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# Listening to the voice of the Thai people

By Busaya Mathelin  
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65 million Thais now look  
forward to free and fair  
democratic elections in  
2017.  
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The national constitutional referendum in Thailand, on 7 August, was held peacefully and is considered a broad success. Yet the doom and gloom on the future of Thai democracy as reported in sections of the Western press was remarkable, writes Busaya Mathelin.

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On Sunday 7 August, almost 30 million Thais, or 60% of the 50 million eligible to vote, turned up at the ballot box to write another chapter in Thailand's democratic history. They were participating in the national constitutional referendum, which was a culmination of months long effort to move beyond the political chaos over the past ten years and return to democratic rule. Of those who exercised their rights, over 16 million voters – 61.35% – voted to accept the draft Charter, while 10.5 million – 38.65% – voted against it.

By any measure, the referendum was a success: polling went off peacefully, and there were no reports of any irregularities. The leaders of Thailand's main political parties, notably Mr Abhisit Vejjajiva and Ms Yingluck Shinawatra, while disagreeing with the draft constitution, immediately made public statements accepting the results.

Yet the doom and gloom on the future of Thai democracy as reported in sections of the Western press was remarkable. Many chose to focus on the restrictions to campaigning and freedom of expression prior to the polling, while other critics predict that the referendum will not heal the political divisions of the last ten years, but will serve to exacerbate it.

Yet, this almost ignores the fact that nearly 30 million responsible Thai adults made the conscious and deliberate decision to exercise their voting rights. The hard copies of the draft constitution were widely distributed to the general public, while the digital copy was freely available to those interested.

But most importantly, the Thai media were not censored, and critical opinions in good faith – including by major political leaders – both for and against the draft Charter were freely expressed in the press and social media. While there were restrictions to

campaigning to ensure public order, it was certainly not a case of 'serious limitations' to fundamental freedoms during the constitutional referendum process. At the end of the day, the Thai people have made their choice and it should be respected.

#### MOVING ON: TOWARDS THE GENERAL ELECTION OF 2017

Dr Surin Pitsuwan - our distinguished former Foreign Minister and ASEAN Secretary General - is one of many who saw the referendum results as a reflection of the strong desire of the Thai people to pursue the healing process and move on towards general elections. Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha has rightly called for reconciliation from all sides of Thailand's political divide and full acceptance of the results. He reconfirmed the timeline for implementing the Roadmap which will lead to general elections in late 2017 under the new constitution.

What will take place in the meantime will be several steps relating to legislative procedure to promulgate the new charter and draft necessary organic laws. The Constitution Drafting Committee has reiterated that views and suggestions of all stakeholders, including of political parties, will be considered during the drafting of the organic laws. All of the necessary procedures are expected to be completed by mid-2017. Then the Election Commission will need up to 150 days to organise the general elections.

So as Thailand moves on, we can reflect on what we can do to make our democracy sustainable. During the many ups and downs of our recent history, one constant has been our aspiration for democracy and good governance. Our foremost tragedy is that electoral system has always been plagued by 'money politics' with its attendant corruption, which served no one except the elected politicians themselves. Even worse, the 'winner takes all' mentality and the ensuing cycle of political turmoil since the mid - 2000s saw free speech used to incite hatred, social division, and political violence, with tragic loss of lives. Not surprisingly, the military intervention in May 2014 was met with relief by many Thais who saw the need for some calm in order to chart a new path away from the cycle of political dysfunction.

Here in Europe, the concept that with freedom comes great responsibility is very well understood. Generations of Europeans have suffered greatly in order to build the equality and freedom which the current generation today take for granted. The Thai people share the same aspirations as the Europeans, but with our different histories, there will be certainly occasions where the Thai nation knows it needs to take a step back in order to move forward. Many Thais will agree that the current draft Constitution is not a perfect document; and that its acceptance is certainly not an 'endorsement of authoritarianism'. But this charter is what we have chosen to try to get rid of money politics and make our democracy sustainable, given the past disappointment with electoral politics.

We certainly are aware that no constitution is a perfect document; but rather, it is up to those who wield its power to either use it for the common good or for their own vested interests. Also, elections are one thing, good governance is another; unfortunately, sometimes the former does not always lead to the latter. The Thai people, being pragmatic by nature, certainly want good and clean governance through electoral democratic politics. It is now up to the current and future generation of Thais to understand its past mistakes and learn to exercise its freedom in a free society, to respect divergent political views and the necessity of compromise, and to reject the dictatorship of the majority. Most of all, it has to learn to the patience to let democratic will takes its course.

All 65 million Thais now look forward to free and fair democratic elections in 2017. The least that we hope for from our European friends, whose civilisation has contributed so much to the world, is to be understanding of divergent and unique paths to democracy. As Thailand starts to write a new chapter of its democratic history, we certainly hope that our friends in Europe will give some thought on how to adopt a pragmatic approach in Thai - EU relations in order to move forward and strengthen our very important relationship for the mutual benefit of our peoples.