



‘International relationship ... is a matter of human relations.’

— President Sukarno of Indonesia to His Majesty the King in 1960

# Friendships near and far

His Majesty the King has put a very personal and human face on international relations during his reign, earning for Thailand respect from the global community



On June 9, 2006, Thailand will be celebrating the 60th anniversary of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne. The longevity of his reign is, in itself, truly remarkable, yet what is much more significant is the fact that His Majesty has truly bridged the gap between past and present, traditional and modern, symbolic and realistic, and has redefined the role of the monarch into a truly contemporary sense of the word.

While his royal blood and birthright give him the elevated status that demands obeisance and adoration, his total dedication to his subjects and his country have earned him the love and respect of the people.

"I shall reign with righteousness, for the happiness and benefit of the Siamese people." Made by His Majesty, this was a deceptively simple oath comprising a mere 14 words, yet carrying the weight of a lifetime's sacrifice and devotion that has made the King one of the most beloved monarchs in Thailand's 900-year history.

For 60 years, he has remained true to that oath, working toward the improved and sustained well-being of his people in every remote corner of the country, earning him most recently the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award, which was presented to him by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

This month's joyful celebrations are a far cry, however, from the actual circumstances that marked His Majesty's accession to the throne 60 years ago. It was the most tragic of circumstances — the sudden death of his brother, King Ananda Mahidol — that propelled young Prince Bhumibol Adulyadej, then all of 19 years of age, into his new role.

When he was born 19 years earlier in Boston, Massachusetts, the idea would hardly have occurred to him. His uncle was on the throne as King Prajadhipok, Rama VII. Yet one after another, a series of unfortunate events took place: The death of his father, Prince Mahidol, in 1929; the coup d'etat in 1932 that turned the country from an absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy; the abdication of King Prajadhipok in 1935; and finally, the death of his brother, the King, from a mysterious bullet wound in 1946.

The country that he was to rule could hardly have been in a more turbulent state, economically and politically. Since the 1932 coup, local politics concentrated on the delicate power play between civilian pro-democracy leaders, royalist factions and the armed forces. External political tensions were compounded by the conflict between France and Thailand in 1941 over the Mekong border areas. Thailand's role in World War Two, ignited by the Japanese invasion of the southern coast of Prachuap Khiri Khan, was a delicate balance between its military alliance with Japan and behind-the-lines resistance. Thailand emerged from the war battered, but a recognised ally of the United States. Not long after that, Thailand became embroiled in the Cold War and the anti-communist manoeuvring that were to affect the entire region of Southeast Asia.

Having been brought up most of his life overseas, and protected by his mother, the late Princess Mother, in a bid to allow him as close to a normal childhood as he could possibly have, the situation that he found himself in must have been deeply alien and unnerving. Images of that happy young prince with the mischievous grin cavorting with his family soon became a thing of the past. It was a sombre king who returned to Lausanne to complete his studies, switching from science to law in preparation for his new role.

The next five years was dedicated to his studies, with a break in 1950 during which he returned to Thailand for the cremation of King Ananda



Mahidol, his wedding to MR Sirikit Kitiyakara and his coronation on May 5, 1950. From the time he returned to his country for good in 1951, it was up to him to carve out his own role in the Kingdom while the government, still suffering from incessant coups, regime changes and constitution adjustments, was more than happy to let him hold a symbolic role. According to the Associated Press at the time, the King arrived back from Switzerland to "become immersed in the development and turbulent politics of his own country".

His Majesty lost no time in learning about his own people, using his passion for science and engineering to introduce measures to improve their livelihoods. By 1952, the grounds of Chitralada Villa, his official palace, had been turned into a fish breeding farm, to be followed by other experimental farms and dairies.

In 1955, His Majesty embarked on the first of his countless upcountry trips, choosing the poorest region of Isan as his destination. Not only did these trips allow him to see how his people really lived and the extent of their problems, they also brought him closer to the people who had long been left to their own devices. It had been over 20 years since the country had had a resident monarch, someone who could give them hope and be a unifying factor in times of trouble. And as they had dreamed, His Majesty brought with him the hope of good food — sustainable farming, replacement crops — and good health (health care and medicine). His Majesty opened up a new phase in the Thai monarchy as a king who was in close touch with his subjects far and wide.

By 1957, the government, under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, gained a level of stability that made it possible for the King to conduct the next step in defining his role as a modern Thai monarch. He embarked on a series of state visits that would help him strengthen ties with the global community, gain the respect of world leaders and put Thailand securely on the world map.

