

Exclusive: Thai Princes Banished Again as Eldest Says 'I Did Nothing Wrong'

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By right of his birth, the immigration officials should have prostrated themselves before Juthavachara Vivacharawongse, eyes glued to the sunbaked earth, before offering jasmine garlands and shepherding him toward a waiting limousine. Instead, Juthavachara, who goes by the anglicized name Max, and his younger brother Vatchrawee, were ushered into a dingy interrogation room at the Thai-Malay border on May 28 and politely asked for their U.S. passports. It was a jarring moment for two sons of Thailand's king—estranged nobles returning to their homeland after decades in exile.

After 45 minutes, a visibly uncomfortable official issued the verdict: the brothers were refused entry to Thailand, the country where their father reigns as King Maha Vajiralongkorn, Rama X of the Chakri Dynasty, the world's wealthiest monarch with a fortune estimated at some \$60 billion. The rejection left Max "physically and mentally crushed," he tells TIME in an exclusive interview. "Because I've missed my homeland every day of my life, and I've always dreamed of going back."

Aside from a fleeting 12-hour visit in January, during which the brothers were detained, interrogated, and harassed by security officials wherever they went, this would have been the first time they had set foot on Thai soil since being banished by their father in 1996, along with their mother and two other brothers, following their parents' high-profile divorce.

The heartbreak at the border spurred Max, 45, and Vatchrawee, 40, to pen a Facebook post that pinned blame on "a small yet powerful group of individuals, seeking to preserve their influence within the monarchy, legal system, and political sphere." Max returned to his life as an aerospace engineer living in downtown San Diego, where his American wife was born and they recently

moved with their three children to be closer to her family. But he agreed to speak exclusively to TIME about his family's ordeal since their banishment and his burning desire for reconciliation.

"I want to get word to my father that I want to go back to live and to work," Max said in a Zoom interview. "I have no other ambition other than to go back and be his loyal subject. But unfortunately, there seems to be some kind of misunderstanding that has prevented us from entering the country."

That misunderstanding has only metastasized in recent days. In August 2023, another brother, Vacharaesorn, 44, shocked the nation by suddenly returning to Thailand, the first time any of the Vivacharawongse family had visited for nearly three decades. He visited schools, made merit at temples, and lent his support to humanitarian projects, such as building houses for flood victims. He rode Bangkok's BTS Skytrain and gushed that it was cleaner than the New York subway. In late May, he shaved his head and donned the saffron robes of a Buddhist monk, as is common for royalty to demonstrate piety. Max's thwarted trip was ostensibly to offer support in this new endeavor.

"We were all novice monks when we were still in the palace, as every young male member of the royal family had to do," Vacharaesorn told TIME last week. "And I'm the first sibling to become an adult monk in Thailand for our family. So this was a very big deal for us, and we were all looking forward to celebrating together."



Vatchrawee after being ordained as a monk during the Vesak Day celebration at Wat Pariwas in Bangkok, Thailand on May 11, 2025. Nattaphon Phanphongsanon—ZUMA Press Wire/Reuters

However, on June 23, Vacharaesorn's stay in Thailand was abruptly curtailed. Scores of Thai security officials swooped on Wat Pariwat Ratchasongkram, a picturesque temple where Vacharaesorn was staying perched on the bank of Bangkok's Chao Phraya river, and detained him. After a quick stop at his home to pick up his belongings, Vacharaesorn was escorted to Suvarnabhumi International Airport and ordered on a flight to New York City, accompanied onto American soil by Thai security officials, who handed him straight to State Department representatives. Another brother, Chakriwat, would be deported from Thailand the following day, Vacharaesorn was told, although his location is currently unknown. All four are U.S. citizens. "The officer who came for Vach informed him that they don't want any Vivacharawongse in the country," says Max, using a nickname for his brother.

TIME requested comment from Thailand's Royal Household Bureau regarding the reasons for Vacharaesorn's deportation and the Vivacharawongse family's

status in Thailand but has not received a response. Thailand's Immigration Police has not responded to similar inquiries. A spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok declined to comment since they "do not share information with the media about private U.S. citizens absent their written consent."

Why the Vivacharawongse brothers were exiled and partially rehabilitated only to be excommunicated once again lies at the core of a succession crisis that is roiling Thailand's royal household just as younger citizens are demanding reform of the institution. Although King Maha Vajiralongkorn has seven children, only three have royal titles, and none have been identified as heir. "If no one really understands what's going on, it's a source of instability, and it's a source of doubts," says Paul Handley, a journalist and author of *The King Never Smiles*, an unofficial biography of King Bhumibol that has been banned in Thailand.

Thailand is America's oldest ally in Asia whose revered palace historically served as a pillar of conservatism and permanence, as well as a bulwark against the communist fervor engulfing its Southeast Asian neighbors. Yet in the post-Cold War era, many young Thais feel alienated by the institution's opaque, hierarchical structures, and desire more accountability.

