

Will a king's death kill Thailand's democracy?

The revered Bhumibol has kept political turmoil at bay. But he's 82 and ailing.

By Stanley A. Weiss

Sixty years ago this week, King Bhumibol Adulyadej arrived back in Thailand. The 22-year-old had lived abroad most of his life. Named king four years earlier on his brother's death, he was coming home for his coronation. The royal navy was drawn up for review. A jet squadron soared overhead. Half a million people lined the streets in celebration. As one biographer writes, "To astrologers, the heavens proved the great event: three days before Bhumibol arrived, hail fell on Bangkok for the first time since 1933."

The Massachusetts-born, Swiss-educated, jazz-playing Bhumibol might have seemed an unlikely fit for the Thai throne. But over the decades, the king has earned Thais' reverence -- even worship -- for his generosity, humility and devotion to his people.

Paradoxically, however, the world's longest-serving monarch may be a victim of his own success -- or, more accurately, his legacy may be tarnished by the lack of a smooth succession. Now 82, Bhumibol is ailing, and no one knows what will come next, which is raising tensions and rattling investors in Bangkok and beyond, especially as the nation is embroiled in political turmoil.

The king has long been a symbol of unity in Thailand's increasingly fractious political and social arena; a trusted referee whenever conflict threatens to spiral out of control. Now, the question on many people's minds is: Can Thailand's unstable democracy outlive its beloved king?

Since 2006, when the military toppled the popularly elected prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, a fierce power struggle has divided Thai politics. Thousands of protesters, the "red shirts" -- mostly rural and poor and whom the ruling elite believe telecommunications billionaire Thaksin is financing and fomenting from abroad -- continue to pressure Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's government for new elections.

The "yellow shirts" -- monarchists, the military and urban middle class -- rightly criticize the Thaksin administration's abuses in office, but their preferred alternative amounts to continued domination by Bangkok's privileged, in a country where the population's richest fifth is roughly 13 times better off than the poorest.

The Thai Supreme Court's decision in February to confiscate \$1.4 billion of Thaksin's assets, stemming from charges of corruption, has prompted fears of violent confrontation between the camps. The red shirt protesters have been demonstrating in the tens of thousands this month.

In December, a frail Bhumibol emerged from the hospital, urging Thais to put "the common interest before their own interest." But some fear that his death, whenever it occurs, will spark chaos in this country of 65 million.

The 1924 Palace Law of Succession establishes primogeniture of male heirs, suggesting Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn will try to fill his father's shoes. Unfortunately, the crown prince lacks his father's discipline and standing; one longtime Bangkok businessman told me that doubts about Vajiralongkorn's fitness for the job were "beyond any return."

Thailand's 1974 constitution declared that in the absence of a prince, parliament could pick a king's daughter to assume the throne. Many Thais feel the king's daughter, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, would be an excellent candidate. Yet Thailand experts tell me that as long as the crown prince is alive, "the dreams of Sirindhorn succeeding are just that." They predict the crown will pass to Vajiralongkorn and that the monarchy will "be weakened and changed forever."

This will mean the transformation of politics as well. For although it is one thing to clamp down on democracy while claiming to defend a revered king -- as the aristocratic yellow shirts did in 2008 -- it will be much harder for monarchists to maintain their grip on authority if the monarch in question lacks mass devotion.

What about the military, responsible for 18 coups since 1935? One prominent Thai entrepreneur told me his worst-case scenario is the emergence of a young, charismatic leader at the helm of a rising red shirt movement, calling for an end to "the double standards in Thai society." This might provoke the army to feel it has the mandate to use force to preserve the status quo. Thailand-based columnist Chang Noi suspects the military may block another general election, speculating that it would likely want to overthrow the winners anyway.

The most hopeful scenario is one in which the king's passing sparks a democratic maturation -- across institutions, civil society and political classes.

The first step, however, must be a national conversation about the future. And that can't happen as long as strict *lèse-majesté* laws render the topic of succession taboo. Bhumibol Adulyadej's name means "strength of the land, incomparable power." Perhaps the greatest gift he can give his country now is permission to start planning for life without him.