

Thailand's July 3 Elections: Have the Thais Empowered ASEAN Anew? by Ernest Bower

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Elections around Southeast Asia have assumed a new and empowering role in defining the region's political outlook. Beginning with Indonesia's historic transition from autocracy to nascent if chaotic democracy, the people of ASEAN are using the ballot box to send strong messages. This trend was underlined by the strong performance of Yingluck Shinawatra and her opposition Puea Thai Party in the July 3 elections in Thailand. Yingluck announced the following day that she would form a coalition government composed of five parties, led by her own (Puea Thai won 265 seats), which together will control 299 of the 500 seats in Thailand's parliament.

Unlike in the Middle East and its Arab Spring, most of Southeast Asia's voters are finding at least some political space and empowerment within their political systems—an ASEAN Year of Empowerment. The results appear to have the potential to strengthen governance and possibly regional integration.

In Thailand, for instance, the most consistent theme of the past five chaotic and even bloody years has been the unflinching will of Thai voters to remain focused on being empowered to choose leaders they believe will deliver value—economically, socially, and politically. While the response from important Thai institutions such as the military and monarchy remains to be seen, it appears that the people's mandate may actually be the key to unlocking the political stability that has been so elusive in Thailand over the last several years.

If that is the case, and Thailand retains stability and works toward reconciliation, then ASEAN and its partners would benefit significantly.

ASEAN has been quietly suffering in its efforts to move toward its stated goals of political, economic, and cultural integration for several reasons, including the ugly thorn of Burma. However, the second-largest barrier has been the fact that one of its most important founding members, Thailand, the very country in which the regional grouping was founded in 1967, has been embroiled in domestic political infighting and has thus been unable to play its role since 2006 as one of the "core five" members of ASEAN. Indeed, Thailand's Machiavellian politics have, at least in part, resulted in conflict with its neighbor Cambodia and directly undercut the narrative of ASEAN unity.

While Thailand was focused internally, Vietnam has joined the core five and Indonesia has stepped back into its traditional leadership role. In addition, the Philippines, an original member of the nucleus of ASEAN that had been

quietly dropped under the reign of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, has been informally reinstated under the leadership of President Benigno Aquino III. Aquino is another leader who, arguably like political neophyte Yingluck, was compelled to take up the mantle of responsibility at the behest of his people. If Thailand is back, ASEAN will have strengthened its core to include six strong nations.

Interestingly, the majority of ASEAN's new core six have undergone important recent elections that have resulted in new leadership or refocused incumbents on responsiveness to the needs of voters, including economic development, governance, reform, and core requirements such as education, health care, and infrastructure.

Prime Minister Najib Razak in Malaysia has worked hard to put political and economic reforms in place after heeding the historic message of the March 2008 elections. His efforts will be judged in the next Malaysian general elections, widely expected within the next year. Singaporean voters stunned the incumbent People's Action Party in May when they voted a historic number of opposition party members into Parliament, and in the Philippines, voters last year conscripted Aquino to run for president and elected him with a mandate to fight corruption and begin a renaissance for governance in the republic. Even Vietnam went through its eleventh Communist Party Congress in January in which newly empowered voters and provincial leaders were given a stronger role in selecting leadership. Increased accountability in governance is a real trend in Vietnamese politics.

US foreign policy should recognize the trends toward empowerment and governance in Southeast Asia. The movements have the potential to underpin a peaceful and prosperous Asia for decades to come.

The Obama administration has positioned itself well to support and invest in a strong ASEAN made up of countries working to cope with new democracies and strengthened institutions. This is a critical point in the region's development. While the choices illuminating political evolution, by definition, must come from the 620 million denizens of ASEAN, the US should work closely and carefully with its allies and partners in ASEAN, and throughout Asia, to support these trends and an empowered ASEAN.

The United States made a bet on a strong ASEAN as the foundation for new Asian regionalism when it joined the East Asia Summit (EAS) and when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was the first to sign up to attend the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus Eight (ADMM+) in Vietnam last year. That vision is paying dividends, and investment, in terms of higher-level engagement in bilateral and regional frameworks backed by resources from the US Agency for International Development, Department of Defense, the Office of the US Trade Representative, and related agencies, should

be redoubled and announced during President Obama's showcase November schedule that includes hosting the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders meeting in Honolulu and visiting Indonesia for his first EAS meeting and the third US-ASEAN Leaders Summit.

Thailand's historic elections last weekend may have opened a door for new stability in Thailand. While they certainly did not resolve the massive underlying divisions between the country's traditional power institutions and its newly empowered voters, the elections certainly sent a clear message to all Thais about the path to peace and prosperity. Thailand has traditionally adapted to support its own interests. There is at least a hopeful scenario in which competing Thai interests will find an accommodation to promote national interests over the coming years. While it would be easy to argue that such an outcome is too optimistic, it would be in Thailand's, ASEAN's, and the United States' interests to see a new political accommodation emerge.

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