



## **International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) to the Kingdom of Thailand's 2019 General Election**

### **INTERIM REPORT**

#### **IEOM Profile**

ANFREL's International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) to the 2019 Thai General Election is composed of 34 international election observers, which include two electoral analysts (EAs) deployed for 45 days, a first team of 8 observers present for 14 days, and a second team of 24 observers deployed for 10 days.

The IEOM team was able to monitor the election by conducting campaign monitoring, in-depth interviews with key electoral stakeholders, desk review, and visits to a random sample of polling stations. ANFREL observers covered 27 polling centers on Advance Voting Day (March 17), and 492 polling stations across 30 provinces on Election Day (March 24).

This interim report contains an assessment of the pre-election activities, as well as election day operations, from the opening of the polls to the counting, consolidation and publication of results. ANFREL will issue a comprehensive Mission Report a month after the publication of the final election results, which will expand on the information included in this Interim Report and include an assessment of post-election electoral dispute resolution as well as a list of recommendations for electoral stakeholders to consider.

#### **Summary**

The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) congratulates the people of Thailand on the successful and peaceful conduct of the 2019 General Election held on March 24. Through the deployment of international election observers around the country, the mission witnessed a tremendous popular effort and desire to reestablish democratic processes in the country after years of military rule. While the process displays fundamental democratic shortcomings, ANFREL recognizes this election as a first step towards genuine popular representation in governmental affairs. Through this report, ANFREL presents its preliminary assessment of the electoral process, which was crafted with internationally-recognized democratic election norms and principles in mind.

With a voter turnout of just over 65%, it is safe to say that the people still believe in the ballot and the prospect of change it can bring. Therefore, it is imperative that all issues both observers and voters saw emerging from the process be addressed promptly in order to encourage and rebuild trust in the elections.

The voting processes on Election Day ran smoothly, albeit characterized by some variances in the implementation of procedures which did not significantly impact the quality of voter experience or the integrity of the ballot. ANFREL takes issue, however, with the

overly restrictive regulations regarding the validity of the ballot marks, which contributed to the 2.8 million invalid ballots. Furthermore, while there were only minor mistakes to report as the counting process began, the subsequent tabulation and consolidation of ballots were deeply flawed, which led to an announcement of some preliminary results that were wildly inaccurate on election night. The blunders did further damage to the perceived integrity of the general election, and ANFREL invites the ECT to release comprehensive election results as soon as possible in order to foster trust in the general public's eye.

ANFREL saw a campaign environment which is heavily tilted to benefit the incumbent military junta and the candidates that it supports. Furthermore, an analysis of the legal framework revealed a plethora of legal provisions that are detrimental to the performance of the duties of the media, civil society and voters, prompting these actors to minimize or ultimately self-censor criticism against the military junta. Furthermore, the near absolute powers granted by the 2015 Interim Constitution's Article 44 to the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) remained in place throughout the electoral process, and loomed above the head of the current regime's critics.

The advance voting process on March 17 revealed strong voter enthusiasm, to the point that long queues sometimes discouraged voters from participating. As an indication of the level of preparedness of the ECT for the ballot, polling was generally transparent and orderly, but observers deployed in several provinces encountered issues in the uniformity of the implementation of electoral procedures.

The campaign period was dominated by vibrant interactions among the various parties and stakeholders. The media performed well by providing the public with comprehensive information regarding the political parties and their campaign platform. Voters seemed to possess sufficient information to arrive at well-informed votes. The 2019 General Election also saw a process which proved to be generally conducive to the participation of women and youth.

The ECT could have improved the quality of the process by doing more to disseminate information on the polling procedures, which could have alleviated much of the public's doubts regarding the process. The lack of transparency and cooperation between the ECT and other electoral stakeholders severely limited the outflow of information, thereby fueling further distrust in the process and the institution itself.

The mission saw eager participation from Thai election monitoring organizations despite their facing the dual challenges of working under the harsh military-controlled environment of recent years and shortages of time and resources for training and planning. Regardless, these election monitoring organizations still managed to deploy observers in a number of polling stations all over the country. However, both international and domestic observers faced at times limitations in getting access to the entire electoral process, with polling stations or tabulation centers requiring additional approval from the district authorities before observers could enter the premises.

## **Election Day**

On March 24, ANFREL observers deployed across Thailand were able to witness a rather transparent and trustworthy polling process which gave voters the opportunity to cast their ballot in a free manner. Polling stations were found to be peaceful, orderly, and generally well-managed, which is a considerable achievement given the large number of polling stations and the short time period that election officials had for preparations.

