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2011 Elections: Thaksin Shinawatra Returns to Power**

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The Democrat and Phuea Thai Parties in Thailand's 2011 Elections: Thaksin Shinawatra Returns to Power

Michael H. Nelson¹

The elections of July 3, 2011, were not a routine procedure for determining which party, or coalition of parties, should govern Thailand for the next four years. From the time the outgoing coalition government led by Democrat Party chairperson Abhisit Vejjajiva took over from the remnants of Thaksin Shinawatra's People's Power Party (PPP), which had been dissolved by a verdict of the Constitutional Court in December 2008, it had been seen by many as having been formed illegitimately. Abhisit then twice used the military to dissolve resultant protests by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). On the second occasion, in April and May 2010, the confrontation led to 92 dead (in their great majority unarmed protesters, but also a number of soldiers) and around 2,000 injured. Obviously, the Democrats, Thailand's oldest and by far second-largest political party, which had been the main electoral competitor of Thaksin Shinawatra since 2001, had to find it hard to win an election after they had strongly antagonized the biggest segment of the voters who, in any case, had already held clear preferences for Thaksin.

Beyond this narrow electoral issue of voter preferences and their aggregated distribution among political parties, the 2011 election most significantly was but one component in the ten-year struggle of the anti-Thaksin forces against what they eventually called the "Thaksin regime." The pro-Thaksin camp wanted to repeat what it had done convincingly in 2001, 2005, and even in 2007—gaining the reigns of power by winning an election.² The anti-Thaksin forces, being uncompetitive in the contest for votes, as most obviously demonstrated in the 2005 polls, had turned to non-electoral actions in trying to topple the "Thaksin regime." These actions included the protests by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) in 2006 and 2008; the election boycott by the Democrat, Chart Thai, and Mahachon parties in April 2006 (leading to a veritable state crisis); the military coup in September 2006 (which came after the King had signed a royal decree announcing fresh elections for October 2006); the

dubious dissolution of two Thaksin parties (Thai Rak Thai in 2007, and People's Power in 2008), including the disqualification of their leading politicians from politics for five years; the drafting of the supposedly anti-Thaksin constitution of 2007 by a coup-derived panel of establishment actors; the questionable sentencing of Thaksin to two years in prison without probation in October 2008 (prompting him to flee the country); and the problematic court-ordered confiscation of most of Thaksin's assets in February 2010.

This list also included the Democrats' Abhisit Vejjajiva becoming prime minister in December 2008, reportedly with substantial help from army quarters. A break-away faction from the dissolved People's Power Party, the Bhumjaithai Party, which was led by Thaksin's former close aide and strongman from Buriram province, Newin Chidchob, also joined Abhisit. However, in the election of July 2011, Abhisit and his party largely depended on the regular electoral process alone, and this used to be a hurdle that was too high for the Democrats to overcome, although they could possibly still count on what Abhisit had earlier called "crisis-triggered votes" (*The Nation*, April 24, 2005). When Abhisit, true to his promise, dissolved the House prematurely on May 9, 2011, with the royal endorsement given on the same day, and the dissolution taking effect on May 10, the Democrats still held out hopes for a "close race" between them and the Phuea Thai Party.³ Soon enough, however, the question became whether the Democrats would be able to keep their defeat within decent limits.

In the following, this chapter will provide information about how the two main competitors in the 2011 elections, the Democrat and the Phuea Thai parties, approached this election. The conclusion will give some analysis as well as basic election statistics. Since the Democrats were the incumbents, I will begin with them, and afterwards portray their challenger.

The Democrat Party: Trying to survive as a significant political force

In the struggle against Thaksin, which became visible with the protests by Sondhi Limthongkul at the end of 2005, the Democrats were firmly in the anti-Thaksin camp. As important Democrat leader Korn Chatikavanij noted in retrospect, "if there is any lesson I have learnt during the past four-five years' struggle with Thaksin's regime, it is that we do not have the privilege nor the luxury to pass this difficult responsibility on to others" (Korn 2010). The Democrats fought the "Thaksin regime" as a complex

of actions that disregarded *formal* political structures and rules by largely replacing them by *informal* power requirements as perceived by the leader, Thaksin. On the opposite side, however, the Democrats, normally proud of going by the book, also adopted *informal* methods to counter what opponents perceived as the threateningly autocratic and corrupt “Thaksin regime.” The Democrats deliberately created a state crisis by boycotting the elections of April 2006, hoping they could block the convening of the House and thereby the election of Thaksin as the prime minister indefinitely. The Democrats also supported the military coup of September 2006 (notwithstanding Abhisit’s halfhearted claims to the contrary) as well as the street protests of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) that aimed to topple the Samak and Somchai governments (both of them were “nominees” of Thaksin). Finally, the Democrats assumed government power in such an informal way as to produce the red-shirt protests that aimed to force Abhisit to dissolve parliament and call fresh elections (with the certain prospect of returning a Thaksin outfit to power). Crushing these protests fatefully landed Abhisit in the company of two military predecessors, Thanom Kitikachorn (October 1973), and Suchinda Kraprayoon (May 1992).

All this also meant that the Democrats, although they were fighting the elections from the position of the incumbents, went into the election campaign from a decidedly weak position. The Democrat-led coalition government’s policies had few admirers. More importantly, Abhisit, with his actions against the red-shirt protesters in 2009 and 2010, might well have satisfied the Democrat Party’s key clientele. On the other hand, however, he had also irreparably antagonized the dominant voter base of the Thaksin camp, in particular the millions of voters who had joined the red shirt movement. Convincing significant portions of these two overlapping voter segments, which had clearly defeated the Democrat Party in the elections of 2001, 2005, and 2007 (though this post-coup election saw the Democrats gaining basically the same number of party-list votes as the People’s Power Party), to switch their electoral allegiance seemed to be an impossible task. When an interviewer of the Financial Times suggested to Abhisit one month before the election, “The polls don’t look very good,” Abhisit responded by saying, “They look OK to me. It’s a tight race and I always like to be the underdog: it makes your people work harder.” In the same interview, Abhisit claimed, “We are slightly behind. Seat allocation is a little tricky in a system like this, but we are looking at two parties getting between them about 400 seats, so either side

at 200” (as quoted in *Bangkok Pundit*, June 6, 2011; in the event, PTP got 265 seats, the Democrats 159). A few days later, Suthichai Yoon remarked,

Some senior executives of the Democrats have privately admitted they might be able to win somewhere between 170 and 180 seats. Any number above 200 would be a ‘Godsend’. But if the returns produce fewer than 150 seats, that would be a ‘disaster’ that could see Abhisit quitting the party’s leadership to accept responsibility for his failure. (Suthichai 2011)

At roughly the same time of the Suthichai column, Andrew Spooner interviewed Korn and suggested, “You’re not doing great in the polls at the moment,” on which Korn responded, “We’re doing terribly in the polls.” Spooner continued with, “And it’s obvious now you’re not going to win a majority.” Korn: “I think it was obvious from the beginning.”⁴ When asked, “But do you think there is any chance of the Democrat Party forming the next government?” he said, “Sure. But I don’t think Pheu Thai will win a majority either. And from the beginning I didn’t think they were going to do so either.” Finally, Spooner suggested, “Your backs are up against the wall.” Korn, though he also professed that he loved fighting in an election, appeared to be resigned to this fact saying, “Always, always, every time” (Spooner 2011).

In order to understand the Democrats’ predicament in the 2011 election, it is instructive to go back in time and read an editorial that *The Nation* newspaper published a decade earlier, after the old-established Democrats had been overwhelmingly beaten by a new force in Thai politics, Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai Party. The critical but decidedly sympathetic editorial from January 2001 asked a question that could just as well have been asked after the party’s loss in the 2011 election, “What’s next for the Democrat Party?” In fact, this question had also been asked in 2005 and 2007. For an entire decade, the Democrats seemed to have been in a permanent search for a political-organizational adaptation that would restore its electoral competitiveness. The party seemed to have failed in this, or perhaps it had not even tried seriously, rather preferring to rely on the reproduction the Democrats’ received political culture, and, after its defeat in the 2005 election, placing all its hope for better times in the party’s young and attractive new chairperson, Abhisit Vejjajiva. The editorial warned, “But it is the future of the party that the Democrats must now turn to if it is not to be left behind by this [TRT] change in Thai politics” (*The Nation*, January 8, 2001:A4).

In retrospect, the concern expressed in this editorial was well justified—the party had been “left behind” during the past decade of Thai politics. Thus, after the 2011 elections, *The Nation*’s influential yellowish anti-Thaksin commentator, Suthichai Yoon, choose a more dramatic approach when trying to determine what was wrong with the Democrat Party.

If the Democrats can’t turn over a new leaf to achieve this new challenge [departure from its old ways], it will certainly be destined for a prolonged winter of lost hope and betrayal for those who are desperately seeking an alternative to the current brand of politics. (*The Nation*, August 11, 2011)

The call for the party leaders to “reinvent the party for [the] world of the 21th century” (*The Nation*, January 8, 2001:A4) seemed to have gone unheeded. Poor election campaigning was certainly an important factor in the Democrats’ unsatisfactory results (Thaksin was credited with having introduced modern political marketing approaches in TRT’s campaign leading to the 2001 election).

But these issues are not the heart of the matter. Unless the Democrat Party accepts that Thai politics has changed, it will sink into oblivion like the three medium-sized parties which fared rather badly in this election despite earlier expectations that they would each gain at least 50 seats each. The January 6 [2001] election, for better or worse, is a watershed for every Thai political party. (ibid.)

The author of the 2001 editorial spoke of “change” Thai politics had undergone, and that the Democrats had to adapt to this change. In 2011, Thai politics had “changed” even to a much greater extent, while the prospect for the Democrats’ adaptation seemed as remote as ever. If it could not adjust to the change after 2001, how was the party and its leadership supposed to adjust to those changes that lead to their 2011 election defeat? Importantly, if the Yingluck government did not commit any huge mistakes during their term in office, the Pheua Thai-led government predictably would be in power for the coming four years until 2015, with good reasons to believe that the party would win that election, as it did in 2005. Given this situation, the 2011 elections held the prospect for the Democrats of eight years on the opposition benches, with little opportunity to show that they would be, in fact, a considerably better governing option.

Perhaps surprisingly, the 2001 editorial already expressly mentioned one key change that many academic and journalistic observers in 2011 associated with the red shirt movement,

First and foremost, people are much more responsive to politics now... The Thai Rak Thai phenomenon is a combination of policy populism, tireless door-knocking campaigning, clever marketing, the selling of leadership, and teamwork. Of course, these were all made possible because the party leader had lots of money. But the voters were attracted to these novelties because they helped to build up expectations of what Thaksin Shinawatra could do as prime minister. (ibid.)

The editorial added,

[the TRT] understood the role of politics: that is, to build up as large a membership as possible. The party members nationwide are not just interested in an election, but they want to be accommodated by the party they are affiliated with on a regular basis. The Democrat Party, like the medium-sized parties, only becomes active during the election. No longer are people willing to accept this. (ibid.)

Furthermore,

The party needs to remain active every day. The environment of the Democrat Party's headquarters in Bangkok tells a tale. It is an idle and empty place when the party is in power because its interests are elsewhere. The party has not been close to their million or so members in the country. (ibid.)

In short, this editorial from 2001, written against the backdrop of Thaksin's overwhelming election victory, provided the Democrat Party with guidelines about how it may resuscitate its political fortunes: "Otherwise, it will suffer enormously when the next national election comes along" (ibid.). These were truly prophetic words when we look back to the elections of 2005. Furthermore, one day after the above editorial, *The Nation* published an article about Abhisit Vejjajiva, who would become party leader after Banyat Bandhatthan had lost the 2005 elections for the Democrats, headlined, "We stopped responding, Abhisit admits" (*The Nation*, January 9, 2001:A2).

We didn't lose because of poor campaigning. After three years in office, the government had stopped responding to the people. This is the main and most important reason. (ibid.)

Abhisit thus did seem to recognize that how governments and political parties responded to the voters was an important factor in their electoral decision-making. Put another way, he acknowledged the importance of the needs/policy link for the success of governments and political parties, including the significance of retrospective voting (both of which were obvious in the 2005 and 2011 election results). Remarkably, Abhisit did not choose the easy option (liked by so many academics and commentators) by simply attributing the winning party's success to spending an enormous amount of money for vote buying. In 2011, these insights were as valid as they had been in 2001. Yet, Abhisit's own government had not only "stopped responding to the people," but it had actively turned against them, most prominently in 2009 and 2010.

