

Politics and Sanity
Address by Mr. Anand Panyarachun
The Petroleum Institute Dinner
at the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel
February 18, 1997

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My first, off-the-cuff thought in considering the content of today's presentation was that politics is the most potent aphrodisiac. The quest for power has, for most politicians, an irresistibly seductive attraction. In fact, it is the allure of that aphrodisiac that entices so many men, and increasingly women as well, into politics as a full-time career.

Having been propelled into Thailand's national political arena some years ago under circumstances largely beyond my control, I shall seek your indulgence in claiming personal exemption from the attribution that I am a professional politician. Nevertheless, the seductive influence of politics has not escaped me.

I say this despite the peculiar dangers attached to such an admission. Not only may my family and friends misinterpret my message by attributing double meaning to the term, "aphrodisiac", but reference to that titillating term has probably already diverted your attention to other, more delicate topics.

Let me, then, depart from this line of discussion and start over with a second thought - that in Thailand, at least, the title of this speech, "politics and sanity," is an oxymoron, a pairing of words that naturally contradict one another. Perhaps, in the Thai setting, "politics and insanity" would have been a more natural and understandable title.

Speaking of sanity and insanity in relation to Thai politics carries my thoughts to Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis. How would Freud have explained the malaise of Thai politics? Let us recline for a moment on Freud's famous couch, savour the fragrant aroma of his favourite Monte Cristo cigar, and listen to his interpretation.

First, he would have examined the outward symptoms. Treading lightly over this sensitive terrain, he would likely have characterized Thai politics as a network of alliances among numerous contending factions or interest groups, constantly reforming themselves through an ongoing process of negotiation to solidify their power base. Each of those factions, he would have noted, is led by a personality skilled in the arts of negotiation and compromise, a personality considered by his encourage as capable of mobilizing resources in pursuit of the faction's objective of maintaining and strengthening its power base.

Freud would have perceived, in that pattern of constantly shifting political alliances, the individual politician's concern not so much with the means of promoting the public interest as of gaining factional, and ultimately personal, control over the levels of power. He would have inferred that many Thai politicians lead dual lives arising out of their persistent advocacy of the public interest while striving for personal and factional gain. That Jekyll and Hyde personality trait would have interested him greatly, for it is no easy matter, psychologically speaking, to transform oneself at a moment's notice from standing before the TV cameras with promises of public benefit to sitting in private negotiations over division of the spoils.

Freud would also have meditated on the relations between Thailand's politicians and other key actors, especially big business and the bureaucracy, including the military establishment. Here he would have noted the surprisingly intimate atmosphere of close and cordial cooperation and accommodation among the various contending interest groups in working to their mutual advantage.

In considering the relations between the politicians and interest groups with less to offer in negotiation, Freud would have been struck by the differing rules applied to keep the less powerful in check:

=> The docile willingness of the public-at-large -- especially the politically less sophisticated rural population - to accept the broad ambiguities, sweeping generalizations, unattainable promises, and more, voiced by most politicians in local election campaigns, would have left him bemused.

=> He would have been equally intrigued by the blandishments offered to the less impressionable student population, in the form of vague allusions to greater participatory democracy, as well as more pragmatic promises relating to enhanced educational and post-educational opportunities, to defuse their activism, in recollection of the political confrontations of yesteryear.

=> As for organized labour, one of the few interest groups generally unwilling to succumb to the politicians' blandishments, the repressive measures enacted to curtail labour "interference" or "disruption" would have been noted as an important clue to the social psychology of the Thai political leadership.

In short, Freud would have been struck by the emphasis in Thai politics on placating the various major social interest groups through largely unfulfilled promises, while harbouring a strong aversion to open debate and decisive action on basic social issues.

From a review of the symptoms, Freud would have proceeded to a socio-psychological analysis of the Thai political scene. In one of his most entertaining works, "Civilization and Its Discontents," Freud developed a theory of the

irremediable antagonism between the demands of instinct and the restrictions of civilization. In effect, that theory argues that it is our self-control of our instinctual desires that makes us civilized. We pay a price for that self-restraint in the form of a deep-seated sense of frustration. Civilization requires that we suppress our instinctual desires, but it cannot prevent feelings of desire. That inner conflict is expressed through feelings of guilt. Thus the title of Freud's book -- civilization is inevitably accompanied by discontent.

