

Interview with Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit

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VOLUME 5, NUMBER 1



Kong Tsung-gan • Richard Heydarian • Antony Dapiran



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Superstition

Sunisa Manning

by about a third, to eighty-three. Around twenty-six are Party LSGs, the remainder are State Council bodies.”

As in every autocratic system, power consolidation comes through disruption. In Xi’s case, he oversaw the punishment of up to 1.4 million party members, including, Shirk notes, “seventeen full and seventeen alternate Central Committee members, a pair of sitting Politburo members, an ex-member of the Politburo Standing Committee, and more than a hundred generals and admirals”. This allowed him to bludgeon the Chinese political elite into submission, paving the way for the elimination of term limits and creating the possibility of a Mao-like “leader for life” scenario. In the words of one Chinese Communist Party leader, Xi may have surpassed all modern predecessors, because “not even Mao Zedong has controlled the military to the same extent as Xi does today, [since] Mao had to share power with powerful revolutionary-era marshals”. No wonder, then, that Elizabeth Economy of the Council on Foreign Relations has aptly described Xi’s presidency as the “third revolution”, with Xi singlehandedly transforming the structure and operation of the Chinese state. But this is precisely why the Hong Kong protests, and the brewing anti-China backlash across the world, is a nightmarish situation for the Chinese supreme leader. His enemies, including those who suffered under the lopsided and selective anti-corruption purges, will surely use China’s recent setbacks to undermine his position, while fence sitters and soft supporters may begin to harbour doubts over Xi’s leadership.

Just when China needs profound reforms, Xi’s political insecurity may force his hand: either much needed reforms are sacrificed for short-term stability and the appeasement of key constituencies, or draconian measures are introduced in a moment of half panic. Magnus suggests that both are already taking place, as the Chinese leadership postpones indispensable market reforms, especially the need to deleverage overburdened financial markets, amid a trade war and an economic slowdown, as well as to hand “arbitrary and discretionary powers” to organs of the ruling party at the expense of technocrats and state administrators.

Magnus correctly notes that “one-man rule makes China’s political system and economy more vulnerable to instability”, since the absence of checks and balances breeds “inevitable errors and miscalculations”, especially if the top leader, surrounded by sycophants and fearful courtiers, becomes divorced from reality. Moving forward, Xi confronts two stark options. He could stick to his guns, doubling down on repression at home and intimidation abroad, taking his current course of authoritarian consolidation to its logical conclusion. History is replete with cult-like dictators such as Joseph Stalin, who took precisely this course when under the greatest amount of pressure from both within the regime and abroad. Alternatively, Xi could take inspiration from Deng Xiaoping, who, with the unforgivable exception of the Tiananmen massacre, stubbornly welcomed pragmatism over violent confrontation.

Choosing the second option would mean making genuine concessions to Hong Kong, including introducing universal suffrage, as well as dialling down the intimidation of neighbouring countries, whether across the Taiwan Strait or the South China and East China Seas. It would also mean recalibrating relations with the West by, for example, ceasing predatory trade practices and technological theft, which have unleashed the greatest trade war in recent memory. But such concessions could severely undermine Xi’s position among the very nationalists and hardliners he has gladly encouraged and empowered with his “great rejuvenation” and “Chinese Dream” rhetoric, jingoistic policies, and triumphalist posturing on the global stage. In many ways, the fate not only of China but also of the world lies in the hands of one man, and it’s not Donald Trump. □

Richard Heydarian is the author of *The Indo-Pacific: Trump, China, and the New Struggle for Global Mastery*

N came from an old, wealthy family. There was a family fight over an inheritance. One day the rumour spread that her family’s front gates were shot at by a passing motorbike man. *Phooo-phoo-phooo-phoo-phoo*. The crackle of bullets harmed no one. It wasn’t intended to. It was N’s uncle warning her father to let the issue of inheritance, and whether the uncle should get the bulk of the money, go. Let go the father did — message delivered.

This took place in my home country, which operates on violence and ornate superstition. Most homes have a shrine staked in the garden to protect the perimeter of the house. After the shooting, N’s family likely went to the temple and made merit, as if karma were a precise equation, as if violence could be banished by giving money to buy monk’s robes or temple roof tiles.

Would it have been better for the siblings to sit down and have a discussion? Yes, and yet — confrontation just isn’t done. Messages are sent, violence smoothed over with a donation, and everyone smiles, as if nothing could disrupt the placid waters of my tropical home.

