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# Thais mourn 'Father of the Nation'

MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR, Asia regional correspondent

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Women hold photos of the Thai king at Siriraj Hospital before the announcement of his death. (Photo by Marwaan Macan-Markar)

BANGKOK -- As the skies darkened above Siriraj Hospital on Thursday evening, silence spread across its courtyard and gardens, where thousands of Thais had gathered. The quiet was broken by chants of "Long Live the King!" Then, from one corner, a group burst into a royal anthem, which was taken up by the rest in a crescendo of devotion. Wearing shirts in the symbolic royal colors of pink and yellow, the crowds sang facing the northern wing of the hospital, where the frail and ageing King Bhumibol Adulyadej had been treated.

Tears welled in the eyes of well-wishers, and some sobbed silently, as they brought their palms together in a sign of prayer and looked towards the nine lit windows on the 16th floor. "He is still there," a mother told her teenage daughter, gesturing with her right hand. They were among the Thais of all ages, teenagers to grandparents, who were marking a final vigil for the only king they had ever lived under. At one point, as if making a final appeal for his longer life, some middle-aged women held up photos of the 88-year-old monarch, and looked toward the sky.

At 7 p.m., the government officially announced the monarch's death. The crowds broke into tears. Weeping rose through the courtyard and spread through the hospital's corridors, packed with inconsolable groups. Some wailed, hugging the photo of the king; others did so holding onto a neighbor. It was a collective expression of grief to mark the end of the world's longest

reigning monarch.

"It is the saddest day of my life," said Amnard Viboolpan, a 77-year-old retiree, who was part of the throng of grieving Thais. "He did so much for our country," added the native of Sogkhla, a southern province, who had fond memories of the monarch traversing the country to promote his pet development projects.



Women chanting Buddhist prayers for the king's health at Siriraj Hospital. (Photo by Marwaan Macan-Markar)

A Buddhist monk from Myanmar, drawn to the hospital, shared his memories of a monarch who had earned respect beyond Thailand's borders during his 70-year reign. "He was a good king who won respect because of his Buddhist values as a leader," said Okkansa Siddhi, who has been living in Thailand for two years. "I came to give prayers for him."

### **Final act**

The final act began on Sunday, when the royal household bureau departed from its usual practice of announcing positive news of the king's health, and informed the nation that his condition was "not stable." Thais took to social media to try to interpret the update. The Sunday night bulletin said that the king's medical team had performed kidney dialysis, replaced a tube to drain fluid from his lungs, and that the monarch was placed on a ventilator. Appeals went out for Thais to dress in pink, an auspicious color for good health.

Siriraj Hospital, which sits on the western bank of the Chao Phraya River, became the focus of national attention. On Wednesday evening, the crowds who filled the courtyard began chanting Buddhist prayers. By then the king's four children were in the hospital, including the heir apparent, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, who had to rush back earlier that day from Germany. These moves helped power the rumor mill, prompting the ruling junta to warn against speculation. It did little to stop a steep drop in the Thai stock market.

But in Dusit, the royal district in a historic part of Bangkok, life moved at its customary pace on Wednesday. Joggers and power walkers paced around the tree-lined streets of Chitralada Palace, the official residence of the monarch. Down the road, at Ratchawat Market, which serves Thai street food, vendors prepared tom yam kung, a spicy Thai soup, and khao man gai, a popular rice and chicken dish, for the evening's diners. There was hardly a hint in the evening's chatter about the fate that awaited the district's most revered resident.

### **Different mood**

It was a different mood on Thursday night, as word spread about the king's death, and the nation took tentative steps to mourn the loss of the "Father of

the Nation." The roads around the palace were quieter, joggers were scarce, and the food vendors, catering to smaller crowds, appeared to be in two minds: stay open or shut up shop?

Restaurants and bars along Sukhumvit Road, a popular tourist stretch, remained open, but were reportedly quieter.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, the former army chief who heads the military regime, set the tone for the national mood. In his statement on Thursday night, he requested government officials to mourn for one year, and one month for the rest of the country.

The coming days will reveal how Thais cope with the loss, since King Bhumibol had touched many through his presence as a unifying symbol of the kingdom. "His Majesty was our soul," said Natthaporn Ngamsodsai, a bank employee who had maintained a vigil at the hospital for days. "People didn't want him to go."



A woman holds a photo the king and weeps after news of his death. (Photo by Marwaan Macan-Markar)

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## King Bhumibol Adulyadej -- Thailand's much-revered monarch

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DOMINIC FAULDER, Associate editor, Nikkei Asian Review

BANGKOK -- King Bhumibol Adulyadej's twilight years, largely spent living in a hospital, were marred by constant speculation about his impending demise, the trampling of constitutional democracy in protracted bouts of street protests, two coups, and uncertainty about his successor.

