Central Government, Government CXO, Policy, Public Infrastructure

BACK ON THE TRACK: TRANSFORMING THAILAND UNDER THE WING OF ICT MINISTER

By Thanya Kunakornpaiboonsiri | 14 January 2013

After completing his first year as Thailand's ICT Minister, Group Captain Anudith Nakornthap, in an exclusive interview with FutureGov, shares on the key challenges encountered in projects in leveraging ICT to deliver government promises to citizens and realigning the country's modernisation path with its long-term vision.

A successful government is judged by its capacity to turn policy into action, but a capable government can only be enabled by a wide variety of parameters — a crucial one being a country's political stability.

"Before the coup d'etat in 2006, our ICT readiness growth was at a satisfactory level. But after the insurgency, our ranking continued to fall," recounts Thailand's ICT Minister Group Captain Anudith Nakornthap.

Further, he points out that a major reason for the drop of ICT growth in Thailand indicated by the World Economic Forum was 'inconsistent government policy'.

This was one of the many consequences of the coup — the frequent changes in leadership with one interim government appointed by the junta, and changed governments three times within one election cycle. The instability continued until 2010, when the Thai Army stormed the protestors' campsite in the heart of Bangkok, resulting in the infamous bomb blasts at strategic locations across the country — especially in the business district in the capital. This put an end to a prolonged series of political protests, and a new election was organised a year later.

The frequent change in leadership often comes with an incomplete and inconsistent policy, which has restricted the country's growth in all aspects including ICT, the Minister adds.

Gp Capt Nakornthap is the first ICT Minister after six long years of political instability in Thailand: a developing country of seventy million. Prior to entering politics, Gp Capt Nakornthap was a distinguished pilot serving in the Royal Thai Air Force. He won several awards for his outstanding performance in the Air Force, and was academically successful while studying Aerospace Engineering at Royal Thai Air Force Academy. He was in the Jet Fighter Unit and was Thailand's first leading pilot of the F-16 Air Defense Fighter team in 2001.

He was appointed as CIO after a landslide election in 2011, and has proved aggressive in his role. "Political instability used to be a major issue in Thailand, but since the ruling party is now the absolute majority voice in the parliamentary votes, political backing has become a strength, and is no longer a liability," he says.

A year has passed since he came to the role of GCIO; with 'Smart Thailand' campaign under his wing, he has leveraged the use of ICT actively across the country's public sector to promote and deliver key services and campaign promises under the three elements of 'Smart Business', 'Smart Network', and 'Smart Government'.

A number of significant projects have been completed: the establishment of a government cloud, One Tablet Per Child Policy (the world's largest education IT roll-out), Government Information Network, Smart Province in Nakhon Nayok, Smart Card Application, and Free Public Wi-Fi—an aggressive move towards boosting internet penetration under the 'National Broadband Policy'.

"Our government focuses on improving ICT infrastructure. This is based on the research that Thailand has a large digital divide, particularly in underprivileged areas," he points out.

He explains that citizens in developed areas have had access to broadband at a reasonable price, while citizens living in remote area had limited access or were offered an overpriced service. This became a motive for the government to increase broadband penetration to 80 per cent within its four years at the helm.

"Since I was appointed to the office, we have boosted internet penetration from 10 per cent to 30 per cent," he says, frankly, about a job well done.

Under ICT 2020, a National Broadband Policy framework was initiated to develop ICT as a basic public utility that all citizens can access universally. "Like water, electricity and roads, broadband will be promoted to be one of the main utilities accessible by everyone," the Minister says, referring to broadband metaphorically as 'an Electronic Highway'.

TELECOMMUNICATION RESTRUCTURING

To achieve this goal, the government has prepared long– and short–term plans to optimise the country's ICT infrastructure. It will restructure the business operations of CAT Telecom and TOT—its key state-owned telcos that manage concessions given to private mobile operators such as TRUE MOVE, AIS, DTAC and others.

However, these concessions will be gradually phased out between 2013 and 2018. "The concessions are based on 'build, transfer and operate agreement'. Which means all assets

built belong to the country and will be returned to the government to manage and operate upon the termination of the concessions," he says.

He reveals that the ICT Ministry will manage this infrastructure returned from the private operators under the concept of the government as an infrastructure provider, and the private operators as tenants.

With this strategy, the government can solve the existing problem of inadequate ICT development in remote areas.

"There are not enough users at remote areas for the private operators to break even from their investments, so they are not interested in expanding their networks to these locations," he says, and continues: "With the government looking to invest in the infrastructure in the future, we can reach out to almost every underserviced corner in the country as profit is not our motive."

By shifting the ownership of future ICT infrastructure investment to the government, Gp Capt Nakornthap believes that private sector operators can focus on service delivery and not duplicate infrastructure investment in any areas. At the same time, citizens will be assured of universal mobile and broadband internet access across the country.

