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Thai Premier Wins Election, but Crisis Only Worsens

By Alan Sipress
Washington Post Foreign Service
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BANGKOK, April 2 -- Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was reelected easily Sunday in a contest boycotted by Thailand's main opposition parties, but he failed to break a political deadlock that has provoked weeks of mass protests demanding his ouster for alleged misconduct.

Early returns showed that a new parliament may not be able to convene under Thai law because some seats remain unfilled, further aggravating the three-month-old crisis.

The heightened uncertainty comes as Thaksin's foes have vowed to intensify their demonstrations later this week. Opponents accuse him of weakening the country's democratic institutions and, in particular, improperly enriching himself when his family agreed in January to sell its telecommunications empire to a Singapore company for \$1.9 billion.

Though initial returns showed Thaksin's party, Thais Love Thais, headed toward a commanding majority, large numbers of people in Bangkok registered their discontent with the prime minister by signifying on their ballots that they were abstaining.

Dozens of seats could remain vacant in uncontested districts around the country where the candidate fails to reach the required 20 percent threshold of eligible voters. The prime minister's party is running unopposed for more than half the parliament's 500 seats, according to the national election commission.

Thai legal experts said new elections must take place in the coming weeks to fill the vacancies because a government cannot be formed under Thai law unless parliament has a complete complement of members.

After casting his ballot in western Bangkok, Thaksin told reporters, "This election is very important for the direction of the country because there is a split right now." He appeared relaxed but later in the evening called off a scheduled news conference, saying he wanted to wait for the results to become clear. Election officials say they expect vote-counting to be finished Monday.

Even before the ballots were tallied, retired Maj. Gen. Chamlong Srimuang, a protest leader of the People's Alliance for Democracy, dismissed the outcome.

"The problem is that Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has no legitimacy to rule, so PAD will go on rallying until Thaksin resigns and Thailand gets a royally appointed prime minister," Chamlong said in comments reported by the Nation newspaper's online edition.

The protest movement plans to file suit Monday to annul the outcome of the vote and seek an injunction

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to prevent endorsement of the results by the election commission, according to an alliance spokesman.

"We are in for a long haul," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a political analyst at Chulalongkom University.

He said Thaksin could ease tensions if he took advantage of the comfortable victory to make a dignified exit, perhaps by turning power over to a deputy. "But if it leads Thaksin to become more emboldened and renew his term, it will make the crisis worse," Thitinan continued. "If he somehow opens parliament, we will have a downward spiral in confrontation on the street."

Several clashes already broke out last week between Thaksin's supporters and detractors, raising the prospect that the military or Thailand's revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej could intervene to name a new interim government and restore calm.

Although Thailand's military has a long history of coups, senior officers have said they plan to remain on the sidelines.

Thaksin's challengers are divided over whether the king should press the prime minister to resign, with skeptics warning that this could undermine the country's democracy.

But if the protests provoke bloodshed -- so far the only fatality was reportedly from the heat -- many politicians say they expect the king would signal that it is time for the military to move in. The prime minister himself could also declare emergency rule in response to mounting unrest.

Election observers have warned that violence could erupt if provinces traditionally opposed to Thaksin respond angrily to the election of pro-government candidates from their districts.

Once the most popular elected prime minister in his country's history, Thaksin, 56, called the elections three years early in a bid to defuse a crisis that has repeatedly drawn tens of thousands of protesters into the streets and parks of the capital.

But opposition parties announced they would boycott the election on the grounds it would lend Thaksin undeserved legitimacy. "What we did when we took the position was to make a statement, and we made a statement," Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the opposition Democrat Party, told reporters.

As the election approached, the prime minister sought to win over foes by offering them cabinet positions and pledging to undertake political reforms. He also promised to step down if he failed to gain half the vote.

His opponents balked. Some opposition leaders urged Thais to go to the polls but vote to abstain.

Election returns reflected the deep rift that has opened between Bangkok and Thailand's rural hinterlands to the north and east.

In the capital, where many intellectuals and middle-class Thais object to what they call Thaksin's autocratic rule, early results showed abstentions outrunning votes for the prime minister.

But the initial results also indicated he still enjoys broad support in the countryside, where villagers are grateful for his populist policies including subsidized health care, village investment funds and rural debt restructuring.

Shortly after the polls closed Sunday, small bombs exploded outside at least two election stations in the southern province of Narathiwat, where Muslim insurgents have been waging a two-year uprising. Several security officers were wounded, police said. Earlier in the day, police defused another bomb in neighboring Pattani province.

Despite underlying anxiety in the capital, Bangkok was unusually quiet on a sunny election day. The campaign posters and billboards that plastered roadsides before previous elections were largely missing and the mass demonstrations of recent weeks were suspended shortly before the weekend.

At a voting station in Bangkok's Mater Dei Institute, a steady stream of voters filed beneath the basketball hoops of the school's gymnasium to cast their ballots. Voters said most of the people in this affluent downtown district had abstained.

"People here don't like Thaksin. Most prefer other parties," said Pear Pongsachareonnont, 25, a soft-spoken doctor.

"After the election, Thaksin will remain the same," she continued, "but people's opposition to him will grow stronger because people will still refuse to accept him."

Just outside the school's parking lot, where voters arrived in Mercedes, BMWs and SUVs, Suriya Suwannasoya, 35, had a different opinion. Clad in the orange vest of a motorcycle taxi driver and cradling his helmet in his arms, he said he remained loyal to Thaksin, as does nearly everyone in his home town in Thailand's rural northeast. Suriya said he felt so strongly that he had arranged to vote ahead of time rather than risk missing the chance because of work.

"The election will not end the political crisis," Suriya said as a young woman took a seat on his motorbike. "Maybe if there's a new prime minister, the situation will calm down, but I still think Thaksin should stay."

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Thai court may nullify polls

The Nation/ ANN and Associated Press

BANGKOK, May 1: The Constitution Court today decided to proceed with a judicial review of the legality of the 2 April election as filed by Thammasat University lecturers.

Mr Paibool Warahap-aitool, secretary-general of the Constitution Court, said the EC was given three days to submit its defence against the charges that it had violated the charter in holding the 2 April election. The case was endorsed by the Parliament ombudsmen and forwarded to the court on Friday. The court held a meeting today and resolved to proceed with the case.

The leader of the group of academics, Mr Bancherd Singkanethi, argues that the 2 April election and an 23 April by-election were framed in the form of a referendum to endorse the regime of outgoing Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra - not a true election as specified by the Constitution.

Following months of street protests against him,



Thai Constitutional Court president Mr Parn Juntraparn at a meeting of judges. ■AFP

Mr Thaksin dissolved Parliament and called a snap election that was boycotted by the main opposition parties, resulting in the election of fewer than the full 500 candidates required for the lower house to convene.

The academics' complaint lists several charges, including that the election was hastily scheduled 37 days after the dissolution of Parliament and did not give all parties proper time to prepare. Mr Paiboon said the court accepted the complaint because it felt

there were "grounds in the charges that election law had been violated." He said the court asked the Election Commission on Monday to answer to the charges, giving it three days to respond in writing.

Meanwhile, the Administrative Court - which adjudicates cases of dispute involving state agencies - met today to consider a complaint filed by other university lecturers, who claim that ballot booths were positioned a way that did not guarantee voters privacy.

Mr Thaksin, who has recently been keeping a low domestic profile, returned to Thailand after a private, four-country tour. His supporters said he might consider running again for Prime Minister if the election is nullified. "Everything is possible. Everyone has the right according to the Constitution," said acting Prime Minister Mr Chitchai Wannasathit. The academics who lodged the complaint also argue that Mr Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party hired small parties to run against its candidates in some constituencies.

02 MAY 2006

THE STATESMAN

Thaksin back at helm

Associated Press

BANGKOK, May 23: Embattled Prime Minister Mr Thaksin Shinawatra resumed his duties today after a seven-week self-imposed leave of absence, even as challenges to his hold on power continued to mount.

"Yes, I am coming to work full-time and will chair every Cabinet meeting," Mr Thaksin told reporters before attending the weekly

Cabinet meeting.

Pending new elections yet to be scheduled, Mr Thaksin heads a caretaker government with no Parliament to carry out legislative duties.

The leader of the opposition Democrat Party Mr Abhisit Vejjajiva said Mr Thaksin's return would create more political and legal turmoil, and other opponents vowed to resume street protests against him.

Seeking an end to the political crisis that ensued

from an abortive 2 April general election is expected to be his top priority, while his critics - who accuse him of corruption and abuse of power - keep agitating for his removal from office.

Mr Thaksin resumed work with determination, holding an unusual two-session Cabinet meeting - in the morning and afternoon - to tackle various issues.

