

As the Floodwaters Rise in Thailand, an Ideological Debate Comes to the Surface

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Both in their scale and in their impact on people's lives, the ongoing floods have brought to Thailand a tragedy whose dimensions can be hard to grasp. Thousands of factories have closed. Hundreds of thousands of jobs are in jeopardy. Millions of people dependent on the workers who held those jobs now face financial uncertainty.

At least 350 people have lost their lives and there are fears that afflictions such as diarrhoea, typhoid, leptospirosis and skin infections will add to this suffering in the weeks and months ahead.

The Thai government expects to spend billions of dollars on post-flood cleanup, recovery and reconstruction. Yet how to go about those tasks, how long they will take and whether foreign investors will have the confidence to return to the major industrial estates in Chao Phraya Delta provinces like Ayutthaya are open questions.

All of this is bad enough. But media coverage of the Thai floods has ignored an additional important dimension of the unfolding situation: The floods have triggered a political and ideological contest concerning the role of the Thai monarchy. This contest is playing out on a number of levels.

On one level, it is about who offers symbolic leadership to Thailand during times of crisis. During the second week of August, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra visited the northern provinces of Sukhothai, Uttaradit, Phrae and Nan in one of her first high-visibility acts after taking office.

In the first of those provinces, she was photographed walking through flood waters in rubber boots. While in most countries such an act by a head of government would appear routine and reassuring, in the Thai context it had other meanings. For many decades, the national leader that Thais were most accustomed to seeing photographed on visits to rural people under adverse conditions was their king. Today, King Bhumibol Adulyadej has reached an age at which such visits are no longer possible. At the same time, younger members of the royal family — the king's children and grandchildren — have opted to make their marks in the realms of scientific research, military aviation, scholarship, literature, music, fashion and the law. None has come to be associated as directly with the welfare of rural Thailand as the king.

In one sense, the visibility of Yingluck's August trip had an encouraging dimension. It underlined the fact that the leader of Thailand's elected government was prepared to shoulder responsibility in times of crisis. In another sense, however, it presented a potentially jarring image to Thais accustomed to the long-dominant royal order in their country.

On a second level, the events are more nakedly political. Thais unreconciled to the victory of Yingluck's Red-Shirt-supported Pheu Thai Party in July's polls have in recent weeks tried to turn her government's current struggle to partisan political advantage. They have criticized the prime minister as favoring photo opportunities over effective measures to address the crisis. They have

claimed that she remained more focused on enacting policies to enrich people and firms close to her government than on dealing with the mounting disaster facing the country. They have decried her government's state of apparent confusion in the face of the vast sea of floodwaters that has now overrun its crisis center at the Don Mueang airport.

Such criticism, justified or not, is natural in a free-wheeling political culture like Thailand's. But it has in this instance been accompanied, in cyberspace in particular, by another form of criticism: faulting Yingluck for, in essence, not having the wisdom and expertise of King Bhumibol in matters relating to water — or at least for not drawing sufficiently on that wisdom and expertise and therefore showing disrespect for the king.

Thais on the Yellow, anti-Thaksin side of their country's deep political divide have taken to the Internet to assure one another that the king has set up an alternate crisis center to meet the challenge posed by the flooding. To prove their case, they have even circulated on Facebook a photograph of the king meeting with a group of officials, with a large map spread out in front of them. It turns out, however, that the photograph comes from a TV news report from June on the king's meeting with the leadership of the hospital in which he has stayed since 2009 to discuss road construction and drainage in the area around the hospital.

Attacks of this nature exemplify the longstanding determination of anti-Thaksin, anti-Red-Shirt political elements in Thailand to accuse their opponents of disrespect for the monarchy. What gives these attacks particular force among those elements, however, is King Bhumibol's long history of interest in water issues. Perhaps to pre-empt such attacks, Yingluck used her late-September audience with the king not only to report on her government's efforts to manage the flooding but also to solicit his advice on appropriate measures to take.

In many respects, the third level on which Thailand's flood crisis has occasioned an ideological contest over the monarchy is the most dangerous. It relates directly to the king's decades-old interest in and association with management of Thai water resources.

The king has repeatedly offered ideas about those resources in his birthday speech to the nation each December. Major dams in northern Thailand are named for King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit, while those in the northeast of the country carry the names of their three daughters. The Royal Irrigation Department celebrated King Bhumibol's 60th birthday in 1987 with the publication of a book on water resources development compiled by the department's then director general, who later served as an adviser to the king on water projects. In 2006, events marking the king's 60th year on the throne included a lecture on "His Majesty the King and Hydropower." In the same year, The Bangkok Post published a photograph captioned, "While playing in a Swiss forest as a boy, His Majesty shows his keenness for water management by building a dam with clay." The reverse side of a 1,000 baht note pictures the king in front of another dam, one whose construction he advocated with unusual directness in his birthday speech of 1993.

Smith Dharmasoraoja, a former director general of the Department of Meteorology, has spoken in recent days of the flooding crisis as a reflection of the country's flawed approach to water management. There is a growing understanding in Thailand that such long-term factors as the degradation of watersheds and water catchment areas, urban sprawl and industrialization and an inflexible water bureaucracy with little idea of how best to manage its dams explain the current disaster far more than do heavy rains in recent months.

Concern that these factors will come to be associated with King Bhumibol's own legacy of interest in and influence over the management of water resources is growing among observers of Thai affairs. Many worry that the ideological strife to which that association might lead could prove almost as

destructive to the country as the floods themselves.

P.S.

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