

Palace struggles (Thailand): As Thai king's consort Sineenat returns, so do rumours of a plot to oust her

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- **Months after King Maha Vajiralongkorn reinstated the consort he sacked last year, Queen Suthida's camp is said to be trying to get rid of Sineenat again**
- **Her return comes as the palace struggles to boost its image amid pro-democracy protests and an 'ugly power struggle' within its walls, observers say**

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When Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn last month greeted thousands of supporters at a pro-monarchy rally in Bangkok [1], the cameras zoomed in on him and Queen Suthida beaming and waving at devotees holding flags and the royal couple's portraits.

Also in the crowd was royal consort Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi [2], marking her return to the spotlight after almost a year in banishment for disloyalty. Since her reinstatement in September, she's been touring Thailand's provinces in a public relations blitz amid a pro-democracy movement raging across the country.

According to political scientist Puangchon Unchanam from Naresuan University, the public role of Sineenat - known as Koi - is to endear the royals to Thai youths, because "she is young, energetic, beautiful, fit, friendly and sporty".

But the consort's return has also resurfaced intrigue about the palace, including speculation about a plot by Queen Suthida's supporters to oust her - especially in the wake of a scandal that saw the release of hundreds of intimate photographs featuring Sineenat last month.

On November 1, Sineenat was pictured beaming as she greeted supporters in a manner not usually adopted by the royals, including posing for photographs and shaking the hands of fans.

While her apparent humility could be a boon for a family that's long been viewed as out of touch, her status as a consort - the first in nearly a century - itself poses image problems, as a new generation of Thais questions the unconditional reverence of the monarchy as part of a wider demand for greater democracy and equality in the country.

"Her status does not fit with the social values of today's youngsters, who promote monogamy, gender equality, and feminist ideology in Thai society," Puangchon said.

All the king's women

Thai king reinstates titles for once-disgraced royal consort Thai king reinstates titles for once-disgraced royal consort

When Sineenat was stripped of her title in October last year [3], it was widely suspected to be an inside job to sabotage her reputation. The announcement said she had acted arrogantly and made “every effort to match herself with Her Majesty the Queen”.

Sineenat was presumed to have followed the fate of the king's three ex-wives, who were publicly disgraced and exiled.

Vajiralongkorn's disregard for the sanctity of marriage is common knowledge. He has kept lovers since his first marriage in 1977 with Princess Soamsawali, his first cousin and the mother of his eldest child, Princess Bajrakitiyabha [4], born in December 1978.

Months after his daughter was born, the king welcomed a son with former actress Sujarinee Vivacharawongse [5], who had a total of five children with him while he was married to Princess Soamsawali.

Sujarinee, who married the king in 1994, later settled in the US with her sons. They have long been estranged from the palace and abandoned all their titles. When Chakriwat, one of the sons, was last month hospitalised from a serious illness in New York, he did not receive any support from his father, the British Daily Mail tabloid reported.

Sujarinee's youngest child Princess Sirivannavari [6], however, continues to have ties with her father. The 33-year-old fashion designer recently became the target of Thailand's pro-democracy supporters as they staged a demonstration to mock her show in Bangkok [7].

In 2014, Vajiralongkorn divorced his third wife, Srirasmi Suwadee, after many of her family members were sentenced on charges of fraud and disrespecting the monarchy, in one of the biggest royal purges. The couple had one son, Prince Dipangkorn Rasmijoti [8], who is now studying in Germany.

It is unclear when Vajiralongkorn began his relationships with Suthida, 42, and Sineenat, 35 - who are a former Thai Airways flight attendant and a trained nurse, respectively - but as early as 2010, Suthida was working as a royal guard, while Sineenat has been a palace officer since 2012.

'Not a role model'

Sineenat's dismissal and the Thai king's later decision to wave away her misdeeds have been highlighted by critics as evidence of the monarchy's abuse of power.

“(The king) can appoint a consort, openly ‘disappear’ her, then snap his fingers and have her brought to him directly at his luxurious estate in Germany,” said Tamara Loos, a professor of history at Cornell University.

“He can circulate her around the country in a media blitzkrieg in an attempt to salvage his image and build his popularity, as if she is merely an extension of him,” she said. “It means there are no consequences for the king's behaviour, but dire consequences for those close to him and those who

confront him.”

The relationship is not legally approved since Thai law does not recognise polygamy. While the historical role of a consort was to provide heirs, political connections, or wealth to the throne, Sineenat’s role has been to widen support for the monarchy.

In recent weeks, she has toured many regions of Thailand solo, sporting the sarong of each particular locale – a move that has earned her praises in the media not only for her sense of style and attention to detail, but for her respect towards Thailand’s local cultures.

Her provincial tour is viewed as an attempt to counter the protests roiling Bangkok and other areas, led by young people demanding change in a kingdom that has seen repeated military rule since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932 delaying a full democracy [9].

Separately, the king and queen have also been seen recently at planned walkabouts meeting thousands of royalists wearing yellow, the colour associated with the Thai monarchy.

