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Thaksin's 2005 Electoral Triumph: Looking Back From the Election in 2007

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After Thaksin Shinawatra had led his Thai Rak Thai (Thai Loves Thai, TRT) party to an overwhelming election victory in February 2005, by December 2007, he should have passed the half-way mark of a comfortable second term as Thailand's incontestably elected prime minister, implementing his campaign slogan of "*si pi som si pi sang*" (four years of repairs, four years of building up). Instead, Thaksin was overthrown by a military coup in September 2006, his political party dissolved by a military-appointed "Constitutional Tribunal" in May 2007, and he and 110 former members of TRT's executive board were banned from occupying certain political offices for five years. They also retroactively lost their active and passive electoral rights for the same period, based on a revision of the Political Party Act imposed by the military-generated Constitution Drafting Assembly and National Legislative Assembly, and election campaign rights based on an informal decision by the military-confirmed Election Commission of Thailand (ECT). Since the coup, Thaksin has been living in exile. And he has been threatened by numerous lawsuits initiated by the military-appointed Asset Examination Committee, which also froze most of the family's money kept in Thai-based bank accounts. These suits could land the previously high-flying Thaksin and his wife in prison for many years.

The dissolution of TRT necessitated a regrouping of its members. As a result, new political parties emerged, such as Matchimathipattai¹ Phuea Phaendin,² and Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana.³ However, the biggest group of

1. At its core was a former faction of TRT led by Somsak Thepsuthin. Since he was among the disqualified TRT board members, his wife took over as secretary general, while Prachai Leopairatana, a controversial businessman and political newcomer, assumed the position of party leader.

2. Former TRT minister Suwit Khunkitti was made party leader, with controversial old-style politician Vatana Asavaheme as the party's "president". Important informal roles were assumed by former prominent TRT politicians, such as Surakiat Sathirathai, Thaksin's foreign minister and candidate for the position of UN secretary-general, Suchart Tancharoen, formerly a deputy speaker of the House of Representatives, and Phinit Jarusombat, a former cabinet member. All three were among the "disqualified" former members of the TRT executive board.

3. Chettha Thanacharo, a former army C-in-C and TRT MP, was appointed leader of this outfit. Important driving forces, however, were Thaksin's former election strategist and finance minister, Somkid Jatusripitak (also among the "disqualified" former TRT board members), the Democrat party's former secretary general, Pradit Pattaraprasit, and failed Mahachon leader Anek Laothamatas. The "Chart Pattana" in the party's name derived from the inclusion of former TRT minister Suwat Liptapanlop, who had merged his Chart Pattana party with TRT, and now led his faction to join Ruam Jai Thai. As with other "disqualified" former TRT board members, he has continued to play an active political role, though behind the scenes.

former TRT members of parliament, in mid-July 2007, joined the little-known People's Power Party (PPP), which had received merely 26,855 votes for its party list in the election of February 2005. Thaksin asked Samak Sundaravej, a 70-year old right-wing politician, former leader of the Prachakorn Thai party and former governor of Bangkok, to help him take care of his former TRT MPs by becoming the leader of PPP. One of Thaksin's confidants, a former TRT minister, Surapong Suebwonglee, became secretary general of this partial reincarnation of TRT.

In August 2007, the military-initiated 18th constitution of Thailand was passed in a referendum.⁴ However, the win did not turn out as the military junta and its affiliated bodies had hoped for. First, only 56.7 percent of the voters approved the constitution, leaving a substantial proportion of rejection at 41.4 percent.⁵ Worse still, this rejection was not equally distributed throughout the country. Rather, the “no” votes were concentrated in the north and the northeast, indicating that Thaksin and the PPP still enjoyed solid support in those “red areas”. At the same time, the result made a mockery of the powers-that-be attempt to heal the perceived deep political “division” by bringing about “reconciliation”. On the contrary, the referendum confirmed that the country was politically split along geographical lines.

Regarding the election, this situation made the power bloc fear that its attempt to eliminate the “Thaksin regime” from the Thai political landscape might ultimately fail—despite its best efforts, which included the annulment of the April 2006 election, replacement of the previous Election Commission of Thailand, the coup (including the cancellation of the royally-approved election that had been scheduled for October 2006), the dissolution of the TRT, the retroactive stiffening of the penalties for the former members of TRT's board of executives, and the establishment of the Asset Examination Committee to bring Thaksin, his family, and cronies to court over alleged massive corruption

4. See Nelson (2008). An English translation of this constitution, prepared by the foreign law bureau of the Thai Council of State, can be downloaded from the web site of the Asian Legal Information Institute at <http://www.asianlii.org/th/legis/const/2007/1.html>.

5. The turnout of 57.6 percent was relatively low when compared to the 72.6 percent that had been reached in the 2005 election. However, this was not too bad given that there was nothing like a fierce election campaign.

and abuse of power. A return of Thaksin and TRT to power—although in different form and through indirect means—should make many of those involved in the anti-Thaksin movement since September 2005 feel that the country has wasted two years time, both in political terms and even more so concerning its economic development. Indeed, after PPP won the election and formed a coalition government—under Samak as prime minister—with Banharn Silpa-archa’s Chart Thai party, Phuea Phaendin, Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana, Matchimathipattai, and Sanoh Thienthong’s single-province party Phracharaj, the idea that Thai politics had returned to “square one” suggested itself to a number of commentators. Suthichai Yoon, an anti-Thaksin and pro-coup commentator put it this way: “Call it a slap in the face or a deliberate challenge to the average Thai citizen’s sense of propriety, but the fact that some of the 111 former TRT Party executives banned from politics for five years by the Constitution[al] Court have managed to put their wives, brothers and cronies in the new Cabinet represents nothing less than an outright, inexcusable insult to the nation’s intelligence” (*The Nation*, February 7, 2008).⁶ In any event, the new cabinet—even by Samak himself seen as an “ugly duckling”—was sworn in on February 6, 2008, and it has started its work.⁷

In order to provide those interested in Thai politics with a point of comparison concerning the election of December 2007, it might be useful to recall the political situation at the time of the election of February 2005, and briefly to contextualize it with Thaksin’s path to power.

6. In his comment, Suthichai criticized the coalition parties for having presented the public with a “grade-B cabinet”. He did not mention where the supposedly “grade-A” politicians should come from, after the military-appointed Constitutional Tribunal had disqualified TRT’s 111 top-level politicians from politics for five years. Political parties anywhere would face serious problems compensating such an enormous bloodletting. Suthichai and some of his fellow commentators at *The Nation* newspaper might be seen as tireless propagandists in favor of the implementation of an assumed western model of politics in Thailand, featuring enlightened rational voters, political parties that are based on ideologies and thus have clear distinctions concerning their policies that are oriented towards an imagined national good, candidates who stand in elections by proposing party-determined policy alternatives, and a cabinet whose members have a high degree of technocratic competence in their fields of policy work. It goes without saying that corruption, cronyism, conflicts of interest, vote buying, vote canvassers, supposedly uneducated and “gullible” rural voters, party switching, and factionalism are not part of this model.

7. Brief descriptions of the cabinet members can be found in the *Bangkok Post*, *The Nation*, *Krungthep Thurakit* of February 7, 2008, and *Matichon* of February 8, 2008.

