

The autocratic record of Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej

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The death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand last week has prompted a wave of glowing tributes by governments around the world. US President Obama declared that “his Majesty leaves a legacy of care for the Thai people that will be cherished by future generations.” British Prime Minister Theresa May proclaimed that he had “guided the Kingdom of Thailand with dignity, dedication and vision throughout his life.”

Internationally, the corporate media has produced countless articles glorifying Bhumibol as a benevolent and revered figure. The obituary in the British-based *Guardian*, for example, fraudulently claimed that the king had “worked tirelessly to promote democratic government,” ignoring Bhumibol’s long record of collaborating with the military and supporting its coups and dictatorships, including the current one.

In Thailand the monarch’s death is subject to tight media censorship and any, even mild, criticism risks a 15-year jail term under the country’s draconian lèse-majesté laws. The determination of the ruling elites to preserve the king’s image untarnished highlights his key role in preserving the capitalist state, above all in times of social upheaval.

Far from being a neutral arbiter in political affairs acting for the welfare of the people, Bhumibol always operated in the interests of the capitalist elites—above all the military, the state bureaucracy and the dominant factions of big business. The monarchy itself has a huge tax-exempt business empire operated by the Crown Property Bureau (CPB), with assets estimated to be worth \$30 billion, including vast tracts of land and large stakes in corporations like the Siam Commercial Bank and Siam Cement.

Bhumibol was largely educated abroad, primarily in Switzerland, and only ascended the throne in 1946 after the death of his elder brother by a gunshot wound in circumstances that remain very murky. He quickly returned to his studies in Switzerland. His uncle Rangsit was appointed regent and acting in his name approved the military coup in November 1947 to oust the government of Rear Admiral Thawan Thamrongnawasawat.

The coup leader Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (known as Phibun) politically sidelined Rangsit and Bhumibol, who returned to live in Thailand in December 1951. Phibun sought to weaken the monarchy by sacking royalist parliamentarians and in 1954 passed a law mandating the eventual redistribution of aristocratic land-holdings. He also banned Bhumibol from touring outside the capital.

The monarchy acted decisively to defend its power. On September 16, 1957, Bhumibol called on Phibun to resign. When Phibun refused, he was immediately overthrown by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, a rival general backed by the palace. Just two hours after seizing power Sarit obtained the king’s formal sanction for the coup.

Through Sarit and his successors the palace forged an enduring partnership with the military. Sarit repealed the 1954 land reform and restored large amounts of property that had been owned by the bureaucracy since 1932 to the monarchy. He encouraged Bhumibol and his wife Queen Sirikit to tour the country and promoted a cult of

personality around the king. Bhumibol revived long-dead royal traditions, including prostration before the throne (abolished in 1873), an ornate court language, and a system of royal honours. Sarit also helped the monarchy gain full control over the Buddhist *sangha*, or priesthood.

Throughout the 1960s, Bhumibol worked closely with successive military regimes to strengthen ties with US imperialism. Thailand was a member of the US-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), formed in 1954, and Washington still considers Thailand one of its most important formal military allies in Asia. Throughout the post-war period the US provided billions of dollars in military aid to successive Thai dictators and assisted in producing royalist propaganda.

Paul Good, who worked for the US Information Service in Thailand from 1963 to 1968, told an interviewer in 2000: “We had a program which had been instituted with the purpose of solidifying the Thais behind their king... We were in effect a PR unit for the Thai government. We would pass out pictures of the king... The purpose was to show the people that the king was thinking of them and taking care of them” and to deter “any susceptibility to the communist influence” (quoted in *A Kingdom in Crisis* by Andrew MacGregor Marshall).

There were some 45,000 US troops stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam War and the country was a major base for American planes bombing Vietnam and Laos. Bhumibol strongly supported the war and travelled to the US in June 1967 to personally negotiate increased funding and equipment for the Thai army in return for Thailand’s commitment to send 20,000 troops to Vietnam.

The junta used weapons supplied by the US to wage a brutal counter-insurgency campaign in rural areas, mainly in northern Thailand, where the Maoist Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) had gained thousands of supporters. Emulating the US campaign in Vietnam, the Thai military used missiles and napalm to incinerate villages and forests. Bhumibol worked with the generals in charge of the campaign and approved their operations.

Revolutionary upheaval

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw huge political upheavals in Thailand as it did internationally. Hundreds of thousands of workers, farmers and students were radicalised by conditions of deepening social inequality and poverty, the war in Vietnam and the brutal military regime of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, who took over as dictator after Sarit’s death in 1963.

Thailand was severely affected by the global economic downturn at the end of the 1960s; real wages declined throughout the decade and by late 1973 inflation had reached 5 percent a month. Thousands of farmers came into Bangkok to protest against deteriorating living conditions, while workers’ strikes increased dramatically, with 249 stoppages in December 1973 alone.

