

Reign of Virtue: A New Phase of Buddhist Kingship in Contemporary Thailand

Khoompetch Kongsawat

Graduate School of Global Studies, Sophia University, 7-1 Kioichō, Chiyoda City, Tokyo 102-8554, Japan

(Corresponding author's e-mail: c2368216@eagle.sophia.ac.jp)

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Abstract

This article examines the shifting modalities of royal authority under Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), whose reign has strategically reconfigured traditional religious ideology, termed as Royal Thai Buddhist Nationalism (RTBN). Recent portrayals have recast Rama X as a dhammarāja, a benevolent monarch embodying Buddhist virtue. Central to this transition is the 904 Royal Volunteer program, ostensibly promoting civic engagement and loyalty to the monarchy through orchestrated public service. Rather than marking a linear progression to virtue, the article presents that the new reign has embraced and shuffled a dual face of the royal governance model, integrating institutional pressure with virtues through symbolic performances of civic engagement under the royal banner. This strategy represents a secularization of royal virtues, shifting moral legitimacy from traditional religious institutions to state-managed civic activities under royal patronage. The study reveals the program's operations as bureaucratically orchestrated, emphasizing symbolic visibility over substantive public welfare. Ultimately, this recalibration of RTBN reflects the adaptive attempt of the crown to maintain legitimacy amidst contemporary democratic pressures and societal expectations.

Keywords: Religious nationalism, Thailand, Monarchy, 904 royal volunteer

Introduction

In 2024, the Kingdom of Thailand commemorated King Maha Vajiralongkorn's (Rama X) 72nd birthday with an extensive campaign of public celebration. It appeared that various state agencies coordinated tributes across the country, with his image prominently displayed on billboards at temples, in front of government offices, and throughout public spaces—not only in Bangkok but nationwide. These tributes were also disseminated digitally via official websites and social media platforms, collectively portraying him as a benevolent “dhammarāja”, or virtuous Buddhist monarch who embodies moral authority and altruism. Beyond visual tributes, these narratives emphasized that King Vajiralongkorn had long been working tirelessly for the public behind the scenes since his time as crown prince. Such contributions, previously unacknowledged, were

now publicly foregrounded, signaling that the time had come for the public to recognize and appreciate his longstanding yet discreet service to the nation. This public depiction stands in sharp contrast to earlier scholarly characterization of his reign as a “Kingdom of Fear” (Chachavalpongpun, 2022, pp. 359-370), defined largely by coercive power and political repression. Such contrasting representations raise a critical question: if fear has indeed been the primary mechanism for King Rama X's consolidation of power, how can we explain the current state-driven narratives emphasizing his virtue and benevolence?

To understand this apparent paradox, it is necessary to explore the evolving nexus between religion, monarchy, and nationalism under King Rama X, which this article terms as “Royal Thai Buddhist Nationalism (RTBN).”

Historically, the Thai monarchy has derived its legitimacy from a close alignment with Theravāda Buddhism, presenting itself as both the “protector of the faith” and the “moral compass of the nation.” This strategy reached its apex during the later years of King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s reign (Rama IX), when his moral authority and public image as a virtuous monarch became nucleus to royal legitimacy. In contrast, Rama X initially asserted his rule through institutional consolidation and legal mechanisms, prompting many observers to characterize his governance as one driven more by coercion and fear than by spiritual or moral authority.

However, recent developments, notably the widespread promotion of programs such as the 904 Royal Volunteers, signal a nuanced recalibration of Rama X’s public persona. This initiative mobilizes a large number of citizens, ostensibly promoting traditional Thai values, civic engagement, and devotion to the monarchy, yet critically reflecting a broader strategic shift. Rather than abandoning the mechanism of fear, King Rama X appears to be integrating it with performative displays of royal virtue through civic engagement. This “dual modality” governance simultaneously employs institutional coercion while strategically reframing virtue in secular, civic terms.

This article, thus, explores how the current reign of Rama X has reconfigured royal legitimacy by advancing a secularized form of religious nationalism—not by reducing the role of Buddhism, but by relocating its authority from monastic institutions to civic and bureaucratic structures under royal control. Rather than resting solely on traditional religious symbolism, the current reign actively stages civic rituals that emulate religious devotion, thereby constructing a moral image aligned with the ideal of the dhammarāja. This strategic yet intricate recalibration reflects an attempt to adapt royal authority to contemporary political conditions, cloaking enduring mechanisms of coercion beneath the outward performance of virtue. Accordingly, this article centers on a core question: by what mechanisms has the persona of King Rama X come to be portrayed as the “protector of the faith”?

The sacred throne: Historical foundations of Royal Thai Buddhist Nationalism

The Thai monarchy has long been positioned as a core pillar of national identity, closely linked to the country’s religious and cultural foundations. However, this association is not a seamless tradition but a politically constructed synthesis. Royal Thai Buddhist Nationalism (RTBN) illustrates how the monarchy has instrumentalized Buddhist values to legitimize symbolic and institutional authority across religious, cultural, and political domains. Though presented as traditional, RTBN is a modern construct serving to reinforce royal legitimacy. The ideal of the dhammarāja, exemplified by King Ramkhamhaeng, was institutionalized and selectively revived to justify royal rule (Ishii, 1986; Tambiah, 1976). During the Ayutthaya period, monarchs blended Buddhist kingship with Hindu cosmology to portray themselves as chakravartin—universal rulers wielding both spiritual and temporal power. These syncretic models justified centralized authority through temple patronage and sangha-state integration, highlighting the monarchy’s adaptive religious-political role (Ishii, 1986, pp. 59-66; Tambiah, 1976, pp. 89-91).

In Theravāda political thought, kingship derives legitimacy not from lineage or force, but from alignment with dhamma. The ideal ruler—both dhammarāja and cakravatti—is one who governs through moral example rather than coercion, as captured in the canonical description of a king who “relies just on Dhamma... sets a Dhamma watch and ward” (Tambiah, 1976, p. 40). This virtue is expected to radiate outward, fostering harmony, just governance, and the flourishing of the sangha, whereas immoral leadership brings disorder. Unlike the punitive Brahmanical model symbolized by the daṇḍa (scepter), Buddhist kingship is defined by the cakka (wheel), representing nonviolent moral influence (Tambiah, 1976, pp. 32-53). Yet, this ideal also imposes on the monarch the obligation to “purify” the sangha in times of perceived decline. Tambiah notes that enforcing monastic discipline has historically been regarded as a royal prerogative, positioning the king as the ultimate moral arbiter (Tambiah, 1976, pp. 162-63).

