



The Hon. Issara Sereewatthanawut (above) and at work (opp. page)

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Issara Sereewatthanawut is currently Deputy Secretary General of the Democrat Party Thailand and Honorary Consul and Head of Mission at the Consulate of the Republic of Moldova to the Kingdom of Thailand. Before joining the Democrat Party, he served the country in various advisory roles in the Parliament of Thailand as well as the Central Intellectual Property and International Trade Court. Dr. Sereewatthanawut sits on the Board of Directors for automotive companies, located in Thailand, Europe and China. He also teaches at both public and private universities in Thailand. His alma maters include Chulalongkorn University and Imperial College London where he received his bachelor's and Ph.D.'s degrees in chemical engineering. He also pursued a Master's degree in Public Administration from Ramkhamhaeng University and received post graduate training at Harvard Law School and the University of Pennsylvania Law School

Thailand's Future

An Interview with The Honorable Dr. Issara Sereewatthanawut,
Deputy Secretary General of the Democrat Party of Thailand, Honorary Consul and
Head of Mission - Consulate of the Republic of Moldova to the Kingdom of Thailand,
and Automobile Executive

What are your views on Thailand's politics over the past decade and how did you become interested in politics?

Although Thai people have strongly supported the principles of democracy as we believe it is the least terrible system, during the past decade, I regard Thailand's politics as a rather "Illiberal Democracy." Why? There are a series of activities which led to this. These activities also happened in many developing countries around the world, starting with elections that were not totally free and fair, and then the abuse of political power (for instance, a parliamentary dictator or an extrajudicial execution). Next, we experienced the populism policy and a political polarization, which separated people into two groups – one that gained and one that lost – leading to protests. This came out naturally as people who suffered from being taken advantage felt angry. Then, the country's politics became deadlocked and this required military intervention to unlock. After the sanction, the structural reform was not as strong as expected, thus the same thing repeated itself again.

As for my interest in politics, I have always believed in the principles of the charter of the United Nations and in its millennium goals. Having followed Thai politics closely through many channels, I realized that there are many problems that need to be solved. Through my experience and exposure, I want to play a part in making this kind of politics fade away in the not-too-distant future so that people can consider Thailand as a better and more civilized country. To that end, I want to make a difference in Thai society by instilling in people the passion to learn, the eagerness to be strong, the practice of patience and the adoration of virtue.

How will Thai politics be impacted by the new election system and constitution to be instituted in 2019?

The laws that have recently gone into effect and the new constitution are considered to be quite long and complicated. We acknowledge that the new system is aimed at being constructive by raising the level of people's participation. However, I thought that it may be difficult to put into practice unless some modifications and amendments are made. Some even have doubts about those in political power and their motivations in creating the new rules. Thus, there is a high possibility that we will see the continuation of the current political circumstances rather than a big change. My hope is that every player,

whether new or old candidates, will uphold the rule of law and work to create free and fair elections.

In a recent interview, you quoted from His Royal Highness Prince Mahidol of Songkla who said, "The genuine success of education is to be able to apply knowledge for the interest of the society." How can education reform enable the Thai people to prosper in the future?

Education has long been a core pillar of Thai society. Long before the establishment of schools and universities, Thai people studied in the temples. Now, the advancement of technology has enabled everyone, regardless of the age, to learn anything at any time, anywhere, and sometimes for free. The world has also begun to adopt the concept of hiring those without degree qualifications as long as they have the abilities and skills necessary to meet the requirements, which supports the trend of a degree no longer being looked at as the only success indicator. As a result, I strongly believe that a visionary leader could cause Thai education to take a quantum leap through technology. We have to focus on improving the quality and equality of our education of all types and at all levels and ensure that everyone is able to access reliable knowledge sources, be creative in applying the knowledge and skill they gain to make a viable living and, ultimately, develop their consciousness and give back to the society and country. I believe there is still room for improvement with this in Thailand.

What is the perception in Thailand of its young leaders and the next generation and how they compare with the global trends?

