

# Thailand votes for industrialization

by S. Tanapura and L. de Hoyos

In a surprise move, Thailand's Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond announced that he would step down from his post, although his ruling four-party coalition had won a majority in national elections held July 24. Five days after the elections, the mantle has fallen to Gen. Chatichai Choonhavan, leader of the Chart Thai Party, to attempt to organize a government.

Prem's decision to step down is less dramatic than it might appear, as the national elections reaffirmed Thailand's commitment to industrialization and economic growth. The Chart Thai party was an early supporter of the Kra Canal Great Project for southern Thailand.

Out of 357 elected seats to the nation's parliament, the Chart Thai Party, which is considered the "party of business" and has developed close ties with Japanese investors in Thailand, retained its position as the country's largest party, gaining 87 seats. The Socialist Action Party, headed by Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila, came in second with 54 seats. The major political shift is the downturn of the Democrat Party, headed by former deputy prime minister Bichai Rattakul, who often finds himself in the same camp as the Socialist International. The Democrat Party had split and lost position in the capital city of Bangkok, bringing in a national total of 48 seats.

Various reasons have been offered in the Thai political circuit for Prem's decision to leave office after eight years. For the past period, Prem's presence in the post has acted to guarantee a certain level of stability in Thailand. Prem was an unelected prime minister, a post he held with the clear approval of the Thailand's royal family. H.M. King Bhumipol had asked Prem to stay in office to preside over the king's 60th birthday last year. In addition, Prem's own lack of color and political initiative enabled him to function as a balancer among the factions in the military and political arena.

However, in the last few months, Prem has come under steady attack. In June, over 100 academics and other prestigious figures called for him to step down. Prem also came under harsh attack from Kukrit Pramoj, a former prime minister with close ties to the royal family, who holds the position of Thailand's elder statesman. On July 16, Kukrit issued a stern warning against a new term for Prem. Speaking at

Thammasat University, Kukrit predicted that if Prem returned as prime minister, dissent against him would continue to rise, which in turn could force Prem to employ "dictatorial tactics" to stay in power. "Whoever chooses General Prem as premier and not me, will have to bear responsibility if the country ends up in political turmoil," Kukrit was quoted by the *Bangkok Post*. Kukrit further argued that the lack of action coming from the civilian government headed by Prem was resulting in the degradation of the national parliament and the military's retaining of too much political power.

Now that Prem has stepped to one side—in deference to the apparent wishes of the population—the coming days will tell whether this will bring about a dramatic shift in Thailand's political configurations or whether General Chatichai is able to organize a pro-industry consensus to take the reins of government.

## No to the Buddhist fundamentalists

One very hopeful sign was the national defeat in the elections of the Palang Dharma Party ("the force of *dharma*"), a Buddhist fundamentalist party headed by Gen. Chamlong Srimuang. Chamlong, a former Young Turk and personal secretary to Prem, became governor of Bangkok in a landslide victory three years ago, on a platform of "cleaning up the city."

Although only a new party, the Palang Dharma ran 315 candidates in all 73 provinces, out of a possible 357. But contrary to media predictions, Chamlong's party did not repeat the landslide this time in the Bangkok region, indicating that his "clean" image may be wearing off. The Palang Dharma took only 10 seats in Bangkok and 4 in the provinces. Even Chamlong's wife was defeated in her district by the slate put forward by Samak Sundaravej's Prachakorn Thai Party, whose biggest base is also the capital city.

Before the elections, all the media were playing up Chamlong's party as the alternative to the pro-industrial orientation of the Thai government. Chamlong is backed by the highly dubious religious sect Santi Asoke, which advocates a Khomeini model of theocracy for Thailand and rejects "materialism." A few days before the elections, the Buddhist scholars' association announced that it was planning legal action against Santi Asoke immediately after the elections, on charges of fraud in ordaining Buddhist monks, while the sect does not adhere to the Religious Affairs Code.

Financial backing for Chamlong's party comes from the "Magic Eye" environmentalist project of the Bangkok Bank and the British pharmaceutical company L.P. Standard Laboratories. The latter had pledged \$4 million. The international press, such as the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the Sikh community in Bangkok, and the BBC had all portrayed General Chamlong and his party as the new generation of "clean" Thai politicians. However, Chamlong and his philosophy of vegetarianism and rejection of material existence did not sit well with the Thai people.