Conflicting Agendas: Political Reform vs. Thaksin⁸

Filling positions of power in the Thai polity through elections had long favored politicians-cum-businessmen from the country's vast rural areas. The collective political outlook, practice, and capacity of these people were quite different from what the supposedly more advanced civic, academic, and bureaucratic elite, including the middle class, in the capital Bangkok expected. Experiences with the government under Chatchai Choonhavan since 1988, the military coup in February 1991, and the "bloody May" of 1992 had encouraged opinions critical of Thai political structure and practice. On this basis, a loose coalition of Bangkok-based academic, social, and political activists, with mass media support, had since 1994 pushed for the creation of political institutions capable of controlling the rural politicians' behavior in elections (ie. vote-buying) and in government (ie. corruption). Some actors in this coalition also aimed at infusing more stability and competence into the country's legislative and executive mechanisms. In January 1997 this movement led to the establishment of the Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA) from which politicians were remarkably excluded. On September 27, 1997, in a joint meeting of both houses of the National Assembly, the newly written 16th constitution of Thailand was ratified by an overwhelming majority.⁹ This was less an act of acceptance based on political conviction than a sign of just how bad the image of the political personnel was at that time, especially in Bangkok. Elected politicians and appointed senators would simply not dare to reject a document the drafting of which had been accompanied by a broad public debate, and by country-wide public-relations and participation campaigns. Portrayed as the "people's constitution", it went into effect on October 11, 1997.¹⁰

8. The body of what follows was previously published in German (Nelson 2006). I am grateful for comments provided by John Funston, Stephen Haggard, and Duncan McCargo.

9. For more information on process and result, see Borwornsak and Burns (1998), Connors (2002), Harding (2001), Klein (1998), and Prudhisai (1998).

10. In fact, the influence of the broader public on the content of the new constitution was rather limited, judging from this author's field research during the entire constitution-drafting process in Chachoengsao province (December 1996 to August 1997). However, the reference to the public's participation was important for legitimizing the product. Some authors have argued that it was the economic crisis of 1997 that led to the acceptance of the draft. For example, Michael Connors (2002:52f.) sees the "political circumstances resulting from the economic crash of 1997" as the

Coincidentally, it was also in 1994 that Thaksin, one of Thailand's richest businessmen, a Bangkok-based telecommunication tycoon entered the political arena with initial elements of a personal agenda that neither conformed to the rural politicians' interests nor to the aims of the multi-faceted category of political reformists.¹¹ After Thaksin had failed to succeed by using an existing political party, Chamlong Srimuang's Palang Dharma,¹² he finally founded his own TRT party in July 1998.¹³ This choice of name (Thais Love Thai) reflected the heavy criticism brought to bear on the governing Democrat Party for appearing to have caved into the demands of the International Monetary Fund in exchange for its loans as a result of the Asian financial crisis.

Less than three years later, TRT convincingly won the election to the House of Representatives held on 6 January 2001.¹⁴ After the first-ever Senate election in March 2000, this was the second election based on the new constitution. Most observers therefore saw it as one more step on the long road to realizing the goals of "political reform". Then, with the election of 6 February 2005—which brought Thaksin an overwhelming confirmation of his work as the prime minister—almost all hopes that once rested with the political reform project seem to have been lost. Rural politicians were largely kept in check. But they did not submit to any legal-institutional framework that had been devised by academics and other experts before and during the constitution-drafting process. Rather, they accepted the leadership of an ambitious, energetic, and skillful individual of unrivaled monetary power,

"compelling factor that forced" the National Assembly into acceptance. In support of this view, he quotes Meechai Ruchuphan, then the speaker of the Senate, although Meechai's reference to the crash is obviously only that of an additional factor complementing "the people's hope". Without the existence of this hope, the National Assembly might well have rejected the draft constitution, even after the economic crisis had broken out. Unfortunately, the author does not consider the enormous public pressure that had been built up since the start of the constitution drafting process in December 1996.

11. Though he had tried to become Chiang Mai's representative in the CDA while involuntarily taking a break from party politics in 1996.

12. On Chamlong, see McCargo (1997).

13. The expression "his own" indicates, among other things, that Thaksin had to be understood not so much as the elected chairman of the party, but as its owner.

14. For detailed information see Nelson (2002).

Thaksin. Furthermore, Thaksin made significant headway in replacing the political reformists' vision of a democracy centered upon the progressive constitution of 1997 and its complicated legal-institutional system of checks and balances with his personal model of an electoral authoritarianism centered upon himself.¹⁵ However, it must be acknowledged that creating a strong prime minister, and empowering him to dominate the mostly rural politicians by establishing a "rationalized" parliament¹⁶ were indeed two of the core goals of influential legal reformists and members of the CDA.

Perhaps ironically, it was the first fully "democratically elected" government since 1976¹⁷ under Chatichai that unintentionally facilitated both the initiation of political reform and the rise to political prominence of Thaksin. Chatichai came to power in August 1988. He was deposed in a military coup d'état in February 1991 by the so-called National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC). His government came to be seen as a collection of mainly rural politicians who had bought their votes to get elected, and then tried to make money out of their legislative and executive positions via corruption, including bribery for the issuing of state concessions. This view strengthened discussions (that had already started in 1987, at the latest) about a reform of the electoral system that might make elections cleaner and fairer by eliminating vote-buying. It was hoped that this institutional change would not only reduce political corruption, but also facilitate the recruitment of "better" people into legislative and executive positions.

The unwitting role of Chatichai's government in propelling Thaksin to power was more direct and more important. When Chatichai assumed office in 1988, Thaksin was a comparatively small-scale businessman who had tried to make money from leasing computers, a pager service, and even a radio channel on public buses. A number of business projects had failed and left him with substantial debts. At that time, Thaksin had neither the money nor the business and public profile with which to venture into politics by claiming

15. Two critical book-length treatments of Thaksin are Pasuk and Baker (2004), and McCargo and Ukrist (2005).

16. A recent publication dealing with the operations of parliaments in Asian countries, including Thailand, is Rüländ et al. (2005).

17. In this year, police, right-wing forces, and military violently ended the three-year "democratic period".

to be a new-age visionary leader who could almost single-handedly solve Thailand's problems (if he had wanted to do so at that time). This situation changed dramatically with the issuing of 22 telecommunication concessions between 1988 and 1991, motivated probably as much by mounting public demand for new services as by the relevant cabinet members' greed for bribes in the form of commissions paid by prospective state concessionaires, often by issuing the infamous "gift checks".

In March 1990, Thaksin's company Advance Info Service (AIS) was granted concessions to operate a mobile phone service and a card phone service, each with a worth of three billion baht. Pasuk and Baker speculate about the size of the bribe Thaksin might possibly have paid to the ministers in charge by noting, "While researching the book *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand* in the early 1990s, we asked Thaksin what the going rate was for kickbacks on projects. It is a measure of his openness that he replied that 10 percent was normal but could drop down to 3-5 percent on projects with a very large budget. He was of course talking generally, not in reference to any particular project, payee, or recipient" (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 42f). The authors point out further that "both of the ministers who had granted Thaksin key concessions—Montri [Phongphanit] and Chaloem [Yubamrung]"¹⁸ were found "guilty of amassing 336.5 million baht and 32 million baht respectively while in office" (ibid: 47) by a committee established by the NPKC after their coup to investigate "unusually rich" political office-holders from the Chatchai government.

Profits from Thaksin's concessions swiftly increased from 445 million baht in 1992 to three billion baht by 1995 (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 45f). Pasuk and Baker (ibid: 45) summarize the change of Thaksin's status as follows: "Between 1988 and 1991, Thaksin had been transformed from owner of a

18. Montri died a few years ago. Chaloem was appointed minister of the interior in the PPP-dominated government led by Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej in February 2008. The findings of the special investigation committee did not lead to any convictions, and the money confiscated had to be returned to the politicians who had been found guilty, because a court judged that this military-appointed special committee had lacked the proper powers for doing its work. The coup-makers of 2006 learned from this experience and made sure that their specially-appointed Asset Examination Committee, tasked with identifying the supposedly huge corruption and abuse of power committed by Thaksin and his government, would not work in vain.

struggling computer leasing business into a major entrepreneur in government concessions...” It was mainly the profits derived from these concessions that gave him the financial resources necessary to put himself at the top of government.¹⁹

Thaksin and TRT: Anticipated Triumph

During the run-up to the elections of 2001, Thaksin benefited from a political leadership-vacuum, since all major competitors had substantially damaged their credibility while serving as prime ministers. While Banharn, head of Chart Thai, and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, head of New Aspiration, symbolized incompetence and corruption, Chuan Leekpai, head of the Democrats, grew associated with the hard times that followed the financial crisis of 1997. Although Thaksin was a new and politically unproven politician—in fact, he portrayed himself as a “non-politician”—he nonetheless inspired “new hope”²⁰ for strong and visionary political leadership.²¹ Through the recruitment of scores of promising constituency candidates as well as sitting MPs from other political parties, and by mounting a professional and

19. In Thailand, the relationship between individual wealth—coupled with societal influence—and access to political positions at all levels is very direct, and hardly hindered by any political-institutional barriers. Therefore, Thailand's political system is highly exclusive. Saying that Thailand's politics is “democratic”, for example, by pointing to regularly held elections, is misleading if one associates characteristics of western democratic countries when applying this adjective to Thailand. Moreover, it is not completely impossible that people without money can enter politics and even make it to the top, as the Democrat's Chuan Leekpai shows.

