

PRIME EXAMPLE
Anand Panyarachun
By Judi Buehrer, Thailand Tatler
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Among the companies and enterprises chaired by Anand are the Saha Union Group, Star Block Group, Eastern Star Real Estate Co. and the Post Publishing Public Co. Ltd. He also sits on the boards of directors of IBM Thailand, Samitivej Public Co., Siam Commercial Bank, Sime Darby Berhad of Malaysia, IBM Asia Pacific, the International Advisory Board of General Electric Company, American International Group Inc, and International Finance Corporation Business Advisory Council. He is honorary chairman of Chiva-Som International Health Resorts. And that’s not all. He also chairs the Thailand Development Research Institute Foundation, the Thailand Environment Institute and the Cambridge Thai Foundation. He is a member of the Advisory Council of SASIN Graduate Institute of Business Administration of Chulalongkorn University, the Board of Trustees of the Asian Institute of Technology, and Chulalongkorn University Council. Anand is also chairman of the Business Council for Sustainable Development based in Geneva.

For a man who zealously guards his privacy, Anand Panyarachun is a conspicuously public figure. In fact, Anand seems to be everywhere these days addressing business, education and environmental seminars and conferences in Thailand and abroad. Newspaper and magazine stories quote his witty messages, next to photographs of his familiar, smiling visage – often sharing the spotlight with such notables as Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai and Miss Thailand.

You would think that Anand is on a mission. And he is. You could say he’s Thailand’s self-appointed, roving ambassador. The 62-year-old former Prime Minister-States-man-businessman spends about half of his time these days crusading. At an age when most men plan their retirement, Anand divides his time and energy between chairing the multi-billion-baht Saha Union Group, stumping the speaking circuit to promote Thailand abroad, and to fight for educational and environmental reforms on the home-front.

“I think it’s important that the Thailand story is told to the outside world in an accurate, comprehensive and objective manner,” Anand says, “I hope that my talks will contribute in some measure to the better understanding of Thailand, and to the advancement of the Thai position in international diplomacy and trade.” Anand is selective about his speaking engagements. He declines about

60 percent of invitations he receives, premising his acceptance “upon my interest in promoting Thailand’s political and economic interests.”

A prominent figure nearly half of his life-time, Anand has been described as a polished diplomat, skillful technocrat, astute chief executive – even a knight in shining armour. Admired for his numerous business, political and personal achievements, he is perhaps most warmly regarded by Thais and expatriates for nurturing the Kingdom through the healing, re-building process after two national crises; the February 1991 coup d’etat and the May 1992 uprising.

After the first incident, Anand headed the interim government as Prime Minister until April 21, 1992, when he left Government House and returned to his ninth-floor office in the Saha Union building at Sukhumvit 58. National stability was short-lived, however, and he was appointed Prime Minister again after the bloody May 1992 student uprising, that resulted in 50 deaths. The tragic incident triggered a period of national despair, and Anand faced the weighty task of reassuring his fellow citizens while encouraging them to get the country back on its feet. His faith in Thai people led him to counsel them to “reach inside our own souls to rediscover and tap this inner strength of ours.”

Looking back, Anand says thoughtfully, “Everyone was deeply disturbed and distressed. I think every society, every nation, goes through some kind of a crisis, now and then. In our case it was a crisis of such magnitude – a crisis of the mind – there was a need to resolve it in a rather peaceful, just and objective way. In the shortest possible time, too, although it’s not the type of thing you can lay to rest easily.”

These days, Anand maintains his pragmatic approach, moral values and earnest demeanour. His spacious, meticulously ordered office, projects a purely business-like ambiance, except for a stunning collection of blue and white porcelain vases, and numerous photographs of Anand with His Majesty the King and Heads of State from around the world. Walking briskly across the room to a semi-formal sitting area, Anand reclines in a silk-upholstered chair and glances at the seven-page bio-data in his hand. He relinquishes it to the reporter, saying almost apologetically, “I don’t really like handing out this sort of material about myself.”

It seems an odd remark from a man who has attained national and international esteem, and chaired a host of notable enterprises.

In spite of his public and business stature, Anand is uncomfortable talking about himself. Responding to comments about his accomplishments, he says, “I just do a day’s work. If it turns out to be good, it might be labelled as an accomplishment. Well, thank you, but that’s it.”

Though he answers personal questions tersely, he reveals much when asked whom he most admires. “Normally I go for people with integrity, people who are decent human beings. My role model would be my father.”

Anand talks almost reverently about his father, Phya Prichanusart, who played a key role in defining Thailand's education system. King Rama VI sent him to England to study the British public school system. Later, as education permanent secretary, Phya Prichanusart helped set up many schools, including Vajiravudh College, of which he became headmaster.

Anand describes his father as "a decent man, and a very good father. He generated warmth within our family circle. He never tried to make our decisions for us, although we would talk, discuss matters. He was a teacher - he spent all his life teaching. He loved to read - something I inherited from him. He listened to people, which is very important in a man. You have to be able to listen to other people, to be interested in their ideas and point of view. He left the Civil Service in his early 40s, at a very young age, and started another career. He co-founded the Bangkok Chronicle, now known as the Bangkok Post. Together with a blind American teacher, Miss Caulfield, he set up the first school for the blind in Thailand. Although he was a devout Buddhist, he became, I think, the first non-Christian to chair the YMCA in Thailand. He was a well-travelled man who loved music, especially Chinese and Western opera, and Thai classical dance. He was a man of varied interests, a kind-hearted person, a man of principle."

Anand contemplates his answers carefully, before delivering them in precise English, with a cultured Cambridge accent. It is hard to imagine this poised, confident man grappling with the English language.

