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PROSPECTS FOR RECONCILIATION IN THAILAND

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Beating pre-election estimates, the pro-Thaksin Phue Thai (PT) Party swept the board in Thailand's general election on July 3. PT amassed a total of 265 of the 500 seats in parliament, compared with the 159 secured by the Democrat Party. On the following day, PT began negotiations with five minor parties, including Chart Thai Pattana, to form a coalition government that eventually had a solid majority of 300 seats.

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On August 5, Yingluck Shinawatra, born in 1967 and the youngest sister of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was elected to lead the new Cabinet. She is the first female prime minister in Thailand, which has had 27 prime ministers.

Since the September 2006 coup that ousted Thaksin, battles have continued between the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), known as the “red shirts”, and the “yellow-shirt” People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). These battles culminated in bloodshed in 2010, with 92 people killed and more than 800 injured in the three months from March to May. It is wrong, however, to depict Thailand's political turmoil as one between PT represented by the red shirts and the Democrat Party represented by the yellow shirts. PT's supporters include not only the red shirts but also low-income dwellers in Bangkok and citizens in rural areas outside the southern region. Meanwhile, the yellow shirts have started this year targeting their criticism not just at PT but also at the government led by the Democrat Party's Abhisit Vejjajiva. More importantly, the yellow shirts advocated boycotting the July election, thus denying the very foundation of democratic principles. The myth that the yellow shirts are a pro-democracy force has been shattered.


The biggest factor contributing to PT's victory was the spread of democracy from the capital region into rural areas. This allowed rural residents to express their frustration at the widening economic disparities by ballot rather than the traditional method of making a direct plea to the king (*thawai thika*) or submitting a petition to political leaders (*kho-rong*). This is attested to by the high voter turnout of 71.4%, the second highest on record after the general election in December 2007.

Let's take a closer look at the results of the 375 seats allocated for single-seat constituencies by comparing them with pre-election estimates. PT made headway in the northeast region where the party won 103 seats as compared with the estimated 70 (of the 126 seats in total), in the north where it won 49 as compared with 36 (of the 61 seats in total) and in the central region where it won 42 as compared with 36 (of the 102 seats in total). In contrast, the Democrat Party suffered a crushing defeat as it saw its seats drop from 25 to 4 in the northeast, from 17 to 13 in the north and from 42 to 25 in the central region.

Even in Bangkok where a clear-cut victory was expected for the Democrats, the party secured only 23 of the 33 seats. PT's overwhelming strength in rural districts can be attributed less to Thaksin's popularity than to the strong frustration felt by people at the failure of the Abhisit government to narrow the economic gap.

In May, just before the election, the Abhisit government introduced a series of electoral reforms. Amendments to election law increased the number of proportional-representation seats from 100 to 125 while reducing the number of proportional-representation districts across the country from eight to one. They also changed the existing multiple-seat constituencies into single-seat constituencies. These reforms, however, all backfired on the Democrats. In proportional representation, PT with Yinluck as its head appealed to the voters with slogans calling for "the first female prime minister in Thailand" and "social reconciliation under the female prime minister," effectively dispelling the Democrats' attacks that PT was Thaksin's proxy party and that the red shirts were a group of terrorists. The national leader's popularity has a decisive impact on election outcomes in Thailand. The high expectations of the newcomer Yinluck far outstripped the popularity of her predecessor, Abhisit Vejjajiva, who in people's eyes epitomized the political elite.

Where will Thai politics lead? The instability that has characterized Thai politics since the 2006 coup will continue for the time being. It is unclear how effectively Yinluck, whose political expertise is unknown, can mitigate the domestic conflict. If the new government insists on a political comeback for Thaksin and seeks to hold accountable those responsible for the 2010 bloodshed, frictions with the military and the royalists will grow. On the other hand, if the government carries out PT's election pledges of raising the minimum wage to 300 baht a day (the current minimum wage in Bangkok stands at 215 baht) and doubling the initial salaries of civil servants to 15,000 baht, and couples these with economic policies that could add to inflationary pressures, the economy could become unstable. This would inevitably be reflected in political instability.

Thailand is no longer a developing country; it is a middle-income country. The percentage of the population deemed poor dropped from 21% in 2000 to 8.5% in 2007. The challenge the country is facing is no longer poverty itself but widening domestic gaps in income and employment due to inequality of opportunity. This also includes the problems of the social security system, which has not yet taken into account the rapidly ageing and shrinking population, and the mismatch of education and labor markets that is coming to light as an increasing number of people receive higher education. Thais expect the new government to address these “middle-income country” challenges. What is required is not mere cosmetic political reconciliation but rather earnest effort toward resolving the new social problems underlying the political conflict. 

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