

## History of Thailand

The periodization in this paragraph uses dates that are generally accepted as milestones in Thai history.<sup>1</sup> The early period of Thai history, and the origin of the Thai people are shrouded in mystery, because the oldest written source is from at earliest 1283 AD.

### Prehistory and Sukhothai era (1238-1376)

Around AD 1000 Tai peoples started to migrate from southern China into the area what now is Thailand. Tai is the term for the Tai race, comprised of various ethnic groups, among which are the modern ethnic Thai, the Shan, and the Tai Dam. These groups slowly replaced the older Mon and Khmer civilizations, intermingling with them in the process. The first Thai centers of civilization were located in north Thailand, and in the course of a few centuries they extended to central Thailand and what is now Laos.

By the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century there were two main Thai kingdoms. Lanna (meaning: a million rice fields) was located in the north with Chiang Saen, and later Chiang Mai, as its capital. To the south of that was Sukhothai, founded as a Thai kingdom in 1238 with an influence all the way down to the Malaysian peninsula. Several other states existed as well, including Phayao and Lopburi. The ruling elite in all these kingdoms were Thai, but the inhabitants came from many different ethnic backgrounds, including Mon, Shan, Lawa, and Khmer. There was a complex web of vassal relationships between the various city-states. States were not thought of as mainly territorial, but as a group of people under a common ruler. The whole region was sparsely populated, and there were large swathes of uninhabited jungle between the cities, which were located on river banks.

Official Thai history, with its central Thai bias, places great importance on the short-lived centralized kingdom of Sukhothai under king Ramkhamhaeng (1279-1298). A famous inscription from his reign proclaims 'there is fish in the water and rice in the fields'. Until today, this phrase is often used to describe Thailand, with the silent satisfaction that Thailand is a good country where everything that is needed for the sustenance of life, is easily available. Sukhothai, however, was quickly overtaken by a new pretender and by 1376 had to accept the sovereignty of Ayutthaya.

### Ayutthaya era (1376-1767)

In 1351, Ayutthaya was founded by the son of a Chinese merchant, a testimony to the far-reaching influence of Chinese throughout Thai history. Ayutthaya was destined to become the main Thai kingdom. It overtook Sukhothai as the leading city, and many other Thai principalities, like Nan, Phrae, and Nahhon Sawan also fell under the sovereignty of Ayutthaya. But to the north, Lanna would remain a powerful rival for centuries to come. To the east there was another major Thai kingdom, Lan Sang.

After 1550, Burmese armies raided and conquered all major Thai kingdoms. Whole areas were laid waste. In 1569 Ayutthaya was sacked. In the decades after that, the Khmer also raided large parts of Thai territory. King Naresuan was the one to first organize the defence against the Khmer, and then win independence from the Burmese. In 1598 he confirmed Ayutthaya's place as the premier Thai kingdom by placing Lanna under its suzerainty. After that, Ayutthaya continued to grow in size, importance, and splendour.

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<sup>1</sup> The information in this paragraph is mainly based on David K. Wyatt, *A short history of Thailand*, second edition, New Haven, 2003, and Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: the History of the Geo-body of a Nation*, Honolulu, 1994.

During this period the first foreign relations with European powers began. The first Siamese diplomatic mission to Europe was to the Netherlands in 1608, and for almost 200 years the Dutch were the main international trading partners of Siam. Under king Narai (1656-1688), the Dutch influence slowly waned, and the French became more important. In 1688, after a tumultuous period involving the Dutch, the French, and the English, there was a backlash against the foreign influence. Ayutthaya had developed economic, bureaucratic and legal institutions that enabled it to control a large territory and to sustain a metropolis of about one million inhabitants. Its weaknesses, however, were lack of “mechanisms of the transfer of political power from one generation to the next” and its “inability readily to mobilize its labor”.<sup>2</sup> These weaknesses led to the eventual sacking of Ayutthaya by a Burmese army in 1767.

### **Thonburi-Bangkok era: absolute monarchy (1769-1932)**

The reconstruction of the Thai kingdom fell to the Sino-Thai governor of Tak, Taksin (1769-1782). He was the only one who organized meaningful resistance against the Burmese after the fall of Ayutthaya. He conquered Thonburi, a small port close to the sea, and made that into the new capital in 1769. However, Taksin eventually developed paranoia, mistreated his subjects and even family members, and got extreme religious ideas that threatened a schism in Thai Buddhism. In 1782 Taksin was put to death in a palace revolution, and the army leader, another Sino-Thai, who was on an expedition to Cambodia and may or may not have been involved in planning the execution of Taksin, was invited to become king.

The new king was Rama I (1782-1809), the first of the dynasty that is on the Thai throne to the present. Rama I moved the capital to the other side of the river, where he changed the small village of Bangkok into the new city of Krungthep (the Thai name of Bangkok). From the beginning, the new king supported Buddhism by restoring the monkhood, building temples, and reestablishing many Buddhist state ceremonies. Additional battles with Burma followed, but those proved to be the last time that Burma threatened the existence of the Thai kingdom.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the kingdom of Siam more and more developed the bureaucracy needed to centralize power. The vassal-kings, who had been largely independent, were increasingly pulled into the system and became more accountable to the Bangkok hierarchy. Bangkok’s influence in the peninsula and in the north grew. In the east, the king of Vientiane rebelled and made a move for Bangkok that took him all the way over the Khorat plateau to Saraburi, only 100 kilometers from Bangkok. But the Siamese army responded in time, recovering the lost cities and even occupying Vientiane. During this period new cities were founded on the Khorat plateau, which had been extremely sparsely populated up to that time.