This isn’t a story that would normally be shared with outsiders. It’s not that we have a secret culture; we have a polite one. It would be inhospitable to share a story that might make the other person uncomfortable, so unless you’re in a position to be uncomfortable already, you will not be bothered with some truth that could mess up your idyll, your beach vacation.

Your privilege is to remain comfortable. That’s the Western way of saying it.

Because things can turn violent so fast, it’s important to have protection. Though I live in the United States now, in my early twenties I lived in my home country. The police went through a phase of pulling over fancy cars and foreigners to fleece them for (bribe) money. They could also plant drugs in the car, landing said person, discernible by fair skin or make of car to be wealthy, in jail and subject to an even larger fine (bribe) to get out.

I drove a Mazda — not so fancy — but I have fair skin and am recognisable as half white. Anticipating trouble, my American father handed me the business card of a general in the army, a friend of his, to ward off policemen. I was to use the card the way you would brandish a wooden stake and braid of garlic when faced with a vampire. If things went really bad, I had permission to call the general.

Hi, I’m the daughter of _____ and I’m at _____ intersection, where policeman number _____ stopped me. Can I put you on the phone?

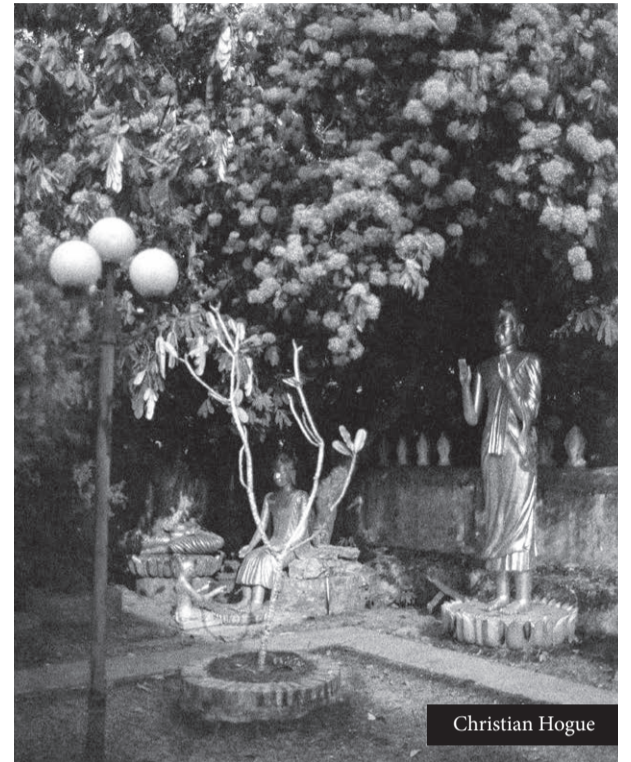
The card was my shot across the bow, a strong visual cue meant to dissuade more than damage. Used right, it should be able to extricate me from a bad situation without embarrassing the policeman — a concern because home has a face-saving culture, and if I (small young female) embarrassed an officer (presumably older, male) things might get messy.

What is messy — what exactly am I euphemising?

When things get messy, people disappear.

Recently, the *New York Times* reported that two democracy activists had been found dead. They had earlier fled my home country to a neighbouring one, hoping to escape the ire of the military dictator who is the prime minister. Their bodies washed up on the bank of the Mekong. They had cement bricks in their stomachs.

I was confused by this description, and texted my brother, who lives back home.



Christian Hogue

How does a person get cement bricks in their stomach? Is it poured concrete?

I think they cut them open and put the bricks in so the bodies will sink.

Were the people dead already?

This is the clinical curiosity of the native. Would I have bricks put in my stomach?

Examples of the untouchable elite are endless. One, so obvious it would be struck out of a fictional story, is that a son from a famous family ran his Ferrari over a police officer. This happened during the day, with many witnesses. That guy has yet to appear in a court.

A thought that comforts my husband is that it’s unlikely I will be dumped in one of the waterways that spread through the city, since I’m the daughter of someone (relatively) well known and (relatively) well connected.

I’m connected outside of patrimony, too. I used to work for members of the nobility. My husband, my father or my brother would call them if I were detained. We’d call the general. We’d call everyone.