Government spokesman Mr Surapong Suebwonglee said Mr

Thaksin told the Cabinet that to resolve current economic problems, the government will have to focus on grass-roots growth in the countryside before moving to spur economic activity in urban areas. Shortly after the April polls, Mr Thaksin had handed over the power of acting premier to Deputy Prime Minister Mr Chitchai Wannasathit, saying that he was taking "a rest" in the interests of political reconciliation.

24 MAY 2016

THE STATESMAN

POLLS ORDERED AFRESH

Thai court nullifies election

The Nation/ANN

BANGKOK, May 8: The Constitution Court has invalidated the controversial April election and ordered a new election to be held, court's secretary-general Mr Paiboon Warahapaithoon said.

Eight of the court's 14 judges voted that the polls had been unconstitutional for a variety of reasons, such as the manner in which the ballot booths were placed in a way to compromise voting privacy. Eight judges who ruled the election is unconstitutional were: Justice Pan Chantarapan, Justice Me Jira Boonpochanasoonthorn, Justice Noppadol Hengcharoen, Preecha Chalermwanich, Justice Mongkol Sara-an, Justice Saowanee Assawaroj, Justice Apai Chantanajullaka and Justice Ura Wangormklang.

The court also voted 9-5 that a new election should be held, Mr Paiboon said at a press conference. The nine judges were Justice Jira Boonyapochanasoonthorn, Justice Noppadol Hengcharoen, Justice Preecha Chalermwanich, Justice Mongkol Sara-an, Justice Mani Wittayatem, Justice Saowanee Assawaroj, Justice Apai Chantanajullaka, Justice Ura Wangormklang and Justice Pan Chantarapan.

In past cases, Justice Pan has repeatedly voted in favour of the government of caretaker Prime Minister Mr Thaksin Shinawatra. Meanwhile the leading Opposition party, the

Democrats, who boycotted the 2 April polls, said they are now ready to contest a new election. "We are preparing for the new election, but we still have no details on the election day," said Democrat spokesman Mr Ong-art Klampaiboon.

The historic ruling came after two groups of people filed complaints with Constitution Court, alleging that the election is unconstitutional.

The complaints ~ filed by a Thammasat University law lecturer and the People's Network for Elections, a Thai watchdog ~ argue that the 2 April date was chosen unfairly, that the winners were improperly certified, and that the ruling party had financed campaigns by fringe groups.

The most serious issue was that the ballot booths were placed in a way to compromise voting privacy despite the fact that the constitution stipulate that the voting has to be direct and secret. When the meeting of judges began at the 10 a.m, about 20 protesters standing outside the court room called on members of the election commission to resign.

The sitting of the judges today on the issues came after HM the King suggested senior judges from the Supreme Court, Supreme Administrative Court and Constitution Court to launch deliberation on a series of cases to determine the legality of Thailand's 2 April snap election which has led to widespread political confusion.

09 MAY 2006

Thai court cancels April poll, orders new elections

NOPPORN WONG-ANAN
BANGKOK, MAY 8

THAILAND'S Constitutional Court ruled on Monday that the inconclusive April 2 general election was unconstitutional and said a new poll should be held to try to resolve months of political deadlock. "The Constitutional Court voted 8 to 6 that the elections were unconstitutional and voted 9 to 5 to hold a new election," Judge Ura Wangomklang told reporters.

A spokesman later confirmed the ruling and said the government should set the date for a new poll. However, in a sign of the constitutional confusion which is likely to ensue, a senior bureaucrat said it



Opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva talks to the media

was actually up to the Election Commission (EC) to decide.

"It is the EC's job, not the government's," said Cabinet Secretary-General Bovornsak Uwanno. "The EC will have to talk to every party to find an appropriate election date."

Earlier, another judge said the ruling would resolve the political crisis, although a clear way out of what revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej has described as a "mess" does not appear to be imminent.

The impasse was brought about by a boycott of the snap April poll by the Opposition Democrat Party that left empty seats in the Parliament and Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra unable to form a government.

Thaksin stood aside after a strong protest vote but members of his Thai Rak Thai party, including the deputy who has taken over his day-to-day duties, have said he would be eligible to run again if the poll was nullified.

09 MAY 2006

INDIAN EXPRESS

Thai judges fail to reach decision

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BANGKOK, April 28: Thailand's three most powerful judges failed to agree today on whether to uphold controversial snap elections held earlier this month, dimming hopes for a quick breakthrough to end months of turmoil.

The chief justices of the country's top three courts met for less than two hours to discuss the crisis that has gripped Thailand, sent tens

of thousands into the streets, and forced Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to step aside.

Instead of taking new action, the judges agreed to speed up deliberations on a dozen cases already filed in the three courts contesting the fairness of the election process, said Mr Charan Pakdithanakul, speaking on behalf of the judges. "The agreement

betw-eeen the three judges was that each court will independently deliberate on cases under their jurisdiction urgently," said Mr Charan. The judges also decided to hold further meetings, although they did not set a date.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej ordered the courts to try to end the turmoil in a rare political intervention. ■ AFP

29 APR 2005

THE STATESMAN

'PM TRYING BACKDOOR ENTRY'

Thaksin allies in Senate fray

SB
Thaksin
18/4



Associated Press

BANGKOK, April 17: Thailand elects a new Senate this week, as opponents of outgoing Prime Minister Mr Thaksin Shinawatra complained that many of the candidates for the supposedly nonpolitical body are the wives and allies of ruling party politicians.

Candidates for Wednesday's election include one of Mr Thaksin's lawyers, Thana Benjathikul, and a former high-ranking Thai Rak Thai official, Mr Thawee Kraikub. Elections for Thailand's 200-seat upper house of Parliament come two weeks after a controversial snap poll called by Mr Thaksin to defuse the country's biggest anti-government street protests in over a decade.

Though street protests have died down, Thailand's fragile democracy was bruised by the 2 April elections. The polls, which were boycotted by the Opposition, resulted in Mr Thaksin stepping down but left his Thai Rak Thai party with almost absolute control over the House of Representatives and have intensified demands for political reforms. Critics who accuse Mr Thaksin of widespread corruption believe the telecom tycoon-turned-politician has already charted a comeback course, which includes continuing his domination of the supposedly non-partisan Senate.

"Thaksin wants an absolute power sweep,

therefore he needs to control the Senate," said Senator Niran Pitakwachara, a Thaksin critic. He expected some 150 of the election victors to be closely tied to the Thai Rak Thai party, roughly the makeup of the current Senate.

Until the previous Senate election in 2000, Thailand's upper house of Parliament was appointed by the government. The creation of a directly elected Senate, a product of the 1997 reformist constitution, was seen as a milestone in the reform of Thai politics and a way to ensure a better system of checks-and-balances in the government.

The body is empowered to remove corrupt officials and politicians, including the Prime Minister, and appoints members of independent bodies that were set up under the new constitution, such as the Election Commission, the Constitutional Court and the National Counter Corruption Commission.

Outgoing Senator Kraiak Choonhavan called the Senate a "collapse of democracy", saying his class included about three dozen reform-minded senators who were hamstrung by the rest who toed the government line. He estimated that at least half of the candidates for Wednesday's election were the wives of politicians and others were government allies or civil servants with close ties to Mr Thaksin. Senate candidates are required by the constitution to have severed links with political parties at least one year before running for the upper house. |

But many say the first class of elected senators failed to live up to the body's ideal of the impartiality. The Election Commission was probing the allegations.

18 APR 2006

THE STATESMAN

Thais resent EC clean chit to PM

Associated Press

BANGKOK, April 10: More than 100 demonstrators laid a wreath today in front of the offices of the Election Commission, protesting its investigators' findings that Prime Minister Mr Thaksin Shinawatra's party had not violated electoral law.

The People's Alliance for Democracy, a group that has for months led mass protests to oust Mr Thaksin, submitted a petition before the 2 April general election calling for a probe into possible violations by the Thai leader's Thai Rak Thai party.

It alleged that Thai Rak Thai tried to buy voters' favour with cash, T-shirts and headbands. However, the commission yesterday issued a preliminary finding that the ruling party did not violate electoral law.

The four election commissioners had been expected to release their final ruling today, but delayed it by a day.

"The Election Commission is dead. It no longer has any legitimacy", read the words on the black wreath that protesters laid in front of the commission's office in the Thai capital.

Mr Thaksin's opponents have already accused the commission of favouring Thai Rak Thai by delaying the release of the investigation's findings until after the polls, which were boycotted by the three main Opposition parties. The alliance, which accuses Mr Thaksin of corruption and abuse of power, wants him to resign immediately, even though he has already put the deputy Prime Minister in charge.

Hospital blast kills 15 in China

YUANPING (China), April 10: At least 15 people were killed today in an explosion at a hospital in Yuanping, a city in north China's Shanxi Province, local sources said.

