

Thai court accepts case to dissolve largest parliamentary party

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Last Wednesday, Thailand's Constitutional Court accepted a petition seeking the dissolution of the “progressive” Move Forward Party (MFP), the largest party in the country's National Assembly. The party has been given 15 days to respond with evidence in its defence after which a ruling is expected. The proceedings demonstrate the utterly anti-democratic character of the Thai parliamentary system.

The grounds for dissolution arise from the party's previous pledges to reform Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, the *lèse-majesté* law, which forbids any criticism of the monarchy. The Thai Election Commission (EC) submitted the petition to the court after it came to the unanimous decision on March 12 that the MFP, in seeking to amend Article 112, sought to “undermine the democratic system with the King as the Head of State.”

The EC's petition followed a separate unanimous decision by the Constitutional Court in January that determined the MFP's attempts to amend Article 112 violated Section 49 of the constitution, written by the military after its 2014 coup. The court ordered the party to cease activities related to the law's amendment, with which the MFP promptly complied.

January's ruling led to the EC reviewing the MFP's status under Section 92 of the Political Parties Act that empowers the EC to petition for the dissolution of any party that is deemed unconstitutional or that “may be adverse” to the government.

Both the Constitutional Court and the EC are comprised of military appointees, installed following the 2014 military coup led by General Prayut Chan-ocha. The military used its power to impose a new constitution in 2017 and strengthened reactionary laws to protect the monarchy, which is a key linchpin of bourgeois rule. The *lèse-majesté* law is routinely used

to intimidate political opposition to the government. Each offence is punishable with up to 15 years in prison and can be cumulative, resulting in effective life sentences.

If the MFP is dissolved, party executives may be banned from politics—even voting—for 10 years. Additionally, the National Anti-Corruption Commission is overseeing a separate case which could potentially impose lifetime bans on 44 MFP members of parliament who had explicitly endorsed proposed reforms to the *lèse-majesté* law. The party's dissolution would represent the disenfranchisement of 38 percent of those voting in last year's election, or 14.4 million people who voted for the MFP, more than any other party.

Millions of people no doubt backed the MFP hoping it would bring about genuine changes in government. But despite its electoral success and the formation of a majority coalition immediately after last year's election, the MFP was blocked from taking power by the military-appointed Senate in parliament. The concern in ruling circles was that the party would be unable to control the demands of workers as social and economic conditions continued to decline as a result of the growing crisis of capitalism internationally.

Those concerns persist, no doubt fuelling the drive to dissolve the party. According to polling in March from Thailand's National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Pita Limjaroenrat, the MFP's prime ministerial candidate last year and *de facto* party leader, is still the most favoured candidate for the premiership, with support of 42.75 percent, up from 39.4 percent in NIDA's previous poll in December. This is greater than the popularity of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin and Pheu Thai leader Paetongtarn Shinawatra who combined with only 23.75 percent.

Similarly, the MFP's approval rating has risen to 48.45 percent from 44.05 percent in the previous survey. Pheu Thai's rating has dropped to 22.1 percent compared to 24.05 percent in December.

Srettha and the ruling Pheu Thai Party have stated that the government had nothing to do with the moves against the MFP which could defend itself in court. While in Germany in March, Prime Minister Srettha responded to a reporter's question on Thailand's democratic credentials considering the ongoing attempts to dissolve the MFP. Srettha insisted that his government was formed following democratic elections and that freedom of speech exists in Thailand. However, it "must be under the law," he added.

In reality, Pheu Thai only came to power because the Senate used its de facto veto power to block the MFP from forming government. Pheu Thai, which had at first agreed to join an MFP coalition, quickly abandoned its former partner as Pita was temporarily suspended from parliament on phony pretexts. Pheu Thai agreed to a new coalition with the two primary military-backed parties as well as other right-wing groups. Srettha then stacked his cabinet with numbers of officials who had served in former Prime Minister Prayut's cabinet or who are close to the military.

In reality, the MFP is not a real threat to the Thai ruling establishment, but rather functions to contain growing political opposition to the ruling class within the narrow confines of what passes for parliamentary democracy in Thailand. It is a bourgeois party, representing aspiring sections of the corporate and financial elite, that masquerades as a "progressive" opponent of the military and more right-wing sections of the Thai state.

This is clear through the MFP's passive response to its possible dissolution. Pita, for example, posted on Instagram, "I am confident that whatever will happen to the party, we will surely go towards the change we are looking for. Inadvertently, the party's dissolution will make us reach the finish line even faster. Every action [equals] reaction."

The MFP is not making any attempt to mobilise workers and youth in opposition to the Thai state's flagrant attack on democratic rights. This was made clear by MFP leader Chaithawat Tulathon, who told reporters, "We plan to talk to the public about how we will fight this case in our way... It will not affect our

work in parliament."

The MFP is just as fearful as its political opponents of any independent movement of workers and youth and is seeking to head off any mass protests, such as those that followed the dissolution of the MFP's predecessor, the Future Forward Party (FFP), in 2020. The FFP was dissolved by the Constitutional Court after winning 17 percent of the votes in the 2019 general election and coming in third with 81 seats. The court dissolved the party on trumped-up allegations of receiving illegal campaign donations. It contributed to a wave of student-led mass protests during 2020 and 2021, where participants demanded democratic reforms.

The MFP has placed itself at the mercy of the judicial system while remaining a "loyal opposition" to the government and the military. The party is meekly setting plans for as smooth a dissolution as possible by minimising the legal repercussions while preparing its MPs to jump ship. Rumours are already swirling in the media about the creation of a new party, "Kao Mai" or "New Step" that MFP members would join.

The fight for genuine democratic rights will not come from supporting the MFP. The party has acquiesced to every dubious "legal" offensive waged by the Thai state against it. A genuine struggle for democratic rights can only come from an independent political struggle of the working class for socialism.



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