

# THE CHANGING POLITICS OF THAILAND'S BUDDHIST ORDER

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**ABSTRACT:** Thailand's monastic politics are in turmoil. No longer can the sangha be written off as a political force and viewed simply as a fount of legitimacy for the nation and the monarchy. The role played by a few hundred pro-Thaksin "redshirt" monks in the March to May 2010 mass demonstrations testified to growing unease within the rank-and-file monkhood, which is drawn from the same regions and segments of society as the redshirt movement more generally. But beyond these overt displays of dissatisfaction, the sangha faces a range of serious challenges. While long-standing tensions between the rival Thammayut and Mahanikai orders have apparently declined, a dearth of moral and administrative leadership has paralyzed the Thai monkhood and rendered it seemingly incapable of reforming itself. Competing power groups linked to secular politics are vying for influence within the Supreme Sangha Council, while there is no widely supported successor ready to replace the current supreme patriarch, himself nearly a hundred years old. In many respects, the political paralysis of the monkhood mirrors the wider crisis confronting the body politic of the Thai nation itself.

At the height of the pro-Thaksin "redshirt" demonstrations that convulsed central Bangkok from March to May 2010, an elderly monk was moved from his room on an upper floor of Chulalongkorn University Hospital and transferred to Siriraj Hospital in Thonburi. This apparently unremarkable transfer was of considerable symbolic importance, however, for several reasons. The monk's removal from a hospital surrounded by pro-Thaksin protestors was ordered by Her Royal Highness Princess Sirindhorn. King Bhumibol of Thailand has been residing at Siriraj Hospital since 2008. And the elderly monk was none other than Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, not only the abbot of Wat Bowornniwes, but also the supreme patriarch, the head (literally, the king) of Thailand's sangha (Buddhist order), and the king's personal spiritual mentor since his own ordination

at Wat Bowornnives in 1956. The transfer illustrated the close parallels between the monarchic and monastic institutions and the shared anxieties surrounding their well-being and futures during a time of fervid political upheaval and change. Ironically, the decision of then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–2006) to appoint another senior monk as acting supreme patriarch in 2005 had been one factor that helped trigger popular protests against his government. By openly acknowledging the supreme patriarch's inability to provide de facto leadership of the Sangha, Thaksin had crossed a saffron line in the country's treacherous political sands.

The conventional view of Thailand's Buddhist sangha is that the monastic order legitimates the Thai state, a view suggested by the oft-repeated shibboleth "nation, religion, king." Such an understanding is supported by the centrality of Buddhist rituals and merit-making in the Thai political order, especially in ceremonies associated with the monarchy. The sangha enjoys a structure that closely resembles that of the Thai bureaucracy, and senior Buddhist monks—for all their façade of saffron-robed equality—are engaged in struggles for promotion and status that closely resemble those of army generals or provincial governors. Nevertheless, despite the strong parallelisms between the sangha and the state and constant ritual reiterations of religious and political loyalty by the monkhood, Thailand's Buddhist order is changing rapidly. Just as for more than a decade the majority of Thai voters have supported parties associated with the controversial, self-exiled former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, ousted in the 19 September 2006 military coup—who leads a power network rivaling that of the palace—so the majority of Buddhist monks have sympathies with

Monks attending a makeshift ceremony on the Phan Fa stage for two redshirt protestors who had just been killed, 10 April 2010. (Credit: Nick Nostitz)



Thaksin and the “redshirt” movement,<sup>1</sup> a heterogenous grouping that constitutes his popular grassroots support wing. The hollowing out of sangha support for the traditional institutions of the Thai nation is one of several parallel processes that illustrate the country’s rapid but sometimes largely occluded political transformation. This is not to suggest that the sangha has become overtly disloyal to the monarchy. But many monks have shifted from enthusiastic endorsement of the monarchy-centered power networks that continue to control much of Thailand to a more distant and certainly less wholehearted role in legitimating state power.

This transformation of the sangha has a number of causes. These include the tide of monkly sympathy for the ordinary Thaksin and redshirt supporters—often from the North and Northeast—who share the same background and worldviews. Related to this is the sense many ordinary monks have of themselves as *prai* (literally, serfs or slaves) who are deprived of power and influence in a sangha dominated by an *ammart* (aristocracy) of old men who have run out of energy and ideas. This state of affairs is related to the decline and much weakened condition of the Thammayut denomination, an elite order that has dominated the Thai sangha since King Mongkut created it in the nineteenth century. This is compounded by the weakness of the sangha hierarchy, especially the supreme patriarch and the Supreme Sangha Council, an increasingly enfeebled gerontocracy. Another source of anxiety is the question of leadership succession: the supreme patriarch will be one hundred in 2013 and no widely accepted senior monk is well placed to succeed him. Also salient is the issue of moral and spiritual leadership more generally, in an era that lacks intellectually able monks who can challenge the status quo and promote a culture of reform. Finally, there is the growing influence of the Wat Phra Thammakai movement, which also has close ties to pro-Thaksin politicians. Taken together, these challenges amount to a crisis of legitimacy and credibility for the Thai sangha, one that weakens the legitimacy of the Thai state itself.

