



## A Year in Bangkok: Personal Reflections

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### **Work in the UN ESCAP**

When the opportunity to work at the UN ESCAP presented itself in late 2010, then IPS Director Ambassador Ong Keng Yong felt it would be useful for me to gain experience through working with an international organisation and also to observe the issues that the private sector in the region dealt with. This would help me to contextualise the work that IPS was doing for businesses in Singapore.



The UN building in Bangkok, where the UN ESCAP is located.

At the UN ESCAP, I was attached to the Private Sector and Development Section of the Trade and Investment Division. My main job was to prepare, organise and market the Eighth edition of the Asia-Pacific Business Forum (APBF), as well as the Inaugural Asia Pacific Trade & Investment Fair, both of which were to be held in the UN Conference Centre in Bangkok from 25-29 July 2011. The two events were convened successfully with record attendance by policymakers, representatives from the corporate sector, academics and activists of non-governmental organisations, among others. Given my networks with business leaders in Singapore and the rest of Southeast Asian region as a result of my previous work at the Economic Development Board of Singapore and the ASEAN Secretariat, I was also asked by the Section Chief to support the work of the Business Advisory Council (BAC) at the UN ESCAP. The BAC, whose primary role was to provide strategic business advisory to the UN ESCAP and input to enhance the agenda of APBF, comprises top business leaders and industry captains from economies across the

Asia Pacific region. From Singapore, Mrs Elizabeth Sam, Dato' Dr Jannie Chan, Mr Teng Theng Dar, and Mr Cecil Leong were invited to sit on the BAC.<sup>1</sup>

I was also responsible for research and analysis of technical reports and materials provided by external experts on specific areas, including: (a) low carbon growth opportunities brought forward by climate-smart technologies, which can impact policies for business and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs); (b) the integration of SMEs into the global/regional supply chains; and (c) ways to enhance the flow of foreign direct investments (FDI) into the Asia-Pacific region, in particular, for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), Countries with Economies in Transition (EIT), and small states. I also wrote background papers to deepen the understanding of the interests and concerns of developing countries, LDCs, LLDCs, and Countries with EITs in today's global system, in particular, on issues related to FDI and private sector/SME development in the Asia-Pacific regional context. Many of these background materials formed the input for UN publications, such as the Asia-Pacific Trade & Investment Report 2011, World Investment Report 2012, and the Study on Trade, Investment and Climate Change.

### **General Election**

Perhaps the most valuable experience of the year away was to observe, at close hand, the political developments and governance challenges facing Thailand. The highly anticipated general election was held in July 2011, and it was eye-opening to witness how different, rowdy and aggressive Thai election campaigning can be in comparison to Singapore, with politicians and their parties regularly making provocative remarks at one another. There was also a great deal of mudslinging and unkind insinuations through election posters and in mainstream media like newspapers and magazines. One encouraging sign however, was



An election poster outside the UN building that reads, "Vote no animals into Parliament!"

<sup>1</sup> Mrs Sam is the director of Boardroom, SC Global Developments, Straits Trading Co, and Thailand's Kasikorn Bank; Dato Dr Chan is executive vice-chairman of watch retailer The Hour Glass Ltd; Mr Teng is the Chairman, Investments & International Business Vector Scorecard, and Singapore's Non-Resident Ambassador to Oman; Mr Leong is the Chief Executive Officer of Bryan Cave International Consulting.

that every politician respected the election outcome, as all parties had earlier agreed that “who(ever) gets the majority vote will have the right to form the government, and that everyone has to respect the rule of law.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The Great Flood**

Not long after the general election, the new government under Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra was tested by the severe flooding crisis. In my opinion, this flooding was caused by both natural and man-made factors. Rainwater had arrived in extraordinary volumes in 2011, and at same time, deforestation and industrialisation had greatly reduced the kingdom’s capacity to absorb the water. In Bangkok, for example, two plots of massive swamp lands, which used to hold water during heavy rains and prevent flooding just a decade ago, now house the Chaeng Wattana Government Complex and the Suvarnabhumi International Airport.

My family and I learnt how to be resilient during the floods. We ensured that we were prepared by stocking up on adequate amount of dry food, drinking water, candles, and cash, among other necessities. There was such a level of panic that automated telling machines and banks, on some days, ran out of local Thai baht as people prepared for the uncertainty ahead. Drinking water, instant noodles, and canned food were out of stock in supermarkets and convenience shops. Scenes like these are hardly imaginable in Singapore, with shelves in the supermarket always filled with merchandise and essentials. Believe me, it was almost like living in a war-torn environment at the peak of the flood threat in Bangkok.



Empty shelves at a supermarket in Bangkok.  
Photo credit: [leapfeetfirst.blogspot.com](http://leapfeetfirst.blogspot.com)

Indeed, as unbelievable as it may sound, sand bags, where available, were sold at a much higher price than a sack of rice in some areas in Bangkok. Essentially, these sandbags could secure properties and residences whereas rice could not. It was a common sight to see tons of sandbags being filled and stacked up almost everywhere in Bangkok – bus-stops, entrances to the commercial banks, convenience stores, restaurants, shopping malls, hospitals, and even at the Bangkok skytrain (BTS) stations! In addition, with designated car parks fully occupied, a



Another example of an election poster, which says, “Elect Chuwit: Politics are like diapers – the more you change, the better it is”.

<sup>2</sup> “Thai Contenders Pledge to Respect Election Outcome”, *Bloomberg News*, 3 July 2011.

lot of car owners were left with no choice but to leave their vehicles along the highways, expressways, intersections, over ramps or anywhere to ensure their cars were not destroyed by the flood waters. This exacerbated what would normally be bad traffic congestion as the two extreme left lanes on a highway would be blocked off.

