

The parable of the poisoned arrow: Thailand 4.0 edition

written by Peera Songkunnatham | June 9, 2018

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The Buddha always told his disciples not to waste their time and energy in metaphysical speculation . . . [One time] he said, "Suppose a man is struck by a poisoned arrow and the doctor wishes to take out the arrow immediately. Suppose the man does not want the arrow removed until he knows who shot it, his age, his parentage, and why he shot it. What would happen? If he were to wait until all these questions have been answered, the man might die first." -Thích Nhất Hạnh, retelling the story from Cula-Malunkyovada Sutta

For two years in a row, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice Prajin Juntong has given a keynote speech at the E-San Industrial Fair in Khon Kaen City. The annual four-day event just concluded on Sunday, May 27, 2018.

In both of Prajin's speeches, he expressed support for the "Khon Kaen Smart City" local initiative, linking it to the government's digitalization policy "Thailand 4.0." Both times, Prajin compared the policy to shooting an arrow composed of three tiers of Thai people, the head, the shaft (which may be further divided into the front and the back part), and the tail.

Prajin's arrow metaphor is meant to explain how it is not to be expected that everyone will become a "Thai Person 4.0." Some will get there first, while others lag behind. If the tail can get from "1.0" to "2.0," that can still be called a success for moving all Thais forward.

Joining the long list of exceptionally Thai metaphors of hierarchy, Prajin's three-or-four-part arrow corresponds to the junta's scale of Thais from "Thai People 1.0": labor-intensive farmers who only use the call function in cell phones, to "Thai People 4.0": efficient entrepreneurs who leverage internet technologies to their economic advantage.

As such, Prajin's arrow seems to be essentially identical to the "four lotuses" (*bua si lao*), a metaphor of readiness for enlightenment incorrectly attributed to the Buddhist scripture.

The first lotus is in bloom ready to receive the light, the second lotus is just emerging from the water, the third lotus is underwater but will make its way up slowly, while the fourth lotus, *pathaparama*, lies in the mud, never to emerge to see the light of day, destined to become food for the fish and the turtles.



In the Kingdom of Thailand, just about everything can be turned into a metaphor of human hierarchy, including “unequal” fingers of the hand, the lowly position of the root in “grassroots,” the “head” and the “tail” of an arrow, and the different “levels” of where lotuses are.

This last lotus is routinely used by Thais to insult “stupid people,” with the connotation that they are a lost cause and deserve to rot in ignorance.

My curious mind wonders: with all this buzz around the term “Khon Kaen Smart City,” which is inevitably a metaphor, what’s the backdrop that made “smart” catch on as a term? If something or someone isn’t smart, does that mean they’re stupid and can’t do anything good on their own? Where does all this archery lead?

Here’s some speculation about Thailand’s development into “Thailand 4.0” and Khon Kaen’s development into a “Smart City.”

Who is the archer if the Thai populace is the arrow?

Apparently, the Deputy Prime Minister means government executives and organizations including Khon Kaen municipalities. The archer, Prajin notes, not only has to know how to shoot an arrow, but also know the conditions of the wind.

In his speech at the E-San Industrial Fair this year, Prajin gave a nod to the industrial sector for being the rightful determiner of governmental policy. He said:

“I used to think that industry must wait for policy. I was wrong. The truth is that industry is the one who determines policy, because without ‘demand’ arising, the target would be incorrectly identified, and government policy would surely follow a wrong path.”

The ideal archer, then, most resembles a technocratic body informed by industrial market dynamics.

But there are times when this ideal archer is at odds with a local contender. In the struggle over [who gets to manage the \\$470m Light Rail Transit system in Khon Kaen](#), the city admins and businessmen present themselves as a more novice, but a more appropriate archer than the Mass Rapid Transit Authority of Thailand (MRTA).

What good is an arrow's tail?

By placing “Thai People 1.0” at the rear end of the arrow unlikely to hit the bull’s-eye, Prajin seems to think that the tail has little ability or power of its own, tagging along as passive recipients of belated development.

The physics of an actual arrow, however, reveals the importance of the feathered end of the arrow. An arrow should just need a tip and a shaft if it were to go fastest, shouldn’t it? Wouldn’t the feathers at the tail drag the speed? Yes, it would, but it would only drag it if the arrow is headed in the way not aligned with the tail.

Furthermore, if the head starts to spin out uncontrollably, the feathered tail helps correct and steady the course as well.

Spearheading group Khon Kaen City Development (Khon Kaen Think Tank), the company composed of 20 Khon Kaen elite businessmen, describes “Khon Kaen Smart City” on its website as “a city of opportunity, a city for everybody, a city that will leave no one behind.”

While the rhetoric of moving together and leaving no one behind is rampant in both “Thailand 4.0” and “Khon Kaen Smart City,” there is little recognition of the directive power and (de)stabilizing potential of those in the back.

Is the arrow poisoned?

