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Thai envoy aims to set example for other women

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THAI Ambassador Suchitra Hiranprueck was unaware that she had broken the "Asean Men's Club" by being the first woman ambassador from the region to be posted to Malaysia.

She is, however, unfazed by it. Ambassador Maite Emily Mohale from South Africa had been the only woman representative before she arrived in February to represent Thailand.

Suchitra had told an old friend that she would now have to learn to play golf since the rest of the Asean ambassadors traditionally played golf together.

However, her busy schedule has prevented her from even beginning to learn the basics.

Diplomacy had not been her first choice. She was a university lecturer but she quit after two years because she realised that she did not really enjoy teaching.

Someone suggested that she sit for the foreign service examination. She did and joined the elite service shortly after that.

She soon discovered that she enjoyed being a diplomat.

"I think perhaps deep down I always wanted to be a diplomat because my father was in the foreign service although he left a long time ago," she said.

Her first job was in the Thai Asean secretariat in 1972, five years after the establishment of the regional organisation in 1967.

It was an interesting time for her and she was able to work with and meet with people from the Asean member countries.

She was then posted to the Thai Embassy in Geneva as second secretary.

She then served as director of International Economic Affairs in Bangkok before being posted to her embassy in Tokyo.

She returned home to become director-general of the Department of European Affairs in the Foreign Ministry before her first posting as ambassador - to Russia.

As Ambassador to Malaysia, she hopes to see closer relations between people as she feels that people-to-people relations are very important.

She also hopes for closer economic relations between Thailand and Malaysia not only in both markets but also in third markets.

"Malaysian businesses are very strong now, and they are going out all over the world, why don't we join them," Suchitra said and added, "our businesses can explore different markets together."

She also feels that there is still misunderstanding and misperceptions between the people of the two countries.

Referring to an article in the Far Eastern Economic Review which said that the relationship between the two countries were strained, she said that as far as she knows apart from the border demarcation issue, "we have hardly any problems."

Since the March visit of Thai Prime Minister Gen Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, both sides have been working very hard to settle the border issue and that "we should have a resolution soon."

"There is a lot of misunderstanding, that is why outsiders think that relations are strained, but actually it is just some misunderstanding," she said.

"I think my job is to help, to do everything to reduce misconceptions. "Of course we may have different priorities, but I still feel that we have

to work closely together and move forward together," she added.

This year is the 40th anniversary of Thailand-Malaysia bilateral relations. Thailand is one of the first countries Malaysia set up diplomatic relations with after independence.

In fact Tunku Abdul Rahman sent a mission to study Thai protocol to use as a base for Malaysian protocol. Malaysia learnt how to treat visiting heads of state and how other countries should treat our head of state.

Among Malaysia's neighbours, Thailand was the only country with a monarchy and rules of protocol of the Thais were already well established since they had always been independent.

According to Suchitra she would like to plan some activities to celebrate the anniversary.

She said: "We are close neighbours and members of Asean, so our destinies are linked together. I thought it would be a good idea if we do something special this year."

However, she is still discussing with Malaysia on what the activities should be and when the best time would be to hold the celebrations.

When asked about Asean, she responded by saying that Asean is a very effective organisation. The fact that developed countries want to be Asean's dialogue partners is an example of the importance of Asean.

"We have now gone more into the security question which will make Asean more effective and more relevant," she added.

Her response to criticism that despite Asean being the fourth largest economic region in the world, it does not make its opinions heard or seem to fight for issues that affect it, is that "it is not the Asean way and not in our culture".

However, she also feels that it depends on the leadership of each country. She said: "For example, in Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia has a strong leader and he is doing a good job of expressing his views on behalf of Malaysia and for the region as well. Perhaps, in other countries we do not feel that secure."

According to the Ambassador Asean is however, making itself heard more in the international arena. It is quite active in the World Trade Organisation but it goes by the rules and uses the means that are available. It is not the Asean way to make a lot of noise.

"Right now our region is the most dynamic in the world, if we can keep up and sustain this rate of development we will reach the status of developed countries," she said.

On the entry of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar into Asean, she said that the ultimate objective of Asean was to have all 10 countries of Southeast Asia as members.

"We feel that if we invite one, we should not leave another out. Particularly as these three countries are at almost the same level of development," she said.

"Asean has already made a decision to admit these countries, it is only a matter of timing that has to be decided by the Asean Foreign Ministers. These three countries will be admitted when they are ready to accept and meet all of Asean's commitments."

"It is the right of other countries to make or take whatever decision they want, but we still believe that we are going to admit Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar into Asean," she responded when asked about the United States' protest over the admission of Myanmar into Asean.

On April 23, President Bill Clinton announced fresh sanctions against Myanmar including banning new investments by US citizens. The United States has tried to pressure Asean against admitting Myanmar this year.

"Having all the 10 countries in Asean, we will be one of the strongest regions in the world. Asean has a very strong future," she added.

When asked what the highlights of her career has been to date, she said her last posting to Moscow was very important and very interesting.

She hoped to achieve something while in Malaysia.

"I always believe that whatever I do, I must do well. So if I am here in Malaysia, I have to do my job well so that people will not say that that I have not done anything to improve relations between Thailand and Malaysia," she said.

"I want people to remember me as a woman diplomat who has achieved something in her career. Being the first woman is not an achievement. It is because I was posted here. It was not by design.

"I hope I can do a good job so as not to be a bad example for other women, I hope I can do a good job so the men won't say let's not have any more women here."

Last year she was selected as one of 12 outstanding civil servants by the civil service association in Thailand. She was the first foreign service officer to receive the award.

There are others, then, who believe that she is doing her job well. Perhaps having Ambassador Suchitra in Malaysia is the first step towards marking the 40th anniversary of Thailand-Malaysia relations.

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