But if I transgressed enough, I could be in danger. I wrote a novel about a democracy movement in the 1970s that is not openly talked about. There are musings in the book about monarchy, opportunity, benevolence and poverty that could, perhaps, get me in trouble. Many of the democracy activists from that era were chased down, beaten and killed. The more recent *New York Times* piece resurfaced like a bad dream.

I can’t elaborate. It would get me in trouble. I already wrote the novel, which, if published, will be a record of my own loss of innocence.

Notice that I haven’t named my home country?

I don’t have more to say — besides, you have to write what you have to write.

My husband and I had been trying to make a baby for over a year. My mother knew this. I was visiting her in Ireland, where she lives, when she said she had a surprise for me. I hoped it was a soak in the seaweed baths. Instead, we went to an angel store, a place for people like her who hear voices and read auras. Upstairs, she was greeted like an old friend.

A brother and sister read my fortune. They didn't look at my palms or draw my chart. They sat in front of me, breathing deeply, with their eyes closed.

When you hear something you can't un-hear it. The brother said that my novel was only halfway done, that it would take a lot of work to finish it, and someone would have to help me. He added that it wouldn't amount to much anyway, the writing. My work, as in my vocation, was to help guide young souls.

"A dark tunnel. You help them into the light."

Into heaven? That would be the joke, but I didn't ask, because actually I understood what he meant. I love working with young people, though I hope my writing does amount to something, because of the years I've spent on it, because of the joy I gain, producing something more total than what I could've imagined from the outset.

I'm writing this as my novel is out on submission for the second time after not selling in the previous round. My agent did help me edit the novel extensively. Though I thought it was done when the brother was talking to me, it had a ways to go.

His sister spent the session staring at the air around me and smiling faintly. Then she made shooing motions towards me.

"These are your babies," she said in a singsong voice. "They're in you now."

I said I wanted to have a large family — three or four.

She shrugged. Maybe, but she saw only two. They would come in rapid succession.

Here is the thing with prophecy, even when you don't believe in it: I got pregnant as soon as I returned from Ireland. Having gone through pregnancy and labour, I can barely fathom doing it one more time.

It's custom to go to the family fortune teller around the new year. One of my friends, on the advice of her fortune teller, didn't drive for twelve months, because of the potential for life-ending catastrophe. When I told her that this was absurd, she replied that it would be equally absurd to die in a car crash after being warned.

When she put it that way, I saw her point. Anyway, it was easy enough to use taxis and motorbikes to hopscotch through the city. The next year, she drove again.

Everyone also gets a star chart drawn before entering into nuptials. I know people who got married at 4:43 a.m. because it was the most auspicious time for their union. Luckily, only this couple's family had to rouse themselves for the ceremony at that hour. Most of us went to an evening reception to toast the couple, the inconveniences of prediction averted.

Though we married in my home country, my husband and I chose not to get a star chart drawn. I had spoken with my Asian mother about it, who advised that if we wanted to go the Western way, it would be better not to know what the right time would be, because then we would be disregarding good advice.

We chose a time that fit in the schedule of the day. I felt reckless with free will during our ceremony. We were turning away from the full sails of fortunate winds in favour of choice, of paddling our own boat, even if we were about to go over falls. These thoughts occurred to me as I sat on a dais in a greenhouse, bamboo arcing over our guests' bowed heads.

Superstition does prey on my mind despite my disavowal of it. One year, I went to that friend's fortune teller. She told me I was predisposed to get fat, which I laughed at, being easily slim at the time. She said I would move back to my home country, because I was born there.

Native soil calls to you.

I both welcomed this comment and dreaded it. For almost a decade I've lived in the United States. I miss my tropics: wet air, abundant fruit, joking, ease. And I disdain it. I don't want to disappear into a place where we could enjoy live-in help and a low cost of living, where my destiny would never feel like my own.

The fortune teller was a large woman sitting behind a glossy desk that telegraphed her authority. We were on the bottom floor of her townhouse, feet resting on

cool tile. The walls were painted pale lime. I was sure she'd chosen the colour because it matched her aura, but I didn't ask, because I wanted to keep my own intuitive certainty. That is a kind of superstition, too.

I don't go to fortune tellers anymore, following an extension of my mother's advice. It's better not to know. What someone decrees tends to lodge in my mind, humming with prophetic power despite my attempts to disregard it.

When I was working for minor royalty I discovered the importance of guarding the precise time you were born. The Western custom of sending out a birth announcement complete with birth time gives away too much biometric data. You should worry that someone could steal your identity. Think about it — full name and date of birth are major security questions.

