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Pheu Thai's Victory: Prospects for Peace in the Deep South

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Synopsis

The landslide victory of the Pheu Thai party heralds a major change in Thailand's political climate and in the approach to dealing with the Southern insurgency. However, the new prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra faces the prospect of working under the shadows of both the military and her brother Thaksin.

Commentary

THE LANDSLIDE victory of the Pheu Thai party of Yingluck Shinawatra in the general election of 3 July 2011 heralds a major change in Thailand's political climate. It also promises a new approach to dealing with the long-standing insurgency by Muslim separatists in the southern Thai provinces.

The insurgency had been largely ignored during the political unrest and turmoil in Bangkok since the ouster of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra by a military coup in 2006. The deep fissures in the fabric of Thai society were revealed by the social and political upheaval that followed, with the ouster of two succeeding prime ministers and dissolution of two successor parties of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai.

New Approach in the South?

The subsequent ascent of the Democrat Party's Abhisit Vejjajiva as prime minister was preceded by the occupation of Bangkok international airport in late 2008 by the pro-royalist Yellow Shirts, paralysing it for two months. That was followed by social unrest, culminating in the blockade of a central square in Bangkok by the pro-Thaksin Red Shirts, which ended with a bloody crackdown by the military in which 85 persons were killed and nearly 1400 injured.

Eventually after several failed attempts to reach a compromise with the Red Shirt leaders PM Abhisit called the elections, which resulted in the Pheu Thai party winning 265 of the 500 seats and Yingluck Shinawatra set to become prime minister in a five-party coalition government.

What new approach will she bring to the problems in the "Deep South"? Successive governments, including that of Thaksin Shinawatra, were unable to undertake serious measures while violence continued unabated. Indeed during his premiership Thaksin was deeply resented in the southern provinces because of his high-handed policies and insensitivity towards the grievances of the people. The brutal crackdown by police on Muslim militants such as the attack on the Krue Se mosque and the ill-treatment of detainees at Tak Bai in April and October 2004 respectively, exacerbated hatred in the South of Thaksin. Just before the elections Thaksin, living in exile in Dubai, expressed regret for his harsh policy of the past. However, given the perception that

Yingluck would be acting on behalf of her brother, the rift between the people in the Deep South and the central government could become worse.

During his term, Prime Minister Abhisit had initiated a Justice and Development in the South programme. He restructured the Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBAC) and had it report directly to the Prime Minister instead of the military's Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC). He also promised much needed economic development in the southern provinces and introduced vocational training programmes.

However these efforts, like those of his predecessors, could not yield any perceptible results largely due to implementation failures arising out of the instability in Bangkok. Moreover, most of the initiatives were criticised as irrelevant and tangential to the core causes of the conflict, besides being perceived as the policies of the governments that did not have the trust of the people in the Deep South (under Samak Sundaravej) or lacked legitimacy (under Abhisit Vejjajiva).

Yingluck's administration may well continue with these efforts. However she has ideas of her own about how to deal with the Southern conflict. During the election campaign she promised a degree of autonomy for three Southern Provinces, similar to that of the Pattaya City Administration, where a local government will take control of policymaking and public services. Her opponents, however, denounced the proposal as an election ploy and a poorly thought out measure that would only serve to empower the militants who are fighting for full independence.

Shadow of the Military

The new government will be under the shadow of Thailand's powerful military which, under Commander-in-Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha, demonstrated a distinct disfavour of the Pheu Thai party and its leaders during the elections. General Prayuth has openly criticised Yingluck's proposal for the south and it could be extremely difficult for her to implement the measures without the cooperation of the military which effectively controls the Southern Provinces under emergency decree.

The military and the government have often disagreed over how to deal with the insurgency in the south. While the post-Thaksin governments wanted to promote a more conciliatory attitude, the military has been uninhibited in its use of force. Due to military pressure, the 2005 Emergency Decree which is most unpopular in the South and which further aggravated the sense of alienation among the locals, has been repeatedly extended. The military has also managed to keep its personnel exempted from SBPAC's authority to transfer officials found guilty of corruption and misconduct.

Reconciliation the key

The past few years have been particularly unsettling for Thailand which disrupted normal life and almost ruined country's economy. It also cast a pall on the prospects of peace and reconciliation in the Deep South. Yingluck and the Pheu Thai party have a tough time ahead. Ultimately, the new government and the military must work together not only to usher in political stability and restore investor confidence to boost the Thai economy but also to deal with the insurgency in the southern provinces.

Without a united front by the government and the military, it would be difficult to inspire the trust of the people in the Deep South. The result could then be continued violence and bloodshed which has already claimed more than four thousand lives since January 2004.

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