

International

Thai election complaints mount as junta holds popular vote edge

Junta primed to retain its grip on power

BANGKOK: Confusion and complaints over preliminary results in Thailand's election mounted yesterday after the first poll since a 2014 coup, with the junta primed to retain its grip on power despite only having a slight edge in the popular vote. Election officials released the first unofficial preliminary results for seats in the lower house yesterday as a blizzard of complaints over apparent mistakes in the count and possible irregularities at the polls rolled in.

Sunday's election - seen as a referendum on the military - was held under new rules written by the junta to ease its transformation into a civilian government. Despite that headstart, analysts had not expected the army-linked Phalang Pracharat party to win the popular vote, given anger at junta rule and the enduring popularity of Pheu Thai - the party of ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

But preliminary figures showed Phalang Pracharat - with 2014 coup leader Prayut Chan-O-Cha as its candidate for prime minister - ahead in the popular vote. It had racked up more than 7.6 million votes with more than 90 percent of ballots tallied, giving any government it tries to form a claim to legitimacy. That is nearly half a million more votes than Pheu Thai, which nonetheless had earned 137 of the 350 available constituency seats in the lower house compared to Phalang Pracharat's 97, according to preliminary figures released later.

There are still 150 "party list" seats in the lower house up for grabs, which is where the popular vote will matter more. But no matter how the numbers play out, coup leader Prayut's party will benefit from a military-appointed 250-member Senate. That means Pheu Thai would need to cobble together 376 votes in the lower house to override the Senate advantage, while the junta only needs 126.

As rivals scrambled to seize the momentum and per-

suaide other parties to join forces in a coalition, Pheu Thai's prime ministerial candidate Sudarat Keyuraphan said her party had won the "mandate from the people" to form a government. She also pointed to "irregularities" and said her party was "gathering evidence about the election process". Pheu Thai will have to try and build a pro-democracy coalition, lassoing in Future Forward - a new upstart anti-junta party which has won the hearts of millennials, claimed over five million mainly youth votes and 30 lower house constituency seats.

Future Forward leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, whose party is key to any alliance, told reporters yesterday that his "greatest concern" is the junta staying in power. Nearly 1.9 million votes had been invalidated with 93 percent of votes tallied. But the Election Commission defended itself against critics accusing it of bungling the process. "Please wait, this is Thailand, we are not like other countries who have an election one day and form a government the next," said Jarungvith Phumma, EC secretary-general.

The commission sidestepped questions over wildly inaccurate poll returns reported late Sunday in several constituencies, with another official calling it "human error". Thaksin, the self-exiled billionaire ex-cop turned-Thai premier, who is at the crux of Thailand's political breakdown, reached out to shocked supporters in the pro-democracy camp. "As long as we still have breath, we can not give up," he said in a Facebook post yesterday.

The EC has said it will finalise the results by May 9. But questions over the count have billowed out, with social media ablaze with allegations of vote buying, mass invalidation of ballots and bungling by polling staff across the country. About 400,000 people signed a change.org petition to sack EC members, and more dis-

Deep divides

operation is expected across the political spectrum. A coordinator for Thailand-based election monitor We Watch said that voter education was insufficient.



BANGKOK: Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha (right) and his wife Naraporn leave Government House in Bangkok yesterday, a day after the country's general election. —AFP

A candidate in Songkhla province for the Democrat Party, which came in second in the last election in 2011 but was down in fifth this time, said they had evidence of votes bought. "Without vote buying, we wouldn't have suffered such big losses," candidate Sirichok Sopha told AFP. General Prayut's party appears set to get close to the 126 lower house seats it needs to secure a parliamentary majority, in combination with the appointed Upper House that it created when it was in power.

"The people have chosen us," Kobsak Pottrakool, Phalang Pracharat spokesman told reporters. But the

vote has again revealed Thailand's old divisions between Thaksin supporters and arch-royalist, conservatives who look to the army for stability. On the eve of the poll, Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn issued a cryptic statement urging people to support "good" leaders against those who create "chaos."

