

# New Thai cabinet stacked with pro-military and big business figures

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The new Thai government of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin took office early this month after being approved by the monarchy. The administration came to power following May's general election, after which the winner, the Move Forward Party, was blocked by the military from forming a government. The composition of the cabinet and the subsequent release of its first policy statement last week make clear the anti-working class, anti-democratic character of the government.

Srettha's Pheu Thai Party formed a coalition with the two military-backed parties—the previous ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) and the United Thai Nation Party (UTN). The coalition also includes eight other parties including the right-wing populist Bhumjaithai Party (BJTP), which was part of the regime installed after the 2014 military coup. Coup leader General Prayut Chan-o-cha held power as junta leader then prime minister up to this year's election.

Within the 34-member cabinet, portfolios have been allocated to six of those parties, with Pheu Thai holding 18 ministerial positions. The BJTP has eight posts, the PPRP and UTN each hold three, and Chartthaipattana and Prachachart hold one each.

The cabinet also includes nine officials who served in Prayut's government. These include Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul of the BJTP, Labor Minister Pipat Ratchakitprakarn, another BJTP member, and Agriculture and Cooperatives Minister Thamanat Prompow of the PPRP. He has previously been described in Thai media as a “fixer” for Prayut's military junta. Another figure in the new government is Patcharawat Wongsuwon, a PPRP member who was not in Prayut's cabinet, but is the younger brother of Prawit Wongsuwon, another 2014 coup leader and current head of the PPRP.

The inclusion of so many figures in the new cabinet who are close to the military and the monarchy makes clear that Pheu Thai, which has long postured as the party of “democracy” in Thailand, has abandoned any pretensions to represent a democratic alternative. In the face of growing discontent of workers, farmers and the poor, the bourgeois Pheu Thai party fears a social explosion no less than the military.

Pheu Thai is the de facto successor of the Thai Rak Thai Party, with its members migrating to the People's Power Party following the 2006 coup, and then to Pheu Thai in 2008. The party represents a dissident faction of the ruling class frustrated at the domination of the traditional ruling elites—the military, monarchy and state bureaucracy. In power, it gained a following among the rural and urban poor by implementing limited social reforms while pushing for a further opening up of the economy to foreign investors.

The military, which controls the unelected upper house giving it a veto over the formation of a government, has allowed Pheu Thai to take power to mollify widespread public discontent, but is keeping it on a tight leash.

Pheu Thai's pledges to rewrite the anti-democratic 2017 military constitution will be blocked or purely cosmetic. Prime minister Srettha has already made clear that his government will not touch the draconian lèse-majesté law that is used to muzzle criticism of the monarchy.

Any changes the new government does carry out will largely be to benefit big business and the ruling elites. Srettha himself is a 61-year-old real estate tycoon and not an elected member of parliament.

Many leading cabinet members are from big business. They have pledged to boost Thailand's economy. Bangkok has set a modest target of 5 percent GDP

growth annually. Currently, the government expects 3.2 percent growth for next year while growth stood at just 1.8 percent in the second quarter of this year. This inevitably means imposing austerity on working people.

The government's agenda is being given a populist façade, with a three-year debt moratorium for farmers and small businesses announced on September 13. Thai household debt is more than 90 percent of the country's GDP. More details of the moratorium will be announced in coming weeks.

In releasing his government's agenda to the National Assembly on September 11, Srettha focused heavily on the economy. "Under the present economic circumstances, Thailand is like a sick person...Tourism and spending are recovering so slowly that there is the risk of economic recession. It is necessary to stimulate the economy and spending," he said.

Another promise is a 10,000-baht (\$US280) digital wallet scheme, slated to be implemented early next year. All Thai citizens 16 and older will receive 10,000 baht in digital currency as part of a stimulus plan. People are restricted in how they can use the digital currency, which will only be valid for six months. They will be barred from spending the digital currency to reduce their debt and must spend it within four kilometers of their registered address. It is not convertible to hard currency except by approved businesses who must pay taxes when doing so. The plan has specifically been touted as a means of raising tax revenue.

Like many of Pheu Thai's pledges, detail of the digital wallet scheme has not been worked out or released to the public. However, the handout is primarily designed to develop new digital infrastructure for businesses and has been backed by companies working with blockchain technology.

Pheu Thai also pledged to raise the minimum wage to a paltry 400 baht (\$US11.20) a day. The current daily minimum is between 328 and 354 baht, varying by province. Big business, however, has already pushed back on this limited increase.

Labor Minister Pipat Ratchakitprakarn, a wealthy businessman and former Prayut cabinet member, criticised the increase, saying, "If we are going to increase the minimum wage to 400 baht, inflation and GDP must be considered." He continued, "Under the

current economic circumstances, the wage should increase by 2 percent," or an increase to 361 baht at most.

A key aspect of the government's economic plan is the promotion of new free trade agreements while opening the economy further to foreign investment. While traveling to the US for the UN General Assembly this coming week, Srettha plans to hold discussions with companies like Microsoft, Google, and Tesla on investing in Thailand.

While much has been said about these economic issues, little has been discussed publicly about the growing danger of a US-instigated war with China that would inevitably draw in Thailand. The new government has stated that it will continue a balancing act between Washington and Beijing. This will prove increasingly difficult as Washington lines up its allies in the Indo-Pacific for its war drive.



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