

TV debate puts protesters on the spot



Protesters drop letters into mock postboxes placed on Ratchadamnoen Nai Avenue near the Grand Palace. WICHAN CHAROENKIATPAKUL

THINK PRAGMATIC

Veera Prateepchaikul



Development Administration (Nida) and Ms Panusaya "Rung" Sithijirawattanakul, one of the firebrand protest leaders of the Khana Ratsadon movement and a student at Thammasat University's Faculty of Social Science and Humanities.

As far as educational background, maturity and experience are concerned, the pairing of the two figures in a TV debate on a rather complicated issue was like putting a flyweight and heavyweight boxer in the same ring. It is no surprise that it was a virtual case of murder in front of tens of thousands of TV viewers and sweet revenge for the royalists who rejoiced in images of a young aggressive woman, hailed

The talk of the town this weekend was the debate on Thai Rath TV's *Direct Question with Jomquan* talk show on Friday night on the Crown Property Regulations Act, between Dr Arnond Sakworawich of the National Institute

by the BBC as one of the world's 100 most influential women, being humbled and, at times caught speechless, by Prof Arnond.

The moderator, Jomquan Laopetch, was criticised by some netizens, believed to be opponents of Khana Ratsadon, for being partial and siding with Ms Panusaya. Some even questioned her integrity for reminding Ms Rung during the debate about what she had "briefed" her before the debate.

Jomquan later explained she had briefed Ms Rung about the rules of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission on sensitive issues such as the monarchy. She did not coach her as some alleged.

Just look at the huge gap in educational credentials between the two speakers and the homework done by the academic on the issue. A little coaching or help from Jomquan should be acceptable and not branded as prejudice.

As a reminder to Jomquan, the next time there is a debate about the Crown Property Bureau or HM the King's personal property, it should be a more equal pairing so the audience gets a more balanced view of both sides of the political divide. One worthy lesson from this lopsided debate that the protest leaders should learn is that they must equip themselves with more knowledge about the issues they are fighting for so they can articulate them without being ridiculed by their opponents as just "a bunch of loud-mouth illiterates" who know nothing about the issues they are fighting for. Or just puppets for someone else.

Obviously, it is not only Ms Rung, but also the majority of Thais who know barely anything about the King's personal property, the Crown Property Bureau, the amount of the property involved or the taxes paid by the King simply because they were previously treated as a taboo subject. Now that the lid on debate has been lifted, thanks to the Khana Ratsadon



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protesters, the topic can be openly discussed without the risk of being slapped with charges under the lese majeste law.

Prof Arnond provided a useful insight into the Crown Property Regulations Act, the King's personal property and crown property, which should clear up public misconceptions about the matter.

According to the act, the King's personal property, or wealth inherited from previous monarchs, and crown property as such are separate but both fall under the supervision of the Crown Property Bureau. The idea of putting the two portions under the same roof was to make earnings from the pair taxable because crown property was previously tax-free.

The King's personal wealth includes his 20% stake in Siam Commercial Bank, which originated from an investment by Prince Jayanta Mongkol, brother of King Chulalongkorn, to set up the first Thai bank, known as the Book Club, in 1907, so that Siam, as Thailand was then named, would have its own bank instead of relying on foreign banks for its economic development. The bank's name was later changed to Siam Commercial Bank and the investment has steadily grown to approximately 20% of the bank's worth.

Prof Arnond claimed that HM the King has wanted all the income from these two assets to be taxed like any Thai citizen's. As the King's assets can now be openly discussed, other issues surrounding the monarchy can also be discussed publicly in a manner that may lead to some constructive reform of the institution.

As the situation stands today, the protesters are still a long way from achieving their goal of sweeping reforms despite repeated protests which are causing inconvenience to many people. The royalists, too, cannot remain stuck in the past forever and must accept change. Both sides should be more flexible in order to work out a peaceful solution rather than escalating the conflict into potentially violent confrontations.

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