

Top Thai parties jockey for power

AP, Bangkok

Thailand's leading parties wooed possible partners for a coalition government on Monday, a day after allies of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra came out on top in the country's first election since he was ousted in a September 2006 military coup.

The pro-Thaksin People's Power Party won just under half the seats in the 480-member lower house of parliament, delivering a powerful message that the exiled prime minister's mostly rural supporters would be happy to see him return despite allegations he was corrupt and abused power.

Not so happy to see Thaksin return would be those who deposed him the military, Bangkok's educated middle class, and the country's elite, including elements around the monarchy who felt threatened by his accumulation of power.

Speaking in Hong Kong, the self-exiled Thaksin said he will "explore options" for a return some time between mid-February and April, but will not resume his political career after being ousted in a bloodless coup d'etat last year.

"I really want to go back as a normal citizen. Enough is enough

for politics," said Thaksin at a press conference.

However, he said he would be willing to act as a political adviser to the People's Power Party if asked. "If they (the PPP's leaders) want my opinion and ideas, then I will give it to them," said Thaksin.

Thaksin was abroad at the time of his bloodless ouster, and has since lived in exile, mostly in London. He is legally barred from office, his Thai Rak Thai Party was dissolved by the courts, and he has been charged with a slew of corruption-related crimes.

Under an interim military-installed government that succeeded Thaksin, his foes changed the constitution to limit the influence of big parties and sought to demonise him as a corrupt destroyer of democracy. His return could undo their efforts and put their own positions in jeopardy.

Ahead of the vote, rumours even swirled that the military would stage a new coup if faced with the prospect of a Thaksin comeback, although the army commander vowed to abide by the election results.

What his foes failed to do, the election results showed, was win over Thaksin's followers in the rural

north and poor northeast. Those supporters remained loyal in gratitude for the former leader's populist programmes, including universal health care and generous village development funds implemented when he held office from 2001-2006.

"This is the people's decision. The military has to accept that people disagree with the coup," said a member of the Democrat Party, who teaches law at Bangkok's Thammasat University.

The PPP captured 233 seats in the lower house, according to full results released by the Election Commission on Tuesday, putting it in the best position to form a new governing coalition.

The rival Democrat Party was second with 165 seats, while the Chart Thai Party finished third with 37.

PPP Secretary-General Surapong Suebwonglee said Monday that his party had won the agreement of enough other smaller parties to form a stable majority coalition with 280-300 seats.

There would be "no problem in forming a government," he said at a news conference. The House is supposed to convene within one month of the election.

Surapong said he will reveal his would-be partners' names only after Jan. 3, when the Election Commission is expected to certify the voting results.

Even if the PPP, led by former Thai Rak Thai members, has concluded a coalition deal, it could fall apart if enough of the party's candidates are disqualified for electoral violations such as voting

Because Thaksin has such influential enemies, however, his proxy party is being sharply challenged by the Democrat Party, which, despite coming in second at the polls, has the confidence of the political establishment.

Democrat Party Secretary-General Sunthep Thueksuban said the PPP's claim that it has enough partners to form a coalition would only be credible if all the involved party leaders announce it publicly and jointly.

Building a working coalition is only the first challenge to restoring stability in Thailand after two years of polarising politics, which began with street demonstrations in Bangkok demanding that Thaksin step down and continued after the coup failed to reconcile Thaksin's urban opponents with his rural supporters.

Hamas releases senior Fatah sympathiser

AFP, Gaza City

The Hamas government has released the former director of Gaza's electric company, officials announced yesterday, six months after arresting him in a crackdown on political rivals in the wake of the Islamic militant group's takeover of the area.

Suleiman Abu Samhadana was arrested in July, weeks after Hamas routed the rival Fatah movement and seized power. Abu Samhadana, a Fatah sympathiser, was charged with embezzlement.

