

Where's Dad?

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Thailand shivers over concerns about its monarch's health

Standing stiff in full regalia as his cream-colored Rolls Royce slowly drove around Royal Plaza in the annual Trooping the Color ceremony on Wednesday, King Bhumibol Adulyadej made his first public appearance since his sister's cremation last month.

Without acknowledging the chaotic events in Thailand over the past six months, the world's longest-reigning monarch read a prepared speech to the King's Guard, thanking soldiers for their loyalty. It was supposed to be a prelude for a far more extensive speech the next day, the eve of his 81st birthday, when the nation was expecting some sage advice from the only king most have ever known.

It was not to be. During one of Thailand's most turbulent weeks, which saw its airports seized, a second prime minister kicked out by judges in four months, and a light shown on its opaque palace politics, the king was a no-show to his own party.

His children took center stage, telling a disappointed audience of royal well-wishers and the country at large that Bhumibol was "slightly ill" and his condition was not serious. Yet his absence unleashed a deafening silence that resounded across the kingdom. Many Thais were gutted, sad, reflective. Just like the elaborate cremation for his sister a month before, they knew it was a sign of things to come.

Speculation about why he didn't show up will run rampant. None of it really matters at the end of the day. As with everything related to the royal family, the palace walls are difficult to penetrate.

What counts more now is public perception. For the Red Shirts, the movement aligned with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, which was created to foil the yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy, the royal family has become a target of veiled attacks. The proxy war raging ever since Thaksin pointed a finger at the king's top adviser in the run-up to the 2006 putsch threatens to spill out into the open.

The queen's attendance at a funeral last month of a PAD protester helped make things clearer. Bangkok taxi drivers, many of whom come from the rural Northeast that forms Thaksin's base of support, now openly rail against her. The mainstream foreign press has also become bolder, picking up the basic thesis put forward by Paul Handley in his 2006 book "The King Never Smiles," which argues that Bhumibol has consistently pursued political power at the expense of elected governments.

With the monarchy so exposed, the royal establishment may have a harder time putting the lese majeste toothpaste back in the tube. The myths that have surrounded the monarchy for decades have now been thoroughly shattered, thanks in no small part to Sondhi Limthongkul and his roving royalist street gang. Declaring "We will fight for the King" as far back as 2005, Sondhi has put the monarchy up for public discussion under the guise of defending its interests.

If anything his movement has overreached to the extent where opposition to the monarchy is now far

greater than it has been in recent memory. Videos posted on websites, including some lurid ones of the heir apparent and his consort, undermine the visions of ethical purity and righteousness pounded home in countless hours of royal propaganda that has been force-fed to Thais for years. Decades of pent-up pressure created by stifling lese majeste laws is finally starting to escape.

The Democrat party, which has never betrayed its royalist, elitist roots, proposed a law the other week that would seek to fight lese majeste on the web. But doing so would be difficult to pull off and put Thailand on a par with other repressive regimes that try to stifle free speech. Around the world, people would ask: If the king is so beloved, then why are these harsh lese majeste laws necessary?

In Thailand, the monarchy must ask itself that as well. While it's easy to frame the current power struggle as monarchy versus republicanism, the truth is much less black and white.

Deep down, many Thais want a monarchy in some shape or form. Bhumibol has amassed tremendous popularity over the years through propaganda and strict laws, but he was also helped by a citizenry eager to have a monarch guide them.

Sondhi accuses Thaksin of wanting to eliminate the monarchy in part because it's a good way to whip a crowd into a frenzy. While some in Thaksin's camp are definitely republicans, there is little evidence they want to do away with the monarchy completely. Most just don't want the king's advisers to be able to mess with elected governments with impunity, a view increasingly shared by their supporters.

At the same time, the Bangkok middle class has legitimate concerns about Thaksin's ambitions, seen most clearly in his efforts to gut democratic institutions while he was in power. The unfortunate thing is that those who opposed Thaksin on the grounds that he was anti-democratic undermined their own arguments by subsequently supporting coups, blatantly political court rulings, a proposal for an appointed government and a street mob that acts as Bangkok's resident bully.

The way forward will be messy. Sondhi and his herd will be back, likely with behind-the-scenes support from the military, palace, courts and "old-money" tycoons. They will try to subvert elections and may try to make the constitution even more regressive than the one written by soldiers last year. More bombs will go off; more people will die.

But the forces for democracy in Thailand are still strong. Even many who despise Thaksin and sympathize somewhat with the PAD reject its so-called "New Politics" that aims to appoint more of its friends to keep rural voters from having too much influence. Junta-appointed constitution drafters last year were pressured to scrap a proposal that would allow a non-elected prime minister to take power. The military has been reluctant to stage a coup this time around despite endless provocations from the People's Alliance for Democracy.

Those are positive signs that democracy will prevail during what may be a lengthy transition period. If the Crown Prince were anywhere near as popular as Bhumibol, the anxiety over succession wouldn't be so great. The looming power vacuum could bring a stifling conservative backlash or a more open, egalitarian society. Bangkok's royalist establishment must wonder if it's worth the effort to continue fighting against the rural electorate, which realized under Thaksin that their votes could translate into cheap health care, village loans and crop subsidies.

Indeed, if this conflict heads where many people fear – civil war – the costs of retaining power may be too great for both sides. It will take years and the winners will rule over nothing more than a divided country with weak institutions and a devastated economy. A middle way is waiting to be found, if only the extremists loyal to both Thaksin and Bhumibol would lay down their arms and

figure out how to co-exist peacefully.

Intended or not, Dad's failure to show up and speak yesterday sent one clear signal: It's time for Thailand's 66 million children to grow up. The world is waiting to see whether they'll now proceed to beat each other senseless.

P.S.

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