

REFLECTIONS ON THE MODERNIZATION PROCESS

by

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DISCUSSION PAPER

on

Pinit Ratanakul's

CHARACTERISTICS ON MODERNIZING STATES

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From the outset, I would like to say that I enjoyed reading Dr. Pinit Ratanakul's paper from which I learned a lot about Thailand's efforts to modernize. Before I get into the different issues he raised, I would like to recommend three improvements on the paper:

A. Improvements:

The first point is that there is no conceptual or theoretical framework for the analysis. The absence of this has reduced the study to a historic narration of facts and incidents. I don't believe this is what the author's objective and purpose is.

The second point has to do with a few actual and/or apparent contradictions. I shall give some examples to illustrate this point. On page (17), he says that "local officials do not yet understand the concept of modernization or development" and therefore there is insufficient local and regional input. On page (18) he states that the failure of development policies are due to "the lack of control and policy guidelines from the top". Again on page (31) he says "the failure...is caused by high centralization of decision-making..." I'll give another illustration. On page (34) he says that "modernization requires basic changes in attitudes and behaviors...and economic growth (modernity) cannot be assured without attitudinal and behavioral transformation of the people". Therefore, what is needed is "a national plan for cultural development to transform the old culture...into a new one." Yet in his conclusions, Professor Ratanakul seems to reaffirm the need to preserve the Thai culture. He states that the country must find "a new model of development that is attuned to the cultures and aspirations of her people." (page 41). The third point relates to what the paper does not contain. Thailand is known to have developed its tourist industry rather well. What has been the impact of this on the economy and socio-cultural values? Could it thus serve as a model for other developing countries? The resource base of the country has not been discussed, as well as the natural resources and the ability of the country to generate foreign investments and foreign aid flowing into the country. Finally, Thailand is a member in the regional economic integration and cooperation known as ASEAN.

I believe that these aspects or "characteristics of modernization" as the author calls them are vital in the development experience of Thailand. Dr. Ratanakul does address a number of issues which I discuss below.

B. Issues

Now let me turn to the issues raised by Dr. Ratanakul. Thailand's modernization efforts have followed the same path and evolution. The basic characteristics are the same. These include:

1. The actors:

The removal of the authoritarian central figure (the absolute monarch) in 1932, created a leadership vacuum in Thailand. In other LDCs, the vacuum is created in many ways: the departure of a colonial power; the overthrow of absolute monarchs, kings; the demise of a favored group, class, etc. The military has been the most likely candidate to fill up the gap. Often, the military has a junior or partner in the form of bureaucrats, intellectuals, and urban intelligentsia. A third actor is the religious group whether this is made up of Buddhist monks in South and Southeast Asia, the Catholic church in Latin America, or the Muslim clergy in the Middle East.

2. Legitimacy

Third World leaders have been involved in an endless quest for legitimacy of their regimes. They promulgate constitutions tailor-made to suit their needs. These are abrogated as soon as a new regime takes over, which in turn promulgates its own constitutions. The legitimization process forces the leaders to make promises, few of which they deliver. They project the image of reaching out to the rural masses when they jealously hold onto the controls. Even those benevolent systems that allow facade of democratic institutions--they do so only by "promoting political participation only within controllable organizations" as Dr. Ratanakul correctly notes on page (30). Thus the failure of broad political participation is not due to "poor preparation" (page 32), for that can easily be remedied, but due to an unwillingness of the center to share real

power with the periphery. As a result, the experimentation with the "tambol" councils in Thailand, the "rejama" villages in Tanzania or the "ta'awun" cooperative cells in Yemen do not and cannot exert real political power.

3. Institutions

Institution-building is a major aspect of development because this is the channel through which communication, money, technology, authority, and decisions flow. The bureaucracy is a necessary mechanism in institution-building, yet it has become corrupt, inefficient, parasitic, and unmanageable. But this is the very source of power of urban intelligensia. A perfect bureaucracy does not have much power, and thus does not satisfy the aspirations of the politicians, professionals, and other elites. In addition, bureaucracies provide an easy answer to the unemployment problem, especially the educated unemployed. As Adolf Wagner noted, "Where government bureaucracies were once small, they became big; and where they were big, they became still bigger."

4. Planning

The concept of planning assumes two things wrongly. It assumes that governments understand the variables in a play in a given situation; and that they can direct and control those variables. Neither is correct. Thus the planning concept is, at best, a second best solution. Yet, the overlap of authority in the cities, the helplessness of central authorities in rural areas, and the pockets or enclaves of interest groups/persons which are out of the reach of government institutions; all those factors leave a lot to be desired in the planning efforts of developing countries. The planning efforts require tools and mechanisms for their success. Two such tools are physical and human infrastructures. At the physical level, roads are constructed, water, sewage, and electric projects are implemented, harbors and airports are built, etc. In terms of human infrastructure, major emphasis was put on education, with supplementary efforts in health, training, etc.

Dr. Pinit Ratanakul explored all those aspects of the development process. The analysis covered only Thailand, but those are the same issues that face other LDCs.