



PRINCE PRISDANG AND THE PROPOSAL FOR THE FIRST SIAMESE CONSTITUTION, 1885¹

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Abstract

The proposal for the Siamese Constitution in 1885 was initiated by Prince Prisdang, the Siamese minister in Paris, as a counter measure against the colonial powers which were annexing territories under the pretext that people had to be freed from despotic rule and that natural resources should be properly managed for mankind. The proposal was made against the background of the fall of Upper Burma and, to some extent, the progressive ideology of the Young Siamese Club, a secretive “Young Turk” group headed by King Chulalongkorn himself, with Prince Prisdang as one of its members.

“...War on the Vietnamese and Burmese fronts should be over. The problems will now be on the Westerners’ side. Take care that they do not take advantage. Whatever they do or think, learn and apply accordingly. But do not become totally subservient to their way.”

King Rama III’s utterance on his death bed, 1851

The reason Prince Prisdang, who was the Siamese minister in Paris, initiated the Constitution of Siam in 1885 was principally due to the pressing need to reform the government of the country under threat of colonialism. However, a personal penchant for reform and social egalitarianism also played a part.

In the nineteenth century, territories around Siam fell one by one to the two competing colonial powers, Britain and France. While Siam accepted politics in the international arena by setting up permanent missions in Europe and establish-

¹ This paper is an elaboration on the lecture *Prince Prisdang and the Proposal for a Siamese Constitution in 1885* given at the Siam Society on 19 November 1985. An abridged version of the lecture was published in *South-East Asian Studies Newsletter*, No. 22, British Institute in South-East Asia, Bangkok, January 1986.

The term “First Siamese Constitution” in the title is up to debate since Inscription 1 of Sukhothai, dated 1292, can be regarded as Siam’s first written constitution with its references to government, succession, freedom of occupation and trade, duties limitation and right of royal appeal.

ing dialogues with the West, Burma under King Thibaw, still believing in military might with French armaments (which proved to be an empty promise), adopted an unconciliatory policy towards Britain. Earlier, in 1826, the British had annexed Arakan and Lower Burma, and by the early 1880s the independence of Upper Burma had become precarious. Thus in 1883 King Thibaw dispatched a mission to Europe to reconnoitre but principally to firm up support from the French. Consequently the Burmese made a prolonged stay in Paris. With the French being tied up in the war in Tonkin, the British very quickly invaded Upper Burma. Mandalay, the capital, was captured at the end of November 1885 and the rest of the country was formally annexed on 1 January 1886.

The Burmese envoy and his retinue in Paris suddenly found themselves stateless, and, destitute, sought refuge at the Siamese Legation in the Rue de Siam.² Pouring out his disappointment with his Government which did not heed his proposals for Burma to be more accommodating to Britain, the envoy lamented at length on the state of Thibaw's court and asked Prince Prisdang for his opinion as to whether Britain would allow his country to have a new king. The prince told him that if the Conservatives came to power in Britain Burma would exist no more, whereas if the Liberals won the elections the country would perhaps become a protectorate. The Siamese minister then posed the question: where would a new king be found, since King Thibaw had all the royal princes massacred while the king's elder brother, who escaped to French Pondicherry, would not be acceptable to the British because of the French connection?

The Burmese mission was well received at the Legation but there was very little that the Siamese Minister could do except to arrange for the Burmese envoy and his retinue a safe passage back to Burma.

Prince Prisdang wrote lengthy reports and sent numerous newspaper cuttings to King Chulalongkorn and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Krom Muen (later Krom Phraya) Devawongvaroprakara. The king had been shaken by the events leading up to the annexation of Burma and wrote to his minister in Paris asking for the latter's recommendation as to how Siam could preserve her independence, giving the reason that since the prince had long resided in Europe he should be well acquainted with Western ways of thinking. The minister at first replied that he may not be qualified for the purpose and that he might submit too strong an opinion, thereby incurring His Majesty's displeasure. King Chulalongkorn wrote back insisting that the prince air his views frankly.³

² *Prince Prisdang's Files on His Diplomatic Activities in Europe, 1880–1886*, M.L. Manich Jumsai, Chalermnit, Bangkok 1977, p. 245 et seq.

³ *A Brief Autobiography*, in Thai, Colonel (Special) H.H. Prince Prisdang, From birth BE 2392 to BE 2473, Vol. 1 (complete in 3 vols.), Bangkok BE 2472 (1929), pp. 48, 49.

There are discrepancies at this point. The proposal submitted to His Majesty was dated 9 January 1885 which meant that the king must have written to Prince Prisdang some time before that date and well before the actual capitulation of Upper Burma which occurred in November of that year.

