

Mahachon and the tiger

Why did the Mahachon Party do so badly? It won its first seat with a political gypsy who was recording his sixth election victory under his fifth party label. Then it scraped a second in a re-poll with one of the lowest margins of victory of any constituency. Across the country, only three other Mahachon candidates came within 20,000 votes of the victor. On the party list, Mahachon polled 4.3 percent, almost 200,000 votes short of the 5 percent needed to give any seats.

Lots of reasons can be offered for this dismal defeat, but several excuses have to be avoided. This was not solely about money. Mahachon seemed to have an adequate budget to spend on advertisements and other campaign materials.

It was not about policies because Mahachon had some good ideas. If electors had been given each party's policy platform and asked to choose blind on that basis alone, Mahachon might well have won. Its policies were developed carefully and with market research (just like TRT) when the party's core was still the policy team inside the Democrat Party.

It was not about the electoral dominance of the provinces over the capital. In Bangkok, Mahachon bombed. Only one of its candidates crept over 10 percent. Four more hovered around five. But most scored between zero and two percent. Even here, Mahachon as a branding seemed to give no help at all.

It wasn't even about individuals. In Khon Kaen constituency 3, Naronglert Surapol won with twenty thousand votes in 2001 as a Social Action Party candidate. This time with Mahachon, he got only one tenth of that number.

Even considering the overwhelming performance of Thai Rak Thai, voters seem to have found something positively negative about Mahachon.

Of course this is harsh. Some people joined the party with the best intentions. Many of them worked their hearts out in the last few months. Some have lost a lot of their own money, and have the embarrassment of spending even more of other people's. Several have screwed up careers and now face uncertain futures. But as the party intends to soldier on, it is worth asking why its performance was so disappointing.

Mahachon was built around two things. First was the politics of which Sanan Kachornprasart was the most prominent surviving representative. This was a style of politics which go back to the coup era of the 1970s and 1980s, and the years when the military was a ruling caste. The political players may be many years removed from the military, but they still carry a certain aura. They are surrounded by aides and flunkies. They are borne up by totally mysterious sources of income. They hang around the Turf Club. These are politics supposedly conducted on behalf of nation and people (and Sanan was certainly good-hearted) but somehow never involve the people. These are politics of the dealer, the fixer, the manipulator.

Mahachon walked straight out of the cradle and into the past. The party's first photo opportunity gave us Sanan with the Samut Prakan clique which has been found serially guilty of electoral fraud, and is widely suspected of various economic crimes and misdemeanours. As a taxi driver cackled at Chang Noi a few weeks before the election: "Mahachon (big mass)? More like Maha-jon (big thieves)".

The second founding pillar of Mahachon was the idea that the opinions of academics, intellectuals, and journalists soon become the will of the great Bangkok middle class, and then drive political change. This idea was expressed quite explicitly a few months ago to explain Mahachon's potential. It's an idea based on one interpretation of the history of Thailand's democratisation. Students were the vanguard against dictatorship in the 1970s. Black May 1992 was a "middle class rebellion" which finally ended military rule. The disgust of the Bangkok middle class, marshalled by the press and expressed in no confidence debates, was able to bring down unacceptable governments in the mid 1990s.

In their last message two days before the election, the Mahachon leaders told the voters that their priority would be to abolish the village fund. Now, the village fund may be a very bad thing, a cheap populist trick which buries people in debt. But opinion poll after opinion poll has shown it is one of the government's most popular policies. People like having another facility for rotating their debts. Campaigning for the fund's abolition is like telling people they are stupid to like it. It's the approach of a teacher, not a politician. In the constituency where Mahachon made this appeal, TRT outgunned Mahachon by almost four-to-one.

Both these ideas are based on confidence in the special power of an elite – either an elite with that special aura of military rank, or an elite of intellect and publicity.

TRT's stunning victory signals that Thailand's political game has changed. It's time to realise that Thaksin's success is not about the aftermath of the crisis, his huge funds, his readiness to use public money and facilities to party advantage, or his near-monopoly of media space – however important these things might be in themselves. Underneath, there is something bigger.

It's not that Thaksin and TRT have changed Thai politics. Something has changed Thaksin and TRT. When the party was formed, its main promise was to make Thailand more modern. Thaksin did not talk about "the people" at all. It has taken six years to arrive at the slew of social policies in TRT's 2005 programme, and its emotional claim that the people are the party's "heart". Thaksin and TRT have become populist through market research. They have found a sleeping tiger and stirred it awake.

Some may not like what Thaksin is doing with this tiger. But there are two important things to learn. You can't make a deal with a tiger in a smoky backroom, and there's no point giving a tiger a lecture.