In the East it's too much biometric data because human resources or your director might get your chart drawn and compare it with those of people already on the team. If the fortune teller says that your profile is going to clash, you might not get the job.

When I worked back home, the leader of the field team, a man I liked very much, wanted to know what time I was born. I danced around the answer and never gave him a precise time. Privately, I scoffed. Superstition! Again!

But now I wonder if it is so different from making employees take the Myers-Briggs test, an unreliable, opaque, pseudoscientific crutch. Why do I allow some superstitions and dismiss others? Trained in Western schools, I seem to privilege Western superstitions.

When my son was born my husband and I worked very hard not to release the time of his birth. I assumed that my mother and stepmother would have his chart drawn, and I didn't want to try to forget whatever predictions they were going to tell me. The baby's

destiny was to be his own. I didn't want him to need the navigational guidance of anything else. He was to be an American, reckless with free will.

It was a good plan. The baby was born so close to midnight that we aren't even sure if the time the nurse noted on his birth certificate was, in fact, correct. The joke in the labour and delivery room was that the baby got to decide the day of his birth.

Then, despite all our manoeuvring, we let the secret slip. My mother was helping us translate the baby's birth certificate. Too late, we realised she did have access to his official birth time.

She promised she wouldn't have his chart drawn. We'll see.

The violence of my home country has touched my family. When my mother was newly divorced she scrambled to find a job that could support her. She'd been out of the workforce for six years. A male friend gave her a job in his small sales firm. She did well, but she had qualms about the way the company was run. This is a euphemism for corruption. When she quit, it embarrassed her boss. He lost face and decided to sue her. If she lost the case she would face jail time. He was friends with the judge; in a country of corruptible judiciary, my mother had to see if she could find connections to anyone in a higher position.

It worked out, in that those connections were found. My mother wasn't charged, but she had so much trouble finding her next job that she moved to Singapore, to work for a large company in a neutral country where her aptitude counted for more than her docility. Thus began the years of flying to see my mother.

My mother and uncle went to the top universities back home. You have to test to get in, and it is just about the only thing that can be achieved on aptitude. Despite their intelligence, they haven't been able to get ahead. This is because they lack connections and, if I'm honest, have intransigent personalities not suited to an obsequious culture. So although my father has thrived, the other side of my family has not.

This is a point more about opportunity than violence, but poverty is violent, specifically the realisation of the relentless lack of opportunity. That realisation does violence to the spirit.

There should be an index in the *Economist* that measures the correlation between state violence and superstition. The potential for instability tracks up alongside the grip strength of amulets, witch doctors and fortune tellers. I can't actually disdain it. My father tried to protect me with the general's calling card. My mother, lacking influence, heaped me in superstitions.

Perhaps the supernatural is even more assuring than connections. It holds out the promise of being more powerful than money. Everyone wants access to some reassurance. We want superstition to do what life cannot — guarantee safety and an easy path.

It's what sends me googling the fortunes for the Lunar New Year from my house in Northern California, taking up the ritual my grandmother used to practise when she crossed the city to pull fortunes for the family at a famous Chinese temple. We would gather around her table to listen to how an ox, a snake, a rooster and a dragon would fare.

Soon after I turned twelve, a stock-market crash originated in my home country. That year, we didn't know, as we piled fruit on platters at the shrine to our ancestors, that my parents would separate; that the family company employing my mother, uncles and aunt would close; that my grandparents' house would be threatened with repossession.

What did grandma say that year? What could she have pronounced to prepare us for what lay ahead? I don't remember, but I do remember the security that came with belief. Hearing predictions reassured me. If our fate was known and mapped, it couldn't explode into shards and destroy us. □

Sunisa Manning is a writer based in California



We hear lots of stories about Indonesian maids.

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sample story



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The challenger

Mutita Chuachang

After the March 2019 election in Thailand, people thought politics was back on a democratic path. The military's five-year hold on power was over, and a new political star had begun to shimmer: Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the energetic, fiery, wealthy young scion of Thai Summit Group.

But nothing about Thailand's destiny is certain. The 2017 constitution was designed for the express purpose of leaving the junta's power uninterrupted: the referendum on the draft constitution was marked by the fierce obstruction of those who campaigned against it, and the electoral system was constructed to weaken large parties. In addition, a rival party opposed to the military government was dissolved before the election and many of the executive orders issued by the junta continued to have the status of law. Despite these and other obstacles, Thanathorn's Future Forward Party secured more than eighty seats in parliament, two to three times what it had expected, and the Pheu Thai Party, that of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, received the most votes. Yet the election resulted in the public seeing the same old faces, including the same prime minister, from parties affiliated with the military.

