

PERSPECTIVE

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A Grateful Son, a Military King: Thai Media Accounts of the Accession of Rama X to the Throne

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thailand's new monarch King Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun acceded to the throne on the evening of 1 December 2016, several weeks after the death of his father, King Bhumibol, on 13 October 2016.
- Thai press and media coverage of the new king emphasise several recurring themes: (1) He is a loyal son who has become king to accord with King Bhumibol's wish that he should succeed his father; and (2) He is a man with a military background who is prepared and able to defend the nation, and whose accession to the throne is welcomed by the military government.
- Media accounts of King Maha Vajiralongkorn have focused on his qualities and personal experience which in Thai royal and political culture are regarded as equipping him to rule.
- While it is very early days yet in the reign of the new king, he has already demonstrated a capacity for independence that suggests relations between the monarchy and the military government may evolve in unexpected directions.

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INTRODUCTION

King Bhumibol Adulyadej or Rama IX, ninth king of the Chakri Dynasty of Bangkok, died at 3.52 pm on Thursday 13 October 2016 after more than seven decades on the throne, the longest reign of any monarch in Thai history. He died two-and-a-half years after the May 2014 military coup led by current Prime Minister General Prayuth Chanocha, which overthrew the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra, younger sister of former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was also deposed in a coup in September 2006.

PM General Prayuth has insisted that the military seized power in order to follow a “road map” and take Thailand through a “transition period”. While rarely stated explicitly, this military-guided “transition” is generally interpreted as implying overseeing the transition from King Bhumibol to his successor as well as a political transition to elections under a new constitution that favours the military. Many observers contend that the military government is unlikely to hold elections until after the coronation ceremony of the new monarch, whose date has still not been set.

The transition to a new king was delayed when, on the evening of his father’s death, the heir to the throne unexpectedly announced that for a period he would decline an invitation to become the king in order to share the grief and mourning of the people at the passing of King Bhumibol. For the following few weeks, the president of the royal advisory body the Privy Council, former PM General Prem Tinsulanonda, acted as regent.

The interregnum period ended on 1 December 2016, when the Crown Prince accepted the invitation to ascend the throne and took the formal titles of King Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun and King Rama X. After weeks of saturation media coverage of King Bhumibol’s life and legacy, the accession of King Maha Vajiralongkorn saw the national media turn to reportage of the new monarch. In contrast to the many dimensions of the “genius” of the late King Bhumibol reported in press memorials following his death, media coverage of the new King Maha Vajiralongkorn have been considerably more focused on several main themes.

REIGNING WITH HIS FATHER’S IMPRIMATUR

One of the most widely reproduced images in the Thai press in the first days after King Maha Vajiralongkorn ascended the throne was a colour photograph of King Bhumibol’s ritual investiture of Prince Vajiralongkorn as Crown Prince, and heir to the throne. This elaborate ceremony took place on 28 December 1972, when the prince had returned to Bangkok during a break in his studies at the Australian Royal Military Academy of Duntroon in Canberra. In this widely reproduced photo, the prince is pictured with head bowed before King Bhumibol, who is sitting on a raised throne. This 40-year-old picture represents the new king in a humble position before the former king, visually indicating King Bhumibol’s imprimatur of his son as successor to the Chakri throne and provides an especially powerful image of the authority of the late king in perpetuating the Thai monarchy. The widespread reproduction

of this photograph also emphasises the fact that, despite rumours that King Bhumibol's second daughter Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn might be a candidate for the throne, the late king did formally designate his only son as heir several decades ago and never indicated any alternative successor.

KING RAMA X CONTINUING THE LEGACY OF KING BHUMIBOL

In the early days of the new reign, the Thai press repeatedly emphasised King Maha Vajiralongkorn's close relationship to and approval by his late father, publishing accounts that stressed continuity between father and son, in which the new king is reflected in the charismatic aura of his late father. Much press coverage represented the new monarch as the loyal and grateful son of his father, with King Maha Vajiralongkorn reported as ascending the throne in order to honour King Bhumibol's wishes and to continue his legacy.

The majority of outlets reported that the new king's first words upon accepting the invitation to accede to the throne were, "I accept in order to fulfill His Majesty's wishes".¹ The English-language *Bangkok Post* reported this in an article headed, "Long Live the King: HM Promises to Fulfill Intentions of Late Father".² The Thai-language *Thai Rath*, the country's largest circulation daily, similarly reported the first royal pronouncement as, "[I accept the invitation to become king] to accord with the royal wishes of King Rama 9".³ These reports of the first words of King Maha Vajiralongkorn were highlighted in banner headlines.

