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The 2005 General Elections in Thailand: Toward a One-Party Government

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ABSTRACT. Thailand's 1997 Constitution and the new electoral system make it easier for big money to take control over Thailand's party politics. Some of the political trends that have emerged in the 2005 general elections in Thailand prove this assertion. These trends include the increased importance of party labels and leaders in electoral politics, the widening role of the mass media in elections, the professionalization of the electoral campaign, the use of the policy platform as a vote-getting tool, and the continuation of money politics and vote buying. The dominance of the *Thai Rak Thai* (Thai Loves Thai [TRT]) exemplifies these trends. As a single-party government, TRT will no longer have to worry about coalition disharmony and fragmented government. However, the stability of the government still largely depends on the deft handling of the rival factions within Thai Rak Thai. More significantly, the success of one party in electoral politics does not necessarily translate into democratic consolidation.

KEYWORDS. Thailand · election · political party · Thaksin Shinawatra ·*Thai Rak Thai* · democratic consolidation

INTRODUCTION

Since 1957, no single party has ever been able to form a government in Thailand. The outcome of the 2005 general elections will allow the *Thai Rak Thai* (Thai Loves Thai [TRT]) Party, led by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, to strengthen its power and govern Thailand as a single-party administration. This paper traces the reasons for the success of the TRT in electoral politics and analyzes the 2005 general elections and its implications, specifically the challenge it poses, to the consolidation of Thai democracy.

PERFORMANCE OF THE FIRST TRT-LED GOVERNMENT

The Thaksin government, a coalition between TRT and *Chart Thai* (Thai Nation) parties, made history by being the first democratically-elected

administration to complete a four-year term. During the first four years, TRT was selling the "Think New, Act New" approach to the people and fulfilled most of its campaign pledges. The party focused its efforts on places where people and conditions were in need of urgent help (Phongpaichit and Baker 2004). The outstanding policy showcases included:

1. the ability to repay International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans two years before the due date;
2. the implementation of welfare programs, i.e., the THB-30.00-per-visit (about USD 0.70)universal healthcare scheme, and the *Ua Arr-torn* (We Care) program served to boost the government's popularity among the urban poor with handouts of low-priced goods and services such as houses, apartments, motorcycles, and insurance policies;
3. economic reorientation directed at grassroots activities and domestic markets to assist farmers and workers; [1]
4. development of the Thai Asset Management Corporation to restructure the debts of commercial banks and to help them on their nonperforming loans (NPLs); and
5. vigorous resolution of perpetual social problems such as illegal drugs. [2]

Prime Minister Thaksin's tour of the provinces was an exercise of direct patronage distribution using taxpayers' money to rack in votes for TRT. During tours to numerous provinces across the country six months before election time, Prime Minister Thaksin authorized billions of baht funds mainly to infrastructure spending, such as construction of roads and water reservoirs, renovation of religious sites, and improvement of tourist sites (*The Nation*, July 20, 2004). Prime Minister Thaksin's approaches to stimulating domestic demands and his extravaganza of policy contents and promises stirred much criticism. TRT policies have been dubbed as "populist policies."

Moreover, the Thaksin administration was a prime example of a government party that could effectively utilize information technology to publicize its performance. Every Saturday morning, Prime Minister Thaksin would go on a radio program entitled "Prime Minister Thaksin Meets the People" to report his visions and plans directly to the people. The administration also used video conference in several government-bureaucratic meetings broadcasted live on state-run TV stations.

It is no mere coincidence that Prime Minister Thaksin himself owns the so-called independent television channel, ITV. In addition, a fellow party member is the concessionaire of the Army-owned Channel 3 television. These media are politico-economically induced to shift from playing the proper role of public watchdogs to becoming cheerleaders and, on many occasions, spokespersons of the government and its cabinet members. Moreover, in 2003, family members of Industry Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit, secretary-general of the TRT, bought 20 percent of the shares owned by the fiercely independent media firm, Nation Multimedia (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 11, 2003). The advantage of TRT party leaders owning the airwaves—as what media tycoon and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi did in Italy—is that the party has its own effective channels to communicate with voters without the need to own printing presses like in the old days.

Notably, in a coalition government, the leader of the government was the one who benefited the most from a political innovation by the ruling coalition. Though originally created during the Chart Thai-led government under Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhawan, the "mobile cabinet meetings" project during the Thaksin government brought the ministers into direct contact with the people of various regions. The popularity was translated into vital political credit for Prime Minister Thaksin himself and his party. The impact of the regional meetings has undermined the position of the opposition *Prachatipat* (Democrat) Party, as well as the government coalition party, Chart Thai . Moreover, from November 6 to 11, 2004, about two months before the general elections, the TRT government used state money and agencies to launch a comprehensive five-day exhibition advertising the government's achievements. The exhibition entitled "From Past to Future: From Grassroots to Taproot" offered visitors freebies including Ua Arr-torn houses, eyeglasses for senior citizens, health care services, cheap air tickets, and even facelift creams (*The Nation*, November 7, 2004). The exhibition mirrored the party's attempt to centralize and unify its election campaign.