A key historical example is King Rama I, who came to power in 1782 following the deposition of King Taksin. Justifying the coup on grounds of Taksin's irregularities, Rama I sought to restore moral order by reforming the sangha: revising the Buddhist canon, forming a monastic council, and defrocking deviant monks (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2014, pp. 25-27; Handley, 2006, pp. 27-29; Gray, 1986, pp. 202-216; Keyes, 1987, pp. 40-41). His reign embedded Buddhism within the state structure, with the first "Edict on the Sangha" articulating a royal duty to guide all social groups toward spiritual and worldly well-being. In doing so, Rama I established kingship as a moral guardianship rooted in Buddhist cosmology and the governance of Dhamma (Skilling, 2007, pp. 188-194).

In the late 19th century, Kings Mongkut (Rama IV) and Chulalongkorn (Rama V) deepened the monarchy's role in religious reform as part of a broader strategy of this purification process to modernize Buddhism and centralize state authority. Rama IV, trained in both Buddhist doctrine and Western rationalism, sought to align religious practice with canonical purity and scientific logic, exemplified by his founding of the Dhammayuttika Nikāya (Jackson, 1990, pp. 43-47; Keyes, 1989, pp. 123-126; Mérieau, 2018, p. 285; Puaksom, 2023). Rama V institutionalized these efforts through the 1902 Sangha Act, establishing a state-controlled ecclesia and appointing Vajirananavarorasa as Sangharaja to disseminate Buddhist instruction that fostered loyalty to the nation and monarchy. By the turn of the century, the monarchy had positioned itself as both the guardian of Buddhism and the moral center of the emerging nation-state—an identity shaped by internal reforms and colonial pressures (Dabphet 2010, pp. 58-60; Ishii, 1986, pp. 69-78; Saenkam & Sangkhajan, 2019, pp. 144, 151-153).

These developments coincided with a distinctive pattern in Thailand's engagement with Western modernity—one marked by selective appropriation rather than wholesale adoption. Scholars such as Davisakd Puaksom (1998), Craig Reynolds (1976), and Thongchai Winichakul (2010; 2015) have shown how Siamese elites domesticated Western science and rationalism by embedding them within Buddhist cosmology. This

bifurcated logic—preserving Buddhism as the moral-spiritual core while assigning science to the material realm—formed the epistemic basis of "modern Buddhism". It also informed the development of comparative religion as a defensive intellectual project, wherein Buddhist thinkers selectively adopted Western frameworks to assert the rationality and superiority of Theravāda Buddhism. Rather than neutral engagement, this hybrid discourse functioned as a mechanism to uphold monarchical-Buddhist hegemony within the Thai nation-state. Collectively, these strategies illustrate how religious authority and modern knowledge were merged into a culturally distinct formation of Thai modernity.

The early 20th century saw Thailand grappling with modernization and political transformation. The 1932 revolution curtailed the monarchy's absolute authority, sidelining traditional Buddhist kingship ideals. Yet, the monarchy retained symbolic influence through its association with Buddhism and national identity. In this context, RTBN resurged as a framework to legitimize the monarchy's relevance, though its prominence shifted in response to political and geopolitical changes (Keyes, 1987, pp. 61-66; Mérieau, 2018, pp. 293-294; Tambiah, 1976, pp. 241-249). During the Cold War, the monarchy was reasserted as a moral and spiritual bulwark against communism. Under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, royal authority was reframed to fuse Buddhism with anti-communist nationalism (Chaloemtiarana, 2007; Keyes, 1987, pp. 95, 102-111). The reign of King Bhumibol further institutionalized this role by aligning with military regimes and launching civic programs like the Village Scouts to promote loyalty to the throne (Bowie 1997). Collaborations with the Border Patrol Police and U.S. agencies localized Cold War dynamics into royalist developmentalism (Hyun 2023). Through these networks, the monarchy wielded both symbolic and material power, adapting its legitimacy to a militarized and developmental image sustained through paramilitary patronage (Unchanam, 2020, pp. 110-144).

In the later years of King Bhumibol's reign, RTBN was ideologically consolidated through portrayals of the monarch as a compassionate dhammarāja. Although religious purification was less emphasized, the

monarchy's involvement in rural development and public welfare projects reinforced its image as a benevolent force. Yet, scholars note that these initiatives were largely state-funded, blurring the line between royal patronage and public expenditure. By embedding such initiatives within national development infrastructure, the monarchy maintained its moral authority while relying on public resources. This strategy, they contend, obscured the institutional foundations of royal legitimacy and reframed them as individual virtue (Chitbundid, 2007; Unchanam, 2020). This convergence of symbolic virtue and bureaucratic support allowed the monarchy to maintain moral authority while leveraging state infrastructure.

The reign of King Bhumibol deeply influenced Thailand's religious and political landscape. Through his constitutional role as the protector of Buddhism, public displays of devotion, temple patronage, and the integration of Buddhist ethics into governance, the monarchy was cast as both a moral and spiritual anchor of the nation (de Vienne, 2022, pp. 61-62, 157-162; Fong, 2009, pp. 687-689; Gray, 1986, pp. 392-398, 443-444, 450-451; Jackson, 2010, pp. 29-32). These acts reinforced the image of King Bhumibol as a dhammarāja and embedded RTBN into state ideology, allowing the monarchy to assert itself as a stabilizing force amid economic and political uncertainties. However, this carefully cultivated moral image began to fracture in the final years of his reign. As Khorapin Phuaphansawat (2018) highlights, the monarchy's silence during the 2010 crackdown, which resulted in nearly 100 deaths, catalyzed widespread disillusionment, particularly among the Red Shirt movement. The sentiment of *ta-sawang*, or "eye-opening," captured this awakening, as dissenters turned to underground forms of resistance—humor, coded speech, and graffiti—as expressions of lost faith and sacred trust.

These shifts exposed the fragility of royal charisma. As Serhat Ünaldi (2014) argues, monarchical legitimacy is not innate but produced through ritual, visual culture, and spatial symbolism, making it susceptible to disruption. This vulnerability became visible when protestors repurposed iconic royalized spaces like Siam-Ratchaprasong with anti-monarchical graffiti, subverting

the very sites meant to project reverence. In doing so, they challenged not only the monarchy's symbolic dominance but also the ideological scaffolding that sustains it. Together, these developments reveal a critical turning point in Thailand's political landscape: a moment when the monarchy's long-standing authority, rooted in ritual and emotional resonance, became contested and exposed to the erosion of public trust.