In 2020, unprecedented public protests erupted across Thailand that shattered taboos by openly calling for royal reform. Ten listed demands included permitting criticism of the King, properly accounting for the crown's finances, banning the sovereign from expressing political opinions, and prohibiting the monarchy from endorsing coups. In rare public comments around the time, King Vajiralongkorn called Thailand "the land of compromise" and said "we love them all the same" of the demonstrators.

Still, the lack of a clear succession plan is a cause of great anxiety in a country where the monarch has long served as a bastion of stability. The nation's 2014 coup d'état was commonly ascribed to a desire by the nation's elites to micromanage the transition to King Vajiralongkorn. Yet he will turn 73 next month and nobody has a clue what the future of this paramount institution looks like.

Although primogeniture would make Max first in line for the throne, he currently has no royal titles, and Thailand's constitution excludes any potential heir with a foreign spouse. He insists that he and his brothers only want to be reunited with their homeland to live a simple life as regular folk. Yet forces are conspiring to ensure this never happens.

“I just don’t understand why this is such a problem,” says Max. “It hurts me even more to think that I don’t believe I did anything wrong in my life, and yet I feel like I’m being punished for things that I did not do.”

It is, of course, a sadly common sentiment among the progeny of broken homes, though the fallout from Max’s parents’ split was anything but typical. King Vajiralongkorn inherited the throne following the death of his revered father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who was the world’s longest-reigning monarch when he passed in 2016. The only son among Bhumibol’s four children, then Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, a former Royal Air Force pilot, was famed for his sybaritic lifestyle, spending much of his time in Germany, and has been married four times.

In a 1981 interview with the Dallas Times Herald during an American tour, Vajiralongkorn’s mother, Queen Sirikit, said: “I have to be very frank. My son, the Crown Prince, is a little bit of a Don Juan. He is a good student, a good boy, but women find him interesting, and he finds women even more interesting. So his family life is not so smooth.”

Vajiralongkorn’s first wife bore him a daughter, Princess Bajrakitiyabha, but they divorced in 1991. His second wife, actress and dancer Sujarinee Vivacharawongse, gave birth to four sons and a daughter: Max, the eldest, followed by Vacharaesorn, Chakriwat, Vatchrawee, and Princess Sirivannavari.

The siblings grew up in the lap of luxury, dressed in the finest silks, with doting courtiers catering to their every whim. Though life wasn’t always easy. When Max was young and living in the palace, the royal garage was his refuge, where he could escape domestic strife by clambering through dozens of luxury and vintage cars. “Because there were a lot of unhappy times.”

Vajiralongkorn divorced their mother in 1996 after accusing her of being unfaithful, stripping her and their sons of their titles and forbidding their return to Thailand. The family were living in the U.K., where the eldest two boys attended the prestigious Harrow private school, when the Thai Ambassador suddenly appeared and demanded they relinquish their diplomatic passports. Instead, ordinary ones were issued valid for just one year. Without her mother’s knowledge, Princess Sirivannavari was spirited away to Thailand to live with her father. “My mother got on the phone with His Majesty and said, ‘Okay, you already have the girl. Do you want the boys as well?’” recalls Max. “According to my mother, he said, ‘Not at this time.’” The brothers have not seen their sister since.

Cast out from their homeland, Sujarinee and her sons moved to the U.S. as political refugees, settling in central Florida. "I'm a diehard Tampa Bay Buccaneers fan," laughs Max. Sujarinee was the quintessential "tiger mom," says Max, and ruled the household with an iron fist. "She's a very, very tough woman, and she pushed us extremely hard from a very young age. Education was extremely important. She said, 'just because you are not in Thailand doesn't mean you have to lower yourself to the standards of commoner.'" Three brothers have law degrees; Chakriwat is a medical doctor.

Every year, the brothers would write a letter to their father on his birthday, as well as to mark important family events such as graduations, appraising him of their health and progress. No reply ever arrived. On occasions, the family would post public statements expressing their devotion and desire to return to Thailand. Early in their banishment, when the pain was still raw, the tenor was rebukeful. In 1998, a letter co-signed by the brothers accused their father of "trying to erase memories of us," saying that he never loved their mother and would force them outside of their house "every time he found another woman." Asked about this missive, Max says early letters tended to be drafted by their mother and didn't necessarily reflect the sons' true sentiments.

In 2003, the boys heard that their father was to visit the U.S., so they turned up unannounced at the Thai Consulate in Chicago to doorstep him. The 30-minute meeting, during which Max and his three brothers sat on the floor per royal protocol, was "standoffish," says Max. "He didn't quite treat me as his child." Still, the then-Crown Prince enquired after the brothers' health, education, and interests. "Then he says, 'hey, you kids didn't do anything wrong,'" recalls Max. "If you ever want to come back to Thailand, nobody's going to stop you."

