

The Man of the Hour Can Anand's Constitution Reform Thailand? Asiaweek, October 10, 1997

The Nations Thailand

“It's a Good Starting Point”

The charter chief on the reforms – and himself

In the popular imagination, Anand Panyarachun's persona is that of a retired, reluctant sheriff called up by the decent folk of some Wild West town to get rid of the bad guys terrorizing them. The reputation as saviour was forged during Anand's two short but highly effective stints as caretaker prime minister. The first was in February 1991, when a military junta asked him to head the government. The second was after the May 1992 crackdown on democracy demonstrators. During both periods, Anand performed like no other Thai premier – with competence, honesty and the public interest in mind. Small wonder many Thais want the suave former diplomat and businessman back as PM, especially during this time of political and economic uncertainty.

Anand, now 65, would decline in the unlikely event such an offer was made, but he did agree to serve as chairman of the Constitution drafting committee, overseeing 99 indirectly elected people from various walks of life -- politics, business, academia. The upshot is a new charter that goes some way toward cleaning up Thai politics and improving civil rights and liberties.

As an aristocrat and self professed Anglophile (he graduated from Cambridge in law), Anand can come across as elitist and autocratic in style. In substance, however, he is very much a man of the people. On the eve of the parliamentary vote over the new Constitution, Anand discussed the changes, their implications for the country – and himself – with Correspondent Julian Gearing, Excerpts from their 90-minute talk:

The current Constitution was actually drafted and amended when you were in office. Did you not have any concerns about it at the time?

Every now and then there are complaints, that when I was Prime Minister, why did I not use the opportunity to reform the political system? The fact is that when I was first asked (by the coup leaders) to be Prime Minister, I was a bit ambivalent. On the one hand, the military knew that all my life I had been against dictatorship, corruption and extreme rightist policies. On the other hand, I saw that the coup did receive fairly strong support from the public, because the public was fed up with the government and with the corruption. I knew that if I were to accept (the job), I would disappoint a number of my more liberal friends, those people who viewed me as a sort of standard bearer for democratic ideas. But, I said to myself, if I were to go in, try to sort out the confusion and chaos, it would have some redeeming value. I did not like certain provisions in that interim Constitution, but after I talked to the coup leaders, I

said to myself, you are damned if you do, you are damned if you don't (laughs) – so I went in. So I had nothing to do with the Constitution. As a result, during Anand I and Anand II, I was not able to take any political initiatives.

There is criticism that the new charter is too much of a compromise?

Compromise is the basis of democracy. Whatever course we decide to take. It is always subject to criticism. I am aware of that, I am used to it. It doesn't bother me. There might be one or two sections where there are problems, but it doesn't mean that the whole process is bad. It can be amended some time in the future, after the next election, after the new Constitution has come into force and has been tested in practical terms.

What will this charter do to tackle vote buying and corrupt practices?

The monitoring process is going to be more thorough. The organisations to be set up will have the power and responsibility of bringing wrongdoers to justice. It doesn't mean that just because we have a good Constitution, democracy is going to have a rosy path in this country. People have to participate in the follow-up. People have to be alert to see that only all good men are put in these monitoring bodies (laughs).

What about the bad men, the godfathers, the corrupt? Will this new Constitution get rid of them?

You cannot get rid of them overnight. You have to go through a series of elections. There is a school of thought that people with unsavoury characters, if they live under rules which allow them to show their unsavoury side, they will do it. But if you put them in a different environment, under different rules which make it much more difficult to show their unsavoury side, then they may conform. I will not say they will reform, but they may conform.

A number of politicians have been quite outspoken in their opposition to the draft. Why do you think someone like Interior Minister Sanoh Thienthong expressed sentiments against it?

Perhaps he is worried this new Constitution may spell the end of his career. In the debate over this Constitution, many of the MPs have shown their real characters.

Deputy PM Thaksin Shinawatra suggests only rich people, people who can support themselves, ought to be ministers?

I don't agree with that. This is a very simplistic assessment. Rich men do not cheat. Or educated people do not cheat.

Will Thailand continue to be ruled by the elite, people with money?

I don't think so. Look at Democrat Party leader Chuan Leekpai. He comes from a rural area, he comes from a very humble family, his mother is still living in the market sector of Trang in the south. Look at Britain, at the number of Etonians, the people with money. But then they had John Major. Times change.

We are sitting in Bangkok, but the provinces rely very much on the old system of patronage politics?

It is not a system, it is a culture, and you cannot change that culture overnight. Democracy is not only based on the Constitution. It is based on traditions, conventions, generations of practice which form into a culture, a democratic culture. We don't have that yet. And it will be a long time before we do. We have to uplift education, we have to enable the people to earn a decent livelihood, because what is the use of talking about democracy or the Constitution if they have no jobs? It is no use saying because we don't have this and we don't have that, then dismantle the whole process.

If we look at the bigger picture, how does Thailand's democracy compare with others in Asia?

As far as democracy is concerned, we are much better off than many other nations in terms of freedom of assembly, of expression, of civil rights and liberties. On the other hand, we in Thailand have had a so-called democratic period of only 65 years, with 40 years of interruption from military coups and what not, so it is a fledgling democracy. People are not accustomed to the principles of democracy, to the philosophy. Many think that if you are able to exercise your vote once every three to four years, that is democracy. It is not only about participating in elections. It is about involvement in the decision-making process and in the governance of the country. We tend to look to the form rather than to the substance and essence.

A few critics have questioned whether Thailand should be borrowing political systems from the West?

They all wear suits to Parliament. To me, it is a very flimsy charge. After all democracy was born in the West. So if we didn't go to the source, where could we go? The philosophy itself is something that is not indigenous. And if you don't learn from the mistakes of other countries, the way they reform their political system and the way they try to reform their perennial problems, who could we go to? There is nothing to be ashamed of, there is nothing wrong with this approach.

Will you return to politics?

I was never really in politics. I was brought into it, practically dragged into it. I enjoyed the work that I did as Prime Minister. I think I did some good for the country, but I never liked the life. Politics is the art of the possible. In the process you have to engage in manoeuvring and shenanigans. My family wouldn't want me to take it up again. It is not my cup of tea. It is not my line. I like simplicity. I like my privacy.

Often the Thai people seek a white knight to save them in times of crisis?

That is right. That is the problem with the Thai; people. They are always looking for a knight in shining armour. People have given up hope. There has not been any cheery news for Thailand for quite some time – economically or politically. The new charter is something to which the public is looking forward. Of course you always have to be wary that you do not raise their expectations too much. It is not a panacea to all our ills, but it is a good starting point. Because in a way, it is the first fundamental reform of our political system. It is a watershed.