The blast took place at about 2.25 a.m. in the staff hospital garage of the Xuangang Coal and Electricity Co. here.

Rescue workers recovered 15 bodies by mid-afternoon and said the death toll would probably increase. The blast damaged buildings within one km of the car park, causing serious damage to walls and windows in a five-storey apartment block used by hospital staff. The vice-governor rushed to the spot. Investigation into the cause of the explosion is under way. ■ IANS

11 APR 2006

THE STRAITS TIMES

With a bottleful of salt

A few hours before Thaksin Shinawatra announced on Tuesday evening that he wouldn't accept the premiership when (if) the new House was called to pick a new leader, I wrote this commentary based on his television appearance the evening before:

You can never be too sure whether Thaksin Shinawatra is making a serious proposal or expressing his personal feelings when he mentions "national reconciliation". In fact, if you are familiar with his famous "quick promises, quick reversals", then you probably would want to treat his public statements on this issue just as a source of entertainment.

"If I am the real source of the country's ongoing conflict, I am ready to quit," he said. But did he mean it? Nobody knows. But if one goes by his record, one would have to take it with a bottleful of salt.

The fact that Thaksin was still wondering whether he was the real problem — one day after the 2 April snap-election results showed an unprecedented 10 million people registering their anti-Thaksin votes by marking the abstention box on the ballot — showed that he still didn't get it. Or didn't want to get it at all. This, despite the fact that thousands of voters had gone one step further to show their anger by writing condemnations of Thaksin on the ballots, deliberately invalidating them.

Thaksin instead chose to emphasise that 16 million people around the country were still on his side, trying desperately to overlook the fact that he can't possibly rule a country where at least 40 per cent of the populace will not accept him as their leader. He simply refused to take note of the fact that this was the first time in Thai political history that such an overwhelming number of voters came out to notify an incumbent leader that his regime was too corrupt and despotic to deserve any trust at all.

Does Thaksin realise that there is a real political stalemate even after this purported exercise in democracy? The signs are too blatant to ignore. But, political chicanery, not adherence to reality, has become his weapon of choice. Thaksin went on television on Monday night to talk about "national reconciliation" as a way out of the current crisis, but it's reconciliation of a bizarre kind. He wants to meet "half-way", but only on his

Does Thaksin mean what he says? Nobody knows,
writes SUTHICHAI YOON



Thaksin's 'political pause' is only the first step terms.

He said he would name an "independent panel" comprising three ex-chief judges, three former House speakers, and three ex-premiers and/or former university rectors to work on reconciliation. That's typical of Thaksin's way of thinking: as soon as he mentions "compromises" he starts to set his own

rules for the game. One simply doesn't set up one's own committee without consulting with the warring parties and proceeding from there to reach a compromise.

It's plain, though, that he realises he has to go. But then, he goes about complicating things by taking one step back immediately.

"But who's to guarantee that if I go, things

will be back to normal?" he asked. He was implying that nobody else could set things right in this country. And, of course, that misguided notion has been the single source of nationwide protests against his rule. Does he realise that? He does but he doesn't want to admit it. And that's the source of trouble plaguing the country right now. The election,

as pointed out repeatedly by critics from all quarters, not only failed to resolve the nation's rising tension; it dragged the country further down an unfathomable dark hole. If Thaksin cares, he hasn't shown it in any apparent way.

His latest conditions for reconciliation, on the surface, sound simple enough: "Let the Opposition parties lift the boycott. Let the People's Alliance for Democracy call off all rallies. Then I will immediately step down."

Sounds easy and clear, but it's not. One would have to first ask the question: "Does he mean it?" Then, if the answer is in the affirmative, the next question is bound to be: "If he means it, why did he talk about setting up an independent panel to coordinate reconciliation talks?" But that's not all. With Thaksin, nothing is as it seems. Your suspicion that something is always up his sleeve inevitably proved right. His next statement, given on television on Monday night, was classic "Thaksin-speak".

"Then, if we agree to all these conditions, the next question is: how do I tell the 16 million voters who cast their ballots for me to remain Prime Minister that I am not going to comply with their wishes?" he asked, with his typical knowing smile which inevitably carried that obnoxious "See, I can get away with it again, mate?" message.

That, without a doubt, is no message of reconciliation. Obviously, he has 16 million conditions attached to his "one step back" compromise. Sad to say, with that attitude from the man in the centre of the storm, things will get worse before they get better.

The price we will have to pay is becoming increasingly difficult to predict.

As things turned out, a few hours later Thaksin did prove predictably unpredictable. Contrary to what he suggested, it wasn't all that complicated to find a way to explain to the "16 million voters" why he had to turn down the premiership. And perhaps to his own great surprise, after he promised to remove himself from the political equation, national reconciliation, which had seemed almost unattainable only a few hours earlier, immediately appeared to be within reach after all.

(The author is Group Editor-in-Chief, The Nation/ANN.)

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S. S. Ashwin
S. S. Ashwin
S. S. Ashwin

Thais hail PM's ouster

Bangkok: Opposition activists were rallying on Friday to celebrate the ouster of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and map out a strategy to rid the country of his legacy of alleged corruption and erosion of democracy. People started arriving on Friday morning for the rally near the Grand Palace, called by the People's Alliance for Democracy, and expected to continue into the early hours of Saturday.

The gathering, expected to draw thousands, followed Thaksin's announcement that he would "take a rest" and not serve when the next government is formed, probably next month, and his appointment of a caretaker premier in the interim.

As the celebration began, the main opposition Democrat Party warned Thaksin not to "pull strings" from behind the scenes in the new government or he would face further popular protests. AP

07 APR 2006

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Tackling Thailand's crisis

A day after claiming victory in a snap general election, Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has agreed to step down before the new Parliament meets. The decision was a sequel to his meeting with the country's highly respected monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyatej, who will soon be celebrating his diamond jubilee. Even before the election, the Prime Minister declared that if the King were to "whisper" the message into his ear, he would resign. The respect King Bhumibol — the antithesis of King Gyanendra of Nepal — enjoys springs from the fact that, as head of state, he has scrupulously steered clear of divisive politics and has been a model of constitutional detachment and justice. When Thailand faces a crisis, the politicians as well as the people tend to look to their King for sage counsel. He chose to remain silent until his people had spoken. The April 2 election turned out to be a hollow victory for Mr. Shinawatra and his ruling Thai Rak Thai party: with the opposition boycotting the polls and about 40 per cent of the electorate exercising the 'No vote' option, the 'winner' clearly lacked legitimacy. With the opposition parties refusing to relent and continuing popular protests guaranteed, Thailand faced the prospect of a long and hot summer of disaffection. The King's whisper presumably was the last straw. Mr. Shinawatra's resignation might lower the intensity of the political crisis facing Thailand but it will not resolve it. Parliament will be packed with Thai Rak Thai MPs and will not be representative — even if the election authority permits the boycotting opposition to contest the 38 seats that will go for a re-poll because ruling party candidates in those constituencies could not muster the minimum statutory requirement of 20 per cent of the vote.

Mr. Shinawatra, a business magnate, entered politics with the promise of cleaning it up. Today, he is seen by his people as the embodiment of financial skulduggery and conflict of interest. Five years ago, during his first term as Prime Minister, he narrowly escaped conviction and a ban on holding office after concealing financial assets. He has faced insider trading charges. His bid for a third term as head of government was dogged by a scandal over the alleged abuse of his position and the bending of the laws to put through the sale of his corporate empire — the Shinawatra Computer and Communications Group. It is perhaps time for the monarch to follow up whatever he did to make the Prime Minister resign by nudging the political parties in the direction of a national government — for the simple reason that a Thai Rak Thai regime will be unsustainable. The main task of an interim national government will be to review the constitution, craft a package of political and electoral reforms, and place it before the people for approval.

06 APR 2006

THE HINDU

Thai PM hands over power to deputy

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BANGKOK, APRIL 5

OUTGOING PM Thaksin Shinawatra said today he has handed over his responsibilities to Deputy PM Chitchai Wannasathit. Thaksin told crowds of supporters outside his Thai Rak Thai Party headquarters that he "will let Chitchai be the acting Prime Minister".

The move comes a day after Thaksin's surprise announcement that he would step down from his office, after two months of protests calling for his resignation.

"I have decided that if I have to rest to let the country move forward, I want to rest now. I have appointed Chitchai to do my work from now on. I need to rest. I have told Chitchai that I'm worried," Thaksin said outside his party headquarters.

Chitchai, 59, who was recently appointed to oversee security affairs, is a longtime friend of Thaksin. The two studied together in the US and both joined the Royal Thai Police Department where Chitchai rose to senior positions. Since he is not a Member of Parliament, he is unlikely to remain in the job after the body meets to name Thaksin's successor.



