

Thailand: December 2007 election's results

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Who Wins What: Samak claims victory

Four parties refuse to join Samak-led coalition govt / Democrats hold South, win Bangkok; PPP sweeps North, Isan / Abhisit refuses to bow out, gives PPP first go at forming govt

POST REPORTERS

The People Power party (PPP) last night fell short of a majority of the 480 house seats, and called for help in forming a stable coalition government.

Two parties immediately said they were prepared to join it in forming a government. Together, they command a small majority _ 242 seats from the total of 480.

After declaring victory in the general election with 228 seats, party leader Samak Sundaravej invited other parties to join him as potential coalition partners.

Pracharaj and Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana said they were prepared to join the PPP. But the Puea Pandin, Chart Thai and Matchimathipataya parties decided against accepting Mr Samak's invitation.

Puea Pandin and Chart Thai held a joint press conference last night confirming that they will not be part of PPP-led attempts to form a government. Matchimathipataya also confirmed it would not join a PPP-led coalition.

The PPP wants to have around 280 members to make sure the next government will be stable.

A combination of the PPP, Prachaj and Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana has 242 seats, which still leaves it short of the numbers it wants.

Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva said the Democrats would become the main opposition party rather than join the PPP in a coalition, but would be ready to form an alternative government if the PPP fails to do so.

Five-and-a-half hours after ballot boxes closed, PPP leader Samak Sundaravej asserted that he would be the next prime minister.

"I will become the next prime minister," Mr Samak declared at the party's headquarters.

"We invite all parties to work with us. The outcome of the election shows to people across the world how Thais feel towards the party," said the PPP leader.

The PPP needed three or four coalition partners, he said, adding he had already approached several parties.

He said he needed at least 30 days to form a government.

Commenting on the PPP's plan to grant a political amnesty to all 111 executive members of the dissolved Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, he said: "The 111 banned executives didn't do anything wrong and if we have an opportunity, we will give them an amnesty." The coup, he declared, was dead.

PPP secretary-general Surapong Suebwonglee voiced skepticism about the results in the Bangkok race in which the party trailed the Democrat party.

Mr Samak said the PPP's internal surveys showed a different outcome.

Mr Surapong said the PPP would analyse vote count details to make sure they were correct.

Meanwhile, Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva said other parties had the right to accept or decline the invitation.

"I want to give all party leaders respect. There is no commitment that we have to be political allies. Just make the best decision for the country and the people," he said.

"If the PPP succeeds in forming the government, the Democrat party will serve as the opposition to protect the people's interest.

"And if the PPP fails, the Democrats are ready to form a coalition government," he said.

Mr Abhisit said that it would be inappropriate to set a timeframe for the PPP to form a coalition administration.

He also urged Mr Samak to think first of the people rather than of deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and former executives of dissolved Thai Rak Thai party.

He was referring to Mr Samak's campaign to seek an amnesty for the banned politicians.

Mr Abhisit last night thanked voters for their support, saying it was a 'pure vote' and the largest number the party had ever won in a general election.

The PPP and the Democrat parties won similar numbers of list seats in the proportional representation system.

At press time, the PPP had won 34 seats while the Democrats had won 33 seats. There are 80 list seats in total.

Puea Pandin spokesman Wachiramont Khunakasemthawat yesterday denied a report that key party members were summoned by Privy Council president Prem Tinsulanonda.

Political observers said there was a chance that the PPP would fail to form a coalition government.

Sujit Boonbongkarn, political scientist and former Constitution Court judge, said the PPP had failed to win a majority vote and the Election Commission has yet to consider election fraud complaints.

“So small parties will still be a decider in formation of the government,” he said.

Mr Sujit said the result in the Northeast and rural areas showed that coup-makers failed to justify the military’s take-over.

Narong Boonsuayfan, of Walailak University in Nakhon Si Thammarat, suggested that Mr Samak drop the proposed amnesty for the 111 former TRT executives and proceed with forming economic policy. He said the PPP’s coalition partners might not agree with the amnesty.

Where bread and butter matters most

POST REPORTERS

The People Power party (PPP) won substantial support in the North and Northeast where people still favour the populist policies of the now-disbanded Thai Rak Thai party.

The party, known to have a strong connections with ousted prime minister and former Thai Rak Thai leader Thaksin Shinawatra, easily took most of the 75 seats in the North, and most of the 135 seats in the Northeast, the region with the most seats.

Observers said many people in the Northeast remain staunchly loyal to the disbanded Thai Rak Thai, which gave the PPP an edge.

Many villagers recall the economic stimulus policies introduced by the Thaksin government.

“The PPP candidates are mostly familiar faces.” People recognise them and associate them with Mr Thaksin,” said Niran Kulthanan of Rajabhat Buri Ram University.

Villagers were more interested in hearing how parties could help them earn a living. Mr Niran said the voters’ preference was based primarily on bread- and-butter issues, rather than politicians’ honesty. This explains why the PPP policies were the right fit for voters’ needs.

“Many villagers only care for their stomach,” Mr Niran said.

Some village heads and kamnan are also a factor in the PPP’s success. They work as canvassers, who persuaded villagers to vote for the PPP.

In the North, the voting pattern was similar. Rival parties, however, have managed to penetrate some bastions of the PPP in Tak, Phitsanulok, Phichit, and Chiang Rai.

