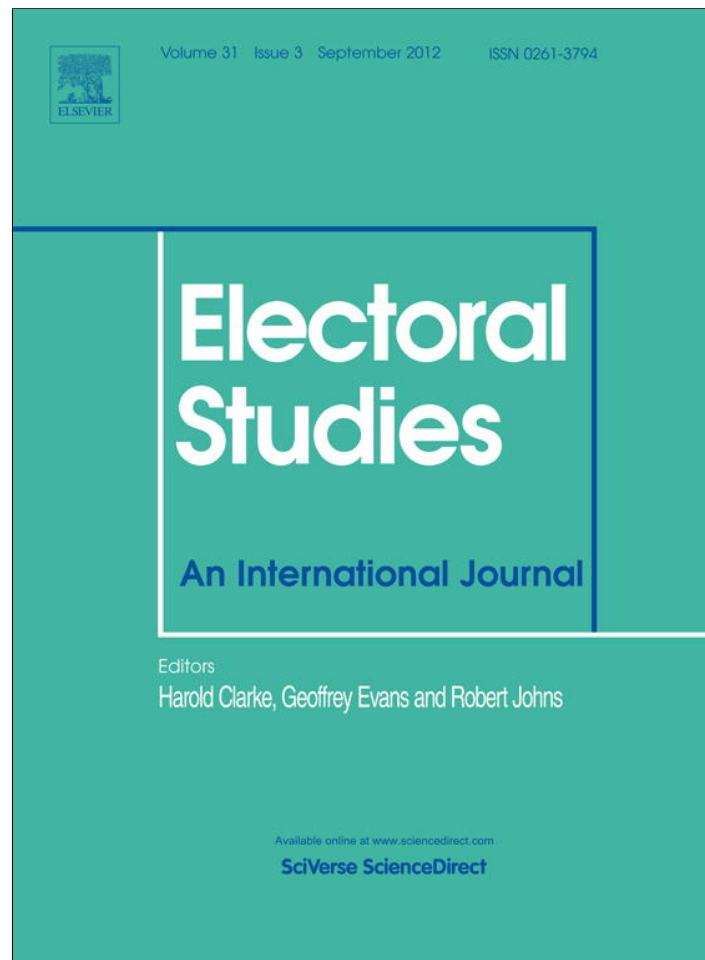


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# Parliamentary elections in Thailand, July 2011

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## 1. Background

Since 2006, Thailand's politics has been polarised by intense divisions and violence to a point where, at various junctures, the government of the day was left paralysed. At the centre of Thailand's political tensions is the country's former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a coup in 2006. Thaksin came to power by capturing the support of Thailand's rural masses, especially from the north and northeast of the country, through his populist policies, but he was highly unpopular with segments of the urban middle class and in the south more generally. These are simplistic categorizations as some of the middle class do support Thaksin. However, the intricacies of the conflict are beyond the scope of this article and better explained elsewhere (Prasirtsuk, 2010). Political tensions have also manifested into the form of two mass movements: the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), also known as "red shirts", a pro-Thaksin Shinawatra group with strong connections with the Pheu Thai Party; and the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), the "yellow shirts", a group formerly aligned with the Democrat Party.<sup>1</sup> Depending on which side is in power, the two groups have taken turns in disrupting the functioning of the government of the day. The scale and level of organisation surpass those of any protests in the past. Communication outlets such as community radios, satellite TV, and text messaging have all played a role in these protests. "Phone-ins" or televised speeches have enabled Thaksin, who is currently in exile, to keep his presence very much alive amongst the red shirt supporters. The money, resources, power and influence available to both sides have contributed to prolonging Thailand's political crisis. As both sides are prepared to do almost anything to outdo the other, Thailand's political system has reached a point of stalemate.

## 2. Electoral system

Thailand's general election took place on 3 July 2011 after the Democrat Party-led coalition, partly in response to political pressure, dissolved parliament early in May 2011. Before departing, the Democrat government made a few amendments to the mixed-member majoritarian electoral system that was used in the previous 2007 election. The majoritarian element was switched from multi-member to single-member constituencies. This element was also reduced in size, the number of constituency seats falling from 400 to 375, with an increase in the closed-list proportional representation element from 80 seats to 125 seats.

