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11 January 2008

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The general election in Thailand of December 23, 2007 was supposed to bring the country back to democratically elected administration after a year of military rule, but it is unlikely to resolve the country's deep divisions and bitter resentments among its population. It seems that Thailand's political crisis is leading to another deadlock with deepening polarisation between rural and urban population.

Polarisation of Thai society

The majority - the 60% rural population – have been supporting Thaksin populist programmes, particularly in the country's north and northeast. These groups were neglected by the traditional political elites before Thaksin came to power in 2001. Under Thaksin, his policies, like cracking down on the drug trade, subsidising healthcare and initiating poverty-reduction programmes, have dramatically lifted incomes in some of Thailand's poorest regions.

On the other hand, the rural population's economic contribution, mainly through agricultural activities such as rice cultivation, accounts for around 10% of Thai GDP, but manufacturing, electronic and service industries, concentrated mainly in urban areas such as Bangkok, account for 80% of GDP. This means that the almost 40% - the working class - though in minority, is playing the major role in contributing to Thailand's economy and generating the huge profits needed by the capitalist class.

However, in 2005, under the blows of rising oil prices and inflation, severe droughts and floods, the increasing Southern Thailand insurgency and the tourism aftershocks of the Tsunami on December 26, 2004, economic growth slumped to 4.5% from 5 - 7% in the previous years. This economic slowdown and the impact of the neo-liberal policies of Thaksin had very much affected the working class and much of the population in the urban areas, especially in Bangkok. This triggered protests and demonstrations against Thaksin that led to his downfall. But because of Thaksin's populist policies, now the poor, especially the rural population, are hoping that his return to government would bring back the benefits that they enjoyed under him.

The pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP) was formed by Thaksin supporters to contest elections on December 23 after their former party - Thai Rak Thai (Thais loves Thais) - was dissolved by the country's Constitutional Tribunal in May 2006. It won 233 out of the 480 lower house seats in the election. The PPP gained the majority of its votes from its northern and north-eastern strongholds where rural populations are concentrated, winning 59 percent and 71 percent of the popular vote, respectively. Its close rival, the Democrat Party, which the military tacitly backed as the alternative to the PPP, only managed to gain 165 seats from its traditional stronghold in the South and Bangkok, where the anti-Thaksin populations live – in the Muslim insurgent areas of the south and the working class and middle class concentrated in the capital.

At the time of writing it is still uncertain whether the PPP with the largest number of seats, could form a coalition government, taking into considerations the persistent hostilities of military and royal advisers over the question of Thaksin. Nonetheless, whether the PPP or the Democrats form a new coalition government with smaller parties, the country is likely to spark into more instability, and possibly another coup.

Incapacity of military rule

The military coup in September 2006, which ousted billionaire prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, was tacitly endorsed by the royal palace advisers close to Thailand's much-revered king. This coup followed after the political stalemate that originated from a polarisation of Thai society. On the one hand, there were massive street protests of working class and middle class people in Bangkok in early 2006 demanding Thaksin's removal due to allegations of corruption, nepotism and abuse of power. On the other hand, there was huge support from the urban and rural poor people for Thaksin as a result of his populist policies like low-cost health care, debt forgiveness and the distribution of village funds. So it seems that, although the rural population, which is majority, is decisive in electing the government, the urban population, mainly in Bangkok, with its economic weight, could nevertheless destabilise the government with mass street protests.

After the coup, the military junta, which called itself the 'Council for Democratic Reform', insisted that its aim was to rescue Thai democracy from the rampant corruption of the Thaksin government, to end his meddling in the country's independent institutions and to heal the deep divisions Thaksin had sown among Thais. At that time, Bangkok residents, euphoric at Thaksin's demise, showered the soldiers with praise and flowers. Since then the military junta has taken every opportunity to sideline Thaksin and his party, especially among rural voters.

At the first attempt, the junta obtained the Constitutional Tribunal ruling to disband the TRT and to bar 111 of the party's executive members, including Thaksin, from politics for five years, for electoral fraud. Then, the generals justified their seizure of power by bringing corruption cases against Thaksin and his family, but they have made little headway in the courts. However, the fifteen months of propaganda by the military junta has not succeeded in convincing the rural and urban poor to stop supporting Thaksin. Moreover the election on December 23 was held under the firm grip of the military with the pretext of maintaining order to discourage votes for PPP. Around 200,000 police and military personnel were deployed in the name of helping the Election Commission.

