

Puey Ungpakhorn

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On May 29, 2001, the increasingly presidential — some might say 'regal' — Thai premier, Thaksin Shinawatra, summarily dismissed his aristocratic central bank governor Chatumongkol Sonakul. His ouster was not unexpected. The abrasive and outspoken civil servant had sparred with just about everybody (including the Democrats under Thaksin's predecessor Chuan Leekpai) in his attempt to maintain the Bank of Thailand's independence.

Reflecting on the well-documented, if one-sided, struggle has reminded me of two things. Firstly, the celebrated if overlooked career of the late Dr Puey Ungpakhorn, Bank of Thailand governor from 1959 to 1971. As one of Southeast Asia's most courageous and brilliant postwar administrators, the Magsaysay awardee's face-off with the Thai authorities constitutes my second point, namely, the on-going tussle between politicians and the civil service over the integrity and independence of key national institutions.

However it must be said that the combative Chatumongkol has never been viewed with quite the same warmth as Puey. Nonetheless both men represent, as Abhisit Vejjajiva, a leading opposition figure argues, "the fast diminishing core of strong, independent-minded civil servants who'll stand up to government."

Puey's career was both distinguished and dramatic. Despite his humble background and ethnic Chinese origins, he rose to occupy an extremely exalted position in the bureaucracy. At the height of his influence in the mid-'60s under Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn, Puey was able to introduce a slew of administrative initiatives, thus providing the basis for Thailand's subsequent economic growth.

The LSE-trained economist revived the Bank of Thailand's reputation after an infamous financial scandal, "The Banknote Printing Affair", rocked the administration in 1959. He also succeeded in in-

jecting a strong dose of professionalism and competence into government service whilst overhauling the banking sector.

At the same time, he pushed for the formation of a Board of Investment in order to attract foreign capital. Systematic and orderly, he promoted the introduction of a programme of central planning that helped coordinate Thailand's hitherto erratic economic management with a series of five-year plans that was inaugurated in 1961. Moreover, he pushed for investment in infrastructure, opening the U.S.-financed "Friendship Highway" in the impoverished northeastern province of Isaarn, bringing prosperity to millions.

Still, he was criticised by many for agreeing to work with the military. But Puey — ever the realist — understood that he was presented with a unique opportunity to set in place reforms that would transform his country, and he seized the chance readily.

This did not mean that he turned his back on principle. One of the hallmarks of his career was his emphasis on education. He was also willing to tackle broad socio-political issues. As a passionate believer in *santi-prachadarmma* — a civil society based on Buddhist principles — he sought to balance the ugly rush to development with a greater emphasis on spirituality. Indeed, in his book, *The Economy of Thailand*, he argued that moral principles had to be taught alongside traditional economics if any measure of social justice was to be achieved.

Puey's dedication lent him considerable moral authority and in 1973 he dared to challenge Thanom's increasingly authoritarian rule with a heartfelt, if provocative open letter that is now considered to have been the precursor to the military strongman's ouster later that year. As Dr Puey wrote, "Nothing is worse than the pollution caused by the fear of intimidation. Such fear poisons people's minds and wisdom."

However, Puey was to end his life (he died in late 1999) in ignominy and exile. Unlike so many of his Southeast Asian counterparts, he rejected the comfort of a government sinecure or establishment

co-option. Principled to the end, he brought the same clarity of mind and purpose to his role as an educator when he left the Bank of Thailand and assumed the Rectorship of Thammasat University in 1971.

Unfortunately, his stint at Thammasat coincided with gathering anti-communism that peaked with the fall of Saigon in 1975. Given the university's non-conformist ethos, the scene was set for a bloody showdown between the rightists and student activists. On Oct 6, 1976, thousands of thugs surrounded the campus (which was only a stone's throw from the Grand Palace) before storming the building, ransacking the premises and butchering countless students.

In the aftermath of the massacre, which remains a scar on the Thai body politic, Puey was accused of harbouring communists and inciting anti-royalist sentiment. Protesting his innocence all the while, he was forced to flee and was lucky to escape with his life. Later that year whilst testifying before the U.S. Congress he said: "The word 'Thai' means free, and we Thais, living in Thailand, must be free, whether we are poor, whether we are Third World, whether we are illiterate. I don't see any way of living for my own compatriots except to be free."

Hounded from his homeland (he died in London), Puey's example, his integrity and courage in the face of official censure, remains relevant especially in a region where civil servants are embattled and demoralised. Sadly, those that are not cowed by political persuasion are so thoroughly compromised that in many cases they no longer comprehend the concept of institutional integrity. In short, the dividing line between politics and administration has become too blurred.

After decades of being at the beck and call of their political masters, civil servants must find the resolve to stand firm. Furthermore, Puey recognised the importance of maintaining high standards of efficacy and professionalism in administration. He had zero tolerance for corruption and cheating.

However, I should caution that Puey's moral stature came from his unwavering adherence to principle. He had no personal agenda and no patrons to impress. He did not bend in the face of political charisma nor did he advocate religious extremism. Finally, he did not succumb to the enticements of the business community.

Instead, he remembered at all times that a civil servant's duty was to the people as a whole, not to one particular section of the community or to its political masters: lessons that are still instructive today.