Nevertheless, reports from some polling stations highlighted uneven implementation of rules and procedures, the result of perfunctory training of polling staff or their misunderstanding of the guidelines they were to follow. In a few isolated instances, polling staff did not prevent unauthorized persons in the polling area or voters discussing while casting ballots, either of which may have compromised the secrecy of the process.

Other shortcomings reported include insufficient checking of voter ID cards, or inappropriate locations for polling stations. One, for instance, was installed at the entrance of a government-sponsored “Thong Fah Pracharat” shop, which sells subsidised goods to low-income earners and bears a resemblance to the name of a pro-establishment political party. However, the fact that such mishaps were few among the over 500 polling stations visited by ANFREL observers indicates the consistent quality of the voting process that took place on Sunday.

Throughout the day, there were few agents of political parties and even fewer domestic observers to be found at polling stations. Cumbersome procedures for the presence of party agents required them to obtain approval from the ECT well in advance. An easier process for the approval of party agents and observers could have increased their presence, which in turn would have enhanced the transparency and fostered trust in the exercise. Civil society organizations need to invest in developing an engaged critical mass of observers to effectively oversee electoral and political processes in the future.

While the accreditation card provided by the ECT was enough to gain access to most polling stations, members of the ANFREL mission were asked in others to provide clearance from district authorities or remain outside the premises, which in a few cases hindered our ability to observe. Most worrisome is the fact that one ANFREL observer was asked by a police officer to hand over the information she had written down, a fundamental breach of the rights of election observers that was, fortunately, an isolated incident.

Reports from our observers showed that, overall, the closing and counting process was conducted diligently, transparently, and in accordance with the rules enacted by the ECT. However, the ECT procedures laid out for determining the validity of a ballot were problematic as they allow voters to choose from amongst 16 acceptable variations of a cross to mark their ballot, but charts showing examples of the proper marks that are allowed were usually not publicly displayed during voting hours. Additionally, these examples do not cover every scenario, allowing a discretionary space for polling officials to declare a ballot paper invalid, even in cases when the intention of the voter was clear.

These counting rules and their uneven implementation may have allowed a number of otherwise legitimate ballots to be included in the two million eight hundred thousand invalid

ballots cast on Sunday. While this number is lower than in the 2011 general election, invalid ballots still amount to a significant 5.6% of the total voter turnout. The ECT would do well to review ballots that were initially deemed invalid, especially in constituencies where the percentage of invalid ballots is greater than the winning margin.

While ANFREL acknowledges the integrity of the counting process in most of the polling stations where its observers were present, it has serious concerns over the transparency of the vote tabulation and consolidation operations, to which no observers, party agents, or media had access. The counting of over 2 million advance ballots and the presentation of their breakdown were also not publicized enough according to our findings. Without the access required to fully scrutinize the process, from the moment the first ballot is cast until results are made official, observers cannot produce a definitive statement on the trustworthiness of an electoral result as a whole.

Election management bodies have to ensure that election results are not only accurate but also the result of a trustworthy process that is accepted by the public. The latter represents a considerable challenge given the low level of trust many Thais have displayed towards the ECT. The debacle that was the preliminary announcement of results on the evening of March 24th strengthened suspicions of the public about the credibility of the election outcome, warranting urgent mitigation measures from the ECT.

## **Advance Voting**

Thailand implements advance voting mechanisms to provide all citizens with an opportunity to cast their ballots, and therefore to comply with their compulsory voting requirement. Registration took place online and in civic registration centers from January 28 to February 19, with a total of 2,752,119 voters signing up for advance voting, a remarkably large number given that there was little publicity for the process and that the registration window ended more than a month before Election Day itself.

From March 4th to March 16th, overseas voters were the first ones able to exercise their franchise, in 94 Thai embassies or consulates around the world. Out of 119,232 registered overseas voters, 84.7 percent cast ballots, despite facing an array of problems in many polling stations<sup>1</sup>. Voters encountered instances of long queues, incorrect candidate information, and postal ballots being delivered late or at a wrong address, all of which indicate an insufficient level of preparation from the Election Commission and diplomatic missions tasked with carrying out the ballot.