THE 2005 ELECTORAL RESULTS

Before analyzing the 2005 electoral results, it is necessary to examine the impact of the new electoral system on the development of Thailand's party politics. The new system for electing members of the House of Representatives, known as the "mixed electoral system," was put in

effect during the January 6, 2001 general elections. Of the 500 members of the parliament, 100 are elected nationwide through a proportional representation system with a five-percent threshold; the other 400 are chosen through a single-member constituency plurality system (Sections 98-100 of the 1997 Constitution). To be specific, the proportional representation system used in Thailand should be called a "combination electoral system" (Blais and Massicotte 1996, 65-66), similar to the Japanese system after the 1994 reforms (Christensen 1998).

Although there are no specific provisions in the Constitution or other electoral laws that encourage the emergence of a strong one-party government, two important aspects of the new electoral system account for the vulnerabilities of small parties in the competition (Nogsuan 2004). First, only major parties are able to make electoral appeals under a proportional representation system that revolves around the new need to maximize party-list votes across the country. Small parties lack resources and thus have a poor chance of national-level victory. Second, after the change from a multimember constituency system to a single-member, single-ballot system, the strength of individual candidates in a small constituency was put to the test. Thailand's old electoral system was a plurality-system version of a multimember constituency. It created incentives for the continued existence of small parties. This was because in such a constituency, candidates from different political parties—both big and small—could be elected at the same time, which is significant. In the era of business conglomerate controlling political parties, as in Thailand now, politics and the electoral competitive domain are no longer limited to the province and to the candidate's specific constituency. Parties are moving toward policy competition, mass media, modern technology, and a national agenda. As such, small parties need to adjust and adapt their strategies more than ever before.

The 2001 electoral results in Thailand indicate that small parties are in the decline and are facing difficulties to survive. It can be argued that the decline of small parties is due to their inability to act as the real representatives of the electorate and not because of the electoral system; still, it is an indicator that the new electoral system is biased toward generating government capability rather than ensuring representativeness.

Prime Minister Thaksin has always aspired to create a big dominant political party. In the 2001 elections, TRT won 248 out of the total 500 seats in the House of Representatives. Within four years, TRT was able to command 328 members of paliament (MPs) under the party

Table 1. Number of seats and percentage of party list votes, 2001 elections

Party	Number of Seats			Percentage
	Constituencies	Proportional	Total	of votes
Thai Rak Thai (Thai Loves Thai)	200	48	248	40.64
Democrat	97	31	128	26.58
Chart Thai (Thai Nation)	35	6	41	5.32
New Aspiration	28	8	36	7.02
Chart Pattana (National Development)	22	7	29	6.13
Seridham (Liberal Democratic)	14	0	14	2.82
Rassadorn (Citizen)	2	0	2	1.25
Tin Thai (Thai Motherland)	1	0	1	2.11
Social Action	1	0	1	0.20
Total	400	100	500	85.89

Source: Election Commission of Thailand.

banner through mergers with *Seridham* (Liberal Democratic), 14 MPs; *Tin Thai* (Thai Motherland), one MP; *Kwam Wang Mai* (New Aspiration Party [NAP]), 36 MPs; and finally *Chart Pattana* (National Development), 29 MPs (see Table 1). The acquisition of small parties pointed to the party's desire to control the competitive environment by expanding its size in parliament. After defections to it from two large factions of Chart Thai, TRT entered the 2005 elections with the most number of incumbent candidates. Small- and medium-sized parties faced great difficulties in this new political environment.

Before the 2001 elections, a pattern of regionalism was quite evident in Thai electoral politics (see Table 2). Political parties tended to draw support from their specific strongholds in particular regions. The now-defunct *Palang Dham* (Righteous Force) Party, for example, won very few seats in regions outside Bangkok. Chart Thai and New Aspiration, on the contrary, established their electoral support mainly in the central and northeastern regions. These parties hardly got their candidates elected in Bangkok since the 1992 general elections. The only party that has been able to capture seats both in and out of Bangkok was the Democrat Party. Notably, however, the Democrat Party's stronghold was in southern Thailand.

In the 2005 general elections, TRT was the only party that fielded candidates in all 400 constituencies and presented the list of 100 names for the proportional representation electoral system. Though they presented the optimal 100 names for their party-lists, three other major political parties—namely, Democrat, Chart Thai , and *Mahachon* (People's Party)–could not match TRT in fielding candidates in all electoral districts. Overall, there were 2,289 candidates from 25 political parties

Table 2. Electoral results by region, 1992-2001 general elections

Party	Year	Region					Total
		North	Northeast	Central	South	Bangkok	
Democrat	*1992	8	17	9	36	9	79
	1995	12	14	7	46	7	86
	1996	21	12	14	47	29	123
	2001	16	6	19	48	8	97
Chart Thai	*1992	16	21	38	0	0	75
(Thai Nation)	1995	19	29	44	0	0	92
	1996	6	5	28	0	0	39
	2001	3	11	21	0	0	35
Social Action	*1992	3	15	4	0	0	22
	1995	2	14	6	0	0	22
	1996	3	12	5	0	0	20
	2001	0	1	0	0	0	1
Thai Citizen	*1992	1	0	0	0	2	3
	1995	2	0	4	0	12	18
	1996	4	0	10	0	4	18
	2001	0	0	0	0	0	0
Palang Dham	*1992	5	9	6	3	23	46
(Righteous	1995	3	0	4	0	16	23
Force)	1996	0	0	0	0	1	1
	2001	0	0	0	0	0	0
New Aspiration	*1992	9	31	6	6	0	52
	1995	9	36	7	5	0	57
	1996	20	78	21	5	1	125
	2001	1	19	3	5	0	28
Chart Pattana	*1992	21	27	12	0	0	60
(National	1995	18	27	8	0	0	53
Development)	1996	20	21	10	0	1	52
	2001	2	16	4	0	0	22
Thai Rak Thai	*1992	-	-	-	-	-	-
(Thai Loves	1995	-	-	-	-	-	-
Thai)	1996	-	-	-	-	-	-
	2001	54	69	47	1	29	200
Others	*1992	6	8	8	0	0	22
	1995	10	17	11	0	0	38
	1996	1	9	4	0	0	14
	2001	0	16	1	0	0	17