As Sombat Chantornvong has noted, citing a royal speech of 24 May 2007, Thailand has been in a state of political crisis for some years. In that speech the King spoke of the country being on the verge of calamity (*jomlom*) and called upon all Thais to make every effort to avert this.<sup>2</sup> The Thai political calamities of recent decades reflect a tension between notions of democracy and a mistrust of the electorate that has underpinned a series of mass street protests, many of them culminating in violence. When Thailand faces a critical juncture and so cannot operate effectively in “party mode,” there is a tendency to shift into the more disruptive and potentially dangerous “rally mode.”<sup>3</sup> This was the case in October 1973, October 1976, May 1992, and more recently from August to December 2008 and from March to May 2010.

At such junctures leadership becomes important. If Thai society is indeed

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1. The terms “red” and “redshirt,” which signify those broadly supportive of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, are used hereafter without quotation marks.
  2. Sombat 2010, 3.
  3. For a discussion see McCargo 2012, 190–98; and Graham 1993.

predicated on an implicit social contract, along the lines Robert Bellah has suggested for the United States,<sup>4</sup> each move into rally mode could be seen as the suspension of that contract and a shift to the politics of polemic and discord. Civil order and the restoration of a social contract require calm voices and moments of reflection. This form of moral leadership is difficult to provide in a Thai context. Whereas in the United States James Patterson could argue that presidents could play the part of secular “prophets” within the nation’s civil or public religion,<sup>5</sup> the special place of monarchy in Thai society means that any prime minister who sought to assume a similar role would soon find himself in trouble—as Thaksin Shinawatra certainly did.

In a predominantly Buddhist society such as Thailand, any such social contract needs to be actively managed by the sangha and especially by prominent figures within the monkhood who are capable of exercising moral, philosophical, and spiritual leadership. It is precisely the paucity of such wise leadership at the national level—ironically, in a society where slogans about “wisdom” are proliferating<sup>6</sup>—that undermines civil order and makes the task of institutionalising liberal and democratic norms so difficult.

The political crises Thailand faced from early 2006 onwards, reflecting intense conflict between network monarchy and supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra, illustrated the emergence of political pluralism in Thailand and the impossibility of sustaining outmoded notions of national unity.<sup>7</sup> The military coup of 2006 exacerbated already deep divisions in Thai society, divisions that grew in salience in the years that followed.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Thailand has now achieved a different understanding of the relationship between nation and monarchy; elected politicians may now invoke support at the ballot box as a valid source of national legitimacy.<sup>9</sup> The lack of a class of moral leaders able to promote progressive ideas has been a major obstacle to the success of Thailand’s democratization project. In other countries, religious leaders—such as South Africa’s Desmond Tutu or the Dalai Lama—have been able to play such roles. But for all Thailand’s intense religiosity, there is a profound deficit of religious-based leadership except at the local level. This deficit reflects the internal political problems of the Buddhist order.

### **The Trouble with Religion in Thailand**

The relationship between the Thai state and the sangha has been described as a “continuous dialogue”—but in this conversation, the state has always spoken with the louder voice.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in other Southeast Asian countries (including

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4. See Sombat 2010, 18. Source here is Bellah 1967.

5. Sombat 2010, 22. Source is Patterson n.d.

6. Various Thai educational institutions have adopted slogans using the term “wisdom,” such as NIDA’s “Wisdom for Change” and Mahidol University’s “Wisdom in the Land.”

7. On the concept of network monarchy, see McCargo 2005.

8. For analyses of the politics surrounding the 2006 military coup, see Connors and Hewison 2008.

9. King Prachadipok’s Institute 2012, 133.

10. Somboon 1982, 7.

Burma and Vietnam) monks have a history of playing a more independent political role, in Thailand the sangha has operated as an instrument of state power and legitimation. Dissident monastic traditions, notably the Lao forest tradition in the Northeast, were systematically curtailed and crushed by the authorities in Bangkok.<sup>11</sup> Sangha Acts passed in 1902 and 1962 testify to state preoccupation with “disciplining” monks and so curtailing their scope for independence and especially for political freedoms. The exception was the more progressive but short-lived Sangha Act of 1941, which reflected the more open politics following the end of the absolute monarchy.