“People still trust Thai Rak Thai all the same,” said Chiang Mai University’s dean of the law faculty Somchai Preechasilpakul.

Thai Rak Thai was dissolved after the Constitution Tribunal found its principals committed fraud in last year’s election.

However, Mr Somchai said, many villagers did not believe Mr Thaksin had broken any laws as claimed by the Assets Scrutiny Committee.

In their eyes, the outgoing Council for National Security had failed to substantiate charges against Mr Thaksin, which were cited as pretext to topple the former prime minister by the coup-makers.

Mr Thaksin is native of Chiang Mai.

Results show politics still very polarised

Smaller parties failed to win many seats

ACHARA ASHAYAGACHAT and ANCHALEE KONGRUT

The outcome of the general election has indicated Thailand will have a political system dominated by two major opposing parties, said Sombat Thamrongthanyawong, the rector of the National Institute for Development Administration (Nida).

The outcome of the poll has defeated the purpose of the present constitution, which was designed to support smaller parties working together in coalition governments, he said.

The outcome is also a pointer to the massive rivalry between the two major parties and the polarisation that exists in Thai politics at the moment, he added.

The present constitution and its organic law on the election was written to create more constituencies than in the last charter so that small and medium-sized parties could stand more of a chance of winning seats in those constituencies.

"The outcome of the new election shows people wanted to vote for the two major parties only." "Voters ignored small- and medium-sized parties," said Mr Sombat.

Surachart Bumrungsuk, a political scientist at Chulalongkorn University, said the more than 200 votes the People Power party won showed that the Sept 19 coup had failed in many ways.

Efforts by the Council for National Security and the government of Gen Surayud Chulanont to undermine and block allies of deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra since the coup have been a failure, he said.

Mr Surachart admitted it was difficult to explain the voting patterns in the North and the Northeast.

He said votes in the North and the Northeast had been split between a number of different political parties as the People Power party did not win overwhelming support in the region, home to many of the strongholds of the former Thai Rak Thai party, Mr Surachart said.

Mr Surachart also criticised opinion surveys and exit polls conducted by polling institutions that projected differing results from Sunday's voting.

He said the polls should be carried out in a more careful and more appropriate manner.

Voting for the People Power party to head the government will return the country to the same situation it was in before the Sept 19 coup took place, Mr Surachart said.

Surat Horachaikul, a political scientist, said the reason for the huge support for the People Power party, which he said was clearly a nominee of Thaksin, is because people believed the former Thai Rak Thai leader was better able to identify with them and their problems than the Oxford-educated Democrat party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva.

Mr Surat said that despite the apparent aim of giving smaller parties more of a role in parliament, the present constitution had in fact given bigger parties an edge over the smaller ones.

Only major parties have the money and resources to compete under the new election system, with more constituencies than under the last constitution, he said.

Former senator Jon Ungphakorn said many people voted for the PPP based on intuition and personal preferences.

He admitted voters felt attracted to PPP, a reincarnation of Thai Rak Thai, because they want more of the populist policies Thaksin offered in the past.

He said the lower House should ideally consist of small- and medium-sized parties that could maintain the balance of power and prevent one major party from dominating parliament.

Middle parties disappointed with outcome

Election results fall short of projections

POST REPORTERS

Key leaders of many smaller political parties appeared disappointed at the expected results of the election, which saw most of them fall short of their aims.

Chart Thai leader Banharn Silpa-archa was reportedly concerned by projections that his party would not secure the minimum of 40 House seats it had aimed for and that candidate Janista Liewchalermwong was not likely to win a seat in Bangkok's constituency 5, despite being tipped as one of the favourites.

The People Power party (PPP) led by Samak Sundaravej swept all seats in the constituency, according to unofficial results last night.

"There will be no press conference tonight," said Mr Banharn from his home province of Suphan Buri, where he and his family members cast their votes yesterday.

Two key Chart Thai members, deputy leader Somsak Prissanantakul and party member Sanan Kachornprasart, opted to stay at their homes in Ang Thong and Phichit respectively.

Chart Thai deputy leader Veerasak Kowsurat said in Bangkok that his party will only accept the official results from the Election Commission.

A similar mood of disappointment was felt by other parties, including Puea Pandin and Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana.

Puea Pandin leader Suvit Khunkitti postponed a press conference citing that he had an important engagement, leaving only secretary-general Vachara Phanchet at the party headquarters.

Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana party leader Gen Chettha Thanajaro also cancelled a press conference.

No top party members were left at the party head office yesterday evening. Gen Chettha told reporters that he had an appointment with a doctor.

The former army chief admitted he was disappointed with the results, which showed the party would not even manage to secure 10 votes, falling short of the 12 seats the party felt sure it would be able to secure.

"I'm confident the EC would not make any mistakes in the counting," he said.

Gen Chettha said no party had approached Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana to form a government with it and said deputy leader Prapas Limpraphan and secretary-general Pradit Phataraprasit had been assigned to coordinate negotiations with other parties.

Pracharaj leader Sanoh Thienthong remained tight-lipped about the coalition government saying he would wait until the election results were finalised.

Only Democrat chief adviser Chuan Leekpai admitted the defeat as the PPP won the most seats in the contest, which gives it the best chance of forming a new administration.

He attributed the disappointing results to the unpopularity of the Democrats in northern and northeastern provinces, where the party has always struggled to win over voters.