The king in October returned from his usual base in Germany and will reportedly return there later this month, making this trip his longest stay in Thailand since he became monarch in 2016.

At a recent rally in Bangkok’s shopping district, protesters spray-painted derogatory remarks against the king on the street, including calling him “sia” – a title often given to wealthy older men who operate with force and money, sometimes in an immoral way.

The word is usually linked with a person who has a status of a “crime boss”, rather than the “father of the nation” reputation that Vajiralongkorn’s father Bhumibol enjoyed during his 70-year reign.

Wan, 36, a protester and a self-proclaimed feminist, said that while she had no problem with anyone’s decision to practise polygamy, the “lack of due process [taken by the king] when Koi was sent to prison ... shows how unfairly the supreme authority of Thailand treats women”.

“When Koi was stripped of her titles, the claim was that she broke the palace’s rules for servants. So she was earlier proclaimed as a wife, but she was punished as a servant,” Wan said. “This is not the practice of a role model that the king – and the monarchy as an institution – is supposed to represent.”

Andrew McGregor Marshall, a Scottish journalist who has covered the Thai palace for decades and who has been accused by the government of violating the country’s strict *lèse-majesté* laws, said: “Most progressive Thais question why their monarch is able to openly flaunt two official partners, in addition to the many other women in his harem who the palace tries to keep secret.”

Koi vs Nui: ‘Ugly power struggle’

Amid the political crisis outside, the palace is reportedly going through its own internal crisis.

In the past month, at least two observers of the Thai monarchy said there was a new plot to overthrow Sineenat from the same factions that caused her downfall last year.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun, a Kyoto University scholar and Thai political refugee, said in November he had received a collection of Sineenat’s personal photographs, some of which he shared on Facebook.

McGregor Marshall said he had received a memory card containing 1,443 pictures of Sineenat “shortly before Koi was released from the Lat Yao women’s prison in Bangkok and travelled to Germany on August 29 to rejoin Vajiralongkorn”.

The pictures “had apparently been extracted from three iPhones that Koi used to own”, he said.

“Most of the images are photographs she took of herself, and dozens of them are very explicit,” he said. “It seems probable that she had taken these explicit photographs of herself to send to Vajiralongkorn.”

On Facebook in November, McGregor Marshall wrote that Sineenat’s return was “bitterly opposed” by loyalists of Queen Suthida and Princess Bajrakitiyabha, the king’s eldest child. “It is highly probable the images of Koi were leaked in an effort to sabotage her return as Vajiralongkorn’s consort.”

On social media, admirers have been following the two women’s clothes, hairstyles, and jewellery they wear, many of which belong to past queens or consorts.

On the “Major General Chao Khun Phra Sineenat Bilaskalayani” page on Facebook, a supporter of Sineenat said her decision to wear local Thai outfits during her tour showed she had “done a study on the culture of each province”.

On a Facebook page titled “We love Queen Suthida”, a person noted how the queen had exercised patience when riding past protesters in a motorcade weeks ago and that she would always have her support.

On Instagram, there are no photos of Sineenat on Suthida’s fan pages and vice versa. Both have never intentionally appeared in public together. When they are at the same event, both hardly look at each other, notably during the king’s coronation last year.

McGregor Marshall said the “ugly power struggle” in the palace due to the king’s “complicated sex life” was likely to worsen, as Sineenat and Suthida continued to compete for status and attention.

Sineenat’s imprisonment had “worsened the reputational damage that the whole saga has done to the Thai monarchy”, McGregor Marshall said, adding that Suthida would be “looking at the fate of Vajiralongkorn’s previous three wives ... with great trepidation”.

“It is natural that there will be intense rivalry between the two women, and this will cause factionalism and instability in the palace,” he said. “It’s difficult to see how the situation can end well.”

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P.S.

• South China Morning Post (SCMP). Published: 9:30am, 2 Dec, 2020. Updated: 8:29pm, 2 Dec, 2020:

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3112106/thai-kings-consort-sineenat-returns-so-do-rumours-plot-oust-her>

- This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as: comeback by consort stirs fresh intrigue.

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3107990/thailand-thousands-royalists-gather-show-support-king>
- [2] <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3099908/thai-king-reinstates-titles-royal-consort-says-she-was-never>
- [3] <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3036166/5-things-know-about-thai-kings-disgraced-ex-princess-and>
- [4] <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/luxury/article/3038354/5-things-know-about-princess-bajrakitiyabha-daughter-thai>
- [5] <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3036876/thai-king-maha-vajiralongkorn-ex-wife-exile-5-insights>
- [6] <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/luxury/article/3037220/5-things-know-about-sirivannavari-nariratana-gifted-thai>
- [7] <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/fashion-beauty/article/3107778/thai-princess-hosts-fashion-show-protesters-walk-red>
- [8] <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/celebrity/article/3038884/5-things-know-about-prince-dipangkorn-rasmijoti-son-thai>
- [9] <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3106250/why-are-there-protests-thailand-and-what-will-happen-next>