

H.E. Dr Thanat Khoman (1914-2016)

Dr Thanat Khoman, an Honorary Member of the Siam Society since 2000, passed away peacefully on 3 March 2016, two months short of his 102nd birthday and fittingly just two months after the formal inauguration of the ASEAN Community. This was another milestone in the life of ASEAN, which he co-founded in 1967 during his illustrious career as foreign minister of Thailand between 1959 and 1971. Undoubtedly, the pivotal role and decisive contribution of this distinguished diplomat to the creation of ASEAN has always been deservedly recognized.



But rather than just “resting on his laurels,” this eminent scholar-statesman continued to maintain his personal interest in ASEAN and keep a watchful eye on the organization’s progress. In 1992, twenty-five years after the inauguration of that “joint effort to promote economic co-operation and the welfare of the peoples of Southeast Asia,” Dr Thanat favored us with a succinct yet enlightening account of the “why and wherefore” of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia as well as its future prospects.¹ In this masterful presentation, Dr Thanat started from the very beginning, tracing back to the “legacies” of the colonial past, which were fraught with potentially explosive issues. He continued ahead to the dawn of incipient regionalism in the form of a minor grouping under the name of ASA which dismally failed to weather the divisive storm of territorial disputes, and finally to the realization on the part of the five countries of Southeast Asia of the need for another organization for regional cooperation, which eventually materialized in the Bangkok Declaration of 1967. He did not dwell on the details of the historic Bangkok meeting beyond affirming that ASEAN owed its name to Adam Malik, the then Indonesian foreign minister.

However, for many of the people present at that meeting in the ornate reception hall of the old Saranrom Palace late in the afternoon of 8 August 1967, including even junior Thai Foreign Ministry officials serving as members of the secretariat taking notes at the

¹ “ASEAN: Conception and Evolution,” in *The ASEAN Reader*, ed. K. S. Sandhu et al., Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992.

far end of the hall, it was certainly an unforgettable experience to witness Dr Thanat Khoman, chairman of the meeting, who, after the signing of the Declaration by the five ministers, graciously turned to Dr Adam Malik and pointed out that the organization's name as spelt out in the Declaration was simply "Association of Southeast Asia," and seemingly had no possibility of a decent acronym. The chairman was obviously pleading for a suggestion from the Indonesian, reputedly a master at coining acronyms. Dr Malik no less graciously and smilingly obliged. Something along these lines followed. Dr Malik said, "Put the word 'Nations' in after 'Asia,' which should change to become 'Asian,' and now we have the full name as Association of Southeast Asian Nations." He then puckered his lips and slowly pronounced the word "AH-SEE-AN" as the acronym. That was the very first time the name "ASEAN" was ever uttered or heard.

In Dr Thanat's article, which was cogently presented in his usual and inimitable style, two important features or propositions stood out yet are sometimes overlooked.

First, in the midst of the territorial disputes involving three regional countries, namely, Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, there could be no real prospect of future cooperation unless reconciliation was first attained. It thus fell on Thailand and, in particular, on Dr Thanat, as a non-involved party, to offer to help bring the disputants together in Bangkok where he succeeded in achieving what was needed. At no time was the term "mediator" ever used.

Another prominent point or theme running through Dr Thanat's presentation is his constant concern for cooperation among nations in the wider geographical region of Asia and the Pacific. He was evidently a firm supporter of cooperation among the Asia-Pacific countries—as witnessed by his active involvement in PECC (Pacific Economic Cooperation Council) in the days preceding the advent of APEC—singling out Australia and New Zealand as good prospective partners. Yet he seemed to question the "credibility of assurances advanced by larger powers to smaller partners." Drawing upon lessons learnt from historical events both in Europe and Asia, which encouraged weak nations to rely more on neighborly support than on stronger states, Dr Thanat concluded that "For Thailand, in particular, its disappointing experience with SEATO taught it the lesson that it was useless and even dangerous to hitch its destiny to distant powers who may cut loose at any moment their ties and obligations with lesser and distant allies."

