

Political unrest looms after Thai elections

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Whatever the outcome of Thailand's national election next Sunday, the potential exists for a new round of political unrest as bitter infighting continues in Thai ruling circles between supporters and opponents of exiled Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Most polls predict that Puea Thai led by Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra will win the most seats and may even achieve an outright majority, despite changes to the constitution aimed at favouring other parties. If Puea Thai does form the next government, it is likely to face concerted opposition from the traditional establishment centred on the army, state bureaucracy and the monarchy.

In 2006, the military ousted Thaksin amid sharp differences over his pro-market measures and methods of rule, which undermined the country's established patronage system. Political turmoil erupted again in 2008 after the pro-Thaksin party won national elections and formed government. Anti-Thaksin protests led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and backed by the monarchy and the army created the conditions for the removal of two prime ministers by the judiciary and the installation of Abhisit Vejjajiva and his Democrat Party in power.

Last year Abhisit ordered a bloody crackdown by the army on pro-Thaksin protesters led by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) who were demanding Abhisit's resignation and early elections. At least 91 demonstrators, many of whom were rural poor from the northern areas of the country, were shot dead and many more injured.

While Abhisit eventually called the elections earlier than expected, none of the underlying political and social tensions has been resolved.

The likelihood of new political unrest has led to nervousness in financial circles in Thailand and internationally. Since campaigning formally began last month, the Thai stock exchange has fallen by 5 percent. According to estimates cited in Britain's *Financial Times*, more than \$1 billion has been withdrawn by foreign investors from Thai shares.

An article on the *Bloomberg* website on June 22 warned that Thailand's "economic resilience" might "be tested next month as polls indicate a win for the party removed from power twice in the past five years." It noted that the 2010-2011 Global Competitiveness Report based on a survey of 13,000 executives said government and policy instability were the biggest concerns for undertaking business in Thailand.

In Thailand, the Thai Bankers' Association secretary general Kriengkrai Thiennukul expressed concerns that the spectre of political violence appeared to be raising its head again. He warned of mass layoffs as "investors will step away from Thailand and that will certainly damage Thailand in the long run."

As polling day approaches, the campaign itself is sharpening tensions between the government and opposition. Puea Thai's support among the country's rural and urban poor stems from limited concessions made by Thaksin while he was in office as part of his economic stimulus measures. Abhisit's attempts to outbid Puea Thai's populist pledges by promising wage rises and support for small farmers have largely failed. As a result, the government has turned to more drastic methods.

Last Thursday, the Democrats provocatively staged a large rally at Ratchaprasong intersection in

Bangkok—the site of the protracted protests by the anti-government UDD “Red Shirts” last year. Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban told supporters that no one had been killed by the army during last year’s crackdown—despite abundant evidence, including video footage, to the contrary. He denounced the UDD leaders standing as Puea Thai candidates, saying a vote for them meant “you select the terrorists to be members of parliament.”

Abhisit took up the theme of UDD “terrorism” in a demagogic tirade calling for a Democrat majority. He said that if people were afraid to vote for the Democrats because of the fear of Red Shirt violence then “the whole country will continue to be Thaksin’s hostages forever.” These denunciations of opposition “violence” and “terrorism” not only sharply polarise voters, but also lay the groundwork for anti-Thaksin protests or an army intervention if Puea Thai wins the poll.

The military leadership has denied any plans for a coup, but its bias is obvious. In a nationally-televised address on June 14, the national army chief, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, made a transparent appeal for voters to reject Thaksin and Puea Thai and vote for “good people.” Referring to the fact that pro-Thaksin party won the last election in 2007, he said: “If you allow the election [result] to be the same as before, you will not get anything new and you will not see any improvement from this election.”

Agence France Presse this week reported that the military had sent teams from its Internal Operations Command to pro-Red Shirt villages in the country’s north east to promote development projects sponsored by the country’s king. While the military denied that it was attempting to undermine Puea Thai support, local villagers told the news agency that the visits had only started in recent weeks.

The anti-Thaksin PAD, which played a prominent role in protests against Thaksin in 2006 and 2008, has refused to back the Democrats, having criticised Abhisit for taking a weak stand over border clashes with Cambodia earlier this year. PAD has begun legal action, however, involving the Election Commission to have Puea Thai outlawed because of its connection to

Thaksin, who was convicted of corruption.

Legal action to outlaw Puea Thai or pursue Thaksin’s sister Yingluck over alleged perjury would be one means of undermining the party if it won the election. In 2008, two pro-Thaksin prime ministers were removed on trumped-up charges in what amounted to judicial coups. With their strong bias toward the traditional elites, the courts could well be used to remove a Puea Thai-led government.

If Puea Thai wins the election but fails to achieve an absolute majority, it will need the support of minor parties. In late 2008, the military put pressure on the minor parties to switch sides to the Democrats, along with a faction of the ruling pro-Thaksin party. The army is quite capable of repeating the exercise to snatch power away from Puea Thai.

If that happens or blatantly rigged elections deliver a win for the Democrats, the result will only enrage the rural and urban poor who falsely regard the billionaire Thaksin and Puea Thai as their champion against Bangkok’s wealthy elite. Social tensions that have already been fuelled by sharply rising prices would inevitably erupt again and quickly go beyond the limited promises being made by Puea Thai and UDD leaders.



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