In 2008, when he could still stand to receive people, King Bhumibol told nine foreigners granted an audience that he planned to live for at least five more years. Unprompted, he also brought up the question of his succession. The throne would pass to his only son, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, he stated unequivocally.

The crown prince's investiture (his formal elevation to the position) took place in Bangkok in December 1972. The auspicious moment was also chosen by four Palestinian terrorists to seize the Israeli embassy in Bangkok as "our land."

In 1978, in an apparent "heir and a spare" arrangement following an adjustment to the constitution, King Bhumibol's second daughter was named an alternate heir should her brother be unable to succeed. She became known as Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

Whilst the matronly, unmarried princess is certainly the most popular member of the royal family after her genuinely revered late father, successions are not elections.

After 68 years on the throne, King Bhumibol was the world's longest-serving living head of state. His reign outstripped those of the U.K.'s Queen Victoria (63 years to 1901) and Japan's Emperor Hirohito (62 years to 1989). It dated from 1946 as war-shattered, politically chaotic Thailand (known as Siam until 1939) surfaced from an unhappy wartime alliance with Japan.

Backed by the U.S. during the Cold War and the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, King Bhumibol -- invariably dressed in military uniform -- restored Thailand's monarchy, helped block the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, and acted as a bulwark against insurgencies backed by China

and the Soviet Union. But the king lived so long that tourists from Russia and China came to be welcomed in vast numbers with visa waivers.

### **Never knew his father**

At birth, Prince Bhumibol was low in the line of succession. His uncle, King Prajadhipok, was pushed aside in 1932 in a coup led by French-educated revolutionaries that overturned centuries of nominally absolute monarchy. King Prajadhipok abdicated in 1935 while in England, and died there in 1941 while the German *Luftwaffe* was bombing London. (He was cremated to the strains of Mendelssohn at Golders Green crematorium, with almost nobody present.) His successor, named from Bangkok, was Prince Ananda Mahidol, a young nephew being raised in Switzerland, along with his brother, Prince Bhumibol.

King Ananda was found dead in bed on the morning of June 9, 1946, with a bullet through his forehead. The royal brothers played with guns a lot. Among numerous theories, there has been speculation of an accident, but the shooting has never been convincingly explained. In an interview with the BBC in the late 1970s, King Bhumibol ruled out an accident or suicide. He said a proper investigation had been suppressed by "influential" people in Thailand and abroad.

Prince Bhumibol was only 18 when he acceded on the evening of his brother's death with the unanimous endorsement of parliament, which had been specially convened. The reign's sinister start cast a mournful shadow; it was King Bhumibol's coronation four years later in 1950 that was thenceforth celebrated annually on May 5.

Young King Bhumibol was in many ways a foreigner in his own land -- like his late brother, he was a Swiss schoolboy with better French than Thai. He preferred French to English, but conversed comfortably in both. He was born in the U.S. on Dec. 5, 1927, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while his father, Prince Mahidol Aduldej, was battling chronic ill health to qualify as a doctor at Harvard.

In 1923, a doctor in England had given the sickly Prince Mahidol less than two years to live; yet he fathered two boys who unexpectedly became kings -- against his expressed wishes. King Bhumibol's only other sibling, Princess Galyani Vadhana, was three years older. She died in 2008, aged 84.

Prince Mahidol was the 69th of 77 children of King Chulalongkorn, and a brother to two kings. Since it was considered inappropriate for royalty to touch commoners, after his return to Siam the progressive Prince Mahidol went north to the provincial town of Chiang Mai in 1929 to practice medicine out of sight of the palace. Within weeks, he was diagnosed with an amoebic liver abscess and died of kidney failure.

Prince Bhumibol therefore never knew his father and was entirely raised by his mother, Sangwan, a commoner of Chinese ancestry who was training as a nurse in the U.S. when she met Prince Mahidol. When King Vajiravudh, another son of King Chulalongkorn, assented to his half-brother Prince Mahidol marrying a commoner in 1920, it was not expected to affect the

succession, even though the children of Chulalongkorn had been dying prematurely for years.

### **Monarchy as a focus**

Crown Prince Maha Vajirunhis died in 1895, and Chulalongkorn's longest lived child died at just 56. More potential heirs died in the 1920s. The morbidity was a result of institutionalized consanguinity in the royal family. While King Ananda was always sickly, the longevity of King Bhumibol and his sister Princess Galyani was entirely due to their mother's healthy infusion of non-royal blood.