Max now regrets that the brothers didn't immediately seize that invitation, though he notes they were young and didn't want to abandon their mother, who was still patently unwelcome. Over time, the brothers came to terms with their exile, different as it was from the pampering of the palace. Max tried to put Thailand out of his mind and immerse himself in American life. "At the time, all anybody could ever talk about was Thailand, Thailand, Thailand," says Max. "I felt like it was holding us back. So I tried to go to school, get a job, move away from the family a little bit, and get my life going."

For nearly three decades, that's exactly what the family did. The brothers focused on school, worked casual jobs, and graduated college. As a young man, Vacharaesorn hawked hot dogs at sporting events and sold vacuums door-to-door.

In 2013, Max married an American woman, Riya Gough, and the couple have a son and two daughters. When not traveling for work, he plays pickleball, shops at Costco, and drives his kids to soccer practice in his custom BMW, which he sometimes races at the track. Thailand faded into the background.



Vatchrawee and Chakriwat speak to the media at Suvarnabhumi Airport in Samut Prakarn, before departing to the United States after their visit to Thailand in 2023. Peerapon Boonyakiat—SOPA Images/LightRocket/Getty Images

That all changed in August 2023, when Vacharaesorn suddenly returned to the Kingdom. “I literally found out he was in Thailand through the media,” says Max. “He did not consult with me, my mother, or anybody in our family before going.” It was a lightning bolt that left Max “hurt and then somewhat angry,” he says, “because I thought that when it comes to Thailand, we’re all in it together.”

However, Max softened after it emerged that Vacharaesorn’s return had been generally well-received: “I saw that he was making headway.”

Vacharaesorn’s return to Thailand spoke to a succession crisis that is roiling the nation of 70 million. Although King Vajiralongkorn was named heir aged 20, he

still has not named his own successor. The presumed favorite had been Princess Bajrakitiyabha, the daughter of his first wife, but she collapsed while training her dogs in December 2022 and has been in a coma ever since. Hopes of a recovery are slim.

The King also has a son by his third wife, Prince Dipangkorn, although he is understood to have learning difficulties that could impede his ability to fulsomely discharge his royal duties. With few viable alternatives, Vacharaesorn's prodigal return has been seen by analysts as an attempt to road-test his suitability for the role.

However, after a few months, the tone soured. It emerged that Vacharaesorn had married an American woman, Elisa Garafano, and the couple have two daughters, which would bar him from consideration, just like Max. Although Vacharaesorn has steadfastly denied any desire for the throne, his desperate scrambling to explain that he was getting a divorce appeared to betray his furtive ambitions.

The perception among analysts was that Vacharaesorn was striving to thread the needle as a compromise candidate for succession, one who would appeal to progressives as a worldly, modernizing force, while still bearing blood blue enough to avoid alienating staunch royalists. But he may have misjudged just how precarious that tightrope had become, as the future of the institution was thrust to the center of political discourse.

In May 2023, Move Forward, a political party that openly campaigned on curbing the monarchy's powers, won the most seats in Thailand's general elections but was blocked from forming a government by the military-appointed Senate. The party's subsequent disbandment by the Constitutional Court last August added grist to the perception among Move Forward's predominantly young voters that the nation's elites are conspiring to expunge their democratic will.

Vacharaesorn appeared to align himself with reformers with veiled criticism of Thailand's draconian *lèse-majesté* royal defamation law, known as Article 112, which is the bedrock on which royal power is built. Under it, anyone who defames, insults or threatens the King, Queen, heir apparent, or regent faces three to 15 years in prison. Critics argue that far from protecting the dignity of the monarch, the law has been co-opted to silence all dissent.

At least 276 people, including 20 under the age of 18, were charged under Article 112 in the four years until November, according to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights. Last June, former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was

ousted in a 2006 coup and is father to current Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, was indicted for lèse-majesté for an interview he gave nearly a decade ago. “Article 112 prosecutions are becoming more and more aggressive,” says Paul Chambers, a renowned American expert on Thailand, who fled the country in May following a lèse-majesté charge.

In his recent Facebook post, Max lamented how his family had been harassed “using surveillance, threats, and abuse of Article 112.” But asked by TIME to elaborate, he pointedly declines. “Charlie, I’m going to stay away from that one,” he says. “It’s the palace’s prerogative how that law is utilized.”



Max ties a Buddhist khata scarf around the Bangkok City Pillar Shrine on Jan. 3, 2025.

Regarding Article 112, it's possible Vacharaesorn flew close to the sun. In September 2023, a month following his initial return to Thailand, he attended an exhibition titled Faces of Victims of 112 at New York's Columbia University curated by Thai dissident Pavin Chachavalpongpun, a prominent academic who himself faces lèse-majesté charges. Afterwards, Vacharaesorn posted on Facebook that "I love and hold my loyalty to the monarchy, but I believe that 'knowing' is better than 'not knowing,' and each individual has their own opinion which is derived from their own experiences."