Most worrisome for the Democrats' electoral prospects was that the greatest number of MPs was to be elected in the country's Northeast (126 of 375 MPs, while Bangkok would elect 33 MPs, central Thailand 96, the North 67, and South, the only regular stronghold of the Democrats, only 53 MPs). However, the Northeast was also the stronghold of TRT and the red shirts, and the Democrats had always been very weak in this region. Thus, when a by-election was held in Khon Kaen on December 12, 2010, the Democrats' candidate was said to be fielded to test "the popularity of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his policies" (Manop 2010). The summary assessment of this "test" was placed right in the headline of the report saying, "Democrats need 'vote magnet' or a miracle" (ibid.). The article also suggested that the Democrat Party, "remains clueless as to how it can gain a solid foothold in the northeastern region." Abhisit and Suthep needed, "to find a formula to attract voters in the region." There had to be "a better strategy." Yet, the article also noted that "voters there still have a bad impression of the party" (ibid.). Oddly, Manop related this "bad impression" neither to the most recent drastic events operated by the Democrats' Abhisit and Suthep against the red shirts nor to the great number of their supporters in the Northeast in whose minds these events were still very fresh and acute, and would therefore heavily affect their voting behavior. Scurrilously, he rather mentioned that police dogs, during the pre-2001 Chuan Leekpai (then the Democrats' chairperson) government, had attacked protesters at Government House. This incident, he claimed, was still "lingering in their minds" (ibid.). Manop also mentioned the land-reform scandal that erupted during the Chuan government in 1995 as a reason why the north-

easterners did not like the Democrats. Another column on the Democrats and the Northeastern voters might have been closer to one key factor when it said,

It stems from the thinking of the Democrats' executives who have had no sincerity (*khwam chingchai*) towards the people of Isan. The people of Isan feel that the Democrat party looks at the Isan people as belonging to a different class. (*Matichon*, May 11, 2011:3)

This column also added the obvious (without academic validity, though) by stating that in the election of 2007, the Isan people had accused the military to be a hidden power that wanted to see the Democrats form the government. In addition, they felt that their PPP had been treated very unfairly when the Constitutional Court dissolved it. Thus, many northeastern voters still had hard feelings towards the Democrats (an informed speculation, one might say). While the Democrats' approach towards the people in Isan was still not serious, PTP's Chalerm Yubumrung had been campaigning in Isan ever since January 2011. He had covered all levels, from the provinces and districts, through the *tambon* to the villages (*ibid*).

In terms of key personnel, the Democrats also faced doubts. Critical commentator Thitinan Pongsudhirak, as early as March 5, 2011, titled a column, "Abhisit's teflon starting to wear off" (Thitinan 2011). Thitinan pointed out,

Mr Abhisit's once-shining political star has waned. Its descent is likely to mark a new phase of political volatility. ... The formation of his government in an army barracks seemed to have the blessing of those who ultimately mattered in Thailand. He was their newfound darling—The One—with consummate pedigree, profile and talent to go up against those at home and abroad who doubted the integrity of Thailand's democratic system in which political parties had been dissolved and leading politicians banished into the political wilderness, to enable the Democrat Party's breakthrough. (*ibid*.)

Thitinan's reference in the second sentence is to the leading level of the *aphichon* (the democratically unaccountable establishment). Significantly, Thitinan did not see the party dissolutions as isolated legal acts by an independent court,⁵ but rather as deliberate political measures against the "Thaksin regime." This procedure was part of what in Thai had been called *tulakanphiwat* (judicialization).⁶ Yet, if one did not want the "Thaksin regime," meaning that entire set of politicians with their political views, practices, and networks (at the local, regional, and national levels), then only the

Democrats remained as a viable political-party option for providing the core of a coalition government. Destroying the “Thaksin regime” thus had always implied the transfer of power to the Democrat Party, with Abhisit Vejjajiva becoming prime minister. The Democrats’ participation in the struggle against the “Thaksin regime” therefore surely included an element of political opportunism.

Thitinan then touched on a particularly astonishing issue concerning the Democrats’ actions when they dominated the government with Abhisit at its helm.

After a record deficit-spending and two years of pork-barreling—blatant populism masked as social welfare in the name of Pracha Wiwat—the Democrat Party is still uncertain of winning the votes... Indeed, the perverse outcome of Mr Abhisit’s two-year rule so far is that Puea Thai can still win the next round of elections after all that has happened.

The present author is unsure about the word “perverse.” However, it was surely a bad sign for the Democrats that they had been able to spend more than two years in government, and nevertheless remained unable to benefit from this in terms of the number of votes and seats. On the other hand, however, any potential gains due to the Democrat-led government’s policies had to compete with the other actions that the Abhisit government had made the hallmark of its performance, namely the dissolution of the red-shirt protests in 2009, and the crackdown on them in 2010. Since voters take in information not only on the government’s policy performance, but include all government actions, and since the Abhisit government’s actions regarding the red-shirt protests were high-profile, lasted for long, and included an extremely drastic end, observers did not have to think long and hard to decide which way the majority of voters would decide on election day. Still, the Democrats’ losses might have been even higher without their policies. Moreover, the assumption that voters would universally condemn the Abhisit government’s crackdown on the red shirts is certainly wrong. Many surely welcomed the crackdown, and might have even thought that Abhisit hesitated too long, and was too soft on the protestors. From this perspective, the voter effects of the government’s policies and crackdowns would have to be measured against the respective sizes of the Democrat and Phuea Thai parties’ potential voter pools as well as the size of the bracket of potential swing voters.



Pictures 1-3: Titles pages depicting the electoral alternatives. The picture on top is from the red-shirt paper *Mahaprachon*. It says, “The Thais must decide” between “talking” (Abhisit) and “doing” (Yingluck). The picture on the lower left side is from *Lokwanni Wansuk*, a paper sympathetic to the red-shirts. To this weekly, the alternative was between, [Abhisit] “handsome (the puppet of the *ammart*),” and [Yingluck] “beautiful (the clone of Thaksin).” The third title page is from the PAD mouthpiece *ASTV Phuchatkan Sutsapda*. To this paper, the alternative was between “the movement that clings to the king” (symbolized by Abhisit), and “the movement that wants to topple the king” (symbolized by Thaksin).

Thitinan then speculated that Abhisit's previous backers might already see him as "spent." In a series of statements, he added, "Which is why an extra-parliamentary, ad hoc outcome should not be ruled out down the road;" "To date, Mr Abhisit has unfortunately not led to a way forward but to yet another dead end. It is a pity;" "His desire to come up to the top at all costs compromised him from the outset. He will have to answer for it, and Thailand may later suffer from it for having wasted such talent" (ibid.). Indeed, this probably was an assessment shared by many observers leading to speculation whether Korn Chatikavanij might succeed Abhisit. On the one hand, it might be said that this messy political situation had not been all Abhisit's fault, because he had to deal with the UDD protests in 2009 and 2010, instead of being able to concentrate on constructive governing (or perhaps rather on delivering even more speeches to his key Bangkok clientele than he already did). On the other hand, it was Abhisit in the first place who had agreed to becoming prime minister under very murky circumstances, thus himself helping to create the key condition for the red-shirt protest movement to emerge.

Late in the election campaign, when the Democrats appeared hopelessly to trail their Phuea Thai competitors, the question occurred what theme might be able to return at least some voters to the Democrat camp. Surprisingly, the Democrats chose a risky approach by adopting the right-wing view of the 2010 UDD protests as having been about *phao ban phao mueang* (burning the city). This mainly referred to the acts of arson that followed the Abhisit government's crackdown on the red shirt protesters in the Rajaprasong area. In fact, this issue had been touched upon earlier in the election campaign already when Suthep Thueaksuban, deputy prime minister, and key Democrat player in the crackdown, published his statements in a no-confidence debate on the crackdown, what had happened at that time, and who was responsible. The conservative Thai-language paper *Daily News* saw Suthep, with the publication of this book, as "revive[ing] the 'who burned the city' incident" (*Daily News*, May 26, 2011:3).⁷ For June 23, 2011, the Democrats planned to hold their final big election rally in Bangkok right where, some months earlier, their government had cracked down on the red shirt protests, the Rajaprasong Intersection, more precisely, in the space in front of the Central World shopping mall. In his interview with Democrat Finance Minister Korn Chatikavanij, Andrew Spooner asked him,

Bangkok Post had an article that the Democrats, in reaction on the bad polls, will try and link the PTP to the ‘Burning of Bangkok.’ The Democrats and the Democrat-leaning press have been pushing this line for a year but you’re still behind in Bangkok—is this message designed to appeal only to your base? Because, if you look at the polls, it doesn’t seem to be working. Korn: “We’ll see.” Spooner: “Any more thoughts about it?” Korn: “No.” (Spooner 2011)

According to one author, the Democrats’ tactic in taking up the “Burning Bangkok” theme was to attract voters who were inclined to follow the PAD’s appeal to “Vote No,” and those who would stay home.

The problem for the Democrat Party is how it will achieve its goal of turning these last two groups to its side. ... This time the Democrats are reminding voters of what happened in May 2010, when buildings in Bangkok and town halls in the provinces were torched by the red shirts. (Nattaya 2011a)⁸

Until this point in the election campaign, this theme had not been a strong selling point, if at all. At least, it had not shown in the papers, except in a few quotes from Suthep and Chuan about “*phao ban phao mueang*.” On the other hand, UDD protesters had reminded Abhisit of “91 *sop*” (91 corpses) or “*khrai sang kha prachachon*” (who had ordered the killing of the people). Thus, the Democrats taking up the “burning Bangkok” theme took the risk of being turned around into “Abhisit killed the people.” *The Nation* newspaper also speculated that the adoption of this theme could only be due to desperation on the Democrats’ side. The headline of an article read, “Abhisit turns up the heat. Amid bleak election outlook, Democrat chief reminds voters of ‘people who burned the city,’” adding that Abhisit’s “last card is apparently on the table now” (*The Nation*, June 17, 2011:1). At a rally in Thonburi, Abhisit had even “said he had never thought Thais would torch their capital the way Ayutthaya was raided by the Burmese in 1767” (ibid.). Abhisit’s remark was on a par level with what right-wing paper *Naew Na* would print a few days later, namely that the arson around the Rajaprasong Intersection had been the

biggest *kanphao ban phao mueang* that had taken place in the history of the Thai nation, counted from when the Burmese for the second time burned Ayutthaya in the year 1767. (*Naew Na*, June 21, 2011:5)

The right-wing splinter group *sayam samakkhi* (united Siam), added,

When you cast your ballot on July 3, don't allow evil people to govern the country, don't elect people who have burned the country, don't elect the clique that is wrathful of the monarchy. (*Matichon Sutsapda*, July 1-7, 2011, Vol. 31, No. 2611:9)

The above-mentioned *Nation* article also quoted Abhisit as having said, "We will have to uncover the truth [behind the arson attacks]. Next, it will be our job to put out the fires" (*The Nation*, June 17, 2011:1). For good measure, at a rally in Kamphaeng Phet province, Abhisit had said, "Are the interests of our country supposed to be guarded by people who burned the city?" (ibid.). The former chairperson of the Democrat Party, Banyat Bantadtan, assisted,

From now on, the party must make clear the truth and the possibility that such events might occur again in the future, and ask whether this will be good or bad for the country. We cannot allow that the people will be under the influence of propaganda, because this would be very dangerous. (*Daily News*, June 20, 2011:3)

Finally, Suthep Thaugsuban rejected the notion that the red shirts could be angered when the Democrats organized their rally at that particular spot. His words: "We only think that Thais who own the country should hear information from all sides and use their own judgment instead of only listening to distorted information of the Pheu Thai every day" (*The Nation*, June 20, 2011:16A).⁹

Of course, the views of Abhisit and Suthep drew criticism outside their followers. A deputy PTP leader, Kanawat Wasinsungworn, promptly posed the question, "You know who killed protesters, ... but can the government prove the red shirts burned buildings?" (ibid.). *Matichon* noted that the Democrats' "*phao ban phao mueang*" rally on June 23 was turned against them, in particular their PM candidate Abhisit, with the question "who ordered the killing of the people?" It was like Abhisit accused the PTP to have supported the arson, while this very accusation generated the counter-argument, "but you ordered the killing of the people." On the other hand, the Phuea Thai campaign had ignored such issues, or refused to get drawn into arguments about them with the Democrats. Instead, they had entirely concentrated on their own positive election campaign regarding Yingluck/Thaksin and their policies. However, the PTP had also clearly signaled its stance by putting around 20 red-shirt leaders on secure party list positions, the two key leaders Natthawut and Jatuporn even amongst

the top ten (*Matichon*, June 20, 2011:3). Sarcastically, the paper added, “It would be very strange indeed if these two people [Abhisit and Suthep] did not know who ordered the killing of 91 people and caused the more than 2,000 injured. Or didn’t we have any government during the months’ of April and May 2011 that administered the country?” (*ibid.*).

The brother of nurse Kamolkete, who was killed at Wat Pathum Wanaram (highly probably by soldiers stationed above on the passing BTS tracks, shooting at and into this Buddhist temple that had been designated as a “save zone” for red-shirt protesters leaving the Rajaprasong protest site), commented,

To organize the rally at Ratchaprasong intersection is like rubbing salt into the wounds. We don’t see any necessity for the Democrats to host the rally there if the party really wants to seriously achieve reconciliation. (*Bangkok Post*, June 22, 2011:1)

The Democrats’ rally at the Rajaprasong Intersection deliberately diverted the issue from “who ordered the killing of the people” (the formula used with respect to the events in 1973 and 1992) to “*phao ban phao mueang.*” Abhisit and Suthep (and with them the right-wing and much of the conservative press) essentially posited that the people who were killed deserved what they got, because they were as evil as the Burmese warriors who had destroyed the Siamese capital Ayutthaya in 1767. This approach might well have secured the Democrats some additional votes in Bangkok. On the other hand, they did not only provoke the red shirts, but probably also confirmed to voters connected with the red-shirt movement that Abhisit Vejjajiva and his Democrat Party were politically hopeless, and utterly hypocritical. This might not have cost the Democrats any votes, because very few voters in the PTP/UDD camp were probably considering voting for them. But Abhisit and Suthep’s tactical choice of campaigning at Rajaprasong certainly cemented the division of the Thai political landscape into two camps even further. Yet, this might have been seen by the Democrats as a small political price to pay for a few more votes, and perhaps seats.

