



King Mongkut's Political Stability during the Era of Colonialism

Shanasuek Wisetchai

Faculty of Humanity and Social Science, Phranakhon Rajabhat University, Bangkok, 10220 Thailand

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Abstract

The objectives of the research were: 1) to examine the factors affecting political stability during King Mongkut's reign and 2) to investigate strategies King Mongkut established for political stability during the influence of colonialism. The study was conducted as qualitative research by gathering data from documentary research and in-depth interviews. The documents consisted of primary documents which included chronicles, royal documents and announcements, and the secondary documents which included research, book and articles. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 informants who are historians and political scientists. The data were interpreted and analyzed descriptively.

The results revealed that: 1) the factors affecting political stability of King Mongkut included external and internal factors. External factors included the spread of British and French influence into the regions and territories which affected the stability of the Kingdom of Siam and the King. The internal factors included the outdated governance which weakened the royal power of the monarch, the power and influence of the Bunnag family who controlled large amounts of people and forces, and the royal power of the King's younger brother who was popular with the Siamese citizens and foreigners. 2) King Mongkut implemented strategies in order to establish his political stability which consisted of building political acceptance to gain civil support and international acceptance. As well as managing effectively in politics and tensions by implementing coordinated policy towards Western nations demands and threats. As a result of the royal actions, the Kingdom of Siam was able to maintain its independence without being occupied by Western powers, and the King securely reigned the country until the end of his life.

Introduction

Colonialism is a phenomenon that occurred from the 15th - 19th century, a phenomenon that the European countries had explored the world and occupied lands and territories in different parts of the world gaining wealth

by exploiting other lands' resources (Hoffman, 2015). Dominating other interior nations in favor of extraction of the colony's wealth, employing the military and diplomatic forces means to occupy and seek benefits by utilizing the people and resources of the colonized region around the world (Veracini, 2010). Great Britain and

* Corresponding Author
e-mail: shanasuek.wis@gmail.com

France in 19th Century had competitively played the significant role in colonizing lands and expanding trade influence. Thailand (Siam) located in the strategic location, connected to Burma, Indochina, and Malay sultan states (Auslin, 2004), and rich in economic resources was the target of these western countries' interests.

King Mongkut, the 4th king of Chakri dynasty, reigned in Thailand during the western threats of intensive escalation and threats to the sovereignty of the country and the security of the throne (Nana, 2008). Internationally, acclaimed philosopher, King Mongkut, talented in languages, astronomy, foreign affairs and governance, had ruled the country for 17 years. During his reign, the king changed political and governance norms that were the foundation for the development of the country in many aspects (Plainoi, 2001). Under the threat of Western expansion and colonialism which was being intensified, the stability of the king as the head of state was highly important as it was not only crucial for the existence of the king, but also the state.

Political stability is a state of controlling power and authority firmly and safe from violent resistance that could potentially destroy the government or rulers (Dhiravekin, 2004). Being politically stabilized is explicitly essential during challenging times; and even more crucial in monarchy system when the king as the head of a kingdom does not absolutely control the governance. The ability of the monarch in establishing political stability during the cruel threat was beneficial in preserving the nation's sovereignty and political regime. King Mongkut had implemented various measures responding to internal and external political conditions threatening the kingdom and his throne; embracing western knowledges, initiating the modernization, and managing internal politics wisely, as a result the King had preserved the nation's sovereignty and maintained his political stability throughout his reign.

It is crucial and well worth examining what the monarch implemented to protect the nation and maintain the stability of the King during the violent threats of Western colonialism. The facts will create awareness for Thai people regarding the struggles the country has encountered and the enormous efforts the former king made to uphold the country's independence and foster national development. Therefore, it leads to the objectives of this research which are to thoroughly examine the variables influencing King Mongkut's political

stability as well as how the King established his political stability.

Objectives

- 1) To examine the factors affecting political stability during King Mongkut's reign.
- 2) To investigate how King Mongkut established his political stability during the influence of colonialism.

Methodology

1. Data Collection

This is qualitative research by collecting data via documentary researching and In-depth interviews. The primary documents include chronicles, royal documents, royal announcement, the archives and contemporary records, and secondary documents that included related articles, analysis and books.

2. Population and Samples

As this research is qualitative research focusing on historical and political topics, the population are the academics in history and political science. The key informants include 5 historians and 5 political scientists who were purposively selected as the research sample group.

