

# **Bhumibol Adulyadej's death officially announced: Thailand's heir apparent Maha Vajiralongkorn raises fears - and eyebrows**

Thursday 13 October 2016, by [HOLMES Oliver](#), [The Guardian](#) (Date first published: 13 October 2016).

**Crown prince is best known for making his poodle Foo Foo an air chief marshal, but his darker side has long caused concerns about his potential rule**

Thailand's Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, a three-times divorced playboy who made his pet poodle an air chief marshal in the Thai military, poses perhaps the biggest challenge for both the country's monarchists and its ruling junta in coming weeks, following the death of his father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Vajiralongkorn, who has asked for some time to mourn with the Thai people before his appointment, was born to be king. However, though he trained at Australia's Duntroon military college and boasts a string of military titles and a pilot's licence, for decades he has shown little interest in the public duties that will be expected of one of the world's most revered monarchies.

Instead Vajiralongkorn has built up a reputation for womanising, extravagance, bizarre self-indulgence and occasional cruelty, including to his own children, several of whom have been stripped of their names and titles and live in exile [1].

His exploits hit international headlines in 2007, when a leaked video showed his then consort, Princess Srirasm, performing near-naked at a birthday party with pet poodle Foo Foo. The canine air chief marshal, who died last year, was cremated after four days of Buddhist rites [2].

More recently the prince was photographed at Munich airport, accepting salutes from the pilot and other aircraft staff while dressed in jeans and a tight crop top, showing off a torso covered in temporary tattoos [3].

The country's fierce lèse-majesté laws, officially designed to protect the much-loved Bhumibol and his family from defamation, have kept the prince's stranger exploits out of the Thai media, but the cover-up is only cosmetic.

Stories about Vajiralongkorn are a gossip mainstay nationwide, and he is loathed by many of his future subjects [4], including the elite circles expected to crown him and then help him rule.

"The lèse-majesté law criminalises publication of the prince's exploits, but despite this, or indeed because of this, Thais have voracious interest in informal royal information and gossip, which they share privately with those they trust," said Andrew McGregor Marshall, a British journalist who has written extensively on the monarchy.

"Almost all Thais know about the exploits of the crown prince, who has been a hated figure in Thailand since the 1970s." [5]

Distaste for the prince was spelt out in a leaked US diplomatic cable from 2010 [6], in which members of the Thai privy council openly discussed their concerns about Vajiralongkorn including his meddling in politics and “embarrassing financial transactions”.

“Anand [Panyarachun, the former prime minister] added that the consensus view among many Thai was that the Crown Prince could not stop either, nor would he be able, at age 57, to rectify his behaviour,” the cable reads.

In conversations with the then US ambassador summarised in the cable, Thai officials also discussed the hope shared by many in the elite – but since all-but abandoned – that the king would appoint his widely respected daughter, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, as heir. Thailand has never had a ruling queen, and the laws of succession specify a male heir.

“If the Crown Prince were to die, anything could happen, and maybe Prathep [Sirindhorn] could succeed,” the cable quotes the late air chief marshal Siddhi Savetsila saying “almost hopefully”.

At the heart of the concern about Vajiralongkorn’s ascension to power at that time was not just his erratic track record, but fears of his personal relationship with ousted former prime minister and business tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra.

Thaksin presented the crown prince with a luxury car when he was first elected in 2001. Fears that Vajiralongkorn might find a support base among the populist politician’s voters are believed to have contributed to the coups that removed first Thaksin [7] and then his sister Yingluck Shinawatra [8], also a prime minister, from power in 2006 and 2014.

However, since then the generals have been courting Vajiralongkorn, apparently preferring to shore up ties with a man almost certain to become king than leave him vulnerable to overtures from an exile and political rival.

Their efforts include a public relations campaign to bolster his reputation [9], including mass cycle ride tributes to his mother and father [10]. They presented the prince as the image of energetic filial devotion, a counterpoint to stories of decadence and persistent rumours of ill-health details in another leaked US diplomatic cable revealed by WikiLeaks and dated November 2009 [11].

The junta’s interest in the crown prince appears to have been matched by a growing taste for power from the future ruler himself, whose views on how Thailand should be governed are almost entirely opaque.

