

10/07/2003

Thaksin outlines Thai vision

Abdullah Ahmad

THAI Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra expounds his vision of consolidating Asean into a strategic alliance, of restructuring his nation into Thailand Inc, and of elevating the comradeship of relations with Malaysia in an extensive interview with Abdullah Ahmad.

Q: Mr Prime Minister, thank you very much for receiving us. Thailand has modernised, changed and is changing very fast. I have never seen anything like what is going on now and the high level of expectations under your leadership. Thailand has the distinction of being the only country in Asean that has never been colonised, and I believe that if anyone can take Thailand to over-whelming success, it will be you. I may be wrong but I think you can do it. What do you have to say to this?

Prime Minister Thaksin: Well, you know, I try best my best but I don't know how well I can succeed. In an open society like Thailand's and also within the old bureaucratic system, it is very tough because the resistance to change is always there. Whatever you do, you will get some resistance. But you must have strong determination. Like the many philosophers who said that if you want to be a good leader, you have to be a master of story-telling, so you have to tell the public that you are leading them to a very much better place. Otherwise, the resistance to change will be too much.

Q: Are you meeting resistance?

A: I think that, in the beginning, yes (there was resistance), but it is diminishing more and more. In the beginning, there was a lot.

Q: Is it because the story you are telling them is good?

A: Yes. Right. That is very important. You have to tell them the story of what the future will be like. It is very difficult for Asian people, especially the Buddhists, to follow the vision because they are satisfied with their current life. They may complain a little bit but they are fine. They don't care much about rapid change. But in my time, I want change fast. I want to move fast. Now you are competing in terms of economy of speed.

Q: Relations between Malaysia and Thailand have historically been very close. How far have they developed since you assumed the office of Prime Minister 21 years ago?

A: I think our bilateral relations, especially over the past 21 years have grown by leaps and bounds. This is because I believe immediate neighbours are more important to Thailand than neighbours farther away. This is because we have to live together eternally. We cannot separate. We have only one destination, which is a good relationship. We cannot have any other. We have to stay together. We have to be close together. And not just close because we know each other but we should be close through a strategic alliance.

Q: Of course, this is helped by the fact that you and Dr Mahathir seem to share common goals for Asia.

A: I am a new and younger leader. So I have no problems admiring Dr Mahathir, placing him as a more senior leader in terms of political life, age and experience. I have admired him for many years, even before I entered politics. So when I meet him, I talk to him sincerely as a junior who wants to learn from him. And he is very kind to me.

He gives me good advice, besides having activities together to enhance bilateral ties and move faster, especially during the last Hari Raya Aidil

Fitri season. I told him that I wanted to bring the entire Cabinet. I said please accept my invitation for a joint Cabinet meeting. This was the first of its kind in the world. And he kindly accepted. It drew the attention of the whole world. That is what has happened under our leaderships.

Q: There is a rumour in Kuala Lumpur that you are going to Langkawi at the end of the month. What is that about?

A: Yes, I am going on July 27. It will be related to science and technology. We will work together with MIGHT of Malaysia.

Q: What are the other areas you are looking forward to for a closer relationship between our two countries?

A: Actually, the whole region, especially Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, should draw up some strategies together. And we should join forces. You know, in business we have alliances. You need economies of scale.

But we are a small country of 53 million, not really small but quite small compared to the 1.3 billion people in China. So if we can think strategically together, we will be in a much better situation. We are changing the landscape of countries, bilaterally or multilaterally. We have a different vision of the countries from which we can draw strength and one plus one will equal more than two. I think in the future we can do that.

Q: It seems that the Thai-Malaysia gas pipeline is doing as well as it should. Are you happy with the progress that Petronas is making here?

A: I think Petronas may be going very fast, especially during the crisis. It handled many activities assigned by the Government of Malaysia. Petronas and the Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT) had very good relations. But Petronas may be a bit busier than PTT, because the business is expanding so fast. But anyway we would like to see Petronas and PTT work closer together in every energy-related area.

Also I explored the idea with the Asia Co-operation Dialogue (ACD) ministers that Asia should talk about energy and food security because we are fertile in both food and energy. We should use this advantage and draw up strategies so that we in Asia can have both food and energy security. This idea needs effort and support from different countries in Asia.

Q: I understand that there are some Thai students studying at the Universiti Petronas. I am quite sure you would like to see more Thai students going there?

A: Yes, especially students from the south (of Thailand). They regard Malaysians as their relations, their cousins.

Q: We also regard the Thais as good neighbours and relatives. I am from Kelantan, so I understand all this.

A: Why don't you interview me in Thai (laughter) so that I can speak much better than in English. My English comes and goes. It never stays with me all the time (laughter).

Q: Your English is good, your communications skills even better (laughter). Mr Prime Minister, how serious is the separatist movement in the south and the threat posed by the so-called Islamic terrorists. Are they well-connected internationally?

