

This Week in Asia / People

Monarchy - In Thailand, Queen Suthida's absence raises anxiety among royalists - and questions about royal consort Sineenat

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- **The queen has not been seen in public for a month, raising anxiety among some diehard royalist supporters**
- **Royal consort Sineenat has recently taken on a more visible role, amid hints of internal palace strife should she become a second queen**

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The absence of Thailand's Queen Suthida from public engagements has roused some anxiety within the country, where the 42-year-old has her own supporters among diehard royalists.

Information about the Thai monarchy is heavily sanitised by the country's lèse-majesté law, which punishes criticism of the royal family with up to 15 years in prison. As a result, most Thais rely on the royal news broadcast, which runs on television every night, to keep up with the monarchy's activities - but Suthida has not been mentioned on it since late December.

Neither has the palace moved to discredit rumours swirling online that Suthida might suffer the same fate as King Maha Vajiralongkorn's three former wives, who were either forced into exile or publicly humiliated.

These developments come as Thailand's pro-democracy movement, emboldened by the popular support of internet-savvy millennials, has vowed to continue campaigning for reform of the monarchy and revocation of the royal defamation law, which they view as a political tool to silence dissent.

Since the protests took off last July, the Thai monarchy's place in the public consciousness has changed. Many young Thais no longer address Vajiralongkorn, 68, with a special vocabulary or praise his development projects, as his father King Bhumibol Adulyadej was honoured during his 70-year reign until his death in 2016.

Critics of the monarchy, including Scottish journalist Andrew MacGregor Marshall and Kyoto University scholar and former Thai diplomat Pavin Chachavalpongpun, have noted Queen Suthida's absence and how its timing has coincided with the king's increasing public appearances with his consort Sineenat.

Unofficial YouTube channels focusing on news about the Thai royals have discussed Suthida's "disappearance", with their clips receiving more than 2 million views within days of being uploaded.

SECRETS AND SUSPICIONS

Suthida's last public appearance was on December 28, when she and the king presided over an event commemorating the 18th-century Thai King Taksin in Bangkok. The event was held just days after Vajiralongkorn completed a weeklong tour of the provinces with Sineenat, his first official public appearance with the consort he had sacked in October 2019 before pardoning her in August last year.

Since the king's October return from Germany, where he has stayed for months at a time over the years, Suthida has been at his side at mostly official events in the Thai capital, as well as royal walkabouts the palace organised amid the pro-democracy protests demanding the curbing of his authority.

The trip with Sineenat took the public by surprise, as no Thai monarch has flaunted their consort so publicly. It also invited criticism even from the royalists who have staunchly defended Vajiralongkorn against allegations he has abused his political and financial influence.

MacGregor Marshall said according to senior palace aides, there was "widespread despair in royal circles about the chaos caused by the king's personal life".

However, he said it was not unusual for Vajiralongkorn and Suthida to spend time apart, just as they had in recent years.

"For several years, Vajiralongkorn has lived at Grand Hotel Sonnenbichl in Bavaria, with Sineenat and the rest of his harem, while Suthida lived at Hotel Waldegg in the Swiss town of Engelberg," MacGregor Marshall said. "The king and queen rarely saw each other except when they had to go to Thailand for royal duties, and these visits are kept very short, usually less than 24 hours."

Pavin, the former diplomat, pointed to another possible reason for Suthida's absence.

He and MacGregor Marshall had received more than 1,400 intimate photos of Sineenat last year, he said, and this was seen as a bid to sabotage her return as the royal consort.

According to Pavin, Suthida's loyalists might be connected to the leaked photos, and her current absence could be the consequence of that sabotage attempt.

"That is the most likely allegation against her and could be the reason for her disappearance," Pavin said. "There is strong belief in the public that she was behind the leaking of Sineenat's private nude photos. Since Sineenat is now a favourite, she could have taken revenge against Suthida."

THAILAND'S SECOND QUEEN?

In Suthida's absence, Sineenat has taken up some public roles and assignments that would previously have been in the queen's wheelhouse. The consort was this month appointed as deputy adviser to a royal-sponsored prison project, one that Suthida formerly co-advised with the king after Sineenat was stripped of her titles in late 2019.

This time, Suthida's name was taken off the project, going by an announcement in the royal gazette, which came soon after the palace released pictures of the king and Sineenat taking part in an agricultural project in the prison. A New Year card featuring photos of her and the king was also issued, while their most recent public appearance was to celebrate Sineenat's 36th birthday on January 26.

"It is evident that she is his favourite consort," Pavin said. "Imprisoning her and then releasing her, it cannot be more evident that Sineenat has got a hold of his heart."

But the appointment of Sineenat as second queen, as is rumoured, would mean more civil war within the palace, adding to the fragility of the centuries-old institution that the pro-democracy movement has already revealed.

MacGregor Marshall, citing "several well-placed palace sources", said Vajiralongkorn had originally planned to make Sineenat his second queen last week during her birthday, becoming like the monarchs of the past who had several wives.

"But it has been delayed amid intense opposition from the king's sister [Princess Maha Chakri] Sirindhorn and his daughters, [Princesses] Bajrakitiyabha and Sirivannavari, all of whom will go down one place in the royal ranking if Thailand gets a second queen. The sources say it is still likely to happen later this year, as the king seems determined."

Pavin of Kyoto University said anything could happen under the current king's reign.

"Vajiralongkorn has proven that title and status, no matter how high and prestigious, can be taken away from any of [the women in the royal family]. In some ways, it is an erosion of positions of the monarchy as an institution, since the queen is a part of the institution."

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P.S.

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