

# Siamese spat

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## **Thais should be free to understand more about the role of their own monarchy**

On Monday The Times published an interview with Thaksin Shinawatra, the ousted Prime Minister of Thailand. As a result of his comments about that country's Royal Family, part of the Times Online website has been blocked in Thailand. Thaksin and this newspaper's Asia editor could also, theoretically, face up to 15 years in jail. The Thai laws of lèse-majesté have always been excessive. They now look childish, too.

To those unversed in the peculiarities of the Thai system, Thaksin's alleged offence may be hard to discern. He did not abuse the Royal Family, or even find fault with them. Instead, he merely discussed the link between the monarchy and Thai politics, and speculated as to how the landscape might change if the much revered king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, should one day die.

King Bhumibol is the world's longest-serving head of state and is admired in Thailand for the stabilising role he has played during his six decades on the throne. He is also 81, and has been in hospital for the past seven weeks with suspected pneumonia. This should not have been inflammatory stuff. Thailand is an exciting, modern, forward-looking nation, but nothing jars with this quite so much as the antiquated prohibition against discussing the monarchy in anything but the most fawning and platitudinous terms. At times, the country can seem less like a constitutional monarchy and more like a personality cult. This benefits nobody, not even the royals themselves.

Indeed, in this as in so many things, King Bhumibol himself is a beacon of good sense. "The King can do wrong," he reminded the Thai people, in an address on the eve of his 78<sup>th</sup> birthday. "If we hold that the King cannot be criticised or violated, then the King ends up in a difficult situation."

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In recent years, the King has found himself in such a difficult situation a number of times. The Royal Family themselves do not invoke the law of lèse-majesté, but when citizens bring charges on their behalf the police are obliged to investigate. Earlier this year the King pardoned an Australian author who had been sentenced to three years in prison owing to a 100-word passage in a novel that sold seven copies. More often, they are exploited as a means of silencing dissent, imprisoning dissenters or of cowing domestic and international journalists. The BBC's respected correspondent Jonathan Head has found himself investigated for lèse-majesté on several occasions. This is a petty law, which only opens Thailand up to ridicule.

In Thaksin's words, either way, one finds neither criticism nor violation of the monarchy. Instead we find something that the Thai Establishment regards as equally taboo — the mere acknowledgement that some in the royal circle may have some involvement in Thai politics. That this should be publicly unutterable in any 21<sup>st</sup>-century nation beggars belief, let alone one with the potential and ambition of Thailand.

In his interview, Thaksin spoke of how influences in Thai public life may change, should King Bhumibol be succeeded by the Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn. We wish the King a speedy recovery, but whatever the future holds, Thailand can only benefit from a free and frank discussion

of its own system of government. Scrutiny need not entail disrespect.

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**P.S.**

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