To escape stifling court life, where she was often treated as an outsider, and the threatening politics of the early 1930s, Prince Mahidol's widow Mom Sangwan, who was later titled the Princess Mother, took her children to Switzerland. Young King Ananda and his family visited Thailand only once from Switzerland before World War II, when travel became impossible. With winter sports and summer walks in the mountains, the upbringing was unimaginably liberal by Thai standards. They had a Greek tutor, Cleon O. Seraidaris, a schoolmaster and mentor, who taught the boys carpentry.

After his unexpected accession, King Bhumibol returned to Switzerland to attend the University of Lausanne, but did not graduate. His studies ended with a car crash in 1948 that cost him his right eye. King Bhumibol would later present more degrees and receive more honorary degrees than anybody else on earth.

During his convalescence, the king courted a younger royal cousin, Mom Rajawongse Sirikit Kitiyakara, the daughter of the Thai ambassador in London. They married in 1950 after the long-delayed cremation of King Ananda and shortly before the coronation.

The couple spent more time in Switzerland before returning finally to Thailand in 1951. Their movements were restricted by the prime minister, Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram, who had been a key participant in the overthrow of the monarchy in 1932 and wanted to avoid a royalist resurgence.

In 1957, Phibun was removed in a coup by Field Marshal Sarit Thanaraj, a northeastern uninterested in foreign notions of democracy. Sarit got on well with the young king and promoted the monarchy as a focus for national development and security. Royal ceremonies not seen in decades were restored, and the king developed an interest in arcane rituals that fostered a mystique around the monarchy. Many Thais came to regard him as a semi-divine being who had achieved the status of a *dharmmaraja* by observing a Buddhist concept of 10 kingly virtues.

With Sarit's encouragement, King Bhumibol and his glamorous queen traveled the world as emissaries for a kingdom best known for its 1956 Hollywood depiction in Walter Lang's *The King and I*, starring Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr. The film is banned in Thailand for its buffoonish depiction of King Bhumibol's great grandfather, King Mongkut. Apart from a brief visit to Laos in 1994, the king did not travel abroad after 1967, when he

visited Iran and North America.

Sarit, the only Thai prime minister to die in office, was succeeded in 1963 by Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, who together with Praphas Charusathien, another field marshal, led Thailand through the Vietnam War -- an era when the U.S. military presence, mostly air force personnel, rose to almost 50,000.

### **Protector of all faiths**

King Bhumibol traveled his kingdom widely, taking an interest in health, rural development, irrigation, education, and disaffected minorities in border areas. On an early excursion in 1955, he became the first of the nine kings in the Chakri dynasty (founded in 1782) to visit Isan, Thailand's impoverished northeastern region.

Over the decades, thousands of royal development projects were initiated. While the results have never been properly audited, King Bhumibol's patronage of counter-communism, development, and inclusivity won him enduring popularity and respect. Even communist insurgents concluded that it was unwise to attack the king. Royal portraits appeared spontaneously in private homes, not as a North Korean-style official personality cult. Regular spells were spent at provincial palaces, including at Narathiwat in the far South, a deeply troubled area where a Muslim insurgency has left more than 7,000 dead since 2004.

King Bhumibol's personal views were opaque, but fundamentally conservative. He warned against change for its own sake. His extemporaneous annual birthday talks were broadcast nationally, but could be hard to follow. Topics ranged from sermons against narcotics to musings about Sesame Street, a U.S. television program for children.

There were contradictions. The king was an environmentalist who proclaimed the virtues of vetiver grass against soil erosion and translated the ideas of the German-born British economist and environmentalist E.F. Schumacher. Yet the royal family's names appear on the largest dams in the country, and its members regularly bring Bangkok traffic to a standstill with some of the world's longest motorcades.

Like many in the Thai elite, King Bhumibol distrusted political parties and scorned the money-politics that have caused Thailand so much grief. He supported Thailand's most liberal constitution in 1997, working quietly to ensure that Buddhism was not mandated the state religion. He took his role as protector of all faiths seriously, and followed constitutional matters keenly.

King Bhumibol kept his distance from political parties, but his view of the broader rivalries between competing groups in Thai society was more ambiguous, particularly his relationship with the meddling military. Since 1932, Thailand has had 21 coup attempts -- 13 successful -- and some 20 constitutions in its failed attempts to establish a lasting constitutional system.

## Sufficiency Economy

Critics faulted King Bhumibol for not opposing coups, and for signing proclamations for the governments they produced, most recently in 2006 and 2014. But the king also signed all the proclamations put before him by elected governments, often led by unsavory politicians.