Over the past couple of decades, Buddhism has taken a more conservative ethnonationalist turn, especially since the death in 1993 of the greatest scholar-monk of the twentieth century, Buddhadasa Bhikku. His demise symbolized the diminishing quality of Buddhist “prophecy” in Thailand and a decline in the level of moral leadership offered by the sangha collectively.<sup>12</sup> Such a stance is evident in the growing demands for Buddhism to be recognized as Thailand’s national religion. Whatever its precise lineage, this discursive turn reflects widespread popular anxieties about the growing visibility of other religions, especially Islam, anxieties fueled by the upsurge of political violence in the Muslim-dominated southern border region since 2004.

### The Rise of Redshirt Monks

Since 2005, Thai politics have featured regular mass protests as color-coded groups aligned with different political factions took to the streets of Bangkok. Protests by groups wearing red shirts, broadly supportive of Thaksin Shinawatra, took place in 2009 and 2010. The March–May 2010 protests were violently repressed by the military, resulting in more than ninety fatalities.<sup>13</sup> During the 2010 protests, eleven senior monks were placed under close surveillance by the authorities.<sup>14</sup> They included the rectors of both of the country’s Buddhist universities, the chief of Bangkok’s Monastic Council, the assistant abbot of Wat Saket, the abbot of Wat Phra Thammakai, and leading members of the Buddhist Protection Centre, a nationalistic organization based at Wat Ratchatiwat. The watch list, compiled by the military-led Center for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES), was leaked to the media in an apparently deliberate ploy to reveal the extent of state distrust for elements of the sangha. One of the monks included on the list said that releasing their names made him wonder whether the government still respected the sangha or not. Certainly, if the public naming of supposedly untrustworthy monks was intended to threaten the

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11. The history of this suppression is explored in Kamala 1997.

12. Elsewhere (McCargo 2009) I have contrasted the universalist stance of Buddhadasa with the more particularistic perspective of Prayudh Payutto, who has in effect replaced him as Thailand’s leading monk-scholar. Prayudh does not accept my views and recently published a book in which he strongly articulates his disagreements with me. See Prayudh 2011. Confusingly, Prayudh has published his work under different monastic titles, as he has been regularly promoted through the sangha hierarchy. His current title is Phra Bhrama Khunabarana; his previous titles were Phra Rajavaramuni, Phra Dhevedhi, and Phra Dhammapitaka.

13. For a detailed analysis of the 2010 protests, see Montesano, Pavin, and Aekopol, eds. 2012.

14. For a list of the eleven senior monks blacklisted, see *Thai Rath*, 3 March 2010.



Several hundred redshirt monks camping out at Sanam Luang march to Phan Fa stage, 14 March 2010. (Credit: Nick Nostitz)

sangha and curtail political dissent, the exercise failed— indeed, it seems to have had rather the opposite effect.<sup>15</sup>

It was not simply in the upper echelons of the Thai sangha that political tensions were rising. Some informed analysts suggest that as many as 80 percent of ordinary monks have sympathies with some of the sentiments and ideals of the pro-Thaksin redshirt movement. This is not to suggest that all of these monks are overtly red, let alone that they would be ready to join street protests en masse: only a few hundred have apparently done so to date.<sup>16</sup> Redness is largely a question of degree. Rather, large numbers of monks have roots in the same regions and socioeconomic echelons where Thaksin has the bulk of his support base. Bangkok monks are in some ways the original “urbanized villagers”— boys and men from the countryside who moved to towns and cities to make their way in the world.<sup>17</sup> For them, the monkhood traditionally has provided opportunities for advancement and education that in past decades were very difficult for rural laymen to access. Their instinctive sympathies lie with disadvantaged peoples from the North and Northeast.<sup>18</sup> Such sympathy is compounded for many ordinary monks by their sense of disempowerment within

15. Interview with Phra Metthathamajan, vice-rector, Mahachulalongkorn University, 10 September 2012.

16. Jim Taylor argues that some 400 to 500 monks took part in or offered support for the 2010 redshirt protests. Many followed monastic regulations and attire, though others even sported red flags and headbands themselves. At least five monks were arrested; some of these were forced to disrobe. See Taylor 2012, 290–92.

17. For a discussion of the concept of “urbanized villagers” as a central explanation for the social origins of the redshirts, see Naruemon and McCargo 2011.