Prince Prisdang had strong views on the matter but hesitated, for instead of giving his opinion and proposal to the king directly, he resorted to enlisting the support of three senior princes in England, viz., Prince Krom Muen (later Krom Phra) Naresvararit, Prince Svastisobhon (later Krom Phra Svastivadhanasidh), and Prince Sonabandit (later Krom Khun Bhidhyalappluetithada). The proposal was for the first Constitution of Siam.

Before proceeding to the substance of the Constitution and its justifications, it is as well to know something about its initiator.

Born as Mom Chao in 1851, Prince Prisdang had already become in his teens buildings and artist assistant to his architect father, Prince Krom Khun Rajsihavikrom, a son of King Rama III. The young artist-architect at the same time became a member of the Young Siamese Club with a select group of cousins of the same age group, and with the king himself as their leader. Their chief aim was to institute reform and at the same time, as a hidden agenda, to wrestle power from the conservative Bunnag family, as well as to safeguard the young king against of the Prince of the Palace of the Front who had his own aims, with British support.⁴ The group issued its own newspaper called *Darunovath*, the first Thai language periodical, which made a brief appearance in 1874–75.⁵ However, in 1870, at the age of 19, the young prince was sent to England where he studied engineering at King's College, London, and became the first Siamese to have graduated from an English university.

The following extract on the prince's graduation appeared in *The Times* of London, 7 July 1876, under the heading "King's College Red Letter Day. Mr. Gladstone at King's College".

"Mr. Gladstone distributed the prizes yesterday to the students. Chomsai Prisdang, a native of Siam, took... (nearly all the prizes) ... (for which Mr. Gladstone then said that he) never witnessed a more remarkable exhibition of that feeling than when Dr. Barry (the praelector) announced to them that day the first arrival upon the platform of a young gentleman who had come to obtain the benefit of education in this country from one of at least the most distant countries in the world. Nor could he perceive that the lively satisfaction with which the gentleman's fellow students witnessed his success was rendered slack by the formidable and the monopolizing character of the proceedings of that young gentleman to whom he had so often to hand across the table the proof and commemoration of his exertions."

⁴ *The Politics of Reform in Thailand*, David K. Wyatt, Bangkok BE 2512 (1969), pp. 45, 46.

⁵ *First steps in the newspapers in Thailand*, in Thai, Luang Bunyamanmanoppanich, Bangkok BE 2508 (1965), p. 27 et seq, and p. 52 in which Prince Prisdang's name appears.

After a brief visit back home in 1876 Prince Prisdang went to train in Holland on the Zuiderzee Dam project. Not long after, in 1879, he was recruited into the Siamese diplomatic service for special missions in Europe, eventually becoming, from 1881, minister accredited to 11 European countries as well as the United States.⁶

Besides setting up the Siamese Legations in London, Paris and Berlin, and presenting the credentials to the Treaty Powers (excepting the USA), he successfully negotiated the Spirits Conventions, a partial rectification of the result of the Bowring Treaty, helped to establish the Siamese Post and Telegraphic services at the international level, arranged for Siamese exhibitions in Europe and became the *de facto* superintendent of the Siamese students in Europe. A photograph dated 1883 shows him “convening” the first “Siamese students meeting” at Oxford, where he had earlier arranged for the admission of Prince Svastisobhon.⁷ In this picture, students, princes and embassy officials mingled in the most informal manner, the Siamese minister himself lying nonchalantly in a hammock.⁸

The Oxford connection was important for it must have been between 1883 and 1884 that Prince Prisdang decided to propose the Constitution to the king and asked Prince Svastisobhon to prepare the draft. The resulting document was timely when the king wrote to ask for Prince Prisdang’s recommendation on ways and means for Siam to remain independent. With the support of his princely peers in England he set the matter in motion: the document was read over with corrections made by Prince Krom Muen Naresvararit and his secretary, Prince Sonabandit. The staff of the legations in Paris and London were requested (but not coerced) to sign the document together with the four princes. Together there were eight signatories. Four copies were made, one to be submitted directly to the king, one each for the legations, and one to be taken by Nai Sneh, an embassy secretary, for additional signatures and for presentation to His Majesty.⁹

⁶ *Collected letters of H. H. Prince Prisdang, the first resident Thai ambassador in Europe*, in Thai, Committee to Review Thai History and to Publish Historical and Archaeological Documents, Secretariat of the Prime Minister, Bangkok 1991.