The message that the new king had assumed the throne at the behest of his respected father was further emphasised in a simple two-word page 1 banner headline of the *Bangkok Post*, "Grateful King", published on 2 December 2016, the morning after King Maha Vajiralongkorn's accession.⁴ The English term "grateful" here translates a Buddhist term from the Thai expression *luk katanyu*, which denotes a child who shows "respectful gratitude" to his or her parents. The suggestion was that King Maha Vajiralongkorn had become king out of an ethical obligation to his father. The Thai Buddhist notion of "gratitude" to one's parents differs from the Confucian notion of "filial piety" in that Thai custom emphasises respect for one's immediate parents rather than one's patrilineal ancestors. Also, in Thailand the attitude of *katanyu* or respectful gratitude emphasises the honouring of one's mother as well as one's father. Nevertheless, like the Confucian notion, the Thai cultural value implies a profound lifelong moral obligation to one's parents and the description of King Maha Vajiralongkorn as a "grateful king" yet again represented his reign as being in continuity with that of his father.

¹*Bangkok Post*, 2 December 2016, p. 1.

²*Bangkok Post*, 4 December 2016, p. 2.

³*Thai Rath*, "Phuea sanornng phra ratcha panithan khornng r. 9", 3 December 2016, p. 1.

⁴*Bangkok Post*, 2 December 2016, p. 1.

KING RAMA X AND THE THAI PEOPLE: ALL CHILDREN OF KING BHUMIBOL

The image of the late King Bhumibol as the “royal father” (*phor luang*) of both the Thai nation and the new king has also been emphasised in the press. There is a long history of Thai kings being represented as the “fathers” of the nation and its people, and in the final decades of his reign King Bhumibol was increasingly referred to in public discourse simply as *Phor*, or “Dad” in English. On the occasion of what would have been King Bhumibol’s 88th birthday on 5 December 2016, the Thai-language *Matichon* daily headed an article on his legacy, “The Royal Father of all Thais: The Royal Father of King Rama 10”.⁵ This item used the Thai term “father” (*phor*) to suggest a common paternity between the new king, Rama X, and the mass of the Thai people. The article represented the late King Bhumibol as the symbolic father of the Thai people and Thai nation just as he was also the biological father of King Maha Vajiralongkorn. This placed both the new king and the people of Thailand in a parallel situation of all being the “children” of the late king and hence, according to Thai Buddhist custom, as being ethically obliged to demonstrate gratitude (*khwamkatanyu*) and show respect (*khwamnaphue*) for their deceased “royal father” and his wishes.

KING RAMA X AS A MILITARY MONARCH

When the Thai press represents the new king as his own man, rather than as the son of his father, the overwhelmingly dominant images are of him as a military man. On 2 December 2016, the day after he ascended the throne, the Thai-language *Post Today* and its English-language stable mate the *Bangkok Post* both included full-colour inserts of the new king, including the same image of King Rama X in royal-military uniform. In the *Bangkok Post* the English-language caption accompanying this page 1 photo was “Military Monarch”,⁶ while the Thai-language caption accompanying the same image in *Post Today* was *Kasat jorm thap thai*.⁷ This Thai phrase translates as “The Thai King Supreme Commander” and suggests the new king is more than a ceremonial head of state, using an expression conveying the impression he is actual head of the Thai armed forces with resonances of the US President as Commander-in-Chief.

As a man with military education, training and experience, media reports also indicated that Thailand’s current military rulers welcomed King Maha Vajiralongkorn’s accession. On 3 December 2016, the page 1 headline of the Thai-language *Daily News* was, “Royal Expertise in Military Affairs – The Three Armed Forces Delighted”.⁸ The article was illustrated with a photo of the prince while at Duntroon, wearing a uniform with his surname in English as Mahidol. Prince Mahidol was King Maha Vajiralongkorn’s grandfather.

⁵*Matichon*, “*Phor luang khorng puang Thai: phra borom ratchachanok ratchakan thi 10*”, 5 December 2016, p. 13.

⁶*Bangkok Post*, 2 December 2016, special insert, P.1.

⁷*Post Today*, 2 December 2016, P. 1.

⁸*Daily News*, “*Song chiaw chan kanthahan, 3 lao thap pluem piti*”, 3 December 2016, P. 1.

The Thai press has emphasised that the new king's military interests follow from a preparation in sports and scouting as a youth and a passion for piloting military and civilian aircraft as an adult. *Daily News* headed a 2 December 2016 page 1 lead article, "Praise for royal wisdom – From his youth he liked the scouts before military studies", accompanied by photos of the new king as a youth in a boy scouts uniform and playing rugby.⁹ Many press outlets have reported King Maha Vajiralongkorn's passion for flying, with photos of him as a young pilot of a Thai fighter jet.