It is not an exaggeration to say that development—as it has been practiced in northeastern Thailand since the late 1950s—has been poison. Literal poison in the form of chemical pesticides that the vast majority of farmers now depend on for a good yield, and in the form of air pollution in cities like Khon Kaen. Figurative poison in the form of cyclical debt that keeps growing. It kills you, so you can live and die more comfortably.



“No More Poisoned Land”: protesters gather in Bangkok for a rally against the [decision](#) by expert Committee on Hazardous Substances Control to not ban toxic weed killer paraquat earlier in May. Photo by [Bongkod NokHook Phu](#), 5 June 2018

Outside Bangkok, the Southern and Eastern seaboard have been getting preferential treatment. Isaan and faraway places in every other region are left falling behind, always the tail of the arrow. Then, the Isaan “Big Four” cities—Khorat, Khon Kaen, Ubon Ratchathani, and Udon Thani—got preferential treatment. And now, the Ministry of Interior is pushing its [“Thailand B.E. 2600”](#) plan to be included in the junta’s 20-year Master Plan. The “Thailand B.E. 2600” plan sets out to spread development across all of Thailand, divided into 18 province clusters, each with its own set of strengths and money-making potentials.

But once you compare all these grand development schemes to the reality that [precariousness that farmers](#) and the [urban poor](#) face, you can see the disparity.

Late last year in Khon Kaen, thousands of people in the [old bus station community](#) were left virtually jobless, just because the one-eyed aiming of the urban planning archer dictated that every bus be moved to the new station nine kilometers away. Is this part of the plan for the supremacy of the “smarter” bus station, which incidentally has the Smart Bus that runs 24 hours a day?

Is the red, round target actually human flesh?

Who is being shot at?

While there is a set of policies supporting (or shall I say “targeting”?) regular farmers to upgrade themselves into “smart” entrepreneurs, these policies are still rooted in “Thailand 1.0” ways of doing things. That is to say, the bureaucratic body in most cases is less accustomed to treating farmers as partners-in-policy rather than subsidy recipients. This won’t work with policies aimed at sustainable network building like the organic farming expansion policy, the “Young Smart Farmer” network, or even the support for farmers to integrate into food processing industry.

The only uniform experience for farmers under this junta is probably the occasional cash hand-out festivals at every branch of the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives.

What of the rising cost of living in “Khon Kaen Smart City”? The proposed Light Rail Transit will surely increase land price in Khon Kaen city at a rate which everyday wages will probably not catch up with. (In 2012, the Treasury Department [revealed](#) that the land price on Sri Chan Road in Khon Kaen City rose to 50,000 baht per square meter.)

We already know that the government doesn’t have the people’s interest at heart. Take the recent example of the ten percent price increase in gas which came at the same time as the Ministry of Energy’s Order that gas companies not reveal price changes in advance for the sake of fair and transparent competition in the market (this Order has been reverted due to the tail’s reaction).

In the Deputy Prime Minister’s speech in Khon Kaen last year, he provided a solution to the rising cost of living. He spoke of eradicating poverty:

“You need 8,000 to 12,000 baht a month to live on. Now Khon Kaen’s cost of living is starting to climb up. And what do you need? Like the Governor said this morning, you need these three things: a job, money, and qualification. Once you have money, you’ll be able to take care of your family, build a comfortable lifestyle. You’ll have money for healthcare, money for education, money for tourism. Therefore, your lives will change.”

Notably, healthcare and education are followed by tourism as the good things enabled by money in the Holy Trinity of Work, Money, and Qualification. As if good healthcare and education weren’t supposed to be a right for all regardless of wealth and income!