As *The Observer* newspaper noted on July 17, 1960, upon the King's arrival in London on a state visit, "His travels have a significance that goes beyond the formal courtesies of such royal progresses, for his object has been to get out of Siam — or Thailand, as it is now called — to get about, and to learn."

In 1960 alone, Their Majesties the King and Queen visited 14 countries within a period of six months, with a gruelling schedule that left little

room for rest and recreation, not to mention having to contend with fevers, exhaustion and lack of sleep.

The first state visits were to countries of regional significance: Vietnam, Indonesia and Burma. The significance of the state visit to Vietnam on December 18, 1959, was immediately reinforced by President Ngo-Dinh Diem in his welcome speech at Tan-Son-Nhat Airport, Saigon. After reiterating his pride at having been selected as the first official visit since His Majesty's accession to the throne, the president said, "This visit will, besides, happily reaffirm the friendly bonds between our two countries, at a time when these bonds need to be reinforced even more. The events which have occurred recently at our borders make sufficiently clear to us, in fact, the intentions of communism and its fellow-travellers.

"The evolution of the international situation, especially in this part of the world, thus makes apparent the necessity of an even-closer solidarity between countries which, like Vietnam and Thailand, defend not only their territorial integrity but also the authentic values of Asian civilisation."

That same evening, during the state dinner in honour of Their Majesties the King and Queen, the president continued, "I am convinced that the Thai people as well as the Vietnamese people, faithful to the authentic values of our common spiritual inheritance, will work together each day in an ever closer co-operation for the safeguard of that which constitutes the very essence of our civilisation and for the maintenance of peace and freedom in the world."

In his speech during the return dinner given in honour of President Ngo-Dinh Diem at the Royal Thai Embassy in Saigon, His Majesty stated, "As our two countries, with similar problems and similar aspirations, stand today in this part of the world for peace, justice and progress, we have everything to gain in joining our endeavours."

His second state visit in February 1960 was to Indonesia, a country with historical ties to Thailand dating back 600 years.

In His Majesty's reply to the speech by President Sukarno at the state banquet in Jakarta, he said, "In this world, no nations, especially those which are situated in the same region, can afford to live alone by themselves. It will take time to smooth out. The people of Asia have just begun to look for each other. Every effort should, therefore, be made to bring these peoples closer together in a spirit of friendship and mutual confidence. With this purpose in mind, your great country, which is abundantly rich in resources and manpower, and mine, can work together on the basis of mutual respect and friendship to achieve greater well being and prosperity for our nations."

"International relationship, like the relationship between Thailand and Indonesia, international relationship in fact is a matter of human relations," said President Sukarno in his reply speech.

The importance of the state visit to Burma was not lost amidst flowery words. "The two countries have learned to overlook the differences of the past and to promote the friendly sentiments of the present in order to secure great mutual benefits in the future. May they show to the world that they are the best of neighbours; and that howsoever future events may unfold, they can always live together in peace and ever labour for their mutual advantage."

Already the signs indicated that His Majesty was no mere figurehead or symbol of a dated system. The penchant for direct and straightforward comments rather than glossing over unpleasant subjects has become His Majesty's trademark, making him even more highly regarded by those for whom honour and truth are defining factors of a good human being.

His speeches were often punctuated with a sense of humour as well, and he used this to great effect during his state visit to the US in June 1960. Aware that the film *The King and I* had caused a bit of a diplomatic embarrassment regarding this visit, he sought to put everyone at ease. At a luncheon given by the Motion Picture Association of America, he said, "I would like now to confide something, just between the King and you. It's about *The King and I*. Although this film was produced with the best of intentions and acted superbly, I may say that it has caused a great deal of adverse feeling and, if shown, might have brought about a serious incident between our two countries. The Thai people have always shown a great reverence to their kings and take it badly if one of their kings is depicted in a comedy. Having seen the film myself, I personally regard it as very entertaining and magnificent, and might have recommended it, had I not known the true historical facts and the sentiments of my people.

"The film, however, has done considerable service to my country. It has been a great piece of public relations for us."

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RIGHT  
◆ Their Majesties the King and Queen welcome Queen Ingrid of Denmark in September 1960.

BELOW RIGHT  
◆ His Majesty King Baudouin, King of the Belgians, welcomes Their Majesties to Belgium in October 1960.

