

Speech pointers for  
H.E. Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva  
Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand  
*"Taking on the Challenges of Democracy"*  
at St. John's College, Oxford University  
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Dr. John Hood, Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford,  
Sir Michael Scholar, President of St. John's College,  
President of the International Relations Society,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. First of all let me say what a great pleasure it is to be back here, although actually in very unfamiliar surroundings. The one thing that has been conferred during my return is that nobody can accuse me of being too young anymore. First because this auditorium was not here when I was here, and secondly, when I asked about all the tutors who have taught me, in philosophy, politics or economics, I learned that most of them had retired or passed away. So it is with pleasure that I do return here. I hope that later on I will be able to look at the more familiar surroundings where I spent possibly the best three years of my life. I shall also get the difficult part out of the way. First, I was introduced as a Thai Geordie : references were made to the greatest football club in the world. Just to reaffirm that we are the best, we just need to win sometime.

2. Now on to the serious topic which I've been asked to speak on, which are the challenges of democracy. Well I will first start by saying that when I was here-- roughly the same time as my finance minister, also an ex-St. John's student, he's actually a year above me although we are roughly the same age--- when we were here we were the minority. Possibly very few Thais in Oxford University. These days I think things are rather different, many more Thais have been given the opportunity to study here. I think that reconfirms what the Vice Chancellor had just said that Oxford has become more international. But the thing was very few people knew where Thailand was. Over the years when we grew through the process of democratic development, Thailand has become better known throughout the years. I remember when we were here, there was not even a Thai restaurant. We had to do with an Indonesian one which is now closed. But now Thai food is very much here, many of my friends have been to Thailand and enjoyed the sun, the sea, the sand and what not. But what made me most proud throughout the years was that Thailand was becoming a country known where democracy was taking its roots, especially on certain aspects like freedom of expression. We were

once ranked very high in terms of media freedom. Indeed, the last time my party was in government, Thailand ranked in the top thirty of countries in terms of media freedom and political stability. But look at the rankings now, over a decade after what was supposed to be the best period in Thai democracy, we found that global media now ranked us only in the bottom thirty for media freedom and even worse in terms of political stability. And for those of you who have been following the news on Thailand, you clearly saw disturbing images over the last few years.

3. So the real question that must be posed is, is Thai democracy backsliding. After all, has Thailand now lost its reputation and the ability to convince people that we could somehow be a model democratic development in the region, in Asia, or indeed in as far as all developing countries are concerned. What I would like to do today is to take you through the challenges that we have faced, so we can learn some lessons.

4. At the same time, I am here to reaffirm that Thai democracy is alive and well. And I have every determination to make sure that we get on this path. So in discussing political development in Thailand I will share with you some thoughts of the experience in the last decade, and see how we can take on the challenges of democracy.

5. As I said, Thai democracy may have taken some blows of late, but it has survived much worse. We experienced several setbacks before, but after each setback, the people of Thailand have always rebounded more resolute than before to fight for freedom and equality. I am determined to honour the sacrifices of generations past by doing everything in my power to advance and strengthen democracy, no matter what the challenges and obstacles along our way are.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

6. Here in Britain, democracy has for so long been taken for granted. Indeed, it's hard to imagine Britain as anything else. But the path even to British democracy was not strewn with roses. It is perhaps a sign of how completely democracy has triumphed in this country that the struggles to get here – the civil wars, the revolutions – have mostly slipped from popular memory to become dull chapters in dusty history books.

7. In Thailand, such struggles remain vivid in many people's memories. I was 9 years old in 1973 when the military used violence to suppress pro-democracy demonstrators and students on the streets of Bangkok. The incident, known as the October 14 incident, effectively ended the authoritarian rule over the country.

8. The realisation that the Thai people were willing to lay down their lives for freedom from tyranny made a life-long impression upon me. Democracy may be taken

for granted elsewhere, but not for the Thai people. If the political system is more open, if the people in power are willing to listen and accommodate, or if all of us play our parts to strengthen the foundations of democracy, then we may be able to avoid the unnecessary loss of lives in the name of democracy. After the October 14 incident, I realised that the only way for me to help bring democracy to Thailand is through public service as an elected career politician, and through commitment to the ideals that those brave people fought for. And I know that questions have already been asked whether my ambition to become an elected leader was something that was grown from Oxford. I say that the 14 October incident basically made up my mind. I wanted to be a career politician and was the main reason why I decided to take up PPE at Oxford, of course which is well known for professional and career politicians over the world. And indeed, I also recall fondly that my experience of winning elections also began here. In fact, in my first year I ran to become Oxford University's student representative and in my second year I was elected junior common room president.

