

WHO IS THAILAND'S 96-YEAR-OLD ROYAL REGENT?

BANGKOK: A 96-year-old former general has become temporary regent after Thailand's Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, in a surprise move, delayed his own proclamation as king following the death of his beloved father. So who is the regent, Prem Tinsulanonda?

A 96-year-old regent?

That may raise eyebrows outside Thailand but Prem is astonishingly spry, frequently attending royal engagements, delivering speeches and moving around without help. His installation as temporary head of the revered and influential monarchy further cements his status as one of the shrewdest and most powerful players in the Machiavellian game of Thai politics. Born in the southern province of Songkhla in 1920, he stormed up the army ranks during the Cold War and was promoted above his seniors to army chief in 1978. Two years later, he assumed power in what was widely viewed as a silent coup endorsed by the king and queen. His 1980-1988 spell as premier was a rare period of political and economic stability, contrasting with the tumultuous years of coups and counter-coups preceding it. Prem later led the Privy Council of late King Bhumibol Adulyadej who died last Thursday after a 70-year reign-making him the monarch's closest adviser and gatekeeper.

Why is he regent?

Because the law says so. Past dynastic changes often sparked periods of intense instability as competing princes battled for the throne. The 1924 suc-

cession law, and Thailand's constitution, attempted to end that by mandating that until the next king is proclaimed, the Privy Council's head automatically becomes acting regent until a solution is found. Senior junta official Wisanu Krea-ngam assured Thais over the weekend that Prem's elevation to regent was temporary and followed Vajiralongkorn's request to be given time to mourn his father and prepare for the trappings of kingship before being formally proclaimed.

Why does this matter?

Bhumibol was the only king most Thais had known and he was revered as a moral anchor in a country riven by political and class divides. So his death inevitably causes grief and anxiety among millions of subjects. A delay in proclaiming his designated successor doesn't help. The elite acknowledged these concerns on Saturday, when military junta leader Prayut Chan-O-cha said the crown prince told him Thailand's people should not "be confused or worry about the country's administration or the succession".

How long will this last?

The prince has indicated his desired to be proclaimed king at the "appropriate" time after mourning, but it remains unclear how long that will take. Prayut has said the proclamation will occur after religious and funeral rites are completed, but he gave no timeframe. The crown prince, who spends much of his time outside the kingdom, has yet to attain his father's widespread popularity.

Impact on Thailand

Both as prime minister in the 1980s and later as head of the Privy Council, Prem cemented the mil-



BANGKOK: This file photo shows Thai General Prem Tinsulanonda during a gala dinner for the Royal Thai Army Day at the Thai Army Club in Bangkok. The surprise decision by Thailand's Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn to delay being officially proclaimed the new king following the death of his beloved father has resulted in a 96-year-old former general becoming the temporary regent. — AFP

tary's self-designated role as protector of the monarchy through his remarkable relationship with Bhumibol. "He was able to make the military into a mechanism for the monarchy but keep the military as a powerful institution in Thai politics," Paul Chambers, an expert on Thailand's military said. Since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, Thailand has seen 12 successful military coups. Prem has instigated or had a hand in five of them, said Chambers. The most recent came in 2014, toppling the democratically elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of telecoms billionaire and former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra who was himself ousted in a 2006 coup.

Prem-Thaksin relations

They are believed to be bitter foes. Thaksin was loved by Thailand's rural and urban poor, especially in the long-neglected north and northeast, and won resounding election victories. But he was loathed by Bangkok's military and aristocratic elite who saw him as a corrupt populist threatening their power base. Pavin Chachavalpongpun, a Thai politics expert at Kyoto University in Japan, said Thaksin became "the number one threat" to the royalist elite and that "Prem helped remove him" in 2006. For the next eight years Thailand was battered by political strife including deadly violence-pitting Shinawatra family supporters against the military-royal elite until the 2014 coup brought Prayut to power. The generals say they acted to restore stability, but critics say the coup was partly a move to ensure the military held control during the royal succession. — AFP

STUDENT WHO FOLLOWED IS LOVER TO SYRIA FACES TRIAL

MOSCOW: Police in bullet-proof vests guard a military court for the terrorism trial of Varvara Karaulova, a slim 20-year-old with braided hair who clutches a page of handwritten notes. Karaulova was studying philosophy at the renowned Moscow State University when she tried to enter Syria last year after falling in love online with an Islamic State fighter. Karaulova's trial on terrorist-related charges is the most high-profile yet of a Russian heading to Syria where Moscow warplanes are bombing in support of ally President Bashar Al-Assad and supporters say authorities are using her to send out a warning. A large number of the foreign fighters with the jihadist IS group in Syria are from Russia, and Moscow claims 2,700 of its nationals and citizens from other ex-Soviet republics have been killed in the anti-IS operation. But most of those from Russia fighting in Syria come from Muslim communities principally in the volatile North Caucasus region.

