and Laos and allowing the U.S. to open airbases in the east of the country to conduct its bombing war against North Vietnam. The **Vietnam War** hastened the modernisation and westernisation of Thai society. The American presence and the exposure to western culture that came with it had an effect on almost every aspects of Thai life.

The population began to grow explosively as the standard of living rose, and a flood of people began to move from the villages to the cities, and above all to Bangkok. Thailand had 30 million people in 1965, while by the end of the 20th century the population had doubled. Bangkok's population had grown tenfold since 1945 and had trebled since 1970.

Economic development certainly did not bring prosperity to all. During the 1960s many of the rural poor felt increasingly dissatisfied with their condition in society and disillusioned by their treatment by the central government in Bangkok. Villagers became subject to increased military and police harassment and bureaucratic corruption. Villagers often felt betrayed when government promises of development were frequently not fulfilled. By the early 1970s rural discontent had manifested itself into a peasant's **activist movement**.

In the early 1970s university students helped to bring some of the local protests out on to the national stage. By the late 1960s, however, more elements in Thai society had become openly critical of the military government which was seen as being increasingly incapable of dealing with the country's problems and unwilling to restore democracy. It was not only the student activists, but also the business community that had begun to question the leadership of the government as well as its relationship with the United States.

In the end it was the students that played the decisive role in the fall of the Thanom-Prapas junta. In October 1973, thousands of students held a protest at the Democracy Monument demanding democracy. They were later joined by workers, businessmen and other ordinary citizens, and the crowd swelled to several hundred thousand. On **October 14**, the police and the military tried to break up the crowd by firing on students gathering in Thammasat University. With chaos reigning on the streets, **King Bhumibol** intervened by ordering Thanom and Prapas to leave the country. The junta had fallen, at the cost of 1,577 lives.

The post-1973 years has seen a difficult and sometimes bloody transition from military to civilian rule. The political “revolution” in October 1973 led to a new constitution and free elections. However, the elections in 1975 – 76 failed to produce a stable civilian government. The sharp increase in oil prices in 1974 led to recession and inflation, weakening the government's position. When Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia fell to communist forces in 1975, public opinion in Thailand was swung back to the right.

The army and the right-wing parties fought back against the student radicals through paramilitary groups such as the Village Scouts and the Red Gaur. Matters came to a head in October when Thanom returned to Thailand. Violent student protests were met by equally violent counter-protests. On **October 6, 1976** the army unleashed the paramilitaries, and created the orgy of violence, in which hundreds of students were tortured and killed, to suspend the constitution and resume power.

The new and ultra-conservative government carried out a sweeping purge of the universities, the media and the civil service. Thousands of students, intellectuals and other leftists fled Bangkok and joined **the Communist Party's** insurgent forces in the north and north-east, operating from safe bases in Laos. Others left for exile, including **Dr. Puey Ungphakorn**, the respected economist and Rector of Thammasat University.

The economy was also in serious difficulties as the policies frightened foreign investors. The new regime proved unstable and in October 1977 the army staged another "coup" and **General Kriangsak Chomanand** became PM. Kriangsak's position as prime minister soon became untenable and he was forced to step down in February 1980 at a time of economic troubles related to high oil prices. Kriangsak was succeeded by the army commander-in-chief, **General Prem Tinsulanonda**, a staunch royalist.

Much of the 1980s saw a process of democratization overseen by the King and Prem. The two preferred constitutional rule, and acted to put an end to violent military interventions. The insurgency ended and most of the ex-student guerillas returned to Bangkok under an amnesty. The army returned to its barracks, and yet another constitution was promulgated, creating an appointed Senate to balance the popularly elected National Assembly. Prem was also the beneficiary of the accelerating economic progress which was sweeping south-east Asia. After the recession of the mid 1970s, economic growth took off. For the first time Thailand became a significant industrial power, and manufactured goods such as computer parts, textiles and footwear overtook rice, rubber and tin as Thailand's leading exports. With the end of the Indochina wars and the insurgency, tourism developed rapidly and became a major earner. The urban population continued to grow rapidly, but overall population growth began to decline, leading to a rise in living standards even in rural areas, although the Isaan continued to lag behind. While Thailand did not grow as fast as the "Asian tigers" like Taiwan and South Korea, it achieved sustained growth.