## 3. Campaign

Because of the violence between March and May 2010 that left 92 people dead and nearly 2000 injured (ICG, 2011), most of the political parties used their 2011 campaigns to emphasise reconciliation. However, there was not much substance behind this. Another theme that dominated the campaign trail was populist platforms. Redistributive initiatives such as raising the minimum wage, subsidized universal healthcare and microcredit were offered to Thailand's rural poor.

Opinion polls conducted throughout May and until the third week of June<sup>2</sup> showed the Democrats lagging behind Pheu Thai. Based on data between 4 and 18 June, Suan Dusit Poll suggested that 52 per cent of respondents would vote for Pheu Thai, while 34 per cent would vote for the Democrats (Bangkok Post, 2011a). Once translated into parliamentary seats, this meant that Pheu Thai would win 260 and the Democrats 170 seats. In a last-ditch attempt to close this gap, the Democrats decided to hold one of their final campaign rallies on 21 June at Rajprasong intersection. This was the scene of the red shirt protests between March and May 2010. At this rally, the party vowed to "tell the truth about what really happened" during the period of protests, although what they said was nothing new. The

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly, the Democrats and PAD were aligned in a campaign to oust Thaksin. It was in late 2010 when a rift began to show between the two.

<sup>2</sup> The Office of the Election Commission of Thailand barred the publication of opinion polls one week prior to the election.

Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva justified the party's decision to illustrate that the Rajprasong area was open to all, but critics slammed the move as a cheap ploy to woo the electorate through negative campaigning (Bangkok Post, 2011b). The choice of venue certainly looked to be about highlighting the negative images of the red shirts that occurred a year ago, rather than talking about policies or reconciliation.

As polling day came closer, the campaign could not be described as either intense or suspenseful. Based on the opinion polls, the key question was whether Pheu Thai would get an overall majority. On the other hand, much optimism was shown by Suthep Thuagsuban, the secretary-general of the Democrats, that the party could still form a government if they locked in their coalition partners with a firm alliance. This turned out to be fanciful.

#### 4. Results

By the evening of polling day, Yingluck Shinawatra, Pheu Thai's candidate for Prime Minister, stood calmly before greeting and thanking her supporters with a 'wai' (a Thai gesture of respect), and claiming victory in the election. As expected, Pheu Thai topped the polls on 3 July by winning a total of 265 out of the 500 seats in the House of Representatives (Table 1). The party easily retained its strongholds in the Northeast and the North where it won a total of 101 and 49 seats respectively. With the largest population in Thailand and thus the largest number of MPs, the Northeast region has long been a deciding factor in Thailand's elections. The Democrats came a clear second in the electoral race, with a total of 159 seats. The party retained its stranglehold in the south of Thailand. While the party kept its grip on Bangkok, its support there slightly decreased from the 2007 elections. The main loser of the elections was Bhumjaithai Party which had defected from the People's Power Party (what is now Pheu Thai). That defection had ultimately brought down the Pheu Thai-led government, the winner of the previous 2007 elections, and ushered in the Democrat-led government in December 2008. It was because of the defection, the party lost two seats in its stronghold of Buriram. This is surprising considering that during the Democrat-led government; the

party controlled the Interior Ministry. Other small and medium-sized parties did not fare too well having lost some of their support to Pheu Thai. Voter turnout was 75% and invalid votes amounted to 4.9% (Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, 2011). Abstention increased compared to the previous 2007 election in which turnout had been 85% (although invalid votes were also higher, at 6.5%). The decline in voter participation was most likely due to parts of the electorate wearying of Thailand's polarized politics.

Independent watchdogs such as the Asian Network for Free Elections (Anfrel, 2011) have expressed that, despite some flaws, the Thai elections went well on the whole. The European Union (2011) also endorsed the conduct of the elections. However, when it came to announcing the results, the Election Commission was heavily criticised for delaying the official endorsement of victorious MPs. According to the Constitution, the Election Commission is required to endorse 95% (i.e. 475) of the 500 parliamentary seats by 30 days after the election. At the eleventh hour, the Election Commission decided to endorse Jatuporn Prompan, a prominent red shirt leader who had been detained on *lese majeste* charges. Furthermore, two MPs who had been handed yellow cards for vote buying then won rerun elections and regained their status as winners. Another victory in one of Thailand's southern regions was also re-confirmed after a recount.