The Democrats’ political archenemy, Thaksin Shinawatra, was not entirely missing from their electoral appeals. Abhisit urged the voters,

If you want to see a determined removal of the Thaksin venom, then you must give the Democrat Party the first place with more than 250 seats. We will then announce to the entire country, to the entire world that Thailand

is ready to move ahead with preserving the democratic system that has the king as head of state, and we will say that Thailand cannot be bought with money, that the Thais do not allow the law of the jungle to triumph over the law. The Thais will declare their liberation from fear and tyranny. And they will declare that Thailand does not belong to a single person or a single color but to people of all colors. (*Matichon Sutsapda*, July 1-7, 2011, Vol. 31, No. 2611:9)¹⁰

That latter element was also publicized in many Democrat-Party newspaper advertisements that carried the main message of, “I [Abhisit] do not work for a single person. I work for the entire country,” implying that Yingluck would only work for furthering the interests of her brother. One might then conclude that the Democrats hoped that the combination of anti-Thaksin and anti-Reds feelings would eventually motivate the voters to cast their ballots for them, or at least to motivate their key electoral voter reservoir to turn out in force.

After the expected electoral defeat, Abhisit immediately resigned from the chairpersonship of his party, only to be reelected soon afterwards. This might have surprised observers, who assumed that merely taking symbolic responsibility was insufficient. One columnist rhetorically asked whether the Democrats’ election defeat meant that the people wanted to “detoxify” Thailand from Abhisit (Surasak 2011). Certainly, the election was also about rejecting Abhisit as the prime minister, and rejecting what he had done during his turn at the helm of government. Thus, there were some quite strong and widespread negative feelings about him in the population. Nevertheless, more than eleven million voters (35.2%) had cast their ballots for the Democrat party list, and thus for Abhisit. Therefore, the Democrats had little reason not to return him to the position of party leader. Still, the question arose how he would go about to increase the number of votes for the party in the four years until the next election. Since Abhisit, when he was the prime minister, had been a key part of the problems that the Democrats had encountered in the election of 2011 (besides having been deeply entrenched in the Democrat’s political culture, especially under Chuan, since decades), was it reasonable to assume that Abhisit was the most suitable person to spearhead an organizationally and politically innovative solution? Such questions inevitably led back to the widely held view that the Democrats simply did not seem to have anybody better who could replace Abhisit.

After Abhisit had returned to the chairpersonship of the Democrats, one could read what sounded like echoes of 2001. For example, *Post Today* headlined an article,

“Mark [the nickname of Abhisit] returns: tough task to overhaul the Democrat Party” (*Post Today*, July 22, 2011:4, *wikro* section). *Thai Rath* assisted with the headline of its major page-three column on Sunday saying “Overhaul—vying for the people. Watching Abhisit getting the ticket to adjust the Democrats’ strategy” (*Thai Rath*, July 24, 2011:3).¹¹ If the Democrats failed in this task, “this important political institution might merely be history” (*ibid.*). Among the top problems, as indicated above, was the situation in the Northeast. The 2011 election saw the party reduced to a truly pitiable four seats out of 126 (PTP gained 104). Democrat representatives, *Thai Rath* added, had demanded an urgent reform of the party’s structure, especially in the Northeast (*ibid.*). But this had been a recurrent issue in innumerable articles on the electoral prospects of the Democrat party during the past decade, and beyond. As *The Nation* noted after the election,

We are back to the original, ‘too-obvious’ cause of the Democrats’ woes—their long-lasting failure to get a sizeable share of political support in the Northeast. ... as long as they can’t establish considerable presence in the most populous region, they will never win an election. (*The Nation*, July 24, 2011:7A)

This situation was made even more puzzling since “blind polls” conducted before the election were said to have shown that the voters in the Northeast favored the Democrats’ policies over those of the PTP (*ibid.*). In this context, the *Post Today* mentioned the problem of communication. Suthep once proposed to establish a “Blue TV” to compete with the “Red TV.” This would be an important channel to infiltrate red localities and supply information to the people. However, this had been blocked by the party, because it was seen as violating the Election Law (*Post Today*, July 22, 2011:4, *wikro* section).¹² More importantly, how could the Democrats gain informational and politically convincing access to the people—voters—in Isan, when they had hardly any MPs, with most electoral positions occupied by the PTP, regarding both national-level positions and the many positions available in local governments. The PTP/UDD camp also had cable TV and a great number of community radio stations. From the perspective of the Democrats, the people in Isan were therefore virtually cut off from information about alternative political options, though Suthep was rather self-serving and simplistic when he complained at the Rajaprasong rally “that ‘innocent’ red shirts had been brainwashed by their leaders over the past two to three years of ‘agitation’”

(Pravit 2011). In the South, after all, the PTP faced the same situation, being political-ly almost completely excluded by the Democrats' stifling dominance. Unfortunately, for the Democrats, the South has far fewer MPs than the Northeast (53, of which the Democrats won 50, while PTP won none).

Another problem to be tackled by Abhisit was the internal structure of the party. That the Northeasterners did not like the Southerners' dominance in the party had long been known. In addition, however, as *Post Today* pointed out, four to five people close to Abhisit had monopolize the movements in the Democrat Party. According to the paper, they did not listen to the party members. This "power group" had to open up channels of communication so that more suggestions could find their ways to the leaders, and that full cooperation was secured from party members (*Post Today*, July 22, 2011:4, *wikro* section). More importantly, however, communication was vitally needed to be established with the people. In the words of the Democrats' Bangkok governor, Sukhumbhand Paribatra: "Democrat executives think and talk like bureaucrats. They could not communicate well with the people in the streets. Chuvit Kamolvisit has better communication skills" (Nattaya 2011c). An example of this weakness in communication was the Democrat's electoral use of the monarchy. "One key message that the Democrats used in their platform was for voters to choose them if they wanted to protect the monarchy. But most people didn't care about the issue because they didn't believe the institution was in danger, said MR Sukhumbandh" (*ibid.*).

In sum, the task of surviving as a meaningful political force seemed as daunting for the Democrats after the elections of 2011 as it was after the party's first election defeat from the hands of a Thaksin party, the Thai Rak Thai Party, in January 2001 (not to mention 2005). Yet, the Democrats chose to try to turn their political fortunes around by relying on Abhisit Vejjajiva, who had played an important role in creating the party's predicament, in the first place.

I will now turn my attention to how the Democrats' main competitor, the Phuea Thai Party, dealt with the challenges of the pre-election situation, in particular concerning the question of who should be the party's standard-bearer.

The Phuea Thai Party: Looking for a leader Thaksin could trust and the voters could believe in

Understandably, the dissolution of the People's Power Party (PPP), and Newin Chidchob's faction leaving the Thaksin camp under the label of the Bhumjaithai party to set up a coalition government with the Democrat Party under Abhisit Vejjajiva in December 2008 left PPP's successor party—Phuea Thai—in disarray from the beginning. Subsequently, politics was dominated by the attempts of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), the “red shirts,” to force Abhisit into dissolving the House and calling fresh elections. The Phuea Thai Party (PTP) unsuccessfully opposed the Democrat-initiated change of the election law, as proposed by a committee led by Sombat Thamrongthanyawong (rector of the National Institute of Development Administration, and a self-confessed yellow shirt). Electoral matters became more urgent when, in February 2011, Abhisit indicated that fresh elections might be held as early as mid-2011.

At that time, Phuea Thai only had a nominal party leader in Yongyuth Wichaidit, who was not even an MP. While in the opposition, factional rivalries within PTP had prevented it from agreeing on who should become the constitutionally required opposition leader. In particular, one faction leader, Mingkwan Sangsuwan (the head of the party's economic team), arising from “relative obscurity” (*Bangkok Post*, October 9, 2010), had been trying “to position himself as a dominant faction leader,” thereby “placing himself at odds with ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra” (Aekarach 2010a). It was reported that Mingkwan paid 100,000 baht per months (reportedly using money from a financier outside of the party) to a growing number of MPs in an attempt to construct a basis from which to launch his bid to become the party's prime ministerial candidate in the coming elections (*ibid.*). Two weeks later, the same paper stated, “The oppositional Phuea Thai Party believes list MP Mingkwan Sangsuwan can be touted as a potential prime minister at the next election” (*Bangkok Post*, October 9, 2010), without saying, though, who it meant by “Phuea Thai Party believes.” The paper's follow-up statement, “The party wants a leader comparable in political charisma and popularity to ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra, who is Phuea Thai's main backer” (*ibid.*) contradicted its preceding sentence. After all, Mingkwan had neither any political charisma nor was he popular. The paper even added, “But, most importantly, the person must not carry an image of being a mere stand-in or po-

litical proxy of Thaksin” (ibid.). Whose view, one might ask, did this statement reflect—the PTP’s or the author’s? It is probably safe to assume that this sentence—and there were to be many more of this kind of biased election “reporting” by this and similar newspapers—reflected the anti-Thaksin stance of the *Bangkok Post*’s editorial decision makers, rather than the preferences of the great majority of voters.

Thaksin himself was more reserved towards Mingkwan. When he participated in a party meeting via video link, he was reported to have said, “Things have not yet stopped at Mingkwan.” Somewhat ironically, Thaksin added, “Please don’t take care of only a few MPs. Take care of them all” (Nattaya 2010). Rather, there were six options for the position of prime ministerial candidate at this point (*Post Today*, October 13, 2010). According to intra-PTP opposition to Mingkwan, Thaksin had been worried about Mingkwan building an internal faction by paying money to MPs, and there was a comparison with what had happened with the faction previously led by Newin Chidchob. They thus preferred the money being given to the central fund of the party (ibid.). The six possible candidates for prime minister included Mingkwan, Chalerm Yubamrung, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, Apiwan Wiriyaichai, Kowit Wattana, and Virabongsa Ramankura (Nattaya 2010). It is noteworthy that a key person was still missing from Thaksin’s/Nattaya’s list: Yingluck Shinawatra. However, only two weeks later, Aekarach (2010b) not only reported that Thaksin had approved Mingkwan leading the censure debate against the Democrat-led government to prove his worth, but also noted, “It was reported last week that Thaksin wanted his younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, to lead the party into the election.” Moreover, “Another senior party member said Thaksin had allowed Mr Mingkwan the opportunity to prove his worth out of gratitude for his help in covering the party’s expenses. However, the source said Thaksin was still expected to opt for Ms Yingluck as a matter of trust.” It seemed that determining the PTP’s candidate for prime minister—and thus selecting the person who would be elected to head the government of Thailand—was all about whom Thaksin personally wanted, and whom he personally trusted. Obviously, Thaksin could not possibly personally trust anybody more than a very close relative in his family. The party therefore did not seem to have played any significant role in selecting its own candidate for prime minister. It needs to be added, however, that the notion of a Phuea Thai Party that had an existence independently of Thaksin—often emphasized by authors in the anti-Thaksin camp (and normatively promoted by academics)—was entirely unrealistic. Though residing abroad, Thaksin still was the “de-

facto leader,” as he was often called in newspaper columns, and the sole force that had given political coherence to the Thai Rak Thai, the People’s Power, and the Phuea Thai parties. None of them could have existed without Thaksin at their centers since the establishment of TRT in the year 1998.

The electoral picture became clearer in December 2010 when the Constitutional Court voted four to two not to dissolve the Democrat Party (it had been accused of the wrongful use of 29 million baht from the election commission’s political party development fund). As a result, one paper saw the PTP “near death” (*Matichon*, December 3, 2010). Similar to Thitinan Pongsudhirak above, the paper did not look at the verdict as a merely judicial act, or as a manifestation of the rule of law in Thailand. Rather, it’s perhaps overly dramatic “near death” label stemmed from the assumption that the judges performed their duty in the context of the conflict between Thaksin and the “power holders” (*phuthueamnat*). The core leaders of Phuea Thai were said in the article to have concluded that these “power holders” wanted to send a signal to the PTP via the verdict rejecting the case against the Democrats. This signal, according to the paper, “stresses the political reality that Thaksin Shinawatra and the ‘Thaksin regime’ (*rabop thaksin*) must be erased from the directory of Thai politics” (*ibid.*).

Maybe, the “power holders” were not really prepared for the drastic course of action suggested in the above quote. Yet, it was now clear that the PTP would have to face the Democrats in the elections. From Chaturon Chaisaeng’s perspective (he had been the acting chairperson of TRT when it was dissolved by the military-appointed “Constitutional Tribunal”), the PTP now urgently needed to increase its popularity, because it would have to compete with the “power of money” (*amnat ngoen*), and with the “power of the state” exercised by the Democrats via the Abhisit government. The Phuea Thai party needed a leader and policies that the people could accept—“we must look for a leader as soon as possible” (*Khao Sot*, December 21, 2010). As much as Mingkwan’s faction-building and lobbying for the party’s top job might have displeased the pro-Thaksin forces in the party as well as Thaksin himself, Chaturon’s ideas might have had a similar effect. As its mass-circulation sister paper, *Khao Sot*, *Matichon* also published an interview with Chaturon, and on the same day. It chose a daring headline saying in its second part, “Dare! to liberate (*plottaek*) [Phuea Thai] from Thaksin” (*Matichon*, December 21, 2010). In its introduction to the interview, the paper suggested that PTP’s defeat in a recent by-election had shown that “the

popularity of Thaksin Shinawatra ... has already declined” (ibid.). When asked in which way the PTP had to act in not depending on Thaksin too much, Chaturon tried not to overstep the limits, saying, in summary

It does not exactly mean to cut out the Thaksin issue altogether. Everybody knows that the Phuea Thai Party was connected to Thaksin. He had greatly benefited the country, and he was an important force in PTP. He had come up with many good policies, and still could come up with more of them. Therefore, the issue was not to cut Thaksin out from PTP or to reject him. Rather, it was about determining his position [within PTP], and the relationship with him, and how they talked about him. This was what the PTP had to think about. (ibid.)

