

An exclusive interview with H.E. Abhisit Vejjajiva, Prime Minister of Thailand on the future of Bangkok, the city's place in the region, the coming transformation of Rama III and finding the right balance between modernisation, development and conservation. | by TERRY BLACKBURN, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Abhisit's vision for Bangkok

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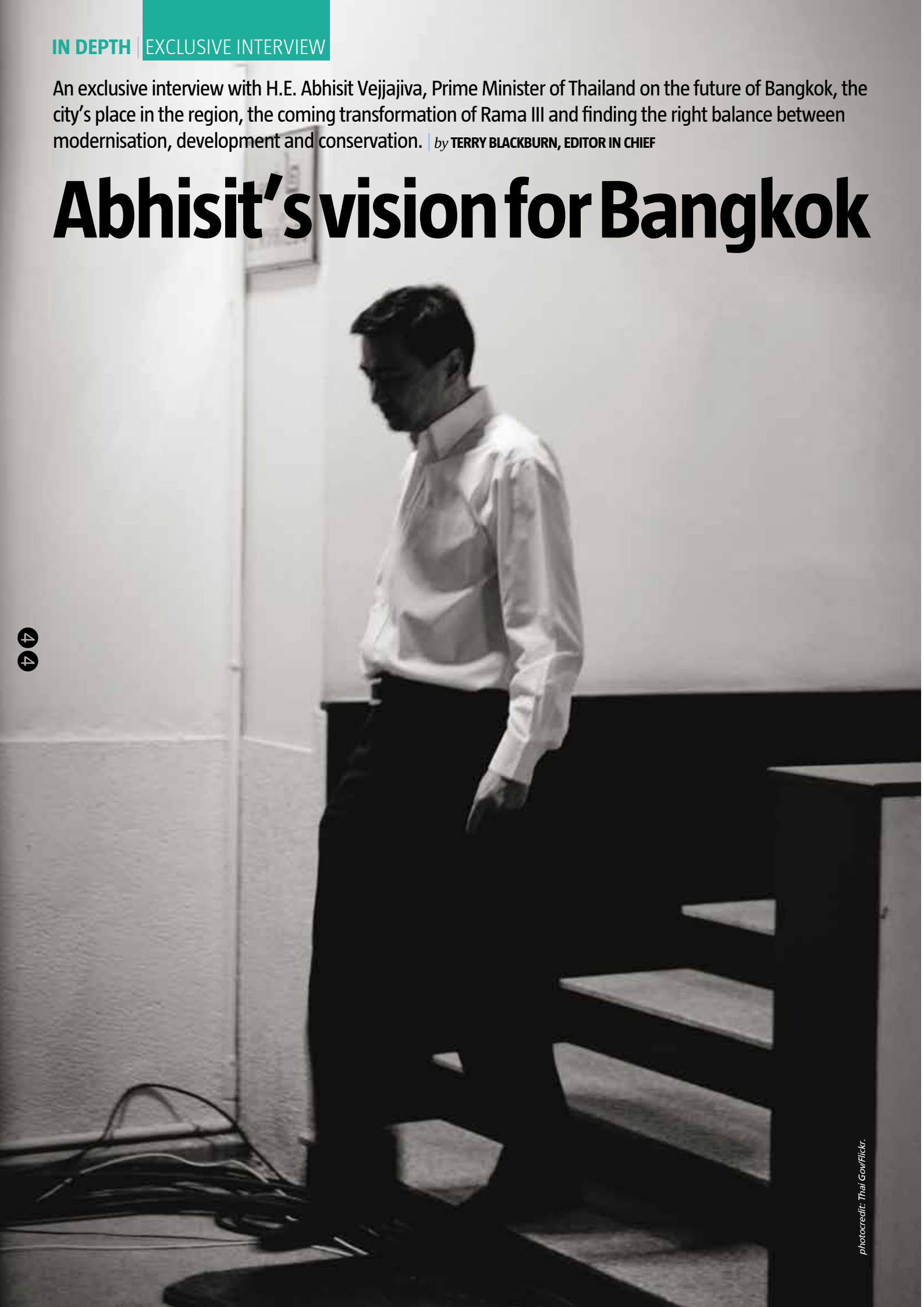




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How do you see Bangkok developing in the future and what do you think government, local and national, can do to support Bangkok's development?

Bangkok is a large city, and living in such a city can have its challenges. But the benefits the city brings to the quality of life and the strength of our economy should not be forgotten. We used to have a chronic traffic problem, for example, and now we have the elevated expressways, BTS Skytrain and a subway system that has helped ease the problem. We enjoy those benefits, thanks to the vision and endeavour of the generations that came before ours and the effort they made to build a better future.

If we were to stand aside in the coming decades we would see our capital city grow, driven by the demands of Thailand's expanding economy and the energy of its growing population. But like people in other countries, we can and should ensure that the changes that will come to our capital are directed according

to a clear vision and that we give opportunities for creativity, harnessed to investment, to create new and pioneering neighbourhoods that improve not just the skyline of our capital, but also the quality of life for its people. In addition, with recent challenges in environmental problems, natural disasters and other threats, we must also ensure that our capital is safe and secure from any of those challenges.

How well do you think Bangkok compares with other cities in the region – do you think our vision for the city should aspire to improve the city's infrastructure and to encourage more ambitious and iconic development projects?

