



# Working towards the Monarchy: The Politics of Space in Downtown Bangkok

*Serhat Ünaldi*

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In the twilight years of Thailand's ailing King Bhumibol, battles between royalists and their red shirt opponents are increasing, and the tectonic shifts that lie beneath Thailand's decade-old political crisis have become increasingly apparent. Serhat Ünalı's *Working towards the Monarchy* sheds new light on recent developments with its bold analysis of urban space in downtown Bangkok: buildings, the author finds, are abstractions of the complexities that shape Thailand's transformation.

Most criticism of the political role of the Thai monarchy—its deep involvement in Thailand's uneven capitalist development, Bhumibol's endorsement of military coups and his silent acquiescence to political violence—has focused on the role of individuals: the king, the royal family, or privy councilors. Ünalı departs from such limited intentionalist approaches to show instead just how deeply enmeshed the monarchy is in Thai society as a whole. He demonstrates how and why Thais from all walks of life drew on royal charisma to advance their individual aims, in effect "working towards the monarchy." Ünalı's sociological analysis of urban space reveals how buildings and spaces have been constructed for political and economic ends, particularly to shore up the monarchy. For several decades the architecture in central Bangkok has helped protect the charisma of the monarchy, which dominates landholdings and investments in the area. Because the sacred aura of the royal family legitimized capitalist expansion and consumerism, it was defended and enhanced by those Bangkokians who profited from it. Yet politically and geographically marginalized Thais failed to benefit from this royalist-led capitalist development and eventually found a new leader, business tycoon-cum-politician Thaksin Shinawatra. When Thaksin's followers turned against royal charisma and attacked the architecture that represented and supported it, movement away from royal charismatic authority became a real possibility for the first time.

By combining sociology, political science, architecture, and anthropology, *Working towards the Monarchy* offers a unique interdisciplinary approach. It will interest scholars and generalists alike, particularly those involved in the comparative study of monarchies.

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