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## Counting Thaksin's blessings

Posted by Zia - 2008/01/04 23:27

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By electing allies of the deposed prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, Thais have voted against the 2006 coup. But the country's worries are not over yet

IN STARK contrast to the terrible political violence in Pakistan and Kenya, Thailand's election, on December 23rd, was mostly peaceful. It also, notwithstanding perennial complaints of vote-buying, seemed largely fair. More remarkably, the military chiefs who deposed the government of Thaksin Shinawatra in a coup in 2006 seemed to accept the public's decision to overrule the coup and restore Mr Thaksin's allies to power in the form of the People's Power Party (PPP), a reincarnation of his disbanded Thai Rak Thai (TRT).

Mr Thaksin, too, has struck a conciliatory note. This week he said he would return from exile soon and invite the coupmakers to a round of golf. "For the sake of the country's reconciliation", he would meet his nemesis, General Prem Tinsulanonda, the chief adviser to King Bhumibol, and the man widely presumed to be the mastermind behind the coup. If so, Thailand may emerge from two years of political strife and regain its former status as a beacon of multi-party democracy in Asia. Until recently such an outcome had seemed improbable. In October a memo came to light detailing the junta's plans, through spreading black propaganda and fomenting anti-Thaksin protests, to subvert the election to thwart a PPP victory. However, embarrassed by the plan's discovery, and perhaps disheartened by months of unpopularity, the junta seems to have dropped the plan and let the people decide.

A potential spanner in the works is a decision by the Election Commission, due later this month, on which winning candidates will be disqualified for electoral malpractice. Early in the campaign the commission announced absurdly stringent regulations, raising fears it might apply them partially, to disqualify PPP candidates, or indeed the entire party, on flimsy grounds. The commission later absolved the junta over its plot to subvert the election, arguing that the conspiracy had not been enacted and thus no harm was done. If it is consistent it will judge poll-fraud allegations by the same yardstick, disqualifying elected members only if their rule-breaking may have altered the results. Early this week there were signs of splits in the commission, with one of its members saying he wanted to quit.

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It had been widely assumed that the PPP would get the most seats but not enough to prevent its main rival, the Democrat party, from forming a governing coalition. However, the Thaksinites did better than expected, winning 233 seats, only eight short of a majority in the 480-seat lower house (see chart). This was in spite of a recent change to the electoral system—to merge single-seat constituencies into ones returning up to three members—that seemed designed to encourage Mr Thaksin's supporters to spread their votes around other parties. As the extent of the PPP's victory became clear on election night, Samak Sundaravej, Mr Thaksin's stand-in as party leader, insisted he would be prime minister. By the middle of this week it seemed as if the PPP had persuaded most or all of the five minor parties that won seats to join its coalition. This would give it a big enough majority to withstand all but an extravagant number of disqualifications.

Mr Thaksin took full advantage of his crushing majority in the last parliament, pushing his cronies into key institutional jobs while scorning his critics. His allies' new government may not have it so easy. For one thing, the Democrats emerged stronger from the election, gaining 165 seats, up from 96 in the 2005 election (when the lower house had 500 seats), so they should provide more effective opposition. Furthermore, a new constitution narrowly approved in a referendum in August strengthens the checks and balances against an over-mighty executive. This includes a dubious change in which some Senate members will be appointed by judges and officials (the rest will be elected, probably in March).

Ideally the PPP-led government would offer the advantages of the previous TRT ones—sound macroeconomic management and policies to aid poor rural villagers—without the disadvantages, such as Mr Thaksin's autocratic tendencies and conflicts of interest. To boost flagging economic growth and weak investment, confidence in the stability and competence of government needs to be restored swiftly.

Samak the knife

However, Thailand's political strife may not yet be over. Mr Samak, abrasive and uncouth, may prove an even more divisive prime minister than Mr Thaksin. Mr Samak is a staunch royalist but he is also a foe of General Prem, so it cannot be guaranteed that the generals and the Thaksinites will kiss and make up, especially since Mr Samak wants to lift Mr Thaksin's five-year ban from politics, and halt the corruption inquiries the coupmakers instigated against him. Mr Thaksin insists he has retired from politics but not everyone believes he will keep his word. If he or close relatives take top jobs in the new administration, and especially if he uses his restored power to seek revenge on the coupmakers, he risks renewed street protests and a reaction from the army's hardliners.

In the absence of such a disaster, history may look kindly on the perpetrators of Thailand's 18th coup since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932. They spilled no blood and kept their promise to restore democracy promptly. But they and

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their supporters would have been more nefarious had Thai public opinion not stopped them: they tried to insert a clause in the new constitution granting themselves sweeping powers in the event of a political conflict, and then tried to achieve the same by means of an ordinary law, which the military-appointed interim assembly watered down before passing last month.

The generals signally failed to prove the claims of "rampant corruption" and other misdeeds by Mr Thaksin used to justify the coup. Worse, they did nothing to correct the most heinous abuses of his administration: extrajudicial killings by police during a 2003 "war on drugs" and two massacres in 2004 of Muslim protesters by security forces in Thailand's troubled south. The junta and those among the fickle Bangkok elite who excused the coup should have learned their lesson that extra-constitutional excursions do not solve problems. That, however, may be too much to hope.

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## Re:Counting Thaksin\'s blessings

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the thai political problem is not politicians and personalities, but the whole undemocratic and corrupted to the core political system.

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