

CONGRESSIONAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

Capitol Hill Culture Shock: A Perspective from an Asian Fellow

Sa-ngopkarn Mounghong, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand

As an Asia Foundation-sponsored Thai fellow with a Foreign Service background, the obvious choice for my fellowship was with a member of the House of Representatives or the Senate who was a member of either the House Foreign Affairs or the Senate Foreign Relations Committees, and in particular the Asia-Pacific Subcommittee. That had always been my choice. But during one of the APSA Congressional Fellowship orientation sessions, when former fellows shared their experiences on Capitol Hill, I was exposed to a new idea. “The fellowship is yours, and it is up to you to make of it what you will,” said one of the former fellows. “Get out of your comfort zone and try something new,” said another on the same speaking panel. Those comments kept running through my mind when I was selecting potential offices for my fellowship. During my office selection period, I had prepared a wish list of offices I would like to work for, including both those related to Foreign Affairs and the Foreign Relations Committee, as well as those I hardly knew anything about and that had no direct connection with foreign affairs, but could potentially be good offices in which to work. Thanks to sequestration’s reduction of congressionally authorized staff positions, I was fortunate to get six interviews, and three offices offered to host me. The choice I had to make was between staying in my comfort zone and going for something new. In the end, I chose the latter.

FROM THAILAND TO TUCSON

Before interviewing with congressman Raúl Grijalva’s office, I knew only two things about Arizona: it had the Grand Canyon and deserts. On taking up my assignment in Congressman Grijalva’s office, I had a difficult time locating Arizona’s 3rd District, which the congressman represents, on the map. But both Congressman Grijalva and Arizona’s 3rd District ended up being very interesting. Grijalva is a son of Mexican migrant workers. He was born and raised in Tucson, Arizona. He has dedicated his life to improving social welfare and, in particular, education for the people of Tucson. He served on a number of local education boards before entering Congress. Grijalva is a co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, a long-standing member of Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and recognized as one of the most influential Hispanic members on the Hill. I found out later from the office that I am the first

Asian fellow that the office has accepted, so the idea of an Asian fellow in a Hispanic member’s office is not only new to me, but also new to the office.

Arizona’s 3rd District’s land area itself is larger than seven individual states and is larger than Rhode Island, Delaware, Hawai’i, Connecticut, and New Jersey combined. The southern boundary of the 3rd District coincides with 300 miles of the US/Mexico border.

The urban center of the 3rd District contains the central, south, and west sides of the city of Tucson. The population within the district is predominantly working-class, from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, although predominantly Hispanic, African American, and urban Native American. The district is also home to four sovereign Native American nations: the Cocopah, Pascua Yaqui, Quechan, and Tohono O’odham. Hence, the 3rd District is confronted by a wide variety of issues stretching from border security and immigration to natural resources and Indian affairs.

GRIJALVISTA

Each office on Capitol Hill has a different office culture and work ethic, and the office of Representative Grijalva is no exception. It was a bit of a culture shock when I came to the office the first week, expecting to be trained on legislative issues and procedures, but instead was taught to answer the phone, sort mail, use constituent mailing lists, deal with constituents, and other administrative tasks. Later, I learned that this office’s philosophy is to “work from the bottom.” Many “Grijalvista”¹ in this office have worked their way up from being an intern, then a fellow, a staff assistant and legislative correspondent, a legislative assistant, and, in some cases, a legislative director or chief of staff. From a practical point of view, it makes sense that—because all staff in the office are often busy attending meetings, conferences, and committee activities—everyone should take a fair share of the office administrative duties. But after I was comfortable with the administrative tasks, the office moved me to into an all-staff office and that’s when I was introduced to the reality of legislative work on the Hill.

As a legislative agenda, apart from working to improve social welfare for Americans in general, Congressman Grijalva has two priority portfolios: education and natural resources. I now look after one of them: natural resources. In Grijalva’s office this covers a wide range of issues at the House Natural Resources Committee, where the congressman is a senior member and a ranking member on the Public Lands and Environmental Regulation Subcommittee. The portfolio includes topics such as climate change, energy, and animal issues. Although I have been exposed to a number of environmental issues in Thailand, such as global warming and climate change, dealing with United States’ and Arizona’s natural

Sa-ngopkarn Mounghong is a diplomatic officer, for the Department of American and South Pacific Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand. He is currently a 2013–14 Asia Foundation/APSA Congressional Fellow. He is currently serving as a Fellow in the office of representative Raul M. Grijalva (D-AZ). He can be reached at pake.mounghong@gmail.com.

resource issues represented a whole new ball game. Apart from learning about US environmental regulations and their acronyms that sound very foreign to me, such as NEPA (National Environmental Protection Act), CAA (Clean Air Act), CWA (Clean Water Act), and ESA (Endangered Species Act), I contact a number of agencies and groups that I would not have imagined: federal agencies, like the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Park Service, the Forest Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and private groups such as the Sierra Club, Earthjustice, the Natural Resource Defense Council, and the Center for Biological Diversity.

I am treated as a full-time staffer when it comes to natural resource issues. My responsibilities involve preparing the congressman's briefing binder, including background information, his prepared statement, and questions to ask witnesses, as well as supporting him at all House Natural Resources Committee hearings and markups. This involves preparing his talking points and statement; meeting constituents, environmental groups and sometimes lobbyists; and attending meetings and functions on his behalf. I was given extra responsibilities during the appropriations period (March to the beginning of April) to prepare appropriation letters on national parks to the House Appropriation Committee and to make sure our office signed on to all our priority Natural Resources appropriation letters. Although no one knows exactly how much of a role appropriation letters actually play in influencing the budget, it is a symbolic gesture that every House office makes to show ideological support on issues that concern them or their constituents.