The clearest indication of the unchanging nature of Thai politics is that Thanathorn remains unable to take up his seat in parliament, owing to the many political cases brought against him and his party. All he can do is wait to see whether the sword of the Constitutional Court will fall on his political rights — or even on the Future Forward Party, as happened numerous times to Thaksin-aligned parties in the preceding decade. The standards for political-party dissolution in Thailand have grown very lax.

The Future Forward Party emerged like a thunderbolt in March 2018, shaking a public bored with old-style, conflictual politics and fed up with the ageing soldiers who were driving the economy into the ground. It was a dream come true for progressives when Thanathorn and Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, a former Thammasat University lecturer, united to form the party. Their ideas are clear and radical in the context of Thailand. They are resolute in their opposition to the military regime and have criticised the institution of the monarchy. Conservatives have taken up the latter point and exploited it to attack them. Cases, as yet unexamined, have alleged that they established the party to “overthrow the government” — an indirect way of saying what Thais avoid saying directly, which is “overthrow the monarchy”. One of these cases, for example, claims that when Thanathorn and Piyabutr registered the party, they referred to the principles of democracy according to the constitution, rather than the “system of democracy with the king as head of state”.

Despite the attacks, Future Forward has a great deal of support among young and middle-class voters, and even poor and working-class voters. This phenomenon has changed how we understand Thai society. Along the path of democratisation, the middle class has often been steadfastly conservative while the poor and the working class, who make up most of the population, have been loyal to the parties of former prime minister Thaksin.

Where Thai politics will end up remains unclear. But in the interim, the Future Forward Party has become the opposition that raises challenging questions in parliament. Simultaneously, Thanathorn — the MP who cannot enter parliament — travels tirelessly from province to province to listen to citizens' problems.



Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leader of the Future Forward Party, gave a three-finger salute to his supporters in Bangkok, 6 April 2019

Thanathorn was born into a middle-class family that met with financial success when he was a teenager. After his father died, Thanathorn took over the family business and expanded it. For a member of the elite, he has had a wide-ranging and diverse life. The biography *Portrait Thanathorn* paints a picture of an ordinary, mischievous kid who went to university, studied Marxism and became compelled by the problems of those at the grassroots. His friends from those years who shared his dreams of forging equality and transforming society are the same ones who joined with him to create the Future Forward Party.

On 7 January 2018, after being a long-time observer and supporter on the fringes of numerous social movements, this wealthy young man, who loves sports and adventure, decided to metamorphose into a novice politician. Many wondered how far he could go and whether Thailand really would have a new future.

Can we talk about your motivations for leaping into politics? Today, do you feel as though you made a mistake?

At the end of 2017, I was discussing Thailand's fate with a bunch of friends. We just couldn't envision a way out. At that time, demonstrations of five or more persons were still forbidden. Political parties couldn't hold events. Those who rose up to protest the junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), were prosecuted in large numbers. The foundations of the economy were beginning to crumble.

Many of us had struggled and fought in the streets, but to no effect. What remained was the form of struggle that we had not tried ourselves: starting a political party. We began to think seriously about it in the middle of 2017. We tried to convince some charismatic and well-known figures to join us and become leaders of the party. But no one agreed. They thought it was impossible. Plus, they were afraid it would put them on a collision course with the NCPO. So we decided that if there was no other choice, we would do it ourselves.

I'm still just as determined. Yes, the context and situation have changed a great deal, but all the little

dreams that come together as a big picture remain. Pushing Thailand to be a democratic country once again, one that respects the rule of law, the principles of human rights and the importance of reducing inequality, is still part of the picture — as are eliminating monopoly capital and reforming both the military and the Bangkok-centred bureaucratic system. Nothing less.

You're fighting for significant change. No one has ever managed to lead the country out of a military-dominated regime. What makes you confident that you can?