3. Research Instrument

The instrument used in this research was an interview form conducted with the selected sample group. The framework of questions asked included the internal and international political conditions during the reign of King Mongkut, factors related to the King's political stability, the policies or strategies of the King to create political stability, and the achievement of political stability of the King.

4. Data Analysis

The data obtained from documents and interviews were sorted. The triangular check was used to verify the accuracy of the information. Data analysis techniques included Content Analysis, Interpretation, and Descriptive Analysis.

Conceptual Frameworks

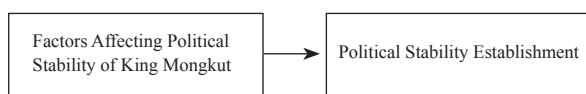


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Results

1. Factors Affecting Political Stability of King Mongkut

Factors that affected political stability of King Mongkut consisted of various external and internal factors. The external factors consisted of the spreading of western colonization by expanding their powers into the region which affected the security and stability of the Kingdom of Siam. The internal factors were the outdated governance system, the influence of the Bunnag family, and the royal power of Prince Chutamani, his brother. The combination of all these factors influenced King Mongkut to carry out strategic policies to stabilize his throne and to secure the sovereignty of the kingdom, as well as his monarchy regime.

Considered as the external threat to the nation, Great Britain and France, the significant western powers who spread their power in the Southeast Asia Region, as well as Siam. In the 19th century during the reign of King Mongkut the 2 major nations intimidated the independence and security of the country known as Siam at that period of history. Great Britain's colonies in India and Malacca peninsular connected to the territory of Siam making the royal court of King Mongkut to have direct contact with the British interest. Controlling trade routes in Malacca, and seeking advantageous trade opportunity, Great Britain had disputes with Siam over land and trade agreements that could have escalated to violence. What Great Britain had done to China by violently threatening the sovereignty of the greatest Asian empire, in the consequence of in compliance to British trade agreement, was the action that would be applied to Siam and other nations if they failed to fulfill and respond to the British' demands. In the meantime, France, another western nation was trying to gain access to the south of China and wishing to gain wealth via exploring the lands, occupied Indo-China peninsular. The French ambitious to control the region was threatening the land under Siamese protection, and even Siam itself.

The outdated governance system was an internal factor affecting King Mongkut's political stability. Ancient Thai feudal social system or Sakdina, the social hierarchy assigning rank to citizens who were subject to serve their precedence in society, especially to the nobility. Hence, the King did not hold absolute power (Sereerangsang, 2018). Under this outdated governance system, the central administration had decentralized power to nobilities both in central and regional units, and the nobilities autonomously controlled

their men affecting most of the major state works including warfare that depended on the nobility's orders. These characteristics had weakened the stability of the King's power.

The Bunnag, appointed in major positions, controlled international trade and ruled people and the army in eastern and southern cities of the kingdom, and were the most political influential noble family since the reign of King Rama III. The Bunnag clearly demonstrated their power by suppressing the opposite royal members whom they considered as a threat to their interests. Playing the significant role in supporting King Mongkut ascending to the throne after the death of King Rama III in 1851 meant they were clearly marked as the most powerful noble group in the kingdom which could definitely affect the stability of the King. Moreover, the power of Prince Chutamani, King Mongkut's brother, also influenced the stability of the royal throne as the Prince had control over a large number of armies. While the King was lacking of any supporting troops due to his 27 years in monkhood in which he was unable to accumulate any wealth and forces.

2. Political Stability Establishment of King Mongkut

Political stability is a combination of the word "stability" which means continuity and unchanged and the word "politics" refers to activities involved in power and influence in dealing with various types of interests or the distribution of value patterns in society which depends on power (Lasswell, 1936), therefore; political stability means the state of being in power in order to be able to exercise power to manage or distribute resources and interests to the members in such a political society. As well as not being violently opposed to the cause of the loss of power, if there is any change, it will be an orderly change under the rules of the governing regime (Dhiravekin, 2004).

