

# THE BIG INTERVIEW

This month, **112WATCH** interviews scholar, Patrick Jory, the author of “Thailand’s Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jataka and the Idea of the Perfect Man,” on the necessity of the royal reform in Thailand

**112WATCH:** In view of the reform of the monarchy, how important is this agenda if Thailand is to move forward as a functional society?

**Jory:** I think that an important question to ask is whether the Thai monarchy can be reformed, and survive. If one thinks about it carefully, at a bare minimum, reform of the monarchy would have to mean the reform or abolition of the *lèse-majesté* law. This law forbids criticism of the king, queen, heir apparent, and regent, but in its application it effectively forbids virtually any criticism of any member of the royal family or the institution of the monarchy more generally. But reforming or abolishing the *lèse-majesté* law would open the monarchy up to unprecedented public scrutiny on some extremely serious matters. These include the 1946 regicide, the role of the monarchy in the October 6 1976 massacre, and numerous very serious scandals surrounding the current king going back to his youth. It is difficult to imagine that the monarchy could survive the free and open discussion of these matters. Royalists believe, correctly in my view, that reform of the *lèse-majesté* law would lead to the eventual abolition of the monarchy. That is why I believe that the current government and supporters of the monarchy will never allow a reform of the *lèse-majesté* law.

At the same time, the monarchy is now intensely politicised. Public criticism of the monarchy has become much more frequent, especially among the young. This has led the authorities to use the *lèse-majesté* law much more frequently, which in turn fuels further resentment against the monarchy, more public criticism, and inevitably, more *lèse-majesté* charges. The government is intensely aware of the growing criticism of the monarchy, and even republican sentiment. The main task of the current military-backed Palang Pracharath government that came to power in 2019 has been to defend the monarchy against rising anti-monarchy sentiment. For the military, protecting the monarchy is essential in order to safeguard their own immunity from prosecution for the frequent massacres of civilians and coups d’état they have carried out over the past half century.

**112WATCH:** The protests which began in 2020 now seem to have died down. At one level, this could be interpreted as the monarchy being able to withstand pressure. Is this the case of King Vajiralongkorn being capable of

strengthening his power position, even more so than his father?

**Jory:** The authorities have been shrewd in the manner in which they have dealt with the unprecedented protests against the monarchy that broke out in August 2020. A number of anti-monarchy activists who had earlier fled into exile in Laos and Cambodia have disappeared, presumed killed, likely as a warning to others. The authorities have charged numerous others with *lèse-majesté*. The government has been careful not to use excessive force on the younger protesters, which might have generated greater public sympathy for their cause. Their main tactic has been to arrest the key leaders, detain them for relatively short periods of time (weeks or months, rather than years), often denying them bail, before releasing them with a warning not to reoffend. The government has also used the Covid restrictions as an excuse to limit protests. This mix of both extreme and more moderate measures appears to have been successful in taking the momentum out of the protests – for now. All of this suggests that the authorities are aware of significant opposition to the monarchy and are careful not to inflame it. The 2020 protests erupted quite suddenly. It is possible that a new round of protests could break out again, under the right conditions

What does this say about the authority of the new king, Vajiralongkorn? His father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, had been very careful to cultivate the public image of a pious Buddhist king – a future Buddha – who cared deeply about the well-being of his subjects. King Vajiralongkorn seems to have no interest in maintaining this public image of a religiously virtuous monarchy. Since acceding to the throne he has spent a large amount of his time overseas in Germany. Besides the current queen, his fourth wife, he has an official mistress, to whom he has given an official title, “noble consort”, and who presides at official functions. He also maintains a harem of around twenty women, all of whom have been awarded military ranks and receive salaries funded by the tax-payer. He has purchased a number of expensive aircraft. He has shown little public sympathy for the economic hardships many Thais have faced during the Covid crisis. The impression of an aloof and uncaring monarch devoted to his own pleasure is not helped by his daughter, Princess Sirivannavari Nariratana, who promotes her haute couture fashion business in Europe and purchases expensive



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horses. But while he lacks the moral authority of his father, King Vajiralongkorn has concentrated power around himself to a much greater extent. At present his control over the government, the military, the judiciary, and the Sangha (the Buddhist monkhood), seems secure. The next test will come with the upcoming national elections scheduled to be held in 2023. Thaksin Shinawatra's Pheu Thai Party, which is expected to do well in the election, has been conspicuous in publicly presenting itself to be loyal to the monarchy. The Move Forward Party, by contrast, has warned that if the lèse-majesté law is not amended, the growing resentment that it is creating may eventually result in the law being repealed altogether.

