



## **Democracy Returns to Thailand?** by Will Itoh

Thailand's December 23 elections will choose 480 members of the House of Representatives, 400 from constituencies and 80 selected on a proportional basis from party lists. The elections will begin a new chapter in Thai politics, though the story line might seem familiar. Gone is former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, deposed by a military coup in September 2006, but his shadow looms over the elections. Gone also is his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party which dominated the Thai parliament after dramatic election victories in 2001 and 2005, although elements of the party have been reassembled under a new name. The constitutional court found TRT guilty of election fraud, ordered TRT to dissolve, and banned 111 senior party executives from electoral politics for five years.

Still around, however, are former Thaksin allies and associates who have organized new parties which are expected to do well in the December 23 contest. The People's Power Party (Palang Prachachon or PPP) led by veteran political personality Samak Sundaravej, is essentially a reincarnation of the TRT and many suspect that the new party receives financial support from the wealthy Thaksin family. The PPP is expected to attract voters in former TRT strongholds and is the party of choice of more than 30% of voters. The Motherland Party (Pua Paendin) headed by another veteran politician, Suwit Kunkitti, contains several former TRT cabinet members, though it claims to offer a "third choice" for voters looking for an alternative to the pro-Thaksin or anti-Thaksin parties. Though only in single digits, Suwit's party may do well in rural areas.

Thailand's oldest political party, the Democrats (Prachaitipat) under Abhisit Vejjajiva, have strong support in the South and in Bangkok. Under Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, the Democrats were in government from 1997 until swept out of office by Thaksin's TRT in 2001. In opposition and during the current transition period before the December 23 election, the Democrats have not been as successful as expected in convincing the public that they are the obvious choice to lead the nation once again. Polling data suggest that they have the support of 30% of the voting public, similar to figures reported for Samak's PPP.

Under the leadership of the 43-year-old, Oxford educated Abhisit, the Democrats are trying to shake off a perception that they are more concerned with process than results and are more focused on their constituencies in the middle class and the south. Taking a leaf from Thaksin's highly successful "populist policies," the Democrats are campaigning on promises of "99 days" of action to implement free education for all, lower cooking gas prices, an energy conservation campaign, a new effort to seek peace in the troubled southernmost provinces and a fund to help the poor improve

their quality of life along the lines of His Majesty King Bhumibol's "sufficiency economy" philosophy. Abhisit is the clear favorite of business, but he has not yet appeared to capture the hearts of lower income voters.

The Thai Nation Party (Chart Thai) is another older party headed by veteran politician Banharn Silpa-Archa. Banharn was Prime Minister under the coalition government which collapsed in late 1996. With poll data suggesting around 10% support, Banharn can be expected to join a Democrat-led coalition if it emerges after the December 23 result.

66 political parties are now legally registered with the Election Commission and more than 18 have declared the intent to compete for seats in the new Thai Parliament. Among the new parties to emerge during the past year, the United Development Party (Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana) has brought together a notable collection of personalities from varied backgrounds. The party head is General Chetta Thanajaro, respected former commander in chief of the Royal Thai Army. Though still in single digits in the polls, the party is expected to win several seats in the December 23 contest.

The Neutral Democratic Party (Matchima Thippathai), the creation of tycoon Prachai Leophairatana, received support from 9% of respondents in one survey last month. Prachai, a Thaksin critic, was recently convicted for stock manipulation, but is not technically banned from politics. Despite public statements that he would resign, he will remain as party leader and recently signaled his commitment to the party by cashing in a large chunk of his company shares to help fund party campaign expenses.

The Royal People Party (Pracha Raj) founded by veteran politician Sanoh Thienthong, an early defector from the TRT, will gain a handful of seats in the new Parliament, if only from Sa Kaew province. Among other political personalities still looking for a party and a role is former Prime Minister General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, head of the New Aspiration Party which entered into a coalition with Thaksin in 2001 and was then totally absorbed into the TRT. Chavalit has not yet associated himself with any party.

