



JON UNGPHAKORN

His is a remarkable family. This is where so much of what he would become begins.

His father, Puey Ungphakorn (1916–1999), the son of a Chinese fish merchant in Bangkok, had a storied career as a government scholar in England, a war hero, and a brilliant economist and educator widely esteemed for his integrity and dedication to public service. In 1946, while pursuing his war-interrupted doctoral studies at the London School of Economics (LSE), Puey married Margaret Smith, who was a sociology student in his undergraduate class at LSE. An Englishwoman with a strong Quaker background, Margaret shared her husband’s interest in social reform.

Together, they raised three sons, Jon, Peter Mytri, and Giles Ji, who would enact in their own lives, in distinctively individual ways, the same zeal for social welfare.

THE eldest son, Jon Ungphakorn was born in London on September 19, 1947. When he was one, the family moved to Thailand where his father entered government service as an economist in the comptroller general’s department of the Ministry of Finance. Puey then became technical assistant to the Permanent Undersecretary of Finance at the same time that he lectured in economics at Thammasat and Chulalongkorn universities. As his talent was increasingly recognized, he was appointed in 1953 as deputy governor of the Bank of Thailand, the central banking institution, and member of the board of directors of the National Economic Council. In these positions, he played a key role in the postwar economic rehabilitation of Thailand. (For his exemplary work in government service, Puey Ungphakorn was honored with a Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1965.)

Despite his father’s prominence, the family lived simply. They lived in a one-storey wooden house in a large property, in what was then the rural outskirts of Bangkok, which Puey bought on installment from a cousin. Puey was an unprepossessing man, a government official who avoided the trappings of high office, shied away from publicity, and—something quite rare—always insisted he should not be overpaid.

Jon says, “My father was always concerned about the poor, himself coming from a family that was not rich.” He was “a very generous person with strong feelings for the people of Thailand.” Margaret herself, Jon says, was something of a “social activist” who, in her younger days, wrote letters to newspapers to voice her protest over many issues. She believed in social equality and had many friends “who would not allow themselves to earn more than what the average person earned in England at that time.” She frowned on luxuries of any kind and did not want to have servants in the house (although she eventually relented and the Ungphakorns did have a woman helper in the house). “She didn’t want my father to have large official cars and things like that,” Jon says. “We didn’t have access to television during our childhood both in Thailand and in England because she did not believe it was essential for our education and growth.” While their father was patient and tolerant, she was “quite strict” in matters like table manners, bedtime, and spending money. Yet, Jon adds, she was “very democratic” in other matters, allowing her sons to follow and develop their own interests.

Theirs was an interesting Anglo-Thai family. Puey had a large, extended network of Chinese relatives, but he and his children were among the most Westernized in the “clan.” While he was a Buddhist (he would,

in fact, become famous for his views on the relationship between Buddhism and modern economics), he was not a regular templegoer. Jon says: “He was a Buddhist in philosophy, not so much in practice.” The same statement may well apply to Jon himself.

Margaret, on the other hand, came from a Quaker family on her mother’s side and had a strict upbringing (when she was young she was not allowed to go to the theater, for instance). She drew from her Quaker background a pronounced interest in welfare work and social reform. Yet she was her own person, a “rebel” and “agnostic,” Jon says, who was “probably the most leftwing of her family.” (An article she wrote on social services in England, which her husband translated into Thai, would become basic reading for social welfare workers in Thailand for a time.)

“Respecting differences in views,” Jon says, “is part of the culture in our family.” Though Margaret was a pacifist by conviction, she did not criticize Puey’s decision to go to war. (With other Thai students, Puey founded the Free Thai Movement in England in 1942 and volunteered for the British Army Pioneer Corps with the aim of making contact with the resistance movement inside Thailand. With other volunteers, he was trained in guerrilla warfare and intelligence work in India and later dropped by parachute into Thailand. They were captured but, with the help of resistance sympathizers, they were soon able to carry out their mission of recruitment and intelligence work. In 1945, Puey was taken out of Thailand by a Catalina flying boat and returned to England.)

Their parents, Jon says, “always believed in raising us to have our own independence.” They never dictated to their children what careers to take up or religion to follow.

JON attended Darunotayan School, a preschool in Bangkok whose headmistress was a close friend of his father. After two years, he had his primary education at Saint Gabriel’s, a very conservative Catholic school known for its academic excellence. (It belongs to an international network of schools run by the Brothers of St. Gabriel, a Catholic religious congregation based in France.) Jon was not particularly happy at Saint Gabriel. Even then, he disliked such practices of discrimination as pupils having to line up according to how high or low their grades were.

