

Pro-Thaksin party to form next Thai government after election win

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The opposition party, Puea Thai, won a clear majority in Sunday's election and will form the next Thai government in coalition with four smaller parties. Unofficial Election Commission results released Monday gave Puea Thai, which is closely associated with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, 265 seats in the 500-seat parliament.

The result is a set back to Thailand's traditional elites—the military, monarchy and state bureaucracy—that backed the army coup which ousted Thaksin in 2006, engineered the removal of two pro-Thaksin governments in 2008 and helped install a Democrat Party-led government headed by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. On Sunday, the Democrats won just 159 seats.

Both Puea Thai and the Democrats ran populist campaigns, promising handouts to small farmers, workers and the urban and rural power. During his term in office from 2001 to 2006, Thaksin built a base of support, particularly in the rural north and north east of the country, with a series of limited concessions that formed part of his economic stimulus measures. Puea Thai swept these northern areas and made significant gains in Bangkok.

Despite constitutional changes by the military in 2007 and by the Democrats this year designed to prevent victories by pro-Thaksin parties, these parties have now won every national election over the past decade.

As Chulalongkorn University academic Thitinan Pongsudhirak told the media, however, the large vote for Puea Thai was “not so much a vote for Thaksin as a vote against the manipulation, coercion and suppression that we've seen since 2006.” The outcome expressed the bitter resentment among the urban and rural poor who last year participated in months of anti-government protests that were violently crushed by army, which killed at least 91 people and injured 1,800.

Puea Thai's leader, Thaksin's youngest sister Yingluck Shinawatra, announced the formation of a five-party coalition yesterday with four smaller parties—Charthaipattana, Chart Thai Pattana Puea Pandin, Palang Chon and Mahachon. If the provisional results are confirmed, the coalition will have a total of 299 seats.

Although she undoubtedly consulted her brother, who is living in exile in Dubai, Yingluck made the announcement without any consultation with the party's executive. Despite Puea Thai itself holding a clear parliamentary majority, she is clearly seeking to pre-empt any move by the army or through the courts to block the formation of a Puea Thai government.

Abhisit, who had provocatively branded Puea Thai as a “terrorist” organisation during the campaign, conceded defeat and announced his resignation as Democrat leader yesterday. The outgoing defence minister and former army commander Prawit Wongsuwan attempted to calm concerns about another coup by declaring on Monday that “the army accepts the election results” and has “no desire to stray out of its assigned roles.”

Both the *Asia Times* web site and the *Wall Street Journal* have published articles pointing to secret negotiations in Brunei between representatives of Thaksin, the monarchy and the military to strike a peace deal between the warring factions of the Thai ruling elite. The agreement reportedly involves a guarantee by the army not to hinder or oust a Puea Thai government. In return, Puea Thai would not take action against the 2006 coup makers, remove the current army head General Prayuth Chan-ocha, interfere in military affairs or change the country's anti-democratic *lese majeste* laws.

That these talks have apparently taken place after five years of bitter infighting is in large measure due to fears in the ruling elite as a whole that last year's protests began to raise social demands by ordinary working people that neither the government nor the opposition can satisfy. After last year's military crackdown, the Abhisit government and the protest leadership of the “red shirt” United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) both attempted to ease tensions in order to prevent a further radicalisation of the urban and rural poor.

In part, Abhisit's decision to call the election early was a concession to the demands of the UDD and Puea Thai. Abhisit also calculated that, with the economy slowing, an early election offered the Democrats the best chance to retain office.

Yingluck has already publicly declared that a Puea Thai government would not take revenge against the military and would

respect the monarchy.

However, none of the issues underlying the past five years of political turmoil has been resolved. Bangkok's traditional elites initially backed the billionaire Thaksin when he took power in 2001, but turned on him after his government failed to live up to its promises to protect Thai businesses and reverse the Democrats' implementation of the International Monetary Fund's pro-market restructuring agenda. His autocratic methods of rule further alienated sections of the Bangkok middle classes and cut across systems of patronage that had previously benefitted the military, state bureaucracy and monarchy.

While an immediate move against the government is not likely, nothing can be ruled out. Legal moves have been initiated against Yingluck over perjury allegations. The election results could be challenged and charges of electoral fraud laid—the method used to oust a pro-Thaksin government in 2008. In the background, the military continues to watch and wait. Under its 2007 constitution, the generals have significant powers to intervene whenever they perceive a political crisis.

The anti-Thaksin *Nation* newspaper warned yesterday that Puea Thai had “a massive responsibility to create a government whose legitimacy does not rest solely on a numerical majority.” It ominously warned that the party should learn from the fate of previous pro-Thaksin governments that had eroded goodwill and “encouraged unwarranted street politics and military intervention.”

The most obvious trigger for renewed political turmoil would be any attempt by Puea Thai to carry out its election promise of an amnesty for Thaksin. Both Yingluck and Thaksin have denied that there would be any precipitous steps to allow the former prime minister to return to Bangkok or recover monies seized after his corruption conviction. Any move in that direction would provoke fierce opposition from sections of the military and the People's Alliance for Democracy. PAD organised the protracted “yellow shirt” anti-Thaksin protests in 2006 that created the political climate for the coup, and in 2008, for the ousting of two pro-Thaksin governments.

More fundamentally, the social tensions that began to be expressed during last year's protests have only worsened. As in the rest of Asia, food prices have risen in Thailand, impacting heavily on the poorest layers of the population. While the Thai currency and shares received a boost from the decisive election result and hopes for political stability, economic growth is forecast to halve from 8 percent last year.

The Puea Thai government is no more capable than its predecessor of addressing the social needs and democratic aspirations of the working class and oppressed masses. Having raised expectations during the campaign, its support will only fall all the more quickly when it fails to implement its election promises.

Financial commentators in Thailand and internationally have warned that Puea Thai's election pledges are economically unsustainable. Bangkok University academic Supong Limtanakool estimated that the agenda advocated during the campaign by the Democrats and Puea Thai would require additional spending of \$US49 billion to \$US244 billion—up to five times the present national budget.

As the hopes of those who voted for Puea Thai are dashed and the government imposes the burden of the continuing global economic crisis, disappointment will inevitably turn to anger and political opposition. Far from being any victory for working people, a Yingluck government will be just as ruthless and anti-democratic as the Democrats in suppressing any opposition by workers and the rural masses.

Thaksin's autocratic methods of rule while in office must serve as a warning to the working class. In 2003, he unleashed “a war on drugs” during which the security forces carried out the extra-judicial murder of more than 2,200 alleged drug dealers over three months. The following year, he responded to terrorist attacks by separatists in the Muslim south of the country by imposing emergency rule over the region and ordering the military to crack down on local opposition.

As popular hostility grew to his policies, Thaksin attempted to establish monopoly control of the media through the state and his extensive business empire. Journalists who criticised the government were threatened and pressured into silence.

To defend its interests, the working class must draw its own lessons from the past decade. Neither faction of the ruling class is capable of meeting the pressing social needs of ordinary working people. What is needed is the construction of a socialist alternative based on the working class, independent of all sections of the bourgeoisie, that can win to its side the rural masses in the political fight for a workers' and peasants' government as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.

The essential prerequisite for such a struggle is the building of a section in Thailand of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which alone fights for this political perspective.



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