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Surakiart Sathirathai [Thailand, Deputy Prime Minister]

Surakiart Sathirathai

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Interviewee: **SURAKIART SATHIRATHAI**
Interviewer: Kirpal Singh
Date: 6 November 2015
Location: Singapore

0:00:21

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Thank you, Your Excellency for coming and agreeing to be interviewed. I really want to begin by asking you: how was growing up like for you, as a young person in a privileged home?

0:00:31

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

Well first of all, thank you very much Professor Singh, for inviting me to this very important and distinguished session. For me, I'm the only child of my parents. My father got his PhD in Economics from France, my mother was a professor of French language. So, I have grown up in a sort of say, my academic family. Since I'm the only child, I'm quite close to my parents. We travelled together. I can observe a lot of their work, their relationships with the people. They are very concerned that as the only child, I would be spoilt. So, the thing that my mother has to make sure is that her son would not be spoilt. She disciplined me quite a lot, including my father as well. I think I have grown up in a family that has tried to discipline me and expose me to the world, introduce me to understanding of different aspects of the society. They were very concerned that I would not understand the outside Bangkok society, so they would bring me out to the countryside, to other provinces to talk to people. They are concerned that I would not be exposed to international community, so whenever they have foreign guests, my father was a government official, Director General at the Finance Ministry, they would invite me to see how the table is set, and sometimes, if appropriate, they would include me into the dining table, or the luncheon, for me to be able to observe the conversations. I have to say that I have been quite disciplined, I think. I have been exposed to both the domestic society in Thailand, also the international community since my childhood.

0:02:41

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Wonderful. So, this was the larger, almost non-formal education as you were growing up. Can you share with us just a little bit about the formal side of education, like your schooling?

0:02:52

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

I went to the... it was called The Chulalongkorn Demonstration School. It's a Demonstration School of Chulalongkorn University. Demonstration meaning that they want to test how the new curriculum of the school should be like. I started with that and I went through twelve years of my...

0:03:15

[Kirpal Singh](#)

All in Chulalongkorn?

0:03:16

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

All at Chulalongkorn Demonstration School. After that I took the entrance examination, entered the faculty of law. Basically, just across the fence from the school to the university. Why did I take law? I think my father has an influence. He said that law permeates all fields, and to work either in business or to work either in the government, to know... he didn't expect me to be a lawyer, but he said that the knowledge of law will help you understand the society better, to help you better protect yourselves, not to do anything wrong without knowing it.

0:04:00

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Was most of your legal training in the Western tradition? Where does, say for example, our Asian heritage, or also the law and how Asia would see law, vis-a-vis how the West sees law and most of our training is usually Western. Have you some observations about this, given your experience now after many years?

0:04:21

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

Well definitely. That's an excellent question, Professor Singh. Although I studied the first degree in law in Thailand, but I have to say that most of the body of law in Thailand, domestic law, is influenced by the Western legal tradition. Because we have adopted the French Napoleonic Code. Our system is the codified law, which is traced back to the Corpus Juris Civilis as we all know. At the same time, our judges in the old days were educated in UK (United Kingdom), which is very interesting combination. The judges were educated in the country that judges made law, instead of codify law, but they have to come and interpret the law that is codified in the French system. So that's another problem in itself in Thailand,

but just would like to say that it has been influenced by the Western legal tradition.

When I continue my education after Fletcher School, although I studied international law at the Fletcher School, and then went to Harvard for my Master and S.J.D (Scientiae Juridicae Doctor. Translation: Doctor of Juridical Science) PhD in Law, I could see that the adversarial nature of Western society is very different from the Oriental society that we are talking about. The way... in Thailand, although the legal tradition is influenced by the West, but the Thai people, like other Asian people, we aren't so legalistic. We like to get things resolved amicably. We may have differences.. references to the law, to the legal position, but we'd rather get things agreed peacefully, amicably. We want to make sure that we can see each other and talk to each other without any animosity created because of the legal proceedings. Let alone the cost involved.

