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Scheming king unwilling to stop the violence on Bangkok's streets

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As Thai troops moved to confront tens of thousands of protesters on a Bangkok university campus one evening in the political crisis of 1992, a vision appeared that brought days of violence to an instant halt.

It was a TV image of the Dhammaraja king, the sacred Buddhist ruler of virtue, the King of Thailand, on his throne. Before him, on their knees, were the leaders of the two warring sides.

King Bhumibol urged the prime minister and the opposition leader to "sit down and face the facts together in a conciliatory manner, and not in a confrontational manner, to find a way to solve the problem".

He admonished them: "What is the point of anyone feeling proud of being the winner, when standing on a pile of ruins and rubble?"

The king was drawing not on any formal constitutional power but on his personal power, on national respect, and on the mystical power that many Thais invested in the throne. It was the strongest case for the concept of monarchy: that in the event of intractable political crisis, there is a grown-up, an impartial figure, above politics, who will intervene in the national interest.

It seemed to bring to an end the Thai compulsion to endless coups and crises. It ushered in a new era of functioning democracy and economic growth. Even when the Asian crisis convulsed the country in 1997-98, tempting the then prime minister to thoughts of enlisting the army to defy the people and stay in power, the generals wouldn't play.

Thailand had graduated, it seemed, into the ranks of successful democracies, with much credit to King Bhumibol, the world's longest-reigning monarch.

Today, as the latest Thai crisis escalates, as army snipers take aim at unarmed civilians and murder them in the streets, with 35 dead in five days and some 240 wounded, many have asked: where is the king now?

Bhumibol, 82, is reportedly in hospital suffering exhaustion and respiratory infection, but that doesn't seem to be the main reason he has failed to make any sort of statement or intervention.

Why not? Because the present round of crisis is only the latest escalation in a running four-year-old political and constitutional dysfunction that was part-engineered by Bhumibol himself.

When the army and business establishment united to bring down the populist, and popular, Thaksin Shinawatra in a 2006 coup, the king was involved through his chief aide, Prem Tinsulanonda, a former general, one of the most powerful figures in the country for decades.

When the army tanks moved against Thaksin, twice democratically elected, the ribbons tied around their gun barrels were yellow, the colour of the king, the colour of the shirts worn by the pro-establishment demonstrators who have been clashing for years now with the red-shirted Thaksin supporters.

And if there were any doubt about which side the palace has taken, Queen Sirikit made a very public appearance at the funeral of a leading Yellow Shirt protester last year.

The deposed Thaksin has explicitly named Prem and a second member of the king's Privy Council, as the men who orchestrated the coup against him. "In attacking these prominent royal advisers, Thaksin took a step closer to an attack on the monarchy itself," write Andrew Walker and Nicholas Farrelly of the ANU. His criticism "gave the red-shirt campaign a republican tinge".

Why would Bhumibol want Thaksin removed from his democratically elected post? The pretext is Thaksin's corruption, and he is certainly corrupt. The real reason, however, is that he has been the champion of the rural poor. He is, even now in exile, the most popular politician in Thailand.

As prime minister his government put unprecedented sums of money into the hands of the poor and public facilities into their villages.

His efforts in one term in power easily eclipsed the king's decades of charitable efforts to help the poor.

Thaksin's pro-poor populism infuriated the Bangkok elite and divided the country along class lines. This was the central reason that Bhumibol lent his authority to the coup.

Of course, there were other ways for the political system to pursue Thaksin over corruption. But the arrogance of the elites, with the imprimatur of the king, blinded the plotters to the central fact that in the modern world, democracy is the only true source of political legitimacy.

All the chaos and violence since has flowed from that original sin, the misjudged resort to authoritarianism in 2006. Bhumibol has had a number of opportunities to intervene to end the violence bred by this constitutional crisis.

But he has not. The truth about Bhumibol, a truth concealed for decades behind the shield of a strict rule of lese-majeste that carries a maximum penalty of 15 years' prison, is that he has been a compulsive political meddler for Thailand's entire modern history.

As Paul Handley demonstrates in his book *The King Never Smiles*, banned in Thailand, the king reflexively backs military men over civilians, authoritarians over democrats. He has even been prepared to preside serenely over mass bloodshed, notably twice in the 1970s, to make sure the "right" people ruled.

The intervention in 1992 seemed to be the beginning of a new era of democracy. Instead, we now see it was an aberration for an old-style, autocratically inclined Machiavelli.

He has not named a successor and there is no right of succession in Thai law. The heir apparent, Bhumibol's son, the Australian-educated Prince Vajiralongkorn, is deeply unpopular, a self-indulgent thug and playboy, and so manifestly unsuited to the throne that even his mother, the queen, has said he is unfit to rule.

The crisis is accelerating. There is a deadline. The term of the head of the army is to expire in September. The current illegitimate army-and-palace-backed prime minister wants to be in power long enough to name the replacement, to keep control of the military. The Red Shirts are determined to interrupt this plan.

King Bhumibol is old and increasingly under question. On his present trajectory, he will leave Thailand deeply divided, with no way out of the cycle of confrontation, in danger of becoming a pile of ruins and rubble.

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