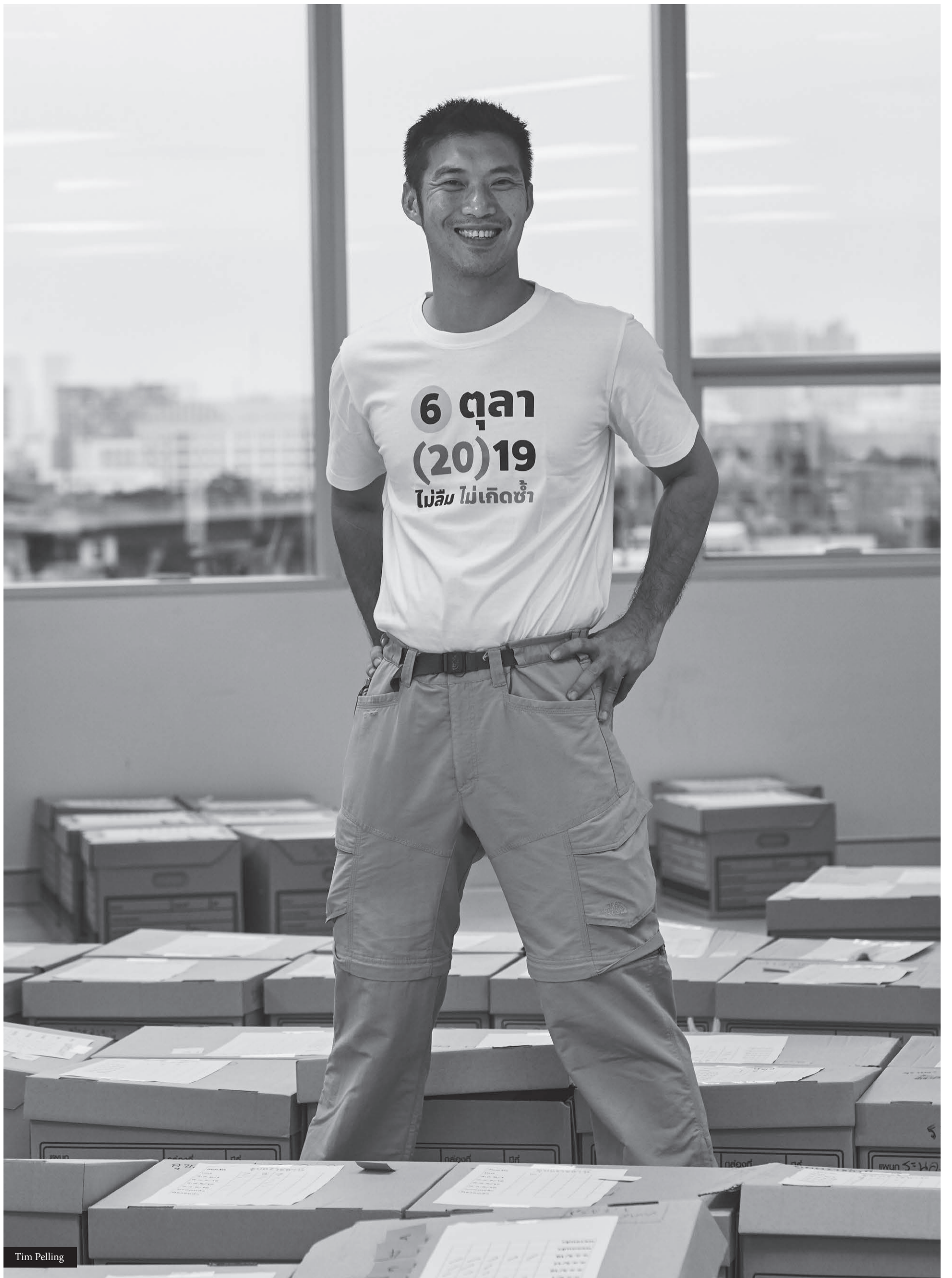
We're in an incredibly exciting time historically, when there is a chance to fundamentally change how people think. After 1997, people liked to talk about the campaign for the “people's constitution”, as the constitution on which society came to consensus. If we compare it with the people's political consciousness about the 2017 constitution today, people's consciousness now is even more expansive. If we were to amend the 2017 constitution with popular support, with the power of the people who understand the changing political conditions, there is the opportunity to penetrate down to the roots.

So this is not only about amending the constitution but also about altering how people think.

It's about making the people into citizens who comprehend their dignity and rights. To be a citizen in a democracy is to have a duty to do more than just pay taxes; it's to have a duty to protect democracy and the constitution. My view is that the consciousness of being a citizen has not yet been born in this country. If we do a good job on the campaign to amend the 2017 constitution, this may be the first time that the awakening of the people to their rights and freedoms, their awakening to the constitution, will go far.

