
The Mixed Legacy of King Bhumibol Adulyadej

Author: [Joshua Kurlantzick](#), Senior Fellow for Southeast Asia
October 13, 2016

To an outsider, an obituary of King Bhumibol Adulyadej might read like one of Queen Elizabeth II, another long-reigning monarch who became a symbol of her country, especially during times of massive political and economic transition. During his staggering seven-decades-long rule, Thailand's economy boomed and achieved middle-income status, the country took fragile steps toward democracy, and a treaty alliance was cemented with the United States.

But Bhumibol Adulyadej's death may set off shockwaves in Thai politics that the eventual passing of the British queen will not. Also setting the Thai monarch apart is the development of a personality cult that has made it difficult, particularly within Thailand, to separate fact from fiction about his life. (For an excellent analysis of the king's life up to the mid-2000s pick up Paul Handley's [The King Never Smiles](#)).

Most Thais have not known any monarch other than Bhumibol, the ninth of his line of kings. Fear over what his death would bring for a country rattled by an insurgency in the south, recurring violence in Bangkok, and deep political rifts, has been looming for nearly fifteen years. The king's declining health was always a major unstated rationale for the growing chaos in the kingdom and the return of military dominance over Thai politics.



Thailand's revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej (L) and Queen Sirikit wave to well-wishers on the 60th anniversary of the king's coronation in Bangkok in this June 9, 2006 photo. (Photo: Reuters)

Restoring the Monarchy

Over time, Bhumibol used his position to bolster the monarchy's influence with the public, politicians, and the military, and he repeatedly intervened—behind closed doors and occasionally in public—to foster his version of Thai stability and Thai identity. Although criticism of the monarchy is banned in Thailand, where a strict *lese majeste* law is in force, Bhumibol seemingly enjoyed high levels of popularity for most of his reign. His successor, the former crown prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, is reportedly widely disliked, and has stumbled through [a series of embarrassing missteps](#) in the run-up to the succession.

Bhumibol's greatest achievement, at least to a certain segment of the Thai population, probably was to place the monarchy once again at the center of Thai politics and culture, and to make it an important mediator of political disputes. That today, in 2016, the monarchy remains vital in Thailand was by no means assured early in the king's reign.

Bhumibol's greatest achievement, at least to a certain segment of the Thai population, probably was to place the monarchy once again at the center of Thai politics and culture.

When Bhumibol formally ascended to the throne in 1950, at only age 22, he had lived most of his life abroad, in Switzerland, and the monarchy seemed like a quaint and potentially vulnerable institution. The absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932, and both military officers and some more progressive democrats debated whether Thailand even needed a king anymore. Indeed, monarchies throughout the

world were vanishing, and many politicians and military officers saw Bhumibol in the 1940s as a man with few political skills and as a figure to be manipulated. Thailand's royalist elites were in retreat, at least in the period just after World War II, and all of Asia was changing rapidly, as colonial rule collapsed and independent states were born.

The People's King?

As Handley notes, however, Bhumibol and his royalist allies in the military and political parties changed that trajectory. With the help of the United States, which saw Thailand as a stable Cold War ally, Bhumibol positioned himself as a savior of the poor and as a bulwark against populist, communist movements that menaced much of Southeast Asia. He was welcomed on state visits to the United States and was given ticker tape parades and features on the cover of major news magazines. He traveled widely in the kingdom and cultivated an image of caring for Thailand's least fortunate, bending down to greet them and patronizing royal projects to foster development in the north and other poor parts of the country, such as the Golden Triangle. The king bolstered his image through a savvy radio and television campaign that portrayed him as a people's ruler.

At the same time, the monarchy maintained a vast network of investments in real estate, blue chip companies, and other assets. The holdings gave the palace enormous leverage in Thai politics and business, especially when combined with what Thailand scholar Duncan McCargo has labeled the "[network monarchy](#)" of pro-royal allies throughout the military, bureaucracy, and business community. In McCargo's telling, these relationships worked with the monarchy to promote its goals and wield enormous influence over Thai society. Today, the Crown Property Bureau, a holding company for the monarchy, is believed to control some of the most valuable real estate in the kingdom.

His version of stability was not necessarily coherent with democracy, and he often intervened to backstop military rule.

As the king gained power, he apparently became less fearful of exercising it. His version of stability was not necessarily coherent with democracy, and he often intervened to backstop military rule. However, at times, such as in 1992, he also pushed military juntas to stop killing protestors and allow some kind of civilian government. That year, after protests in Bangkok attracted hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, and the army shot live ammunition into the crowds, the king called the protest leader and the junta chief to his Bangkok palace. On live television, he chided them as they prostrated before him, and the military rulers gave way to civilian government.

A Populist Challenge

Nineteen-ninety-two was probably the high point of Bhumibol's reign, as the transition ushered in two decades of relatively free elections and mostly civilian governments. But the king seemed to openly tire of democracy as Thailand's elections paved the way for populist parties, led by tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra and supported by many of the poor northern and northeastern Thais who comprise a large plurality of the public. The king used his public speeches to criticize Thaksin and to complain about the corruption of democratic politics. He seemed publicly offended that the same lower-income Thais whom he had favored with royal projects and cultivated as his bedrock of support would hold unruly demonstrations, support a populist party, and make greater demands on government.

Some Thailand commentators interpreted the palace's [publication of a book](#) in 2002, which celebrated the king's loyal dog, Tongdaeng, as a sign he wanted his subjects to be more compliant. In 2006, the king endorsed a coup that deposed Prime Minister Thaksin, a move that undermined the king's carefully crafted image as a statesman who embraced democracy.

It is impossible to accurately measure shifts in Thai views of the monarchy, but the 2006 coup seemed to mark a change. Although Thaksin's party and its supporters publicly continued to embrace the monarchy, signs of anger at the king's policies and with the archconservative Queen Sirikit [began to emerge](#). Partly in response to the continuing popularity of Thaksin's party and of apparently rising popular discontent with the palace, the army became increasingly involved in politics. Its increasing involvement culminated in the 2014 coup, a much harsher version of 2006.

In recent years, various health crises seemed to force the king to retreat from politics. The junta ruled in his name, but his true physical and mental condition remained obscure. Still, the veneer of stability he provided, backed by lese majeste laws, endured. Now, it may well be destroyed.