As the factors affecting King Mongkut's political stability included the spread of British and French influence into the regions and territories, the outdated governance system, the power and influence of the Bunnag family, and the royal power of his younger brother, the king had to strengthen his political post by; a) creating political legitimacy to gain political acceptance and support towards political system and rulers, and b) building effectiveness in politics and manage all tensions.

a. Creating political legitimacy to gain political acceptance and support towards political system and rulers

Political acceptance is strongly based on political legitimacy which refers to the perception on the governor or government having the right to coercively impose and enforce laws, or basically to use the power. Legitimacy is basically founded on the political norms in a specific culture; individuals believing that the ruler, as an authority, conducts himself or herself appropriately in accordance with social standards and norms (Dhiravekin, 2004). In monarchy system, the divine right establishes the political legitimacy of the monarch's rule; legitimacy also derives from popular perception (tradition and custom) and acceptance of the monarch as the rightful ruler of nation. Legitimacy can be divided into two categories: foundational legitimacy and contingent legitimacy. Foundational legitimacy refers to a government's capacity to ensure the safety and security of its citizens, while contingent legitimacy applies when governments exercise their authority in ways that are deemed acceptable (Mittiga (2021). Legitimacy contribute to political acceptance which leads to political support (Lipset, 1964), in contrast; the lack of legitimacy creates a negative perception among the people against government or rulers which could lead to disobedient, intolerant and eventually rebellious. Therefore, the political acceptance which is contributed by legitimacy is one of the foundations in establishing political stability.

As the legitimacy is the right and acceptance of an authority which includes the governing law, regime and ruler, people commonly acquiesce that the ruler, rightly appointed by the law and the social norms, has the justification to exercise power. Internationally, King Mongkut had projected to the major western royal courts the image of him as the King of a civilized kingdom who was legitimately in power to rule over the lands in the region. Hence, all the major western nations selectively treated Siam in a different manner- contacting and negotiating directly via royal-appointed ambassador.

Local wise, as the legitimacy of the monarchy regime was strongly based on the perception of people towards the rightness of the king, King Mongkut established political acceptance by conducting himself as a Bodhisattva; a person aiming to gain Buddhahood in the future, incarnation to earth in order to help people. In complying to the belief regarded to the ruler in Buddhism ideology, the king had publicly showed that he was highly concerned about his citizens' problems and grievances, and then solved them promptly to the well-being of his people. As a result of the royal

practices, the king had gained support by people which contributed to his political stability.

b. Building effectiveness in politics and managing all tensions

Political instability is caused by a failure in solving tensions pressured onto political system. There is a strong connection between the effectiveness and stability of government. In general, effectiveness is the capability of achieving desired outputs. The effectiveness in politics and managing tensions is the outcome in alleviating demands or eradicating political pressures which explicitly relates to the ability of government or authority. The unsolved political conditions and demand indicates the incapability of government and may lead to distrust on government. A lack of confidence on government breaks people support, and may lead to severe protest against the government (Miljkovic and Rimal 2008). As political tension and crisis strongly harm the stability of government, or ruler as individual, the ability in eradicating such tension is essentially crucial. The outside forces such as foreign policies and interest potentially affect the stability of governments due to contrasting national interests and may escalate to conflict and crisis (Huntington, 1965). If the government is unable to deal with such conditions effectively, it will affect its security and stability.

King Mongkut apparently realized that he had no strength to secure the stability of the throne as he had to rely on the power of the Bunnag family. To establish effectiveness in political management, therefore; the King created the balance of power in his royal court by appointing Prince Chatmani, his younger brother who had commanded a large number of troops as the second king named Pinklao. King Pinklao had the equal honor the same as King Mongkut. King Pinklao's influence made the Bunnag family more circumspect in their use of power. Crowning his royal brother as the second king was not only advantageous for managing power with the Bunnag family, but also to prevent his brother from challenging his own position. King Pinklao formally expressed his desire to take the throne after the death of King Rama III. This meant that by placing King Pinklao as the same honor to himself caused the relationship between them to remain peaceful throughout his reign. Nevertheless, King Mongkut had gained strong support from the Bunnag family.

To gain the Bunnag family's support and loyalty, since they played a significant role in supporting King Mongkut to succeed the throne in 1851, the King

maintained them in their positions to allow them to be involved and take accountability in governance as key state stakeholder. The King promoted Did and Tat, the senior members of Bunnag family to Somdet Chao Phraya, the highly special rank of nobility, and regents of the kingdom. All the key members of Bunnag were also promoted, especially Choung, Did's eldest son, was made Chao Phraya Sri Suriyawong who later played prominent roles in government and foreign relations. During the negotiation process of the Bowring Treaty, the treaty that brought a huge change in economic and society of Siam, seven high rank officials were authorized full power by the King to negotiate the treaty, within these numbers, four of them were Bunnag members, indicating that the King believed the Bunnags were an important political group sharing the kingdom's interests. Appointing the Bunnag members to be involved in the negotiation allowed them to be able to defend their interests, as well as the interests of the kingdom. The King distributed political interests to a highly influential group, and as a result he gained strong support from this nobility family. This was considered as the King's strategies to build effective political management.

