

Thailand's king and its crisis

A right royal mess

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Thailand's interminable political conflict has much to do with the taboo subject of its monarchy. That is why the taboo must be broken

EVEN the most revered of kings, worshipped by his people as a demigod, is not immortal. Thais were reminded of this last month when six days of ornate cremation ceremonies, with gilded carriages and armies of extras in traditional costumes, were held for Princess Galyani, the elder sister of their beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej (pictured above). There was talk in Bangkok of the princess's funeral being a "dress rehearsal" for the end of Bhumibol's reign, 62 years long so far. Making one of few public appearances this year, shortly before his 81st birthday on December 5th, the king did indeed look his age.

The funeral only briefly calmed a political conflict that has raged for three years between supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra, the prime minister ousted by royalist generals in the 2006 coup, and an opposition movement backed by much of Bangkok's traditional elite, apparently including Queen Sirikit. But the day after the ceremonies ended a grenade exploded among anti-Thaksin protesters, killing one. The anti-government protesters, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), who had been occupying Government House since August, then seized Bangkok's main airports, causing chaos. The siege was lifted only eight days later, after a court dissolved the main parties in the pro-Thaksin coalition government.

Mr Thaksin is in exile, convicted in absentia of corruption. But a government dominated by his allies has governed since democracy returned in last December's elections. It looks poised to carry on under new party names despite the court ruling. Last month Mr Thaksin staged a huge rally of his "red shirt" supporters to remind his "yellow shirt" royalist foes in the PAD, who claim to be protecting the king against Mr Thaksin's supposed republicanism, that he remains Thailand's most popular politician.

Besides justified concerns about Mr Thaksin's abuses of power, one of the royalists' worries is that he was building, through populist policies such as cheap health care and microcredit, a patronage network and popular image that challenged the king's. Another fear is that Mr Thaksin's alleged generosity to Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn in the past was intended to build up influence with him once he succeeds to the throne. For these and other reasons, the little-told back-story of King Bhumibol is vital to understanding the predicament of this country of 64m people.

Many Thais will squirm at what follows, and will prefer the fairy-tale version of the king's story. But the king's past actions are root causes of a conflict dividing the country, and need to be examined.

Bhumibol's tale, even if stripped of the mythology his courtiers have spent decades constructing around him, is exceptional. The American-born son of a half-Chinese commoner accidentally inherits a throne close to extinction and revives it, creating one of the world's most powerful and wealthy monarchies, and surely the only one of any significance to have gained in political power in modern times. The king's charisma, intelligence, talents (from playing the saxophone to rain-making, a

science in which he holds a European patent) and deep concern for his people's welfare make him adored at home and admired around the world. His image perhaps reaches its zenith in 1992, after the army shoots dozens of pro-democracy protesters in Bangkok, when television shows both the army leader (and prime minister) Suchinda Kraprayoon and the protest leader, Chamlong Srimuang (now a PAD stalwart), kneeling in an audience with him. Shortly afterwards General Suchinda resigns, and the king is given credit for the restoration of democracy.

However, Bhumibol's story is also that of a king who lost faith in democracy (if he ever really had it), who constantly meddled behind the scenes in politics and thus, in the twilight of his reign, risks leaving behind a country unprepared for life without "Father", as Thais affectionately call him. Understanding why a country that was until recently a beacon of pluralism in Asia has become such a "mess", as the king put it in 2006, is impossible without lifting the thick veil of reverence surrounding him.

This is not easy because, paradoxically, a king whose adulation by his subjects is supposedly near-universal is nevertheless deemed to need protection, in the form of the world's most ferociously enforced *lèse-majesté* law. Whereas other monarchies have mostly abolished or stopped enforcing such laws, Thailand's was made harsher in the 1970s. Even the most mild, reasoned criticism of the monarchy is forbidden, punishable by up to 15 years in jail. This has had a remarkable effect not just on Thais but on successive generations of Western diplomats, academics and journalists who, with few exceptions, have meekly censored themselves.

All the king's men

The origins of this, in part, were in the Vietnam war, in which America found King Bhumibol a staunch anti-communist ally. Recognising his value as an anti-red icon, America pumped propaganda funds into a campaign to put the king's portrait in every Thai home. Even today, although quick to decry undemocratic moves in other Asian countries, America rarely protests at the arrests of Thais and foreigners for criticising the monarchy. Foreign journalists and academics need visas and access to officialdom to do their jobs, and thus have played down the royal angle to any story.

As a result of this conspiracy of silence, only one serious biography exists of one of Asia's most important leaders. "The King Never Smiles", by Paul Handley, an American journalist (2006), notes that the king's restoration of the power and prestige of the Thai monarchy "is one of the great untold stories of the 20th century."

