

Thailand in 2017

Politics on Hold

ABSTRACT

Following the epochal funeral of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej in October 2017, Thailand stands at a difficult crossroads. A new constitution was ratified in April, and the military junta is running out of reasons to stick around. Yet Thailand remains deeply polarized politically, while King Vajiralongkorn is untested and lacks popular legitimacy.

KEYWORDS: Monarchy, constitution, junta, elections, Yingluck

PUBLIC LIFE IN THAILAND IN 2017 was overshadowed by extended mourning for the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), who passed away in October 2016. Many Thais—especially those working in the government sector—wore only black and white for more than 12 months. The formal end of mourning was on October 30, 2017, after the elaborate royal cremation ceremonies that took place between October 25 and 29. Since King Bhumibol had been on the throne since 1946, most Thais had never known any other monarch. His reign had been characterized by extraordinary socioeconomic transformation, and despite regular episodes of political turbulence was viewed by most Thais as a golden era, comparable only to the reign of the great King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910), during which Siam had resisted formal European consolidation and laid the basis of a modern nation-state. Commemorations of the Ninth Reign, in the form of books, exhibitions, media coverage, and television programming, were ubiquitous throughout the first 10 months of 2017: the late King maintained a continuing virtual presence. Thirteen million people paid their respects in person during the mourning period, and King Bhumibol's funeral was watched on

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television by millions more around the country and the world. This was a year of national remembrance and reflection, coupled with deep nostalgia for the heyday of the Ninth Reign—notably the final decades of the Cold War, during which King Bhumibol made numerous development-oriented visits to the countryside—which was nevertheless inextricable from profound anxieties about the country's future.

POLITICAL QUESTIONS

With the end of the royal cremation period, a new reality has dawned on Thailand. The military regime headed by General Prayut Chan-ocha, who seized power in a May 2014 coup, is beginning to wear out its welcome. Having promised to restore national happiness and reform the country's dysfunctional politics, the junta has so far achieved neither. The April 6, 2017, promulgation of the country's 20th constitution since 1932 did little to address Thailand's underlying polarization. A virulent insurgency in the southern border provinces, which has claimed more than 6,500 lives since 2004, continues, and there is widespread skepticism about a Malaysian-brokered peace process, to which the Thai authorities are paying lip service.

At the end of May 2017, Prime Minister General Prayut used his weekly television address to the nation to pose four questions about elections and politics. He invited all Thais to respond to the questions in writing by visiting their local district officers.

1. Do you think the next election will get us a government with good governance?
2. If that is not the case, what will you do?
3. Elections are an integral part of democracy but are elections alone with no regard for the country's future and others right or wrong?
4. Do you think bad politicians should be given a chance to come back, and if conflict re-emerges, who will solve it and by what means?¹

Prayut's questions certainly articulated the anxieties of many Thais, especially Bangkokians, about the country's future, but they were also revealing for their negative view of both elections and politicians, and fueled concerns that the junta was still not committed to restoring parliamentary democracy.

1. Suthichai Yoon, "The Four Questions That Prompt 400 Answers," *The Nation*, June 1, 2017.

Prayut's critics responded with questions of their own: Was the prime minister suggesting that elections might be further postponed? Did he really believe that his own administration—widely criticized for a cabinet dominated by lackluster military officers—was delivering better governance than any elected government? Was he suggesting that all elected politicians were bad, and had no regard for the country's future? Was General Prayut aware that no other middle-income country in the world was run by a comparable military regime?

By late September, over a million people had submitted their responses to Prayut's questions.² What they answered has not been publicly revealed, though one published poll suggested sharply divided responses to most questions.³ The highest response turnout was in various northeastern provinces, typically strongholds of support for former Prime Ministers Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra, who were ousted from power in the 2006 and 2014 military coups, respectively. Prayut initially insisted that he would read all the responses himself; it is hard to see how anyone could have done so. Following a visit to the US that included a meeting with President Donald Trump on October 2, 2017, Prayut promised fresh elections in November 2018, on a date to be specified in June. Analysts grew more optimistic that following the royal cremation, Thailand would return slowly to political normalcy. But on November 8, Prayut gave a press conference asking for public responses to six more questions, including whether a new political party and politicians were needed, and why politicians were trying to discredit his administration. The junta was apparently deeply torn—recognizing the need to hand over power, yet remaining fearful of the consequences of returning to an elected government. Speculation was widespread that new political parties would be created before the election, taking advantage of the benefits they might derive from the new multi-member apportionment voting system, which combines constituency and party list votes into a single ballot.⁴ But it remained unclear how any new party could challenge the electoral dominance of pro-Thaksin forces.

