

Thailand: When King Pumipon dies

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Many Thais, whether they are Royalist Yellow Shirts, or pro-Democracy Red Shirts, are waiting for King Pumipon to die. It may take years. Their feelings will be different, either positive or negative. This is because Pumipon has influenced Thai society for years. But the issue to discuss is whether this influence is created by others or based on his own power?

Most Thais, both Yellow and Red, believe that Pumipon is the most powerful political actor. Many academics like Paul Handley believe this too. But it is not the case. If it were the case that Pumipon was powerful, like an absolute monarch, when he dies there will be a civil war between those who want to become the next King. The Princess' soldiers will fight the soldiers of the Crown Prince or the Queen. Prem's soldiers might place Prem on the throne! That is unlikely.

There will be a power struggle and rivalries, but it will be a struggle among the elites, including Thaksin, to see who can use the Monarchy for their own ends. After the 2006 Thaksin lost this battle. Maybe he might return to the fight. Among the Yellow Shirts there will also be such rivalries.

When Pumipon dies, my guess is that the Army and the conservative elites will hold a gigantic and very expensive funeral for him. Resources which ought to go to building welfare and raising wages will be used for this. My guess is the funeral will be at least twice as long as the one recently organised for his sister, which lasted a whole year. Perhaps Pumipon's funeral will last 5 years. Extensions of other King activities could take the whole thing to ten years! Pictures of the King will increase even more. The reason for this huge funeral will not be in order to satisfy "millions of Thais who will be heart-broken by Pumipon's death". Many will be celebrating in private. No, the reason for a huge funeral will be in order to shift the propaganda machine into an even higher gear. The conservative elites will be desperately trying to promote and re-promote the ideology of the Monarchy. Anyone who opposes the Army, or the authoritarian elites who are now in power, anyone who campaigns for Democracy, will be accused of *lese majeste* and of trying to "overthrow Pumipon". The fact that he is dead will be of little consequence. While all this is going on, the extremely unpopular and disrespected Crown Prince will be gradually shifted on to the Throne. His equally hated mother, the Queen, will be there too, but both will be under the larger than life picture of Pumipon. We will never be able to forget Pumipon and his so-called "wonderful works". We will see the Crown Prince, but the words "Pumipon" will be blaring out from loud speakers.

If all this propaganda does not work, there will be the *lese majeste* law, the contempt of court law, the computer law and the internal security Law. If that does not work, the Army can always shoot pro-Democracy demonstrators.

When the generals staged coups or intervened in politics, they were not following the orders of Pumipon. Pumipon has always been shy, timid, and lacking in courage and character. Pumipon has no leadership qualities. He goes with the flow. When Taksin was Prime Minister, he praised Taksin. When the soldiers staged a coup, he praised them. His speeches use obscure language so that the elites can make their own interpretations and Pumipon does not have to take any responsibility. He is happy that people crawl to him and he is happy accumulating his vast wealth. The Queen and the Crown Prince have a reputation for being tyrants. Maybe that is so, but they have no more real power than Pumipon.

So when the generals decide to do anything, they stage an elaborate play in order to make us think that they are going to the palace to “take orders”. In fact they are there to “tell” the King what they have already decided to do. Pumipon will nod agreement or will be unavailable for an audience, depending on the advice he gets from the Privy Council. The advice is not based on decisions made by Prem, the Privy Council Chairman, it is based on the consensus of those in power in the Army and outside. After Pumipon’s nod of agreement, the generals come out of the palace and announced to the public that they have “taken orders” from the King. That way they can build legitimacy for their actions and fear to oppose them.

When Pumipon dies, the powerful Army will still be there. The tanks and guns will not have disappeared. The raw and repressive power of the conservative elites rests with the Army. But the generals will panic because their sole source of legitimacy will have died. That is why they will extend the funeral as long as possible. When Pumipon dies, the generals will still pretend to go to the palace and “receive orders” from the Queen and the Crown Prince. Occasionally, when it is some minor and rather silly issue, they might be real orders and the generals will follow them just to keep the Royals happy. But on all important matters of policy, they will be merely informing the Royals of their decisions.

If the Crown Prince is hated and despised by Thais, why would the Army promote him to be the next King? If Pumipon is all powerful, why does he not appoint the Princess as his heir to the Throne? The answer is that Pumipon is too cowardly to decide anything. The Army are reluctant to appoint the Princess over the Crown Prince because their false claim that the Monarchy is steeped in “ancient tradition” would collapse by such an appointment. Not only that, changing the succession, because the Prince was unsuitable, would mean that the Monarchy could always be changed and even be abolished.

Do not think for one second that when Pumipon dies, that Thailand will descend into chaos. It is and has been in chaos for the last 3-4 years despite Pumipon. It was in chaos in the mid 1970s. Pumipon is not universally loved by all Thais. Most Thais are Red Shirts. Most Red Shirts tolerate the present King. A few love the King, but most are waiting for him to die. After Pumipon dies most Red Shirts will not tolerate the Crown Prince or his mother, the Queen. The Queen lost popular support after she openly sided with the PAD.

When Pumipon dies, the work of those who want a republic will not be easier. The King’s death will provide opportunities and dangers. The Royalist Yellow Shirts will be more desperate and dangerous. But the legitimacy of their actions can be attacked. Democracy does not fall from a branch like a ripe mango. We have to reach up and pick it and at the same time, reach up and pull down the conservative elites and their entire authoritarian system.