Mr Handley says that in the two intervening years nobody has disputed the main facts in his book; not even the most damning stuff, which explodes the myth that the king rarely intervenes in politics and then only on the side of good. Perhaps his gravest charge is that in 1976 the king seemed to condone the growth of right-wing vigilante groups that, along with the army, were later responsible for the slaughter of peaceful student protesters. As has happened often in modern Thai history (and could easily happen again now), the 1976 unrest was used as a pretext to topple the government and replace it with a royally approved one.

Bhumibol was 18 when he took the throne after the mysterious death of his ineffectual brother, King Ananda, in 1946. He promptly came under the sway of his uncles, princes itching to restore the power and wealth the crown had lost when the absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932. As he grew into his robes in the 1950s he created a comprehensive patronage system. The award of honours in exchange for donations to royal causes made the monarchy the predominant fount of charity. This "network monarchy", as it was dubbed by Duncan McCargo, a British academic, put the king back at the centre of Thai society and recovered much of his lost power.

A theme now embraced with gusto by the PAD, inspired by the king's speeches over the years, is

that electoral politics is irretrievably filthy and that Thailand would do better with ad hoc rule by royally favoured “good men”. The epitome of these is General Prem Tinsulanonda who, as unelected prime minister in the semi-democracy of the 1980s, did more than anyone else to foster the idea of the king’s near-divinity. Now president of the privy council, General Prem is also supposedly above politics. But this too is a myth: he is widely seen as the mastermind of the 2006 coup. Shortly beforehand he told the army that the king was its “owner” and Mr Thaksin merely a replaceable “jockey”.

AP Royalists wear yellow

The PAD is a motley bunch, united only by fanatical hatred of Mr Thaksin. It includes disgruntled businessmen, aristocratic ladies, members of a militaristic Buddhist outfit, formerly anti-monarchist intellectuals and reactionary army types. Its “new politics”, consisting of a partly appointed parliament, sweeping powers for military intervention and, of course, a strong crown, is “Premocracy” redux.

The army is a big part of the country’s predicament. Its generals believe they have a right to remove any government that incurs its, or the palace’s, displeasure—taking its cue from the monarchy that has approved so many of its coups. These two obstacles to Thailand’s democratic development are inextricably interlinked.

Mr Handley criticises the way the king has undermined the rule of law. When he has intervened to make known his wishes, his influence is such that it is taken as an order. In an example too late for the book, months before the 2006 coup the king ordered the country’s judges to do something about the political crisis. In a recording of a phone call between two Supreme Court judges shortly afterwards, later posted on the internet, one says they need to avoid the perception that they are following palace orders because “foreigners wouldn’t accept it”.

Since then, their interpretation of the king’s wishes has become increasingly clear, as the courts have rushed through cases against the former prime minister and his allies, while going easy on their critics. Some cases, such as the corruption allegations against Mr Thaksin, clearly deserved the courts’ attention. Others were trivial, such as the court-ordered sacking in September of Samak Sundaravej, the pro-Thaksin prime minister, for doing a television cookery show. In contrast, rebellion charges against the PAD’s leaders over their seizing of Government House were watered down and the courts freed them to continue the occupation.

None of this is to absolve Mr Thaksin and his cronies of their sins. But even his gravest abuse—a “war on drugs” in 2003, in which police were suspected of hundreds of extra-judicial killings—was not entirely his fault. The dirty war against supposed drug-dealers was misguidedly supported by Thais of all social classes. Even the king, in an equivocal speech that year, sounded at times as if he approved of it.

Father knows best

Other countries, from Spain to Brazil, have overcome dictatorial pasts to grow into strong democracies whose politics is mostly conducted in parliament, not on the streets. Thailand’s failure to follow suit is partly because “Father” has always been willing to step in and sort things out: his children have never quite had to grow up. The Democrats, the parliamentary opposition, are opportunists, cheering on the PAD while seemingly hoping for another royally approved coup to land the government in their lap.

AFP Princess Sirindhorn is preferred...

The rage of Bangkok’s traditional elite against Mr Thaksin stems partly from embarrassment at having originally supported him. When he came to power in 2001 there was a feeling that Thailand

needed a strong “CEO” leader, as the former businessman presented himself. His then party, Thai Rak Thai (TRT), was the first in Thai history to win a parliamentary majority on its own, and formed the first elected government to serve a full term, after which it was re-elected. Mr Thaksin’s policies of improved public services and credit for the poor, though self-serving, promised to improve an unequal, hierarchical society: another reason why the old palace-linked elite wants him eliminated.

The government of generals and bureaucrats installed by the 2006 coup-makers performed miserably. In last December’s elections, though TRT had been disbanded, Mr Thaksin’s new People’s Power Party won most seats. This spurred the PAD to resume its protests. In clashes in October PAD members fought the police with guns, bombs and sharp staves, hoping the army would again use disorder as the pretext for a coup. The PAD nevertheless blamed the clashes entirely on police brutality, and the anti-Thaksin Bangkok press let it get away with this. The death of one PAD member, apparently blown up in his car by the bomb he was carrying, was quickly buried. But the death of a young woman, reportedly when a police tear-gas canister exploded, became a cause célèbre.

