



## ***THAILAND'S BRAIN DRAIN CHALLENGE: TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS***

BY ATTAWAT ASSAVANADDA

*Attawat Joseph Ma Assavanadda is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Hong Kong.*



*Thailand's opposition leader Pita Limjaroenrat said the party could be the bridge to create a new political consensus in the country. Source: Reuters*

Thailand has recently witnessed an alarming number of its young professionals and skilled workers determined to eye overseas opportunities. Unlike the previous waves of Thai emigration, the forming one is distinctive. Thai youths considering leaving the country are generally educated or well-trained to compete internationally and seek a long-term career that can later translate into opportunities to live permanently or secure new citizenship abroad. This trend puts the Thai government under a new pressing security concern: an imminent brain drain.

The brain drain problem is critical to Thailand's security and development. The Thai government has rolled out several ambitious plans in hope of transforming the nation into a developed country. To realize this mission, Thailand needs to count on its younger generations, who will soon come to take the

helm and steer the country forward. However, several polls and the disquieting case of 'Let's Move Abroad' have shown that many Thai talents are considering walking away from the Land of Smiles.

Surprisingly, this human capital challenge receives scant attention from the society and misinterpretation by the government. Because the youths' motivation to relocate partly concerns frustration with an authoritarian socio-political structure and diminishing economic prospects brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue quickly became highly politicized. The Thai government has so far seemingly held a misperception of this phenomenon, deeming the outward-looking talents 'unpatriotic' or 'fanatical about the West,' for instance, and thus shown little interest in addressing this concern.

The exodus of the country's brightest minds could cause severe problems to its development, but paying no heed to the causes of their frustration or misinterpreting their motives can be equally harmful.

### **Thai Migration in the Past**

Historically, most Thai emigrants are classified as non- or semi-skilled workers who seek overseas jobs to escape economic hardship at home. The low-skilled workers primarily engaged in labor-intensive agriculture, manufacturing, construction, and care sectors in the more affluent economies. They chose to stay in foreign lands to collect money for a certain time before returning to their homeland. In short, income differentials were a determinant factor driving migration. This characteristic marks the borderline between the earlier migration movements and the forming brain drain.

### **The Forming Wave of Thai Migration**

The forming wave of migration is different. Recent surveys show that around 60 percent of Thai people younger than 30 years old and 45 percent of Thai holders of master's degrees and above are eyeing overseas opportunities. Likewise, 19 out of 23 surveyed occupational groups favor working overseas.

These statistics echo the online craze among young Thai netizens of late, as demonstrated in the 'Let's

Move Abroad' Facebook page. Initially set up to seek business advice, the page gradually changed to serve as a forum to share insights about finding ways to settle abroad. The group became so viral that it started to raise the eyebrows of the Thai government and inevitably ceased its operation soon afterwards. Yet, one key question remains: what makes “moving out” such a fad among Thai youths?

### **The Push Factors from Thailand**

Experts argue that many young Thais are unsure about the opportunities to thrive in the country under the existing socio-political structure dictated by the junta. They are losing hope in Thailand's political future after seeing their demands for more welfare benefits, self-determination, and transparency in the governance scrapped by violent suppression. Furthermore, the government's mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite its tight control of society, together with economic downturns in the wake of the pandemic, served as a trigger factor that sparked a fire.

### **The Pull Factors from Abroad**

On a different side of the same coin, Thai youths have come to realize that the doors to work in developed economies are opening wider than ever before. The transition towards the post-pandemic stage translates into a new round of competition among many affluent countries to attract non-local, highly-skilled workers to support their economic recovery and tackle their ageing society concerns. This so-called ‘talent war’ makes many popular destinations increasingly willing to embrace incoming specialists with attractive visa schemes that could lead to a long-term or permanent stay. At the time of this writing, countries/territories with such immigration programs of its kind include, but are not limited to: the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

For young Thais, working in a developed, democratic country would give them higher economic gains and better quality of life. Besides, globalization also reduces the travel and communication costs that once effectively deterred their decision to step out.

### **Policy Recommendations**

For the short-term measures, it is high time the government paid serious attention to this challenge and exercised restraint when dealing with discontent youths, i.e., refrain from using oppressive measures to sanction the youths who try to raise their voices on social problems. In this sense, strategic communication between the elites and the youths is vital. The government should establish official channels dedicated to listening to the young voices while abandoning suppressive mechanisms, which will help restore public trust that any opinions are respected. Besides, the government should join forces with the private sector to implement plans to revive the country's economy and encourage in-country employment. A better economy and higher chance of employment might attract some young Thais to work domestically.

For the medium- and long-term measures, the government should implement structural reforms focusing on enhancing government effectiveness and transparency, augmenting the country's global competitiveness, and improving people's quality of life and public goods such as infrastructure and education. Priority should be placed on Research and Development (R&D), which is the key to the country's innovation and competitiveness.

Many countries worldwide are now hunting global talents to help stimulate their growth. Unless things are rectified, Thailand, in contrast, will soon witness the drastic flight of its top-notch young intellectuals, let alone the crème de la crème. The brain drain problem might be latent and rarely visible in the short term, but reversing the trend when things come to a head is strenuous. All deficiencies must be addressed in a proper and timely manner.

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