

What happens when the king's gone?

PICTURE: EPA/RUNGROJ YONGRIT



A Thai royalist holds a portrait of King Bhumibol Adulyadej as she shouts 'Long Live the King' to celebrate his 87th birthday at Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok, Thailand on 5 December 2015. A scheduled public appearance was cancelled due to health concerns.

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BACK in February 2005, Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai was re-elected with a bumper majority. His telecommunications fortune,

cultivation of provincial powerbrokers and knack for televised theatrics made him the most popular, and electorally successful, politician in Thai history. His mandate as 'CEO Prime Minister' was to keep the economy bouncing

along while restoring a dented national pride. Thaksin and his allies sought to make Thailand the destination for all that was great, good and prosperous in Southeast Asia.

As Thaksin consolidated ever

more power, his opponents became anxious. The Democrat Party worried that it would never again control the levers of government, perpetually relegated to bridesmaid status as the outspoken telco billionaire effectively monopolised the political process. His influence on military and bureaucratic promotions hinted that he would not stop until all key positions were held by his trusted aides. In a system where there was already a well-established and deeply conservative culture of patronage, his audacious moves were upsetting the rambutan cart.

IN THE lead up to the 2006 coup Thaksin was targeted by a chorus of self-righteous outrage. Groups that judged they would continue to miss out on the trappings of authority made it clear they could no longer tolerate his re-arrangement of the bureaucratic furniture. Cries of vote-rigging, policy corruption and abuse of power echoed from protest megaphones. The Thaksin government was forced to continually justify its legitimate mandate. But Thaksin must still have felt confident. Many had suggested that Thailand's heavily politicised armed forces had 'returned to the barracks' for good. We now know that such talk was premature.

WHEN the tanks and special forces units rolled out under a royalist haze on the evening of 19 September 2006, Thaksin was in faraway New York. There was no chance of a viable counter-attack. Now, for almost a decade, Thai politics has been caught in a seemingly limitless spiral of push-and-shove between Thaksin's supporters and those who backed the 2006 coup. This has never been a simple story, and there are many different gradations of allegiance, affection and affinity. Naturally enough some people have changed sides through these long and tumultuous

years. But the basic deadlock remains and it has more to do with the Thai palace than the politics of Thaksin's democratic rise.

Since the May 2014 coup that brought General Prayuth Chan-ocha and his military machine to power, there have been few indications of a quick return to electoral protocols. For a start, Thaksin and his political allies remain too popular, and too smart. The juggernaut built in the early 2000s to contest elections has survived a thousand efforts to dismantle it. Even under military rule there are

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clear signs, such as the persistence of underground red shirt politics and a rolling online anti-military campaign, that any loosening of draconian internal security procedures would lead to a quick resurgence of pro-Thaksin politics. It is why the military regime's own constitution draft was rejected by the National Reform Council. Anxiety about Thaksin is still too strong.

The fundamental worry is about what happens when King Bhumibol Adulyadej is no longer on the throne. Everything else pales in comparison to this potential crisis. For almost 70 years, King Bhumibol has been at the centre of national life: an austere, fatherly, supreme figure, obscured by the pomp of one of the world's greatest royal houses. His standing among the Thai people has been carefully maintained by a vast and unrelenting public relations campaign. Almost every hour of every day the Thai people absorb messages about his contributions and the special status of his family.

The armed forces have also worked tirelessly to keep the king on the throne. Their penchant for military coups is legendary but perhaps what matters most is the unswerving fealty to the king shown by generations of senior generals. Whenever other military factions have sought to undermine royal standing they have been promptly stamped out. General Prem Tinsulanonda, the chairman of the king's privy council, has played this role going right back to the 1980s. He has now surrounded the king with retired officers who form a protective ring around a man who is ailing and whose fragile health could fade at any time.

THE mortality of the king will come as a shock to many Thais, 95 per cent of whom were not alive

the last time anybody else was on the throne. This gives the king an aura unmatched by other modern political figures and as his health wanes the mythology around his kingship only grows. He has only been seen in public on rare occasions in the past few years, always confined to a wheelchair. His public comments can no longer command the people's attention. In his final stage, the king is a distant and perhaps lonely figure, isolated at the top of what has become a precarious political order.

THIS is where the policy discussion gets tricky. So much of Thailand's future hinges on what happens when the king is no longer on the throne, but the conversation about such sensitive matters cannot happen in public. The use of the *lèse-majesté* law, Article 112 of the Criminal Code, and the Computer Crimes Act—another tool in the repressive armoury—mean that any hint of

palace-related criticism can lead to a spell in prison. Thai authorities are unapologetic about how they handle these crimes. Some recent sentences stretch for decades and could potentially see the imprisoned die in jail. The threat of such punishments encourages most people to choose their words carefully. Yet others are prepared to take incredible risks to present alternative views on how Thailand should be run.

Whether royalist or republican, there is agreement on one thing: there is no obvious or unanimous path back to more representative or participatory government. Nor is there any indication that General Prayuth is tiring of his time as prime minister. Back in 2006 the military rulers—under the leadership of General Surayud Chulanont who was installed as unelected prime minister—took only 15 months from coup to election. The lesson has likely

been drawn that this is insufficient time to do a full job of dismantling Thaksin's influence. The fact that Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, was prime minister from 2011 to 2014 only serves to reinforce the generals' sense of having to start all over again. De-Thaksinisation, this time around, will take more time.