To effectively respond to external threat; the spread of British and French influence into Southeast Asia region, King Mongkut contributed to effectively managing tension. The King was fully aware that under colonialism, the Western countries prioritized their own interests over the sovereignty and independence of other countries. The fall of sovereignty and the end of the dynasty could be caused by violent forces if his royal court did not conciliate with their demands.

The King was aware that the British Empire was focusing more on free trade with partial restrictions or tariffs, nevertheless; they still used forces to control the lands in which they had interests. To ease the tension threatened by the British Empire, the King flexibly responded and cooperated with the British intention, even though he would loss some trade control in the kingdom and the influence over the areas connected to the British colonies. The King compromised with British demands by welcoming British envoys for negotiations which then led to the agreement on The Bowring Treaty in 1855. The Bowring Treaty allowed Britain to have a consulate in Bangkok and complete extraterritorial powers in Siam (Ingram, 1971). While France, firstly established its colony in Southeast Asia by occupying Vietnam in 1862, was expanding its influence in the east of Siam. France, desired to occupy Cambodia as a method to access

Southern China. Cambodia was a Siamese tribute state, so France forced pressure on Siam. The King vigilantly evaluated the situation and implemented the proper policy to ease the tensions. Being tolerant to the pressure, the King signed a treaty with France in 1867 (Chandler, 1992) confirming that Cambodia was under French Protectorate, in exchange for control of some eastern provinces which included Battambang and Siem Reap. The King's response somewhat satisfied France which definitely contributed to the stability of the king.

As a result of King Mongkut's actions in various fields during his reign to respond to resolve external and internal political stability factors, the King effectively maintained political stability of the kingdom and to himself. The result of his foreign policy with the West in gaining international recognition that his government was the government of a civilized kingdom as well as having cordial relations with the royal courts of Western nations. The King made concessions to major Western nations allowing Siam to maintain its independence without being occupied. More importantly, the King's political stability was preserved.

Discussion

The research found that the influence of nobility such as the Bunnag family, affected King Mongkut's political stability. This is consistent with the results of a study by Sukanya (Bamrungsuk, 1982), which found that the Bunnag nobles were immensely powerful because they controlled important positions, especially the Ministry of Defense. The Bunnag family rise to noble status was due to the situations both inside and outside the country contributing to the Bunnag family becoming the most influential nobles. The Bunnag family played a significant role in the appointment of a new monarch: King Mongkut. Hence, the Bunnag family dominated the royal court during the transition period to a new reign. This is consistent with Therdpong who stated that the Bunnag family had a prominent role in supporting King Mongkut to ascend to the throne and later the King needed to rely on their support, indicating the most powerful nobility in the kingdom (Kongchan, 2004).

The research revealed that the outdated governance system was an internal factor affecting King Mongkut's political stability as the governance powers were scattered to nobility in foreside cities. Attajak (Sattayanurak, 1988) proposed that under changing conditions and circumstances which pushed King Mongkut to concentrate his power, therefore the absolute

monarchy was firstly established in his reign. As an absolute monarchy is commonly established in modern state which needs to have valid state boundary and unified people sharing the common national values, this research argues that the governance system in the reign of King Mongkut was still clearly decentralized; power still was allocated in various cities and towns, with both central and regional nobles playing roles in governing by controlling their own troops and resources. The reason Attajak might have made such a statement is the historical event where the King carried out the boundary delimitation between Siam and Britain in 1864. Despite such a delimitation, which was aimed to create state territory to stop Britain from expanding their power into the kingdom, there was no technology that could effectively determine the certainty of the boundaries. At that period of history it was not yet possible to forge the people to have a common sense of one kingdom. Since the centralization of the king's power was still ineffective, the attribution of the absolute monarchy in his reign had not yet occurred.

The research's finding on the topic of effective political management and managing tensions showed that King Mongkut's had performed effective politics administration by coordinating benefits with the nobles in order to give them the opportunity to participate in managing the country's interests as the key stakeholders. The King appointed Bunnag family member to control important positions, especially armed force control, trade and international affairs. Giving a sense of national administration ownership was not only to remunerate the Bunnag family for supporting the King to the throne, but also to prevent them from insubordination or resistance in case their interests got interrupted by Western demands. This is consistent with Terdpong's conclusion stating that the King was obliged to reward the Bunnag nobles for their role in the royal court as an important and prominent group in supporting the throne, this allowed the Bunnag family to continuously preserve and attain interests, especially in foreign trade (Kongchan, 2004). However, Therdpong mentioned that rewarding the Bunnag family to administrate the key positions of the kingdom had prevented the King from showing his full wisdom in political management. This does not align with this research finding which argues that the King was a talented and outstanding monarch of the Chakri dynasty. Handling the colonization threats during his reign intelligently, he performed a high competency in foreign policy and diplomacy.