What contributed to Pheu Thai's electoral success? Traditionally, the party has geared its policies towards Thailand's rural population including anti-poverty programmes, subsidized universal healthcare and microcredit, to name just a few. In this election, Pheu Thai campaigned to raise the minimum wage to 300 baht (US\$10) a day nationwide, an increase of between thirty and fifty per cent from the previous levels, to hand out computer tablets to eight-year-old school children, to guarantee a minimum price of 15,000 baht (US\$500) per tonne for rice farmers via the new government's mortgage scheme, and to guarantee the minimum wage of 15,000 baht (US\$500) for university graduates. Yingluck also promised to build ten new Sky-trains and subway mass transit lines and to reduce the fares to 20 baht (under US\$1) per trip (The Nation, 2011). Support therefore came not only from the party's

**Table 1**  
Results of the parliamentary election in Thailand, 3 July 2011.

Party	Party list votes (%)	Party list seats	Constituency seats	Total seats	Seats (%)
Pheu Thai	48.4	61	204	265	53.0
Democrat	35.2	44	115	159	31.8
Bhumjaithai	3.9	5	29	34	6.8
Chartthaipattana	2.8	4	15	19	3.8
Chart Pattana Phea Pandin	1.5	2	5	7	1.4
Palang Chon	0.6	1	6	7	1.4
Rak Thailand	3.1	4	0	4	0.8
Matubhum	0.8	1	1	2	0.4
RakSanti	0.9	1	0	1	0.2
Mahachon	0.4	1	0	1	0.2
New Democracy	0.4	1	0	1	0.2
Other parties	2.1	0	0	0	0.0
Total	100.0	125	375	500	100

Source: The Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, <http://www2.ect.go.th/home.php%3fProvince%3dmp54>, (accessed 16.08.11).

strongholds but also from the desire for Thaksin to come back and kickstart the economy.

Second, there was the ‘Yingluck’ factor. The fact that Pheu Thai had endorsed a smart, modern successful career woman had a bearing on its electoral success. Having spent most of her life managing one of the family’s businesses, she is not tainted with a bad past or corruption scandals. Though clearly a puppet of her brother, Thaksin, as well as a novice in politics, on the whole she is a likable figure though it has yet to be seen how she is going to manage her administration.

In contrast, the Democrats polled poorly despite the advantage as the incumbents. Their performance in office for the past two years has been disappointing and the administration seemed gravely out of touch with Thailand’s rural population. Furthermore, among those who sympathize with the red shirts, there is much resentment against the Democrat-led government’s heavy-handed suppression of the red shirt protests in spring 2010. On the other hand, those who oppose the red shirts often regarded the government’s response to those rallies as having been too slow and too lenient. The protests paralysed Rajprasong, Bangkok’s main commercial area, for three months costing businesses an estimated 200–500 million baht (US\$6–16 million) per day (Netrhin, 2011).

The Democrats’ strongholds remain the middle class urban areas like Bangkok and the affluent South, and the party has always fared poorly in the North and Northeast of the country. As a result, the Democrats have not won an election since September 1992, and their last convincing win was back in 1986. The Democrats are widely seen as unaware of the needs of ordinary people. As noted by one Thai political scientist: ‘People in the North and the Northeast do not “hate” the Democrats, it’s just that the party does not know how to pick the right candidates and communicate with this demographic’ (Noksuan-Sawadee quoted in Bangkok Post, 2011c).

## 5. Government formation

Although Pheu Thai won a decisive victory with enough seats to form a single-party government, the party opted to form a coalition with five additional smaller parties, taking the government’s parliamentary representation up to 300 MPs. This move was partly to illustrate that Pheu Thai did not want to seem unwilling to work with other parties. It also ensured that the party would still have the basis for leading the government even were the Election Commission to disqualify any of its MPs.

