

THE BIG INTERVIEW

Pavin Chachavalpongpun, founder of 112WATCH, interviews leading intellectual **Noam Chomsky** on Article 112 and the state of Thai politics.

Pavin: In your view, what should be the role of monarchy in the modern world?

Chomsky: Humankind has long coped with the problems associated with the monarchy for centuries. As a form of governance, the monarchy either thrives and then survives, or stagnates and then eliminated. Western countries whose monarchy has continued to flourish included the United Kingdom and Sweden, for example. This is because the monarchy in these countries have limited their role, mostly ceremonial, while refraining from intervening in the political system. The move has been made in the past century for the monarchy itself to ensure that it strictly remained a sort of national symbol connecting the past with the present, while actively working with society. The case of the United Kingdom is worth mentioning. The resilience and adaptation are keys to the survival of the British monarchy, as seen in the case of allowing members of the royal family to wed those once perceived to be outside the norm. I hope that over time, Thailand will be able to find its way to guarantee the co-existence between the monarchy and democracy.

Pavin: But as you know, in Thailand, the monarchy has resisted reforms. Instead, it has strengthened its position and competes with democracy. How do you see the Thai situation?

Chomsky: Generations of political leaders have tended to augment political power for themselves. The Thai monarchy, in heading toward that direction, is posing a threat to democracy and it can be very dangerous. Thai society must be able to find its own way to get out of the situation and Thai people must find their own way to emancipate themselves from this kind of subordination. Freedom must be declared a norm, as a healthy path toward democracy. The case of Thailand is hardly unique. The combined force between the monarchy and the military has been seen in other authoritarian societies. During the Cold War, the United States played its part in consolidating such combined force because Washington needed Bangkok's participation in a containment policy

against communism. This was an ugly record for the United States.

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Pavin: Article 112 has affected the level of freedom and violated human rights in Thailand? What is your suggestion regarding the way to deal with this issue?

Chomsky: Article 112 of Thailand offers immunity to the royal institution, to the point that the institution cannot be condemned, criticised or defamed. I believe that the repressive policy as a result of the use of Article 112, should not exist. But we must bear in mind that to eliminate Article 112 is not easy. In the United States, while the constitution guarantees the freedom of speech, the Supreme Court continues to grant immunity to the state. In England, while lese-majeste law has not been abolished, it has rarely been used. I believe that political and cultural system must not be exempted from being criticised. But as I said, the problem will not be easily overcome.

Pavin: We mentioned the combined force of the monarchy and the military. What is your view on the role of the Thai military (particularly in politics)?

Chomsky: Indonesia provides a case of success in pulling the military from politics. In 1965, with the rise of General Suharto, Indonesia went into a dark age when a massacre took place at the order of the Suharto regime against innocent citizens. It was a breaking record of human rights violation in the world. The Suharto regime was supported by the United States. Hence, Washington must be guilty and responsible for the moral crisis in Indonesia as well as in the West. Finally, Indonesia was able to de-

politicise the military, with the help of young students whose moral courage and commitment led the way for the reform. I hope that Thailand will one day follow in the footsteps of Indonesia.

But youth movement has changed itself over the period. In the 1950s, many students were passive and obedient. But in the 1960s, we witnessed social and cultural revolution partaken by young students. It will be difficult to try to explain what was behind the evolution of the youth movement. It has become unpredictable. In the case of Thailand, I hope to see the dedication of the youth in confronting repressive elements in order to rebuild a more positive and constructive society which is just and free. But it is up to the Thai youths. I just hope that there will be a continuity of effort in shaping the Thai society for the better.

Pavin: How do you see the role of younger generation in the promotion of democracy?

Chomsky: Youths are perceived to be a driving force for progressive societal change. This is because normally the young are often at the forefront of the process of change. The reason is that because most of them are university students, this is during the most important period of their lives, which is free and control-free. They have not yet entered the burden of having to maintain their family and to put food on the table. This is a period of exploration. It leads to the creation of political activism which help “civilise” society. But youth movement has changed itself over the period. In the 1950s, many students were passive and obedient. But in the 1960s, we witnessed social and cultural revolution partaken by young students. It will be difficult to try to explain what was behind the evolution of the youth movement. It has become unpredictable. In the case of Thailand, I hope to see the dedication of the youth in confronting repressive elements in order to rebuild a more positive and constructive society which is just and free. But it is up to the Thai youths. I just hope that there will be a continuity of effort in shaping the Thai society for the better.



Noam Chomsky, is currently teaching at the University of Arizona.