

Thai Energy Policy Challenges and Public Trust

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On February 4, an international meeting titled “1st ASEAN Energy Literacy Conference” took place in Bangkok. The Thai Ministry of Energy hosted the conference for which the Petroleum Institute of Thailand served as an organizer. More than 300 people from Thailand and other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations participated in the conference, including energy policy officials, energy industry officials, researchers, experts and media reporters. In four sessions following keynote addresses, participants vigorously discussed Thai and other countries’ problems involving energy literacy for establishing ordinary people’s trust in energy policy planning and promotion. On the occasion of this conference, I had an opportunity to personally exchange views with energy policy and industry officials. In the following, I would like to discuss what I viewed as key points mainly in regard to the conference and other meetings in Bangkok.

The keynote address at the outset of the conference indicated that while it is most important to secure citizens’ understanding about various energy policy challenges facing the Thai government at present, the dissemination of inaccurate or distorted understanding and information makes it difficult for the government to make and promote energy policies. Behind the conference was the recognition that it is basically important to promote the diffusion of accurate knowledge and understanding about energy problem realities to overcome and solve relevant problems.

As Thai energy policy challenges, the keynote speaker and other conference participants cited responses to growing energy demand and imports, diversification of electricity generation sources to address the power generation sector’s excess dependence on natural gas, the improvement of policy, framework and systems for domestic oil and gas development to address its declining production trend, the energy market distortion created by energy subsidies and many other problems. Among initiatives to address these problems, however, a coal-fired power plant expansion program designed to stabilize energy supply-demand and diversify electricity sources has hit a snag in the face of strong opposition amid citizens’ concerns over environmental problems and their distrust in government policies. The government is urgently required to obtain citizens’ understanding about and support for the program, according to participants in the conference.

Other problems related to energy literacy were cited. Regarding public distrust in policies, emotional and nationalistic criticisms have come against the Thai government's present concession system for domestic oil and gas development. Some people have criticized a delay in oil development and Thailand's dependence on oil imports based on overestimated (wrongly assessed) domestic oil deposits. Furthermore, biased critics have blamed domestic energy problems on the energy industry.

Through serious discussions on these problems, I have understood that Thai energy policy challenges and citizens' understanding about them pose a serious problem and found that such energy literacy problem exists in other countries as well. Particularly, I have recognized that Japan faces similar problems. The sponsor of the conference asked me to report various energy problems in the world and the positions of coal and nuclear from the viewpoint of the best energy mix as well as discussions on these issues in Japan. My report attracted close attention. In Japan, there are major energy policy problems toward establishing the best energy mix. In this regard, Japan has problems securing the people's understanding about and their trust in energy policies. In my report, I frankly discussed this point, drawing interest and understanding from other participants in the conference.

Thailand must address and solve various problems, as a provisional government led by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, since the coup in May last year, has been attempting to stabilize politics, the economy and society. Particularly, the stabilization of the economy is important as the base for the stable lives of the people. As Thailand's economic growth in 2014 is widely estimated to have been limited to less than 1%, economic reconstruction is important for the provisional government. The promotion of domestic economic reform, the exploitation of foreign funds and international cooperation are indispensable. In this sense, the enhancement of relations with Japan should be a matter of interest for Thailand.

Through discussions at the conference and my talks with some of the meeting counterparts, I felt that Thailand sees the resolution of energy problems as important for economic stabilization and has great interest in enhancing cooperation with Japan in the field of energy problems. Given that Thailand has great growth potential for a medium to long term and holds a key position among ASEAN countries, enhancing cooperation with Thailand is significant for Japan's government and industry. Through the discussions, I felt that Thailand needs to promote and deepen comprehensive talks on overall energy policies, promote appropriate coal utilization based on clean coal technologies, stably procure natural gas which accounts for the largest share of power generation, secure the competitive procurement of liquefied natural gas which is now growingly important, step up oil and gas development in the domestic market and neighboring countries, promote energy conservation and consider nuclear energy use as a long-term challenge. Japan can apparently accept most of these measures and cooperate with Thailand in implementing them. I really hope to see Japan-Thailand talks and cooperation deepening at government and industry levels.

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