18. Sulak Sivaraksa interview, 26 July 2012; Phra Metthathamajan interview, 10 September 2012.

the sangha, which is ruled over by unelected abbots, provincial monastic heads, and high-ranking somdet who form an unaccountable elite within monkly society.<sup>19</sup> In many respects, the sangha is a pre-1932 political order in which the absolute rule of the upper echelons over the lower remains a daily reality. The sangha itself is not democratic in its culture or organization; nor does it provide any clear support for the wider democratization of Thai society. Monks are not entitled to vote.

Suraphot Thaveesak has conducted important research on the political orientation of monks, focusing primarily on the redshirt monk phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> He surveyed more than five hundred monks, including seventy-five who had taken part in redshirt demonstrations; he also conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen prominent monks and a number of scholars of Thai Buddhism. He found that sangha council prohibitions on taking part in political activities were widely disregarded.<sup>21</sup> His survey results—based mainly on samples of students from the monastic universities—found that while a clear majority of Central and Southern monks favored a stance of political neutrality, monks from the North were evenly divided between neutral (49.3 percent) and redshirt-leaning (47.0 percent), while the majority of Northeastern monks favored the redshirts (57.3 percent) over a neutral stance (40.0 percent). Since Isan (the Northeast) accounts for a third of the Thai population, and Isan-born monks are heavily overrepresented among the monastic population generally, these results suggest that a majority of Thai monks outside the South may have redshirt leanings. By contrast, the Santi Asoke movement, which was expelled from the mainstream sangha in the 1980s, has been a core component of the People's Alliance for Democracy, a "yellowshirt" royalist grouping, and has participated in many of their demonstrations, including the extended occupation of Government House in 2008.<sup>22</sup> The charismatic young monk V. Vajiramedhi, a darling of the Bangkok middle classes, is viewed by many reds as a spokesman for the yellow side,<sup>23</sup> while the hysterically entertaining TV star monk Phra Phayom Kluyano is universally regarded as red in orientation. However, the highly respected monk-intellectual Phra Paisal—admired by many in the redshirt movement—offered a strong defense of remaining "neutral," declaring: "I think many monks nowadays do not follow the right principles. They base their judgments more on their personal feelings rather than dharma. This is not dharmocracy, but rather egocracy."<sup>24</sup>

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19. Thanks are due to Nidhi Aeusrivongse for this observation, 30 August 2012.

20. See Suraphot 2011 (Khvamkhit) and the detailed discussion in Suraphot 2011 (Phra).

21. Suraphot 2011 (Khvamkhit), 53. He also argues that such prohibitions have no basis in Buddhist scriptures.

22. Suraphot's discussion of yellow monks is much weaker than his analysis of redshirt monks, partly because he takes Samana Photirak, the leader of the breakaway Santi Asoke movement, as the main representative of yellowshirt monks. This is a misleading view, given that Santi Asoke had not been part of the mainstream sangha for the past twenty-five years.

23. For a critical discussion of Vajiramedhi's controversial 2010 statement that "Killing time is more of a sin than killing people," see [blogazine.in.th/blogs/buddhistcitizen/post/3465](http://blogazine.in.th/blogs/buddhistcitizen/post/3465). For a spoof Facebook page full of Photo-shopped images of the monk, apparently created by his critics, see [www.facebook.com/luangjae](http://www.facebook.com/luangjae) (accessed 4 October 2012).

24. Quoted in Suraphot 2011 (Khvamkhit), 69–70.



Photirak and fellow Santi Asoke ordainees joining a yellowshirt protest against a proposed reconciliation bill outside the Thai Parliament, 30 May 2012. (Credit: Duncan McCargo)

Paisal's unwillingness to defend the redshirt stance, let alone embrace it, illustrates the difficulties redshirt-inclined monks face in identifying clear intellectual and political leadership. A serious weakness with Suraphot's argument is his apparent conviction that Buddhism readily supports democratic and liberal political ideals, when in fact the evidence for such an assertion is very patchy. Yet for all the shortcomings of Suraphot's research—which tends to assume a rather polemical, pro-redshirt tone—the broad thrust of his conclusions is widely supported. Scholars specializing on the sangha are in broad agreement that many or most Thai monks have red sympathies. Such sentiments are overwhelming strong in the North and especially the populous Northeast. Even the so-called Ayuttaya faction (popularly known as Or Yor) of monks from central Thailand who currently hold many senior posts in prominent Bangkok temples are overwhelmingly redshirt in their orientation.<sup>25</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa argues that although many prominent monks never utter a word of criticism concerning the royal family or the ruling order, their partiality to redshirt causes is self-evident.<sup>26</sup> Significantly, no internal disciplinary action was taken against any of the hundreds of monks who took part in redshirt protests in 2010—even those who made provocative antigovernment speeches from the protest stage.<sup>27</sup> This clear reluctance of the sangha hierarchy to discipline “rogue” monks illus-

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25. Interview with two academics specializing on Thai Buddhism, 27 July 2012.