Another issue that arose from overseas advance voting was the delay of about 1,500 ballots coming from voters in New Zealand, which were not delivered to their respective polling stations by the deadline of 5 PM on March 24, and therefore deemed invalid upon arrival. This development came as a disappointment for many voters that went through all the necessary steps to vote, only to be disenfranchised because of the lack of planning from election management bodies. It is the duty of the ECT and its partners to ensure that every

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<sup>1</sup> <https://prachatai.com/english/node/7974>

Thai citizen has access to the fundamental right of expressing its choice through the ballot box.

Advance Voting Day was held on Sunday, March 17, and marked the start of the General Election in Thailand, with over 2.2 million Thais marching out to vote in what amounted to an 87 percent turnout among those registered. Although advance voting usually displays higher turnout rates than Election Day, in part because those registering to vote early are more educated on electoral matters than the general population, this was a remarkable display of the voters' intent to take part in the country's first electoral process in years.

ANFREL observers reported that Advance Voting Day was peaceful and orderly, with a voting process generally organized and transparent, and no major incidents of violence or electoral violations reported. However, queues rapidly formed in many of the Kingdom's 385 polling centers open for the occasion. Despite the deployment of large numbers of polling staff to assist voters, the widespread overcrowding of polling stations led to hours of waiting for many voters, and in some cases to people having to leave without being able to vote. This tumult could likely have been avoided if advance voting took place over two days like in past elections, instead of a single one this year. Therefore, we recommend that the election commission considers extending the time frame for casting advance votes in the next general election.

Instances of mismanagement nevertheless punctuated the day, with inconsistencies in the application of rules by polling staff, and complaints of inadequate education and information efforts from both voters and political parties. The most noteworthy issue was that, in several polling stations, voters were given the wrong ballot paper, a blunder acknowledged by the ECT that would effectively mean their vote would be discarded. There were also cases of voters whose names were not found on the list because the online registration process for advance voting was either faulty or too complicated.

Overall, advance voting mechanisms provided voters, media, and observers with a clear picture of the level of preparedness of ECT. Although the conduct of the polling process on March 17 went rather well, there were many indicators of low voter education and perfunctory training of polling staff, both of which were to be displayed on a much larger scale on March 24 with the bigger polling exercise that is Election Day. The ECT and other government bodies were unable to foster public trust in the electoral process, in particular with regard to the transportation and storage of advance ballots which raised many questions. Therefore, we invite election officials to be more forthcoming in the future about the process and safeguards they implement.

## **Legal Framework**

The legal framework for the 2019 General Election contains a variety of undemocratic provisions which tilt the electoral playing field, provide the unelected National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) with extraordinary powers which continue up to, and in some areas beyond, the formation of a new government, and impose restrictions on the fundamental freedoms of expression and assembly. Beginning with the non-inclusive

makeup of the Constitutional Drafting Committee and the deeply flawed 2016 Constitutional Referendum, the legal framework for elections has shown significant procedural and substantive shortcomings. Too many articles of the Constitution and election laws are designed to move Thailand towards a form of guided democracy rather than a fully-fledged democracy.

In the run-up to the election, the Constitution's empowering of 250 appointed Senators with a great deal of legislative and oversight powers was often cited as one of the most undemocratic aspects of the legal framework. Many of the stakeholders interviewed by ANFREL expressed misgivings about the fairness of the opaque and non-inclusive Senate appointment process and the role that the Senate will play after the election, in particular their five-year inclusion in the vote for the next Prime Minister. ANFREL hopes that the future Senators will respect the fundamental right of Thai voters to select their leaders, as expressed on March 24th.

Additionally, Thailand's legal framework does not do enough to include all of the country's citizens in the electoral process. Among those still unable to participate in the voting process are all members of the Buddhist Clergy, and detainees, including those awaiting trial or convicted of minor crimes, as well as a sizeable number of stateless persons born in Thailand. While ANFREL certainly respects the cultural and religious traditions of Thailand, there are several examples in the region of countries which do more to include clergy and those who are detained. Going forward, ANFREL hopes that Thai leaders will do more to protect and defend the rights of these deserving potential voters. In addition to being consistent with the international commitments Thailand has made, such reforms would promote the principle of universal suffrage and would be an indicator of Thailand's becoming a more inclusive and mature democracy.

## **Campaign Environment**

Campaigning strategies adopted by political parties and candidates predominantly used traditional methods such as house-to-house visits, posters, motorcades with loudspeakers, and public rallies. The campaign environment also provided opportunities for public discussions among political parties, candidates and other electoral stakeholders, which were previously impossible for five years under the imposed ban on political activities. Many political parties and candidates also campaigned extensively on various social media platforms in order to reach out to the masses. In rural areas, exposure to the electoral campaign was often limited to TV and community radio stations, thus limiting the potential spectrum of information provided to voters.

