

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 sometime between mid-February and April, but will not resume his political career after being ousted in a bloodless coup d'état 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," commented Prinya Thawanaarmitkul, 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 vote-buying.

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 Suthep 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

General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who led the coup against Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra last year, vowed Tuesday to press ahead with corruption probes against him even if his allies form the next government.

Sonthi toppled Thaksin in September 2006, accusing him of widespread corruption, of disrespecting the monarchy, and of fomenting social divisions.

During the coup, he set up the Assets Examination Committee (AEC) to investigate a slate of corruption claims against Thaksin.

The panel has frozen about two billion dollars worth of Thaksin's assets and filed criminal charges against him in court, but has yet to secure a conviction.

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 founded 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 southwest 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.

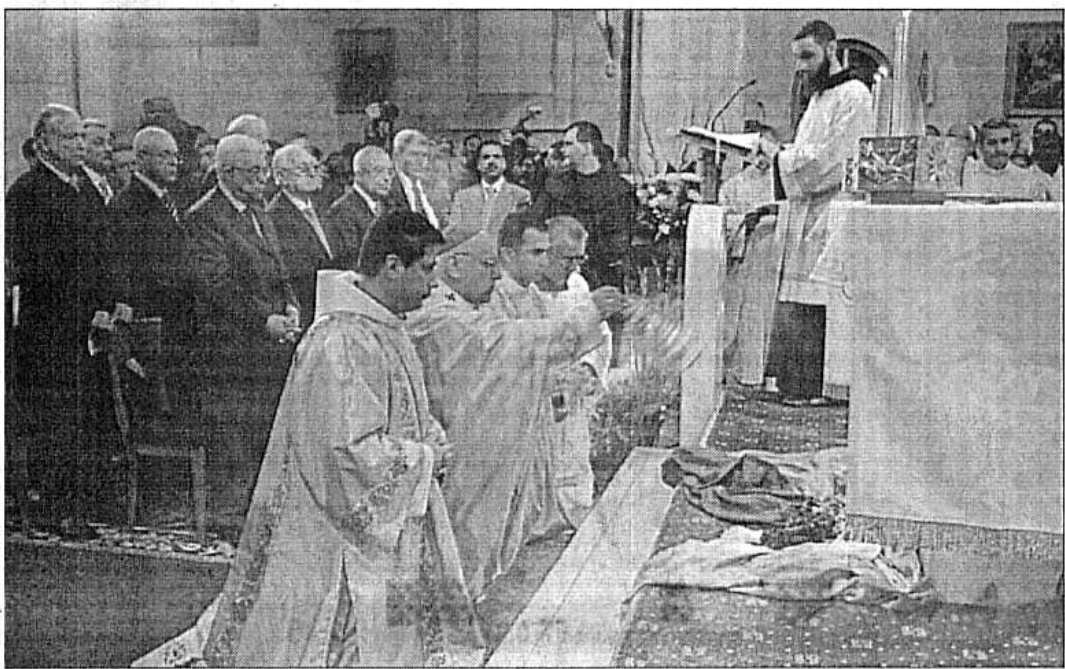


PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian President Mahmoud 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

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Benedict XVI lamented the "grim sound of arms" in the world's conflict zones Tuesday in a message of peace echoed by other Christian leaders as they celebrated Christmas.

Delivering his traditional blessing to thousands of worshippers in St Peter's Square in Rome, the head of the world's 1.1 billion Roman Catholics said: "On this day of peace, my thoughts turn especially to those places where the grim sound of arms continues to reverberate."

He emphasised "the whole of the Middle East -- especially Iraq, Lebanon and the Holy Land", and singled out Darfur, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo and "many other crisis situations that unfortunately are frequently forgotten".

On Christmas eve, the Catholic

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 Mahmoud 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.

Afghanistan orders UN, EU officials to leave

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan has ordered a top European Union official and a United Nations staffer to leave the country for threatening national security, government and diplomatic officials said Tuesday.

The two were declared persona non grata, apparently after allegations they had met with Taliban insurgents, a European diplomat said.

The office of President Hamid Karzai had at first announced at a press conference that the two, said to be British and Irish, had been arrested.

Spokesman Homayun Hamidzada later told AFP the pair, whom he did not identify, had been asked to leave the country. Another official said that two of the pair's Afghan colleagues had been arrested.

"The foreign nationals have been declared persona non grata and their Afghan colleagues have been arrested and are being investi-

gated," Hamidzada said.

He said his earlier statement that the pair were in custody was a "misunderstanding." In that statement, he said the unidentified pair "posed threats to the national security of Afghanistan."

A European diplomat said on condition of anonymity that the men had been given two days to leave, but the UN mission here said it was not aware of any deadline.

They had been accused of "having had contacts with the armed opposition out of the knowledge of the government," the diplomat said.

"Afghans claim they have documents proving these guys had contacts with the Taliban but have not given any proof," he said.

The UN mission said it was not sure on what basis the government had made the allegations.

