



Quo Vadis Thailand? Thai Politics after the 2005 Parliamentary Election^[1]

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Introduction

The parliamentary election held in Thailand on February 6, 2005, was a critical juncture in that country's political evolution. The election marked the decisive entrenchment of the political hegemony of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the ruling Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party that emerged after he was elected Prime Minister in a landslide vote in January 2001. While TRT gained seventy-five percent of the seats in the House of Representatives, the main opposition force, the Democratic Party (DP), suffered a crushing defeat. Though it is evident that Thaksin and TRT won a convincing victory, it is not clear what will follow. Although TRT formed the first single party government in the history of Thailand's democracy in March 2005, it remains uncertain whether the reelected government can deal effectively with the country's urgent problems.

Moreover, the election also represents the consolidation of several less positive trends that deepened over the past four years, including the division between the South and the rest of the country, problems of electoral quality, and the steady erosion of the institutions of liberal democracy. This article examines the likely prospects for Thailand in the aftermath of the 2005 parliamentary election. It begins by reviewing the political background of the election. It then discusses several key elements of the election, including the campaign, its conduct, and the outcomes, which have important implications for Thai politics in the coming period. Next, it analyzes the causes for the triumph of Thaksin and his TRT and discusses several domestic political scenarios that might emerge in Thailand in the next four years. It concludes by examining the implications of the election for regional security and for U.S. interests in the coming years.

Background

Thailand's current democratic polity is the result of a long political struggle characterized by frequent alternation between authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes since the end of absolute monarchy in 1933. Throughout this period, the military and civil bureaucracy continually held political power until the late 1970's. However, long-term processes of economic and social change, together with the rise of private business and party politics starting in the 1970's,

weakened the power of the ruling generals and bureaucrats. In the early 1980's, this development led to the liberalization of the "bureaucratic polity."^[2] A "soft" authoritarian regime, which some Thai scholars described as "half democracy," emerged.^[3] A former senior military officer appointed Prime Minister, who was not accountable to the elected House of Representatives, led the government. Meanwhile, the popularly elected House of Representatives (Lower House) had to share its political powers with an appointed Senate (Upper House), whose members were nominated by the government and came primarily from the ranks of the state bureaucracy and the Royal Thai Armed Forces.

Political liberalization during the rule of Prime Minister General Prem (1981-1988) led to a short-lived democratic interregnum between 1988-1991. Disgruntled generals under the leadership of General Suchinda staged a coup against the elected government in Spring 1991, abruptly ending this democratic interlude. Then in May 1992, an interim government under career diplomat Anand was installed and free and fair elections for the House of Representatives occurred in September of the same year.^[4]

The "Angel" parties who had opposed the coup d'etat of 1991 won a narrow victory in the September election, and subsequently formed a coalition cabinet under the leadership of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai from the Democratic Party (DP). Even after transition to democracy in September 1992, the old bureaucratic elites were able to preserve significant political powers, particularly since the military defended its political and institutional autonomy as well as significant political prerogatives.^[5] Furthermore, in the period after 1992, Thai democracy became synonymous with cabinet instability, chronic political corruption, vote buying, and the fusion of provincial crime with party politics. In Thai political discourse, party politics was reproached with incompetence, corruption, and a dubious morality. The obvious shortcomings of the democratic process—i.e. frequent changes in coalition governments (between September 1992 and March 2000, the average cabinet durability was only about ten months),^[6] three parliamentary elections within four years, intense patronage politics, the infusion of dark influences associated with provincial business elites in party politics, and the poor showing of the governments of Prime Ministers Banharn Silpa-Archa (1995-96) and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (1996-97)—created a dubious political climate. Thai economist Pasuk Phongpaichat characterized this as follows: "In the view of [civil society], the parliamentary system had simply been co-opted into the bureaucratic state. The battle was still between the people and the state, the people and paternalist domination, the people and *rabop upatham*, the patronage system which now encompassed not only bureaucrats but elected representatives. ...With this declining faith in 'democracy' as the route to a better political future, and in parliamentary institutions as a mechanism of change, the idea of 'civil society' has been seized upon to play the [role] as the repository of hope."^[7]

A resulting political reform movement, based on a "tactical alliance between liberal, progressive and conservative forces to check the power of elected politicians." gained momentum.^[8] The struggle for political and constitutional reforms eventually led to the passage of the sixteenth constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand in October 1997, accompanied by a broad package of additional reforms including electoral and bureaucratic measures.^[9] Important constitutional and electoral reforms included the establishment of a powerful Election Commission, a popularly elected Senate, new Organic Laws on Political Parties and the Election of Members of the House of Representatives and Senators, an independent National Counter Corruption Commission, a constitutional Court, an Administrative Court, and a National Human Rights Commission.^[10]

As one western Thai scholar recently pointed out, "these new measures represented attempts to 'engineer' greater democracy in Thailand."^[11] However, the "architects of reform do not seem to have anticipated ... potential drawbacks of their scheme. ... Thailand's new constitution ... is haunted by the law of unintended consequences, as measures designed to promote political stability threaten to have the opposite effect instead."^[12] The most significant of these "unintended consequences" is the rise of a single political party and an all-powerful single political

leader to near-hegemonic power. That single party is the Thai Rak Thai party, founded in 1998 by billionaire and politician-turned-telecommunication tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, who became prime minister in February 2001. Thaksin joined party politics in the early 1990's, but the rise of TRT and Thaksin to political power essentially occurred after the Financial Crisis and the constitutional reforms in 1997. Within only a couple of years Thaksin, frequently billed as one of Thailand's "richest men,"^[13] strategically and systematically built up his party by luring away MPs from other parties and recruiting a base of eleven million party members (according to the party's own declaration), especially among the rural population, farmers and urban low income earners.^[14]

