

Civic society is growing and, with it, calls for greater accountability – much to the annoyance of those in power, writes **Stephen Vines**

Out of the bag

It may be a stretch, but it's just possible to feel sympathy for the bosses of ParknShop who did their best to introduce an environmentally sound policy of imposing a voluntary charge on the supply of plastic bags, only to be faced with a barrage of criticism. Yet, the critics had some valid questions, such as wanting to know how the money collected would find its way into the hands of appropriate charities. The company could have responded in a mature fashion and answered the critics. Instead, it rapidly decreed that, if it were to face questioning, it would go back to its old ways of dishing out the bags for free.

The decision seems to have come from the top in the shape of Canning Fok Kin-ning, the managing director of Hutchison Whampoa, ParknShop's parent company. Mr Fok and his boss, Li Ka-shing, who presides over the Cheung Kong group of which Hutchison is a part, seem rather overensitive to criticism.

Indeed, in 2002, Mr Li threatened to stop investing in Hong Kong unless the critics kept quiet. Mr Li has apparently changed his mind on this matter, but he and his senior aides appear not to

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understand that presiding over what is arguably Hong Kong's leading conglomerate will inevitably attract greater scrutiny than the affairs of some minor operation that could well be doing things that deserve even greater approbation.

The age of deference towards the leaders of corporate Hong Kong has ended. No longer will bank customers line up humbly to present New Year gifts to their bank managers, nor can public companies automatically expect those attending their annual general meetings to nod through whatever the board recommends.

Yet Hong Kong consumers are nowhere near as assertive as those in the United States or Europe, nor do they have anything like the ammunition of protective consumer law enjoyed there. Meanwhile, shareholders in Hong Kong are only just beginning to appreciate their power to hold public companies to account. And they have to do so without the far greater

transparency and accountability in other jurisdictions.

The reaction of business leaders to the government's laughable attempts at introducing a voluntary minimum-wage code shows just how out of touch they are. Some are genuinely taken aback by reports exposing their hypocrisy in supporting this scheme while paying their workers less than the minimum wages it specifies.

The government, meanwhile, behaves like a scared animal caught between the rapid advance of two dangerous predators. In the past, officials simply did all they could to placate and protect powerful business interests. Indeed they still do this by, for example, preventing the introduction of legislation to thwart anti-competitive practices that push up prices for consumers, by organising land sales to ensure the continued dominance of the big property cartels, and, of course, by ensuring that the growing army of very poorly paid people remain in poverty.

However, Hong Kong is no longer a largely immigrant society whose people expect little from the government and adopt a deferential attitude to officials. Civil consciousness is rising by the day.

The government's plan to sell off public-housing retail facilities was delayed by the action of a couple of poor and elderly public-housing tenants who objected to what they saw as an unfair deal. That they did not succeed is not the point; that they protested and gathered considerable support is very much the point.

And so it was again when ParknShop reversed its plastic-bag policy and found demonstrators outside its supermarkets' doors. Indeed, protest is now a frequent response to both government and corporate action.

Yet the protesters rarely succeed, because corporate power is remarkably concentrated in Hong Kong, and the government retains its tenacious grip over public policy. Those in power tend to resent the growth of civil society and the concomitant calls for greater accountability. The administration of Donald Tsang Yam-kuen pays some lip service to the development of civic consciousness but, in reality, views all opposition as little more than obstruction.

Does it really want to wait until this opposition reaches boiling point?

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Reluctant opposition

As the oldest party in the pan-democratic camp, the Democratic Party should take a long, hard look at itself after the humiliating defeat in the district council elections. The roots of failure lie in poor positioning: people cannot tell what the party stands for and, as a result, it failed to appeal to either the pro-government or anti-establishment voters. Thus, defeat was unavoidable.

It is well-known that the pan-democrats are unhappy that the government has labelled them "the opposition". They criticise the administration for having different "affinities" with political parties, favouring some over others. They also complain that, because of the government's favouritism and the labelling effect, it is difficult for them to garner public support.

This is an absurd argument. First, there is nothing wrong with being the opposition party. Opposition parties exist in all democratic countries and they all enjoy considerable support among the electorate. Even though Hong Kong has no ruling party, and the so-called governing coalition is little more than a façade, pro-establishment parties do exist that always support the government. If the pan-democrats don't want to join them, they should not complain about playing the role of the opposition, trying to monitor the government, and fighting for people's interests. With pan-democrats reluctant to accept such a role, it is difficult for voters to know where they stand.

While it is inadvisable for our non-elected government to have different affinities with political parties, it is also not hard to understand why its relationships vary from one party to another. No government would want to support its rivals. As an opposition, the pan-democrats should capture the moral high ground and rally the public to speak out against the existing political structure, thereby pushing for the early introduction of universal suffrage.

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The pan-democrats also like to complain that they suffer from a lack of financial resources, especially when compared to their competitors, and that they have been subject to political purges. But, the world over, pro-democracy campaigners are under pressure and purged.