“Vajiralongkorn has over the years demonstrated little interest in political and royal affairs,” said Professor Pavin Chachavalpongpun in a recent paper. “ [His ] life is an elusive study because Thais know little about his views on politics, or his vision of the future of the monarchy.”

He has shown none of his father’s charisma or public commitment to serve, however, apparently preferring the use of fear and violence intimidation to bolster his position. In recent months have brought purges of members of his own and his father’s inner circle, and his former wife’s family.

Marshall warned that this ruthlessness could be far more destabilising to Thailand than the dissolute, distracted ruler anticipated by many of the elite.

“With an incompetent junta in power, providing impunity to a loathed prince who is increasingly out of control, the likelihood of some kind of uprising seems very high,” he said.

“In my view, it is probable that we will face a so-called hard landing in terms of Thailand’s transition

after Bhumibol's death. Instead of a soft landing of peaceful evolution towards a democratic constitutional monarchy, we are likely to see a violent transition."

### **Staff reporter in London**

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/13/thailand-maha-vajiralongkorn-crown-prince-king>

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## **Thai king Bhumibol Adulyadej dies after 70-year reign**

### **Death of world's longest reigning monarch throws politically turbulent Thailand into uncertainty.**

Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej has died aged 88, ending seven decades on the throne during which he became a unifying father figure and rare source of stability in a country that has weathered more than a dozen coups since he came to power in 1946 aged just 18.

A statement from the royal household bureau said Bhumibol, who was the world's longest-reigning monarch, "passed away peacefully" at 3.52pm (8.52am BST) on Thursday at Siriraj hospital in Bangkok.

Thailand's prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, dressed in a black suit, appeared on domestic television channels minutes after the announcement to say that the nation would observe a year-long mourning period.

Prayuth confirmed that Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn would ascend the throne, though in a later statement he said there would be a delay in appointing Vajiralongkorn as he had asked for time to mourn with the country.

All TV channels in Thailand, including foreign satellite stations such as the BBC and CNN, have been replaced with black and white royal broadcasts.

Bhumibol had been absent from public life for years. His death throws an already politically turbulent Thailand into a haze of uncertainty that is unprecedented in its modern history.

Most Thais have only known King Bhumibol on the throne and his influence has superseded that of bickering politicians since the closing days of the second world war.

As soon as the palace confirmed the news, the crowd outside Siriraj hospital let out a cry and mourners hugged each other. Some people were wearing yellow - the king's colour - but many more wore pink, which was named years ago by royal astrologers as a colour beneficial for the monarch's wellbeing. They had been chanting "long live the king" for much of the day.

Although Bhumibol had been ill for much of the past decade, some people were shocked on hearing he had died. Dozens of mourners who had spent much of the past week at the hospital on the west side of the Chao Phraya river made their way back to central Bangkok dazed and fatigued. "When we saw the news that he was ill, we just hoped it was fake news," said a woman after stepping off

the boat.

Another mourner, 24-year-old student Tachpon Techarang, said Thais had spent the evening sending consoling messages to friends and family.

During the king's reign, there have been close to 20 attempted or successful coups – the last one in May 2014 when a military junta seized power [\[12\]](#) – but the monarchy has remained revered.

That Thailand's many civilian and military leaders crawled on the floor in the presence of the king illustrated how Bhumibol kept the executive in check even with the country ostensibly in a continual state of flux.

His constant presence made Thailand one of the most widely cited development successes, becoming an upper-income country in less than a generation. He successfully negotiated many times with military leaders to return democracy to the country, but finally left Thailand to the army.

Critics of the military junta say it used its support for the monarchy as a pretext for grabbing power from the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra, the sister of Thaksin Shinawatra, who was also deposed by the military in 2006 and fled the country.

The constitutional monarch had been treated by doctors for “water on the brain” and a chest infection in August 2015. On Sunday, the palace said his condition had become unstable.

During the closing years of his life, he was mostly hidden from the public, occasionally wheeled out on a bespoke sandy-coloured chair to tour a new supermarket or visit a palace. During these outings, Thais knelt on the road, some crying as their expressionless and silent monarch passed by.

