

## EDITORIAL

# The real reform target – an end to LEGAL ‘PRIVILEGE’

GIVEN THE WOEFUL RESULTS OF A RECENT OPINION POLL, EQUAL JUSTICE FOR ALL SHOULD BE OUR PRIMARY GOAL

When it comes to political and social reform, we Thais have been barking up the wrong tree. Most people in this country seem to know where the real problem lies, as demonstrated in a recent opinion poll. In that survey, the majority of respondents expressed cynicism that prominent people caught doing wrong would ever fully face justice. The suspects they had in mind were the heir to a global company rooted in Thailand, another business mogul, and a popular senior monk who led a massive Buddhist sect. All of these men have successfully evaded investigators far longer than an “ordinary citizen” could possibly manage.

Nearly two-thirds (64.2 percent) of the 1,202 people surveyed said they believe the poaching case against construction tycoon Premchai Karnasuta – found in possession of meat from protected animals in a Kanchanaburi wildlife sanctuary – will never be punished for his alleged crime. Their judgement was based on the fact that Premchai’s social status is relatively high. Unlike the other two high-profile suspects, Premchai does at least deserve credit for not running away.

In the survey, conducted nationally by the Bangkok University Research Centre, 53.3 percent of the respondents thought Red Bull heir Vorayuth “Boss” Yoovidhya – wanted over the 2012 hit-and-run death of a traffic policeman – would get away with it. The young man always seems to be on the run, around the globe, and efforts by Thai authorities to track him down can best be described as lukewarm.

More than half of the respondents further believed the law won’t catch up with Phra Dhammachayo, the former abbot of Wat Dhammakaya, who faces charges related to an alleged massive fraud.

The ability of these three suspects to evade justice appears to be the ruler rather than the exception when Thai justice attempts to prosecute wealthy or powerful individuals. Less wealthy, less powerful citizens can count on swift retribution for wrongdoing. The rich and connected can drag their cases on indefinitely, or at least until people forget about them. There have been instances of powerful people being convicted swiftly, especially when politics is play, but that doesn’t necessarily mean the punishment will also be prompt, or even imposed.

There are politically charged criminal cases that divide opinion, and there are cases brought against influential people that follow the same pattern – a legal process that’s painfully slow unless social uproar propels it forward, and lack of appropriate punishment.

Thais are too focused on matters such as whether senators should be elected and if or how the prime minister should be appointed. The reconciliation Thailand so badly needs is all but impossible if we remain mired in ideological debate that, however necessary, can never bring about genuine social justice or fairness.

The cases of Premchai, Dhammachayo and Vorayuth represent the real reform challenge. The results of the Bangkok University survey tell us so. The message is loud and clear. The results show, most importantly, that Thais are frustrated, dismayed and pessimistic about the problem of unequal justice. The only rosy aspect is that this shortcoming should be far easier to fix than bridging the political divide. And, if we ensure equal justice for all, the graver problems will be easier to resolve.