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Petra Desatova

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Bangkok: Two Cities

PETRA DESATOVA

Bangkok delivered one of the biggest surprises of Thailand's March 2019 election, with the capital's fickle voters amplifying larger national trends. Though popularly viewed as a stronghold for the storied Democrat Party, the history of Bangkok's elections over the past 40 years has been distinctly mixed. Bangkok voters have shown an unparalleled willingness to embrace new parties—hence the landslide wins by Prachakorn Thai in 1979, Palang Dharma in 1992 and Thai Rak Thai in 2001. It was the Democrats that secured the majority of Bangkok seats in 2007 and 2011, on the strength of backing both from more affluent middle-class voters and low-income inner city communities in districts such as Bang Rak and Khlong Toei. In the 2011 elections, the Democrat Party won 23 out of the capital's 33 constituency seats. Its main rival, Pheu Thai, secured the remaining ten seats.

By contrast, in the March 2019 elections, the Democrat Party failed to secure even a single constituency seat in the capital. Out of 30 seats available, Pheu Thai won nine. The rest were split between two new parties: the pro-military Palang Pracharat Party (12) and the progressive Future Forward Party (9). Only ten of the 30 Democrat candidates polled in the top three positions in their respective constituencies. The remaining constituencies were a three-way battle between Palang Pracharat, Future Forward and Pheu Thai party candidates. Not only did big-name Democrat

PETRA DESATOVA, PhD, is a researcher on the US Institute of Peace project into Thailand's 2019 elections at the School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds. Postal address: School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom; email: petra.desatova@gmail.com.

candidates such as Huwaideeya Pitsuwan Useng (the younger sister of the late Surin Pitsuwan, a Thai politician who also served as ASEAN secretary-general from 2008 to 2013) and Parit Wacharasindhu (the Oxford-educated nephew of Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva) fail to get elected, they failed to even place third in their respective constituencies.

In terms of actual votes, the Democrat Party did not fare any better. It came in fourth across the capital with 474,820 votes.¹ This was an underwhelming performance for a party that had hitherto dominated Bangkok. Future Forward won the popular vote with 804,272 votes, while Palang Pracharat came a close second with 791,893 votes. The pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party secured a total of 604,699 votes. The fact that two new political parties—formed just over a year before the 2019 elections—were able to defeat established political juggernauts shows that many Bangkok residents wanted change. There was definitely a strong sense of “old” versus “new” politics in Bangkok in the run up to the 2019 election. A number of informants across the Thai political spectrum whom the author talked to prior to the election confirmed that many Thais were tired of the politically turbulent 2000s and 2010s.² For these informants, voting for the Democrats or Pheu Thai would mean a return to the “old” politics characterized by parliamentary bickering, public discontent and street protests. Both Palang Pracharat and Future Forward were aware of these public sentiments and used them to their advantage in the 2019 elections. For example, three of my informants knew or had heard of people who were going to vote for Palang Pracharat because they appreciated the junta-imposed values of peace and order.³ Less than a week before the election, fresh stickers started to appear on Palang Pracharat campaign posters all over Bangkok urging voters to vote for Prime Minister General (retired) Prayut Chan-ocha—the party’s sole prime ministerial candidate—if they wanted peace.⁴ Peace effectively became part of Palang Pracharat’s electoral platform.

The Democrats’ poor electoral performance in Bangkok can be partly explained in terms of the party’s brand identity crisis that coincided with the rise of new political parties.⁵ Following the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra in the early 2000s, the Democrats rolled back on their liberal democratic values and joined Thailand’s traditional elites—the monarchy, military and senior bureaucrats—in the fight against Thaksin. By the time of the 2014 military coup, the Democrats were one of the two major parties dominating Thai politics—the other one being Thaksin’s Pheu Thai Party (2008–present) and its

two precursors, the People Power Party (2007–8) and Thai Rak Thai (1998–2007)—and the only credible anti-Thaksin option at the polls. But as the 2019 elections approached, several new anti-Thaksin parties emerged, splitting the old Democrat vote. Talking to a group of locals in the Democrat stronghold of Bang Rak district three days before the election, the author could feel that voters' loyalties were shifting. Although one market vendor in his thirties affirmed in no uncertain terms that he was going to vote for the Democrats, others were still unsure.⁶ In the 2011 election, the local constituency was won by Onanong Kanjanachusak, the Democrat candidate, defeating her Pheu Thai counterpart by a margin of more than 25,000 votes—its largest in Bangkok during the 2011 elections.⁷ Yet in the 2019 election, Onanong came in third, losing significantly to the candidates of both Palang Pracharat and Future Forward.⁸

During the 2019 election campaign, Abhisit Vejjajiva, the leader of the Democrat Party for 13 years, sought to re-brand himself and his party as a “third” alternative to the pro-military, anti-Thaksin camp led by Palang Pracharat, and to the anti-military camp led by Pheu Thai. He publicly refused to support Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, but did not rule out the possibility of joining hands with either the pro-military or anti-military camp.⁹ Given the Democrats' chequered history and strong anti-Thaksin stance, this ambiguous branding satisfied virtually nobody.¹⁰ In Bangkok, more conservative Democrat voters shifted their support to Palang Pracharat, while more liberal Democrat voters opted for Future Forward. As a local community leader in Bang Rak explained, she used to vote for the Democrats but grew disillusioned with them because they were no longer democratic—the party supported the often-violent anti-Thaksin movements of 2005–6, 2008 and 2013–14, boycotted the 2006 and 2014 snap elections called respectively by Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra, and endorsed the 2006 and 2014 military coups that ousted Thaksin, Yingluck and their respective governments. Still unsure as to who to vote for even as she was queuing at the local polling station to receive her ballot paper, she shared that she was considering Future Forward.

