

Thailand's Elections Won't Solve Crisis

Saturday 21 May 2011, by [LIN NEUMANN A.](#) (Date first published: 8 May 2011).

On the surface, Bangkok shows few signs of last year's political turmoil and the bloody crackdown on Red Shirt protesters. The economy is doing well and the tourists are back.

This would seem a good time for Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to dissolve Parliament and call a national election, as he did on Friday. He recently told a group of visiting Asian newspaper editors that the time has come to heal Thailand's political wounds with "free, fair elections."

But ask nearly anyone in Thailand if they expect the elections to go well and the scenarios that come back are almost universally bad.

"Things in Thailand are such a mess that it is now finally as bad as the Philippines," said a foreign businessman friend of mine who has been in Thailand for more than 40 years. "It can only end badly unless the Democrats win a majority — and even that is bad because this government is so ineffective."

The well-connected businessman shares a common view that Abhisit owes his tenuous hold on power to the military and the royalist elite and that those factions are unlikely to allow a victory by the opposition Pheu Thai party, the latest vehicle for former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's ambition of returning from exile on the back of the Red Shirts to reclaim the seat that was taken from him by a coup in 2006.

"If the military calls off the election because they think Thaksin will win, it will be chaos," the man said. "If Pheu Thai win and they are denied the right to form a government, it will be chaos. If there is a shaky coalition government, it will be a mess."

Abhisit was forced to promise an election in the wake of the disastrous May 2010 events in which 92 persons, the vast majority of them Red Shirt protesters, were gunned down after his government lost control of central Bangkok.

Until now, no real investigation has dealt with what happened. The Thai media has also lost much of its vaunted independence in the face of shadowy pressures from the military and royalist elements eager to stamp out pro-Thaksin voices or discussions of the crisis that will occur when the country's frail 83-year-old monarch dies.

Asked by the editors about reconciliation with the opposition, a weary-looking Abhisit wandered around the issue. "I have listened to all voices, including Red Shirts," he said. But Abhisit would not even speak Thaksin's name, saying only that Thailand must "move beyond the interests of one man or one group."

It is not at all clear that the Democrat Party can lead a coalition to victory. An April poll conducted across 17 provinces says the race is almost a dead heat, with the Democrats enjoying a slight lead over Pheu Thai, which appears set to be led to the polls by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, a political neophyte. A third of the electorate remains undecided.

A win for Pheu Thai may spur another coup by the military, or an attempt to dragoon enough other

political parties together into a coalition to keep Pheu Thai from governing, as the military did in creating the coalition that brought an un-elected Abhisit and the Democrats to power in December 2008 after the courts unwound a post-coup Thaksin victory.

It must be wearying indeed for Abhisit to be on such shaky ground when his Democrats should be able to control the scenario at will despite Thaksin's money.

Amid this turmoil, Thai politics increasingly seem to be driven by the military. The royalist People's Alliance for Democracy — the Yellow Shirts in Thailand's color-coded street politics — with the connivance of the military, kicked off a border squabble with Cambodia last December over the ancient Preah Vihear temple that continues until today, with Thailand resisting efforts by Asean to stop a renewed flare-up of fighting that has killed a number of soldiers on both sides and that many fear could be used as a pretext to halt elections.

Thaksin has dominated Thai politics like no one before him, a fact that led to fears when he was in office that he would one day supplant the monarchy. He fled the country in 2008 to avoid prison but a Pheu Thai rally recently featured a telephone address in which he promised a populist cornucopia of benefits should the party win. The Democrats have countered with their own largesse.

In the meantime, charges of lese-majeste — insulting the royalty — continue to be used against anyone who dares to discuss the royal succession in public.

At the root of the uncertainty is the fact that the glue that has held together Thai society for generations — the monarchy — appears unable to influence the situation. US diplomatic cables made public by WikiLeaks indicate that ailing King Bhumibol Adulyadej's weak protestations against the actions of the Yellow Shirts have simply been ignored, and the issue of who will succeed him remains an object of intense, if whispered, speculation.

For all of this, international investors seem unfazed. The government reported at the end of March a 58 percent rise in foreign investment, indicating perhaps Thailand is becoming a post-political society. "There looks to be no way out," my businessman friend said. "But that's politics," he added. "Business is good."

P.S.

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