In the January 2001 parliamentary election, the Thai Rak Thai party and Thaksin Shinawatra ran one of the most expensive and most populist election campaigns in the history of Thailand.^[15] Thaksin promised one million Baht (U.S. \$23,000) for each of Thailand's more than 70,000 villages, announced to suspend repayments of farmer's debts for three years, and promised a health insurance system in which any treatment would be available for 30 Baht (less than U.S. \$1). Many voters, especially in the rural areas, turned to TRT out of frustration with the incumbent government of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai (Democratic Party), which came into office in November 1997 as an immediate consequence of the economic crisis sparked by the collapse of the Thai baht a few months earlier, believing that the recovery after the severe economic crisis of 1997-98 had excluded them. Old style 'money politics' certainly contributed to TRT's victory as well. Furthermore, Thai Rak Thai capitalized on the new electoral system. The disproportional effect of the dominant first-past-the-post component in single-member constituencies worked in favor of the TRT. The 32.1 percent of nationwide votes garnered by Thai Rak Thai party in the constituency-based election translated into 49.8 percent of seats in the House of Representatives, which holds almost all legislative powers and elects the Prime Minister.^[16]

Thai Rak Thai won 248 seats in parliament (more than any other party previously) and therefore needed only three more seats to form a government. Nonetheless, Thaksin opted for a broad coalition, assimilating both the Chart Thai Party (forty-one seats) and the New Aspiration Party (thirty-six seats) as well as absorbing the smaller Seritham Party (fourteen).^[17] Although TRT consists of more than a dozen different factions and has a large number of powerful old style politicians, Thaksin succeeded in assuming a dominant position in almost every aspect of party politics and government. His cabinet became the first democratically elected government in Thailand's history that survived a full legislative term. Contrary to the unstable multi-party coalition cabinets of the pre-Thaksin era, his government provided political continuity.

Thailand was still suffering from the effects of the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98 when Thaksin took office. After a shaky start in 2001, however, his government presided over an astonishing economic recovery. In addition to an impressive growth of GDP since 2002, Thailand's foreign debt has dropped by two-thirds, and exports have boomed. Inflation was kept under control and the unemployment rate, which had reached an all-time high in 1998-99, dropped by 50 percent. Furthermore, almost immediately after he took power, Thaksin began to implement most of his populist campaign pledges. Stimulating domestic demand in the short run through increased government expenditures became a core element of "Thaksinomics." which included several programs and schemes from which especially farmers, the urban poor and the rural population benefited. These included farm assistance and urban relief programs, the Village and Urban Revolving Fund, the establishment of the People's Bank and the Bank for Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises, the One Tambon Project, and the 30-Baht Health Scheme.^[18]

That economic success has earned Thaksin high popularity but also has accompanied less positive trends in political development throughout the past four years. Since the advent of the Thaksin government in 2001, many of the democratic characteristics of Thailand's polity have progressively eroded. Simultaneously, there has been a pronounced authoritarian shift in the character of Thai politics.

Table 1: Major Economic Indicators, Thailand 1997-2004 (%)[19]

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Growth of GDP	-1.4	-10.5	4.4	4.8	2.1	5.4	6.7	7.2
Growth of GDP p.c.	-2.3	-11.5	3.4	4.6	0.5	4.5	5.8	6.4
Growth of merchandise exports	3.8	-6.8	7.4	19.5	-7.1	4.8	18.6	14
Growth of merchandise imports	-13.4	-33.8	16.9	31.3	-3	4.6	17.1	17.8
Current account balance/GDP	-2.1	12.8	10.2	7.6	5.4	5.5	5.6	3.9
Inflation rate (CPI)	5.6	8.1	0.3	1.6	1.6	0.7	1.8	2.4
Money supply (M3) growth	2.0	9.5	2.1	3.7	4.2	2.6	4.9	1.9
Gross domestic investment/GDP	33.7	20.4	20.5	22.8	24.1	23.9	25.2	25.7
Gross domestic savings/GDP	33.6	36.1	32.8	31.0	30.0	30.5	28.7	29.6
Unemployment	1.5	4.4	4.2	3.6	3.3	2.4	2.2	n/a
Fiscal balance/GDP	-1.9	-2.5	-2.9	-2.4	-2.1	-2.2	0.6	-0.1
Debt service ratio	15.7	21.4	19.4	15.4	20.8	19.6	15	13.5

The powers of the government to constrain civil rights became unprecedented, as demonstrated in the three-months long "war on drugs" in 2003, during which legions of suspected drug dealers and users—most of them young men—were gunned down in the streets of their towns or villages. Government reports indicate 2,245 people were killed in all.[20]

Simultaneously, policy failures of the incumbent government and the PM's insensitivity in dealing with the country's Malay-Muslim minority in the South have significantly contributed to deepening ethno-religious violence in Thailand's three southernmost provinces since 2001.[21] Increased insurgent activity and intensity of attacks in the South throughout the past four years have resulted in an unprecedented level of violence. The implementation of two new anti-terrorism decrees in 2003 triggered additional worries that the government could justify human rights violations in the interest of its national counterterrorism strategy.[22]

The ruling TRT clearly aspired to dominate the political landscape by absorbing smaller parties and excluding opposition parties from political decision-making. In addition, by attempts to compromise the moral and constitutional strength of institutions like the Constitutional Court and the National Counter Corruption Commission, the government has increasingly diminished the checks and balances that the 1997 constitution had established in order to strengthen liberal democracy.[23] Civil-military relations, one of the persistent problems of past Thai politics, also reflects the general trend of faltering consolidation and worsening democratic standards. By co-opting large numbers of high ranking officers into the cabinet and utilizing annual military reshuffles for entrenching a strong network of personal friends and relatives in key positions within the army, Thaksin succeeded in placing all military decision-making powers in his own hands.[24]