Source: Department of Local Administration, Ministry of the Interior and Election Commission of Thailand.

*13 September, 1992 general elections

participating in the 2005 elections while several unfamiliar parties nominated only one candidate in the constituency race.

The 2005 electoral results showed that TRT was able to capture seats in every region of Thailand (see Table 3). Its strength was found in the north and the poorest northeast. Strikingly, TRT, despite receiving much criticism from middle-class Bangkokians, gained more seats in

Bangkok than in the 2001 elections—up from 29 to 32 seats. However, it garnered few seats in the southern region, especially in the three provinces troubled with unrest, a fact widely interpreted as voters' expression of dissatisfaction with the way the government had been handling the crisis.

The Democrats, the largest opposition party, won only a few seats in the rest of the country despite winning almost all constituencies in the south. Chart Thai, a government coalition partner, found its support base in the central and northeastern regions penetrated by TRT. Only 18 Chart Thai candidates were elected from the constituency system, compared to 34 in 2001. However, Chart Thai was able to gain more party-list votes this time with seven of its party-list candidates winning seats.

The newly-established Mahachon Party was a casualty in the electoral race in the single-member constituency plurality system. Most candidates of the Mahachon Party came in second behind TRT in the north and northeast. However, runners-up do not count in the "first past the post" system. Only two of its 302 constituency candidates won in the northeastern region.

The requirement that parties must win at least five percent of the votes from the party-lists to secure representation in the House of Representatives had put small parties at a disadvantage. The three parties that won seats from the proportional representation system collected altogether 91.02 percent of the nation's popular votes (see Table 3). Exactly 2,782,849 votes tallied for party-list candidates were wasted. In effect, TRT and the Democrat Party benefited most because of small party eliminations. The Mahachon Party, albeit founded through a merger between Democrat defectors and former members of *Rassadorn* (Citizen) Party who were incumbent MPs and well-known personalities, could manage only 4.33 percent (1,345,631 party-list votes). With the magnitude of the TRT's vast electoral margin, all other parties have practically been driven into oblivion. The benefit of having such a huge number of MPs is, among other things, complete control of the executive and legislative powers.

Toward a One-Party Government

In a parliamentary system, power means participation in the cabinet and maximum power means holding as many of the cabinet positions as possible (Lijphart 1984, 48). When one party has a majority of the

Table 3. Electoral results, 2005 general elections

Registered voters	Voter turnout*			"No-vote" ballots		Spoiled ballots	
44,572,101	32,342,834 (72.6 percent of registered voters)			738,747 (2.3 percent of votes cast)		1,936,495 (6.0 percent of votes cast)	
	Seats won per region					Party-list	Total
Party	Bangkok	Central	North	Northeast	South		
Thai Rak Thai (Thai Loves Thai)	32	80	71	126	1	67	377
Democrat	4	7	5	2	52	26	96
Chart Thai (Thai Nation)	1	10	0	6	1	7	25
Mahachon (People's Party)	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
Total	37	97	76	136	54	100	500

Source: Election Commission of Thailand.

*The 2005 general elections was the second time that compulsory voting was in force. Voter turnout in this election reached a record high of 72.6 percent, compared to 69.94 percent in the 2001 elections. "No vote" ballots decreased from 3.75 percent in 2001 to only 2.3 percent in 2005, while the spoiled ballots were equally high at 6 percent.

Table 4. Percentage of parliament seats won by major political parties, 1986-2005

Party	General elections							
	27 August 1986	24 July 1988	22 March 1992	13 September 1992	02 July 1995	17 November 1996	06 January 2001	06 February 2005
Democrat	**28.8**	13.4	12.2	**21.9**	22.0	31.3	25.6	19.2
Thai Nation	18.2	**24.4**	20.6	21.4	**23.5**	9.9	8.2	5.0
Social Action	14.7	15.1	8.6	6.1	5.6	5.1	0.2	-
Thai Citizen	6.9	8.6	1.9	0.8	4.6	4.6	-	-
Progressive	2.6	2.2	-	-	0	-	-	-
United Democrat	11.0	1.4	0	-	0	-	-	-
Community Action	4.3	2.5	-	-	0	-	-	-
Puangchon Chao Thai (Thai People's)	0.3	4.8	0.3	-	0	-	-	-
Muan Chon (Mass)	0.9	1.4	0.3	1.1	2.0	0.5	-	-
Ruam Thai (Thai United)	5.5	9.8	-	-	0	-	-	-
Rassadorn (Citizen)	5.2	5.9	1.1	0.3	0	-	0.4	-
Palang Dham (Righteous Force)	-	3.9	11.4	13.1	5.9	0.3	0	-