On October 13, as many as 400,000 workers and students rallied on the streets of Bangkok, the largest mass demonstration in Thailand’s history, to denounce the junta and demand elections. The following day protests

continued outside the royal palace. Police and soldiers led by General Narong Kittikachorn, Thanom's son, opened fire on the crowd, killing more than 70 people.

Bhumibol played the central role intervening to defuse the threat of revolution and stabilise capitalist rule. He demanded the resignation of Thanom, who was exiled from the country, then appointed a civilian government led by Prime Minister Sanya Dharmasakti, the dean of law at Thammasat University. Elections were held in 1975 and 1976, producing unstable minority governments led by the Democrat Party. US troops were withdrawn from the country in 1976 in a further attempt to appease popular anger.

Far from demonstrating Bhumibol's commitment to democracy, his intervention in 1973 was simply to buy time while the armed forces and monarchy prepared a counter-attack to crush the popular revolt. Throughout the 1970s, Bhumibol and other members of the royal family promoted the far-right royalist paramilitary organisations: Nawaphon, the Red Gaurs and the Village Scouts.

These fascistic outfits carried out political assassinations and attacked protesters and suspected communist sympathisers throughout the country. In 1976 Nawaphon leader Kittiwuttho Bhikkhu, a close associate of the king, notoriously declared that killing communists was a Buddhist duty because "such bestial types are not complete persons" (quoted in *The King Never Smiles* by Paul Handley).

The Chart Thai Party, which had close ties with these groups and was led by a former defence minister, launched its campaign for the April 1976 election by calling for "the Right to kill the Left."

In September 1976, Bhumibol allowed the former dictator Thanom to return to Thailand and he and his wife personally visited him. This direct intervention by the king in support of the hated general provoked furious protests in Bangkok. Royalists responded by whipping up anti-communist hatred against the students. Lieutenant Colonel Utharn Sanitwongs, a cousin of Queen Sirikit who ran an army radio program, accused the protesters of lèse-majesté and called on the Village Scouts and Nawaphon to attack them.

On October 6, a mob of soldiers, police and royalist thugs attacked a student-led protest at Thammasat University. More than 100 people were murdered and thousands more were injured, tortured and imprisoned. That evening Admiral Sangad Chaloryu overthrew the Democrat Party government of Prime Minister Seni Pramoj.

The Thammasat massacre was followed by another 16 years of brutal dictatorship, fully backed by Bhumibol. The king first installed Thanin Kraivichien, an extreme anti-communist judge, as prime minister, who suppressed unions and carried out a sweeping purge of leftists in universities, the media and the civil service. Thanin, according to Wikipedia, "ordered the confiscation and burning of 45,000 books, including works of Thomas More, George Orwell and Maxim Gorky." Lèse-majesté laws were toughened, with the maximum sentence raised from six to fifteen years in prison. As a result of the crackdown an estimated 10,000 students and intellectuals fled Bangkok and joined the Communist Party insurgency.

Thanin was replaced in 1977 following another military coup led by General Kriangsak Chomanand, who was succeeded after his retirement in 1980 by General Prem Tinsulanonda. According to Paul Handley, "Prem spared no effort to promote the king and royal culture," fostering "a full-fledged court society." Bangkok's high-ranking bureaucrats, businessmen, politicians and generals competed with one another to donate to the king's charities and participate in royal events.

Prem survived two coup attempts by rival factions of the military thanks to the direct intervention of the king. He devoted army personnel and hundreds of millions of dollars to rural development projects, overseen directly by Bhumibol, designed to glorify the monarchy. The highly-publicised projects did not alleviate poverty. Handley notes that in 1988

"more than 25 percent of Thai families lived below the official poverty line, little changed from a decade before."

Prem oversaw the further integration of Thailand into the global economy, leading to an explosion of foreign investment, the creation of hundreds of thousands of low-wage factory jobs and increased social inequality. The richest 20 percent of Thais captured 56 percent of the income in 1988, while the poorest fifth got only 5 percent.

After stepping down in 1988, Prem was appointed by Bhumibol as head of the Privy Council. Following the king's death this month the 95-year-old Prem was named as Regent by the current junta in a move designed to consolidate the military's hold on power.

The government elected in 1988, headed by Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan of the right-wing Chart Thai Party, was overthrown in another coup in February 1991. Chatichai was a former army officer and diplomat, part of the wealthy establishment. The military and the monarchy turned against him, however, after he sought to cut funding to the army and removed favourites of Bhumibol and Prem from the cabinet and bureaucracy. Chatichai sought to liberalise trade with Thailand's neighbours; in doing so his government "challenged the military's ability to make foreign policy" and its control over the lucrative border trade zones (C. Baker and P. Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*).

The coup led by General Suchinda Kraprayoon, endorsed by Bhumibol, provoked outrage among layers of the middle and working classes and the largest demonstrations in Bangkok since 1973. Following elections in March 1992, carried out under an anti-democratic constitution that entrenched the powers of the military, hundreds of thousands of people protested in April and May. On May 17 and 18 soldiers opened fire on demonstrations, killing more than 50 people.

