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'Rich' number bid dials pain for the poor

Is this a case of "irrational exuberance"? The military regime keeps telling us we live in a time of political security and that the economy is picking up. For ordinary Thais, the bright and breezy statements are becoming increasingly painful to hear.

Let's start with National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission's secretary-general Takorn Tantasith who was in high spirits as he announced last Sunday that an auction for unique mobile phone numbers had generated as much as 120 million baht.

Mr Takorn appeared extremely pleased that the auction brought in 20 million baht more than what the commission expected. He said that because as many as 70 people entered the bid and that the amount of money they were willing to pay for the phone numbers reached extraordinary heights, it suggested Thais were becoming increasingly flush as a result of the strong economy.

The highest bid was eight million baht for the number 091-999-9999.

Mr Takorn said that for the next auction he will set the minimum bid price higher, at 20 million baht, for two very unique mobile phone numbers. The minimum bid this time was set at three million baht.

I have no idea how Mr Takorn arrived at the conclusion that 70 million Thais must be well-to-do because 70 of them can afford to pay millions of baht for easy-to-remember phone numbers.

As I listened to him talking excitedly about this auction, and his assumption that Thai people are actually rich, every word he uttered hurt.

The reality is as stark at the catchy phone numbers. The Fiscal Policy Office has announced that it will organise another round of registrations for low-income people next month. According to the office, there are 14 million low-income people in the country, seven million of which have received 1,500-3,000 baht income-support allowances from the government.

Mr Takorn's assertion that the economy must be robust because the bid for mobile phone numbers fetched higher-than-expected prices seems more like an attempt to echo what the military regime has been peddling, than a judicious statement.

The amount of money that a tiny group of people splurged on non-essential items has never been used as an indicator of the state of a country's economy.

What Mr Takorn's boasts reflects the fact that wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few and that the regime's development policies will likely serve to secure the status quo for these people.

The paying of 120 million baht for some 70 mobile phone numbers seems to correspond to a recent report by the global financial institute Credit Suisse which ranks Thailand the third most unequal country in the world with 1% of the population, or about 680,000 Thais, owning more than 58% of the nation's wealth.

As former member of the State Enterprises Policy Commission Banyong Pongpanich pointed out recently, the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is growing at a meagre 3.2% while corporate profit, which accounts for 25%, grew at a whopping rate of 15%. Those who lost out in

the GDP profile were wage-earners, farmers, or non-formal workers.

The reading is simple: As the country grows, the rich get richer while the poor become poorer.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha announced late last year his 20-year vision to transform Thailand into a first-world developed country where every citizen earns more than they do today.

Through transparency, partnership between the public, private and civil sectors, or *pracharat*, and heavy investment promotion, the military government aims to create a high-income and knowledge-based economy out of the current sluggish one caught for decades in the middle-income trap.

Sadly, what is happening is far from what people would think of as inclusive growth. Gen Prayut often talks about how his government must address problems of an ageing population; but what it did was slash the budget for universal health-care coverage by 13 billion baht. At the same time, it has set aside about the same amount of money to buy the first of three submarines for the navy.

People who have to wait in long queues at public hospitals to be treated are unlikely to appreciate military prowess that contributes nothing to their livelihood. At the same time, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) is pressing ahead with its 16-billion-baht promenade and bike lane project along the Chao Phraya River.

Are we living in a time of prosperity? If so, why does it hurt so much?

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