Several considerations influenced the making of Yingluck’s new government. Firstly, there are her family members. It was not only her brother, Thaksin, who had a say in allocating cabinet positions but also his former wife, Potjaman na Pompejra, and Yingluck’s sister, Yao-wapa Wongsawat. Secondly, Pheu Thai MPs from the Northeast were keen to remind the party of their important contribution to the party’s electoral victory. Media sources suggest that they initially demanded eight cabinet posts; however, this was reduced to six following the nomination of northeastern MPs as the house speaker and his deputy (Bangkok Post, 2011d). Lastly, there were the

coalition partners. However, due to the sheer number of elected Pheu Thai MPs, the coalition partners had very little to bargain with.

The finalised cabinet contained a small number of capable figures and a larger number of politicians closely connected with Thaksin. The more experienced figures include the former president of the Stock Exchange of Thailand, Kittiratt Na Ranong, and Secretary-General of the Securities and Exchange Commission, Thirachai Bhuwanatnaranuban. These two were asked to head up the Commerce and Finance Ministries respectively, posts for which their credentials were unquestionable. On the other hand, the appointment of Pheu Thai MP Surapong Tow-ijakchaikul as Foreign Minister triggered criticism – a relative of Thaksin, he lacked any experience in international affairs. Despite the red shirts’ role in supporting Pheu Thai, they were not rewarded with any ministerial posts, although some were given advisory positions in various ministries.

## 6. Outlook

Challenges lay ahead for Yingluck’s government. Keeping those policy promises to the rural electorate that brought her to power will be key to her political survival. There has been much talk and debate about raising the 300 baht (US\$10) daily wage. On one hand, her key supporters are expecting her follow through her promises. On the other, businesses and academics are voicing their concern that this may result in inflation and lay-offs.

Another potentially difficult issue is that of her brother, Thaksin Shinawatra. He was sentenced in absentia to two years in jail for abusing his authority as prime minister by helping his wife purchase a piece of government-owned land in a lucrative downtown area. Within just one month of taking office, the government is pressing ahead with a campaign to rehabilitate Thaksin. One option was to ask the Supreme Court to review Thaksin’s case. However, Thanapich Mulapruek, spokesman for the Office of the Attorney-General, has already said this option may be unlikely as a review is usually ordered in light of new evidence (Bangkok Post, 2011f). There is also the issue of his passport. Even before the elections, Thaksin indicated his desire to come back to Thailand in time for his elder daughter’s wedding due at the end of the year. Many of his supporters would like to see his return; however, it is clearly a divisive issue for many Thais. His passport was revoked after he failed to appeal his sentence at the Supreme Court under the previous Democrat government. Re-issuing Thaksin’s passport is thus key to his potential rehabilitation and return and the public will be closely watching whether Foreign Minister Surapong will take that step. Within a week of taking up his post, Surapong had already sought a request from Japan to allow Thaksin special entry to visit Tokyo and the Miyagi Prefecture, the area stricken by the earthquake and tsunami in March (Japan Times Online, 2011).

In what many perceive as another move to ensure Thaksin’s return, the government has also announced that it will amend the Constitution. The aim is to discard Article 309 which protects the actions of the 2006 junta.

Most importantly, it includes those actions that led to the persecution and conviction of Thaksin. In an ABAC poll conducted in mid-August 2011, 53 per cent of respondents expressed concern that amending the Constitution could result in more conflict and violence (Bangkok Post, 2011e).

Relations with the military will be another important factor influencing how long Yingluck stays. After all, it was the military that, along with Thailand's courts, brought down her brother's backed government in 2006 via a coup. Rumours suggest that Pheu Thai have struck a deal with the military (Crispin, 2011); however, these rumours have yet to be substantiated. Defense Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha has reassured the public that the army will not intervene in politics (Sullivan, 2011). Though history suggests scepticism on that front, some analysts suggest times may genuinely have changed.

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## The parliamentary elections in Croatia, December 2011

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### 1. Background

The parliamentary elections on 4 December 2011 were held on schedule at the end of a full parliamentary term. However, political events during that four-year term were anything but 'business as usual'. Prime Minister Ivo Sanader,