Chaturon added,

In case PTP suggested the policy of bringing Thaksin back home without saying by using which method, or to what purpose, this would not touch the people’s heart that much. Before Thaksin could come back and receive justice, Thailand had to be a democracy. He would then receive more justice than at present. Putting it this way might generally be more acceptable. If we brought up the issue in a narrow way, without details, and without detailing the method [to be used to bring Thaksin home], those who were in his clique would accept it, and be satisfied. Yet, people who were more distant, who were not interested in this issue, they might not accept it. (ibid.)

One wonders why Chaturon thought that the latter group of voters was relevant for PTP’s election campaign. Did he think that it comprised many people who would actually cast their votes for the PTP if only Thaksin was kept at a low level of visibility in the party’s election campaign? Alternatively, was his statement perhaps not directed at potential voters but rather at potential—or even actual—adversaries, who would predictably attack any PTP policy to bring back Thaksin? Be this as it may, Chaturon went even further with his rather reserved view of Thaksin’s potential role in any attempt to beat the Democrats at the polls. He said,

I think that the Phuea Thai Party must stress its policies, because this is the party’s strong point that continuous from the time of Thai Rak Thai. The people have seen that the party gives importance to policies. It could really do them, with real results. This is like a culture that the Phuea Thai Party has created. The people believe that [the party’s policy announcements] are more for real [than those] of other parties. (ibid.)

This statement only reflected a small part of the truth. Would these policies have existed without Thaksin, or be effective in getting votes without Thaksin? Chaturon himself mentioned that Thaksin came up with many policies. Was it not the combination of a strong political leader and his policies that had secured the success of TRT and PPP? Voters, one might say, were confident that this particular political leader could make his policy promises come true by implementing them. And he did. Thaksin, therefore, could not be eliminated from this equation by focusing on the policies alone. Nevertheless, this emphasis on policies (including proper procedures and teamwork) fitted with Chaturon's idea of having the PTP develop into "a stable institution" (ibid.). In fact, he tried to use a reference to Thaksin's supposed style of policy-making to argue for a process of formulating the party's platform that could do without Thaksin. Chaturon said (my summary),

The PTP should not wait until Thaksin writes them a letter with policies, and then adopt them. This was not the method that Thaksin used to employ. That Thaksin had been successful was not based on working alone. Rather, he had joined the thinking of many groups. Now it was like him alone doing the talking, and presuming that people would adopt his proposals accordingly. This was not at all in harmony with Thaksin's approach. This was not in harmony with the success of Thaksin's using of a lot of participation. (ibid.)

Yet, in addition to policies, the PTP also needed "a leader, or a group of leaders." This problem, Chaturon noted, had been with the party for a long time, because it had many equally knowledgeable and capable (*mi khwamru khwamsamat*) politicians. However, none of them was accepted by the entire party. This had led to the view that if the party would determine one single member as chairperson, opposition leader, or prime ministerial candidate, this would cause the party to break up (*thamhai phak taek*). Therefore, it had chosen the method of not naming an opposition leader, and of not having an MP as the party leader. The party had also not announced a real party leader who would then automatically be the prime ministerial candidate. "The reason is that there was concern that if this had been done, the party would have broken up" (ibid.). In other words, the various faction leaders saw themselves as equals, and thus their feelings of honor could not have swallowed if one of their competitors would have been elevated above them. They could never be loyal to any such person, while loyalty to a party ideology was not even an issue, simply because there was no such

thing. The party was integrated by personal relationships, not by an abstract model of political ideas. Faction leaders had submitted to the superiority of Thaksin Shinawatra as their “big boss.” After all, he had admitted them to *his* party. Under Thaksin, the various faction leaders could work together, at least to a certain extent (TRT had comprised more than 20 factions). But with him gone, things had to become stalled. From this perspective, the later choice of Yingluck Shinawatra was the only remaining viable option for re-establishing unity in the party, and preventing any centrifugal tendencies from becoming threatening. Thus, Yingluck’s function was not only to make the voters connect the PTP to Thaksin again, it was also to reconnect the faction leaders within the party to Thaksin. Both within the party, and externally to the voters, Yingluck functioned as a stand-in for Thaksin. In her first role, she re-created unity and cohesion in the Phuea Thai party; in her second role, she served as the focal point for the voters.

By the end of December 2010, it had become clear that Yingluck was an important option for filling PTP’s top electoral position. *Post Today* printed an article the headline of which suggested that Mingkwan was the wrong person, while Yingluck was the “real thing” (*tua ching*). The accompanying illustration showed a big portrait of Thaksin in the middle, with smaller portraits of Yingluck and Mingkwan to his left and right side, respectively. Thus, the article suggested that Thaksin’s main options were these two persons (*Post Today*, December 31, 2010). People such as Mingkwan and Chaturon, however, supported the approach of “passing over” (*khaokham*) Thaksin. This meant not to emphasize him too strongly (*mai tong nen mak*), because if the PTP returned to the government, it already had the task of helping him to return to Thailand. If they emphasized Thaksin, he would be a big target of the military, the “traditional powers” (*phalang charit*), the business groups, and the middle class. These forces would join in trying to block him. “It would be as if Phuea Thai ran against a wall. There would be no way they could win” (*ibid.*). From this perspective, the PTP needed a “real leader” not controlled by Thaksin. This would make the middle class abandon their worries that Thaksin would return and make the country plunge into political turmoil again. To proponents of this view, Mingkwan was the solution, because he would create the necessary image of not being Thaksin’s nominee, and of being ready to bypass him. Unfortunately, though, Mingkwan was compromising to a degree that his own political positions often disappeared. He lacked leadership, which was a big issue if one wanted to become the country’s lead-

er. Therefore, people in the PTP said that his task was to demonstrate leadership since he had not yet gained the confidence of all factions of the party (ibid.). In fact, Thaksin provided Mingkwan with such an opportunity to demonstrate his leadership qualities by letting him lead the no-confidence debate against the Abhisit government in March 2012. Yet, this opportunity turned into Mingkwan's unmaking as a viable PM candidate, because he performed poorly.

As for the section on Yingluck in the above article, it stated that "Thaksin's heart" was pushing for Yingluck. He had her train in political work (*fuek ngankanmueang*) at the Phuea Thai Party. She had been like a *maeban* (housewife) who dealt with a large number of problems, be it about the budget or management. Since Thaksin's goal was to regain the position of prime minister, he merely waited for the situation being ripe for Yingluck. "Since everything in the party is about Thaksin, it is difficult for him to leave something in which he has invested so much capital in the hands of somebody else." The lesson from the Newin instance was clear. At that time, the control within the party was lacking, and so Newin Chidchob could pull MPs into his faction, and eventually even establish his own party. "This time is the same. There has been an important lesson already. Therefore, real blood is certainly thicker than water" (ibid.).

The *Post Today* newspaper, in its article from December 31 briefly summarized in the preceding two paragraphs, put all its eggs into one basket: Yingluck Shinawatra. Yet, the paper was right. Five months later, in May 2011, she was indeed made the top-placed candidate on the Phuea Thai party list. However, as indicated by the reference about Yingluck's apprenticeship in PTP, her involvement with the party had in fact started much earlier. Just how early became clearer when Wikileaks published cables that then-US Ambassador Eric John had sent to his headquarters in 2009. As early as November 2009, Yingluck already had had a number of talks at the US embassy. In his blog, *Bangkok Pundit* provided key excerpts from a report by the *Associated Press*, saying,

U.S. diplomats concluded as early as 2009 that the surprise front-runner to become Thailand's next prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, had a 'bright future' despite a low profile in the shadow of her famous brother's troubles. (The *Associated Press*, as quoted in *Bangkok Pundit*, June 15, 2011).

When Eric John met her on November 25, 2009, he noted a change in her behavior by saying that she appeared to be “‘far more poised’ than in earlier meetings. He noted that she spoke with confidence about the ‘operations, strategy and goals’ of the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party, with which she held no official leadership position at the time.” They had also met on November 23, 2009, Yingluck being accompanied by Noppadon Pattama. “Yingluck claimed that Thaksin was not a stubborn person; he was simply interested in dialogue, and as a true businessman, he just wanted the government to ‘make him a deal.’” Moreover, she “deferred less to Noppadon [Pattama, one of Thaksin’s key lawyers], who has accompanied her to all of our sessions with her.” “While it was obvious that politics does not come as naturally to Yingluck as it does to her brother, one suspects she may well have a bright future with the party. As they departed the Residence, Noppadon quipped: ‘You just shook hands with Thailand’s next Prime Minister’ (i.e., Yingluck)” (*Bangkok Pundit*, *ibid.*). *Bangkok Pundit* concluded by saying, “it is clear from the 2009 cables she was meeting with diplomatic missions and was already playing a bigger role behind-the-scenes than what we knew about” (*Bangkok Pundit*, *ibid.*). Already in February 2009, Yingluck was present “when Pheu Thai MPs gathered at a hotel in Pak Chong district for a seminar and a Cowboy Night activity was held with many senior party figures in attendance” (*The Nation*, June 17, 2011).

Certainly, the public did not know anything about the political role Thaksin had obviously assigned to his younger sister at that time already. Key members of the party, however, should have known. Yet, Mingkwan still tried to build his own faction by paying MPs a monthly stipend in order to position himself as a future prime ministerial candidate of the party. While Mingkwan probably merely tried to further his political career by using PTP, Chaturon Chaisaeng tried the balancing act of following his old idea of making the party more of an institution without cutting Thaksin out too obviously. One key PTP politician who had not only recognized the signs but also accepted them as premise for this own political course was Chalerm Yubumrung, at that time the chairperson of the PTP’s MPs. As early as October 1, 2010, he gave an interview in which he strongly pushed for a strictly Thaksin-centric approach of the party’s coming election campaign. In Chalerm’s words,

If we do not do this, Phuea Thai can never win [in the elections]. When we compete with Abhisit (Vejjajiva), we must sell the hope that we will

bring Thaksin back. There is no other option, because otherwise we would only sell expired medicine. We must sell Thaksin. ... If we do not sell this issue, what will Phuea Thai sell instead? (*Post Today*, October 2, 2010)

Obviously, Chalerm did not think that Chaturon's approach of emphasizing the party's policies would catch up with the voters. Chalerm wanted to see a "direct sales" campaign with the "brand name Thaksin." One had to give people the feeling that the party loved Thaksin, that it wanted Thaksin to be safe, that Thaksin would return, and that the court cases would end. If the PTP did not choose this approach, it would be ruined (*ibid.*). This was all the more important because PTP needed to gain at least half the total number of MPs. Otherwise, it would not be in the government, because no other party would want to join hands with the Phuea Thai party. And being in government was all-important since a Democrat-led government would mean that Thaksin would have no hope of returning to Thailand for four more years. In this context, Chalerm rejected the ideas of the members of "House no. 111" (the disqualified former members of the TRT's executive board, of who Chaturon was a leading member). Chalerm saw them as thinking that Thaksin had grown because of them, while, in fact, it was them who had grown because of Thaksin (*ibid.*).

Post Today's parent newspaper, the *Bangkok Post*, summarized Chalerm's view as follows.

In my view, we have no choice but to use Thaksin Shinawatra as a key element in our campaign. We need to make it a 'public agreement' in our campaign that if we can form a single-party government, we will bring back Thaksin, introduce a bill to grant him and all political and administrative offenders a blanket amnesty, reinstate the 1997 constitution and promote the defunct Thai Rak Thai Party's economic policies. Everything will be 'set to zero.' (*Bangkok Post*, October 4, 2010)

Chalerm was not sure whether other PTP executives would accept his views. However, "we can't deny Thaksin's popularity, particularly in the Northeast and North" (*ibid.*). Importantly, he added,

The future of Puaea Thai does not depend on its political and economic policies. It depends on Thaksin. We can't ignore this fact. This is Thaksin's last stand. If he cannot return to the country in the four years [after the next elections were won by PTP], he will never be able to return. (*ibid.*)

In the end, Chalerm's words proved prophetic. The Phuea Thai party did exactly as he had suggested, and Yingluck Shinawatra was the embodiment of this approach.

Of course, critics of the "Thaksin regime" could never accept this situation, especially the role of Yingluck as a permanent stand-in for Thaksin. Conveniently, her choice offered plenty of reasons for attack. One of the staunchest and most important long-time critics of Thaksin, Cherm Sak Pinthong,¹³ summarized his views in one of his regular columns in the right-wing *Naew Na* newspaper (Cherm Sak 2011a). According to him, his doubts arose because Yingluck had never before been involved in politics or in the administration of the country. She had never run for the House or the Senate, she had not been a minister, and not even had experience as a local government council member. She also had never worked in the government service as a bureaucrat. Finally, during the country's crisis, she had never had any role in the solution of collective problems (ibid.). Cherm Sak, and with him possibly the great majority of observers, could not help noticing that Yingluck was like a young and entirely inexperienced apprentice in one of her own companies who, nevertheless, wanted right away to take over her position of chief executive officer. In Yingluck's own companies (or rather in those owned by her brother), she would, of course, never have allowed this to happen. Yet, regarding the government of the country, she seemed to think that a long period of learning the ropes was unnecessary when coming into this position as part of internal family politics against the backdrop of fundamental national-level political conflicts, when backed by a formidable electoral machine, and when being sure of the great voter support her brother still enjoyed.

