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Vietnamese Airline Apologizes for Tweet Poking Fun at Thailand's King

An April Fool's tweet referenced the apparently volatile relationship between King Vajiralongkorn and his consort Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi.

By Sebastian Strangio

The low-cost carrier VietJet Air has been forced to make a public apology after an April Fool's tweet prompted a flood of criticism in Thailand, one of its major markets, for making fun of Thailand's King Vajiralongkorn. The post described the creation of a fake new route between the city of Nan in northern Thailand and Munich, Germany, where the king has for many years spent considerable amounts of time.

"As the executive of the airline, I would like to admit my fault for not taking enough care of my staff," Thai VietJet CEO Woranate Laprabang said in a statement, according to Khaosod English. "The airline would like to clarify that the executives did not approve or support the publication of such online content and ordered an immediate removal upon learning about the incident."

Despite bearing the hashtag #aprilfoolsday, the tweet prompted criticism from the brigades of ultra-royalist scolds online, who said it had mocked Vajiralongkorn. "Thai people, I included, found this tweet associated with your company disgusting," one commenter wrote on Twitter, Khaosod reported. Added another, "If there is any law to act against this airline, I would support it. Don't let them make profits from the Thai people."

Specifically, the April Fool's tweet references the fact that long before becoming king, Vajiralongkorn spent more time in Germany than in the nation of which he is now the titular head. Shortly after taking the throne, for instance, he demanded that the new Thai constitution be written so as to allow him to spend time outside Thailand without appointing a regent in his absence, effectively allowing him to reign from abroad, and frequently travels there aboard one of his alleged private fleet of seven commercial jetliners.

Indeed, an important spur to the large public protests that erupted in 2020 was the revelation, widely reported in the international press, that Vajiralongkorn was waiting out the COVID-19 pandemic in the luxury surrounds of the Grand Hotel Sonnenbichl in the Bavarian Alps, while his people suffered at home.

The protests, which crested in the second half of the year before coming to a halt amid government crackdowns and spiraling COVID-19 outbreaks, publicly aired for the first time in living memory criticisms of the Thai monarchy and calls for restrictions to be placed on its wealth and power. Such criticisms are illegal in Thailand under the country's harsh lese-majeste law, which carries punishments of up to 15 years in prison.

According to Andrew Macgregor Marshall, a journalist and long-time Thailand-watcher, the VietJet April Fool's joke, by referencing the city of Nan, also called attention to the strange and sordid relationship between the king and his off-again-on-again consort Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi.

Known by the nickname “Koi,” the former bodyguard, pilot, and parachutist, who holds the rank of major-general in the royal guards, was in July 2019 appointed the first Thai official royal consort for nearly a century, shortly after the king married his fourth wife Queen Suthida.

Then, just three months later, she was arrested and stripped her of her rank and titles, with the royal palace claiming that she was punished for trying to “elevate herself to the same state as the queen” and for her “misbehavior and disloyalty against the monarch.”

In September 2020, Vajiralongkorn then reversed the decision, with the Royal Gazette announcing that “Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi is not tarnished” and that “henceforth, it will be as if she had never been stripped of her military ranks or royal decorations.” In February of last year, he officially made her Thailand’s “second queen.”

In recent months, however, there have been suggestions, made by Marshall among others, that Sineenat has disappeared from public view, indicating that her relationship with Vajiralongkorn has zagged back into difficulties.

Needless to say, whatever the exact truth of the couple’s relationship, the mere fact that it is the subject of public jokes – by the social media team of a prominent regional airline, no less – exposes the mundane, shambolic, and potentially sinister inner workings of the Thai royal family to outside view. This naturally undercuts the almost holy image of the monarchy that Thailand’s elites have attempted to cultivate for years, in order to sacralize the country’s lopsided distributions of wealth and power.

The difficulty for Thai royalists, however, is to square this sacred image, forged in the seven-decade-long reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, with the reality of his son’s reign, which has been marked by frequent scandals and has not coincidentally seen some of the first open criticisms of the monarchy in many years.

The curious thing, at least according to Khaosod’s reporting of this story, is that while many ultra-royalists condemned the veiled tweet, few actually came out to say why it was a problem. To do so, of course, would simply highlight the wide gap between the reputation of the institution they are defending and its reality.