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# Isan: Double Trouble

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*SAOWANEE T. ALEXANDER*

“Khao ao ngoen phai, ka lueak Pheu Thai khue kao” [It doesn’t matter whose money they take, they will vote for Pheu Thai like before], a concession stand owner on campus told the author two days after the Palang Pracharat Party had held a mass rally at Ubon Ratchathani University—an unprecedented opportunity for any Thai political party. She had attended the rally, for which village-level coordinators had arranged transportation and collated the names of attendees. Upon being asked by the author whether the attendees would get paid, the concession stand owner merely smiled and said that she did not know. Instead of pressing for an answer, the author decided to wait anxiously for election day to find out whether the lady was right about Pheu Thai’s prospects.

For almost 20 years, Thailand’s Northeast region (Isan) has strongly supported the Pheu Thai Party and its precursor parties closely associated with former prime ministers Thaksin Shinawatra and Yingluck Shinawatra. The region is also the bastion of the Red Shirt movement, a loose-knit, self-proclaimed “pro-democracy” alliance which staged large mass protests against the unelected government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva in 2009 and 2010. Since the Shinawatras and the Red Shirt movement were closely linked, the Northeast is viewed by the military and the Bangkok elite as “double trouble”. Following the 2014 military coup, the region was a major focus for the suppression of dissidents: some were

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jailed, some were forced into exile and some died mysteriously.<sup>1</sup> Isan remains a dangerous political hotbed—very much as it was during the Cold War, when it was a stronghold of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT).

On 17 and 24 March 2019, the author observed Thailand's much-anticipated general elections. On 17 March, the advance voting day, nearly 7,000 voters braved the scorching heat and queued for two to three hours at the polling stations in Warin Chamrap District Office.<sup>2</sup> The majority of them were young and enthusiastic. However, on 24 March, the main voting day, the mood had turned much gloomier. Few locals showed up to witness the votes being counted. Unlike in previous elections when vote counting was an adrenaline-filled episode, this time the witnesses' emotions were subdued. The unsettled atmosphere foreshadowed a troubled aftermath.

From the outset of the 2019 election campaign, the author found it quite difficult to get a sense of the possible outcome as people in Isan were extremely reluctant to talk. We now know why. As it turns out, nearly half of Isan's voters voted for anti-junta parties, with Pheu Thai and Future Forward together garnering 49 per cent of the total vote in the entire region.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the pro-junta Palang Pracharat Party only gained 21 per cent of the popular vote. The results reflect the region's resistance to the ruling junta and its refusal to be co-opted by the junta's handouts. But did the junta's small margin of success in securing the popular vote suggest that anti-military sentiment was on the decline in Isan? This question is not easy to answer, especially given that these elections were far from free and fair: the junta not only created a proxy party but also exploited state resources to its own electoral advantage and intimidated anti-junta opponents.

In November 2018, the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) redrew the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies across the whole country, reducing the total number of constituencies from 375 to 350.<sup>4</sup> While the ECT claimed to have used fair criteria in dividing the constituencies, anti-junta candidates complained of gerrymandering, especially since the pro-Thaksin region of Isan lost ten constituencies, reducing its total from 126 seats to 116.<sup>5</sup>

In Isan, Pheu Thai fielded candidates in 112 out of the 116 constituencies, while its sister party, Thai Raksa Chart, ran 52 candidates.<sup>6</sup> It was the first time Pheu Thai did not run in every Isan constituency. Thai Raksa Chart generally ran in constituencies where Pheu Thai candidates were either not the favourites to win, or could expect to win by a large margin. This is confirmed by

the fact that Thai Raksa Chart constituency candidates were new faces but its party-list candidates comprised veteran Pheu Thai MPs or former Red Shirt leaders. The plan was for Thai Raksa Chart to gain sufficient non-winning constituency votes to get its key figures elected as party-list MPs. However, the electoral life of Thai Raksa Chart was short-lived. After nominating former Princess Ubonratana as its prime ministerial candidate on 8 February, the party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court. The dissolution of Thai Raksa Chart, however, allowed the anti-junta Future Forward Party, which competed for all 116 seats in Isan, to pick up votes that might otherwise have gone to Thai Raksa Chart.

In the run-up to the elections, Palang Pracharat aggressively co-opted former MPs from different parties—largely from Pheu Thai—along with some former prominent Red Shirt leaders and should have been well-placed to make major electoral gains. In Isan, campaign activities were stifled, especially for Pheu Thai candidates who were often barred from using government compounds as rally sites, while their campaigning was closely monitored by security officials and subject to extra scrutiny by the ECT.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Palang Pracharat candidates were allowed to campaign freely, and were helped by state officials such as village heads and healthcare volunteers, who operated as vote canvassers. In Isan, Palang Pracharat's platform claimed that the junta's policies had helped the region's poor people, promised more handouts and attacked Thaksin and his associates. While the first two strategies proved relatively effective, the third did not. Palang Pracharat learned quickly that attacking Thaksin was counter-productive. At one party rally in Maha Sarakham Province, when a speaker criticized Thaksin, attendees walked away.<sup>8</sup> Attacking the Red Shirts was also ineffective.<sup>9</sup> Despite video evidence of vote-buying efforts in Ubon Ratchathani and Yasothon going viral on social media, Palang Pracharat continued to campaign freely. Voters in Amnat Charoen and Ubon Ratchathani reported receiving cash from Bhumjaithai vote canvassers, but such incidents were never reported in the national media.<sup>10</sup>