In 1956, when Jon was nine, the Ungphakorns returned to England. Three years earlier, Puey had been forced out of his position at the Bank of Thailand because he had opposed the scheme of prominent military members of the cabinet to take over a commercial bank. Perhaps because of this and similar aggravations, Puey requested a leave of absence from government to take up a research post at Chatham House, a famous institute for international affairs in London. The government instead offered him the post of economic and financial counselor at the Royal Thai Embassy in London, which he accepted.

Jon and his brothers were enrolled at St. Christopher School, an independent, coeducational day and boarding school in Letchworth, Hertfordshire, around forty miles from London. They attended as students but lived with their parents in a neighboring town (his father had to travel one and a half hours each way to get to his office in London). It was not one’s regular English boarding school. St. Christopher was a progressive, vegetarian school in a town that originated as a Quaker farming community in the nineteenth century.

Jon did well in school but he was a shy, reserved boy (in this, he says, he takes after his mother). “I was a rather reserved person and did not have all that many friends. I felt, probably, quite lonely, in a sense.” Looking back, he believes however, that British education had advantages he would not have enjoyed in Thailand. Students were encouraged to have their own opinions in subjects like history and to be intellectually adventurous in matters like the use of the English language.

It was a restful time for the family. Jon enjoyed the time he spent with his English grandparents and loved cycling as a pastime. He dreaded, however, he confesses, having to go on the long, dreary country walks his parents loved to take.

In 1962, the family returned to Thailand, rejoining Puey who had returned sometime around 1959 to take up the position of governor of the Bank of Thailand. Back in Bangkok, Jon attended Sathit Patumwan, a coeducational demonstration school of Srinakharinwirot University. He went on to attend Triam Udom Suksa School, a preuniversity school considered to be the best high school in Thailand. As a student, he breezed through the sciences but struggled with classical Thai language and literature. He enjoyed school and made lasting friends at Triam Udom.

In 1965, Jon was back in England for his university studies. He was not too enthusiastic about making the trip because he had made friends in Bangkok and had in fact started attending classes in a local medical college where his friends had enrolled (the dean was a friend of his father). He would have enjoyed staying in Bangkok, but somehow there was the expectation that England was where he would pursue higher studies.

To qualify for university studies, he attended Paddington Technical College (now part of what is called City of Westminster College). He then proceeded to the University of Sussex to specialize in electronics (“I had always been interested in electrical gadgets, scientific things”). It was not all gadgets for him, however. He had a good general education in Sussex since he was also interested in politics and society, taking up courses on subjects like the Soviet economy.

When he was still in Paddington, he stayed in his parents’ house in London, where he enjoyed the company of Thai students his parents had allowed to stay there. When he moved to a dormitory in Sussex (around fifty miles from London), he frequently visited London, often hitchhiking to make the trip, to be with his Thai friends. He subsisted on a frugal family allowance and, on one vacation, worked as a porter in a hospital to augment his pocket money.

He was not a serious student, he says. He loved going out with friends to concerts or clubs to drink beer and listen to blues music and bands like the popular Anglo-American group called Fleetwood Mac. “I wasn’t really doing anything constructive during that period,” he says in self-deprecation.

“I didn’t enjoy university in England at all,” Jon says. Part of this may have drawn from his feelings of social isolation. Though he never experienced open racism, he was sensitive to his being looked at as different. This went back to his first remembered experiences as a boy, living in rural England where there were not too many foreigners. He recalls being “teased a lot” when he was at St. Christopher’s. “I remember,” he candidly confesses, “feeling ashamed of my father, in a way.” But he also remembers how his father always carried himself with great dignity in everything. Kind and impeccably composed, his father never complained even if he was treated badly. Jon says: “I had never felt happy and comfortable living in England. . . . I identified much more as being Thai.”

He earned a bachelor’s degree in science, major in electronics, in Sussex. He did not have any fixed plans about what to do with his life but imagined at the time he would be going into teaching.

Through with his studies, he embarked on a bold adventure. He decided to return to Thailand overland. He planned his journey by visiting embassies in London for information about travel papers, routes, transport, and accommodations. With the money his parents had sent him for his airfare back to Thailand, he set forth on a solo journey that took him from London to Istanbul, with extended stops in Switzerland and Yugoslavia along the way. By train and bus, he traveled from Istanbul to Iran, taking his time to wander around and to soak in the places he visited. Crossing the border from Iran into Pakistan, he missed the train because of problems with his luggage and, stuck in the Pakistan border, had to spend a night in a “mud-type hut” in the desert. He traveled by train to Lahore and then across the border to India, where he looked up friends of his father in New Delhi. After a few days, he resumed his journey by taking the train to Madras. He then took a boat to Penang, where he stayed with friends of his father before proceeding to Hat Yai in southern Thailand and then, finally, Bangkok.

The journey took about two months. It showed that, while frail and sensitive, he could be quite adventurous and tenacious in his own way.

