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Thailand: Political parties must respect human rights following elections

Thai political parties must publicly commit to respect human rights, Amnesty International said today, on the eve of the country's first national elections in more than three years.

Thailand will hold its general election on 3 July, pitting the Pheu Thai Party, led from self-imposed exile by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, against the ruling Democrat Party, backed by the military and some political elites. Thaksin was overthrown in a military coup d'état in September 2006.

"These elections present an opportunity to all sides—not just the eventual winner—to halt the serious erosion in the country's human rights record," said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Thailand researcher.

"Thailand needs to refocus attention on its human rights crises, including the conflict in southern Thailand, the plight of refugees and migrant workers, a precipitous decline in freedom of expression, and a lack of accountability for scores of politically related killings."

Security forces have cracked down on protesters with the unlawful use of lethal force, and have intimidated peaceful dissidents. Some protesters have used lethal force during demonstrations. The authorities have used repressive laws to stifle dissent, including through widespread censorship.

Thailand's political system has been overwhelmed since the eruption of mass political demonstrations against Thaksin in late 2005, and his ousting in 2006.

Even if poll predictions of a Pheu Thai victory hold, it remains uncertain whether they will achieve enough votes to form a government and make Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra Prime Minister.

Huge demonstrations against the government in April and May 2010 ended after at least 92 people were killed, many allegedly by the security forces of the government. Protesters were also allegedly responsible for violent incidents, including several deaths.

"More than a year on, no security forces have been held to account for the deaths on Bangkok's streets," said Benjamin Zawacki. "During the elections this weekend, and in their aftermath, security forces must strictly adhere to international standards in response to any demonstrations, while protesters themselves should not resort to violence."

Amnesty International called on the new government, once in place, to bring the perpetrators of past human rights violations to justice, including those responsible for the protest-related deaths from April-May 2010.