

Judge NCPO by its performance, not by opinion polls

THINK PRAGMATIC

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Bangkok University's Krungthep Poll came out last week with the latest opinion survey on the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) showing it had scored 6.9 points out of 10 for its first three-month performance. By comparison, for that same time period, the Yingluck government scored 4.49 points, and the Abhisit government 3.82 points.

The poll was conducted on Tuesday and Wednesday via telephone interviews with 1,259 people. The survey showed 92% of respondents were pleased with the NCPO's performance on narcotics and illegal firearms suppression and 88% on human trafficking.

The 6.9-point performance rating is an average of the following scores: 7.69 points on security affairs, 7.44 points on administration and law enforcement, 7 points on quality of life, 6.34 points on economic performance, and 6 points on foreign affairs.

Yet it is debatable just how credible

this latest opinion poll — and others conducted earlier — is, and question marks remain over the figures. The answers to the poll depend on the style of questions asked, the approaches used by the pollsters and just how well informed were the respondents about the NCPO's performance — or non-performance.

Leaving aside all opinion polls, which I find superficial, I prefer to judge the NCPO's performance on activities which can be seen or felt as undertaken by officials of various agencies, the military in particular.

Take the land encroachment problem. The NCPO appears to have made impressive advances — thanks to its absolute power and martial law — in its efforts to reclaim state-owned land from encroachers. Successive governments of the past decade or so have failed to do this — or simply lacked the political will to fix the problem.

In Phuket for instance, one beach after another, beginning with the famous Patong beach, has seen encroachers evicted and such eyesores as umbrellas, beach chairs, food stalls and even beachfront shops have been or are being demolished.

Many, if not all, of the island's beaches have been restored to their former natural state — a state that was stolen

from Phuket residents and tourists by the greedy encroachers.

Reclaiming the beaches, though, is not as complicated as reclaiming forest reserves and park land from hotel, resort, condominium and villa owners who claim to have land rights documents, such as Sor Kor 1, Nor Sor 3, land tax payment documents and even title deeds.

The Royal Forest Department and the National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department, with the backing of the military, are trying to wrest back encroached land from these wealthy "landowners" — some of whom might not actually realise their land plots are in national parks or forest reserves and that their land rights documents were illegally issued or fabricated, apparently with the connivance of local land officials.

The crackdown on encroachers is continuing in Hua Hin, Krabi, Phi Phi island, Phupan mountain range, and many other forest reserves and national parks across the country. (Unfortunately, many illegal incursions are unreported or under-reported.)

In the Phupan mountain range in the Northeast, more than 10,000 rai of forest reserve turned into rubber plantations have been reclaimed and many rubber trees chopped down.

As the encroached land in forest

reserves and national parks is slowly restored, the big question arises: Will the Royal Forest Department or the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plants Conservation be able to guard the land and restore it?

The departments often claim a manpower shortage and budgetary constraints for their failure to save the forests. If the departments are unable to do their jobs properly — as has been the case for the past several decades — why not lease some of the land to the private sector for development rather than just commercial eucalyptus farms or rubber plantations?

On Phuket, for example, why not lease for the long-term — say, 60 years or more — some of the degraded forest reserves and turn them into residential estates or parks for the rich, since Phuket is already a haven for the wealthy? This way the two departments could generate huge returns from leasing the land and would not need to complain about lack of funds — the generated income could be used to reshape forest reserves and parks elsewhere.

While the NCPO's iron-fist approach on land encroachment is appreciated, its paranoia over free expression and criticism needs a complete rethink.

A case in point is the Wednesday arrest and detention at an army barracks

in Hat Yai of 11 activists from an energy reform network. The army clampdown on the group was a totally unjustified over-reaction.

The group planned a 950km march from Hat Yai to Bangkok to highlight its call for energy policy reform and for public participation in the reform process. They also planned talks during the long march to educate and inform people about the need for energy policy reform.

The members of the group were released four days later after the intervention of fourth army region commander Lt-Gen Valit Rojanapakdi.

Although they were allowed to carry on with their march, it was not without conditions, including limiting the march to five people. The march must stop at 5pm, and no public forums are to be held during the march.

Of course, the NCPO has absolute power vested in it by the provisional constitution and martial law. But it needs to be more discreet and prudent in exercising this power, especially with those genuinely expressing their views for the good of the country and those who are harmless and do not pose a threat to the junta, such as the energy reform network.

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