Martial law - with which the military can ban political gatherings, detain people without charge and censor the media - is still in operation in 31 of the 76 provinces, including those where Thaksin's support was significant. Despite all these measures, with support from the poor, the PPP outperformed pollster predictions. Military rule had been undermined by the appointed government of mostly elderly bureaucrats which was regarded as slow-moving and incompetent.

On "Black Tuesday", 18 December, 2006, the military junta's capital control measures sent its stock market plunging nearly 15% - the steepest one-day fall in its 31 years. It brought frightening echoes of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and tarnished the competency of the military in being able to maintain the country's economy. Thailand's 4.3% economic growth for 2007 is the lowest in the region, and the government's failure to spend heavily in the provinces has left the rural poor longing for Thaksin to return with his populist policies which had been possible in the period of economic boom.

When the military chiefs seized power, many Thais hoped they would bring order and security. However, eight bombs exploding across Bangkok on New Year's Eve, 2007, shattered any illusions that military rule guarantees security. The Muslim insurgency in the south shows no sign of declining, despite the junta's efforts to negotiate with the insurgent groups

and the release of a group of Muslim prisoners held for years without charge. The insurgency continued when explosives planted by suspected Muslim militants went off at three locations in a southern province near the Malaysian border wounding 27 people on the eve of this year New Year.

Although the military claims it is keeping its promise by relinquishing its direct control of government administration, in reality it still has immense power to control the government and repress dissidents. The military appointed National Legislative Assembly (NLA) will automatically assuming the role of a Senate or Upper House after the elected Lower House is established. With this arrangement, the government will likely find it difficult to implement any constitutional amendments, including any attempt to reverse any draft laws passed by the NLA. Moreover the Senate will also have the power, with a three-fifths majority, to impeach the prime minister and any elected members of the Lower House. The NLA also passed the controversial new Internal Security Act (ISA) just two days before the election. This gives the military extensive powers to contain domestic dissent and detain people suspected of being threats to national security for six months without trial.

Undoubtedly, the military in the last 15 months has attempted to reshape its bourgeois democracy to protect the interests of the capitalist class which had been threatened by mass street protests in Bangkok, the hub of investment and business activities. However, the world economic uncertainties and security issues did not favour the military junta and they were unable to find solutions under the capitalist system, even for a short term. The needs of the rural poor and the working class were further ignored and sidelined in that process.

Thaksin and the PPP

Thaksin, the billionaire tycoon, made a fortune in telecom deals that triggered controversy at the end of 2005. Later in exile in London, he bought Manchester City football club for £84 million as an imaginative strategy to reshape his image and win the support of the Thai masses who are ardent football fans. He has been living in luxury in London without any serious threat of punishment over his past corruption and wrong-doing since the military coup that ousted him. Furthermore, Thaksin through his proxy, Samak Sundaravej and his reincarnated party, the PPP, has maintained the support of the rural and urban poor through campaigning for his populist policies. Therefore, the election win by the PPP has left open the possibility of Thaksin's comeback and it is expected that this will be welcomed by the rural population. However, the urban population who had demanded Thaksin's resignation at a series of street demonstra-

tions could feel disconcerted with his return. Meanwhile the king's top advisor, Prem Tinsulanonda, as well as military generals who planned the coup to topple Thaksin, will attempt every possible way to block Thaksin from returning to Thai politics.

During the election, the PPP, without disguising its close link with Thaksin, openly campaigned on a platform of bringing Thaksin back from exile and continuing his populist policies. However, a favourable deal between a PPP coalition government, the military, and the king, to allow Thaksin's return may not be obtained. Then, if he returned the military could use the arrest warrants which were issued by the Supreme Court on corruption and graft charges to arrest him and put him on trial. The arrest and court charges against Thaksin would be welcomed by the urban population and anti-Thaksin groups, but, at the same time, could enrage the rural poor. Although Thaksin has said that he would not get involved in politics, with his influence and immense wealth, he could play a crucial role from behind the scenes in determining the direction and policies of the PPP and its coalition government, if they were able to form one.