Cherm Sak then raised 15 questions that were designed to prove that Yingluck was unqualified to becoming the prime minister of Thailand, and merely served as a representative of her elder brother, Thaksin. I will summarize them here, because they represented concisely what many people in the "yellow" camp (but not only they, to be sure) must have thought.

1) If Yingluck had not been the younger sister of Thaksin, but would have had solely to rely on her own, would she have wanted to stand in this election, and announced that she wanted to be the prime minister? Not long before the election, she had said in an interview that she had no interest whatsoever in entering politics.

2) If Yingluck had not been the younger sister of Thaksin, but would have solely relied on her own attributes, experiences, knowledge, capability, and achievements in her life, if she had then entered the PTP announcing

that she wanted to run for an MP seat, and wanted to become the prime minister of Thailand, would the party's chairperson and its executive board been willing to make her the PTP's leading candidate? Considering only her personal capabilities, was she sufficiently well prepared or not?

3) If Yingluck had not been the younger sister of Thaksin, but ran in the election and announced herself as a candidate for prime minister with the support of the party's chairperson and executive board, would the PTP have had the same amount of budget and the same number of supporters as we had seen (in the election), and why?

4) Yingluck had not shown her political vision together with her competitors, such as Abhisit Vejjajiva. Was this because she did not dare, although she had knowledge and ideas? Or was it because she lacked personal knowledge and ideas? Or was it because there were some issues that Yingluck and the PTP did not want the public to ask about, and to know some truths clearly? Against this background, when she will have become prime minister already, how will she be able to answer questions and inquiries posed by professional journalists?

5) If Yingluck became prime minister, to what degree would she be able to administer the country's affairs efficiently? "How will she understand the tasks, duties, and responsibilities of the prime minister of the country?"

This question was about what concept Yingluck had (or rather would develop) of the premiership, and how she would design her work processes. Surely, her approach would be much different from that of Abhisit, whose concept of the premiership of Thailand included delivering two to four speeches in Bangkok elite circles per day, with those speeches rarely being related to government policies. Moreover, he seldom ventured outside of his Bangkok elite comfort zone to visit Thailand's 76 provinces. In the context of this question, Chermesak also specifically mentioned the conflict between the common good and the private interests of Thaksin, herself, and her clique (*phakphuak*). He wondered how Yingluck would divide her time, how much weight and importance she would assign to decisions concerning the administration of the country.

6) In how far will Yingluck be able to understand the relationship between high-level institutions and organizations of the nation, for example, the monarchy, the judiciary, the parliament, the military, and others, both with respect to custom and history and according to the constitution? Chermesak also included "international institutions" in this point, namely ASEAN, EU, IMF, WB, ICC, and UNESCO as well as international fora, such as the "world economic forum" (English in the original). "And if 'Thaksin

thinks, Phuea Thai acts' [is realized], how much time will 'Yingluck' take to prepare herself, or must there be a person who directs her?" (ibid.)

This question might be seen as rather patronizing. On the other hand, this kind of lack of understanding of the institutional structure and the dynamics of domestic Thai politics had been a major problem of Thaksin's conception of the prime minister (as exemplified in the label "Thaksin regime," or in Thaksin's own statement that governing a country was no different from being the CEO of a private-sector company). This failure to understand fundamental aspects of Thai politics (though he understood some aspects quite well, as can be seen in his creation of TRT and winning elections) had played a vital role in Thaksin's downfall. However, Cherm Sak's statement left out a very important issue in this context, namely "change." His own group was extremely conservative, and it seemed not to have realized that the adaptation of political players to far-reaching attitudinal changes among the Thai citizenry had become one of the most important challenges in the Thai political order, as could easily be seen from the elections of 2001 and 2005, the events in 2009 and 2010, and from the clear victory of the PTP led by Yingluck.

In any case, it seemed to be obvious that Yingluck would have to do a great deal of "learning on the job." She had spent the past two decades adjusting to the image of a business executive, and she did so entirely within her brother's companies. Thus, one can assume that she had developed a good understanding of this business context, namely the Chinese-style family enterprise (as opposed to being dependent solely on her actual management capabilities in a big non-family corporation). Regarding the position of prime minister, however, where would the incentive to develop anything more than a superficial understanding would have come from? Obviously, she had been involved with Thaksin's fate as a family member. Perhaps, this had made her learn some lessons. Yingluck had also a different personality from Thaksin. Yet, she had shown a rather self-centered or family-centered perspective about what had politically happened during the past few years when she complained on one occasion that nobody knew how much her family had suffered during the past few years. This was a very narrow perspective, indeed, especially given what had happened in 2009 and 2010. Since her path to the position of prime minister was purely nepotistic, since she did not seem to possess any relevant experience for the job, and since the

position of prime minister belonged to the public, this public was perfectly allowed to ask hard questions, as Chermesak did.

7) If Yingluck became PM, would she be able to understand international relations, be able to negotiate, and understand the country's benefits vis-à-vis the big powers, the neighbors, and others in the region?

8) Would she respect the independence of the justice system, or will she intervene, such as with the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) or the public prosecutors?

9) Would Yingluck nullify verdicts against Thaksin by passing an amnesty law, and by amending the constitution? Would she disobey the needs of her brother, or would she agree to act according to his needs, although this might inflame the country?

This was easily the most explosive of Chermesak's questions, because it raised the key concern in the quarters he represented—the return of the “Thaksin system,” and the undoing of everything they thought they had achieved in undermining it during the past few years. This especially included the return of Thaksin without him having to serve even a single day of the doubtful two-year sentence that the Supreme Court had given him, essentially for signing a letter as required by Thai law enabling his wife to buy a piece of land in a prime area of Bangkok, and for Thaksin allegedly having used his position as the PM for advantaging his wife in the bidding for that piece of land. Moreover, Chermesak held out the thinly veiled prospect that, in case Yingluck initiated an amnesty absolving Thaksin and amendments to the constitution, the yellow-shirt movement would resume its mass protests on Bangkok streets.

10) How well would Yingluck understand the management of the economy, which was very different from managing a business? How well would she guide the Thai economy against obstacles resulting from the world economy? Who would determine the fate of Thailand's economy? Would it be her, or some person on the outside, or in the background?

11) Would Yingluck be able to evade the patronage and gratitude-reward system (*len phak len phuak*)? She herself has had debts of gratitude towards others all the time.

Since the patronage system is one of the key characteristics of social life in Thailand, and politics and administration could not be conceptualized without reference to this system, one wonders how the prime minister could be expected to avoid it. More specifically, this question was another reference to Thaksin. By having recruited her into

his company network, he had enabled her to lead the luxurious life that she had been enjoying, irrespective of whether this lifestyle corresponded to her capabilities. The implication was that she would have been off much worse, economically and socially, if it had not been because of Thaksin's patronage. Therefore, as a family client, she owed her patron a huge debt of gratitude, which she had to repay.

12) Would Yingluck intervene in the mass media? Would she bestow benefits on them in order to control them? Already before the election, there had been news about bribery.

13) Would Yingluck be a public person? Would her personal information become public information, because she had become the government leader? How much would she open up her life to the public? She would be subject to revelations, pressure, and criticism.

This question suggested that Chermesak thought that a prime minister should not have any private life. But why should this have been so? It is one thing to be transparent about personal issues that might affect one's performance and decisions in office. It is quite another thing to require the prime minister to expose her private family life to the full view of the mass media.

14) Could Yingluck free herself from the influence of her family, especially from the influence of Thaksin? How much could she be herself? Or would it turn out to be like "Thaksin thinks, Yingluck acts," making her respond to all his needs, and administering the country under the mandate of a fugitive from criminal justice, and corruption?¹⁴

This, of course, was not a real question, because the very fact that Yingluck was on her way to becoming PM demonstrated that she had not been herself. Moreover, most of Chermesak's questions raised the issue of Yingluck's lack of qualification for the job, meaning that she would be dependent on a great number of assistants. Under such circumstances, how could one seriously expect her to be "herself" in the position of prime minister? The best one could expect was that she would, with Thaksin's help, moderate the networks of advisors, and then present a unifying picture of "her" government to the audience. Chermesak's key question was whether Yingluck would be nothing more than a naive puppet of Thaksin, and thereby be in an even weaker position than Samak and Somchai, who had at least been experienced "nominees."

15) Which direction would the country take under the “Thaksin thinks, Thailand’s prime minister acts” approach?¹⁵

Many observers would have liked to know the answer on this question. However, the question posed by Cherm Sak was self-servingly narrow. After all, the country’s direction depended on other factors as well, such as the behavior of the Democrat Party, the way the events of 2009 and especially the deaths of 2010 would be dealt with, the behavior of the military, the actions of PAD and UDD, and the lessons that the hyper-royalists and *aphichon* had learned from the events since 2006. A most important issue would be the succession. Yet, these issues did not fit into Cherm Sak’s article attacking Yingluck nor did they probably fit into his political outlook.



Picture 4: The famous PTP election poster saying, “Thaksin thinks, Phuea Thai acts.” Beneath, there is a smaller slogan saying, ““Those who have worked already’ give support.” This probably referred to Thaksin’s administrative teams from 2001 and 2005.

Source: <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2011/05/09/thaksin-is-back/>

As for her personality, Yingluck Shinawatra did not “fit the characterization of a policy wonk, a glib debater or a witty jokester, personalities who can be found by the score among the country’s parliamentarians” (Chiratas and Srisamorn 2011). If she indeed became prime minister, the authors continued, this would be due to “a brilliant

marketing campaign scripted by a legion of political advisers who have helped map every speech, every wave and every message to highlight her strengths while playing down her weaknesses” (ibid.). This sounded plausible, because political marketing certainly played a big role in Yingluck’s campaign.¹⁶

It’s true that Yingluck’s appointment was one stone killing many birds. She was a Thaksin representative without the usual hostility. She was a new kid in the political town. And she is a woman. All of a sudden, the Pheu Thai Party’s election campaign was sexed up and romanticized. The Democrats, on the other hand, had the politically bruised Abhisit Vejjajiva to content with. (*The Nation*, July 224, 2011:7A)

However, one needs to be careful not to overlook the voters’ political preferences. Insisting on the major role of marketing insinuates that people were somehow tricked into buying a product that they neither needed nor actually wanted. Contrary to this view, one would need to weight the respective influence of the UDD and Thaksin’s past government performance, as well as Abhisit’s actions when he was prime minister in comparison to any marketing efforts. It also needs to be pointed out that very few voters actually encountered Yingluck on her election campaign trail, while many of them, in one way or another, got into contact with the party’s constituency candidates. Yet, her election campaign certainly was impressive and professionally managed (contrary to that of the Democrats, apparently). A foreign journalist summarized his impressions as follows.

[T]he naturalness and easy manner that Thais appreciate in Ms Yingluck is authentic—but the fact that it comes over so well is the result of a lot of sweat and forethought. I have covered many campaigns now both in rich and in developing countries, and Ms Yingluck’s campaign is among the best choreographed and organised that I’ve seen. (R.C. 2011)

In this context of how Yingluck could best be presented in the election campaign, one important question, almost from the beginning, was whether Yingluck would be willing to meet Abhisit for a televised debate. She had always responded that she was not principally against it, but the timing had to be right, especially because she had to go out and meet the voters, and explain the party’s policies to them. Observers could not help noting that a debate would strongly favor Abhisit, because his most outstanding feature had always been his debating skills, while Yingluck, as mentioned above, was

anything but a “glib debater.” Natthawut Saikuea, “a red shirt leader, said the Democrat Party was confident Mr Abhisit would have the upper hand over Ms Yingluck in a debate. He said during two years in power, the only thing Mr Abhisit had been good at was talking” (Mongkol and Manop 2011). Yingluck’s persistent evasion of any debate made Abhisit feel “like a befuddled boyfriend who doesn’t know what he did wrong. Yingluck Shinawatra just doesn’t talk and will never be drawn to any argument” (Tulsathit 2011). With Yingluck, “the ruling party members have been wondering why Yingluck’s ratings continue to soar when all she does is stick to non-provocative scripts and, of course, smile her sweet smile” (ibid.).

As long as Yingluck does not speak, there is little the Democrats can do. ... Abhisit must feel tortured. All he needs is a debate. All she does is raise her index finger to signify her party number and smile. ... Abhisit wants to break that silence for political gain. Thaksin wants to keep her that way, also for political gain. (ibid.)

The *Bangkok Post* also seemed to be tortured, saying in an editorial,

What is missing is a clear explanation of policy from the major candidates themselves, rather than merely soundbites from the campaign trail. There is no better way to bring this about than a well organized debate between the two major candidates. [Such debates] are considered a necessary step in political contests in most democratic nations. (*Bangkok Post*, June 19, 2011:10)

Yet, neither Abhisit’s supposedly tortured feelings nor the *Bangkok Post*’s obvious attempt to give their favorite an advantage by evoking “democracy” could move Yingluck to enter into a debate that would have benefited only Abhisit. The “debate” issue could not be taken seriously, because it was too clearly used by its promoters merely for political gain. Everybody knew perfectly well that Yingluck was not a politically genuine candidate. Thus, asking her to show her political “vision” and to enter into a debate with the professional speaker Abhisit (himself not exactly a great fountain of policy innovations), though desirable in a more democratic context than Thailand could offer in the elections of 2011, seemed to be pointless. Under prevailing conditions, asking for a debate was a cheap trick aimed at Yingluck making a fool of herself.

