

Voters need to make the right choice

JINTANA PANYAARVUDH
THE NATION

ONCE AGAIN, Thai voters have come to a point where they have to decide if they should follow their heart or their head, or should even bother exercising their ballot if the election is held on February 2 as scheduled.

Of course, all Pheu Thai and its coalition supporters are clear – they will head for the ballot station to vote for their favourite parties and candidates.

But it's the anti-government protesters who are possibly confused about what they should do on that day. Some of them might follow protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban's previous edict that ballot stations should be blocked and those against this government should refuse to take part in all processes of the election. However, yesterday the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) changed its stance, saying that its followers would not block the election but would continue protesting peacefully.

As for those groups that have realised that there are other ways to support Suthep, they will most probably go to the polling booth to cast a "no vote".

Last month, *The Nation* spoke to some protesters at the Rajdamnoen rally site about the February 2 election and discovered that they were divided into

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three groups: those who will cast a "no vote"; those who will spoil the ballot; and those who will not show up at all.

Those who favour the "no vote" option explained that they wanted to use their voting right to show their disapproval of the ruling Pheu Thai Party, which still enjoys strong support in the North and Northeast.

The "no vote" option is a clear indicator that a voter exercises his or her right by going to the polling station but declares: "I vote for nobody."

This option is very significant, especially for the upcoming election, even though it could be seen as supporting the caretaker government's stance that favours an election before national reform.

According to the charter, if a constituency has just one candidate, then he or she must win at least 20 per cent of the eligible votes, and these votes need to outnumber the "no votes".

At present, 22 constituencies in the South have just one candidate each, and if these candidates fail to pass the requirements, new polls will need to be held.

In addition, a "no vote" count that is higher than the winner's

number of votes in constituencies that have more than one candidate would serve as an embarrassment.

Recent opinion surveys show that most Bangkokians will exercise their balloting right in the February 2 snap election, though many refused to reveal which parties or candidates they would go for or how they would cast their ballot.

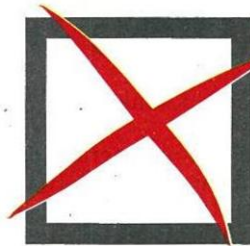
Bangkok Poll learned yesterday that 79.6 per cent of the respondents intended to cast their vote, 9.9 per cent said they preferred not to, while 10.5 per cent were still undecided.

The respondents were also split on whether the election should be held on February 2 as scheduled, with 51.5 per cent saying yes, while the rest were divided – with 28 per cent saying they wanted "reform" before the election and 20.4 per cent saying the election should be postponed.

The Suan Dusit Poll found that as many as 45.56 per cent of its respondents would most definitely cast their vote, 19.78 per cent would not and 14 per cent were still undecided.

Judging from these figures, it does not look as if Thai democracy is at stake, though the fear of violence might keep some voters at home, thus providing an opportunity for electoral fraud or stolen votes.

At this point, though, the one thing we all can hope for is that all voters make the right choice.



PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE ELECTION

The general election set for February 2 has already faced many problems, and more troubles are likely if the process goes ahead as scheduled.

EXISTING PROBLEMS

- Clashes, injuries and deaths during candidacy registration
- 28 constituencies have no MP candidate
- 22 constituencies have only one candidate, which means for a candidate to win his or her seat, each would need the backing of at least 20 per cent of eligible voters, and they must outnumber the "no votes" cast
- Many Election Commission offices have been closed or disrupted by the protesters
- Lack of election staff
- Threats to the safety and delivery of ballot cards

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

On election days (advance poll tomorrow and main one on February 2)

- Lack of polling venues
- Blockade of staff organising the election
- Blockade of voters wishing to participate
- Voting cannot take place in some constituencies
- Vote result of party-list MPs cannot be announced
- To be convened, at least 95 per cent of the 500 seats in the House of Representatives must have elected MPs; a shortfall is already almost guaranteed because of the lack of candidates in several constituencies
- It may not be possible to form a government
- Uncertainty over when the election can be completed (prolonged election process)
- Legal complaints seeking to nullify the election
- Legal complaints against poll organisers

Source: The Nation

NATION GRAPHICS