

# News from Southeast Asia

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The following articles come from the Thailand Studies Programme (TSP) at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. The programme promotes analysis of and scholarship on contemporary Thailand. Its goal is to develop understanding of the country among the full range of parties concerned with its mid-term and long-term future: governments, the media, journalists, international organizations, civil society, the private sector and scholars. The foci of the programme are three-fold – on political dynamics, social change, and cultural trends. In its attention to politics, the concerns of the programme include party and electoral politics, Thailand's place in regional politics and geopolitics, regionalism and decentralization, the state of Thai institutions, constitutionalism and royalism, and the impact of politics on economic competitiveness and the investment climate. Social issues that fall within the programme's purview are migration and demographic change, religion, ethnicity, the Thai education system, the relationship between urban and rural Thailand, the middle classes, and sectorial industries like tourism. In the area of cultural trends, the arts and literature, the media and mass consumption patterns number among topics of interest. The programme seeks to build institutional links to scholars, analysts and centres involved in the study of modern Thailand, not least those in Thailand itself. The co-coordinators of the Thailand Studies Programme are Michael Montesano ([michaelmontesano@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:michaelmontesano@iseas.edu.sg)) and Benjamin Loh ([benloh@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:benloh@iseas.edu.sg)). Please contact the co-coordinators for further information on the programme.

## Reactions to the Thai royal transition

Benjamin Loh

THE PASSING OF THAILAND'S long-ruling and highly revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej signalled the end of an era for Thailand, but also the start of a new one at a time of acute political polarization and instability within the country. What followed was the peaceful ascension of the Crown Prince – despite speculation of a disruption – who is putting an assertive stamp on his rule. From requiring constitutional changes to reshaping the royal household, King Maha Vajiralongkorn has made it clear to the military that he will not just sit in the background as a constitutional figurehead after assuming the throne from a father treated by Thais as semi-divine.

Geopolitically, the royal transition is also occurring at a time of deepening political and economic relations with China and difficult relations with the West. US-born and Swiss-educated Bhumibol was a staunch supporter of strong relations with the US. Chinese President Xi Jinping has been quick in affirming his country's readiness to bolster bilateral relations, and has invited the new king for a state visit. While King Bhumibol has met almost every Chinese leader who visited Thailand since bilateral relations resumed in 1975, the visit would be the first time that a Thai King visits the People's Republic of China in the same period.

Below: Train passenger carrying calendar depicting King Maha Vajiralongkorn; Sale of black clothing at a Bangkok mall. (Source: Benjamin Loh)

On the ground, the king's death triggered an outpouring of grief across the nation. Even the younger generation participated in the national mourning by wearing "I was born in the reign of King Rama IX of Thailand" emblazoned T-shirts and filling their social media pages with selfies of their reverence. Black clothing soon flew off the shelves and dyeing centres popped up across Bangkok as black clothing became too expensive. Demand for commemorative banknotes and coins, stamps, and books bearing the portrait of the late king also soared. And while the prices for Buddhist amulets have been declining over the years, those for medals and amulets – both newly-minted and old – bearing the king's image have risen manifold. At the capital's amulet shops and markets, the efficacy of King Bhumibol amulets are often explained with a laminated reprint of a 2006 news article on how a policeman who was also a Thai Rak Thai Party politician purportedly survived a gun shooting incident by wearing such an amulet.

If the veneration for a king is both expressed and stimulated by the mass production and commodification of his image, it will be small wonder when his successor follows suit. Following the amendment in April of a royal property law to formally give King Maha Vajiralongkorn full control of the Crown Property Bureau, which manages the multi-billion dollar holdings of the monarchy, Siam Commercial Bank – with stakes controlled by the bureau – issued a calendar later that month with the image of the new king on its cover. The bank's customers would have collected the calendar, rolled it up for the journey home for display, perhaps, alongside the multiple pictures of the old monarch hung on their walls. Some other people were seen to be more overt with its display on streets and the metro system.

In a country where relationships between monarchy, army and politicians determine its stability, the authorities will want to avoid any perception of uncertainty and they are expected to continue to use all of the tools at their disposal to orchestrate stability and taper existing fault lines in Thai politics; predictably, these include constitution rewrites, delays to the general election, and an even looser exercise of *lèse majesté*.

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