IN 1971, a year after he arrived in Bangkok, he married Ladawan Punyashthiti, whom he knew and courted in England where she was studying in a secretarial school. (She had returned to Bangkok; she later worked in the United Nations Development Programme secretarial staff in Thailand.) Jon had, upon returning to Bangkok, started teaching physics at Mahidol University. He taught in Mahidol for around five years and enjoyed it because he was learning as he taught, and teaching gave him great confidence in himself. Inclined to be reserved and reclusive, he thought that teaching was a “turning point.”

University teaching would thrust Jon into the political turmoil of Thai society at the time. In the politically turbulent 1970s, universities were a seedbed of discontent in Thailand. Students had emerged as leading elements in the opposition to militarism, dictatorship, corruption, and unrestrained capitalism. The opposition to the U.S. military presence in Indochina and the Maoist-style revolution in the countryside were part of this volatile mix.

The student protest movement peaked on October 14, 1973 when half a million people joined a demonstration that began at Thammasat University. The demonstrators demanded a return to the constitutional rule that was abolished in 1971 when Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn executed a coup against his own government and dissolved parliament. The military’s violent dispersal of the demonstration left seventy-seven people dead and 857 wounded. The Thanom government fell but the state of unrest continued as student protests and workers’ strikes occurred almost daily and as vigilante-style killings of students, workers, and peasant leaders took place. Of this time, the social scientists Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit wrote: “The events of October 14, 1973 began an extraordinary period of debate, conflict, experiment, and change.”

Jon found himself in the midst of these events. “It was a period in which I myself became politicized,” he says.

Drawn into faculty and student politics, he was involved in the student university newspaper and was part of a student-faculty commission, created to look into curricular reform and program admission policies, which made a controversial recommendation that students be allocated to sought-after programs (like medicine) not just on the basis of academic grades but also on extracurricular social work. As an active member of the faculty association, he met with lecturers from other universities to form study groups and support the causes espoused by progressive students. Tagged as a “left-sympathizing” member of the faculty, he was popular with the students.

More than ever the ferment of the time opened his eyes to the grimmer social realities of Thailand. With friends from the university, Jon did a short film (using an eight-millimeter Super 8 camera that was a gift from his father) to document the lives of women workers who had gone on a protracted strike in a factory and had taken it over to produce jeans that they themselves sold at a fraction of the market price. (The strike was broken up and the women arrested shortly after he finished the film, which is now in the national film archives in Bangkok.)

He came to know many student leaders (a number of whom had links with the Communist Party of Thailand [CPT]) and even went on “social immersion,” traveling by bus, lorries, and on foot, to a remote area in northeastern Thailand in order to see how rural peasants lived (in the Maoist rite of “learning from the people”).

Though he was “not really an activist,” Jon says, he was sympathetic to the democratic, antidictatorship goals of the student movement. This was not surprising. His father was an important figure in Thailand’s history of democratic reform. In 1964, Puey was dean of the Faculty of Economics at Thammasat University and a member of the committee that tried to recover the wealth illegally accumulated by Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat. Later, as rector of Thammasat University (1974–1976), he was among the personalities (together with former Prime Minister Seni Pramroj) who were publicly vilified in the media by right-wingers. A middle-class liberal, Jon was sympathetic to the left but ambivalent about the CPT. While he fully believed in the cause of social justice, he was against “armed struggle.”

Looking back on these years, Jon says: “It was a very turbulent time. But that’s the time that changed my life.”

JON was visiting his mother in England when one of the most tragic events in modern Thai history happened. On October 6, 1976 during a mass student demonstration against the return to Thailand of the former dictator, Thanom Kittikachorn, military and police forces fired into Thammasat University and invaded the campus. Officially, forty-three students were killed. Over three thousand were arrested on October 6, and more arrests took place in the weeks that followed. An army faction took power in a coup, installing the anticommunist Thanin Kraivixien as prime minister. In the wake of the Thammasat massacre, an estimated three thousand students, workers, and peasant activists left the city for the communist camps in the jungle.

Jon's family's immediate concern was the safety of his father who was the rector of Thammasat when the massacre happened. (There were rumors he would be "lynched by the right-wing forces.") With the help of friends in government, Puey was able to leave Thailand. Jon promptly resigned from the civil service (his university position) and stayed in England, where he joined sojourning Thai students in organizing study groups and demonstrations at the Thai Embassy in London to protest the coup.

With other prominent Thais in exile, Puey Ungphakorn set up Mitr Thai Trust (Friends of Thailand Trust). He traveled to many places all over the world (including the U.S. Congress) to speak about the events of October 1976 and denounce the brutal attack on human rights and democracy in Thailand.

