Propelling Thailand towards a Prosperous Future

Thailand 4.0. You've probably heard of it, most people living in Thailand have, but very few people know or can see the huge sea change that it encompasses. Stop the average foreigner on the street and ask him about it and he'll mutter something about technology, or tourism, or a faster internet. They all see it from within their own narrow frame of reference; where very few actually understand it and, some even presume it will fail without really understanding what it is.

In a speech, in July 2016, the Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha stated that Thailand 4.0 is "the new direction of the country" based on the promotion of "creativity, innovation, and the application of technology in various economic activities". But what does that actually mean? And how will it be implemented? And why 4.0?

The latter question is the easiest to answer. Thailand has undergone three major development phases over the past several decades. Thailand 1.0 was the development of the agricultural sector. This was followed by Thailand 2.0, which was the development of import-substituted light industry, manufacturing parts for OEMs and local consumption, and Thailand 3.0 was the development of export-oriented heavy industries such as steel works, oil refineries and car plants. Each of these has been a success in its own right; Thailand is one of the world's leading agricultural-based products exporters, large numbers of foreign companies flocked to Thailand to take advantage of a relatively low cost, but skilled and quality conscious workforce to manufacture sub systems (for example Thailand is a major manufacturer of computer hard drives and printer mechanisms) and Thailand is the 2nd largest manufacturer of pick-up trucks in the world.

In essence the country has targeted and successfully implemented, in a few short years, what technologically advanced western countries took 200 years to develop and now it is ready for the next step of moving away from 'screwdriver' manufacturing into designing and supplying value added products and services. In order to do this it requires a huge effort on a national scale; embracing, as it does, step changes in education with a focus on scientific, technology and innovation, as well as towards practical learning, physical infrastructure (with massive transportation projects; such as new roads, airports, railways and docks being undertaken at a breakneck pace), digital infrastructure (with huge increases in speed and reliability in the telecoms sector, expanding internet connectivity and e commerce), and a focus on 10 'core' industrial technologies (such as biotechnology, electronics, software, processed agricultural products, and health products and services). Underpinning this is a huge revamp in immigration and visas, with new 4 year technology visas and a BOI promoted 1 hour online integrated visa and work permit service and in finance with Public-Private Partnership being promoted to finance major projects.

And those are just the things you can see. Behind the scenes, every government office is being tasked with making their own contributions to the project and experts from technologically advanced nations are being courted to provide input to the process either as direct contributors (in the form of entrepreneurs being wooed through substantial tax breaks and an enviable lifestyle) through to consultants and governmental specialists. In addition, various vocational colleges are upgrading curricula and promote partnerships with industries with student internships that should enable them to learn about the very latest technological breakthroughs.

Thailand 4.0 is a massive project encompassing a whole nation and, based on the country's track record, it is very likely to succeed in propelling Thailand towards a prosperous future.

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