In addition to bringing the military into line with his government's policies, Thaksin used military-run radio and television stations for party purposes. In recent years, the country's historically vocal print media has been notably restrained when it comes to allegations of conflicts of interest involving senior government figures. Companies associated with members of the cabinet have purchased major shares of independent newspapers and other media enterprises. Furthermore, the government threatens anyone who makes conflict-of-interest allegations against the PM with lawsuits or criminal charges. Together with the government's control of other public media and the Prime Minister's own media enterprises, this has allowed the government to monopolize the media.[25]

The 2005 Parliamentary Election

The previous election of the governor of Bangkok, held in August 2004, had surprisingly brought a narrow victory for Apirak Kosayodhin, who was running on the opposition Democrat Party's ticket, over Pavena Hongsakula, an independent candidate, who enjoyed support from the Thai Rak Thai party. The TRT's poor showing in the 2004 Bangkok election and opinion polls released in the later part of 2004 indicated that Thaksin and TRT suffered from declining popular support.^[26] For a while it seemed that the PM was losing ground to opponents who charged that his heavy-handed rule threatened Thailand's young democracy, he needlessly inflamed the Muslim insurgency in the South, his populist economic policies were risky and unsustainable, and he had adopted policies that enriched his friends and his own business empire. The tsunami that struck six coastal provinces in Thailand's South—Phangnga, Phuket, Krabi, Ranong, Satun and Trang—on December 26, 2004, however, presented Thaksin with an opportunity to regain popularity by showing his strong and disciplined leadership during the crisis. The following six weeks before election day, criticism of the government almost vanished from the national media while Thaksin emerged with even a stronger popularity from the crisis. Close observers of Thai politics anticipated the February 2005 election to be a clear referendum for Thaksin.

Electoral System

The 1997 constitution adopted a mixed system for election to the House of Representatives. Under the new system, of the 500 members of the House of Representatives, 400 are elected by first-past-the-post (FPTP) in single member constituencies and the remaining by proportional rule under the party-list system. Voters cast two votes. The first is a vote for an individual candidate for each of the 400 single member constituencies. Each of Thailand's seventy-six provinces, including the capital city Bangkok, is divided into smaller constituencies of approximately equal population that send one representative each to the House of Representatives. The number of constituencies per province varies between one and thirty-seven in Bangkok, which is by far the largest.

The second vote is for the party-list. Each political party submits a list of candidates, comprising not more than one hundred persons, to the Election Commission (EC). Any party receiving less than five percent of the total votes for the party-list will not have its candidates elected and its votes will be eliminated. The remaining votes are divided by one hundred to determine the number of votes needed for each candidate. The number of party-list representatives that each party may send to Parliament is calculated by dividing the votes each party obtained by the number of votes needed for one party-list candidate (d'Hondt formula). Cabinet ministers can only be appointed from the ranks of party-list MPs or they have to resign their constituency seats and pay for the re-run of the election of their vacated seat.

Voting is compulsory under the new constitution. Failure to vote without notifying the authorities of the appropriate cause may lead to revocation of certain political rights. Candidates must be members of the political party which nominates them for at least ninety days before the election and must not hold multiple party memberships. Since 1997, candidates in an election are required to possess at least a bachelor's degree or equivalent. This and other qualifications exclude more than ninety-five percent of the Thai electorate from the right to run for office.^[27]

To enforce these new rules, the 1997 Constitution created the independent Election Commission of Thailand, who is in charge of running and supervising the general election. The powers and duties of the newly established Election Commission include organizing elections of the members of the House of Representatives and Senators, investigating poll fraud, disqualifying and punishing candidates in cases of "convincing evidence" of irregularities, and ordering re-election when there exists credible evidence that the election was not just and fair. However, the EC must endorse winners within thirty days of the original polling day. Experience of the January 2001

election has shown that this deadline makes it difficult for the EC to thoroughly investigate all reports of fraud.[28]

Parties, Candidates and Campaigns

Traditionally, Thai politics was characterized by a deeply fragmented, volatile, ideologically weak and highly personalized party system with only very weak social linkages (Hicken, forthcoming). However, supported by the new electoral system and the 2001 election, significant party realignment has occurred in the past couple of years.[29] The trend is from a highly fragmented albeit low ideologically polarized party system with shallow programmatic profiles of, and thus only rudimentary policy differences between, individual political parties towards deepening polarization between two large political parties with different political platforms and clearly distinguished groups of voters. While the 2001 election intensified this development, the 2005 election has consolidated it.

On the one side of the political spectrum is the Democratic Party, the oldest party in Thailand, founded in 1946. Although the Democrats suffered from old style politics and political corruption, in the past the party was often viewed as a force of democratic and economic reforms. Under the leadership of Chuan Leekpai, the DP transformed from a largely provincially-based party that was dominated by southern politicians in the early 1990's to a party that had a base of support particularly among business and white-collar middle class people in Bangkok, although the South remained the party's main stronghold.[30] Opposite the Democrats stands the TRT, founded by Thaksin Shinawatra in late 1998 to counter the DP's urban bias. The party seeks support from businesspersons and rural farmers who felt they had been neglected during the 1997 economic crisis. As already mentioned, the party platform is often described as populist because of the political style of its founder-leader and its concrete social and economic policy programs.[31] Regionally, its strongholds are the Northeast, Thailand's least developed region, Central and the North, Thaksin's native region.

Although twenty parties nominated candidates with the Election Commission for the February 2005 election, only two other parties besides TRT and Democrats had a realistic chance to win a significant number of parliament seats. These were the Chart Thai party of former Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-Archa and the newly revamped Mahachon (People's) Party. The Mahachon Party emerged from the smaller Rassadorn Party on July 19, 2004. After changing its name the party was taken over by former DP secretary-general Sanan Kachornprasart and subsequently became a reservoir for disgruntled members of the Democratic Party.[32] As a result of the electoral reform of 1997 and the subsequent concentration of party politics in Thailand, the total number of candidates registered with the EC diminished from 2,782 constituency candidates and 940 party-list candidates in 2001 to 1,267 and 582 respectively in 2005. Furthermore, most parties registered only a handful of candidates.

