Political Changes in Thailand

Thailand is preparing for the first general election, scheduled for 24 March, since the 2014 coup d'état. An intense election race is compelling the Thai society to follow news updates and actively support their candidates. But several days ago an unprecedented event took place in the nation's political life, replete with surprises, and was then followed by rumours about yet another military coup. All of these developments have already generated interest among foreign onlookers.

On 8 February, the Thai Party Thai Raksa Chart (Phak Thai Raksa Chat) nominated Princess Ubol Ratana (Ubonrat Ratchakanya Siriwatthana Phannawadi) as their candidate for the post of Prime Minister. For the first time in the history of Thai constitutional monarchy, a member of the Royal family became a contender for political office.

Princess Ubol Ratana, the sister of his majesty King Maha Vajiralongkorn and the oldest child of the now deceased King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), was born in Lausanne, Switzerland. In 1972 she gave up her royal title and moved to the United States to live with her husband Peter Ladd Jensen. However, after their divorce, she returned to Thailand in 2001.

The Princess's foray into politics completely changed the political landscape before the election, and became a serious blow to the current Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha and his party Phalang Pracharat.

Late in the evening of the same day, King Vajiralongkorn announced that his sister Ubol Ratana was not in the position to become a candidate for the post of Prime Minister, as she was still a "member of the royal family" according to traditions. Thai laws decree that the Royal family stay above politics, because its members cannot be criticized. This privilege is protected by the law that forbids insulting the monarchy.
After these events, Thailand's election panel disqualified the princess as the PM candidate and filed a petition with the Constitutional Court seeking to dissolve the party Thai Raksa Chart, as it attempted to involve a member of the Royal family in politics, in violation of electoral campaign laws and the Constitution. The fate of the party now rests with the court. If the Thai Raksa Chart party is found guilty, it will be dissolved and all of its candidates will be automatically banned from holding any political posts. This will affect the current standing of populists—"red shirts", and of their supporter, the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who is currently in exile as is his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra.

The Thai Raksa Chart party has close links to the largest populist Pheu Thai Party, which is yet another incarnation of Thaksin's previously banned parties, such as Thai Rak Thai Party (Phak Thai Rak Thai) and Phak Phalang Prachachon (the People's Power Party).

Considering the fact that the Pheu Thai Party still has a lot of support, first and foremost, among the farming community in Thailand, it is guaranteed to win a substantial number of seats in the Assembly. However, although pro-Thaksin forces have won all the general elections since 2001, this may not be enough for Shinawatra to claim victory in the upcoming election.

In accordance with the new 2017 Constitution, the National Assembly of Thailand (a bicameral legislative branch) is comprised of 750 representatives. To be able to appoint the Prime Minister a simple majority vote of 376 is required in the Assembly. And the military is at an advantage, as the Senate (the upper house) has 250 members, who are not elected and instead appointed by the government in power at that time. For military personnel to win an election, they only need to obtain 126 seats in the House of Representatives (the lower house). The "red shirts", on the other hand, actually have to win all 376 seats, which makes their task more daunting.

To obtain a majority, the Pheu Thai Party is willing to ally itself with the new Future Forward Party (Phak Anakhot Mai), which is becoming increasingly popular and is headed by the young ambitious billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, who is of a similar social standing to Thaksin. But even these votes may not suffice.

The fact that the victory by populists and their allies at the upcoming election was not guaranteed is the reason why Thaksin decided to take a risk and submitted Princess Ubol Ratana's candidacy, who maintains close ties with the Shinawatra family. It appears that they were operating on the assumption that King Vajiralongkorn (and he was the only person capable of opposing another member of the Royal family) would not openly become involved in politics. However, the gamble did not pay off and the King made a tough decision to publicly denounce his sister's foray into politics. In the end, the daring attempt only exacerbated Thaksin's and his party's standing right before the election.

The events that transpired in Thailand on 8 February and their consequences are part of the more widespread and long-lasting crisis of succession, which reflects the struggle to reform spheres of influence and establish a new system of power relationships among the Thai elite.

On account of the political uncertainty at a time of slower economic growth and growing social inequality, the actual decision making center is shifting to other structures, which, unlike the Assembly and the government, are not directly associated with power structures. One such organization is the National Strategy Committee, which, in accordance with the 2017 Constitution, oversees the implementation of the 20-year National Strategy on Thailand's development. The Committee has the right to disband the government if it fails to achieve the aims of the strategy, notwithstanding the fact that the objectives are vaguely worded and are open to various interpretations. The Constitutional Court also has the power to oust any government and dissolve any political party even for a small violation of regulatory requirements.

The role of the Monarch is often underestimated too. It is also important to remind our readers that approval of practically all the executive appointments and proposed legislature requires the King's signature. In other words, the King of Thailand has the veto power on most key issues. If we take into account that the actual political system in Thailand is in fact a military guardianship of the civil government, then, under the Royal leadership, the role of the Palace and the Monarch becomes more significant than it is customary to believe.

After the death of his father in 2016, King Maha Vajiralongkorn of Thailand substantially consolidated his power.

In April 2017, control over the Royal Aide de Camp Department, the Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary, the Bureau of the Royal Household, the Royal Guard Command and the Royal Court Security Police was transferred to the Palace and the King. As Thailand is a constitutional monarchy, its head, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, was granted full, personal ownership of royal assets, worth up to $30 billion, and which include...
prime real estate in the center of Bangkok. Amendments to the Sangha Act, which governs a Buddhist monastic community, were also made.

