

# What's going on in Thailand? A struggle over royal succession ?

Wednesday 19 October 2016, by [MARSHALL Andrew](#) (Date first published: 18 October 2016).

**With the passing of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, his son and heir apparent, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, should have been named King Rama X. He hasn't. As Andrew MacGregor Marshall writes, Thailand's succession struggle isn't over yet.**

Thailand is a kingdom without a king

Following the death of Bhumibol Adulyadej last Thursday after 70 years on the throne, it was widely expected that his wayward and controversial son Vajiralongkorn would be proclaimed King Rama X the same day.

Instead, Thai dictator Prayuth Chan-ocha told the nation that the crown prince was not ready to be monarch. As I explained in a previous note, this has created an unprecedented succession crisis — for the first time in the history of the Chakri dynasty, Thailand looks set to be without a king for an extended period of time.

Junta leader Prayuth has told the nation that Vajiralongkorn himself asked for a delay in becoming king because he wanted time to mourn Bhumibol. This is not a credible explanation. The crown prince was never close to his father, and Bhumibol had effectively been brain dead for months. Princess Sirindhorn, who of all the royal children was closest to Bhumibol, was back at work on Monday performing royal duties. Whatever the reason for the delay in Vajiralongkorn becoming king, it is not because the crown prince is too sad to reign.

Information from multiple sources with links to the palace and the extended royal family suggests that a secret struggle over royal succession that has simmered beneath the surface of Thai politics for years is not yet over — and this is why Vajiralongkorn has not yet been proclaimed king. In particular, the scheming 96-year-old royalist former general Prem Tinsulanonda is trying to force the crown prince to accept curbs on his rule.

Prem has been a bitter enemy of the prince for decades — their mutual enmity dates back to when Prem was prime minister between 1980 and 1988. Prem's conservative royalist network, along with so-called royal liberals in Anand Panyarachun's circle and the Bangkok faction of the Democrat Party have been plotting for years to try to prevent Vajiralongkorn becoming king. The conflict intensified after 2005 due to palace concerns about Vajiralongkorn's apparent alliance with populist demagogue Thaksin Shinawatra.

Prem masterminded a military coup in 2006 [\[1\]](#) that was largely aimed at undermining Vajiralongkorn's succession prospects and sabotaging his ties with Thaksin. His influence began to wane as it became clear that the coup was a debacle that had caused irreparable damage to the image of the monarchy. In recent years he was regarded as a mostly spent force, with Prawit Wongsuwan becoming the most powerful royalist military godfather pulling strings from behind the scenes. But Prem, Anand and other senior royalists remained implacably hostile to the crown prince,

as a leaked US diplomatic cable from 2010 showed [2].

Despite his advanced age, Prem has staged a remarkable comeback in recent months. During August and September he managed to convince Prayuth to allow the appointment of Chalermchai Sittisart — a general loyal to Prem — to the crucial strategic position of army chief. As I wrote in a previous note on royal succession last week [3]:

*"The logic of putting General Chalermchai Sittisart in this position was to try to placate Prem and his allies, as well as military factions resentful of the Eastern Tigers, and prevent a counter-coup during the royal succession process.*

Vajiralongkorn was persuaded to enter into an uneasy alliance with his old enemy. If Prem still secretly intends to try to launch a succession surprise, however, the appointment of his ally as army chief gives him control of a strategically crucial position."

Now it seems Prem has indeed launched his surprise. As Bhumibol's health dramatically deteriorated last week, Prem and his sidekick Surayud Chulanont sought to force the crown prince to accept some kind of compromise. According to multiple sources, the reason that Prayuth cut short a visit to Chonburi and rushed back to Bangkok last Wednesday was for a tense meeting with Prem and Vajiralongkorn, who had just returned from Munich and landed at Suvarnabhumi Airport at 12:30 pm on Thai Airways flight TG923 from Frankfurt.

Prem was still pushing for Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn to be named the next monarch, but this was rejected by Vajiralongkorn and Prayuth. Prem then proposed that the crown prince's eldest daughter Princess Bajrakitiyabha be named monarch. Again, this was rejected. The standoff remains unresolved, and this is why the junta announced that Vajiralongkorn wants to delay becoming king — negotiations are continuing. It is telling that Vajiralongkorn has said nothing publicly, with Prayuth claiming to be speaking on his behalf.

Prem's position as regent and significant influence over the army have given him some leverage, but he is pursuing an exceptionally risky strategy. According to several sources it appears extremely unlikely that he can prevent Vajiralongkorn becoming king, and negotiations are now focusing on the possibility of reviving the old position of *uparaja*, or deputy monarch. Prem wants Sirindhorn to be *uparaja*, to act as a curb on Vajiralongkorn. The crown prince has countered with a suggestion that his elder sister Ubolratana be deputy monarch. As of now, the negotiations remain deadlocked and Thailand has no king.

The contested succession may end up doing even more damage to the monarchy, at a time when many Thais are questioning whether the palace has any worthwhile role in post-Bhumibol Thailand.

**Andrew MacGregor Marshall**

*Editor's note: According to a Bangkok Post report [4], Prayuth Chan-ocha said on Tuesday that Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn will be named king after 15 days of mourning. We watch this fast-changing story with growing interest.*

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**P.S.**

\* "What's going on in Thailand?". New Mandala. 18 OCT, 2016:

<http://www.newmandala.org/whats-going-thailand/>

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This article was first published to his Facebook page on Tuesday, 18 October 2016.

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://www.zenjournalist.org/2013/11/01/ thailand-era-of-insanity-2/>

[2] [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10BANGKOK192\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10BANGKOK192_a.html)

[3] <https://www.facebook.com/notes/andrew-macgregor-marshall/whats-going-on-in-thailand-a-brief-guide-to-the-royal-succession/1288157517870251>

[4] <http://m.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1113341/prayut-at-least-15-days-mourning-before-royal-succession>