Table 4 (continuation). Percentage of parliament seats won by major political parties, 1986-2005

Samakhi Dham (Virtuous United)	-	-	**21.9**	-	-	-	-	-
New Aspiration	-	-	20.0	14.2	14.6	**31.8**	7.2*	-
Ekkaparb (Solidarity)	-	-	-	2.2	0.5			-
Chart Pattana (National Development)	-	-	-	16.7	13.6	13.2	5.8*	-
Seridham (Liberal Democratic)	-	-	-	2.2	-	1.0	2.8*	-
Nam Thai (Dynamic Thai)	-	-	-	-	4.6	-	-	-
Tai (Thai)	-	-	-	-	-	0.3	-	-
Thin Thai (Thai Motherland)							0.2	-
Thai Rak Thai (Thai Loves Thai)	-	-	-	-	-	-	**49.6**	**75.4**
Mahachon (People's Party)	-	-	-	-	-	-		.04
Percentage of seats controlled by the coalition government	66.9	61.6	54.1	57.5	60.8	56.2	73.6	75.4

Sources: Maisrikrod 1992, Pongpaew 2001, Ministry of the Interior, Department of Local Administration; Election Commission of Thailand.

Note: Percentages highlighted represent political parties in the coalition government, while bold numbers represent political parties that received most seats for that election year.

**Seridham,* New Aspiration and *Chart Pattana* were eventually merged with *Thai Rak Thai* in 2001, 2002, and 2004 respectively.

parliamentary seats, the majority party will most likely form a one-party cabinet to control the government. Prime Minister Thaksin declared on many occasions prior to the 2005 elections (such as during the TRT's annual meeting in April 27, 2003 and the party's seminar for election preparation in December 27, 2003) that TRT will be the only party forming the government in many years. The return of the TRT as a single-party government in 2005 raises many questions about the future development of Thailand's democracy. The most salient is: whether the Thai political party system will move from a fragmented multiparty system toward a two-party system or one party will dominate it.

Thailand has been characterized as having a multiparty system where governments are formed through party coalitions. In such a system, it is possible that the biggest political party can fail to govern if it is not able to capture the majority of seats in the parliament, thus the coalition governments. An alliance of far more than a majority, on the other hand, might oblige it toward too many partners, all of which expect payoff of sorts (Riker 1972).

Table 4 indicates that Thai political parties have relied on forming large alliances, preferably an alliance assuring a majority in the representative bodies. Thereby, most coalition governments were composed of more parties than necessary. The aim was to control as many votes in the parliament as possible to guarantee a stable government and withstand possible defections of the allied parties in the future. Here, small parties could often have disproportionate bargaining power. No matter how powerful the core party may seem, it could not assume power without the support of its coalition partners. This could give smaller parties influence far beyond their numerical strength and was a major reason why the core party could not hope to control all of major ministries.

The allocation of cabinet seats carries a lot of meaning for the government's stability and effectiveness. Friction and conflict arose between coalition members as they tussled over the number of cabinet posts that they should have and the quality [3] of these cabinet seats. During the TRT's first administration, Prime Minister Thaksin reshuffled the cabinet 10 times. For the most part, these changes were designed to appease or reward various factions within the coalition. Moreover, the coalition government usually suffered from a lack of common policy and coordinated program implementation. Some of the most important policy areas had been fragmented into different ministries and allocated to the representatives of various parties. For example,

during General Chavalit's cabinet, one of the five portfolios in the Ministry of Transportation and Communications was given to the Chart Pattana (Suwat Liptapanlop), one went to the New Aspiration (Aram Lhoveera), one to the Seridham (Phinij Jarusombat), the other to the Social Action (Somsak Thepsuthin), and the final position to a non-elected MP, Direk Jareonpol. During Prime Minister Thaksin's first cabinet, two of the three posts in the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives went to Thai Rak Thai's Choocheep Harnsawad, a member of Wang Nam Yen faction, [4] and Prapat Panyachartirak, a member of Prime Minister Thaksin's faction; the other went to the Chart Thai's Natee Kliptong. This sometimes meant that each minister went his or her own way and there had been more than one government policy in each area. Accordingly, the country was run by mini-governments, rather than by a single effective coalition. The instability of a fragmented coalition government has been cited as one principal reason hindering political development in Thailand.

Then came TRT's resounding 2005 electoral victory. With 376 MPs (75.4 percent of the seats) at the House of the Representatives, TRT had the unprecedented opportunity to form a one-party government (see Table 4). As a single party controlling absolute House majority, TRT will no longer have to worry about coalition disharmony and fragmented government.

Moreover, the 1997 Constitution also makes it more difficult for members of parliament to scrutinize and curb executive power. It requires 200 out of 500 members of the House of Representatives to submit a motion for a general debate for the purpose of passing a vote of no confidence on the prime minister (Section 185). Ministers will also be immune from parliamentary impeachment since Article 304 of the Constitution requires 125 MPs in the House to request the Senate to pass a resolution removing them from office. This reduces the opposition (123 MPs) to insignificance. The Thai parliament now does not have an effective mechanism to check on the prime minister's decisions and the government's actions.

