

## THAILAND

### Introduction

Thailand is a country of 48 million people located on about 550,000 square kilometres at the crossroads of Southeast Asia. Eighty-five percent of the population lives in rural areas, and over 90% are Buddhist, with some Muslims and less than 1% Christian. Thailand has always been important in geo-political terms and is the only country of Southeast Asia which retained its independence during the era of colonial rule. It also has one of the oldest surviving monarchies in the world. (It has had constitutional rule since 1932.) The reigning monarch, King Bhumibol (Rama IX), is venerated by the vast majority of Thais and has been a stabilizing influence on Thai politics since being crowned in 1950.

### Domestic Political Situation

The Thai internal political scene consists of a complex array of mainstreams and cross-currents. The political system might best be described as a constitutional monarchy under the supervision of the military watched by a parliament. The foundations of the system are stable, but intense personal rivalries and economic difficulties have precipitated frequent political upheavals and changes of governments and constitutions. The stability of Thailand's system of government consequently depends very much on strong leadership and on the government's effectiveness in maintaining economic resilience and solving development problems.

Over the past half-century there have been numerous changes in leadership (including experiments with full democracy), but these changes have altered very little the conservative outlook of the Bangkok government. The past decade has witnessed challenges to the political centre in Thailand from elements of Thai society (students, workers, farmers) who have sought, with growing political awareness, greater egalitarianism and more government efforts to alleviate the plight of the poor. These challenges have had some impact in sensitizing the government to the needs of the ordinary people. The military, however, has maintained order and the fundamental allegiance of the Thai people to the Royal Family, traditional patron-client relationships and the Buddhist faith have counteracted destabilizing forces within the society.

Thailand has enjoyed a measure of internal stability since 1977. This has been the result of efforts by successive governments to create an efficient, moderate, civilian administration while recognizing that economic