Literature review

From "Love to Fear," then "Fear to Faith"?: A historical review

Despite the aforementioned disillusionment and challenges to this portrayal, the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX, 1946-2016) can also be characterized by widespread public reverence, often articulated through the lens of Buddhist virtues. He was often portrayed as a morally righteous ruler aligned with Theravāda Buddhist values; at times, this image elevated him to the zenith status of a bodhisattva king—a compassionate, Buddha-like figure dedicated to public welfare and the pursuit of merit (Jory, 2016; Larsson, 2022, p. 3). This image was reinforced through highly visible initiatives such as rural development projects, religious observance, and public works programs, which associated the monarchy with benevolence, piety, and national stewardship. These efforts contributed to the perception of the king as a virtuous leader devoted to the welfare of the people (Baker et al., 2011; Fong, 2009). Moreover, King Bhumibol's role as dhammarāja was not merely symbolic but constitutionally enshrined—affirming the king as both a Buddhist and "upholder of religions," thereby linking spiritual authority directly to the preservation of national heritage (Gray, 1986, pp. 392-451; Jackson, 2010, pp. 29-39).

Upon ascending the throne, King Rama X was confronted with the dual challenge of upholding his father's legacy while responding to evolving public expectations, particularly among a younger generation with growing democratic aspirations. In contrast to King Bhumibol—widely regarded as a "paternal figure" with close ties to the populace—King Rama X's early reign was marked by perceptions of eccentricity and political

ambiguity, partly due to discernment of “reign-by-absence.” His personal lifestyle since the crown prince, including an extended residence in Germany prior to his accession, contributed to a sense of political uncertainty and public skepticism (Chachavalpongpun, 2020, pp. 1-13; Haberkorn, 2023, pp. vii-ix; Hewison, 2020, pp. 128-134; Oltermann, 2021). Moreover, Pavin Chachavalpongpun portrayed this period as the “Kingdom of Fear,” arguing that ‘fear’ was the defining characteristic of King Rama X’s rule, distinguishing it from the moral authority-based governance of his father, King Bhumibol. Unlike previous monarchs who relied on legitimacy through Buddhist ideals and national development, it was observed that the new king consolidated his royal power through a regime of fear, punishment, and legal repression, targeting both the ruling elite and the general public. Within the palace, fear operates as a tool to control high-ranking officials, military leaders, and courtiers, who face arbitrary demotions, purges, and public shaming through the Royal Gazette. The regime also extends fear to the broader public, using legal mechanisms—particularly Section 112 (*lèse-majesté* law) and the Computer Crimes Act—to criminalize dissent, while deploying extrajudicial tactics such as enforced disappearances of exiled dissidents. The 2020 youth-led protests, which openly called for monarchical reform, signaled the growing limitations of fear-based governance, as younger generations increasingly resist the monarchy’s unchecked authority. Pavin situated this dynamic within the traditional Thai political framework of ‘*barami*’ (moral legitimacy or virtue) and ‘*amnat*’ (coercive power), arguing that Vajiralongkorn’s overreliance on ‘*amnat*,’ without the balancing force of ‘*barami*,’ has led to a crisis of legitimacy. It was acknowledged that fear, though effective in short-term control, is ultimately an unsustainable tool of governance in a modern, middle-class-driven, capitalist society. As opposition movements gain momentum and public scrutiny increases, Pavin suggested that the monarchy’s fear-based rule may no longer be viable, raising questions about the long-term stability of King Vajiralongkorn’s reign (Chachavalpongpun, 2022, pp. 359-370; 2023, pp. 1-16).

Several scholarly works on the reign of King Rama X have examined the shifting modalities of royal power consolidation, focusing on mechanisms that depart from traditional frameworks of legitimacy. Key studies have emphasized the role of the military (Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2018; Ganjanakhundee, 2022; Raymond, 2023), the operations of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) (Pawakapan, 2021), and the intensified use of *lèse-majesté* laws under Section 112 (Chachavalpongpun, 2020; 2023). In addition, Sopranzetti (2020) and Hewison (2020) have shown how King Vajiralongkorn’s reign represents a fundamental shift from a monarchy grounded in ‘*barami*’ to one defined by ‘*amnat*’. Sopranzetti argues that, unlike his predecessor King Rama IX—whose sacral image was legitimized through Buddhist moral authority—King Rama X seems to lack the aura of a *dharmarāja* and instead relies on legal-institutional tools and military control to maintain dominance. Hewison complements this view by tracing the King’s direct consolidation of control over the Crown Property Bureau and elite military units, marking a transformation from symbolic monarchy to executive royalism. Together, these accounts illuminate a broader transition toward a post-charismatic, bureaucratized kingship—one in which traditional legitimacy is supplanted by centralized command, ritualized performance, and authoritarian insulation.

Conversely, existing scholarship engaging with the concept of RTBN has largely emphasized religious over institutional dynamics. Notably, Taweesak (2014; 2017; 2018; 2021; 2022; 2024) provides significant insights into RTBN through analyses centered on the sangha and Buddhist doctrinal discourse. However, his work often refrains from extending these insights to examine the monarchy’s role within this framework. While Katewadee Kulabkaew (2021) explored the monarchy’s increasing involvement in Buddhist rituals, her analysis stops short of interrogating how RTBN operates beyond the ecclesiastical sphere or how it is implicated in the consolidation of royal authority under King Rama X. In contrast, Tomas Larsson (2022) directly links the monarchy’s intervention in sangha governance to broader efforts at regime legitimation, arguing that legal reforms

and the symbolic “purification” of the monkhood reflect a calculated strategy to reassert Buddhism as a pillar of monarchical authority in the post-Bhumibol era. His analysis underscores how religious reforms have been mobilized to sanctify King Vajiralongkorn’s reign, illuminating the institutional mechanics through which RTBN has been recalibrated under the new monarch. Yet, Larsson’s approach remains within the cosmological framework of purification—clarifying how a monarch may lay legitimate grounds for Buddhist kingship—without fully addressing the mechanisms required to sustain this model over time.

Taken together, these strands of scholarship, while insightful, have yet to fully capture the emerging transformation in which King Rama X’s reign consolidates power across legal, religious, and civic domains while simultaneously rebranding itself through the idiom of Buddhist kingship. This dual process—wherein coercive governance is increasingly couched in the symbolism of virtue, benevolence, and religious devotion—marks not a departure from RTBN, but its strategic recalibration. In this updated configuration, traditional Buddhist motifs are not discarded but instrumentalized to sanctify a new mode of royal authority—one that merges bureaucratic command with moral spectacle. As such, the monarchy’s moral revival under King Rama X demands closer scrutiny not only as a symbolic project but as a mechanism of regime stabilization through the reconstitution of spiritual legitimacy.