'I didn't join anything'

As an ethnic Russian woman from a privileged background, Karaulova is a rarity. She is charged with preparing to participate in a "terrorist organization" and if convicted faces up to five years in jail with the verdict expected in a week or two. She is pleading not guilty, arguing she never intended to fight but simply wanted to be with the man she loved. In court she is known as Alexandra Ivanova after changing her name to try to avoid media attention. "I didn't join anything, I'm not a terrorist and absolutely never intended to become one," she said at the opening of the trial on October 5, quoted by Interfax news agency. Her defense lawyer Sergei Badamshin said the justice system is making an example of her, even though "families of terrorists are not punished in our country." "This is undoubtedly a show trial," he said. "Unfortunately, they chose a victim who has nothing to do with IS's terrorist

activities." "Why it was her I can't say."

'Winner in life'

Karaulova grew up in a middle-class family in a leafy area of Moscow and left school with all A grades, Badamshin said. "She's a winner in life." Then Karaulova became interested in Islam and began wearing a headscarf, and on May 27, 2015, she disappeared. Her father reported her missing and traced her to Turkey, where she and a group of other women were caught by border guards as they attempted to cross into Syria. After her return to Russia in a blaze of publicity, investigators initially said she had committed no crime. But almost half a year later, she was detained and charged. She is being held in the notorious Lefortovo jail under tight supervision, her lawyer said. At the trial held in Moscow District Military Court, Karaulova speaks clearly but briefly, and keeps a copy of the Criminal Code on the seat in her glass cage. At one point a witness described her as weighing around 75 kilograms and she flares up: "Did the witness weigh me?" She refuses to answer questions about her religious views, but is now bare-headed and wears colorful dresses, her eyes ringed in dark liner.

First love

She says she got to know a man through a social networking site, who used various names including Vlad, Artur Sokolov and Adam, but whose real name is reportedly Airat Samatov, a Russian citizen, who investigators say is fighting with IS. Her lawyer says Karaulova was going through a period of teenage low self-esteem that made her vulnerable to such tactics. "She's a closed, reserved person... No one knew what was going on inside her, not her parents, not her friends," Badamshin said. For her, it was first love, he says, while raising the possibility that the messages to her were not even all written by the same person, due to stylistic differences. — AFP



MONYWA, Myanmar: Government rescue personnel from the Myanmar Fire Services Department transport a victim's body during a search operation after a ferry capsized on the Chindwin River near Monywa city in Sagaing region. — AFP

32 BODIES FOUND IN MYANMAR FERRY DISASTER; TOLL MOUNTS

A TOTAL OF 154 PEOPLE RESCUED

YANGON: Searchers have recovered 32 bodies after an overloaded ferry sank in central Myanmar and expect to find dozens more dead, officials said yesterday, as workers began raising the boat from the riverbed. A total of 154 people were rescued alive after the ferry sank early Saturday on the Chindwin River, about 72 kilometers north of the city of Monywa. But rescuers have found only bloated corpses floating in the water since then, and fear the toll could reach 100 once they raise the craft.

"So far we have recovered 32 dead bodies," said Sa Willy Frient, director of the local relief and resettlement department who is overseeing the operation. "We are trying to raise the boat using a crane after tying it with strong ropes. After we lift it out, the death toll will be higher." Sa Willy Frient estimated 240-250 people-around 100 more than its capacity-were on the boat, along with heavy cargo.

Survivor Hnin Lei Yee, a 27-year-old school-

teacher, was travelling with her husband and one-year-old daughter to celebrate the Buddhist Thadingyut festival with her family. Her baby was killed in the disaster. She still does not know her husband's fate. "It happened very fast," she told AFP. "The window was open so I had a chance to get out of the boat." "I cannot swim so I had to hold on to a plastic float and finally the rescue boat came to save my life." "In the morning, I heard there was a dead child in the hospital and I went there. I saw my daughter dead," she said, weeping. Some 30 teachers were thought to be among the passengers, along with dozens of students from Monywa university and workers heading home for Thadingyut.

