

Thai military junta holds rigged election

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1 April 2019

The Thai election held on March 24 was a sham, engineered by the country's military junta to try to give some legitimacy to its autocratic rule. After seizing power in 2014, the regime promised to hold an election the following year, but even after ramming through a new anti-democratic constitution in 2016, has repeatedly delayed any poll, fearing a voter backlash.

Despite the atmosphere of repression in which the election was held, the preliminary unofficial results did not result in a majority for the military-backed Palang Pracharath Party. Of the 350 contested constituencies, the main opposition Pheu Thai Party won 137, with the Palang Pracharath Party coming a distant second with 97 seats.

Ten parties are likely to be present in the House of Representatives, if it actually assembles, after the Election Commission confirms the official results on May 9.

Electoral anomalies already point to widespread vote rigging by the junta. After an unexplained 24-hour delay in releasing the initial results, the Electoral Commission made the astonishing announcement that the overall vote for the Palang Pracharath Party was 7.69 million, ahead of Pheu Thai at 7.23 million.

When asked to explain the delay, the Election Commission head declared that he could not comment because he had no calculator at hand. Most pre-election opinion polls put the military's front party at less than 10 percent. A typical poll had Pheu Thai at 45 percent, Forward Future 21 percent and Palang Pracharath at just 7 percent.

Social media carried many accounts of the army bribing voters. When evidence grew that in some electorates more ballots were cast than the number of voters, the Commission declared that "human error" in entering incorrect data was responsible and all would be revealed on May 9.

Suspicions were heightened because of the high

number of voided ballots—two million or six percent of the total. Within 24 hours of the poll, there were 1.4 million tweets denouncing electoral fraud and 600,000 people had signed an online petition to sack the election commissioners.

Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra denounced the election result as rigged. "Whether or not the junta's leaders now allow the pro-democracy parties to form a government, they will find a way to stay in charge. They have no shame, and they want to be in power no matter what."

The current election is the continuation of more than a decade of political turmoil in Thailand. In 2006, the military ousted the billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister, and in 2014, it removed his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, as part of protracted feuding in ruling circles. Pheu Thai is backed and aligned with the Shinawatras, who are now living in exile.

Thailand's traditional elites—the army, the monarchy and the state bureaucracy—are bitterly opposed to Thaksin Shinawatra, who came to power, initially with their backing, on the basis of a populist appeal, particularly to the rural masses in the country's north and north-east.

Thaksin made very limited concessions, including on health care and financial support for farmers, and ruled autocratically, carrying out a vicious "war on drugs," involving hundreds of extra-judicial killings. What the Bangkok elites objected to, however, was his pro-market reforms that undermined the traditional patronage networks on which they were based.

The military will stop at nothing to block a Pheu Thai-led government coming to power and have imposed a constitution designed to ensure against that eventuality. In addition to the constituency seats, there are 150 party-list seats in the lower house allocated on the basis of a formula designed to favour small parties.

A cap has been imposed on the number of

constituency seats that a party is allowed if it is to receive party-list seats. Pheu Thai, having reached the cap, will receive no list seats while the military's Palang Pracharath will receive between 15 and 25. Three parties that won no constituency contests will have a total of 21 list seats.

Despite the junta's efforts to rig the election, Pheu Thai's prime ministerial candidate Sudarat Keyuraphan joined with five other party leaders last Wednesday to announce an anti-military coalition which they expected would muster a majority of 255 in the 500-seat lower house.

The junta's deputy prime minister, Wissan Krea-ngam, quickly declared that Pheu Thai's coalition would not bear fruit. He added that the official results would not be known until May 9 and that the final seat tally was subject to change. He warned that some candidates might be issued "red or orange cards" for electoral irregularities which could affect their party's seat count. "So, nothing is certain," he declared.

Even if the Pheu Thai coalition wins a majority of lower house seats, the new prime minister will be chosen by a combined vote of the lower house and the upper house, where all 250 senators are military-appointed. As a result, coup leader and self-proclaimed prime minister, General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, only has to secure 126 votes in the lower house to be reappointed.

Having carried out two coups against Shinawatra-backed parties and violently suppressed pro-Shinawatra "Red-shirt" protesters in 2010, the military will not hesitate to use force if all else fails. The election campaign was marked throughout by anti-democratic measures directed against opposition parties and their supporters, including arrests and detentions, particularly in Pheu Thai strongholds in the north east.

Pheu Thai, which faced the threat of being dissolved, formed the Thai Raksa Chart party as a backup electoral vehicle. King Vajiralongkorn's sister, Princess Ubolratana, was put forward as their prime ministerial nominee, provoking a storm of opposition from the monarchist camp, including the king. This became the excuse for banning Thai Raksa Chart and excluding its 121 candidates from the election. Pheu Thai was only able to campaign in 250 of the 350 constituencies.

The junta is also laying the basis for disqualifying

another of the opposition parties. Prior to the election, the junta charged the billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, founder and leader of the Forward Future Party, with spreading false information. The case is now before the courts.

The Forward Future Party, which campaigned for a new constitution and a reduction in the bloated defence budget, received five million votes, won 30 constituencies and could have up to 50 list seats. It was among the parties attending the anti-junta coalition meeting on Wednesday.

The muted international responses to the election signal that the major powers will turn a blind eye to the military's anti-democratic moves. The European Union and United Kingdom urged that irregularities be addressed and the results announced quickly.

The US State Department raised similar concerns but added that the US is looking forward to working "with Thailand's newly elected government." In 2017, the Trump administration welcomed coup leader Prayuth to the White House and wants him back in power to strengthen US-Thai military relations directed against China.



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