Against this backdrop, Vacharaesorn's efforts to find the middle ground between reformists and royalists may have simply alienated both camps. His cause certainly hasn't been helped by several missteps. Other than the secret American family, it emerged that he left the U.S. with \$94,767.88 in credit card debt, which he later agreed to pay back. After arriving in Thailand, he set up a legal consulting firm, VVV Group, to help foreign companies come to Thailand, and has been working with brands from Chinese EV firm Zeekr to Hollywood actor Mark Wahlberg's tequila label.

The VVV Group website originally listed its chairman as "Prince Vacharaesorn," despite his having been stripped of royal titles, but he has since removed the honorific. Still, the perception for many was that Vacharaesorn was attempting to cash in on his royal connections. He also reportedly had close contact with Thaksin, the former prime minister whose populist adulation has made him anathema to royalists. "I think somehow he met up with the wrong people," says Pavin. "And this encouraged rightwing royalists to go after him."

Max still insists his father remains unaware he was blocked from returning to Thailand, nor of Vacharaesorn's forced departure, believing instead that some shadowy clique is working against his family to protect their own interests. "His Majesty has no idea that I'm trying to get back in. I sincerely believe that," he says. "He would welcome me with open arms. Things would never be back the way they were, but he would definitely not tell me to go away."

Max suspects that a palace faction has been conspiring to temper any influence his family might generate, fearful that more returning brothers might form a stronger alternative power source that would be more difficult to tame. They would presumably be figures who are close to Prince Dipangkorn and would prefer him to take the throne. "This is a zero sum game for them," says Pavin.

Some have suggested it could even be the brothers' estranged sister, Princess Sirivannavari, who having toiled by her father's side for decades now objects to being sidelined by her returning kin. "That is certainly the rumor that I've heard," says Max. "But I don't know if I could ever substantiate it."

The opacity of the palace means no outsiders can know for sure. But the actions of King Vajiralongkorn following his rise to the apogee of Thai society don't suggest a monarch wanting for control.



A portrait of King Maha Vajiralongkorn in Bangkok, Thailand, on Aug. 15, 2024. Andre Malerba—Bloomberg/Getty Images

Since taking power, King Vajiralongkorn has taken personal command of the Crown Property Bureau, which handles the estimated \$60 billion royal fortune, and brought several influential state offices under his direct supervision. In 2017, he ordered the transfer of two army units—the Bangkok-based 1st and 11th Infantry Regiments—from the military chain of command to the Royal Security Command under his direct supervision. The following year he established a new elite faction of the Thai Army—known as *kho daeng*, or red collar—whose members the palace nominates and from whom top leadership posts must be

picked, including the Army Commander, Supreme Commander, and the Commander of the First Army Area, which covers central Thailand including Bangkok and has historically staged several coups. In addition, more than 1,600 police have been assigned to protect the King and his family.

Also in 2017, King Vajiralongkorn changed the national constitution to allow him to rule from abroad. Months later he dismissed or reassigned 96 palace staff on charges such as being “lazy” or “arrogant,” according to official royal proclamations, and later dismissed six palace officials for “extremely evil” conduct. When, in 2019, Vajiralongkorn’s oldest sister Princess Ubolratana announced her candidacy for Prime Minister, Vajiralongkorn quickly blocked her, saying it would “defy the nation’s culture.”

In July 2019, King Vajiralongkorn designated Sineenatha Wongvajirapakdi as his official consort—rekindling a position that hadn’t been seen for almost a century—only to strip her of her title and rank three months later. After she disappeared for 10 months, Sineenatha reemerged in August 2020 suddenly restored to her former position as “untainted,” though she briefly disappeared from public view again in late 2021. Today, other than his queen and official consort, Vajiralongkorn has increasingly been seen with two other minor consorts, who have even been charged with royal duties in his absence.

In fact, the line of succession is the only aspect of palace life that King Vajiralongkorn has yet to exert a firm hand over—but it is the one that threatens to be most destabilizing. “It’s the king’s prerogative; it’s the palace’s prerogative,” shrugs Max of the succession. “I don’t care because that is not my intent in life.

“The bottom line is that I love and respect His Majesty and want nothing more than to literally kiss his feet again. I just want to make people around him understand that there is absolutely no danger of any kind. I don’t want anything. I respect the institution and just love my homeland.”

Does his American family feel the same way? Max breaks into a weary grin. He reveals that he recently overheard a young friend of his 10-year-old son asking him what it was like being a part of a royal family. “My son looked at his friend and says, ‘Oh, it’s crazy. There’s nothing good about it.’”