Noticeably, a threat to government stability seems to originate from internal party conflicts. TRT is an unusual amalgam of long-time politicians who defected from other parties as well as younger people making their debuts in parliament. Among the key players in TRT is Sanoh Thientong, a former Interior Minister who ditched New Aspiration to join TRT before the 2001 elections, bringing approximately 60 of the New Aspiration lawmakers with him. Other factions that

Table 5. Key players in the *Thai Rak Thai* Party

Monopoly and conglomerate national capitalists	Rural network of politicians	"Octoberists" and Prime Minister Thaksin's close advisers
Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (business empires include telecommunication concessions, satellite, real estate, airlines, and ITV channel)	Sanoh Thientong (head of the Wang Nam Yen faction; construction, grindstone mills, East Cement Co. Ltd., land developer)	Somkid Jatusripitak (former director of Petroleum Authority of Thailand and adviser of the Stock Exchange of Thailand)
Suriya Jungrungreangkit (autoparts business, Summit Auto Seats Industry Co., Ltd.)	The Wang Bua Ban Faction (composed mainly of Northern MPs, headed by Yaowapa Wongsawat, Prime Minister Thaksin's sister)	Prommin Lertsuridej, MD (vice president, Shin Satellite Public Co., Ltd.)
Pracha Maleenon (Bangkok Entertainment Company Ltd. Channel 3 Television)	The Wang Nam Yom* Faction (led by Somsak Thepsuthin, construction and farming business, Sukhothai Engineering Ltd. and Therdthai Farm)	Surapong Seupwonglee, MD
Adisai Bodharamik (Jasmine International Public Co., Ltd., and Thai Telephone & Telecommunication Public Co., Ltd.)	Seridham (Liberal Democratic) Party Faction (also known as "the Serpent" faction, headed by Pinij Jarusombat)	Phumtham Vejjayachai
Watana Muangsook (son-in-law of the owner of the big conglomerate CP Group)	New Aspiration Party Faction (headed by General Chavalit Yongjaiyut and Wan Muhamma Nor Matta, the Muslim MP faction within the party)	Pansak Vinyaratn (chief strategic adviser)
The "Future" Faction (a group of the younger generation of the "old capitalists" and wealthy families, i.e., Suranan Vejachica, Pimon Srivikorn, Pimuk Simaroj)	Suvit Khunkitti (led a network of Khorn Kaen province and Northeast MPs from the former Social Action Party)	
	Bangkok MPs Faction (led by Sudarat Keyurapan, a former Palang Dham Party member)	

*Wang Nam Yom (The River Yom palace) is the name of a well-known river in the North. This faction splits up from the Wang Bau Barn faction. Somsak Thepsutin is now the faction's leader.

deserted their original parties to join TRT include about 35 MPs from Wang Bua Ban faction [5] and about 35 parliamentarians from the *Naga* (serpent) faction, another subdivision within TRT (*Matichon*, January

5, 2002, 2). Prime Minister Thaksin also brought his own faction into his cabinet. This group of associates is loyal to Prime Minister Thaksin and his ideas. Another important part of TRT is comprised of individuals and party financiers who own national business conglomerates (see Table 5; McCargo and Pathmanand 2005).

Since the party structure is based on power within groups and factions, the power struggle to capture the power center is significant. Government formation thus requires much wheeling and dealing. Factions within parties who feel they are underrepresented or ignored always voice dissatisfaction. Rifts can be long lasting and can seriously threaten government unity and stability. Cabinet reshuffles are expected more frequently in countries where faction politics is practiced. This practice reveals a lack of party loyalty among the parliamentarians with a destabilizing effect on the party system.

As mentioned earlier, as the party in government for four years,TRT did develop policies to which it committed itself. TRT now has full autonomy to carry out its policy program. However, the core of TRT's economic policies, namely modest Keynesian economic stimulus programs with state support for entrepreneurialism and export competitiveness (Glassman 2004, 59), indicates that the TRT government will have to shoulder a heavy financial burden to carry out all policy promises made during the elections. This requires that the world and the Thai economy be in good shape to allow the government to spend huge sums of money on mega projects contained in the government's program. In any case, the government party certainly enjoys substantial advantage over the opposition. Party(ies) in government get better access to the executive branch and thus can act quickly on the constituent's requests with better results. Personal connections with the bureaucracy, established through long service in a government agency, can also be a factor determining an MP's capability in serving the electorates, thus increasing the chance of winning the next election.

Political Implications of the 2005 General Elections

TRT has written a new chapter in Thailand's political history by being handed a mandate to form a single-party government. The outcome is reminiscent of the *Seri Manangkasila* Party's victory under Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram in February 1957. The party won 85 seats against 28 seats captured by the Democrats, while small parties and 13 independent candidates took the rest (Dhiravegin 1992, 142-45).

However, after public outcry over the "dirty election," the Seri Manangkasila government was overthrown in September 1957 by Field Marshal Sarit's bloodless coup.

What do the 2005 general electoral results mean politically? What are some of the political trends that have emerged in this election?

The increased importance of party labels and party leaders in electoral politics

Unlike previous elections where parties settle to being part of a government coalition, now they compete to win the right to form a government. TRT claimed that "a vote for Thai Rak Thai is a vote for Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to lead the country with his particular style of leadership" (*Bangkok Post*, January 31, 2005). The Democrat and Mahachon parties also put forward their leaders as Thailand's next prime minister. The leader of Chart Thai, on the contrary, stood as a constituency candidate, foregoing the opportunity to become prime minister and showing the party's willingness to ally with other major parties.