That human dilemma can be dealt with in a variety of ways. We can sublimate our guilt feelings through productive effort. That option has resulted in the great accomplishments of art and science, which we commonly consider the hallmark of civilization. Alternatively, we can seek to repress the conflict between our personal urges and social convention through neurotic behaviour. Third, we can escape the realities of the human dilemma entirely through psychotic behaviour. Such a socially pathological course of action ignores the restrictions imposed by civilization. We thereby regress to ego-satisfaction, ultimately descending to selfishness and brutality.

Perhaps you may think that I have deviated a bit too far from the theme of this talk that I have fallen into a trance under the clouds of cigar smoke drifting over Freud's couch. Let me disabuse you of such suspicions by returning to the subject at hand.

Freud did his research and writing in a far different environment than that of contemporary Thailand. It has been said, in half-jest, that his theory is applicable solely to the Freud household of early 20th-century Vienna, and to no other time or place. As Freud himself said, after delving deeply into psychological theories of auto-eroticism: "When all is said and done, a cigar is still a cigar."

Despite the cross-cultural complications of travelling between 1920s Vienna and 1997 Bangkok, I believe that Freud's couch may be quite a suitable place from which to examine the social pathology of present-day Thai politics.

Politics, it has often been said, is **the art of the possible**. If negotiation lies at the heart of that art, compromise is its soul. Thai politics exemplifies these metaphors, but with a Freudian twist. They centre on what Freud would call ego-gratification, with the negotiations and compromises all too often attaching no more than cursory consideration to the larger social concerns for which the politicians have been delegated responsibility.

Let us lift our eyes above the latest political scandal -- whatever it may be today -- and scan Thailand's broader political horizon. What we see is a panorama of self-indulgence. The traditional political expression, kin moeang (referring to the perquisites of absolute Kingship), has been distorted to new meaning in this age of participatory democracy. Election to political office in this modern age conveys upon the honoured recipient public trusts to represent and serve the people. It does not include a mandate to adopt the perquisites of traditional Kingship. In this

regard it is evident that many individuals and factions in positions of political leadership still have much to learn about their larger duty, their duty to the public interest.

Freud stated that “unrestricted satisfaction of personal interest means putting enjoyment before caution, and soon brings its own punishment.” In the Thai political context that pronouncement carries prophetic meaning. The current recession in the Thai economy, it is widely agreed, is a direct result of the political mismanagement of recent years. The past record of factional accommodation to personal ambitions without due consideration of the public costs and benefits has led to the current International perception of our country as a relatively high-risk investment haven. It is no surprise, under those conditions, that the investment bubble has burst, with dramatic consequences first for the stock market and, over the longer term, national income and employment.

Thailand’s business community has only itself to blame for this passage of events. For it was negotiation and compromise between the politicians and business - in the form of financial backing in return for favourable treatment - that laid the foundations for the bust. As a major player in the political sweepstakes, business placed personal and factional interests ahead of the larger social concerns, with predictable consequences. Freud would have considered this a reflection of man’s self-destructive instincts, which can only be overcome by “civilization” - placing the common good ahead of self-gratification. He stated as a basic psychoanalytic principle that “the replacement of the power of the individual by the power of the community constitutes the decisive step of civilization.”

If civilization represents sanity, as Freud suggests, then a sane politics can only emerge with the public interest as its overriding motive. Aldous Huxley said that an intellectual is a person who has discovered something more interesting than sex. A civilized man, it may be said, is someone who has discovered something more satisfying than personal advantage.

That is the essential political issue confronting Thailand today. It is an issue that transcends the law. No constitution can legislate that dictum into prescribed action. It is a responsibility that each of us must pursue with personal conviction and the common sense that recognises us as inseparable members of the larger community.

Having spent so much time reclining on Freud’s couch, permit me to close with one of his favourite quips, taken from the eighteenth-century philosopher, Pascal: “Had Cleopatra’s nose been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed.” He meant that, had Cleopatra not been quite so pretty, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony might not have parted ways, and the Roman Empire might have taken another course. The point is that small matters can make a very big difference.

That point should be pondered by each of us as we decide on our role in ensuring that our country's future will be even greater than its past. If we want to ensure sanity in Thai politics, each of us must accept our responsibility as an active participant working for an open society.