When his father suffered a stroke in September 1977, Jon assisted in his recuperation, took more active family duties, and assumed a larger role in Mitr Thai Trust as coordinator (1977–1980). He organized meetings with the Thai community in the United Kingdom and networked with antidictatorship Thai groups in Europe, the United States, and Australia, which together formed the confederation called Union of Democratic Thais. He helped make arrangements for prominent Thai dissenters (like Sulak Sivaraksa, Thongbai Thongpao, and Sutham Saengprathum) to speak before audiences in the United Kingdom. With his brother Peter, Jon helped put out Mitr Thai Trust's monthly newsletter. Published in Thai, the newsletter was sent to people in Thailand to report on Thai prodemocracy activities overseas, developments in the Thai government and the CPT, and other information suppressed in Thailand.

His brothers Peter and Giles were involved in the antidictatorship movement, each in his own way. Peter helped in the activities of Mitr Thai Trust. He later went to work with the information and media relations division of the World Trade Organization (WTO). More sympathetic to the left than Peter was, Jon says, with considered understatement, that he has "a lot of reservations" about the WTO but fully respects the choices his brother has made.

Giles, on the other hand, was involved in the Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party in England, and he was critical of Russia and China as well as the Maoist-oriented CPT. Educated in biochemistry and the environmental sciences, he worked as a laboratory technician in Oxford but was happier distributing socialist papers in the streets on weekends and holidays. He took up Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom and returned to Thailand where he taught political science in Chulalongkorn University and founded Workers' Democracy, a group affiliated with the British Socialist Workers Party.

The brothers charted their own careers, respecting differences, but both inherited their parents' commitment to public causes and social change. This interesting mix of individualism and social responsibility characterizes much of how Jon shaped his own life.

IN 1980, Jon Ungphakorn returned to Thailand after general amnesty was issued by the new prime minister, General Prem Tinsulanonda. The situation had stabilized as government made moves to reestablish some form of constitutional normalcy. The CPT had been weakened by internal dissension and the government's anti-insurgency campaign, and the withdrawal of Chinese support after the Thai government reached an entente with China. There was disenchantment among the students who went underground over the CPT's

rigid, autocratic methods. Between 1979 and 1981, most of the students who had left for the jungle returned to Bangkok.

The 1980s saw the rise of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) movement in Thailand. This was fed by such factors as the easing of government restrictions, disillusionment with the communist armed struggle, the energies of a socially awakened youth, and the emergence of civil society movements elsewhere in the world.

When Jon returned in 1980, he was no longer interested in teaching and was looking for a job when he was told about the formation of an NGO called Thai Volunteer Service (TVS). He applied and was hired as executive director. TVS was formed by a group of nineteen Thai NGOs with the aim of recruiting young social activists as volunteers for development work. The concept was not new to Jon. When his father was rector of Thammasat University, Puey set up a Graduate Volunteer Program to expose academics to social problems and the lives of the underprivileged in the rural areas.

At the outset, TVS stated its aims thus: (1) to support the Thai NGO movement by developing human resources through the fulltime voluntary system; (2) to provide young people with a meaningful career alternative; and (3) to support development work by providing training, information, and other support services for joint NGO projects and activities. Corollary to these aims, TVS aspired to bring about closer cooperation, sharing of experiences, and a venue for the search for a common direction in development work among Thai NGOs.

Jon ran TVS from 1980 to 1991. Based in Chulalongkorn University, in partnership with the university's Social Research Institute, TVS started with a staff of four and a corps of nineteen student volunteers. In its early years, TVS had an average of forty to sixty volunteers who worked fulltime in overlapping two-year terms. The organization conducted training programs, fielded volunteers to work in other NGOs, and undertook advocacy work and activities to foster stronger inter-NGO cooperation. TVS received funding assistance from local as well as foreign (mostly European) donors, like ICCO (an interchurch organization for development cooperation based in the Netherlands), Bread for the World (Germany), and Christian Aid (United Kingdom). (By 2005, TVS had provided over five hundred fulltime Thai volunteers to around three hundred development projects run by some 150 Thai NGOs. It had also expanded into partnerships with similar volunteer programs in countries like Cambodia and China.)

In 1985, Jon was also involved in the formation of the NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development (NGO-CORD), which he served as secretary and then vice chairman (1988–1989). NGO-CORD was initiated by the Thai government, through the National Economic and Social Development Board, for the purpose of involving NGOs in the government's development programs. Though wary of government-initiated programs, the NGOs joined the committee as a venue for furthering their goals and exploring the value of NGO-government cooperation.