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**112WATCH:** Has the sharp increase of lèse-majesté cases in Thailand posed any concerns to the interest of Australia?

**Jory:** There have been some small public protests by members of the Thai community against the lèse-majesté law in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane. These protests did not attract a great deal of attention from the Australian public. The Australian media did cover the political situation in Thailand in 2020, but that interest has since faded. While there are some political activists within the Thai community in Australia who have raised the issue of the lèse-majesté law at protests or on social media, they are a relatively small minority. There is a larger number of Thais in Australia who are dissatisfied with the behaviour of the present king, but they tend to keep their views private. The Australian government is very unlikely to pressure the Thai government on the lèse-majesté issue.

**112WATCH:** The growing intimate ties between Thailand and China has contributed to a growing confidence of the Thai regime in violating human rights in Thailand. Do you agree with this statement and why?

**Jory:** I don't believe that China is a major factor that directly affects human rights issues in Thailand. Thailand's human rights situation today is determined by

domestic political factors, in particular the military's current political influence in Thai politics, rather than the external influence of great powers. It is true that unlike the US, the Chinese government does not raise human rights issues with the Thai government. But even before the cosy-up of relations between China and Thailand, the leverage that the US and the West had over human rights issues in Thailand was already fading. Today, the US is even less willing to push the Thai government too far on human rights issues due to a concern that it may damage relations between the two countries. At present the main US interest in its relations with the countries of Southeast Asia is to counter growing Chinese influence

**112WATCH:** Can you briefly tell us the nature of the debate in Australia on whether it will remain a part of the Commonwealth and accept the British Queen as the Head of State?

**Jory:** In 1999 Australia held a referendum on whether to end its ties with the British monarchy and become a republic. The referendum failed and Australia remained a constitutional monarchy headed by Queen Elizabeth II. The British monarchy is quite popular in Australia, especially the person of the Queen. Part of its popularity has to do with many Australians' historical, cultural, and family attachments to Great Britain. Part of it also has to do with a belief that the constitutional monarchy has contributed to Australia's political stability over a long period of time. The British monarchy has been careful not to be seen to interfere in Australian public life. Its role in Australian public life today is mainly ceremonial and cultural. There is no law against criticism of the monarchy. Like everywhere, many people enjoy following the latest news about the royal family in the tabloid media. I think it's fair to say that at present there is not a strong republican movement in Australia.

However, Prince Charles is not popular. The recent under-age sex scandal surrounding Prince Andrew, and the dispute between Prince Harry and Megan and the royal family, have also affected the royal family's public image in Australia. In addition, mass migration to Australia since the 1980s from non-English speaking countries has diluted the "Britishness" of Australian society to some extent. The sentimental attachment to the British monarchy is not as strong as it once was. Some recent surveys suggest that a majority of the population may now support Australia becoming a republic. For many Australians, a republic does not just mean the replacement of the British monarch with an Australian head of state, but a fundamental break with the United Kingdom. Arguably the question of the future of the monarchy in Australia is more of a cultural than a political issue. But it is not currently seen as an urgent issue. Most politicians who publicly support Australia becoming a republic have said that a new referendum should only take place after the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. In addition, there is much disagreement about the system that would replace the constitutional monarchy. Would



the President be popularly elected, or would they be appointed by the Parliament? How much power should be invested in the office of the President? Should the President be mainly a ceremonial office? These questions would have to be more widely debated and resolved before a referendum could take place. Finally, even if Australia did become a republic it would almost certainly remain in the British Commonwealth.



**Patrick Jory** teaches Southeast Asian History in the School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry at the University of Queensland.



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contact@112watch.org