Compared with the previous election, the share of female party-list candidates more than doubled, although it still was quite low. There were some significant changes in the occupational backgrounds of party-list candidates in the 2005 general election. In contrast to 2001, the percentage of businessmen and civil servants sharply declined, while the number employees and professional politicians increased.

Although the data is only available for party-list candidates, this supports some analysts' observation that the relevance of individual provincial businessmen-turned politicians and former civil servants in party politics is diminishing. This perhaps is an intended consequence of the electoral reform in 1997, which explicitly aimed to weaken the influence of local power brokers on national politics and to strengthen political parties.

Table 2: Number of Candidates by Region and Party in 2005[33]

	NORTH	CENTRAL	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	BANGKOK	PARTY LIST
CHART THAI	25	47	71	25	35	100
SOCIAL ACTION	-	-	-	-	-	5
PATTANA CHART THAI	-	-	-	-	-	5
DEMOCRAT	76	89	109	54	37	100
THAI PEOPLE	-	-	-	-	-	47
KHONKHOPOLDNEE	2	-	-	-	-	28
THAI NATURE	-	-	-	-	-	5
THAI GROUND	-	-	-	-	-	5
THAI RAK THAI	76	97	136	54	37	100
NEW ASPIRATION	5	-	-	-	-	20
MAHACHON	56	57	110	27	36	100
THAI CITIZEN	-	-	-	-	-	10
THAI CUAHY THAI	-	-	-	-	-	9
LABOUR	-	-	-	-	-	7
NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC	-	-	-	-	-	7
KASIKORN THAI	-	-	-	-	-	5
THAI ALTERNATIVE	-	-	-	-	1	5
THE GREEN PARTY OF THAILAND	-	-	-	-	-	8
THE FARMER FORCE	-	-	-	-	-	11
PEOPLE POWER	-	-	-	-	-	5
ENTIRE KINGDOM	240	290	426	160	145	582

Simultaneously, it is also an unintended consequence of the rise to power of businessman-politician Thaksin, which has seriously weakened the fragmented power structure of Thai politics that allowed provincial business to reinforce their economic power with political influence.

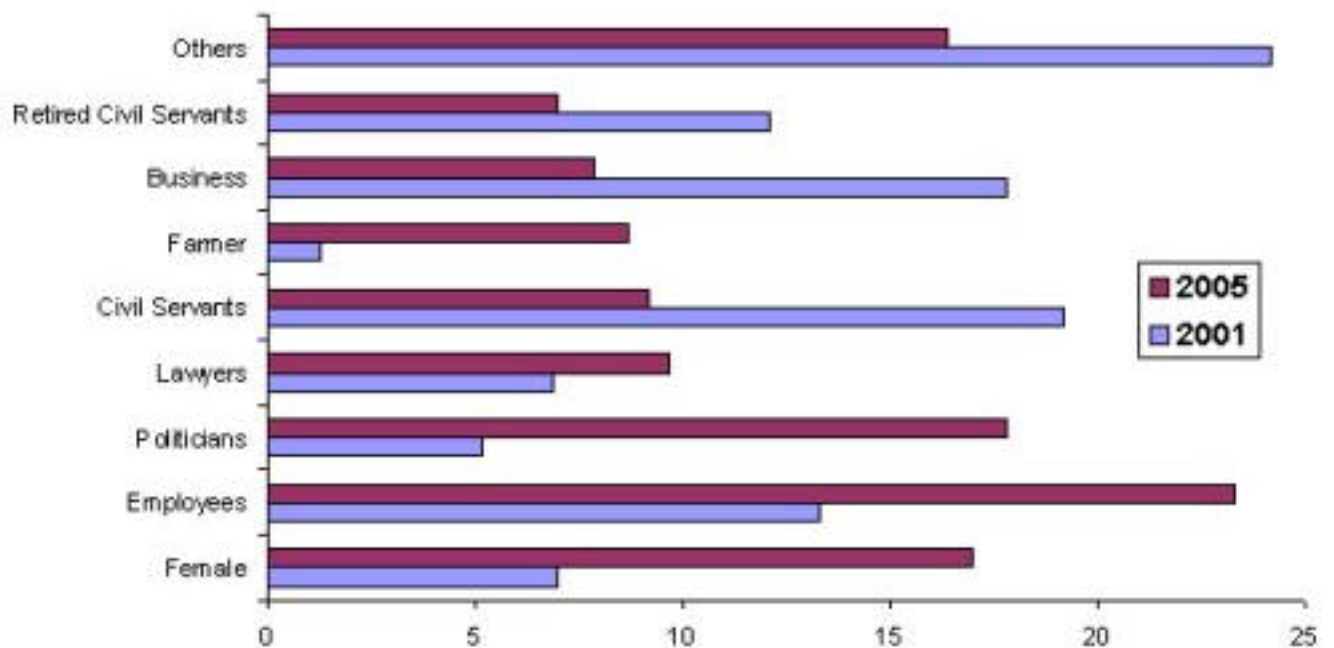
Thai Rak Thai's campaign issues were essentially a renewed version of its populist 2001 platform plus a repackage of several existing government policies and projects to particularly attract Bangkok voters. Under the slogan of "Four Years of Repair—Four years of Reconstruction" (later changed into "Building Opportunities"), ten issues dominated the party campaign:[35]

- Poverty eradication;
- Reform of the education system;
- Financial assistance for small farmers;
- Extension of the 30-Baht health scheme introduced in 2001;
- New public housing projects for low-income earners;
- Support for infrastructure projects in Bangkok as part of TRT's "Healthy Bangkok" campaign in order to improve traffic and environmental problems;
- Improved public care for elderly and children;
- Reform of public administration;

- Fighting corruption; and
- Pacifying the unrest in the South.