While working with TVS from 1989 to 1990, Jon became interested in the issue of HIV/AIDS through TVS activities with local NGOs working on the problem. He quickly recognized the gravity of the challenge. At the time, it was estimated that Thailand had around a hundred thousand people who were either HIV-positive or suffering from AIDS (the number reached one million by 1999). The high rate of incidence as well as mortality (AIDS had become the single largest cause of death among Thais by the mid-1990s) had made Thailand Asia's frontline in the global campaign against the AIDS epidemic.

HIV/AIDS activities soon became a rather large, unwieldy section of TVS, and these were hived off into a separate organization called AIDS Counseling Centers, Education, and Support Services (ACCESS). This was later registered as the AIDS-ACCESS Foundation with Jon (who left TVS in 1991) as executive director (1991–2000). ACCESS is a nonprofit organization that aims to join social efforts in controlling the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Thailand from "a humanitarian and human/social development perspective."

With the help of the Partners for Appropriate Technology (PATH), an organization based in the U.S., ACCESS trained counselors and started an anonymous telephone counseling service in Bangkok to provide information and support for people living with HIV/AIDS or PLWHA, their families, as well as the general

public. Jon personally participated in the counseling service. He enjoyed the person-to-person interaction. Previously he had been getting restless with the largely administrative role he had as TVS director, and was now happy to be involved in “something I could put my hands on.”

With assistance from the Ministry of Public Health and other partners, ACCESS expanded its AIDS awareness program. It started radio programs and mounted an effective campaign putting stickers on public buses to advertise its counseling service. Diverging from the government approach at the time, which involved a negative campaign that portrayed AIDS as a fearsome disease, ACCESS ran a positive, nonjudgmental campaign.

Adopting participatory approaches (including hiring sex workers and PLWHA), ACCESS carried out an aggressive, multifaceted campaign. This included health clinics, home visits and homecare support, radio programs for PLWHA and their families, sex education for the youth, publications and training activities, access to treatment, and community outreach peer-education programs with fulltime community workers. ACCESS staffers and volunteers visited brothels, conducted training for sectors at risk (like people from the informal sector, drivers of public conveyances, and factory workers), trained sex workers as educators, and distributed condoms and lubricating gels.

Its training programs for PLWHA and health care workers included courses in sexuality, behavioral change communication, HIV/AIDS basic counseling, opportunistic infection, and antiretroviral management. ACCESS has partnered with other groups for regional training projects in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

ACCESS did policy advocacy work and forged partnerships with other NGOs. Through its mobilizing work, ACCESS helped in the establishment of the Thai Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (TNP+). TNP+ has become part of a wide international network of PLWHA groups engaged in programs of self-help, support, and empowerment. It has also become one of the most active and visible organizations in the burgeoning anti-AIDS activism in Thailand. When the Regional AIDS Conference was held in Chiang Mai in 1995, around fifty-three PLWHA organizations all over Thailand participated. When Jon left ACCESS in 2000, there were over six hundred PLWHA organizations involved in working for their rights.

By the end of 1999, ACCESS had sixteen members in its fulltime core staff, thirty-four fulltime community workers, and around twenty-five volunteers working as telephone counselors. The foundation served around four thousand people each year through its counseling and support services. ACCESS had established a presence in the provinces, maintaining offices in Bangkok, Chiang Rai, and Kanchanburi.

Jon emerged as one of the country’s leading AIDS activists. At various times between 1994 and 2000, he acted as chairperson of the Thai NGO Coalition on AIDS, vice president of the executive committee of the Center for AIDS Rights, and member of the Thai National AIDS Committee.

His work in the HIV/AIDS campaign has ranged from disease prevention to rights advocacy, to care and treatment and access to drugs. He has been very vocal, for instance, in the fight for the rights of PLWHA in matters like discrimination in employment, forced testing, and access to anti-AIDS drugs.

In the area of HIV vaccine research, he has always insisted on respect for the rights of participants, transparency, public accountability, and strict adherence to scientific procedures. When the food supplement called V1 Immunitor was promoted as a miracle drug for HIV, he challenged the claims made for it, and as a result, its license was revoked. (Thailand was identified by the World Health Organization as one of four countries most advanced in HIV vaccine research.)

Jon has been in the frontline of the campaign to remove the licensing and patent restrictions of foreign drugs. Since 1992, Thailand’s Government Pharmaceutical Organization (GPO) has been hampered in its mandate to produce cheap, reliable generic drugs after the Thai government, under pressure from transnational pharmaceutical firms and the United States, modified the Thai Patents Act to allow patenting of pharmaceutical products. An important case in point was that of Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS), which acquired the patent and exclusive marketing rights to its didanosine or ddI, a key retroviral drug. This prevented GPO, which had developed a low-cost formulation of ddI in powder form, from producing it as a tablet.

