

Moving Thailand Forward

Abhisit Vejjajiva
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There are so many questions about Thai politics today, but what we should be concerned about is the future of this country, given that we have lost almost two years where we have been mired in political conflicts and other crises. While all this has been happening, the world has not stopped turning and other countries are making progress, making advances in economics and in other fields - so basically Thailand cannot afford to lose more time.

Introduction
for the
whole paper

To me, there are three vital tasks that are facing us today, and the Democrat Party - as the oldest political party in Thailand - is determined to make sure that we succeed in these tasks. **The three tasks are first, to restore democracy, second, to ensure that we put an end to the unrest in the South, and third, of course, is to revive the economy.**

Structure of
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paper

Democracy

First, democracy After the verdict on the May 30th, 2007 there are still many questions and uncertainties. I have made clear from the time before the Thai Rak Thai verdict was known to us that we think the country should move on and that we should continue on our path towards restoring democracy; but **some elements will have to be put in place.**

Introduction
for
Democracy

First, we need a democratic constitution – so that regardless of what happens to the various political groupings, the number one focus is that we must have good democratic rules in place. At the time, there were a number of clauses that were of great concern to us and to other supporters of democracy in the country. For instance, there was a clause about an emergency panel consisting mainly of appointed people who could somehow overrule or make key political decisions – that is certainly undemocratic. At that time, the Senate which would be empowered to impeach elected politicians were all going to come from some selection process or appointment. Of course, there are also a number of clauses for the transition period which suggests possible channels by which the military or the CNS could somehow hang on to power even after the elections were held. To us – and I am sure to the majority of the Thai people – that is simply not acceptable.

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If the Constitution is seen to be undemocratic and unable to support a process of restoration of democracy in the country, I am certain that it will not pass the referendum. If that were to happen, both the CNS and the government would be extremely hard pushed not to concede and respond to the mood of the people as expressed through that process. Since then, there have been some amendments. The emergency panel is now gone. We have – for me – an uncomfortable compromise whereby half of the senate will be elected and another half selected, and there are still some clauses in the transition period yet to be worked out.

The drafting assembly is in the process of deliberation on the various articles. We can expect them to be able to stick to the timetable which means that a complete draft would be ready by the end of the month (June 2007.) Again, our call to the Assembly is to ensure that we have a good enough Constitution to allow democracy to get back to work.

But the Constitution itself is not enough, democracy is about political competition. On the night of the verdict I was one of the first to call for the military, government and the Electoral Commission to allow the supporters and members of the Thai Rak Thai Party to register a new party as soon as possible. We welcome the decision by the cabinet to propose a law to the National Legislative Assembly to achieve that. And if they wish to use their old name of “Thai Rak Thai”, we say that they should be allowed to do so.

We would now urge the NLA to speed up the procedures so we hope that within the next month the TRT members and supporters will be able to register a new party. In case you think that I am only saying this because they will be a small or a weak party, let me remind you that the number of former MPs still with the Thai Rak Thai even discounting the 111 people currently banned, is still about twice the number of former MPs that we have. We welcome the competition and we want to have a meaningful election by the end of the year. We urge the Electoral Commission and the government to work towards free and fair elections. If the people in the military or the CNS have any political ambitions, we urge them to run in the elections. We are willing and happy to face the competition from both the TRT and the CNS. We only ask for free and fair elections to be held – which means no abuse of power by the current regime in the elections and of course, getting to grips with the problem of vote buying which has acted like a cancer in Thai democracy.

Why have I placed democracy at the top of the agenda? Because I do not think the key problems facing the country - namely the unrest in the South, or the economic problems – could be solved otherwise. There is no way that we could have a regime that does not have representatives in the Deep South to be able to resolve a crisis which runs really deep in the minds of the locals. There is also no way that we can regain confidence, or even respect that is needed from the investors’ community – foreign and local – unless democracy returns.

Conclusion for Democracy

The South

On to the South. The problems in the South have been discussed many times. There had been expectations that maybe after the coup and after the change in government, that somehow the situation might improve, partly because of the belief that much of the problems that we see now is the direct result of policy mistakes during the Thaksin years, particularly the abductions and killings that have fueled local conflicts and have meant the loss of trust – not just among the locals and officials – but also trust among the locals themselves. Six to seven months on, despite the Prime Minister’s apology and insistence on reconciliation, the violence is as frequent as ever and it can even be argued that the form of violence has become even more acute.

Introduction
for The
South

or us Democrats, we believe that the Prime Minister has the right ideas; unfortunately those ideas are not being implemented effectively. Despite the improvement in policy direction, the current regime and the Prime Minister are held back by two key factors. First, there are the ties with the military – unavoidably part of the people who created the problems during the Thaksin years. To follow up on his apology, there has to be many more actions to address the injustices of the past. Secondly, the current government is held back by its own conservatism. The solutions for the Deep South require creative thinking, imagination, and a great deal of political courage. No conservative solutions seem to be feasible now.

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What will we do? Number one, we believe that there can be no peace without justice. We have to face up to the injustices of the past committed by the state and take the appropriate steps to win back trust from the locals. There can be no conditions nor factors that should hold us back from doing just that, because we think it is absolutely necessary to move ahead to find a lasting solution.

