

RESEARCHERS AT THE INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

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**Singapore | 3 June 2015**

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## **Findings from Latest Surveys on *The Thai Prime Minister and the Media* and *The Draft of Constitution (2015)***

### **Special Feature:**

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- In collaboration with Thailand's National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA),<sup>1</sup> which conducts regular surveys in Thai society on a variety of issues, ISEAS' Thailand Studies Programme<sup>2</sup> publishes selected survey findings for *ISEAS Perspective* readers, which offer snapshots of Thai politics and society. This issue carries the findings of two different surveys – on *The Thai Prime Minister and the Media* and *The Draft of Constitution (2015)*.
- In light of the Thai Prime Minister's difficult relationship with the media, respondents were asked how they felt the Prime Minister came across in his dealings with the local media and journalists. Approximately 40 per cent said that the Prime Minister was 'too frank'; 26 per cent said that he was 'too outspoken'; while 18 per cent said that he 'gets easily upset'.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on NIDA please contact Assistant Professor Dr. Suvicha Pouaree, Director of NIDA Poll, at [nida\\_poll@nida.ac.th](mailto:nida_poll@nida.ac.th). The surveys relied on random sampling from NIDA Poll's master sample database. Data were collected through telephone interviews.

<sup>2</sup> The co-ordinators for ISEAS' Thailand Studies Programme are Michael Montesano and Terence Chong. For more information, please visit <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/thai.cfm>

- The *Returning Happiness to Thai People* programme, which is broadcast by all television and radio stations every Friday, allows the Prime Minister to address the Thai public. Respondents were asked for their opinion on the programme: 31 per cent of them said that they ‘really like it’; 34 per cent said that they ‘somewhat like it’; 11 per cent said that they ‘dislike it’; and 18 per cent said that they ‘quite dislike it’.
- Those who liked the programme did so because it informed them about what the government had achieved and about the general situation of the nation. Those who disliked it said that the Prime Minister spent too much time talking about the same issues and that the programme is broadcast at a time slot traditionally reserved for soap operas and entertainment programmes, and this makes it less enjoyable to watch.
- On 17 April 2015, Thailand completed the first draft of its new Constitution. A survey on the issue asked respondents if they followed news about the process. Only about 8 per cent said they did so ‘all the time’. More importantly, a significant 31 per cent said that they did not follow the news most of the time, while the biggest group, at 34 per cent, shared that they ‘do not follow the news at all’.
- Finally, the majority of respondents – about 65 per cent – agreed that a referendum on the latest Constitution should be conducted. Only about 11 per cent disagreed with the idea of holding a referendum, while approximately 24 per cent were unsure or did not specify an answer.

## INTRODUCTION

ISEAS' Thailand Studies Programme collaborates with Thailand's National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) in selecting for publication in *ISEAS Perspective* findings of surveys conducted by NIDA. NIDA surveys seek to provide snapshots of contemporary Thai politics and society. The present issue carries the findings of two separate surveys.

### 1. Survey on the Thai Prime Minister and the Mass Media

This survey was conducted on 2 and 3 April 2015, and sought to understand public opinion on the relationship between Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and the national media as well as on public reactions to broadcasts of the *Returning Happiness to Thai People* programme. The survey sample was 1,250 of Thai citizens living throughout the country, cutting across every region, education level, and occupation.

Prayuth Chan-ocha has had a strained relationship with the media ever since he became Prime Minister. He has been known to commit gaffes or to berate reporters when faced with difficult questions. The Prime Minister was even reported as saying that he would 'probably just execute' journalists who did 'not report the truth'.<sup>3</sup> In light of such reports, how does the Thai public feel about his relationship with the mass media?

#### *The Prime Minister is too 'frank', 'outspoken' and gets easily 'upset'*

**Question 1: What do you think of the frequent disputes between the Prime Minister and the local media?**

**Table 1:**

Top five answers	Poll Percentage
The Prime Minister is too frank. This has caused dysphemism by using unpleasant phrases or expressions	39.6%
Journalists like to ask outrageous questions	29.2%
The Prime Minister is too outspoken. It seems as if he likes to get into an argument all the time.	26.0%
The Prime Minister gets easily upset	17.8%
It is just colourful news.	14.2%

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<sup>3</sup> <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/03/25/uk-thailand-junta-media-idUKKBN0ML0RL20150325> (accessed 7 May 2015)

Respondents were asked how they felt the Prime Minister came across in his dealings with the local media and journalists. They were given a series of answers to choose from. Approximately 40 per cent of respondents chose the statement: *The Prime Minister is too frank. This has caused dysphemism by using unpleasant phrases or expressions.* About 30 per cent of respondents, however, felt that the cause of tension was: *Journalists like to ask outrageous questions.* Conversely, 26 per cent of respondents chose the statement: *The Prime Minister is too outspoken. It seems as if he likes to get into an argument all the time,* while approximately 18 per cent said that: *The Prime Minister gets easily upset.* However, about 14 per cent of respondents were likely to treat disputes nonchalantly, noting that: *It is just colourful news.*

According to Asst Prof Asawin Nedpogaeo, Director of the Doctoral Programme, Graduate School of Communication Arts and Management (NIDA), the Prime Minister “may seem warlike” primarily because he had been “a professional soldier for all his life”. Furthermore, since the coup is widely perceived as a “non-democratic” ascent to power, the local media are more likely to pose harder questions to the Prime Minister, thus provoking a harsher response.

