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Monarchy and modern politics in Southeast Asia

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Monarchy has thrived in five countries of Southeast Asia, blending traditions of kingship from the pre-colonial era with modern forms of constitutional rule. Brunei, Thailand, Malaysia, and Cambodia have monarchs as titular heads of state; Indonesia uniquely has forms of monarchy that thrive in a republican context at the regional level. These two traditions of monarchy, one archaic and the other modern, coexist uneasily —especially in times of stress, whether because of succession or political instability. Therefore, to understand the dynamics of political stability in Thailand and Malaysia, the role of monarchs cannot be ignored.

The end of the colonial era in Southeast Asia was marked by the adoption, for the most part, of modern forms of statehood modeled on the democracies of the departing colonial rulers. Thailand was never colonized, but its monarchy modernized in response to pressure for democratic reform and adopted forms of government that established limits on its power. The nine traditional rulers of the Malay states that constituted the core of the new federation of Malaysia were enshrined as keepers of Malay tradition and defenders of Islam as the federal division of powers evolved. One of their number serves as the Malaysian king or Yang di-Pertuan Agong on a revolving basis.

Cambodia's King Norodom Sihanouk was both traditional ruler and modern nationalist, leading his country to independence from France in 1953, before abdicating to go into politics. In much the same way, the sultan of Yogyakarta assisted in the establishment of the Indonesian republic, served for a period as vice president, and won the preservation of his realm as a special administrative area that his son and heir still governs.

In all cases, the surviving monarchies of Southeast Asia have power and influence that potentially or in reality exceed that described in constitutional terms. This has come about chiefly because of the continuity of the archaic sacred and cultural symbolism of monarchy, which the monarchs themselves have cleverly perpetuated—as well as the patronage derived from their considerable wealth.

Perhaps the most successful monarchy is in Thailand, where King Bhumibol Adulyadej, 87, is not only the longest reigning monarch in the world, but has acquired a revered status among his subjects—albeit underpinned by strong lese majeste laws that involve severe punishment for criticism of the monarchy.

It is important to recall that the throne Bhumibol inherited at the end of the Pacific war was much weaker than it is today. The absolute monarchy ended after a coup led by democratic reform-minded civilians and military officers in 1932. Some scholars argue they were more concerned about protecting Siam, as it was called then, from colonial depredations, than liberating the Thai people. In reality, what followed was a long period of military-backed strongman rule. On ascending the throne in 1946, in the shadow of his brother Ananda Mahidol's mysterious death, Bhumibol essentially reinvented the monarchy as the core of the Thai state and extended its influence across vast areas of the country's society and development infrastructure.

Along with the influence of the palace, there grew concentric circles of power and patronage. The military developed a powerful base around protection of the palace, and the Crown Property Bureau became an important source of wealth and investment. All of this made the Thai monarchy by the 1980s the most important and powerful institution in the land.

So when politicians clashed with one another or military factions competed, the king played arbiter and headed off conflict. This was most visibly demonstrated in 1992, when Bhumibol was seen on television urging the military to reconcile with civilian forces after days of violent demonstrations that saw troops open fire on students. In later years, Bhumibol used closely watched annual public addresses to advise his subjects on issues such as the rule of law and democracy. Some would argue that his public endorsement of the use of the courts emboldened the judges and paved the way for a number of rulings that affected the course of Thailand's political development in the past decade.

Contemporary political conflict in Thailand is seen as pitting the courtly conservative establishment against a populist movement led by political figures who are associated with left-wing movements that the palace establishment opposed and which were brutally crushed by the army in the 1970s. Thus the monarchy has in effect been dragged into the political conflict, which has resulted in a sharp increase in the number of lese majeste cases. This is almost certainly less about the king himself, who has been ill and withdrawn from public life for some years, and more about elite maneuvering around the succession.

The prospective end of Bhumibol's spectacularly long and successful reign has generated anxiety in Thai society, and is a major factor prolonging the tenure of a military-led government in power since May 2014. Even if elections are held, as promised in 2016, the military is set to control the levers of power under a new constitution. Elite concern centers on the immediate

aftermath of succession that will inevitably lead to a reordering of power relationships around the palace and could generate further conflict. Although nothing can be stated publicly, people engage in subtle messaging using the favorite colors of each member of the royal family, such as blue for Queen Sirikit or mauve for Crown Princess Sirindhorn.

Malaysia's rulers have also been dragged into politics of late. As in Thailand, the rulers are regarded as the pinnacle of the establishment—in this case, majority Malay society—and therefore are imbued with the role of arbiter in times of stress and conflict. Constitutionally, the Malay rulers are above politics but play a limited role in political matters, through the Conference of Rulers. The main function of this body is to elect the Yang di-Pertuan Agong once every five years, but it also notionally has a role in safeguarding the constitution when it comes to Malay rights and privileges.

In the past, there were rumblings in ruler circles about matters such as the imposition of Islamic criminal "hudud" law, or the degree to which the government limited freedoms. As political tensions have risen over a financial scandal that has implicated Prime Minister Najib Razak, the rulers have stepped up their muted expressions of concern about unity and stability.

Concern was expressed at the Conference of Rulers in mid-2015 over the need to safeguard moderation, whilst the well-regarded and popular sultan of Perak, Nazrin Shah, has often spoken out about the need to foster a culture of tolerance in Islam and respect differences of opinion for the sake of unity. But the recent interventions by some rulers have taken many by surprise because it has involved the assertion of views spread via social media, which calls into question whether the Malay rulers can stay above politics when the country faces a political crisis.

In August this year, Johor Sultan Ibrahim Ibni Almarhum Sultan Iskandar made a public statement advising the prime minister to pay more attention to the value of the currency, which has plumbed 18-year lows in value. In what could be taken as a strong rebuke infringing on political issues, the sultan said: "I would also like to remind representatives elected by the people to shoulder public responsibilities entrusted to them, and to set aside personal interests." The young crown prince of Johor, Tunku Ismail Sultan Ibrahim, has more boldly used social media to express concerns about the current situation in Malaysia. And as tens of thousands of people gathered in downtown Kuala Lumpur to protest against the government at the end of August, banners appeared quoting the Johor Sultan’s speech. Ironically, the color yellow chosen by the Bersih protest movement, a movement for clean and fair elections, is the traditional color of Malay royalty.

In both Thailand and Malaysia, protracted political uncertainty and instability have dragged the monarchy into politics primarily because it remains an institution of considerable power and influence despite constitutional limitations. The effect, however, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it allows people in situations where freedom of expression is limited to have their grievances aired, as in the case of Malaysia. But as the case of Thailand shows, the power of patronage and legal sanction protecting the throne can also act as a considerable obstacle to free speech. In early August, a Thai man was jailed for 30 years for allegedly insulting the monarchy on Facebook.

Either way, in the current context it is hard to conclude that monarchy is a fundamentally weak player in the Southeast Asian political spectrum. Ideally, many people would still welcome the monarchy's role as arbiter in times of political stress or crisis—such as when the current king of Cambodia sought to broker an agreement between the government led by Prime Minister Hun Sen and the opposition in 2014. But the reality is that protective power and patronage flows from the apex of society in Southeast Asia, and monarchs, no matter how virtuous or above politics they appear to be, can do little to deter the manipulation of their authority without damaging their own prospects for survival. Equally, the more effective the manipulation, the more sullied the throne becomes.

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