PROTECTING THE NATION: THE KING'S BATTLEFIELD

The Thai press has also widely reported the new king's active service in supporting the Royal Thai Army in campaigns against Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) insurgents in the 1970s. This period was the height of the Cold War, when communist revolutions toppled governments and monarchies in Laos and Cambodia and when relations between the Thai monarchy and military were reshaped by dramatic and rapid shifts in domestic politics. In October 1973, a ruling military clique was forced into exile in the aftermath of massive public demonstrations, while three years later in October 1976, after a brief window of democratic politics, the military returned in a violent coup that saw large numbers of students and their sympathisers join the CPT's revolutionary activities. The then-Crown Prince's personal support for the army after the October 1976 coup reflected the alignment of the monarchy with the military. Recent press biographies of the new king report that on 5 November 1976, "Captain Crown Prince"¹⁰ flew by helicopter to be with Thai army troops at Ban Mak Khaeng in Loei Province in northeast Thailand when the troops were under fire from CPT cadres. These reports represent the new king as a guardian of national security who has undergone a trial by fire in defence of the nation, with the Thai-language *Thai Post X-Cite* describing Ban Mak Khaeng as the new king's "battlefield".¹¹ While the Cold War ended and the CPT ceased activities over two decades ago, images of anti-communist operations from the 1970s still have political valence, reflecting the continuing role of anti-insurgency thinking against often-unnamed "enemies" of the nation in the military's approach to politics to this day.

KING RAMA X AS A BUDDHIST KING

Despite many revisions of the Thai constitution under a succession of military and civilian governments since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in June 1932, the provision that the Thai monarch should be Buddhist remains unchanged. In the days after he ascended the throne, the Thai press stressed King Maha Vajiralongkorn's religious affiliation as a faithful

⁹*Daily News*, 2 December 2016, P. 1.

¹⁰"*Roi ek somdet phra borom orotsathirat sayammakutratchakuman*", *Thai Post X-Cite*, 2-3 December 2559, Issue No. 7330, pp. 12-13.

¹¹*Thai Post X-Cite*, "*Ban Mak Khaeng – somoraphum phra racha*", 2-3 December 2559, Issue No. 7330, pp. 12-13.

supporter of Buddhism, publishing many photos of him when, in November 1978, he followed Thai custom and ordained for a period as a Buddhist monk.

Faithful following of Buddhist ethical and ritual practices is regarded as the foundation of the charismatic authority of a Thai king's legitimate and righteous rule. Religiously based royal charismatic authority is called *barami*, and Thai press reports of King Maha Vajiralongkorn's period in the Buddhist monkhood highlight the *barami* he acquired from this ethical practice. On 5 December 2016, the birthday of the late King Bhumibol, the page 1 headline of *Daily News* was, "Extolling the Royal Authority (*barami*) of R. 10 – When ordained [as a Buddhist monk] he had kingly faith in Buddhism".¹² In contrast to some international reportage that has focused on the new king's private life of several marriages and absences from Thailand on unofficial overseas trips, the Thai press has consistently emphasised his qualities as a man who is qualified, equipped and fit to rule.

CONCLUSION – A SELF-ASSURED NEW KING BUT AN UNCERTAIN MILITARY GOVERNMENT

Internationally, there has been considerable media coverage of the strict limitations Thailand's *lèse majesté* law imposes on discussion of the monarchy within the country. The long prison sentences given in recent years to Thai citizens charged with violating this law have also been widely reported both internationally and within Thailand. Despite the limitations on reporting imposed by the *lèse majesté* law, Thai press accounts and images of the monarchy, both of the late King Bhumibol and new King Maha Vajiralongkorn, reflect some diversity in public discussion of the royal institution. Given the tight restrictions on commentary upon the monarchy, the content of public reports on the new king published in the Thai press and media provide indicators of possible directions for the Thai monarchy in the era after King Bhumibol.

If recent media trends persist, we can expect continuing reference to the heritage of King Bhumibol as justification for political actions and policies. We can also expect relations between the monarchy and the military to continue to have a major, if not defining, role in Thai affairs into at least the medium term. However, while monarchy-military relations are likely to remain close, the new king has moved quickly to assert a degree of independence that indicates he is unlikely to accept a subordinate role. He has shown an ability not to follow expected political scripts. No commentator on Thai politics predicted the Crown Prince would postpone ascending the throne after the death of King Bhumibol, or that Thailand would effectively be without a ruling monarch from 13 October to 1 December 2016. The new king has also unexpectedly requested, and received military assent for, several amendments to the new, yet again revised Thai constitution that appears to give increased authority to the monarch.¹³

¹²*Daily News*, "chuen chom phra barami r. 10, muea khrang song phanuat mi phra ratcha sattha nai phra phutthasatsana", 5 December 2016, P. 1.

¹³David Streckfuss, "In Thailand, A King's Coup?", *The New York Times*, 10 April 2017.

At the same time, the military government is being increasingly criticised for lack of clarity about its “road map” for the country’s future. As the most intense period of mourning for King Bhumibol passes, media criticism of the government has intensified, especially after it announced in November 2016 that new elections would be postponed, yet again, to an unspecified date in 2018. Despite the restrictions imposed on reporting following the May 2014 coup, Thai newspapers are increasingly lambasting the military government in lead articles and editorials.

The picture of the government reflected in the Thai press in recent months has often been of an indecisive military leadership not fully in control of its own stated agenda of having a “road map” to lead Thailand through a “transition” to a “happier” future. In contrast, the emerging image of Thailand’s new king is of a monarch who is quickly finding his feet and demonstrating confidence in exercising the authority of his position.

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