⁷ Lord Granville, the Foreign Secretary, was asked by Prince Prisdang to help with Prince Svastisobhon’s admission to Oxford. The latter, reading Modern Languages and Law, became instrumental in drafting the proposal for the Siamese constitution for the Siamese minister.

⁸ Social stratification became more marked and formalized towards the end of the fifth reign and throughout the sixth reign, which, with the delay in promulgating a Constitution and economic factors, led to the coup d’état which overthrew the absolute monarchy in 1932.

⁹ Chao Muen Vaivornath was one of the officials asked by Prince Prisdang to sign the document. However, he declined to do so and instead submitted his own opinion to the king and suggested that His Majesty should make State visits to Europe. See *Documents on Thai Politics and Government*, in Thai, BE 2417–BE 2477 (1874–1934), Chai-anand Smudhvanich, Bangkok BE 2518 (1975), p. 37, footnote 1.

It should be noted that in 1880 King Chulalongkorn was already making preparations to go to Europe and had even appointed Prince Prisdang as his personal interpreter. See H. H. Prince Prisdang, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

The following is a partial translation of the justification for the Constitution:¹⁰

“Under its present form of government the country faces danger from without. A change towards a ‘civilized’ form of government is necessary, viz., the adoption of the European system, such as is being undertaken by Japan. This change can be brought about only with the king’s concurrence.

“The danger is colonization by the European powers, who claim the right to bring civilization, justice, law and order to the oppressed, to open up trade and develop resources.”

“The country’s present policy will not remove the danger (of colonization), because:

1. The policy of making frequent small concessions, viz., on territories or in ‘fines’, might induce a momentary feeling of security and postpone the problem for a little while, but in the end will not work...

2. Military resistance is out of the question. Siam can at best muster an army of 50,000, but the time and money required for its organization would make it an impossible task. Even if Siam won a battle, it would be only a temporary victory, and she would be regarded as demonstrating her backwardness even more so by attempting to prevent colonization.

3. There is some advantage in being a buffer state between the French and British possessions, assuming that Siam can be seen to govern itself in an orderly way, but Britain and France are already in collusion over plans to leave merely a very narrow strip of territory as a buffer between their colonies in Burma and Indochina.

4. It is wrong to assume that reforms have already taken place in Siam simply because the country now has ambassadors in Europe, post and telegraph services, European customs, conventions with the Treaty Powers, etc.”

The following is a verbatim translation of one of the numerous strongly worded passages on this theme:

“The reason why we say this is a wrong assumption is that such reforms are only superficial and instituted piecemeal for European consumption, and, however good in themselves, when instituted in an underdeveloped society, become themselves corrupt. For example, the royal decorations which Siam has copied from Europe have been totally misused: instead of being symbols of meritorious deeds and exemplary

¹⁰ Chai-anand Smudhvanich, op.cit., pp. 37–75.

See also: *The call for the first Constitution in the reign of King Rama V. Prince Prisdang and “The text submitted to the King concerning the way to effect change in the Government, 1885”*, in Thai, Thanet Aphornsuan, *Art & Culture Magazine*, Bangkok, October 2004.

behaviour, they are used only as decorations for members of the privileged class. Therefore to say that this is reform, a cause with which to defend the country, is untenable. Even having ministers in Europe will not help matters if at home government remains a matter of caprice. Manners and uniforms adapted from Europe do not constitute advancement. They are only masquerades...”

Other justifications follow (partial translation):

“5. Treaties will not help Siam. The experience of China is a case in point.

6. Opening up trade will not necessarily lead to foreign domination because of the competing interests amongst the colonial powers.

7. It is a fallacy to think that since Siam has preserved her independence thus far, she can continue to do so in the future. The situation has changed, from former times when communications were more difficult and contacts with the West were fewer.

8. Some still wrongly believe that international law guarantees security. This law only applies amongst the ‘club’ of ‘civilized’ nations. Even Japan has not been admitted to the ‘club’, and meanwhile has been lobbying in vain to rectify its treaties with the colonial powers...

“The present system of government in Siam is not only inviting danger from without, but in itself is not a good system. It is too capricious, being dependent only upon His Majesty and the Office of the Royal Secretary (viz., Prince Krom Muen, later Krom Phraya, Devawongvaroprakara).

“There is only one solution: the country must adopt a Constitution.

“The proposed Constitution does not mean, at this stage, setting up a Parliament. But it will involve the following measures:

1. Change must be made from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy.
2. Defence and administration of the country should be in the hands of ministers who will together form a Cabinet, and a clearly formulated Law of Succession should be promulgated.
3. All corruption is to be stamped out, and to ensure this, the salaries of government officials are to be made sufficient. [This point should be seen against the background of Siam before King Chulalongkorn’s reform programme].
4. Universal contentment is to be met by ensuring equality before the law, including the tax system.
5. Outdated traditions are to be done away with, however time-honoured they may have become.
6. Freedom of thought, freedom of speech and freedom of the press are to be guaranteed.
7. Appointments and dismissals in government service are to be determined by clearly defined legislation.

