

# SAILING *against* THE TIDE

*Once Bangkok's massage parlour king, then a notorious politician, Chuwit Kamolvisit seems somewhat disillusioned these days. Will he throw in the towel and sail away from Thai politics or pursue his fight against corruption?*

By Liam Aran Barnes  
Photography by Patrick Brown



“When I first started out I wanted to be like Hugh Hefner: be surrounded by girls and make money. They called me the massage tycoon of Thailand. But after a while I wanted something cleaner, so I jumped into politics. I made a big mistake. Politics is far dirtier than the massage parlour business.”

Chuwit Kamolvisit emerged from the soapy waters of Bangkok's seedy, but prosperous, massage scene more than a decade ago and dove headfirst into Thai politics. But after a decade wearing this cloak of supposed responsibility, his enthusiasm has waned.

At the zenith of his business career, Chuwit, now 53, had made up to an estimated \$226 million and owned six of the largest massage complexes in the Thai capital. Services offered to paying customers at these garish monoliths remained within the law, although the act of selling sex is illegal in Thailand.

“Everybody knew about my parlours. They weren't small, like huts – they were huge! It wasn't that easy to hide what was happening inside,” reveals Chuwit, although this is precisely what he did for years.

When previously pressed on services rendered within his premises, he claimed they were above board. He blew his own cover, however, in early 2003 when he bulldozed his way onto the political scene on a radical anti-graft ticket. Armed with a notebook that, he claimed, teemed with names of those he'd bribed to keep his empire running, he took down a handful of high-ranking police officials who had all allegedly spent a significant portion of time in hot tubs laden with young women and booze.

The outburst stunned Thai politics and Chuwit dominated front pages and television screens nationwide. He lambasted the ruling Thaksin Shinawatra administration for its failure to act upon populist promises to tackle corruption and also took aim at Thailand's endemic culture of bribery.

“It’s a tradition. When Thai people pass a spirit house they always *wai* (show respect), so I ask: ‘What’s inside the spirit house?’ but they don’t know. It’s the same with corruption. They say: ‘Everybody pays, so I need to pay.’ The majority of this society pays bribes, and if you don’t, you become a stranger in your home. I tried to inspire them not to pay and become the majority. Let the minority pay.”

But this whistleblowing was far from a selfless act.

In the small hours of January 26, 2003, a wrecking crew stormed a popular, albeit sleazy, tourist spot on Bangkok’s Sukhumvit Road, razing a ramshackle collection of go-go bars, pubs and souvenir shops to the ground. The tenants were displaced without warning, leaving their livelihoods in tatters by sunrise. Chuwit was soon revealed to be the landlord of the area dubbed Sukhumvit Square – he bought it for THB500m (\$12.5m) only months prior to the eviction – and was subsequently arrested. He was quick to retaliate.

Upon his release after a month in prison, Chuwit brazenly alleged that certain members of the police force as well as politicians had not only been on his payroll but also regularly freeloaded at the parlours.

A backlash from the rarely scrutinised Thai police seemed inevitable. And Chuwit vanished soon after the accusations were made. Two days passed before a dazed, disorientated and supposedly drugged Chuwit was found staggering aimlessly on the outskirts of the city.

“Nobody believed [I was kidnapped]. People asked me if it was real,” he says. “They still think I staged it. All politicians are like actors, so when this happens to me they don’t believe it.”

These days, Chuwit is somewhat laconic about the kidnapping and circumstances surrounding the controversial eviction. He does say, though, with no hint of irony, that Sukhumvit Square’s current incarnation as a public park is a considerable improvement on the sleazy venues that once occupied the plot.




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Chuwit Garden, which also serves as the headquarters of his Phak Rak Prathet Thai (Love Thailand Party), is a serene spot in a city starved of green space. It plays host to joggers and dog-walkers, as well as a number of quirks, including an unusual commemorative plaque on the gate that reads: “Dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ, 29th August 2005, to God be the glory.”

Thailand’s population is 95% Buddhist and Chuwit refers to himself as an atheist – a highly unusual admission for a Thai politician. The dedication, he explains, pays respect to the Christian faith upheld by his parents and the rest of his family.

Raised during the 1970s on the steamy streets of Bangkok’s Chinatown by a Chinese father and Thai mother, Chuwit claims he was “born bad”, a product of his environment. In his late teens, Chuwit headed to the US to study business at San Diego University. He says that his six years in the US taught him the virtue of straight talking, on which he clearly prides himself.

“What is most important is that I have two kids. You see, I made a big mistake when I was 21 – she was half-American, half-Canadian,” he jokes, before moving on to explain that, as well as a failed marriage, two children and a master’s degree, his time overseas provided him with a better understanding of Thailand. “When my kids went to school [in the US] I noticed that the pupils are always asking questions, but when a teacher asks questions in a Thai school, nobody raises their hand. Of course they want to ask, but they are embarrassed. Society here needs to be taught that it’s going the wrong way.”

Animated, he lunges forward, knocking the voice recorder to the floor, and beckons Thailand to “Come back! Come back!” Returning to his seat, he picks up the recorder and, flashing a cheeky grin, rests it upright against his crotch.

Although still quick with quips, pranks and poses for the camera, the vigour that carried him into politics and captured the imagination of disgruntled voters has waned somewhat. His early

campaign persona was one of an angry man determined to clean up politics at all costs, but Chuwit cuts a resigned figure these days. His once menacing eyes appear softer now; his shoulders have slumped and even his famous, drooping moustache has started to thin and grey.

“I thought I would get into parliament and clean people, the way we cleaned them in the parlours,” he says. “But they’re too dirty, even for me. So here I am. Ten years in Thai politics and I get nowhere.”

When speaking about the political debacle in which Thailand is currently embroiled, Chuwit accepts that his voice is not as loud as it once was.

He dismisses Yingluck Shinawatra and her “greedy” brother, Thaksin, whom he blames for unbalancing the political playing field by “taking too much of the cake”. Meanwhile, Democratic Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva and mob ruler and former MP Suthep Thaugsuban are ridiculed for their “good guy, bad guy routine” and their stance against democracy in the country.

Ensclosed in a rattan chair, Chuwit gazes out the window of his tasteful *mock-sala Thai* (traditional Thai house) office for some time, before he embarks on a final tirade.

“I cannot change this country. I wish I could, but the fact is I can’t. I’ve become a very minor machine and this has made me bored,” he says. “I cannot change the corruption, I cannot change the politics, and I cannot change the people. I plan to resign and spend my life differently. This is my last war.”

He adds, however, that there is no chance the rescheduled elections – set for July 20 – will go ahead and concedes that his latest campaign will be yet another waste of money. Unsurprisingly, he has a louche contingency plan for life after politics.

“Recently, somebody wanted to buy Chuwit Garden for THB4 billion (\$123.6m). So I thought I’d move to Australia, buy a yacht and pay two or three girls to come with me,” he says, flicking through the pages of a Princess Yacht catalogue. “Don’t you think that kind of life is more interesting?” ■

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