Polling data has been limited and the motives and methods of many surveys have been questioned. Generally, polling results tend to reflect public perceptions of the national image of each party. More than half of Thai voters claimed to be undecided two weeks before the election. The 400 seats representing local constituencies will determine which party will be in a position to form the new government. The PPP and Democrats both publicly claim to be in a position to return around 200 members, overly optimistic projections for both parties. The next government will be a coalition, formed either by the PPP, presumably with support from Pua Paendin and others; or by the Democrats who will bring along Chart Thai and others. However, for many party leaders, the goal of

getting into government will be more important than ideology, policy, or commitments to political allies.

While many hope that December 23 will mark the return of a democratically elected parliament in Thailand, the process is likely to be untidy and it will take longer than anticipated to form a new government. The National Election Commission will have the responsibility of adjudicating contested seats and will hand out “yellow” and “red” cards to candidates deemed to be in violation of the rules. Given the strong “anti-Thaksin” or “pro-Thaksin” sentiments in the country, along with voting outcomes which will be dramatically different by region, one can predict that the commission will have its hands full with recounts and in some cases, new elections to fill disputed seats.

Advance and absentee balloting which took place a week ahead of the polls, has already given some indications of what lies ahead for the elections. Turnout was much higher than expected, with almost 3 million people exercising their right to vote early. This amounted to 88% of those registered to vote early, the highest advance vote ever. There were claims that the military-installed government had stimulated the high turnout by ordering soldiers to vote against the PPP. Although the advance voting was generally peaceful, there were immediate charges of voting fraud that were referred to the election commission.

Under the most optimistic scenario, if the Democrats gain a plurality of seats and if the number of disputed seats is relatively small, it will be late January before a new government can be formed. If the PPP does well, the process will be much more difficult as there will be a real “anyone but the PPP” movement to keep the heirs of Thaksin from forming a government. One real concern is that the anti-PPP (read anti-Thaksin) forces will act before the election to constrain PPP candidates and their leader, Samak. While we are hopeful that Thailand will get through the elections and move to a new political foundation, one cannot rule out some form of intervention to constrain the PPP. Ironically, as Samak talks more openly in defense of Thaksin, the more the military worries about a move to bring back Thaksin, thus increasing the possibility that it may act to prevent that from happening. Leaders of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), the loosely organized pressure group that led mass protests against the Thaksin government, have already announced that they will move against a PPP government and especially any effort to reinstate the political rights of the 111 politicians banned from politics or to allow Thaksin to return to Thailand without facing trial.

Even without challenges from the PAD or the military, a PPP government would face significant difficulties in governing. Without Thaksin and the 111 banned politicians, the party has little of the charisma, political savvy and brainpower that fueled Thaksin’s government. Samak, a sometimes irascible personality, is not seen as a suitable candidate for prime minister by opinion leaders in Bangkok. His term as governor of Bangkok produced little except charges of corruption – charges that are under investigation and could result in an indictment of Samak. There are also outstanding charges of forgery on a membership application that could result in the dissolution of the PPP.

Assuming that all parties are able to contest the election throughout the country, no party will be able to claim a real majority of the 480 seats in the new parliament. Thailand will thus return to the pattern of coalition governments of the early 1990s, marked by less effective political leadership and a stronger bureaucracy, problems that many hoped would be corrected by the 1997 reform constitution. Much of the bureaucratic influence reduced in that constitution has been restored in the constitution promulgated earlier this year. Some of last-minute legislation being considered by the military-appointed National Legislative Assembly also restores power to the bureaucracy and the security agencies. Given the nation’s experience with a dominant single party under Thaksin, who actively moved to undercut the checks and safeguards of the new system, a return to coalition government along past lines may be the preferred path.

Many Thai are hopeful that the December 23 elections will pave the way for a new foundation for Thailand’s political future. Many believe that the country must return to stability and economic growth and that the nation has lost valuable time in facing the challenges of the future. People are ready to move beyond the interim government appointed by the Military Council which was responsible for the September 2006 coup and are hopeful that a new government will ultimately be capable of leading the country. A successful transition to a democratically-elected parliamentary government will improve Thailand’s international image, along with restoring confidence of investors, who have been on the sidelines in recent months. A coalition government, with politicians keeping an eye on one another, would presumably reduce the ability of individual cabinet members to make policy without consulting other members of the cabinet, a demonstrated weakness of the current interim government.

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