2. "Million People Have Answered PM's Four Questions," *Bangkok Post*, September 27, 2017.

3. "Poll on 4 Questions: 54.73 per cent Don't Expect Good Governance from Elections," *Thai Rath*, June 17, 2017, <<https://www.thairath.co.th/content/975603>> [in Thai].

4. Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, "The Effects of Thailand's Proposed Electoral System," *Thai Data Points*, February 10, 2016, <<http://www.thaidatapoints.com/project-updates/theeffectsofthailandsproposedelectoralsystembyallenhickenandbangkokpundit>>.

While General Prayut rarely mentioned former Premiers Thaksin and Yingluck by name, the specter of a post-election return to power by the Shinawatra dynasty was clearly a major concern of the junta. As the regional splits seen in the 2016 constitutional referendum suggested, Thailand remains deeply divided between Shinawatra supporters—probably still the majority of the electorate—and those vehemently opposed to Thaksin and all he represents.⁵

In late August 2017, Yingluck faced potential imprisonment in a Supreme Court case relating to criminal negligence in a highly controversial rice-pledging scheme through which her administration had bought up vast stocks of rice above the market price, thereby channeling billions of dollars in subsidies to farmers, which also benefitted well-connected middlemen. Instead of showing up in court, the former prime minister vanished shortly before the verdict was due to be announced. Various explanations have circulated concerning exactly how Yingluck left the country, but all shared a common thread: given the high levels of security, the former premier could not have slipped out of Thailand without the active collusion of the regime. This was obviously an inside job.

By late 2017, Yingluck was believed to be in London,⁶ though her previously active Twitter feed (<https://twitter.com/pouyingluck>, with over half a million followers) had not been updated since August 22. In September she was sentenced in absentia to a five-year jail term. Yingluck's self-imposed exile, like Thaksin's, suited the military and royalist establishment extremely well: had she been jailed, Yingluck would have become an international symbol of Thailand's democratic failures and a domestic focus for anti-regime resistance. But facilitating Yingluck's departure was another of the junta's half-baked fudges: it did nothing to address Thailand's profound political polarization.

ECONOMY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS

The Thai economy continued to flounder during 2017, despite some encouraging signs. Although the country enjoyed a sizeable current account surplus,

5. Duncan McCargo, Saowanee Alexander, and Petra Desatova, "Ordering Peace: Thailand's 2016 Constitutional Referendum," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39 (2017): 65–95.

6. Chieu Luu and Euan McKirdy, "Former Thai Leader Seeking Asylum in UK, Says Party Source," *CNN*, September 28, 2017, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/28/asia/yingluck-shinawatra-asylum/>>.

and manufacturing output growth was higher than expected, significant levels of household debt dampened domestic consumer demand.⁷ Some forecasts for 2017 annual GDP growth reached 3.5%, a slight improvement on earlier projections but still well below that of ASEAN neighbors and competitors such as Burma, Malaysia, and Vietnam.⁸ While those running major businesses were upbeat, small business owners and ordinary consumers complained that the major government economic stimulus initiatives undertaken in 2015 and 2016 were having little impact on their incomes. A major focus of the regime's nation-branding efforts during 2017 was Thailand 4.0, a plan to transform the country into a post-industrial knowledge and digital economy, thereby escaping the middle-income trap.⁹ Unfortunately Thailand 4.0 remains poorly understood by most stakeholders, and there is no central strategy or agency driving the project.