FREE WI-FI FOR PUBLIC

To accelerate internet penetration, the 'ICT Free Wi-Fi for Public' project has seen the government not only install its own Wi-Fi hotspots in prominent public locations nationwide, but also share existing hotspots within metropolitan areas owned by private mobile network operators.

Under Gp Capt Nakornthap's leadership, TOT has installed nearly 10,567 hot spots at major public locations nationwide such as city halls, district offices, state hospitals, schools, petrol stations, police stations, and other similar spaces. The Ministry aims at expanding this free service for up to 40,000 spots by the end of 2012.

"For every ten per cent increase in internet penetration, the country's GDP will increase by 1.4 per cent or more depending on the data transmission speed," he reveals, quoting a World Bank study on how technology helps improve economy.

The ICT Ministry has also joined forces with main private telecom operators like AIS, DTAC and TRUE to allocate their existing hot spots at strategic public areas in Bangkok and other big provinces countrywide for the 'ICT Free Wi-Fi for Public' scheme.

The Ministry aims to have the total number of 100,000 free hot spots by end of the year, 250,000 by 2013, and 400,000 by end of 2015, in collaboration with the private sector.

"From January to June, we already provided 400,000 people — both Thai citizens and foreigners — with a Free Wi-Fi network nationwide. This has proved our success," he says.

ACHIEVEMENT & NEXT STEPS

There have been three cabinet reshuffles during this government's term, but Gp Capt Nakornthap has remained in his role since the very beginning. His performance as GCIO has been deemed to be on the right track to apply technology strategically to modernise the government and the country as a whole.

"Our biggest achievements for the past year are better network readiness and penetration and the establishment of government cloud," he reveals.

He plans to use the G-Cloud to replace the national data centre in the future. During these initial stages, an e-government pilot project has been launched in Nakhon Nayok Smart Province to verify the applicability of G-Cloud services before countrywide implementation.

Apart from the above two successful projects, he is also working to advance the country's cyber security laws and related regulations and rules. "This is the first time after the coup that progress in all ICT aspects has advanced in a systematic manner," he adds. Under his rule, the Minister wants to makes sure that every agency under the ICT Ministry's umbrella works according to the latter's master plan and progresses towards achieving the same goals.

When asked about what awaits him in the future, he says: "In the current four year term, a major project that we are planning is the restructuring of telecommunication assets," he says. To this end, the way the MICT will manage telecommunications infrastructure assets will be based primarily on the equitability of universal access and use.

Despite a controversial deal about 3G network licensing that has recently been pushed ahead aggressively, Gp Capt Nakornthap has given green light and full support to the Ministry to advance the development of 4G LTE and the accompanying clarification of spectrum management as this will be managed by CAT Telecom and TOT on the returned infrastructure under 'Smart Network' campaign.

Gp Capt Nakornthap is well aware of the reality of the shifting sands of power within the Thai political edifice. When asked about the critical points that would drive ICT policy and result in successful implementations in spite of political volatility, he points to the ICT Ministry's masterplan called ICT-2020 that will spell-out and clarify each milestone that anyone in his position would be expected to embark on and achieve.

"With this master plan, if it happens that someone comes to replace me, he or she will have no problem pushing forward projects that would be of benefit to citizens," he concludes.

AN OVERVIEW OF PROJECTS UNDER 'SMART THAILAND'

SMART BUSINESS

Objective: promoting citizens and ICT business opportunities
- ThaiCert: strengthening cybersecurity reliability
- E-Certificate: an e-service for more convenient business operations
- E-Contract: amending law agreement related to electronic contracts

SMART NETWORK

Objective: connecting all rural communities

- FiberCo and TowerCo: business units that will be set up under CAT Telecom and TOT to operate and optimise telecommunication network infrastructure
- IPv6: promoting the use and understanding of this new technology
- 4G LTE: preparing the launch of and facilitating the process of spectrum agreement

SMART GOVERNMENT

Objective: to optimise government services and investment

- Government Cloud Service: linking the information networks of government agencies for information sharing and collaboration via the Government Information Network
- National Single Window or Trade Window 2012: linking 36 agencies that will lead to ASEAN Single Window in 2015
- Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey: changing the traditional method of conducting the national survey to use tablets to manage digital data.

FACT NOTE

- *For the Smart Province project, CAT Telecom is installing a 48-core, 60-kilometre fibre cable network to cover the entire province of Nakhon Nayok.*
- *To deliver e-government efficiently, Electronic Government Agency was set up to ensure the delivery of e-gov in rural communities, while Software Industrial Promotion Agency will develop software that to support the efficient functioning of Smart Province.*
- *The ICT Ministry together with Thammasat University's College of Innovation recently opened the country's first CIO University certified by International Academy of CIO (IAC) to provide accredited and qualified CIOs to the market.*