This study identifies a significant gap in the existing scholarship on RTBN: while considerable attention has been paid to the role of the sangha, far less has been devoted to how the monarchy itself, particularly under the new king, appropriates Buddhist rituals, reforms, and symbols as instruments of legitimation. Much of the existing literature has either assumed the new reign would rely predominantly on coercive power, lacking the sacral charisma of a dhammarāja, or has overlooked the strategic religious and civic maneuvers that now characterize its public image. In response, this article shifts the analytical lens away from the ecclesiastical sphere and toward the monarchy and its contemporary agents, especially the 904

Royal Volunteers, arguing that the current reign of King Rama X in the 2020s has deliberately recalibrated RTBN to reassert moral authority during an era of heightened political scrutiny.

Unlike Buddhist majoritarian nationalism, which tends to emerge from grassroots movements and politicizes Buddhism in exclusionary terms (Sombatpoonsiri, 2023), RTBN functions as an elite-driven ideology. It is disseminated through state-backed royalist discourse and emphasizes the monarchy’s deep historical entwinement with Buddhist institutions. Rooted in the notion of royal nationalism (Winichakul, 2008), RTBN positions the monarch not simply as a political leader but as a moral sovereign whose legitimacy is drawn from Thai Buddhist virtues, ritual symbolism, and the enduring ideal of the dhammarāja—a spiritual core of fantasized harmony in Thai society (Ishii, 1986; Tambiah, 1976). Under King Rama X, this ideological formation has not only been revived but also strategically repurposed to inaugurate what this article terms a “Reign of Virtue,” a new phase of royal governance that fuses moral imagery, religious engagement, and public performance (ThaiPBS, 2024; ThaiPost, 2024; Thairath, 2024b). Yet, this moral veneer is layered over persistent mechanisms of coercion that endure beneath the surface of “faith and devotion,” particularly amid heightened scrutiny and rising public demands for monarchical reform (BBC Thai, 2020; iLaw, 2022; Prachatai English, 2020).

This recalibration is first evident in a series of legal and institutional reforms, most notably the 2017 Constitution and the 2018 amendments to the Sangha Act, which re-centralized royal authority over Buddhist institutions (Larsson, 2022). More visibly, it is expressed through the 904 Royal Volunteer program, which has become a key instrument in this transformation. Officially framed as a fusion of civic duty and royal tradition, the initiative mobilizes millions of citizens in activities ranging from environmental conservation to ceremonial service. By 2022, over 6.9 million individuals were reported registered, with more than 1.1 million participating in a single quarter (The Secretariat of the Cabinet, 2022). This study posits that the program is more than public outreach; it is a mechanism for embedding the

monarchy into the rhythms of everyday life and reinforcing its symbolic and institutional centrality. Taken together, these developments reveal how RTBN under Rama X serves as a hybrid strategy, merging religious symbolism with bureaucratic consolidation to reassert monarchical supremacy in Thailand's evolving political landscape.

Righteous rule reimaged: From the kingdom of fear to the reign of virtue

Phase I — Kingdom of fear: Securing control by any means necessary

The passing of King Bhumibol in 2016 marked not only the end of an era but also raised significant concerns about the future monarch and the viability of royal religious nationalism. King Rama X inherited a complex legacy, built on deep public reverence for the monarchy's moral and spiritual authority. However, unlike his father, Rama X ascended the throne with a markedly different style shaped by personal discretion. This contrasted sharply with King Bhumibol's later years, when royal influence was from time to time exercised indirectly through symbolic gestures and trusted intermediaries (McCargo, 2005). That said, King Bhumibol's interventions were not always subtle; historical accounts suggest he directly influenced key events when they aligned with royalist visions of unity and stability during, for instance, military regimes and political incidents in 1973, 1976, 1992 (Handley, 2006, chapters 12, 17, and 18; Hewison, 2008), and 2006 (Winichakul, 2006).

In contrast, Rama X's reign was defined from the outset by bold, personalized moves that broke from his father's more opaque approach. These included consolidating personal control over royal assets in the Crown Property Bureau (Ruffles, 2023), replacing some members of the Privy Council with his loyalists (Chachavalpongpun, 2023, pp. 4-11), and centralizing military power through what has been termed a "monarchised military" (Chambers & Waitookiat, 2018; Ganjanakhundee, 2022; Raymond, 2023). The reign also employed public shaming and punitive measures to signal intolerance for perceived disloyalty (Soprancetti, 2023, pp. 220-226). These actions—more direct, visible, and

coercive—created a climate of uncertainty and fear, especially among royal officers whose loyalty was under constant scrutiny (Chachavalpongpun, 2020, pp. 12-13; 2022, pp. 359-371; 2023, pp. 26-27; Hewison, 2020, pp. 128-131).

Besides, the mainframe, which laid the legal foundation for these consolidations, rested on the 2017 Constitution, granting the monarchy broad interpretative authority under vaguely defined provisions of 'royal discretion.' Notably, the final version of the constitution differed from the one approved by the public in the 2016 referendum. After the referendum, King Vajiralongkorn requested amendments to expand his personal authority, including removing the requirement to appoint a regent when abroad and eliminating the need for royal edicts to be countersigned by a minister. The military government complied, revising the draft before its promulgation in April 2017 (Holmes, 2017). This episode revealed not only the pliability of the junta's legal process but also the growing assertiveness of the new king in reshaping constitutional norms to serve royal interests.

This intervened constitutional framework provided the legal and ideological groundwork for subsequent legislative changes that expanded royal influence—particularly over Thailand's religious sphere. Most notably, the monarchy advanced a sweeping reconfiguration of sangha-state relations through two amendments to the Sangha Act, enacted in 2017 and 2018 respectively. The first amendment, passed in December 2016 without public consultation, restored the king's authority to appoint the Supreme Patriarch, ending a prolonged leadership stalemate and reasserting royal control over Buddhist affairs. The second further strengthened the monarchy's role by granting it the power to appoint and dismiss members of the Sangha Supreme Council (SSC), a function previously managed internally by the Thai Sangha. Though a brief consultation preceded the second amendment, the process lacked meaningful public engagement. Both reforms were framed as restorations of "ancient royal traditions," marking a clear departure from the bureaucratic, reformist governance of earlier administrations and signaling a return to a neo-traditionalist, monarchy-centered religious order

(Larsson, 2022, pp. 8-10; Mérieau, 2018, pp. 304-305). These legislative reforms not only assert King Rama X's control over religious institutions but also reaffirm the monarchy's customary role as protector of Buddhism. This transformation extends beyond institutional dominance; it highlights once again the traditional concept of Buddhist kingship, where it is rightful for a dhammarāja to "purify" sangha for "harmony" (Larsson, 2022, p. 4). By intertwining governance with Buddhist principles, the monarchy began repositioning itself as a moral authority in Thai society. This strategic alignment enhances its ideological influence, maintaining its relevance amid shifting political currents, and reinforcing its dual role as a political and spiritual compass.

