

Thailand election: Orange sway turns the impossible into the inevitable

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A woman prepares to cast her ballot at a polling station during Thailand's general election in Bangkok on May 14. (AFP/Manan Vatsyayana)[/caption]

For months, predictions have been made of the possible change-making results of the general election held in Thailand on May 14. The common conviction of pundits of different faiths as well as of the majority of ordinary citizens was that the voters may challenge the unpopular leadership of Prayut Chan-o-cha. The former general seized power almost a decade ago with a coup that installed the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) military government in 2014 and was appointed as prime minister in 2019 following a heavily rigged election in favor of the pro-army parties.

The power seizure was just the last of a series of coups interrupted by shaky returns to democracy, the first initiated in 2006 to oust populist prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra – a billionaire tycoon admired for his pro-poor policies, especially among the rural population in Northern Thailand, who left into exile to avoid a raft of corruption charges. Whether at the time there was a surprising level of collective acceptance for the undemocratic turn of events in Thai society, misgovernance, economic woes and growing human rights abuses coupled with a higher degree of political acumen, especially among the young generation, have gradually led to widespread rejection of the military-aligned rule.

While the extent of such sentiment is difficult to measure, polls inevitably forecasted the loss of the incumbent. There was also agreement that of the two main opposition parties, identified in color codes as red for the Pheu Thai Party and orange for the Move Forward

Party (MFP), it would be the former headed by Thaksin's daughter Paetongtarn Shinawatra that would take the lead due to its loyal supporters and welcome promise of more pro-poor policies. The MFP, the de facto successor of the junta-dismantled Future Forward Party, although extremely popular among urban youth was considered only as a potential second. This in spite of it gaining poll and media attention for the energized campaign of its charismatic leaders, both party head Pita Limjaroenrat and the movement initiator Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit (himself banned from seeking electoral posts for 10 years due to misuse of electoral law) and a score of highly motivated candidates who went door-to-door to engage voters.

As the argument went, the majority of the older Thai population would be weary of the party's more radical agenda, including the abolishment of military conscription and the reform of the *lèse-majesté* provision under Article 112 of the penal code. Talks centered thus on the probability of Pheu Thai obtaining a landslide victory that would result in a large majority of parliamentarians (375 out of the 500-seat lower house) surpassing the vote of the military-appointed 250-member Senate in electing a prime minister. If that could not be achieved, a coalition would have to be formed with parties palatable to the regime. As the count was happening and voting trends were taking shape, well-known political scientist Thitinan Pongsudhirak of Chulalongkorn University reiterated on the public TV station Thai PBS World the view that Pheu Thai would win by a large number and the MFP, although a close second, may not even be included in the coalition.

He stressed that it may even be a blessing in disguise for the MFP because to be in government could force it to compromise and weaken its agenda, displeasing its electorate. But voters decided otherwise and made it clear that they demanded real, substantial and immediate change. A day after the election, on Monday, the Election Commission confirmed that with the count completed and the highest voter turnout on record of 75.2 percent of the eligible voters, the MFP had attained the largest total number of seats in the mixed electoral system (112 constituency and 39 party list seats), trailed closely by Pheu Thai Party (112 constituency and 29 party list seats). The two opposition parties together have therefore a majority of 292 seats, allowing them control of the parliament, but do not yet have a final say on the next prime minister.

In third place is the Bhumjaithai Party of the current public health minister who gained popularity because of his marijuana liberalization policy for medical purposes, which according to the opposition parties is a screen for entertainment usage as manifest from the many "dispensaries" that have sprung up all over Thailand. Only in fourth and fifth place were the parties of the two "uncles", a nickname for elderly politicians with entrenched authoritarian and patronage systems, Palang Pracharath of the incumbent's ally Prawit Wongsuwon followed by the United Thai Nation Party of Prayut Chan-o-cha himself. Jubilation and surprise at the unexpected orange revolution caught social media, with netizens posting orange images and tangerine references. Seizing the moment, Pita promptly declared himself ready to serve as prime minister, stressing that he had the people's mandate.

Again, defying predictions, in a few hours he had formed a coalition with Pheu Thai and four other small parties not tainted by association with the current government, and held a festive victory parade in Bangkok, where 32 out of 33 constituency seats went to the MFP to thank the orange-clad crowd for their votes. The wind of change is felt across the country, with the victorious party confirming that the coalition will proceed with its agenda without backing from its most establishment-challenging components. There is hope also for junta-oppressed

Myanmar, with the promise of opening a much-awaited humanitarian corridor. Amid the high hopes for a new Thailand, and in spite of the united opposition front, pundits are again returning to their risk-averse mantra that the MFP will not be allowed to govern. That the coalition's 309 seats are still not sufficient to overcome the Senate's vote.

Some half-jokingly stress that it will take a first compromise on marijuana, to bring the third party on board in order to bypass the Senate. Not to talk of a stalemate that would enable the current prime minister to remain as caretaker, among plenty of rumors of a coup as a last resort. The hurdles are indeed gigantic, but the majority trust in the power of the orange revolution to continue to turn the "impossible" into the "inevitable". And as Thammasat lecturer Charlie Thame summed up yesterday on his Twitter: "For all the conjectures about what comes next, today is a good day!"

*** The writer is director of SEA Junction, emeritus Asia regional director of the International Development Research Center (IDRC) and the Rockefeller Foundation, and senior adviser to Australian Aid in Indonesia. The views expressed are her own.

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