Four arrested

"I am really so sorry," said Sai Khaing Myo Tun, vice president of Myanmar's teachers' federation. "This incident has terrified us very

much." "The teachers often have to use such unsafe transportation, especially when they (come to) get their monthly salary." Four of the boat's staff have been arrested and will face legal action. Authorities are still hunting for one crew member and the ferry's owner.

Local lawmaker Shwin Htay said people were devastated by the scale of the disaster as he called for the boat operators to face justice. "I have never known of a boat sinking where so many people have died in this area," he said. Boat accidents are common in Myanmar. People living along the nation's long coastline and flood-prone river systems rely heavily on often overcrowded ferries for transport. At least 21 people, including nine children, died in April after a boat capsized off the coast of Myanmar's western state of Rakhine. In March last year at least 52 people lost their lives off the west coast when an overloaded ferry sank in rough waters. — AFP



MOSCOW: Moscow State University student Varvara Karaulova sits inside a defendant's cage during a hearing at Moscow's District Military Court. — AFP

BANGLADESH ARRESTS SUSPECT IN SECULAR ACTIVIST MURDERS

DHAKA: Bangladesh police said yesterday they have arrested the main suspect in the murders of a gay activist and a secular blogger who wrote against radical Islam. They say Rashidun Nabi is the main suspect in the murder of 26-year-old law student and blogger Nazimuddin Samad and gay activist Xulhaz Mannan, who were brutally hacked to death in April. Bangladesh has seen a spate of gruesome attacks on secular activists, religious minorities, bloggers, gay rights activists and foreigners, many of whom have been hacked to death with machetes.

Counter-terrorism officers said they detained Nabi at a bus station in the capital Dhaka, alleging he was the ringleader in Samad's killing. "Five people including Rashidun Nabi took part in Samad's killing," said Monirul Islam, head of Dhaka police's counter-terrorism unit. "They all carried sharp weapons and one carried a firearm. They hacked Nazimuddin with the sharp weapons and later shot him

when people started to gather around," he told reporters.

Dhaka police spokesman Masudur Rahman said Nabi was also a suspect in Mannan's murder, and in an attack on publisher Ahmedur Rashid Tutul. A police statement said Nabi was a member of Ansar al-Islam, also known as Ansarullah Bangla Team, which purports to be the Bangladesh branch of Al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent. Ansar is one of two homegrown extremist outfits accused in the recent wave of murders, and had claimed responsibility for Samad's killing. Nabi's arrest was announced hours after Bangladesh executed a militant leader of the outlawed Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) over a 2005 blast that killed two judges.

The government has blamed JMB for a deadly July 1 attack in an upmarket Dhaka cafe where 22 people, mostly foreigners, were killed by suspected militants. — AFP

SRI LANKA'S PROSECUTOR WICKRAMASINGHE QUILTS

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's top anti-corruption prosecutor resigned yesterday after President Maithripala Sirisena accused her of launching politically-motivated investigations into former military officials, including the brother of his predecessor. Sirisena, who came to power last year promising to end corruption and restore rule of law, took the unusual step of publicly condemning Dilrukshi Wickramasinghe last week over the prosecution of three retired admirals and the former defense secretary.

Yesterday Wickramasinghe resigned as head of the

Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC), commission member Neville Guruge said. Sources close to her said the president's public comments last week prompted her decision. Wickramasinghe, a senior prosecutor from the state Attorney General's department, has launched several high-profile investigations against members of the former regime and the family of former president Mahinda Rajapakse.

There was no immediate comment from Sirisena, who said last week that military commanders

who led the successful campaign to crush separatist Tamil Tiger rebels in 2009 should not be humiliated in such a manner. The president accused Wickramasinghe's CIABOC of working according to a "political agenda" and vowed to take unspecified "stern action" against it and two other anti-corruption bodies, the Financial Crimes Investigations Division (FCID) and the Crime Investigations Division (CID). Analysts said the president's remarks signaled a rift between him and the national unity government led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, which oversees the FCID and the CID. The two men are

from rival parties, but made common cause to topple former strongman Rajapakse, whose entire family and closest associates face allegations of corruption as well as murder. Members of the former regime are accused of siphoning billions of dollars from the country during Rajapakse's decade in power that ended on January 8, 2015. The new government is yet to deliver on promises to the UN that it will investigate allegations that troops under Rajapakse's command killed at least 40,000 Tamil civilians while battling separatists in the final months of an ethnic war that ended in 2009. — AFP