

## How to beat Thaksin in elections

by Joe Horn-Phathanothai, 27 January 2014

Bangkok residents, calm and peaceful but a few months ago, have been jolted into massive protests, larger even than those that led to the ousting of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. There is talk of a coup, of installing an appointed PM, we are now shutting down Bangkok, and the main opposition Democrat Party has announced it will boycott the upcoming elections.

What is the end game? Has it not been the case that the harder you fight Thaksin, the stronger he returns? There is only one way out of this and that is to beat him in elections.

Ask any Democrat why they're not contesting the next elections, and the answer is because they know they can't win. But is it truly impossible to beat Thaksin's Pheu Thai Party (PTP) in elections? The current Yingluck Shinawatra government's track record is poor. Their rice pledging scheme, where the government buys rice from farmers at above market prices, has single-handedly lost Thailand its leading position as a rice exporter, and has laden the government with over 400 bn baht in loss. The handling of the 2011 floods was a joke. With the amnesty bill debacle, even Thaksin's closest allies took to the streets to have it thrown out, because in order to let himself off the hook he was willing to also pardon the opposition leaders accused of murdering red-shirts protesters during the army crackdown in May 2010.

In contrast, during their term in government the Democrats demonstrated aptitude in steering the country through yet another financial crisis. GDP growth was respectable given the global slump, 7.3% in 2010 following negative growth of 0.9% in 2009; unemployment averaged 1.1%; and the stock market SET index went from 400 to 1,000, making it the top performer world-wide.

One reason why the Democrats lost was they failed to reach out to the other side. Instead, at each turn they further confirmed the assertions of Thaksin that they were part of the "old establishment" conspiring to smother the voices of the downtrodden. They could have done a few things that would have helped: 1. not appoint a yellow-shirt leader as cabinet minister, despite being allies and to a certain extent owing their ascent to power to the yellow-shirt protests that locked down the capital in late 2008; instead 2. mete out justice with an even hand, convicting and jailing certain yellow-shirt leaders; 3. appoint a small handful of competent red-shirt leaders to cabinet positions; 4. try harder in the rural northeast, Thailand's largest voting bloc which has long supported the PTP.

Just because the Democrats have been unable to beat Thaksin does not mean democracy can't. Many who voted PTP in the last elections are no doubt disappointed with its performance, but as of today, they will likely still elect Yingluck for lack of a better alternative.

Let's form a coalition of political parties (Democrats included), build a common war chest, and fight Thaksin head on in all but his most secure constituencies. We'll need three things to beat him: policies, money, and a "coalition manager".

### *Policies*

Who are Thaksin's supporters? They are of course those who love him unconditionally. There are also those who feel animosity against the "city elite". This group points to unfairness in Thai society, and blames it on an alleged conspiracy to keep have-nots in perpetual poverty. Another group of supporters, ironically, are democracy lovers. They acknowledge that Thaksin was corrupt and sought to erode

democratic checks and balances during his time in office. However, they deem that the manner in which his opponents played was worse still.

But mostly, those who back him do so because his being in power has benefitted them until now; this includes tycoons as well as farmers.

The key strategy in beating the PTP is divide and conquer; use each party within the coalition to woo a different group of his supporters with targeted policies.

In the central farming regions propose an effective alternative to the rice pledging scheme. In the northeast, coalition candidates must convince voters that they will fight to free the jailed red-shirts and seek justice for those who died during the May 2010 crackdown; and that they will go to Bangkok to diminish the power of the “establishment”. In the industrial areas, the candidates must outline their plan for making Thailand a net beneficiary of AEC integration, and beyond that how they plan to make Thailand an advanced industrial nation by say 2020.

#### *Money*

Money has often been cited as a big reason Thaksin remains unbeatable. Now, if every one of the million-plus protesters were to give one month's income to defeating Thaksin, that's already a formidable war chest. You can also add to that any Thai who just wants this mess to go away.

These funds will easily put the coalition on an equal footing with Thaksin in the regions worth fighting for.

#### *Manager*

The manager forms the coalition, oversees the war chest, and most importantly shows people that there is the plan and the resources to win.

Give the people a vision of Thailand freed from this gridlock, and the parties will join forces, the money will flow, the candidates will come, and so will the voters. In the past many voters cared only for those who paid the most. Now, they will take the money and vote for whoever they feel cares for them the most, and in many cases it's neither Thaksin nor the Democrats. This coalition will give the people someone credible to vote for.

#### *What is the end-game?*

Even if the Democrats end up with fewer votes than the PTP, together, the coalition stands a chance at the majority.

This alliance might be unstable and in the long term untenable, but Thailand has often prospered in times of uncertainty and instability. I may go so far as to muse that Thailand probably needs a certain amount of political instability to act as a safeguard. Because the official democratic checks and balances are weak, the best protection Thais have against a single group becoming over-powerful is this constant change. To quote Mark Twain, “politicians and diapers must be changed often, and for the same reason”.

Thais are steadily becoming wealthier and better educated, and they certainly are no longer passive and apathetic towards politics. Winning democratically is possible, and is the *only* way ahead.