9. But the victory that followed the October 14 incident was short-lived. Only three years later, in 1976, the military staged another coup following a massacre of supposedly leftist students at Bangkok's Thammasat University. Again, students and pro-democracy leaders who were against the military lost their lives. Thai society was deeply divided on the question of how democratic principles should be implemented. Many students left university and joined the Communist insurgency in rural areas. It cost the country long hard decades of struggle to win over those who were disoriented, to achieve stability and to restore democratic rule. Though the authoritarian regime put in place after the coup lasted only one year, Thailand was to be under what was dubbed "semi-democratic rule" for over a decade.

10. I spent many of those years as a student in Britain absorbing the culture of democracy. I became more convinced that democratic rule is absolutely essential for every country, including Thailand. When I returned to Thailand and entered politics in 1992, democracy in Thailand was yet again at a critical juncture. This time around, as a newcomer to politics, being elected to Parliament for the first time in March 1992, I witnessed an uprising largely by the middle-class against another military strongman in May 1992. I should say that that strongman was supported by the majority of the members of Parliament then. There was a crackdown that resulted in a lot of deaths and injuries. This sad chapter in political history also led to new elections, and the Thai people eventually rebounded and pooled together to push for one of the most comprehensive political reform process, which led to what was called the People's Constitution of 1997. The Constitution ambitiously sought to strengthen our weak political party system while putting in place checks and balances in the form of unelected and independent organisations.

11. The drafters of the Constitution underestimated the ability to abuse power by politicians, even elected ones. They did not anticipate that a strong parliamentary majority and executive power could undermine transparency and accountability. Sustained by populist policies, that majority came to be the basis for an authoritarian approach by the government. With such approach came rampant corruption on a massive scale and a casual contempt for the rule of law, borne out in such incidents as the massacre of Thai Muslims at Krue Se Mosque in the South of Thailand and Takbai, a ruthless and no-questions-asked crackdown on drug dealers involving extra-judicial killings leading to the large loss of lives of over 2,000 Thais, as well as torture and forced disappearances like the case of human rights lawyer Somchai Neelapaijit. The opposition was harassed, the press was subjected to intimidation, and independent organisations faced political interference. It is indeed ironic and hard to believe that a democratically-elected government would engage in such practices. It also raised the question about democratic forms and functions, and where we should go from there.

12. The upside to all this was that, for the first time, Thailand's rural poor was awoken by the populist elements of democracy. Schemes such as village funds, the marketing of community products, and cheap health care became instrumental in retaining rural support. These measures had the effect of empowering the rural poor, at least politically.

13. Despite the upside, widespread abuse of power inevitably bred a reaction, as demonstrators took to the streets condemning cronyism, conflicts of interest and mega-scale corruption. There was a real fear that a government would use its absolute majority in Parliament for its own self-interest, and even put themselves above the law.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

14. This is why, when the military staged a coup in September 2006, it was met with a sense of relief among the majority of people, and I regret to say that. It was a reflection of increasing democracy when the coup makers had to quickly announce that power would return to the people in one year.

15. The 2006 coup proved that, despite the military's intervention, power ultimately rests in the hands of the people. Democracy prevailed. Firstly because even the coup leaders had to subject the new Constitution to a referendum which was passed by a narrow margin, suggesting of course, that there has to be further amendments to the Constitution. Secondly, although democracy took a step back, free and fair elections did take place in one year. The majority of voters, largely from the rural areas, decided to vote to support the policies of the party that was overthrown by the coup in the first place. The bottom line is that the military will be even more reluctant now to force their way into power again.

16. This is the nature of democratic development in Thailand, for every stepback, we make a relaunch, taking more steps forward.