Was the king's signature an endorsement or a procedural formality? Although he could delay, he only once refused to sign a piece of legislation, and that was because of faulty drafting. The only prime minister he overtly placed in office, Sanya Dhammasakdi in 1973, came from his own privy council. After less than 18 months, Sanya handed back power and a constitution that had been promised more than a decade earlier but had never materialized.

King Bhumibol believed that preserving the institution of the monarchy was paramount. But he also knew that the most dangerous scenario in Thai politics is a split in the military. For that reason, whatever he may have thought, he never attempted to roll back a successful coup. There was invariably speculation about which coups he supported.

His direct political interventions always came at the 11th hour when all other avenues had been exhausted. In 1973, after the military shot students from helicopters, the king opened the palace gates to give sanctuary, and sent into exile the military's so-called Three Tyrants -- Praphas, Thanom, and his son Narong.

In May 1992, King Bhumibol famously berated two feuding generals, one of them Prime Minister Suchinda Kraprayoon, on the palace carpet for causing bloodshed. A much more controversial issue was the massacre of at least 46 students at Thammasat University in October 1976 by police, rightists and ultra monarchists, which the palace conspicuously failed to prevent.

A keen jazz musician since his youth in Switzerland, the king's other hobbies included musical composition, photography, ham radio, painting, translating, and sailing. He made his own wooden dinghies, and sailed with friends off the beach at his seaside palace in Hua Hin, where he spent time in his final years when not in hospital. The sailing, which involved long periods hanging out of heavy wooden hulls at awkward angles, may have contributed to serious lower back problems that eventually immobilized him.

After the 1997 Asian financial meltdown, his ideas for a so-called Sufficiency Economy, imbued with Buddhist notions of moderation, were consolidated and broadcast widely. Their austere call for restraint often failed to resonate with an urbanized generation striving for growth and modernity.

There were also questions about how the Sufficiency Economy meshed with his own way of life. King Bhumibol was listed by *Forbes* as the world's wealthiest monarch on account of the immense landholdings and equities of the Crown Property Bureau. Officially, the royal treasure house belongs to the crown as an institution and not the monarch as an individual. Amid the semantics, it was generally overlooked that King Bhumibol held his far more

modest personal assets separately and in his own name.

Unlike allowances paid to senior royalty in other countries, the income from the CPB enabled the Thai royal family to be financially independent -- essential in the venal swirls of Thai politics. This prudent construct of financial independence was clouded, however, by royal projects, security and other expenses funded from public coffers.

## Later years

King Bhumibol fell gravely ill in 1975 and 1995 with a rare form of pneumonia. After the latter bout, he curtailed his trips upcountry, but the palace was loath to describe this as even semi-retirement. Predictions that he would retire to a monastery or abdicate proved unfounded.

There was national rejoicing in 2006 at the king's diamond jubilee, but it was followed by a coup that ousted the elected prime minister, populist telecoms billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra. The reign's end was blighted by Thailand's most polarized politics since 1932. A dispute in 2005 between Thaksin and media mogul Sondhi Limtongkul became conflated with loyalty to the monarchy. Like football teams, supporters of Thaksin wore red shirts and his opponents yellow, a royal color.

The political feuding fueled hundreds of cases of lese-majeste, or insulting the senior royals, under the most draconian law of its kind anywhere. Together with the Computer Crimes Act, enacted by an unelected military government in 2007, the law was used unashamedly to counter dissidents. Sentences of up to 15 years in prison were handed out.

In one of his later birthday speeches, King Bhumibol said lese-majeste caused him problems, and called for the law's repeal. This was ignored. Palace insiders said the law was needed to protect the less popular Crown Prince and Queen Sirikit.

King Bhumibol was 88. He is survived by Queen Sirikit, his son Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, and his daughters Ubolratana, Sirindhorn, and Chulabhorn.

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October 17, 2016 3:45 pm JST

Peter Tasker 

## Modern monarchy, a stable system for turbulent times

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Thailand is in [deep mourning](#) after the passing of the widely revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who reigned for 70 years. During that period the country experienced umpteen coups d'etat and attempted coups. Democracy has proved no panacea for deep-seated social and regional divisions, in fact it may have exacerbated them. Even so, Thailand has continued to develop economically and has become a huge magnet for tourism and foreign direct investment from Japan and other countries.

Thai politics has never been pretty, but neither has it generated enough instability to present a deadly threat to the country's growth. The monarchy must take a great deal of the credit for contributing to the building of a national identity, which is essential for limiting social and ethnic conflicts. Many other countries, including some in Southeast Asia, have not been so lucky.

Most Thais seemed to have unbounded affection for their king, to judge by the outpouring of grief and the portraits on display almost everywhere. The question now is how much of that affection reflects that for the late King Bhumibol himself and how much for the institution. To the vast majority of the public, there has been no difference between the two for their entire lives.

Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, King Bhumibol's heir apparent since 1972, has a tough act to follow, but working in his favor is the fact that the monarchy system has proved to be a surprisingly durable institution. In nearly all the countries that have monarchies there is little desire to change the status quo -- and that includes wealthy social democratic countries in Europe, such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg, Belgium and Holland. Spain, even more politically divided than Thailand after the bloody civil war and long rule of Gen. Francisco Franco, restored the monarchy in 1978. Despite recent scandals, it is widely accepted.

Many countries of the British Commonwealth have opted to retain the British monarch as head of state. In Canada, 70% of the public supports keeping the monarchy; it is one of the features that distinguishes their country from its

superpower neighbor. Australia has a strong republican tradition -- current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is a committed anti-monarchist -- yet when the issue was tested by a referendum in 1999 under the pro-royal Prime Minister John Howard, the result was a decisive vote against change. Hardline republicans blamed the result on Howard's framing of the referendum question -- but the reality was clear: not enough of them wanted a republic at any price.

In Japan, opinion polls have reflected overwhelming support for the emperor since they were first taken in the 1950s. Abolishing the institution is favored by a tiny and diminishing percentage of the population. When Emperor Akihito intimated in August that he wished to abdicate for reasons of ill-health, there was an outpouring of sympathy for him in the country at large.

### **Donald or Kate?**

So why has monarchy been so successful in such a variety of different settings? At first sight, a system that works by hereditary succession seems woefully out-of-synch with the values of meritocracy and fairness that the modern world is supposed to prize. But it is actually those outmoded characteristics that are the key to its longevity. Because the values of the marketplace, efficiency and the struggle for survival have become so ubiquitous, the spaces that remain untouched become more valuable. One such space is the family; we do not lay off our children or siblings in favor of lower-cost alternatives. Heredity wins over merit. Another is the monarchy; kings and queens do not need better exam grades or resumes to get their positions. They symbolize an older and deeper form of social relations.

They also symbolize continuity. It is remarkable that Japan has had only four emperors since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, a period in which the United States and France have had 27 and 25 heads of state respectively. The world has changed out of all recognition since the mid 19th century. There has been dizzying technological, social and political change; industrialization, world wars, the spread of mass communications. Monarchy is an institution in the shape of a person that binds societies to their histories. Without such institutions we might drown in the flood of change.

The strongest argument for constitutional monarchy is that it is better than the alternatives. As the reputation of politicians falls, the relative attraction of a nonpolitical head of state grows. It is doubtful that many Canadians envy Americans their choice of either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton as head of state and symbol of the nation in the upcoming presidential election. Most European monarchs enjoy public support ratings of 70-80%, a level that elected political leaders can only dream about.

Monarchies, with their time-honored ceremonies and special garb, provide what 19th century British journalist Walter Bagehot called "magic and mystique." The idea that economic progress removes the need for enchantment is wrong. It simply finds other vehicles -- vacuous celebrities or, worse, malign political figures. A recent Financial Times article described how the cult of Mao Zedong has re-emerged in today's China as an overtly religious phenomenon. Much better, surely, is the version provided by the

wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011, watched on TV by over half the British population and a global audience of 350 million.

The trick that modern monarchs must perform is to embody tradition and continuity while adapting to new conditions. As marriage breakdowns and extramarital liaisons have become more common in British society, so they have within the British royal family, with three of Queen Elizabeth's four children having divorced. Nobody expects them to be spotless. On the other hand, clutching on to outdated privileges or transgressing contemporary behavioral norms could be fatal. The last French royal house, the Bourbons, famously "learned nothing and forgot nothing" and they are long gone.

Modern monarchy's golden rules are to keep a safe distance from politics, do not go too far off-piste in terms of personal behavior and remember that public support is always essential to the institution's survival. The King is dead. Long live the King.

*Peter Tasker is an analyst with Tokyo-based Arcus Research.*

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October 20, 2016 12:00 pm JST

# Can the Thai economy handle a year of mourning?

YUKAKO ONO, Nikkei staff writer

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**BANGKOK** The abnormally quiet weekend at bars, cinemas and golf courses following the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej on Oct. 13 hints at hard times for the recovering Thai economy.

Many Thais are putting off weddings, vacations and other "joyful events" as the country begins a one-year period of mourning. This is in addition to a 30-day ban on "entertainment" that has forced infamous bar districts, like Bangkok's Soi Cowboy, to pull down their shutters out of respect for the late king.

Even after the entertainment ban is lifted, it is hard to say how quickly the nation's mood will bounce back.