Thaksin is embraced by supporters on Wednesday in Bangkok. (Inset) Thai Deputy PM Chitchai Wannasathit. AP

Who could be the next PM?

■ **Deputy PM and Commerce Minister SOMKID JATUSRITPAK**, 52. Served in Thaksin's governments as finance minister, deputy PM and commerce minister. Entrusted with directing economic policy for Thaksin. Suffers from health problems and may not want job. Specialised in marketing, strategic management and business policy.

■ **BHOKIN BHALAKULA**, a former House Speaker, 54. Thaksin's top legal adviser, involved in the PM's battle strategy to hold on to his post in the past few months, earning him enemies who might make it difficult for him to assume the PM's post. Educated in law in France. Has been a deputy judge and speaker of the House of Representatives, and interior minister and deputy PM in Thaksin's governments.

■ **Agriculture Minister SUDARAT KEYURAPHAN**, 44. One of country's best known female politicians. Helped Thaksin found the Thai Rak Thai party in 1998. Served as both health and agriculture minister in his government.

■ **Deputy PM SURADART SATHIRATHAI**, 47. Promoted as Asia's candidate to become the next secretary-general of the UN. Held foreign portfolio before becoming Deputy PM. Has doctoral law degree from Harvard University. Lacks appropriate administrative skills.

—AP

BANGKOK, April 5. — There is no better proof of the resilience of Thailand's democracy under the constitutional monarchy than the interplay of political forces that has compelled Thai Rak Thai leader Mr Thaksin Shinawatra to forego his chance to become a third-term Prime Minister only two days after scoring yet another electoral landslide. The most remarkable thing is that the titanic struggle between Mr Shinawatra, a seriously-flawed, but democratically-elected leader, and the people who have taken to the streets to oppose him was played out over two volatile months without violence.

Even more wonderful is the fact that such a peaceful

resolution to the most dangerous political conflict since the 1992 bloodbath was achieved through the exercise of ordinary citizens' constitutional rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, which are the hallmarks of well-functioning democracies everywhere. The People's Alliance for Democracy, the organiser of the anti-Thaksin campaign, has made effective use of non-violent protest as a weapon against the regime, which stands accused of corruption and anti-democratic tendencies.

The sustained peaceful protest — which first galvanised the middle-class

elite and then persuaded members of society at all levels to rise up in defence of democracy, uphold the national interests and reassert their constitutional rights — enabled the whole society to engage in an intense public discourse on the most important question of the day: what constitutes the political legitimacy of a democratic leader?

It helped focus the collective mind of the people on the true spirit of democracy, not just the facade of democracy that has been cynically manipulated by Mr Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party. The awakening of the usually apathetic public proved to be the desperately needed

Democracy marches on...

catalyst for positive change in Thailand's political landscape, which had been completely dominated by Mr Shinawatra for the last five years.

Without a doubt, a valuable lesson has been learned by the Thai people about democracy and how it can be made to work the way it is intended. People learned that they can take their fight to the streets

against a government that has lost its legitimacy to rule, and they can also take their fight to the ballot box. The avalanche of abstention votes cast by democratic-loving citizens was a resounding rejection of Mr Shinawatra, his Thai Rak Thai Party and the culture

citizens against poverty-stricken rural masses.

This is a time for national reconciliation. The Election Commission is planning new rounds of elections in single-candidate constituencies where the sole contestant failed to garner the requisite 20 per cent of eligible votes. The continuing election process must be completed without further delay now that rules have been relaxed to allow new candidates to take part in subsequent rounds. One of the likeliest scenarios is that the Thai Rak Thai Party will form the core of the new government to oversee constitutional reforms, perhaps with some level of participation by impartial public figures or even members of opposition parties.

of deceit and corruption that they stand for. Credit must be given to security forces, assigned by the government to maintain peace and order, which consistently carried out their duty with restraint and discipline. They deserve praise for not allowing themselves to be used by the Thaksin government to suppress peaceful demonstrators.

Mr Shinawatra's announcement that he will step down as caretaker Prime Minister after the House of Representatives elects a new Prime Minister is a great source of relief for the nation, which is beset by an unprecedented divisiveness that has pitted mostly wealthy urban middle-class

Thaksin for national reconciliation

HD-13

SB Asia
(Kailash)

Thailand in a fluid political state

P. S. Suryanarayana

SINGAPORE: Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra on Monday pledged to work for national reconciliation, after claiming victory in Sunday's snap general election, which produced a wave of "no-result" outcomes in a number of constituencies.

With a "no-result" verdict or protest-vote becoming clear in nearly 40 constituencies, as counting continued, Mr. Thaksin told journalists in Bangkok that political reconciliation was the priority now. This would take precedence over the question of whether or not he should stay as Prime Minister on the basis of his party's showing in the latest poll.

In a late-night talk show over a local television network in Bangkok, Mr. Thaksin said his party had secured about 60 per cent of the total votes polled across the country for the 500-member Parliament. He offered to set up a nine-member panel, inclusive of at least three former Prime Ministers, to decide whether he should remain at the helm.

Observers, who monitored Mr. Thaksin's remarks in the Thai language, noted that he conceded that his party's margin of victory was very much

below his electoral performance in 2005, when he scored a landslide, securing 377 parliamentary seats.

Reports from Bangkok also indicated that the poll authorities had decided to hold by-elections in at least 38 constituencies. The "no-result" outcome was caused by the failure of the unopposed candidates from Mr. Thaksin's party to secure the mandatory minimum percentage of votes for being declared elected.

Under Thailand's complex poll laws, even unopposed candidates should be elected, given the practice of mandatory voting. With the main Opposition parties refraining from fielding any contestants anywhere, unopposed candidates figured in 277 constituencies. In the event, the ruling party faced notional challenge from new "parties" in other places.

In response to Mr. Thaksin's comments, the Opposition leaders vowed to continue their struggle to oust him. The poll was called in the context of allegations that the Prime Minister had indulged in corrupt practices and also abused authority to enable his family to make huge tax-free gains over the sale of a mega firm which he had formed before beginning his political career.

04 APR 2006

THE HINDU

Thaksin declares his party's victory

The Nation/ANN

BANGKOK, April 3. — A defiant Thaksin Shinawatra today claimed victory in yesterday's snap election but, despite proposing a "reconciliatory" panel to solve the current political impasse, risked polarising the country further by dismissing the significance of the huge number of abstention votes cast and his party's loss in the capital.

Speaking to the public for the first time since the election, Mr Thaksin repeatedly called for "unity", respect for the rules of the game and cited the Bush-Gore dead heat in the 2000 US presidential race to back his argument that a nation deeply divided politically could still function. Citing the 16 million party-list votes in Thai Rak Thai's favour compared to approximately 10 million abstention votes, he challenged his opponents to offer the electorate a satisfactory reason for him to step aside.

"Tell me how the country would be better off without me (as Prime Minister)," Mr Thaksin said in an interview on Channel 11 last night. "There must be good reasons for me to stay or quit. The 16 million (who voted for Thai Rak Thai) should be told how the country will be reconciled if I step down." Mr Thaksin, who vowed before the polls not to take the premier-

ship again if his party received less than 50 per cent of the votes cast, last night insisted that he had won well above that mark.

Looking tired with bloodshot eyes and sometimes distracted, Mr Thaksin strongly suggested his party would go ahead and serve as the core of the new government, possibly with him still at the helm. But he did not rule out a temporary "exile" from politics if the "reconciliatory" panel he is proposing agrees that he should step aside.

The Thai Rak Thai leader downplayed the three-million-vote drop from the party's tally of 19 million votes in last year's election. "It's like getting a B (grade) instead of an A," he said. "Last year the turnout was 32 million but

this year only 28 million cast their ballots. We only lost 2.8 million votes. It's definitely not a failure." He claimed that his party had won 349 parliamentary seats, a decline from 377 seats last year.

But Mr Thaksin barely discussed the fact that, in the constituency contests nationwide, many TRT candidates received fewer votes than the abstention votes. In Bangkok, TRT candidates received more votes than the abstention votes in only nine of constituencies. About 51 per cent of Bangkok voters ticked the "no vote" box, deemed a protest vote against Mr Thaksin.



04 APR 2005

THE STATESMAN

Thais to vote amid Opposition boycott

Thaksin opponents ask electors to choose "no-vote" option to thwart the Premier's comeback bid

P. S. Suryanarayana

SINGAPORE: As Thailand entered the "cool-off period" on Saturday, ahead of Sunday's mid-term general election, political calm prevailed across the country. However, it masked the moves by opponents of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to create a "no-vote" constitutional crisis. By and large, the entire campaign period too remained peaceful, although political tensions ran very high because of competitive "people-power" rallies by the Prime Minister and his opponents.

