

Democracy strikes back: Lessons from Thailand



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COMMENT The landslide victory of Thailand's Pheu Thai (PT) in Sunday's parliamentary election reflects broader trends that are affecting South-East Asia, including Malaysia. The Thai people in a clear mandate signalled that they wanted better and fairer governance and overwhelmingly rejected the authoritarian rule of Abhisit Vejjajiva's Democrat Party.

It is important to understand that Abhisit was in office through a coup and what many perceive to be unfair decisions by the courts and anti-corruption bodies, similar to what had taken place in Perak.

Thailand's election on Sunday sent a clear message repudiating the 2006 military coup and rejecting the increasingly draconian steps in Thailand that included banning of Twitter on election day, crackdowns on peaceful protest, arrests for commenting on the monarchy, and banning of radio stations.

While Thailand remains divided between the reds in the rural areas and yellows concentrated in Bangkok, and considerable uncertainty surrounds the role of the military, the royal transition and the return of Thaksin Shinawatra, the election is seen as minimally a step toward reconciliation and people's power.

Important lessons

As such, Thailand's election is a watershed event for democracy in the region. Given the close proximity of Thailand to Malaysia and the close personal ties between former Thai prime minister Abhisit and Malaysia's Premier Najib Abdul Razak, it is important to flesh out some of the important lessons in Sunday's vote.

1. Anti-democratic crackdowns haunt leaders: Despite the Democrats winning most of the seats in Bangkok, a large share of the votes went to PT. Throughout Bangkok, posters of Abhisit were mutilated and many were torn down altogether as anger over the killings in May 2010 and subsequent arrests for peaceful protest remained. When leaders cross the boundaries of civility, voters remember.



Malaysia is not immune to this phenomenon as well, as many voters recall the raising of the kris at the 2005 Umno general assembly and the Hindraf crackdown, to name but a few examples.

South-East Asians have long memories. One has to look to the Khmer Rouge trials under way in Cambodia to know that calls for justice when injustice has occurred survive. The vote in Thailand sent a clear signal that crossing red lines - literally shooting on red protestors

and killing an estimated 90 people after intimidation - is not acceptable.

2. Party image counts: The image and behaviour of political parties can overshadow individual leaders. The Democrat Party under Abhisit worked hard to garner support. It spent more money on populist policies than Thaksin's government, and was earnest in the outreach efforts. Yet, the image of the Democrat Party - as one connected to bankers after the 1997 crisis and tied to coming into power through a coup - could not be revamped.

The image marker that permeated the most was its elitism, distance from ordinary people. Although the party responded by adopting new campaign messaging - pictures of the PM with ordinary folk - the sense that the Democrat Party was still in the old mode persisted. This party has not won a national election since 1992.

Despite all the efforts by Abhisit, his party proved unable to transform, to leave behind the baggage of the past and offer a new face through substantive reform. Voters across the region know if a party is really reforming and genuinely connecting to people.

3. Need for national base: Abhisit's party was not a national party, and when the votes were counted, it showed. An appeal to one geographic or ethnic base does not make for national leadership and engender confidence. If a party aims to rely on one community or region, it ultimately creates more instability and uncertainty for itself and a country.

This action promotes polarisation and anger, not a solid foundation to govern from. In Malaysia, it is not enough to hold on to power from one region or community. This election, the PT picked up 1 million votes in Thailand's central region through outreach to different communities, making it into a more national party.

4. Machinery is important: This election was as much about machinery than national messaging. Both leading parties won in the areas where they did their groundwork and mobilised voters.

Whether it was the PT north-eastern heartland or the Democrat south, the legwork and networks connected to support. Parties that win long-lasting support do so through hard work and an early presence on the ground.

5. Never exclude groups of people: PT's strength came from his ability to recognise and respect ordinary voters, especially the rural communities. While Malaysia is much more urban than Thailand, the Malaysian share of seats from the rural areas is high. Campaigns that focus on urbanites and focus development programmes on the cities, out of a corporate mold, leave behind communities and widen the gap between the haves and have-nots.

The loyalty of the rural areas to PT stemmed from a sense of inclusion, of appreciation. Rural Malaysia - from Kedah to Sarawak - is being comparatively left out of development compared to Selangor and Penang. East Malaysia in particular is being left out. Thailand's election is a wake-up call for greater inclusion and the need for a new paradigm not based on race, but place.



6. Adopt decentralised people-centred policies: The loyalty of PT voters was tied to concrete policy initiatives in health care and development. Under Thaksin, governance decisions were decentralised and local communities were given more power to make decisions for their communities.

When ownership is fostered in communities, coupled with the priorities on basic human needs, people remember. They remember the Thaksin period as successful, in part since they were given a role in governance.

7. Treat voters with respect: With the focus on colour politics, red and yellow, there is often a mistaken sense that voters in Thailand are not sophisticated, an image reinforced by the violence of 2010 and mass mobilisation since 2005.

In fact, Thai voters are comparatively well-informed and made careful reflective decisions. Rural voters knew their votes counted and embraced their civic duty to vote. Campaigns were forced to deliver better messages to win support, with programmes and policies. The days of simplified loyalty to a party are long gone in Thailand. This trend is regional, from Indonesia to Singapore. Voters expect to be wooed with respect, with clear party platforms and good candidates.

8. Embrace women for victory: With the election of Thailand's first woman prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, an important ceiling in Thai politics has been broken. Comparatively, women in Thailand have traditionally had among the lowest political representation in the region. With a woman at the helm, there is now an opportunity for greater gender inclusion.

This election was arguably the most feminised in Thai history, with a record number of female candidates and record number of successes. Historically, parties that have embraced women in Malaysia, initially Umno, later MCA, DAP and PKR, and more recently PAS and PBB, have picked up support.

9. Recognise flaws in election processes: The election on Sunday was marred in many ways. There are concerns about ballot stuffing and money politics, although voters in Thailand like those in Indonesia have long moved away from being swayed purely by money.

Over 1 million votes were spoilt on Sunday. The main cause appears to be the complicated nature of the ballot papers, as voters continue to be confused by the party list and constituency electoral systems adopted. This points to the need for better voter education, something that Malaysia comparatively lacks.

While the election was peaceful, serious questions surround the independence of the election commission. It is vital for any government in any region that an election process be one of integrity.

10. Election is not everything: Sunday's polls are a step forward for Thailand. The burden on PT is to govern - to select a good team, to prove to be genuine in reconciliation, to set policy priorities and implement good policies. They now have a window to carry out their mandate.



There are many clouds that threaten stability and democracy in Thailand - the military, the yellow shirts, Thaksin (*left*) and a stable royal transition are the most pressing. There are serious issues to address from the economy to border issues in the south and with Cambodia.

It is important to recall that Thaksin's tenure was marred by corruption and authoritarianism and voters in Thailand worry that his sister will not be her own person. The steps ahead are as important as the election itself. Thailand - like Malaysia - is in dire need of statesmanlike leadership that respect elections and strengthens the country through respect of all groups and strengthening institutions.

The Thai people spoke out on Sunday and sent a clear message of change. There is hope in Thailand for reconciliation and better government. At this juncture in Malaysia, Thailand provides some valuable lessons indeed.

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