

Military-backed coalition government installed in Thailand

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A joint session of Thailand's parliament on Tuesday selected Pheu Thai Party (PT) candidate Srettha Thavisin to become the next prime minister—a decision that was endorsed by King Maha Vajiralongkorn last night. The new government will be sworn in within 15 days.

Srettha, a property tycoon, won 482 votes out of 728 present members in a joint sitting of parliament, including 152 votes from the current 249 seats held in the military-appointed Senate. The upper house had previously blocked the formation of a coalition government headed by the Move Forward Party (MFP), which won 151 seats in May's general election, the most of any party.

Following Tuesday's vote, Srettha, who is not a member of parliament, gave a perfunctory victory speech lasting a minute. He avoided interacting with the media before being shepherded away by PT leaders including Paetongtarn Shinawatra who refused to comment.

Pheu Thai, which won 141 seats, initially joined an MFP-led coalition before dumping the general election winner and instead joining arms with the right-wing Bhumjaithai Party (71 seats). Later two main military-backed parties joined the coalition—the United Thai Nation Party (UTN) with 36 seats and the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) holding 40 seats. Seven other minor parties also joined, giving a lower house majority of 314 out of 500 seats.

Pheu Thai has stated it would control eight cabinet posts and nine deputy cabinet posts while the military-backed parties would receive two cabinet posts and two deputy posts each. Ministries are yet to be allocated but it is almost certain that the military will assume control of the key security posts.

Pheu Thai's formation of a government with these

parties demonstrates its complete repudiation of any democratic pretensions. The PPRP is the outgoing ruling party and headed the coalition that held power after the fraudulent 2019 election and included UTN and Bhumjaithai.

Furthermore, UTN and the PPRP are the political vehicles of the generals who led the 2014 military coup against the PT government of Yingluck Shinawatra. Outgoing prime minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha joined UTN early this year after splitting from the PPRP. General Prawit Wongsuwon leads the PPRP and is the outgoing deputy prime minister.

The inclusion of the military-backed parties in the new coalition overturns promises made by PT and has angered many supporters of the party, which had postured as an opponent of military rule. Srettha told the *Straits Times* before the May election, “We only work with parties... that are not responsible for the coup.”

PT leader Cholan Srikaew, who earlier declared he would step down if the party broke its promise, is now chief spokesman for the new coalition. Justifying the party's about face, he declared: “The goal right now is shared responsibility for the sake of the country.”

The new government amounts to a repudiation of the popular vote in May, which was characterized by a broad rejection of the military and its political parties. The incoming government's pledge to reform the thoroughly anti-democratic, military-imposed constitution to “make it more democratic” is entirely empty.

Pheu Thai is the successor of Thai Rak Thai, which was founded in 1998 by Thaksin Shinawatra and came to power in 2001 pledging assistance for the poor in the wake of the devastating impact of the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis. Thaksin, a billionaire and former police

lieutenant colonel, postured as an alternative to the traditional elites in the monarchy, military, and state bureaucracy.

As prime minister, Thaksin won a significant following among the poor with his limited financial assistance to rural areas and provision of health care. At the same time, however, his government privatized state-owned enterprises, suppressed freedom of the press, and carried out a savage “war on drugs” that hit the most oppressed social layers hardest. In the first three months, some 2,800 extrajudicial murders took place.

The traditional ruling elites who had backed Thaksin initially increasingly turned against him as his pro-market policies cut across their interests. He was ousted in a military coup in 2006 and fled the country in 2008 after being convicted of trumped-up corruption charges.

Thai Rak Thai transformed into the People’s Power Party (PPP) returned to office in 2008. At the end of that year, this party was banned in what was essentially a judicial coup and replaced by the military-aligned Democratic Party. Anger grew and PPP supporters led by the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), also known as Red Shirts staged large and protracted protests against the military government. Mass demonstrations in 2010 were violently suppressed by the military which opened fire on protesters, killing 91 and injuring thousands.

In 2011, Thaksin’s party, renamed as Pheu Thai, won the national election and came to power again, with his sister Yingluck as prime minister. She was subsequently ousted in the 2014 coup that brought Prayut and the military to power and led to the creation of the 2017 constitution.

Now Pheu Thai is effectively in alliance with the military. Indicating the extent of discussions between PT and the military, Thaksin returned to Thailand on Tuesday. Undoubtedly a deal has been struck behind the scenes to ensure Thaksin does not serve any significant jail time, in exchange for toeing the military’s line.

The ruling class undoubtedly intends to exploit PT and Thaksin to suppress the growing anger of workers and the poor towards declining economic conditions. According to the Bank of Thailand, the ratio of public debt to GDP at 61.6 percent is the highest of any incoming government in over two decades. The growth

rate for the second quarter was a sluggish 1.8 percent according to the National Economic and Social Development Council, well below the 3.1 percent expansion expected by economists.

Significantly Pheu Thai’s coalition has received the tacit support of the so-called “progressive” Move Forward Party, led by wealthy businessman Pita Limjaroenrat. While the MFP voted against Srettha in a calculated move to maintain its oppositional posturing, it has conducted no campaign against the anti-democratic methods used to install the new coalition.

After the Senate rejected Pita as prime minister on July 13 and barred him from renomination, he was suspended from parliament by the military-appointed Constitutional Court on July 19 on concocted charges. MFP stepped back to allow Pheu Thai to form a government and continued to support PT even as it became clear the latter was in talks with the military parties and would push the MFP into the opposition.

The MFP limited its response to petitioning the Constitutional Court on Pita’s behalf, arguing for his ability to stand again for prime minister. The case was dismissed last week on the technicality that the MPs making the petition were not prime ministerial candidates and hence were not directly affected by the decision.



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