Major theater chain SF Cinema saw the number of customers drop 40% from normal weekends during Oct. 15-16, while Siam Piwat, which operates shopping malls such as Bangkok's Siam Paragon, says people are refraining from luxury purchases.

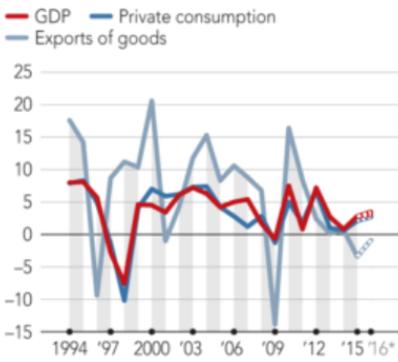
The only conspicuous increase in demand is for black clothing, as ordinary citizens have been asked to dress in mourning for 30 days. The dress-code period for civil servants is a full year.

**UNFORTUNATE TIMING** The somber mood is expected to affect the country's vital tourism industry just as it enters its peak season.

Many events that draw visitors from around the world will be canceled such as the monthly Full Moon Party on the island of Phangan. The annual lantern floating festival in the northern province of Chiang Mai, scheduled for November, was also called off at one point but later reinstated. The event will take place but without "entertainment activities."

Such large-scale cancellations have not

### Thailand's GDP growth (in percent)



\*Forecast, as of Aug. 15  
Source: Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board

been seen in recent years, and although Thailand's tourism industry has proven surprisingly resilient -- weathering the 2014 military coup and fatal blasts, including in central Bangkok in 2015 -- this time could be different.

Thailand's gross domestic product expanded 2.8% last year, compared with near-flat growth of 0.8% the year before. A large part of that rise came from tourism, which accounts for at least 10% of the economy. The industry was heading for a record year in 2016, with the number of foreign tourists set to increase by 11% to 33 million and revenue to reach 2.58 trillion baht (\$73.3 billion), up 17% year on year.

Teppei Ino, an analyst with the Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ's Singapore branch, suggests that if a dip in consumer spending and tourism proves a risk to the overall economy, the Bank of Thailand, the country's central bank, could move to cut policy rates, which have remained unchanged since April 2015.

**ANOTHER SETBACK** Economic recovery had already been proving a tough task for the junta, which seized power in a 2014 coup. Exports, the main pillar of the economy, had been hit by global slowdowns, and foreign direct investment waned due to political uncertainty. Concerns were growing that Thailand would fall into the "middle-income trap," in which an emerging economy begins slowing before it can reach the developed stage.

Even with government infrastructure projects getting on track and consumer spending gradually picking up, the economy was looking at projected growth of 3-3.5% this year, a far cry from the average 5% expansion the country once enjoyed and which it aspires to resume in the near future.

There had been fears that the shock of losing the "father of the nation" would cause economic activity to grind to a halt. It was a promising sign, then, when business carried on largely as usual in the days following the king's death.

On the same evening he announced the king's death, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha urged the public in a televised speech to keep the economy running: "Don't let the stock market, the trade and investment slow down. Don't let our country's credibility be ruined."

Applications for foreign investment in the country had tripled year on year by value in the first eight months of 2016. The prime minister knows he cannot afford to lose that momentum.

Businesses, domestic and foreign, seem to have responded to the junta's call.

The day after the king's death, the stock market opened as usual and saw many buy orders push stock prices up. Although the day was later declared a public holiday for mourning, commercial banks operated as usual.

Most Japanese companies, the largest group of foreign investors in the country, did not close their factories. There had been fears of a repeat of 2011, when flood damage at many factories caused serious disruptions in product and supply chains. Cars and electronic components manufactured in Thailand are shipped all over the world.

Market players welcomed the fact that business was carrying on as usual. The benchmark SET Index jumped 4.6% on the first trading day after the announcement of the king's death. This marked the largest gain in five years and wiped out much of the losses the index had sustained since the Royal Household Bureau announced that the king's health was unstable a few days prior to his demise. The baht has appreciated against the dollar, too.



**UNEASY FUTURE** Some analysts are raising concerns over the political uncertainties that linger as the country faces its first royal transition in more than 70 years.

"From a political standpoint, one potential implication is that the mourning period may lead to further delay in holding the general election," Goldman Sachs warned in a report. Currently, elections are slated for late 2017, which is already far behind the initially promised schedule of October 2015.

All eyes are on the promulgation of a new constitution, a required step before general elections can be held. The country's latest constitution, approved by a national referendum in August, awaits the new king's signature.

A possible delay in returning to civilian rule could discourage foreign investors, especially Western companies, from investing in the country. Such a scenario would prolong the "wait and see" mood, according to Goldman Sachs.

