

# By-elections fail to end Thai political crisis

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By-elections held last Sunday for 40 unfilled lower house seats in the Thai parliament have failed to resolve the constitutional crisis created by the boycott of the April 2 national elections by the major opposition parties. While some seats were filled, 13 are still vacant after the candidates did not attain the necessary minimum of 20 percent of voters. The Thai constitution requires that all 500 seats be filled before parliament can meet and install a new government.

In a last ditch attempt to fill the remaining seats before the constitutional deadline of May 1, election officials have called a third round of voting on April 29. It is unlikely that the new poll will break the impasse. All 13 seats are in southern Thailand where Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party are bitterly hated for unleashing military repression to crush Muslim separatists.

Thaksin called the April 2 election to shore up his position after a series of mass protests in Bangkok demanded his resignation, amid allegations of corruption and hostility to his anti-democratic methods. The opposition Democratic, Chat Thai and Mahachon parties boycotted the election and called on voters not to cast their ballot for any of the remaining candidates.

Even though Thaksin's TRT obtained more than 50 percent of the total vote, the outcome was a serious rebuff. At least 10 million people formally registered a "no vote" on the ballot paper. In Bangkok, the "no vote" was over 50 percent as compared to just 45.9 percent who voted for TRT. The majority of the TRT's 16 million votes came from the rural north.

Facing the prospect of ongoing anti-government protests and waning support in ruling circles, Thaksin announced on April 4 that he would not seek the premiership when the new parliament met. It is now unclear whether the parliament will be able to convene to decide on a successor.

The main opposition parties have appealed to King

Bhumibol Adulyadej as head of state to call fresh elections in which they could participate. However, in a rare televised statement yesterday, the king rejected any direct intervention and called on the Thai courts to immediately resolve the constitutional crisis. "Everyone has to help to prevent the country from plunging deeper into turmoil, which will make it more difficult to rescue in the future," he said.

National Election Commission (NEC) officials have suggested that they may seek permission from the Constitutional Court to convene parliament without all seats being filled, provoking sharp protests from opposition figures. As a result of the opposition boycott, the parliament elected on April 2 consists overwhelmingly of TRT members.

Sunthorn Rakwong, a spokesperson for the Peoples' Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which organised the anti-Thaksin protests, condemned the proposal and the NEC as a political tool of the TRT. Thammasat University vice rector Parinya Thewanarumitkul told the *Bangkok Post* that the NEC suggestion was "unconstitutional" and that "opening parliament is off limits" to the NEC.

Even if fresh elections were called, it is likely that the TRT would retain government. Thaksin is still popular in rural areas as a result of his handouts and debt assistance. With Thaksin on leave, the government is currently in the hands of deputy prime minister General Chidchai Wannasathit. Thaksin appears to favour the other deputy prime minister Somkid Jatusripitak as his successor.

The Bangkok press has pointed out that neither candidate has a significant power base within the TRT and suggested that Thaksin may try to manage government from the sidelines. Whatever the outcome of the immediate constitutional standoff, the political crisis reflects deep-seated divisions in Thai ruling circles, particularly over economic policy, as well as

broad popular resentment over growing social inequality and attacks on democratic rights.

The anti-Thaksin rallies swelled to more than 100,000 after the February sale of the Thaksin family share in the Shin Corp to the Singapore government's investment arm, Tamasek, for \$US1.9 billion. The most prominent protest leaders were publishing tycoon Sondhi Limthongkul and former Bangkok governor Chamlong Srimuang, both of whom had been prominent Thaksin supporters.

When he was first elected in 2001, Thaksin capitalised on the widespread hostility to the impact of the IMF "reforms" being implemented by the Democratic Party in response to the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. His nationalist demagoguery included promises to protect business threatened by the opening up of the Thai economy as well as cheap health care and village development aid.

However, under pressure from foreign investors and governments, Thaksin was forced to continue the policies of market reform. These included the privatisation of the state oil company and airports and a proposal to sell off the national electricity generating authority (EGAT). Thaksin was under pressure from Washington to speed up the negotiation of a free trade deal with the United States.

These "reforms" earned Thaksin high praise in the international press. The *New York Times*, for instance, on April 11 referred to his economic record as "most impressive". But the policies produced strong opposition from business interests represented by figures like Sondhi and Chamlong. Sondhi, who was bankrupted by the Asian financial crisis, had strongly backed Thaksin in 2001 and was duly rewarded with government contracts that helped him to reestablish his business empire.

The anti-government protests were greatly boosted by the flagrant manner in which the Thaksin family avoided paying any tax in the Shin Corp sale. Opposition leaders also denounced the sale of a key Thai asset to a foreign corporation. The rallies also attracted broader layers including workers threatened by privatisation, teachers fighting Thaksin's plans to decentralise state education and those opposed to the government's blatant attacks on democratic rights.

None of these issues will be resolved by replacing Thaksin as prime minister or through fresh elections.

The divisions in the Thai ruling elites are being exacerbated by a slowing economy and foreign investment for which there is no immediate relief in sight. While Thaksin's decision to step aside ended temporarily the protest rallies in Bangkok, mass opposition may well re-emerge. A major protest has been organised for May 2—the day after the deadline for the recall of parliament.



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