The campaign environment in the provinces observed by ANFREL's international observers was seemingly peaceful and free of any major violent activities and electoral violations. The relatively peaceful nature of the campaign environment is nonetheless perceived by various stakeholders interviewed as a reflection of the stringent electoral regulations imposed by the Election Commission of Thailand; and political parties and candidates' effort to strictly avoid any possible violations in order to safeguard themselves and their party from severe penalties. In addition, fear of retaliation and backlash by

authorities and powerful political groups prevented voters from lodging or commenting about possible electoral misconduct.

A frequent and commonly raised issue by stakeholders was the prevalence of an unlevel playing field for political parties and candidates. Several voters and stakeholders interviewed opined the campaign process 'unfair'. Often than not, pro-junta parties are accused of receiving more leverage and leniency from the government and electoral authorities, one of which also nominated the current PM as their prime-ministerial candidate in the 2019 general election. While the ban on political activities and campaigning was lifted almost four months prior to the March 24 general election, the government's populist policies and extensive field visits across the country conducted by the PM and government officials much ahead of December 2018 is seen as vote canvassing by many voters and stakeholders.

While ANFREL appreciates the generally peaceful campaign environment, there were multiple instances reported in the media and by political parties where the actions of security officers seemed both partisan and intended to intimidate rather than focused on actual security. Candidates from both Pheu Thai and the Democrat Parties reported that security officers searched their homes on March 21st without a warrant or probable cause. Without a proper reason for doing so, these actions not only needlessly frighten the candidate and their family, they damage the reputation of the security forces, weaken the perceived integrity of the election process, and are incompatible with a free campaign environment.

Furthermore, some voters expressed skepticism about the existence of a conducive electoral environment that is truly free and fair due to the legal provisions that kept sweeping powers in the hands of the government during the campaign and immediate post-election period. For example, some of the legal provisions that have gathered wide public scrutiny and criticism, and also feared to be misused against anti-junta political parties and candidates are the infamous Article 44 of the 2014 Interim Constitution; NCPO's announcements and orders that severely curtail freedom of expression; the recently amended Computer Crime Act; the powers of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC); and the extension of electoral regulations on social media campaigning.

### **Vote Buying and Abuse of Government Resources**

Allegations concerning vote buying were widespread during the campaign period and increased before Election Day. ANFREL observers have collected reports of this type of malpractice in both cities and rural areas across every region in the country. While some of these reports are likely apocryphal, it seems likely that many are true. While more efforts to reduce vote buying would increase integrity of, and public confidence in, the polls, it is also true that Thai voters are more sophisticated than in the past and some of those interviewed expressed that those taking money would still be able to vote for whichever party they preferred.

The abuse of government resources in the form of an intertwining of a government welfare program and the political campaign was both broad and deep. In particular, the

Pracharat welfare scheme, named very similarly to the Palang Pracharat Party running to continue military aligned rule, was a serious misuse of government resources both because of its shared name which unduly benefits one party but also because the benefits continued throughout the campaign period, with additional money approved for the program in the final week of campaigning. The national budget is money that belongs to all of the Thai people and must not be used to advantage a particular political party, as was so clearly evident in this case.

## **Electoral Administration**

### ***Voter Registration and the Voter List***

Voter registration and the management of the voter list remains generally efficient and is one of the stronger areas of Thailand's election system. ANFREL believes that the automatic addition to the voter list of eligible citizens turning 18 creates an inclusive environment with one less obstacle preventing the participation of all citizens. While there is always room for improvement in such systems, printouts of voter lists were posted at every Polling Station ANFREL observed, systems for a voter to lookup their Polling Station information online were generally effective, and ANFREL was happy to observe very few instances of voters being turned away or unable to vote after arriving at their Polling Station.

### ***Electoral Dispute Resolution***

The Constitution and the Organic Act on the Election Commission passed in 2017 provide the Election Commission of Thailand with a broad mandate to “control and supervise” the election, including the power to conduct fact-finding investigations, suspend candidates from running for office for not more than one year, order re-elections, and make recommendations, including for the dissolution of parties, when referring cases to the Constitutional Court of Thailand.<sup>2</sup>

The most significant such case before the Commission was that of the Thai Raksa Chart Party, which had a prime ministerial candidate disqualified by the Election Commission just one working day after its announcement and party dissolution recommended in a referral to the Constitutional Court only two days after that. The legal basis for the decision and the speed with which it was made drew accusations from some analysts about the unequal treatment of parties.