Mr. Thaksin had called the snap poll just a year after winning a landslide re-election. By this, he sought to ride out a political crisis over his alleged corruption and

abuse of authority in the tax-free sale of a family-owned mega firm to a Singapore company.

The Opposition parties and the Alliance for Democracy, said to be a larger people's forum, have called for boycott of the general election.

Political ruse alleged

The established Opposition parties have not fielded candidates at all. And, Mr. Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thailand) Party is now facing the candidatures of newly-sprung marginal outfits. The Opposition has blamed the Prime Minister for his alleged "political ruse" of creating a notional contest.

Significantly in this context, the established parties and public interest activists have called up-

on the voters to exercise their franchise by choosing the "no-vote" option on the ballot paper instead of a candidate. Voting is compulsory.

Under the Thai electoral laws, said to have been designed to safeguard the country's relatively new democracy, even the unopposed candidates should secure a minimum of 20 per cent of the vote in the constituency for victo-

ry. If not, byelection(s) will follow until the mandatory requirement is met.

It is this legal nicety that Mr. Thaksin's opponents are seeking to exploit by asking the electors to exercise the "no-vote" option as a political tactic. The transparent objective is to try and delay or even derail the formation of the next Parliament.

Call for reconciliation

Should Mr. Thaksin be stopped in his tracks as a result, the re-elected King can, under the untested Section 7 of the Constitution, become the executive Head of State, the "no-vote" campaigners say. This scenario is uncharted politics, and Thailand had abolished absolute monarchy over 70 years ago.

Voting compulsory in Sunday's election

No Opposition candidates in the fray

Key role for King if stalemate develops

Xinhua reports: Mr. Thaksin renewed his call for national reconciliation, saying he is willing to consider all proposals following the general election, even suggestions about self-sacrifice, or suspending his political role.

The embattled caretaker Prime Minister said that every party must end conflicting ideologies out of respect for the beloved monarch, as Thailand is celebrating the 60th anniversary of the King's ascension to the throne this year. "Let's reconcile after the snap election in honour of our beloved monarch and for the sake of national solidarity amid fiercer global competition," he said. He said he is willing to consider even suspending his own political role.

Thailand goes to polls amid turmoil

03 APR 2006

ASSOCIATED Press
Bangkok, April 1

ELECTION WORKERS fanned out around Thailand on Saturday, setting up polling stations for a general election which Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra hopes will strengthen his hand against critics seeking his resignation. The three main opposition parties in Parliament, however, are boycotting Sunday's elections, refusing to run candidates and urging people to abstain.

Thaksin called the election three years ahead of schedule, hoping to defuse a mounting political crisis. For months, his detractors have been demanding his resignation, accusing him of corruption and abuse of power. Near daily protests — drawing tens of thousands of people — have taken place in Bangkok for more than a month. Thaksin has maintained throughout that he will not bow to "mob rule" and on Saturday encouraged Thais to exercise their right to vote.

"After the election, everyone should turn and face each other. It's like a game, a sport. After the whistle is blown, 'tweet,' the game is over and everyone has to shake hands," Thaksin said, relaxing on a golf range.

In last year's election, Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party won 377 of the 500 seats. It is expected to win again due to its popularity among rural voters, who benefited from Thaksin's social welfare programmes.

Thaksin has said he will step down if his party receives less than half the votes cast — an outcome seen as highly unlikely. Thai Rak Thai candidates are running unopposed in 168 constituencies. His critics, however, say they will keep up the battle to force him out of office regardless of the results of the poll. They are hoping that a low voter turnout would invalidate results in some constituencies and ultimately make it impossible to form a new government, at which point they hope King Bhumibol Adulyadej would intervene to replace Thaksin.

Demonstrations turned increasingly aggressive this week, particularly when some 2,000 Thaksin supporters disrupted a pro-boycott rally on Thursday in northern Thailand.

Campaigning is not allowed the day before an election, and one of the few demonstrations Saturday was a "meditation walk" by about three dozen people who marched to Bangkok's Democracy Monument to call for a "just and ethical" government.

KEY PLAYERS

Thaksin Shinawatra

A telecom tycoon before turning to politics, Thaksin, 56, is Thailand's only elected PM to complete a full term. His populist policies won him huge support among the rural masses but upset Bangkok's middle classes.

Sondhi Limthongkui

A former Thaksin business associate, media tycoon Sondhi was the spark that lit the anti-Thaksin flame.

Chamlong Srimuang

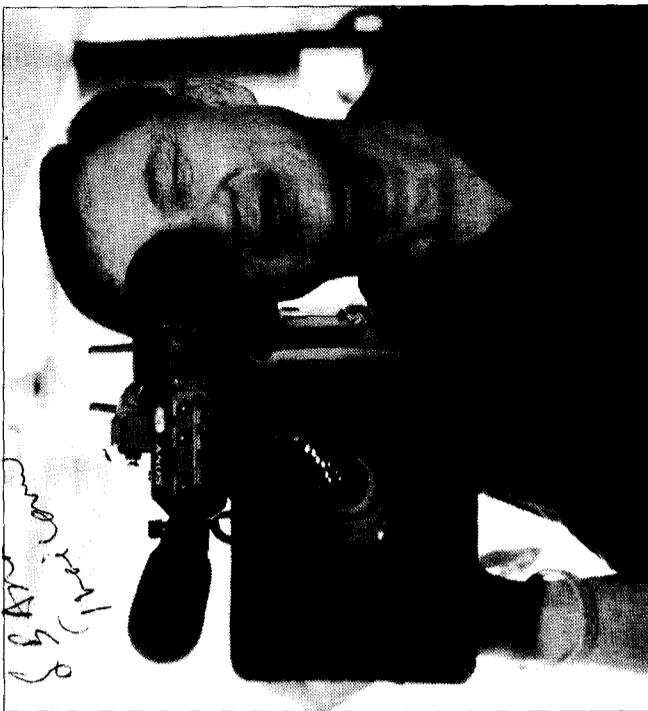
A former major-general who brought Thaksin into politics, the 70-year-old Chamlong is as unpredictable as he is tough.

Prem Tinsulan

A former prime minister, the 85-year-old is top adviser to King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej

The revered king completes 60 years on the throne this year, the world's longest-reigning monarch. He has publicly intervened in politics twice — in both instances against military rulers.



Thailand Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra aims a TV camera at reporters in Bangkok on Saturday.

AP

Thaksin and Thailand's snap polls

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, with his pro-poor image, is pitted against an Opposition that has accused him of manipulating the political system for his benefit.

P.S. Suryanarayana

THE SNAP general election in Thailand, slated for April 2, is shaping up as an unusual experiment with "people power." Claiming to campaign against the authoritarian and "corrupt" ways of a duly elected leader, the Opposition parties have announced a total boycott of the poll. In contrast, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who called the snap election as a crisis-management option, is hoping to prove he remains the people's choice.

The Opposition and other anti-Thaksin activists in the Alliance for Democracy have organised impressive political rallies in the capital, Bangkok, during the run-up to the election. They shifted their refrain from strident calls for Mr. Thaksin's resignation to impassioned appeals for political intervention by the constitutional monarch.

As the poll countdown began, the Opposition wanted King Bhumibol Adulyadej, a venerated father figure, to sack Mr. Thaksin and appoint a new caretaker Prime Minister. Regardless of the King's options, given that Thailand's absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932, the anti-Thaksin protagonists could hardly conceal their limited political base. Their rallies were mostly attended by elitist and middle-class groups.

Against this backdrop, Mr. Thaksin sought to excel himself as the most accomplished political showman on the Thai stage. He toured the countryside extensively, regardless of the Opposition's poll boycott, and played the 'I-care-for-you card' with consummate ease.

As a fabulously rich businessman-turned politician, Mr. Thaksin has, like a number of others before him all over the world, captured the imagination and support of the poor masses.

Of the projects that he launched for the poor, since becoming Prime Minister in 2001, the cheap and efficient health care system is widely reckoned to have made him popular. Tales of people's gratitude to him on this score were numerous during the campaign.

Schemes of alternative housing for metropolitan slum-dwellers were also cited by the beneficiaries.

Economists have argued against the administrative imprudence of such populism, dubbed by critics as 'Thaksinomics.' But Mr.



POLITICAL THEATRE: Protesters take a break during demonstrations against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in Bangkok on Friday. — PHC

Thaksin, who successfully tried to stay ahead of his opponents as a competitive organiser of 'people power' rallies, had more or less won the argument among the non-elite sections over some other policies too. Revealing was the praise that he elicited

for his campaign against drug trafficking. The opponents of Mr. Thaksin lambasted him for the perceived extra-judicial killings of alleged drug traffickers. But sizable other sections gave Mr. Thaksin high marks for fighting a social menace.

