

A Legacy That Stands by the People

Don Pramudwinai
Deputy Prime Minister
and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand

As we approach the end of this very challenging year of COVID-19, Thais around the world are commemorating our National Day on 5th December, which is also the birthday of His Majesty the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great, Thai Father's Day, and World Soil Day. All these occasions remind us of how our nation has evolved this far and what institutional forces have kept such progress moving.

Old friends of Thailand might be familiar with stories about the monarchy, whose dedication to nation-building and development are intrinsically interwoven into every chapter of our history. The royal family's cherished commitment towards the welfare of her people was particularly recognised after the Second World War when Thailand had to gather all its strength and resources to combat poverty and maintain security. The kingdom was then blessed with the will power to steer itself through those troubles when His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great, whose name coincidentally means "Strength of the Land, Incomparable Power," acceded to the throne in 1946 at the age of eighteen.

As a constitutional monarchy, the sovereign does not wield any power beyond ceremonial duties. But the King and members of the royal family have the liberty to initiate any charitable activities and development projects and complement government efforts. Throughout the 70-year reign of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great, around 4,877 royal projects in various fields were initiated to reduce development gaps nationwide. While most projects were financially supported by the government, many of them were fully financed by His Majesty's personal funds.

When I started working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the 1970s, these development projects were just being crystallised. I recall how Thai people keenly followed the televised reports of the King's visits upcountry every evening. Thais valued and became familiar with images of the King holding a wrinkled, well-used map in his hands and a camera hanging from his neck, sweat dripping from his brow, interacting attentively with locals to understand their concerns and environment.

Likewise, the monarchy and the people have always had close and intimate contact, enabling both sides to develop a kinship type of relationship, rather than one of an authoritative nature. Hence, designating 5th December as Father's Day actually originated from the genuine sentiment of the people, who cherished their beloved King as a father figure -- a pillar of strength one could always rely upon when in need. Indeed, it was during the turbulent Cold War years that His Majesty led his people through some of Thailand's most challenging times.

An important point worth noting is that it has been customary for the monarchy to stand with the people and to improve their wellbeing. For instance, I remember that it was also in the 1970s that Her Royal Highness Princess Srinagarindra, the grandmother of His Majesty the present King, established two foundations for community development.

The first is the Mae Fah Luang Foundation under Royal Patronage, initially founded as the Thai Hill Crafts Foundation to create livelihoods and generate income for ethnic minorities in Northern Thailand. The second is the Princess Mother's Medical Volunteer Foundation, established in 1974, the year I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Princess paid frequent trips to remote villages, taking with her a medical team to treat any sick or injured persons during her visit. This is important because in certain remote areas of the country, access to public health services was quite limited. Stateless people living along the border areas were given treatment just the same. The Foundation is a living testament to her community spirit and non-discriminatory community service in public health which has carried on until today.

Not long after in 1976, Her Majesty Queen Sirikit The Queen Mother set up the SUPPORT Foundation to preserve traditional handicraft techniques and promote them as supplementary sources of income for farmers who have spare time after harvest.

Fast forward to my ambassadorial postings in the 1990s through to the 2000s and beyond, I had many opportunities to celebrate royal contributions to national development. One of the most memorable occasions was the UNGA's resolution to declare 5th December as World Soil Day, to highlight the importance of healthy soil for sustainable development and commemorate His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great's advocacy in this field. Agriculture was a favourite subject for him since it is so vital for our people's livelihood.

Thailand nowadays has changed immensely from the time when I was a junior diplomat. Economic growth in the last three decades has elevated the country to the upper middle income echelon, and has urbanised the lifestyle of most Thais and the way they perceive the world. State mechanisms have matured, becoming more effective in addressing the grievances of the people. Thai people are more self-dependent, better educated, and have access to opportunities for better prospects in life.

In the fast-changing world where human touch seems to be dominated by virtual interactions, many people have forgotten how the monarchy has stood up for Thai people through thick and thin, and now often take the monarchy for granted. Some, including the more confident and expressive younger generations, are not even certain how to relate the institution to their daily lives, as they did not grow up, like my generation, to experience how the monarchy was directly involved in improving the livelihood of Thai people and Thailand's status in the international arena.

Nevertheless, in such times, the monarchy has always remained steadfast in its conviction and has never stepped back from assisting the people, often quietly, while expecting nothing in return.

Last year the world saw the ceremonial grandeur of the Coronation of King Rama X, or His Majesty King Maha Vajiralongkorn Phra Vajiraklaochaoyuhua. In his Oath of Accession, he pledged *"to treasure, preserve and build on our heritage....for the great enduring good of the people."* His Majesty has never forgotten the solemn commitment of continuing the royal practice to help and empower the Thai people to be self-reliant.

His Majesty has supported the royal initiatives of his royal parents and other members of the royal family in numerous endeavours. Many are focused on promoting sustainable development, therefore contributing to Thailand's achievements in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, since 1978, His Majesty has strategically inaugurated 21 Somdej Phrayuparaj Hospitals in the most remote areas of

the country, where they were most needed. More currently, His Majesty made significant donations of medical equipment during COVID-19, supporting SDG 3 on good health and well-being. On education, His Majesty set up the Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn Scholarship Foundation, which has provided scholarships for 1,764 students to receive proper education from high school to bachelor's degree. This corresponds to SDG 4 on quality education.

His Majesty's projects are a reflection that sustainable development can only be attained through a community-wide team spirit and concerted efforts to improve society. To transform this vision into action, he launched the Royal Initiative Volunteer Project to engage the people in public service activities. Such activities strengthen the bond within communities and remind us of how Thai communities throughout history and around the world have always come together to overcome hardships.

The monarchy has been a guiding beacon and stabilising force in Thailand for eight centuries. As some critics have stated, monarchies hold institutional memories of tradition and continuity in ever changing times. They undeniably remind a country of its unique traits and identity, facts that can often be forgotten in the swiftly changing currents of politics. In a volatile and complex world, we are in constant need of inspirational strength of stability to keep our feet on the ground, so that we will not be too easily blown away by the winds of uncertainty. The monarchy is, of course, one of these invaluable institutions that has stood the test of time and serves as an enduring link between our inspirational past, our dynamic present, and our promising future.

* * * * *