

Why are the Thai authorities so sensitive about Anna and the King?

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Late last year, the Thai censorship board banned Hollywood's latest remake of *Anna and the King of Siam*, the nineteenth century story of the English school teacher Anna Leonowens and the King of Thailand, then called Siam. Starring Jodie Foster and the Chinese actor Chow Yun-fat, the filming of *Anna and the King* revealed from the outset the sensitivities of Thai politicians to any slight to the Thai monarchy—either real or imagined.

Anna and the King is the fourth film version of the original 1946 stage play and filming was originally to take place in Thailand. The producers bent over backwards to try to ensure that their film did not go the same way as the 1956 musical *The King and I* starring Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr, which also was banned and has never been screened in Thailand.

To meet possible Thai objections, the script and casting was to be “culturally sensitive”. Thai authorities had complained that *The King and I* presented the Siamese monarch as a fool and denigrated Thai culture as inferior to Western. The remake with an Asian actor shows the king as a cultured man fluent in several languages, sensitive to the needs of his family and keen to provide his children with a Western education to equip them to maintain relations on an equal footing with the European powers.

The original story was based on Leonowens' diaries and depicted life in the household of King Mongkut (Rama IV) who reigned from 1851 to 1868 and employed her to teach his 50 or so children. Her memoirs are viewed with skepticism by historians who say she exaggerated her own abilities and depicted the king as a buffoon when in fact she had very little contact with him.

Commenting on the new film's altered cultural emphasis, one reviewer wrote: “Instead of recording Anna's understanding of Siam and its monarch and how she transformed a king and his country, this film is more interested in watching Anna's personal transformation. In this postcolonial film, we witness a woman who arrives armed with her Britishness and who learns the fallacies of her culture and her own moral superiority.”

At Thai request, a number of changes were made to the script of *Anna and the King*, but no final agreement was reached and in the end the film was made in Malaysia. After its release last year, a Thai committee comprising academics, journalists, members of the National Film Board and special branch police viewed the film and on December 28 declared it “illegal” under a 1930 law prohibiting filmmakers from portraying the Thai monarchy in a disrespectful way.

Justifying the decision, Police Major General Prakat Sataman said: “The film *Anna and the King* has several scenes that distort history and insult the king and most members of the censorship board ruled to ban it.” Board member Thepmontri Limpayom castigated the film,

saying: “The filmmakers have made King Mongkut look like a cowboy who rides on the back of an elephant as if he is in a cowboy movie. In one scene Chow Yun-fat pushes the king's crown and his portrait down to the floor—that's totally unacceptable.” Not to be outdone, another board member added said: “If we cut all the scenes which we consider mock the monarchy it would only run for about 20 minutes.”

The penalties for anyone caught smuggling or publicly showing copies of the film in Thailand are draconian, to say the least. In January, two men were arrested by Thai undercover police for being in possession of 200 pirated copies of the movie. Importers and vendors of the film face penalties of up to six months in jail and a 21,000 baht fine.

Those caught organising public viewings of the film face far stiffer penalties. The feudal law of “lese majeste” is still on the books in Thailand, making it a treasonable offense to criticise or show disrespect for the monarchy. Those found guilty can be sentenced to stiff prison terms and even to death.

Behind what appears to be a somewhat ludicrous overreaction, serious issues are raised. Under the guise of defending Thai culture, the authorities have imposed a ban that represents a blatant attack on democratic rights. The decision taken by the government of Chuan Leekpai, which claims to represent a break with previous military dictatorships, sets a dangerous precedent for the banning of other artistic works regarded as culturally offensive or politically sensitive.

Clearly there is more to the ban than is immediately apparent. Police and officials routinely turn a blind eye to the country's notorious prostitution rackets, to high-level corruption in business and government, and to the appalling safety standards in the country's sweatshops. But the top levels of the state apparatus are adamant that the dignity of the Thai monarchy should not be ruffled by showings of *Anna and the King*.

The question is why an innocuous Hollywood film should provoke such a reaction. Police Major General Prakat Sataman, who heads the Censorship Board and also the country's Central Investigation Bureau, pointed to the underlying concerns when he commented: “The screening would be against the peace and security of our society as it would incite riots among those loyal to the monarchy. It would be out of our control. The film undermines the monarchy. If we had to censor it, there would not be anything left to see.”

A Thai professional quoted in a *Los Angeles Times* article focussed on the key political role played by the Thai monarchy in ensuring political and social stability. Explaining his support for the ban, he said: “Educated people would understand this is a Hollywood production; uneducated people might not. They might be influenced

by an inaccurate portrayal of our highest institution.”

As the comments indicate, the sensitivity to anything that might puncture the public image of the monarchy is a political rather than a cultural question. Throughout the 50 years since he was crowned in May 1950, the latest monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej Rama IX has proven to be a key linchpin for the Thai state, particularly in times of acute political and social crisis.