A: The southern part of Thailand has a Muslim majority. But they can live together with Thai culture and Thai Buddhists in harmony. There isn't much of a serious problem. Everything that happens in the south is reported in the Press but much of it is very similar to other regions, such as organised crime involving drugs and trade in women and forest encroachment. Some are different, such as weapons like AK-47 and M16 rifles, which have become a commodity in the south because of activities related to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Aceh.

They might cause some problems by inducting the youth into drugs or (armed) groups. They are not really big activities but the news is bigger than the situation. Anyway, with Malaysian co-operation, we can handle it easily.

Q: Their Majesties, the King and Queen of Thailand, Mr Chuan Leek-pai and you have worked hard to give Thai Muslims a high profile in the Government. What are your plans to get Thai Muslims more involved?

A: We are trying to invite Muslims to join our parties. But not many of them are really interested in politics. We have (Muslims) like Khun Wan Mohamad Nor Matha (Minister of Home Affairs) who has brought some Muslims into the party. We would like to see more of them (in politics), and not only Muslims, since Thailand has freedom of religion. So we allow people of every religion to join politics and even women as well. But not many of them are interested in politics.

Q: You have just stated, and we know, that you and Dr Mahathir are good friends. You share common goals and common policies. What will the Thai-Malaysian relationship be like after Dr Mahathir leaves office in November?

A: It happened that (Datuk Seri) Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was my counterpart when I was Foreign Minister. So, we are friends. I went to Malaysia twice. Once, on an official visit, and that was my first meeting with Dr Mahathir. And second during a joint-commission meeting.

Q: So we can expect (bilateral ties) to be better, or at least, at the same level?

A: Yes. Definitely. I will try to do more, not because I am closer to Abdullah than Dr Mahathir but because I will be staying longer and will have more time to think about how we can work together.

Q: As an immediate neighbour of Myanmar or Burma, what kind of engagement can Thailand have with Myanmar, especially on Aung San Suu Kyi. What are the sensitivities on that issue as well as other matters?

A: Our goal is to bring about national reconciliation in Myanmar. I would like to see not only engagement on Aung San Suu Kyi but also on embracing the minorities along the border (with Thailand) who used to fight with the Myanmar Government. I want them to stop fighting and become one Myanmar. Regarding Aung San Suu Kyi, Thailand is very concerned. We keep a dialogue going with the Government of Myanmar all the time and tell them of the world's concerns.

I tell them of the imminent sanctions by many countries who told us that they should do something. If they start imposing sanctions, it would take longer to remove them. It is not easy for Myanmar because it is already facing hardships economically and the people are still very poor. I tell them if they have sanctions imposed against them, their country will be in difficulties. We are worried. We are helping by trying to work closely with them economically and at the border areas.

Q: Would you like to say something on the Thai-Cambodia relationship now that the general election is around the corner?

A: We have no problems with whoever wins. We can work with them.

Anyway, I think Cambodia has progressed further than Myanmar and Laos in terms of democratic institutions. Even though they are not up to modern expectations, I think the Cambodians have progressed.

Sometimes, (when) the country is still very poor, you need some time. Democracy is only a means to an end. The end is the better livelihood of the people, peace of the society and progress of the country. Democracy is just the means but sometimes you try to take the means as an end in itself. That is impossible.

Q: Some people think that as a result of Asean engagement over this (Myanmar), Asean is departing from its policy of non-interference in the

internal affairs of member countries?

A: I don't think so. We are still in the mode of constructive engagement. But, anyway, this is very constructive but more modern than in the past. You are trying to help your friend. But sanctions will destroy the economic development of our neighbour. So we should voice this concern to them. Let them hear louder.

Q: You are going to be host to Apec in October. Why did you want Dr Mahathir to attend this conference? Otherwise, he would have left his job a bit earlier. But he is staying on especially, I understand, because you want him in Bangkok.

A. That is very nice of him. And it is also an honour that in 2002 he allowed Abdullah to be there (Apec meeting) on his behalf. But for Thailand, his neighbour, he has given me the honour of coming himself.

That is an honour for me and my country. We will share a little of his history in that his last Apec meeting was here in Thailand.

Q: And I am having a little problem - every reporter in my office wants to come here in October.

A: You are all welcome in Thailand and we are happy you will be covering the meeting in force. That week is going to be the busiest of my life, because I will have three state visits, from China, the United States and Russia, and two official visits, from Peru and Chile, also many more bilateral visits by the public and private sectors. That is going to be an extremely busy time for me.

Q: You are young, active, in good health and enjoying your job.

A: Well, 54 may be considered young but physically I have worked too hard since I was a young boy and I burned out my energy a little too much. Fifty-four may be a bit old for me.

Q: Dr Mahathir is 78. You have a long way to go.

A: I don't know. As long as you are still energetic, you can work. If you do not feel energetic, you should not be leading the country.

Q: Mr Prime Minister, this is personal. You were a very, very successful businessman before becoming Prime Minister. How do you reconcile or apply hard-nosed business strategies in running your Government?