26. Sulak interview, 26 July 2012.

27. Phra Methithammajarn interview, 10 September 2012.

trates the extent to which their actions have been condoned or even tacitly encouraged in the upper echelons of the Buddhist order.

Yet to understand red monks as aligned with progressive, democratic causes against the conservative establishment would be woefully simplistic. Redshirt-aligned monks hold a nationalistic worldview, linked to the fear of other religions and a sense that if the country and its monarchy grow weaker, Buddhism will be under threat. Red monks played leading roles in the campaign to make Buddhism Thailand's national religion—a big issue during the debates surrounding the drafting of the 2007 constitution—and have also called for the setting up of a Ministry of Buddhist Affairs, along with specific legislation to strengthen the position of Buddhism within the Thai state and society.<sup>28</sup> A focal point for these activities is the National Centre for the Protection of Thai Buddhism. Ironically, these same campaigns are also supported by monks and non-monks who see themselves as hardline royalists, often associated with stances adopted by the Queen. They were defeated in 2007 by an alliance of civil society activists and liberal royalists (aligned with the yellowshirt movement) for whom proclaiming Buddhism as Thailand's national religion is a step too far. Liberal royalists believe that the King opposes such a change, which would undermine national unity and lead to greater social conflict. In other words, on this issue many royalists are progressive and most redshirts are reactionary. Indeed the overwhelming majority of Thai monks support the promulgation of Buddhism as a national religion, believing that it would upgrade their status and serve to secure their special position within Thai society.<sup>29</sup> Only a minority of intellectually inclined monks can see beyond these arguments, a further indication of how strongly the nationalist turn has affected Thai Buddhism.

The nationalist turn in Thai public life was supported by interventions such as those of the outspoken late monk Luang Ta Maha Bua, who famously asked supporters to donate their gold to help the nation escape from a national debt crisis following the 1997 Asia financial meltdown. He subsequently turned on the government for wasting the money he had raised and engaged in withering, vituperative, and sometimes unprintable denunciations of former premier Thaksin Shinawatra and all his works. The growing prominence of Luang Ta Maha Bua from the late 1990s illustrated a coarsening of tone in popular discourse, one not merely sanctioned but actively and vocally encouraged by prominent monks.<sup>30</sup>

Thai society and politics in recent years have been overshadowed by three important issues, to which most other questions are linked or subordinated. One concerns that of the royal succession: Thailand is in a state of heightened national anxiety as King Bhumibol enters the twilight years of his reign, with no settled and satisfactory consensus as to who should succeed him. A second concerns the polarization of Thai society into two broad camps: those sympathetic to Thaksin Shinawatra and the ideas and policies he is seen to represent, and

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28. *Ibid.*; Suraphot Thaveesak interview, 14 June 2012.

29. Interview with two academics, 27 July 2012.

30. Informant interview, 11 June 2012.

those who oppose Thaksin and seek to defend the status quo, in which the monarchy, military, and judiciary enjoy veto power over elected politicians. A third issue concerns the capacity of both pro-Thaksin (redshirt) and pro-royalist (yellowshirt) forces to mobilize their supporters, taking to the streets and seizing key locations in the capital city. Each of these three elements—succession anxiety, polarization into two factions, and regular mass mobilizations—has parallels within the Buddhist order itself. In many respects, what happens in the realm of religion may foreshadow the future of both the nation and the monarchy.

### The Sangha and the Question of Succession

Thailand is at core a gerontocracy, in which age and seniority determine formal authority. Army commanders and permanent secretaries of ministries are normally appointed only when on the verge of retirement, and several privy councillors—including Privy Council President General Prem Tinsulanond—are older than the King himself. But nowhere does the gerontocracy system operate so clearly as in the sangha. The sangha is governed by a small committee of senior monks, the Supreme Sangha Council. The core members of this Council are the highest ranking monks in Thailand, eight of whom hold the title of somdet, or prince—the same word used in the title of senior royals. The nonagenarian current supreme patriarch, Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, has not taken part in Supreme Sangha Council meetings since 1999; indeed, since early 2004, he has been residing at Chulalongkorn University Hospital. A committee of monks appointed based on seniority of monastic title has been running the sangha on his behalf since 2003, despite resistance from his supporters who have been reluctant to admit that Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara is no longer able to perform any duties. Although he no longer appears in public, written statements continue to be issued in the supreme patriarch's name, such as contributions to funeral volumes for prominent monks who have passed away.<sup>31</sup>