Even though the opposition criticized the TRT program and policies as "populist," both Democrats and Chart Thai developed their own populist agenda, promising more jobs, free education and health care, and combating crime and corruption. Furthermore, during the campaign, representatives from all main opposition parties refused to give details of their policies. They thus provided little evidence that they were more willing to pursue concrete alternative policies to the "populist" programs of TRT. The Democrats and Mahachon also attacked the TRT's record on human rights and violence in the South.

Figure 1: Gender and Occupational Backgrounds of Party List Candidates in 2001 and 2005[34]



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Election Results

Despite some calls after the tsunami disaster to reschedule the election, it was held on the scheduled day. Voter turnout reached a record high 75.1 percent. The number of invalid votes that had reached a record high of ten percent in 2001 declined to four percent. Thaksin and TRT

won a landslide victory and received almost two-thirds of the party-list votes. Both the Democrats and Mahachon suffered a crushing defeat. The DP gained less than one-quarter of the votes. The Mahachon Party received only 4.36 percent of the party-list votes and failed to meet the five percent threshold needed to send candidates on the party-list ticket to parliament. Finally, the Chart Thai took 6.63 percent of the votes.[36] Due to its strength at the district level, TRT won more than 75 percent of the total seats in the House of Representatives, the largest number a party has ever won in Thai elections. As a final feat, TRT succeeded in winning Bangkok, a former Democrat stronghold.

Table 3: Results of the February 2005 Election[37]

REGION	REGISTERED VOTERS	VOTER TURNOUT (%)	INVALID VOTES (%)	MPs	MP's			
					TRT	DP	CHART THAI	MAHACHON
NORTH	8,435,050	76.4	4.6	76	71	5	0	0
NORTHEAST	15,357,447	72.0	4.3	136	126	2	6	2
CENTRAL	11,070,436	79.1	3.5	97	79	8	10	0
SOUTH	5,838,497	77.0	3.9	54	1	52	1	0
BANGKOK	4,145,042	71.2	2.9	37	32	4	1	0
ENTIRE- KINGDOM	44,846,472	75.1	4.0	400	309	71	18	2
PARTY-LIST	44,846,472	69.5	4.0	100	67	25	8	0

The election result supports the recent trend in Thai party politics from extreme pluralism to single party dominance. The effective number of parties in the House of Representatives decreased from three in 2001 to 1.6 in 2005. That is just one third of the average number (4.95) since transition to democracy in September 1992.[38]

Table 4: Winner and Losers of the 2005 Election[39]

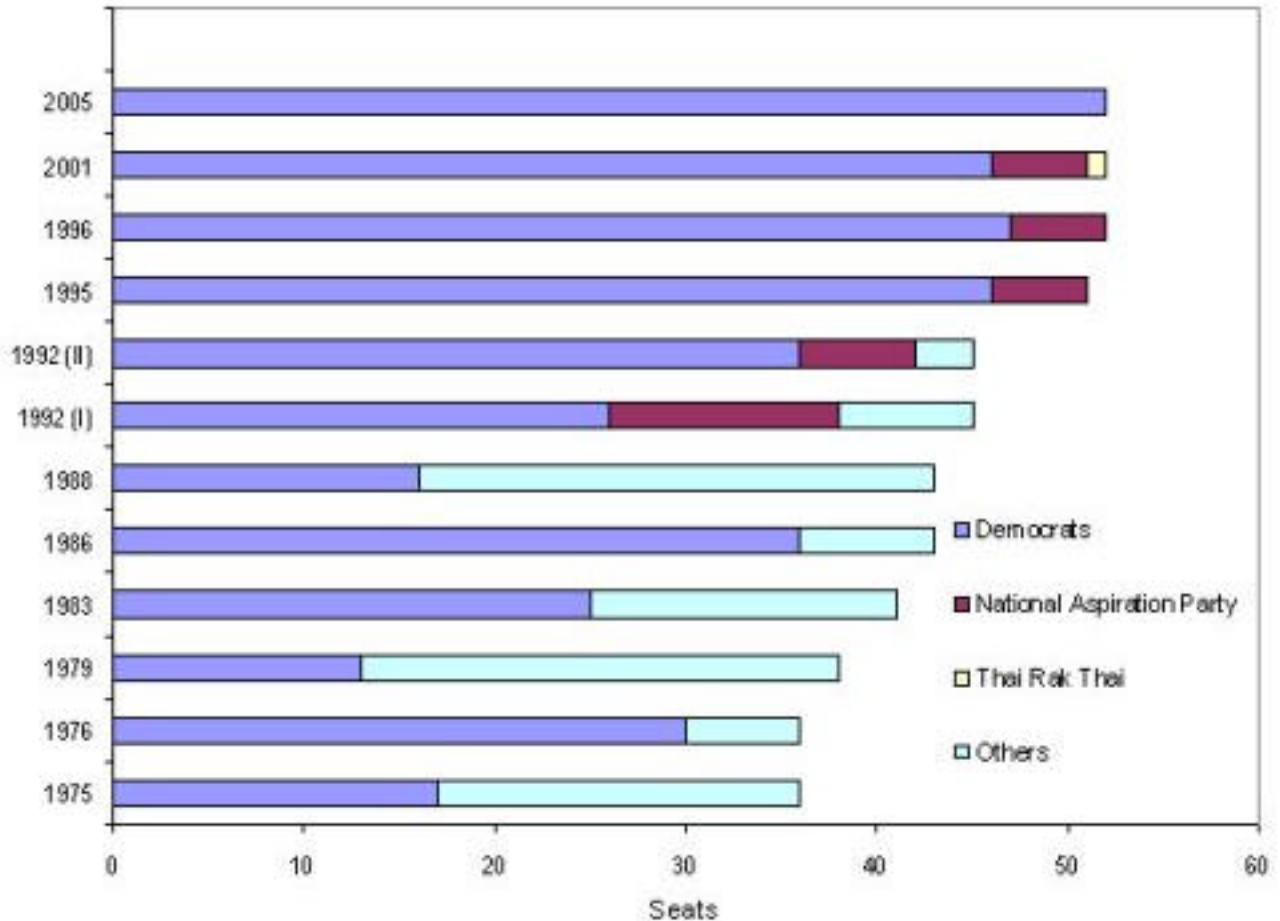
	% OF PARTY-LIST VOTES		% OF SEATS IN PARLIAMENT	
	2001	2005	2001	2005
THAI RAK THAI	38.87	61.13	49.6	75.2
DEMOCRATS	25.43	23.26	24.6	19.2
CHART THAI	5.10	6.63	8.2	5.2
NEW ASPIRATION PARTY	6.71	*	7.4	*
CHART PATTANA	5.87	*	5.8	*
MAHACHON	+	4.36	+	0.2
OTHERS	6.28	4.62	4.4	0.0
EFFECTIVE NUMBER OF PARTIES	4.4	2.28	3.0	1.6

