



The Asia Foundation

Press Release For Immediate Release

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ASIA FOUNDATION RELEASES NATIONAL SURVEY: *CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM AND DEMOCRACY IN THAILAND*

SAN FRANCISCO AND BANGKOK — SEPTEMBER 16, 2009 — Today, The Asia Foundation released findings from its first national survey of the Thai electorate. The survey, *Constitutional Reform and Democracy in Thailand: A National Survey of the Thai Electorate*, was conducted through face-to-face interviews with a random, representative sample of 1,500 voters from all regions of the country (except the three southern border provinces) between June 13 and July 5, 2009.

This survey represents the latest in a series of democracy assessments sponsored by the Foundation (these surveys can be found on our website). The primary purpose of the research is to provide lawmakers, politicians, academics, and other stakeholders with information about the Thai publics' opinions and knowledge on issues relevant to the current debate on constitutional reform; and to identify key issues and challenges facing political parties, election administrators, and assistance providers in advance of a potential referendum on constitutional reforms and subsequent General Elections. In addition, to assess the process of democratization in Thailand, the survey sought to measure Thai voters' knowledge of and attitudes towards democracy and democratic institutions.

Key Findings

The National Mood

Thai citizens are rather pessimistic about the direction of the country, with less than a third saying the country is moving in the right direction. The most common reasons for thinking the country is headed in the wrong direction were bad economy, lack of development, poverty or unemployment (41%) and the recent political conflicts and demonstrations, were cited by 11%. Similarly, when asked about the biggest problem facing Thailand, 60% cited economic concerns, with another 24% mentioning political conflict. Pessimism is not surprising, as two-thirds (67%) say their personal economic situation has gotten worse or much worse in the last two years. Regardless of economic concerns, a small majority (53%) say they are fairly or very satisfied with the job the government is doing.

Amending the Constitution

Thais are evenly split between those who believe constitutional amendment could reduce conflict (45%), and those who think it might exacerbate conflict (45%). In total, 53% of the population says they want constitutional reform or a new constitution, while 28% are happy with the current constitution.

When asked how the Constitution should be amended, 67% say amendment should be drafted through a participatory process that involves ordinary citizens; 10% say amendment should be done by Parliament alone, and 16% thought changes should be drafted by a committee of experts. Regardless of method of amendment, an overwhelming majority (84%) believes that a new or revised constitution should be ratified through a referendum. Regarding the timing of elections, 53% think elections should be called before the end of the current term—with respondents split as to whether the elections should occur as soon as possible (23%) or after reforms have been made (30%)—while 43% favor waiting until the term of the current government expires.

Election Reform Issues

Most Thais across the political spectrum reject impunity for powerful people, even if it means an increase in political conflict. Only one in five (21%) think politicians convicted of crimes should be pardoned, and 57% would support revoking the pardons granted by the military coup-makers in the 2007 constitution.

Thais feel their interests in government are better represented through elections than appointments, and express the desire to be more involved in the political process. Only a quarter of citizens (25%) support the shift from an elected senate to a partially appointed senate mandated in the 2007 constitution; 63% say they prefer the system described in the 1997 constitution, and 6% want to eliminate the Senate entirely. Additionally three-quarters (74%) reject the proposal to reduce the number of directly elected MPs and replace them with MPs selected by functional groups or independent institutions. When asked about the most appropriate system for electing MPs to Parliament, half (50%) of the respondents opted for the current mixed system, with 45% preferring smaller single member districts; and 54% would drop the party-list system in favor of single member districts.

Decentralization

A substantial majority (69%) of respondents are in favor of shifting some power from the national to the local level, and directly electing provincial governors. When asked specifically, 75% say they prefer choosing their own governor through direct elections. In those places that already have elected governors, voters liked their governors twice as much as residents of provinces with appointed governors.