Until 2021, Rama X's reign unfolded in a politically volatile landscape observed through growing calls for democratic accountability and monarchical reform, including demands for transparency and constitutional limits. In response, this article argues, the reign has sought to adapt and revitalize RTBN to meet these challenges. Once consolidating power across political, economic, and military spheres, the reign of Rama X began expanding royal influence into socio-cultural domains. Among others, one key initiative was the 904 Royal Volunteer program, which mobilized a great number of "volunteers" for public service. Promoting national pride and traditional values, the program functions as a civic link between the monarchy and the public, aligning the King's image as a unifier with the contemporary needs of society. Complementing these efforts is his increasing visibility in Buddhist rituals, which signal a conscious embrace of the dhammarāja ideal (Kulabkaew, 2021). His participation in religious ceremonies such as royal kathina offerings and the dissemination of royal Buddhist teachings have worked to bolster his moral standing and reinforce the monarchy's association with religious institutions (Department of Religious Affairs, 2024; PPTV Online, 2024; Royal Office, 2024c; 2024d; Royal Thai Government, 2024; Thairath, 2024a). Together, these symbolic and civic engagements reflected a royal ambition to reposition Rama X's reign from one initially perceived as an absence

to one increasingly defined by spiritual leadership and socio-political outreach.

In essence, having consolidated control over the material domains of power during the so-called "Kingdom of Fear," King Rama X's reign has since transitioned into a new phase centered on cultivating spiritual influence—yet this shift continues to rest on underlying structures of fear. Drawing on the legacy of predecessors, the reign of the new king has recalibrated RTBN to navigate a changing society. His current approach has blended legislation, public service, and religious participation to reshape the monarchy's image. This calculated shift reflects an intention to re-establish the monarchy as the "unifying force" of the nation, preserving its relevance amid mounting demands for reform. By aligning traditional Buddhist values with modern governance, the reign of Rama X signals a strategic transition in the 2020s to, what this article terms, the "*Reign of Virtue*." Nonetheless, the article assesses that this ambition cannot be fully realized without its prime agent: the 904 Royal Volunteers. While other state institutions play a role in promoting the discourse of dhammarāja and the concept of Buddhist kingship, it is the 904 Volunteers who bring these ideas to life, translating them into concrete actions and lived experiences for the Thai public. In essence, the "904 Volunteers" serve as the contemporary expression of RTBN under King Rama X, embodying the ideal of dhammarāja.

Phase II — Reign of virtue: Securing cultural legitimacy through civic volunteerism

A prominent indicator of the reign of King Rama X's trajectory toward "Reign of Virtue" is the establishment of the 904 Royal Volunteer program. Launched around 2017 during the early phase of his reign and gradually expanded after the 2020s, the program has steadily developed into a structured initiative that recruits large numbers of volunteers across the country to engage in public service, including environmental protection, disaster response, and community development. Named after "904," a number linked personally to King Rama X's royal cypher, the program promotes values of civic responsibility, national cohesion, and loyalty to the

monarchy. The cypher itself, *ว/ส.*, a monogram of the King's initials topped with a crown, is prominently displayed on uniforms, official materials, and state-linked initiatives, serving as a symbol of royal authority. When combined with the "904" identifier, it becomes more than a ceremonial mark; it functions as a personalized badge of allegiance, indicating participation in royalist training and public service. The cypher and 904 designation have thus come to embody King Rama X's wider agenda of moral legitimation and the construction of a loyal volunteer-civil service network dedicated to his ideals of unity, discipline, and virtue. Rooted in earlier forms of royal volunteerism, the program is also said to promote national solidarity by welcoming all Thais from diverse age groups and social sectors to become its "volunteers" (Crown Property Bureau, 2024; Royal Office, 2024e).

According to the Royal Office, the 904 Royal Volunteer program is intended to instill a collective ethic of national service rooted in Buddhist ideals of compassion, self-sacrifice, and altruism. Volunteers are expected to engage in activities such as reforestation, waterway cleanup, environmental beautification, and rural support projects—all of which are framed as expressions of Buddhist virtue and Thai civic responsibility. These efforts are portrayed as practical manifestations of the dhammarāja model, reinforcing the image of King Rama X as a moral unifier who motivates the public to act in service of the greater good (Royal Office, 2024e; 2024h). By enabling ordinary citizens to perform merit-making through royal-endorsed community work, the monarchy channels spiritual values into structured civic participation.

What distinguishes the program is not only its activities but also its formalized training system and emblematic visual identity. Volunteers are trained at the Royal Volunteer School, which offers a progression of courses: a seven-day General Course, a six-week Core Course, and a three-month Special Course. The Core Course, tailored for military, police, and civil service personnel, includes both theoretical and practical modules focused on national ideology, the history of the monarchy, discipline, and technical skills such as farming, disaster response, and security procedures (Royal Office, 2024a).

This rigorous training is promoted as fostering both technical competence and ideological alignment, encouraging loyalty, resilience, and a shared ethos of public service. Symbolically, volunteers wear a distinctive uniform consisting of a blue cap and yellow scarf. The blue cap honors Queen Mother Sirikit, while the yellow scarf bearing the "904" cypher signifies allegiance to King Rama X (Royal Office, 2024f). The Royal Office portrays program participation as prestigious and emphasizes its motto: "doing good for the nation, religion, and king." These symbols—uniforms, slogans, and visual markers—enhance the program's visibility and embed its values into the national psyche, further consolidating King Vajiralongkorn's image as an altruistic dhammarāja and supreme moral authority.

According to the 904 Royal Volunteer program, its activities are organized into three primary categories: Development Volunteering, Disaster Response Volunteering, and Special Event Volunteering. Development efforts focus on improving community well-being through initiatives such as canal dredging, tree planting, and the promotion of local crafts—projects aimed at advancing grassroots sustainability. Disaster Response Volunteers are trained to support relief operations during crises such as floods and fires. Meanwhile, Special Event Volunteers assist in the organization of royal ceremonies to facilitate and ensure public engagement in these national rituals (Royal Office, 2024e).

