

## **Will Thailand's New Leader Hurt or Heal a Divided Nation?**

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**By Robert Horn / Bangkok**

Yingluck Shinawatra greets the press before a victory speech at her party's headquarters on July 3, 2011 in Bangkok

With barely more than a month under her belt as a professional politician, Yingluck Shinawatra stood poised Monday to become Thailand's first woman prime minister after her Pheu Thai party scored a resounding victory in Sunday's national elections. Riding a well-oiled political machine and benefiting from the popularity of her brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was deposed as prime minister in a 2006 military coup, Yingluck and her party won an apparent majority in parliament according to unofficial election returns. But even with an experienced team behind her, can a novice prime minister succeed where several veterans have failed and end the political strife that has torn Thailand apart for nearly seven years?

"There is a lot more hard work to do... to make reconciliation possible," Yingluck told a press conference after incumbent Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva conceded on Sunday evening. Abhisit, once regarded as Thailand's brightest up-and-coming political star, resigned as Democrat Party leader on Monday. The hardest issue of all — and one that is central to reconciliation efforts — will be a possible amnesty Yingluck initially proposed for anyone charged or convicted of "political crimes" since the 2006 coup. A blanket amnesty would cover anti-Thaksin 'Yellow Shirt' protesters who took over Bangkok's airport in 2008, and pro-Thaksin 'Red Shirt' protesters whose two-month demonstration in central Bangkok last year ended in a confrontation with the army that resulted in 92 deaths and buildings being burned. Most contentiously, an amnesty would include her brother Thaksin who was convicted of corruption and fled Thailand in 2008 rather than serve a two-year prison sentence. A court later seized nearly \$2 billion of his assets. ([Watch a video about Thailand's elections.](#))

After initially promising the amnesty in the early days of her campaign, Yingluck backtracked when opponents claimed her candidacy was solely intended to whitewash her brother's convictions and return his money. Despite Thaksin's resilient popularity with large sections of the electorate, he remains the most divisive figure in Thai political history. A substantial minority who believes he is corrupt and autocratic is bitterly opposed to his return. When Thaksin or the parties he controlled have been in power, Yellow Shirts have staged disruptive demonstrations. When Thaksin's opponents have held the premiership, Red Shirts have responded in kind. The conflict has made Thailand nearly ungovernable during the past several years. Yingluck's platform has centered on reconciliation.

Seeking to defuse the issue of her amnesty promise, Yingluck later said a neutral panel would be established to look into the matter, and insisted her party would serve everyone — not just her brother. Thaksin, living in self-imposed exile in Dubai, told Thai PBS television after learning of his youngest sister's victory "conditions must be right. If my return will be part of the problem, I will not rush back." ([See pictures of the May 2010 violence in Thailand.](#))

The military will also be key to creating stability in the nation. Although different commanders than those who deposed Thaksin are now in charge, their antipathy for the former Prime Minister is well known, and the country buzzed with rumors of another coup in the days leading up the election. Nonetheless, outgoing Minister of Defense Gen. Prawit Wongsuwan told reporters Monday that the top generals accepted the election

results. And with Yingluck's Pheu Thai party snaring 265 seats in the 500-seat parliament, and already engaged in talks with smaller parties to join a coalition and bolster that majority, the generals have no room to engineer any backroom deals to block Pheu Thai's path to power.

Yingluck's stunningly rapid rise to Thailand's top job may owe a great deal to her brother, but the public also responded to the 44-year-old mother of one as an individual. "For a broad swathe of the population, her sunny, youthful disposition offers a refreshing alternative for voters bored with the masculine godfather caricatures that have dominated national politics for decades," said a *Bangkok Post* editorial on Monday. Although Abhisit doesn't fit the godfather description, his role in the political battles of recent years undercut his appeal to the many Thais who expressed that they were tired of political conflicts. By contrast, newcomer Yingluck carried none of the "personal bruises and scars" of political life, said Hasan Basar of Bangkok Public Relations.

The coalition that originally supported Abhisit has also splintered since his election. The Yellow Shirts abandoned him over his unwillingness to go to war with neighboring Cambodia over a tiny patch of disputed land and a temple on the nations' border. They urged followers to register a protest vote for no candidate — allowed on the ballot — and more than 800,000 did. Some Thais whose chief complaint is corruption, and in the past favored the Democrat Party, instead voted for former massage parlor magnate Chuwit Kamolviset. After being arrested over a land dispute in 2005, Chuwit began telling the press and the public about all the bribes he had paid to police commanders over the years and successfully transformed himself into an anti-corruption campaigner. Chuwit's party won nearly one million votes.

Abhisit took office just as the world economic crisis hit at the end of 2008. Despite extending relief to low-income earners and overseeing the strongest GDP growth in 15 years at 7.8% in 2010, many voters cited the poor economy as a reason for voting for Pheu Thai. Abhisit's relief and stimulus programs were being phased out with recovery, and at the same time, food and fuel prices have soared to record levels.

In her speech Sunday night, Yingluck said, "I would like to reiterate that we are ready to deliver on all of the policies that we have announced." Some of those promises, however, will be unachievable, such as her oft-stated pledge that in four years, no Thai person will be poor. Other promises include free tablet computers for one million schoolchildren, and paying farmers \$500 per tonne of rice — a move that some experts have said would threaten to further exacerbate food price inflation.

Still, Yingluck's success or failure as a Prime Minister will rest less on her policies than on whether or not she can keep a still sharply divided Thailand stable and at peace with itself.

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