BBC

**Thailand's lese-majeste laws explained**

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 central to Thai society

**Thailand's lese-majeste laws are among the strictest in the world. BBC News explains what they are and how they are used.**

**What are the laws?**

The laws protect the most senior members of Thailand's royal family from insult or threat.

Article 112 of Thailand's criminal code says anyone who "defames, insults or threatens the king, the queen, the heir-apparent or the regent" will be punished with up to 15 years in prison.

This has remained virtually unchanged since the creation of the country's first criminal code in 1908, although the penalty was toughened in 1976.

The ruling has also been enshrined in all of Thailand's recent constitutions, which state: "The King shall be enthroned in a position of revered worship and shall not be violated. No person shall expose the King to any sort of accusation or action."

Image captionMembers of the Thai royal family - most prominently King Vajiralongkorn - are covered by the laws

However, there is no definition of what constitutes an insult to the monarchy.

Lese-majeste complaints can be filed by anyone, against anyone, and they must always be formally investigated by the police.

Meanwhile, the details of the charges are rarely made public for fear of repeating the alleged offence.

Critics say the room for interpretation is too wide and the penalties too severe.

**Why does Thailand have them?**

The monarch is central to Thai society. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who died in October 2016 after seven decades on the throne, was widely loved and often treated as a virtual god.

"The monarchy is above any conflict," says Winthai Suvaree, a spokesman for Thailand's military rulers.

The ruling junta, which overthrew Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's government, is seen as staunchly royalist.

The military took power on 22 May 2014 after months of anti-government protests, saying it would return stability.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha has stressed that lese-majeste laws were needed to protect the royals.

Image captionPrime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha has warned against people making "anti-monarchist" remarks

"His Majesty is not in a position to respond or explain," the premier was quoted as saying.

One of the justifications for the military coup in 2006 was that the then prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, was undermining the institution of the monarchy - an allegation he vehemently denies.

**How have they been used?**

The law has netted an odd assortment of offenders over the years.

In 2007, Swiss national Oliver Jufer was jailed for 10 years after drunkenly spray-painting posters of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. [**He was later pardoned.**](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/6547413.stm) And in 2011, a 61-year-old grandfather was sentenced to 20 years in prison after being found guilty of sending text messages deemed to be offensive to the queen.

Image captionSomyot Prueksakasemsuk was jailed for apparently publishing anti-monarchy articles

Human rights groups say the lese majeste laws have been used as a political weapon to stifle free speech.

Amnesty International condemned a Thai court's decision to uphold a 10-year sentence against social activist and former magazine editor Somyot Prueksakasemsuk. He was [**jailed in 2013 over two articles**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21155704) deemed offensive to the royal family.

"Authorities in Thailand have in recent years increasingly used legislation, including the lese-majeste law, to silence peaceful dissent and jail prisoners of conscience," [**Amnesty said following the ruling.**](http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/thailand-release-activist-imprisoned-allegedly-insulting-monarchy-2014-09-19)

Some of the most recent arrests for lese-majeste have been made over posts on social media sites.

A man faces 15 years in jail for [**posting images on Facebook of Bhumibol's favourite dog**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-35099322) in a way that mocked the king, according to the prosecutor.

And a cleaning lady is being charged for [**posting the words "I see"**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-36328865) in an exchange on Facebook between her and a political activist that police say had defamatory comments.

Even hitting the "like" button on Facebook on a post that is deemed offensive to the king has led to people being charged under Article 112.