

Thai parliament to convene next week

John Roberts
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With the outcome of the July 3 elections having just been cleared by the Electoral Commission (EC), Thailand's Prime Minister-elect Yingluck Shinawatra is now in the process of forming a five-party coalition government, with the new parliament set to meet on Monday.

The new premier, the youngest sister of exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, has not yet named her cabinet, and the entire process has been fraught with the intense tensions that have marked Thai politics over the past five years. Next week's parliamentary session will select the speaker and other senior posts that must be filled before parliament is convened to formally install the prime minister and new government.

Of immediate concern for Yingluck, her pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party and its four coalition allies had been whether the EC would endorse the minimum quorum of 95 percent of the 500 parliamentarians by the August 2 deadline set out in the country's constitution. Puea Thai won an absolute majority with 265 seats and with its allies will control at least 299, if all those elected are endorsed.

Only yesterday did the EC endorse a final group of 94 poll winners, bringing the total to 496. If a quorum had not been confirmed, parliament could not have met and a constitutional and political crisis would have ensued. The EC is working under the 2007 constitution drawn up during the 14 months of military rule that followed the coup that ousted Thaksin in September 2006.

The coup and subsequent political turmoil involved bitter infighting between rival factions of the country's business and political elite. The military with the backing of the monarchy and other sections of the traditional establishment moved against Thaksin after he encouraged foreign investment, undermining weaker sections of Thai capital, and cut across existing systems of patronage by favouring his own extensive business interests and those of his close cronies.

There was also consternation over his electoral base, built up largely in the populous rural north and north east of Thailand. This support, which gave Thaksin some

independence from the traditional powerbrokers, rested on limited economic concessions that included cheap health care and village development loans for regions long neglected by the Bangkok-based political and economic elite.

The military's 2007 constitution was configured to prevent the return of a pro-Thaksin government. Nevertheless, Thaksin's supporters won the December 2007 election and confronted a sustained campaign throughout 2008 by the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to oust it from office. The now caretaker Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his Democrat Party were installed in office in late 2008 via what amounted to a judicial coup supplemented by the intrigues of the military.

The emphatic July 3 win for Puea Thai came despite a continuing climate of repression that followed the military crackdown on mass demonstrations by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) last year. More than 90 people were killed and 1,800 injured when Abhisit ordered the army against the "Redshirt" protestors in May.

The EC had promised to meet the deadline on endorsements, despite calls from PAD and others to have the election annulled. The size of the Puea Thai win has made it difficult, for now, to repeat the 2008 unseating of the elected majority. Allegations challenging Yingluck's right to sit in parliament were dismissed by the EC. Still on the backburner, however, is a legal move by sections of the Democrat Party to have Puea Thai outlawed because Thaksin, who has been convicted of corruption, and other banned politicians were allegedly involved in the election campaign.

Three seats where prospective parliamentarians were not endorsed will be decided at by-elections on Sunday. As of yesterday, the most prominent UDD leader, Jatuporn Prompan, a Puea Thai party list candidate, had not been endorsed.

Earlier, UDD members had threatened to picket the EC office unless the six UDD/Puea Thai candidates awaiting

the hearing of treason charges over the 2010 conflict were permitted to take their seats. The prospect of UDD or Redshirt demonstrations outside the EC offices provoked immediate condemnation from both Yingluck and Abhisit.

Yesterday, five of the six candidates were endorsed, leaving only Jatuporn in limbo. The EC delayed its decision on him until today, causing Redshirt outrage.

The entire ruling class, including the billionaire Thaksin and property developer Yingluck, remains haunted by last year's UDD protests, when the rural and urban poor began to express demands for democratic reforms and social equality that went far beyond the political aims of the Puea Thai and UDD leadership.

In secret meetings held prior to the election and reported in the local press, Puea Thai and UDD leaders met with the Abhisit government and effectively agreed to bring what they consider the more radical Redshirt elements under control in order to produce a more stable election outcome.

For the mass of Puea Thai voters, their votes were primarily directed against the country's hated political establishment. Yingluck is just as afraid of the expectations raised by her victory as Abhisit and the Democrats.

Yingluck has been discussing the cabinet posts behind closed doors. Intense criticism that her brother Thaksin was the real powerbroker in this process caused the Puea Thai party executive to pass a resolution this week giving all power of appointments to Yingluck and party leader Yongyuth Wichaidit. The local press remains unconvinced—one *Bangkok Post* headline stated: "It's Yingluck in name only."

Yingluck has come under intense scrutiny from big business over the key post of finance minister. This concern is tied up with the demands of major corporations that Puea Thai drop its "populist" election promises, particularly to lift the minimum daily wage rate to 300 baht [\$US10]. There has been a line up of business media and organisations warning of the dangers to Thailand's international competitiveness, inflation and budget deficit.

On July 20, Federation of Thai Industries chairman Payungsak Chartsuthipol announced that all federation members had agreed to oppose the 300-baht policy, declaring it an unwarranted political interference in labour relations.

Theevara Wittanokorn, chairman of Hi-tech Apparel Chaiyaphum, which represents five firms that employ 20,000 workers in the north-eastern Chaiyaphum

province, warned that if the daily wage rate of 165 baht were raised to 300 baht, the firms would move to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia or Indonesia.

With the heightened expectations among Puea Thai voters, the scene is set for sharpened social conflict. Yesterday, 20 union members of a factory in Rangsit sent a letter to Puea Thai leader Yongyuth demanding the immediate implementation of the 300-baht wage policy. A spokesman said all 25,000 Rangsit workers had agreed to this demand.

Another key cabinet selection is the defence portfolio. The appointment will indicate whether the military hierarchy has decided to work with the Yingluck government, for the time being, or is awaiting an opportunity to obstruct it.

Four or five Puea Thai figures are reported to be lining up for the foreign ministry post. The most immediate question in this office will be the July 18 order by the International Court of Justice to demilitarise the area around the Preah Vihear border dispute with Cambodia. Sections of the military and the rabidly nationalist PAD have demanded a tough line on the issue.

Overshadowing all the manoeuvring is the economic situation. The baht is currently appreciating as money flows into Thailand's short- and long-term bonds and the stock market. This movement of capital, however, is not so much a vote of confidence in the prospects of the Thai economy as a flow of capital into Asia produced by the Eurozone debt crisis and the US Fed's policy of quantitative easing designed to lower the dollar.

Demands by business for the imposition of austerity measures will only intensify once the Yingluck has been installed. The Puea Thai-led government will be just as ruthless as its predecessor in cracking down on any political opposition, particularly from the working class. During his term of office, Thaksin was notorious for his autocratic methods of rule, including his efforts to silence media critics and a ruthless "war on drugs," during which thousands of alleged drug dealers were murdered by police in a wave of extra-judicial killings.



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