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Thailand

Thailand: a high risk succession

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The king is dead, long live the king? The Thai royal family legitimates power more than actually possessing it. This function could be endangered with the coming to the throne of the crown prince. The death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej was officially announced on October 13, 2016. He had long been hospitalised, incapable of speech and probably of much else. This did not stop him from officially “signing” whatever the ruling military junta required to consecrate its political decisions.

Known under his monarchical name of Rama IX, Bhumibol was 88. He had reigned for seven decades and was said to enjoy unparalleled popularity and respect. The history of monarchies is however never entirely happy. Since 1932, the Thai monarch is no longer absolute, but constitutional; with rare interludes, real power has been held by the army.

Bhumibol came to the throne in 1946, succeeding his brother who was shot in the head in circumstances which have never been clarified. [1] He was however only crowned in 1950, the kingdom having meanwhile been ruled by a regent. The situation was then favourable as his reign began.

During the Second World War, the Japanese occupiers had initially been presented by the authorities as an ally. After Tokyo's capitulation, the army wished to give a new legitimacy to its regime – and finally broke definitively with the left wing of the anti-monarchical coup of 1932, whose figurehead was Pridi Banomyong, an intellectual influenced by socialist ideas and non-Marxist European liberal concepts. From 1935, the new defence minister, Field Marshall Phibun, had established a dictatorship and martial law. However Pridi, in exile, had represented, with Seni Pramoj, the Free Thais (*Seri Thai*), one of the two anti-Japanese resistance movements (the other one being constituted by the Communist Party). In 1945, Seni Pramoj became Prime Minister to negotiate with the Allies. The following year Pridi proposed a new Constitution. In 1947, Phibun led a coup. In 1950, Thailand sent troops to South Korea alongside US forces. The kingdom was henceforth anchored in the “American camp”.

The Communist movement remained still very weak in Thailand, but it had taken root. [2] The Chinese revolution had triumphed and the Vietminh was growing in Vietnam. The US became the great tutelary power in South East Asia. In these conditions, the army was ready to establish an alliance with the royal palace in the name of anti-Communism.

Although unpopular in the 1930s and 40s, and officially stripped of its sacred status in 1932, the Chakry dynasty had not been historically subjected to a colonial conquest. Thailand was a buffer zone between the British and French possessions, aided by Germany, and the country was never directly colonised. It was then possible to restore the lustre of the monarchy and its sacred status: “the rituals and language of court were reinvented for it, constructing the renovated icon of a “Deva-Raj” (King-God, in the Hindu tradition) and of a generous monarch reigning according to the principles of Buddhist morals. Modernity obliged however that he maintained the behaviour of a man of the 20th century: he walked around with a camera around his neck and often played the trumpet during soirées in the palace... He was both more divinely venerated than his predecessors and closer to the people, whom he met with incessantly during his tours of the country”. [3]

This rehabilitation of the monarchy was systematically continued by the military regimes that followed in successive putsches. General (then Marshal) Sarit Thanarat was one of the masters of the alliance between the Palace and the army high command. For some historians, Bhumibol “was in reality never persuaded that a system of the democratic type, which he once characterised as a “principle imported from abroad”, could apply in his kingdom. The figure of the enlightened and benevolent monarch coexisted with that of the sovereign capable of justifying the permanent

coup d'état as a modern form of the Thai political game". [4]

As exceptions which confirm the rule, in 1973 and 1992, the authority of the royal figure and the political intervention of Bhumibol helped resolve crises which had become inextricable by forcing the temporary withdrawal of the military with the resignation of hated dictators. Then history resumed its "normal" course, the army returning to power with the blessing of the monarch, as shown by the dramatic events of 1973-1976. [5]

The first big crisis of the kingdom, under Rama IX, developed in the context of the US military escalation in Vietnam. The country had been transformed into an immense terrestrial aircraft carrier and was covered with brothels to cater for the GIs. Young people, students in particular, rose up, benefiting from a very broad popular support. The military junta was overthrown in October 1973, with the king's intervention. At the same time, the latter allowed the development of far right militias which prepared to take control of the country. This was done on October 6, 1976, through a bloody coup d'état. The army took back power with the blessing of the Palace.