The Hamas-controlled Interior Ministry said Abu Samhadana was freed on Monday. It said he paid a \$100,000 (euro69,500) fine, and turned over a deed to two acres (.8 hectares) of property as bail.

In addition, two relatives promised to pay \$200,000 (euro139,000) each if he flees Gaza.

A court date was not immediately set, and Abu Samhadana declined to speak to reporters after returning home.

Abu Samhadana was the first of dozens of senior government officials, judges and prosecutors rounded up by Hamas after the

takeover and also was the longest held. Most of the officials were released within days, although they lost their jobs and were replaced by Hamas sympathisers.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Thailand premier Thaksin Shinawatra smiles at a press conference in Hong Kong yesterday. Former premier Thaksin hailed the return of democracy to Thailand following weekend elections, and called for all parties to take part in reconciliation efforts.

Thai coup leader vows to keep up Thaksin graft probes

AFP, Bangkok

The pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP), which came out ahead in Sunday's elections and is moving to form a coalition government, has threatened to disband the AEC and grant an amnesty to Thaksin.

Sonthi said in an interview published on the Bangkok Post's website that he would stay out of politics, but that he would not allow the next government to scrap the AEC.

"There is no doubt that I will fight for the survival of the AEC since I fought for it with my very own two hands," he said.

The remarks were the first statement Sonthi has made on Sunday's election, which left PPP just shy of an absolute majority in parliament despite the military's relentless efforts to erase Thaksin from the political landscape.

14 sailors missing in S Korean waters

AP, Seoul

Fourteen sailors aboard a ship carrying nitric acid were missing Tuesday after their vessel was thought to have sunk in South Korea's southern waters. One survivor was taken to a hospital.

The 1,323-ton ship was carrying 2,000 tons of nitric acid, a highly corrosive chemical used to clean metals when it went missing.

Choi Eun-ju, a regional Coast Guard officer, said because nitric acid easily dilutes it is unlikely to pose a threat to the ocean or marine life if the ship sank.

South Korea's Coast Guard and navy started searching for the ship after it sent out a distress signal off Yeosu, 283 miles south of Seoul, early Tuesday, said spokesman Eum Seung-ye. It was sailing to Taiwan after leaving the southern port city of Gwangyang on Monday night.

One sailor, identified as a 28-year-old Burmese, was found floating unconscious at sea hours later, but the other 14 crew members, 12 South Koreans and two from Myanmar, were still missing, Eum said.

Assassins attack Somali police chief

AP, Mogadishu

Gunmen threw grenades at the home of the regional police chief in southwestern Somalia, killing two of his grandchildren and a bodyguard but not their target, authorities said yesterday.

Seven other family members were wounded in the Monday night attack, which police said was a failed assassination attempt against Gen. Ibrahim Hashi Gabow, the regional police chief based in Baidoa.

"They threw hand grenades into the house," said Aden Bid, the commander of Baidoa's police station. "The two children died at the hospital, but the bodyguard died on the spot." The children were aged 5 and 8.

Baidoa, 155 miles south of the capital, Mogadishu, is the headquarters for the Somali parliament and several senior government officials live there. Security in Baidoa has been deteriorating, with increased attacks on lawmakers. Last week, a judge was fatally shot there.



Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas (3rd L) and other officials attend the Christmas midnight mass led by Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabbah at the Church of the Nativity, early yesterday in the West Bank town of Bethlehem. Thousands of the faithful flocked to Bethlehem Tuesday as the biblical birthplace of Jesus Christ hoped for a better Christmas after years of deadly violence.

Leaders urge peace as Christmas celebrated

AP, Vatican City

leader in the Holy Land, Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, had also pleaded for peace in the Middle East.

"This land of God cannot be for some a land of life and for others a land of death, exclusion, occupation, or political imprisonment," he said in a sermon for midnight mass in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born.