On a less newsworthy but no less important point, several stakeholders stated that the mechanisms implemented by the ECT for addressing reported instances of electoral fraud and other complaints have not been made clear to them yet. In addition to at times inadequate information about how to file complaints, transparency about the number and progress of cases filed has not been made readily available. ANFREL observers also heard

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<sup>2</sup> Sections 224-226 of the 2017 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand and Section 132 of the 2017 Organic Act on the Election Commission

complaints about a perceived double standard when it comes to the decision making of the ECT regarding both their prioritization of certain cases and the way those cases are decided.

Impartial dispute resolution mechanisms are essential to bolster public trust in the electoral process. Some electoral stakeholders expressed a loss of confidence in existing procedures of dispute resolution because of a perceived lack of transparency in deliberations and decision making processes. This was true before the Election and the issues with vote counting and ballot consolidation on evening of the Election will only further this belief unless the Election Commission takes a more pro-actively open and transparent course of action. To ensure justice to the people of Thailand, we encourage the ECT to conduct its electoral dispute resolution activities without undue delay and in a transparent and fair manner.

### ***Transparency Measures***

Transparency and engagement with political parties and civil society are two key ways that any Election Commission can build integrity and public trust in the electoral process. Unfortunately, the majority of those interviewed by ANFREL, whether from political parties, civil society, or the public at large, felt that the Election Commission often avoided transparency whenever possible and was hesitant to engage with other election stakeholders.

In a variety of ways, from the transfer and consolidation of both Advance Voting ballots and those from March 24th, to the Election Commission's failure to clarify its regulations or give access to data, the Election Commission missed an opportunity to embrace transparency in a way that could have made a real difference in winning the public's trust in the process.

Providing more information and data to the public is another area where the Election Commission could have done much more to design transparency into the process. Open Data embraces giving the public access to its data in a way that is machine readable and easy to access and analyse. Even more traditional forms of transparency with data such as the posting of a results sheet at every polling station and at the constituency level would help assuage some of the concerns which cropped up almost immediately after polls closed on the 24th. The Election Commission should also provide more granular results, including voting results from each polling station, as soon as possible so that the public and observer groups can check such figures against their own data from watching the counting and recording the results.

### **Voter Awareness and Voter Education**

Interviews conducted by ANFREL observers revealed that voters generally possessed sufficient information to arrive at a well-informed choice when casting their ballot. However, some observers reported that the voters, aside from expressing excitement at the prospect of being able to vote again, relayed their distrust caused by the minimal information they received regarding the electoral process. Unfortunately, the ECT did not make its rules and

procedures publicly available ahead of time, thus fueling the existing distrust of voters in the election as a whole. Furthermore, civil society organizations and media also displayed poor awareness of the process, and thus were not able to alleviate the situation. The lack of coordination between the civil society, media, and the ECT, especially with regard to the release of voting procedures, primarily caused this poor flow of information.

Voter education initiatives, which are essential in acquiring an understanding of the electoral process among voters, were limited. The ECT and various organizations conducted social media campaigns and distributed materials such as pamphlets and booklets containing information on the voting procedures and candidates, but did so over a short timespan prior to the elections. Reports from our observers also indicate that some of these materials contained errors on candidate information, and were mostly limited to urban areas. To augment these efforts, universities, in partnership with domestic observer groups such as WeWatch and PNet, have initiated voter education programs, with the hope of bringing about awareness of the importance of the electoral process to students and first time voters.

The ECT released a well-designed mobile application entitled “Smart Vote” that compiled a lot of information useful to voters, including the location of their polling station and the candidates in their area. However, some of the information provided, such as that on voting or counting procedures for instance, was rather generic. Providing more detail could have prevented spoilt ballots or confusion at the polling booth. The app was downloaded over 100,000 times on the Google Play Store, which is encouraging but at the same time insufficient to ensure the widespread dissemination of information to the general public. It is also regrettable that this information was not prominently displayed on the ECT’s website.

In Bangkok and other urban areas, voters were able to access information regarding candidates and parties through both traditional and social media, while rural residents tended to utilize traditional media more. Door-to-door campaigns, distribution of pamphlets, and rallies organized by the political parties were the most direct source of information on the campaign platforms of parties, and the main means of direct interactions between candidates and voters. Most voters expressed that the debates, as well as the comprehensive interviews held by television media such as the Standard, Voice TV, or Thai PBS, helped to guide them in making their choice.