The introduction of the new electoral system under the 1997 Constitution, especially regarding the proportional representation system, affects parties' strategies in electoral campaigns. Party leaders have steadily gained control over the candidate selection process. In the multimember-constituency electoral system, prior to the 1997 Constitution, MPs got votes from their good deeds at the local level. Accordingly, political standing of the candidates was not controlled by party leaders. To a large extent, parties' candidates were prepicked by faction leaders. MPs under the proportional representation, instead of being responsible for addressing the needs of specific localities, have their political careers depend primarily on satisfying their party's leadership, which determines their ranking on the party-list for the election.

The introduction of proportional representation system meant that political parties can no longer focus on geographic and regional areas as they do in the single-member constituency electoral system (Nogsuan 2004). To win in the party-list votes, they need to wage a national campaign, thus the presence of government ministers accompanying constituency candidates in campaigning across the country. As for other parties, prominent party figures and leaders also led campaign rallies in several strategic electoral areas, accompanying constituency candidates in their walkabouts and campaign caravans.

TRT, emulating the whistle-stop tours of the United States presidential elections, rented a train that took the party leader and its rank-and-file members through the election heartland of the northeast (*The Nation*, January 30, 2005). This marks a discrepancy between the parliamentary and the presidential political systems where cabinet members are appointed and do not have to run for election and attract votes for political parties in the presidential system.

For that reason, party strategies and election campaigning are inevitably influenced by electoral laws (Katz 1980; Denemark 1996). Furthermore, because electoral messages must be targeted at voters everywhere and not purely in areas of party's strongholds, in accordance with the proportional representation system, one of the significant implications of the change is greater reliance on television as the predominant conveyor of campaign messages to voters.

The growing role of the mass media in elections and the professionalization of electoral campaigns

The use of the mass media to convey campaign messages was not a significant factor in Thailand's electoral exercises before the 2001 general elections. Before the 1995 general elections, political advertisements were not even permitted on television (Maisrikrod and McCargo 1997). However, changes in the law and technological advances in radio, television, mobile telephone, and the Internet have given political parties and the electorate new and powerful information capabilities with dramatic consequences. These changes have altered patterns of communication, social interaction, and have raised the political parties' and their leaders' ability to communicate. Specifically, these changes enabled centrally created messages and programs to be transmitted to large communities, thereby creating larger audiences for party politics.

In 2000, with 90.6 percent of Thai households having a television set according to the 2004 data of the National Statistics Office (up from 67.9 percent in 1990) and with use of radio in decline (from 81.3 percent in 1990 to 76.7 percent in 2000), parties have made television coverage an essential part of their campaign. During the 2005 campaign period, TRT benefited most from television coverage. A survey conducted by ABAC Poll between January 26 and 30, 2005 found that during evening news programs on six free-television channels, news about TRT's campaign activities appeared most frequently (270 times)

followed far behind by the Democrat Party (160 times), and Chart Thai (102 times) (*The Nation*, February 2, 2005).

The new and remarkable transformation of how electoral campaigns are waged during the 2005 elections was seen in the increased reliance on professional agency and media advertising companies to promote and publicize parties' activities, performance, and platform. TRT, for example, has always relied on SC Matchbox Agency, a company under the Shin Corporation, to produce party advertisements, billboards, presentations, and marketing strategies. The newly-established How Come Entertainment under Pantongtae, Prime Minister Thaksin's son, was taking care of TRT's advertisement on the Internet. The Democrats availed themselves of the services of Panda Multi Media Service Agency to look over their posters, brochures, and websites, while the Mahachon Party employed the Media Limited Agency for buying newspaper ads and airtime on radio and television (*Business Thai*, December 2004). The media-oriented campaign with its general theme, slogans, and symbols is formulated based on careful research of the audience's listening, reading, and especially, viewing habits. Media campaign plans include themes, unified messages, and color schemes that cover everything, from the fraction-of-a-page newspaper advertisement to the color of a poster's backdrop.

The Thai voter has witnessed, besides the persistence of political dynasties, the different recruitment strategies employed by the parties in their quests for new candidates; their propensity to pick popular faces of movie stars, newscasters from several TV channels, and candidates with attractive personality, good education, and solid family background. This media-driven campaign strategy works well in a society where information absorption is at a minimal level; the capacity of the political system to transmit and circulate information is limited; and the ability of the people to gather, perceive, and digest knowledge is low. Hence, political image is more significant and much more relevant to the electorate than political message.

However, the most significant development in waging electoral campaigns in Thailand is the parties' extensive use of polls to formulate systematic and integrated plans to win votes. TRT began setting up a well-managed database of information about the country's population as far back as July 1998. Phumtham Wechayachai, Prime Minister Thaksin's close adviser and now Deputy Minister of Transport, stated that a rich database accumulated from innumerable surveys over the past seven years helps the party in its understanding of the voters—their

profiles, behavior, wishes, and problems (*The Nation*, February 21, 2005). Political parties marshaled their resources on polls to evaluate and determine their strength among voters. With poll information, Thai Rak Thai candidates are ranked into three groupings: A, B, and C. Those guaranteed of winning were categorized in Group A; incumbent MPs or aspiring candidates with slim chances of winning in Group B; and those likely to be defeated in Group C. Aspiring candidates in groups B and C were likely to be replaced by candidates with brighter prospects of winning (U. Kraiwattanusorn, personal communication).