We... Thai society is not a confrontational society, is not an adversarial society. People walking on the street and fall into a drainage, they would not sue the Bangkok municipality. We go to the doctor, and something is wrong, we will not sue the doctor. So, the medical malpractice lawyers are not doing very well in Thailand. I think that's the difference. Of course, when the economy grows, like in other economy, of course it's more interconnected with the international world, with the Western world. The interactions between these two legal traditions is something that., most interesting to observe, in my view. How the Asian society can be mitigated with the Western value, with the Western legal tradition.

The same can be said about ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Through forty-eight years of ASEAN, we have evolved through what is called the ASEAN way. The ASEAN way is of course, different from the tradition in the EU (European Union), where everything is much more legalistic. It's much more rule-based than ASEAN. But several years ago, we decided to have the ASEAN Charter, so you see that things have become more regulated, more regulatory-based. The ASEAN way on one hand, and the more rule-based ASEAN is something that would be emerging together as we speak, also in the next five to ten years as well. I think it's a test case of ASEAN to see how these two traditions, if you will, can be mitigated. How could we survive successfully, like what we have been in the past forty-eight years? So either with ASEAN, which is Association of Southeast Asian Nations, whether it is a society in Thailand, or some other Asian societies, which may share the same Oriental wisdom and Asian value, at the same time the economy is internationalised, society is internationalised, and Westernised, especially through the social media, how these two traditions can play a role in a way that create harmony in the society, and will not create fractions in the society?

0:08:38

[Kirpal Singh](#)

You're the first sort of Thai to get this wonderful big degree from Harvard. How did that feel? How did that make you feel as someone from Thailand making this big global impact?

0:08:49

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

I didn't know that I would be the first. Harvard has been there for 300 years, and there have been so many Thai students studying at Harvard University, including Harvard Law School. So, I thought that it would have been several PhDs in Law from Harvard already. I only know when I graduated.

0:09:07

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, it took you by surprise?

0:09:09

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

Yes, took me by surprise. [They said,] "Congratulations," when I passed my defence, "you are the first Thai to achieve that." So, I was thinking that whether I have done something wrong, whether it was a mistake, or whether it was an accident.

At Harvard I also had the chance to co-teach a course with Professor Frederick Snyder, that has led me to work with him in co-editing a book, which is the first Third World piece called "The Third World Attitude Towards International Law", published by Martinus Nijhoff, back in 1987. Teaching a year course with him, although I was legally only a teaching fellow, but he was very kind in really giving me the opportunity to really teach it. He sat at the back of the class and smiled, looking at me in my first class. These are graduate students at LLM (Latin Legum Magister) programme, Master of Law programme at Harvard. At the end of the class, he came to me and said, "Surakiart, you prepared for this class, two hours lecture and seminar as if you're teaching the whole semester." He said, "Too much, too much." So, I'm learning through that year course of what teaching is all about. Of course, research we are being exposed to it because of the PhD work. And so that's why I decided at the end that although my father is interested to have me working in the Finance Ministry like him, my uncle was ambassador at the Foreign Ministry, would like me to go into Foreign Ministry, I decided to go into academic world. That's why I started my career as an academic, as a lecturer at the Faculty of Law at Chulalongkorn University, because of that one-year teaching experience at Harvard Law School.

0:10:56

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, here is a kind of leader, academic leader, your professor, and he's in a sense grooming you, and giving you the stage, giving you the experience, and then

gently saying you did too much, perhaps. Now, when you think about leadership, do you think that's very essential for leaders as well? To have like the next generation grooming, and giving them... because in all of this, sometimes there's a risk element involved. What are your views about this?

