

Thailand's military-backed parties suffer losses in general election

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The opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) emerged as the largest party in the lower house of parliament after Thailand's general election on Sunday. The party took 113 constituency seats and 39 party-list seats, up from its total of 81 in the 2019 election. Voters selected individual candidates while casting separate ballots for party-list seats, with the latter awarded on a proportional basis.

The other main opposition party, Pheu Thai Party (PTP), won 112 constituency and 29 party-list seats, up marginally from a total of 136 seats in 2019. While the two opposition parties now command a clear majority in the 500-seat lower house, it is far from certain that MFP leader Pita Limjaroenrat will be installed as the next prime minister.

Under the constitution drawn up by the military, the prime minister is chosen in a joint sitting of the upper and lower houses—the upper house of 250 seats being appointed the military. On Monday, Pita announced a planned coalition with Pheu Thai and four smaller parties—Thai Sang Thai, Prachachart, Seri Ruam Thai, and the Fair Party—with a total of 309 seats. This is still well short of the 376 seats needed for a majority in the joint sitting.

The election results demonstrate the widespread hostility to the military, which seized power in a coup in 2014 and has maintained control through its anti-democratic constitution and police state measures. In 2020, the military suppressed huge protests of mainly young people lasting for months demanding coup leader Prayut Chan-o-cha step down as prime minister, the reform of the monarchy and a new constitution.

Voter turnout in Sunday's election reached a record-high with 75.22 percent of eligible voters casting ballots. Young people, in particular, were determined to express their opposition to the military-backed regime

by voting for opposition parties.

The ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) split prior to the election with Prayut forming his own United Thai Nation Party (UTN), which won 40 seats and 36 seats respectively. The combined total was far less than 116 seats won by the unified PPRP in 2019. Both were outstripped by the right-wing Bhumjaithai Party (BJTP) that appeals to a layer of farmers and was part of the previous ruling coalition. It won a total of 70 seats.

Move Forward's Pita has dismissed concerns that the Senate would fail to back his proposed government. However, the *Bangkok Post* reported on Saturday that the Senate was split into roughly three factions, with 120 senators supporting Prayut, 80 supporting First Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwon of the PPRP, and another 50 who were undecided.

The lack of support for Pita in the Senate is the result of bitter differences within the Thai ruling class between dissident factions represented by Move Forward and Pheu Thai whose interests are constrained by the country's traditional elites—the monarchy, military, state bureaucracy and associated interests.

Senator Jadet Insawang has already publicly declared that he will vote against Pita to defend the monarchy and maintain the country's *lèse-majesté* law. Under this draconian legislation, anyone guilty of insulting the king and his close family is punishable by up to 15 years in prison. A number of the prominent leaders of the 2020 protests have been charged under the law.

The formation of the next government is likely to be a drawn-out process. In the 2019 election, Pheu Thai won the most seats in the lower house and formed a coalition that claimed to hold a majority in the lower house. The military simply ignored the result and used its majority in the joint sitting to reappoint Prayut as prime minister, who has never been elected to any

position.

If its chicanery through the joint sitting of parliament, the electoral commission and the courts fails, the military could simply resort to another coup. In 2006, it ousted the billionaire founder of Pheu Thai, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was forced to flee the country, and, in 2014, resorted to a coup to seize power from his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, who took over Pheu Thai and won the 2011 election.

Last Thursday army chief Nongpan Jittkaewtae downplayed the possibility of a military takeover, declaring, “The chance [of a coup] is zero now.” However, both Prayut and the PPRP’s Prawit hinted before the election that a coup could be necessary.

While Pheu Thai and Move Forward have exploited the widespread opposition to the military and monarchy, both are parties of big business connected to wealthy families and are incapable of addressing the pressing social needs and democratic aspirations of the working class and rural masses.

Pheu Thai’s leader Paetongtarn Shinawatra is the youngest daughter of Thaksin Shinawatra and the latest in the ultra-rich Shinawatra family to make a bid for prime minister.

Move Forward has particularly oriented towards young people, taking an ostensibly more critical stance towards the monarchy and the military. It is the successor to the Future Forward Party founded by multimillionaire auto company director, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, just prior to the 2019 election. Its leadership consisted largely of young business executives and academic lawyers.

The sudden emergence of Future Forward provoked fear in the military backed regime which used the Constitutional Court to accuse Thanathorn of violating the election law, disqualify him as a member of parliament and ultimately to disband the party. The court decision proved to be one of the catalysts for the mass protest movement in 2020.

Move Forward head Pita is a wealthy businessman with close family connections to the Thai state. His father, Pongsak Limjaroenrat, served as an advisor in the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives while his uncle, Padung Limjaroenrat, was a close aide to Thaksin as prime minister. Pita joined the MFP in 2020 after the forced dissolution of his Future Forward Party (FFP).

In an indication of the layers the MFP is oriented to, Pita stated on Monday that after finalizing coalition talks, he will hold discussions with government officials and big business. He will no doubt emphasize that his government would represent no challenge to the ruling elite, and offers the best means for containing the sharp social tensions produced by deteriorating living standards and rising social inequality.



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