The country's polarized politics continue to pose a risk. The interim constitution received the royal assent in 2014, which legitimized military rule and its approach to maintaining peace and public order. How long Thai society is prepared to tolerate such heavy handedness in the absence of the revered monarch is an open question.

Thailand's political unrest from late 2013 through 2014 scared away both investors and tourists. If conflicts should flare up following the king's death, the blow to the economy could be similarly severe. Higher political tension may also impede structural reforms, which often pit different segments of society against one another, but which are crucial for boosting national growth potential.

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## Tears and trepidation

YUKAKO ONO, Nikkei staff writer

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**BANGKOK** Just like the clouds that unexpectedly dropped heavy rain after two days of mourning under a spotless blue sky, a sense of trepidation and uncertainty hangs over Thailand following the death on Oct. 13 of the much-revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Mourners have painted a normally colorful country monochrome as they ponder the kingdom's future without the father figure most have known all their lives.

"I felt anxiety and insecurity when I heard about the greatest loss to our country," Sawanee Sawathorn, 32, who works at a foreign embassy in Bangkok, told the Nikkei Asian Review.

Kwanjai Samanjit, 33, a company employee, shared similar sentiments: "Thailand has political instability just as it always does, but now we do not have our king," she said.

Most of the kingdom's 67 million people have lived their entire lives under the reign of the world's longest-serving head of state. The "father of the nation" stepped in at times of crisis -- political feuding, bloodshed, financial collapse, natural disaster -- to provide guidance, reassurance and comfort. People came to assume he would always be there, but this pillar of stability, unity and continuity is gone.

The kingdom is going through a period without a new king. Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, King Bhumibol's only son and the heir apparent, told Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha that he will not immediately formally accede so that he can "share the grief with the people and wait for the appropriate time."

On Oct. 18, Prayuth said the formal accession would take place on one of a number of possible dates in the coming weeks. As prime minister, he will forward the crown prince's name to the military-appointed parliament, the National Legislative Assembly. It must be approved unanimously without debate, in line with earlier constitutions.

The formal accession process has taken longer than expected. Prince Bhumibol was confirmed on the same day his brother, King Ananda Mahidol, died on June 9, 1946, from an unexplained gunshot wound. King Bhumibol returned to his studies in Switzerland and did not come home to Thailand for his actual coronation until four years later.

King Bhumibol's cremation will not be held for at least a year while the mourning period is observed. This long interlude and period of reflection is not unusual for Thailand, and preparations for the elaborate ceremony take considerable time. The coronation of a new king follows the cremation of his predecessor.

This is Thailand's first such transition in over 70 years, and likely to be the most delicate and complicated issue the junta will handle since it seized power in May 2014 -- and it is anxious to ensure all goes smoothly.

"The state is likely to use the full force of its self-conferred power to suppress any criticisms of the succession process or the next monarch," said David Streckfuss, a specialist in Southeast Asian history at Thailand's Khon Kaen University.

Indeed, some foreign media outlets have already seen succession-related stories blacked out. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on Oct. 15 critical of some coverage. Without being specific, it accused "some big foreign media" of reporting "erroneous or false information of accusations that are of a manipulative or provocative nature." The ministry said such reports were "insensitive to the feelings of the Thai people and offensive towards Thai cultural traditions."

The arcane process and a lack of communication may have contributed to the crossed wires. The official confirmation of a "regent pro tempore," an automatic procedure when the king is no longer able to carry out his duties, only came two days after the king's death, but cleared up some uncertainty. The regent, Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, was prime minister in the 1980s and a close adviser for many years to King Bhumibol.

As regent, Prem takes on certain constitutional duties as acting head of state, but he has no executive responsibilities. He is empowered to sign Thailand's 20th constitution since 1932, which was adopted by national referendum in August. It remains to be seen how soon promulgation of the constitution will occur, but it is needed at some point ahead of a general election promised for late 2017.

Prem, at 96, is the oldest member of the privy council and was army chief prior to becoming prime minister in 1980. His eight years as premier were endorsed by parliament under the constitution of the time, and the period saw an incremental democratization process. Heavily reliant on technocrats,

Prem's five cabinets spurred economic development, and he remains one of the country's most influential political and military figures.

The 300,000-strong military continues to provide Prayuth with his main support base. His nominee for army chief, Gen. Chalermchai Sitthisart, took command on Oct. 1, and hails from the less politically active special forces. Prayuth himself comes from the powerful Queen's Guard, which as a military faction is dubbed the Eastern Tigers.

"Chalermchai is the instrumental stabilizer of Thailand's 'monarchized' military at this trying time," said Paul Chambers, a national security expert at Thailand's Chiang Mai University. The military has traditionally used defense of the monarchy to justify coups and other political interventions.