The leader of the PPP, Samak Sundaravej, a 72 year old staunch royalist, who is expected to become prime minister under a PPP coalition government, is another controversial figure. He is an ultra-conservative who brands his opponents as 'communists' and 'street gangsters'. In 1976, he was an appointed interior minister when police and right-wing paramilitary mobs invaded Thammasat University, raping, lynching and burning alive scores of student, hunting down leftwing activists who were demonstrating for greater democratic rights. In 1992, when layers of Bangkok's middle class rose up to demand the resignation of the then coup leader, Suchinda Krapayoon, Samak, who was deputy prime minister, called the demonstrators 'troublemakers' and 'communists'; he said it was acceptable for the government to shoot them. In 2000, when he was Bangkok's governor, he was under investigation for alleged corruption in the procurement of fire-fighting vehicles. With his past infamous achievements in government, it could not be ruled out that if Samak became prime minister, he could be used by the ruling class to contain future protests and demonstrations in Bangkok in a heavy-handed manner with the support of the military.

The forthcoming Supreme Court cases could lead to the PPP being disbanded or its election achievements being nullified. The Election Commission, appointed by the junta, has suspended 65 of the winning PPP candidates on suspicion of cheating and vote-buying. Another threat will be the Supreme Court case accusing the PPP of being a vehicle for Thaksin, who was banned from politics for five years by the Constitutional Court. However, if the PPP ends

up disqualified or its number of MPs are severely depleted, the anti-Thaksin Democrats are likely to form a weak and unstable coalition. In that situation, a Democrat-led government would face the protests from the country's rural and urban poor, who threw their weight solidly behind the PPP.

It is also doubtful with the current economic performance, that either a PPP or Democrat coalition government would be able to allocate substantial public spending to maintain popular policies for rural and urban poor. The present economic circumstances are not as advantageous as the economic boom periods under Thaksin. Under the economic boom, Thaksin was the country's first prime minister to be able to complete a four year term. But his increasingly pro-capitalist policies burdened the lower layers of the urban population and which was the cause for his downfall. Moreover, Thailand's export-dependent economy is very vulnerable to the presently volatile global economy. So, in the next period, the country's economic state will again be a key factor in determining political stability in Thailand.

The current impasse in Thailand's politics could also return it to the 1990s situations which were well known for the short lifespan of its coalition governments. In those ten years, Thailand came under the rule of seven different prime ministers - some elected, some appointed. For four years in that decade, there was a parliamentary election every year.

The working class and a workers' party

Since 2006 and after the downfall of Thaksin, the distrust between the rural population - mostly farmers - and the working class and middle class in the urban areas, mainly in Bangkok, is widening. This is mainly caused by Thaksin's policies that divided the rural and urban population. His populist policies have been favourable to rural and urban poor but his neo-liberal programmes have very adversely affected the workers and some layers of the middle class in the urban areas.

In the present political climate, both the farmers and the workers are being led by elites with a certain political opportunism. In the absence of a mass party of workers and poor farmers as a credible alternative, they have turned to these elites to highlight their grievances. The elites and politicians in the PPP as well as the Democrats are openly supporting the capitalists as well as the rich landlords who are continuously exploiting the labour and rights of poor farmers and workers. In Thailand, with around 60 million population, less than 2% of the manufacturing and service based industries' workers are in the trade unions.

The workers, farmers as well as students of Thailand have many times courageously entered into struggle to overthrow repressive governments and military dictatorships since 1932 after the absolute monarchy was abolished. However, the movement and its leadership that fights for democratic rights and for the fundamental needs of poor farmers and workers subsequently handed over power to another regime which supports free market and capitalism. Although workers are a minority, with their collectively organised nature and huge economic power in capitalist Thailand, they should lead in the struggle to establish a government of workers and poor farmers. This would be the force which would fight for a genuine transformation of Thailand's society that has been suffering under capitalism and feudalism.

Here the struggles for the democratic rights have to be linked to the struggle for a socialist change to fulfil the needs of all. Programmes such as the nationalisation of major industries and large land-holdings under the control and management of workers and poor farmers are necessary. In order to establish this, an independent party of workers and poor farmers with a clear programme should be initiated as a tool to unite workers, poor farmers and students of Thailand in the struggle to achieve a socialist society.

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