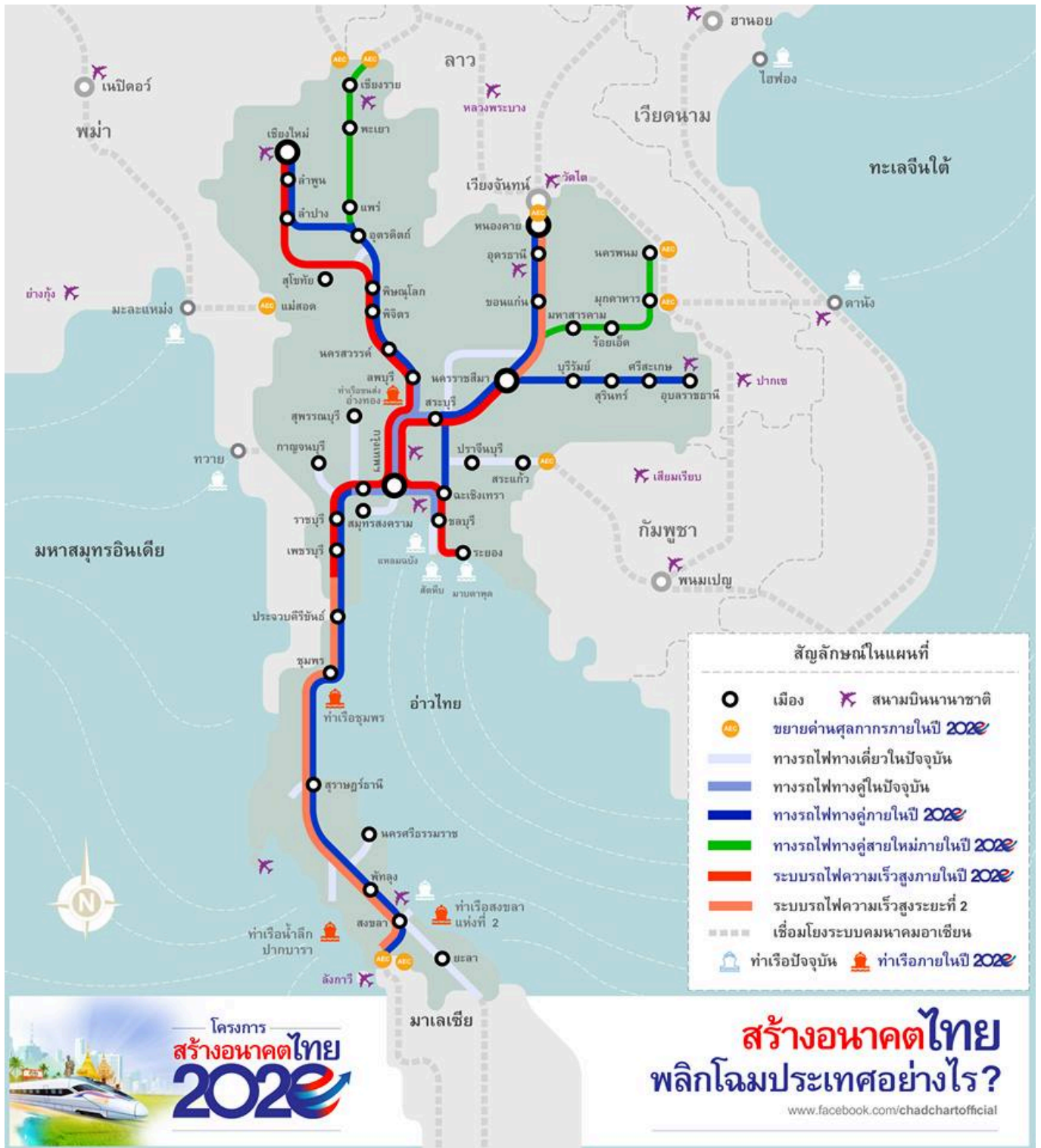
How can the arrow be taken out? (Assuming that the body struck by the arrow can’t take it out alone.)

There was a Change.org campaign last year calling the government to establish a law for [“Sufficiency Economy Zone”](#) to protect the livelihoods of farmers and others who subscribe to the self-sufficiency philosophy. Around 900 people signed on, but even some of those who signed added critical comments about the sheer impossibility of the proposal. Deepening pain and suffering for the “1.0”s of Thailand seems inevitable. King Bhumibol-inspired agrarian utopia doesn’t measure up.

So, instead of that, and short of overthrowing the regime, do we place hope in public-private collaboration (*Pracharath*-style) between charismatic politicians like the Khon Kaen City mayor and “patriotic” businessmen like the Khon Kaen City Development company? At least they seem to have what it takes: money and power. Yes? No?

Is there a human cost of not reaching for any target?

Yes. Time is the costliest thing, like former Minister of Transport Chatchart Sitthiphon [famously said](#) in his defense of Yingluck government’s “Create Thailand’s Future 2020,” now a forlorn parallel universe to the military junta’s [scaled down](#) partnership with China. If efforts like “Khon Kaen Smart City” get folded, the future will probably suffer the most.



Official poster of the 2013 infrastructural development project “Create Thai Future 2020” under Yingluck Shinawatra’s government.

In the article “Thinking about smart cities,” American scholars Amy Glasmeier and Susan Christopherson point to the urgency:

“Estimates are that 2.6 billion people will move to or be born into urban centres by 2050. Two-thirds of these residents will live in Asia or Africa. Left untouched, many of these cities will emerge out of or swallow-up squatter settlements . . . The pace of change is forecasted to be so swift that unless efforts begin now to provide solid research findings, the opinions and advice of scholars are likely to have little effect or impact on these cities of the future.”

The Khon Kaen City elite have done their best strategically playing the junta's game and getting the power and helmsmanship it needs.

Deserve it or not, the Khon Kaen elite have a political will to follow through with this infrastructural development, and that is something the future deserves.

Deputy PM Prajin Juntong seemed to be the only person who ever said with certainty that the "Khon Kaen Smart City" projects will prevail even if there is a change in government. Khon Kaen people aren't so confident-the anxiety that a political sea change may wipe the slate clean and the knowledge that Phuket and Chiang Mai will be attended to before Khon Kaen drives them desperate for time.

So, critical speculation about the potential pitfalls of a certain infrastructural development plan, or a particular local or national government, at a certain point may actually contribute to the people's suffering. What's the most important is that critique must emerge from participation in concrete efforts in specific places, so critique doesn't sideline itself into irrelevance.

Maybe the Buddha was right after all.