In regards to the establishment of political support from people via creating political legitimacy, the research revealed that King Mongkut had conducted himself as a Bodhisattva who had high legitimacy to the throne as per Siamese norms. This is consistent with the results of the study of Sara Meephonkij stating that the King had preserved traditional knowledge and advanced the beliefs for the benefit of maintaining his stability and as a result he gained support from people who were influenced by the norms and beliefs (Meephonkij, 2012). This finding is also aligned with the study of Thongtong who found that the King had communicated to his citizen that he was a legitimated king who highly cared for his citizens well-being which made him accepted and supported by the people (Chandransu, 2010).

The research found that King Mongkut projected the image of the king of a civilized kingdom who legitimately owned power in ruling over the lands and tribute states in the region. This international projection created effectiveness in political management making major Western nations implement their policies with specific protocols. This finding aligns with Suwinya's (Imkiat, 2009) which stated that the king had improved the country's image in order to eliminate the Western's pretext claiming the right to occupy other lands due to being an uncivilization. The image adjustment and building resulted in the Western policy towards Siam being classified as a special status compared to other territories.

The research finding showed that King Mongkut contributed political stability by coordinating interests with Western powers. The King pursued a compromised policy by sacrificing some interests in order to preserve the independence of the country and stability of himself in order to alleviate tensions in the political system. This is consistent with the study of Kornkamol (Seekao, 2006) which proposed that the King was definitely unable to ignore Western demands threatening the kingdom's independence. As the King was fully aware that a harsh policy towards western countries was ineffective as evidenced by the loss of Myanmar in 1852, the King prudently carried out coordinative policies.

In terms of monarchy in the present time, Bogdanor (2003) argued that the monarchy has lost much of its magic but retains support on utilitarian grounds as a practical solution to the problem of sustaining constitutional and democratic government. Bogdanor also argued that the monarchy is subject to support the political regime, otherwise they would lose the stability.

This clearly shows that the monarchy's stability, even in the present time, depends on the acceptance of the people and being in accordance with the current political system. Hence, in order to establish such acceptance, the monarchy should act in enhancing the well-being of the people as well as the political regime. Bogdanor's study is aligned with this research result which found that the political stability establishment of King Mongkut comprised of "building political acceptance to gain civil supports" as the key component. The acceptance was based on the people's perception toward the King such as being politically legitimated in accordance with the political regime and he clearly projected himself to be the ruler who was highly attentive to the well-being and the needs of the people. Therefore, to establish political stability, both historically and present time, the common essential foundations include the people's acceptance and political legitimacy.

Conclusion

King Mongkut was a philosopher and talented king of Thailand, he reigned during the Western threats which were intensively escalating and threatening to the sovereignty of the country. The King's lack of wealth and force was due to his time of being a monk for almost 3 decades. The outdated government, decentralization governance, and the influence of nobility, as well as the western colonization threats influenced the King to implement political stability strategies. Projecting and demonstrating political legitimacy in accordance with social norms was practiced in order to gain political acceptance which was the essential foundation of public support. Allocating interests to major nobility groups, creating balance of power in the royal court, and avoiding confrontation by compromising with foreign demands were conducted by the King to create effectiveness in politics and manage tensions. By implementing the discussed strategies in this research, the King successfully established political stability.

Suggestions

1. Government agencies should publicize the royal performance of King Mongkut in how he preserved the nation's independence during Western colonization. This would lead to increase awareness on how the monarchy had contributed the sovereignty and flourishing of the country.

2. Ministry of Education should promote students' awareness and pride of being Thai by increase

focus on teaching Thai history. Awareness should be focused on the events in protecting the country from colonization during the reign of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn.

3. In the field of political science, the courses should include political stability topic. The course administrators should insert knowledge of political stability of the monarchy in pre-modern times to ensure learners have a profound understanding of the monarchy system, in the view of evolutionary changes. This would aid students to connect their knowledge to the present situations and to have profound understanding in current social and political phenomenon.

4. Future research should be conducted as comparative studies in the preservation of national independence in Asian countries during the spread of colonialism in the 19th century between Thailand and Japan or China, which were the countries that were not colonized by the West. Such research would increase the understanding of the politics during the historical periods.

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