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Thailand’s Recent Elections: Disappointments, Surprises and Non-surprises

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- As widely forecast, the Thai general elections of 24 March produced inconclusive results and saw many disappointments, including low voter turnout.
- There were also many surprises, including a foiled attempt to nominate the king’s elder sister Princess Ubolratana as a candidate for the premiership; the disastrous defeat of the Democrat Party; and the amazing wins of the one-year-old Future Forward Party.
- The Phuea Thai Party came first in the polls, winning 137 seats. But this total is not enough for it to claim an indisputable mandate to form a new government.
- Coming in second with 117 seats was the Phalang Pracharat Party, which nominated incumbent Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha for the premiership. The party is counting on the support of the 250 members of the Senate to propel its nominee back to the premiership.
- Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that Prayut will be able to ensure peace, stability and prosperity for the new reign of King Vajiralongkorn, whose coronation ceremonies are set to begin on 4 May.

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INTRODUCTION

The Thai general elections of 24 March were full of disappointments, surprises, and non-surprises. Their inconclusive results are bound to trouble the country for quite some time. One week after the polls, politicians were still quarrelling about which political party had received a mandate from the gravely polarised Thai electorate to take the lead in forming a new government. That process promises to be a long one.

As things stand now, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta appears determined to keep General Prayut Chan-ocha in the premiership. More controversies and uncertainties therefore lie ahead.

DELAYS AND ANTICIPATION

The junta's decision to hold general elections in the first quarter of 2019 brought great joy and excitement to Thai voters. It had been almost eight years since Thailand held its most recent successfully-held elections, on 3 July 2011.¹

On the first day of party registration, 2 March 2018, 42 parties turned up.

In October 2018, four economic ministers in the Prayut administration took over an unknown party, Phalang Pracharat, as a vehicle to nominate Prayut for the premiership. At first Prayut was non-committal. But finally he gave his consent on the last day for submission of candidates for the premiership, on 8 February 2019.²

As many as 51.24 million Thais — out of about 68 million, including Thais overseas — were eligible to vote. This number included about 7.34 million first-time voters between 18 and 25 years old. Their likely voting behaviour was unpredictable.

Over 90 per cent of those interviewed, especially first-time voters, said that they intended to vote, and this led to widespread expectations of exceptionally high voter turnout, higher than the 75.03 per cent documented in the 2011 polls.

DISAPPOINTMENTS

The first disappointment in the electoral process was the initial reluctance of the Prayut government to allow foreign observers to monitor election preparations and campaigning.

Some foreign observers, including members of the Asian Network for Free Elections, were, however, able to travel to Thailand a few days before the voting day. But that was already too late for most of them to take a good reading of what was happening. Consequently, most of them could not publicly say that the polls were clean, free and fair.

The policy platforms of many parties were also disappointing. They consisted largely of promises of more welfare benefits, more cash hand-outs, more crop subsidies, and new tax cuts.

The pro-Prayut Phalang Pracharat Party even promised to raise Thailand's minimum wage by more than 40 per cent, from around 300 baht (S\$12.5) a day to 425 baht (S\$18)! This was actually a violation of the election law. Politicians may not make irresponsible campaign promises without explaining the ways and means of fulfilling them.

Another disappointment was Prayut's refusal to take part in any policy debate among candidates for the premiership. He saw no need to subject any part of his policies to scrutiny. Perhaps he knew that other candidates would tear his policies to shreds. Worse still, he might lose his cool on national television in a heated debate.

Yet another disappointment was the harsh push-back of Army Commander General Apirat Kongsompong against anti-junta parties. These parties — including Phuea Thai, the party set up by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra— also clamoured for an overhaul of the bloated armed forces, defence budget cuts, transparency in arms procurement, and ending the compulsory military conscription. The Army chief considered such campaign rhetoric insulting and unpatriotic.

Next came another big disappointment, on voting day itself. Voter turnout was lower than expected. Subsequently, the Election Commission reported a turnout of only 74.69 per cent, slightly lower than in 2011.

Also disappointing was the widespread disorganisation – considered incompetence by many critics – of the Election Commission in the wake of numerous “irregularities” on and after the voting day.

There were long delays and discrepancies in reporting results from many of the 92,320 polling stations. Election results on the Election Commission's Rapid Report online system were erratic and slow. The commission blamed some of the glitches on hacking of its IT system by some underground “usual suspects”.

The Election Commission failed to take into account 1,542 ballots cast by Thai voters in New Zealand. They voters casted their ballots on 17 March, but their ballots arrived “too late”, on the eve of the election day — too late, that is, for the Election Commission to distribute them to relevant polling stations on the following day. Ironically, the Election Commission ruled these ballots “valid votes”, but they could not be counted because of their late arrival.

Several lawsuits have been filed to hold the Election Commission responsible for the blatant violation of the voting right of the 1,542 Thais in New Zealand. An online petition on “change.org Thailand” to sack the seven-member commission has collected more than 832,000 endorsements in just one week.