Since day one, I was amazed, and often perplexed, at how fast-paced the work environment was and how scarce the time each staffer had to complete each task. My background in the Thai Foreign Ministry accustomed me to two aspects of the system. The first is the concept of bureaucracy. For example, if a foreign minister wants a talking point on the issue for which I am responsible, my drafted talking point would have to go through at least five or six steps before being sent to the foreign minister's secretary. The second is seniority. Asians and Thais in particular have a high respect for elders. So the idea of speaking before or challenging elders is rare. But my work experience in Grijalva's office challenged all my conventional work experience. Due to tight deadlines, I prepared the Grijalva's talking points and statements only a day, and sometimes only hours, in advance. Furthermore, only my legislative director (LD) would review my draft talking points and statements before I put them in the congressman's briefing binder. I was asked to brief Representative Grijalva all the time on my issues. During my time in the Thai Foreign Ministry, however, the head of the division or head of the department would brief the foreign minister. My LD told me to continually ask questions—not only to find out information, but to find any fault in the information, whether it came from the congressman, agencies, or outside groups.

“ON CAPITOL HILL, NOTHING IS WHAT IT SEEMS”

My first exposure to a committee hearing as a staffer really stunned me and turned out not exactly how I had anticipated. When I supported Grijalva at my first Natural Resources Committee hearing in February 2014, nine pieces of legislation were being introduced. The hearing went relatively well and proceeded in a collegial manner until one committee member started yelling at the witnesses. Then “all hell broke loose.” The hearing involved finger-pointing, yelling, and ridiculing the comments of the witnesses. After the hearing, when we were walking back to the office, the congressman said to me, “On Capitol Hill, nothing is what it seems.”

At the time I thought his comment was just to convince a committee staff first-timer that members of Congress are not always unpleasant, nasty, and scary. I didn't pay much attention to his comment until I staffed him at more hearings and markups, when I began to realize there are reasons for members' (mostly aggressive) behavior in the committee. For instance, I learned that one Republican member has attended more committee meetings than any other member and tended to ask more aggressive questions because he is running for a Senate seat and facing a tough primary in his state. One other Republican member, who is also usually quite aggressive, especially against administration witnesses on oil and gas drilling issues, does so because his district has large untapped oil and gas reserves.

I have been constantly amazed at how swiftly members could change character. One minute they will be screaming and yelling at each other in the committee and the next they would be making jokes and laughing in the close-door member-only conference room. “It's all because of the camera,” my boss later told me. Nowadays we live in a world of 24/7 media outlets, where news and information are constantly being broadcast. Things that happened on the committee or on the floor one moment would be reported and published the next. As a result, members have less personal time among themselves and have to constantly “act in front of a camera” to please their base. But when the doors are closed and no staff are around, members do talk to one another. At the end of March, I was involved in organizing a strategy to get a hearing for some of our bills in the Committee. The strategy involved a one-on-one meeting between Grijalva and the committee chair, where the congressman personally asked the chair for hearings on our legislations. After the meeting, the congressman told me, “Sometimes to getting things done on the Hill, you must prepare to speak to the devil.” At that moment, I came to understand what he told me during my first committee hearing, “Nothing is what it seems on Capitol Hill.”

FROM CAPITOL HILL TO CAPITAL (BANGKOK) SHUTDOWN

During my time on the Hill I have been constantly asked about the current political situation in Thailand. People on the Hill seem genuinely interested and have a surprising amount of knowledge about the political situation in Thailand: “Is the former prime minister (Thaksin Shinawatra) coming back?” “Will the Yellow shirts topple the government this time?” “What are the Red shirts doing?” “Should we expect to see another coup d'état?” Although the political turmoil in Thailand has been overshadowed by other unfolding political events around the world, such as the events in Ukraine, Venezuela, or Iran, people on the Hill still have a strong interest in the issue and want to see the situation resolved in a peaceful and democratic manner.

Not only are people on the Hill concerned with the situation in Thailand because of the stability of the country and its people, they also think about how the situation could undermine the US position, especially in regards to its “Strategic Rebalancing towards Asia-Pacific.” Many of my coworkers (both Democratic and Republican) point out that Thailand is economically one of the United States' major Southeast Asian trading hubs. Thailand is the only true democracy in the region (surrounded by quasi-democratic/authoritarian states like Myanmar, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Laos). Hence, a stable Thailand could play an important part in strengthening democracy in the region. While discussing Thai politics, I often ask my coworkers on the Hill what role they think the United States should play in respect to Thailand's current political conflicts. Many of my cowork-

ers respond that the United States should not intervene or play any role in Thailand's internal affairs, but let the Thais solve this problem themselves. Considering the continued disagreement and gridlock in Congress, it is quite reassuring to see both Democrats and Republicans agree on what to do (and not to do) with its oldest treaty ally in Asia.

HALF-WAY THROUGH

I wrote this article after three-and-a-half months in Congressman Grijalva's office, half-way through my time as a fellow. Although the work has been challenging, and has taken me out of my sociocultural comfort zone, I have tremendously enjoyed every second of the experience, from engaging with the office and committee staff

both on and off the Hill, to meeting new people and constituents, and most of all, to learning more about Congressman Grijalva. I learn new things on the Hill every day whether they are about policies or politics. The experience on the Hill is not only teaching me insight into US politics, particularly with respect to how Capitol Hill functions, but it is also one of the best life experiences I have ever had. And while the first part of my fellowship has concluded with many wonderful memories, I am looking forward to more in the second half.

NOTE

¹ Grijalvista is the term used to refer to people who work in Congressman Grijalva's office.