

Thailand's Monarchy on the Firing Line

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Although in Thailand's increasingly violent political crisis both sides have claimed the support of the country's king, support from the monarch may be more one-sided. What is really being played out behind the scenes is still anyone's guess, but increasingly a royal hand seems to be behind the People's Alliance for Democracy, which for months has been seeking to oust the current government.

King Bumiphol Adulyadej has a widespread reputation for remaining above politics and only intervening when he feels it necessary to steer the country back on course and avoid further bloodshed. This stance has been disputed on various online forums and most credibly in Paul Handley's biography, *The King Never Smiles*. Handley makes a convincing case for royal intervention being based as much on preservation of the institution and privilege for the elite as for preserving national unity.

Many Thais are waiting to see where the king's sympathies lie and are hoping for some form of royal intervention to end the crisis. The king's intervention to end bloodshed during the 1992 demonstrations has been cited as an example of how the monarch could put an end to the demonstrations and bring stability back to the country.

The king, however, has remained mum. Both former prime minister Samak Sundaravej, who was forced to resign after being found guilty of violating the constitution, and current prime minister Somchai Wongsawat have had audiences with the king, but neither has made public comments about what was said. Both, however, were widely reported in the Thai press as appearing upset when they emerged from the palace.

The king's silence has confused many. He has not come out in support of the government, but nor has he said anything to restrain the PAD. The Queen, however, has recently made it clear where her support lies. After violent clashes on October 7 between the police and protestors, Queen Sirikit was quick to "express concern" for injured protestors and set up an initial aid fund of Bt100,000 (US\$2,872) for injured protestors at Vajira hospital.

Another Bt800,000 (US\$22,976) was donated by the queen to three hospitals later in the day and a further 100,000 Baht (US\$2,872) to another hospital on the 9th. No money was donated to injured police until Oct. 9 when Bt100,000 (US\$2,872) was given to the Police Hospital. While the army has striven to remain outside the fray, the police have come to be identified with the government.

In an even more outward display of support, the queen along with daughter, Princess Chulabhorn, attended the October 13 funeral of protestor Angkana Radappanyawuthi, who was killed in the October 7 clashes. Several of the king's advisors also attended the event. The woman's father told reporters that the queen had told him his daughter had died for a noble cause and "she had helped the nation and preserved the monarchy."

This has been widely perceived as showing the queen's support for the PAD, which has camped in Government House since overrunning it in August. The funeral of a pro-government supporter killed in earlier clashes in September was not attended by any of the royals.

Political observers have been speculating, albeit very quietly, that the monarchy was behind the PAD, but prior evidence was circumstantial and rumored. General Prem Tinsulanonda, the Privy Council chairman and longtime favorite of the king, is widely believed to be behind the September 2006 coup that toppled Thaksin from power and many with connections to the government say that he is likely still pulling the strings. Prem, for his part, has denied any involvement.

The king's quick approval of the coup and the appointment of General Surayudh Chulanonond as privy councilor were seen by many palace-watchers as clear indications of royal dissatisfaction of Thaksin and his brand of politics. The election of the PPP in December 2007 was a setback for the palace and the revitalization of the PAD soon after to confront the PPP could be perceived as a royally backed move to continue to oppose Thaksin and the possibility of a more popular government.

There are also rumors of donations from the palace to keep the PAD's machine running. The months-long protests which escalated with the seizure of Government House are believed by observers to cost millions of baht per day and could in no way be supported for this long by the small donations claimed by the PAD.

The PAD itself says it is protecting the monarchy from what it claims to be the republicanism of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his proxy, the ruling People's Power Party (PPP). Yellow, the color of the king, has been adopted by the PAD with demonstrators wearing yellow shirts and headbands, often carrying slogans such as "We love the King, We love Thailand."

The real level of royal support is almost impossible to gauge. Thailand's strict lese majeste laws make discussion of the royal family and their activities taboo and are being increasingly used by the right wing to suppress dissent. Charges of lese majeste have gone beyond criticism of the immediate royal family and have extended to criticism of past kings, activities of foundations under royal patronage and even expressing republican sentiments. Convictions for lese majeste can carry a three to 15 year sentence.

There are currently 32 cases being investigated. In probably the most famous one, investigators recently recommended the prosecution of former minister Jakrapob Penkair for remarks he made at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand about Thailand's "patronage system" in August 2007. The BBC's correspondent, Jonathan Head, has also been charged with lese majeste for remarks made during his reporting on Thailand since 2006.