SURPRISES

The polls set many Thai election records: 81 parties fielded 11,181 candidates to contest for 350 seats in the House; 2,917 candidates, from 77 of the 81 parties, vied for a share of the 150 House seats from post-voting apportionment; and 71 candidates ran for the premiership, from 46 of the 81 parties.

One surprise was the Phuea Thai Party's decision to contest only 250 of the 350 constituencies, leaving 100 other constituencies – including eight of 30 constituencies in Bangkok – to its “offspring parties” to contest. These “offspring parties”, such as Thai Raksa Chat, Phuea Chat, New Economics and Prachachat, were formed by Thaksin's senior supporters from the Phuea Thai Party.

Two previous Thaksinite parties, Thai Rak Thai and Phalang Prachachon, had been dissolved for electoral wrongdoing. Thaksin feared that the Phuea Thai Party could be next on the chopping board. Hence the Phuea Thai Party virtually gave birth to several “offspring parties”. Should it be dissolved before the polls, there would still be other “offspring parties” left in the race.

Undoubtedly, the biggest surprise was Thai Raksa Chat's nomination on 8 February of Princess Ubolratana, the 67-year-old elder sister of the king, as its candidate for the premiership. This announcement was followed the same evening by an even more dramatic surprise: an unprecedented urgent announcement on national television from the king, expressing his disapproval of the nomination of his elder sister. He considered it a “transgression” and “highly inappropriate” for the party to involve such a high-ranking member of the royal family in politics. All accusing fingers were pointed at Thaksin, because it was an open secret that he and the princess are “good friends”.³

Then came yet another big surprise, one which raised many eyebrows in Thailand. Princess Ubolratana appeared as the chief guest of honour at the wedding reception of Thaksin's daughter at the Rosewood Hotel in Hong Kong on 22 March. Thaksin was beaming with pride. But many Thais disapproved of Thaksin flouting Thai cultural convention at the event.

Late on the evening on 23 March, there was yet another urgent announcement from the Bureau of the Royal Household on television. It conveyed a message from the king reminding the Thai people to remember the famous advice of his father, the late King Bhumibol, about supporting “good people” to run the government in order to stop “bad people” from harming the country. The message was repeated on national television on the morning of the voting day, just a few minutes before polling stations opened at 8:00 a.m. It was easy for conservative Thais to read between the lines and to figure out who were “good” and who “bad” people.⁴

There was another surprise: the worst election defeat in the history of Thailand's oldest party, the Democrat Party. Its candidates didn't win any of the 30 constituencies in Bangkok. It had not suffered a washout in the Thai capital since its creation in 1946. The party will have around 52 seats in the 500-member House—33 constituency seats and 19 party-list seats. This result is a disaster when compared to the 159 seats – 115 constituency seats and 44 party-list seats – that it won in the 2011 polls. The debacle led party leader and former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to resign late in the evening of polling day. He had earlier pledged to step down should his party win fewer than 100 seats.

Abhisit gambled and lost in his campaign strategy to offer himself and his party as the “third choice”, an idealistic solution to the polarised struggle between Thaksin's Phuea Thai Party and the pro-Prayut Phalang Pracharat Party. Conservative voters who would normally vote

for the Democrats this time opted for Prayut's assurance of security by voting for Phalang Pracharat candidates. They apparently viewed Prayut as a strongman with military support who could cope with Thaksin and defend the monarchy, whereas Abhisit might have been considered too weak for this crucial task.

Another big surprise was the victories of the youthful Future Forward Party. It won in 30 constituencies, including 10 in Bangkok. Its 350 candidates collected nearly 6.266 million votes, and this total will give the party about 49 seats from the apportionment of the 150 party-list seats in the House.

With 79 House seats, the Future Forward Party suddenly has emerged as the influential third largest party, trailing only the powerful Phuea Thai and Phalang Pracharat Parties. This is beyond the wildest dream of all in the party, including party leader and 40-year-old billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. Future Forward is barely one year old, and most of its candidates, including Thanathorn, were political novices.

Apparently the Future Forward Party's hardline anti-junta policy struck the right chord with a large majority of the young first-time voters. The party's sudden success could also partly be attributed to the dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chat Party, which hosted Thaksin's fourth generation of young politicians. It was punished for trying to involve the princess in politics. Without Thai Raksa Chat in the race, many of Thaksin's supporters apparently voted for Future Forward's candidates, especially in the 100 constituencies that the Phuea Thai Party did not contest.

Also a surprise was the Phalang Pracharat Party's success in overtaking the Democrats to emerge as the second-place finisher in the elections. The party won 96 constituency seats and was set to receive another 21 seats from the apportionment of party-list seats.

The Phalang Pracharat Party even proved pundits wrong by winning the largest number of seats in Bangkok, 12 out of 30. Many of its candidates also won seats in constituencies in the Northeast and the South, strongholds of the Phuea Thai Party and Democrat Party respectively. Apparently Prayut's assurances that he offered security and stability had immense electoral appeal nationwide.