The only difference is that, in democratic countries, governing parties use subtler smear tactics against their rivals; authoritarian states prefer to use violence to achieve their aims. Of course, I deplore such behaviour. In Hong Kong, the public will punish those who use violence; anyone using dirty tricks offends the core values of the people.

Therefore, the pan-democrats should no longer blame their failure on others. They should go through a period of honest soul-searching, to find out what they have done wrong.

As the saying goes: If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. Voters must have good reasons to dump a party. To bounce back, members must review their policies, to adapt to the political reality. The recent victory of Australia's Labor Party, and the landslide triumph of the Labour Party in Britain, in 1997, are good examples of how a party can change its fortunes by answering the call of the public. If the pan-democrats are determined to be the opposition – as the League of Social Democrats has professed to be – they should pursue their goals tirelessly. They cannot expect to take uncompromising stances but, at the same time, enjoy favours from the government.

The pan-democrats should also embark on an aggressive membership drive. Though established for more than 10 years, the Democratic Party has only a few hundred members. It is not only dwarfed by the 10,000-strong Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, it also compares unfavourably with the newly formed League of Social Democrats. The Democratic Party has very stringent criteria for membership, mainly because it fears infiltration. Opening the door to young people will not only help solve the succession problems, it will also benefit party finances through membership fees. The only way forward for the pan-democrats is to go back to their roots in the masses, and dig deep again.

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Other Voices

Thaksin haunts democracy party

Kevin Rafferty

Bangkok and the rest of Thailand are awash with yellow, the royal colour, to celebrate the 80th birthday of the country's revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej next Wednesday.

Lurking in the shadows of the massive, kitsch portraits of the king in his yellow robes are pictures of men mostly wearing yellow ties to try to cash in on the royal aura. These are the campaign posters for politicians hoping to run the country after elections on December 23.

But there is also an unwanted spectre haunting the hopes of a smooth return to democracy: ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, in exile in England, but still clearly alive in the hearts of many Thais.

He is the popular hero in Isaan, his home territory in the northeast, which has about one-third of the parliamentary seats and has traditionally returned the party that could make or break a government.

Thaksin's assets are frozen, pending the outcome of corruption cases; his Thai Rak Thai party is banned and disbanded; and he, and more than 100 lieutenants, are barred from politics. Still, candidates in the northeast are clamouring to cling to his name. Some even have posters showing themselves with Thaksin and declaring that they are the real Thai Rak Thai.

In Bangkok, and the south, the story is different. The Democrat Party, led by the Eton- and Oxford-educated Abhisit Vejjajiva, is likely to win. But the Democrats will need allies, and the fear must be that the immensely likeable, intelligent and talented Mr Abhisit will be no match for the street-smart politicians of old when the real negotiations begin in the very dirty game of Thai politics.

For all the efforts to clean up poli-

tics, some things continue as usual. Corruption still reigns. By most estimates, elections inject upwards of 32 billion baht (HK\$8 billion) into the economy as politicians pay for votes. It happens in many countries, but voters in places like India are smart enough to take the bribes or free food, and then vote for whoever they want under the cover of the secret ballot.

Thais respond that their politicians are smarter because the benefits of bribes do not kick in until the results are known. Thus, a politician would give one shoe for the vote, and the second only when he has been elected, or the money for a new road or school is paid only when the community has elected him.

Equally pertinent, rural Thailand remains highly feudal, and village chiefs can actually deliver the votes. Thaksin's chiefs can do so because, when in power, he helped the rural poor.

Another depressing factor is that all the politicians who gave Thai politics such a bad name are out in force. Banham Silpa-archa, now in his 70s and known as "the eel" for his ability to slither into government, is touting himself as a potential prime minister. Major General Sanan Kachornprasart, having been Democrat secretary general before founding the Great People's Party, has now skipped to the Thai Nation Party to deploy his government-making skills for Mr Banham.

Meanwhile, the septuagenarian former Bangkok governor Samak Sundaravej, known as the chameleon of Thai politics, has turned up as Thaksin's anointed head of the People's Power Party, the main claimant to be the new Thai Rak Thai.

Just as depressingly, the military and the backers of the coup have learned few lessons about the changing needs of a developing Thailand.

Thailand has been spoiled by the cupidity of its elite. Tragically, that includes Thaksin

The interim national legislative assembly, appointed after the coup, is busy making new laws as if it had a full elected right to do so.

Controversially, it has passed the first reading of a new law that would give a permanent place in Thailand's political structure to the military establishment, and thus allow officers or their civilian deputies to override the basic rights guaranteed by the constitution. In other words, the unelected unloved assembly is putting in place the machinery for the next coup, and the one after that.

Thailand's basic problem is that, in terms of education, income and sophistication, its people – especially in the urban areas – have moved into the 21st century, while most of the military, bureaucrats and politicians are stuck with the ruling mindset of the 1980s. They believe that the country can be run simply on their orders, with ample opportunity for them to take a juicy slice of the action.

Nothing better illustrates Thailand's confusing mess than Bangkok's new Suvarnabhumi Airport, 50 years in the making and opened 14 months ago as Thaksin's showpiece of all that is best and modern about the country. Now, it will reach its capacity by 2009, so some aviation officials are calling for the old airport to be used as a twin international hub, rather than spend heavily on expanding Suvarnabhumi.

