

## Elections No Fix for Thailand's Political Problems

The fissures from the Shinawatra era run deep, and won't be bridged any time soon.

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By **Tim LaRocco**

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It really was doomed from the start. Despite the promise, the potential, and the hope of Yingluck Shinawatra — the nation's first female prime minister — Thailand was in need of an exceptional person to heal the country's bitterly divided and stratified society in 2011. The business class needed reassurances that Yingluck's administration was not going to set off on a Hugo Chavez-inspired populist redistribution of wealth; the working class wanted guarantees of a more socially just state of affairs. In the end, Yingluck tried to play the role of the great compromiser, pleasing no one, enraging everyone, and precipitating the collapse of her Pheu Thai-led government. An exceptional person she evidently is not.

Following five years of coups, protests, and general political chaos, Yingluck's election during the summer of 2011 was seen by some as a breath of fresh air. Riding a tidal wave of support from the poor, rural majority, her resounding victory was taken as a repudiation of past neoliberal policies embraced by the opposition Democrat Party and international financial institutions and a mandate to continue the kinds of reforms implemented by her older brother Thaksin before he was overthrown in 2006.

Those reforms — transportation subsidies, universal healthcare, and price controls for agricultural products — were never entirely embraced by the Bangkok establishment, despite their initial economic successes. Thai business leaders naturally preferred to privatize most industries, especially utilities, and to deregulate the labor market as per the wishes of the International Monetary Fund's Washington Consensus in the decade following the Asian Financial Crisis. The elephant in the room during the **Thaksin regime** was always his wealth, which remains in the billions, and with which he used to control the political narrative in the media, stamp out criticism, and enrich his allies. It was this duplicitous behavior that ultimately led to a bloodless military coup while Thaksin was at the United Nations in New York in September 2006.



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However, Thaksin's populism earned him the adoration of and a cult-like following amongst the nation's poor. It was Yingluck who capitalized on that reverence two and a half years ago, winning Thailand's first legitimately free and fair election since the Thaksin era.

It was easy to predict that it would likely be rough sledding to placate the country's wealthy. Some **analysts noted** it would only be a matter of time before opposition forces, galvanized by their hatred of Thaksin, regrouped and took to the streets the way most political disputes are settled in Thailand. As Gavin Greenwood, a regional political analyst with Hong Kong-based security firm Allan & Associates **told *The Diplomat's* Luke Hunt**, Yingluck's massive electoral victory pointed "to the near delusional belief from much of the old elite that they can somehow reverse what Thaksinism has wrought and return to their variant of a golden age of emerald rice fields tended by a respectful and sturdy peasantry, kept in order by the Analects and a feudal respect for their betters."

But it has been surprising to observe the disillusionment of the lower classes with the Shinawatras since Yingluck's election. This started just a few short months after the 2011 election. The rainy season of 2011 was particularly bad for large parts of Southeast Asia, and when the **floods threatened Bangkok**, Yingluck was prepared to divert the rising water around the capital and towards the surrounding countryside. Thai rice farmers, many of whom survive on subsistence wages, were outraged to learn of the decision to allow their fertile farmland to be destroyed. It was this constituency that had overwhelmingly elected Shinawatra just three months prior. In the end it was a moot point, as the flood waters proved too much for the sandbags and Bangkok was hit anyway. Damage was estimated at around \$45 billion.

In June of this year, Yingluck proposed to **reduce rice prices** and cut subsidies for farmers. Financial help to farmers had mixed results when Thaksin began doing so as part of his "Thaksinomics" economic policies: public debt soared and demand for Thai rice abroad was curtailed. However, it was seen as a necessary safety net for the country's poorest people, and as a way for Thaksin to thank this most important constituency for supporting the Pheu Thai party. Yingluck's prospective rollback — sought by international financial institutions — only served to alienate the Red Shirts. "If the government doesn't listen to farmers' voices, the Pheu Thai party won't have farmers as a shield to protect them," Charin Sing-dee, head of the farmer council from Singburi province, told Bloomberg News.

Most recently, the proposed and now **failed amnesty bill**, which would have allowed Thaksin to return to the country, further disaffected the Red Shirts; they rallied against it because it would have prevented any criminal or civil charges from being brought against the leaders of the Democrat party who were responsible for the crackdown against street demonstrations in 2010 which left more than 90 people dead. With the memories of that violent confrontation still fresh in the minds of many Red Shirt supporters, the amnesty might very well have been the final nail in the proverbial coffin for Yingluck.

It is still quite possible that Yingluck and the Pheu Thai party will emerge victorious from the snap elections scheduled for early February. Win or lose, however, the divide between haves and have nots runs very deep in Thailand. The differences between the two sides cannot be solved simply with an electoral mandate for one side or the other after an election. Throw in the uncertainty of a frail and aging monarch, and a separatist insurgency still raging in the south of the country, and one can adduce that Thailand's problems are likely to remain as paralyzing to its democracy as the recent protests have become to traffic on Sukhumvit Boulevard.

***Tim LaRocco*** is a professor of political science at St. Joseph's College in New York. He was previously a Southeast Asia-based journalist.