All those whom God, the lord of history, has gathered here must be able to find in this land life, dignity and security," he said, addressing thousands of Christians from all over the world in a sermon delivered in his native Arabic.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas attended the mass fresh from last month's meet in the US city of Annapolis, where he formally relaunched the peace process with Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Midnight mass is nothing more than a memory for Christians in

Baghdad where danger is ever present.

The last one was celebrated four years ago, before the American invasion in 2003. A mass is now held at dusk on Christmas Eve, and another on the morning of Christmas Day.

In Roman Catholic-dominated Philippines, Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales urged the government in his Christmas message to address injustices suffered by the country's millions of poor.

"Our prayer and pleading, like a Christian prayer of hope and peace, is for the poor to be paid more attention to in our Christian country's economy and laws. This will eventually bring peace to everyone," he said.

Guns fell silent in the country's long-running communist insurgency as the security forces and Maoist guerrillas observed a traditional Christmas ceasefire.

On Sunday, he made his comments on Sunday, gave no time frame for the projects. He comments do not

Iran plans to build 19 more nuclear power plants

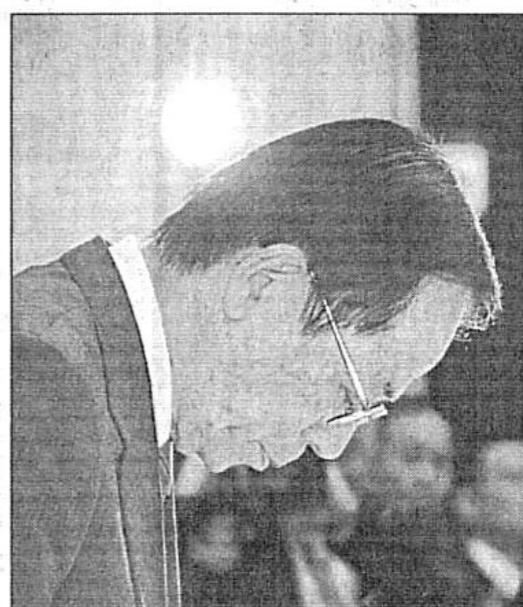
AP, Tehran

necessarily represent the position of Iran's executive branch, headed by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

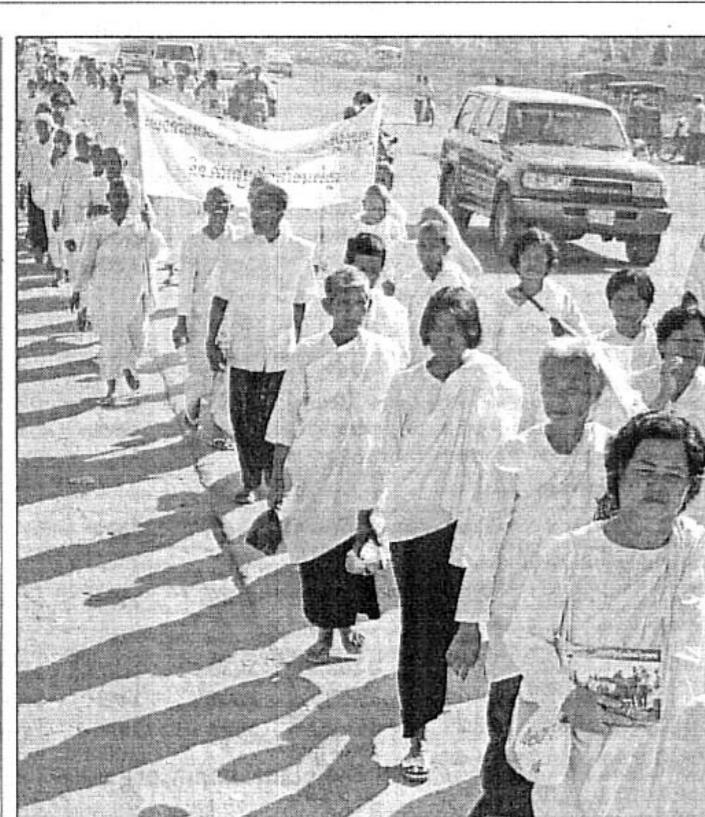
Iran currently does not have any operating electricity-producing nuclear power plants.