0:11:24

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

I think leadership can be trained, can be oriented. Some people are born to have a charismatic leadership, some people are not born with it. But in my time in various sectors - academic, business, government, political sector – I have seen people who could develop themselves through training, through capacity building to become leaders at various levels. But to me, I think a leader should be a man of a vision, as to what is the vision of the organisation, or of the division that you're going to lead... should be a person who can come up with a strategy to make that vision realised. But the most important, most people would say that a real leader is a change leader, the real leader is one that has charisma, but I think all of this is not only how you lead, but how you lead means how other people can go with you.

To me, the ability to communicate is one of the most important. You have the vision, you have the strategy, but you have to make sure that you can communicate with the people in the organisation, the mid-level, the top-level, the bottom-level, to have the shared vision. Because when you have the shared vision, you have the shared responsibility. This is easily said than done, especially when you head the Ministry with thousands of people. But even then, when I was Foreign Minister, I had a meeting with all government officials, who are based in Thailand through Skype and other facilities, through other... and of course, the overseas all the time... of what is my vision, what is the strategy, what I have been doing. Otherwise, there would not be a shared responsibility. The real leader has to be able to create participation, make everyone feel that we are joining the bandwagon. The train of this vision will not leave anyone behind.

Everyone, big and small, very able or not very able, would have to be able to join the bandwagon. So, the ability to create a sense of ownership of division, to create a sense of ownership of the strategy, I think is the proof of a real leader.

0:14:02

[Kirpal Singh](#)

This is very important, and I'm immediately led to a point that quite a few people around the world, in fact, but also around ASEAN, have made that now we lack a leader with some real vision. Like visionary leaders are very scarce, like there's a vacuum out there. Do you think this is due to just a conflict-ridden world, or do you think this is something the New Millennium somehow gave it to us? What's your take on this? Why are we lacking visionary leadership, if that's that you agree, I'm just asking?

0:14:41

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

I think we have visionary leadership. I don't think we lack visionary leadership, but the thing we lack, the leaders who can implement the vision. We have leaders who have vision. If you have an hour discussion with any leaders of the organisation, government officials, the top civil servant, ministers, Prime Ministers, Presidents in ASEAN and Asia, they all have visions. But another component of the leadership as I just shared with you, is ability to implement the leadership, especially the ability to bring everyone together on board for that. I think that is something that is lacking.

For government officials, from my experience say in Thailand, I cannot talk about the other countries, sometimes you have to sign too many papers in the file, even though you are the best and the brightest, graduate of top universities, but you are burying yourself with the documents, and signing this until eight 'o clock at night every day. You don't have time to think of your mid-term, long-term, short-term vision, and how they're related with other people, and how they can be implemented. Execution theory is very important. At the top of my vision, it's the same the top of your vision, and if you don't adopt the execution theory to make sure that that vision, that policy, that strategy is executed effectively at all levels once you talked about it, that leadership there is irrelevant.

I think leaders of ASEAN all have vision. But how that vision can be filtered through in his or her own country, and how that vision can be filtered through among 600 millions of ASEAN people? Of course, there can be a different level of participation, different level of... a feeling of shared vision, but I think it has to be there. To me my feeling is that the vision of ASEAN is not yet shared by ASEAN people. It's shared by some politicians, some diplomats, some bureaucrats, some business people, some top academics, but not very much everyone on the ground.

0:17:04

[Kirpal Singh](#)

For leaders of society, and especially societies that are becoming increasingly more expecting of a different kind of communication system, this consultation process, especially at the level of societal leadership, becomes very, very important, but at the same time it delays the execution. What are your thoughts about this?

0:17:28

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

We are reaching a critical point, where we have to find the right balance between the two. If you spend too much time on communication, consultation, then you will kill effectiveness. But if you focus too much on effectiveness, it will not be effective, because other people would disagree with it and that project of building the hospital may not be successful, because there'll be protest here and

there. We have seen this elsewhere in ASEAN, in Asia, and in the world. But at the same time, through social media, the awakening of democracy all over the world.

