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CORRUPTION

Integrity pact to curtail state project bribes

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Legislators will incorporate the graft-battling "integrity pact" (IP) into procurement bids for large-scale government projects, in a move agencies say will finally thwart rampant corruption during the bidding process.

The IP, launched early this year, is a deal signed between state agencies and companies bidding for contracts and requires both parties to declare they will abstain from collusion, bribery and other forms of corruption in the project.

By signing the agreement, they consent to let a third party monitor the entire process — from the drafting of the terms of reference, bidding and the transaction itself.

While it is currently only enforced in five government projects — including the city's purchase of NGV-fuelled buses and the construction of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) Blue Line railway system — the IP will next be incorporated into the new Public Procurement Act, to be examined by legislators shortly.

"The IP will be powerful in helping the government set new standards of transparency," Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) senior researcher Duenden Nikomborirak said.

The procurement process in Thailand has long been prone to corruption, she said.

More often than not, the competition is unfair, as officials and private firms collude behind the scenes and agree to delegate projects to particular contractors even before the bidding process is completed, she said.

Ms Duenden said the project's budget as disclosed to the public may not be its real cost, but an inflated figure agreed on by parties involved, including bribe money going into officials' pockets.

Enlisting external observers to oversee deals will finally tackle the problem which often involves state officials, politicians and company executives, she said, adding it will also ensure state money is spent properly.

Pramon Suthiwong, chairman of the Anti-Corruption Organisation of Thailand, said building the IP into the Public Procurement Act will make sure anti-graft measures are systematically enforced.

At the moment, the use of the IP depends on cabinet resolutions.

"It is currently subject to politicians' will, whether or not they want to use the IP for a particular transaction," he said, adding that external observers must be independent parties, unconnected to the bidding process and have knowledge or expertise related to the project.

They may be retired officials, members of the private sector or members of civil society with spotless reputations who will act in line with the national interest only.

The recruitment of observers will be the biggest hurdle, given the large number of government projects proposed each year, according to Mr Pramon and Ms Duenden.

National Anti-Corruption Commission member Phakdee Photisiri said he also backed the plan to build IP into the new procurement act as it would include the private sector and civil society in graft-monitoring and graft-battling efforts.