Since the 2014 coup, Thailand has been on difficult terms with the United States. During the Obama administration, senior American officials shunned meetings with the regime, and the annual Cobra Gold joint regional military exercise was scaled back. Meanwhile the country grew closer to China, as exemplified by the Thai cabinet's July 2017 approval of the first phase of a huge US\$ 5.2 billion project to link Bangkok and Kunming by rail. A combination of fears about Chinese influence and the Trump administration's reduced emphasis on democracy and human rights considerations paved the way for an Oval Office meeting between Prayut Chan-ocha and Donald Trump at the beginning of October. Ironically, Prayut was the first Thai prime minister to visit the White House since none other than Thaksin Shinawatra, in 2005. While the Thai side interpreted the American invitation as a major thawing of relations,¹⁰ a dispute soon broke out as to whether, in the joint statement issued afterwards, Prayut had promised to hold an election in 2018.¹¹ In the event, the Thai

7. Focus Economics, "Thailand Economic Outlook," November 14, 2017, <<https://www.focus-economics.com/countries/thailand>>.

8. World Bank, "Economic Growth in Thailand Gains Momentum, Forecast Rise to 3.5% for 2017: World Bank" (press release), August 24, 2017, <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/08/24/economic-growth-in-thailand-gains-momentum>>.

9. Petra Desatova, presentation at Ninth EuroSEAS Conference, University of Oxford, August 16–18, 2017.

10. "Trump 'Reached Out' to Prayut at White House Meet," *Bangkok Post*, October 16, 2017.

11. Suthichai Yoon, "What Does the Thai-US Statement Say about Election Date?" *The Nation*, October 6, 2017.

prime minister made a firm public commitment to a November 2018 election a few days later. Prayut's Washington photo opportunity appeared to have firmed up a return to parliamentary rule. In December the European Union announced a normalization of relations with Thailand, on the basis that the election timetable had now been set.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

New King Vajiralongkorn's detractors have long dismissed him as a playboy who takes little interest in serious matters, but since ascending the throne on December 1, 2016, he has proved to be an activist and interventionist monarch.¹² In short order, King Vajiralongkorn changed the Sangha Act, which determines the governance of the country's Buddhist order, appointed a new supreme patriarch, ratified the new 2017 constitution (after requesting certain minor amendments), and changed various national holidays. The new king has also brought the finances of the Crown Property Bureau under his personal control, removing long-standing ambiguity about their status. King Vajiralongkorn apparently pays very close attention to government policies and matters of legislation, especially where they may affect the legitimacy or privileges of the monarchy, or touch on matters of religion. He carefully monitors promotions and transfers inside the bureaucracy, especially the upper echelons of the military and the police force. There has been a high turnover of palace aides in the new reign, part of a royal crackdown on discipline: most prominently, former Grand Chamberlain Jumpol Manmai was fired and jailed for abuses of authority.¹³ Nevertheless, the new king remains neither popular nor widely respected; crucially, while his father never left Thailand after 1967, King Vajiralongkorn spends much of his time in Germany. His private life is the topic of constant gossip and speculation. The prospect of his coronation—and a raft of associated symbolic changes, such as new banknotes, coins, and stamps—fills many Thais with apprehension. The most visible signs of the new king's authority may be seen in the new

12. For a worst-case scenario, see Eugenie Merieau, "Seeking More Power, Thailand's New King Is Moving the Country Away from Being a Constitutional Monarchy," *The Conversation*, February 3, 2017, <<https://theconversation.com/seeking-more-power-thailands-new-king-is-moving-the-country-away-from-being-a-constitutional-monarchy-71637>>.

13. Tan Hui Yee, "Axe Falls on String of Palace Aides in Thailand," *Straits Times*, March 18, 2017.

ultra-short “904” haircuts he has ordered for all military and police personnel, along with a new form of salute.¹⁴

Thailand stands at a crossroads. Will the old soldiers currently running the country finally permit some form of parliamentary democracy, or will they cling to power as their credibility gradually fades? Perhaps more importantly, will the new king embrace fresh elections, recognizing that greater political legitimacy could provide a much-needed boost to his own charisma and standing? In a 2009 interview with the London *Times*, exiled former Premier Thaksin Shinawatra spoke of a “shining new age” in the next reign. But is anyone going to turn on the lights?

14. “New Buzz Cuts Imposed on All Thai Police, Soldiers,” *Khao Sod Online*, November 20, 2017, <<http://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2017/11/20/new-buzz-cuts-imposed-thai-police-soldiers/>>.