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from

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on

Engaging the public in the new Thai Parliament

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Introduction

Given the belief that public engagement is beneficial to public support of institutions, law - making bodies have increasingly sought to expand the range and scope of public interaction with political institutions. The Thai Parliament has placed a great amount of importance to public participation as a means of strengthening representative democracy. Direct political participation by the people is stipulated in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, B.E.2550 (2007) which complements the principle of participatory democracy, which enhances the opportunity for the people to take part in decision making process and overseeing the political system.

Public Engagement Framework

In ensuring that adequate avenues are provided for the people to participate in the business of the legislative, the Thai Parliament attempted to implement various activities to draw attention and participation from a wide array of stakeholders. The primary target and the most important stakeholder is the public. Avenues to participate include parliamentary committees, which are increasingly holding the public hearings on bills before Parliament and fora or seminars that aimed to deepen democracy. The aim of involving the public involves the Parliament, civil society organizations, as well as academics.

Recently, Thailand has established the provincial parliamentary offices in 6 pilot provinces covering every part of the country in order to ease and expedite communication between the Parliament and the public, and building trust between both sides.

Other activities that were carried out to reach people are also such as the parliamentary youth program on democracy, the women parliamentary club and the

roadshow aimed at imparting the cooperation of regional grouping, the ASEAN Inter - Parliamentary Assembly in major cities of the country. The project of the new Parliament is one of which to integrate public inputs, from the very beginning of the process to achieve a more meaningful and broader public participation.

The Parliament for the People

The new parliament project has been carried out with an aim of building new complex and premises, which will serve as the official legislative institution, and encourages trust from the people

The idea of the relocation of the Thai Parliament was tabled since 1992 under the supervision of the President of the National Assembly since the increase of the Thai population. This gave rise to the growing numbers of MPs, which led to the need for more effective facilities to serve the increasing and more complex parliamentary operations. Many attempts were made to relocate the Parliament to a new place which in the hopes to fulfill people's aspiration of a "House of the Nation", a new national landmark, symbolizing unique Thai elegance as well as to become an icon of modern democratic values.

With the policy given by the President of the National Assembly that all steps of the process for the new Parliament must be transparent, numbers of public hearings were conducted to elicit feedbacks and public approval. A forum was also organized in order to publicly impart information regarding the construction project. For many years, the project to relocate the Parliament complex has not been close to realization due to criticisms and mixed public reaction to the choices of potential locations during the feasibility study. This was the case until the Committee on the Construction of the new Parliament finally agreed to choose a piece of State property land on the Bank of Chao Phraya River as the location for the new Parliament.

In order to give an opportunity for the public to take part in the design of the new Parliament, criteria were set to allow exclusive architectural design teams of Thai Nationals to submit their proposals for bidding. Apart from the master plan for landscape project, such criteria also covered a concept of uniqueness and a technical specification in accordance with Environmental Health Impact Assessment (EHIA). There is also a consideration of the accessibility of all citizens and the physical security and safety of the venue. A total of 131 designs from 99 entries reflected not only the attention from the public but empowered them to take advantage of this opportunity to comment publicly.

The New Image of Parliamentary Service

It is essential for the parliamentary service to play its role and business under the strategic plan, which is a key element designed to achieve its goals and vision. Particularly, it intensified the public's political awareness that pushes the need to increasingly promote public engagement. One of the major initiatives that have been synchronized in the foundation for the new era of parliamentary framework to bridge the gap between the public and the Parliament is the establishing of Parliament - public participatory center. It provides activities for the people and disseminates the development of drafted legislations for the public to raise their voice and sentiments over the issues. The Parliament absolutely serves as the center of these initiatives including the project to have provincial parliamentary offices at all regions of the country.

The project for a new Parliament has been strategically designed, with consideration to the complexity of factors and issues including increased clamor from

Members of the Parliament, the emerging improvements in information and communications technology, the new standard of management requiring the resources potential, the new architecture of regional and international cooperation requiring higher inter - parliamentary service standards, the appropriate working environment with security and safety concerns and in particular the intensification of political awareness among the public that pushing the need to promote public engagement in political process. Considering all these issues, the engagement in the policy discourse will also be improved, which is in line with the Parliament's vision and is primary to any democratic institutions.