A similar opinion-divide came into focus as regards the widely chronicled extra-judicial excesses of the security forces in the battle against suspected terrorists and Muslim insurgents in the majority-Buddhist kingdom. In any case, in the eyes of a number of Thais, Mr. Thaksin's proactive policy of meeting the tsunami crisis of December 2004 showed up his humane instincts. Many sections seemed to view this record as the uncomplicated scorecard of stated objectives and desirable results.

Business dealings

It was against this that Mr. Thaksin's opponents sought to question his business dealings. He was accused of manipulating the political system so that his family could, without breaking the relevant laws, siphon off nearly \$2 billion as tax-free gains by selling to a foreigner the mega firm he floated before entering politics.

Not obvious to his opponents was the difficulty of making the non-elite sections believe he had acted wrongly when he was not actually accused of violating tax laws. Beyond such simple niceties lies the possibility that the April 2 poll might produce a constitutional puzzle.

Complex are the Thai electoral laws under the 1997 'people's Constitution,' the latest the country has given itself since the abolition of absolute monarchy. So, Mr. Thaksin, the unchallenged leader, may still find it difficult to ensure that the next parliament is duly constituted, if the Opposition can manipulate the voter turnout to deny his candidates the mandated margins of victory.

'Thaksinisation' is the name that specialists on Thai politics like Duncan McCargo and others have devised to describe Mr. Thaksin's huge bag of perceived political tricks. He has now invited the Opposition to join him in a post-poll government of national unity. As a possible new addition to the baggage of 'Thaksinisation,' this offer is designed to avoid a post-poll stalemate.

However, the people and experts see the King as the ultimate moral arbiter on the Thai political stage, where the military had played havoc in the past. Specialist Chris Baker has spoken of Mr. Thaksin's "presidential" style. So, it now remains to be seen whether Mr. Thaksin or the King or both will fashion the Thai political system after the April 2 vote.

01 APR 2006

THE HINDU

Could the massive anti-Thaksin street protests ahead of Thailand's snap general election underscore a growing disillusionment with democracy in Asia?

GEORGE WEHRITZ
AND JOE COCHRANE

IT MIGHT look as if history were repeating itself; just as in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, defiant protesters have taken to Bangkok's streets in a bid to oust a Thai leader they revile. Yet this time their nemesis isn't a swaggering general who seized power in a coup, but a populist prime minister who won re-election in a landslide barely a year ago. Thaksin Shinawatra, say his critics, has abused state power to enrich himself and undermine representative government. But that doesn't negate the irony on display as self-professed democrats attempt to oust a still-popular elected leader — with force, not votes. "It's the only way to fight a tyrant," says anti-Thaksin political analyst Chaiyan Chaiporn.

What about elections? Thaksin has called a snap vote for this Sunday — yet, knowing he'd win handily (rural Thais remain steadfastly loyal), the three main opposition parties have opted to boycott the contest and even appealed to Thailand's revered monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, to name a new leader. Their frustration with the electoral system has echoes across the region's youngest democracies. Protesters in the Philippines have similarly sought to oust an elected president, and even in South Korea and Taiwan, voters are increasingly tuning out of a shrill and deadlocked political culture. Indeed, what Chu Yun-han, professor of political science at National Taiwan University (NTU), calls "democracy fatigue" is spreading from Seoul to Jakarta.

The disillusionment has grown because the social improvements people dreamed of when first casting their votes haven't

materialised. The East Asian Barometer, an annual comparative study of political attitudes in 10 East Asian nations, has recorded consistent dissatisfaction with democratic governance since 2001. According to a recent poll, just 41 per cent of respondents in Taiwan, and 49 per cent in South Korea, agree that "democracy is the best system under all circumstances". In the Philippines and Thailand, "sympathy for authoritarian alternatives" runs so high, says Chu, that democracy rests "on a rather fluid and fragile foundation".

Part of the problem is that elections have in many cases failed to produce cleaner, fairer governance. In the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has never come clean about her role in a 2004 vote-rigging scandal despite an opposition-led impeachment drive and the resignation of key ministers in protest. That led to a recent coup attempt (the nation's ninth since dictator Ferdinand Marcos fled the country in '86) and talks for her to resign. Many of those calling for her early departure picture themselves as champions of democracy.

Where elections have been close or contested, as in the US in 2000, politics have also become nastily partisan. In Taiwan, President Chen Shui-bian's narrow re-election triumph in 2004, just one day after he was shot and slightly injured in an assassination attempt, has spawned a cottage industry of conspiracy theories. "Before the election, there was enough mis-

trust already. And many people were hoping, after the election, we could start over," says NTU political scientist Huang Chang-ling. "But the shooting and controversy afterward made things even worse." So has media sensationalism: much of what fills TV airtime in Taiwan are politicians playing to the cameras over

minor disputes. "The smaller the differences, the fiercer the fight," says Shelley Rigger, a Taiwan expert from Davidson College in North Carolina.

While the West is no stranger to such vitriolic partisanship, Asia's young democracies are still plagued by relatively immature political institutions. Since military

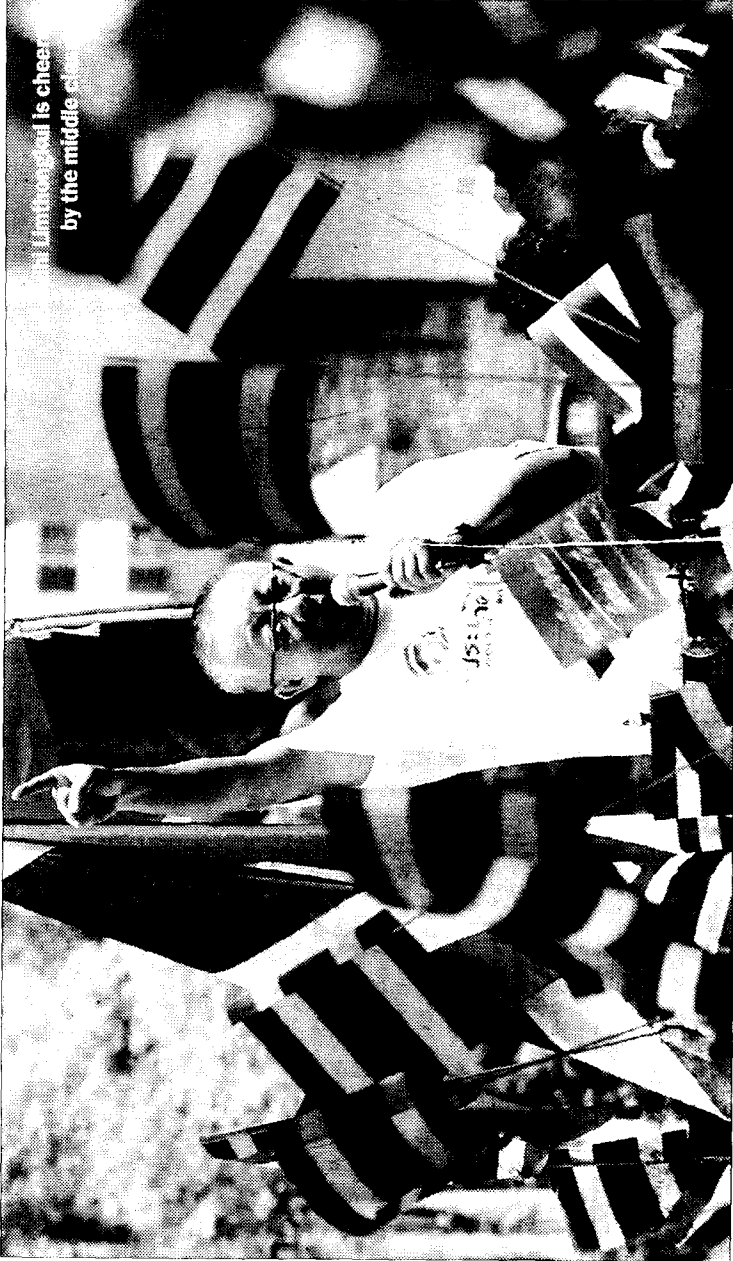
rule ended in the 1980s, for instance, South Korea has enacted laws befitting a modern democracy. Yet experts say that politics remains hamstrung by a culture guided by charismatic figures and a "gotcha" media culture. "On the surface, Korean democracy has improved greatly over the past two decades," says Lee Jung Hee, a

Call it democracy fatigue

political scientist in Seoul. "But in reality, it is still mired in the old political paradigm of empty promises appealing to shallow emotions." The country's prime minister, Lee Hae Chan, resigned this month after being spotted playing golf with allegedly corrupt businessmen.

