

# REVIVE STUDY RELATIONS BETWEEN THAILAND AND THE PHILIPPINES

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SPECIAL TO THE NATION

**IN 1973**, Benigno S “Ninoy” Aquino, Jr wrote a letter to his only son from a prison cell. Ninoy, the most controversial opposition politician in the Marcos-era Philippines, ended the letter with, “Serve them [Filipinos] with all your heart, with all your might and with all your strength. Son, the ball is now in your hands.”

Though placed in the global limelight in different times and capacities, Ninoy and his wife Corazon, or “Cory”, are the country’s most influential couple. They were most influential to Filipinos not as a pair, but separately. Ninoy, with his fiery eloquence as a politician, stood up against dictatorship and fought on despite the foreseen consequences, and Cory, with her charm and demeanor, assumed the office of president through a revolution of the masses to find a debt-ridden country in transition and badly in need of hope. The People’s Power Revolution was in February 1986, and Cory died of colon cancer in 2009.

Thirty-seven years after the assassination of Ninoy at the international airport that would later bear his name, his son, Benigno S “Noynoy” Aquino, was sworn in as the 15th president of the Republic of the Philippines in 2010.

President Noynoy, or “P-Noy”, is faced with many challenges. One of the most pressing is the contentious reproductive health (RH) bill, which puts him at odds with the powerful Catholic Church, again bringing to national attention the centuries-old issue of the separation between Church and State. Still another burdensome issue is corruption in the Philippine government, military and police.

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President Aquino is on an official visit to Thailand this week. The visit will reaffirm

60 years of close relations between the two countries. Moreover, it will be an opportunity for two countries that share the values of democracy and human rights to rekindle long-standing bonds. The two countries were among the founders of Seato in 1954 and Asean in 1967. The respective capital cities became sister-cities in 1997. Economic relations have prospered, growing to over US\$7 billion in 2010.

Beyond economic relations, the area of education deserves much attention. Like Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities in Thailand, the University of the Philippines and De La Salle University in Manila are among the handful of members of the Asean University Network, a collaboration of top educational institutions in Asean that promotes teacher and student exchanges and pooling of resources. In 2010, QS Asian University Rankings, a well-known university rating agency, placed a number of Thai and Philippine universities in its top 200 list for Asia. The order includes Mahidol, Chulalongkorn, Ateneo de Manila, the University of the Philippines, Thammasat, De La Salle, Khon Kaen and Kasetsart.

In every country, there are of course educational institutions of a higher quality than others. With a large number of universities compared to their neighbours in the region, there is no lack of reputable universities in the Philippines or Thailand, despite the misperceptions and generalisations.

But today, there is indeed a need to revive the educational relationship between Thailand and the Philippines. In the past, many Thai students pursued their education in Philippine universities that taught courses in English. This was a low-cost alternative to studying in Western countries. The Filipinos still mention the large number of Thai students of the past, but today it has become a sad recollection of how Thai students came to learn agriculture and other subjects from the Philippines, but now Thailand is doing much better in terms of economic growth and agricultural productivity. Thais, on the other hand, make no mention of the Philippines as an educational destination anymore – at least until educational reform is complete in the Philippines. This is a missed opportunity for both sides.

There is misperception and generalisation on the part of many Thais and citizens of other countries. Most judge the quality of a university on the general impression they have of the country. For example, parents

tend to think that all universities in countries like the US, UK or Australia are attractive and of the highest quality merely because of their location in the West. On the other hand, top universities in developing countries are overlooked because of the generalisation that educational quality is parallel to economic performance and the overall image of the country. People involved in education or studies fields will, however, recognise a quality university in Vietnam, India or Indonesia, while the layman may not.

We Thais are comfortable believing that our top universities are the best. We are familiar with universities in the West but cannot come up with the names of any top university in Malaysia or the Philippines. We Thais are proud that the many foreign students who study in our English-language programmes at Thammasat, Assumption, Bangkok University or elsewhere graduate with Thai or Asian-oriented knowledge, as a "niche exposure" to Thai and Asian society, markets and business. But it is not reciprocal when Thais talk about universities in the region, even when we should be taking a more regional outlook as we aim to establish the Asean Economic Community in 2015.

So there remains much to do – an opportunity for Thais and Filipinos to re-learn from each other. There is at present a lack of interest in area studies between both countries. A revamped academic relationship would bring the younger generation in each country closer together.

In Thailand there is a saying that "parents are the first teachers, and teachers are

the first parents". The legacies of fathers and mothers are embodied in their children, and when talking about the Philippines' current president, we can say that Ninoy and Cory's legacies are seen in President Noynoy.

With this legacy there is, clearly, high hope for change for the better in the Philippines, from a president who carries the name of the man pictured on the 500-peso bill. President Noynoy would seem to be bound to perform and serve the country well, not only by the office he holds, but also by his own family history.

But the country is now operating in a different context than dictatorship, revolution or when it began borrowing from the IMF. The Philippines has passed the turbulent years. The goal now is how to most efficiently tap the potential in the country, to prosper again. *Laban*, literally "fight" in Tagalog, was the catchword for the revolutionary struggle. Indeed, for President Noynoy, the *laban* continues.

In the context of Philippine-Thai relations, the efforts shall continue in strengthening the economic partnership and reviving the educational relationship. With stronger interest and attention from both sides, there is much that can be done.

Mr President, the ball is in your hands. Thailand is ready to play, ready for a pass, a dribble and slam-dunk.

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