



RIGHT IS MIGHT: PUEY'S FORMULA FOR THAILAND

Today marks the 65th birthday of Prof Puey Ungphakorn. In the midst of multiple crises surrounding us, some people may think that one man's birthday is too insignificant to talk and think about. The nation has other more pressing problems to worry about and the powerful personalities are too much involved in their pursuit of more wealth and power to pay any attention to one Puey Ungphakorn.

But to his students and followers across the country and, indeed, around the world, March 9th marks a special occasion. It is a time not to remember only the man, noble and virtuous though he is, but to remind ourselves of the ideas and ideals he has inspired in us by his teachings and exemplary deeds.

Prof. Puey is living in self-imposed exile in a London suburb far away from all the troubles in his native country. He left Thailand on that fateful day of Oct 6, 1976, when a series of bloody clashes between students and the "uniformed mob" on Thammasat campus led to the overthrow of the most democratic government we had ever had.

He was accused of being the figure behind student activism. They branded him as “a Communist” and a menace to everything Thai. As the rector of Thammasat at the time, he was held responsible for everything that the “uniformed mob” did not like.

Dr. Puey once related a story to his intimate group of students. “There is an English proverb,” he began, “that when you want to destroy your adversary, you will first have to make him look bad in the public eye. ‘Give the dog a bad name and hang it.’”

With a touch of irony, Puey, ‘Acharn’ to his students, was given “a bad name” and “hung.”

As the Governor of the Central Bank, the Bank of Thailand, Puey steered that highly important institution away from being a political asset of any particular military and business elite group contesting for power during the 60’s.

He brought many monetary reforms to the nation’s banking system. With his characteristic ability to persuade without appearing to coerce, Dr. Puey was able to bring all the belligerent private banks and financial institutions under official control. Economic stability and financial security were the common good that most enjoyed but few realized the amount of painful efforts that one man had put himself through.

Puey was also particularly instrumental in the introduction of economic planning to Thailand. He played a major role in the drawing up of the first economic development plan and lobbied very hard for rural road construction and the master plan for national education.

Puey has been an ardent enemy of corruption in the bureaucracy and had gotten himself in some critical situations

when he refused to be a partner in corrupt schemes. He believes in power being used with care and benevolence. But he is also most appreciative of the dilemma of power. He once quoted Lord Acton's dictum approvingly: "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Dealing with people at the top and engaged in the politics of high finance, Dr. Puey could not help but realize the widening gulf that separates the rich and powerful from the poor and feeble.

For more than two decades since the early 60's until his exile, Dr. Puey had been almost single-handedly responsible for the steady growth of the Thai economy.

All his career has been dedicated to the uplift of the estate of the under-privileged. He has held an unshakable faith in the people. He believes in their collective wisdom and the power of their common aspiration to improve their own lot.

He introduced a phrase encapsulating his faith in the people: *Santi Pracha-dharm*. "Pracha-dharm" means right is might. And not might is right. A society that has Pracha-dharm must maintain law and order. It cannot be governed by one particular group with no regard being paid to others.

Puey believes that Pracha-dharm is both the means and the end of our political pursuits. "The beginning and the end is the Thai people, their liberty and their rights. In society with Pracha-dharm there should not be a gap between the government and the people, the officials and the citizens, the male and the female, the rich and the poor, the developed and the backward areas. People must have equal opportunity for education and self-development. They must be free from diseases. All this must not come about through any political ideology. But

they are only right for our people to expect these things.”

“There is no other way to achieve Pracha-dharm except through peace. Violence would only lead to further violence or a temporary peace, at best.” But a lasting Pracha-dharm must come from peaceful means and loving efforts.

Truth and peace may be defeated by violence and deception. But the truth shall not die is a Buddhist proverb. We must not lose heart in trying to rectify the truth and maintain peace. “Even if you have no hope for success, you should keep on doing what you believe in for the sake of your freedom of doing so. For me, I shall continue to write and speak out (the truth).”

Puey, the man, is now living in exile in London. But this March 9th, his students and followers in government services and the private sector are once again reminded of the truth and the ideals which that noble and mighty spirit has imparted to us.

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