Voter turnout still remains high everywhere, but public cynicism runs deep. In Thailand, the middle-class protesters furious at Thaksin simply don't trust elections to produce good leaders. Media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul, a key member of the anti-Thaksin alliance, believes the rural Thais who form the backbone of Thaksin's support are too uneducated and easily manipulated to be allowed to choose the country's next leader.

The campaign to oust Thaksin, driven by Bangkok's middle and upper classes, has thus taken on undertones of a class war. If balloting goes ahead this weekend, the poor are likely to vote in large numbers, and largely for the prime minister. But the opposition's boycott could push voter turnout low enough that many pro-Thaksin candidates fail to garner ballots from 20 per cent of eligible voters, the legal threshold to claim seats in Parliament. That could force another election, or more demonstrations on Bangkok's streets. Either way, the partisan split will be deepened, and the ultimate casualty could be democracy itself. "People in other countries protest for elections, but here they are protesting against elections," observes Chayachoke Chulariwongs, a lecturer at Chulalongkorn University. They should be careful what they wish for.



Thaksin's support is cheered by the middle class

8 MAR 2006
NEWSWEEK

Thai Premier warns of "nightmare" as opponents begin fresh protest

S B Anon
Thailand
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26/3

Activists ask the King to appoint a new head of Government

P. S. Suryanarayana

SINGAPORE: The opponents of Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra began organising a new rally in Bangkok on Saturday night, appealing to the revered King, the constitutional monarch, to appoint a new head of government.

By nightfall, there was no definitive indication from the King or his advisers. The Opposition has been holding weekly anti-Thaksin rallies, and the Prime Minister's office in Bangkok is still under a symbolic "blockade."

At the other end of the political spectrum, Mr. Thaksin stayed the course in his campaign for the April 2 snap general election, which the Opposition vowed to boycott, alleging that his abuse of authority and corrupt practices had already vitiated the proposed poll.

Battle of attrition

With the King and his advisers monitoring the situation, the protagonists on both sides of the political divide intensified their battle of attrition. Mr. Thaksin warned the country of a "nightmare" if the ongoing poll process were to be rolled back. He called upon the Opposition to "respect people power" and "respect the democratic process."

The Opposition Alliance for Democracy, an umbrella group of activists including academics and politicians, was quick to counter with the argument that it was Mr. Thaksin who was steering the coun-



FOR PEACE: Thousands of Buddhist monks gather to pray for peace near the Royal Palace in Bangkok on Saturday. - PHOTO: AP

try towards a "nightmare" by refusing to call off the imminent parliamentary elections.

The electoral authorities, requisitioned by the Opposition to cancel the scheduled general election, took the line that the poll decree, which was issued with the King's

approval, had not been withdrawn.

At the centre of the current controversies is the accusation that Mr. Thaksin is trying to "subvert" the democratic process by refusing to call off a poll that he is alleged to have ordered only to "whitewash" his political excesses. These excess-

es, according to the Opposition, ranged from alleged human rights violations in the battles against drug traffickers as also "Muslim insurgents" in the Buddhist kingdom, at one end, to a blatant "manipulation of the tax laws" to suit the business interests of his family.

26 MAR 2006

THE HINDU

washingtonpost.com

Wrong Time for 'People Power'

Thursday, March 9, 2006; A18

THAKSIN SHINAWATRA has poorly served Thailand's fragile democracy during his five years as prime minister. He monopolized television media and bullied or bought opponents in the parliament and independent press. He launched a "war on drugs" that led to the assassination of some 2,500 suspected traffickers by government-backed death squads. His campaign against Muslim insurgents spawned still more human rights abuses, including the suffocation of 78 prisoners in government custody. He has been cozy with the ruling generals of neighboring Burma. We have criticized him on all these grounds as well as the Bush administration for embracing him in spite of these failings.

Mr. Shinawatra nevertheless has been democratically elected twice, the last time by a large margin. In response to mounting criticism and street protests by his opposition, he has called a vote for early next month. Opposition parties have responded by announcing a boycott and by organizing still-larger protests, including a march by nearly 100,000 people Sunday in Bangkok. Another big one is planned for next week. Mr. Thaksin's adversaries clearly hope to force him from office through the use of "people power," which has driven pro-democracy revolutions in Thailand and several other Southeast Asian countries during the past two decades. But that's the wrong answer.

Protest leaders claim that they can't support new elections because elections won't change the political system Mr. Thaksin has manipulated to his advantage. They point out that he appointed cronies to bodies that will supervise the balloting. But a glance at opinion polls makes it hard not to suspect another motive: In any fair vote, Mr. Thaksin would easily win. Though he is held in contempt by the capital's elite and middle classes, the prime minister is strongly supported in the countryside, where his populist policies have brought real improvements. By skipping the election the opposition simply concedes the prime minister a still more dominating position in parliament. Trying to oust him through street demonstrations risks destabilizing violence or intervention by the Thai military, which ruled the country before an eruption of people power in 1992.

Such rebellions are a good answer to dictators, but they are self-defeating in a democracy. They weaken the authority of elections and invite opponents of even scrupulous governments to raise mobs rather than canvass voters. The right way to oppose Mr. Thaksin is to embrace the elections he has offered, along with his proposal to establish a commission to prepare constitutional reforms. The Thai political system needs better checks and balances to prevent further abuses by Mr. Thaksin and future prime ministers. But a street revolution isn't likely to bring them about.

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March 9, 2006

China Attacks Its Woes With an Old Party Ritual

By JIM YARDLEY

BEIJING, March 8 — Like a giant company concerned with organizational disarray and a sinking public image, the Chinese Communist Party is trying to remake itself into an efficient, modern machine. But to do so, it has chosen one of its oldest political tools — a Maoist-style ideological campaign, complete with required study groups.

For 14 months and counting, the party's 70 million rank-and-file members have been ordered to read speeches by Mao and Deng Xiaoping, as well as the numbing treatise of 17,000-plus words that is the party constitution. Mandatory meetings include sessions where cadres must offer self-criticisms and also criticize everyone else.

"It is an effort to cope with the declining reputation of the party and the distrust of the people toward party officials," said Wenran Jiang, director of the China Institute at the University of Alberta.

But many are distinctly uninspired. Jokes have been circulating mocking the study campaign and many party members privately grumble that it is a pointless waste of time. Web sites offer fake essays that cadres can download to meet homework requirements.

On the surface, the campaign, known as "bao xian," or "preserving the progressiveness," would seem an unlikely modern-day remedy. But in China it is partly a byproduct of a closed political system that ensures Communist Party rule but is without any national elections to force the party to whip itself into shape.

President Hu Jintao, who is also general secretary of the party, has insisted that every party member complete the program.

Some analysts say the campaign's primary purpose, besides addressing corruption, is to rebuild grass-roots party organizations that have been falling apart. "The party is not in great shape," said Cheng Li, a specialist in Chinese politics at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y. "Loyalty is deteriorating. And the grass-roots organizations are very weak."

As for the bao xian campaign, Professor Li said, "For Hu Jintao this is better than nothing."

Requests to attend bao xian meetings were turned down by three different provinces. But conversations with several party members found apathy and annoyance. A Beijing graduate student said he was required to attend four meetings a week from September through December. He said that the self-criticism sessions were awkward, and that most people refrained from making harsh attacks against others. Most people opposed the "rigid form" of the meetings, he said, but added that the sessions provided useful opportunities "for people who are so busy to get together and talk."

At one meeting, the graduate student said everyone watched a movie about the collapse of the Soviet Union "to show us the 'grave consequences' of losing Communism." The student, fearing reprisals, would only allow his English name, Ben, to be used.

At a recent news conference about bao xian, Ouyang Song, a vice minister overseeing the campaign, acknowledged that party organizations had atrophied in villages and small towns in recent years, noting that the exodus of migrant workers had diminished the pool of young candidates for party work.

But Mr. Ouyang said the movement had already resulted in 54,000 new "grass roots" party organizations, while 80,000 cadres had been promoted to leadership positions.

Asked by a Chinese reporter about complaints over the campaign, Mr. Ouyang said the public had seen the campaign's benefits through the response of party members. As an example, he described a 75-year-old party member who, on completing the study sessions, volunteered to scrub public toilets.

Not everyone has been so enthusiastic since the campaign began in January of last year. The program has flowed down the party's hierarchy, led by central government ministries and major state-owned enterprises. The third, and final, phase is now under way at village party branches and is to end in June.

Businessmen have complained of having to reschedule appointments to make time for bao xian meetings. Mr. Jiang, the University of Alberta scholar, said he had led a delegation of Canadian oil and gas executives to an energy conference last year in Beijing. But Chinese energy officials, citing scheduling conflicts with the party study sessions, unexpectedly canceled meetings in which the two sides had planned to talk business.