* Party merged into Thai Rak Thai; + Party did not run in the 2001 election.

The vote followed clear geographic patterns. Thai Rak Thai was strongly supported everywhere but in the South, which the DP successfully regained. In the February election, TRT lost all seats it had controlled after the "Wada faction" of Deputy Prime Minister Wan Huamad Noor Matha

from the New Aspiration Party had merged with TRT in 2001 and four Democrat MPs from the South defected to TRT in August 2004.[\[40\]](#)

Figure 2: Elections in the South, 1975-2005[\[41\]](#)



The sharp drop in support for TRT and related party factions in the Muslim-dominated southern provinces does not necessarily mean that a number of Malay voters in Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala switched their support to the Democrats. A large number of these voters probably consist of people who became disillusioned with the "Wada faction" and DP-renegades within the TRT and decided to cast a protest vote against the Thaksin government. However, the fact remains that the Democratic Party, despite losing the election, was able to strengthen its already powerful position in the South, which in turn deepens Thailand's political divide between the South and the rest.

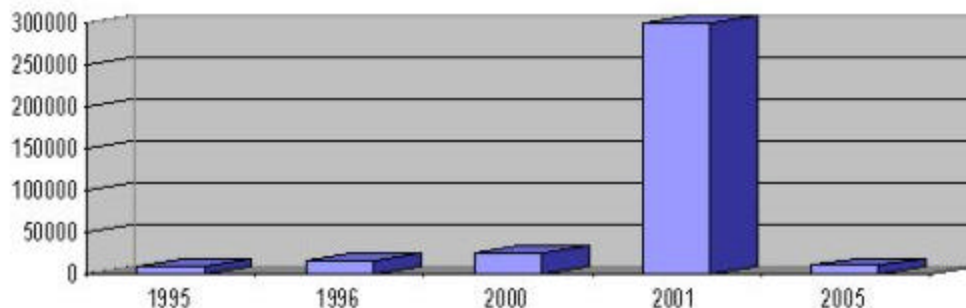
Despite efforts to clean up the system, vote buying and electoral violence remained problems of electoral quality in 2005. Anecdotal information from official announcements, press reports, and surveys conducted shortly before the election indicate that the established mechanisms of bullet-and-baths politics worked again. The concrete extent, however, to which guns and gold played a role in the 2005 campaign, remains unclear. In 2001, forty-three politicians, canvassers and bureaucrats were shot dead nationwide in election-related acts of violence, particularly in the North and Northeast.[\[42\]](#) Furthermore, the Election Commission has called new polls in sixty-two

constituencies after "red cards" were handed to candidates in eight of those districts and "yellow cards" in the other fifty-four. Those with red cards were barred from contesting by-elections while candidates given yellow cards could still run in the following vote.

Yet, after the 2001 election, "the EC's autonomy and neutrality became increasingly dubious, and it began tilting toward the party in power."[\[43\]](#) The packing of the Commission with commissioners associated with TRT and sympathetic to Thaksin since 2001 is interpreted by some analysts as a major reason for the EC's failure in 2005 to investigate allegations of illegal use of government power to favor the ruling Thai Rak Thai party. Furthermore, the Commission disqualified only two candidates for electoral irregularities—both Democrats.[\[44\]](#)

The PollWatch Foundation, Thailand's most prominent election watchdog, declared that vote buying in this election, specifically in the North and the Northeast, was more serious than in the 2001 election. The organization also accused the government of violating the election law by abusing state power in presenting new projects in a bid to seek votes. Reports from additional groups pointed to several more subtle vote-buying methods which gained popularity in the 2005 election such as pyramid schemes to buy canvassers, buying the votes of employees at small companies and buying the votes of entire families.[\[45\]](#) Other reports, however, provide support to the argument that less cash than in previous elections changed hands and electoral violence was below the levels reached in earlier years. A survey conducted among 13,836 community leaders in all 400 constituencies throughout the country between January 24 and February 2, 2005, discovered widespread vote buying, totaling almost 10 billion Baht (approximately US \$250 million), which would constitute a large decrease in the amount of money spent for vote-buying compared with previous elections.[\[46\]](#)

Figure 3: Estimated Amount of Money Spent in Vote Buying, 1995-2005, Billion Baht[\[47\]](#)



