

Thailand grieves in elaborate final goodbye to King Bhumibol

By Tassanee Vejpongsak and Stephen Wright
The Associated Press

BANGKOK — With solemn faces and outright tears, black-clad Thais said farewell to their king and longtime father figure on Bangkok's streets and at viewing areas around the nation, capping a year of mourning with funeral ceremonies steeped in centuries of tradition.

Three processions involving the royal family, thousands of troops, a golden palanquin, a gilded chariot, and a royal gun carriage transported a ceremonial urn representing King Bhumibol Adulyadej's remains from the Dusit Maha Prasad Throne Hall to a spectacular newly built crematorium.

The urn, placed under a nine-tiered white umbrella and accompanied by a palace official, was then hoisted into the main chamber of the golden-spired crematorium as monks chanted, traditional instruments wailed, and artillery fired in the distance. New King Maha Vajiralongkorn then climbed the red-carpeted steps to light candles and incense in honor of his father.

The ceremony was watched in person by tens of thousands of mourners dressed all in black and millions more around the kingdom in broadcasts aired live on most Thai television stations and shown at designated viewing areas across the country.

Before dawn, 63-year-old Somnuk Yonsam-Ar sat on a paper mat in a crowd opposite the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Her granddaughter slept in her lap and her husband rested his head against a metal barrier. The family came from the coastal province of Rayong, where they run a food stall.

Somnak waved a fan to cool herself but said she was not tired.

"I feel blessed to be able to sit here, and be part of this," she said. "It's an important day for us."

The funeral for Bhumibol took place over five days and began with his son, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, performing Buddhist merit-making rites before chanting monks and officials in immaculate white uniforms.

Bhumibol's body was cremated within the special crematorium built over a year and representing mystical Mount Meru, where Buddhist and Hindu gods are believed to dwell.

Thai media reports and images posted online showed smoke rising just before midnight.

Deceased Thai royals have traditionally been kept upright in urns during official mourning. But Bhumibol, who spent much of his early life in the west, opted to be put in a coffin, with the royal urn placed next to it for devotional purposes.

The urn was at the center of the processions, including one led by Vajiralongkorn, Bhumibol's only son, in which the golden container was placed upon the Great Victory Chariot. Built in 1795 and made of gilded and lacquered carved wood, the chariot has been used to carry the urns of royal

family members dating to the start of the Chakri dynasty.

As the chariot, pulled by hundreds of men in traditional red uniforms, passed the mourners lining the parade route, they prostrated themselves, pressing their folded hands and head on the ground in a show of reverence.

Bhumibol's death at age 88 on October 13, 2016, after a reign of seven decades sparked a national outpouring of grief. Millions of Thais visited the throne hall at Bangkok's Grand Palace to pay respects.

The adulation Bhumibol inspired was fostered by palace courtiers who worked to rebuild the prestige of a monarchy that lost its mystique and power when a 1932 coup ended centuries of



absolute rule by Thai kings.

That effort built a semi-divine aura around Bhumibol, who was protected from criticism by a draconian law that mandates prison of up to 15 years for

insulting senior royals.

But he was also genuinely respected for his development projects, personal modesty, and as a symbol of stability in a nation frequently rocked by political

ROYAL FAREWELL. Elephants — doused in powder to appear an auspicious white — stand at attention and trumpet at a ceremony to mark one year since King Bhumibol Adulyadej's death, on October 13, 2017, in the ancient royal capital of Ayutthaya, Thailand. Mourners clad in black stood in front of the elephants and fell silent for 89 seconds from 3:52pm, marking the official time of Bhumibol's death in what Thailand's Buddhist culture recognized as his 89th year. Then they sang an uplifting royal anthem and held pictures of Bhumibol above their heads while others prostrated on the ground. (AP Photo)

turmoil, though his influence waned in his final years.

The funeral was by design an intensely somber event, but also rich in history and cultural and spiritual tradition.

Mourners were not allowed to
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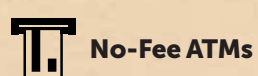


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