

From the Desk of...

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Poll Result Heralds a Thai Spring?

The thunderous results of Thailand's general election on July 3 will seem familiar to anyone attuned to the political upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa. Entrenched incumbent regimes everywhere are under severe stress from advances in information technology, shifts in demographics, rising expectations, and the obsolescence of Cold War exigencies. In the absence of a willingness and ability to use violent repression, regime survival can be achieved only through concessions, accommodation, and periodic reinvention.

With 47 million voters and turnout at 75 percent, Thailand's latest election results pose a decisive challenge to the country's long-established regime. The Pheu Thai party, led by Yingluck Shinawatra, the youngest sister of exiled fugitive former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, secured a resounding triumph, winning 265 seats in the 500-member assembly, while the ruling Democrat Party mustered just 159.

The return to power of Pheu Thai is extraordinary — and not only because Yingluck will be Thailand's first female prime minister. The establishment-aligned courts dissolved the party's two previous governments, and banned scores of its leading politicians from office for five years.

Pheu Thai's victory thus suggests that a previously marginalized electorate has been permanently awakened. A similar majority of the Thai electorate voted for Thaksin's parties and their pro-poor populist platforms in January 2001, February 2005, April 2006, and December 2007, defying a military coup, a coup-induced constitution, judicial interventions, and army coercion and repression.

The recent election marked a profound break from the past. In the second half of the 20th century, Thai elections seemed to alternate with military coups. Voters were bought and sold like commodities. After elections, voters hardly ever saw or heard from their MPs, who

typically went on to engage in corruption and graft in Bangkok — eventually losing legitimacy and paving the way for military coups. A new constitution and elections invariably ensued. This vicious cycle of coups, constitutions, and elections defined Thai politics for decades.

That pattern reflected Cold War imperatives. The pillars of the Thai state — nation, religion, and the king — struck a unifying, collective chord, and the resulting stability enabled economic development. While growth was so concentrated that popular resentment simmered, communism was kept at bay. Challenges to the established order, anchored in the military-monarchy-bureaucracytriumvirate, were repeatedly put down.

Back then, Thai schoolchildren sang martial songs each morning, and Thais knew their place in the rigidly elitist pecking order, which was reinforced by socialization and indoctrination in classrooms and living rooms, where only state-controlled media could enter. Thais were more like obedient subjects than informed citizens. Dissenting views found little traction.

The rise of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party in 2001 changed all that. The party pursued a scientific approach to elections, relied on expensive polling by foreign experts, and offered a clear agenda and strong leadership. It was the first post-Cold War party to capture Thais' collective imagination. The voices of neglected swaths

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of the electorate, particularly in the rural north and northeast of the country, began to count. Vote-buying became increasingly insufficient. A bond between party and voters — a bond based on policy — took root.

By 2001, the Cold War was long over. Political leaders who dissented from the status quo could no longer easily be jailed on communism-related charges. The advent of the Internet had made it harder for the authorities to shape Thai minds, as media sources multiplied and the resulting diffusion of information undermined the effectiveness of state propaganda. Moreover, new international norms had come to the fore: external powers that previously turned a blind eye to coups, military dictatorships, and repression now rallied around democracy and human rights.

Thailand's demographics also changed. The Cold War curriculum of induced unity and stability has no relevance for today's schoolchildren; indeed, most university students nowadays were born after the Cold War ended.

These factors fostered a new political environment, and Thaksin, who was a telecommunications tycoon at the time, was well positioned to seize the opportunity. He overhauled the bureaucracy, delivered on his promises to the poor, mapped out an industrial strategy, and redesigned an overstretched foreign policy agenda, among other innovative measures.

Of course, Thaksin's rule had a dark underside: corruption, legislated conflicts of interest, cronyism, human rights violations, and abuse of power, among other evidence of misrule.

Such is Thaksin's mixed legacy. The opportunities, hopes, and dreams delivered to the downtrodden and the vision and plans for Thailand's future were enmeshed with his own venality. But, while Thaksin committed many infractions, his gravest "sin" was to have changed the way Thais think and behave. Some see this change as usurpation; others view it as Thailand's deliverance into the 20th century.

Thaksin's adversaries in Thailand's entrenched regime were unwilling to accede to his policy innovations and populism. For them, doing so would be tantamount to admitting that most people in this hospitable, well-endowed kingdom had been kept poor by design all along.

For his part, Thaksin has sought to portray the recent election results as being all about him. But he is best viewed as a self-serving, unwitting agent of political modernization. It is these 21st century dynamics and changes, underpinned by an increasingly assertive citizenry, with which the Thai establishment must come to terms if the country is to move forward.

About Thitinan Pongsudhirak and The Insight Bureau

Dr Pongsudhirak is one of Thailand's leading analysts on politics and macro-economy. He is a Thai national, based in Bangkok, with over 14 years as a political observer and commentator of Thailand and its relations within ASEAN. As a freelance writer, he is an outspoken columnist with the Bangkok Post and well-respected for his research credentials and analytical skills, which allows him to incorporate great depth to his presentations and to facilitate and lead discussion on economic and political developments in Thailand. www.insightbureau.com/ThitinanPongsudhirak.html

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