Prime Minister Thaksin himself admits the importance of polls in TRT's electoral victory: "We have been conducting polls regularly, about once a month. That's why we know we would win at least 350 to 360 seats. The result was not a big surprise for us... We had our surveys in hand and knew the result by inference from the percentage of the respondents" (*The Nation*, February 9, 2005). It seemed that ill-planned and poorly-executed old-style campaigning is likely to deliver defeat. Evidently, a massive amount of money is needed for a capital-intensive party management of this kind.

The use of policy platform as vote-getting tool

In general, Thai political parties are now trying to propose to the electorate clearer platforms and programmatic policies. Nonetheless, when critically examined, all these policies manifest populist tendencies. Populist and direct-sale policies are launched in order to gain votes from grassroots voters. TRT employed shrewd marketing campaigns to communicate with the electorate, trying to sell and tell what they have been doing. The success of TRT in using policy platform as a vote-getting strategy was evident in the 2001 general elections. Before, all parties' policies look alike and sound alike. But TRT developed policies that were clear and concise and designed to appeal to all sectors in the society (Ockey 2003). In other words, TRT was able to convert voters' prismatic urgent demands into specific policy alternatives and give them political expression during the campaign period.

TRT's policy platform in the 2005 elections is an extension of populist policy over the past four years, with a heavy focus on poverty alleviation and a new method of direct budget allocation to rural areas. The new range of populist policy introduced on July 14, 2004—the sixth anniversary of TRT—includes the promise to distribute two million cows nationwide, dig ponds for farmers, and inject cash to

villagers through the SML (small-medium-large village) Project (*Matichon*, July 16, 2004). In implementing the SML project, the government would give money directly to Thailand's 77,000 villages. The villages will receive their budget allocations proportional to their population, thus the small, medium, and large categories. The party claims that the current implementation of THB 1 million per village along with the SML policies will help get rid of the middlemen or the mediator between the villagers and the state, i.e., provincial and local officers as well as local and national politicians who were formerly responsible for developmental budget in provinces. To counter alienation of urban voters in the cities, TRT promises to give every family its own house, renovate slums, spend THB 1 trillion on the sky-train and subway construction, build more schools and hospitals, cut taxes for people with dependent parents, and continue its fight against drugs.

The key areas of contention and divergence among the parties seemed to be with respect to economic and social reforms. The newly-established Mahachon opposed TRT's moves toward a market economy, increased government spending, privatization of state enterprises, bilateral free-trade agreements, and special economic zones. Mahachon's policies claimed to be socially progressive and welfare-oriented rather than populist: free medical health care for the poor only where the better-off still have to pay (*Bangkok Post*, January 21, 2005). Yet they were also suggestive of a corporatist approach, advocating the role of business associations in binding the state and the private sector together. The Democrat Party's five-point platform proposed during the elections included promises of free education and health care, job security for new graduates, and debt relief for farmers. One can therefore say that these two parties' platforms were simply refinements in matters focused upon by TRT (*Bangkok Post*, April 27, 2004).

Notably, the policy promises and the implementation of populist policies can lead to the creation of the new hierarchical clientelism, in which political parties are patrons. Evidently, parties that can use their controls of public resources to distribute benefits such as jobs, subsidies, infrastructures, housing projects, and access to financial help are in a better position to exchange clientelistic materials for electoral support. Political parties are now showing that they can provide services required by the electorates, which were once generally delivered by the candidates' own patronage network. Patronage from this perspective means how political party leaders seek to use public institutions and public resources for their own ends, and how a variety of favors are exchanged for votes.

The continuation of money politics and vote buying

Despite various efforts since the introduction of the 1997 Constitution to curtail vote buying, it is still widespread and undeniably an effective way to get elected (Anusorn 1998; Ockey 2003; Callahan 2003). The killings of political canvassers in many provinces prior to the February 2005 general elections underscore the persistence of traditional, old-style politics and the continuing trend of vote buying (*The Nation*, January 12, 2005).

Vote canvassers provide channels of communication between candidates and constituency electorates. These canvassers are the candidates' personal networks that are not controlled by the parties. In most cases, vote buying is done by handing out cash to voters through the vote canvassers. However, before the money reaches the voter, it passes through different hands. From the candidates, the money goes to the candidates' major canvassers in each district. The canvassers have their own extensive networks that cover the district, the villages, down to the polling levels, and finally to voters in the targeted households. Without vote canvassers, vote buying would be difficult to execute. Thus, when vote canvassers get killed during an election season, it is usually politically motivated. A new form of vote buying found during the 2005 elections was for candidates to send money via mobile phones, disguising it as prepaid service refills. Besides vote buying, electoral frauds involved alleged biases among government officials and abuses of state power. Rumors had it that many provincial officers were "ordered" to mobilize voters and manipulate election results. With thousands of reports in electoral irregularities, only a few were followed up by the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT). Quite rightly, the ECT is seen as an ineffectual independent agency.

