

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://thediplomat.com/2016/10/the-darker-side-of-thai-royalism/>

The Darker Side of Thai Royalism

While most Thais mourn their late king with decorum, a sinister ultra-royalism rears its ugly head.

By James Buchanan
October 26, 2016

Thailand is now shrouded in black as it mourns the death of King Bhumipol Adulyadej, who passed away on October 13, at the age of 88. His 70 years on the throne made him the world's longest reigning monarch, as well as a figure who towered over all aspects of Thai life. He was considered by some in the country to be semi-divine.

Amidst a flurry of internet speculation, a palace document confirming his death was published online by local media. An official announcement on all television channels followed some time later, read by a news presenter sitting in front of a black studio backdrop, dressed in a black suit, shirt, and tie. He solemnly informed viewers that the king had "reached the heavens," before introducing a broadcast by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha.

The prime minister — a retired general who seized power in a *coup d'état* in 2014 — lamented that the death of the monarch was a tragedy for the people of Thailand, adding that the king was "loved and adored by all." He then announced that the government would observe one year of mourning and requested that Thais refrain from participating in any "joyful events" for a period of 30 days. Television channels, newspapers, and websites adopted a sorrowful monochrome appearance to pay their respects.

The following day, the late king made his final journey from Bangkok's Siriraj Hospital — his home for much of his twilight — to the Grand Palace, where his body would be given traditional bathing rites. Large crowds of black-clad Thais lined the streets along the way, sitting for hours in the oppressive afternoon heat as they awaited his arrival. Some sobbed quietly, wiping tears from their faces. Others carried the late king's portrait with them, clutching it preciously and holding it above their heads. When his motorcade drove slowly passed, a deathly silence fell on the crowd — collective grief and historical gravity combining to give the moment a somber but peaceful dignity.

But not all Thais have behaved with the same level of decorum since the announcement. While the majority mourn quietly and inwardly, others have turned grief into rage, lashing out at those they accuse of paying insufficient respect to the late monarch. Such incidents have been occurring on an almost daily basis, sullyng the mourning period and revealing the darker side of royalism in Thailand.

Ultra-Royalist Mobs

On October 14, as night fell on the newly grieving country, a large, angry crowd gathered outside a small shophouse in Phuket. Dressed in black, they demanded the arrest of a young man inside, who they accused of disrespecting the royal family on social media. A thick line of police officers was needed to keep the outraged mob back from the shop. It took several hours to calm the throng, which eventually dispersed at around 3 am. The man at the center of the allegations was then charged with royal defamation, only to be released shortly afterwards due to lack of evidence. The organizers of the witch-hunt remained unsatisfied, vowing to pursue the matter further.

Thailand's strict *lèse-majesté* law punishes offenses against the monarchy with up to 15 years in prison. Multiple cases can be brought against a defendant at the same time — in 2015, a man charged with six counts of defaming the institution faced being sentenced for 60 years. This was eventually reduced to 30 years after he pleaded guilty, as is customary in such cases. The much-criticized law is loosely defined and broadly interpreted. Trials are conducted behind closed doors.

The night after the incident in Phuket, the same occurred in Phang Nga province. An angry crowd of royalists dressed in black surrounded a roti shop, demanding an apology from the owner's son, who was accused of disrespecting the late king. The young man had commented on social media that the outpouring of grief since the monarch passed away was excessive. He also queried if people had ever expressed as much love for their own father as they have done for the king, who is often described as the “father” of the nation. Again, a heavy police presence was needed to placate and disperse the mob.

A spate of similar incidents followed soon after. In Koh Samui, a 43-year-old woman accused of insulting the monarchy was forced by police to prostrate herself in front of the king's portrait, while an angry, jeering crowd looked on. She, too, is likely to face *lèse-majesté* charges.

In Bangkok, an elderly woman was hounded off a public bus by other passengers, who accused her of disrespecting the monarchy. After she climbed down from the bus, a black-clad onlooker gave her a hard slap to the face and rebuked her. When police and military arrived on the scene, the assailant and bus passengers called for the elderly lady to be arrested. It was later disclosed that she suffers from mental illness.

And in Chonburi, a young man was hunted down by vigilante royalists after allegedly making an offensive remark about the monarchy on Facebook. He was snatched from his home by the mob, beaten, and forced to kowtow to a portrait of the late king — then kicked in the face as he did so.

Reactions to these events have been varied. For some Thais, they are indicative of the intense pressure to conform to prescribed notions of royal-nationalism. For others, the mobs are entirely justified and those who disrespect the monarchy must be severely punished. When clips, photos, and — in some cases — live feeds of the incidents were posted online, many of the comments were disturbing.

Thousands of social media users have incited the mobs to violence, encouraging them to attack the victims of the witch-hunts. Posts used the Thai pronoun “it” to refer to the perceived wrongdoers, which is not only considered rude in Thai language, but also has a dangerous, dehumanizing effect. Some comments told the mobs to vandalize and burn down the shophouses the victims were taking refuge in. Others suggested they be forced to leave the country and go live elsewhere.