A woman pays her respects to the late king near the Grand Palace in Bangkok. (photo by Nozomu Ogawa)

The change of command comes after Muslim separatists in the country's southern border provinces have shown greater restiveness. On Oct. 10, the day after the Royal Household Bureau issued an unusually candid bulletin revealing the king's health was no longer stable, police issued warnings of a car bomb plot in central

Bangkok for the last week of the month. It was not revealed who might be behind the plot, but local media speculated about Muslim separatists, who are known for using car bombs.

Separatists were earlier thought responsible for a coordinated series of small bomb blasts in Thailand's southern provinces in early August that killed four bystanders and pointedly coincided with Queen Sirikit's 84th birthday. The attacks targeted popular beach resorts, including Hua Hin, where the royal family has had a favorite beachside palace since the 1920s. The blasts appeared to be an attempt to embarrass the military government just days after the junta gained credibility from the constitutional referendum.

Thailand's first attempt at constitutional democracy came in 1932 when centuries of absolute monarchy were ended by a coup. Since that time, the king has remained head of state but wields no executive power -- he reigns but does not rule. King Bhumibol nevertheless on occasions proved himself a unifying force that will be extremely hard to replace. In 1973 and 1992, he intervened directly to end bloodshed and remove onerous and violent military governments.

"King Bhumibol of Thailand has been far more than a figurehead, and by no means a conventional constitutional monarch," Professor Duncan McCargo of the University of Leeds observed in a 2005 report.

At a safe distance from the bear pit of party politics, the king won respect for development projects, including flood prevention schemes and business assistance programs for farmers. The Doi Pui Project, for example, helped

opium farmers in northerly provinces switch to growing coffee, fruit and flowers. The initiative later benefited other parts of the country and earned a United Nations International Drug Control Program award in 1994.

The monarchy that evolved under King Bhumibol has its own particular qualities. Thais are taught to love the king from their earliest days, and pictures of him are ubiquitous. Parents and schools teach children about the king's royal projects and tell them to be *khon dee* -- a good person, like him. Foreigners are sometimes startled in Thai cinemas when everyone suddenly stands as the king's anthem is played with stirring footage ahead of the film.

"There is no one else in the world who can replace our great king," said one self-employed woman of 61. She was among the tens of thousands grieving outside Siriraj Hospital as they waited for the king's body to be transported to the Grand Palace on Oct. 14 for its extended period of lying in state.

Filling such exalted shoes would be a tall order for anyone. Crown Prince

Vajiralongkorn was invested as heir apparent in 1972 and is not held in the same kind of esteem as his father. Divorced three times, he has in recent years lived mainly in Germany with his 11-year-old son and fourth wife.

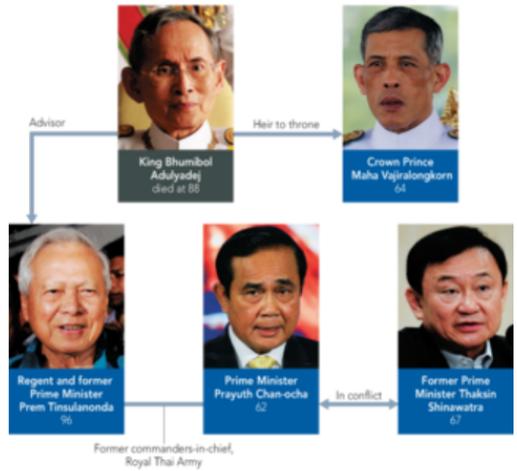
The loss of the king will be a test of how the nation moves on, and how the monarchy adapts -- or is compelled to change -- in a modern world. Much has already changed. In the early 2000s, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra built a huge support base and won re-election by delivering on populist policies, but he also created a deep political divide with the military-backed Bangkok elites. This led to two coups and political fissures that are still gaping.

Streckfuss sees an inevitable tension between monarchical traditions and democratic aspirations. "The stronger the role of the monarch, either constitutionally or informally, the weaker Thai democracy is," he said.

Although many see a need for peaceful change, a strain of ultraroyalism has emerged. Some failing to wear black or demonstrate sufficient grief have been chastised on the streets and in social media. But there have also been conciliators. "We need to move forward and stop fighting," said Nataya Saingthong, 31, an office worker.

Among the numerous images of the late king circulating on social media is a cartoon of the king patting a child's head. The child asks the king if his death is just a nightmare.

Key figures in Thai politics



Photos: Reuters

"I am no longer here," the king replies. "You have to take care of yourself, my child."

Asia regional correspondent Marwaan Macan-Markar contributed to this article.

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