Leave aside a multiplicity of flaws

in its planning – only realised after its opening – it is failing in one basic area: security. United Airlines has openly challenged the system by imposing its own questioning, passenger frisking and item-by-item bag search only 50 metres after travellers have gone through the airport's supposedly state-of-the-art screening process.

Political commentators are now looking back, with trepidation, at 2001 – when accused of corruption, Thaksin appealed to the higher verdict of the people's vote, and escaped. Thaksin, now facing much more serious charges, could soon claim another vindication at the ballot box. That would be a much more serious challenge, because it would offer not only the politics of corruption and opportunism but also of vengeance.

The real tragedy is that Thailand has much more potential than its lowly 5 per cent growth suggests. It is a land blessed by nature, a food exporter with an industrious people (it has a higher percentage of entrepreneurs than any other country) and has a good economic base.

But it has been spoiled by the cupidity and stupidity of its elite. Tragically, that includes the military, bureaucrats, Thaksin and other rich businessmen, as well as fawning royal courtiers. There will be no easy way out.

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The rush for hydropower

David Fullbrook

The Mekong's days of flowing freely look numbered, threatening food security for millions of people and friction between states along the river. Since March, officials in Vientiane have given Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese investors approval to study four large hydroelectric dam projects on the Mekong in Laos. Last year, Laos also let Malaysian developers assess a dam project, while Chinese investors gained approval from Cambodian authorities to study a project there. Thai engineers are examining two more dams on the Thai-Laos border under Bangkok's authority.

In addition, 13 dams on Mekong tributaries in Laos should start generating electricity – mostly for export – by 2015, adding to the 10 already exporting power. Another 35 sites have been identified and are up for grabs. Just how Laos' struggling bureaucracy will manage this multibillion-dollar dam-building boom remains to be seen.

Officials think hydroelectricity export revenues will solve their budget crisis, under which the poverty-stricken nation is dependent on aid from China, Japan and the west. In October, the UN's World Food Programme reported that one in every two children in the country was malnourished.

For years, there has been talk of Laos exporting its way out of poverty as the battery of Southeast Asia. Now, hydroelectric dams are also being touted to provide clean, sustainable energy for Mekong countries addicted to imported oil and gas. And with oil prices rocketing, hydropower can charm governments seeking to cut energy import bills and temper inflation.

However, this rush for

hydroelectricity seems poorly thought out and badly co-ordinated, at best, across the Mekong basin.

The Mekong River Commission, charged with sustainably developing the basin by Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam (China and Myanmar opted out), met at Siem Reap, along with donors, last month. It was reported that Cambodian officials were opposing Laos' plans for dams and had complained that their inquiries to Vientiane had gone unanswered.

Concern is warranted. Large hydropower dams have left a legacy of problems in developing countries due to poor public accountability, political neglect and weak bureaucracies.

Resettlement of people and environmental protection projects surrounding the Nam Theun II – which, when completed, will be the largest dam in Laos – have not gone smoothly. Arguably, had the World Bank not been involved, problems would have been far worse.

A series of dams on the Moon River, an important Mekong tributary in northeast Thailand, decimated fisheries. Many fisherfolk have had to leave their families to seek work in Bangkok. Campaigns to restore the fisheries resulted in occasional beatings from riot police and, beside one dam, a fish ladder copied from North America.

However, local fish do not jump like American salmon, so the ladder stands abandoned, a folly to the ignorance, disdain and greed of officials and developers alike.

Despite such experiences, promoters say that the dams' benefits will outweigh their damage. Such claims are hard to stand up because the Mekong has not been thoroughly studied. Sixty million people live off protein from the river,

which, according to the commission, accounts for one-fifth of freshwater fish caught worldwide. In 2004, the commission identified dams as the biggest threat.

Millions of villagers have little, if any, idea about the dams or their potential consequences. Terra, a Thai environmental organisation, accused the commission of failing to uphold its duties, and questioned its legitimacy just days before the Siem Reap meeting. The commission is drifting, torn from its charter by the political realities of serving masters coveting national interests above regional co-operation and little troubled by public participation in policy-making.

Grumbling Cambodian officials, seemingly aware that the dams' damage multiplies downstream, may be a harbinger of bilateral bust-ups. Laos' plans are a difficult challenge for Vietnam, which will have to balance corporate interests against the livelihoods of millions in the Mekong delta. Complaints from Hanoi may fall on deaf ears, given Beijing's fast-growing influence on the back of sharp increases in aid and investment. Notably, Chinese developers are first in line for three Mekong dams in Laos, against one so far for the Vietnamese.

Officials and developers see large dams as a great way to generate power, profits and taxes. Campaigners, however, believe that the broad costs could outweigh the narrow benefits. Going ahead with these plans risks the lives of millions who have little, if any, say in the decision – never mind threatening extinction for the unique Mekong giant catfish and the Irrawaddy River dolphin.

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