Some Thai political scientists support the view that there was a decrease of vote-buying, quoting several factors which contributed to this development: first, the sharper policy-profile of the political parties in the 2005 election; second, the fact that most contests in constituencies across the country were heavily lopsided and TRT candidates were so far out in front that vote buying would have made little difference; third, that populist policies and pledges of government expenditures replaced vote buying as the preferred method of securing votes.[\[48\]](#)

According to statements from the National Police Office, official police records note that acts of election-related violence such as shootings, killings and attempted murder were reduced by more than half when compared with 2001. The number of pre-election killings of canvassers nationwide reported by the police to the Thai press two days before the election day, however, exceeded the final numbers, which casts doubts about the reliability of the official numbers. Furthermore, our breakdown of incidents of election violence reported in two Thai newspapers (*Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*) throughout the period December 1, 2004 to February 6, 2004 indicates fifteen

incidents of election-related violence in which ten people were killed and another eight were wounded which substantiates these doubts.[49]

Causes and Implications for Thailand's Future

On March 9, 2005, during the second sitting of the new House, Thaksin was re-elected as Thailand's 23rd prime minister with the majority vote of 377:1 and 116 abstentions. While all Democrats and all but one MP from the Chart Thai party abstained, the two MPs from Mahachon voted for Thaksin.[50] For the first time in Thailand's democracy, a single-party government was formed. In order to immunize the cabinet against corrosion from intra-party feuds and factionalism, the Prime Minister arranged portfolios in such a way that every major intra-party faction felt it had a fair share of rewards, while at the same time the PM's own faction was strengthened. Subsequently, the new cabinet includes thirty-five ministers from fifteen TRT factions.[51]

The outcome of the 2005 general election certainly reflects the political preferences of the vast majority of Thailand's voters. Although the electoral playing field was tilted in favor of the ruling party, almost all domestic and foreign monitors agree that the election was sufficiently free and fair in order to label the February poll 'democratic'. In spite of initial wariness about disruptive actions from Muslim insurgents, the election proceeded without major incidents, particularly in the South. Support from 10,000 of the almost 20,000 soldiers on duty at that time in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat probably helped local election committees to hold ballots.[52] Nevertheless, the fear of attacks certainly prompted prospective MP candidates in the southernmost provinces to avoid public events and created a lackluster campaign in that part of the country.

With the lack of reliable exit-polls surveying the reasons why voters made their concrete choice, there is no certain evidence of the causes for the overwhelming victory of TRT and Thaksin in the 2005 general election. It is plausible to assess that the election result was the outcome of multiple causes. The TRT utilized the high popularity of the party's founder-leader and successfully orchestrated a campaign that heavily drew on new campaign techniques, populism, the party's financial and administrative resources, and its dominance of the country's media. Simultaneously, many smaller but well established opposition parties had joined the ruling party after the January 2001 election and strengthened the political networks and electoral machines at the constituency level. The Democratic Party had still not recovered from its paralysis after the shock of losing the 2001 election; furthermore, the split between Mahachon and the Democratic Party further weakened the main opposition party. In contrast to numerous liberal critics, NGOs and human rights groups inside and outside Thailand, controversial policies, such as Thaksin's heavy-handed law and order policy, and the crackdown on drugs in 2003, have had overwhelming popular approval. Another factor that supported the incumbent government in the February election was the "tsunami-effect." This helped the government overcome the erosion of TRT's support among voters, particularly in Bangkok, resulting from rising concerns about the situation in the country's deep South in late 2004. Thai Rak Thai's victory also supports the argument that Thaksin succeeded in attempting to establish a new social contract for Thailand, in which the government promises to deliver economic and social "benefits to citizens in exchange for political support." [53] While some critics of the incumbent government call this "bribery," "vote buying," or "corrupting the Thai people," it seems that a large majority of Thai voters view this rather as a new form of government that is characterized by an hitherto unknown responsiveness to their own material needs.

The overwhelming victory of Thai Rak Thai in the February election has already created a new political landscape. Immediately after the poll, the Mahachon party began to show signs of rapid disintegration and it is highly possible that party leader Maj Gen Sanan Kachornprasart will soon dissolve the party.[54] Within the Democratic Party, post-election blues has rekindled intra-party power struggles. Party leader Banyat Bantadtan resigned along with the party's secretary general and seventeen other party leaders on February 7 and the party will probably be occupied with inter-factional conflicts for some more time. Chart Thai party leader Banharn Silpa-Archa declared

his intentions to cooperate with the new government on an issue-by-issue base. Given these developments, it is highly unlikely that the Thaksin government will face determined and strong resistance from the opposition banks in parliament in the near future.

Thai Rak Thai's victory also signals the transformation of Thailand's party system from extreme pluralism to what Giovanni Sartori called a "predominant party system" in which a couple of political parties compete for votes in free and fair elections, but one party continuously succeeds in being the decisive actor in forming the government. Other parties may participate in coalitions (as in 2001), but they have no political leverage against the predominant party. Political power rests with one party only in spite of free elections. Alternation in government does not occur.^[55] The positive implication of Thai Rak Thai's legislative superiority and Thaksin's consolidated position as hegemonic political leader for Thailand's future economic and political development is four more years of stable government. However, this is not necessarily good news for Thai democracy.

There is some chance that a major challenge will emerge to Thaksin and TRT. This is possible for three reasons. First, it remains to be seen if the strongly factionalized TRT will be able to establish a more cohesive and effective government than the oversized coalition cabinets that dominated Thai politics in the 1990s. Competition between many small coalition parties over access to public funds and state resources was one reason for corruption, policy blockades and inefficient economic policies that led to the past financial crisis and rendered the quick implementation of viable remedies to the crisis difficult.^[56] However, the demise of extreme pluralism and the rise of one-party dominance in party politics may only be accompanied by a simultaneous shift from multiple "veto players" to a more flexible constellation of "veto players" in legislative politics, if competition between various coalition parties is not simply transformed into intra-party and inter-factional levels.