Political observers say that although the increased use of lese majeste laws may be seen by the right wing as a way of keeping the king out of politics, it has actually had the opposite effect. If anything the attention being paid to the issue has shown that there is a considerable level of dissatisfaction with the monarchy or the forces allied with it, and has only served to heighten the public's curiosity.

Nowhere has this curiosity been stronger than on the internet where debates rage on Thai language blogs and forums about the activities of the royal family, what may happen when the king passes on, the role of royal institutions and even the pros and cons of republicanism. The response by the right wing has been to try to stifle the debate by censoring the internet.

The most famous attempt was the 2007 blocking of YouTube after a clip deemed insulting to the king was put on the popular video site. This has only served to increase the curiosity of ordinary Thais who otherwise may not be politically motivated.

For all its flaws, and there are many, the People's Power Party and its inherited legacy of Thaksin's populist policies may be the greatest direct challenge to royal authority since the 1970s when the

monarchy and its allies in the military and police quashed most outward support for increased controls over the royals or even a republic.

While Thailand has ostensibly been a democracy since a 1932 coup overthrew the absolute monarchy of King Prajadipok, much of the period has been dominated by military governments or rule by an elite that often saw elections as simply a way into positions to further increase their wealth.

It was only with the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party and their populist policies that saw common citizens begin to feel they had a say in how the country was governed and that they were actually electing someone who had their needs at heart, although it has to be said that Thai Rak Thai has been accused of massive vote-buying as well. In any case, Thaksin's rise provided a direct challenge to the monarchy's place as the institution people looked up to in times of need. Thaksin and the PPP deny accusations that they are seeking a republic.

In any case, the impoverished people of Isaan, the north of the country, suddenly had options besides the old established political parties that often simply worked to enrich themselves and their cronies rather than provide for the farmers and factory workers that make up the largest share of the Thai population. There were now programs that appealed directly to the average Thai in addition to the much publicized royal projects and development programs. Suddenly the elite – and by extension – the royals saw their hold on power challenged by the average Somchai and Titiwan from the rural villages or the cities' working classes who could vote into power a party and a leader of popularity approaching the king's. This smacked of republicanism, something which the elite has worked for seven decades rid the country of.

The royal propaganda machine has made strenuous efforts to show the monarchy as above politics. This has grown into a common belief that the king only intervenes when it is absolutely necessary to do so to avoid bloodshed. In reality, however, this remove from politics, insiders say, is not always the case. The royals have influenced political decisions in the past and likely are continuing to do so. Their influence as royals and the patronage networks that go along with being a member of a royal family combined with a large business empire – Forbes magazine called the Thai king the richest monarch in the world this year – give them tremendous influence in politics and society.

The palace and its supporters are now working overtime on the monarchy's image, both to pull it back from the taint of politics but also to preserve its paramount position in Thai society. This is especially important due to the king's age and the necessity of providing a smooth succession. The unpopularity of the crown prince has made the succession an important issue and one that is widely debated in blogs and forums.

General Anupong Paochinda, commander of the Thai Army, announced Tuesday that the military, which has largely remained neutral in the political crisis, will not tolerate attacks on the monarchy for political gain. Claiming that websites and flyers offensive to the royals had been found, he called on all sides to refrain from dragging the royal family into the political fray or from insulting the royal honor. Prime Minister Somchai also called for people to keep the royals out of politics.

In seeming response to Anupong's call, another round of internet censorship is beginning. The government has announced plans to spend between US\$2.9 and 14.6 million to set up a firewall to block websites contrary to the king, the royal family and the monarchy.

Part of this renewed campaign to preserve the royal honor can be seen as preparation for the royal cremation of the king's sister, Princess Galayani Vadhana on November 15. However, the current promotion of royal fervor has gone beyond the norm. Annual celebrations of Chulalongkorn Day on

the Oct. 23 celebrating the reign of the fifth king of the Rama dynasty, were especially well covered by the local press with activities by universities, the government and the royals well publicized. Many bookstores in Bangkok, including those with mostly English material, have special displays of books either written by royals or written about them and their projects.

Preparations for the cremation of Galayani are being widely publicized and the event is expected to be a well-orchestrated show of royal prestige as should befit the sister of a king. The king's only real public appearances in recent months have been for royal ceremonies in preparation for the cremation. The king's birthday on December 5 is likely to be an even grander event. Both, however, provide the royalists with excellent opportunities to promote the monarchy without opposition. Questioning the intentions of the palace and its involvement with the PAD during this time would be unwise.

P.S.

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