The fact that Thailand's generals have received only mild criticism from the international community is also part of this story. In Southeast Asia there is almost no rebuke for countries that lurch back into military dictatorship. In fact soon after the 2014 coup General Prayuth greeted Myanmar's Senior General Min Aung Hlaing with a widely publicised hug. If there is one thing Myanmar and Thai generals have in common it is the ignominy of running military dictatorships. No doubt Myanmar's commander-in-chief offered his sympathy.

PICTURE: APICHAET WEERAWONG / AP PHOTO



Supporters of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra hold a banner and his portrait during a protest outside the Supreme Court on 21 October 2008 in Bangkok.

ELSEWHERE in ASEAN the tone tends to be pragmatic. It helps that Laos, Vietnam and Brunei are authoritarian systems of grand resilience. Of course, Cambodia, Singapore and Malaysia have also had their democratic ups-and-downs. Nowadays it is only the Philippines and Indonesia that set any regional standard for consistent democratic practice.

Further afield, it is inevitable that Thailand's supporters among the Western democracies make their statements with an eye to the future. While most are not prepared to give full endorsement to General Prayuth, they are aware of the broader picture. The United States and Australia, to take two examples, have maintained most of their security and other ties to the kingdom. They are fearful that Thailand will find support with China and leave behind its longstanding allies among the democratic West.

China goes to great lengths to ensure that the Thais are comfortable with its decisions and has planned major infrastructure investments to sweeten the deal. Thailand may prove an important part of China's southern push, with all the ambition of the so-called 'One Belt, One Road' likely to create extra capacity for Thailand to trade. China has no interest in pointing out flaws in Thailand's treatment of dissidents. They are, in that sense, increasingly likely to find common cause.

The ongoing investigation of the August 2015 Erawan Shrine bombing also gives China and Thailand another issue in common. Most of the dead were Thai and Chinese. Since the first hours after the attack there has been talk that the shrine was targeted because it is a popular destination for Chinese tourists.

Some have linked this speculation to Thailand's recent deportation to China of more than 100 Uyghur who were reportedly making their way to the Middle East.

With little solid information, and a haphazard investigation in progress, it is too early to know exactly what has occurred. Nonetheless, the possibility of an attack against Chinese interests on Thai soil has clearly got people's attention. In the days after the bombing, a Chinese government spokesperson warned that it was premature to suggest such a link, but as the investigation continues there is still a chance that the Uyghur issue is in play.

AT THE same time, even the pragmatic Chinese leadership must be concerned that Thailand is perched precariously at the end of King Bhumibol's reign. They must be hoping that Thailand's elders and leaders may yet find a way to muddle through and create space for a new compromise between the different

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forces still looking for any chance to destroy their opponents.

It is precisely this winner-takes-all approach to statesmanship that has created the conditions for a decade's worth of grief. This can be measured not just in the blood spilled, careers destroyed and buildings burned, but in the immense loss of opportunity that the country has suffered. The rest of the world has not been standing still. Across Southeast Asia some countries have begun to take big strides towards closing gaps in development with their Thai neighbours.

THE most obvious example is Myanmar which has made moves towards normalising its internal and foreign affairs since 2011. This does not mean that Myanmar enjoys Thailand's economic or cultural heft, but there is certainly the potential for the country to make significant moves in that direction. Much will hinge on the performance of its government after the November 2015 election. As Thais well know, a democratic system takes decades to fully bed down.

So what will happen next for Thailand? Without its own robust institutions to manage legislative, judicial and executive power, the country once again looks to the palace for inspiration and guidance. The military knows that royal charisma helps to support their longer-term goals. Questions about authoritarianism can be quickly deflected as rebellious, anti-monarchy talk. As self-proclaimed custodians of the kingdom, the top generals imagine they are also protected by the king's benevolent aura. Such conflation of different powers—particularly when democratic concepts are belittled and electoral mandates destroyed—leaves the country without any immediate prospect of positive change.



Then Prime Minister of Thailand Yingluck Shinawatra talks to General Prem Tinsulanonda, President of the Privy Council, during a gala dinner on the occasion of the Royal Thai Army Day on 19 January 2012.

INSTEAD General Prayuth and his opponents are stuck, all waiting for the inevitable transition when King Bhumibol is no longer on the throne. Under such conditions many millions still also wait for Thaksin's return. They seem to respect his fighting spirit and the way that he has maintained a consistent political position for so many difficult years. Such people—the millions who voted for him in 2001, 2005, 2006 and 2011—do not tend to

believe the charge that Thaksin seeks to overthrow the monarchy. Some even wonder whether he might not prove its greatest saviour, perhaps returning triumphant to support a future king or queen.

It is through such future repositioning of the Thai political elite that the big stories will be told. We tend to expect that we can understand alliances in ways that mean they will stay constant across

time. But Thailand's topsy-turvy last decade suggests that there are too many different factors at work and that a violent showdown could be catalysed by the succession. Under these conditions the military will be forced to decide whether it ever wants to return power to the people. **EAFO**

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