20. Already before the election of 2 July 1995, Thaksin was, according to a public opinion poll, the most favored candidate for the position of prime minister. Thirty percent of the respondents wanted to see him in this office (*Bangkok Post*, 1 July 1995: 1). In a special election supplement published by this newspaper in the same edition, the well-known social critic, Thirayuth Boonmee, compared Thaksin (whom he later strongly attacked) to the other candidates for the post and then stated, “Each of them makes us shout in dissatisfaction because we cannot have new generation leaders such as Khun Thaksin Shinawatra.” At that time, Banharn Silapa-archa was made prime minister. In the poll, he had received 6.2 percent support. And a foreign observer teaching in Thailand praised Thaksin as “a breath of fresh air in the stale Thai political landscape” (*The Nation*, 17 November 1995: A4).

21. Thaksin is comparable to a tough leader born out of disappointment with the conventional politicians. This tough leader could “present himself as the one who wants everything, and who can change everything” (Luhmann 1987:13; see also footnote 55). This fits well with Thailand's leadership culture. Pravit Rojanaphruk (*The Nation*, 27 January 2006) remarked that Thais “simply like the convenience that comes with being a follower all too much”. They do not like “to think and act for themselves”. Their preferences then lead them to select their leader, be it Thaksin, Sondhi Limthongkul, Thirayuth Boonmi, or Chamlong Srimuang. “And they all will lead you, solve poverty for you, move you, impress you, read newspapers for you or even think for you.”

expensive election campaign, TRT defeated all of the more established parties. TRT received 200 constituency MPs and 48 party-list MPs. The results for the other parties were Democrats 97/31; Chart Thai 35/6, New Aspiration 28/8; Chart Pattana 22/7.

Although his removal from office by the Constitutional Court hung like a sword of Damocles,²² Thaksin began speedily to implement his major “populist” campaign promises, especially the village fund, the 30-baht health care program, and the debt moratorium. Despite doubts over the design of these policies and difficulties in their implementation, people in Thailand’s vast countryside—by far the country’s biggest voter pool and one that had mostly been neglected by previous governments—clearly favored them.

During the months before the 2005 election, Prime Minister Thaksin visited many provinces. On each occasion, he personally distributed hundreds of millions of baht to be used for development projects in these provinces. The central fund of the state budget, from which Thaksin could draw money freely, had grown to such an extent that of all the ministries only the ministry of education had more to spend than Thaksin himself. Some new policy promises were also aimed at repeating the success of his efforts in 2001: the village fund would be turned into village banks; amounts of 2-300,000 baht would be given to small, medium, and large villages for investment in economic development projects (the ‘SML project’); every family would own its own home; poverty would be eradicated by the end of Thaksin’s second term; all schools would have computers and internet access; and student loans would be provided up to university level.

TRT’s main election flyer showed a confidently smiling Thaksin on its front page, against the backdrop of a Thai national flag. Its slogan read, “Towards a Stable Future: Elect number 9, both the person and the party.”²³

22. For details see Klein (2003: 71-76) and Nelson (2002:381-388). Klein does not seem to know the earlier source.

23. This TRT flyer (“*Kaosu anakot thi mankhong lueak boer 9 thang khon thang phak*”) was collected during my field research in Chachoengsao province in January and February 2005. All parties have numbers drawn by their leaders at an ECT-organized event in Bangkok. Thaksin drew no. 9, the Democrat’s Banyat no. 4, Anek Laothamatas of Mahachon no. 11, and Banharn of Chart Thai no. 1. For voters, it was vitally important that they remembered their favored party’s number, because the constituency ballot only listed the parties’ numbers, but not the individual candidates’ names, while the party-list ballot listed the parties’ numbers as well as their names. As a result, all

In its centre-fold, the flyer listed all of the government's professed achievements, such as having supported employment creation for 13 million people through the village fund project, its benefiting 2.3 million farmers through the moratorium on debt repayments of some 75 billion baht, its having generated income of more than 40 billion baht for people in 26,000 communities through the One-Tambon-One-Product (OTOP) project, and its improving the health of 46 million people by the 30-baht health care program.²⁴ At the bottom the flyer's centre page, part of a text read, "All this is merely a part of our efforts. We are determined persistently and patiently to work for the nation and the people." After all, TRT's core slogan was "*thai rak thai huachai khue prachachon* (the people are at the heart of Thai Rak Thai)".

The back page of the flyer contained a section labeled, "The further task of the Thai Rak Thai party: making the nation strong and sustainable." This was articulated through 16 measures, including the distribution of two million calves that farmers would raise and later sell to the state; the transformation of assets and rights of use into capital; the spending of 1,000 billion baht for the construction of 291 kilometers of electrical railways; the continuation of the "war against drugs"²⁵; and the provision of water supply in all villages and electricity to all. One might think that these campaign promises were rather exaggerated. However, the refrain of a campaign jingle played from pick-up trucks that had been converted into campaign vehicles roaming provincial and village roads in Chachoengsao assured voters: "*nayok thaksin tham dai* (Premier Thaksin can do it!)."

During Thaksin's first four years in office, TRT and the government expanded their reach through political marketing. At the same time, opportunities for critical political reporting were narrowed down—television

campaign materials (flyers, small introductory cards, election posters, billboards, spots) always gave the number of the party. Obviously, looking back on the past two years of turmoil, the promise of a "stable future" sounds somewhat strange. And we do not even know now what the Samak-PPP government has in store for the country.

24. Thailand has about 63 million inhabitants.

25. This was one of the most controversial policies during Thaksin's first term. Around 2500 alleged drug traders were slain in what appeared to be extrajudicial killings by the police.

and radio were almost completely controlled by the government,²⁶ while most of the Thai and international press had chosen to “tone down” their criticism.²⁷ The Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2005 issued by Reporters Without Borders reflected this situation. Compared to 2004, Thailand had slipped from rank 59 to 107, while Malaysia and Singapore had improved slightly from 122 to 113, and 147 to 140, respectively. Ironically, the political and mass media situations in both distinctively authoritarian countries were used by Thaksin to present his fellow Thais with positive examples about the direction in which he thought that Thailand should progress.

During the same period, the civil service was subjected to a persistently centralizing approach that put a large degree of pressure for conformity on bureaucrats.²⁸ Pojamarn Shinawatra, the wife of PM Thaksin, who happened to be TRT’s main source of funds, and who owned the party’s luxurious headquarters, was attributed with an ever-increasing “influence on the administration of the country” (*Matichon*, January 1, 2006: 3). This included appointments of military and police officers, section chiefs of the ministry of the interior in the provinces, provincial governors, and chief district officers (*ibid*).