Another important move was the King's refusal to approve the Constitution, adopted by the 2016 referendum, until required alterations were made to it. The key change, requested by Vajiralongkorn, involved granting him the right not to appoint a regent while he is abroad (it is well known that Rama X spends a substantial portion of his time in the environs of Munich, in Germany).

The new King also made some radical changes to the membership of the Privy Council, a powerful advisory body in Thailand. But the 98-year-old PremTinsulanonda still remains its President.

Maha Vajiralongkorn gave careful consideration to army reforms. After all it is the military elite that historically serves as the principal supporter of the monarchy (and as a result, it is also the only force capable of deposing a monarch).

The new King of Thailand is a member of the traditional army faction Wongthewan (Divine Progeny), which was founded in 1870. Yet, military personnel, headed by Prayut Chan-o-cha, in power at present belong to another large faction Burapha Payak (Tigers of the East), which was responsible for the coups that led to Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck being deposed in 2006 and 2014, respectively.

To be able to exert his own clout over military personnel, in October 2018, Maha Vajiralongkorn appointed General Apirat Kongsompong from the Wongthewan faction as the Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army. While he was the crown prince, Maha Vajiralongkorn was friends with Apirat and his father, General Sunthorn Kongsompong, who was the leader of the 1991 coup d'etat. And at the beginning of January 2019, Apirat Kongsompong was appointed to the Crown Property Bureau's executive board. In addition, Maha Vajiralongkorn maintains a good relationship with Prayut Chan-o-cha.

In October of last year, Major General Narongphan Chitkaewtae, who is very close to Maha Vajiralongkorn, became the chief of the First Army Region, which ensures security in Bangkok and plays a decisive role in suppressing as well as staging coups. In 2019, he will most likely be promoted to the position of Assistant Commander in Chief of Royal Thai Army, and in 2020, he will become the Army Commander after Apirat Kongsompong retires.

Up until 1 April 2018, Narongphan Chitkaewtae led the 1st Infantry Division of the King's Guard, a key unit that, according to traditions, protects Bangkok and the King himself. The current commander of the King's Guard 1st Division, Major General Songwit Noonpakdi, the son of yet another member of the 1991-92 junta, General Isarapong Noonpakdee, is also close to Apirat Kongsompong. Songwit Noonpakdee is destined to eventually succeed Narongphan Chitkaewtae as the Commander in Chief of the army.

According to unconfirmed sources, all the army divisions and units, with the exception of the 1st Division of the King's Guard, have withdrawn from Bangkok at the orders from the Palace.

Apirat Kongsompong, Narongphan Chitkaewtae and Songwit Noonpakdi all belong to the Wongthewan faction, and they are all close to the new King. And they will ensure he continues to exert his clout over the armed forces for many years to come.

The elite force Rachawallop Infantry Unit 904, which was dedicated to protecting the Prince before he became King, was included in the King's Guard. Since the 1980s, this unit has been Vajiralongkorn's 5000-strong “praetorian guard”. In December 2018, Apirat's son, Peerapong Kongsompong, was appointed as the commander of this Rachawallop Unit.

In October 2018, a new police branch, the Special Services Division, was established. It is tasked with protecting the Royal family and collecting information about “individuals or groups whose behaviors pose a threat to the national security and His Majesty the King". In January 2019, the unit was renamed to Ratchawallop Police Retainers, the King’s Guards 904.

It comprises a special operations unit, whose responsibilities include protecting the members of the Royal family and coordinating volunteer groups, created by Maha Vajiralongkorn. It will also serve as a link between volunteers and the police.

Earlier, the presiding monarch established a network of volunteers, called Chit Arsa, which comprises hundreds of thousands of people and performs "a wide range of civic works, from cleaning the streets and canals to organizing
The head of the new police unit is Major General Torsak Sukwimol, the younger brother of Air Chief Marshal Satitpong Sukvimol, a close ally of the King and also the secretary to the Crown Prince, Director-General of the Crown Property Bureau and the Lord Chamberlain of the Royal Household Bureau.

With such actions, King Maha Vajiralongkorn is not simply creating his own version of a power structure, inherited from his deceased father, which some researchers have dubbed as the "network monarchy". In such a system, the Palace officially stays above politics, but increasingly relies on cooperation with other political players, in order to consolidate its power while creating an unspoken alliance of Royalists, high ranking government officials and businessmen loyal to the King. By using changes in legislation and reforms of elite organizations, the new King is trying to strengthen the hold of the so-called "deep monarchy" (analogous to the American term Deep State) by ensuring support from all levels of government.

Some experts think that one of the causes of the 2014 coup d'etat was the serious decline in health of Rama IX and the realization by Thai elites that the transformation of the nation's entire power structure was inevitable. Meanwhile, the key goal that the military aimed towards was to ensure stability in the nation during the transition period, as far from everyone wished to see Maha Vajiralongkorn crowned King (for reasons which included his very famous lifestyle deemed inappropriate for Royalty), despite the fact that the Prince was the sole heir to the throne and there were no other candidates.

From this point of view, Maha Vajiralongkorn's coronation ceremony, scheduled for 4-6 May 2019, is of far greater importance to the future of Thailand than the election on 24 March, which is only a part of the process for establishing a new balance of forces among the Thai elite.

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