

The political lessons of the 2023 Thai election

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More than three months after Thailand's May 14 general election, a new prime minister, Srettha Thavisin, a wealthy property magnate from the Pheu Thai Party (PT), was chosen on August 22 with the backing of a coalition that includes both the country's pro-military parties. The Pheu Thai's embrace of the military, which ousted it in two coups in 2006 and 2014, marks its complete abandonment of any pretensions to represent a democratic alternative.

The entire election process under the constitution imposed by the military junta in 2017 was anti-democratic from beginning to end. The prime minister and therefore the government is not chosen by the elected lower house, but by a joint sitting with the upper house appointed entirely by the military. The Move Forward Party, which won most seats, was blocked by the military appointees and its leader subjected to trumped-up charges in the Constitutional Court.

Similar moves were taken against Pheu Thai which won a majority of seats in the 2019 election. The protracted mass protests dominated by young people, which erupted after the 2014 coup leader Prayut Chan-o-cha was reinstalled as prime minister and targeted the opposition parties, were suppressed by force.

That the military has allowed its bitter political enemy, Pheu Thai, to form government speaks to the fear throughout ruling circles that a repeat of the 2020-21 protests would involve sections of the working class under conditions of deepening economic and social crisis. The party has now ditched campaign promises not to form a coalition with the military's parties and will work with them to impose an agenda of austerity on working people and suppress any opposition.

As for the Move Forward Party, which capitalised on the previous protests, and advanced, at least in words, proposals for limited democratic reforms, it has accepted its sidelining with barely a murmur of protest. While it formally voted against the new prime minister to maintain its oppositional posturing, Move Forward mobilised no opposition or demonstrations to the anti-democratic

outcome of the election.

Both Pheu Thai and Move Forward have done their utmost to confine any opposition within the straitjacket of parliament and the courts—a system rigged by the military to favour Thailand's traditional elites centred on the monarchy. Both parties were founded by business tycoons and represent dissident sections of the Thai capitalist class seeking to assert their interests against the stifling domination of the conservative establishment.

For many young people, workers and rural poor who voted for Pheu Thai and Move Forward in the hope that they represented a progressive alternative that would guarantee democratic rights and improve living standards, the election outcome is a bitter disappointment. It is necessary to understand why this has occurred and, above all, what is the political road forward.

In his Theory of Permanent Revolution elaborated more than a century ago, Leon Trotsky explained that no section of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development, including its so-called democratic and liberal wings, was capable of leading a political struggle for the basic democratic aspirations and social needs of the masses.

Unlike the classic bourgeois democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and America, the weak capitalist class in countries like Russia confronted a powerful working class that threatened its very existence. Invariably, when confronted by a mass movement, even the liberal bourgeoisie sides with reaction against working people.

Trotsky established that as a result of this, the democratic tasks necessarily fall to the working class, leading the rural masses. The working class carries this fight using its own class methods as part of the struggle for socialism. That political struggle on the national arena necessarily extends internationally as a component part of the world socialist revolution.

The Theory of Permanent Revolution provided the theoretical basis for the 1917 Russian Revolution led by Trotsky and Lenin that brought the first workers' state to

power and provided an enormous impetus to the fight for socialism internationally. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was bound up with its degeneration under the Stalinist regime that usurped power from the working class and, based on the anti-Marxist perspective of “Socialism in One Country,” was responsible for terrible defeats of the international working class.

Permanent Revolution was confirmed in the negative countless times in the course of the 20th century, not least in Asia, where the Stalinist parties repeatedly subordinated the working class and peasantry to one or other supposedly progressive wing of the bourgeoisie. The Stalinist two-stage revolution—first the democratic revolution under the leadership of the bourgeoisie, then the fight for socialism in the distant future—inevitably produced a disaster.

Nowhere were the consequences more tragic than in Indonesia where the Stalinist Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) promoted the peaceful road to socialism and kept workers shackled to President Sukarno by promoting the illusion that he would defend their democratic and social rights.

Yet, as the Theory of Permanent Revolution explains, this “progressive bourgeoisie” was incapable of defending democratic rights. In promoting Sukarno, the PKI opened the door for the 1965-66 CIA-backed military coup that resulted in the systematic slaughter of up to a million workers, peasants and PKI members.

Thailand is no exception. Time and again, the weak and venal ruling class has resorted to the military to crush any threat to its rule by the working class and rural masses. On each occasion, the parties representing the so-called progressive wing of the bourgeoisie shamelessly capitulated leaving working people to their fate.

Billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra established Pheu Thai’s forerunner, Thai Rak Thai, in 1998 as a political vehicle to prosecute his interests and gained a following by pledging to ameliorate the impact of the Asian Financial Crisis on working people. He came to power in 2001 and provided hand-outs to villages and state-funded health care. Thaksin rapidly came into conflict with the conservative establishment concerned that he was stoking demands for social improvements that could not be met and which he would be unable to control.

The Thai Rak Thai government was ousted by the military in 2006 which Thaksin did little to oppose. He fled the country after he was convicted on trumped-up corruption charges. The coup opened up a period of political instability which continues today. Popular

opposition to the persecution of Thaksin and his party and the continuing attacks on basic democratic rights erupted in protracted mass demonstrations in 2010 of his Red Shirt supporters to which the military ultimately responded by firing on a mass protest in Bangkok, killing 91 people and injuring thousands more.

The military and its backers will not hesitate to do so again. The flagging Thai economy and growing social tensions, which are part of the global crisis of capitalism, will inevitably lead to an eruption of the class struggle as is the case around the world. At this stage, the ruling class is relying on Pheu Thai to use its residual political influence to contain the opposition as it emerges. If it fails to do so, other means including the use of military force will be used.

The working class cannot rely on Pheu Thai, Move Forward or any other capitalist party to defend its class interests. Workers and youth who are disgusted and angry at the outcome of this year’s election need to draw the necessary political conclusions. The fight for democratic rights is indissolubly connected to the struggle for socialism.

Moreover, it is increasingly evident that none of the issues confronting working people—the growing dangers of world war and catastrophic climate change as well as the relentless assault on basic living standards—can be resolved on a national basis but require a unified international movement of the working class.

What is necessary is the construction of a political party of the working class in Thailand based on socialist internationalism and the Theory of Permanent Revolution, as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—the only political organization that fights for this perspective.



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