Thailand’s Royal Gambit: A New King Rises Amid Unease and Unknowns

By Marwaan Macan-Markar

WHEN 243 MEMBERS of Thailand’s National Legislative Assembly (NLA), the ruling junta’s rubber-stamp parliament, gathered at 11:19 am on November 29 for a “special session,” a climate of uncertainty that had gripped the country for weeks finally began to lift. What followed was a brief formality, lasting until 11:25 am, during which Pornpet Wichitcholchai, the NLA’s president, informed the lawmakers that they should stand up and bless their new king.

“Long Live the King!” they all chanted in unison. This was the historic moment, chosen by astrologers, for the 64-year-old crown prince, Maha Vajiralongkorn, to begin his reign. Two days later, the country was presented with a picture of the new political order in Southeast Asia’s second largest economy: the Chief Justice Weeraphol Tangsuwan, Prime Minister and junta strongman Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha and Pornpet, all with their heads lowered, prostrating themselves on the floor before King Rama X, as the new monarch of the 234-year-old Chakri dynasty will be known. It was a telling image of one of Asia’s last remaining semi-feudal kingdoms.

The previous uncertainty itself was newsworthy. It took hold within hours of the death of the long-reigning monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, on October 13. Just after sunset, Prayuth went on air to announce that the ailing, 88-year-old king had died. Genuine grief erupted in and around the Bangkok hospital where Bhumibol had been treated through a long series of illnesses. Hundreds of people gathered in its courtyard to pray for him openly wept. And in the midst of this sadness, the nation learned that the NLA was being summoned for a special session that night, which many assumed to be the first formal step toward succession. But it was not to be. Prayuth made a subsequent announcement: the crown prince, long the designated heir, wanted time to mourn “with the people” and had requested the succession be delayed. To fill the void, the aging, ultra-royalist palace insider, Prem Tinsulanonda, longtime head of the royal Privy Council, was appointed as acting regent.

The move fueled gossip and wild theories within political and diplomatic circles about possible behind-the-scenes intrigue. The interregnum was uneasy and filled with unknowns.

Nonetheless, Prayuth played his role well in the month after Bhumibol’s death. In power after ousting the elected government in a 2014 coup, he came across as a pillar of stability, restoring calm and ensuring order to the many thousands of Thais, dressed in black, who headed to the sprawling and gilded Grand Palace to mourn. Many in the swelling crowds regarded the late king as “Father of the nation,” and his carefully crafted image over many decades had revived the monarchy and made him the symbol of stability and order through periods of political turmoil and economic growth. Some Thais even revered him as divine, holding pictures of him aloft in their grief. During his 70 years on the throne, the country was transformed from an agrarian, politically insignificant outpost to a modern, industrial, politically strategic regional presence.
FOLLOWING THE SCRIPT

The junta encouraged the adulation and mourning. All radio and TV stations and all electronic and video billboards and screens marched with a non-stop, month-long loop of hagiography. Among the repeats were familiar footage of a younger, active monarch traversing through rural Thailand to engage with the people and set the foundation for his political role as a unifier. To the casual observer, the junta appeared to have read the national mood well. There was hardly any public grumbling at the transformation of the normally vibrant and colorful dress sense among Thais to one with a monochrome motif for a month.

The junta had reason to feel confident in capitalizing on the mourning mood. Prayuth’s hand had been strengthened since the country’s 20th constitution, drafted by the junta’s allies and held in a politically restricted atmosphere, was approved in a referendum on August 7. The result, 61 percent in favor, was more impressive than had been forecast by analysts and intelligence assessments. Voters also approved a second question on the ballot, to permit the regime to appoint the first post-junta prime minister. The thumbs-up was an endorsement of the junta’s political blueprint for Thailand’s future, which seeks to weaken elected governments, empower unelected institutions and set the stage, as one foreign academic said, to establish a “deep state” along the lines of Pakistan’s politically meddlesome military.

No wonder an emboldened Prayuth saw fit to warn the regime’s adversaries — from a smattering of idealistic anti-junta youth to a small network of academics, grassroots political activists and established political parties — to freeze politics until after the cremation of the late monarch, possibly in October 2017. But that did not apply to the regime (of course), which is stepping up its efforts to keep Thailand’s battered democracy in chains. The latest move is to curtail the grassroots role played by a wide network of elected village administrative organizations, the bedrock of political decentralization that Thailand embraced in the 1990s to expand public participation and peel the mask off the country’s largely cosmetic democracy. The junta obviously wants none of that. It prefers the old order: a powerful Bangkok and the centralized state in the driver’s seat, just as during the Cold War era, when Thailand was ruled by a “bureaucratic polity,” as scholar Fred Riggs described the authoritarian Thai political system of the mid-1960s.