Dark Histories

This toxic blend of ultra-royalist nationalism and lynch-mob mentality is not new in Thailand.

On October 6 this year, events were held to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the student massacre at Thammasat University. The atrocity — considered one of Thailand’s darkest moments — was sparked by rumors that protesting students had disrespected the monarchy. Heavily-armed state security forces and far-right paramilitary groups then attacked and besieged the campus in Bangkok’s historical quarter.

Officially, 46 students were killed in the attack, although the real figure could be more than 100. Some students were shot on campus; others escaped by jumping into the adjacent Chao Phraya river, only to be shot in the water by naval vessels. Others, still, were beaten to death by vigilantes as they tried to escape, their corpses brutalized and set on fire. The atrocity continued for hours, interrupted only when dark clouds unleashed a heavy rainstorm.

An iconic photograph from the massacre shows one student’s battered, lifeless body hanging from a tree, neck stretched, as a man prepares to strike its head with a folding chair. A crowd of young men and boys stand watching, some with broad smiles on their faces. To many Thais, the grotesque image has become a powerful symbol of the latent violence lurking just below the surface of their society.

This violence is particularly apt to erupt when people believe the official state ideology of Nation, Religion, and King is threatened. In 2006, a mentally ill man destroyed a revered Brahman statue in central Bangkok's Erawan Shrine with a hammer. He was soon attacked by a mob of onlookers and beaten to death.

Both nationalism and royalism were exploited by the Yellow Shirt movement against Thaksin Shinawatra. The former prime minister came under criticism for "selling the nation" when he offloaded his family's share of the telecommunications company Shin Corporation to the Singapore-based Temasek Holdings. He was also accused of being disrespectful to the king — an allegation that was eventually cited by the military as a justification for toppling him in 2006.

When the largely pro-Thaksin Red Shirt movement emerged some time afterwards, they, too, were criticized for harboring anti-monarchy sentiments. The claim — which was exaggerated but not completely without basis — was used to vilify the movement and fueled a vicious backlash against it.

In the normative Thai worldview, royalism and nationalism are so closely intertwined that anyone not enthusiastically royalist must also be "not Thai." The Red Shirts were thus cast as "others" — external enemies to be crushed. Approximately 90 from the movement were killed during military operations to disperse their protest in 2010. Many of those succumbed to single sniper shots to the head — with little public outcry from Thais not aligned with the movement.

In 2014, royal-nationalist protesters mobilized against the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra. The royalist yellow of previous movements was replaced by the nationalist tricolor of red, white and blue, which adorned shirts, flags, and protest paraphernalia. The movement made the same appeals to royal-nationalism as the Yellow Shirts and was supported by a similar section of society. In the discord which followed, tit-for-tat violence claimed around 28 lives on both sides of the political divide.

Deep Divisions

The passing of King Bhumipol has occurred after a decade of intense and unresolved political strife. The role of the monarchy and the nature of royalism in the country are important aspects of the conflict — a fact that is impossible to discuss openly, not only because of the *lèse-majesté* law, but also due to the emotionally-charged fervor of the ultra-royalists.

The ruling junta seems keen to keep a lid on the vigilantes, warning people not to take matters into their own hands but report crimes against the monarchy to the authorities. However, the signals have been mixed — the country's justice minister appeared to give the mobs his blessing, stating that those who insult the monarchy should face "social sanctions." He also recommended that Thais living abroad harass exiles considered to be anti-monarchists. Approval of such actions from someone in a position of authority or influence is extremely dangerous.

The rhetoric from some ultra-royalists is increasingly alarming. One man posted bullet-ridden photos online of a famous anti-monarchist dissident, Aum Neko, who has been living in exile in France. A long-standing royalist witch-hunt group, "Rubbish Collection Organization," has led

calls for Aum to be hunted down. The name of the group implies those who disrespect the monarchy are “rubbish” to be “disposed of” — Aum has now fled to an undisclosed third country for her safety.

A worrying video was also posted online, recorded by a man driving in his car, weeping about the loss of King Bhumipol and threatening to shoot people who disrespected the late monarch. He had two handguns sitting next to him and a framed portrait of King Bhumipol and Queen Sirikit in the back seat.

The color-coded political conflict of the past 10 years has torn communities, friendships, and even families apart. In apartment buildings and shophouse rows all over the country, Thais have raised eyebrows as they watched neighbors leaving their homes to attend protests, dressed either in red or in yellow. Friendships have soured and come to an end over political posts on Facebook. People generally know who in their community is “red” or “yellow” — and they know what this implies.

The long-running political turmoil has been highly-charged, caused massive disruption, brought down governments and taken lives. Old grudges are not quickly forgotten, particularly against those thought to harbor ill feeling towards the monarchy. With the country now draped in black and emotions running high, there is a danger Thailand may be about to revisit some of its darker moments.