Russia is completing a 1,000-megawatt nuclear power plant for Iran outside the southern city of Bushehr. Iran received the first shipment of nuclear fuel from Russia last week, paving the way for the startup of the reactor in 2008.

The government has previously announced plans to build six more reactors like Bushehr to produce 7,000 megawatts of electricity through nuclear energy by 2021. Some lawmakers say have called on the government to produce 20,000 megawatts of electricity through nuclear energy by then.



This combo of photos show Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda (L) bowing as he apologises to a group (R) of victims and relatives of people who contracted hepatitis C from tainted blood products at his office in Tokyo yesterday. It was announced on December 23 that Fukuda and his ruling coalition would seek new legislation to compensate all the victims of dirty blood products contaminated with hepatitis C.



Cambodian (ECCC) march to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia in Phnom Penh yesterday. More than 600 Buddhist monks and nuns, as well as Muslim leaders, marched to Cambodia's UN-backed genocide tribunal to demand speedier trials of Khmer Rouge cadre.

NUKE PLANT CLOSURE N Korea likely to miss yr-end deadline: China

AP, Beijing

China said yesterday that North Korea was unlikely to meet a year-end deadline to disable and declare all of its nuclear programmes, although the "majority" of work will be finished.

"Thanks to the joint efforts of all parties, the six-party talks have made constant progress," foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang told journalists.

"The Yongbyon nuclear facilities were suspended and disabled and the majority of work will be finalized by the end of the year."

North Korea agreed to disable its plants at Yongbyon and declare all nuclear programmes by year-end in exchange for a million tonnes of fuel oil or equivalent energy aid.

Although the disablement of North Korea's nuclear facilities has gone as scheduled, it has increasingly appeared that Pyongyang is not ready to declare information concerning a suspected uranium enrichment programme.

Spokesman Qin refused to directly comment on Pyongyang's nuclear declaration.

But he said the other five nations were gradually fulfilling their commitments to supply North Korea with energy and aid in return for the disablement and declaration.

On Monday, South Korea's top

several major highways on the Plains.

Sunny conditions on Monday helped road crews deal with the remnants of a blustery snowstorm that blacked out thousands of homes and businesses and was blamed for at least 22 traffic deaths in the upper Midwest.

Sgt. Michael Melgaard of the Wisconsin State Patrol in Eau Claire said driving conditions improved substantially for holiday travellers starting in the late morning.

"The roads were clear for the most part and traffic was moving at normal speeds," he said Monday afternoon. "It seemed like there was a lot of steady holiday traffic, but it's starting to wane now as people are getting to their destinations."

But in Michigan, crashes on icy roads Monday evening caused multiple injuries and shut down sections of three interstate highways in Detroit, Dearborn and Warren, radio station WWJ-AM reported.

The weekend-long blast of ice and windblown snow led to multi-car pileups that closed sections of

US roadways improve after deadly storm

AP, Milwaukee

Buffalo, New York. Five to 10 inches of snow was possible there and in other parts of western New York by Tuesday morning, the weather service said.

In Chicago, some 250 travellers stayed overnight Sunday at O'Hare International Airport after 300 flights were cancelled because of high winds. The airport set up cots for travellers, and flights were running smoothly Monday, airport spokesman Gregg Cunningham said.

The freezing rain, ice, gusty wind and heavy snow over the weekend knocked out power to than 421,000 homes and businesses in Michigan and Illinois, as well as thousands in Wisconsin. Only 6,000 customers were still without power in Michigan Monday evening, while scattered outages remained in Illinois, utility representatives said.

In addition to the Michigan fatality, accidents on highways slippery with snow and ice killed at least eight people in Minnesota, three in Indiana, three in Wyoming, five in Wisconsin and one each in Texas and Kansas.