Up to this point there were only whispers as to why the PAD enjoyed such lenient treatment—even from the army, which refused to help the police remove protesters from government offices. However, rumours of an extremely influential backer were confirmed when Queen Sirikit, attended by a clutch of cameramen, presided over the dead woman’s cremation. The king remained silent.

Nobody can discuss, of course, what effect the queen’s support has had on the majority of Thais who still, apparently, back Mr Thaksin. A whirl of *lèse-majesté* accusations have been made against pro- and anti-Thaksin figures. But the PAD’s ever more menacing behaviour, the palace’s failure to disown it, and the group’s insistence that Thais must choose between loyalty to Mr Thaksin and to the king, may be doing untold damage to the crown itself. Some of Mr Thaksin’s voters must be contemplating the flip-side of the PAD’s argument: if the monarchy is against the leader they keep voting for, maybe it is against them. Such feelings may only be encouraged by the PAD’s condescending arguments that the rural poor, Mr Thaksin’s main support base, are too “uneducated” to have political opinions, so their voting power must be reduced.

Bloomberg ...to the stiff crown prince

At a pro-Thaksin rally in July a young activist ranted against the monarchy, calling the king “a thorn in the side of democracy” for having backed so many coups, and warning the royal family they risked the guillotine. She was quickly arrested. What shocked the royalist establishment was not just the startling criticism of the king—but that the activist was cheered. “It is more and more difficult for them to hold the illusion that the monarchy is universally adored,” says a Thai academic.

This illusion is crumbling amid growing worry about what happens when the king’s reign ends. The fears over Mr Thaksin’s past influence on the crown prince are overshadowed by far deeper ones about the suitability of the heir to the throne. Vajiralongkorn has shown little of his father’s charisma or devotion to duty, and in his youth suffered from a bad reputation. In a newspaper interview he defended himself against accusations that he was a gangster. But even his mother, in an extraordinary set of interviews on a visit to America in 1981, conceded he was a “bit of a Don Juan”. “If the people of Thailand do not approve of the behaviour of my son, then he would either have to change his behaviour or resign from the royal family,” she said.

The Thai press dutifully self-censored and certainly would not repeat these criticisms now. Nevertheless, the crown prince will probably remain deeply disliked. There has been speculation over the years that the king might pass the crown to the much more popular Princess Sirindhorn, who now does most of his job of touring the country to meet the masses. The 8pm nightly royal news on television constantly shows her, smiling through endless visits and ceremonies, making merit at

Buddhist temples and doing other good works. In the crown prince's rare appearances he looks reluctant and stiff, and is rarely seen meeting ordinary people.

The patrilineal tradition of the Chakri dynasty is unlikely to be broken. And the prominent role played by the crown prince in Princess Galyani's cremation removed any doubts about whether he was the chosen heir, says a Thai academic. Even so, many Thais, a superstitious people, will remember an old prophecy that the dynasty would last for only nine generations—Bhumibol is the ninth Chakri king—and that a tenth would be a disaster.

Some day my prince...

For all these reasons, a former senior official with strong palace ties says there is a terror of what will come after Bhumibol. "When we say 'Long live the king' we really mean it, because we can't bear to think of what the next step will be," he says. Most Thais are too young to remember a time before Bhumibol took the throne. His death will be a leap into the unknown. It would seem wise for royal advisers to be doing some succession planning. But, says the former official, none seems to be going on. And any advice offered would probably not be heeded: "The king is his own man. Nobody advises the king," he says.

In the shorter term, a trigger for renewed confrontation may be, if a pro-Thaksin government survives, its plan to amend the constitution passed during the military regime that followed the 2006 coup. Some mooted changes, such as restoring a fully elected Senate, seem reasonable. But the PAD assumes the main motive is to relieve Mr Thaksin and his allies of the various legal charges against them. Neither side yet seems willing to compromise. Both have made clear their readiness to use street mobs to achieve their ends.

A messy but effective "Thai-style compromise" is still hoped for, to pull the country back from the brink. It is even possible to dream of the red- and yellow-shirt movements transforming themselves into a well-behaved, mainstream two-party system with broad public participation. This, in turn, might help the country escape the dead hand of the courtiers and generals who are trying to drag the country into the past. But none of this is likely.

If Bhumibol's glittering reign either ends in conflagration or leads to a Thailand paralysed by endless strife, with nobody of his stature to break the deadlock, it will be a tragedy. But he will have played a leading role in bringing about such an outcome. There is of course an opposing case to be made—that the king has been a stabilising influence in a volatile age, that his devotion to duty has been an inspiring example and that he has only ever done what he thought best for the country. But that case has been made publicly, day in, day out, for decades. Thais are not allowed to discuss in public the other side of the coin.

P.S.

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