

## EDITORIAL

# Poll has shown why REFORM WILL BE TOUGH

LITTLE APPEARS TO HAVE CHANGED IN TERMS OF THE HUGE POLITICAL DIVISION WITHIN THE COUNTRY

A recent opinion poll simply confirms the main problems facing interim Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha or, in fact, Thailand. Bangkok Poll has shown that the Democrat and Pheu Thai parties have switched places in terms of popularity, yet they remain the country's most and second-most popular political camps. Despite months-long street protests in Bangkok, Pheu Thai still enjoys a high popularity, although its approval rating has fallen behind the Democrats in the latest Bangkok Poll. And despite its association with "illegitimate" anti-government protests before Prayut staged the coup in May, the Democrat Party was found by Bangkok Poll to be voters' top choice.

There is no doubt which parties remain Thailand's biggest. And there is no doubt that the Democrat-Pheu Thai rivalry played a big part in the country's political crisis, although other issues figured significantly as well. While the Democrats have been blamed for some "unparliamentary" activities that undermined "legitimate" governments of their rivals, the political forces of Thaksin Shinawatra were responsible for some controversial moves that stretched their mandate to the limits. But it is probably irrelevant now to say who was more wrong. The

question is how Thailand can achieve genuine political peace when Abhisit Vejjajiva and Yingluck Shinawatra remain virtually neck and neck as the country's most popular prime ministerial candidates.

Thailand's much-talked-about "reform", therefore, will boil down to the question of how to make election winners and losers truly accountable to the democratic system. This means the reform must focus on the politicians themselves. They must be made aware of ethics, respect and observe them by themselves. So far, it's been their supporters who said what is right and what is wrong, and they did so on blockaded streets in the middle of the capital.

Pheu Thai supporters have decried "mob rules". The Democrats' followers have condemned "tyranny of the majority" or abuse of mandate. Prayut's coup just temporarily halted a showdown that would rear its ugly head again immediately once it has a new chance. But things simply can't go on like that. Thailand's biggest political parties must stop sending their combative followers to the streets and have them say what is right and what is wrong. Our politicians need to know what is right and what is wrong by themselves. It is as simple as that.

Democracy is not about judging right or wrong by numbers. Political rallies have been an important part of democracy, of course, but they have crossed the line completely in Thailand. And the obsession with numbers has subjected results of the ballot boxes to wrong ideas. Elections are meant to settle, say, differences over sizes of taxation or the question of how big a welfare fund should be, but in Thailand, the purposes of elections have been badly stretched.

Ethics must be shoved down our politicians' throats if need be. Unless they are strictly ethical, the same problems will occur once Prayut ends his "interim job". Political rallies can be volatile enough being held for good causes. When vested interests are involved, or when they are held to defend things that are unethical, the situation can become truly dangerous.

We can only hope that the latest Bangkok Poll tells everyone involved in the reform process that has not even started what should be done. Changing electoral zones won't help, nor will making the Senate fully elected or partially elected. Thailand badly needs an ethical revamp in order to achieve true peace, and if anyone still harbours any doubt, he or she must re-read the Bangkok Poll results.