

Coup prospects overshadow Thailand elections

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Amid widespread social discontent, Thailand is holding a general election this Sunday. Whatever the outcome, none of the parties taking part in the contest has any progressive solutions to the crisis facing the country's working class and youth. All of the parties represent the interests of rival factions of the country's ruling class.

The opposition bloc headed by the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) is expected to make a strong showing. According to Thai newspaper *Matichon*, the PTP is expected to win as many as 200 seats while its ally, the Move Forward Party (MFP), could take up to 70. While this would give the bloc a slender majority in the 500-seat lower house in the National Assembly, this is not enough to form a government.

The election is heavily rigged in favour of the military junta, which seized power in a coup in 2014, led by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. A party must win support from a majority of the entire National Assembly, which includes 250 seats in the upper house, which are appointed by the military.

The leading parties tied to the armed forces—the outgoing ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) and the United Thai Nation Party (UTN)—are expected to win about 50 seats each. The PPRP has put forward Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwon as its candidate for prime minister while UTN is backing Prayut, who left the PPRP at the end of 2022.

The military also has control of critical state bodies, including the supposedly independent Election Commission, which has not shied away from vote rigging in the past, including during the last general election in 2019.

In fact, with early voting taking place on May 7, reports are already emerging of irregularities with ballots, including missing names or incomplete

candidate lists. After the early voting, the hashtag “Why do we have an election commission?” trended on social media.

Many voters are turning to the PTP and MFP in the hope of reducing the power and influence of the military in Thai politics. There is widespread hostility towards the Prayut regime for its inaction on the COVID-19 pandemic and sharp growth in social inequality.

However, the opposition PTP, led by prime ministerial candidate Paetongtarn Shinawatra, offers no alternative for working people. She has ruled out joining hands with the ruling PPRP specifically, but this does not mean Pheu Thai will not cobble together an alliance with other sections of the conservative bloc. Speaking on Monday, Paetongtarn stated, “We are joining hands with the democratic side as the first option, but we will have to debate about party policies.”

In other words, so long as a party is not openly in favour of military rule and influence, the PTP views them as an acceptable partner, regardless of their political stances. A “debate” on policy, in real terms, means the abandonment of even the PTP's meagre election pledges, such as the doubling of the daily minimum wage to 600 baht (\$US17.85) by 2027 should it come to power.

However, the critical question for the Thai ruling class is not so much the matter of transitioning leadership to Pheu Thai, which does not represent a threat to capitalism, the military, or the monarchy, but its capacity to contain the growing struggles of workers and youth, amongst whom there is immense opposition to the military regime, not only for its flagrant attacks on democratic rights, but on its handling of the economy.

Thailand's economic growth has recently been the slowest in Southeast Asia increasing only 2.6 percent in 2022 and 1.5 percent in 2021. Inflation hit a 24-year high last year of 6.08 percent, driven by increased costs in fuel prices, which increased the cost of transportation and logistics. According to the National Statistical Office, average monthly expenses were 18,145 baht (\$US540) in the fourth quarter of 2022, and 40 percent of Thais earned less than 17,000 baht.

Household debt is also outstripping income growth. The University of Thai Chamber of Commerce provided a snapshot of this crisis with a debt survey of labourers who earn less than the average wage of 15,000 baht a month.

It found that 99.1 percent of those surveyed were in debt, and 77.2 percent were not able to cover their daily expenses. Only 4.3 percent of those in debt could afford to repay their debt in full, 26.7 percent had to rely on partial payments, and only 68.8 percent could barely scrape up the minimum monthly payments.

Of those surveyed, 73.5 percent reported zero savings, which corresponds to Bank of Thailand estimates that 88.2 percent of deposit holders possessed an average deposit of just over 4,000 baht (\$US119), or the equivalent of a car service.

These conditions, coupled with attacks on democratic rights, led to mass student-led protests in 2020 and 2021, with demonstrators demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut and his cabinet, the reform of the monarchy, and the re-writing of Thailand's anti-democratic constitution drawn up by the junta.

If the ruling class fears that the PTP and MFP cannot contain the resurging growth in opposition, it may once again resort to a military coup—that is, a government directly, rather than indirectly, controlled by the armed forces.

Speaking in March, Deputy Prime Minister 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 *Thai Enquirer* on May 5 reported "numerous sources" within the pro-military coalition as well as Pheu Thai and Move Forward disclosing that Thailand's political establishment, including the courts, is building a case to dissolve the opposition parties. Sources in the PPRP and UTN have disclosed that

plans are being made to bribe PTP and MFP members to join these parties tied to the military in the event the dissolutions take place.

The PTP has called for a "people's constitution" and a law against coups, backed by the MFP as a way to "prevent dictatorship." This undoubtedly resonates with broad sections of workers and youth.

A law against coups is not going to stop coups taking place. The obvious contradiction is that if a coup is successful—as has happened 13 times in Thailand since 1932—the junta will make laws as it sees fit.

The only way forward for the democratic movement lies not in the Thai elections, which act to diffuse the struggles of workers and youth down harmless channels, but in turning to the struggles of the working class throughout Thailand and more broadly with an international socialist program.



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