Most constituency candidates get their money from political patrons and from their parties. The patrons who provide money for candidates during elections are local influential personalities (Robertson 1996; Ockey 2000). At present, there are reasons to suspect that local power in Thailand is in jeopardy. The Thaksin government's policies such as "war on drugs," "underground lottery abolition," and "eradication of influential personalities" (*poo mee ittipon* [local godfather]) have shattered sources of money for several candidates. Many influential people have been closely scrutinized by the Anti-Money Laundering Office (AMLO) and other state apparatus. Somchai Kunpluem, alias Kamnan Poh, a well-known godfather from the eastern provinces, is now in jail. Soon after that, his son, the former tourism and sports

minister, switched from Chart Thai to TRT along with MPs under his patronage. Pracha Phothipipat, also known as Kamnan [6] Siah, a Democrat candidate, had some of his assets seized (*Matichon Weekly*, January 28, 2005). This can be read as part of an effort by TRT to put pressure on rival patronage providers and, at the same time, to tame the dependency of politicians on influential persons, forcing them to turn to the party for help.

Political parties with better financial status can provide more financial support to their MPs, and are thus more attractive than those less affluent ones. The prime resources necessary in contemporary political campaign have changed, and as currently constituted, are beyond the ability of most candidates to deliver. Party candidates are becoming more dependent on the national party, more likely on party leaders. The result is that leaders from conglomerate businesses, with longer financial pipelines, are taking control of Thai political parties.

Conclusion: Challenges to the Consolidation of Democracy Post-2005 General Elections

A democratic regime is consolidated when all politically significant groups regard its key political institutions as the only legitimate framework for political contestation and adhere to democratic rules of the game (Gunther, Puhle, and Diamandouros 1995, 7). The democratic structure put in place under the 1997 Constitution seems to be embraced by all significant factions in Thai society. However, democratic consolidation is a long-term process and certainly not without challenges. The challenges to democratic consolidation in Thailand seen in this study are twofold.

The first is the growing dependence of the people on political patronage provided by political parties. This is an outcome of attempts by political parties to create a new style of "clientelism" by giving out goodies and public subsidies to the people, replacing the traditional individual politicians' patronage network. While most people are drawn by what the parties offer, in the long term they stand to become dependent on government assistance and to keep demanding more and more handouts. The government will then tend to gain more power while the people will become less and less self-reliant. This is coupled with the fact that Thai political parties never emphasize nonelectoral tasks such as giving political education to members so as to turn cadres into an elite group, formulating programmatic goals or establishing a

set of ideological principles. By these criteria, therefore, political parties are weakly rooted in society.

The second challenge to Thai democratic consolidation is related to the new structure of competition under the 1997 Constitution. The new arrangements make it easier for big money to take control of political parties and the political arena. The importance of money, though hard to evaluate, can be seen in the ability to expand party activities, form party image, and direct party policy—steps which all have impact on rationalities that drive voting behavior.

The success of one party in electoral politics does not necessarily translate into democratic consolidation. In an atmosphere where political goals and claims to power are developing more in relation to the general mood of the voters, the prerequisites for long-term democratic development can get easily ignored. Of the five criteria for a genuine democratic system proposed by Dahl (1998, 37-38)—namely, inclusion, political equality, enlightened understanding, control of agenda, and effective participation—Thailand has met only the inclusion criterion. While there has long been "universal suffrage," problems of equality and effective participation remain marked. The 1997 Constitution stipulates that a candidate for the National Assembly must graduate with no lower than a bachelor's degree or its equivalent. This is meant to "encourage better-known and more respectable personalities to enter politics" (Chantornvong 2002, 203). Such a requirement, nonetheless, reflects educational bias. Politics and elections thus become "the business" of a certain group of people while barring people at the grassroots and the lower social strata from significant and meaningful participation.

The 2005 election results do not indicate that Thai voters have an enlightened understanding of policy alternatives and their likely consequences. Certainly, broadening access to the political agenda is not a main concern of the Thaksin government. Once, Prime Minister Thaksin proclaimed that:

> Democracy is a good and beautiful thing, but it's not the ultimate goal as far as administering the country is concerned. Democracy is just a tool, not our goal. The goal is to give people a good lifestyle, happiness, and national progress. (*The Nation*, December 11, 2003)

On February 6, 2005, the Thai people cast their votes for prosperity. However, they may have risked more than they bargained for. ❁

NOTES

1. These reorientation included providing one million baht (USD 25,000 funding from the Government Savings Bank) to each of Thailand's 77,000 villages, a three-year debt moratorium for farmers owing USD 2,000 or less to the state-run Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), and a government-promoted One *Tambon* (subdistrict), One Product (OTOP) scheme to encourage entrepreneurialism and small- and medium-sized business in provincial areas. All these were microeconomic policies aimed at rejuvenating the rural sector.
2. Local bosses were neutralized and the underground lottery rackets were brought into the national lottery system.
3. The key ministries are those with the biggest amount of the state budget, the ones most sought after by coalition participations. These include Agriculture and Cooperatives, Transportation and Communications, Industry, Commerce, and Interior.
4. Wang Nam Yen (Cool Water Palace) is a district in Sra Kaew province, where Sanoh Thientong, the faction's leader, establishes his reputation and organizes his network of politicians from neighboring provinces.
5. Wang Bau Barn (Blossom Lily Palace) is the name of waterfall in Chiang Mai province. It signifies the Thai Rak Thai's faction of the Northern MPs.
6. "Kamnan" is an official title for a subdistrict chief.

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