Democracy in Thailand

Thais have a deep and nuanced understanding of democracy. When asked about the characteristics of a democracy, almost half (48%) describe democracy in terms of rights or freedoms, and more than a third (36%) associates democracy with participation, elections, and majority rule. Just 9% could not provide any characteristic of a democracy, the lowest rate we have ever recorded on this question. A strong majority of Thai voters (68%) recognize that political conflict is a normal part of the democratic process, and that it can be difficult to come to consensus or make decisions, but still overwhelmingly support democracy (95%) as the best form of government.

Democratic Values

The Thai people are significantly more politically tolerant than the publics in other Asian countries; 79% would allow meetings of unpopular parties in their area, just 6% said that a friend joining an unpopular party would end the friendship. Additionally 80% of Thais say people are free to express their political opinions.

Political Interest and Efficacy

Almost three-quarters (71%) say they are somewhat or very interested in politics, which is high by regional standards. The political turmoil of the last three years has not turned off voters, with 83% saying their interest has grown or stayed the same, while just 17% said their interest had decreased. Thais are divided on their opinion as to whether or not the government cares what they think, with (55%) believing the government does not care, and (43%) believing it does. When asked specifically if their opinion could influence government decision-making, 80% said it would have very little or no influence on government decision-making; and just a third (33%) believed their MP addressed their major concerns in Parliament.

Influences on Voting Choice

The most important factor influencing voters' choice of candidate is the candidate's availability and accessibility (50%), followed by candidates' education (17%), and personal achievements (10%). In choosing a party, 57% say the past history or accomplishments of the party were most important, 22% preferred the current plans of the party, and 19% would choose based on the character and accomplishments of the party's leaders.

Although it is commonly asserted that local leaders have strong influence over voters, just 16% said following the voting recommendations of local leaders makes sense. Similarly, just 10% felt family members choice should be influenced by the opinion of the head of household. Religion has little influence on voter choice: 90% say religious leaders should avoid politics, and 91% say the political recommendations of religious leaders would have little or no influence on their candidate or party choice.

Election Processes

Although a majority of Thais (58%) believe voters in their area could be influenced by vote-buying activity, an overwhelming majority (84%) feel there is no moral obligation to vote for a party or candidate, even if they had accepted money or a gift.

Democratic Institutions

The courts have by far the highest integrity rating among institutions rated, with two-thirds (64%) assessing them positively, while the police are seen as the least trusted institution, with 39% ranking their integrity as low or very low. The army has the second highest positive rating at 44%. Only 35% gave the election commission high marks, and just 21% felt the media has high integrity.

Most voters also doubt the independence and neutrality of Thailand's democratic institutions. Although the courts are again the most respected institution, only 62% said they are generally neutral and unbiased; while just 37% believe the army is neutral and unbiased, and just a fifth (19%) felt NGOs were neutral and unbiased. Two-thirds (67%) see the election commission as sometimes or often biased, 81% view the media as biased, and 84% see political bias in the police.

The lack of trust in institutions is reflected in other ways. Half (48%) of all voters believe future elections will not be free and fair, and an astonishing 94% say corruption in government is at least fairly common, with 65% thinking it very common. Regarding corruption among local administrative officials, perceptions are split, with 48% saying it is often necessary to pay bribes for routine services and 26% saying they had personally known someone that had to pay a bribe.

The full survey is available on The Asia Foundation's website (www.asiafoundation.org).

About The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation is a non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region. The Foundation supports programs in Asia that help improve governance, law, and civil society; women's empowerment; economic reform and development; and international relations. Drawing on more than 50 years of experience in Asia, the Foundation collaborates with private and public partners to support leadership and institutional development, exchanges, and policy research.

With offices throughout Asia, an office in Washington, D.C., and its headquarters in San Francisco, the Foundation addresses these issues on both a country and regional level. In 2008, the Foundation provided more than \$87 million in program support and distributed over one million books and educational materials valued at \$41 million throughout Asia. For more information, please visit www.asiafoundation.org.