Prem held office for eight years, surviving two more general elections in 1983 and 1986, and remained personally popular. In 1988 fresh elections brought General **Chatichai Choonhavan** to power. But Chatichai proved both incompetent and corrupt.

The military led by **Generals Sunthorn Kongsompong** and **Suchinda Kraprayoon**, staged a coup in February 1991 brought in a civilian prime minister, **Anand Panyarachun**, who was still responsible to the military in the form of the National Peacekeeping Council. Anand's anti-corruption measures proved popular.

Another general election was held in 1992, and the military strongman General Suchinda accepted the invitation from a coalition of parties to become Prime Minister, confirming the widespread suspicion that the new government was going to be a military regime in disguise. Suchinda's action brought hundreds of thousands of people out in the largest demonstrations ever seen in Bangkok, led by the former governor of Bangkok, **Major-General Chamlong Srimuang**. Suchinda brought military units personally loyal to him into the city and tried to suppress the demonstrations by force, leading to a massacre in the heart of the city in which hundreds died. The King intervened: he summoned Suchinda and Chamlong to a televised audience. The result of this was the resignation of Suchinda. Another general election was held in 1992, and the military strongman General Suchinda accepted the invitation from a coalition of parties to become Prime Minister, confirming the widespread suspicion that the new government was going to be a military regime in disguise. Suchinda's action brought hundreds of thousands of people out in the largest demonstrations ever seen in Bangkok, led by the former governor of Bangkok, **Major-General Chamlong Srimuang**. Suchinda brought military units personally loyal to him into the city and tried to suppress the demonstrations by force, leading to a massacre in the heart of the city in which hundreds died. The King intervened: he summoned Suchinda and Chamlong to a televised audience. The result of this was the resignation of Suchinda.

Since 1992, the governments have been democratically elected, and PMs include **Chuan Leekpai** (1992-1995 and 1998 – 2000),

Banharn Silpa-acha (1996), General **Chavalit Yongchaiyudh** (1996-1997), and **Thaksin Shinawatra** (since 2001).

Chavalit was confronted by the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. After coming under strong criticism for his handling of the crisis, Chavalit resigned in November 1997 and Chuan returned to power. In January 2001 Thaksin had a sweeping victory at the polls. In power, Thaksin has presided over the rapid recovery of the Thai economy. The dominance of Thaksin, whose rule was highly personalised and somewhat authoritarian (private company CEO-style), was seen by many commentators as an unhealthy development. Mainly due to his populist policies, Thaksin won an even bigger majority at elections in February 2005, securing his second consecutive term. In January 2006, he sold of his family holding in **Shin Corporation** for the 73,000 million baht without paying any tax, and was accused of being immoral and having conflict of interest. Mass rallies were held outside Parliament House, and many called for his resignation. In February Thaksin responded by calling a snap election in April, which was boycotted by the opposition and was later nullified by the court.

Continuing protests in Bangkok against Thaksin led to a bloodless military coup on 19 September 2006 which ousted the Thaksin government. His Thai Rak Thai Party was disbanded and he was forced to remain in exile abroad. A new government headed by **General Surayud Chulanon**, a retired army general and a privy council member, was appointed to oversee the drafting of a new constitution and organize a general election. In the 23 December 2007 election, no party gained an absolute majority. However, Thaksin still proved to be highly popular, particularly in the North and Northeast, because the People Power Party whose leader, **Samak Sundaravej**, openly supported Thaksin's policies managed to win the highest parliamentary seats and, as of January 2008, was given the first chance to form a government.