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Thailand

Elections in Thailand: a stinging disavowal of the ruling oligarchy

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Thailand's parliamentary elections on July 3, 2011 could prove to be among the most important events in the history of the country. These elections took place 14 months after the repression which led to the death of 93 persons, mostly Red Shirts. Abhisit Vejjajiva, who became Prime Minister in December 2008 supported by an alliance organised by the military inside parliament, had turned them into a test in order to win at the ballot box the legitimacy which had been previously denied to him.

The result of the elections is beyond doubt. Despite censorship, military propaganda and intimidation, the voters turned massively towards the main opposition party, the Puea Thai (For the Thais). It won 265 of the 500 seats in the parliament and thus won an absolute majority. This party is the descendant of the Thai Rak Thai, the party of Thaksin Shinawatra, the businessman turned politician overthrown by the last military coup in September 2006. With Thaksin in exile, the Puea Thai had chosen his younger sister Yingluck to lead the campaign. The electoral message was thus perfectly clear and the elections took on the character of a referendum on the events since the coup.

Abhisit's Democrat Party, the motor of the ruling coalition, only obtained 165 seats. It paid the price for its proximity to the military, the monarchy and the high ranking bureaucrats who cream off the wealth of the country and maintain deep inequalities despite a real modernisation and healthy economic growth. The Democrat Party also paid for the strong repression exerted against the Red Shirts. The censorship of their newspapers, radios and television channels, the intimidation and arrest of activists has not sapped their determination.

These elections are a harsh blow aimed at the oligarchy which has dominated political and economic life in Thailand for several decades. It has lost direct control over the legislature and the executive. Despite the 2006 coup and a change in the Constitution drawn up under the direction of the generals, the ruling élites have not succeeded in getting rid of Thaksin who remains extremely popular. Yingluck will become the first female Prime Minister in the history of Thailand. She will be supported by a parliamentary coalition of 299 deputies made up of the Puea Thai and five small parties.

The option of a new military coup seems very unlikely today. At the international level, a new overthrow of a democratically elected government would not be acceptable to the US ally as was the case in 2006. But above all the divisions inside Thai society are so exacerbated that the refusal to recognise the verdict of the ballot boxes would undoubtedly lead to a genuine popular uprising of the Puea Thai and Red Shirt rank and file.

It is more probable that everything will be done to destabilise the new government without recourse to force. The risks of still greater political polarisation are real. The weakness of the parliamentary opposition could favour the development of an extra parliamentary opposition like that of the ultra-nationalist movement of the Yellow Shirts against Thaksin or recourse to backroom manoeuvres by the army and the palace.

The military could also make the choice of adopting a more conciliatory attitude towards the Puea Thai whose interests are not so divergent. This party is not without contradictions. Although elected by a popular electoral base and supported by the Red Shirts, it remains a capitalist party which defends the interests of the big industrialists. Its popularity rests on Thaksin who between 2000 and 2006 conducted a populist policy which allowed considerable improvement for the lives of millions of the less well off.

Since the military coup, the popular mobilisations have shown a real aspiration to democracy, social justice and to political and social changes. Will the new government meet these expectations? The response to this question

depends in great part on its will and ability to confront the ruling élites. The military control and dominate to a great degree political life and to a certain extent Thai economic life. Reviving the democratic process halted by the 2006 coup supposes depoliticising the army, subjecting it to the civilian authorities and eroding its economic bases. The government should attack the economic property of the army and its means of communication which include several television channels and drastically reduce the budget allocated to it.

If it really wants to strengthen democracy, at the institutional level the new government should first restore the Constitution of 1997 replaced in 2007 by a new constitution dictated by the generals. The Constitution of 1997 was by far the most democratic ever since the revolution of 1932. The new government should also give guarantees at the level of social justice. All political prisoners and persons prosecuted for the crime of lèse majesté, more than 300 cases according to the Political Prisoners in Thailand association, should be released or amnestied as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the Yellow Shirts who have been guilty of a number of crimes, in particular the closure of the two international airports at Bangkok in November 2008, should be prosecuted. An independent commission of investigation should also be set up to shed light on the repression which led to the death of 93 people in April and May 2010, mostly Red Shirts. The responsibilities of Prime Minister Abhisit and his Vice Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsubal, the former commander in chief Anupong Paochinda and his replacement Prayuth Chan-ocha should be clearly identified.

The democratic process cannot be revived without a profound reform of a justice system which has been in the service of the wealthy, an end to censorship and all the repressive laws like the crime of lèse majesté and the law on cybercrime.

At the economic level, the Puea Thai has advanced many economic proposals in favour of its popular base, among them bringing the daily minimum wage up to 300 baths, that is increasing it by 40 to 100% according to the region; allowing borrowers to suspend the repayment of their debt for three years; implementing a programme guaranteeing rice growers a fixed price ; indexing the repayment of loans granted by the state to students to their incomes; fixing the price of universal cover for medical care at 30 baths. The implementation of such measures would allow a beginning in the reduction of the deep social inequalities which divide Thai society.

The Red Shirts have mobilised to call for respect for democracy and social justice. The massive vote for the Puea Thai is another sign that the majority of the population want structural change. Will the Puea Thai have the political will to deal with the political, institutional and social problems which traverse Thai society? The implementation of the reforms necessary to overcome this multiple crisis will undoubtedly depend more on the capacity of the Red Shirts and civil society to impose them.