At sub-national levels, transfers played an important role, because they enabled TRT and its MPs in their constituencies to build networks of trusted civil servants in the district and provincial administrations, in schools, and in the police. As a result, they were indebted to those politicians for their career advancement. During the election campaign, these civil servants would

26. Most Thais do not read newspapers. Their main sources of information are radio and television. It was therefore not accidental that, before the 2001 election, Thaksin’s company, Shin Corporation, bought the single television channel that was independent of the government, and critical in its political reporting (staffed by journalists from *The Nation*), namely iTV (“independent TV”). This way, the government under Thaksin’s leadership had been able to control the content of its electronic media while Thaksin’s company, Shin Corporation, fulfilled the same role at the only “independent” station.

27. This changed drastically in the context of the protests that started in September 2005, when most papers adopted anti-Thaksin editorial policies.

28. This followed Thaksin’s “My Country Is My Company” approach (Bidhya 2004). The issue should be treated separately from Thaksin’s efforts at making the bureaucrats work more effectively. In this respect, some of his initiatives might well have been successful (for a critical assessment see Painter 2005). For example, the much-maligned CEO-governor approach is not in itself a wrong idea, since the lack of horizontal integration at the provincial and district levels has long been a problem in Thai territorial administration.

certainly not act against the wishes of their formal and informal political superiors. Rather, they might actively help their political patrons with securing votes. For example, an official of a provincial election commission rhetorically asked me, “How can we expect the police to help us with suppressing vote buying when they themselves help distributing the money [for certain election candidates]?” Furthermore, provincial politicians might even be able to infiltrate certain levels of the election commissions—such as the provincial elections commissions, constituency committees, polling station committees, and vote counting committees—with civil servants who are loyal to them.²⁹

Even civil servants who were critical of the Thaksin administration recognized that it would serve another term. Consequently, they remained extremely reluctant to favor opposition candidates openly. At the same time, the main opposition party in the House of Representatives, the Democrats, had lost more and more of those people whom they had appointed to their government positions, and they could do nothing to replace them or even to expand their connections in the civil service and the police. Even in the Democrat’s stronghold in the south, sympathizers in the bureaucracy had to be careful if they wanted to protect their livelihoods.

The Opposition Democrats: Fighting a Losing Battle

Given TRT’s political dominance, the position of the Democrat party was indeed precarious. After its humiliating defeat in the 2001 election, the party for a long time had remained in a state of shock. Opposition work in parliament started so slowly that observers wondered whether the party deliberately avoided responding to government decisions and policies. However, as usual, no-confidence debates against many ministers were initiated. But none of those accused of corruption by the Democrats were found guilty of such practices in the constitutionally mandated subsequent

29. The Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) might be an independent organization according to the constitution. In practical terms, however, it is dependent in its task of organizing elections on provincial-level civil servants, police, and soldiers. Moreover, it seems to have become just another bureaucratic organization with the equivalent world view. The offices of the provincial election commissions are hardly different from any other section in the provincial administration (*sala klang*).

investigation by the National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC).³⁰ This did not increase the party's credibility. Halfway through the government's term, in April 2003, the Democrat party invited the public to observe its factional conflicts on the occasion of selecting a new party leader after its two-time prime minister Chuan had stepped down. Chuan supported the party's young face and new hope, Abhisit Vejjajiva, while former secretary-general and power broker Sanan Kachornprasart³¹ lobbied for Banyat Bantadtan, a member of the old guard. Abhisit's narrow defeat put Banyat into the unenviable position of being seen as an uninspiring interim party leader with the main task of being clearly defeated by Thaksin in the 2005 elections, thus enabling Abhisit to make a fresh start afterwards.

One year after the Democrats had chosen their new leader, in March 2004, the first direct election to the position of executive chairperson (*nayok*) of the local government Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) tested the relative strength of local political networks connected to TRT and the Democrats in country's 75 provinces (excluding Bangkok). These networks were characterized by personal loyalties to individual candidates, and they are decisive in generating constituency MPs. From the Democrats' perspective, the result was discouraging: TRT gained around 55 positions. Some *nayok* were classified as independents, while four came under Chart Thai party, leaving only 13 positions to the Democrats. This imbalance that so favored TRT was also reflected in the total number of votes cast for the candidates connected to both parties. While the Democrats had to be content with three million votes, TRT received about 12 million (Nelson 2004b and c). This hardly boded well for the Democrats' performance in the general election that was to be held less than a year later, because creating competitive constituency-level political networks, or strengthening existing ones, required sustained efforts over a longer period of time, as well as robust party coffers. For a party without any prospect of access to government funds that could be channeled

30. One can speculate that this result stemmed from an assumed dominance of the NCCC by commissioners connected to Thaksin.

31. Sanan later left the Democrats and founded the Mahachon party. Before the 2007 election, he deserted it to assume the position of chief advisor to Banharn's Chart Thai party. In the Samak government, he was made one of the deputy prime ministers.

to constituencies as development projects, and without a clear strategic direction concerning its policies and the role of local party members and branches in regaining political territory, contesting the next elections effectively seemed nearly an impossible task.

The Democrat party's campaign centered on "five urgent policies", but they offered little excitement compared to what the TRT-led government had already implemented and promised to implement in its second term: free schooling from kindergarten to secondary school; unemployment insurance for one year; clearance of debts through work; old-age allowance from age 60; replacement of the government's 30-baht program by free quality health care for all Thais.³² Also promised were a "curriculum revolution"; opposition to materialism in favor of sufficiency in society; support for the decentralization of power; and solving the problems in the south within four years.³³

The Democrats also attacked Thaksin and his perceived wrongdoings by issuing the "Democrats' Announcement". It pledged to avoid the following: over-centralization of executive power; conflicts of interest; the privatization of state enterprises; and leading people "astray", causing their "indebtedness", and "closing ears and eyes towards the people."³⁴ Six other actions were

32. Given all the financial, management, and quality problems of the 30-baht program, one wonders why the Democrats chose to be even more populist than Thaksin instead of offering a more responsible policy option. Or had they grown resigned to the fact that one could not hope to win an election by proposing to abolish this popular program, so they instead tried to outdo TRT? Interestingly, one of the first policy decisions of the post-coup Surayud government was to make health care free. The minister argued that the 30-baht fee required too much bureaucratic follow-up work and thus expenses.

33. Traditionally, Thai political parties had no policy profiles. Policies were often written by outside academics just before the elections, and then distributed as the parties' policy platforms. Plagiarism was not unusual, and the platforms did not play any significant role in electioneering. The purpose of political parties was to join coalition governments where their people would preside over the ministries' established policies, develop some projects on their own, and make political decisions necessitated by new political, economic, and social problems. In opposition, they often did not know what to do, or they concentrated on destabilizing the coalition governments, or on censuring ministers on the grounds of alleged corruption. Having to adapt to TRT's insistence on a competition on policy terms, which is an innovation to Thailand's political system, hits traditional politicians and parties hard. This includes the Democrat party's figurehead chairperson, Abhisit Vejjajiva, who is not known for being a policy-driven political leader.

34. In fact, before the 2001 election, TRT had proudly announced that its teams of researchers had systematically talked with people in all districts of the country in order to find out what they wanted.

pledged to be taken: practicing sufficiency economy;³⁵ abrogating the “CEO” approach to government; abolishing economic monopolization; promoting equitable opportunities;³⁶ terminating the state lottery;³⁷ and freeing the mass media.³⁸

The Election Result

Anything but a crushing defeat of the Democrats in the general election of February 2005 would have come as a great surprise. Such was the quality of Thaksin’s leadership that one of his most qualified and persistent critics, respected senior economist Ammar Siamwalla, opined shortly before the 2005 election that this was not really an ordinary election: “It has turned out to be a national referendum on whether we should accept Thaksin or not accept him” (*The Nation*, January, 28, 2005: A1). The answer given by a very convincing majority of the electorate, especially on the party-list ballot, was unmistakably clear: “We accept him as our national political leader”. *The Nation* (February 7, 2005: 1A) called the result a “landslide” (see table 1). *The 2004 Year-End Economic Review* of the *Bangkok Post* (p. 17) headlined an article that previewed the elections, “Thai Rak Thai poised for landslide”.