In Thailand, the demonstrations, protests, expression of opinions - political opinions, social opinions in the past fifteen years I think is awakening. Is a wake-up call that the Thai society is not the same any more. People have woken up that you cannot make decision on the political future without consulting us. I think that's an interesting alarm clock. But at the same time if you want to make sure that everyone has to agree, that's not democracy either. Democracy is a system of the majority, with the respect to the minority, but it must be done with good governance. It must be done with accountability. It must be done with transparency.

That's the key. How can we be decisive? How can we be effective? At the same time bringing everyone on board. So that's why the management is the art. It's the art of management. It's not the science of management. But the thing it's important for leaders to be aware that this is happening. You cannot only think of your political victory, you cannot only think of the next election, you have to think of the next generation. Meaning that you cannot try to be popular, because you consult them, you listen to different opinions only, but then you feel that "Okay, I got a lot of support, people like us. We don't have to do anything for the country. Because if I do it, there will be more people. If I build this one, I will build this train, and we'll build this park. If I do this, people will not be happy so we will not do it." So that will not be our statement.

You have to think of your next generation, things you'll have to do. You have to make decision. At the same time, it's the art of management. You have to manage the different opinions, you have to convince people that we can have strength out of diversity. Everyone doesn't have to think the same and act the same. But differences create strength for the society. So that art of management is something that leaders will have to realise much, much more than in the past.

0:20:37

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now you have done remarkable work in so many different fields - business, academia, politics, industry - when you look back at all the many different ventures that you have been doing and undertaking and executing, are there some real gaps in terms of leadership? In these areas, like what do you see as gaps in terms of leadership today?

0:21:06

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

There are two, I would say. One is that leaders, because of the fact that society is much more complex, is much more... the relationship of people among the society is much more complicated, there are more things that you have to do, the leaders, it seems to me that do not have enough time to focus on the execution of

the vision and of the strategy. There are ways to tackle this, but that seems to be my observation.

Secondly, we are lacking, as I said before, communication. There are so many leaders in business organisations, in universities, in the government, who are doing very well. But then you talk to the members of the society of that organisation, they know very little about what their leaders are doing. They don't feel that they are a part.. it's not that they disagree with it. Even though they agree with it themselves, they haven't heard of it. Or some of them have heard of that vision and strategy but didn't know where he or she should be a part and parcel of that vision, of that strategy. This happened in business organisations, this happened in the government, in politics, in political parties, and this happen in university as well.

I'm also the Chancellor of two universities. I told the Presidents that that is something that you have to do, you have to have meetings with all the vice presidents, the deans, vice deans, Heads of Department at least once a month. As the Chairman of the University Council, I'll be happy to meet them every three months. I want to engage myself in a retreat with them, I want to hear from them, and not that I would be talking all the time, I want them to talk to me. I want to make sure that University Council members, the management have the opportunity to talk to students. So anyway, the whole organisation, the whole apparatus, has to move together. It's like a watch. Some of them may be a very small piece in the watch, but if the small piece in the watch doesn't work, the watch stops.

0:23:18

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Do you think, going forward, that leaders of society will be even more stressed by on the one hand, this terrible awakening on the part of the young, and on the other, the equally terrible pull of history, legacy, their own inheritance, to try to come to a middle point? Do you think that might happen peacefully or... as we are seeing in many societies, it's going to be fairly explosive?

0:23:47

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

I talked about Thailand as an example of that, the respect, the politeness is our strong point. Twenty years ago, thirty years ago, our students, people who are our junior, would not dare to speak unless asked. It's worse than that, even when they are asked, they will not speak. Because they feel that they have no confidence, they feel that there will be a mistake. But because of the growth of the social media, the growth of the internationalisation of education, I have observed that in the past, I would say twenty years, we were talking about before twenty years ago, in the past twenty years, that has changed. Thailand has gone through this transition. I could see now students are much more active in the class. They ask questions. They not only ask questions, they express their opinions, they disagree with me, even me! At this time teaching part-time, and I

like that very much, I encourage them. Sometimes they asked me questions that I cannot answer, and I said, "Well, that's a good question, I never thought about it. Next week, I'll come and tell you about it." I think that transition is already being made in Thailand, and I think it's also happening in other society.

