

Modesty and mystery

Obituary : Bhumibol Adulyadej, king of Thailand - “To him, the army emphasised unity; politicians were too divisive”

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Bhumibol Adulyadej died on October 13th. The king of Thailand was 88.

AIRCRAFT dropped flowers and lucky rice on the crowds that gathered in Bangkok to see Bhumibol Adulyadej return from university to be crowned. He was 22, and had been king for three years. Auspicious signs had preceded his arrival, in the spring of 1950: a white elephant had padded out from the jungle and hailstones had fallen on the capital. He bathed in sacred waters and mounted an octagonal throne, cooled by the shade of a nine-tiered umbrella. No man could bestow sovereignty upon him, so the young king himself put on the steeped Great Crown of Victory and the royal gold slippers.

He acceded just as the monarchy’s golden years were ending. A revolution during his childhood had curtailed the absolute power his ancestors once wielded. Yet he seemed a model for a modern king: born in America (near Harvard, where his studious parents met), he had grown up in Switzerland, speaking English and French. He was tall, cerebral, dignified—and had not been reared to rule. The throne fell to him only after the death of his brother Ananda, found shot in the head with one bullet in his bed before breakfast. (Two servants and a palace secretary were executed for his murder, but it was not properly investigated, and Bhumibol did not wish it to be.)

His subjects took to him immediately. They tuned in to the foreign records which the music-loving monarch broadcast from a radio studio in his palace. He wrote songs and gave saxophone concerts, backed by court bands; wags called him the King of Swing. But he also worked long hours, handing out so many degree certificates that doctors said his arm and shoulder were at risk. Later he would spend as long as six months a year, in civvies and with a camera swinging round his neck, touring Thailand’s impoverished provinces. He met the poor rice- and rubber-farmers whom the elites disdained, set up experimental paddy-fields and started co-operatives. He pored over maps to promote vast new dams, including some on the Chaophraya river that regularly flooded Bangkok; the idea had come to him, as a keen naturalist, from the way monkeys pushed out their cheeks to hold a whole bunch of bananas, which were then released as needed.

Blessing and pardon

He pledged that he would not take sides in Thailand’s politics. But behind the scenes the palace’s power grew, stoked by a cabal of ambitious princes. They made Bhumibol one of the world’s wealthiest men; his court could outspend any politician or general who dared vie for the people’s adoration. Through rituals and ceremonies encased in gold, the courtiers strove tirelessly to restore the king to the heart of Thai Buddhism and make him semi-divine.

Thailand's ruling classes, led by its meddling army, resisted, then gave up the battle. Adoration of the monarchy was useful in the escalating fight against communism. America helped plaster the countryside with posters and billboards bearing the king's image. In return Bhumibol indulged the generals, tacitly supporting coup after coup, for his blessing was needed for political enterprises, as well as his pardon: most memorably in 1992, when the new (military) prime minister and the leader of protests against him knelt and bowed before his gilded sofa to seek the royal forgiveness. He became the soft-spoken arbiter of all weighty national disputes, and thus held unparalleled power. Eventually, he also gained the aura of being the longest-reigning monarch in the world.

To him, the army emphasised unity; politicians were too divisive. Nor were greedy capitalists much favoured, even though the palace, and the elites who circled it, made billions as Thailand grew rich. When Asian markets tumbled in the late 1990s, Bhumibol urged his subjects to favour moderation over wealth. That was sincere, but also self-interested—it praised the quiet virtue of staying in one's place and doing one's duty, as he did, adhering solemnly and even joylessly to the dharma or teachings of the Buddha. He even declared that he ate unmilled rice like the poorest peasant, because he too was poor.

Meanwhile the palace jealously guarded the king's image. Photos of him filled the newspapers. A refurbished *lèse-majesté* law was used to hammer dissenters of all stripes. The king expressed unease; if he could not be criticised, he said, it suggested he was not human. But he remained selective with his pardons, even as, with the advent of social media, the number of convictions rose.

Tongues wagged, despite the risks. Gossips whispered that the king and his wife, Queen Sirikit, were now estranged. No law could silence the oldest and cruellest rumour of all: that Bhumibol had killed his brother by accident, while playing with the pistols both kept beside their beds.

In 2009 he moved into a Bangkok hospital. Some said he was depressed. Laws meant to protect his family, his first duty, had brought censure and increasing ridicule from abroad. The palace's monopoly on do-gooding had starved civil society of oxygen. His subjects, divided by class war, shed blood on the streets of the capital; their leaders eyed the vacuum that would follow his demise. He had only ever tried to be the king his people deserved. Yet Thailand's modern monarch left its politics trapped decades in the past.

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P.S.

* The Economist. Oct 13th 2016:

<http://www.economist.com/news/obituary/21708703-king-thailand-was-88-obituary-bhumibol-adulyadej-died-october-13th>