A key battleground was the WTO-administered Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), a comprehensive international agreement on intellectual property rights negotiated in 1994. Criticism by the developing countries of the restrictive applications of the agreement led to the Doha Declaration in 2001 that stated, among others, that TRIPS should be interpreted in the light of the goal “to promote access to medicines for all.” It was agreed that TRIPS should not prevent states from dealing with public health crises (AIDS, in particular) through compulsory licensing. Despite the Doha Declaration, however, the issue of intellectual property rights remained a subject of intense pressure and contestation.

In 1999, TNP+ organized a mass sit-in at the Thai Public Health Ministry—in which Jon was one of the leaders—to push for the compulsory licensing of antiretroviral drugs under the TRIPS Agreement. ACCESS was party to a lawsuit against Bristol-Myers Squibb’s monopoly on the drug ddI. In a landmark judgment on October 1, 2002, a Bangkok court ruled that, in effect, GPO and other manufacturers could now produce the drug ddI in pill form at dosages different from that sold by BMS.

This was just part of a wider (and continuing) battle but the case was a milestone in the campaign that helped pave the way for the production of cheap and accessible antiretrovirals by GPO.

While Jon played a prominent role in this campaign, he is quick to cite that this has been an effort made possible and effective through the labor of many individuals and organizations. He cites as one notable example the contributions of Krisana Kraisintu, the GPO pharmacist who developed the antiretroviral drug GPO-VIR. (Krisana, who has a doctorate in pharmaceutical chemistry from England, has since expanded her work to Africa where she is prominent in the effort to develop locally produced, affordable generic drugs for AIDS patients.) The work of NGO activists and scientists like Krisana influenced public policy and created the means that have made Thailand the first developing country to make AIDS drugs affordable and relatively widely available.

The joint action of international organizations, the Thai government, and Thai civil society has been critical in Thailand’s signal success in reversing a serious HIV/AIDS epidemic. As Jon would be the first to point out, however, serious obstacles and challenges remain in dealing comprehensively with the AIDS problem.

NONGOVERNMENTAL organizations in Thailand work in an environment where state policies can change very quickly and the “democratic space” in which they operate can contract or expand according to the frequent changes in government. At many turns, Jon says, the work of NGOs in social and political reform can be “extremely difficult.” It can be noted that Thailand has seen twenty-eight changes in the position of prime minister, with many of these changes effected by military intervention. This has created a volatile environment of challenge, danger, and opportunity for NGOs.

In 1991, the year ACCESS was established, Thailand went through another political convulsion. On February 23, 1991, a military coup toppled the democratically-elected but unpopular Chatichai Choonhavan government. As the military assumed control, protests continued all over Thailand calling for a democratic constitution and various reforms. NGOs and other groups organized themselves into an alliance called Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD) and spearheaded the protest.

The situation turned violent on May 17, 1992 when the military brutally dispersed a mass demonstration in Bangkok that had gathered around two hundred thousand protestors. Shots were fired into the crowd, arrests were made, and violence continued over three nights. Random shootings were reported in the city and rumors abounded as media was suppressed. For a time, ACCESS used its telephone counseling service as a vehicle to relay information about what was going on. ACCESS was in the center of the disturbance since the foundation had its office on Ramkhamheang Road, which was a focal site of the military actions of May 1992.

The popular reaction to the brutal military crackdown in May 1992 led to the resignation of General Suchinda Kraprayun, the unelected prime minister, on May 24, the appointment of prominent businessman Anand Panyarachun as interim prime minister, and the elections of September 1992.

Popular pressure for change forced parliament to agree to the drafting of a new constitution with the active participation of civil society. The result was the 1997 Constitution, the most democratic constitution in Thai history. Among other things, the new constitution opened a more level playing field for civil society leaders to stand for election to the Thai Senate as independent, nonparty candidates, since candidates were not allowed to carry or to belong to political parties and were severely restricted in their campaign methods and expenditures.

At a reunion of TVS volunteers held in the Khao Yai national park, NGO leaders discussed the situation of NGOs in the changing political context as well as the prospects of fielding NGO candidates for what would be the country's first directly elected senate in the elections of 2000. Jon says, "We realized that it could be a way for the NGOs to get a foot in the door."

It was suggested that Jon contest one of the eighteen senatorial seats representing Bangkok. Jon's colleagues felt that, apart from his considerable contributions as an NGO leader, the prominence of his name would be an asset. His father's death on July 28, 1999 had occasioned the appearance of numerous books and articles on his life and career. (In ill health, Puey Ungphakorn spent the last twenty-three years of his life in England.)

With NGO support, Jon won a senate seat in the election of March 1, 2000. Despite his low-key style and relative newness as a public figure, he came out eighteenth in a field of around 256 candidates. (Among other NGO leaders elected in 2000 were human rights lawyer Thongbai Thongpao and social activist Prateep Ungsongtham-Hata, both Ramon Magsaysay awardees.) The election of NGO candidates like Jon Ungphakorn was a new phenomenon in a country where the military and big business had always dominated politics and government.

