

Thailand to hold joint parliamentary session to install next government

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Two parliamentary sessions were held in Thailand on Monday and Tuesday—the first since the May general election in which the Move Forward Party (MFP) won the most seats. The opening of parliament was brought forward by three weeks despite no party or coalition having a majority in both houses, setting the stage for a politically volatile period.

The MFP won 151 seats and currently leads a tentative coalition with the Pheu Thai party possessing 141 seats. With the support of minor parties, the MFP leads a coalition totalling 312 seats, a clear majority of the 500-seat lower House of Representatives, but still far short of the 376 needed to elect a prime minister in a joint session of parliament with the 250-seat Senate, all of which are appointed by the military.

The election was held under the anti-democratic constitution imposed by the military after it seized power in a coup in 2014.

The coalition will put forward MFP leader and wealthy businessman Pita Limjaroenrat as candidate for prime minister in a vote on July 13. However, there has been little response in obtaining the extra 64 seats required, despite the MFP's appeals to the military-backed upper house. Senator Kittisak Rattanawaraha told the *Bangkok Post* on June 28 that Pita would be unlikely to gain even five senate votes, with most senators likely to vote against the MFP leader or abstain.

One senator who indicated he will vote for the MFP coalition is 45-year-old academic Zakee Phithakkumpol, who previously backed 2014 coup leader and outgoing Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in 2019. In an indication of the fighting taking place behind the scenes, he told *Bloomberg*, "I'm not taking Pita's side but the way [senators] are carrying on may not be good in the long term, especially if we want the

monarchy to endure in Thai society."

Separately, on July 4, after weeks of being wrangling, Pheu Thai and the MFP agreed to concede the position of House Speaker to fellow coalition member Wan Muhamad Noor Matha from the Prachachat Party, which holds nine seats. As there were no other candidates for the position, no vote was required.

Wan Muhamad had previously been a member of Pheu Thai until he left the party in 2018. The first deputy speaker position was filled by MFP candidate Padipat Suntiphada and Pheu Thai's Pichet Chuamuangphan was chosen as second deputy speaker.

The push to resolve the political situation in Thailand arises from the concerns of big business that a prolonged election period is damaging the economy. Thailand's stock market is the worst performer in Asia this year with a minus equity index of around 10 percent as some \$US2.9 billion have been pulled from Thai stocks by foreign investors.

The early opening of parliament may be an attempt by the conservative, military-backed elites including the monarchy and state bureaucracy to force the MFP's hand and sideline Pita. He faces two investigations seeking to disqualify him as prime minister. The Election Commission is investigating his shareholdings in a media company, which is illegal for a member of parliament to possess, despite the company being defunct since 2007. Another investigation is into Pita's recent sale of land and his relations with a deeply indebted oil company.

A direct military intervention is always a possibility in a country where there have been 13 successful coups since 1932. The *Straits Times* reported on June 26 that the military and Royal Thai Police are on standby in preparation for social unrest. All foreign trips by military and police leaders have been cancelled and

social media is being closely monitored.

The last general elections in 2019, rigged by the military, were followed by widespread protests led by students and youth, which is undoubtedly giving the ruling class pause, since it fears above all the intervention of the working class. Protesters in 2020 and 2021 called for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut and his cabinet, the abolition of anti-democratic laws, and the reform of the monarchy. In the election, Pita and the MFP gained the support of young voters by promising limited constitutional and other reforms.

The MFP's predecessor, the then newly formed Future Forward Party (FFP), won an unexpected 81 seats in the 2019 general election. In the following months, the military-appointed Constitutional Court disqualified FFP leader, the billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, for seeking office while holding shares in a media company. The court dissolved the FFP on the same spurious grounds in 2020, contributing to the protests that began that year.

The MFP is a capitalist party, representing sections of the ruling class that has been marginalized by the military and its traditional backers. The party uses democratic slogans such as the “3D’s” of Demilitarization, Demonopolization, and Decentralization both to advance the material interests of this dissident section of the bourgeoisie and cynically contain the struggles of youth and workers within the safe channels of military-dominated politics.

Furthermore, Pita is seeking to curry favor with the US, having pledged at his victory press conference in May to play by “international rules”—a reference to Washington’s constant refrain that Beijing must uphold the “international rules-based order,” that is, one in which the US sets the rules. He has compared himself to former US President Barack Obama, who came to power while Pita studied at Harvard in 2008. “That really shaped me as a politician,” he said in an interview with *Foreign Policy*.

It should be recalled that Obama urged voters to “look forwards, not backwards” in order to pass over the criminal record of the Bush administration at home and abroad, in the invasion of Iraq. Pita is proposing to do the same for the widely-detested Thai military.

Upon winning the election, Pita stated in an interview with the *New York Times*, “This is another historic moment that shows we can transform the government

to democracy peacefully.” In other words, Pita is offering his services to bring about transition from military rule and maintain the stability of capitalism.

If Pita is allowed to form the next government, it will be primarily because significant layers of the ruling class fear the prospect of further social unrest as the economy continues to stagnate amid global economic uncertainty and the intensifying US-led confrontation with China throughout the Indo-Pacific region.



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