“The above seven points are in accordance with the principles of government in Europe. It is important to make Siamese citizens feel that there is justice in their country and that it belongs to them, so that in times of crisis they will defend the homeland together. This would be the real ‘army’, born of democracy and justice, which is of greater strength than the armed forces mobilized for limited purposes.”

The rest of the document deals with ways and means of instituting the Constitution and changes in the government. It is couched in a language which shows that its proponents had already assumed that the king would agree with their ideas. At the same time it warns him of opposition from the older generation¹¹ and the possible rebellion. It therefore recommends total secrecy, quiet mobilization of forces and military preparedness.

The document ends by saying that future generations will look back and praise the king for having preserved Siam’s independence and for having been the catalyst of the nation’s progressive reforms, and that he will be an example to succeeding rulers.

These recommendations, undoubtedly most daring at the time, were signed on 9 January 1885. Prince Prisdang, the master-mind, kept a low profile and attributed much of the thinking to Prince Svastisobhon who, as a young man of 19, was unlikely to have contributed much in essence. As for the new minister in London, Prince Krom Muen Naresvararit, the best part was his agreement to be party to the scheme.¹²

The king’s reply was written in a beautiful, clear language.¹³ He began by expressing his appreciation of the proposal. He then said that he had already put forward similar views and would not do anything to hinder the change to constitutional monarchy. However, he had already taken the first step by instituting the Legislative Council and this had failed. He then gave its history. When he came to the throne at the age of 15, power was in the hands of the old guard, mainly the Bunnag family headed by the regent, who controlled the executive branches of the government. To curb their power he had set up the Legislative Council, which could be described as a kind of opposition party. “How much we suffered we know and remember well. Therefore, why should we not want less power which will only bring us happiness and security to the kingdom? You must understand that we shall not be king if we are forced to step down like the kings of Europe.”

¹¹ Reference to the “older generation” is understandable in light of the emergence of the Young Siamese Club. When the proposal for the Constitution was submitted to King Chulalongkorn, His Majesty was 32, Prince Prisdang 34, Prince Krom Muen Naresvararit 30, Prince Sonabandit 22 and Prince Svastisobhon only 20 years of age.

¹² M.L. Manich Jumsai, *op.cit.* p. 257 (a postscriptum by Sumet Jumsai).

¹³ Chai-anand Smudhvanich, *op.cit.*, pp. 76–81.

The king went on to explain that once he possessed executive power he no longer had time personally to look after the legislative aspects of government, which soon disintegrated. What he wanted at this point, therefore, was: 1) government reform; and 2) legislative reform. But he complained bitterly of the inadequacy of his ministers and officials who, “knowing their own shortcomings try to absent themselves from Council meetings, or, if they attend, keep silent, or, if they voice opinions, will only reflect petty personalities.” He then said that he agreed with the changes as proposed. “But how?” he asked. “Should our ministers resign because of their inadequacies? There would be an unprecedented mass resignation in Siam!”

The king emphasized that the practicability of any changes in the system of government must be ensured and that they must be undertaken gradually. As to the Legislative Council, he agreed that it should be strengthened, but he had no one to turn to: “No capable person can be found, only yes-men or people who say it is up to the king... They will procrastinate... and later blame the king. If the Legislative Council cannot function properly it is better not to have it.”

The king, however, made it clear that he was against a Parliament and political parties.

“...Government reform is the key to success; if it is not put in hand first then other matters will not succeed. Therefore, we urge you to consider this point rather than the other matter [viz. the Constitution].” He ended by saying: “We have explained ourselves, not because of the accusations you have levelled at us, but for the benefit of the present and of future generations who might misinterpret our intentions, but who, on learning of this reply, will know our true feelings.”¹⁴

The royal reply was dated 15 May 1885. In the same year orders were issued to all the four princes to return to Siam. At that time Prince Prisdang was on the point of concluding the remaining Spirits Conventions and signing Siam’s membership of the Postal Union. He therefore delayed his return in defiance of the royal command until the following year when his missions had been accomplished.