Thailand's monarchy is protected by harsh royal defamation laws and is nominally above politics. But another royal command in February torpedoed the candidacy of the king's elder sister Princess Ubolratana for prime minister via a party linked to Thaksin. Thaksin was ousted in a 2006 coup, and has lived in self-exile since 2008. The administration of his sister Yingluck was also the victim of a 2014 power grab by the military. —AFP

Gaza: A year of deadly tensions

GAZA: New tensions between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas come days before the first anniversary of the start of massive protests and clashes in the Gaza Strip. Since March 30 last year at least 258 Palestinians have been killed in the violence, along with two Israeli soldiers. Here is a recap:

First deadly day

A mass protest on March 30, 2018 demands the right for Palestinians to return to homes, now inside Israel, that they fled or were expelled from in the late 1940s, while the Jewish state was created. Tens of thousands of Palestinians converge along the barrier that separates Gaza from Israel. Officially organized by civil society groups, the rally is backed by Islamist militant movement Hamas which runs Israeli-blockaded Gaza. Several groups of protesters face off with Israeli soldiers, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails. Israeli snipers respond with live fire, killing 19 Palestinians.

Kites on fire

On April 6 thousands of Palestinians gather again near the barrier. Nine Palestinians are killed and nearly 500 injured. Four days later the Palestinians employ a new tactic, sending kites across the border, some carrying explosive devices, to set fire to farmland. Similar kites and balloons have

since torched thousands of hectares (acres) of land.

Bloodbath

On May 14 tens of thousands of Palestinians return to the barrier to protest as the US opens its embassy in Jerusalem after recognizing the disputed city as Israel's capital. At least 62 Palestinians are killed by Israeli fire in the ensuing violence, with more than 2,400 wounded. On June 13 the United Nations General Assembly adopts a resolution, opposed by Washington, condemning Israel for the violence.

Summer of violence

On July 14 Israel unleashes dozens of air strikes, killing two Palestinians, while 200 rockets target Israel. Overnight August 8-9 Hamas fires some 180 rockets and mortars from Gaza, according to the Israeli army, which says it responded by targeting 150 of the movement's military sites. After a brief respite, 10 Palestinians are killed in clashes with the Israeli army during demonstrations on September 28 and October 5.

Aid from Qatar

On November 9-10, as mediation efforts progress, Palestinian civil servants in Gaza receive millions of dollars in salary arrears, funded by Qatar. Since then four installments of Qatari aid have been distributed to Palestinians in Gaza. Under UN auspices, Qatar has also financed deliveries of fuel to the territory's only power plant.

Escalation

On November 11 an Israeli military

operation in the Gaza Strip leaves seven Palestinians and one Israeli soldier dead. Hamas the next day attacks an Israeli bus, severely wounding a soldier. It is the beginning of one of the worst escalations in years, with hundreds of rockets and mortars fired at Israel and dozens of Israeli strikes against Gaza positions. Seven Palestinians are killed. On November 13 an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire is agreed. A day later Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman resigns, saying Israel is "capitulating to terror". On November 21 four Palestinians are killed by Israeli soldiers.

UN probe

On February 28, 2019 a UN probe says Israel may have committed "war



BEIT HANUN: Mourners attend the funeral of 24-year-old Palestinian Habeb Al-Masri, who according to Gaza's health ministry was wounded previously in clashes with Israeli forces at the Israeli-Gaza border fence, during his funeral in Beit Hanun. —AFP

crimes or crimes against humanity" in responding to unrest in Gaza, as snipers "intentionally" shot civilians, including children. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejects the report.

Rockets and strikes

Overnight March 15 Israeli aircraft and helicopters strike dozens of Hamas targets in Gaza after rockets are fired from enclave towards the region of Tel Aviv. Israeli media report that the rockets were fired by mistake. On March 25 a rare rocket hits north of Tel Aviv, wounding seven people. Netanyahu cuts short his US visit, vowing "we will respond with force". The Israeli army accuses Hamas of firing the rocket and says it is sending reinforcements to Gaza. —AFP

Serbia marks 20 years since NATO bombing

BELGRADE: Serbia on Sunday marked 20 years since the NATO air strikes that forced Belgrade to withdraw its troops from Kosovo, ending a conflict that claimed more than 13,000 lives. After the operation to get president Slobodan Milosevic to stop his deadly crackdown on Kosovo separatists, the former Serbian province, mainly ethnic Albanian, was put under UN administration.

