

'Passion may drive young people, but strategic thinking will help them in the long run'

Pita Limjaroenrat, winner of Thailand's 2023 elections and leader of the now-disbanded progressive Move Forward Party, in a conversation with The Daily Star contributor Sarzah Yeasmin, discusses his vision to create a Thailand that is competitive not just for the elites, but for all its people—a country that is not just a paradise for tourists, but for its natives as well.

When your party, Move Forward, achieved an unprecedented victory in the elections, did you expect it?

Thailand has been deeply affected by military intervention, which has become normalised in our politics. The military junta that seized power more than a decade ago has systematically entrenched itself. They did this by amending the constitution to make it almost impossible to change, appointing senators who have the power to select the prime minister, and instituting a 20-year national strategy that restricts any political movement or policy changes outside of their control.

When the military took over in 2014, they ensured their continued dominance. The frustration among the people had been building for a long time, and it culminated during the Covid crisis. The pandemic exposed the military government's inability to handle modern challenges. When Move Forward came into the picture, we proposed a new approach—one centred on professional civilian-led governance, decentralising power, and demilitarising the government. We argued that military defence funds should be reallocated to deal with real world issues like climate change and digital transformation. We also focused on decentralising the economy and political power, as Bangkok has long been over-centralised. This left rural areas, which make up a vast part of the country, severely underfunded and underserved in terms of healthcare, education, and infrastructure.

How did you get people to buy into your vision?

Politics isn't like business—you can't just issue orders and give KPIs and expect people to follow. You have to inspire people, engage with them, see them as equals, and build a sense of shared purpose.

One key difference between business and politics is that in business, there's a predetermined hierarchy, and decision-making is often streamlined. But in progressive politics, things are more collaborative, and that means you have to engage in dialogue, persuasion, and sometimes compromise. We attracted people because we offered something different. Our platform wasn't just about getting into power; it was about fundamentally changing the way power is distributed in Thailand. We emphasised decentralisation, de-monopolisation, and demilitarisation.

How did you navigate the deeply hierarchical political system in Thailand?

I have always seen youth as an asset rather than a liability. In a system where age and seniority are highly valued, it can be difficult for younger politicians to break through. But I focused on what I could control: my ability

to analyse, strategise, and communicate effectively.

The older generation may have more experience, but younger politicians have the advantage of being more agile. For me, it was about leveraging those strengths to carve out space for myself at the political table. I was precise with my analyses and communication. Senior politicians often don't have the patience for long explanations, so I developed the ability to deliver concise, two-minute "elevator pitches" that got my point across quickly and effectively.

You also need to manage expectations and build relationships. I call this "upward management." In politics, you have to align with people's expectations before important meetings and make sure there are no surprises.

What factors make a country prone to dynastic politics, and how do you find scope for democratic openings?

First of all, I draw a distinction between dynastic politics and succession planning,

based leadership, and succession planning. You need systems that ensure that those who rise to power have proven themselves capable of leading the country. The difference lies in how leaders rise to power and how they exercise power once in office.

In countries like the Philippines, with the return of the Marcos family to power, and even in Thailand, political families wield enormous influence. In these cases, the line between succession planning and dynastic politics becomes blurred. Families gain power not only through democratic processes, but also through control of key institutions, access to wealth, and monopolising media influence. When the same families stay in power for generations, they limit the space for young or progressive leaders to rise, which can stifle innovation and political reform.

We have seen dynastic politics not just in Southeast Asia, but across the world. For example, in the United States, the Bush and Kennedy families are prominent political dynasties. In Canada, we see the same with Justin Trudeau, whose father was a prime

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help people reskill quickly and efficiently. In South Korea, for example, people can use their newly acquired skills as collateral to access credit. We can implement a similar system in Thailand, where workers who complete certified training programmes can use those credentials to secure loans or start businesses. This would help bridge the gap between the skills available in the workforce and the demands of the marketplace.

Innovation is key to turning Thailand into a high-tech, high-touch economy. Right now, we're stuck in a low-tech, low-touch paradigm, but we can change that by focusing on niche areas. Thailand is growing at a slower rate, like that of a developed country, when the growth should be like that of a developing nation, so we also need to focus on inclusive economic growth. We need to invest in high-tech industries, and leverage our position in ASEAN to grow regionally. Having a cheap labour force cannot be our only competitive advantage. If that is the case, then we will never have a skilled workforce.

Third, our ageing population is another challenge that can be turned into an opportunity. By 2030, at least 30 percent of Thailand's population will be over 65, making us one of the fastest-ageing societies in the world. But we can leverage this by developing industries around elderly care, wellness, and health tourism. For example, we could create "dementia villages"—communities designed to offer specialised care and a high quality of life. This would not only address the needs of our ageing population, but also create jobs and attract investment in the healthcare sector.

What advice would you give to young people who want to enter politics, especially in closed systems?

My advice to young people is to build your own doors if the existing ones are closed. In many countries, including Thailand, political systems are designed to exclude new voices. You need to have a solid foundation in data-driven strategies and genuine public engagement. One of the biggest challenges is earning the credibility to be at the decision-making table. But once you earn that right, you must focus on providing clear analysis and effective communication. You also need to have resilience and tolerance for failure. Politics is tough, especially when you're trying to challenge entrenched powers. I often say, "Follow your heart, but take your brain with you." Passion is what gets you started, but it's your strategic thinking that will help you navigate the obstacles along the way.



Pita Limjaroenrat with his supporters in Thailand.

PHOTO: COURTESY

which is captured well by former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who was asked if he would encourage his children to become the prime minister of Singapore. He replied that he would encourage young generations to take leadership, but if it's his own children, the bar is 10 times higher. He emphasised the importance of meritocracy in governance.

