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WORLD NEWS | Fri Oct 14, 2016 | 2:46am EDT

Thailand faces uncertainty, grief without King Bhumibol

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Thailand in mourning

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By Andrew R.C. Marshall and Patpicha Tanakasempipat \mid BANGKOK

Thousands of weeping Thais on Friday lined the route the <u>body</u> of their beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej will take to the riverside Grand Palace ahead of a funeral and a traditional royal cremation that will need months to prepare.

The world's longest-reigning monarch, who was worshipped as a father figure during his 70-year reign, died in a Bangkok hospital on Thursday. He was 88.

The king stepped in to calm crises on several occasions during his reign and many Thais worry about a future without him. The military, which took power in a 2014 coup, has for decades invoked its duty to defend the monarchy to justify its intervention in politics.

Many people sheltered beneath umbrellas on the route from the hospital to the palace or cooled themselves with fans along the narrow, sun-seared pavements.

Military government leader Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha said on Thursday security was his top priority and he ordered extra troops deployed around the country.

Security was tight on Friday in the city's old quarter of palaces, temples and ministries with soldiers at checkpoints, government offices and intersections.

The king had been in poor health for several years but his death has shocked the Southeast Asian nation of 67 million people and plunged it into grief.

Most people in the capital and in towns across the country dressed in black but shops opened for business.

The cabinet declared a government <u>holiday</u> for mourning but the Stock Exchange of Thailand and other financial institutions opened as normal.

PICTURES

ORDERLY SUCCESSION

The stock market's benchmark index .SETI rose at the open and was up 4 percent at 0600 GMT while the baht currency THB=TH strengthened about 1 percent against the dollar, on hopes that there would be an orderly succession. The central bank governor said there had been no abnormal speculation.

Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn is expected to be the new king but he does not command the same adoration that his father earned over a lifetime on the throne.

At the Grand Palace, thousands of mourners, some sobbing, lined up to kneel before a portrait of the king and make a ritual pouring of water as part of royal funeral rites.



People hold portraits of Thailand's late King Bhumibol Adulyadej at the Siriraj hospital in Bangkok, Thailand, October 14, 2016. REUTERS/Chaiwat Subprasom

"I still feel like I'm dreaming. I can't believe it happened," said Supawan Wongsawas, 64, a retired civil servant.

Suthad Kongyeam, 53, said it felt like losing a father.

"He was $\underline{\text{the heart}}$ of the whole country," said Suthad. "Everything is shaken. There is nothing to hold on to anymore."

Thailand has endured bomb attacks and economic worries recently while rivalry simmers between the military-led establishment and populist political forces after a decade of turmoil including two coups and deadly protests.

Military government leader Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha said on Thursday the country was in "immeasurable grief ... profound sorrow and bereavement".

He said security was his top priority and called for businesses to stay active and stock investors not to dump shares.

'DON'T KNOW WHAT TO THINK'

Thursday's crush of mourners in the grounds of Siriraj Hospital, where the king died, had gone by Friday, but about 100 people, most dressed in black, prayed there before a statue of the king's late mother.

"I'm scared and don't know what to think. If I go home I can't think," said Jirawat Wayaphan, 64.

The hospital was open and busy, but all visitors froze and stood at attention as the national anthem was played over loudspeakers as usual at 8 a.m.

Black-and-white footage of the king playing jazz on the saxophone has replaced regular transmissions on television channels since shortly after the king's death was announced.



Photos of the day

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Prayuth said Prince Vajiralongkorn wanted to grieve with the people and leave the formal succession until later, when the parliament will invite him to ascend the throne.

"Long live His Majesty the new king," Prayuth said.

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Thailand's strict lese-majeste laws have left little room for public discussion about the succession.

The junta has promised an election next year and pushed through a constitution to ensure its oversight of civilian governments. It looks firmly in control for a royal transition.

TOURISTS ASKED TO RESPECT THAIS

Foreign embassies in Thailand advised tourists to respect the feelings of the Thai people at their time of

grief.

Tropical Thailand, with its beaches, Buddhist temples and infamous night life, expects a record 33 million tourists this year.

Most Thais have known no other monarch and King Bhumibol's picture is hung in almost every house, school and office.

Until his later years, he was featured on television almost every evening, often trudging through rain, map in hand and camera around his neck, visiting a rural development project.

His wife, Queen Sirikit, 84, has also been in poor health in recent years.

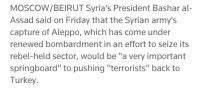
Prayuth warned against anyone taking advantage of the situation to cause trouble. Politicians from all sides will be in mourning.

Given a smooth transition, major economic disruptions are not expected, analysts and diplomats said.

(Additional reporting by Amy Sawitta Lefevre, Aukkarapon Niyomat, Andrew R.C. Marshall, Panarat Thepgumpanat, Robert Birsel, Pracha Hariraksapitak, Patpicha Tanakasempipat and Pairat Temphairojana in Bangkok and Norma Galeana in Los Angeles; Writing by Amy Sawitta Lefevre; Editing by Robert Birsel and Raju Gopalakrishnan)

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