

Thailand grieves in elaborate final goodbye to King Bhumibol Adulyadej

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

The royal officials pull to the royal chariot used to carry the body and the royal urn of the late Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej

Three processions involving the royal family, thousands of troops, a golden palanquin, a chariot and a royal gun carriage carried a ceremonial urn representing King Bhumibol Adulyadej's remains from the Dusit Maha Prasad Throne Hall to the 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-spined 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 TV 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 will take place over five days and began Wednesday with his son, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, performing Buddhist merit-making rites before chanting monks and officials in immaculate white uniforms.

Bhumibol will be cremated on Thursday evening within the special crematorium built over a year and representing mystical Mount Meru, where Buddhist and Hindu gods are believed to dwell.

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 Thursday's 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 for the late monarch.

Bhumibol's death at age 88 on Oct. 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 turmoil, though his influence waned in his final years.

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

Mourners are permitted to prostrate when royal processions pass but must not shout out "Long Live the King" or hold up cellphones to take photos or selfies.

Boonjerd Buasawat, a 61-year-old fruit vendor from the resort island of Phuket, had been waiting near the cremation site since midday Wednesday and slept there overnight.

"I want to be here together with a group of people who dearly love their king," he said. "Our love won't die until we too pass and follow him."

Thais have braved tropical heat and torrential monsoon rains to secure street-side vantage points to witness the funeral. Thousands of police and volunteers are on hand to ensure order and entry into the royal quarter, which has been tightly controlled to eliminate the faint possibility of protest against the monarchy or military government.

An activist had been detained earlier this week after writing on Facebook that he planned to wear red clothing on the day of Bhumibol's cremation, a color associated with support for political movements ousted in recent coups.

- AP