

Thai military blocks general election winner from forming government

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On Wednesday, wealthy businessman Pita Limjaroenrat, leader of the Move Forward Party (MFP), was both suspended as a member of parliament in Thailand by the Constitutional Court and blocked from standing for election as prime minister. While the MFP won 151 seats in May's election, the most of any party, the military-aligned establishment has essentially vetoed the party from forming a government.

Speaking in parliament on his suspension, Pita said he would comply with the court's decision. "I believe Thailand has changed since [the elections on] May 14 and the people have already won half the battle, there's another half to go," he said. "Even though I'm not carrying out my duties [as MP], I'm asking my fellow MPs to look after the people."

Pita's suspension is a blatantly anti-democratic decision. However, it was not opposed by any MPs in the 500-seat lower house of parliament, including from within the 312-seat coalition created by the MFP after the election. That includes Pheu Thai with 141 seats.

Pita has been targeted ostensibly for holding shares in a media company defunct since 2007 called iTV, which he inherited from his father. Pita claims he attempted to sell the shares but could not find a buyer. While it is illegal for an MP to hold shares in a media company, Pita stated he reported the shares to the Election Commission in 2019 and was cleared to take his seat in parliament. For the moment, Pita's suspension is temporary until the Constitutional Court rules on his case. He has 15 days to respond to the allegations.

The political establishment's attack on the MFP is similar to that on the party's predecessor in 2019, the Future Forward Party (FFP). At that time, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, who led the FFP, was also suspended for owning shares in a media company, and the party was forcibly dissolved the following year.

These moves contributed to mass protests calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's government, which seized power in a 2014 military coup, and the reform of the monarchy.

After Pita's exhortations to parliament to "look after the people," a vote passed 394 to 312 opposing his continued standing as a candidate for prime minister. Pita was first rejected as PM in a vote on July 13, with the military-appointed Senate nearly unanimously opposed to him. With one empty seat in the Senate, Pita needed 375 votes, or a majority of both the 749-seat combined lower and upper house. He received a total of 324 votes and only 13 from senators, while the rest abstained or voted against him.

The MFP has responded, not by calling protests in defense of the democratic right to vote, but instead by caving to the military and conservative establishment. The MFP stated on Friday that it would cease attempting to form a government and yield to coalition partner Pheu Thai, which will likely put up Srettha Thavisin as its PM candidate in the next vote to be held July 27.

In an Instagram post yesterday, Pita stated: "The most important thing is not that I haven't become Prime Minister, but setting up a government based on the will of the people who want to change the coup, stopping the inheritance of the previous government." In practice, this is an attempt to subordinate working people to the status quo, under the claim that Pheu Thai will defend democracy.

Yet Pheu Thai may break with the MFP to form a government with parties that will meet the military's approval. According to the *Nation* newspaper, Pheu Thai sources are discussing replacing the MFP with the conservative Bhumjaithai party (71 seats) and the previous ruling party Palalang Pracharath (40 seats) led

by Prawit Wongsuwan, the outgoing deputy prime minister and one of the 2014 coup leaders.

Ultimately, the ruling establishment is opposed to Pita and the MFP, not on the grounds that the party genuinely stands for democracy, but because the MFP represents sections of the bourgeoisie that have been marginalized by the traditional elites and which are now seeking to further their economic and political interests.

Social and political tensions in Thailand are far sharper than in 2020 when mass demonstrations primarily of young people erupted against the anti-democratic actions of the military-backed regime.

Household debt reached 16 trillion baht (\$US465 billion) in the first quarter of 2023. About 58 percent of people between the ages of 25 and 29 are in debt, as are some 90 percent of rural households. In addition, economic inequality is growing with the top 1 percent taking in 21 percent of the national income, while the bottom 50 percent get only 14 percent.

While campaigning for the May election, the MFP made populist pledges including raising the daily minimum wage to 450 baht (\$US13), which was opposed by other sections of the bourgeoisie. Undoubtedly, there are concerns that Move Forward's reformist posturing, however insincere, may stoke working-class discontent that an MFP-led government is unable to control.

Furthermore, Pita has made overtures to the United States, a formal military ally of Thailand, as Washington continually ramps up military pressure on China and other countries to fall into line with its confrontation with Beijing. China, however, is Bangkok's largest trading partner, accounting for \$US107 billion in total trade in 2022, or 18 percent of Thailand's trade volume.

The MFP, no less than the other bourgeois parties, are desperate to prevent a resurgence of mass protests, like those in 2020 and 2021. But while those protests primarily involved students, new demonstrations could draw in workers, who in addition to declining conditions, face the growing danger of war in the region and an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic for which the ruling class has no progressive answer.

Some protests have already begun in Bangkok, though at present involving only several hundred. Tellingly, the middle-class leaders of protest groups

organizing the demonstrations are calling for people to put pressure on military-appointed senators while accepting a potential Pheu Thai-led government.

Prominent human rights lawyer and activist Anon Nampa, for example, called on people to be "witnesses" to a potential Pheu Thai government so that it would not betray the people. In reality, a Pheu Thai-led government, if it is finally formed, will be just as subservient to the traditional elites—the military, monarchy and state bureaucracy—as Pita and the MFP.

The reason is the same: deep-rooted fear in the ruling class of a mass movement of the working class that would threaten the oppressive, anti-democratic foundations of capitalist rule in Thailand.



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