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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Thai General Election 2011: Continuity or Change?**

By Antonio L Rappa

### **Synopsis**

*The general election in Thailand on 3 July 2011 will determine the balance of power between the Democratic Party and Pheu Thai Party. What will be the consequences if Abhisit Vejjajiva or Yingluck Shinawatra emerges as Prime Minister?*

### **Commentary**

THE UPCOMING general election in Thailand on 3 July 2011 will be critical in determining the shape of the political structure of the kingdom for years. Will the Democratic Party of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva be returned to power or will the voters choose the opposition Pheu Thai Party led by Yingluck Shinawatra, youngest sister of ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra?

A Democratic Party victory will legitimise the current government and confirm the people's support for political continuity with the military staying in their barracks. Such a win will give a stamp of approval for Abhisit's handling of several crises since he took office in 2008 while silencing his strongest critics.

### **Contentious elections**

On the other hand a Pheu Thai win will enrage the conservative elites and royalists while reaffirming strong popular support for Yingluck and indirectly her controversial brother. It will represent the triumph of the Red Shirts opposed to the existing power structure over the pro-royalist Yellow Shirts. Should the Pheu Thai form the next government it will most likely create another political upheaval in Thailand. The question of Thaksin's return will arise along with the prospect of his conviction by the Thai courts. The Red Shirts are likely to want to settle old scores, such as the killing of Major-General Khattiya Sawasdipol, or "Seh Daeng" by an unknown sniper and the incarceration of several Red Shirt leaders.

The GE will be contentious for several reasons: the protest culture of the Thais, the large number of voters, the high economic stakes involved, and the widening gap between the urban rich and rural poor. Thai people are not afraid to challenge the authorities even if it entails laying down their lives. So large street protests and bombings may be expected in this country of close to 64 million people.

While the Red Shirts may represent only about a million active supporters, they have had many years in which to sink deep roots in the traditional power bases, not only in the northern and northeast regions but also in the central region around Bangkok. There have already been sporadic bomb blasts and protest demonstrations in Greater Bangkok.

## **Mixed reactions**

A win by a Red Shirt-led coalition of parties opposed to the Abhisit government is possible, while not all Yellow Shirts are completely happy with their leaders. Some have balked because of issues in the courts and also the government's moderate stand vis-à-vis Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple. The Pheu Thai party, which was created after the dissolution of the short-lived People's Power Party (PPP), has shown itself to be better organised with a savvy leadership. The Yellow Shirts or People's Alliance for Democracy is a royalist party that seeks the restoration of a stronger monarchical voice. The PAD are capable of staging large demonstrations as well.

Analysts fear that a face-off between the Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts in the elections would be disastrous and could lead to the intervention of the Army, which has so far declared its intention to stay on the sidelines. Nevertheless the government has rejected suggestions by some opposition candidates that neutral foreign observers be invited to monitor the elections.

While Thai military units remain on alert in the run-up to the elections, the two leading contenders, Abhisit and Yingluck, have received mixed reactions from the people on their visits to the provinces. A seasoned political scientist from Chiangrai believes that while Abhisit is the brilliant Oxford-educated prime minister Thaksin's sister may have all the luck. The outcome of the polls on 3 July will determine whether continuity or change will prevail.

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