While TRT’s increase of party-list MPs was rather modest at four seats, the number of constituency MPs jumped from 200 to 310. Much of this increase was due to the fact that, after the 2001 election, the New Aspiration,

35. With this pledge, the Democrats probably tried to capitalize on the King’s model of “sufficiency economy” by implying that Thaksin encouraged freewheeling capitalist greed.

36. The emphasis here probably is on “equally”. After all, TRT’s policy program emphasized opening up opportunities for grassroots people. One TRT election leaflet showed Thaksin sitting amongst a group of school children, the text saying, “Creating intellectual opportunities.” Election posters also reflected this theme about “creating opportunities”, elaborated through a range of policy areas, such as young people being free from drug addiction, all schools having Internet access, or transforming assets into capital.

37. If anything, this promise should have cost the Democrats votes, because this lottery was very popular.

38. These two paragraphs are based on two flyers of the Democrat party that I collected during my field work in Chachoengsao province. Both were printed in Bangkok. One was a general flyer of the party, showing its leader Banyat Bantadtan on the cover page (*Phak prachathibat sang khon sang anakot*). 1.4 million copies were printed, financed by the ECT’s political party development fund. The printing of the second (*Ha nayobai rengduan*) was also supported by the fund. Its design was similar to the first flyer, but it showed the constituency candidate on the front page, and above him the party’s past, present, and future leaders: Chuan, Banyat, and Abhisit.

Chart Pattana, and Seritham parties merged with TRT.³⁹ These three parties' total number of constituency MPs in 2001 was 64 (they did not win any party-list seats in 2001). Thus, all other factors being equal, a roughly equivalent increase of TRT's seats was to be expected. In addition, however, the Democrat and the Chart Thai parties lost 26 and 17 seats, respectively, to TRT.

Table 1: Initial election results 2005 (number of seats by party and region)

	BKK	Central	North	NE	South	Regions Total	Party List	MPs Total
TRT	32	80	71	126	1	310	67	377
Democrat	4	7	5	2	52	70	26	96
Chart Thai	1	10	--	6	1	18	7	25
Mahachon	--	--	--	2	--	2	--	2
TOTAL	37	97	76	136	54	400	100	500

Source: Khomun sathiti lae phonkanluektang samachik sapha phuthaenratsadorn pho so 2548 [Data, Statistics and the Election Result of the Members of the House of Representatives 2005]. Bangkok: Office of the Election Commission of Thailand.

Note: On February 20, 2005, repeat elections took place in Kanchanaburi and Ubon Ratchathani (both constituency 3). The Democrats lost one MP in Kanchanaburi, because he had also been a member of Mahachon, and was thus disqualified, leaving only the TRT candidate in the race. In Ubon, the Democrats kept their seat. Consequently, TRT's number of MPs increased by one to 378, while the Democrat's decreased to 95. On October 30, 2005, another round of repeat elections took place, due to suspected irregularities, namely in Phichit (constituency 3), Singburi (constituency 1), Uthai Thani (constituency 1), and Satun (constituency 2). TRT kept its seat in Singburi, but lost to Mahachon in Phichit and Chart Thai in Uthai Thani. In Satun, the Democrats' candidate was disqualified; his Democrat replacement won unopposed, because TRT declined to field their previous candidate. As a result, the number of MPs for TRT is now 376, for the Democrats 95, for Chart Thai 26, and for Mahachon 3.

Only four political parties managed to have candidates elected to the House, although 24 had nominated candidates. However, the parties without representatives received a mere 1.3 percent of the constituency vote. TRT (55.7 percent) and the Democrats (25 percent)—note the big difference between the first and second-placed party—together overwhelmed CTP (10.5 percent) and Mahachon (7.5 percent) by 80.7 to 18 percent. Thailand's two-

39. The New Aspiration party still existed, because a small number of members had rejected its dissolution and insisted on using its name.

party system had thus continued to consolidate. After the 2005 election, Thaksin was able to form the first elected single-party government in Thai political history.⁴⁰ Some Thai observers welcomed this development as a positive stabilization of government. Others worried that this situation might lead to a “parliamentary dictatorship” in which an overpowering leader is able to evade all attempts at controlling his use of power.⁴¹

Thaksin had also “unified” the voters in Bangkok and in Thailand’s rural areas. As noted above, one major impetus of political reform was the dissatisfaction of parts of the Bangkok elite and middle class with being politically dominated by rural politicians. Bangkok voters therefore usually voted against the core parties in coalition governments and the respective prime ministers, including Chatchai, Suchinda Kraprayoon, Banharn and Chavalit in the elections of 1988, March and September 1992, 1995, and 1996. Even Chuan’s support in Bangkok was strong only in the 1996 election, and this only for exceptional reasons. Thaksin, however, was as much the overwhelmingly preferred prime minister of the Bangkokians as he was of their fellow Thai voters living in the provinces, market towns, and rural villages.⁴²

After the election of February 2005, it was doubtful whether Chart Thai and Mahachon would last until the projected end of Thaksin’s second term in March 2009. And Chart Thai seemed mostly to exist because of the egoism of Bahnarn, a Chinese-Thai patriarch who had grown rich in the central Thai province of Suphanburi. However, Banharn was 74 years old, without having succeeded in grooming any successor. Not even his two children who are

40. Yet, Thaksin’s TRT was not the first “single-faction” party, since it consisted of 14 to 16 different groups (*Krungthep Thurakit*, February 9, 2005:16; *Matichon*, February 10, 2005:2). As all other Thai groupings of this kind, they are integrated by personal loyalties and benefit sharing. For recent work on the role of factions in Thai politics see Chambers (2003, 2005).

41. This expression was already used to attack the government of Chatchai Choonhavan (1988-1991). He had the majority in parliament, and he governed based on that majority. It seems that some Thai observers and political actors cannot easily accept what in other countries is called a “stable parliamentary majority”.

42. Anek Laothamatas (1996) had once suggested that rural development should be used to turn all rural farmers into middle-class people who would then share the same concept of democracy as their Bangkok counterparts, and thus follow their electoral preferences. In 2001 and 2005, it seemed that “modern” businessman Thaksin had enough to offer to both sides of the Bangkok/urban—rural divide.

CTP MPs seemed to be able to fill his shoes. Banharn's departure would thus probably erode the bonds of personal loyalty that kept its remaining 18 MPs in the party.⁴³ In addition, the fact that CTP was no longer needed as part of any ruling coalition deprived such political vehicles (except for the more institutionalized Democrats) of their *raison d'être*, which has been to bargain for positions in the cabinet, and their concomitant status, budget, and influence. Since this loss of bargaining power had been an obvious possibility long before the 2005 election, two important factions of CTP MPs—the Chidchob group in Buriram, and *Kamnan Po's* group in Chonburi—defected to TRT, taking about 12 MPs with them. Because of this situation, combined with TRT's popularity at that time, CTP had been reduced to its core area in central Thailand's Suphanburi province (the party won all six constituencies in its single-province stronghold),⁴⁴ four adjacent constituencies, and six in the northeast (the two seats in Bangkok and in the south were accidental). For these reasons, after the 2005 election, it was difficult to see what factors might reduce the pressure on CTP to disband and release its MPs to TRT. It was also hard to imagine what political reasons—as distinct from Banharn's established command of personal loyalty—voters in 2009 might have still to elect this party's candidates and vote for CTP on the party-list ballot.

