

CDC at odds over elected PM

POLLS SHOW PEOPLE WANT TO DIRECTLY ELECT THE PM BUT SOME FEAR A POWER STRUGGLE BETWEEN PM AND PARLIAMENT

KRIS BHROMSUTHI
THE NATION

CONSTITUTION DRAFTING Committee (CDC) members are facing both internal and external pressure to approve the proposal to directly elect the prime minister.

The proposal is backed by National Reform Council (NRC) and National Legislative Assembly (NLA) sub-panels, as well as the public and prominent academics institutions such as the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), King Prajadhipok (KPI)'s Institute and the Council of University Presidents of Thailand (CUPT).

But the CDC subcommittee on political leadership and political institutions has stood firm in their dismissal of a direct election for the prime minister.

Its chairman, Sujit Boonbongkarn, said the sub-panel's members had formed the initial conclusion that the pre-coup parliament system of MPs electing the PM should remain, although with some amendments on senator acquisitions.

The charter drafters' president, Borwornsak Uwanno, also dismissed the proposal, stating that it "doesn't suit Thai culture" because it would initiate the first step towards republicanism.

CDC sources said the charter drafters saw this system as a new and untried idea. As such, they do not want the country to be used as a guinea pig for what they regard as an experiment.

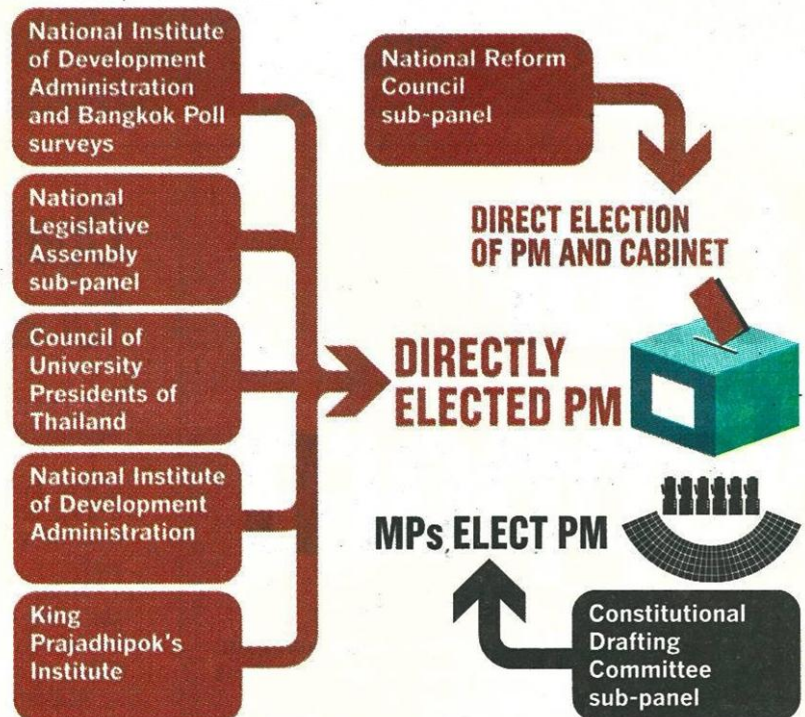
Overwhelming support

On the other hand, the NRC panel on political reform led by Sombat Thamrongthanyawong has formed an initial conclusion in favour of a directly elected PM.

Since then some of the country's respected academic institutions, such

DIFFERENT OPTIONS

Proposals from various political and academic institutions on how to elect the prime minister



Source: The Nation

NATION GRAPHICS

as NIDA and KPI, have voiced their support for the proposal. CUPT interim president Pradit Wannarat is also backing it.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the public has demonstrated a clear preference towards choosing their PM, as NIDA and Bangkok Poll surveys suggest. The former survey showed 78.5 per cent support for the proposal.

Sombat said: "If we want reform based on people's opinion, then we have to go for a direct election for the PM."

It appears academics and the public want this.

Obstacles and questions

So why are CDC members hesitant to embrace the proposal?