Secondly, we need to look at two areas which would help to promote lasting peace in the provinces.

First, in the area of the economy, this government has announced a policy of creating a “special economic development zone” in the area. But again the implementation of this policy only amounts to providing soft loans to business leaders in the provinces affected in by the situation. This is simply not enough; it does not even give a full or correct meaning to the term “special economic development zone.”

We intend to create economic opportunities for the local people according to their beliefs, to their ways of life and to their culture. There is a real opportunity for the three provinces economically. It is well positioned to export a number of goods, particularly to the Middle-East and to the rest of the Muslim world, but there needs to be an integrated program to ensure that the production of those goods really come from the local people and that the benefits accrue to the local communities.

The second area is education. At the moment we have both state schools and private religious schools. The government should continue to provide support and subsidies to the private religious schools but also to ensure that the people who attend those schools emerge with the kind of knowledge and skills that will allow them to have employment opportunities. At the moment, young people who complete their education there find that there are no options are open to them so that they end up unemployed and hence easily drawn into the web of violence and become prey to the insurgents’ movement.

That is the plan we have for the Deep South. We have former local MPs there. We are taking the issue very seriously. Despite the political activity ban, I myself and a number of our people have been down there regularly to visit the area. We will be holding two big seminars, one in Bangkok and another in Hat Yai over the next month on the issue, where we hope to make it extremely clear that this is something that needs to be done. The plan needs the support and cooperation from everybody in Thailand – both inside and outside the area.

Conclusion for
The South

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The Economy

Introduction for The Economy

As for the economy, our approach would involve three main tasks. The first is to send the right signal to the rest of the world. Whether intentionally or whether they are unfortunate mistakes, there have been a number of steps, rather, missteps taken by the current government that have sent the wrong signals to the rest of the world, as far as the issue of foreign investment in this country is concerned. Thailand simply can not afford such mistakes. The capital controls, the Foreign Business Acts amendments – these policies are simply not appropriate for the country in this age. We will quickly move to tell the rest of the world that Thailand has thrived on being open to foreign investment, on being an open economy for a good four to five decades – that has allowed us to be one of the fastest growing economies for two to three decades – and we intend to stick to that path. That does not mean that we would not listen to the people who have complaints about the possible negative affects of globalization on certain groups. But Thailand cannot turn its back on the world. We need to face up to the challenge. The Democrats have always believed that competitions – political and economic – are conducive towards the creation of efficiency. That is the first thing that we would do.

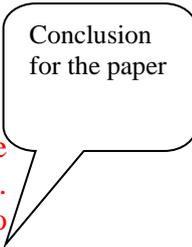
Second, we need to take a hard look at the loss of competitiveness that we have suffered over the last few years. Not enough investments in human resources, inadequate infrastructure. For too many years now the government has been too busy giving money out as loans and ignoring the necessary investments both in human and physical infrastructure. We have a number of projects in and outside Bangkok that we think should go ahead as soon as possible. We will also signal very clearly to the people that it does not make sense to have a “dual-track” economy. You cannot hand out money with one hand, and then use the other to destroy the livelihoods of the people with other policies. The way the FTA with China has affected the lives of the Northern farmers is a case in point. The approach is one of openness, but also to ensure that any openness can be linked to the well-being of the ordinary people, that it has to be one track. The farmers, the industrialists, and the people in the service sector must move together based on the fundamental competitiveness that we can build on, whether it is education, infrastructure, technology etc.

Third, we will focus on the poor. We think it is time to move away from governments that come and go and claim that they work for the poor. So many projects and so many big ideas, yet at the end of the day the poor people remain poor and ever more dependent on the government of the day, ever more dependent on the politicians of the day. We think the way out of poverty is to create jobs and income through the increased competitiveness and openness that I have mentioned. Also, we think that in a market economy where there are losers, where there are people that are disadvantaged, there has to be a good welfare system. It is the right of every single Thai to have access to good education and health care, as well as some kind of savings when they are old. It is time to build on the achievements of the past in terms of the education and health programs that are entitlements, to extend the social security system and to ensure that the communities in the rural areas and in the informal sectors have some form of security whenever they are sick or become old. We have spent the last seven or so months talking to experts and stakeholders and visiting a number of provinces on these issues. We have the numbers, we have the information, we have the policies and believe me – we have the political will.

Conclusion for The Economy

Conclusion

I know that there shall be many political questions when I finish this speech and there will be many more questions when we go meet the people during election time. Whether you think we are favorites or the underdogs, all I can tell you is we will do our utmost to win the hearts and minds of every single voter in Thailand: the Northeast, the North, the Central region, Bangkok, and the South. And whether they vote for us or not, we will continue to work for every single one of them to reunite this country, and to move this great country forward – thank you very much.



Conclusion
for the paper

This piece was adapted from a speech presented by Abhisit Vejjajiva at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand (FFCT) on June 13, 2007.

Vejjaiva, Abhisit, 2007 “Moving Thailand Forward,” http://www.abhisit.org/visiondetail.php?cate_id=56 accessed on October 14, 2007

Notes:

- 1. Introductions and conclusions – Red**
- 2. Structure – first, second and third.**