Of course, as the Chermesak article above shows, Yingluck could not escape the long shadow of her brother. This even seemed to have included details of her campaign. It was reported that Thaksin, “held weekly teleconferences to map strategy and more importantly, reassure his demure sister that yes, she can lead the country” (Chiratas and Srisamorn 2011). The authors added that, “Just two months ago, Ms Yingluck was still publicly denying any aspirations to lead Pheu Thai, only changing her mind at the very last minute out of familial loyalty rather than any personal ambition.” Chiratas and Srisamorn quoted a “party insider,” who she had reportedly told “earlier this year,” “I’m not ready to give up my life, and particularly my son’s happiness, in exchange for the top spot on the party list” (ibid.). Thaksin himself, asked by the German weekly *Der Spiegel* whose idea it was to have his sister run in the elections, answered

We decided together: The entire family, the party, and of course, she herself. We thought long and hard about who the right person would be to lead our Pheu Thai Party into the elections, but in the end we kept coming back to her. (*Der Spiegel Online*, June 15, 2011)

Some weeks before he made this statement, Thaksin gave an interview to the Thai-language *Matichon* newspaper, which was translated by *The Nation*. He was asked the question, “Yingluck is Pheu Thai’s No-1 party-list candidate. So, you have decided to make her the next prime minister?” Thaksin gleefully fell into this trap saying,

I am thinking about it. The prime minister does not need to be No-1 party-list candidate. I am thinking about it back and forth. ... She is good at administration and she used to run AIS and run a firm with Bt200 billion worth of assets. But running a firm is different from running a government. ... I am now reviewing whether she should become Thailand’s first women prime minister or not. (*The Nation*, May 24, 2011:16A)

Thaksin also gladly accepted the next trap when asked, “If not Yingluck, whom will you select as the next prime minister?” saying,

There are several choices in the party. I am pondering the choices of Mingkwan, Pracha, Yongyuth and some outsiders. I have approached a few outsiders for the task. (ibid.)

Reading such statements, one could wonder what business Thaksin had in actively recruiting possible candidates for the premiership in Thailand, and how it was that he, despite living abroad, apparently occupied an informal political position that empowered him to make the final decision about who would have the best chance of becoming the country's next prime minister.

From the perspective of Thaksin and the Shinawatra clan, the task was not to find the best-qualified person in formal political-professional terms. Rather, the task was to find the person Thaksin could trust most to work according to his guidelines, who would also unify the Phuea Thai Party, attract the biggest part of the pro-Thaksin voter reservoir, and who would be best suited for the electoral marketing campaign. Thaksin's own children were still much too young for this task. Thaksin's relatives from his generation were all too unattractive and unconvincing to be fielded. In generational terms, Yingluck occupied the middle position. Whether Yingluck was also qualified in political-professional terms was probably largely irrelevant in the Shinawatra's family-style decision-making, leaving respective criticism to the anti-Thaksin press. The decisive issue seemed to have been winning the election for the Shinawatra family, specifically for Thaksin, by using their personal electoral vehicle, the Phuea Thai Party. It was not about following the ideals of a participatory political process for the selection of candidates for key political positions within an institutionalized political party. Thaksin even turned Yingluck's most obvious disadvantage, her total inexperience, into her key advantage. In the above-mentioned interview with *Der Spiegel Online*, the interviewer asked, "What makes Yingluck a particularly suitable candidate for the post? She doesn't have any political experience." Thaksin responded by saying,

That is precisely her advantage. After the military coup of 2006 and last year's military deployment against the opposition, with more than 90 dead, what the country needs more than anything else is reconciliation. A person, who up until now has had nothing to do with politics, is especially well suited for that. Yingluck doesn't have any political baggage weighing her down. She is also a successful businesswoman who is used to leading a large organization. (*Der Spiegel Online*, June 15, 2011)

Thaksin even proudly declared that Yingluck was better than merely being his "nominee," a charge that had been brought against People's Power Party's former prime

ministers Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat. Rather, he said, Yingluck was his “clone” (*Bangkok Post*, May 17, 2011). To his detractors, such as Cherm Sak and the PAD, this probably sounded like a threat. *The Nation* newspaper, a staunch opponent of Thaksin, performed the usual mix-up of their political opinions with the preferences of the voters saying, “The ‘nominee’ issue will hound her from Day One” (*The Nation*, May 18, 2011:13A), while another paper added, “she will be seen as a proxy of her fugitive elder brother Thaksin” (*Bangkok Post*, May 18, 2011:8). Political columnist Suranand Vejjajiva, who had been in a Thaksin Cabinet (and later joined the Yingluck Cabinet), noted that, “Thaksin is viewed as an outcast who cannot be trusted since he either wants to come back into the fold with a grudge, or is a rebel who would like to topple the entire establishment” (Suranand 2011). And how could Thaksin be trusted? He had been using PPP/PTP and the UDD for realizing his political goals as much as he could. Thaksin had twice helped the Red Shirts in their attempts to topple the Abhisit government by using the means of mass street protests, and he had reportedly been responsible for the rejection of Abhisit’s road map that would have averted what happened in April and May 2010, and led to elections as demanded by the UDD.¹⁷ How could the establishment rest assured that the only thing Thaksin wanted to do was coming back to help with the implementation of new policies that would improve the Thai peoples lives? Furthermore, he had never shown any signs that he had learned from his total failure in 2006, and drawn constructive democratic conclusions. On the contrary, he seemed to be the same person as in 2006—probably with a great degree of resentment against those who had done all this to him. The establishment could hardly be faulted if it saw Thaksin as being on a confrontation course “to advance his personal ambitions and to threaten those currently in power” (Suranand 2011).

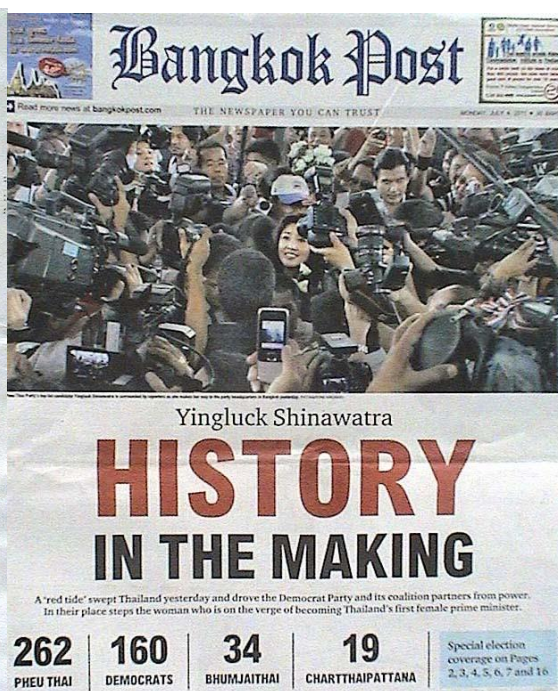
A critical political cartoon depicted Yingluck as a ventriloquist’s dummy sitting on Thaksin’s right knee, while the text said, “Although she has never played any political role, she could become prime minister in 49 days” (*Thai Rath*, July 31, 2011).¹⁸ The voters who would go on and cast their ballots for Thaksin, Yingluck, and Phuea Thai candidates were probably unimpressed by such cartoons, and they could not have cared less if they had been able to understand the following English-language quote from *The Economist*.

Many non-partisan Thais had hoped that Pheu Thai would evolve into an issues-based party rather than remain a Thaksin fan club. Fat chance. As the election nears, the opposite is happening. Mr Thaksin himself has been addressing supporters for hours by videolink and it is likely that the person who will lead the party into the election will be his own younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra. A 43-year-old businesswoman, she has almost no experience of politics. The Thaksinisation of Pheu Thai is not universally popular in the party. Some think Ms Yingluck will re-invigorate the base, but others retort that she is untested and may put off voters tired of the relentless focus on the fortunes of one man—and now one family. (*The Economist*, May 5, 2011)

Yet, this “one man” had been at the centre of the Thai Rak Thai, People’s Power, and Phuea Thai parties. What or who else would these parties have had to create party identities, and to produce cohesion? If one took Thaksin and all the loyalties towards him away, why should all these MPs and their factions have stayed together in these political parties? The phenomenon of “Thaksinisation” is certainly an aberration from the pure normative model of an ideologically integrated and institutionalized political party. Nevertheless, the political structures prevailing in Thailand had made it the key organizing principle from the time TRT was established by Thaksin as his personal vehicle to conquer the position of prime minister. Ten years after TRT’s first election victory in 2001, Thaksin remained the sole serious unifying mechanism of the PTP. Ideas about turning this outfit into an “issue-based party” largely represented an academic misconception of the nature of Thai political parties, and certainly of TRT, PPP, and PTP.¹⁹

Seeing Yingluck “as a proxy” and calling Thaksin a “fugitive” reflected the perspective the Yellow Shirts. Both words carried negative connotations for the PAD, the establishment, and the conservative mainstream press. The Red Shirts certainly did not share such views. Rather than seeing Yingluck as a “proxy” of Thaksin, they saw her as his “representative.” To them, being a “clone” was nothing negative. On the contrary, it reassured them that they would get the best thing next to the real thing, and that she would carry on with Thaksin’s policies. An editorial in the *Bangkok Post* fundamentally misjudged the voters’ views when it stated,

More voters will be repelled than attracted if they see her as a ‘clone’ of fugitive ex-prime minister Thaksin. Thailand’s prime minister must be a qualified, dedicated leader. It would be unacceptable if he—or she—were seen as taking orders or directions from unelected entities, let alone a felon living overseas.” (*Bangkok Post*, May 18, 2011:8)



Pictures 5-8: As these pictures indicate, Thaksin was seen as a key player in this election, although he lived in exile. The election special of the *Bangkok Post* even pictured Thaksin and Abhisit as the main contenders, leaving out Yingluck. One day later, however, the same paper was forced to put Yingluck on its title page, adding the headline “History in the making.” The outcome of the election just could not be ignored, with the paper attributing the result in the subtitle to a “red tide” (when the UDD protesters were on their way to Bangkok in 2010, the *Bangkok Post* had referred to “red hordes”).

The biggest voter bloc (unlike the Bangkok-based establishment and large sectors of the middle class, as represented by the *Bangkok Post*) did not see Yingluck as representing a “fugitive,” let alone a “felon.” Rather, Thaksin was a “hero,” who had illegitimately been removed from power by a military coup, and who was then unjustly sentenced to a prison term by a complicit court of law, in a blatant attempt politically to neutralize him. Newspapers using expressions such as “fugitive” when they referred to Thaksin firmly put them in the yellow shirt or the broader anti-Thaksin camp. Yet, all their best efforts to convince the voters of the undesirability of Thaksin and Yingluck were in vain.

Paradoxically, the UDD/red shirts were another element that could destabilize the PTP’s election campaign, both internally and externally. The Thai-language anti-Thaksin paper *Post Today* expressed its hope when headlining an article, “*Suek phainai rumrao phuea thai khoma!*” [Overwhelming infighting: Phuea Thai in coma!] (*Post Today*, April 19, 2011:4). This “coma” was said to result from increasing “intervention” by the “red shirts,” an increasing claim to power by them in the party, which had led to conflicts amongst its MPs. An important issue in this respect was that the UDD was staking claims for the PT’s party list. They had been pushing for upper places on the party list, which would push down by about ten positions those who were now on the list and this in an election the outcome of which was still uncertain. This situation had made many PTP leaders fed up with the red shirts, and led to the thinking that there had to be a clear line between the red shirts on the one side and the Phuea Thai Party on the other (*ibid.*).

One could say that through the UDD’s pro-Thaksin protests in 2009 and 2010, especially their immense sacrifices in trying to topple the Abhisit government so that the Thaksin forces and thus the PTP could return to power, the red shirts had moved into a realm that the politicians had long seen as their very own political property. Suddenly, they were facing people who had a justified claim to that very same realm, though based on a very different political logic. While the politicians’ claims was largely based on informal provincial-level cliques (*phuak*) and regional or national factions, the red shirts derived their claim to political influence from having created a powerful protest movement that had operated at the centre of the national level, Bangkok (though many constituency MPs had been instrumental in providing facilities and infrastructure for the UDD’s protest mobilizations). Moreover, this protest

movement had been directly connected to the PTP's *de facto* leader, Thaksin Shinawatra. Many PTP politicians certainly preferred to keep the UDD, which had its own organizational structure separate from the PTP, and its own political agenda (which was in some respects more progressive or controversial than what ordinary MPs had on their minds), at a distance from the party and the political processes they had become used to monopolizing. The UDD had grown into a political competitor that many PTP MPs were not used to. This also applied to the constituency level, where previously MPs and their personal cliques had ruled supreme. It was something new to them that local-level chapters of the UDD structure wanted to play a part in selecting constituency candidates, and maybe even push for their own preferred candidates to run in elections rather than merely accepting the established PTP personnel.

