

Canan Atilgan: Elections in Thailand: Power Struggle Between Thaksin and the Military

With the parliamentary elections of December 23, 2007, Thailand has returned to democracy fifteen months after the military coup. Prior to the poll, a new constitution was adopted which was backed by far more than half the population. However, it is by no means certain that the outcome of the parliamentary elections marks the beginning of a course towards establishing a stable democratic order: After all, the coup of 2006 was the 18th in the history of the country, and the elections of December 2007 were the 25th since 1932.

The victory of the People's Power Party (PPP), which is regarded as the successor of the former government party Thai Rak Thai (TRT) that was led by Thaksin Shinawatra and dissolved later, is a bitter defeat for the putschists who were in power until then. And it comes as a surprise many people did not expect, once and for all sealing the failure of the military coup of September 19, 2006. According to the official final result of the elections, in which 74.5 percent of the population took part, the PPP won 233 of 480 parliamentary seats, while the Democratic Party (DP) obtained 165. The remaining seats are divided between five smaller parties.

The framework conditions for the parliamentary elections differed from those in the past in that they were influenced by the now adopted constitution that had been proposed by the interim government appointed by the military. Together with this constitution, a new mixed election system was introduced which combined majority election with proportional representation. According to the new regulations, political parties are no longer allowed to compete on the basis of nationwide lists. The entire country is divided into nine electoral regions, for each of which the parties have to compile a list of ten candidates. Another novelty is the abolition of the five-percent hurdle. The principle of 'one man – one vote' was replaced by the right to cast a multiple vote which allows voters to elect as many candidates as a constituency is entitled to. With these new regulations the military obviously intended to weaken the party system as a whole.

As the political activities of Thailand's parties were suspended again and again due to the numerous military coups, it was only in the course of democratisation in the nineties that Thailand developed its own political-party life. By now, there are around 70 parties, and the dynamic process of founding new ones is continuing. The dissolution of the TRT led by Mr Thaksin must also be seen against this background as the resultant vacuum caused an even greater fragmentation of the party system. The TRT with its 14 million members had been the country's biggest party and enjoyed great popularity. The PPP and several smaller parties that also invoked Mr Thaksin's heritage became its successors.

The programmes of the individual parties are basically interchangeable: They are dominated by empty phrases that contain hardly any conceptual substance. Instead of programmatic statements they offer general demands and populist promises. Thus, taking place in a heated atmosphere, the elections were not about party programmes but – entirely in accordance with the strategy of the PPP – about a 'Yes' or 'No' to the coup and the military government.

Perceiving itself as the legitimate successor to the TRT and Mr Thaksin's party line, the PPP promised to bring Mr Thaksin back into Thai politics, clearly wooing the opponents of the coup. The chairman of the PPP, Samak Sundaravej, always declared that he was merely Mr Thaksin's 'lieutenant'. Unlike the PPP and its 'No' to the putsch, it was difficult for the DP to free itself of the allegation of having supported the coup. Abhisit Vejjajiva, the leader of the party, did not succeed in winning over the opponents of the coup by declaring his support of democracy. Due to its complete lack of a programme or content, Thai Nation, the second oldest party in the

country, remained faceless and shapeless. Even under Mr Thaksin, the party led by Banharn Silapaarcha had sunk into virtually complete insignificance.

The crucial result of the December poll is that it ended the 15-month military rule and enabled Thailand to return to a constitutional parliamentary life. Even though the outcome has not yet been confirmed definitely, any by-elections that might become necessary should not entail substantial changes to the new distribution of power.

What is noticeable is the country's political division into supporters of the PPP and the DP – a development which may be deduced from the outcome of the first-past-the-post and the proportional votes in the eight regions. While the PPP achieved landslide victories in the northern half of the country, the DP defended its supremacy in Bangkok and the south. Only in the central eastern region was there a neck-and-neck race. Thus, regions in Thailand with a dense population and a weak structure are ruled by the PPP. Yet there is no denying that the country's 'stability' has been restored, the political division between those who support and those who oppose Mr Thaksin has been consolidated, and a deep rift is now apparent between the rural population and the urban middle class, especially with regard to their judgement of the person of Mr Thaksin.

Meanwhile, the PPP has announced that it intends to form a coalition with the smaller parties but not with the DP. In the coalition talks, these parties enjoy a degree of importance which they never had in the campaign: The more attractive the government office offered to a party, the greater its willingness to form a coalition. The Thais United National Development Party, the Neutral Democratic Party, and the Royal People Party have already confirmed their participation. Should the PPP succeed in setting up a broad coalition, it would hold a good position: On the one hand, it could play the smaller participants off against one another, and on the other, it would clearly prove its legitimacy to the putschists.

Even more essential than the coalition question is the one about the way in which Mr Thaksin is going to influence politics in the future. The prime minister has already announced his return to the country and its politics. It is cogitable, for example, that the PPD-led government might grant a general amnesty to him and other leaders of the former TRT government. However, Mr Thaksin also has powerful opponents in the royal palace, Bangkok's urban middle class, the media, and large parts of the military. The latter did assert that they intended to respect the election outcome and might even tolerate the return of the former prime minister, but it remains open whether they would agree to granting Mr Thaksin amnesty. According to political observers, another military coup cannot be ruled out should Mr Thaksin exert too much influence on the country's politics.

Currently, there is a great conflict potential in Thailand: The conditions that prevailed prior to the coup together with the persistent deep political division have been restored. A pseudo-democratic middle class is confronted by a rural population calling for palpable political results. The focal point of the dispute is the person of Mr Thaksin who, although he did infringe the principles of good governance, was the first Thai prime minister to articulate the social question. In the elections of December 23, 2007, the political instabilities and social disparities prevailing in Thailand appeared all too clearly.