The most obvious answer seems to be that such a system doesn't suit Thai culture, as charter drafter Borwornsak said.

"Thai culture" could be related to three issues including weak regulatory

bodies.

Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Democrat Party leader, recently rejected the proposal for a directly elected PM, saying it would worsen the problem of an ineffective regulatory system.

"We should carefully analyse and identify what the key problem is. This [the proposal] doesn't solve the problem at its [root] cause," he said.

Abhisit said having a directly elected PM would make it more difficult for the Opposition to keep the government honest because the prime minister could claim a democratic legitimacy and make it harder to impeach him or her.

Pheu Thai Party was among 23 of the 74 existing political parties that voiced their support for maintaining the scrapped 2007 Constitution's parliamentary system.

Another argument against having a directly elected PM is it could affect the monarchy. From a cultural perspective, Thais revere the monarchy and they may fear the power of a directly elected prime minister and what that

could mean for the institution.

Former Pheu Thai MP Udomdej Rattanasatien said: "Although the proposed idea remains under a constitutional monarchy, it is possible that a PM who gains office from a direct election could become very powerful and popular, which might appear to contravene the presence of the monarchy – a very serious issue.

"I do not think the idea of the direct election of a PM is possible in Thailand. Let's consider the fact that we strongly oppose the idea of a presidency."

This issue is linked to the fear many reformers including the CDC hold – the failure of the parliamentary checks-and-balance system will be repeated in the future.

The prime example of that fear might be the Yingluck Shinawatra administration's attempt to pass the blanket amnesty bill – a move that triggered mass protests led by the People's Democratic Reform Committee.

Another historical perspective is that Thailand had been using a parliamentary system similar to those in the UK. By opting to directly elect the prime minister, the Thai parliamentary system would need to make dramatic changes and move towards one similar to the US.

This raises a few important questions, such as: what would be the relationship between the premier and the parliament? In the case that one disagrees with the other, whose agenda would prevail? Would it be the premier, since he or she might claim a democratic mandate from the people?

Also, how would the PM be impeached? He or she would have democratic legitimacy, which would make that process harder. Perhaps the public should be allowed to submit a case for impeachment since they elected the PM.

NRC on political reform chairman Sombat said his panel had identified the failure of the legislature to regulate the executive as a key political problems that must be dealt with.

However, Former Pheu Thai MP Vicharn Minchainant made a fair point. He said that sticking with the

2007 Constitution's parliamentary system – where the leader of the most successful party at an election becomes prime minister – or choosing the new proposal wouldn't make a difference.

"It wouldn't be any different because with the previous system there are only two competing parties, the Democrats and Pheu Thai," he said. "People know which candidate will become the premier if one of these two parties is elected."

People want to pick their own PM

Hence, it could be maintained that despite the backing of several political and academic institutions, the proposal to have a directly elected PM has proved to be divisive. But this proposal should be seriously considered.

Although opponents of the idea have made a substantial point – that it doesn't solve the problem at its root cause, while some people view an overly powerful premier as an unconventional notion considering their reverence of the monarchy.

NATION ANALYSIS

However, poll results have produced a clear message: the majority of Thais want to take matters to their own hands and elect their premier.

Most certainly, they do not want to see this as a first step to a presidency. Their underlying reason for backing the proposal, one could argue, stems from the increasingly large gap between constituency representation and ordinary people.

Experiences over the past few decades mean there is deep mistrust in politicians for their self-seeking interests, backroom wheeling and dealing, money politics and patronage culture, to name just a few concerns.

Hence, it is not surprising that poll results suggest strong public support for the directly elected PM. And if the junta is sincere in saying that public opinion will be placed at the centre of

the reform agenda like other issues – such as decentralisation, the amnesty bill for ordinary political prisoners and the constitution referendum – they should see that it happens.

Last week, Inter-Parliamentary Union secretary general Martin Chungong provided the latest warning for members of the NRC and NLA when he said: "I believe that the reform process underway in Thailand has to give people opportunities to have a say in how their country is run, and give them hope that sustainable solutions can be found."