"The executives were asking me if this political movement will affect China's way of doing business," Mr. Jiang said. "The Chinese immediately reassured us that it wouldn't."

Campaigns of this sort are a legacy of the Chinese Communist Party. When he was president, Jiang Zemin initiated study campaigns, including one for his signature "political thought," the Three Represents. More famously, Mao introduced as many as 200 campaigns, from the angry purges that predated the Cultural Revolution era to mass mobilization efforts to exterminate rodents.

The old-style aspects of the bao xian campaign, like the criticism sessions, have raised concerns by some party members that individuals could be persecuted. Some participants say the campaign has allowed ambitious members to show off in front of their superiors with angry, bombastic displays.

But others say the meetings have a pro forma quality and focus on decidedly nonideological issues. Ben, the graduate student, said members of his party committee had complained about the food at the school cafeteria. An older party member in Henan Province, Mao Yinduan, said one of the topics discussed during bao xian meetings held by his party branch was lunchtime boozing.

"He used to like drinking," Mr. Mao said during an interview last year, nodding toward an embarrassed colleague. "But other party members mentioned this in a meeting. Now he has stopped drinking." Then Mr. Mao added: "I used to like drinking, too. People raised that with me and I've stopped."

Behind the meetings looms the issue of corruption. In February the party's Central Discipline Inspection Commission announced that it disciplined 115,000 party members for corruption in 2005.

Wang Yicheng, a political scientist with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said corruption and

other social problems had shaken public confidence — and the confidence of some party cadres — about whether the party was capable of managing an increasingly chaotic country. He said the sessions were a method of reinforcing the goal of the party.

"The goal is to raise the quality of party members and strengthen the party organizations to better serve the people," Mr. Wang said. "If these problems inside the party cannot be solved, the ruling position of the party could also be challenged."

Bao xian has received the praise one might expect from the state media and was listed as one of the most searched phrases on the Chinese Internet last year. But much of that traffic appears to be driven by cadres downloading essays from the Internet to meet homework obligations.

In a posting last year, a prominent Chinese blogger, Keso, said Web sites and bloggers were using the ideological campaign as a money-making opportunity by offering essays customized to a person's party rank. The head of a street committee, for example, can find a fake self-criticism essay tailored to that job and then tinker with it to make it seem original.

In a posting last year, Keso wrote: "The Web sites cheat party members, the party members cheat their leaders and the leaders cheat their leaders. So in the end we all cheat the party. This is the comedy of our time." Such cynicism underscores why many experts say efforts like bao xian will have little meaningful impact. In fact, some political analysts speculate that Mr. Hu is using the movement partly as a gesture to ingratiate himself to the older generation of former leaders who remain influential behind the scenes.

Others contend that the only effective way to improve government efficiency is for the party to embrace political reform to introduce checks and balances in the system rather than depend on periodic mobilization campaigns.

Ben, the graduate student, said one topic that rarely came up at the meetings was politics and the future of the Communist Party. "It was a difficult topic," he said, "because people have different ideas. The teacher brought it up once. He said he thought the party was facing a grave challenge.

"I agree with him."

Thailand's troubles

The pressures on a conservative society arising from free market capitalism may be to blame rather than Premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

Simon Tisdall

A POLITICAL morality play is being acted out on the streets of Bangkok as Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's Prime Minister, battles to keep his job in the teeth of escalating protests by an *ad hoc* alliance of Opposition parties, students, trade unions, and celibate Buddhist vegetarians pledged to the simple life.

Mr. Thaksin's ethical troubles began in earnest in January when his family sold its 49 per cent stake in Shin Corp, the telecom and airline conglomerate he founded. The fact that his relatives avoided tax on the \$1.8 billion deal, coupled with claims of insider dealing and concern over foreign control of key national assets, brought public unease about Mr. Thaksin's style of governance to a head.

The Prime Minister, criticised in the past for his high-handed manner and alleged cronyism, has been on the defensive ever since. After initially trying to weather the storm, he promised to implement long-sought constitutional reforms, dissolved Parliament and called a snap general election for April 2.

But far from being placated, the anti-Thaksin forces, deriding him as a "square-headed tyrant," are mounting almost daily street protests, among the largest seen since military rule was overthrown in 1992. They demand his immediate resignation. And their movement is gathering strength.

A spokesman for Thailand's powerful national police, General Archirawit Suphanaphesat, added to Mr. Thaksin's woes on Tuesday. He said he had person-

ally advised him to step down and urged him "not to resume the premiership" even if his Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) party won again next month.

Business leaders said, meanwhile, that they would meet next week to decide their stance. Their desertion could tip the balance against Mr. Thaksin who has styled himself the country's CEO and is credited with boosting economic growth. So far Mr. Thaksin has remained unmoved. "I will never, ever bow to mob rule," he said on Tuesday. "A huge majority of people want me to carry on... If I resign it would mean I am undermining the democratic system." To him, he says, the protesters, who include Buddhist ascetics known as the Dharma Army, are just idiots.

A number of factors have contributed to Mr. Thaksin's plight, said Simon Tay of the Singapore institute. "Many reformers and civil society groups feel Thaksin is undermining democratic institutions and free media... They suspect he is moving towards a new form of autocracy backed not by military force but by influence, money and control of the media."

The pressures on a conservative, majority Buddhist society arising from free market capitalism and Western-style "mall culture" may be to blame — rather than Mr. Thaksin — for a growing sense of loss of moral direction. And the largely favourable view of the Prime Minister in poor rural areas that have benefited from his rule is more indicative of a widening gulf with the urban intelligentsia than of nationwide revolt.

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Thailand heading for a showdown

Several groups take out rallies in Bangkok

*S. S. Suri
Thailand*

P. S. Suryanarayana

SINGAPORE: Opponents of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra of Thailand on Sunday stepped up their campaign for his resignation. Serving an ultimatum that he step down by midnight on Sunday or face a "people-power showdown," several groups mobilised his opponents for rallies in Bangkok.

The rallies, expected to go on until past midnight, were planned to counter the "show of political support" — nearly 150,000 — that Mr. Thaksin had put up in Bangkok two days earlier.

Security forces tightened measures to prevent clashes between the opponents and supporters of the Prime Minister.

Fearful of political instability, some academics petitioned the much-revered King, a constitutional head, to stem the crisis.

Regional experts expressed doubts whether the monarch would intervene, given he had already agreed to a snap general election, scheduled for April 2, on the advice of the Prime Minister.

Crux of crisis

The crux of the crisis is the demand that Mr. Thaksin, who had won a massive parliamentary majority just over a year ago, should quit instead of seeking a fresh mandate.

The litany of charges against him read as follows: abuses of authority, including

"human rights violations" in the campaigns against drug-traffickers and Muslim "insurgents" in the majority-Buddhist kingdom; alleged crackdown on the independent media; corrupt practices, and nepotism.

The spark was the suspicion that Mr. Thaksin's family had made illegal gains in the sale of a family-owned firm to a foreign buyer.

This charge, which the Constitutional Court has dismissed for want of evidence regarding the Prime Minister's own complicity, is being projected by his opponents to try and tarnish his pro-poor image.

Mr. Thaksin is trying to shore up that image through rallies of his own.

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THE HINDU

Thaksin raises the stakes

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SB 420
Thailand

Premier rejects critic's call for televised debate on corruption charges

P. S. Suryanarayana

SINGAPORE: Celebrating five successive years at the helm, Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has denounced those who called for his resignation and asserted that he would heed only the voices of the people. Raising the stakes in his political battle with the critics, Mr. Thaksin said he was willing to "solicit ideas from the nation" and "not any interest group," especially over policies including

constitutional changes. On the planned rally against his continuance in office despite allegations of massive corruption in the sale of a business firm that he had founded, he questioned the credentials of Sondhi Limthongkul, media personality, who was spearheading the current wave of public protest over this and other charges.

Mr. Thaksin dismissed Mr. Sondhi's reported suggestion that he be given a chance to quiz the Prime Minister in a televised

debate. Scoring nearly 60 percentage points in a public opinion poll conducted after the recent mass rally near Parliament in Bangkok, Mr. Thaksin eased a an official ban on similar rallies at the same venue.

King's role

His attempt to position the revered King, a constitutional monarch, as the arbiter in the current controversies received only a lukewarm response from the people in the same opinion

poll. Mr. Thaksin had said last Saturday that he would quit if only the King were to so much as "whisper" such advice. It was in this context of a negative reaction to any move to drag the King into political controversies that Mr. Thaksin now offered to ask the nation for ideas. For Mr. Thaksin's opponents, the prime issue is the suspicion that nearly \$2 billion might have been siphoned off by his family over the sale of Shin Corp. that he had founded as a businessman.

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