The fourth party with seats in parliament, Mahachon, was only formed on July 19, 2004, by changing the name of the long-existing Ratsadorn party, which had been led by Vatana Asavaheme,⁴⁵ an old-style politician with a dark reputation from Samut Prakan province. In this province, which is adjacent to Bangkok in the East, Vatana and his family had long tried to dominate politics. Mahachon's driving force, however, was Sanan, who had defected from the Democrats because its party leader had denied him any significant role in managing the party's election campaign. Sanan put Anek

43. Although Thai political parties also have ordinary members, they mainly consist of their MPs and their personal loyalty to the party leader. This relationship might be mediated by faction leaders. The Democrats have a somewhat broader basis, and are more institutionalized. Thai Rak Thai had 14 million members, but it was an almost purely leader-centered party, complemented by the main source of the party's funds, namely the wife of the leader.

44. On Banharn in Suphanburi, see Nishizaki (2005, 2006).

45. As said in footnote 2, he is now "president" of the Phuea Phaendin party. He is one of the main defendants in the court case dealing with alleged large-scale corruption in the province's Khlong Dan waste water treatment plant.

Laothamatas, a former lecturer of political science at Thammasat University, into the position of party chairperson, from which he presented himself in the election campaign as an alternative to then-Prime Minister Thaksin. Anek had also left the Democrats, because he did not think that the party could face TRT's might alone, and was too principled to opt for growth by taking in existing local or regional political factions of various sizes who were looking for new political homes before the election of 2005 (*Matichon*, October 3, 2005: 11).⁴⁶

Originally, Anek had envisaged a party that would have an academic composition, enabling it to present itself as a “third option party (*phak thanglueak thi sam*)”.⁴⁷ Through the inclusion of Sanan and Vatana, however, Mahachon turned out to be a mix of both new-style and old-style politicians. This did not hurt its election prospects so as much as its lack of money. In an article in *Matichon* (October 3, 2005: 11), Anek observed that the party had sufficient money for the months of August and September. Afterwards, the funds would dwindle rapidly. According to Anek, “Finally, those candidates who we had contacted or who we had campaigned for did not join us, because we did not have sufficient support funds (for their election campaigns). Eventually, they joined Chart Thai, TRT, and the Democrats. This way, Mahachon lost a great number of good people.” While Mahachon had intended to field candidates in all 400 constituencies, the party managed to recruit only 301 candidates. Soon after the election, Sanan pressured Anek to leave the position of party leader. At that time, it did not look as if Mahachon had any political future.

The election result indicated that there was some political space left for smaller groups that did not want to join TRT, or that TRT had no interest in supporting, because it already had better candidates in those constituencies. These floating candidates and groups also lacked access to the Democrats,

46. Alternatively, he might have thought that the Democrats had not given him a position high enough for his perception of his political talents. After TRT was dissolved, Anek became involved with founding the Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana party. However, his name soon afterwards disappeared from the newspapers.

47. The voter segment that might be interested in a “third option party”—a party that is neither “populist” like TRT nor bureaucratic like the Democrats—is very small.

because this party finds it somewhat more difficult to accept political opportunists. However, what happened to Chart Thai and Mahachon in the 2005 election showed that great amounts of money were needed to stand any chance of success. Such funds, however, were difficult to come by at a time when prospective donors amongst wealthy businessmen preferred not to make Thaksin and TRT angry by funding their competitors. Moreover, given the certainty of TRT winning the election, these parties had no hope of getting anywhere near positions in the government and its budget. This fact—combined with the Democrats’ struggles, Chart Thai’s losses, and Mahachon’s disaster—discouraged those potential political leaders who might have contemplated establishing a political party designed temporarily to serve their ambitions.

Therefore, after the 2005 election, one was left with the conclusion that the Democrat party probably would be the only “serious” contender of Thaksin’s TRT for years to come. But even this party’s seriousness must be qualified, because the Democrats had weakened further in the wake of their performance in the 2001 contest. In Thailand’s regions, the Democrat’s number of MPs was reduced from 8 to 4 in Bangkok, from 19 to 7 in the central region, from 16 to 5 in the north, and from 6 to 2 in the northeast. The only exception was the Democrat party’s heartland in the south.⁴⁸ Here, they even increased their number of seats from 48 to 52. It is generally assumed that TRT’s Wadah faction, which previously was part of NAP, and the Democrat’s Darussalam group, which had defected to TRT, bore the brunt of Thaksin’s failed policy to pacify the three southernmost Malay-Muslim provinces, especially after the many deaths caused by government security forces at the Krue Se mosque in Pattani and the Tak Bai police station in Narathiwat. According to an article in *Phuchatkan* (February 8, 2005: 12), TRT’s Wadah faction did not help their constituents much in dealing with the insurgency, especially after Krue Se and Tak Bai had “utterly frightened the people.” Najmuddin Umar, a prominent member of Wadah and former TRT

48. For a substantial case study on the Democrats in one southern province, Songkhla, see Askew (2006, 2008).

MP, was even formally implicated with having been involved with the insurgents, an accusation he rejected.⁴⁹

In Bangkok, TRT increased its vote totals, compared with 2001, by 49.8 percent (constituency) and 47.5 percent (party list). Even though the Democrat party also substantially increased the number of its votes, the gap with TRT nevertheless widened. The puzzlement caused to some observers by the Democrats' winning but four seats in Bangkok was reflected by *Bangkok Post* commentator Veera Prateepchaikul (February 14, 2005: 13), who wrote, "Even in Bangkok, where many voters are said to be well-educated and sophisticated, the Democrats managed to capture just four seats." In other words, "well-educated and sophisticated" voters were not supposed to vote for Thaksin and TRT. Rather, their political interest should have been in safeguarding Thailand's democracy in general and the constitution's checks-and-balances system in particular. Indeed, the Democrats had launched the "give [the Democrats] 201 seats" (*lueak hai thueng 201*) campaign with four-page luxurious color-advertisements in leading Bangkok newspapers such as *Krungthep Thurakit* and *Bangkok Post* (January 18, 2005). According to the constitution of 1997, 200 MPs were needed to initiate a no-confidence motion against the prime minister. Since the election of 2001, the opposition had lacked the figures necessary to subject the PM to substantial criticism in parliament. Thaksin treated the National Assembly with contempt and hardly ever took part in its meetings.⁵⁰ The Democrats wanted to change this situation. The first page of their advertisement showed the text: "201 – a good number for Thais for today and for the coming 4 years."

Bangkok's voters did not follow the Democrats' advice. Kalaya Sophonpanich, who was responsible for the campaign in Bangkok, speculated that the party's 201 campaign was "too sophisticated" for city voters (*The*

49. The criminal court of first instance acquitted him on 15 December 2005, because of unclear testimony.

50. To Thaksin, the House seemed to consist of an unloved category of people—"politicians". According to the constitution, he was dependent on them for acquiring the position of prime minister. Afterwards, however, what appeared to him as an institution of useless parliamentary politicking should not be allowed to waste time in his tireless efforts in running the affairs of the state.

Nation, February 8, 2005: A1). In her disappointment, she even turned to scolding the voters: “We didn’t think that voters could accept corrupt politicians even if they keep offering them new stuff through populist policies” (ibid). Perhaps, one reason for Kalaya’s disappointment was that only a few months earlier in November 2004, she had said, “Beating TRT in Bangkok is significant to our campaign” (*The Nation*, November 22, 2004). Having 37 seats to fight for, and then losing four out of the party’s eight seats, made Kalaya’s goal appear very unrealistic.

That Apirak Kosayodhin had won the Bangkok governorship for the Democrats at the end of August 2004 probably contributed to the party’s overestimating the weaknesses of TRT in Bangkok. However, selecting the head of a local authority is very different from a decision about who should occupy the position of prime minister. Secondly, TRT did not even have its own declared candidate, after the very popular—since his “social order” campaign—Purachai Piamsomboon had rejected Thaksin’s wish of giving up his position as deputy prime minister to run in the Bangkok election. Had Purachai entered the race as official TRT candidate with the full backing of Thaksin and the party, one might have serious doubts whether Apirak could have emerged as the winner.⁵¹ Finally, it might be mentioned that the Tsunami of December 2004 enabled Thaksin to put his leadership qualities in a favorable light.