But what is the thing that the leaders would have to realise all the time that we shouldn't feel offended by this new phenomenon of society. We should look at this as something positive. We should look at this as... We should embrace it. We should embrace this, give them confidence. But if they are too provocative, if they are too aggressive, there are ways that you can deal with it. There are ways that you can teach them, there are ways that you can reorient them. That is called wisdom. People who have a lot of experiences may not have the same or the newest technology of the knowledge as the younger generation. but what we have more is the wisdom. So, we have to use our wisdom to groom, to cultivate the younger generation, whether students, or the junior people in the organisation, or what, to groom them, to spend a little bit more time grooming them. Again, this come back to the...something that I talked in the outset, and that's the communication. It's time consuming, Professor Singh, with different hats that I'm wearing in the past and now, especially now, to make sure that there is a clear communication. To make sure that the participation is encouraged, and we have participation from others who have to be involved in the vision, in the strategy, in the policy, is time consuming but sometimes you have to do. Last month I spent two full days in Sakon Nakhon, which is a province in the North-eastern part of Thailand, with forty faculty members on the direction of the university with changes in the world, global megatrends - aging society, urbanisation, climate change. How would that affect our curriculum, the research, linkages among four campuses in four provinces? It's time consuming, but it's worth it once they have felt that they have this sense of ownership. Two months passed, one month passed, they have come up with their own visions, with their own desires of what the university should be for me to respond. And that to me is heartening. That to me is something that I would like to see happening. So, leaders would have to be more patient. We have to understand these changes in the society, and I think we have to engage more, we have to embrace more, in order that the leader can have a real leadership.

0:27:50

[Kirpal Singh](#)

The final question, what about you personally? Where are you going?

0:27:55

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

Where am I going?

0:27:56

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Yes, where do you hope to reach?

0:27:58

[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

I would like to reach the level where I can be constantly happy in my heart, that's what I have been working on. I'm the same as everyone. I have greed, I have desire, I have this and that, but I have been trying to cope with that. Not to overspend, not to over-invest, learn to be happy with what I'm doing, learn how to say no to new things that I would not feel that I have to do it because of this, because of that, and try to do as best as I can with all the hats I'm wearing now. In business, inter... how should I say, international work? Also, in academic work. I'm not seeking any position, I'm not seeking to create tremendous wealth, but I'll try to be as happy, as calm, as tranquil, as possible. So, that's my aim in life.

0:29:04

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But Your Excellency, you're still a very young man. So, you got a whole huge, at least a century, or half a century more ahead of you so, are you thinking of any specific career role?

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[Surakiart Sathirathai](#)

No, I think anything that I can do in whether I'm in business, CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), whether I'm heading this international non-state organisation, or whether I'll be back in the government, I haven't thought about it at all. I have no desire at the moment to do so. But in any position, Professor Singh, what I need to do is to contribute to the society. If I can be useful to the poor, if I can be useful to students, to the younger generation, to those whose lives have been deprived. That's what I would do. It doesn't matter which hat. I have my own small foundation, Surakiart and Suthawan Foundation, it's the name of my wife. We have been doing small little things, helping the poor here, helping students there, helping poor schools in the remote area of the country, pooling various foundations together. We don't have a lot of money, but we feel that because of our experience, because of our exposure in the past, we have the network where we can bring people to work together, outpouring of the heart to help on certain issue. That's what I very much would like to do. I'm not seeking any position even in the private sector, or even in the international level. But if the certain job I can do, I can contribute, I'll consider it.

0:30:36

[Kirpal Singh](#)

This interview, I'm sure you know when people watch it, especially the young, they'll be inspired. It'll give them a new way of looking at everything. So, thank you very much Your Excellency.

0:30:46

Surakiart Sathirathai

Thank you very much. My pleasure. Thank you for your questions.