I think the young people of Thailand follow the global trends closely because they have grown up with globalism and the technological revolution as those in other countries have. From my point of view, we should admire any capable leaders based on their performance, not their ages, so I prefer to call them modern leaders. They are the group of leaders who are aware of the rapid changes taking place and are able to successfully adapt their thoughts and behaviors to those new dynamics. The new generation might have slight advantages as they were born into this era and are naturally exposed to the digital technology. This is a group that tends to be diverse and independent. However, the Thai modern leaders and new generation still

strongly adopt Thai values, traditions, customs, and manners, and they sometimes even blend them with the western culture as they see fit. Although we are living in the western-leaning society these days, Thais still respect seniority, put our hands together to greet each other, and embed in ourselves the practice of being considerate and thoughtful.

You talked about the new generation of national leaders emerging in Thailand. How do you think they can generate a positive impact for the country in the coming years?

The new generation can certainly energize positive impacts for the country, whether it be sooner or later. In my personal view, national leaders require a new, high-level of competencies. They need to have the confidence to make accurate decisions quickly, the courage to fight for what they believe despite unpredictable and challenging environments and, more importantly, the ability to be creative. The new generation has trained to acquire those competencies. They are talented in adapting themselves and are also ambitious and optimistic, but not overly so. Thus, this generation is ready to handle the information and people flows, both at the national and international levels. More importantly, this group will have to live with the consequences of these policies the longest. I will be very pleased if we all begin to think beyond ourselves, and think more about the community, the society and the national security of Thailand while measuring each decision on an ethical dimension. That will truly be a positive development.

How should Thailand be reacting to the recent changes in the foreign policies of major economic powers like the U.S., China and the EU?

These entities are all important to Thailand. We should balance and manage our policies regarding them carefully. It would be easier to look at them just like any other relationship, but the exchange that we have with them is not at the level where everyone is happy. We can talk

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about trade with China; about technology, tourism and cultural aspects with the EU; and also discuss technology and security with the U.S. As long as a win-win synergy can be established and our cooperation adds value to each of us, I think the changes in foreign policies could possibly result in good things. In the history of international relations, hegemony relationships have done no good for us or any country. I strongly believe that no single great power should be able to monopolize or control us.

The U.S. and China are the traditional major markets for Thai exports. What do you think Thailand's position should be regarding the U.S.-China tariff concerns?

Although not directly, this is affecting us. Both the U.S. and China are major markets for Thailand. We just hope that everything will work out well for both of these countries as the negotiations between them continues. Many times in the past, trade wars have extended and turned into broader wars. Hopefully, the lessons learned from these should prevent this from happening in this case. For some reason, Thai people are accustomed to being flexible. Our approach in dealing with export uncertainties include diversifying to other markets, employing sustainable development policies, and practicing self-sufficient economy policies.

What role will Thailand assume in Southeast Asia in the coming years?

In September of last year, as Director of Special Affairs of the Honorary Consuls Association (Thailand), I was responsible for organizing a gala dinner to celebrate the seventh anniversary of the association. There is a phrase I chose to make the presentation theme and it is from Publilius Syrus. I think this quote perfectly describes the position that Thailand will assume in ASEAN in the coming years. It is "Where there is Unity, there is always Victory." Nowadays, there are various challenges for each country to overcome. Many have to revise their economic relations, avoid interfering powers, or undergo a transformation. Thailand

regards all of the countries of Southeast Asia as great and equal partners. Hence, we would not take any side. At the same time, while our national interest is of paramount importance, we will continue to help each other bring the regional unifications into balance.

Will the process of moving the country towards becoming a high-income nation and an inclusive society be an example for success in sustainable growth and development? Will there be bureaucracy reduction to make the transition to high-technology more effective?

I was born and bred in Thailand and am so proud to be Thai. However, I prefer to look at things through the lens of reality. Despite Thailand's great potential based on its geographical advantages and many talents, there are still many wide gaps to fill in order to reach the point where we can fully say that our country's development is on the right track and has succeeded in escaping from the income disparity trap and properly provides for its people's well-being. The areas with room for improvement include political stability, economic sufficiency and the creation of a disciplined society that honors inclusiveness, equality in education and professionalism.

When it comes to the need to reduce bureaucracy to enable an effective high-technology transition, it seems to me to be the other way around. When high-technology is in place and we employ it effectively – which I strongly believe it is on its way – bureaucracy will be reduced or, in some cases, eliminated. Thailand is now in the early transition stage and is making the preparations that are necessary to speed up this process. We are among the nations that record relatively high e-commerce transactions. Both the public and private sectors have realized the importance and benefit of cutting-edge technology. It is the duty of the future democratic government to push forward and foster all elements needed to fully reach the level of the latest technology. ●