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Thailand, Succession and Legitimacy: Mahaha Vajiralongkorn and Tôn Duc Thang

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It may appear incongruous and, to some at least, offensive to compare the present Crown Prince (aged 62) and heir apparent to the Thai throne with the second president of North Vietnam and, after reunification, the first president of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. After all, the putative 'predecessor' of the former, King Bhumibol (Rama IX), while ailing, still remains on the throne and is still the more than ceremonial head of state of the Thai kingdom. As for Tôn Duc Thang's predecessor, Ho Chi Minh, he died in 1969 and Tôn himself passed away in 1980 at the age of 92. Yet a recent trip to neighbouring Vietnam has caused me to think again on political developments in the Southeast country with which I am at present most concerned, Thailand, and the parallels and divergences in the historical trajectories of these two Southeast Asian nations.

During this holiday I visited the Tôn Duc Thang Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, as well as alighting from a cruise on the Mekong to visit the Tôn Duc Thang Exhibition House on My Hoa Hung Island. The Museum has been correctly described by tourist guidebooks as one of the quietest places in the bustling city, formerly known as Saigon, while the Exhibition Hall was totally bereft of visitors. It seemed terribly unfair that such a true Vietnamese revolutionary should, despite some efforts by the Vietnamese propaganda machine, be so neglected by his compatriots. After all he was not only an authentically working class party cadre, but also came from southern Vietnam. He had not only spent fifteen years imprisoned by the French on the infamous Con Dao Island, but had presided over the reunification of his country, the culmination of a life of struggle and sacrifice. Surely if someone deserved elevation to the pantheon of Vietnamese heroes it was Ton. Alas, in life and in death, he had to live in the long shadow cast by his predecessor Ho Chi Minh.

The same cruel fate would appear to await for Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn when he finally ascends the throne after the more than sixty-year-reign of his father, the world's longest reigning monarch. In Bangkok in March 2010 during the violent repression of anti-government, pro-democracy demonstrators by the military that caused the death of 90 red shirt protestors, one of their supporters scrawled on a Bangkok overpass, in reference to King Bhumibol, "Where is daddy?" The question is does this really matter?

Ho Chi Minh was described by the French historian, Jean Lacouture, as a "Franciscan who had read Marx". Certainly his personal modesty, moral integrity and an almost monk-like devotion to his vocation are portrayed in the ubiquitous images that adorn public buildings and hoardings throughout Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh, like King Bhumibol, in his personal behaviour seemed to epitomize the ideal of the Buddhist middle way: the rejection of personal gratification and vice in service of a greater public good. Indeed, King Bhumibol's doctrine of the sufficiency economy, promulgated in reaction to the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-1998, could have been as easily drafted in Ho's modest bungalow in Hanoi as in the Dusit Palace in Bangkok. Both Ho and King Bhumibol are portrayed as having a particular concern for the lowest of the low, the peasant farmer. Other parallels can be drawn: Ho is affectionately referred to as *cu* (uncle), the benevolent family patriarch who devotes himself to his family (the nation) while King Bhumibol is commonly referred to as the father of his people. Yet, while Ho Chi Minh may have an altar devoted to him in several Buddhist temples in Vietnam, (such as that in Chau Doc, I visited), under a secular Communist regime he never acquired the revered status of a dhammaraja (the virtuous Buddhist ruler) associated with King Bhumibol.

It is a cruel fate that Ton Duc Thang has been allowed to fade into obscurity despite sharing many of the character traits so vaunted in Ho Chi Minh. The same continuity in personal demeanour cannot be said to exist in the case of Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn in relation to his father. Going into detail to make the contrast more explicit would potentially incite prosecution under Thailand's much abused lese majesté laws: suffice it to say that the thrice divorced future Rama X is almost the antithesis of the monogamous Rama IX. In the rumour mill that compensates for the lack of open discussion of the monarchy in Thailand, the eccentric playboy, to put it mildly, is often contrasted with the saintly father (and Prince Vajiralongkorn's elder sister). However does this really matter? After all, the British monarchy, to take but one example, has survived for centuries despite having had at times some rather dubious characters on the throne. My argument is that indeed it does matter, for it is not the Thai monarchy itself that is problematical, but rather the particular role it plays – or rather has been orchestrated to play – in the construction of a sense of Thai nationhood.

Once again a reference to the Vietnamese case is useful. Ton Duc Thang's relegation to the status of a footnote of history is of little consequence for the Vietnamese nation. The State-orchestrated cult of Ho Chi Minh is that of the revolutionary leader who united his country across class, regional and ethnic divides to create a new modern Vietnam. The lack of a spiritual successor is of little importance, for, in a sense Ho Chi Minh lives on in the egalitarian ideals of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, if not often in its practice. In contrast, the cult built around King Bhumibol is designed to maintain a somewhat feudal social order in the interests of a Bangkok elite comprising the business community, the top Administration and the Military. This personalized cult, extended only to Princess Chakri Sirindhorn and, to a lesser extent, to Queen Sirikit, does not portray the king as a the head of a Thai democracy, even if this is his constitutional role. Parliaments and elected governments are to be kept weak. They will become even weaker under the present proposals of the civilianized military government resulting from the coup of May 2014. Rather the monarchy is the first of the three pillars, the others being the sangha (the monkhood) and the nation, that officially defines Thai identity. Yet it is the individual on the throne, not the institution of the monarchy per se, that is brought to the fore in this official portrayal.

What lessons can be drawn from this brief comparison? Thailand, like Vietnam, is constrained by its past. As we are constantly reminded Siam (today's Thailand) was the only polity in Southeast Asia not, formally at least, to be colonized. In Thai school textbooks and in the popular imagination the perpetuation of Thai independence was the almost single-handed work of two great monarchs of the Chakri dynasty: King Mongkut (Rama IV) and King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). The latter has been described by one Dutch scholar, Irene Stengs, as the 'patron saint of the Thai middle class'. The modern Thai nation, in other words, is a product of the Thai monarchy, going back even further in history to the 13th century. The 'other side of the coin' of the Thai kingdom's ostensibly uninterrupted independence is that, unlike most neighbouring countries, it did not experience that cathartic seminal moment, when the struggle for independence against the colonizer brings together a founding national movement united across class barriers, and the sense of citizenship involving some form of social contract. The people of Thailand continue to be subjects before they are citizens.

In Vietnam the cult of Ho Chi Minh both maintains and legitimizes the nature of the modern one party nation-state. In Thailand respect for the monarchy, largely centred on the personality of King Bhumibol himself, could rapidly disappear once his son ascends to the throne. As a Thai colleague once suggested to me, Thais have become "Bhumibolists" rather than fervent supporters of the monarchy as an enduring institution. In the inevitable succession it can be feared that social cohesion within Thailand itself would be severely challenged. The reconciliation of kingdom and modern nation remains a work in progress, as the constant changing of the Thai constitution - with the twenty-first since 1932 now being drafted - demonstrates. If constitutions can be discarded like so many scraps of paper quid the future of a constitutional monarchy? If the legitimacy of an institution, such as the Thai monarchy is so centred on the purported extraordinary attributes of one individual, will it survive when a far lesser mortal succeeds the irreplaceable?