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Elections in Thailand

Following the Siamese coup d'état of 1932 and the first election in 1933, Thailand saw its first transformation from absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. The new system was at best nominal during that era of war and turmoil. Thailand still fell under military rules, though interspersed with periods of democracy. A more stable parliamentary politics returned under the rule of Prem, a democratically-inclined strongman.

The 1997 Constitution, the first constitution to be drafted by popularly-elected Constitutional Drafting Assembly, created a bicameral legislature—a two-house Parliament consisting of the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House of Representatives has 480 seats, while the Senate has 150 seats.

There are two types of House Representatives—the Party List House Representatives and the Provincial Representatives. On Election Day, voters are to on their ballot assign a vote to their Provincial Representatives of choice and a vote to their party of choice. The election for 400 of the House members is first-past-the-post, where one candidate with a majority is elected in one constituency. First-past-the-post is a form of simple plurality—a candidate does not need absolute majority (50%+1) to be elected to the House. The number of these Provincial Representatives elected into the parliament is fixed for each particular province, depending on the population size. This system in a way mirrors the election in the United States, where larger states can return more Representatives to the parliament.

The election for the 80 Party List House Representatives is a touch more complex, taking the form of a Mixed Member Majoritarian System. For every 300,000 votes for any particular party, that party reserves the right to assign one of their members to the House of Representatives. This ensures that even a minority party can at least have a chance to represent their policies and platforms in the parliament, even though its opinions are likely to be turned down by the majority-holding party. As the legislative arm of the parliament, a member of the House of Representatives serves for a maximum term of four years.

Similar to the House of Representatives, there are also two types of Senate, each elected differently into the parliament. Out of 150 members, 76 are elected provincially—one senate for each of the 75 provinces and one from Bangkok. This is analogous to the election for the Senate in the United States and allows for an equal representation for each province. The remaining 74 senators are the Professional Senate. Each professional group—be it lawyers, agriculturalists, industrialists—send one representative to be considered a Senate. The chosen potential senators then vote among themselves who to enter the parliament (one senator per one professional). The Senate is a non-partisan chamber and therefore candidates cannot be a member of a political party. Each senator serves for a fixed term of six years.

The head of the government is the Prime Minister, a selected member of the largest elected party of the parliament. The 2007 Constitution asserts that prime minister must be a member of the House of Representative. The qualifications for the office are thus the same as those of the House. A one-fifth support of the Member of the House of Representatives is required for the appointment for office. A simple, first-pass-the-post majority voting will then take place. The process must be done within thirty days of the beginning of the first session of the House of Representatives after an election. If no candidate can be found within this time, the President of the National Assembly of Thailand then submits the name he considers most worthy for the King to make a formal appointment. The Prime Minister cannot hold the office for a consecutive period of more than eight years. This temporal limit forestalls absolutism, sustaining the lifeline that feeds the democratic essence of Thailand.

The Prime Minister automatically becomes the chairman of the Cabinet. The appointment of the ministers, who themselves come from the House of Representatives, requires his approval. The Prime Minister is responsible for the actions—and thus for failures—of the government in its entirety. The Prime Minister can also be removed by a vote of no confidence.

Voters are required by the Constitution to be of a Thai nationality, acquired by birth or by a citizenship of at least 5 years. Ninety days before the election takes place, voters must register at their constituency. Voting for the citizens of Thailand is compulsory after the age of 18; missing an election results in minor tax penalties or other penalties.