Externally, the red shirts' critical view of the monarchy was a convenient point of attack. The article from *Post Today* referred to above also pointed out that the red shirts had started involving the monarchy in their political actions, and that there were many accusations of *lèse majesté*. This could pose problems for PTP's voter base. In order to demonstrate the party's loyalty to the monarchy (*khwamchongrakpakdi*), old-time politicians (by then largely marginalized in their political significance) Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and Sanoh Thienthong were brought in. The latter was quoted in the paper with the dramatic words, "Both of us must be main pillars of the country. We want nation, religion, and monarchy. We accept this even if we have to exchange this with our lives" (*Post Today*, April 19, 2011:4). Veera Prateepchaikul, the conservative lead commentator of the *Bangkok Post*, also criticized Thaksin for having "warmly embraced" red-shirt leaders for PTP's party list, "despite the fact that several of them are facing lese majeste charges," and then added,

Thaksin's defence of his unwavering loyalty to the monarchy while embracing red shirt co-leaders—several of them facing lese majeste charges—into the Phue Thai Party appears to be conflicting in itself. How can one claim to be loyal when he or she allows people facing lese majeste charges contesting the election under his or her party's banner? (Veera 2011).

Thus, from Veera's point of view, when an army commander used *lèse majesté* charges as a means to bully political opponents, then they were immediately guilty as charged. One did not need to wait until a court found them guilty. Yet, Veera proba-

bly reflected the position of the establishment. Putting all these people accused of *lèse majesté* on the PTP party list must have appeared to the establishment as a gross



Pictures 9-11: The Red-Shirt press, here the journal *Red Power* (which had replaced the journal *Voice of Thaksin* that had been closed by the Abhisit government) was quite positive about Yingluck's candidacy.

provocation, and as a confirmation that Thaksin was disloyal to the monarchy. After all, if he were loyal, he would treat the *lèse majesté* charges also as verdicts, and never entrust the accused with running on promising places of the PTP party list. If prominent members of the establishment, such as Army Commander Prayuth or the Department of Special Investigation said that UDD leaders had committed *lèse majesté*, then most members of the establishment were inclined to believe that their fellow leading members were right. In fact, it did not need a court of law at all to decide on the issue (anyway, the legality of court proceedings in such cases are notoriously doubtful).

Veera closed his comment with the dire prediction,

The loyalty or disloyalty problem will continue to haunt the Pheu Thai Party and Thaksin himself during the electioneering period and also after the election. Unless this question is resolved to the satisfaction of the establishment, the military in particular, there is a slim chance that Pheu Thai will be able to form the government even if it wins the election. Or even if it manages to win more than half of the House seats and form a single-party government, it may have to start a countdown from Day One in the office. (ibid.)

The *lèse majesté* issue was part of the background of why the registration of the PTP's party list could not but generate strong reactions. The Thai-language business daily *Krungthep Thurakit* featured the headline, "22 reds capture Pheu Thai's party list. ... Thida confirms that the masses control the Pheu Thai party" (*Krungthep Thurakit*, May 20, 2011:13). The paper's English-language mother paper expressed its feelings in the headline of an editorial saying, "Red shirts on Pheu Thai list mocks peace talk. Leading reds are charged with being party to terrorist acts last year; ranking them highly is a provocation" (*The Nation*, May 22, 2011:7A).²⁰ As can be seen from Veera's and these two papers' approaches, the red shirts could be attacked both on grounds of disloyalty to the monarchy and on being "terrorists." Thus, Thaksin and PTP could be accused of supporting both anti-monarchists and terrorists. The leading Democrat Party propagandist, Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thueaksuban, pulled no punches in his reaction on the PTP party list,

I have not exaggerated the truth. These people have really harmed our country, [committed] terrorism and burned the country, burned the city. ... I want to show this so that the people will see that these people have not only behaved in a way that destroyed the country, created turmoil and chaos. Today, they are trying to turn themselves into MPs so that they can claim immunity and do not have to go to court and waste time with fighting [their cases]. And I wonder why the Phuea Thai Party tries to promote a policy to absolve all the wrongs of those who have committed political wrongdoings. I understand that this is not merely about Thaksin alone. That the Phuea Thai Party wants to absolve the wrongdoings also includes all those who acted as terrorists (*phu ko kanrai*), burned the country, burned the city (*phao ban phao mueang*). This is very worrisome. Therefore, I want to reaffirm the truth so that the people will be aware [of it] before they will decide whom to vote for as their representatives. (*Daily News*, May 26, 2011:3)

Of the 22 red-shirt leaders mentioned in the *Krungthep Thurakit* article above, about ten were placed in what was seen as the “safe zone.” *The Nation* put it this way,

Most of the key red leaders in the party list are in the so-called ‘safe zone,’ that is, the top 50. That means they are very likely to get elected, and may get Cabinet posts if Pheu Thai emerges victorious from the July 3 election and becomes the core of the next government. (*The Nation*, May 22, 2011:7A)

The paper added,

The opposition party had faced a big dilemma regarding the red shirts, who form its enormous support base. Leaving the red shirt leaders out of the party list would have been political suicide. But now that they have been included in the list, the party’s election campaign is looking provocative all of a sudden. (ibid.)

Especially the reference to Cabinet posts surely was a nightmare scenario for the anti-Thaksin and anti-UDD forces. Certainly, it was remarkable that the key confrontational UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan—at that time in prison on *lèse majesté* charges—appeared as number eight on the PTP party list, with the “softer” Natthawut Saisakuea following him as number nine. From the establishment’s perspective, these were gross acts of defiance, regarding both the loyalty and the terrorism issues. Korn Chatikavanij contributed a more technocratic viewpoint by saying,

I almost feel insulted by this from an institutional perspective, that they put two Red Shirt leaders with no experience of running anything in the top ten of the party list. One of them has never even been an MP. ... But it shows that for Pheu Thai the Red Shirts are central to their movement and given that, it is not surprising that the Red Shirts will continue to be an issue. (Spooner 2011)²¹

The party-list placements of red shirt leaders were very high-profile indeed, indicating that the PTP assumed that there were a great number of UDD followers in the provinces that could be mobilized to vote for the PTP by having their leaders placed prominently on its party list—making it certain that they would be in parliament. The UDD voters thus had it in their hands to turn their “heroes” into MPs. The PTP must have thought that this approach would do the party more good than harm, because there were probably very few voters who would be attracted to PTP by leaving out UDD people. Similarly, few voters would not vote for it upon learning that many UDD leaders were included. That the establishment forces would howl was to be expected, but insignificant in electoral terms. The number of votes for the Democrat Party that could additionally have been mobilized by pointing to red shirt leaders on the PTP party list was, I assume, small. The PTP thus represented an electoral package comprising Thaksin/Yingluck Shinawatra and the UDD. This electoral option could not have been more different from the Democrats and Abhisit. It was an option that the *aphichon* and all anti-Thaksin groups must have certainly found very disturbing. The PTP offered a clear anti-Bangkok elite ticket to the voters, and the party was successful with this approach.

In a vain attempt of breaking up the PTP-UDD alliance, the Democrat Party went as far as petitioning the Election Commission of Thailand arguing that the PTP’s election campaign expenses (in Thailand, political parties must observe ceilings for their campaign spending) should include spending by the red shirts, because PTP and UDD were the same organization. A deputy spokesperson for the Democrats, Warong Dejkitwikrom, said, “it was believed that Pheu Thai and the red shirts were one. Therefore, the EC must enforce the law to prevent the red shirts from carrying out any activity that would benefit Pheu Thai, otherwise the party would have an unfair edge over its rivals” (Kanittha and Olarn 2011). Yet, what was unfair in the fact that the PTP had red-shirt mass support while the Democrats lacked it (the Democrats’ previous allies, the PAD, chose to go its own way in this election)?²² Should the Democrat Party not rather have supported the democratic ideal of political participation by the

people, here as citizens in an election? Did the Democrats mean to shut the peoples' voices supporting the PTP since this could benefit this party, but not themselves? Surely, it would have been a more constructive electoral approach if the Democrats had relied on mobilizing their own supporters. Anyway, the ECT's secretary general rejected this attempt arguing, "They may be related but they are not in the same group." Moreover, "it was not easy for the Democrats to prove that the red shirts belonged to the Pheu Thai Party or that they were from the same organization" (ibid.).

Consequently, the Democrats faced both the Phuea Thai Party and the red shirt movement, and this seemed to have been too much.

Conclusion

The election of July 3, 2011, thus confirmed the seemingly invulnerable political dominance of Thaksin Shinawatra since his first victory in the elections of January 2001, then fought with his original Thai Rak Thai Party under the slogan "*khit mai tham mai phuea thai thuk khon*" ("think anew, act anew, for every Thai"). After four eminently successful—but by no means uncontroversial—years as prime minister, Thaksin (who was the first elected Thai prime minister to completed his term) and his TRT contested the elections of February 2005 under the slogan "*si pi som si pi sang*" ("four years of repairs, four years of building up"). In that election, the voters even provided him with an absolute majority of 377 MPs, while the Democrats were reduced to 96 seats (with Chart Thai and Mahachon gaining 25 and 2, respectively). After Thaksin called fresh elections for April 2, 2006, in order to reconfirm the legitimacy of his government that some thought had suffered because of the PAD protests, the Democrat, Chart Thai, and Mahachon parties boycotted that election, thereby creating a state crisis based on certain stipulations in the election law that have since been annulled. Anticipating yet another clear voter mandate for Thaksin in the royally announced elections of October 15, 2006, the military staged a coup on September 19, 2006. Despite TRT being abolished during the coup regime, and Thaksin fleeing abroad in order to avoid having to serve a doubtful two-year prison sentence, TRT's successor party, Phalang Prachachon (People's Power) again succeeded at the post-coup polls held on December 23, 2007. However, since it did not achieve an absolute majority in the House, it had to enter into a coalition with smaller parties. This coalition government crumbled when PPP was also dissolved, on December 2, 2008, ena-

bling the Democrats under Abhisit to form a coalition government instead, and forcing the non-disqualified members of PPP to regroup under the name of Phuea Thai (For Thai) Party. After the Democrat-led Abhisit government had antagonized large voter segments during its anti-red shirt actions in 2009 and 2010 (besides other factors mentioned in this chapter), it did not come as a surprise that the latest Thaksin outfit, Phuea Thai, would defeat the Democrats yet again in the election of July 3, 2011.

The figures in the following Table 1 are clear—PT won 106 more seats in the House than the Democrats did. Compared with the election of 2007, the Democrats lost only six seats, while PT increased PPP’s result from 233 to 265 seats. However, the Democrats’ loss is somewhat bigger than it looks at first sight, because the number of House seats had increased from 480 in 2007 to 500 in 2011. There were 45 more party-list seats available. While the Democrats could increase their share from 33 in 2007 to 44 in 2011, the PTP jumped from 34 to 61 seats.

Table 1: The election result by party and region, constituency, and party-list seats

	BKK	Central	North	North-east	South	Total	PL	TOTAL
PTP	10	41	49	104	0	204	61	265
DEM	23	25	13	4	50	115	44	159
BJT	0	13	2	13	1	29	5	34
CTP	0	11	2	1	1	15	4	19
CPPD	0	0	1	4	0	5	2	7
Phalang Chon	0	6	0	0	0	6	1	7
Mathabhum	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2
RPT	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
Rak Santi	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Mahachon	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
New Democrat	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	33	96	67	126	53	375	125	500

PTP (Phuea Thai Party), DEM (Democrats), BJT (Bhumjaithai), CTP (Chart Thai Pattana), CPPD (Chart Pattana Phuea Phaendin), RPT (Rak Prathet Thai)

Source: Bangkok Pundit (July 7, 2011)

As shown in Table 2 on the next page, the Democrats had received only 190,399 fewer votes than PPP on the party-list ballot in 2007. In 2011, this difference had swollen

to 4.3 million.²³ In percentage terms, the Democrats' share of party-list votes was reduced by 5.3 percent, while that of PTP increased by 7.3 percent. Thus, the

Table 2: Party-list results in the elections of 2001 to 2011

Election	Thaksin Party	Democrats	Others
2001	11,634,495 (40.64%)	7,610,789 (26.58%)	9,383,918 (32.78%)
2005	18,993,073 (61.17%)	7,210,742 (23.22%)	4,844,408 (15.60%)
2007	12,338,903 (41.08%)	12,148,504 (40.45%)	5,546,091 (18.47%)
2011	15,752,470 (48.42%)	11,435,640 (35.15%)	5,348,117 (16.43%)

Source: The official election statistics reports of the Office of the Election Commission of Thailand of 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2011.

Democrats could indeed largely hold on to their relatively high number of party-list votes compared to the much lower numbers they had received in the 2001 and 2005 elections. To many voters, the events since 2006, followed by those of 2009 and 2010, seem to have mattered enough as to favor the Democrat Party over the new Thaksin outfit (in the introduction to this chapter, I quoted Abhisit's phrase of "crisis-triggered votes"). It also seems, however, that citizens who entered the elections as first-time voters in their great majority benefited the Phuea Thai Party. Although the number of voters who turned out in 2011 increased by 2.4 million (the number of eligible voters increased by 2.9 million), the Democrats still lost 712,864 party-list votes over 2007. The PTP, on the other hand, increased their respective number by 2.4 million. Consequently, one might cautiously assume that the Democrat Party, in the next elections scheduled for 2015, will perhaps have a hard time explaining to new and younger voters why they should cast their ballots for them. The situation might become even more severe if the memories of older voters about the time between 2006 and 2010 will

fade and, possibly, be replaced by the more recent experience of a reasonably successful Yingluck government facing a weak and hardly visible opposition. Should this happen, it is difficult to see what convincing selling points the Democrats will be able to advertise in order to achieve a better result than in 2011. The Democrats would find themselves in a situation similar to that after the election of January 2001. At that time, as mentioned above, the issue was put this way, “But it is the future of the party that the Democrats must now turn to if it is not to be left behind by this [TRT] change in Thai politics” (*The Nation*, January 8, 2001:A4).