Second, uncertainties of Thaksinomics cast doubts about the sustainability of Thailand's current growth model. Given the rise of private household debts, and often mixed results of concrete development projects such as the Village Fund, which has provided the rural poor with money to not only generate income (for example, investments in rice paddies) but also to waste on mobile phones and to pay of other debts,^[57] efforts to stimulate domestic growth by encouraging private consumption may soon backfire. Moreover, the collusion between business and politics within government and Thai Rak Thai may strengthen negative side-effects (corruption, waste of public resources, etc.), which could threaten the effective implementation of policies. Together, these threats may cause a sudden economic downturn which could erode the political support of Thai voters for Thaksin.

Third, even if Thaksinomics is sustainable in the longer term, stability of government and legislative majority has been achieved at the expense of inclusiveness of the political system, transparency, and accountability of the political process. The February election has undoubtedly deepened Thailand's political cleavage between the South and the rest of the country. Given the overwhelming support TRT and Thaksin gained from the majority of Thais, electoral incentives for a change in the government's heavy-handed counterinsurgency policy in the south towards non-military and long-term oriented measures that could offer viable solutions for the root causes of the recent trouble are weak. Indeed, immediately after the election, the reelected Prime Minister gave a number of highly controversial comments and suggestions for dealing with the problem such as an ill-advised "zoning proposal," thus supporting this evaluation.

Furthermore, as analysts point out, with TRT in firm control of the parliament, "there is little that other parties can do to counterbalance TRT, even if all other parties unite in opposition. It takes votes from 200 MPs to launch a motion to censure a prime minister and 125 votes to consider impeachment against a government official. One hundred votes are required to launch a censure motion against a minister who is not the PM."^[58] Considering the Prime Minister's ambiguous record and policies of the past four years, the paradox of Thailand's 2005 general election is that

a large majority of Thailand's demos has decided to exercise its democratic rights to bring about a political outcome that opens a wide window of opportunity for the temptations of self-destruction of democracy by the "tyranny of the majority" (Tocqueville) or the despotic rule of democratically legitimated rulers. The opposition's inability to use parliamentary measures to control the government and the overwhelming legislative power of the ruling party offer favorable opportunity structures for the rise of a "defective democracy"^[59] in which the government circumvents challenging and controlling powers, and encroaches, curtails or evades many of the democratic and rule of law controls established in the 1997 constitution without formally breaking the constitution. In view of the Prime Minister's tendency over the past four years to exclude other political and social actors from political decision-making and taking advantage of the full range of his constitutional and legal powers, there is a genuine danger that the government may use its democratic legitimacy and the full-weight of its legislative power to fortify its own political power. This may even occur at the expense of the liberal democratic substance of Thailand's polity.

Implications for Regional Security and U.S. Interests

Given the overwhelming election victory of Thaksin and his party, and the stability which the ensuing single-party government promises, it would at first seem that the election result bodes well for the future of both regional security and U.S. interests. Stability in government could help the ruling regime take a more leading role in Southeast Asia's security dynamic. Furthermore, a stronger leader like Thaksin who is willing to support the United States in its war against terrorism is certainly of benefit to the United States. Nonetheless, when examined on a deeper level, the Thaksin regime could prove disastrous for regional security and the interests of the United States. The reasons for this center on what is proving to be Thaksin's Achilles heel- the insurgency in southern Thailand. As the insurgency has grown in recent years and months, there have been examples of the violence spreading beyond the three southernmost provinces. The early April 2005 simultaneous bombings of the airport, a hotel, and a grocery store in Hat Yai are a recent example of this spread. Many signs suggest that the insurgent violence will further spread outside the immediate southernmost region. Should this happen, the chance of internal political destabilization would increase. In the worst case scenario, such instability could spill over elsewhere in Southeast Asia, leading to serious ramifications for regional security.

The Thaksin government has already in no uncertain terms made it clear to ASEAN that Thailand's southern problem is Thailand's alone and that no other nation need concern itself about this crisis. Yet given the Malay-Muslim aspect of the insurgency, the support of other nations, particularly Malaysia, may be necessary for conflict resolution. Furthermore, the Thai security forces' lack of organization, understanding, and clearly defined goals in addressing this insurgency creates an environment in which external aid may be required. However, bilateral relations between Thailand and Malaysia have never been as poor as they are currently.

The expanding insurgency is also paralleled by a growing conflict in the government's security staff. The course of developments in the south has already made many ranking Thai military officials feel uneasy about the government policies, including promotion and key placement in the armed forces of those with family or TRT ties ahead of those whose turn at promotion was rightly due. Should the chasm between Thaksin and the veteran military officials continue to widen, this could have negative consequences for political stability as well as regional security.

At this point, there is scant if any substantial evidence of concrete links between Thailand's southern insurgents and transnational terrorist groups like Jemaah Islamiyah and Al Qaeda. However, the longer the crisis persists and the further the violence spreads, the conditions for transnational terrorist involvement become all the more fertile. Should transnational terrorism indeed become a component of the current insurgency, the crisis becomes a critical problem for both regional security and the interests of the United States.

The primary foreign policy concern for the United States is currently the war on terrorism. Thus it is in the best interests of the United States that the southern Thailand insurgency soon be resolved. Unfortunately, the experiences so far with four years of Thaksin government make it hard to believe that after four more years the situation in the deep south will have improved. The United States must proceed cautiously. Politically, should the United States strongly support a TRT regime that continues to abandon democratic standards for authoritarianism, it could in effect be supporting a complete breakdown in Thailand's already fragile democracy. Should the United States become more directly involved in helping resolve the southern insurgency, the effect could be not only the worsening of the crisis, but an overall backlash from the Muslims in Southeast Asia. Thaksin's Achilles heel would then become the same for the United States.

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