

Thailand's right-wing populist wins national elections

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Thailand's autocratic prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra won a second term of office at national elections held last Sunday. While the results are yet to be finalised, his Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thai) party is expected to win around 375 of the 500 parliamentary seats. The huge majority will allow Thaksin to dispense with his coalition partners, amend the constitution and make the government immune from opposition censure motions.

Thaksin, a former police colonel, is one of the country's richest men. He built his business empire and a personal fortune of \$1.4 billion by securing lucrative monopolies and state contracts under previous military regimes. Thaksin formed the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party before the 2001 elections and defeated the Democratic Party-led government by appealing to those hard-hit by the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, particularly the rural poor.

In the recent campaign, Thaksin went one step further, promising to "end poverty" in his next term. He shamelessly declared: "You have a prime minister who is a capitalist, and so I am good at finding capital for people." His government has been buoyed by average economic growth rates of 6.1 percent over the past three years, in large part due to growing trade with China and the US.

Thaksin's popularity among the poor is largely due to a series of handouts: a \$2.3 billion fund for village development, debt cancellation for farmers, low interest loans and cheap medical care. The viability of these schemes, however, depends on continuing high growth rates. Commenting in the *International Herald Tribune*, economist Wichai Turongpun warned that Thais were hooked on easy credit, increased rural debt and strained state coffers. "Should a future government stop the program, then we will have trouble because the villages

are deep in debt," he noted.

While welcoming his reelection, economic analysts have urged Thaksin to press ahead with privatisation and further pro-market reforms. Such measures will not only further exacerbate social inequality. They will threaten Thaksin's support among layers of business seeking government protection and cheap loans. The Economist Intelligence Unit recently noted: "The Thaksin administration is particularly vulnerable to allegations of cronyism partly because the cabinet includes a high number of people with business interests or connections."

Philippe Sachs, an analyst for the Standard & Poors credit rating agency, raised concerns about the concentration of power in Thaksin's hands. "If these fears are realised and it resulted in an increase in corruption and a marked rise in populist policies, Thailand's creditworthiness could suffer," he warned. Among the demands of capital are calls to rein in the government budget and to slash subsidies on oil—measures that will erode the social position of the country's poor.

The election was a devastating blow to the opposition Democratic Party, which appealed to voters to give it 201 seats—enough to keep a check on Thaksin. It is likely to win only 91. On Tuesday, party leader Banyat Bantadtan took responsibility for the result and resigned his post. The Mahachon Party—a recently formed breakaway from the Democratic Party—is likely to win only one seat. Its leader Sanan Kachornprasart announced his intention to retire from politics.

The low vote for the Democratic Party is a product of a number of factors, including Thaksin's control over a substantial section of the media—both government and through his own companies—and blatant vote buying. One poll estimated that some 10 billion baht or \$US260

million was spent in bribes to voters during the campaign.

More fundamentally, however, the Democratic Party failed to offer any political alternative to Thaksin. The party, the oldest in Thailand, built its support, particularly among sections of the urban middle class, through its limited opposition to the country's previous military regimes. It came to power in the immediate aftermath of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis and is still identified with the austerity measures implemented at the behest of the IMF and World Bank.

It was only in the predominantly Muslim south of the country, which Thaksin has placed under martial rule in order to suppress separatist sentiment, that the Democratic Party made any gains. It took 10 of the 11 seats in the three southern Thai provinces while the TRT lost all six of its seats. The TRT's former ally—Chart Thai—took one southern seat in the tsunami-devastated area of Phang Nga. Chart Thai expects to win 30 seats overall.

The hostility to Thaksin in the south is a direct product of the ruthless methods that have been used against separatist rebels. Last October, the security forces provoked an international outcry over the killing of at least 86 demonstrators in the Tak Bai district of Narathiwat province. Six were shot dead and 80 more died of suffocation after they were thrown into military trucks on top of each other and with their hands tied behind the back.

More than 550 people have died over the past year either at the hands of the military or armed separatist groups. Thaksin has responded to rebel attacks with increased military repression. According to the *Independent* newspaper, the army sent an extra 10,000 troops into the southern areas prior to the election.

While both Washington and Bangkok deny any US direct involvement in military operations in the Muslim south, there is no doubt that ties exist. Thaksin backed the Bush administration's "war on terrorism", dispatched 450 Thai troops to Iraq and established closer relations between Thai and US intelligence agencies. When alleged terrorist Riduan Isamuddin, also known as Hambali, was captured in southern Thailand in August 2003, he was immediately handed over to US authorities and is still being held at a secret location.

The repression in southern Thailand is just the

sharpest expression of Thaksin's anti-democratic methods. In February 2003, his administration launched a vicious "law-and-order" campaign to crack down on drugs. A list of thousands of alleged "drug dealers" was announced along with an ultimatum to report to the police or face the consequences. In the space of three months, more than 2,000 people were shot dead in what were widely believed to be police-organised extra-judicial killings. Despite protests by human rights organisations, there was no serious government investigation into the deaths.

The latest report on Thailand by the US-based Human Rights Watch organisation pointed to Thaksin's stifling control of the media and clamp down on protests. "Over the past three years, the Thai Journalists Association and the Thai Broadcasters Association have documented more than 20 cases in which news editors and journalists were dismissed or transferred, or their work tampered with, to appease the government. The authorities have arbitrarily used work permits or visa renewals as effective tools for pressuring foreign journalists."

Brad Adams, Asia director for Human Rights Watch, commented after the elections: "Thailand has gone from being a beacon of freedom and respect for human rights in the region to being a country of high concern. Much of the steady progress Thailand had made in the last decade has been rolled back under Thaksin's tenure."

Even in the 1990s, Thailand was never a "beacon of freedom". The military, which dominated the country for much of the twentieth century, was compelled to pull back and concede elections after a wave of public protests in 1991. The emergence of the right-wing populist Thaksin is a sure sign that the ruling class is once again contemplating police state methods to deal with rising social tensions.



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