

Thai military junta stages carefully managed election

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Thailand's national election takes place tomorrow under the firm grip of the country's military junta, known as the Council for National Security (CNS). On the pretext of "maintaining order", some 200,000 police and soldiers have been mobilised to supervise the poll. Martial law is still in place in 31 of the country's 76 provinces, enabling the military to ban political gatherings, censor the media and detain people without charge.

The immediate target of the regime's measures is former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup last year. His Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party was dissolved and 111 party executives, including Thaksin, were banned from politics for five years. The Electoral Commission has prohibited the banned politicians from backing any candidate or party and is currently investigating the distribution of videos of Thaksin urging voters to support the People Power Party (PPP).

The election itself is taking place under a constitution drawn up by the CNS, designed to favour minor parties and encourage weak coalitions that can be easily manipulated. Of the 480 lower house seats, 80 are allocated to 10-seat constituencies where the result will be decided by proportional representation. The remaining 400 seats will be allocated to 197 constituencies of one to three seats. The new constitution was formally ratified by referendum in August, with a turnout of only 57.6 percent. Former TRT strongholds in the north and east voted against the constitution.

Despite all of the junta's measures, the outcome of tomorrow's poll is by no means certain. The PPP, which was formed by TRT supporters, appears likely to win the largest slice of the vote. The party is led by right-wing politician Samak Sundaravej, who was handpicked by the exiled Thaksin, and operates from the TRT's old headquarters.

Opinion polls predict that the PPP could pick up between 180 and 200 seats. Apart from pardoning Thaksin and other banned TRT politicians, the PPP has promised to extend the TRT's populist measures, particularly designed to appeal to

its rural base. These include rural development programs, the creation of a new Peoples Bank, subsidised agricultural prices, a moratorium on farm debt, a reduction of household debt and the revival of infrastructure spending programs.

The Democratic Party, which the military tacitly backs as the alternative to the PPP, is predicted to win only 120 to 140 seats. It may be able to form a coalition with the support of smaller parties and independents. The Democrats' traditional partner, Chat Thai, and Pua Pandin, a TRT breakaway, are predicted to gain 60 to 70 seats each. Pua Pandin is rumoured to be backed by the military, a claim the party denies.

At first sight, the political line-up appears paradoxical. The Democratic Party, Thailand's longest standing party and previously an opponent of the country's many military regimes, is favoured by the junta. The PPP, on the other hand, emerged from the TRT, which was closely linked at the outset with conservative layers of the political establishment, including the security forces.

Thaksin, a former policeman turned businessman, made his initial fortunes through military contracts. The current PPP leader Samak is notorious for his role as interior minister in the military dictatorship that seized power in 1976 following a massacre of students at Thammasat University. He was also deputy prime minister in May 1992 when the army shot dead scores of anti-government protesters.

The current political conflict reflects deep and unresolved divisions within the Thai ruling elite that emerged following the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Thaksin came to power in 2001 amid widespread hostility to the social impact of IMF-dictated economic "reforms" implemented by the Democratic Party-led government. His TRT appealed to the rural poor with a series of limited palliatives and, more importantly, guaranteed to protect sections of business hard hit by the economic crisis.

As Thailand's economic position deteriorated, however, the TRT government came under the same international pressure as the Democrats to open up the economy to

investment. Thaksin initiated a program of deregulation and privatisation, and began negotiations for a free trade deal with the US. At the same time, his appeals to Buddhist communalism and instigation of a virtual war on Muslim separatists in the southern provinces provoked deep concerns in the military hierarchy about growing instability.

Sections of the ruling elite that had supported Thaksin's rise to power turned on him last year. Exploiting allegations of corruption surrounding the \$US1.9 billion sale of Thaksin family's Shin Corp telecommunications conglomerate, his political opponents built large protests in Bangkok demanding his resignation. As the campaign proceeded, the demonstrations were joined by sections of the middle class and workers opposed to Thaksin's autocratic methods and proposed privatisations.

The political standoff produced a drawn-out constitutional crisis as the Democratic Party boycotted fresh elections, which the TRT won overwhelmingly. With the backing of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the military, headed by General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, seized power in September 2006 to prevent the confrontation from spiralling out of control. The new junta immediately implemented a series of economic measures aimed at protecting Thai businesses from foreign competition.

The coup resolved none of the underlying economic problems and political tensions. The regime was compelled to partially reverse its capital controls, announced last December, when they provoked a stock market crisis. Its economic policies have been strongly criticised by international financial commentators. Economic growth is predicted to be just 4.3 percent this year—the lowest in the region. The election is an attempt by the military to improve Thailand's international standing and economic prospects even as it retains tight control over key aspects of the state apparatus.

Whatever happens in the lower house, the military and its allies will retain effective control of the upper house Senate where 74 of the 150 seats will be appointed by a panel selected from the higher courts and other state bodies. The upper house will have the power, with a three-fifths majority, to impeach any MP, including any prime minister. The constitution drawn up by the junta enshrines King Bhumibol's ideas of economic "self-sufficiency", requiring the state to provide economic infrastructure and to block private sector monopolies. It also gives full legal immunity to all those involved in last year's coup.

Ominously, the CNS has been pushing through a draconian new internal security law that legitimises a permanent political role for the military. The legislation would give the Internal Security Operations Command extensive powers to restrict basic democratic rights and

override the civilian administration in all or part of the country without the formal declaration of a state of emergency or accountability to the courts or parliament. The law passed its first parliamentary reading in November and if finally enacted would give the military a powerful tool to pressure, threaten, and if need be sideline, any government.

Despite its obvious intention of keeping a tight rein on the next government, the military confronts obvious dilemmas. Its own lack of political support is underscored by the fact that it has no party standing in the election on its behalf. Moreover, the parties favoured by the military have been keen to distance themselves from the junta and its policies. By tacitly accepting the coup and the subsequent regime, the Democrats have in fact deeply damaged their own reputation as opponents of the military.

While making their own populist promises, the Democrats have been promoting themselves as "economic managers". According to an *Asia Times* report last month, deputy leader Korn Chatikavanij promised a private meeting of foreign investors that the party would rapidly improve the country's transport infrastructure. Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva has said he will make scrapping capital controls a priority. Any attempt to do so is likely to bring a Democrat-led government into conflict with the military and its business backers.

Whoever wins power after tomorrow's poll will confront economic difficulties that will only worsen amid growing international financial uncertainty, and fuel popular resentment and opposition. Far from resolving Thailand's intractable political crisis, the election is only setting the stage for its intensification.



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