The Chakri dynasty, of which King Bhumibol is the latest, is a comparatively recent historical phenomenon, tracing its origins to the late eighteenth century when a Thai general was enthroned as Rama I and established Bangkok as his capital. His descendants ruled as absolute monarchs until 1932 when, amid growing social and political tensions, a group of military officers and civilians seized power and demanded a constitution. Relations between the new regime and the monarchy continued to deteriorate until King Prajadhipok abdicated in March 1935.

For the next decade or so, Thailand was virtually without a monarch. The National Assembly invited Prince Ananda Mahidol, a 10-year-old boy at school in Switzerland, to take the crown. Ananda returned to Thailand shortly after the end of World War II and was shot dead in mysterious circumstances in June 1946. Although initially held to be an accident, investigations showed he had been murdered. Three of the chief witnesses were hurriedly tried and executed.

His brother Bhumibol, also studying in Switzerland, was then put on the throne. It is worth noting that the first film version of Leonowens' story, entitled *Anna and the King of Siam* and starring Irene Dunne and Rex Harrison, was released in the same year, and appears to have attracted little attention in Thailand. It was only after the young king returned to Thailand in 1950, and particularly after Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat overthrew the government in September 1957, that a conscious political effort was made to revive the monarchy. It was under these conditions that Thailand banned *The King and I*.

Sarit, who abolished the constitution and imposed martial law, was intent on using the monarchy to deflect public attention from the impact of his authoritarian rule. As one author commented: “Instead of placing primary emphasis on loyalty to an abstract state or constitution, which he considered had not worked, Sarit focussed primary attention upon the monarch as both the focus of loyalty for the citizen and the source of legitimacy for the government.... Sarit restored the monarchy to an active role in Thai society, reviving public ceremonies that had been neglected since 1932, encouraging the king to appear in public, and making a major public show of allegiance to King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The king personally awarded all university degrees, for example, and made frequent tours of the provinces” (David Wyatt, *Thailand, A Short History*, p. 281).

The close links forged between the monarchy, the military and the Thai state have continued to this day. During the period of political upheaval between 1973 and 1976, King Bhumibol sided with the generals and extreme right-wing elements against a series of unstable civilian governments after the military dictatorship collapsed under the pressure of huge protests led by students involving up 500,000 people.

The fall of the junta opened up a period of political tumult as political organisations and parties were formed, workers mounted militant strikes, and small farmers engaged in demonstrations. Terrified at the turmoil, the monarchy and sections of big business backed the formation of right-wing groups to terrorise leftist organisations and figures. These included the New Force movement based on the motto “nation, religion and king,” the Village Scouts and

the Red Gaurs, a student organisation.

The crisis reached its high point in 1976 after two parliamentary elections produced fragile coalition governments. Former military dictator General Thanon returned from exile, saying that he would become a Buddhist monk. He was warmly welcomed by the military and the right wing and visited by members of the royal family, provoking daily student protests centred around Bangkok's Thammasat University.

When student protesters hung an effigy of Crown Prince Vijiralongkorn, the army radio station called on “patriots” to attack the students and “kill communists”. On October 5 the Red Gaurs and the Village Scouts along with police attacked Thammasat University, lynching and beating students. Some were burnt alive. According to understated official figures, 46 students were killed, hundreds were wounded and some 1,300 were arrested. This orgy of violence was the signal for the army to intervene and suspend the constitution once again.

In May 1992, after another lengthy period of military dictatorship, the king was once again involved in salvaging bourgeois rule amid growing political upheaval. For weeks students, joined by a growing number of workers, academics, young professionals and business people, had been protesting against the continuing domination of military rule. On May 17 a demonstration at the Democracy Monument in central Bangkok swelled to 200,000 demanding the resignation of military strongman General Suchhinda Kraprayoon. The following night the military gave its answer: heavily armed troops and police fired on a large rally at the same spot, killing thousands.

As the country teetered on the brink of civil war, the king intervened to stitch up a deal between the military and the bourgeois opposition to stabilise the situation. In a nationally televised spectacle, Suchhinda and opposition leader General Chamlong Srimuang crawled on their knees, literally, before King Bhumibol and pledged to collaborate to restore order. The military commanders granted a civilian government, but only on condition that they retained a powerful influence in the upper house of parliament and were granted royal amnesties.

Nominally at least, the military have withdrawn from politics. But the Asian economic crisis, which erupted first in Thailand in 1997, has created new social and political tensions as the number of business collapses and unemployment levels have risen. The ruling class is well aware that in the coming period it will require all its political resources—including the monarchy and the army—to deal with the opposition produced by growing social inequality and poverty.

The banning of *Anna and the King* to prevent any stain on the Thai monarchy appears on its face ridiculous. But in the light of historical experience, the decision has more sinister overtones. There is no doubt that some in ruling circles see it as an ideal opportunity to gauge the reaction and prepare the ground for more fundamental encroachments on democratic rights.



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