

# Political uncertainty continues after Thai election

**Robert Campion****14 June 2023**

In the month since Thailand's May 14 general election, who will form the next government remains uncertain. The Move Forward Party (MFP), which took the most seats, faces multiple barriers to assuming office from the military and state apparatus. At present, the Election Commission (EC) will certify the results by July 13, and a vote for prime minister could be conducted on August 3.

The MFP, led by wealthy businessman and prime ministerial candidate Pita Limjaroenrat, won 151 seats, ahead of the previous main oppositional party, the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), which took 141 seats. The MFP currently leads a coalition with a majority in the lower parliamentary house with Pheu Thai and six minor parties, giving them 312 seats out of 500. It is noteworthy that a record 75.2 percent turned out to vote while MFP won 32 of 33 constituency seats in the capital of Bangkok.

The military has effectively held power since the 2014 coup in which it ousted the Pheu Thai led government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The armed forces are closely aligned with the monarchy and state bureaucracy, including the courts, that have long dominated Thai politics. The military-backed parties won a total of just 76 seats in last month's elections.

The election results reflect a growing political radicalisation and deep hostility to the military and monarchy's longstanding domination over Thai politics. By pledging to reform both institutions, and address social inequality, the MFP attracted a great deal of support from students and young people, though it has already begun to shed these pretensions.

At the same time, behind the backs of the working class, sections of the ruling class are manoeuvring to try to maintain stability and to avoid a repeat of the

mass protests that rocked the country following the last rigged election in 2019.

There is a great deal of concern over the potential economic impact of any political uncertainty or unrest. Sanan Angubolku, chairman of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, recently stated: "The private sector would like a new government to be formed quickly. Any delays could slow down the economy." According to the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, the economy could grow 3.6 to 4 percent if a government can be formed in August, but only 3 percent if it takes until September or October.

The ultimate arbiter of political affairs in Thailand remains the military, which holds sway over the EC and the 250 seats in parliament's upper house, or Senate. In order to form a government, a party requires a majority from the combined houses, or 376 seats, leaving the MFP-led coalition short. While some senators have indicated support, it is still unclear if the country's traditional elites close to the military will support an MFP-led government by providing the necessary senate votes.

Currently, the EC is investigating MFP leader Pita over accusations of owning shares in a media company while running as a parliamentary candidate, which is prohibited. Pita had previously disclosed the ownership of shares in iTV, which ceased media operations in 2007, and the EC accepted his candidacy. Now, however, the EC claims that if Pita was aware that owning the shares could impact his eligibility, this would violate the law.

MFP like Pheu Thai in no way challenges capitalist rule, but rather represents sections of the Thai ruling class who regard the domination of the military and monarchy as an intolerable restraint on their business interests. It rests on sections of the upper middle class

and appeals to youth and workers on the basis of empty promises of addressing democratic rights and the worsening social crisis facing working people.

The MFP formed its coalition based on compromises with a number of small parties, excluding those typically associated with the military. As well as Pheu Thai, the coalition includes the Prachachat Party (9 seats), Thai Sang Thai (6 seats), Pheu Thai Ruam Phalang (2 seats), the Thai Liberal Party (1 seat), the Fair Party (1 seat), and Palang Sangkhom Mai (1 seat).

The coalition released a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), a vague and highly conditional platform seeking to garner the support of military-appointed senators. It states that the coalition will “not affect the country’s status as a unitary state, the country’s status as a democracy under a constitutional monarchy framework, and the inviolable status of the monarch.”

The document makes no mention of the draconian *lèse-majesté* law, which in very broad terms makes it illegal to criticize or insult the king with penalties of up to 15 years prison. Hundreds of youth are currently in jail or facing charges under the law from the 2020–2021 pro-democracy protests. The MFP has claimed it will reform the law, but has not made the issue a feature of the coalition so as not to alienate other parties or military-aligned senators.

The Thai monarchy, as well as having extensive business interests, has proven to be the linchpin of the capitalist state in times of political crisis. The political establishment as a whole is determined to maintain the monarchy and parties like the MFP at most seek very limited reforms.

Deputy MFP leader Sirikanya Tansakun stated in an interview earlier this month with the *Bangkok Post* that it is seeking merely to “improve the relationship between the monarchy institution and the people.”

The coalition also claims it will create a “comprehensive welfare system” and improve “the rights of workers” while taking “fiscal sustainability” and “economic growth” into consideration. However, under conditions of economic crisis in Thailand and globally, these pledges will be quickly junked.

The MoU also pledges to “maintain balanced international relations between Thailand and major powers.” The ruling class is deeply concerned over the economic and political instability in the world produced

by the US-NATO war in Ukraine, as well as the intensifying US-led confrontation with China. According to the Department of International Trade, exports to Russia fell 43.3 percent to \$585.44 million in 2022. Thailand’s top exporting destinations are the US and China, representing 15.9 percent and 13.2 percent respectively.

The ability of Thailand to maintain “balanced international relations” is becoming increasingly fraught as the US ramps up its military preparations for war against China. Thailand is a formal military ally of the US and played a critical role in support of the American military during the Vietnam War. However, it is dependent on China for trade and also military supplies.

With a month to go, political manoeuvring in Bangkok is certain to intensify. It is possible that Pheu Thai may desert the MFP-coalition and make its own bid for office. It could seek support from the Bhumjaithai Party, which won 71 seats but has rejected a coalition with any party that suggests a reform of the *lèse-majesté* law. Moreover, the military could just step in as it did after the last election, and, with the support of the courts, install its own regime.

Whatever finally emerges, the next government will be a party of big business determined to impose the burden of the developing economic crisis onto working people and to suppress any opposition to its policies.



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