

Thailand: Opposition Move Forward Party faces dissolution

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The Move Forward Party (MFP), the largest oppositional party in Thailand, is facing the prospect of dissolution after the Constitutional Court characterized a plank of its 2023 election program as an attempt to overthrow the monarchy.

On January 31, a unanimous ruling by nine military-appointed judges stated that the MFP's intent to amend the infamous lèse-majesté law was to "separate the monarchy from the Thai nation which is significantly dangerous to the security of the state."

The ruling continued: "[T]he accused have an intention to subvert the monarchy" in direct violation of Section 49 of the Constitution. Section 49 states that, "no person shall exercise the rights or liberties to overthrow the democratic regime of government with the King as Head of State."

The court instructed the party and its former leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, to cease any and all communications relating to the law's amendment or abolishment. The MFP has complied by scrapping references to the law on its website.

In a press release, Pita stated on behalf of the MFP that the gag order was a "lost opportunity" for parliament to discuss the law. "We refuse that the attempt was an alibi nor was it an attempt to cause any deterioration of the monarchy and did not have any intention of separating the monarchy with the national security," Pita stated in English.

The lèse-majesté law, or Article 112 of the Criminal Code, forbids any criticism of the royal family with a penalty of up to 15 years jail for each offence.

In January, political activist Mongkol Thirakot was sentenced to 50 years in prison for social media postings critical of the monarchy, the longest such sentence given in history.

Prominent activist and human rights lawyer Arnon

Nampa, received an additional 4-year sentence for breaches of the lèse-majesté law. He is already serving 4 years after being jailed last September.

According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, at least 262 people have been charged with lèse-majesté offences since 2020.

The court decision underscores just how central the monarchy is to the capitalist state in Thailand. In times of crisis, the king has stepped in to defuse infighting within the ruling elites and to prevent the development of mass movements that threaten capitalist rule.

The ruling also opens up the party to the possibility of dissolution. Section 92 of the Political Parties Act states that any party deemed to be acting in a way that "may be adverse" to the government "must" be dissolved. This can entail lifetime bans on its top officials from applying to run in future elections.

The law was strengthened following the 2014 military coup. Previously it only applied to parties that had engaged in acts to directly "overthrow" the government. Moreover, dissolution was only an option that "may" be considered.

In response to the latest ruling, Ruangkrai Leekitwattana, who has in the past acted on behalf of traditional elites, has resubmitted a petition from last year calling for the MFP's dissolution on the basis of its advocacy of reforming the lèse-majesté law. It was rejected at the time by the Election Commission as "groundless."

Last month's ruling lays bare the anti-democratic character of the Thai state apparatus, which is not prepared to countenance a public discussion about any reform of the monarchy. The fact that the MFP immediately fell into line underscores its class character as a capitalist party that has channelled the opposition of workers and youth into the dead-end of

parliamentary politics.

The MFP won the majority vote in last year's elections on the basis of broad support from youth and student protests in 2019-2021 calling for the reform of the military and monarchy. At last year's elections, the MFP watered down its demands, declaring that reforming the notorious lèse-majesté law was "not the party's main campaign goal."

Nonetheless, the ruling class deemed the MFP too unreliable a party to form government and used the courts to sideline it. Pita, who was positioning himself as prime minister, had his parliamentary status suspended pending an "investigation" into his holding of shares in a media company, in contravention of electoral laws.

The media company, iTV, had been defunct since 2007, and receives no revenue from media services. It only remains a business entity due to an ongoing legal dispute with the government over unpaid concession fees. Furthermore, the shares had been disclosed by Pita in 2019 when his registration as an MP was approved by the Election Commission.

The trajectory of the MFP is now following a similar path to that of its predecessor, the Future Forward Party (FFP), which won an unexpectedly significant share of seats in the 2019 election on the basis of calling for democratic reforms. It was dissolved by the Constitutional Court the following year for supposedly receiving illegal donations. No other party was subject to the same level of scrutiny.

On Monday, Pita and several other former FFP parliamentarians received suspended four-month jail sentences for participating in an impromptu protest in December 2019. The rally blocked a train station and involved the illegal use of loudspeakers.

The raft of lèse-majesté cases and the legal assault on the MFP is all the more significant in that it is taking place under a Pheu Thai-led government. With the MFP sidelined, Pheu Thai, which in the past postured as a party defending democratic rights and the poor, formed a government with pro-military parties.

The MFP has waged no campaign to defend itself against any of the anti-democratic court decisions. The investigation into Pita's media shares, and the suspension of Pita's MP status was allowed to proceed. After the investigation was dropped on January 24, Pita called the proceedings a mere "detour" of his program.

MFP lawmaker Bhuntin Noumjem made clear that no call would be made to mobilise popular opposition if the Constitutional Court dissolved the party. Rather it would simply change the name and reorganize the party. "You can kill a man, you can't kill an idea. People have already lost faith in our legal system over and over, so if they want to dig their own grave... by all means," he demagogically told the media.

The MFP represents a layer of big business that regards the traditional elites—the military, monarchy, the courts and state functionaries—as a obstacle to its economic interests. While it postures as a defender of democratic rights, it is just as fearful as its opponents of a movement of the working class that threatens capitalist rule.

The only way to fight for democratic rights in Thailand is in conscious political struggle against the capitalist system and its state institutions. This necessitates a break from its political defenders such as the MFP and the fight to build a politically independent movement of the working class that rallies the urban and rural poor and fights for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist perspective.



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