The Bangkok results show that only the most loyal Democrat supporters stuck with the party's candidates. Even for these voters, it was not that Abhisit's “third way” alternative struck a chord; they appeared to have stayed with the party mainly because of the economy. As the Bang Rak market vendor explained, he was voting for the Democrats because he felt that he had been better off under the last Democrat-led government (2008–11) than any other

government since. This sentiment was also echoed by a retired academic, who used to advise the Democrats on economic policy.¹¹ The academic believed that the Democrats had struggled electorally due to an ineffective campaign, but he continued to support them because of their perceived economic competence. The 2019 election was far from a single-issue election: almost all Bangkok voters the author talked to during the final week of the campaign based their electoral choices on a mixture of factors, notably their stances on the military and Thaksin and the state of the economy.

The Democrats were not the only party to lose support to Palang Pracharat and Future Forward in Bangkok. Pheu Thai's voter base, strongest in the outlying areas of the capital, was also significantly eroded. Talking to Bangkok taxi drivers, one of Pheu Thai's longstanding support bases in Bangkok, this author was surprised to discover that one driver had already given his support to Future Forward and another one was planning to vote for them on election day.¹² Both taxi drivers declared themselves tired of the "old" politics and politicians and wanted to vote for someone new. They both liked the young Future Forward leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, and hoped that he would take care of ordinary people like them. As one of the drivers explained, he was well aware that those in government would always find ways to enrich themselves, but at the same time hoped that Thanathorn would also look after others as he already had enough money. The driver's reasoning was strikingly reminiscent of Thaksin's campaign narrative in the run up to the 2001 election, when he claimed he was entering politics to help people, and not to enrich himself as he was already rich enough.¹³ For these two taxi drivers, Thanathorn resembled another Thaksin but with less political baggage. Just like Thaksin, Thanathorn was a billionaire and was entering politics with the promise of a better and brighter future for all Thais. However, unlike Thaksin, Thanathorn was not locked in an almost two-decade long power battle with Thailand's traditional elites, thus making him a more attractive electoral choice. Some traditionally pro-Thaksin voters were becoming increasingly concerned that voting for Thaksin-aligned parties would only prolong the "old" politics and its vicious cycle of elections, violent street protests, biased court rulings and crippling military coups.

With his progressive rhetoric, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the young, charismatic billionaire leader of Future Forward, has managed to morph into Thailand's celebrity politician in the space of less than a year. For many Bangkok voters, Thanathorn was

more than a politician; he had become, as Duncan McCargo aptly describes, “a combination of heartthrob and giant-slaying hero”.¹⁴ The author had a first-hand opportunity to experience the extent of Bangkok’s “Thanathorn-mania” when attending the closing campaign rallies of Future Forward and Pheu Thai on 22 March 2019. While Sudarat Keyuraphan, the Pheu Thai leader and prime ministerial candidate, received her fair share of cheers, Thanathorn received an ovation worthy of a rock star. He was greeted by the loudest cheers of the night, which lasted more than four minutes and were only interrupted once by a short official party video, a standing ovation and thousands of smartphone lights, a strong indication of the immense support Thanathorn enjoyed in Bangkok.

Although direct comparisons between the 2011 and 2019 elections are problematic due to the redistricting of electoral boundaries, six out of the nine Bangkok seats won by Pheu Thai in the 2019 elections had retained their constituency boundaries from 2011.¹⁵ In five of these constituencies, Pheu Thai successfully defended its seats but with a considerably reduced number of votes. In constituency 26, Pheu Thai gained a seat from the Democrats as a result of Palang Pracharat and Future Forward splitting the Democrat vote. Ironically, Pheu Thai won this constituency despite securing far fewer votes than in 2011, when it came in second. There were two other constituencies with unchanged boundaries that Pheu Thai, having won in 2011, failed to defend in 2019.¹⁶ Both of these constituencies went to Palang Pracharat, with Pheu Thai coming in a close second: these defeats to a pro-military, anti-Thaksin party in former Pheu Thai strongholds constitute a significant blow to the strongly anti-junta Thaksinite party. The remaining three constituency seats won by Pheu Thai in 2019 came from newly-drawn constituencies. One of those seats represented two former separate Pheu Thai strongholds that were redistricted into a single constituency, while the other two seats were composed of former Democrat strongholds. Once again, Pheu Thai’s victory here was a result of the Democrats losing their supporters to Palang Pracharat and Future Forward rather than Pheu Thai gaining in popularity. Compared to their 2011 performance, the Pheu Thai’s average vote share in 2019 fell by almost 20 per cent in Bangkok.¹⁷