Once again, the authority of the royal family plummeted; to re-establish it, "cultural tradition" was not enough. So a veritable personality cult was imposed with the help of the USA and its propaganda services. The effigy of the monarch became omnipresent, respecting it was an obligation, subject to severe criminal sanctions (today, the most minimum offence can earn 15 years in prison).

The crime of lèse-majesté is a formidable weapon to repress all sorts of criticism and forbid any debate on the regime, in the manner of accusations of blasphemy or endangering national security in other countries. Bhumibol Adulyadej played his role perfectly. He allowed himself to be deified without however contesting power with those who held it. Of austere appearance, with a sad and distant expression, he incarnated a "protective figure", loved by the people, a posture some characterise as "despotic paternalism". [6] The vast land possessions of the royal family – both urban and rural – allowed him to deploy a network of popular clientelism.

Under Bhumibol, the Thai royal family became the richest on the planet, with a fortune valued at 35 billion dollars (31.70 billion Euros). But what is its effective power? The question remains very controversial. [7] The British queen Elizabeth is also a big landowner, but she does not govern for all that. In principle this is also true in Thailand. What is the reality?

For some analysts, Thailand closed a chapter of its history in the 1990s. The end of the Asian revolutionary wave, the defeat of the Communist Party of Thailand, the socio-economic modernization of the country and the appearance of a new bourgeoisie rendered the era of military regimes obsolete. The weight of the "peripheral" regions was strengthened with the upheavals in the rural economy in the North East (Isan) and the North. [8] Coups were considered residual, anachronistic rearguard combats. The army had gone back to the barracks and would not re-emerge.

Democratization was, then the order of the day. In 1992, a Constitution which was relatively progressive for the country was adopted – but after the putsch of 2006, it was replaced by another, drawn up under the diktat of the army. Successive elections confirmed that a great part of the population aspires to structural changes. They represented a harsh blow to the oligarchy which has dominated the political and economic life of the country for several decades: it lost its direct control of the legislative and the executive. Big social movements formed during this period, like the People's Assembly, founded in 1995. A good number of these movements resisted the predatory mode of development which robbed communities of access to their vital resources. [9]

Unfortunately, neither the royal palace, nor the traditional oligarchy, nor the army wanted any democratic process. Each time that the Shinawatra family (Thaksin and his sister Yingluck), representing this "new bourgeoisie",

triumphed at democratic elections, it was overthrown by more or less legal coups d'états. The confrontation between "red shirts" (Thaksin and his business or popular supporters) and "yellow shirts" (the royalist and conservative reaction) had as one of its stakes the very possibility of establishing a bourgeois democratic parliamentary regime. The response of the dominant powers was unambiguously negative – a Constitutional Court siding with the traditional order, putsches (2006 and 2014), the massacre of 2010 in Bangkok, the systematic repression of the red shirts.

The lesson is all the clearer in that Thaksin was not a republican, but a royalist. Nor was he a democrat; he waged a "war on drugs" having recourse to extra-judicial killings and entered into juicy contracts with the army while repressing the Muslim movements in the South. However, he put in place real social programmes favouring the poor (in the area of health for example), which bypassed the networks of power of the traditional oligarchy and the old military élite, overshadowing the royal family by appearing himself as the "protector of the people".

The Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 created the prior conditions for the army's return to power. Thailand was hit with full force. The elites and "urban middle classes" proved openly anti-democratic, denying the irresponsible poor the right to vote. The Buddhist institutions politicised and a monk, Buddha Issara, took the head of the movement against the red shirts in 2014. The May coup in that year allowed the army to return to power on a lasting basis and thus prepare the royal succession.

The Thai kingdom is not a national abnormality. Far from leading a triumphant march towards democracy, the world neoliberal order favours the development of increasingly authoritarian regimes, right populisms, and new extreme rights. In Thailand, at the ideological level, the pillars of the regime are the monarchy (sanctified), the army (glorified) and the Sangha, the Buddhist clergy (the expression of the state religion, it has very close links with the establishment.). If the gravity of Bhumibol's state of health was hidden for so long, it is because of the problematic nature of the royal succession.

