

# New Voices on the Khon Kaen Ballot

KHON KAEN—Thailand's highly anticipated general election is set to go forward tomorrow, despite the uncertainty that has shrouded the February 2 snap election from the start. In Khon Kaen, this uncertainty has led to a quieter campaign season than normal, and it has also opened up new spaces for smaller political parties in the race.

It was not until earlier this week that Prime Minister Yingluck officially ruled out postponing the February 2 date, and lingering questions remain about how results will be tallied with 28 constituencies still lacking registered candidates, and thousands of people having been blocked from casting their advanced ballots last week.

As a result, Jukkarin Patdamrongjit, one of Khon Kaen's incumbent Pheu Thai candidates, is running a very different campaign than he did in 2011. His posters are smaller, he has fewer canvassers, and his leaflets don't include any points about policy. Mr. Jukkarin stressed that this year's campaign is solely about the act of voting.

"For this election, the Pheu Thai Party's only goal is to get past February 2," said Mr. Jukkarin. "Then we will be able to see how many people voted. It doesn't matter who they vote for, because simply voting means they disagree with Suthep."

Pheu Thai's landslide victory in the last general election and the party's solid support base across the Isaan region make Mr. Jukkarin almost certain to be reelected.

Yet, that doesn't mean other MP candidates in Khon Kaen aren't out on the campaign trail too. In fact, several new parties are using this election to build name recognition and position themselves for success should the country's unpredictable political turmoil play out in their favor later on.

The Cooperative Power Party (Palang Sahakorn) is fielding three candidates in Khon Kaen, and it is running on the promise to provide farmers with more financial support and protection through an expansion of Thailand's cooperative system.

Suparerk Putposri, the Cooperative Power candidate running in Khon Kaen's zone 2, said he does not expect to win this election, but suspects that the country's unstable political climate might open up an opportunity for him soon.

"I think it is likely we will have another election in the next 6 months," said Mr. Suparerk. "Or, if the Pheu Thai party runs into legal problems and the candidate is stopped from getting the seat, I might be the next candidate in line."

The two-year-old New Democracy Party, which consists primarily of teachers and is focused on empowering the rural poor, is also preparing for the

potential decline of Pheu Thai.

New Democracy MP candidate Surachai Hanchin said he suspects that Pheu Thai's stronghold in the Northeast will begin to weaken soon, and hopes that his party will be able to fill the vacuum.

"Somebody needs to be there for the rural people," said Mr. Surachai. "We will be the smaller political party that they can access."

Another small party fielding candidates in Khon Kaen is hoping that its neutrality in the country's political conflict will help rally support.

"We understand this crisis," said Pooncharas Thatdi, the People's Monthly Party candidate for Khon Kaen's zone 1. "We are the neutral party that people can rely on. We will not take sides."

Only a year in the making, the People's Monthly Party is founded on implementing a system in which children receive a 15,000 baht deposit in their bank account every month starting on the day they are born.

Other parties fielding three or more candidates in Khon Kaen include Chart Pattana, Bhumjaithai, and the People's Voice Party. In total, of 12 of the country's 53 political parties have MP candidates running in Khon Kaen Province, though only Pheu Thai has a candidate running in each of the province's ten constituencies.

There will be 2,671 voting units set up in Khon Kaen Province tomorrow, and the local Election Commissioner, Thitipol Thosarod, said he expects the election to be orderly.