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Thais like taste of democracy, and there's no turning back

THAILAND has gone too far up the democratic road to turn back, says Anand Panyarachun, who spoke to Joceline Tan about the implications of the new Constitution for Thai politics. Excerpts from their talk:

Q: Your countrymen complain bitterly about corrupt politicians. Yet each election sees the same kind voted in. How is that?

A: It's the cultural divide. For the urban people especially the educated and thinking ones, their definition of a good man is broader. But for the rural farmers, the good man is what he does for me, my village, my relatives and friends.

So he is good because he brings in roads, water wells, helps me when my daughter got into trouble, attended my son's wedding. They don't question how he could afford to spend so lavishly.

We cannot change this overnight but we hope education, the new Constitution and time itself will narrow the cultural gap.

Q: Some people say Thailand suffers from too much democracy.

A: Democracy did occasionally bring chaos and confusion and a large number of Thais had believed democracy would not work in Thailand.

But we have experienced authoritarian regimes which have also brought chaos. In our case people are not prepared to accept anything less democratic. On the whole, the majority prefer a fully democratic system.

If you watch past developments, democratic principles have been inching up and up ... we cannot turn back.

Q: They also say the Thai media is too free.

A: Yes, very free, but I happen to like freedom. I would personally give a lot of weight to personal freedom.

Q: Do you think Thais still depend on their King to solve their political problems?

A: Psychologically, Thais rely on the King but His Majesty has intervened only when there was chaos or bloodshed. It's his prerogative, he watches the nation's pulse very closely.

But if you let the democratic process run for a few more years, establish a sound political culture, there will be less and less psychological need for the King to intervene.

Q: You have quite effortlessly changed from one act to another.

A: It has to do with a certain non-attachment to the material life like position. Life is a constant change so if you are not afraid of change, you move on ...

Q: Have you made more friends or enemies?

A: I've never stopped to count.

Q: Which has been the pinnacle of your career? Being Prime Minister twice or heading the charter?

A: I don't even think of that. Many people asked me when I ended my second time as PM, what had brought me greatest pride. I couldn't think of one. Again, it was a feeling of non-attachment to the material side of life.

Q: So there are no best parts in your life?

A: I enjoyed the functions of the Prime Minister's office just as I enjoyed being in the diplomatic service for 25 years ... that was the best part of my life.

Then 15 years in business, also the best part of my life ... (laughs). Seriously, I do not enjoy being a public figure. Being in the limelight

the past year was not of my choosing ... more my fate.

Q: Do you have any vices?

A: None that I would mention publicly (laughs). I'll bring my wife next time, she can give you a more comprehensive answer.

Q: Are you optimistic about the near future?

A: One cannot be too optimistic about Thailand. One has to be realistic, so you could say I am cautiously optimistic. But about the Constitutional Charter ... I am optimistic, no adjectives!

(END)