In terms of vote shares (table 2), the Democrats’ position in the south looked very solid, while the gap in Bangkok was large, though not overwhelming. In central Thailand and the north, however, the picture was bleak, while the situation in the northeast appeared hopeless. In this region, only 6.6 and 6.0 percent of the voters cast their votes for the Democrats’ constituency and party-list candidates, respectively. Yet, the northeast was of

⁵¹ TRT unofficially supported Paveena Hongsakul, until her candidacy an MP for the Chart Pattana party, which later joined TRT. When she first ran for the post of Bangkok governor, in the year 2000, she received only 116,750 votes, while TRT’s Sudarat Keyuraphan collected 521,184 votes. In the election of 2004, Paveena’s number of votes increased to 619,039. One is probably not mistaken in the assumption that Sudarat’s voter pool was the decisive factor in this considerable improvement. Apirak won with 911,441 votes. The rather high level of votes for a candidate as weak as Paveena indicates the potential that an official TRT candidate Purachai could have had.

particular political significance, because this region sent the highest number of MPs (136) to Parliament. Winning in the south is important, but the contest there involved only about 54 of parliament's total number of 400 constituency MPs. Without substantial inroads into Bangkok, the north, central Thailand, and especially the northeast, the Democrats would be reduced to a regional party of the south without being able to develop viable national-level aspirations.

Table 2: Constituency and party-list votes (by party and region; 2005)

	TRT		DEM		CTP		MCP	
	Const.	PL	Const.	PL	Const.	PL	Const.	PL
Bangkok	1,541,829 (55.39%)	1,668,102 (57.59%)	1,047,496 (37.62%)	972,290 (33.57%)	133,395 (4.79%)	176,347 (6.09%)	48,974 (1.76%)	39,783 (1.37%)
Central	4,233,587 (55.40%)	4,728,731 (59.12%)	1,896,213 (24.82%)	1,797,028 (22.47%)	1,126,313 (14.74%)	940,925 (11.76%)	371,008 (4.86%)	248,268 (3.10%)
North	3,381,486 (60.50%)	3,986,507 (67.00%)	1,209,661 (21.64%)	1,018,688 (17.12%)	403,354 (7.22%)	245,828 (4.13%)	451,164 (8.07%)	284,153 (4.78%)
Northeast	6,227,136 (65.23%)	7,625,845 (76.55%)	628,458 (6.58%)	600,846 (6.03%)	1,321,865 (13.85%)	601,691 (6.04%)	1,162,662 (12.18%)	632,891 (6.35%)
South	1,139,306 (27.81%)	983,888 (23.20%)	2,619,803 (63.94%)	2,821,890 (66.54%)	134,546 (3.28%)	96,768 (2.28%)	189,591 (4.63%)	141,536 (3.34%)
TOTAL	16,523,344 (55.71%)	18,993,073 (61.17%)	7,401,631 (25.23%)	7,210,742 (23.23%)	3,119,473 (10.52%)	2,061,559 (6.64%)	2,223,399 (7.50%)	1,346,631 (4.34%)

Source: Author's calculations based on *Khomun sathiti lae phonkanluektang samachik sapha phuthaenratsadorn pho so 2548* [Data, Statistics and the Election Result of the Members of the House of Representatives 2005]. Bangkok: Office of the Election Commission of Thailand. The difference to 100 percent results from the exclusion of small parties from this table.

Equally problematic was the situation regarding the Democrats' party-list votes. TRT was able to increase its party-list surplus from 2,018,291 votes in 2001 to 2,469,729 votes in 2005 (table 3). This was even more impressive when we recalled that the voters' preferences for Thaksin and TRT also

benefited the party's constituency candidates. In other words, many TRT constituency candidates received a higher number of votes, and perhaps even won because voters wanted to reward Thaksin for his efforts, and perhaps to give him a solid majority in parliament.

Table 3: Constituency and party-list votes compared: 2005

	Constituency	%	Party List	%	Difference (in PL votes)
TRT	16,523,344	55.71	18,993,073	61.17	+ 2,469,729
DEM	7,401,631	24.96	7,210,742	23.23	- 190,889
CTP	3,119,473	10.52	2,061,559	6.64	- 1,057,914
MCP	2,223,399	7.50	1,346,631	4.34	- 876,768
Others	389,869	1.29	1,436,218	4.63	+ 1,046,349
Total	29,657,716	100.00	31,048,223	100.00	+ 1,390,507

Source: Author's calculation based on *Khomun sathiti lae phonkanluektang samachik sapha phuthaenratsadorn pho so 2548* [Data, Statistics and the Election Result of the Members of the House of Representatives 2005]. Bangkok: Office of the Election Commission of Thailand.

On the other hand, the Democrats' party-list surplus of 889,569 votes in 2001 declined by 190,889 votes in 2005. Overall, the party gained 680,411 more constituency votes (an increase of 10.1 percent), while its party-list votes were reduced by 400,047. This decline of 5.3 percent occurred while votes cast in the 2005 election increased over 2001 by 2,436,390, or 8.1 percent. This constitutes a very significant loss in party-directed voter confidence. Back in 2001, the Democrats entered the race as government party, and it had a well-known leader in then-Prime Minister Chuan. Four years later, Banyat proved "simply unmarketable" (*The Nation*, January 18, 2005: 12A).

Moreover, the Democrats had played a very limited opposition role in the public's eye, both because the party had kept a low profile and because the government-controlled electronic mass media had been less than

enthusiastic in publicizing the opposition's work. Since the party-list outcome reflected the party leader's profile and the attractiveness of its policies as perceived by the voters, a drop in party-list votes for the Democrats had to be expected. However, for parties and/or leaders with low profiles—such as the Democrats in this election, Chart Thai, Chart Pattana, New Aspiration, and Mahachon—the party-list vote was also about strong constituency candidates. Based on their local political standing, they could pull in more party-list votes than could be expected without them, without necessarily being able (or even willing) to match their constituency votes with an equivalent number of party-list votes.⁵² In this respect, the Democrats' constituency candidates were probably willing, but unable, to translate their personal voter support into an equivalent level of party approval. After the 2005 election, it could thus be assumed that if the Democrats' public profile remained low until the next election—which also depended on how the electorate's perception of Thaksin and his government would have developed in the following years—and if the party was unable to recruit a greater number of strong constituency candidates, then its proportion of party-list votes will have been destined to slip even further.

Conclusion

After many political observers had perceived authoritarian tendencies during Thaksin's first term beginning in 2001, they were appalled when Thai voters provided Thaksin with an even more convincing victory in 2005. Even Bangkok's educated and sophisticated voters seemed untroubled by the parlous state of Thailand's democracy and the proliferation of "conflicts of interest". These doubts seemed confined to critical commentary, mainly in the newspapers, provided by civil-society activists and opposition members of parliament. For the great majority of voters, however, strong leadership and policy performance—in the absence of any credible competing option—

52. That the "Others" category (table 3) has a party-list surplus for both 2001 and 2005 is due to the fact that all parties in this category were listed on the party-list ballot, which was used in all polling stations countrywide, and voters—for whatever reasons—cast their votes even for unknown political parties. Most of these parties, however, fielded very small numbers of constituency candidates.

seemed to weigh most heavily. They thus confirmed Thaksin's course of action, giving him a very solid mandate to continue on his path.⁵³

From a critical perspective, that Thaksin seemed to have had succeeded in undercutting the entire constitutional order, including the broader public discourse on "political reform" it was based on, appeared ominous. Thaksin's personal agendas seemed to have replaced public aspirations for a better and more effective democracy, for transparency and accountability.⁵⁴ Under Thaksin, political effectiveness did not relate to the performance of constitutional institutions, but instead to his own abilities to penetrate and subvert subordinate administrative levels.⁵⁵ In doing this, he was even helped by experts who had played major roles in the political-reform discourse as well as in the Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA). During

