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Thailand: A King's Lesson in Democracy

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BANGKOK— The dramatic return to Thailand of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra—after 17 months of self-imposed exile following a bloodless military coup—marks the next round in the bare-knuckled free-for-all that characterizes this country's deeply polarized politics.

There's Thaksin versus the courts—his battle against corruption charges filed by the junta and the five-year ban from politics imposed on him and his party, which regrouped under a new name and prevailed in recent elections.

There's Thaksin versus the opposition Democratic Party, which two years ago led massive protests against his autocratic rule and which—suspicious of his pledge to "never, ever" return to politics—is threatening more protests if he evades the rule of law.

There's the civilians versus the military, which—though now back in its barracks—succeeded in leaving behind a new Constitution that weakens civilian rule, including that of the new prime minister, Samak Sundaravej, who countered by naming himself defense minister.

There's even Thaksin versus Samak, who—initially seen as Thaksin's puppet—recently ruled out early amnesty for Thaksin and, as Thaksin began receiving political allies at his hotel headquarters here, declared "I am the real prime minister!"

And underlying it all is city versus country—the Bangkok bureaucracy, intelligentsia and urban middle class that opposed Thaksin and backed the coup versus Thailand's poor and rural majority, which benefited from his populist policies of debt forgiveness and low-cost health care and which put Thaksin's proxy party back in power.

But what makes this moment especially ominous is the prospect of losing the nation's foremost political referee—King Bhumibol Adulyadej, revered as a dhammaraja (a righteous Buddhist king) whose interventions during political crises are credited with preventing a slide into chaos.

"We keep in the middle, neutral, in peaceful coexistence with everybody," Bhumibol once said of the monarchy. "We could be crushed by both sides, but we are impartial." But with the king now 80 years old and in failing health, Thailand could, in the not so distant future, lose its greatest safety valve against a political meltdown.

"His Majesty's reign has, of course, helped with economic and political development," a former Thai diplomat told me, insisting on anonymity since *lèse-majesté* laws make criticism of the monarchy punishable by up to 15 years in jail. "But maybe he has been so influential that Thais never learned to help themselves mature politically."

Moreover, the king's likely heir—the 55-year-old Crown

Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn—"is not prepared to guide the country through its turbulent road to the future," said the diplomat, reflecting the fears of many Thais. "He does not have a few decades to grow into his office, as his father did."

Yet the topic of life after Bhumibol remains taboo. "Many have conjectured privately that Thailand may enter a period of tension in the coming years, including royalism versus republicanism," a member of a prominent Thai family tells me, also requesting anonymity. "It's the elephant in the room that everyone conveniently ignores."

Indeed, Thai politicians and power brokers would be wise to heed the lesson their king has apparently been trying to teach them for several years—it's time to grow up and start solving your own problems without royal intervention.

Although celebrated for supporting democracy movements that overturned military regimes, most notably in 1973 and 1992, Bhumibol has cautioned Thais against relying on the monarchy as a one-stop cure-all. When massive protests urged him to oust Thaksin two years ago, he called the idea "irrational," adding "you cannot think in haste and pass the buck to the king."

And although he has blessed many of modern Thailand's 18 coups—including the most recent one—Bhumibol is reported to have discouraged other military takeovers and had supported the progressive constitution that the recent junta voided. "Soldiers and civilians must work in harmony," he said in his annual birthday speech in December. "If there is no harmony the country will face disaster, the country will fall. And when it falls where are we going to live?"

Fortunately, despite *lèse-majesté* laws and bans on recent books about the monarchy, Thais appear to begin thinking about the unthinkable. Resisting pressure from the palace, several hundred Thai and international scholars recently convened a remarkable series of seminars in Bangkok on the monarchy, including criticism of the "Sufficient Economy" philosophy of economic moderation championed by the king.

"It was unprecedented," said Andrew Walker of the Australian National University who spoke at the conference, which proved that "the sky will not fall in if we talk freely and frankly about the king's role in contemporary Thai politics."

Let's hope so. Because if Thais cannot talk openly about their monarchy, they can't begin to resolve the current challenges to what one scholar has called their "demi-democracy." And if Thai leaders, civilian and military alike, are to pass perhaps their greatest test yet, they ought to heed perhaps the greatest lesson of their monarch—the buck doesn't stop here, it stops with you.