More broadly, the program illustrates how the monarchy extends its influence into the everyday lives of Thai citizens, particularly in rural regions where state resources are often limited. Operating across all 77 provinces, the initiative not only aims to address local inequalities but simultaneously amplify the monarchy's symbolic and operational presence within diverse socio-economic contexts. These volunteer activities typically appear to be conducted in partnership with local authorities, military units, and other government bodies, forming an extensive network that connects the crown with multiple levels of Thai society. In doing so, the program becomes a vehicle through which loyalty is cultivated via tangible public service anchored in ideals

of compassion and unity (Royal Office, 2024h). This model of semi-decentralized, monarchy-led civic engagement embeds the principles of Buddhist kingship into peripheral communities. By delivering practical benefits to underserved areas, the program translates the dhammarāja ideal from a symbolic framework into lived, material practice.

As of 2022, it was reported that the 904 Royal Volunteer program had been registered with over six million participants (Prachatai, 2022a; 2022b). This figure rose to 7,251,533 by mid-2024. A Cabinet resolution covering July to September 2024 noted that most volunteer mobilizations took place outside of Bangkok, with coordinated efforts spanning all provinces. During this period, 18 government agencies facilitated 28,992 volunteer activities, ranging from royal development initiatives and emergency relief operations to specialized missions and instructor training for new 904 Volunteers. These figures point to the program's increasing institutionalization and its deepening presence as a national mechanism for royal-led civic engagement (The Secretariat of the Cabinet, 2025).

Furthermore, similar to earlier royal development projects, the documents from the Budget Bureau from 2020-2025 indicate that the Royal Volunteer initiatives do receive funding from government budgets, although the financial allocation remains relatively small, approximately 1-10 million THB per program (Budget Bureau, 2020a, p. 681; 2020b, pp. 40, 741; 2021, pp. 40, 771; 2022, pp. 40, 836; 2024a, p. 36; 2024b, p. 44; 2024d, p. 37). This limited budget is particularly striking given the program's nationwide scope, which involves mobilizing volunteers across all 77 provinces. In contrast, other royal initiatives receive substantially greater government funding; for example, the 2025 annual budget for royal affairs alone is about 8 billion THB, excluding additional allocations channeled through various ministries for royal-related projects (Budget Bureau, 2024c, p. 97). Despite this, the Royal Volunteer initiative is consistently portrayed as being entirely under royal patronage, attempting to reflect broader symbolic efforts to elevate the monarchy's visibility and moral authority in public service.

Fieldwork conducted in 2024, including interviews with informants and active participants—who requested anonymity and declined to be recorded—reveals key aspects of the operational structure of the 904 Royal Volunteer program. A commonly cited feature is the issuance of formal “Letters” from the Royal Volunteer Administration Headquarters, which operates under the supervision of high-ranking military officers, supposedly closely aligned with King Rama X (Royal Office, 2024g). These letters, addressed to the Ministry of Interior, request coordination via provincial governors, who act as heads of their respective Provincial Royal Volunteer Administration Centers. While framed as ‘requests,’ the letters activate a top-down mobilization process that engages district officials, local governments, local military units, and municipal agencies to ensure widespread participation. Accompanying these letters is a response form sent to intended participants—usually local bureaucrats—requiring confirmation of attendance and submission of a list of subordinate officials who will also take part (Anonymous informant #1, personal communication, June, 2024). The use of such “Letters” has also been documented by Puangthong Pawakapan (2021, pp. 139-140). These letters reflect a tightly coordinated system structured along a hybrid civilian–military chain of command. This illustrates how the military can exert its power over civilian operations, thereby embedding the monarchy's influence across military, administrative, and civic domains.

Interviewees explained that Royal Volunteer events are typically scheduled to coincide with significant royal commemorative dates, such as the birthdays or memorial anniversaries of key royal figures. The thematic focus of each event is shaped by the legacy of the figure being honored—for instance, events may highlight military service, medicine, or public health depending on the royal individual commemorated. Once formal instructions are issued, provincial and local authorities collaborate with a wide range of state institutions to execute the activities. These include Provincial and Subdistrict Administrative Organizations (PAOs and SAOs), district and municipal offices, police departments, military commands, the rural roads department, the provincial electricity authority,

local public health offices, public relations agencies, and other available government units. Each body is assigned specific tasks, such as managing logistics, mobilizing participants, handling ceremonies, arranging equipment and transportation, setting up audiovisual systems, coordinating press coverage, and ensuring sanitation services and other on-site operational needs are met (Anonymous informant #1, personal communication, June, 2024).

According to interviewees, each volunteer event typically begins with a formal ceremony held in front of royal portraits, during which senior officials lead participants in paying tribute. The ritual usually involves a collective recitation of the program's official slogan—"We do good with our hearts"—repeated three times in unison, accompanied by a right-hand salute and the exclamation "Hey!", followed by group photographs. Only after this ceremonial opening do the actual volunteer activities begin. Several informants noted that tasks such as trash collection or beautification are often partially completed in advance using machinery. This practice appears designed to reduce the physical burden on participants while guaranteeing aesthetically pleasing outcomes for photographic documentation. These observations suggest that the symbolic and visual dimensions of the events may be prioritized over their substantive, developmental impact (Anonymous informant #1, personal communication, June, 2024).

What's more, the program's funding mechanisms appear to be deeply entwined with state resources. Although some events may not receive direct financial support, interviews with active participants in 2024 revealed that "unofficial" governmental allocations are often made available to sustain Royal Volunteer activities. These funds typically originate from public budgets managed by regional and local administrative bodies. Despite the relatively limited subsidies explicitly recorded in Budget Bureau documents, the program benefits from substantial indirect financial support, "reserved" for this sort of activity. Field informants consistently noted that upon the issuance of official "Letters" from the Royal Volunteer Administration Headquarters, heads of relevant government agencies would authorize expenditures from

their available institutional budgets to accommodate the program's demands. These allocations, while not formally earmarked, become 'routinised and normalized' within local and provincial governance structures. Participation for them in Royal Volunteer events is often framed as a demonstration of loyalty, and failure to cooperate, some interviewees implied, could be interpreted as a lack of allegiance to the monarchy, which may lead to adverse consequences for their career in government service (Anonymous informant #1 & #2, personal communication, June and August, 2024).