The traditional campaign strategy of holding large rallies persisted, but to a lesser degree than in previous elections. Large parties such as Palang Pracharat and Pheu Thai managed to mobilize crowds of 7,000 to 8,000 people—a typical bluffing strategy in Thai electoral politics. But it was the sentiments at the rallies that mattered. Large crowds at rallies did not always accurately predict the outcome of the elections.<sup>11</sup> Gauging the preferences of ordinary voters proved difficult, given their reluctance to reveal which

parties they favoured. People attended rallies for different reasons: to show support for the party they liked, or because they were paid or dragooned into showing up. But under the watchful eye of the junta, even rally participants generally stayed silent about their voting intentions.

While Palang Pracharat relied on giving speeches at large rallies, Pheu Thai, Future Forward and Bhumjaithai depended on door-to-door canvassing and small-scale rally speeches. Palang Pracharat did not even feature Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha on their campaign signs in Isan as the coup leader was not an electoral asset in the region. Prayut's last public appearances in Isan were on 6 February in Mukdahan and Yasothon, two days before his candidacy for prime minister was announced. Security was tight, and he did not risk mingling with the crowd.<sup>12</sup>

Electoral turnouts in Isan have been relatively high—72 per cent in 2007 and 2011—and this continued in 2019 with 71 per cent of voters participating.<sup>13</sup> Of the 116 seats in Isan, Pheu Thai came first with 84 seats, followed by Bhumjaithai with 16 seats, Palang Pracharat with 11 and the Democrats with two. Future Forward, Chart Pattana and Chart Thai Pattana secured one seat each. Palang Pracharat's campaign strategies were not successful.<sup>14</sup> Leaving aside the question of ballot rigging—which may well have taken place in some constituencies—the election results show some interesting phenomena. Margins of victory shrank in the 2019 elections, partly because the new electoral system forced voters to choose only one candidate. Some voters the author talked to after the elections did not know exactly how party-list MP seats were calculated.

Bhumjaithai improved its performance in the Northeast, going up from 11 seats in the 2011 elections to 16 in 2019. Most of its candidates were veteran politicians with their own voter bases. Some of the successful candidates were former MPs, such as Aphicha Lertpatcharakamon from Nakhon Ratchasima, who had defected from Pheu Thai. The same applied to Palang Pracharat. Most of its candidates already had an existing voter base, while the supposed “new faces” were actually related to former politicians. For instance, Yothakan Fong-ngam from Ubon Ratchathani was the daughter of Suphon Fong-ngam, a longtime Pheu Thai MP who had defected to the pro-junta party. Because of their candidates' established voting base, both Palang Pracharat and Bhumjaithai benefitted greatly from party-list MP calculations despite not winning any seats.

Pheu Thai had a victory rate of 76 per cent in the 112 constituencies it contested, while Palang Pracharat, Bhumjaithai, the

Democrats and Future Forward, each having contended in all 116 constituencies, had victory rates of 14, 9, 3 and 1 per cent respectively. In the 2011 elections, Pheu Thai contested all 126 constituencies in Isan and its margin of victory was 82 per cent. The 6 per cent drop in victories is not entirely surprising given the pre-election challenges outlined earlier. Raw voting numbers show that support for Pheu Thai has declined somewhat—though to some extent this reflects competition on the anti-junta side from Future Forward. Those voters who stuck with Pheu Thai were typically deeply attached to the party's flagship economic policies, as well as those who had previously supported the Red Shirt movement.

Eight candidates had margins of victory of more than 36,000 votes: all were Pheu Thai candidates in Khon Kaen, Yasothon, Roi Et, Udon Thani and Si Saket Provinces.<sup>15</sup> Jiraporn Sinthuprai from Roi Et had the largest margin of victory, beating the second-placed Future Forward candidate by 47,670 votes. Jiraporn is the daughter of Nisit Sinthuprai, a prominent Red Shirt leader and former Pheu Thai MP. Another large margin of victory was secured by Wanniwat Somboon, a young and politically inexperienced Pheu Thai candidate. He is a relative of Preechapol Pongpanich, the Thai Raksa Chart party leader and a former Pheu Thai MP for that constituency. Wanniwat's margin of victory was 40,629 votes. After the Thai Raksa Chart candidate was disqualified from the race, it appeared that Preechapol's voting base gave landslide support to Pheu Thai as an expression of solidarity.