More than 1.59 million voters in Bangkok chose Palang Pracharat and Future Forward over the Democrats and Pheu Thai. This indicates a considerable appetite among Bangkok voters for “new” politics and demonstrates that longstanding party loyalties are shifting. However, the fact that these 1.59 million voters chose

two parties with essentially opposing ideologies implies that the 2019 election in Bangkok was very much a tale of two cities. On the one hand was the future-oriented, young and liberally-minded Bangkok that voted for Future Forward and its vision of a progressive, liberal and democratic country administered by elected politicians and representatives. On the other was the backward-looking, old conservative Bangkok that voted for Palang Pracharat and its vision of a socially traditional and conservative country administered by often-unelected core elites. Since these two visions are effectively irreconcilable, Bangkok will remain divided. While party loyalties held up much better outside Bangkok, Palang Pracharat and Future Forward did make some inroads across the provinces. This was especially the case for Palang Pracharat, which performed strongly across Thailand's Central region, Lower North and some parts of the South.¹⁸ Future Forward also performed well in the East and even gained a few seats in the North, a core stronghold of Pheu Thai. Almost five years of military rule failed to resolve any of the deep-seated socio-political cleavages that had beset Thailand since the mid-2000s. Instead, they seemed to have added another layer to Thailand's political conflict: a generational clash that manifested itself most clearly in Bangkok's tale of two cities.

NOTES

- ¹ Figures based on unofficial election results published by the Election Commission on 28 March 2019. See “รายชื่อผู้สมัครรับเลือกตั้ง ส.ส. แบบแบ่งเขตเลือกตั้งที่ได้รับคะแนนสูงสุดรายจังหวัด (ข้อมูล ณ วันที่ 28 มีนาคม 2562)” [A list of constituency MP candidates, who received the highest votes arranged by province (data from 28 March 2019)], Election Commission, 28 March 2019, https://www.ect.go.th/ewt/ewt/ect_th/download/article/article_20190328165029.pdf.
- ² Author interview with a political journalist working at *Khaosod English*, 21 March 2019; author interview with an informant working for a regional international organization, 21 March 2019; author interview with a retired academic and his wife, 23 March 2019; author interview with Bangkok taxi driver A, 23 March 2019.
- ³ Author interview, *Khaosod English*; author interview, regional international organization; author interview with a group of Bang Rak locals, 21 March 2019.
- ⁴ Field notes, 20 March 2019.
- ⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this, see Petra Desatova, “What Happened to Thailand's Democrat Party?”, *Thai Data Points*, 15 April 2019, <https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/what-happened-to-thailand-s-democrat-party>.
- ⁶ Author interview, Bang Rak locals.

- ⁷ Bang Rak belongs to District (*khet*) 2 that also includes the neighbouring districts of Pathum Wan and Sathorn.
- ⁸ Pheu Thai did not field any candidates in this constituency in the 2019 election, as part of an electoral deal with the Thai Raksa Chart Party, which was later dissolved by the courts.
- ⁹ Pravit Rojanaphruk, “Abhisit Coalition Waffling Draws Fresh Flak”, *Khaosod English*, 12 March 2019, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2019/03/12/abhisit-coalition-waffling-draws-fresh-flak/>.
- ¹⁰ See Desatova, “What Happened?”.
- ¹¹ Author interview, academic and wife.
- ¹² Author interview, Bangkok taxi driver A; author interview with Bangkok taxi driver B, 22 March 2019.
- ¹³ For a detailed discussion of Thaksin, see Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2005), pp. 70–120.
- ¹⁴ Duncan McCargo, “We Are Grown-Up Now and Can Choose for Ourselves”, *New York Times*, 29 March 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/opinion/thailand-election-thanathorn-future-forward-youth-vote.html>.
- ¹⁵ These were Sai Mai (*khet* 11 in 2019/*khet* 13 in 2011); Bang Khen (*khet* 12 in 2019/*khet* 14 in 2011); Bueng Khum and Khana Yao (*khet* 14 in 2019/*khet* 16 in 2011); Khlong Sam Wa (*khet* 16 in 2019/*khet* 18 in 2011), Lat Kra Bang (*khet* 18 in 2019/*khet* 20 in 2011) and Bang Bon and Nong Khaem (*khet* 26 in 2019/*khet* 28 in 2011).
- ¹⁶ Min Buri and Khana Yao (*khet* 15 in 2019/*khet* 17 in 2011) and Nong Chok (*khet* 17 in 2019/*khet* 19 in 2011).
- ¹⁷ Joel Selway and Allen Hicken, “The Fate of Pheu Thai in the 2019 Elections”, *Thai Data Points*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/the-fate-of-pheu-thai-in-the-2019-elections>.
- ¹⁸ For a good regional comparison of voting patterns, see Joel Selway, “Regional Voting: Comparing 2019 to 2011”, *Thai Data Points*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/regional-voting-comparing-2019-to-2011>.