17. Unfortunately, democratic elections and majority rule, last year, again, ran into some problems. Without respecting the other principles of democracy, it proved to be drastically inadequate to avoid the impending political turmoil. Once again there was chaos. In the end, after the courts ruled against the government for abuse of power and electoral fraud, democratically-elected Parliamentarians decided to end the deadlock by to put in change and voted openly for my party to form a coalition government. The decision was subsequently vindicated by by-election results a month later, when we won 21 out of 27 seats.

18. Today, Thailand is back on track towards democracy. I consider it the duty of my government to ensure that Thailand's progress towards democracy continues apace.

19. So this is what I have promised to the Thai people: transparency, good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law, equal treatment and reconciliation with those with opposing views, especially by providing them with political space. We need not trade off majority rule for transparency and good governance, and in order to move forward, these principles must go hand-in-hand. In doing so, a new kind of political reform, a political "New Deal", must take place--- a process that creates long-lasting liberal democracy under a constitutional Monarchy, where powers of the political leadership are used to provide national policy direction for the better lives of the people, rather than simply to accumulate and exercise unlimited power, including interference with the law for personal gain.

20. We also recognise that, for most ordinary, hard-working people, democracy would be useless if it does not respond to their basic needs. Democracy must be conducive to economic development if it is to be sustainable.

21. Our commitment to freedom therefore extends to our economic policies, where the need for growth, driven by competition and entrepreneurship, must be balanced by public sector intervention to ensure fairness and to help the least fortunate. Regardless of who is in power, Thailand has always favoured a liberal economy, as reflected in our commitment to open markets and close integration into the global economy. Our strong agricultural base means that Thailand will continue to play a key part in feeding the world. We must therefore make sure that the global economic crisis will not result in increased protectionist measures, since such steps would close us off from one another and impoverish us all.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

22. There is no question how much we value democracy. We have learned the hard way how to build democratic rule, and how tough it is to do so. I believe that our political experiences are valuable to the countries now pursuing democratization. Therefore, we are also working to promote democracy in the Southeast Asian region. In our capacity as ASEAN Chair and host of the 14<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit, we have been working with our fellow member countries to advance the cause of freedom and democracy in the region, even though we full well recognize the constraints we are under.

23. The ten Southeast Asian nations---ASEAN, now has a firm foot in the door in areas which were once considered too sensitive to be discussed even within the ASEAN family. First and foremost, our goal of realizing the ASEAN Community will result in this organization becoming more rules-based and effective. Second, the setting up of an ASEAN Human Rights body will finally mean that human rights are given due priority within the region. Thirdly, we are encouraging public participation within ASEAN by making ASEAN more people-centred, a step towards reducing the participation deficit which plagues many international organisations and regions. Indeed, two weeks ago, when I chaired the ASEAN Summit meeting, for the first time, we invited representatives of civil society to address the ten leaders of the ten Southeast Asian nations.

24. These steps are designed not only to make ASEAN more effective and to enhance cooperation among its members, but also to play an indirect role in making ASEAN and its members relatively more 'democratic', or at least more rules-based and heedful of good governance.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

25. I cannot say with certainty how fast Thai democracy will evolve and at what pace. But in the experience of the West, it took more than a century before democracy was fully consolidated. Much of its maturity will depend on a combination of complex factors within the country. But, most importantly, for Thai democracy, I am convinced that there cannot be a slowing down in pace.

26. Still, experience has taught us that the thirst for freedom, be it political or economic, is universal. The Thai people have experienced the essence of democracy and freedom throughout the 75 years since our first constitution. It is highly unlikely that they will settle for less. Thailand, after all, means Land of the Free.

27. To be sure, it will be a long road ahead. But I have every intention of working for all the people of Thailand, so that the noble ideals people have fought for and died for –

the ideals that sparked a nine-year-old boy's career choice – are more than just words on a piece of paper. Thailand is at a crossroads. I intend to make sure that the country makes the correct choice and continues, with as little disruption as possible, on the path to greater democracy.

28. I remember that the motto of Oxford is "*Dominus Illuminatio Mea*". At Oxford, there is indeed a light which shines on me, and guides me not only to do things right, but also to do the right thing ---for myself, for my country and beyond---and that includes more democratic progress in Thailand.

29. Thank you.

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