### **The ‘Returning Happiness to Thai People’ Programme**

**Question 2: What do you think of the *Returning Happiness to Thai People* programme broadcast every Friday night, hosted by the Prime Minister himself?**

**Table 2:**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Poll Percentage</b>
Really like it	31.2%
Somewhat like it	33.5%
Dislike it	11.4%
Quite Dislike it	18.2%
Did not specify	5.6%

The *Returning Happiness to Thai People* programme is the primary platform from which the Prime Minister addresses the public. The programme is broadcast across all television and radio stations every Friday. Believing that print media carry a bias against him, the Prime Minister uses this programme to touch on a range of topics from politics and public policies to even lecturing the public on the work accomplished by his government. He does not answer questions from the public during the programme.

Respondents were asked for their opinion on the programme. Approximately 31 per cent of respondent said that they ‘really like it’, while about 34 per cent stated that they ‘somewhat like it’. Conversely about 11 per cent of respondents noted that they ‘dislike it’ while approximately 18 per cent stated that they ‘quite dislike it’. About 6 per cent did not specify an answer. Respondents who said they ‘really like it’ and ‘somewhat like it’ also said they did so because the programme informed them about what the government had achieved and about the general

situation of the nation. However, respondents who stated that they ‘dislike it’ or ‘quite dislike it’ said that the Prime Minister not only spent too much time talking but also talking about the same issues. In addition, the programme is broadcast at a time slot traditionally reserved for soap operas and entertainment programmes, and this makes it less enjoyable to watch.

**Question 3: The Prime Minister should allow his other ministers to speak about their work in the programme – agree or disagree?**

**Table 3:**

Response	Poll Percentage
Agree – the Prime Minister should allow other ministers to speak	63.9%
Disagree – the Prime Minister should be the only one who speaks	22.5%
Others	2.24%
Did not specify	11.2%

Finally the survey asked if the Prime Minister should allow other ministers to speak about their work on the programme. Approximately 64 per cent of respondents agreed with this idea. They agreed because they believed that other ministers should have the opportunity to speak about their challenges and work performance. This, the respondents believed, would provide the general public with a broader view of governance and issues at hand. Furthermore, ministers are better able to offer more detailed information on specific areas and solutions to various issues. Conversely, about 23 per cent disagreed and said that the Prime Minister should be the only one who speaks on the programme. The reasons for this include their liking his character and personality and the worry that different ministers speaking would create confusion.

**2. Survey on the Draft of Constitution B.E. 2558 (2015)**

On 17 April 2015, the first draft of Thailand’s new Constitution, written by the government-appointed 36-member Constitution Drafting Committee, was completed. It ‘has been framed by the coup-makers as a critical step to moving Thailand out of political paralysis’.<sup>4</sup> This will be the country’s 20<sup>th</sup> Constitution since 1932. But has the Thai public been following its development? Or has the drawing up of yet another Constitution been met with nonchalance?

The survey was conducted on 21-22 April 2015, with a sample size of 1,254 Thai citizens aged 18 years old or above, cutting across every region, education level, and occupation.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/thailand-completes-troubling-new-constitution/> (accessed 7 May 2015)

**Most Thais do not follow news on the draft Constitution**

**Question 4: Have you followed the news on the drafting of Constitution B.E. 2558 by the Constitution Drafting Committee?**

**Table 4:**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Poll Percentage</b>
I follow the news all the time	7.9%
I follow the news most of the time	26.7%
I do not follow the news most of the time	30.9%
I do not follow the news at all	34.3%

The responses showed a high level of ambivalence towards the Constitution. Only about 8 per cent said they followed the news ‘all the time’, while approximately 27 per cent professed to follow the news ‘most of the time’. More importantly, a significant 31 per cent said that most of the time they did not follow the news, while the biggest group at 34 per cent said that they ‘do not follow the news at all’.

According to Assoc Prof Somsak Samukkethum, Director of the Master’s Programme, Graduate School of Social and Environmental Development (NIDA), these results suggest that many Thais are weary over the current state of politics in the country. They probably take the view that national politics is primarily about the struggle between elites and this current draft of the Thai Constitution is part of that struggle. Hence, Assoc Prof Somsak believes that many do not see the need to prioritize or monitor closely the progress of the new Constitution.

Assoc Prof Somsak adds that one reason why many Thais lack interest in the draft constitution is that many believe that a *coup d’etat* cannot be a political solution for Thailand. The current constitution, which is the product of this *coup d’etat*, is thus seen as an undemocratic outcome. Moreover, it is seen as a tool to serve technocrats and those connected to the military. Assoc Prof Somsak notes that many Thais expect the opposition to rise again upon the completion of the constitution. Therefore, Thai politics will continue to be unstable.

**Majority wants a referendum on the constitution**

**Question 5: There should be a referendum on the draft of Constitution B.E. 2558 – agree or disagree?**

**Table 5:**

Response	Poll Percentage
Agree	64.9%
Disagree	11.3%
Unsure/not specified	23.7%

The majority of respondents – about 65 per cent – agreed that a referendum on the latest Constitution should be conducted. Only about 11 per cent disagreed with the idea, while approximately 24 per cent were unsure or did not specify an answer. Those who agreed on the need for the referendum cited the need for a democratic system in ensuring fairness and transparency, and said that a referendum will encourage ideas from various sectors and enable the country to come up with the best transformation. Moreover, the public will in the process be well informed about the contents of Constitution as well.

According to Assoc Prof Somsak the reason for the large number of people who agreed with the need for a referendum is that, ‘In their opinion, they cannot leave the nation’s future solely in the hands of government and Constitution Drafting Committee. They want to participate in the drafting process through a referendum’. Assoc Prof Somsak thinks that this shows that the government ‘cannot avoid conducting a referendum’ and ‘that the absence of a referendum will be used as an excuse by groups that want amendments in the future’.

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