Finally, another intriguing surprise is that the Phuea Thai Party will not receive a single seat in the apportionment of party-list seats. This means none of the party's top members — party leader Pol Lt Gen Viroj Pao-in, its leading candidate for the premiership Sudarat Keyuraphan, and party secretary-general Phumtham Wechayachai— will be in the House when the new parliament opens in late May.

NON-SURPRISES

In light of the king's objection, the nomination of Princess Ubolratana as a candidate for prime minister was rejected by the Election Commission. The Thai Raksa Chat Party was also dissolved in a swift decision of the Constitutional Court one month after its failed gambit to nominate the princess.

The Phuea Thai Party's success in winning the largest number of seats was not a surprise. All previous opinion surveys had predicted that this would be the case. With so many parties contesting, it was also no surprise that none of them could win a majority to claim the decisive mandate to govern. Twenty-seven parties won seats in the House, 16 of them winning just 3 seats or fewer.

It is normal for major parties to jockey for position after the polls, as they seek to take the lead in proposing coalitions able to form a new government. With great media fanfare, on 27 March the Phuea Thai Party led six other parties, including the Future Forward Party, in forming what it called the "Democratic Alliance" and nominating Phuea Thai's Sudarat for the premiership.

The group claimed to have at least 255 House seats, a slim majority in the 500-member chamber. However, the group failed to rope in one of the key medium-sized parties, Bhumjai Thai, which had won 51 House seats. It also failed to persuade Phuea Thai's nemesis, the Democrat Party with its 52 House seats, to bury the hatchet and help save Thai democracy from the junta and Prayut.

Phalang Pracharat, meanwhile, looked confident that it would be able to lead a victorious coalition to return Prayut to the premiership. It claimed to be the "most popular" party, as it had won 8.433 million votes — almost 513,000 more than Phuea Thai — even though the latter won 137 House seats — 20 more than Phalang Pracharat's 117.

It is an open secret that the pro-Prayut party is counting on firm support of the appointed 250 senators — hand-picked by the junta — who will join the 500 members of the House in selecting a new prime minister. The minimum winning majority needs 376 votes in the joint parliamentary sitting.

NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT?

On 28 March, Thais were startled to see on television Armed Forces Supreme Commander General Pornpipat Benyasri line up with the chiefs of the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the National Police, all in full uniforms, to announce something. Another coup?

It turned out that he merely announced a decision of the alumni association of the Armed Forces Preparatory School to recall from Thaksin an outstanding alumni award. The recall was triggered by Thaksin's public show of "friendship" with Princess Ubolratana in Hong Kong on 22 March. General Pornpipat accused Thaksin of failing to uphold the honour of the preparatory school.⁵

Gen Pornpipat also told reporters "not to worry" about anything. He said that the junta had been properly following its political "roadmap" and would cease to exist on the day that a new cabinet was sworn into office. What he did not mention was that the junta's "roadmap" included re-installing Prayut in the premiership.

CONCLUSION

Since the Songkran is approaching in mid-April, many Thais will be preparing to enjoy the water festival, and use that as an opportunity to ignore politicians jostling to claim victory.

More importantly, 4 May will bring the historic formal coronation ceremonies for King Vajiralongkorn, symbolising the beginning of the reign of the tenth king in the Chakri Dynasty. However, there is no credible guarantee just yet that the junta's "roadmap" and Prayut will be able to deliver what all Thais are yearning for—peace, stability, and prosperity when the new reign of King Vajiralongkorn starts.

¹ The results of the Thai general elections of 2 February 2014 were cancelled because of a boycott staged by many opposition parties, including the Democrat Party, and the obstruction of access to polling stations in many areas by anti-government protestors unhappy with Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's youngest sister.

² Each party can name up to three candidates for the top government post. Prayut accepted the nomination of the Phalang Pracharat Party about 30 minutes after news that the Thai Raksa Chat Party had nominated Princess Ubolratana broke.

³ In an interview with a BBC Thai programme from Hong Kong on 26 March, Thaksin confirmed that he and Princess Ubolratana had been "friends" for 30 years. But he denied having any role in the Thai Raksa Chat Party's nomination of the princess. See Itsariya Phraithongyaem, "Thaksin Chinnawat 'Tha yak songsiasala thi cha tham ngan hai banmueang'" [Thaksin Shinawatra: "She wanted to make a sacrifice to work for the country"], *BBC Thai*, 26 March 2019 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-47695389>, accessed 28 March 2019).

⁴ The advice came in a speech that King Bhumibol delivered at the Sixth National Scouts Jamboree in Sriracha on 11 December 1969. He said in part that "... there are good people and bad people in our land. No one can make everybody a good person. Having a peaceful and happy country is not by means of making all people good, but by supporting

good people to run the country, and to prevent bad people from acquiring power to create trouble”.

⁵ Thaksin entered the school in 1969 before going to the police academy in 1971. In September 2015, his police rank of lieutenant colonel was stripped after he refused to return to Thailand to face several pending criminal charges. On 30 March 2019, the king revoked and recalled all of Thaksin’s royal decorations, citing as “inappropriate” his flight from the country.

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