Despite winning only one seat in Isan, Future Forward earned a large number of votes for its party-list MPs. In 16 of Isan's 20 provinces, Future Forward performed better in Constituency 1, which invariably consisted primarily of urban and suburban areas, than in other constituencies. In Khon Kaen, the party won Constituency 1 with 34 per cent of the votes, the strongest Future Forward performance of all the constituencies in the region. In Udon Thani and Ubon Ratchathani, Future Forward also did well, gaining 27 per cent and 22 per cent of the votes, respectively. Support for Future Forward was strongest in the provinces that used to be CPT strongholds during the Cold War, including Kalasin, Mukdahan, Bueng Kan, Nong Khai, Udon Thani, Sakon Nakhon and Nong Bua Lamphu, where the party gained at least 15 per cent of the votes. While it would be simplistic to say there is a link between the communist-era dissidents and present-day voters, this pattern warrants further examination. In general, Isan voters continued to

support Pheu Thai while opening their hearts to Future Forward. This shows their bond with Pheu Thai as well as a growing desire for a bolder move against the junta.

Throughout the political history of Siam and Thailand, Isan has been marked by its “otherness”. Historically speaking, the region is best described as “the others within”—the people belonged to Siam, but were not exactly as Siamese and certainly not equal to the Siamese elites.<sup>16</sup> Today, Isan people see themselves as stakeholders in Thai politics, ones whose voices have not been heard and whose rights as citizens have not been respected. Since the 2001 elections, people have repeatedly stressed this point at the ballot box by supporting pro-Thaksin parties.

Isan is home to dissenting voices. The people of Isan want to show the Bangkok-based establishment how they want the country to be, and what they want as citizens of the country. The elites’ political agenda and that of voters in Isan are diametrically opposed. Most of the voters in Isan have adopted an anti-junta stance in the 2019 elections, and anti-junta parties won the majority of seats, though with a smaller majority of the popular vote. If the junta-backed Palang Pracharat had won decisively, things would have been much easier for the elites. But because Isan voters chose to be disobedient and secured an important electoral victory over the junta, political contestation in this troubled region is almost certain to continue.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For details of these cases, see the iLaw database, <https://freedom.ilaw.or.th/en/content/charges-against-individuals-after-2014-coup>.
- <sup>2</sup> Author’s field observation notes, Ubon Ratchathani, 17 and 24 March 2019.
- <sup>3</sup> When Pheu Chart and Seri Ruam Thai votes are included, the anti-junta, pro-democracy coalition secured 53 per cent of the votes.
- <sup>4</sup> See “Election Commission Begins Drawing New Boundaries”, *Bangkok Post*, 20 September 2018, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/1543070/election-commission-begins-drawing-new-boundaries>.
- <sup>5</sup> Author interview with a candidate’s assistant, Ubon Ratchathani, 23 March 2019.
- <sup>6</sup> See “เปิด 108 รายชื่อผู้สมัครส.ส.ปาร์ตี้ลิสต์ ไทยรักษาชาติ ติดบ่วงยุบพรรค” [Thai Raksa Chart Party-list Candidate List Disclosed, Entrapped by Party Dissolution], *Thai Rath*, 7 March 2019, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/1513295>.
- <sup>7</sup> Author field notes between February and March 2019.
- <sup>8</sup> See Saowanee T. Alexander, “Cooptation Doesn’t Work: How Redshirts Voted in Isan”, *New Mandala*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/cooptation-doesnt-work-how-redshirts-voted-in-isan/>.

- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Author interviews with informants, 26 March 2019.
- <sup>11</sup> On Palang Pracharat losses, see Alexander, “Cooptation Doesn’t Work”.
- <sup>12</sup> Author field notes, Nong Sung District, Mukdahan Province, 6 February 2019.
- <sup>13</sup> The 2007 and 2011 voter turnouts in Isan are calculated from the official ECT files, but for 2019 the figures are derived from unofficial results obtained from materials on the Internet and printouts collected from provincial ECT offices. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing there were no figures for Buriram, Amnat Charoen and Kalasin Provinces. The 2019 turnout figure was thus based on results from the remaining 17 provinces.
- <sup>14</sup> See “‘วิรัช’ยกทีมโคราชขบพลังประชารัฐ ‘สุภรณ์’ โวยึด 116 ที่นั่งในอีสาน” [Wirat Moves Entire Korat Team to Palang Pracharat, Suporn Brags About Winning 116 Isan Seats], *Than Settakij*, 14 November 2018, <http://www.thansettakij.com/content/347428>.
- <sup>15</sup> See Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “Thai Parties Cry Foul After Election Results Favour Military Junta”, *The Guardian*, 8 May 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/08/thai-parties-cry-foul-after-election-results-favour-military-junta>.
- <sup>16</sup> See Thongchai Winichakul, “The Others Within: Travels and Ethno-spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects, 1885–1910”, in *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, edited by Andrew Turton (London, UK: Curzon, 2000), pp. 38–62.