

After Thaksin's avalanche

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In December 2003, Thaksin Shinawatra promised he would win Thailand's next election by an "avalanche." On 6 February, the boulders tumbled down. His Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party won 61 percent of the vote and 377 of the 500 seats.

This overwhelming electoral majority makes Thaksin more powerful than any leader in Thailand's post-military era. Several things about the way Thaksin won are also important for understanding what this result will mean.

First, it was very much a personal victory. Thaksin dominated the party's campaign. He asked people not to vote for particular candidates, but to vote for him to be prime minister. His speeches boasted what *he* had done in the past four years and what *he* would do in the next four, with no sign of the rest of his government. Far more than ever before, people voted by party rather than for local reasons. Even among those who voted for a non-TRT candidate in their constituency, many chose Thaksin and TRT on the party list (a vote by party which decides the allocation of 100 seats). The result is both a big mandate and a big personal mandate.

Second, most of the local politicians who have dominated Thai politics for the last two decades are now inside TRT. Although Thaksin now has 129 more MPs than after the 2001 polls, not many of these are new faces. His 310 constituency MPs include 177 sitting TRT MPs, another 45 acquired by the merger of three parties, 21 more defectors from other parties, 11 who had been MPs before 2001, and 9 sons and daughters "inheriting" the seat from a sitting MP.

TRT has become like a magnet. The party is now a meeting place for the big corporate interests clustered around Thaksin, and the local businessmen – especially construction contractors – who dominate Thailand's provincial politics.

Third, in his speeches on the campaign stump, Thaksin presented voters with a view of how Thailand ought to be run. He claimed he is committed to the people and can get things done because he works hard and has business skills. He appealed to voters to give him a huge majority so he could overcome obstacles like the parliamentary opposition, torpid bureaucrats, yattering academics, and others of little faith. He argued that "destructive politics", meaning the competitive model of plural democracy, was a western import, wrong for Thailand, and due for abolition. He assured voters that he himself is "the fount of democracy."

Thaksin worries those who believe in liberal democracy because he clearly does not.

His politics have changed greatly over the past five years. He has become more populist over time as he has realized the potential of public support. Over the recent past, Thai political analysts have tended to concentrate on the aspirations of the country's new middle class. They have ignored the fact that around two-thirds of the population are still

in smallholder farming or the informal sector of the cities – working in mom-and-pop stores, street-vending, markets, bars, construction sites, small factories, domestic service, and so on. Such people do not form a coherent political lobby, but their numbers are critical in elections. Thaksin has tapped this huge passive force.

He appeals to these people by offering social schemes like cheap health care which are available to all, not just those in formal employment. Such measures are especially attractive to this big informal population. He put a perspex postbox outside Government House so any citizen could petition the prime minister, bypassing the bureaucrats who have lorded it over the little people.

He also appeals to them by being a lot more open and “real” than earlier politicians. He used to appear mainly in his business suit, but more and more he favors shirtsleeves, with buttons undone, and his hair a bit disheveled. He used to lard his speeches with English words and business jargon, but now is more likely to use dialect, colloquial jokes, and asides on his own family and sex life.

Finally, he appeals to them by rubbishing everything to do with the “old politics” from which these people got very little. He makes fun of the Democrat Party precisely for being Thailand’s oldest party. He dismisses academics as “all talk and no action.” He boasts to the crowds on the campaign trail that he needs no help from intellectuals and experts. He has become steadily more aggressive towards old institutions and old public figures because he finds this increases his popularity.

With this mentality and with the immense power conferred by the electoral mandate, he is going to rewrite Thailand’s constitution. He will not try redrafting the document because that would provoke too much controversy. But he will change the rules, introduce new practices, and shift the real location of power.

This process is already under way, but now will accelerate. Over Thaksin’s first term, the “independent bodies” created by Thailand’s 1997 constitution to serve as checks-and-balances on the executive were neutralized one by one. Mainly this was done by carefully managing the appointment of their members, especially in the Constitutional Court, National Counter Corruption Commission, and Election Commission.

Now, parliament too will fade in importance. Over the last couple of years, the prime minister rarely attended the house except for major occasions, sessions were regularly abandoned for lack of quorum, and government passed several critical measures by executive decree rather than legislation. After this election, the opposition has less than the 125 MPs needed to call for a no-confidence debate on any minister. Over the last twenty years, such debates had become the major format for opposition scrutiny of the executive. Now the opposition will find it difficult to create an alternative. Ironically, this parliamentary election has resulted in parliament becoming marginalized

Over the last four years, a group in the senate, though a small minority, used the prestige of their position to challenge and question the executive in public. Elections for a new senate will take place in early 2006. Probably the government will exert subtle pressures to prevent the return of some obvious critics.

The executive is going to become much stronger. Indeed, the rule changes are already under way. Behind the smokescreen thrown up by the elections, the cabinet crafted a decree which reduces the quorum for cabinet to one third, and allows the prime minister to hold an emergency meeting with only one other minister. The cabinet

secretary gave assurances that the emergency provision would be used “on behalf of the people.”

