

# Thailand: Fixing the general election

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How far will the junta go to determine the outcome of the upcoming general election?

At first sight, this might seem an outrageous question. The junta has promised to restore democracy cleansed of the authoritarian distortions introduced by Thaksin. Would the junta compromise its own baby at its very first step? But the question has to be asked given the junta's track record over the constitution referendum.

On the face of it, the prospect of the constitution being approved would seem very strong indeed. People want to move on. The alternative of rejecting the charter draft and giving the junta a blank cheque seems very unappealing. The few polls on the issue have shown overwhelming support for a yes vote.

But what has happened? In Chiang Mai, a speaker opposing the draft was hauled down by police and frog-marched away. In Kamphaeng Phet, a house was raided and campaign materials seized. In Bangkok, Khru Prateep's house was invaded by police who took away posters. None of the people involved were doing anything illegal. The police actions were pure intimidation, designed to give the impression that campaigning against the charter is possibly criminal and certainly risky.

At the same time, the government is proposing to bus people to the polls. That might seem a neutral service, but not really when the government is so strongly committed to a yes vote. The cover of the constitution booklet distributed to every household just happens to be yellow. Last week Sonthi Boonyaratklin issued an "instruction" to military and police subordinates of the junta chiefs to campaign for a yes vote. Under the Referendum Act, using "undue influence" to affect the outcome is illegal. Does an instruction issued by the army chief to his subordinates qualify as "undue influence"? Luckily Sonthi issued his instruction two days before the Act came into force.

These actions suggest the junta is desperate to secure a positive result in the referendum, even to the point of seemingly ignoring the rule of law. What then will they do at a general election when the outcome is much more important and much more uncertain?

After the Thai Rak Thai party was dissolved on 30 May, many people immediately assumed that ruling delivered the next election to the Democrat Party. Just like the Tour de France, when the leader is disqualified for suspected foul play, number two moves up to number one. Through June, a Democrat victory seemed to become ever more likely. The remnants of Thai Rak Thai were splintering into several factions. After Thaksin was prosecuted over the Rachada land deal, and the family assets were seized, Thaksin broadcast he was withdrawing from politics. The Democrats seemed to have the election on a plate.

But in reality, those who assumed the Democrats would surely win were fooling themselves because they wanted to fool themselves. The alternative prospect was too horrifying. If the remnants of Thai Rak Thai were to return, what would happen to all the people who colluded with the junta? What would happen to the judicial assault on the Shinawatra family? What would happen to the plans for managing democracy for the foreseeable future?

Over the last few weeks, those fears have increased. The splintering of Thai Rak Thai stopped well short of total disintegration. Three of the major faction leaders (Sudarat, Yaowapha, Chaturon) made a very public stand of solidarity. Over 200 former MPs have joined People's Power, the shell party adopted in case the new constitution fails at the referendum. That's over double the number of MPs the Democrats had in the old parliament (95). Historically, the proportion of the lower house which changes at a general election is in the range of 25 to 30 percent. On these grounds, the Democrats would have little chance of emerging as the largest single party after an election – without some extraordinary factor.

The proposal to invite Samak Sundaravej to become the leader of the People's Power Party is cynical but also rather clever in electoral terms. On the evidence of his totally ineffectual term as Bangkok mayor, Samak has no credentials to serve as the leader of anything. But he is remembered as a demagogue with great appeal to the Bangkok lower middle class – a big support base which deserted Thaksin in disgust over the Shin Corp sale. Samak can give PPP the ability to bother the Democrats in their Bangkok heartland. That will divert the Democrats' attention and money from building support to the north, northeast, and east of Bangkok where they captured a pitiful eight seats in 2005.

Meanwhile, though Thaksin claims he has given up politics for a new career in sport, his actions suggest otherwise. In recent weeks, he has again made his presence felt in the international and local media. He knows very well that his best strategy for countering the judicial assault on himself and his family is to gain some political torque. Funding his former followers in the upcoming general election must make good business sense.

The prospect that the remnants of Thai Rak Thai might do rather too well at the upcoming general election gives the junta a strong motivation to influence the result. Their track record over the constitution referendum suggest they would have no misgivings at all about trying – very hard indeed.

Probably there will be a campaign to persuade people it is pointless to vote against the powers-that-be. Some politicians will face very close scrutiny when they submit their candidatures. Possibly there will be a blizzard of red and yellow cards. Maybe lots of troops will be mobilized on polling day to “guard” the process. As ballots will again be counted at the ward level, local leaders may be promised rewards or retribution depending on the result. Perhaps even the ballots could be tampered with.

This could be very dangerous. The European Union has offered to send observers to monitor the poll. Probably that offer will be refused, but that's a pity.

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\* From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/stuff.htm>