



Paying lip service to HM the King's efforts

After His Majesty the King's 70-year-long dedication to fight poverty, why is disparity in Thailand among the worst in the world?

After the King's lifetime efforts to restore the environment, why are the country's forests, seas, soil, and rivers all in critical condition?

All governments during the past seven decades similarly vowed to follow the King's royal examples. Yet this is what they all did: they praised royal advice and spent tonnes of money to eulogise royal initiatives -- but only for show. Then they returned to business as usual by allowing businesses to exploit natural resources for short-term economic gains.

The results: the breakdown of communities, farmers and their families and the environment across the country as natural resources in countryside were siphoned off to feed industries and Bangkok's growth.

After over 4,000 royally initiated projects were rolled out across the country to restore the environment and improve the livelihoods of locals, how did the King feel about the country's situation?

Not very good, judging from his royal speech in 1993.

‘The situation of the country is still in a rather bad shape, in all areas,’ the King said during his birthday speech. ‘The standard of living, law and order, the livelihoods of the people, and even the security of the country are not as good as they should be. All this is a cause of worry.’

Why was this so? What is happening now may provide some answers.

Amid the nationwide outpouring of grief and the public’s concern for the future, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has promised to continue the royal legacy by using the King’s sufficiency economy philosophy which focuses on the well-being of the people and the environment to guide national development.

Yet, the government is pressing ahead with plans to build coal-fired power plants in Krabi which will seriously affect the Andaman Sea, the country’s tourism magnet and the livelihoods of millions of small-scale fishermen along the coast.

More coal-fired power plants are also in the pipeline while the world is shifting to clean, renewable energy to fight global warming.

Meanwhile, the government is determined to turn the wetlands and community forests in Chiang Rai into a special economic zone to serve industry, offering investors 99-year land leases with plenty of tax incentives. And what about the villagers who are living there? They will be evicted.

It is widely known that the King supported organic farming to rehabilitate dead soil and the poor health of farmers from prolonged use of toxic farm chemicals. The King’s ‘New Theory’ integrated farming model also returns food security to farmers while protecting them from uncontrollable rice prices.

Judging from state accolades for royal initiatives, we would understandably expect to see comprehensive policy support for organic farming to revitalise soil fertility and add value to farm produce. Now that rice prices are hitting rock bottom, we should expect to see strong state support to help farmers shift to integrated farming. Instead, this very government is strengthening agro-giants’ control on seeds and farm chemical industries.

Apart from allowing agro-giants to form alliances with the state to formulate national farm policies, the government is also set to turn small farmers’ paddy fields into plantations under agro-giants’ contract farming to serve the animal feed industry. It is no secret that corn plantations supported by these agro-giants are causing massive deforestation in the North. Yet the regime is rewarding them with new money-making schemes while sending poor farmers to jail.

Talk about sufficiency. Talk about impunity. And that’s not all.

Knowing that locals dare not stage public protests out of respect for the King during the mourning period, the government is refusing to keep its words on several controversial schemes. For example, the plan to close down the Akra gold mine looks set to come to naught despite local grievances.

Instead of decommissioning the notorious Pak Moon Dam -- a failed project on all counts according to the World Bank -- the government also refuses to let the Moon River flow freely at this time of year as promised just to show the villagers who is the boss.

The King made it clear throughout his reign that his tireless efforts to restore the environment were to serve his people by restoring the sources of their livelihoods. Yet the regime continues to evict forest dwellers who have been living there for generations amid plans to open up the area to large-scale tree farms.

In 1987, the King took a group of journalists to Huay Hong Krai Development Study Centre to show his 'development conclusions' after five decades of trying find low-cost, simple and effective solutions to rural poverty. That it was the King's only press trip showed how important he thought his message was.

I was fortunate to be there, which made me understand why every single government prefers to give the King only lip service. 'Development must respect different regions' geographies and people's different ways of life,' said the King. 'We cannot impose our ideas on the people. We can only suggest. We must go to meet them, find out what their needs are, and then fully explain to them [what can be done].'

There is no single formula to tackle rural poverty, he stressed; any development solution must be determined by specific topographies, soil, climate, cultures and people's needs.

That was why the King set up different development centres dealing with different ecological challenges -- from denuded mountains in the North, depleted mangrove forests along the coasts, acidic swampy land in the South, to soil salinisation in the Northeast.

This was where the King experimented with simple, low-cost ways that mimic how nature works to restore the environment so he could share the techniques with the locals later. 'This is where officials can learn to co-operate, to work together as a team,' he told the press gathering, well-aware of the lack of coordination among state agencies.

'Go to the people. Listen to them. Learn from the locals. Even when you have information from books or whatnot, nothing can compare with first-hand experience of seeing with your own eyes,' was the King's repeated advice to officials. It's clear. The King was for development that is bottom-up, participatory, area-based, and ecologically sound.

It's also clear that the King's inclusive development goes against the government's top-down bureaucracy and centralisation. To follow his royal example, officialdom must give up its top-down authoritarian ways. To make the King's participatory development work on a national scale, it requires comprehensive bureaucratic reform and decentralisation.

What is happening now is going in the opposite direction.

The regime's recent moves to dissolve local administrative bodies effectively roll back decentralisation. Meanwhile, top-down officialdom is getting stronger -- and harsher against

grassroots movements who want to protect their natural resources -- thanks to additional budgetary and policy support for the regime.

With military backing, the mandarins are now bulldozing all their controversial schemes, be it forest evictions, big dams, coal-fired power plants and environmentally-destructive mining.

With military backing, big business -- thanks to the regime's Pracharath policy -- now has official say in forming wide-ranging national policies from the grassroots economy, education, investment and exports to legal amendments.

The aim, insists the regime, is to bridge the disparities and strengthen the country's competitiveness.

The King has left behind a path to save the country from environmental degradation, poverty and hunger. But if we believe that the junta-big business alliance can attain what the King strived for, we are simply fooling ourselves.

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