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Something is Happening: This Time in Thailand

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Danny Unger, Associate Professor of Political Science at Northern Illinois University, explains that Thailand's new government "may struggle to keep its balance until the ban on political activities for the 111 politicians of Thaksin's former Thai Rak Thai Party is lifted next year, after which new elections will become more likely."

The refrain of Bob Dylan's *Ballad of a Thin Man* goes "Because something is happening here but you don't know what it is do you, Mr. Jones?" The same could be said about the current state of affairs in Thailand after the historical events of July 3 last when the Pheu Thai Party swept to power in parliamentary elections and pushed out of office a Democrat Party-led coalition government in power since late 2008. The Pheu Thai Party won 265 of 500 seats and immediately reinforced its majority by agreeing to establish a government with the backing of a number of smaller parties. As a result, Thailand's first woman prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, and her cabinet assumed government powers on August 9.

For the Democrat Party, the defeat was a heavy blow. They tallied 4.3 million fewer party list votes than in the 2007 elections. More broadly, the election was a crushing defeat for the institutions of Thailand's establishment. This included the military and civilian bureaucracy, the judiciary and people associated with the royal palace, along with many leading business figures, all of whom more or less openly pulled out most of the stops available to them—including the purpose built 2007 Constitution—to keep supporters of former exiled president Thaksin Shinawatra from winning the election. Thaksin's primary support base includes the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) and the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), otherwise known as the Redshirts.

In addition, the governing coalition was presiding over a burgeoning economy and, as a result of the 2008-2009 economic downturn, had introduced major fiscal stimulus policies that should have bought it support. However, none of this was enough to stop Thaksin and his allies. It was becoming clearly evident that neither a coup in 2006, judicial interventions—two in 2008—or heavy handed efforts to handicap the PTP had sufficed to stop the Thaksin juggernaut.

The election was a resounding victory for former Prime Minister Thaksin who remains in self-imposed exile to evade going to jail for a criminal conviction. Thaksin took risks that paid off when he supported sustained Red Shirt demonstrations in 2010 against the sitting Democrat-led government and fostered ties between the PTP and the Red Shirts. His choice of candidate for prime minister—his youngest sister and political neophyte Yingluck—also proved a bold and successful stroke.

The question is why did Thaksin and his political allies win so big? First, the Democrat Party leadership was weak on political strategy and communications. Second, Thaksin is an extremely potent political brand backed by a vast personal fortune. Neither criminal conviction nor exile seems to have hurt him much. Third and most importantly, in substantial part due to Thaksin's performances as election candidate first in 2001, and as prime minister from 2001 to 2006, many Thais who previously



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were comparatively indolent politically were awakened. They understand that the courts, with the backing of the military and the establishment in general, have deprived them of a political voice, tossing out at will elected governments that were deemed not to be supportive of the establishment. Thaksin’s Red Shirts appealed directly to these Thais, mobilizing demands for justice and the end to double standards. Fourth, a variety of factors primed these Thais to be receptive to Thaksin’s appeals, including falling poverty but coinciding with rising income inequality, greater geographic mobility, and perhaps most important, pervasive exposure to television compared to the previous generation.

A fifth factor helping to explain the election results is the solidifying of regional voting alignments. While the Democrat Party only narrowly held a large majority of Bangkok seats, it again swept to victory in the South. The PTP won large majorities across the upper North and the Northeast, Thailand’s most populous and poorest regions. The Northeast backed the military-linked parties in the 1992 and later elections, but now is squarely in Thaksin’s corner.

What comes next? The clear and decisive victory saved Thailand from various unhappy scenarios that might have ensued had the PTP won a plurality but been unable to form a government. However, there will be little smooth sailing ahead. The military and the new government will have to feel each other out to see how they can co-exist and manage the annual military reshuffle in October. The new government may yet face legal challenges, although a challenge threatening the government’s grip on power does not seem likely for now. The government will have to decide whether and how it wants to implement a political amnesty.

It is unlikely to bring Thaksin himself back to Thailand until after celebrations of King Bhumipol’s seventh cycle—84th birthday—on December 5. If the military is pardoned for its roles in the 2010 political violence that killed 91 people, the Red Shirts will be very unhappy. If the military alone is assigned responsibility for those deaths, many other Thais would be dismayed. The new government also will have to handle expectations in some quarters that it will substantially amend at least the implementation of Thailand’s *lèse-majesté* law which forbids slander against the King. And it will have to manage disappointment as it fails to implement parts of its campaign platform—Yingluck backtracked on some pledges immediately after the polls.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen made clear his delight with the election outcome and surely hopes he now will be able to settle Cambodia’s festering border conflict with Thailand. Nationalist spirits in both countries are high, however, and any settlement will be ripe for exploitation by demagogues. There are few reasons to believe that Thailand’s other neighbors, or powers such as China or the United States, will be substantially affected by the change in government in Bangkok.

Almost everyone was relieved that, whatever the election outcome, it was not close. The stock market, in the doldrums as the PTP victory came to seem increasingly likely, nonetheless took off in the wake of the elections. Manufacturers will, however, be wary of substantial wage rises—a PTP campaign pledge—in the absence of measures to boost labor productivity. And all investors will be watching closely for signs of further rises in inflation.

The new government has a great deal on its plate and confronts some forbidding hazards. It may struggle to keep its balance until the ban on political activities for the 111 politicians of Thaksin’s former Thai Rak Thai Party is lifted next year, after which new elections will become more likely.