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Ambassador to US travels, boosts coup

Salt Lake City, Utah

Thailand will be back among the "front ranks of democratic nations" in Asia within a year, predicts the country's ambassador, who was in Salt Lake City this week.

According to the Deseret Morning News of Utah, ambassador Virasakdi Futrakul said Thailand is in transition, following the Sept 19 military coup.

"The political change was peaceful. There were no casualties at all," Mr Virasakdi told his audience at the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics on Wednesday.

The parliament is now drawing up a new constitution to replace the one that did not contain enough checks and balances on former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, he said. A public referendum will then be held, followed by a general election in October 2007.

Although Thaksin was popular in the Thai countryside because of his policies that returned federal taxes to local governments and instituted universal health care, he was unpopular among the middle class of Bangkok, the ambassador went on.

Despite complaint by some Western nations and human-rights groups about curbs on press freedoms, the ambassador claimed that there is currently no censorship, the Deseret Morning News reported.

Mr Virasakdi explained the coup in "a matter-of-fact fashion," the newspaper said, after a talk that centered mostly on Thailand's long-standing support of the United States and its economic ties to both the United States and the state of Utah.

Mr Virasakdi noted that in his travels throughout the United States, he has met many Americans who still confuse Thailand with Taiwan.

He then spent part of his talk detailing his country's "strong friendship" with the United States, beginning with King Rama IV's offer of elephants to President James Buchanan in the 1860s.

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