Speaking of the role he and other "NGO senators" assumed in the Senate, Jon would write:

Our role within the Senate has been to take up the Civil Society agenda, working for respect of human rights, civil rights and community rights as stipulated in the Constitution, greater social justice and access to social security, and, most importantly, development of community empowerment and public participation in all decision-making processes of government.

AS a senator, Jon Ungphakorn was an example of conscientious, dedicated service. He served in the committees of public health, justice, public participation, and social development and human security. Though "NGO senators" constituted a tiny minority bloc, he aggressively pushed for reforms both in and outside the Senate, particularly in the areas of public health, education, social services, and human rights. Describing the creative and deliberate manner in which he and his NGO colleagues approached their work, Jon writes:

Although we form a small minority faction within the Senate, we try to maximize our impact by various means. For example, we concentrate on getting on a small number of Senate standing committees so that we can form a majority faction within these committees, to carry out our intended tasks. We work closely with civil society networks to make strategic decisions on our agenda, objectives, and methods. We try to make the best use of the media to communicate with the public on our work and on the issues

which we are investigating. Very often, in our speeches, we try to educate the public more than to influence the outcome of a vote which we know we will lose. (That is why it is often said that even though we lost the vote, we won the debate!) Our committee investigations concentrate on human and civil rights abuses, social injustices, community grievances, and problems regarding freedom of the media. We also study and advocate measures for social and political reforms, such as universal access to health and education and development of community media such as community radio stations. Our reports are released and publicized well before being taken up for approval by the Senate as a whole. We make use of our individual and collective powers to address questions to ministers, to table amendments to legislation, and to refer legislation which we consider to be unconstitutional to the Constitutional Court.

Human rights and people's participation have been central in Jon's advocacies. He called for the abolition of the death penalty and opposed moves to restrict the people's right under the constitution to protest on the streets. He has used his position as a senator to act as a bail guarantor for community leaders who have been unfairly treated and arrested. He spoke publicly against extrajudicial killings that accompanied the government crackdown on drug dealers in 2003, during which, according to U.S. State Department sources, 1,386 people were killed. He has defended human rights beyond Thailand's borders. As a committee member of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Caucus on Democracy in Myanmar, he spoke openly to condemn the military dictatorship in Myanmar.

Despite the dangers involved in attacking the powerful military establishment, Jon has harshly criticized the government's repressive and heavy-handed actions towards Muslim communities in southern Thailand since the outbreak of violence in the area in early 2004. (Upon being conferred the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Government Service in 2005, Jon Ungphakorn said he would have wished the award were given to the civil rights lawyer Somchai Nilapaijit instead. Somchai, president of the Thai Muslim Lawyers Association, was abducted from his car in Bangkok on March 12, 2004, never to be seen or heard from again. This occurred soon after he started a signature campaign calling for martial law to be lifted from three southern provinces, and just after he petitioned a Senate committee to investigate allegations that five people he was defending had been tortured by the police in order to obtain false confessions.)

In discharging the Senate's monitoring and oversight function, Jon has been active in fact-finding investigations and the dissemination of information on state projects and private enterprises that have adversely affected local communities. He has used his position to advance the concerns of marginalized citizens, making shrewd use of the press to publicize critical committee findings that might otherwise have been shelved or buried in the slow-moving legislative process.

He has staunchly advocated for the rights of rural folk whose livelihoods are threatened by property speculators and scandal-ridden dams, power plants, and mines. In 2001–2002, for instance, he opposed a new Mineral Resources Bill that was meant to open the way for a Canadian mining company, Asia Pacific Resources Ltd., to build an underground potash mine in Udon Thani in northeast Thailand. The project had sparked wide protest over the mine's social and environmental impact and violation of landholder property rights. When the House of Representatives passed the bill on August 21, 2002, Jon joined other senators in filing a petition requesting the Constitutional Court to rule on the law's constitutionality. In the debate over the issue, Jon staunchly argued for the protection of landholder rights and greater public participation. He said: "We believe in community rights as set out under the constitution such as the right to have a say in managing natural resources."

Jon firmly believes in the principle that the state should provide protection and guarantees for the basic needs of its citizens. In this light, he has taken up education as one of his concerns. In Thailand, a National Education Scheme was enacted in 1992 based on the principle that education is a fundamental right of every Thai citizen. The scheme was inspired by the World Declaration on Education for All adopted by all

UNESCO member states following a World Conference on Education for All held in Chonburi, Thailand in March 1990. For financial and other reasons, however, the scheme to provide free education for all has not been effective enough beyond midsecondary education levels. Concerned about how students who could not afford higher education had to stop their studies, Jon has vigorously advocated for the expansion of the scheme. The scheme has now been expanded so that students can stay longer in school and access quality education through an extensive program of government scholarships and educational loans. Jon recognizes, however, that much more work remains to be done for “education for all” to become a reality instead of just a declaration of policy.

