

News from Southeast Asia *continued*

Thai media accounts of the accession of Rama X to the throne

Peter A. Jackson

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.

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 fulfil His Majesty's wishes". 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. 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.

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 daily *Matichon* headed an article on his legacy, "The Royal Father of all Thais: The Royal Father of King Rama 10". 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.

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. 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. These reports represent the new king as a guardian of national security who has undergone a trial by fire in defence of the nation. While the Cold War ended and the CPT ceased activities over two decades ago, images of anti-communist operations from the 1970s still



Front page of Bangkok Post, 3 December 2016.

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.

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 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. In contrast to some international portage 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.

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.

Peter A. Jackson, Emeritus Professor, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, Australia (peter.jackson@anu.edu.au).

What is holding Thailand back from becoming a high-income country?

Nipit Wongpunya

A VARIETY OF FACTORS appear to be holding Thailand back from rising to the next level of economic development. The country's long dependence on natural resources and cheap labour means that growth is negatively impacted when resources diminish or when labour becomes more expensive. The country's lack of skilled labour, particularly in the information technology sector, means that it is unable to climb the value chain to produce and export more technologically advanced products like electronics and automobiles. Instead, the country merely assembles consumer products designed in other countries. In addition, existing government training programmes are not used by the labour market, suggesting that these programmes are out of touch with economic realities. Perhaps more fundamentally, the Thai education system has contributed to the lack of productivity because of its inability to deliver skilled labour to the market, particularly to the information technology sector. Meanwhile, R&D investment is substantially lower than in Asian countries. The number of researchers and technicians in Thailand is much lower than in South Korea and Singapore, for example.

Public and private investments have also contracted markedly. Thai firms have demonstrated poor innovation, while foreign investments in the higher-value sector have been low. The consequences of these realities are seen in the decline in short-run income, which reduces capital accumulation and raises the possibility of excessive foreign debt in the long run. There are also few sound macroeconomic policies in place, as a series of coups have disrupted to government policies in recent years. The country's macroeconomic policy, its fiscal policy in particular, has not encouraged long-term growth. Instead, populist policies enacted to stimulate short-term consumption have led to fiscal deficits.

Countries such as Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea have shown that innovation and high-value productivity are needed if one is to escape

the middle-income trap. The Thai manufacturing sector, however, has failed to transfer foreign technology to local firms, and to encourage local innovation. By importing practical technical knowledge, local firms could contribute to the local knowledge base. This would encourage imitation and innovation, which play an important role in promoting technological progress.

However, the Thai economy continues to prefer assembling technology to imitating technology. Thai firms have been manufacturing products designed by other countries for more than two decades as Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM) and should now endeavour to become Original Design Manufacturers (ODM). The Thai government needs to collaborate with leading local universities or the private sector to imitate, for example, the technology needed for these electric vehicle control devices. It could do this by funding Thai players and seeking technical assistance by hiring Chinese researchers, technicians and scientists. After gaining an understanding of how the electric vehicle control units work, the government could proceed to invest in R&D to spur innovation in that field. More importantly, the Thai government needs also to enact policies or initiate training programmes to ensure that technology is transferred to local firms. Additionally, the government should provide incentives such as tax benefits for firms to invest in R&D.

Human capital accumulation is also important for escaping the middle-income trap. One possible solution is to employ larger numbers of foreign scientists and researchers for technical assistance and R&D. Local researchers and students would then be able to learn from them. This can be encouraged in leading universities or in the private sector. The Thai government should make it mandatory for universities to update their curricula regularly.

We also have the issue of endemic corruption. A study conducted by Transparency International in 2015 found Thailand a highly corrupted country. The National

Anti-Corruption Commission recently discovered former permanent secretaries and politicians to be unusually wealthy, and the courts subsequently ordered the seizure of massive assets. Although Thailand has the necessary legal framework to combat corruption, it has not managed to resolve the issue. Corruption in Thailand is difficult to control for many reasons. The wage level of civil servants is crucial in determining the level of corruption. Low wages make corrupt behaviour much more likely. Furthermore, the presence of time-consuming bureaucratic procedures and the red tape involved for various procedures provide good opportunities for illegal solutions, as do complicated government procurement procedures.

Furthermore, political stability is immensely important for Thailand. It would help ensure the formulation and implementation of effective government economic strategies. Political stability and economic development are obviously related. While economic slowdown could result in political turmoil and instability, an unstable political climate could lower investment and hinder economic growth. Thailand has so far confronted uncertainties associated with the unstable political environment. In recent years, political instability in Thailand has been exacerbated by power-sharing amongst several political parties and by military coups. Ministerial cabinets formed by coalitions of several political parties have led to a significantly low level of stability. From time to time, the Thai Prime Minister has had no choice but to dissolve the parliament due to quarrels among political parties. The recurrence of military coups reflects a very high degree of political instability.

Nipit Wongpunya, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand (nipit.w@chula.ac.th). Visiting Fellow in the Thailand Studies Programme of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute from 16 May 2016-14 August 2016.