

DEMOCRAT ADVOCATE

Giving up his chair at a leading finance house for a seat in politics, Korn Chatikavanij is a man with confidence and a love for challenge, writes Wiriya Sungkhaniyom

They say life begins at 40. Korn Chatikavanij celebrated this milestone by retiring as chairman of a top securities firm to run for a seat in Parliament. That choice alone is ample proof of the man's confidence and love of challenges, but the fact that he decided to run on the opposition Democrat party ticket when the party was at one of its lowest ebbs, made one wonder if he didn't have some kind of saviour complex.

"I believe that if you want to change the way things are, and you have the potential to do so, you should get involved," says Korn in his gentle unhurried voice, despite the fact that he has been running late all afternoon and is going to be late for his next appointment. These days, the rookie MP's schedule is filled with trips, meetings and the obligatory appearances at weddings, funerals and other social functions throughout his Constituency 7, which includes the Yenakart area where he lives. His wife Vorakorn comes along to a number of these, but only because "she would see even less of me if she didn't," he says with a chuckle. "She tries to keep a normal life as much as she can."

The trips he has taken as a politician have opened his eyes to the lives of others that are a far cry from that of an Oxford-educated banker, and Korn understands where the allegations of elitism that have been thrown at the Democrats come from. After all, some of the party's most visible members share the same elite backgrounds as himself and party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, Korn's fellow Winchester College and Oxford alumnus.

"Our goal is to represent the people, not just people from the North, or the South, or the Northeast, but you can't please everybody all the time," says Korn. "One of the lessons I've learned is, be yourself and don't pretend to be something you're not. If voters think you

are what this country needs, they'll vote for you. And if they don't, then you need to see what you can do to better represent them. The important thing is that people have a choice."

Face to face, it's clear that Korn is used to being head and shoulders above others. At six feet four inches, he towers over most Thais but moves with the easy grace of an athlete, and he comes across as very articulate but also genuinely gracious. He may yet have to catch up with Abhisit in the rhetoric department, but Parliament watchers will remember his maiden speech, in which he tore down, piece by piece, the spectacular picture the government had

has a kingmaker's job despite his limited experience with real politics – but he's making up for that limitation with his real-world savvy and immense intellect.

Of the problems facing the country, Korn singles out the current political impasse as well as the conflict in the South and household debts as the most challenging. Korn the banker thinks consumer debts should be tackled on two fronts: by reducing debts and increasing savings. "We used to have pretty high savings rates, until five or six years ago. We can go back to where we were, I have no doubt about it." He also thinks that as a country we can remain

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painting of the economy, all the while bending painfully over a microphone set much too low for his height. He credits some of his language skills to his early reading, which included the Thai translation of the Chinese romance Mangkorn Yok and P Indrapalit's classic comic series Sam Kler.

The middle of three sons, Korn was born in London, in February 1964, while his father Kraisi, a Finance Ministry official, was financial councillor attached to the Thai embassy there. After the family came home Korn attended Somthavil and Satit Pathumwan schools, before leaving at age 13 for The Old Malthouse School in Dorset. He went on to Winchester and then St John's College, Oxford, where he read philosophy, politics and economics, played a lot of sports – splashed over a wall of his home gym is a blown-up picture of him and fellow rowers in action – and helped Abhisit Vejjajiva to become student president by encouraging fellow athletes to vote for him. As the Democrat party's deputy secretary-general, Korn again

competitive by "focusing on what we have, and what we do best, such as the service industries, especially tourism," as these bring in foreign currency but don't rely on foreign imports.

Breaking the political impasse calls for another round of reform. "Thai politics has been exclusive, non-transparent and worst of all, corrupt," he says. As a prominent member of the Democrat's economics team, he vows that given the chance to work in an executive capacity, "I will use that chance to help break the vicious cycle that Thai politics has been caught in, by controlling corruption and allowing the people's participation in the political process."

His job may call for a 24/7-commitment, but Korn is quite good at juggling work and family, which includes daughter Karn, son Kraisi, and stepsons Phongsakorn and Bhanittra. "One drawback that comes with the job is, you can work seven days a week and still have more work to do," he laments. "You also end up not having enough time to think. The only 'think time' I have these days is right before bed." □