

Thai military consolidates power as royal succession delayed

By Peter Symonds
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In a sign that the Thai military is further tightening its grip on power, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn and heir apparent has been effectively sidelined following the death of his father King Bhumibol Adulyadej last Thursday. In his place, the junta announced on Saturday that 96-year-old Prem Tinsulanonda, a former head of the army and prime minister, would act as regent for an indeterminate length of time.

Just hours after the king's death was announced, the military-appointed National Legislative Assembly was convened in a special session in order to approve Virijalongkorn's ascension to the throne. However, following a meeting between the crown prince and General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the prime minister and head of the junta, the succession was called off. The assembly members held a silent tribute to Bhumibol and went home.

Virijalongkorn is yet to make a public statement. Instead, his comments have been relayed by Prayuth, who declared on Thursday night that the crown prince had asked for time to mourn his father before being proclaimed as king. On Friday evening, Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam insisted there must be "a regent for the time being in order not to create a gap."

Under the country's constitution, Prem, as head of the Privy Council or king's advisory body, automatically assumed the role of regent, exercising all the constitutional powers of the monarch. Prem and Prayuth held a private meeting with Virijalongkorn on Saturday. Prayuth then declared in a televised message that "his highness's only wish is to not let the people experience confusion or worry about the country's administration."

According to Prayuth, the crown prince indicated that his succession to the throne would take place only after elaborate religious rites and the cremation of his

father's body. No date has been set for the cremation, which could be months or years away. Government officials have indicated to the media that it could be a year—the time announced by Prayuth as the period of national mourning.

The extraordinary lengths to which the junta has gone to manage the succession is an indication, firstly, of the crucial role played by Bhumipol as a linchpin in the Thai state apparatus, and secondly, the extent of the country's protracted political crisis. The military mounted two coups, in 2006 and 2014, to oust telecom billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra respectively as prime minister.

Thaksin, who won office in 2001, initially had the backing of the country's traditional elites—the monarchy, military and state bureaucracy including the courts—but lost their support as his pro-market policies cut across their privileges, patronage and business networks. As the economy deteriorated, these elites were increasingly hostile to the limited social concessions made by Thaksin and Yingluck to the urban and rural poor.

Prem's appointment as regent ensures that the military retains full control of all the levers of state power. Prem is an arch-royalist who had a long career in the military before being appointed army commander in 1978 over more senior candidates for the post. The support of the palace was crucial in his appointment as prime minister in 1980, heading a military-backed government.

The king's backing also aided Prem to fend off coup attempts by dissident factions of the military in 1981 and 1985. When he stepped aside in 1988, he was immediately installed in the Privy Council and functioned as the king's closest adviser and functionary. He is widely believed to have helped

orchestrate the 2006 coup that ousted Thaksin, accompanied by sustained protests and agitation by royalist “yellow shirt” supporters.

The military junta is clearly concerned about Virijalongkorn’s installation on the throne. Not only is his extravagant jet set lifestyle widely known but he is suspected in Bangkok ruling circles of having been courted by Thaksin. While Thailand is nominally a constitutional monarchy, the king has indirectly wielded considerable power through the military and state apparatus.

By delaying the succession, the junta has ensured that Prem, as regent, can sign off on the new constitution drawn up by the military to ensure that it retains extensive political powers and to sideline parties associated with the Shinawatras. The constitution was formally approved in a contrived August 7 referendum, after all opposition or criticism was banned and hundreds of people were arrested.

By installing Prem as regent, the military has also bought time, either to groom Virijalongkorn as the next king or install a replacement. Prem is known to be close to Bhumibol’s daughter, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who is more favourably regarded in ruling circles.

More broadly, however, the military is fearful of social and political unrest as the economy continues to be hit by global economic stagnation. The death of the king provoked immediate falls on the share market and in the Thai currency. Moreover, the enormous social gulf between rich and poor is continuing to generate hostility and opposition to the junta as it implements austerity measures on behalf of the wealthy elites at the expense of working people.

The junta is using Thailand’s notorious lèse-majesté law to clamp down on any criticism or opposition to the monarchy, an institution on which the military has relied heavily for decades. The number of arrests and prosecutions for insults, no matter how slight, to the king escalated sharply following the 2014 coup. Information related to the king’s death has to be formally authorised. The country’s three main mobile service providers have been told to ask customers to report “inappropriate content on the royal institution” on social media.

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