As I said before, I think that every great city has a balance between the way it looks back with respect to its past, and looks forward to welcome its future. I think we do that well in Bangkok. Successive governments have worked with the

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One of a number of plans for the future proposed by developers in Bangkok.



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Bangkok Metropolitan Administration to bring to the people the BTS, the MRT, new roads and bridges, as well as flood prevention measures. This is where local and national governments take a lead in providing infrastructure, and individuals and businesses respond with investment and enterprise.

The Rama III area is a good example. It was recognised 20 years ago that Rama III could become instrumental in building Bangkok’s future. The area has a high volume of undeveloped land that runs along the river and is close to the city centre. Over the years, governments have helped the area to obtain some of the city’s best transport infrastructure, not least the iconic new bridge opened last year and which was blessed by His Majesty. The opening of the bridges has set a high standard that will inspire other projects around it, so that, together over time, they create a riverfront development that can rival the best in the world. The inspiration provided by the new bridges

illustrates a more general point; namely that good developments will encourage others. On Rama III, with the bridges and other infrastructure in place, developers have already begun to circulate ideas for new projects not considered before. It also raises the possibility that in the coming decades the area could undergo a regeneration that could transform its future; just as the Canary Wharf project in London turned a neglected docklands area into a successful residential and business district and consequently delivered investment, jobs and better housing as well as giving the historic city a new iconic skyline.

Bangkokians are creative by nature, and so in areas like Rama III there will be no shortage of bold and imaginative ideas to improve the city’s neighbourhoods. The challenge is always to give those diverse ideas both coherence and scale, so that they can become real. If we do that then we create the common visionary purpose that I talked about earlier. It is



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that common purpose that is necessary, if we genuinely want to transform the less developed areas of the capital. In districts like Rama III, I would hope that Bangkokians, working together, can take the opportunity to create neighbourhoods that rank among the best in any of the world's great cities and that become emblematic of the bold future that the city and the nation are both capable of and deserve. There are many opportunities for our generation of Bangkokians to build a better future. I hope and expect that we will choose to take them.

How do you respond to those sceptics who doubt Bangkok's ability to rival other cities in the region, not least because of the difficulties with transport infrastructure and what can appear to be a lack of coordinated city planning? Do you think it is realistic for Bangkokians to have more daring aspirations for the city and for areas like Rama III?

We are continuously developing Bangkok to not only be a modern city, but also distinctively Thai. The city is constantly changing and the choice we have is how far we assist and direct the course of its development.

It is both possible and desirable to encourage development that is on the one hand bold and visionary and strengthens the economy, and that, on the other hand, improves the quality of life of Bangkok's citizens and recognises our responsibility to protect the environment. There are obvious challenges of managing a growing city in this way; not least the difficulty of coping with larger numbers of people commuting to work each day in the capital. But we don't meet these challenges by standing still. That's why we have set a framework aiming to chart the course of future development, and setting high standards of construction and planning to ensure projects and infrastructure benefit the city as a whole, its people and the environment.



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But I think our aspirations for the city can and should be bold. It is not that we should conceive of Bangkok’s future development as a competition with other cities; that’s not the right approach. But it is right to seek inspiration from other great cities and to set a policy framework that enables the energy, creativity and vision that is already here in Bangkok to take the city forward. In doing so, we should not be afraid to be pioneering.

How does the government plan to deal with increasing pollution in Bangkok and in what ways will they encourage people and companies to be greener?

It is not just global warming, but the more immediate and local effects of pollution that make the environment a priority for every modern city. Bangkok is no different, although the size of the city makes the scale of the challenge more daunting. There are already things that are being done and further measures that we can take in partnership with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration.

Has Thailand found the balance between modernisation, development and conservation? How do you see Bangkok looking twenty years from now?

Some of Thailand’s characteristics can appear to be in competition when they are actually two sides of the same coin. Thailand’s urban and rural development has to proceed hand in hand; each needs the success of the other in order to thrive and both urban and rural areas share the need for the environment to be clean and protected if we are to preserve and improve our quality of life. Equally important, we need to understand and respect the solid foundation built by past generations and then use the wisdom gained to step confidently into a future that is unfolding before us at an ever-accelerating speed.

Generally speaking, I think we get that balance right. The economy is strong and as a result people will see their living standards rise. At the same time, we have been able to implement measures to improve environmental protection and



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to give extra help to the most vulnerable. There is a lot more that we need to do. The pace of change in the region, and the one globally, gives us little time to get distracted from the task in hand.

It is difficult enough to predict the course of the next two years and impossible to look forward 20 years with any degree of accuracy. But I would hope that over the coming decades we can find a way to unleash more of the vast potential that is to be found in the people of this country and of our capital. This is a beautiful city and one that is still full of opportunity. There is considerable scope for regeneration of many areas of the city – not least the Rama III area which I represented when I first got elected to Parliament. It would be good to think that we can see those neighbourhoods transformed with investment, jobs and housing, and towards better education opportunities for the youth. I also hope to see more investment in better public spaces, galleries, museums and parks and a striking new city skyline. For all these developments, Thailand has the services infrastructure ready, and we are world renowned for our warm hospitality and, of course, our cuisine. Most importantly, it is the people that make the future, not governments, and the Thai people are ready to bring growth and development to Bangkok. Having said that, I am confident that the current generation of Bangkokians will ensure that our capital remains one of the greatest cities for all the peoples of the world. ■