"I left Thailand at a relatively old age - the age of 16 - and it was a real struggle to learn proper English," he says, recalling his first experience abroad at Dulwich College, London, in 1948. "The first year was very hard, being away from home, and not being able to catch up with my peers at school because of my inadequacy with the language." He persevered and went on to the University of Cambridge's Trinity College, where he graduated with a law degree and honours.

When Anand returned to Bangkok in 1955, he joined the Foreign Service, where he advanced quickly. He was appointed secretary to the minister of foreign affairs in 1959, and in 1964, first secretary to Thailand's mission to the United Nations. In 1967, while continuing his UN position, he was named ambassador to Canada. He served as Thailand's ambassador to the United States and permanent representative of Thailand to the United Nations from 1972 to 1975, as permanent secretary for foreign affairs in 1976 and as ambassador to Germany from 1977 to 1978.

As an envoy, Anand helped forge several significant agreements, including the first ASEAN-European Community Cooperation Agreement, the normalisation of relations with China, Laos and Vietnam and first ASEAN summit meeting in Indonesia. Concerning his participation in such historic negotiations, Anand says, "I consider it my luck that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, I was often involved in some momentous event pertaining to the interests of Thailand. You can call it fate."

Anand resigned from the Foreign Ministry and joined the Saha Union Group in 1979 as vice-chairman. His first appointment as Prime Minister in 1991, triggered his abrupt resignation from all his business positions, a step he repeated after the May 1993 uprising. He flashes the familiar boyish grin and States, "I felt obliged to go back to my business activities, for the simple reason that when I left Saha Union - twice - I was, not able to give them any advance notice."

Anand says he is in the process of phasing out of the business world. His agenda remains full, and includes a diverse itinerary. For example, over the past year he addressed conferences held by the Pacific Area Travel Association in Hawaii, the School of African and Oriental Studies in London, Merrill Lynch in New York, Thammasat University's Economic Association in Khao Yai, and the University of Khon Kaen and the Federation of Thai Industries in Songkhla.

Anand prefers to focus his talks in Thailand on environmental protection and educational reforms. In addition to advocating environmental preservation, he co-founded The Environmental Institute, because he felt it was time that business and industry began to address the environmental damages they had spawned. Anand's government made the environment a high priority and enacted "a rather comprehensive law" on environmental protection and management. He embarked on a national programme to build more waste treatment plants, and implemented tax incentives to encourage people to use lead-free gasoline.

In the past eight years, he believes Thailand "has done a good job in getting down to the basics." Much more needs to be done, "it is important that a partnership be established between the government, the public sector, the people and the business world. Business and industry are slowly but steadily accepting responsibility for environmental preservation and protection." The Institute is aiming its workshops and seminars at both top executives and young business leaders. "I'm rather encouraged by their interest and attitude," he says.

Following a path his father pioneered, Anand has initiated a "one-man campaign" to get the country moving on education. He supports up-grading the quality of teachers, and beefing up programmes to train Thailand's future business leaders, scientists and technicians. He hopes Thai people will contribute to the task. "It would be more than a donation, rather it would be a wise investment," he says.

"My vision is to make Thailand into a regional education centre. We can position ourselves to do so. Education has been proven to be a vehicle for equitable distribution of income. Unless we start now, we will be more.." Anand paused to find the right word..."retarded," he adds with a spontaneous, youthful grin. More seriously, he concludes, "A beginning must be made."

Last year, Anand added Bangkok's traffic congestion to his priority list. By launching Traffic Crisis 94, he created a forum, including the public and private sector, to propose measures to solve Bangkok's traffic woes.

“His Majesty the King did a lot of good things to focus attention on the issue and galvanize public interest in solving the traffic crisis. Our exercise was, in fact, a response to His Majesty’s initiative. Far too often we just left it to the King to do magic things. I think he’s over-worked,” Anand says.

Though Anand devotes considerable time to business and public speaking, he and his wife MR Sodsri, two married daughters and their families, see each other often and travel together frequently. “I love travelling in Thailand – especially to the north and northeast. One of these days, I hope to stop travelling abroad and concentrate on Thailand. There are so many places I have not yet seen.”

Anand also enjoys watching TV sports programmes and reading Winston Churchill’s books, good English prose, speeches by World Leaders and political and economic publications. A music lover, he says, “I have only one regret. I would love to have learned to play a musical instrument, but I am a good listener.” His favourite composers are Rachmaninov, Chopin, Brahms and Puccini.

Anand continues to play squash when he has time, but has given up tennis. “It’s changed a lot, with all the top spins and what not.” He played on Cambridge tennis and squash teams, but then, as now “Work always took precedence.”

After a nearly two-hour interview, one feels as though there is much more to learn about Anand. At first serious, reserved and intellectual, he has gradually relaxed, allowing his warmth and humour to emerge. He’s come a long way since the anxious, homesick student arrived in London. One has a sense that he will go further, prompting the question: Is he considering returning to politics?

“No,” he responds quickly, emphatically. “I’m a private person, I cherish my privacy. It’s not my “cup of tea” to subject myself to constant public scrutiny.” In view of his rise to power twice, another question persists: Could he be coaxed to return to the political arena?

The youthful Anand grin fills his face. “I could do it for a short time a year or two as I did in the past, but not for the rest of my life. I’m not that dedicated to politics, and my wife does not like it! I still follow politics, and I try to do a few things. Not everyone has to jump into the political arena to have an effect.”

A fitting remark, but an under-statement from a man who continues to stimulate thought and action at many levels.