The reign of king Mongkut (1851-1868), Rama IV, was the beginning of a new period. Mongkut had been a monk for many years, and had strong ideas about restoring Buddhist orthodoxy. He was also interested in modern developments in the world. At the same time it was clear that in the future the main political tensions would no longer be with the Burmese, Khmer, and Vietnamese, but with the colonial powers of England and France.

In 1855 the Bowring treaty was signed, after England threatened Siam with the use of force. In the treaty Siam promised to lower import duties and export taxes considerably, and the government’s trading monopolies were ended. These had been the mainstay of government income and the source of wealth for the ruling elite. However, after just one year, “the difference was made up

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<sup>2</sup> Wyatt, p. 120.

mostly by strengthening excise monopolies in opium, gambling, alcoholic spirits, and the lottery”<sup>3</sup>. At that time it was not possible to differentiate between the personal and government business of the government officials. The peasant population was just seen as servants of the state officials. The further opening up of Thailand to foreign trade through the Bowring treaty led to the commercial planting of rice, which quickly became the primary export commodity.

Soon after the Bowring treaty comparable treaties were made with other countries. This was a conscious effort on the part of the king to guarantee that Siam would not be dependent on just one of the colonial powers. Mongkut tried to use diplomacy to keep England and France out of his sphere of influence, but could not prevent their nibbling on the edges of the kingdom. France took over Cambodia, a long-time vassal. The English had their way in some of the Malaysian states for which Siam used to be suzerain.

In 1868 Mongkut died, and his 15 year old son Chulalongkorn succeeded him. Suriyawong, a member of the Persian family that for generations had held important posts in the Thai government, acted as his regent. Once Chulalongkorn started to take the affairs of state in his own hands it soon became clear that he was a reformer. He issued royal decrees to make the bureaucracy more efficient and worked on the abolition of slavery. In 1892 he instituted the first cabinet, mainly staffed by younger brothers and later some of his many sons (in total he had 77 children). In 1893 the most humiliating experience of Chulalongkorn’s reign occurred. He was forced to give up suzerainty over Laos because of French land hunger in South-east Asia. This was part of a pattern that had started earlier. According to Wyatt the kingdom of Siam ceded 456,000 square kilometers of territory from 1867 to 1909,<sup>4</sup> almost half of its total. Winichakul however convincingly argues that that claim is not true,<sup>5</sup> because during that period there was no strong sense of territory. There was not yet a ‘geo-body’ that could be mapped, and Bangkok’s hold on some of the ceded territories was tentative. The historical construct of an ideal Thailand, that in reality never existed, redirects attention from the victims of Bangkok’s expansionism (the minor kingdoms, regional powers, and ethnic minorities) to Thailand as a victim of the colonial powers. It would be more correct to portray the emerging state of Thailand as a regional colonial power. When Chulalongkorn died in 1910 Thailand had assumed its current shape, and had grown into a centralized state, with Bangkok having the possibility to project its power all over the kingdom. After Chulalongkorn’s death, an elite civil society started to develop. A hunger for more democracy existed, particularly among civil servants who had studied abroad.

### **Modern Bangkok era: constitutional monarchy (1932-present)**

In 1932, a bloodless coup took place to demand a constitution, and the king decided not to resist. Thus came the end of absolute monarchy in Thailand. Democracy did not come easily though. Before long the influence of the military, the only well-organized body, was paramount. Phibun, the most forceful of the military party, became prime minister in 1938. He was an authoritarian leader who espoused nationalistic policies. During World War II Phibun more or less reluctantly decided to give the Japanese free passage through Thailand. Towards the end of the war he was removed from office to allow others to take part in the typical Thai maneuvering between the major powers, to come out of the war as unscathed as possible. In 1948 however, Phibun grabbed power again, and this time he remained Prime Minister for 9 years.

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<sup>3</sup> Wyatt, p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> Wyatt, pp. 192-193.

<sup>5</sup> Thongchai, pp. 150-152.

During these years, and also in the decades afterwards, the military held most of the real power. The many coups in this period were mainly results of quarrels about the division of spoils between the various cabinet ministers and high military officers. During the same time Thailand became more and more an integral part of the global community, as signified by Thailand's acceptance as a member of the United Nations in 1946, the second year of the UN's existence.

The Prime Minister decided to bring the king back into the spotlight in 1958. Since 1932 the monarchy had vanished from the public eye. But now it became clear that the young king Bhumibol (1946-present), Rama IX, was extremely popular, and was still revered almost as a god. In the following decades the presence of the king proved to be a moderating factor in national life. Several times the king played a role in restoring law and order to the country. In 1972 he intervened on the side of democracy; in 1976 he supported the military suppression of protests by radical students.

In 1992 another military coup occurred. By now the middle class in Bangkok had grown so much that this was no longer acceptable. After protests, and a new intervention by the king, elections were held. For fourteen years after that Thailand was governed by civil governments. Cabinets filled with businessmen and with what the Thai media euphemistically call 'influential persons' who built up parties, or factions within parties, based on patronage rather than on any perceptible differences in political philosophy. Thaksin Shinawatra became the first Thai politician to gain a majority in the legislature for his own party in 2001. In the next elections in 2005 he received a larger majority than before, mainly because his populist policies were attractive to rural voters. However he lost favour with the middle class because of his brusque personality and allegations of corruption. In 2006 a military coup, supported by the middle class and legitimized by the king, prevented Thaksin from winning another election victory. However, at the end of 2007 new elections were held and Thaksin's old party, re-organized under a new name, swept back to power.

(This article is paragraph 2.2. of Marten Visser, *Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand*, 2008.)