If you do manage to amend the constitution, what's the next step?

Future Forward is large. It doesn't have to work on only one issue; we don't have to fight with only the



Tim Pelling

soldiers. We have more than eighty MPs, working on a whole range of issues. For example, the urban poor who live in slums are evicted by state agencies. Then, when they rise up to fight back, they are prosecuted. Matters like this don't have to wait for the amendment of the constitution. Regardless of the constitution, you must fight. We visit communities and examine the various problems that have arisen. At the very least, it becomes news when we go into the field. Relevant state agencies come in to consult and begin to deal with the problems.

Local elections are intertwined with the lives of the people. Ensuring good city planning, budgeting well, improving our hospitals and schools — matters like these don't need to go through MPs; they can be dealt with by local administrative organisations. Future Forward will find a team to run for local administrative organisation elections as well.

Therefore, it's not only about amending the constitution. But if we don't talk about the big stuff then large-scale, meaningful reform won't be possible. Finding a solution for monopoly capital, reforming the bureaucracy, reforming the military — these are impossible if we don't begin by amending the constitution. We cannot back down from the heart of it.

Dissolution is surely a lesson to be learned from other political parties that have attempted to amend the constitution or reform the military.

They will hit us with it [party dissolution] or they won't. The power does not reside with us. We cannot anticipate what will happen. But if we're afraid, we'll end up doing nothing at all — we may as well just stay home and sleep. Therefore, the very first step of military reform that society will accept, and which could happen, is to abolish military conscription. Conscription is left over from the feudal system: you pay tribute with your labour and time. Ending it is an economic issue, a social issue, an issue of inequality and an issue of political symbolism all in one. The Future Forward Party will propose the abolition of the Military Service Act in the fourth quarter of 2019, and I believe that other parties will support it.

Have you ever thought about what may happen to you?

I may go to prison, but I don't think they'll kill me. When we founded the party, I knew a certain day would have to come, sooner or later. This is the price you have to pay if you are going to fight in this country. But the question is, are you ready to pay or not? If activists and university students without any social capital get beaten up, arrested and a bunch of cases thrown at them, and yet those with social capital, those who have resources and ability, just sit there and tap their feet, this cannot lead to transformation. I think it's worth giving it a shot for the society we dream of.

You have a large amount of social capital. Once you began working in politics, were you able to push the needle further?

If we speak in broad strokes, we can divide people equally into a progressive basket and a conservative basket. The problem is that to win an election, a party cannot have only an ultra-progressive voice. If you're the only voice of the party, you'll rarely have more than 50 per cent — you'll still be in the same basket. Your task is to do whatever you can to take from the conservative basket. If you can take twenty-five percentage points, to make the division 75 per cent to 25 per cent, you'll win in a landslide. The structure of the Future Forward Party is therefore not an accident; it's by design. I think we've taken some from the centre. We may have 55 per cent now, even 60 per cent.

But that's not you. You're pretty radical, right?

One has to compromise. Professor Piyabutr is like me in the sense that we can speak with people from a broad group, but we have to lower the ceiling. This is natural in politics. When you choose to work in parliament, you have to compromise whether you like

it or not, otherwise all you're doing is fighting with the opposition. We just hope that we can hang on to the big issues, like the constitution.

Are you bothered that you're an MP but cannot work in parliament?

Actually, it's a good thing, because it means I can spend more time in the field. An MP has to spend three and a half days a week in parliament. If I were in parliament, then I wouldn't be able to make anything budget. But because I'm not, tomorrow I'll go to Phitsanulok, Lampang, Uttaradit and Chiang Mai. Last week I went along the Mekong River to Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan and Ubon Ratchathani. Before that I was in the eastern region. I've been able to travel and meet with people and talk about the campaign to amend the constitution. I pass on the problems I see to the Future Forward MPs, who then raise them in parliament.

If you weren't the head of the party, would Future Forward be like this?

Yes. Piyabutr is there.

Are you building the party to be a political institution?

Yes. We created the party to be an institution that has close links with its members. We're building an online tracking system for people to see which issues each MP has taken on and how much progress they've made. As for those who criticise the party as having a single leader or being personalistic, try to be a little more understanding. Only one year has passed since the election. To put it directly, there has to be a leader. You have to look at what we're trying to do.

In terms of ideology, where do you think Future Forward sits on the political spectrum?