A: Whether it is running a government or running a business, you are running an organisation. It is a difference of size and nature, culture and maybe a bit of difference in terms of goals. But definitely you have to use management skills to manage an organisation. It is exactly the same. The philosophy is the same.

The concept is the same but different in terms of how you handle different cultures, how you handle different goals. I am trying to bring my experience in running a company to run a country. I am using the CEO-style.

In the beginning someone said that it was not the same. But when I took the helm, I knew that it was exactly the same. Now, we are starting to structure the Government, which used to be by the division of labour concept originating in the industrial revolution.

I changed it completely to be agenda-based. By dividing groups into clusters and using the matrix reporting system and plugging this into the government financial management information system.

We are using software to handle the expenditure side and the revenue side, the debt side and the inventory of the whole system in the country. And this is going to happen in two years' time.

We will change completely. The governor of the province will become the CEO. They will have to have strategies for that province. The treasurer of the province will become the CFO.

Q: So it does seem that business and politics do mix?

A: If you are driving an organisation for profit, you are driving an

organisation for the profit of the country. The return of the profit is the better livelihood of the people.

Q: Mr Prime Minister, how are the people responding to your war on drugs? Has it affected the public much and are you supported in this campaign by the majority of the Thai people?

A: This campaign has changed the life of the people, especially in the slums, the rural areas and among the working classes.

They come to me and say that they thought they lost their child but finally they get their child back because of the campaign. I can declare that we are very successful. Some may be against it but that is no more (than expected) in an open society.

Q: Of course, as a result of the success of the campaign, you have been under threat. Are you coping with that?

A: You know, being a Prime Minister, you have a lot of security arrangements. When I decided to serve my country as a policeman, I was first sent to a border police patrol. I was never scared.

Q: Do you see Thailand under your leadership, I hope it will be long, as being at its most politically stable? And what has that done in terms of politics and the economy?

A: Continued development of the economy and continuing change is needed for Thailand. Thailand needs a stable government and stable politics for at least 16 years to be able to be strong enough and to be much stronger. Thailand, I can assure you, under my leadership, will be politically stable for many years. I will be Prime Minister for eight years and after that my successor will take over.

Q. Only for eight years?

A: That is too much already for me.

Q: So you have another six years? Lee Kuan Yew stayed for 35 years and Dr Mahathir for 22 years.

A: I want to retire at 60 (laughter). At that time I will be 591 and about to retire. Even then the Thai Rak Thai party will be able to win elections several times because of what we are doing. We are working for the people. We are not doing it for ourselves.

Q: You are not serious, Mr Prime Minister, about retiring in six years' time?

A: I am serious. Otherwise, I won't announce it. In Thailand, political change happens so often that you may not even think that you will still be Prime Minister after the next election. No one dares to say that. But I dare to say that I will be here for eight years.

Q: Have we seen the end of the Armed Forces' long involvement in the running of the Government in Thailand? And what is the role of the Armed Forces now besides peacekeeping and defending Thai independence and sovereignty?

A: Thailand is fully democratised. So the role of the Armed Forces is for peacekeeping and helping develop rural areas and now helping in anti-drug operations and the rehabilitation of drug addicts. They do a very good job there. Anyway, we should strengthen our Armed Forces. They are like an insurance for the country. During peace time you still have to pay insurance premiums.

You don't want your house to be burnt down. You need to have expenses there. So the Armed Forces will be supported by the Government to let them stand ready in case of emergency.

The leaders of the Armed Forces are very disciplined. They support the Government firmly, especially myself, since I come from the Armed Forces academy. We have very good relations. So we have no problems. And their role will be limited to peacekeeping, rural development, drug operations and rehabilitation.

Q: Mr Prime Minister, Malaysia and Singapore appear to be doing very well. What do you attribute this to and how is Thailand doing generally? Does long tenure of leadership provide stability?

A: Yes. I think long leadership is very important. Long and capable leadership. You need this. And if you have that, you will automatically have the support of the public. This is because democracy comes from the people.

So, if you do something good for the people, they will support you and keep you in office. In the past, Thai politics was weak. We were losing opportunities for our continuing development. Now it is time for Thailand to bring back what we missed in the past.

Q: I note that you are business-like, a no-nonsense person, powerful and popular, who will do what needs to be done even if unpopular, for the sake of Thailand's progress and its desire to be a developed nation, perhaps even before 2020 (which Dr Mahathir has set as a target date for Malaysia). Are you concerned about your detractors and what have you done and are doing against these people who want to stop you from doing what you want to do for Thailand?

A: If my vision is right, if I do the right thing, I don't care about anything else. Any resistance will have no impact on me. I may be outspoken; if someone criticises me wrongly, I will reply to them.

I don't want the public to be confused by those who don't have a vision for the country. Or those who don't know what we are doing.

I will try to clear all the cloudiness. I have to clear the air every time it gets cloudy. I am quite confident that my Cabinet members understand my philosophy. They are working hard and just don't care as long as we have the destination. And this is the vision in that if we think we are right, we just keep going, keep moving.