The king was actually angry, not because of the delay in the prince’s return home, but for the latter having involved others in what he regarded as a personal correspondence between himself and his minister in Paris. Also the fact that the proposal was signed by nearly the entire staff of the two legations was tantamount to holding His Majesty to ransom. Prince Prisdang realized his mistake when it was all but too late, the proposal having already gone to the king.¹⁵

Returning to Siam, Prince Prisdang worked as director general of the Post and Telegraph Department, helped to set up Siriraj Hospital as co-chairman

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 81.

¹⁵ H.H. Prince Prisdang, op.cit., p. 50.

of the buildings committee with Prince Krom Luang (later Krom Phraya) Damrongrajanubhap, became a privy councillor, organized the Siamese section for the Paris Exhibition of 1889, made a survey map of the Gulf and the coasts and rivers of Siam, and drew up the charter for the establishment of the Ministry of Public Works.

For a time, life seemed normal. Then came the crisis in 1890, when certain accusations were made against him. In that year he went to Japan with Prince Krom Luang (later Krom Phraya) Bhanubhandhuwongvoradej to establish diplomatic relations. He never returned to Siam again until after the death of King Chulalongkorn. Some of his accusers and the accusations were mentioned in his autobiography.¹⁶ But the whole truth will probably never be known because certain crucial pages in the book were censored and torn out. Away from Siam, he led the life of a monk and an ascetic in India, where he came across some Buddha relics¹⁷, and Sri Lanka, where he became the Patriarch of Colombo for the Amarapura Nikaya. He returned to Siam for the royal cremation and was forced to disrobe in 1911 when rumours were rife that Chao Phraya Yomraj was about to arrest him on the charge of leaving government service without the royal consent. Left destitute, he turned to Prince Krom Luang (later Krom Phraya) Devawongvaroprakran who gave him work at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a clerk translating documents - a striking contrast to his previous role as the minister accredited to 12 countries in the West! The job was, however, short-lived, for he was soon laid off, in an attempt by the government to “economize.”

¹⁶ *In Two Views of Siam on the Eve of the Chakri Reformation*, Arran (Scotland) 1989, Nigel Brailey, the author, came to the defence of Prince Prisdang. See especially pp. 119, 120, Note 42.

Prince Prisdang, from the outset of his career, seemed to be already beset by detractors and accusations. When he was appointed ambassador for special missions to Europe, the British Consul in Bangkok, Gifford Palmgrave, wrote to the Foreign Office in London that the “prince” was son of a slave mother and slave father (since the latter was in turn son of a slave mother), and therefore should not be received at the Court of St. James. (*Vide* Public Record Office, London, F.O.’s letter No. 57 dated 17 September 1881, concerning Palmgrave’s correspondence of 30 May 1880). Palmgrave took up the matter again in a private letter dated 24 September 1881 repeating his “intelligence” to his colleague in London (at the F.O.?) and calling Prince Prisdang rude names. (*Vide* Public Record Office, London, on Palmgrave’s correspondence, p. 292.)

¹⁷ Correspondence and memoranda at the Public Record Office, London, Files No. 740, 741, 279c, etc, 1898.

The discovery of the relics, which were authenticated by the accompanying inscriptions, was also well documented by the Siamese authorities. See for example: *History of Wat Saketvoramahaviharn and documents on the Buddha’s relics at Kapilavastu*, in Thai, Bangkok Municipal Authority, The Prime Minister’s Office Printing Press. Bangkok 1955.



Fig.1 Portrait of Prince Prisdang recovered from the basement of the Royal Thai Embassy in Paris in 1998. (Courtesy The Royal Thai Embassy, Paris)



Fig. 2 Ambassador Prince Prisdang (in the hammock) with students and embassy officials at Oxford in 1883. Prince Svastisobhon, the first Siamese undergraduate at Oxford, is seen seated next to the ambassador. The occasion might be regarded as the first meeting of Siamese students in England.





Fig. 3 “Investing the Siamese Prince Prisdang with the Royal Order of Chula Chom Klao, at the Siamese Embassy in London”, *The Illustrated London News*, 1 December 1883. In this magazine engraving, all the principal signatories of the proposal for the first Siamese Constitution are shown: Prince Krom Muen Naresvararit, Prince Svastisobhon, Prince Sonabandit, Prince Prisdang and the embassy officials (not identified).



- 1 Prince Krom Muen Naresvararit
- 2 Prince Prisdang
- 3 Prince Svastisobhon
- 4 Prince Sonabandit
- 5 Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice,
Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs

Until his death, Prince Prisdang led the life of a Bohemian. He sported a magnificent beard, which won him the first prize in an international competition held in Japan for the longest and most beautiful beard in the world. He died in penury in 1935 three years after the coup d'état which brought the absolute monarchy in Siam to an end and 50 years after his proposal for the Constitution.