One of the most controversial actions of Thaksin Shinawatra was his appointment of Somdet Kiaw (Somdet Phutthacharn, abbot of Wat Saket), as the acting supreme patriarch.<sup>32</sup> Opponents of the move argued that this represented a direct challenge to royal powers and prerogatives, although formally speaking, recent legal changes have removed from the monarch the privilege of appointing the supreme patriarch. It was Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara's personal history, as King Bhumibol's spiritual mentor from the time of his ordination at Wat Bowornnives in 1956, that paved the way for his rise to the post of supreme patriarch.<sup>33</sup> Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara assumed his position with the strong backing of both the King and the Queen. Thaksin's choice as acting supreme patriarch lacked such close monarchical connections and was portrayed by former Thaksin ally Sondhi Limthongkul, leader of the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance

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31. A recent such contribution appeared in the cremation volume for the abbot of Wat Chanasongkram, whose funeral took place in February 2012.

32. Significantly, members of the royal family have not patronized Wat Saket. Sulak interview, 26 July 2012.

33. Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn was also ordained at Wat Bowornnives in 1978.

for Democracy (PAD), as an attempt to usurp royal prerogatives.

During Thaksin's administration, proposals for reform of the sangha were advanced, which would have led to new legislation allowing a working committee of younger monks to manage the day-to-day running of the monastic order, relegating the Supreme Sangha Council to a more ceremonial status. Luang Ta Maha Bua organized protests against these proposals, which have remained on hold ever since—despite Maha Bua's own death in January 2011, at the age of ninety-seven.

### Sectarian Tensions in the Sangha

But there was another reason for unease among royalist circles about Somdet Kiew's positioning as the de facto (and possibly soon to be de jure) successor to Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara. Thailand's Theravada order is divided into two major denominations: Mahanikai and Thammayut. In 1833, Prince Mongkut (later King Mongkut of *Anna and the King of Siam* fame) founded the Thammayut movement as part of his plans to reform Siamese Buddhism. The 1902 Sangha Act recognized Thammayut as one of Thailand's two Buddhist denominations, or *nikai*. Thammayut has always been much smaller than Mahanikai, but has enjoyed disproportionately greater influence because of its privileged position as the *nikai* that enjoys greater royal patronage. Some critics have gone so far as to argue that King Mongkut's creation of the Thammayut order created a schism in Buddhism, one of the five worst sins that any Buddhist can commit.<sup>34</sup>

An important juncture in Thai political history was reached in 1932, when in the wake of the end of the absolute monarchy the People's Party, led by Pridi Banomyong and a group of civilians and military officers, developed plans to merge the two *nikai* into a single unified "democratic" sangha. These plans were demonstrated most vividly in the creation of Wat Phra Si Mahathat in Bang Khen on the outskirts of Bangkok, which was built on the site of battles between royalist rebels and government forces during the 1933 Bowaradej Rebellion.<sup>35</sup> This temple was supposed to bring together monks from both *nikai*. In the event, however, by the time the temple was actually constructed it had been hijacked by the militaristic memorializing of the first Phibun era; latterly, Wat Phra Si Mahathat has been known primarily as the favored temple of the Royal Thai Air Force, as well as the site where the ashes of the 1932 "promoters," including Pridi Banomyong and Phibun Songkram, are interred.

In theory, monks from the two denominations alternate to assume the sangha's highest positions. The reality has been a little different. Altogether there have been nineteen supreme patriarchs to date, the first of whom was appointed in 1782. During the early nineteenth century, prior to the creation of the Thammayut order, the abbots of Bangkok's Wat Mahathat had what was effectively a joint appointment as supreme patriarch. After 1833, Wat Mahathat became simply the main temple of Mahanikai and has not produced another su-

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34. For a discussion of the five *anantariya kamma*, the fifth of which is *sanghabbhedā*, "causing schism in the order," see Prayudh Payutto 2012, 179, sect. 245.