Other similar rule changes are in process. Thaksin’s people say these will increase the executive’s efficiency, but undoubtedly they do so by increasing executive power. The government has also introduced a provision for designating areas as Special Economic Zones in which the prime minister’s writ will replace many of the laws of the land. Critics fear this will be used to overcome environmental laws and constitutional provisions which local people have begun to deploy to resist governmental authority.

The increase in executive power is also a matter of people and institutions. The 1997 constitution increased the prime minister’s power within cabinet, and Thaksin is taking this further by the way he uses appointments. His new cabinet includes more people who are tied to him personally rather than having their own political base. Notable is Thanong Bidaya, now commerce minister, who was Thaksin’s banker in his early business years and later an executive of Thaksin’s companies. There are also four personal aides, two other business friends, a classmate from the police academy, and a family doctor among the 35 ministers. Unprecedentedly, only six are MPs.

Similarly, government agencies that used to be independent have become more poodle-like. A clear example occurred after the tsunami, when speculation about the economic impact threatened to reduce international confidence in Thailand. The NESDB, the old planning board, headed by a recent Thaksin appointee, announced that the tsunami’s destruction would actually *increase* the GDP growth rate.

Thaksin is also blurring the distinction between the ruling party and the state apparatus. Early in his first term, his aides began to assemble a database on the political affiliation of all local officials, presumably to guide promotions and appointments. In the recent election campaign, Thaksin made extensive use of government machinery. Several months earlier, he toured around every province, dishing out promises of government spending on local projects. He launched the TRT’s election campaign at an event portrayed as a celebration of the government’s achievements, paid for by public money with crowds bussed in from the provinces. The state-owned electronic media gave much more prominence to Thaksin and TRT than other parties during the election campaign.

This trend too will intensify. Immediately after the poll result, Thaksin announced that provinces which had voted heavily for TRT would be rewarded in the allocation of government spending. This, he explained, was a matter of gratitude. In Thailand’s old political culture, a patron must always look after his own people first. This principle is now being elevated to national policy.

Thaksin will also try to give his party more institutional strength. TRT has signed up 14 million members (out of Thailand 65 million population), mostly by techniques based on pyramid selling. By the next general election, Thaksin promises that the local party units would select election candidates by something like primary elections. Presumably the plan is for TRT to house the political system, rather like Japan’s LDP or Malaysia’s UMNO.

Thailand now has an effective one-party state with some distinctly presidential touches. Thaksin told his campaign audiences that he expects to remain premier another eight years, and that TRT will dominate Thai politics for much longer. The opposition Democrat Party, he quipped, is “closed down for repairs.”

At the election, the Democrats defended their stronghold in the south very well. But elsewhere, the party was reduced to insignificance. The party has a new core with its newly chosen leader Abhisit Vejjavijja and two young business figures from the capital. But as long as the party remains confined to the small southern region and a segment of the Bangkok middle class, it will never offer a serious threat. Thaksin transformed himself to appeal to Thailand's passive mass. The Democrats will have to do the same thing.

The main threat to Thaksin may be more internal than external – in the possibility of conflict between the two key elements of his politics – the businessmen clustered around the central party, and the poor mass which are his electoral base.

On the stump, Thaksin promised the grassroots voters the earth and a couple of other planets – more debt windows, more village funds, better healthcare, new education funding, a national water grid, free cows, and social provisions from cradle to old age. He also promised the business sector he would keep the economy growing and introduce a massive slew of infrastructure projects. In total these promises run far beyond the capacity of the national budget. He told people not to worry about the funding because he can “turn paper into cash.” In reality, he will sell off state enterprises, securitize various government assets, try to legalize casinos so they can be taxed, increase off-budget financing, and borrow from future government revenues. He will also need to keep the economy on an even keel so he can tap international finance markets for some of what he needs.

But finding the resources to please both sides will always be a strain. At some point, the businessmen may start to question whether the populist schemes are too costly, and insist the money is spent in ways that would more directly benefit them. The grassroots voters have had their expectations jacked up high, and will detect any wavering of commitment.

As long as the economy barrels along, this balancing act may be manageable. But if the economy slows, the conflict will rapidly emerge.

Thaksin's regime now looks a bit like the one-party states which have long existed to Thailand's south in Malaysia and Singapore. It also looks a bit like the populist regimes of Latin America where personalized leaders denigrate and dismantle old political institutions. Thaksin is moving away from the model of liberal, plural democracy which has been the template for Thailand's constitutions. The key political institutions are now the party, the inner coterie, and especially the premier himself. Checks and balances, human rights, critical scrutiny, and parliamentary opposition are discarded as barriers to realisation of the leader's ambitious vision. With this new electoral mandate, Thaksin is in a position to change Thailand's politics in a structural way. He claims his remodelled state will enable him to make the economy zoom, overhaul the education system, and bring the last 7 million out of poverty. For Thaksin, his new authority is a huge responsibility. For everyone else, it's a huge risk.