LEVERS OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE

Prayuth has also borrowed from the playbook of previous Thai strongmen. Among his legal weapons to silence any discontent is the draconian Article 112 of the Criminal Code, the lèse-majesté law, which threatens up to 15 years in jail for a single offence deemed to insult the king, queen, heir apparent or the regent. Article 116 of the Computer Crimes Act also has been quite handy for the generals to silence cyberspace chatter — and on December 16 parliament approved a revised version adding stronger controls. And then there is Section 44 of the 19th constitution, imposed by the junta after its power grab, which gives Prayuth absolute authority over the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. Dubbed the “dictator’s law,” it was used 91 times between December 2014 and August 2016. The fallout has been grave. During the first two years of the junta’s rule, 67 Thais were charged for violating the lèse-majesté law, according to the Internet Law Reform Dialogue (iLaw), a local freedom of expression watchdog. A further 85 people were charged under equally repressive junta edicts against political gatherings and activity. And during the single month of last October, 1,370 websites were shut down, more than the 1,237 shut by the Thai state over the previous five years, according to news agency reports. Google and Facebook have also been in the junta’s crosshairs, with pressure to co-operate. Consequently, Thailand is rapidly resembling a surveillance state. And worse is expected to follow.

This state of affairs largely rules out possible serious, local assessments of Thailand’s first month under a new king. Academics and analysts who usually fill the op-ed pages with national political commentary either stay silent or sing hosannas for the junta’s management of the transition. Thai-based foreign observers also tread cautiously, opting to self-censor to avoid the threat of a lèse-majesté jail term. Thus, one is left with no choice but to look for obvious cues from the palace or read the proverbial tea leaves to comprehend the direction the new king intends for his reign. It is the same with appraising his life and personal tastes before and after he accepted the crown. These are subjects best left unstated.

But when pressed, those familiar with the palace’s inner workings point to a few areas as potential signposts. They include the new king’s choices for his Privy Council (he has so far retired eight of his father’s advisors and named five new advisors, including three military generals) and his nominees to serve on the Crown Property Bureau, which controls the royal family’s properties, assets and investments and was estimated in 2015 to be worth $44 billion. Also worth noting is his endorsement of the 20th constitution without delay in mid-February. Other indicators range from promotions of military officers who serve him, his choice of courtiers to run his royal household and his official acts to reach out to his subjects. But to read beyond that is tricky, as suggested by a still-relevant diplomatic cable sent by then US ambassador Eric John in 2009, revealed by WikiLeaks. “There are in fact multiple circles of players and influence surrounding the.
Thai royal family, often times with little overlap but with competing agendas, fueled by years of physical separation and vacillating relationships between principals," John observed.

THE POLITICS OF THE ECONOMY
Yet the junta’s heavy-handed censorship may not be able to keep a lid on economic woes that could, with time, prove its undoing. Figures released during the last quarter of 2016 should be a cause for concern, even given the anemic growth already evident. Private spending decreased by 5.5 percent in October over the previous month, the Bank of Thailand revealed, a collapse not seen since the damaging floods of 2011. And exports, a key pillar of economic growth, are down, reports the Ministry of Commerce, contracting 4.2 percent year-on-year to US$17.8 billion in October; the 10-month figure shivered 1 percent to $178.3 billion. That, say analysts, will mean a fourth straight year of declining exports. Similar alarms have sounded about foreign direct investment, which, the Bank of Thailand says, dropped 90 percent in value to US$347 million during the first half of this year, the lowest in a decade.

Trouble also looms in the paddy fields following a collapse in global rice prices. The junta woke up somewhat belatedly to appease millions of farmers, a politically significant constituency in the world’s second-largest rice-exporting nation. In early November, the regime unveiled plans to dish out 54 billion baht (US$1.5 billion) to farmers to hold their stocks at home and not release them to market. The move has brought a brief respite, but it has also been mocked by the junta’s critics, with some calling it hypocrisy. After all, Prayuth targeted former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, whose elected administration he overthrew, for her “populist scheme” — a lavish rice subsidy to boost the economic fortunes of farmers. The junta has ordered Yingluck to pay back 36 billion baht to the state, in addition to hauling her into court to face criminal charges.

But that is not all. Stuck for ideas of their own, the generals have happily lifted from the policy prescriptions of the Shinawatras, Thailand’s most politically influential clan, headed by Yingluck’s eldest brother Thaksin, the polarizing former prime minister who was ousted by a military coup in 2006 and is now in self-exile abroad to avoid jail. Prayuth’s regime has already helped rice and rubber farmers in its first two years in power and used other measures to woo rural voters away from the various Thaksin-related political parties that have won all general elections since 2001. This economic drive fits in with the regime’s broader political calculations: make voters more loyal to a military-dominated state for a better life than a government of elected political parties. Junta insiders see such a prescription as a way to deal with the deep political polarization — between the so-called “red shirts” (of the Shinawatra camp) and the “yellow shirts” (the royalist elites) — that has dogged Thailand for a decade.

The junta, however, will have to wait for the general elections it has promised, as part of its “roadmap,” to see if its political and economic clout worked. The regime has already delayed dates for a planned parliamentary poll. And in late November, there were hints of a further postponement, possibly until early 2018. “If an election cannot be held, why should we insist on holding one and then cause damage?” remarked Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan. But there are unintended consequences from such pronouncements. For one, in keeping the public guessing, the junta only adds to the impression that the political year ahead remains filled with uncertainty, unknowns and unease.

Marwaan Macan-Markar is a Bangkok-based journalist.