

Risk, gossip and retribution in Thailand



What a skydiving stunt and the public's reaction says about insubordination and rule under Thailand's new king.

The difference between royals and ordinary mortals is that royal bodies are highly charged, carrying serious political and cultural meanings.

Twenty-first century Thailand is a perfect storm of insanity as the new king and his subjects relentlessly push at mutually acknowledged lines of risk and insubordination. A near-comic junta leader mediates between the two, arbitrarily enforcing the kingdom's *lese-majeste* laws, scaring the bejesus out of everyone.

Or nearly everyone.

The latest story to circulate in Bangkok society is that the king, afflicted with insomnia, headed for Don Muang Airport in the middle of the night to go tandem sky-diving with his latest "serving maid"; her naked, him not.

The supposed serving maid of the hour is a former representative of Thai Airways, a longtime hunting ground and sexual preserve of then Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn.

Instead of calming down and settling into his new role, the king formerly known as Sia O -- a play on words and title that connotes wealthy Chinese gangster -- would seem to be taking ever greater risks, sexual and otherwise.

No sooner had he accepted the throne than Maha Vajiralongkorn, whose real name means "adorned with jewels or thunderbolts," demanded two prerogatives exercised by Siamese despots of the past: the right to appoint the Supreme Patriarch of the Buddhist Sangha, and the right to determine the conditions of the regency.

More importantly, through the exercise of hereditary ritual prerogatives he implicitly claimed the right to name his own heir apparent and restructure his line of descent. In so doing, he reasserts his right to discard inconvenient wives and offspring at will: to determine which bodies are royal and which are not, treating royal and non-royal bodies alike with casual disregard -- his calling card.

Equally *doxic* (unspoken, taken-for granted), he revitalised his harem, occupants of which in days past were aptly termed the "forbidden ladies" (*nang ham*) of the Inner Palace (*wang nai*). Sex and power being intricately linked, His Majesty's persistent introduction of new "serving maids" (*nang sanong*) into his ritual entourage, smack in the face of a grieving nation, and the latest rumoured sexcapade say it all.

The exact purpose of his behaviour, no one knows. What is known is that speaking of the above incurs instant risk for everyone else. This is particularly true of members of his inner circle, who suffer from an alarmingly high mortality rate. Which is the point. However outrageous, the skydiving story rings true for a multitude of reasons.

First and foremost would be Maha Vajiralongkorn's well-known affinities for sex, sport, flying and flight attendants, plus the near "absolute power" (*amnat detkat*) he exercises over Thai Airways, the parent company and dominant shareholder of which is the Ministry of Finance. Included therein would be his free use of the kingdom's municipal facilities, particularly its airports.

Added to this is his degradation of women and royal servants in general, demonstrated by tales of Foo Foo, the mandatory "904" military haircuts in the royal household, and the political persecution of ex-wife Srirasmi and her family.

In Thailand, prostitution is a huge tourist draw; sexually suggestive images characterise tourist advertising in general. If golf caddies doubled as sex workers at the height of the golf craze, it is no huge leap to make similar assumptions about more contemporary (youth-associated) sports like tandem skydiving.

Much of the credence for the skydiving rumour rests on the tattoo incident of July 2016 in Munich. The at-first unbelievable photos from the airport show the prince in a skimpy t-shirt, covered in fake tattoos, accompanied by his similarly half-dressed high-heeled consort Nui (Suthida), a former flight attendant, boarding the royal jet for Bangkok.

No sooner had the Prayuth government screamed, “Photoshopped! *Lese-majeste!*” than a similar photo appeared, this time of the crown prince strolling through a high-end Munich shopping mall with Goy, his eerily twinned #2 serving maid, at his side. Her hair [cut nearly as short as the prince’s](#), Goy was dressed in short shorts and a nearly transparent top. Her tattoos, like the prince’s, were on full display. Judging from more recent, equally bizarre photos taken in late-night Bangkok, Goy’s (or the king’s) preferred dress code continues to be barely clothed.

In both the airport and mall pictures, the prince, wearing low-slung jeans, comes perilously close to mooning any busybodies or stray photographers who might draw near. Stone-faced officials, saluting as he, Nui, and Foo Foo’s successor (anon) board the royal jet, are very nearly treated to a glimpse of the royal jewels.

As might be expected, the Munich photos drove the government mad, and the blogosphere [crazy with speculation](#).

The tattoo incident, which occurred when King Bhumibol was near death and the kingdom was consumed with anxiety over the succession, perfectly illustrates the king’s propensity for personal risk to combat boredom. Or his mastery of the art of the royal insult. Or both.

Given his past lifestyle and residence abroad (for rumoured medical treatment), the tedium of state ceremonies coupled with the prospect of remaining indefinitely in the country would, for this royal, constitute the very essence of boredom.

The flip side to the above is the hot buzz of “gossip” (*nintha, sup-sip*) by his subjects: a deliciously risky behaviour charged with danger and excitement.

In Buddhaghosa’s *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, gossip or “tale-bearing” falls under the category of “belittling.” It is also identified with extortion. One explanation of the disgrace of the disappeared and newly reappeared (in police custody) Grand Chamberlain, [Police General Jumpol Manmai](#), was that he gossiped with Thaksin about the king and the king heard about it.

The king’s outrageous behaviour and gossip about the same, provoking enforcement of *lese-majeste* laws, is the coin of the new realm, the essence of contemporary Thai politics. This dynamic comprises a unique political structure, reliable in its unreliability.

In the absence of law and a real government, constitution, and parliament, Thailand has evolved into a powder keg of gossip and risk. The king behaves in a shocking manner, his subjects retaliate

with forbidden speech, and the military feeds off the dynamic. Long castigated for being uncharismatic and under-educated, inadequate, evil, and out of touch, Thailand's as yet unconsecrated king is an expert at pushing these boundaries.

Adding even more spice to the above, it is inconceivable that the king's sexual and other adventuring actually remains secret. Like Siamese kings immemorial, he travels with a notoriously large entourage in both official and "private" (*suan tua*) capacities. A trek across the city in the middle of the night would entail an escort of at least a dozen police vehicles. Tandem skydiving of the new Dhammaraja or Righteous Ruler would probably involve the entire high command of the Royal Thai Air Force, which is headquartered at Don Muang.

It is likewise inconceivable that Suthida is unaware of his activities since her duty as chief consort is to oversee the harem (the king's pleasure) -- a task at which his first three wives failed miserably. As commander of the household guards, recently promoted to the rank of full general, it is her responsibility to ensure his personal safety.

The whole point of military rule -- the fearsome *lese-majeste* laws, the silencing of the press, secret military tribunals, the uncertain fate of political prisoners, missing members of the royal circle -- is that everything is gossip, "whispered speech" (*krasip krasap*). Therefore everything is danger.

In the past, in Buddhist texts and in popular culture, gossip and similarly low forms of communication were identified with the incredulous and weak-minded: women, servants, rebels from the periphery and unruly monks. Today, journalists, bloggers, political activists and other riffraff regularly occupy the same space.

The king has taken the entire nation skydiving, and no one dares object.

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