Even in 2011, the Democrat’s future seemed to remain nebulous. Since their election defeat in 2001, they had merely changed their chairpersons from Chuan Leekpai to Banyat Bantadtan, and then to Abhisit Vejjajiva, and adopted their own brand of “populist” policies. Yet, the party still largely remained reliant on its southern bastion, while the Northeast remained a terra incognita. Even in Bangkok, the Democrats’ result was very close to that of the Phuea Thai Party. On the party-list vote of Bangkok, the Democrats gained 1.3 million votes, the PTP 1.2 million,²⁴ prompting *Bangkok Pundit* (July 18, 2011) to remark, “Bangkok is very much up for grabs.” It would probably not help the party very much merely to change the chairperson again (and who should take over from Abhisit?), and leave issues such as the expansion of its branch network, its political presence in the Northeast, its southern and establishment orientations, the development of a broader mass appeal, and its policy sincerity unattended.

As for the other political parties, which on average have managed to attract merely 16.8 percent of the party list ballot during the past three elections, and only 15.2 percent of the seats in 2011, they gained their votes and seats mainly by commanding long-established informal political networks in certain provinces. An editorial aptly called them “provincial parties” (*Khao Sot*, May 9, 2011). They are often centered upon certain local leaders and their families (in fact, Phuea Thai and the Democrats have similar foundations). Following the editorial mentioned, these parties included Phak Phalang Chon in Chonburi (Sonthaya Khunpluem); Phak Bhumjaithai with its stronghold in Buriram (Newin Chidchob); Phak Pracharaj in Sakaew (Sanoh Thienthong); Phak Chart Thai Pattana with its center in Suphanburi (Banharn Silaparcha); Phak Chart Pattana Phuea Phaendin in Nakorn Ratchasima (Suwat Lip-tapanlop); Phak Matuphum in the Malay-Muslim provinces of the South (coup leader

Sonthi Boonyaratglin); and the Social Action party in Khon Kaen (Suwit Khunkitti; however, he had already failed to win a seat in the 2007 election).

Parties of this type do not normally aspire to develop into nationally significant political organizations, but rather aim for winning a sufficient number of seats in their respective areas of influence to enable them to join a coalition government. They can then claim a number of ministerial seats that is in proportion to their number of MPs. As can be seen in Table 1, the two biggest of these parties together achieved just above 10 percent of the total number of seats in the House (Bhumjaithai 34, Chart Thai Pattana 19), while the remaining seven parties altogether gained 23 MPs. On the one hand side, the future of such parties was uncertain, due to their personal and network characteristics. On the other hand, since the election system emphasized constituency MP rather than those standing on the proportional party lists (at a rate of 375 to 125), there remained a strong incentive for local informal political networks to continue going it alone, at least as long as their key leaders were still alive and politically influential.

Finally, the changing role of the voters was again put into sharp focus in these elections. When the present author did his doctoral research in Chachoengsao province, he had the unexpected opportunity (unexpected because the military coup of 1991 could not be foreseen) to observe the election of March 1992. At that time, political parties seemed to play very little role in determining the voters' electoral decisions (although this impression might have been partly due to the absence of the party-list ballot, meaning that provincial voters could hardly express their national-level political preferences, if they indeed had them). Some candidates did not even bother putting the names of the parties they were running for on their election posters. At that time, observers still assumed that voters were politically uninformed and uninterested, with their voting decisions solely made on the basis of money paid to them by local vote canvassers (*hua khanaen*) working for a particular MP candidate. Voters in general were seen as poor and ignorant, and thus easily tempted by even a small amount of money. This context led to the expression "night of the howling dogs," that is, the night before election day when vote canvassers would go to the villages to hand out their vote-buying money. Since then, it had become almost habitual for newspaper columnists to claim that an election had been "the dirtiest in Thai political history." However, as mentioned above, this situation unmistakably began to change with the election of 2001 (notwithstanding the switch in argumentation, casting "populist poli-

cies” as some sort of collective vote buying). A decade later, although some influential academic observers still stuck to the formula “poverty + vote buying = vote,” most had probably come to recognize that the great mass of voters had undergone a process of politicization, meaning that they had developed genuine political preferences, which they would use in their electoral decision-making. This change had been spurred not least by the very intense chain of political events and processes since the elections of February 2005. There were probably very few voters in Thailand, who had been entirely ignorant of all that had happened in politics between 2005 and 2011. For those voters who had followed the events and processes, or even participated in them (whether on the side of the PAD or the UDD), their observations and experiences could not but strongly influence their opinions, political preferences, and finally their votes, whether they cast them for Phuea Thai or the Democrats, or for any other political party. For better or worse, Thailand’s political system had arrived in an era of mass politics, and all political observers and actors were called on to draw their own conclusions from this fundamental change.

Endnotes

¹ This paper is scheduled to appear as a chapter in a book on Thailand's 2011 elections, to be published by the King Prajadhipok's Institute (KPI). It is based on a longer report on the 2011 elections submitted to KPI. This report is available at <http://wuth.academia.edu/MichaelHNelson>.

² For information on these elections, see Nelson (2002, 2008, and 2011).

³ Note that the party's name will be written "Phue Thai" and "Phuea Thai" in this chapter. The first version was the official one, while this author prefers the second version, because it properly places an "a" at the end of the name.

⁴ In an earlier interview published by *Matichon* (March 8, 2011:3), Korn seemed to have been more positive. On the question of what the factors were that could return the Democrats to the government, his answer was, "Clear policies that can really be done." However, for pushing the policies one also needed a capable and accepted leader. "The prime minister [Abhisit] has proven himself for two years, which is the guarantee why we are confident that the majority of the people is ready to support us" (*ibid.*).

⁵ The dissolution of TRT, for example, was performed by a military-appointed "Constitutional Tribunal," and the disqualification of the party's leadership level from politics for five years was based on a decree specifically designed for that purpose by the coup plotters and retroactively applied by that "Tribunal."

⁶ For a Thai-language book on this issue, see ประสงค์ อีระเดช มนตรี (2551). The English translation of the book's title is "Judicialization: revolution in Thai politics." The book aims to promote the debate about the adequate role of the courts in Thai politics. An appendix prints the royal advices of April 25, 2006, and May 24, 2007, and other documents of the period.

⁷ See สุเทพ [2010]. In this booklet, Suthep viciously attacks the red shirts. Its programmatic title says, "Do not let our country be burned again." The publishing house, incidentally, belonged to Cherm Sak Pinthong, a well-known extremist yellow-shirt activist, who, after the elections, lost his program on state TV, and subsequently moved in with the Democrat's Blue Sky TV.

⁸ It was noted that a similar "reminder tactic" was used by the Democrats in the elections of September 1992. At that time, they tried to undercut Chamlong Srimuang's great popularity in Bangkok by charging him with "leading people to their deaths" (in the "bloody May" of 1992, when the Suchinda Kraprayoon government cracked down on the anti-government protests in which Chamlong had played a catalytic role). That "was not a noble tactic, but it worked quite well" (*The Nation Online*, June 18, 2011). In 1992, the Democrats had nothing to do with Chamlong's actions. However, in the run-up to the 2011 elections, "the city burning was considered by the red shirts to be a direct response to the Abhisit government's 'massacre' of protesters" (*ibid.*). In September 1992, there was no national divide. "This time [2011], at least half of the country doesn't care much, if at all, about the arson spree on May 19 last year." Finally, unlike in 1992, Abhisit and the Democrats were hated by a substantial proportion of the voters (*ibid.*).

⁹ The conservative *Daily News* (June 20, 2011:3) assisted Suthep, saying that the party had been attacked, and “society” was currently made to believe information from the other side. Therefore, doing nothing and not opposing it, like in the past, was not a solution, and it could not reduce the problems. Only speaking the “truth” could make society, which at present was confused and mistaken about the political image and issues that had been constructed, until they had forgotten to look at the true problems. In addition, the right-wing paper *Naew Na* (June 21, 2011:5) complained about the “lies and distortions,” that had happened to the extent that they eventually believed in their own lies. This had made many Thais to forget “the evil of burning the country, burning the city,” and “the evil of those who had dared to give the commands to burn their own country, burn their own city,” just because this group was denied the realization of its personal interests. The author concludes with the sentence, “On the day our country was burnt, where were we and how did we feel?” (ibid.).

¹⁰ Abhisit had also used the word “detoxify,” for example, “The Democrats called on voters to give them more than 250 seats so that they could ‘detoxify’ Thailand from any lingering legacy of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra” (Nattaya 2011b).

¹¹ Two days after this *Thai Rath* headline, there was a half-page advertisement of the Democrat Party in the *Post Today* (July 26, 2011:3, *wikro* section) about “Joining in building the future of Thailand with the Democrat Party.” It thanked people for their trust and said that the party still strove to build a good future for all Thais. Importantly, it asked people to make suggestions. There was an email address (future@democrat.or.th), facebook ([//www.facebook.com/futuredp](http://www.facebook.com/futuredp)), and a twitter account (@futuredp). It also provided the mailing address of the DP, and said that people could speak to their Democrat MP, or “pass the Democrat Party branches countrywide.” Interestingly, the left side of the advertisement (the text was on the right-hand side) showed Abhisit surrounded by smiling people. That this advertisement equated the future of the Democrats with Abhisit probably anticipated his re-election as the Democrat party’s leader.

¹² Meanwhile, as mentioned in endnote seven, the Democrats do have their own TV station, though they initially strongly denied that they had anything to do with it.

¹³ He had edited a series of five anti-Thaksin books. The first volume, entitled “Knowing Thaksin” (*ru than thaksin*) appeared in 2004 (เจิมศักดิ์ 2547). In 2008, he published a follow-up volume, entitled “Knowing Thailand” (เจิมศักดิ์ 2551). This book followed the original People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) slogan, “Return our country to us!” It was thus another attempt by Cherm Sak to exorcise Thailand from Thaksin Shinawatra.

¹⁴ Being a “fugitive from criminal justice” was a standard cliché used by the conservative and right-wing press to label Thaksin.

¹⁵ Later, Cherm Sak added that this slogan, and indeed Thaksin’s entire involvement in the Phuea Thai’s election campaign, were illegal and should lead to the dissolution of PTP (Cherm Sak 2011b). This was based on the stipulation of the political party law that disqualified executive committee members of dissolved political parties were not permitted to become involved in any electoral issues. In fact, in earlier elections under this rule, a disqualified father could not even be seen being photographed with his son or daughter who were running in the general election. Against this backdrop, the leniency shown by the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) towards Thaksin and the

PTP was difficult to explain indeed. This author remembers that he was slightly shocked when he first saw the “Thaksin thinks, Phuea Thai acts” posters, because they clearly and grossly seemed to violate the political party law.

¹⁶ For a brief analysis of one of Yingluck’s important election posters, see Baker (2011).

¹⁷ For an overview, see Nelson (2011).

¹⁸ The 49 days refer to the period between the official announcement of her candidacy at the top of PTP party list on May 16, 2011, and election day on July 3, 2011. A newspaper sympathetic to Yingluck marketed a special post-election publication with the title “Yingluck’s 49 days towards being the first female prime minister of Thailand” (กองบรรณาธิการ ข่าวสด 2554).

¹⁹ The present author wrote his first text with Thaksin at the center more than a decade ago (Nelson 2002). He later wondered whether Thaksin would become a “democratically elected autocrat” (Nelson 2004), reported about Thaksin’s “electoral triumph” of 2005 (Nelson 2008), and his subsequent decline, including attempts to topple him (Nelson 2005, 2006, 2007a). The final paper, or so I thought, was about Thaksin being overthrown in a military coup (Nelson 2007b). Nevertheless, here I am writing about Thaksin’s return to power, though not in person, and not even while living in Thailand. Certainly, Thailand has not seen a political phenomenon like him.

²⁰ It did not seem to have occurred to this paper that fielding Abhisit Vejjajiva as prime-ministerial candidate of the Democrat Party could have equally be seen by the red shirts as an utter provocation. After all, he had been politically responsible for the killing of more than 90 people, in their great majority unarmed red-shirt protesters. Who would have dared fielding Thanom Kittikachorn after October 1973, or Suchinda Kraprayoon after May 1992?

²¹ Korn’s remark reflected the idea that the party lists, especially the upper positions, should comprise people with a high degree of political and technocratic expertise, signaling to the voters who of the parties’ key personnel were seen as qualified enough to become ministers.

²² On the PAD’s “Vote No” campaign, see Nelson (2013).

²³ This chapter is not the place to provide any detailed analysis of the election results.

²⁴ Regarding the constituency seats, *Bangkok Pundit* (July 18, 2011) noted, “So while in the end the Democrats won 23 seats vs 10 for Puea Thai, the margin of victory in many seats was quite narrow. 9 seats were won by less than 3,000 votes and another 12 seats by between 3,001-6,000 votes. The Democrats won 15 of the 23 seats by less than 6,000 votes; Puea Thai won six out of 10 seats by less than 6,000 votes.”

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