As in 1973, Bhumibol again made a decisive political intervention. In a televised meeting on May 20 with Suchinda and protest leader Chamlong Srimuang, the king demanded that the pair who knelt before him "find a way to solve the problem" to prevent "the utter destruction of Thailand." Chamlong, a former general and governor of Bangkok, agreed to call off the protests in return for the promise of elections—thus defusing the crisis for the ruling class. Bhumibol agreed to an amnesty for the coup-makers.

The Asian Financial Crisis

The turn to elections was bound up with broader processes associated with the globalisation of production. The US-backed military dictatorships in Thailand and throughout the region and their associated cronyism and protectionist policies had become a barrier to foreign investment in the emerging Asian Tiger economies. However, the agenda of pro-market restructuring heightened social inequality and generated sharp tensions within the Thai ruling elites.

The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–98, which was triggered by the Thai government's decision to unpeg the baht against the US dollar, heralded renewed political turmoil. With the economy weighed down by debt, the value of the currency dropped by half and the Thai stock market collapsed by 75 percent. More than two million people lost their jobs. In 1998 the economy shrank by 11 percent. The unstable New Aspiration Party government collapsed in November when Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh resigned, leaving the Democrat Party to form a government and implement the deeply unpopular austerity measures demanded by the IMF.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party defeated the Democrats in the 2001 election by capitalising on the widespread hostility to the IMF's agenda including from sections of business unable to compete as the economy was opened up foreign investors. The TRT promised a series of limited reforms to stimulate the economy, including loans and subsidies for farmers, cheap health care, and a student loan scheme. Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire, was a representative of a newly rich capitalist layer and styled himself as a CEO prime minister.

The monarchy initially supported Thaksin, strongly endorsing his brutal “war on drugs” in 2003, which killed 2,275 people in extra-judicial murders by the police. Bhumibol had called for the crackdown in a speech in December 2002. Privy Councillor General Pichit Kunlawanit called on Thaksin to establish a special court to deal with drug dealers, stating that “if we execute 60,000 the land will rise and our descendants will escape bad karma.”

After Thaksin was re-elected in 2005—becoming the first Thai prime minister to win two elections—the military once again intervened, overthrowing him in 2006. Bhumibol supported the coup. The country’s traditional elites turned against Thaksin after he threatened their entrenched networks of patronage by moving to open the country to more foreign investment. He also attracted hostility from the monarchy and the military by building a support base among the rural poor through his populist reforms.

The 2006 coup was followed by one political upheaval after another. In April and May 2010, sustained mass protests erupted, led by the Thaksin-aligned protest organisation, the Red Shirts, against the military-backed Democrat Party government. Thousands of people, largely from impoverished rural areas, occupied central Bangkok to demand elections and an end to social inequality. In a brutal crackdown by the army, at least 91 protesters were shot dead and 1,800 were injured.

Bhumibol remained silent—a tacit endorsement of the massacre. The sympathies of the monarchy were made explicit the previous year when, in the midst of large Yellow Shirt protests against the Thaksin-aligned government, Queen Sirikit made a very public appearance at the funeral of a leading Yellow Shirt protester. Yellow is the colour of the royal family.

The 2010 events threatened the ability of the monarchy to pose as a neutral force, outside politics, given its blatant alignment with the anti-Thaksin faction of the ruling elite. At a rally on September 19 by 10,000 people marking the fourth anniversary of the coup, anti-royal slogans were chanted and spray-painted on walls in downtown Bangkok.

The increasingly frail king also rubber-stamped the May 2014 military coup against the government of Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin’s sister, declaring it necessary “to maintain the peace and order of the nation.” As in 2006, the coup was preceded by months of destabilising Yellow Shirt protests and the disruption of elections by the Democrat Party, all of which was coordinated with the army chiefs.

At every turn, behind a pose of impartiality, the palace has worked hand-in-hand with the army to attack the democratic rights and living standards of the working class and rural poor.

As for the Shinawatras, they have reacted to Bhumibol’s death by joining in the adulation. Yingluck issued a statement declaring: “As he ascends to heaven, my thoughts are with his unceasing royal mercy and I express my condolences for His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej.” Her brother Thaksin said: “I pay homage to the feet of His Majesty the Great King Bhumibol Adulyadej as my thoughts are with his endless royal mercy.”

These obsequious remarks underscore the fact that the Shinawatras and their Pheu Thai Party represent a faction of the ruling elite, which is just as hostile to the working class and the oppressed rural masses as the military and the monarchy itself.

The gushing praise for King Bhumibol from bourgeois politicians and the media internationally, and the whitewash of his 70-year reign, is in recognition of the loss of an important political asset amid growing signs of economic and social crisis. It is also a symptom of broader processes. The adulation for an authoritarian monarch linked to one military dictatorship after another is another warning of the type of rule being prepared by the ruling classes internationally to implement their agenda of austerity and war.



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