### **Women’s participation**

According to the voter registration data, women comprise 51% of the eligible voters in Thailand. Women voters interviewed by our observers reportedly have not experienced any form of discrimination. ANFREL is still seeking data regarding the number of women candidates for the 2019 elections, but preliminary interviews among political party leaders indicate that most parties have taken a conscious decision to field more women candidates.

ANFREL, however, received information regarding a leader from a dominant religion asking the followers of his group during a service to support men candidates as they are “better suited for leadership roles”. While this is an isolated case, the attitude of Thai voters regarding women in politics has always been lukewarm as exemplified in the Thai

Parliament of 2011, where only 5% of women were appointed to the body, and oftentimes, they were appointed as a replacement to their male counterparts.

## **Youth Participation**

ANFREL is pleased that the youth of Thailand have taken an active role in the 2019 Elections. Comprising 16.1% of the voting population, youth are in a strategic position to contribute to the democratic development of Thailand even after the elections. Undeniably, young people have been very effective in directing the course of the elections, participating in the process as election observers, political party members, civil society and media. This is much more incredible given that, for the past 7+ years, the sector has had very little direct experience participating in any political process in Thailand. The new youth-centric election observation group, WeWatch, emerged to be among the most effective and consequential groups in the country, deploying around 2,600 observers nationwide. Through the 2019 Election, the young people of Thailand have built a strong foundation and platform for civic engagement. ANFREL hopes that their momentum and engagement with the process continues after the election.

## **Media and Freedom of Expression**

Freedom of expression for individuals and media freedom leading up to the 2019 Thai general election is perhaps more controlled and restricted than during the 2011 general election. Political developments in the last five years that significantly polarized the political landscape of the country further shrunken the space to express freely. A widespread notion among the general population was observed regarding NCPO announcements (no. 97/2014 and no. 103/2014) and orders (no. 41/2016 and 3/2015) as well as existing legal provisions such as the recently amended Computer Crime Act, 2007; and sedition (under Section 116) and defamation (under Section 326) in Thai Criminal Code as tools used to intimidate and suppress critical views against the government vis-a-vis military<sup>3</sup>. The Cyber Security Act, 2019 was passed despite wide public criticism over its far reaching powers to oversight individuals' online activities. The ECT's strict guidelines<sup>4</sup> on political campaigning that emphasised on social media activities of political and candidates are reported to be viewed as targeting political parties that received wide attention by voters active on social media platforms.

While media remained visibly active throughout the electoral process, normalization of self-censorship in Thai society was constantly put forth by representatives of media and civil society groups interviewed by our observers. Self-censorship during the period leading to 2019 election was widely perceived by stakeholders interviewed as part and the continuation of fears instilled years ahead of the 2019 election. With the restrictions faced by both media sector and individuals regarding space for various political views and independent opinions

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<sup>3</sup> <https://cpj.org/2017/08/thai-columnist-pravit-rojanaphruk-charged-with-two.php>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/26/thailands-military-junta-cracks-down-on-social-media-ahead-of-election>

particularly in mainstream media, ANFREL wishes to highlight the concern of limited public's accessibility to critical and varied information.

### **CSOs and INGOs**

For a supposedly competitive process, the number of domestic observers were not enough to cover even 10% of polling stations, which indicates that the environment created by years-long of military rule has considerably weakened the sector. The two most recognized domestic election observers are the Open Forum for Democracy Foundation (PNET) and WeWatch. Both organizations deployed monitors in the field to assess the situation in the localities, as well as record and track violations, threats and violence. WeWatch deployed around 2,600 observers all over the country, while PNET deployed at least 600 observers nationwide.

There were also other organizations which did not deploy observers, but conducted other meaningful activities such as information dissemination and doing election related research. iLaw, for instance utilized social media and their website to publish infographics and articles regarding the electoral environment, as well as distribution of booklets containing important information about the election.

Allegedly, various organizations received some funding from the ECT to support the dissemination of election related information and perform other activities to assist the ECT's operation. However, none of those interviewed were familiar with the nature of their engagements and the amount each organization received.

While there were no recorded instances of crackdown on independent organizations during the pre-election period, most of them complained that the extremely polarized political environment and the plethora of existing legal provisions against defamation have forced them to censor some of their statements.

Regarding foreign organizations seeking access to the elections, only ANFREL, a signatory to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, was formally accredited to launch an election observation mission.