53. This is not to say that the usual means of getting votes by constituency candidates—vote canvassers (*hua khanaen*) and vote-buying (*sue siang*)—were not employed in this election, or even that they were less important than in previous elections. However, the usual accusations about the dirtiness of elections were muted this time around. Observers probably felt that the implication of such accusations, namely that the outcome of the election was unfair and did not represent the will of the voters, could not be sustained. The party-list vote, in particular, spoke for itself. This means that the expression of political-party or leadership preferences existed only since the election of 2001, based on the constitution of 1997. The broader issue that followed from this election, the protests, the coup, the election of December 2007, and the establishment of the Samak/PPP government had been about the role of elections in the Thai political system and the meaning of Thai-style democracy, especially the question of what should be done if the voters elected the "wrong" representatives, leading to the "wrong" (perhaps even anti-democratic) government—based on the assumption of an unequal distribution of political "enlightenment". Should self-styled groups with "superior" political insight into Thai society be allowed to override electoral decisions by the majority of voters (beyond the usual activities of civil-society advocacy, democratically-designed protests, mass-media reporting, the political opposition and such like)? On the other hand, should "we allow a leader to use the democratic process to destroy the democratic process itself?" (Chang Noi in *The Nation*, April 3, 2006). Who will decide on the occurrence of such a situation by using which informational and value bases? Of course, political ignorance in relation to democracy is an issue that extends beyond the boundaries of Thailand (see Somin 2004).

54. In the Thai context, "public" does not so much refer to a polity-wide differentiated sub-system of politics, but rather to an elite section of the population, certainly in this elite's self-perception. This situation is different from what we might assume to exist in "developed" political systems, namely the existence of different political opinions and currents *within* relatively unified publics that cover the entire political systems. This is an important characteristic of inclusive "mass democracies". Regarding Thailand, it is still assumed, for example, that people in urban and rural areas (to simplify matters) adhere to different models of politics. In footnote 42, I have mentioned Anek (1996). See also LoGerfo (1996), Albritton and Thawilwadee (2003), Nishizaki (2005, 2006), and Walker (2008).

55. One could thus try and use Max Weber's concept of "charisma" for the analysis of aspects of Thaksin's approach to government. This also applies to his TRT party. As Weber pointed out about 100 years ago, charisma as the guiding point of a political party—in contrast to bureaucratized political parties, which might or might not have strong leaders—has more chance of success if that party is an ad-hoc body of position-seeking followers. In that case, the party is not based on any ideology. Rather, it merely uses campaign policies that had specifically been designed with an eye on the opportunities given in an individual election (Weber 1980:669). See also footnote 21.

Thaksin's tenure as prime minister, one might even question why there were still ministers. Their significance had been greatly eroded through frequent cabinet reshuffles and scant media attention.⁵⁶

From a more positive outlook, Thaksin might indeed have achieved some core goals of "political reform", such as creating a strong executive and "rationalizing" parliament by neutralizing rural-based politicians and their "money politics". Thaksin might also have injected more technical and policy competence into government. Ironically, however, this was not mainly achieved by the CDA's constitutional engineering, but rather by a single individual's ambition for centralizing power, his strategic energy, existing connections, networking skills, and practically unlimited financial resources. Perhaps, though, this approach was more in harmony with Thai society's reliance on overlapping personal networks and loyalties, seemingly impervious to the generalized and abstract modes of socio-legal structuring and interaction attributed ideally to western methods of political-administration.⁵⁷

One might well ask how a governing system that depends to such an extent on an individual leader, his personal networks, and his wealth can survive after this leader has left the scene. What will come after this person—and with him all the bonds of loyalty that he created—has departed, after the tender democratic structures have been suppressed, and after the constitutional order has been compromised? As Thaksin's term in office advanced, it did not seem as if TRT had embarked on any course of formal institutionalization. Its future without Thaksin was thus uncertain. Perhaps the many factions making up the TRT would reorganize themselves into separate parties. In this case, Thai politics after Thaksin would return to patterns

56. In comparative perspective, seeing ministers as significant policy-makers might be too idealistic. Even in western parliamentary systems, their actual role might be rather limited. Most ministers under Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair or Helmut Kohl had little room for policy creativity.

57. For a broader theoretical frame of reference concerning the effects of generalized ways of structuring in Thailand see Nelson (2004a). At the time of finishing this paper, news reached me that Fred W. Riggs had died at age 90. He was one of the first scholars who—starting about 50 years ago—systematically dealt with the situation that arises when indigenous social structures, in the process that is now referred to as globalization, meet with formal western models. His core concept was "prismatic society", but in Thai studies, he was better known for his treatment of the Thai political system as a "bureaucratic polity" (Riggs 1964; 1966).

established before Thaksin, specifically, unstable coalition governments without pronounced policy orientations.

Table 4: Initial election results 2007 (number of seats by party and region)

	BKK	Central	North	NE	South	Regions Total	Party Lists	MPs Total
People's Power	9	39	47	101	2	198	34	232
Democrat	27	35	16	5	49	132	33	165
Chart Thai	--	18	6	7	2	33	4	37
Phuea Phaendin	--	1	1	13	3	18	7	25
Ruam Jai Chart Pattana	--	--	2	6	--	8	1	9
Matchimathipattai	--	2	2	3	--	7	--	7
Phracharaj	--	3	1	--	--	4	1	5
TOTAL	36	98	75	135	56	400	80	480

Source: *Matichon*, December 26, 2007.

Note: These figures were subject to slight changes, because the ECT had disqualified a number of candidates and ordered new elections in a number of constituencies.

A scenario quite similar to what has been described here began to play out much earlier than analysts had anticipated.⁵⁸ As briefly elaborated in the introduction to this paper, a number of new political parties did emerge from TRT, even if most of its erstwhile MPs moved seamlessly into the PPP. The result of these parties' competition in the election of December 23, 2007, is given in the table 4 above.

As a result, Thailand now had a coalition government comprising six political parties (all except the Democrats), led by Samak. The dominance once imposed by Thaksin thus gave way to a more unstable arrangement. Samak had no power base of his own in PPP, the core positions of which

58. For the course of events, see Nelson (2005b; 2006a, b; 2007 a, b, c, d; 2008).

were occupied by Thaksin loyalists. Samak's ministers had little reason to be loyal to him personally. Rather, they were embedded in their respective political parties and factions. Moreover, as for the PPP ministers, they too had to be responsive to Thaksin's wishes. At the time of writing, Thaksin was still in exile, while Samak had just started his work as prime minister, struggling to find his own role in order to counter the widespread perception that he was merely a puppet with a second string cabinet. It remained to be seen what would happen if Thaksin returned to Thailand.

As for the Democrats, they had just started to settle in their new position as the leading opposition party. To be more effective in this role, they established a "shadow cabinet". Though the Democrats performed well in the party list balloting in the 2007 election, receiving almost as many votes as PPP did (that is, without adding the figures of Phuea Phaendin and Ruam Jai Chart Pattana to the PPP result), they could not count on the same results in the next contest. If the Democrats performed poorly in opposition, and if the government persisted for some years in office,⁵⁹ the number of party-list votes for the Democrats might well drop. Thus, ways had to be found to make sustainable inroads at the constituency level, especially in the north and the northeast. It would not be an easy task for the party to recruit and develop constituency candidates who had local support bases that were strong enough to unseat a significant number of PPP MPs. Having power and the state budget, the PPP had a clear advantage in presenting achievements to the voters. Though the Democrats contemplated expanding their network of party branches, this undertaking would not only incur high costs, it would also have limited impact if the branches did not perform regular political activities.

How would economic actors, civil society groups, academia, and the mass media react to the government's performance or non-performance? The election in December 2007 returned Thai politics to "normalcy", if this referred to the absence of direct military interference in the political sphere. But it did not return the country to political stability. Rather, uncertainty prevailed.

59. Some observers gave the government only six to twelve months in office.

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