Future Forward is clear that it's a centre-left party. Left of centre, for certain, but how far to the left? My sense is not the far left.

How many hours do you work a day?

My days are fairly full-on. Yesterday, for example, my meetings began at 9:30 a.m. and ended at midnight. The main issue isn't the work hours or the energy the job takes — the really tough issues go deeper, to the heart. For example, the party's executive committee faces a case because I once held a stake in a company that is now defunct (a media company that published an entertainment magazine and a free in-flight magazine). The case was brought against the more than ten members of the executive committee, who are completely innocent. I invited them to come work in politics. Some are new-generation businesspeople. If they hadn't entered politics, they wouldn't be facing the case.

I work twelve hours a day, but I'm serious about spending time with my children. When I'm with them, I take a full day off and use the time to the utmost. We go visit a public park. We play games. We go swimming. I play football with them. Therefore, being with them only a little is OK. What's harder on my conscience is seeing the impacts of association on the people around me.

Have you been threatened?

Let me give you an example from when I went to Bueng Kan province. We had set up three activities: meeting with members, meeting with businesspeople to talk about economic problems, and meeting with local election candidates. The governor called the Internal Security Operations Command, which went after our provincial team. The owner of the hotel where we had reserved space was told not to let us use it. The party's provincial team was unsettled by the relentless pushback. Ultimately, we cancelled all the events. Another time, I went to Loei. After I returned to Bangkok, the provincial team had a visit from the military. They will use every channel they can to block people from meeting with me. Anyone who

meets with me will then have a visit from the officials, who at the very least will take a picture. This kind of harassment is constant and far more soul-destroying than the long hours.

On 11 October, the Chinese embassy in Bangkok released a Thai-language statement condemning Thai politicians for showing support for the Hong Kong protesters, without naming any individuals. This came days after Joshua Wong, a leading democracy activist in Hong Kong, posted a photo of himself with Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit on his Facebook page.

According to Reuters, the statement said: "Some Thai politicians have contacted the group that wants to separate Hong Kong from China, showing gestures of support. This is wrong and irresponsible. China hopes that relevant people will understand the truth about problems in Hong Kong, act carefully and do useful things for the friendship between China and Thailand."

What's your view on the Hong Kong protests? Do they inspire hope for the situation in Thailand?

I think Beijing is far too removed from the real desires of Hong Kong people. Beijing doesn't understand what they want, and its outpost in Hong Kong doesn't dare report the facts.

The protesters' first demand was to throw out the extradition bill. If the bill had been withdrawn that very day, then the matter would have ended and would not have reached this stage. The demands developed further, to universal suffrage. The problem now is that if they [Beijing] are going to negotiate, who are they going to negotiate with? The demonstrations are diffuse in nature.

As for Beijing, if you confront them and they lose face, there is no way they will give in. Because if one secures a raw, unadorned victory over them, it will encourage others. Tibet will rise up. Taiwan will rise up.

Beijing speaks the way the Thai elite do. They say that the problem in Hong Kong is an economic one, because property there is primarily held by a monopoly of five capitalist families. This makes it difficult for members of the new generation to buy their own apartment. Beijing tries to deal with this issue by saying that it's not about democracy or rights and freedoms. Therefore, the discussions about demands for redistribution, or the distribution of resources to the majority, that take place in the Legislative Council of Hong Kong occur without mention of political problems. This is impossible.

Is the outlook for democracy less hopeful in Thailand than in Hong Kong?

Dr Surapong Suebwonglee, a former cabinet member who was in charge of various ministries, gave a very good 6 October speech [an annual speech commemorating the 6 October 1976 massacre]. He said that each person should act according to their ability, act with patience, analyse and criticise one another fairly, act with concentration — act every day. What he said is appropriate for these times. We must begin to act, even though we may not know when it's going to end. There's no need to ask how we're going to get to that point, because when it comes to political tactics, significant flexibility is necessary. When the situation changes every day, the tactics must adapt as well.

And you have the energy for this political struggle?

I'm very hopeful. We're not collapsing in on ourselves — we're growing. The more we do, the more people understand and the greater the number who join us. I'm certain that if change happens this time, politics won't revert to the same old cycle; there won't be another coup and then a new fight. The wave of political awakening I've encountered around the country is cresting. If we win this time, democracy will have a chance to put down roots in Thailand. □

Translated from the Thai by Tyrell Haberkorn

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