35. For a history of this fascinating temple, see Koompong n.d.



The ashes of 1932 revolution “promoters” interred at Wat Phra Si Mahathat, Bang Khen. (Credit: Duncan McCargo)

preme patriarch since. Since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, eight supreme patriarchs have been appointed, three of them from Mahanikai and five from Thammayut. However, the three Mahanikai supreme patriarchs all had short terms in office, totaling only a decade. For seventy of the past eighty years, Thammayut monks have held the office of supreme patriarch. What is more, the last Mahanikai monk to assume the office was appointed in 1963, at the end of the Sarit regime. Since 1965, every supreme patriarch has come from the Thammayut order, partly because of the dark political power plays that blocked the rise of leading Mahanikai monk Phra Phimonlatham, who was accused of being a communist and stripped of high office.<sup>36</sup> The radical legacy of Khon Kaen-born Phimonlatham was regularly invoked by leaders of the redshirt movement during mass rallies in 2009 and 2010.<sup>37</sup>

This long unbroken period of Thammayut dominance has obvious parallels with the long reign of King Bhumibol and reflects the strong interdependence between the Thammayut order and the Chakri dynasty. It reflects the resurgence of the monarchy from the 1960s onwards, from a subordinated role in the political order to a position of immense extra-constitutional authority. Yet the prospects for continuing Thammayut influence are poor. The order is in a weakened condition, has no obvious candidate in line for the supreme patriarch position, and indeed is so intellectually depleted that even many of the lecturers and students at Thammayut’s Mahamakut University now come from the rival Mahanikai order. Thammayut is a shadow of its former glory, clinging to a self-

36. Interview with former disciple of Phra Phimonlatham, 31 July 2012.

37. Jatuporn Prompan, personal conversation, 10 July 2012. Jatuporn also spoke about the Phimonlatham case during a parliamentary no-confidence debate in 2011.

image as a superior, more disciplined, and royally favored order that now appears increasingly fanciful.<sup>38</sup>

From the death of Sarit in 1963 until the election of Thaksin Shinawatra to the premiership in 2001, the monarchy faced no serious rival. Elected politicians, though gaining in power and influence, deferred to royal wishes, enjoyed relatively brief periods of office, and proved unable consistently to mobilize the masses as a support base. Thaksin Shinawatra, police officer turned billionaire telecommunications tycoon, was a different matter. While claims that Thaksin was disloyal to the monarchy are exaggerated, his electoral popularity came as a shock to the palace, which was used to enjoying a monopoly of public affections.

As prime minister, Thaksin did not appear to have an explicit strategy of securing legitimation from prominent monks. Indeed, he committed early some missteps in this regard, making overtures to the arch-royalist Northeastern monk Luang Ta Maha Bua, who later turned on him in the most aggressive fashion.<sup>39</sup> When former Thaksin ally Sondhi Limthongkul began organizing mass rallies against Thaksin in 2005, Sondhi made common cause with Luang Ta Maha Bua, broadcasting a live television show from his temple, on which the monk declared that Thaksin was plotting to overthrow the monarchy (*lom jao*). It was only then that Thaksin began to understand clearly that the Mahanikai denomination, the order of the *phrai* (serfs) as opposed to the order of the *jao* (lords), would be a more natural ally.

From 2005 onwards, Thaksin intensified his collaboration with the Wat Phra Thammakai movement, a controversial outgrowth of Mahanikai that faced serious legal problems in the 1990s and whose abbot was at one point on the verge of being expelled from the sangha.<sup>40</sup> Wat Phra Thammakai is a mass organization, marketing meditation techniques to mainly lower-middle-class followers from whom it solicits substantial donations. In the face of an intellectually and administratively moribund sangha hierarchy, Wat Phra Thammakai represents an oasis of dynamism and private sector-style efficiency. In these respects, Thammakai represents a model that the hidebound monastic hierarchy might emulate.

Prayudh Prayutto was clearly thinking of Wat Phra Thammakai (as well as Santi Asoke) when he wrote,

Some [new movements] develop different interpretations of the Buddha's teachings or different methods of practice and criticize one another for misinterpretation and wrong practices. They neither think of the central Sangha administration as the authority to refer to nor show their trust in its intellectual leadership.... [I]n doing so they can point to weaknesses, drawbacks and perversions in the Sangha itself. This adds even

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38. Thammaiyut monks view their Mahanikai counterparts as "incompletely ordained" and so believe themselves to be the only "real" monks in Thailand.