Such deep-seated misgivings gained from practical experience may perhaps help to explain, to some extent, Dr Thanat's frequent bouts of exasperation with the external "powers that be" in later years whenever he deemed their action to be prejudicial to Thailand's national interest.

Meanwhile, as regards ASEAN, Dr Thanat affirmed: "My faith in the usefulness and 'serviceability' of ASEAN cannot and will not diminish." Even much later, just a few years ago when his health was already failing, it was reported by a visitor to his home that among the books on ASEAN on his library shelf was one that bore the title "ASEAN Community."

Dr Thanat has often been credited with embodying all the necessary qualities of a leader responsible for the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, for he possessed finesse, erudition, vision and a firm commitment to protecting the national

interest. For those privileged to know him on a personal level, there are other admirable qualities that could be added, such as tenacity of purpose and devotion to his family.

Thanphuying Molee Khoman, his ever-charming spouse, is well remembered for her grace and kindness extended to one and all, especially Foreign Ministry officials and their families. She was always by her husband's side, both literally and figuratively, and was admired for her natural charm, which never failed to win people over and carry the day in any situation or circumstance. Along with their three children, she provided Dr Thanat with domestic peace and happiness, all conducive to the "bedrock" of security in life. Moreover, even prior to his marriage, Dr Thanat had the good fortune of being brought up in a warm and closely-knit family headed by his father, Phraya Bhibhaksa Satyathipatai, a Supreme Court justice and one of the first nine barristers in the land to qualify in 1897 under the modernized legal system established by H.R.H. Prince Rabibadh, the "Father of Thai Law" and a son of King Rama V.

For a father to raise his son in the best possible manner is only natural. But Dr Thanat had no ordinary father, judging from the letters, totaling 113 in number, which he wrote to his son once a month during the period of twelve years that Dr Thanat, then just fourteen years of age, began his schooling in Bordeaux, France, and continuing to the time when he graduated with a doctorate in law from the University of Paris. What is even more extraordinary, perhaps, is the fact that the son kept all those letters over those many years, well packed together and well preserved in a cupboard in his home. Dr Thanat's children stumbled on them and had them published on Dr Thanat's 96th birthday.

What was instantly revealed from those letters was a caring family man of great intellect and integrity, well informed on the current affairs of his country and the world at large. He "reported" to his son, for instance, about the effects on Siam of the worldwide economic depression and also about the change in the political regime from absolute to constitutional monarchy in 1932. At the same time, he never failed to admonish his son not only to work but "to work and play," to save money but only within reason, and, later in life, to drink but only in moderation. He constantly advised his son on subjects to study, for example, early on to choose Latin and English for their usefulness, and later on at university on whether to take up law or political science. Above all, he inculcated in his son a sense of responsibility, especially to the nation. Towards the end of Dr Thanat's student days in France, when by that time he had won a Thai government scholarship, his father tellingly reminded him to "be grateful to the State as I always am. The money that we receive from the State derives from the blood and toil of the people. We must be sparing and spend only on what is really necessary.... No matter how much we have to be deprived and suffer, we still have to render service to the State and our fatherland to the best of our ability."

There were more examples of the father's advice and teachings, all "gems" reflecting his wisdom, of which the son did him proud by absorbing all. Many of the essential qualities we find in Dr Thanat, particularly a firm commitment to protect the national interest, must have their origin in those neatly handwritten pages which his father lovingly crafted for the benefit of his son and, as it turned out, for the country as a whole.

So as we mourn the departure of H.E. Dr Thanat Khoman, one of Thailand's ablest

diplomat-statesmen, with deep gratitude for his lifelong service to King and Country, we also take this opportunity to salute his august father, Phraya Bhibhaasa Satyathipatai (Poh Khoman), for having made Dr Thanat Khoman the man he was.

Vitthya Vejjajiva