

# Thai king's death foreshadows instability

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The death of the Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej yesterday afternoon at the age of 88 has provoked fears in ruling circles in Thailand and internationally that the country's protracted political crisis will worsen. The king had close ties to the armed forces and was the linchpin of the state apparatus, currently presided over by a military junta.

The palace signalled Bhumibol's imminent demise last weekend with an announcement that he had a "severe infection." He was frail and had suffered from multiple afflictions for some time. The news impacted immediately on the financial markets. The Thai stock market fell 6.2 percent over the course of the week and the Thai baht shed 2 percent against the US dollar.

The king's death was greeted with a wave of nauseating accolades from heads of state and political leaders around the world. US President Barack Obama issued a statement declaring that Bhumibol was "a tireless champion" for economic development and improved living standards. The UN General Assembly and Security Council stood in silent tribute. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon praised Bhumibol's "legacy of commitment to universal values and respect for human rights."

The international media followed suit, focussing on the outpouring of grief among the king's supporters. The phrase "revered by the Thai people" appears in article after article, which either gloss over or completely ignore the Thai monarchy's staggering wealth and its support for the country's long succession of military coups and abuse of democratic rights.

Bhumibol's meticulously-cultivated image as a man of the people can survive only due to the protection afforded by the country's draconian *lèse-majesté* laws, enforced by the military and police to intimidate and silence critics. Article 112 of Thailand's criminal code declares that 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.

The pall of media censorship extends over the monarchy's vast business empire. According to the *Forbes* magazine, Bhumibol was the world's richest monarch and one of its wealthiest individuals, with a fortune estimated at around \$30 billion. His holdings included the Crown Property Bureau, which holds vast tracts of land as well as large stakes in major corporations and industries. The monarchy is also an important source of business patronage, including through the award of royal warrants to companies.

Bhumibol epitomised the vast social divide between the rich and poor. A comment on the *Bloomberg* web site noted that more than 70 percent of government spending is devoted to Bangkok and surrounding provinces, and political power is heavily centralised. "The system will almost certainly perpetuate one of the world's widest inequality gaps; by one estimate, the richest 0.1 percent of Thais owns nearly half of the nation's assets," it commented.

As the country's economic boom as a cheap labour platform waned, particularly in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, Thailand confronted a worsening political crisis stemming from growing social unrest among the working class, along with the rural poor in the north and north-east. Deteriorating living standards and social inequality also underlie the protracted armed insurgency in the southern predominantly Muslim provinces that has claimed more than 5,000 lives since 2004.

Far from being a neutral figurehead standing above the political fray, Bhumibol has sided with the Bangkok elites—the military, state apparatus and associated corporate bodies—in their protracted struggle against a rival faction of the ruling class represented by deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The monarchy and the traditional elites initially backed Thaksin when he won the 2001 election in a landslide, then turned

against him. They did so not because of Thaksin's autocratic methods and abuse of democratic rights, but because his economic restructuring cut across existing systems of patronage and he raised expectations among the rural and urban poor through limited social reforms.

Bhumibol and the royal establishment backed the military to the hilt when it ousted Thaksin in a military coup in 2006 and rewrote the constitution. The demonstrations of anti-Thaksin "yellow shirts" that provided the pretext for the coup drew heavily on the Bangkok middle classes and not accidentally adopted yellow—the royal colour—as their symbol.

The inability of the establishment opposition parties to win any of the carefully-managed elections over the past decade has only deepened the political turmoil. The army cracked down brutally on pro-Thaksin "red shirt" demonstrations in 2010, killing at least 90 people, and in 2014 ousted the government of Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra. The failure of the Shinawatras and their supporters to mount any concerted resistance to the monarchy and the military stems primarily from the fact that all factions of the Thai bourgeoisie are terrified at the growing unrest among the working class and rural poor.

The current military junta headed by General Prayuth Chan-ocha as prime minister has sought to consolidate its grip on power by once again rewriting the constitution and cracking down on any dissent. Particularly sensitive to any, even slight, criticism of the monarchy, it has used the *lèse-majesté* laws more and more frequently to arrest and jail opposition. A report by the French-based International Federation for Human Rights issued in February documented 66 arrests on *lèse-majesté* charges since the May 2014 coup, with 36 individuals convicted and jailed, including 22 by military courts.

A great deal of nervousness surrounds the succession, as 64-year-old Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn is in no position to revive the tattered image of the Thai monarchy. Even the *lèse-majesté* laws have not prevented salacious details of his jet-set lifestyle and his lack of any pretence of interest in the lives of the Thai people from being the subject of media commentary.

In announcing Bhumibol's death, General Prayuth signalled that Vajiralongkorn, who was designated as successor in 1972, would ascend the throne. He later

announced that the crown prince had requested a delay in his proclamation as king, and time to mourn his father's death. Together with orders for a lengthy and elaborate period of mourning, it appears that the junta is desperate to prevent Vajiralongkorn's installation from becoming a focus for broad popular opposition to the Bangkok elites.



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