"The government has not made clear its justification for this action and we are trying to clarify this misunderstanding," said spokesman Alem Siddique.

Iran plans to build 19 more nuclear power plants

AP, Tehran

Iran plans to build 19 more nuclear power plants and will soon solicit international bids for their construction, a lawmaker said.

"Contracts for the construction of 19 nuclear power plants, each with a capacity of 1,000 megawatts, will be put into international tender in the near future," Kazem Jalali was quoted as saying by the official IRNA news agency.

Jalali, a member of the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, said the bids will be in line with parliamentary legislation that calls for production of 20,000 megawatts of electricity through nuclear power plants in the future.

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

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.

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

AFP, 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 finalised 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.

On Monday, South Korea's top

nuclear negotiator Chun Yung-Woo said a full declaration by North Korea of all its nuclear weapons programmes was essential to keep a six-nation aid-for-disarmament deal afloat.

"It's time for North Koreans to have the courage to tell the truth," Chun told AFP.

"North Koreans have explained a lot about plutonium. But they seem to be less prepared to tell the truth about the UEP (uranium enrichment programme)."

Chun and his team were briefed last week by Sung Kim, the US State Department's top Korea expert, after Kim's three-day trip to review work on disabling the North's plutonium-producing nuclear plants.

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.



PHOTO: AFP

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.

US roadways improve after deadly storm

AP, Milwaukee

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

several major highways on the Plains.

Adding to the death toll, authorities say a woman died in Maple Valley Township, Michigan, about 60 miles north of Detroit, after she lost control of her truck and it rolled into a ditch filled with water. The woman was trapped in the overturned truck, said police who discovered the wreck Monday morning.

The storm rolled through Colorado and Wyoming on Friday, then spread snow and ice on Saturday from the Texas Panhandle to Wisconsin. On Sunday, snow fell across much of Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota and parts of Michigan and Indiana.

Up to 15 inches of snow fell over the weekend on parts of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, which typically gets heavy snow, and freezing drizzle glazed some highways Monday morning in counties along Lake Michigan.

The storm system had blown out to sea Monday morning, but in its wake wind blowing at 25 mph picked up moisture from Lake Erie to create lake-effect snow in

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 more 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.

Police stop would-be bomber in Istanbul

AP, Istanbul

Turkish police thwarted a bomb attack in Istanbul on Monday, arresting a 25-year-old man with explosives in his backpack outside a subway station, the city's governor said.

The man was carrying more than seven pounds of plastic A-4 explosives when he was arrested in the Sisli district, one of the most crowded areas of the city, Turkish news agencies reported.

The motive was unclear, as was whether it was to have been a suicide attack.

Gov Muammer Guler said it was certain that the man was planning to carry out a bombing but that police had not yet determined the intended target.

He said a man with suspected ties to the suspect was also arrested, but he did not elaborate.

Guler said police raided an apartment believed to be used as a safe house and seized more explosives and various equipment that could be used to set off a bomb. He said a woman and two children living in the apartment were being questioned.

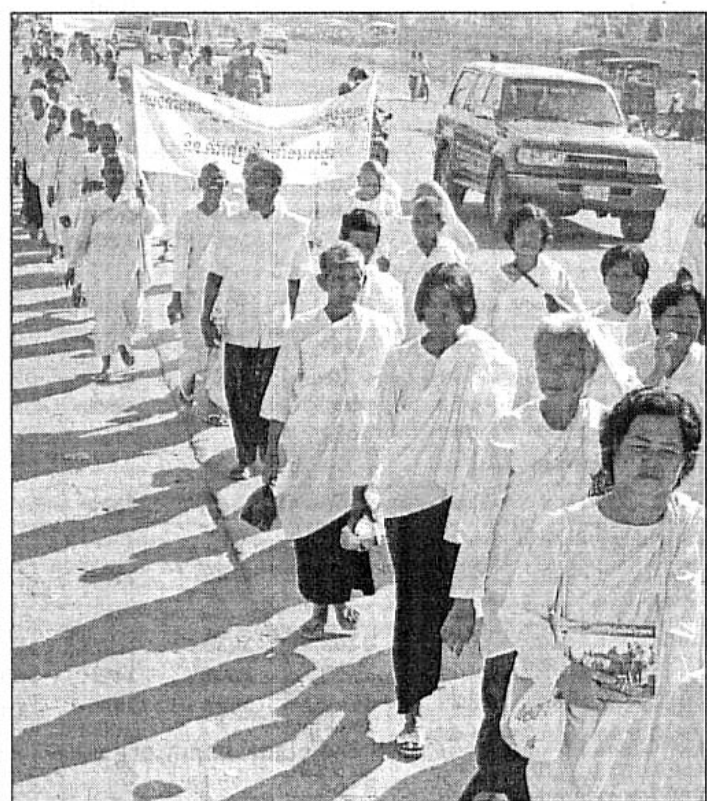


PHOTO: AFP

Cambodian nuns march to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) 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.