

# KEY FINDINGS ON ELECTION VIOLENCE PREVENTION:

## Thailand: February 2014 Elections



Targeted peacebuilding efforts are frequently used to prevent election violence (PEV). Practitioners possess a variety of programming options or interventions, including peace messaging campaigns, preventive diplomacy, dedicated youth programs, or monitoring missions. The choice among preventive measures is often made intuitively or impulsively, rather than based on empirical evidence, risk assessments, or thorough practice evaluations. USIP recently concluded an ambitious study to assess whether prevalent intervention models demonstrate a measurable impact on electoral violence levels. Amidst the five case studies, Thailand's election was high risk, saw very little prevention, and thus experienced widespread violence.

The February 2014 elections in Thailand proceeded amidst unprecedented levels of intimidation and fear. The elections were effectively boycotted by the main opposition party, the Democrats; massive street demonstrations with the self-proclaimed goal of protestors to shut down the capital city of Bangkok characterized the run-up to the snap election; and the subsequent annulment of election results by the courts ultimately led to a military coup on May 22.

Better election management, more systematic and consistent election monitoring, and above all a strong commitment by the security sector to prevent intimidation would have increased the prospects for a more peaceful election.

Election-related violence is the norm in Thailand, and was widely anticipated in 2014 – especially given the highly-charged political conditions. Electoral violence has been a significant feature of Thai elections since 1975. The recent trend in Thai politics has been towards high levels of electoral polarization and extremely aggressive public rhetoric.

In all around 30 people were killed, the same number as the previous peak level of fatalities during the 2005 general election. This level of fatalities, among the highest between the related cases for this study, was within the “normal” Thai range, even though the geographic reach of prevention measures, and the quality and duration of their implementation, was weaker compared to previous elections. These developments reflected significant failings in the mechanisms that could have helped prevent election violence.

## CONTEXTUAL VULNERABILITIES

Contextual vulnerabilities are potential social, political, or economic drivers of election violence that shape the environment in which prevention efforts operate. They offer possible alternative explanations for the presence or absence of violence as well as conditions prevention programming must overcome. Thailand's electoral system has undergone regular changes over the past two decades but broadly speaking, these changes have



created a two-party-dominant system that favors majoritarian governments, which has fueled political polarization and the potential for election violence. In the Thai case, the political structure creates many vulnerabilities:

- **Centralization:** Thailand has a highly centralized political

## PREVENTION MODEL & ELECTION VIOLENCE CODING, THAILAND CASE ANALYSIS

### PREVENTION MODEL & ELECTION VIOLENCE CODING, THAILAND CASE ANALYSIS<sup>2</sup>

	PEV MODEL	SECURITY SECTOR ENGAGEMENT	ELECTION MGMT. & ADMINISTRATION	PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY	PEACE MESSAGING	CIVIC & VOTER EDUCATION	MONITORING & MAPPING	VOTER CONSULTATIONS	YOUTH PROGRAMMING
CODING	.25	.25	.75	.50	0	.25	0	.25	

order in which power and resources are overwhelmingly in the hands of the Bangkok elite. In this respect, power structures mirror horizontal inequalities in Thai society and fuel ethnic grievances against the Thai state.

- **Internal contestation:** Thailand's state elites are characterized by intense contestation between the legislature, the bureaucracy, the police, the Army, the judiciary and senior bureaucrats because elections provide the winners with overwhelming control over state resources. Thailand is thus a remarkably dis-united unitary state.
- **Incomplete consolidation:** Changes of government in Thailand result just as frequently from military coups, judicial outcomes or clandestine elite maneuvers as from election outcomes.
- **Lack of civil society space:** Thailand's media was exceptionally polarized during the 2014 election, promoting a culture of defamation and verbal violence to curtail dissenting voices.

## PREVENTION MODELS

Thailand's February 2014 elections are not readily comparable with previous national polls, given that the election was boycotted, blockaded, never completely carried out, subject to intense legal challenges and controversy throughout, and soon afterwards annulled. The historical comparison shows that whilst the majority of the prevention models were weaker during the February 2014 election, the associated levels of electoral violence were similar to those in 2005.

Only three out of eight PEV models were no weaker during the 2014 election: preventive diplomacy, peace messaging and voter consultation. Preventive diplomacy and voter consultations remained unchanged: the former was unlikely to change given longstanding Thai sensitivities, and the latter has never really existed in Thailand. However, the security sector and the

Election Commission (EC) both played counterproductive roles: the security sector failed to safeguard election procedures due to rivalry between the military and police force; the sector did not operate in a non-partisan manner with clear rules of engagement, contributing to a climate of intimidation and violence. At the same time, the EC was tentative about holding the polls, and kept seeking opportunities and pretexts for postponing. The EC also failed to request security enforcement to prevent election violence at and around polling stations. Finally, it made no effort to change venues to prevent disruption and predicted violence.

In 2014, mechanisms that had worked passably well in previous elections since September 1992 completely failed. This resulted in unprecedented levels of electoral disruption, voter intimidation, and fear, on a scale never seen in any previous Thai elections.

Though it is impossible to prove that stronger PEV models would have curtailed violence further, from a counterfactual perspective proper election management, more systematic monitoring and mapping, and a firm commitment by the security forces to prevent voter intimidation would certainly have increased the chances of a more peaceful polling process.

### ABOUT THE CENTER

Through evaluative research and field experiments, USIP's Center for Applied Research on Conflict (ARC) will continue to facilitate the transition from intuitive programming towards sustained election support grounded on empirical research and rigorously evaluated for impact.

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