



Towards the 21st Century

by
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IN THIS WEEK'S HRI-POST-CO-OPERATION COLUMN,

Dr. Chira profiles the current general election campaign and reasons that when the negatives are balanced with the positives, Thailand should still be the winner.

Welcome to 40 days of election fever! This week we must think about and discuss politics a little more than usual. Looking ahead to the 21st century, it is interesting to ponder the kind of political leadership that Thailand is likely to produce in the age of globalization. And remember, politics and human resources are closely linked together, and the broad consequences of this relationship are significant indeed.

During the last general election in September 1992, I was deeply involved with the PollWatch organisation in the capacity of spokesman. Based on those experiences, I would like to share with you some of my observations now that we are all in the election mood. The most important question to ask is whether this campaign will be different to the previous election? Well, for one thing, the run up to the election is much shorter than last time. In fact the current 45 day campaign is exactly half the length of the 90 day campaign in 1992. Nevertheless, by international standards 45 days is long enough. The recent Malaysian election took place within an even shorter time frame. The advantage of a short campaign is that the disruption to the functioning of government is kept to a minimum, in this case about 2 months.

Another observation I would like to make is that the mass media and information technology will play a more significant role than before. Radio is quite as important as television in Thailand generally and in Bangkok in particular, because it is quick and convenient. Therefore it is important that the media should act responsibly and focus on issues as opposed to personalities.

I think the theme of the election should be about political leadership in the age of globalization as well as striking a balance between the economy and quality of life. Any old kind of leadership will no longer do; we must have political leadership which can help us to compete effectively with our neighbours, especially those in the Asia-Pacific.

Another interesting point is that the reduction in the minimum voting age to 18 will probably have a significant impact on the political landscape. With their modern outlook and broader perspective on life, young voters may demand better government. Therefore we might expect that the kind of issues being discussed may be more profound than before. In order to win the support of these voters political parties will have to offer a brighter future and visionary ideas, and field candidates with new and exciting faces.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, the existing political culture and practices may not change very much, especially in the rural areas where 60% of Thai voters reside. Vote buying will remain a problem. So far Thailand still does not have an independent election commission operating separately to the Ministry of Interior. An amendment to the constitution has been tabled to establish one, but with the dissolution of parliament, it hasn't gone through yet.

So why do parliamentary candidates in rural areas buy votes? It seems to me that there are two basic theories which apply. Firstly, there is the low level of education in rural areas. Most Thais living 'up-country' have less than 6 years of education at primary level only. Secondly, the patronage system still survives in rural areas where protection and security derives from village headman, kamnan and the local mafia.

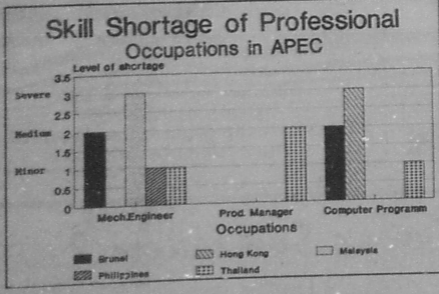
Unfortunately, local villagers cannot rely on the machienry of government to protect them. Therefore they have to rely on influential people who will in turn enter politics.

Although over time the vote buying will decline, it will not disappear overnight. So it is important to see this link between the lack of education and the pace of democratic development. Until we develop our educational system in rural areas, politics will not live up to our expectations and our options will be limited.

In the meantime, all elements of society, from labour unions to farmer groups and NGOs, and from civil servants to the mass media, must work together to improve our political processes.

I have a lot of confidence in our free society in which we increasingly allow information to flow through every sector. Therefore I am looking forward to seeing this next election mark the beginning of a 'third wave' of democratic politics.

See you next week!



Source: HRI, 1994

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