Although the Royal Volunteer program is officially presented as open to all, fieldwork conducted by the author in Bangkok during June, August, and September 2024 revealed notable limitations in public accessibility. Repeated efforts to attend a volunteer activity proved unsuccessful, as event schedules and locations were not publicly disclosed. This lack of transparency suggests that notifications were selectively distributed to pre-identified participants, limiting spontaneous public involvement in the coordination process. The author's position as an outsider, possibly due to not being a registered member of the 904 Royal Volunteer program, may have contributed to the inaccessibility of information. Although the possibility of joining was initially considered, informants offered cautionary advice against enrollment, further constraining access. Moreover, government records and content disseminated through Royal Volunteer social media channels indicate that most activities are conducted by government personnel at prearranged times and locations (The Secretariat of the Cabinet, 2025; Royal Volunteer Administration Center, 2024). Put together, these findings suggested that these activities were primarily carried out by government officials at prearranged dates and times. This raised questions about how, or whether, ordinary citizens, or in this context, "volunteers," are integrated into the coordination process.

Multiple informants later confirmed and clarified that Royal Volunteer activities are primarily executed by government personnel, including officials, military staff, and police officers. This insight helped the author make sense of an earlier fieldwork encounter in Bangkok,

where attempts to observe or join a volunteer event were unsuccessful. It became evident that such activities are generally not open to the broader public, as their organization and implementation are largely orchestrated by state agents. Informants emphasized that the presence and coordination of government officials, particularly from the military, are essential for these events to occur. Additionally, each activity is expected to produce “images and reports” that are submitted through official administrative channels (Anonymous informant #2 & #3, personal communication, August and September, 2024; Ministry of Interior, 2025). While these reports are formally directed to the Ministry of Interior, guidelines published on its website suggest a dual reporting function. It is difficult to dismiss the inference that the ultimate audience for these submissions is the 904 Royal Volunteer Headquarters and its affiliated offices, many of which are staffed by high-ranking military officers and royal aides, believed to be closely connected to King Rama X.

Inevitably, these details obtained during the fieldwork raise a crucial issue about the definition of “volunteerism” within the 904 Royal Volunteer’s framework. Despite being presented as a voluntary initiative, the program operates more as an organized, structured, and trained workforce—functioning as if they were ‘royal civil troops’—with assigned tasks rather than individuals freely choosing to participate. This contradiction raises a critical question: to what extent is the program truly ‘voluntary’ in practice? While framed as civic engagement, evidence suggests that participation, particularly among government officers, may be more obligatory than optional. This article recognizes that the so-called “volunteers” often operate under implicit pressure—both from peers and commanders—rather than free choice. The persistence of an element of ‘fear,’ masked by the language of virtue and loyalty, remains a notable feature of the program’s implementation. Government officials, in particular, may feel unable to decline the “*Letters of Request*” issued for organizing Royal Volunteer activities, as refusal could be interpreted as disloyalty to the monarchy. In this context, participation becomes a performance of allegiance, and request

becomes an order, reinforcing royal charisma and authority through compulsory civic display.

Building on these field observations, this article argues that the 904 Royal Volunteer program under King Rama X represents more than a network of public service initiatives; it functions as a contemporary manifestation of Royal Thai Buddhist Nationalism (RTBN). The program’s structured activities, ranging from ceremonial displays and merit-making rituals to disaster relief and community service, translate Buddhist ideals into lived practice. Rather than emerging organically from civic initiative, these activities are orchestrated through state–military channels, initiated by official “Letters” that blur the line between voluntary service and administrative obligation. This top-down coordination reveals how the monarchy mobilizes state machinery to enact a form of Buddhist kingship rooted in moral leadership and social discipline. In this way, the “Volunteers” come to embody state-sanctioned virtue, materially enacting the Thai Sangha’s doctrinal ideals under royal patronage.

Furthermore, the program’s selective openness, hierarchical structure, and ritualized performances reinforce a deeply symbolic form of civic participation. While framed as inclusive, fieldwork reveals that participation is limited, largely restricted to government personnel, and often governed by implicit pressure. Volunteerism here becomes a vehicle not only for community service, but also for career advancement and performative loyalty—particularly for those navigating Thailand’s patronage-driven bureaucracy (Pawakapan, 2021, pp. 93-101, 109-134). Uniforms, slogans, and the visual grammar of royal symbolism serve to consolidate the monarchy’s presence in both the physical and emotional landscape of Thai society. Through this mechanism, the new reign tends to revive the image of a compassionate *dhammarāja*, transforming the landscape of fear associated with earlier regimes into one of “untold” altruism, virtue, and benevolence, within the

concept of “*Pid Thong Lang Phra*.”¹ The 904 Royal Volunteers thus serve as both agents and symbols of this ideological transition, linking the crown to the people across symbolic, spiritual, and material dimensions.

Reign of virtue of Dhammarāja Maha Vajiralongkorn

King Rama X’s reign in the 2020s reflects a deliberate transition from *amnat* (coercive authority), which defined his early rule, toward a strategic embrace of *barami* (virtuous power), revitalizing elements of RTBN in the form of “secularized royal virtue” to address modern governance challenges, generational shifts, and societal demands—even as *amnat* continues to linger beneath the surface. This ideological recalibration is reflected in a blend of legislative reforms, civic programs, and public displays of engagement with Buddhist rituals, aiming to reaffirm the monarchy’s role as a moral authority and stabilizing force. Essential to this transformation is the portrayal of the king as “*Dhammarāja Maha Vajiralongkorn*,” the morally righteous ruler rooted in Buddhist virtues of dhamma, compassion, and public service. State-sponsored narratives and publicized religious ceremonies—such as the royal Kathin and the distribution of Buddhist texts—foreground the monarchy’s spiritual role, reinforcing its symbolic legitimacy through state media and institutional rituals (Royal Office, 2024b; Royal Thai Army Ordnance Department, 2024). Beneath these performances lies a calculated consolidation of sociocultural power, projecting a reign defined by surface-level virtue and deeper institutional entrenchment.

However, this article assesses that the vision of a “Reign of Virtue,” the persona of the dhammarāja, and the secularized royal virtue cannot be fully realized without the leading role played by the 904 Royal Volunteers. Indispensable to this strategy is the reign of King Rama X’s pragmatic reinterpretation of RTBN, which reinforces monarchical authority across both civic and religious spheres. This framework, rooted in

precedents, firmly established during King Rama IX’s reign, cast the monarchy as a moral and spiritual guide. The 904 Royal Volunteer program of King Rama X is emblematic of this adaptation, representing the King’s active involvement in civic welfare. By mobilizing citizens nationwide for public service, ranging from disaster relief to rural development, the program promotes key Buddhist virtues such as compassion, selflessness, and public welfare, while reinforcing loyalty to the monarchy, who reigns from afar. Its widespread implementation, particularly in provincial areas, positions the new king as a figure capable of bridging regional and socio-economic divides, while also legitimizing his “reign-by-absence” by suggesting that effective leadership can occur “behind the scenes,” entailing the “fantasized faith and harmony” within society. With support from various state actors and agents, these dynamics reflect the current reign’s adjustment to maintain its legitimacy within the framework of Buddhist cosmology.

