

## Exiled Burmese Groups Await New Thai Policy

Contributed by Sai Zom Hseng, The Irrawaddy  
Wednesday, 06 July 2011

### Throwback to Thaksin?

Several Thailand-based rights groups and activists said they are concerned for Burmese migrants and exiled Burmese opposition groups after Yingluck Shinawatra, the sister of former Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra, was elected in a landslide election victory Sunday. However, others expressed optimism that the new Thai administration will act favorably toward Burmese groups in the country.

The Human Rights Development Foundation (HRDF) said it is not yet clear what the policies of the winning Pheu Thai Party, led by Yingluck, would be with regard to the Burma issue. Certainly her brother cooperated with the junta, but on business matters. While in office from 2001 to 2006, he extended the country a Bt4 billion (US\$131.2 million) line of credit that allowed the then-faltering junta to conclude a satellite television business with his family business, Shin Satellite. Under his administration, the government did provide economic assistance to neighboring countries including Laos and Cambodia.

Many observers said Thailand practiced its most liberal immigration policy in recent history. While Thaksin himself enjoyed a good relationship with the former Burmese junta, he is said to have also understood the value of Burmese migrants to the Thai economy. He imposed an amnesty and a registration process for migrants in 2004, allowing some 1.3 million migrants to register.

Speaking to The Irrawaddy on Monday, Andy Hall, a consultant at the HRDF and a foreign expert at Mahidol University in Bangkok, said, "Most of the workers I meet tell me that life under the Abhisit government was quite difficult for them, because [the former ruling Democrats] didn't manage the Thai economy properly, and that impacted negatively on the migrant workers in Thailand and their ability to earn a living and send money to their families in Burma."

"I think neither of the parties has put together a clear, long-term policy on migration that takes into account national security, human security, and economic security," Hall continued. "None of the parties have ever prioritized the protection of migrant workers and the Burmese community in Thailand."

"Under the Democrat government, there was more focus on national security, particularly in relation to the army. Under the Thaksin government, the police were more engaged," he said.

According to Myint Wai, a member of the independent Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma, there will be no major negative change in Thailand's policy toward Burmese migrant workers in the foreseeable future because many were supposedly aligned with the "Redshirt" movement, which is a pro-Thaksin camp.

During the Redshirt demonstrations of March to May 2010, about 90 people were killed and more than 2,000 injured.

The Thailand-based Women's League of Burma (WLB) said it would welcome Yingluck as the first female prime minister of Thailand, but said it is still concerned about the future policies of the new government and what might happen to Burmese groups based in Thailand.

Speaking to The Irrawaddy on Monday, WLB Secretary Tin Tin Nyo said, "Both administrations—the Democrats and the Thaksin government—put pressure on the Burmese groups in Thailand because they preferred to have good relations with the Burmese government. We will have to wait and see how the new policies of Thailand evolve."

About two to four million of Burmese people are currently living in Thailand, according to data from the rights groups.