

Witch-hunt: Exiled Thai activist in Paris threatened over 'insulting the royal family'

Thursday 20 October 2016, by [SMITH Nicola](#) (Date first published: 18 October 2016).

Thai ultra-royalists are reportedly hunting down an exiled activist in Paris after accusing her of defaming King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who died last week.

According to Thai media reports, Saran Chuichai, also known as Aum Neko, has fled France and gone into hiding after calls grew on social media for her to be repatriated for her alleged criticism of the king, who was revered by many Thais and considered close to divine.

Some of her accusers on Facebook went even further than calling for her to be returned to her homeland.

"Execute her, a red shirt who always insults the monarchy of all Thai people," read one comment.

"I think we should hire a gangster to deal with them. Offer him good pay. And after they finish their job, let them fly to Thailand and hide until the lawsuit expires," read another comment, reported on the Prachatai website.

The hunt for Ms Chuichai comes amid a heightened emotional atmosphere in Thailand as millions of citizens mourn the passing of the king who ruled them for seventy years and was considered the father of the nation.

Since he died on Thursday there have been daily occurrences of mobs descending on the homes of those deemed to have insulted the monarchy, demanding that they be charged with Thailand's strict lese majeste laws, which carry a jail sentence of up to 15 years.

Speaking to the *Daily Telegraph*, Pitch Pongsawat, a political scientist at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn university warned that "the witchhunt is coming" as members of the public began to appoint themselves as moral judges.

"It's like everybody is watching each other, whether you're sad enough, or black enough for your dress, whether you express your ideas sadly enough in social media," he said. "It's a competitive grief."

Ms Chuichai appears to have the first Thai living abroad to have enraged ultra royalists since the king's death, but she is no stranger to controversy.

The 22-year-old student, known for her transgender political activism, already faces charges of lese majeste that date back to 2013 after a television host accused her of criticising the royal family in an interview.

She fled Thailand after the 2014 coup, along with dozens of pro-democracy activists who were involved in the so-called red shirt movement, which opposed military rule. Many decided to flee after

they were summoned by the junta, and most face lese majeste charges.

Ms Chuichai fled to France where she was granted refugee status.

In the days following the king's death she has once again been accused of outspoken criticism of the royal family.

One political pressure group of staunch royalists reportedly issued a demand over the weekend to Thai expats living in Paris to track her down, allegedly publishing the address of someone believed to be sheltering her.

A petition to the French government against Ms Chuichai, launched on the website change.org, signed by close to 35,000 people, described her as "dangerous to the world" and unable to "co-exist with society."

When contacted by the Thai media, a friend of Ms Chuichai's claimed she had fled Paris after people started searching for her, and was heading to the airport to "lie low" in another country.

In Thailand there have been appeals for calm after people accused of criticising the monarchy have been threatened with violence by baying mobs.

On Tuesday, Jirawat Pathumthong, 19, was dragged from his bedroom in Chonburi Province, eastern Thailand, and beaten by a mob who claimed he had defamed the king.

The incident was livestreamed on Facebook, in footage that showed the victim with a bloodied face from a wound to the head. He was forced to kneel in apology to the king's portrait.

Some in the crowd threatened his life.

"Do you want to die here? Apologise to him now!" a man is heard calling.

Nicola Smith

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As the royal family is highly revered in Thai society, the laws are in place to protect the most senior members of the country's monarchy from insults or threats.

In a law that goes back to 1908, the country's criminal code states anyone who "defames, insults or threatens" the king, the queen, the heir-apparent or the regent will be punished with up to 15 years in prison.

Anyone can report an allegation of lèse majesté, and the accusation can be made against anyone - including the monarch's family.

So serious is the crime in Thailand, that the police are formally obliged to investigate all complaints, yet details of the charges are rarely publicised to avoid repeating the offensive remarks.

Those who fall foul of the law range from unsuspecting tourists to prominent politicians as well as extended members of the royal family. Human rights activists claim the laws have been used as a political weapon to stifle free speech.

P.S.

* "Exiled Thai activist in Paris threatened over 'insulting the royal family'". The Telegraph. 18 OCTOBER 2016 • 1:46PM:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/18/exiled-thai-activist-in-paris-threatened-over-insulting-the-royal/>