The current reign of King Rama X, especially in 2024, encapsulates a critical moment in the practical adaptation of RTBN to sustain royal legitimacy. His public initiatives reveal a deliberate strategy to harness traditional values—not only to meet the demands of modern governance, and reshape his persona, but also to establish his reign as one defined by virtue. This article perceives this effort as an attempt to distance the monarchy’s image from the “Kingdom of Fear,” even though elements of fear persist beneath the surface of the “Reign of Virtue.” As Thailand navigates growing demands for reform and social transformation, the monarchy’s evolving use of RTBN plays a critical role in redefining its legitimacy and symbolic relevance. This ideological framework may ultimately prove central to sustaining the monarchy’s legitimacy amidst a shifting socio-political landscape.

Moreover, the current reign has sought to set up its own new networks extending beyond traditional elite circles—such as the Privy Council, the “monarchised”

¹ The Thai notion of *‘Pid Thong Lang Phra* [ปิดทองหลังพระ]’ (literally, “gilding the back of the Buddha”) refers to performing virtuous deeds without seeking public recognition. This concept,

deeply rooted in Buddhist ethics, reinforces the image of the King as a selfless and moral leader whose contributions are framed as quiet yet profoundly impactful.

military, and the Thai Sangha—reaching out to the general population through initiatives like the 904 Royal Volunteers. Ostensibly, these initiatives attempt to integrate commoners into royal circles under the banner of royal virtue. However, as this article demonstrates, the practical organization of 904 Royal Volunteer events heavily relies on existing state resources and bureaucratic personnel, suggesting a strategic alignment more akin to reinforcing existing governmental and military networks rather than genuinely cultivating new bases of support among the populace. In other words, these activities largely overlay established bureaucratic and military roles, primarily repackaging their existing functions with the imagery and symbolism of volunteerism—same personnel, different clothes. At this stage, the spirit of volunteering remains predominantly driven by state-orchestrated mobilization, utilizing extensive financial and human resources from the bureaucratic apparatus. Hierarchical enforcement ensures these initiatives continue, demanding follow-up reports and measurable outcomes. Without explicit directives from the chain of command, it is likely that such volunteer activities would diminish significantly or cease altogether. Furthermore, the purpose of the 904 Royal Volunteer program appears more symbolic and performative than practically beneficial to public welfare. Emphasis is placed on visibility, image-building, and the projection of the volunteers' existence rather than substantive contributions to societal welfare. A notable contrast with the Village Scouts of the Cold War era, who were explicitly mobilized against communism, is that the 904 Royal Volunteers lack such a clear, targeted purpose. Instead, their role seems focused on the symbolic reinforcement of royal presence and the conceptual distinctiveness of royal civic volunteerism from other bureaucratic volunteer

mechanisms such as Village Health Volunteers (VHVs)² or Volunteer Defense Corps (VDC)³.

In addressing the research question posed at the beginning, the current reign seems to have embarked on a new phase of its rule by building upon the foundations of the Kingdom of Fear, extending it to a “Reign of Virtue.” This shuffle emphasizes moral politics on the surface, while fear operates underneath. Furthermore, the new reign has not only continued, but “secularized” Thai Buddhism—not by separating religion from politics, but by centralizing religion under the authority of the secular king. This secularization does not alter the essence of Thai Buddhist doctrine but transforms its ‘messengers’; in this context, the 904 Royal Volunteers now seem to become the prime mechanism to sustain the ideal image of King Rama X as the “protector of the faith.” Besides, the volunteers themselves appear to have more prominent roles than the *Sangharaja*, demonstrating the reign’s strategic reshaping of religious and institutional roles within Thai society.

Conclusion

During late King Rama IX’s reign, his power was so deeply ingrained in Thai society that force and fear became almost unnecessary; his legitimacy had already been internalized by the people. In contrast, King Rama X’s rule commenced its own trajectory: consolidating authority through legal and institutional means first—securing men and wealth, then shifting toward moral legitimacy through religion and civic engagement. This shift from a Kingdom of Fear to a Reign of Virtue suggests an effort to secure longer-term stability by creating his own networks from his trusted people, not only through the elite but also the commoners.

² Village Health Volunteers (VHVs) are community-selected individuals trained by Thailand’s Ministry of Public Health, serving as local health leaders and agents of behavioral change, responsible for disseminating health information, coordinating community health initiatives, and providing public health services.

³ The Volunteer Defense Corps (VDC) is a semi-governmental paramilitary organization under Thailand’s Ministry of Interior, established by the Volunteer Defense Corps Act of 1954.

Managed administratively by the Volunteer Defense Corps Administration Office (VDC) under the Department of Provincial Administration and militarily by the Territorial Defense Command (RDOC) of the Royal Thai Army, its duties include maintaining public order, supporting law enforcement, safeguarding important facilities, protecting the monarchy, and providing auxiliary forces in times of peace and war. Members hold military ranks and are legally recognized as state officers.

This article presents that the current reign's strategic engagement with the 904 Royal Volunteers does not entirely erase earlier perceptions rooted in coercion and fear of the early reign of King Rama X, but instead actively reconstructs his image within the tradition of royal Thai Buddhist ideals. The 904 Royal Volunteers program serves as a vehicle for portraying the monarch not as a flawless dhammarāja, but as a supreme protector of Buddhism—one whose symbolic authority and material benevolence offer refuge to conservative segments of Thai society. By leveraging the discourse of volunteerism, the monarchy cultivates an image of compassionate leadership and moral stewardship, thereby reinforcing its centrality in national identity and securing a renewed form of monarchical legitimacy grounded in virtue and public service.

However, the real impact of these initiatives lies less in measurable effectiveness than in their demonstration of evolving royal governance dynamics. Rather than merely quantifying the outcomes, the article emphasizes how these activities signify a significant shift in royal representation—from overt coercion to virtue-infused governance—reflecting a nuanced strategy designed to integrate traditional Buddhist narratives into modern civic engagement.

Ultimately, the 904 Royal Volunteers illustrate an ongoing recalibration of legitimacy under the new reign. The program does not fully transform public perception, nor does it eliminate underlying authoritarian mechanisms. Instead, it exemplifies a pragmatic adaptation where traditional Buddhist ideals are revitalized and strategically deployed to anchor royal authority in contemporary Thai society. This approach underscores the complex interplay of faith, virtue, and power—an intricate balance between historical tradition and modern governance demands, reshaping the monarchy's position and continuing to influence Thailand's socio-political landscape.

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