In reality, what further aggravated the situation was the seeming lack of coordination between the



Vehicles parked along a highway in Bangkok during the flood.

government (spearheaded by the ruling Pheu Thai Party) and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), headed by the Governor of Bangkok, who himself was from the opposing Democrats Party. Throughout the entire flooding episode, it was not apparent if there was a non-partisan attempt to overcome the kingdom's worst disaster. The government, in particular, was heavily criticised for underestimating the extent of flooding, giving mixed or conflicting information, and not giving adequate warnings. Administrators of the Flood Relief Operation Centre (FROC) – formed by the government to tackle the flooding in Bangkok – and the BMA were at loggerheads and accused each other of “playing politics”. The lack of a coordinated and timely response had serious consequences for the local population and residents (including foreign working professionals like me), who really had not been able to rely on timely information or any guidance from the relevant authorities. Both FROC and BMA had their own priorities, which were to do everything possible to prevent their own constituencies from getting wet.

### ***Aftermath of the flood***

The flood has been described as “the worst disaster in Thai history”, and it is not difficult to see why. More than three million people – more than half of Singapore’s population – were left homeless. Business operations were affected as more than 900 factories – mostly Japanese automakers and hard-disk drive makers – in designated industrial estates were inundated. Crop harvests were also affected and 25% of the main crop, rice, was not expected to survive. A point to note is that as many of these peasants did not have much capital reserve, and the effects of the flood were severe as they lost their investment in the current crop and must wait till the flood waters recede before planting another crop to cover their losses.

### ***Learning Points***

Work-wise, I was glad that the one-year stint with UN ESCAP broadened my views and knowledge on some of the research areas I am undertaking in IPS, such as climate change, the development of SMEs, and regional economic integration, especially, in the Asia-Pacific,

where Singapore and ASEAN are valued members. I also managed to widen my network of colleagues, in particular those in the Asia Pacific region, who share similar research interests. Such contacts would inevitably broaden the scope of my research work in IPS.

In view of the flooding disaster in Thailand, I was also struck by how vital good governance is, by way of efficient planning, clear allocation of responsibility, and sound public communication. With Singapore's vast experience and applicable knowledge in public policy and good governance, this can be one way for our public service and education institutions to continue playing a significant role in sharing such expertise with our neighbours in the region.



Roadside businesses in Bangkok trying to survive amidst the flood.

When my colleagues at UN ESCAP and national representatives from countries in the region realised I am a Singaporean (many were misled by my name, thinking I am a Korean), the first thing that always came to their mind was how the Singapore Public Service is widely regarded as one of the most efficient and relatively uncorrupt bureaucracies in the world, with a high standard of discipline and accountability. Many of my younger UNESCAP colleagues were keen to know how they could apply to study public policy in Singapore, namely at the Lee

Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP). In fact, there were a handful of junior staff at the UN ESCAP who graduated from the LKYSPP. They continued to be “ambassadors” of the courses and disciplines that they studied during their stay in Singapore. These young Thais, want to see a strong and corruption-free public service put in place, one that would serve the people whole-heartedly. This should be a cornerstone in ensuring the success of Thailand's nation-building. It is apparent that there is now a willingness to depart from the old culture of resigned acceptance for sleaze and dishonesty in Thai society.

This issue on good governance leads me to my final point. Critics have said the Singapore is a “one-party state”, and that after 46 years of independence, the time is ripe for a change to a more pluralistic political system. In my own view, I am still not completely convinced on the benefits of political pluralism at the expense of strong governance. Having learnt first-hand about the weaknesses of a system that seems to offer people more political choices but where governance and crisis management are poorly coordinated – as I had witnessed in my previous overseas stint in Jakarta with the ASEAN Secretariat and more recently in Bangkok – I humbly feel that it is perhaps more important to have the “visible hand” of good governance in play, than to see the “invisible hand” of free markets. It would be an extremely limited perspective if one assumes that markets always know best, because we

should learn a great deal from the Wall Street crash in 2008, which triggered the global economic crisis.

Time and again, we see that Singapore's government has learnt from previous experience to put in place more robust solutions before the next occurrence of crisis. Granted that the extent of the flooding in Singapore is not comparable to what I witnessed in Bangkok, it makes me appreciate the response by the government and the public spiritedness displayed when we face the problem of flash floods. The early warning system to inform affected residents and motorists during times of heavy rainfall is a case in point. The government has also channelled all required resources to widen the flood canals, and provided a full review in January 2012 for long-term solutions to increase the country's ability to cope with the threat of flooding from extreme weather, as well as unexpected consequences in the course of urban development. In the next few months, Singaporeans can expect a full review by the government and the relevant authorities on the mass rapid transit system (MRT) breakdowns that occurred in December 2011. I expect similar rigour as well as both short and long-term measures to be put in place, and that such incidents are really only the exception to the rule of how things *do* work in Singapore, although I do recognise that no one, in the end, can control the amount of rainfall, and in spite of the best efforts, solutions will never be 'water-tight' completely.

We do not see the scale of partisan bickering that puts the livelihoods of individual citizens, communities and the viability of businesses at stake here in Singapore. Even my colleagues – both Western and Asian – at UN ESCAP were envious of the good governance we enjoy here in Singapore, and many expressed hope for their home countries to consider replicating features of our political system.

In short, Singapore must be doing something right for other states and nations to be keen to adopt our governance and systems. Having said that, I do agree with the need to have a strong system of checks and balances in Parliament as this would prevent the government of the day from being complacent. Ultimately, however, when given a chance to choose living either in a liberalised political environment, such as in Indonesia and Thailand as they are today, or in a stable society with a strong government that works as in Singapore, I know where I would like to live and to raise my family.

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*The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of the Institute.*

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