

Two pillars of change: Decentralization and military reform

written by Pirun Anusuriya | February 26, 2019

Guest contribution by Pirun Anusuriya

Ahead of the 24 March polls, election season is in full swing in Udon Thani's Muang District. Candidates' posters and campaign trucks are out on the streets, advertising many familiar local politicians. But the face of one politician stands out.

He looks young, with a skinhead haircut and a face too friendly to be involved in politics.

His campaign slogan is "New Man, New Politics, Revive the Country."

Nattapong Pipatchaisiri is the candidate of Future Forward Party in the province's Constituency 1.

The 34-year-old, who goes by the nickname Ken, runs a third-generation, family-owned construction tool shop.

"Let's keep it relaxed," he says before sitting down in his office for the interview. "I'm a businessman, not a snobbish politician."



Nattapong Pipatchaisiri on the campaign trail in Udon Thani's Constituency 1. Photo credit: Future Forward Facebook page.

Natthapong knew some Future Forward Party members through business contacts before he was asked to join the party. Impressed by the political vision of party co-founder Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, he decided to run as a candidate in his hometown.

He believes the party can truly bring change to the country because it is run by a diverse group of young people who have few links to the old guard of politicians and their influential families.

Two pillars of change

Voters are usually mainly interested in the different policies candidates propose to improve people's standard of living and solve other everyday problems. But in line with the party's platform, Natthapong intends to focus on two more fundamental issues first.

The key to solve the country's problems and tailor solutions for the geographically and culturally different regions, he believes, is ending military intervention and pushing for decentralization.

"[Military] rule has turned Thailand into an uncivilized nation that discourages foreign investment," he argues. "The economy goes south because there is no cash inflow. It's crucial to have no more coups."



Natthapong Pipatchaisiri in his office at his family's company, Thai Pipat, a construction tools shop, in central Udon Thani City.

Reforming the military

The Future Forward Party wants to keep the military from interfering in politics by turning it into a

professional army. One of its key policies is to cut the annual defence budget and reduce the number of generals in the forces.

Thailand's armed forces has about 1,400 generals and admirals. By comparison, the US military has about 900 for a force several times the size of the Thai military.

"The first thing we're going to do is to push for military reform and reduce the number of generals," Natthapong says. "The freed-up salary budget can be used to develop the country."

Natthapong estimates that this would make available funds of 50 million baht that can be distributed to the elderly and people with disabilities or used for child support.



Military reform and reducing the number of generals and admirals is one of the Future Forward Party's main policies. Credit: Future Forward Facebook page.

Decentralizing state power

Natthapong sees a huge disparity between the Bangkok and the regions. Too often local projects and joint ventures with the private sector get stuck and ultimately suspended because of the centralized approval process.

"The process in the existing system is sluggish," he argues. "Projects pass many desks, are signed by multiple people but eventually fail [to get approval]."

"Local administrations should be able to make decisions by themselves."

Increasing local decision-making power would speed up local projects that often are only of low

priority for administrators in Bangkok. For example, local decision making could boost tourism at local sights in Udon Thani, like the Red Lotus Lake or the Kham Chanot Forest.

Building a welfare state

But how will Future Forward Party's policies improve people's living conditions and their economic status when the focus lies on big issues like decentralization and the political role of the military?

Nattapong explains that his party wants to create a comprehensive welfare state system for the country that covers education, medical services, elderly pensions, and a child welfare benefit.

The party proposes a 2,000-baht monthly handout to students aged 18 years and above for extra-curricular courses, 1,800 baht to elderly citizens, and 1,200 baht in maternity allowances.

"All of these are no different from what other parties offer. But we can say where the money is coming from," he argues.

Apart from reallocating funds from the defence budget to finance welfare policies, Nattapong believes the state's national budget management can be improved which will free up additional funds.



Future Forward promotes welfare policies to improve the people's living conditions, including education, medical service, elderly pensions, and child welfare benefit. Credit: Future Forward Facebook page.

Revamping the rice sector

Nattaphong argues that one of the most problematic characteristics of rice production in Thailand is that rice farmers often overly depend on millers and middlemen to sell their produce.

He believes this issue can be addressed by building on the examples of community enterprises in southern Isaan. In Surin Province, an initiative allows farmers to store their rice in community silos and gives them more bargaining power in determining prices and manage the production process.

“We will streamline the entire production process, from fumigation and dehusking to packaging the product in vacuum bags to reach customers at better prices and quality. Farmers will get a direct benefit and if this is successful, it can be adapted for foreign export,” he says.

In addition, Natthapong argues that the country’s agricultural sector needs an injection of modern technology. But it depends on the farmers to change their ways and accept new methods, he says.

In for the long game

Nattapong is well aware that the party’s policies aim for a complete overhaul of the political system, which will provoke opposition among those who benefit from the status quo.

“I understand that these people are protecting their interests,” he says. “But it is time to open up because in a developed nation there must be competition, not monopolies.”

Once part of the government, the party wants to propose legislation that strengthens the country’s rule of law and to move against monopolies and corruption.

In the past, politicians too often ignored their supporters once elected into office. But as businessmen, Natthapong argues, party leader Thanathorn and he himself know the importance of delivering on their promises.

“Change takes time and patience,” he says. “And we are a party that is in it for the long game.”

This story was first published in Thai on February 20, 2019. Translated and edited by The Isaan Record.