Public health has continued to be an abiding concern for Jon. He was one of the movers in a coalition of eighteen NGO networks that pushed for a Thai Universal Health Law by starting a petition campaign for fifty thousand signatures to initiate the law. (He initially chaired the coalition but resigned since there was a conflict between his being a lobbyist and a senator.) He remained active, however, by speaking to organizations and communities on the benefits of such a law. The campaign turned out the required number of signatures. Riding on Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s populist policies after his election in January 2001, the National Health Insurance Scheme was enacted. Under this program, patients are charged only thirty baht (US\$0.75) per hospital or health center visit, except for low-income patients who do not have to pay anything. Jon believes that the existing national health scheme has not gone far enough, but he acknowledges that a significant beginning has been made.

Jon has continued to be an important voice in the HIV/AIDS campaign in Thailand and in the region. He opposed the move to exclude HIV/AIDS treatment from coverage in the national health program (the proposal was later revised to exclude only men and not HIV-positive women and children). In November 2001, over one thousand HIV-positive Thais rallied outside parliament demanding cheaper access to anti-AIDS drugs and protesting the exclusion of HIV sufferers from government-subsidized health care. Because of public pressure, the exclusion clause was removed. The debate, however, continues on the types of treatment that are to be covered under the national health scheme.

While Jon believes that the national health law can still be improved, he is pleased with what has been accomplished. Thailand is still on the road to being able to provide universal coverage for those in need. The people of Thailand, however, have provided a model for the value of concerted civic action in addressing the problem.

At the International Policymakers Conference on HIV/AIDS in New Delhi on May 11–12, 2002, Jon warned against complacency following initial successes in Thailand. “Our country,” he said, “is getting into a state of complacency, lulled by the international attention and initial success [of our programs].” He warned that infection rates among injecting drug users remain high, there is continuing discrimination against PLWHA and their children, casual sex is increasingly common, and that HIV is no longer the government’s top priority.

After three decades of social activism, Jon has remained challenged and inspired by what remains to be done.

WHETHER as senator, NGO leader, or citizen, Jon Ungphakorn continues to make his voice heard on issues of public health, education, human rights, and people empowerment.

He will end his six-year senatorial term in March 2006. Consecutive terms are not allowed under the constitution, and Jon has no plans of staying on in government. With the rebuilding of traditional-style political parties, he has no illusions about the chances of independent candidates like him getting back into high office. This does not concern him all that much. A man without pretensions or airs (like his father), Jon does not look at a government position as a sinecure or an opportunity for one to accumulate personal power or wealth.

Asked about what he was going to do after his term was over, he said, smiling: “I will have to look for a job.” With his wife and three children, he continues to live simply in the house his father bought.

Approaching the end of his term as senator, he was already exploring other avenues to serving the public. One such avenue is the democratization of media. As a senator, he has been interested in developing community-based media, like community radio stations, as a way of decentralizing power over information. In 2005, he started an internet newspaper in Thai, *Prachathai* (www.prachathai.com). The impetus for the project came from moves made by the Thaksin government to tighten control over media. Political and economic pressures were exerted on newspapers to bias or restrict their coverage. Thaksin’s family bought a controlling stake in the single independent television station formed since 1992. Other channels were ordered to broadcast only “positive” news. Against this background, Jon felt there was a gap in independent news coverage to be filled. The *Prachathai* service focuses on events and issues that are not adequately covered in mainstream media, such as media censorship, corruption, extrajudicial killings, and the conflict in southern Thailand. With a lean staff of around ten journalists, *Prachathai* has slowly extended its reach. It has, for instance, become a medium for around thirty columnists and contributors, some from communities in the provinces. If Jon’s record is any indication, however, *Prachathai* may just be one of other social engagements he will take up.

Intellectually restless and independent, Jon has creatively integrated into his work the varied influences of his formation. He has been the free intellectual, largely indifferent to holding office or building a career, but he has anchored his life in a broad and deep sympathy for Thailand and its people.

Jon Ungphakorn says, “I see myself as a representative of civil society.” He considers himself an adherent of the principles of the welfare state: “I think the major function of government is to ensure that the people have guarantees for their basic needs in life—which means education, health, housing, land, and employment.” It is remarkable how he has pursued this goal, combining personal qualities of humility, tolerance, and restraint, with the impassioned insistence that those who hold power in Thailand respect the rights and attend humanely to the needs of its least advantaged citizens.

Resil B. Mojares

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