



A NEW BEGINNING IN THAILAND?

By Charles E. Morrison

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The recent elections in Thailand have opened yet another chapter in the ongoing Thai political drama, as the Pheu Thai Party, associated with controversial former prime minister and billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, cruised to a decisive victory over the Democrat Party of outgoing Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.

Optimists see the victory as an opportunity to restore legitimately elected government to Thailand and to finally eliminate the division between the so-called yellow and red shirts that has paralyzed the country politically and brought it to the brink of civil war on two occasions. For pessimists, the red shirt victory is tantamount to a return of Thaksin, and will likely generate a new round of violence, divisiveness and possible military coup. However, the sheer size of the electoral blowout will make it hard for the military to simply set the election results aside any time soon.

The Pheu Thai victory came as no surprise. Since Thaksin's emergence onto the Thai political world a decade ago, his political parties have won four successive democratic elections, the last three having been set aside successively by a military coup, court actions, and questionable parliamentary maneuvers, helping to trigger the protests and violence.

What is a surprise, however, is the appearance of Thaksin's youngest sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, as the party's charismatic new leader. The photogenic, 44-year-old Yingluck proved popular, articulate and increasingly self-confident. With an M.A. from Kentucky State University, she is a newcomer to politics, until recently working in the family's business empire. While bearing the popular Shinawatra name and appealing to core red shirt supporters, she broadened the party's outreach, muting the signature red by wearing mainly white clothes with red stripes, and promising reconciliation and a government of unity.

Pheu Thai's electoral platform, like those of previous Thaksin parties, consisted of populist promises directed toward farmers, city urban workers and the middle and lower classes. Voters in these groups have been mobilized in recent years through education, working experience abroad and a growing belief that their votes could make a difference. Thaksin was first national Thai political figure to cater explicitly to these voters, and they rewarded him with strong loyalty. But the Pheu Thai vote was not simply pro-Thaksin. It also drew from discontent with the present Thai political system, including historical, ethnic, regional, and social grievances.

Even abroad, where he has been living for the past five years after being deposed in a military coup and then convicted in absentia of corruption, Thaksin has been a dominating political presence. His authoritarianism, populism and poor human rights record have been anathema to many in Bangkok's urban elite and the country's south, while the Thai military was deeply angered by his meddling in promotion and appointments processes. His opponents also paint him and his supporters as anti-monarchist, a very loaded charge in Thailand and one that he denies.

The size of the electoral victory helps the Pheu Thai forces take office unimpeded. However, it could also tempt the party's leaders toward more risky behavior that could provoke their enemies into action.

Given the fragile health of the Thai monarch and uncertain economic times, an ending to the deep division in Thai politics would be very welcome. Yingluck, Thaksin and their supporters now need to show that they can carry out their pledges to bridge the differences with their opponents.

There are early positive signs in quick establishment of a Pheu Thai coalition with small parties, moderate statements by Thaksin and the military and the graceful concession by Abhisit. However, the true tests are yet to come, especially dealing with Thaksin's possible return and coming to a full and objective accounting of last year's political violence.

Charles E. Morrison is president of the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawai'i.