Thailand after Elections

On 24 of March the first general election in 7 years was held in Thailand. It was meant to put an end to the 5-year rule by the military, who came to power in 2014 as a result of a coup d'etat.

It is worth highlighting straight away that the election did not shed any light on the future of politics in the nation, and instead generated an even more uncertain situation, which the ruling elite are now trying to rectify.

The 2017 Constitution, written by the military, considerably limits the power of large parties so as to not afford them the opportunity to play a domineering role in the Thai National Assembly, as Thaksin Shinawatra’s populists had won all the elections starting in 2001, and this invariably led to political crises and upheavals.

Consequently, after the 2019 election none of the political forces in the country have been able to gain a clear majority in the House of Representatives to create a sufficiently stable coalition for then forming the government and thus enabling the National Assembly to function normally.

One of the political alliances being established has the Palang Pracharath Party at its core. It supports Army General Prayut Chan-o-cha for the post of Prime Minister. The opposing coalition is headed by the populist Pheu Thai Party linked with Thaksin Shinawatra and his family.
On the eve of the elections, a court disbanded one of the opposition parties, Thai Raksa Chart, for attempting to involve a member of the Royal family, Ubonrat Ratchakanya Siriwathana Phannawadi, in politics. This could have dealt a serious blow to the current Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha who intends to head the newly elected government.

The dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chart Party considerably weakened the populists and their allies. In reality, the largest opposition party, Pheu Thai, only put forward its candidates in 250 out of 350 constituencies in the entire nation (and 22 out of 30 constituencies in Bangkok) in order to avoid unnecessary rivalry with the Thai Raksa Chart Party in the regions where it had a stronger presence.

The fairly new Future Forward Party got most of the votes meant for Thai Raksa Chart, which enabled it to come third in the elections.

Before all the votes were even counted, Pheu Thai, the Future Forward Party and five other small parties announced that they would form a coalition in the National Assembly.

The precipitate statement was meant to hide the fact that the populists and their allies would be unable to put forward their candidate for the post of Prime Minister, as in order to do so, they would have needed to win 376 seats in the National Assembly, which they failed to do. Hence, their battle ground shifted to the House of Representatives, which determines the structure of the government. In order to have the majority there, the coalition needed to win 251 seats. Clearly, the populists suffered a defeat as their aim was to establish their own government and appoint someone from their own ranks as the Prime Minister.

The Election Commission of Thailand was unable to determine the optimal means for allocating the party-list seats in the National Assembly, because the relevant Article in the Constitution could be interpreted in two different ways.

After the Constitutional Court confirmed the legitimacy of the selected approach to allocate the party-list seats, the final results of the election were announced. Accordingly, representatives from 27 political parties became part of the House of Representatives.

The chosen method was particularly unfavorable for the Future Forward Party, which lost 7 seats in the National Assembly as a result. This prevented the coalition formed by the opposition parties from gaining the majority in the House of Representatives, in fact, overall, it was only able to win 245 seats.

As expected, 11 small political parties that gained 1 seat each in the National Assembly joined the coalition headed by the Palang Pracharath Party.

Thailand’s Democrat and Bhumjaithai Parties joined to form a “political duet” in order to strengthen their position in the battle for posts of ministers in the new cabinet. This “duet” has 103 seats in the National Assembly, but it has not yet decided which camp it would join. The choice made by these two parties determines who will gain the majority in the House of Representatives and will then have the opportunity to form the government.

The Bhumjaithai Party has indirectly confirmed its willingness to ally with the military in exchange for an opportunity to fill important ministerial posts. However, the Democrat Party finds itself in a tougher position.

Immediately after the election, the head of the Democrat Party and one of the most experienced politicians in Thailand, Abhisit Vejjajiva, quit his post, because his party only won 100 seats in the National Assembly. This was the worst result for the oldest party in the nation.

Currently, there is a rift within the Democrat Party because some of its members are categorically opposed to the idea of Major General Prayut Chan-o-cha becoming the new Prime Minister.

It is highly likely that after lengthy negotiations on allocation of ministerial posts, the Palang Pracharath Party will be able to gain majority seats (approximately 255 seats, with 251 being the minimum) in the House of Representatives, to form the government and appoint the Prime Minister from their ranks (but not necessarily Prayut Chan-o-cha). The problem is that such a small difference of just 4-5 votes calls the ability of the National Assembly to function normally into question.

The new government needs a minimum of 260 to 270 seats in the lower house in order to ensure a stable climate for passing legislation. One way to ensure this is to involve the so-called swing voters from the opposing coalition (who vote for the other side whenever required). But both camps will probably use this approach, which will only interfere with the work of the National Assembly.
A test run of sorts, which highlighted obvious issues when it comes to the National Assembly’s ability to make decisions, became the first session of the House of Representatives. Over a number of hours, the members attempted to elect a new speaker. The two candidates were put forward by Pheu Thai and the Democrat Party. In the end, the democrat Chuan Leekpai became the speaker, as 258 lawmakers voted for him, including some members of the opposition.

Appeals to re-write the Constitution yet again and to hold new elections are being made more often already, since the current climate of political uncertainty and the future government’s weakness may have negative economic consequences stemming from potential difficulties with implementing economic policies. There could be delays in making investment decisions on the private sector, especially with regards to projects within the framework of the partnership between the government and the private segment as part of the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). In addition, several trade agreements with other countries are awaiting their approval by the new government. All in all, the results and consequences of the election are a clear reflection of the ongoing prolonged crisis stemming from the fight for influence and the need to create a new system of power relations among Thai elites. All of these developments are the result of a more wide-spread transformation within the system for allocating power and influence in the nation, which began shortly before the death of the former King, Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX).

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