39. Suraphot Thaveesak interview, 14 June 2012.

40. For a recent discussion of Wat Phra Thammakai, see Cook 2009.



Dhammakaya poster advertising the “100,000 monks” mass ordination project, urging prospective ordainees to make great merit for their mothers. (Credit: Duncan McCargo)

more to the weakening of the sangha’s leadership.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the rise of Wat Phra Thammakai, far from helping to invigorate mainstream Thai Buddhism, may be serving to hasten its decline. In a similar vein, Phra Paisal Visalo has suggested that Wat Phra Thammakai’s influence among the upper, middle, and grassroots levels of the sangha—including over many members of the Supreme Sangha Council—will help it shape the beliefs and practices of Thai Buddhists over the next decade.<sup>42</sup> Not content simply with recruiting followers for its own activities, Wat Phra Thammakai has reached out to a wide range of monks and temples in both main orders, providing financial support to enhance its influence. Wat Phra Thammakai has also boosted numbers of ordinations through aggressive campaigns such as the “Ordination of 100,000” project, which urges Thai men to make merit for their mothers by ordaining as monks, providing them with the funding and infrastructure they need for their ordination. Such newly minted monks are placed in temples all over the country. Critics of Wat Phra Thammakai argue that the movement has an opaque, corporatized culture,<sup>43</sup> and advances some highly questionable

41. Prayudh Payutto 2007, 52–53.

42. Paisal Visalo 2012.

43. The most outspoken critic of Wat Phra Thammakai in recent years has been one of the temple’s former leading monks, Mano Mettanando Laohavanich. See, for example, Mano 2012. The au-

teachings.<sup>44</sup> In 2012, the abbot of Wat Phra Thammakai made some extraordinary claims about the deceased Apple boss Steve Jobs, asserting that he had been able to enter a special meditative state in order to discover Jobs's inner thoughts in the period leading up to his death and the present state of his soul.<sup>45</sup> Thammakai claims about Jobs were ridiculed by prominent monk Phra Phayom, who denounced them as a distortion of Buddhism and a glorification of Jobs's worldly riches and success.<sup>46</sup>

Public furor over issues such as the Jobs controversy were testimony to deeper tensions about the growing influence of Wat Phra Thammakai. Yet Thammakai monks have consistently refrained from allying themselves overtly with redshirt causes or taking part in demonstrations, though the abbot was placed on the March 2010 watch list of eleven suspect monks. However, a number of leading figures from pro-Thaksin parties are closely affiliated with the movement.<sup>47</sup> The elevation of the abbot of Wat Phra Thammakai to a senior monastic title on the occasion of the King's eighty-fourth birthday in 2011 demonstrated that whether or not the powers-that-be really appreciated the movement, they could no longer defer its fuller incorporation into the Buddhist establishment. Like it or not, Wat Phra Thammakai was here to stay.

## Conclusion

Monastic politics in Thailand are a mirror image of the country's secular politics, characterized by deep divisions and uncertainties about the future. Although in theory the sangha forms the central pillar of legitimacy for the established order, in practice that pillar is becoming increasingly hollowed out in ways that have parallels in other state institutions such as the military and the Interior Ministry. While continuing outwardly to perform rituals of national loyalty, many monks are deeply conflicted in their political sympathies and yearn for some form of renewal, both in the Buddhist order itself and in wider Thai society. So long as the monastic gerontocracy continues to monopolize power, any such renewal will be fraught with difficulty. This does not mean that Thai monks are about to take to the streets in the thousands, but it does mean that previous assumptions about the sangha as a stable and unified element of Thailand's monarchical power network need to be revisited. Overall, the majority of Thai monks are now broadly red in their political sympathies. Moral leadership, smooth succession, and organizational unity are proving troublesome and elusive for the Thai sangha, as for Thailand more generally.

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thor claims that he was prevented from giving this paper at a conference at Mahachulalongkorn University in Bangkok owing to the influence of the movement—a claim rejected by the university.

44. See MacKenzie 2008.

45. See the program in question at [www.dmc.tv/pages/en/Where-is-Steve-Jobs/20120822-The-Hereafter-News-Steve-Jobs-where-is-he-now-Part-1.html](http://www.dmc.tv/pages/en/Where-is-Steve-Jobs/20120822-The-Hereafter-News-Steve-Jobs-where-is-he-now-Part-1.html) (accessed 4 October 2012).

46. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtjD10y6Hn4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtjD10y6Hn4) (accessed 4 October 2012) and the following media commentaries: [www.bangkokpost.com/breakingnews/308543/dhammakaya-boasts-steve-jobs-afterlife](http://www.bangkokpost.com/breakingnews/308543/dhammakaya-boasts-steve-jobs-afterlife) and [www.manager.co.th/qol/viewnews.aspx?NewsID=9550000102986](http://www.manager.co.th/qol/viewnews.aspx?NewsID=9550000102986) (accessed 4 October 2012).

47. Mano writes, "Under the first female prime minister of Thailand, Wat Phra Dhammakāya has, for the first time, several hard-core disciples sitting in the parliament." Mano 2012, 510.

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