The monarch can only be a man. Women are excluded from the succession – although princess Sirindhorn is deemed the most reliable by the traditional elites. There remains the crown prince Maha Vajiralongkorn (aged 64). Living more in Munich than in Thailand, he has the reputation of being a play-boy and a party animal. Videos of his escapades circulate and he was photographed getting off a plane wearing a tight crop-top and slim fit jeans with his torso covered in temporary tattoos. Himself a fighter pilot, he appointed his poodle Foo Foo as an air force field marshal, while four days of national mourning were decreed after the dog's death. This unconventional behaviour could be amusing if his personality was not so disturbing. Vindictive in the extreme, he hounds those close to his father through humiliation. He exiled a previous wife and her children and has the traits of a tyrant. Supreme crime, he has been linked to Thaksin.

Duly designated crown prince by Bhumibol, Vajiralongkorn should have mounted the throne on the day of his father's death. Indeed as announced on television by the prime minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, the enthronement has been postponed, with rumours rife as to the reasons for this. [10] For the moment, the management of the kingdom is assumed by Prem Tinsulanonda, aged 96, former commander in chief of the Army (1978), Prime minister (1980-1988) and president of the king's Private Council (1998). [11] A conservative and influential figure, he has organised several coups and Thaksin is his sworn enemy. [12]

The passing of the torch is all the more delicate since today, according to the academic Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "there is a republican movement, notably among the "red shirts"... Many Thais still have love and respect for the king. Most Thais are for the monarchy, but the political interventions of the Royal Palace are very badly received by some of them. We are in a critical period for Thailand. The main cause is the royal succession, but the divisions between rich and poor, urban and rural, also play a role. [13]

For the moment the military regime has the country in lockdown. A year of national mourning has been decreed. On

pain of criminal sanctions, all network serves must actively monitor their subscribers and denounce any words offensive to the monarchy or the ruling junta. The minister of Justice has called for the formation of “vigilante” groups, guardians of the moral order who can intimidate dissidents [14]. Persons accused of lèse-majesté (or not dressing in black) can be attacked and forced to bow before the effigy of the dead king. [15] A climate of hysteria is knowingly created.

A hysteria which no longer has any borders. On October 16, 2016 the ultra-royalist Rienthong Nanna used Facebook to denounce Thais living in Paris, giving the names and addresses of some, and calling on supporters of the monarchy to act – even if the crime of lèse-majesté does not exist in France. Such words could obviously have very serious consequences. [16]

If the Royal Palace was genuinely idolised by the Thai population, the military regime would not need such means to ensure its order. The succession to Bhumibol renders the future still more uncertain.

[1] A commission of investigation concluded that it was not an accident, but could not determine if it was murder or suicide.

[2] Pierre Rousset, ESSF [“People’s struggles in Thailand – I – the CPT era”](#).

[3] Bruno Philip, *Le Monde*, October 13, 2016.

[4] idem.

[5] Pierre Rousset, op. cit.

[6] Bruno Philip, op. cit.

[7] See Gils Ji Ungpakorn: ESSF, [“King Pumipon of Thailand – 1946-2016, seven decades on the throne”](#).

[8] See Grant Evans, ESSF, [“The seismic shifts behind the coup in Thailand”](#).

[9] Pierre Rousset, ESSF, [“People’s struggles in Thailand – II – Popular movements from the 1980s on”](#).

[10] See Andrew MacGregor Marshall, ESSF, [“What’s going on in Thailand ? A struggle over royal succession?”](#).

[11] He notably negotiated the end of the armed struggle with the Communist Party.

[12] See Andrew MacGregor Marshall, op. cit.

[13] Interview in *Le Monde*, March 13, 2015.

[14] See the articles by Prachatai available on ESSF, [An order to all Internet Service Providers: Thailand to monitor social media 24/7 in mourning of King’s death](#).

[15] Prachatai, ESSF, [“Thailand: Lèse majesté purge erupts nationwide after the King’s death”](#).

[16] ESSF, [“An order to all Internet Service Providers: Thailand to monitor social media 24/7 in mourning of King’s death”](#) and [“Witch-hunt: Exiled Thai activist in Paris threatened over ‘insulting the royal family’”](#).