

Thailand election to be held amid deepening political crisis

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Thailand's general election, slated for May 14, is being held out under conditions of popular disaffection as well as the growing danger of a United States-instigated war with China. Regardless of which party forms the next government, it will be unable to address these and other serious issues facing the working masses.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha is deeply unpopular. The leader of a military coup in 2014, his government has overseen worsening conditions for the multi-million working class, attacks on democratic rights and a refusal to carry out any serious measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Mass protests erupted against the Prayut government in 2020 and 2021.

Prayut's unpopularity led to a split in the ruling circles that are particularly close to the military and the monarchy. Prayut left the ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) at the end of 2022 to join the United Thai Nation Party (UTN). The PPRP chose to back retired general, Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwon as its candidate to form a new government. Prawit also played a leading role in the 2014 coup.

Reflecting these divisions, Prayut's eligibility to remain prime minister was brought before the Constitutional Court last September after he reached his eight-year term limit. The court ruled, however, that Prayut's term did not begin in 2014 but in 2017 when a new constitution was promulgated, allowing Prayut to stay in office potentially until 2025.

A recent poll, conducted by Suan Dusit University in Bangkok, indicated an overall dearth of support for the two military-backed parties, with only 7.49 percent of people expressing approval for the PPRP and 8.48 percent for UTN.

By contrast, support for the main opposition Pheu

Thai Party (PTP) reached 41.37 percent, with more than 60 percent support for the opposition bloc as a whole. The PTP, representing major sections of the Thai bourgeoisie, is backed by the wealthy Shinawatra family. It is the successor of the Thai Rak Thai Party, founded by Thaksin Shinawatra, who served as prime minister from 2001 to 2006, when he was ousted in a coup. His sister, Yingluck, served as prime minister from 2011 to 2014 before similarly being overthrown in a military coup.

Thaksin's daughter, Paethongtarn, is the PTP's lead candidate for prime minister. The PTP claims it will not form a coalition with any of the military-backed conservative parties and hopes to win 310 of the 500 available seats available in the bicameral National Assembly's lower body, the House of Representatives.

The PTP is backed by the Move Forward Party (MFP), led by another wealthy businessman, Pita Limjaroenrat. The MFP postures as a "progressive" party that at times makes vaguely anti-capitalist statements in order to win support from left-leaning youth and workers. Its goal, however, is to block a genuine movement against the Thai ruling class by falsely holding up Pheu Thai as an alternative to the military-backed conservatives. In March, Pita stated: "The MFP is ready to work with any [prime minister] candidate from Pheu Thai."

The PTP and its supporters will likely need to win at least 376 seats in order to form a government. The National Assembly's Senate is comprised of 250 seats, all of whose members are appointed by the Thai military. Both houses will vote on a new government, giving a strong edge to the military-backed parties of Prayut and Prawit. This shows the dictatorial measures in place to ensure the ruling elite's preferred candidate is chosen. Other state bodies controlled or influenced

by the military could change the outcome of the election. They include the administrative court, the constitutional court and the Election Commission.

There is no guarantee another coup will not take place. Speaking in March in an interview with political activist Patsaravalee Tanakitvibulpon, Prawit stated: “There will be no more coups if the country is united and there are no conflicts that lead to casualties, but if the country is in turmoil, it [a coup] may be necessary.”

The entire process is thoroughly anti-democratic. Favouring the dominance of larger parties such as Pheu Thai and the military-backed ones, a change in the constitution last year decreased the number of party-list seats from 150 to 100, and they are to be filled by a separate ballot. The total list-seat votes will be divided by 100 and awarded proportionally. Only Pheu Thai and UTN have submitted a full party list of 100 candidates.

Another factor is the setting of election day on May 14, which is national examination day for students. This was undoubtedly decided in an effort to discourage young people from voting, many of whom would choose oppositional parties.

The last general election held in 2019 involved heavy interference from the military. Of the 350 contested constituency seats, Pheu Thai still won 137, with the PPRP winning 97. There were large discrepancies as opinion polls showed 45 percent in favour of Pheu Thai at the time, and 7 percent for the PPRP. There were widespread reports on social media of the military buying votes and other fraudulent activities.

Looming over the election is the growing danger of a US-instigated war with China, which none of the parties has acknowledged. On April 24, the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier strike group docked at Thailand’s Laem Chabang Port, near the capital Bangkok. The four-day visit by the USS Nimitz, one of the largest warships from the most powerful military in the world, underscores the pressure the United States is exerting on the Thai elections.

In the event of war, Washington would use Thailand as a base of operations for launching attacks and bombing runs on China, as it did throughout Indochina during the Vietnam War. The US is demanding that the next Thai government distance itself from Beijing. Bangkok is economically reliant on China and has attempted to balance between Beijing and Washington.

The USS Nimitz was involved in war games alongside Japan and South Korea before its arrival in Thailand. The strike group’s port visit was officially conducted to “strengthen the US-Thai security partnership” and “celebrate the 190th anniversary of US-Thai diplomatic relations.” For all Washington’s talk about defending democracy, the US is sending a clear message to both Bangkok and Beijing that it will use its military if necessary to ensure its interests are met.

Were China to conduct such exercises and dock an aircraft carrier in the port of any country on the eve of an election, one can only imagine the bellicose denunciations of Chinese coercion and authoritarianism that would ensue in the international press. But this is presented as “business as usual” for the US, regardless of its mounting confrontation with China.



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