In a true democracy, there must be institutions that support competition, merit-

minister too. However, these cases also show us that institutions and meritocracy can still function within such a framework when there's competition and checks and balances.

Could you describe the current state of inequality and how it affects the country's future?

When you ask wealthy people in Thailand how the country is, they'll tell you it's very comfortable. The top one percent of Thais

own about 67 percent of the country's wealth. This kind of concentration of wealth creates enormous disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and power. Land ownership is a major issue. Just 10 percent of the population controls 61 percent of private land, while the bottom 10 percent owns only 0.07 percent. If you don't own land, you can't use it as collateral to secure loans from banks. This locks many people out of the formal financial system, making it impossible for them to start businesses or invest in their future. Thailand is also expected to see a 24 percent increase in the number of millionaires by 2028. If you're part of the top one percent, the future looks comfortable. But for the vast majority of Thais, it will be a crisis.

How do you turn these crises into opportunities?

I like to break down these crises into three specific categories.

First, climate change is a major issue. Thailand is the fifth most vulnerable country to climate impacts, and we're already seeing the effects: flash floods, forest fires, and rising temperatures. But this also presents an opportunity for Thailand to lead in climate-resilient agriculture and renewable energy. We can invest in solar energy infrastructure and electrify public transportation, which would reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and create new jobs. By decentralising energy production and democratising access to clean energy, we can make Thailand more competitive and environmentally sustainable.

Secondly, Thailand's labour productivity has been declining, and we need to address that if we want to compete globally. By offering nanodegrees and micro-credentials, we can

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the deals endure, they would further solidify India's position as a major defence partner of the US and strengthen defence diplomacy between the two nations.

However, this also raises crucial geopolitical dilemmas for India. There has been a precipitous drop in its share of arms from long-standing ally Russia, which supplied 76 percent of its military imports in 2009-13 but only 36 percent in 2019-23, according to SIPRI data. The push towards US defence systems could potentially affect New Delhi's long-standing military cooperation with Moscow and shake up the delicate balance that India continues to strike between its relations with Russia and the West.

Moreover, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—the Indo-Pacific alliance comprising the US, India, Japan, and Australia—is expected to intensify under Trump's counter-China strategy. According to the joint statements issued by India and the US after the two leaders met, Modi and Trump are expected to activate new initiatives under the QUAD grouping and convene partners from the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, and the I2U2 Group is expected to announce new initiatives. India is set to host this year's QUAD meeting, which, according to analysts, could advance a multifaceted bilateral partnership.

But perhaps the most immediate and direct impact of Trump's policies in India would result from the US president's immigration crackdown. The US deported 104 Indians on the longest such military flights used thus far, before Modi's visit to Washington. During his first term, Trump tightened H-1B visa regulations, dealing a blow to Indian

professionals in the US technology sector. His second term is likely to see a return of these restrictive measures, which could hurt Indian IT firms, disrupt the \$150 billion outsourcing industry, and slow the flow of South Asian talent to Silicon Valley.

In an unusual diplomatic move, Modi publicly assured Trump that India would take back undocumented Indian migrants from the US. While this signals compliance

to Pakistan, coupled with strong rhetoric against cross-border terrorism. But Trump offered to mediate the Kashmir conflict during former Prime Minister Imran Khan's bilateral visit to Washington during his first administration, after which Trump said he had heard a "very aggressive statement" from Modi, according to a report by Al Jazeera in 2019. If Trump revisits such rhetoric, it could create fresh diplomatic tensions.



US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi shake hands, at the White House in Washington, DC, US, on February 13, 2025.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

with Trump's anti-immigration drive, it also reflects India's attempt to avoid deeper tensions on this front. However, concerns regarding skilled Indian professionals and students who may face heightened visa barriers in the coming years remain.

On the other hand, Trump's unpredictable approach to Pakistan and Afghanistan remains a major concern for India. His first term saw a sharp reduction in US aid

A major diplomatic win for India came in the form of Trump's approval of the extradition of Tahawwur Rana, a Pakistani-origin businessman accused of involvement in the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Preliminarily, this move signals a tougher stance against terrorism-related cases involving Pakistan-based networks.

In another notable move with far-reaching consequences, Trump's executive order has

suspended all USAID and IRI funds to South Asian countries, including Bangladesh and India. If these funds are not reinstated after the initial 90-day review period, crucial development projects across the region—spanning healthcare, education, and infrastructure—could be severely impacted.

One of the most striking aspects of the Trump-Modi meeting was the conspicuous absence of discussions on human rights, press freedom, and religious minorities. While the Biden administration often raised concerns over democratic backsliding in South Asia, Trump's foreign policy is expected to remain transactional, prioritising economic and security interests over democratic values. The BJP government has been accused of cracking down on opposition and backsliding India's democracy, and Trump's approach could embolden them to take a harsher stance on dissent, media freedoms and minority rights without fear of US diplomatic pressure. For Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, where democratic institutions have faced increasing strain, this diplomatic indifference from Washington could also accelerate authoritarian tendencies.

Donald Trump's second presidency presents India and South Asia with a paradox: unprecedented opportunities wrapped in profound challenges. For India, closer defence cooperation and strategic alignment against China are promising. Yet, trade tensions, restrictive immigration policies and the unpredictability of Trump's diplomacy pose real threats. Modi's personal chemistry with Trump may provide some diplomatic cushioning, but it will not override the cold calculus of transactional foreign policy. South Asian nations must now diversify their economic dependencies, recalibrate diplomatic ties and invest in regional cooperation to mitigate the volatility of Trump's second term. As Trump reshapes America's global engagement, the region must master the art of navigating an unpredictable superpower. The next four years will test South Asia's ability to turn challenges into strategic gains, proving that in global politics, survival depends on adaptability.