

New coalition in Thailand excludes general election winner

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More than 12 weeks have passed since Thailand's general election. Since then, the military establishment has essentially barred the winner of that contest, the Move Forward Party (MFP), from forming a government and its eight-party coalition has disintegrated.

The runner-up in May's election, the Pheu Thai party, announced on Monday that it had formed a new coalition with the right-wing populist Bhumjaithai Party (BJT) and will attempt to form a government that will exclude the MFP. Pheu Thai has 141 seats in the lower house of the National Assembly and the BJT 71. Pheu Thai announced on Wednesday that it had added six minor parties, bringing the total number of coalition seats to 228.

The minor parties include four parties from the previous MFP-led coalition: Prachachat Party (9 seats), Pheu Thai Ruam Palang (2 seats), Thai Liberal Party (1 seat), Palang Sangkhom Mai (1 seat). The new additions are Charthaipattanakla (2 seats) and the Thongtee Thai Party (1 seat). The Chartthaipattana Party with 10 seats may join the coalition.

The MFP remains the largest party in the lower house with 151 seats. It earned the hostility of the military, which seized power in a coup in 2014, and the country's conservative elites by making an appeal for limited democratic reforms.

Under the anti-democratic constitution imposed by the military, the prime minister is elected at a joint sitting of the lower and upper houses of parliament. As a result, the upper house appointed by the military has a de facto veto over the next government. The outgoing prime minister—coup leader Prayut Chan-o-cha—never faced an election.

The Pheu Thai coalition requires another 147 seats for its nominee—60-year-old real estate tycoon Srettha

Thavisin—to become prime minister. At present, senators are reportedly split on supporting Srettha.

On July 13, a joint sitting blocked the leader of the MFP, Pita Limjaroenrat, from becoming prime minister despite forming a majority coalition of 312 seats in the lower house of parliament.

The Election Commission (EC) and the Constitutional Court subsequently removed Pita from parliament on trumped up charges of owning shares in a defunct media company. While MPs are banned from owning shares in media outlets, Pita reported that he had previously disclosed the shares to the EC without issues being raised.

Pita has also been barred from standing in a second vote for prime minister. The move has delayed the selection of a new PM due to an ongoing review by the Constitutional Court of an MFP petition challenging parliament's rejection of Pita's renomination. The court is due to announce a decision on August 16.

In announcing the new coalition, Pheu Thai leader Chonlanan Srikaew stated on Monday, "We would like to thank Bhumjaithai for accepting the invitation so that we can step over this political deadlock." The two parties blamed the political impasse not on the military, but on the MFP's proposed reforms that include amending Thailand's draconian lèse-majesté law.

Reaching out to the pro-military Senate, Chonlanan expressed his party's "sincerity to our friends in all political parties and the Senate" and pledged to "preserve the important institution of the country as the cornerstone of the people in the nation," referring to the monarchy.

At present, the Pheu Thai/BJT coalition would have a majority in the 500-seat lower house. More parties are expected to join the grouping, though Chonlanan claimed that it "won't have the two uncles" referring to

the 2014 coup leaders, Prayut and Prawit Wongsuwon from the United Thai Nation Party and Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) respectively. The latter has indicated it may be willing to join the coalition if asked.

The BJT, which appeals to Thailand's farmers, previously served in the military-backed coalition government led by the PPRP and formed following the rigged 2019 elections. It had declared that it would not join any coalition involving the MFP or any party seeking to reform the lèse-majesté law.

The monarchy is a cornerstone of capitalism in Thailand, having extensive business interests throughout the country while also providing stability during times of political crisis. The MFP, however, does not represent a threat. The party speaks for dissident factions of the bourgeoisie that bridle at the domination of the military, monarchy and traditional elites and seek to advance their economic and political interests.

The fear in conservative ruling circles, however, is that MFP's tepid calls for limited reforms could trigger a social upheaval involving the working class that the party cannot control. For this reason, BJT leader Anutin Charnvirakul declared on Monday, "The country needs to move on."

The comment also echoes strong concerns from big business that prolonged political instability is affecting the stock market and international investment. Following the announcement last Thursday that a planned vote for prime minister would be delayed for another two weeks, the baht fell by 1.1 percent to a two-week low and the biggest decline among major Asian currencies. The benchmark stock index ended the morning session 0.7 percent lower.

While pursuing a token legal challenge, the MFP has accepted being sidelined. On July 21, the MFP announced that it would step back to allow Pheu Thai to form a government while remaining within the original and now-defunct eight-party coalition. It immediately became clear that Pheu Thai would dump the MFP. Instead of warning supporters and calling for protests, Pita and the MFP endorsed Pheu Thai, claiming it would protect democratic rights.

Pita said in an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour on July 25, "Yes, I endorse and support the second victorious party, Pheu Thai Party, Thaksin Shinawatra's party to form a coalition, because it's not

just about a personal goal for me to become prime minister, but I think it's to stop Thailand from a vicious cycle of military dictatorship."

Former Prime Minister Thaksin, a billionaire, was ousted in a military coup in 2006 and has been living in exile since 2008. He is the founder of Thai Rak Thai, the predecessor of Pheu Thai and is considered the party's actual leader. In a sign that Pheu Thai is moving to make peace with the military establishment, Thaksin had announced that he would be returning to Thailand.

Pheu Thai and the MFP are both orienting to the pro-military sections of the political establishment. This is not a mistaken policy but stems from a shared fear that a protracted political crisis could pave the way for intervention of the working class and threaten the continuation of bourgeois rule.



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