His wife, Queen Sirikit, has also suffered declining health. They have three children, but Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, their only son and heir, does not command the same affection as his father, causing fears of a rupture in the state's structure.

However, open discussion of the monarchy is restricted by a strict *lèse-majesté* law [\[13\]](#) that makes criticism of the royal family punishable by years in jail, so it is hard to gauge the popularity of the son. Any Thai can bring a legal case against a person under the *lèse-majesté* law. In 2014, complaints were filed against a woman who wore black on the king's birthday.

In August last year, military courts jailed two people under the law, one for 30 years and the other for 28 years, the heaviest sentences for the crime in the country's history, for Facebook posts [\[14\]](#). Critics of the law say it has been used by the military against political opponents.

Bhumibol's death means Queen Elizabeth II is now the longest reigning living monarch.

The king ascended to the throne after the still unexplained death of his older brother, Ananda Mahidol. His brother, also known as King Rama VIII of Siam, was found shot dead in his bedroom in the Boromphiman throne hall in the Grand Palace. Bhumibol later said “it was proved that it was not an accident or a suicide”.

Bhumibol postponed his coronation until 1950 to finish his studies in Switzerland.

Many of his subjects regarded the king as close to divine. His image is displayed in shops, restaurants and homes across the country. The royal anthem is played in cinemas before films are shown and people are expected to stand. The anthem is also frequently broadcast in parks and on the metro, causing a temporary standstill.

The king played the saxophone and loved jazz. He was rarely seen in pictures without a camera around his neck and was a fan of black and white photography, which many suggested stemmed from his preference for simplicity in life.

On Thursday the Bangkok Post's website was black and white in mourning, as world leaders offered condolences.

"Bhumibol was a towering presence whose contribution to Thailand, and the rest of the region, is beyond words," said Najib Razak, the prime minister of Thailand's southern neighbour Malaysia. "We join the Thai people in mourning his loss."

In a statement from the White House, Barack Obama said the king was a tireless champion of his country's development, who "demonstrated unflagging devotion to improving the standard of living of the Thai people".

The UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, said Bhumibol was highly respected internationally. "The secretary general expresses his hope that Thailand will continue to honour King Bhumibol's legacy of commitment to universal values and respect for human rights," a statement from Ban's office said.

Bhumibol's body will be taken from hospital to the palace on Friday afternoon, officials said.

Traffic in the modernised areas of the Thai capital remained heavy and people walked the streets as normal on Thursday. Most signals that the country had lost its most beloved figure were subtle: restaurants were emptier than usual, some advertising billboards had been turned off, and fewer street stalls had opened.

On Khao San Road, a backpackers' hotspot in the capital, the pavement was full of people selling massages, fake DVDs and bottles of cheap spirits. Tourists in flip-flops were drinking beers in bars, but the usually constant blaring music was absent. Asked if the sound systems had been turned off out of respect for the king, a waitress responded by crying and nodding.

### **Oliver Holmes** in Bangkok

\* The Guardian. Thursday 13 October 2016 18.55 BST Last modified on Thursday 13 October 2016 20.22 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/13/thai-king-bhumibol-adulyadej-dies-after-70-year-reign>

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### **Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/asia/article3115503.ece>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/05/thai-crown-prince-pet-poodle-air-chief-marshall-foo-foo-cremated>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/22/andrew-macgregor-marshall-anti-monarchist-thailand-wife-detained>

- [4] <http://www.economist.com/node/15718981>
- [5] <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21702497-after-ailing-monarch-goes-what-next-twilight-king>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/245161>
- [7] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/19/thailand>
- [8] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/23/thai-parliament-votes-to-impeach-yingluck-shinawatra>
- [9] <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/world/with-king-in-declining-health-future-of-monarchy-in-thailand-is-uncertain.html>
- [10] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/16/thailand-queens-birthday-bike-for-mom-ban-gkok-queen-sirikit>
- [11] [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BANGKOK2967\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BANGKOK2967_a.html)
- [12] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/22/thailand-army-chief-announces-military-co-up>
- [13] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/22/new-york-times-thailand-lese-majeste-laws>
- [14] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/07/man-jailed-for-30-years-in-thailand-for-insulting-the-monarchy-on-facebook>