Kosovo unilaterally declared independence in 2008 - which Serbia refuses to recognize. Commemorations were held across the country to recall the start of "NATO aggression", with a main ceremony in the southern town of Nis, which Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic said drew 20,000 people. The sound of an air raid siren kicked off the ceremony at 7:45 pm, the minute when

"The most tragic days"

"These are the most tragic days of our history," Orthodox Serbian Patriarch Irinej told the crowd, many holding candles. "What is even more tragic is that it involved our former allies, our former friends." Milosevic ordered his troops out of Kosovo on June 10, 1999. NATO forces struck dozens of military targets, as well as infrastructure such as bridges, railways and the electrical grid.

The number of civilian victims has not been officially established, and ranges from 500 according to Human Rights Watch to 2,500, according to Serbian officials. "We were alone in the face of the biggest military power in the world," said Vucic, a former ultra-nationalist who became a centrist and wants his country to join the European Union. "Their goal was clear: to beat us and humiliate us, and then give part of our territory to someone else," he said.

"It will always be a crime"

Citing 2,500 civilians dead including 79 children and a "devastated country", he said the bombing campaign would



STAGOVO: A car drives past a graffiti reading "Thank You Nato" and featuring the US flag near the village of Stagovo. —AFP

"always be a crime". Earlier on Sunday, the ambassadors of eight Western countries - Canadian, French, Italian, German, Dutch, Norwegian, British and American - paid their respects to civilian victims at a monument in Belgrade. "We remember March 24 as the day diplomacy failed, and we express our sincere regret for the loss of civilian lives during the events of 1999," they said in a joint statement.

"We are saddened for all of those who lost their loved ones during the

Wars of the 1990s. We are here to honour their memory and are determined to work even harder to contribute to lasting peace and stability to the region." Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj, for his part, said Saturday that "NATO's intervention in Milosevic's genocidal action against people of Kosovo was crucial humanitarian contribution (that) demonstrated coordinated international action for peace, justice and rules-based world order. —AFP

Saudi sisters hope for a 'beautiful future'

HONG KONG: Two Saudi Arabian sisters are hoping for a "bright, beautiful future" after being granted asylum, fleeing what they describe as an abusive family and a repressive society. The sisters fled from their family last September while on holiday in Sri Lanka and have been stranded in Hong Kong since an aborted attempt to get to Australia, where they hoped to secure asylum.

For reasons of safety, the sisters, aged 18 and 20, who say they were beaten by their father and brothers, asked that their names and faces not be revealed, nor the country to which they have now gone. "Oh my God, I was so happy," the curly haired younger sister told Reuters recently, describing how she felt when told asylum had been secured. "I screamed 'It's real, it's happening' ... It was just relief and unforgettable." The sisters spoke to Reuters in a room on the 22nd floor of a Hong Kong hotel shortly before they left the city. Hong Kong-based rights lawyer, Michael Vidler, who has been helping them, attended. They said they had lived in fear for six months, shuttling between 15 safe houses, staying with a nun, families and at a shelter for abused women.

They feared being intercepted by Saudi officials or relatives and forced to return home, where they believe they could be punished for renouncing Islam, which is punishable by death under the Saudi system of Islamic law. The Saudi consulate in Hong Kong has not responded to requests for comment. In a statement late yesterday, Vidler confirmed the sisters had successfully travelled to a third country on "humanitarian visas".

"To ensure their future security we will not be disclosing the third country where the sisters are now living, nor will we be providing any further details," he wrote on the Facebook page of his law firm. "The sisters will not be giving any further media interviews." The sisters said they were treated harshly, at times beaten, by their brothers and father. "They were like my jailer, like my prison officer. I was like a prisoner," the younger sister previously told Reuters.

They were also critical of Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system that requires women to have a male relative's permission to work, travel, marry, and even get some medical treatment. "Women are just like slaves," said the older sister, adding that her dream was to become a writer one day. "I want to settle down and to feel safe, and (to know) that I have rights and I matter in that country. Just to live normal, and discover myself ... because now I own my life." This is not the first case in Asia this year of young Saudi women fleeing what they said was repression. In January, an 18-year-old Saudi woman was granted asylum in Canada after fleeing her family and barricading herself in a Bangkok hotel to resist being sent home. Her case drew global attention to Saudi Arabia's strict social rules, which rights groups say can trap women and girls as prisoners of abusive families. —Reuters