

Right-wing faction emerges as victor in Thailand's Senate election

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Thailand's new Senate, certified earlier this month by the Election Commission, is another demonstration of the sham character of Thailand's supposed "return to democracy" under the ruling Pheu Thai Party (PTP) government. The new Senate met for the first time on Tuesday.

From the beginning, the conservative political establishment has attempted to pass off the highly complicated election process as a means to ensure "fairness" and the selection of a Senate "above politics." Predictably, the very opposite occurred.

Most new senators are closely linked to one major party or another. The number of Senate seats has been reduced from 250 to 200. The exact breakdown is difficult to determine as senators all claim to be nonpartisan. However, a dominant "blue faction" has emerged, which is aligned with the right-wing Bhumjaithai Party (BJT) whose official color is blue. BJT-aligned senators are estimated to have taken anywhere between 123 and 140 seats, giving the party a solid majority.

The BJT further increased its control of the Senate on Tuesday when former Buri Ram governor Mongkol Surasajja was elected as Speaker. General Kriangkrai Srirak and Boonsong Noisophon were chosen as deputy speakers. All three have ties to the BJT.

The BJT played a key role in anti-democratically blocking the Move Forward Party (MFP) from forming government after it won the most seats in last year's election for the lower house of the National Assembly. It refused to enter into a coalition with the MFP because it had campaigned to amend Thailand's draconian *lèse-majesté* law.

The BJT is now emerging as the standard bearer for the most right-wing sections of the Thai ruling elite, grouped around the military, the monarchy and the state

bureaucracy. It is also the second-largest party in the Pheu Thai-led coalition government, holding 71 seats and essentially veto power over the ruling party in the 500-seat National Assembly lower house. The BJT also backed the previous regime headed by 2014 coup leader Prayut Chan-o-cha.

Significantly, in June, King Maha Vajiralongkorn rewarded BJT leader and Deputy Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul with the Chulachomkiao Order, Second Class, and the Rattanakosin Medal, Third Class. The awards are highly significant among the Thai ruling elite. Other recipients included former Prime Minister Prayut, who is now a Privy Council member.

BJT-affiliated senators include Geneneral Kriangkrai Srirak, an adviser to Anutin. Another senator, Dr Praphon Tangsrikiatku, also served as vice health minister under Anutin in the previous Prayut government. Others include Pibul-at Haruehanprakan, former adviser to a previous BJT tourism and sports cabinet minister. Another senator is a chauffeur close to party founder Newin Chidchob.

Only an estimated 10 to 20 senators are affiliated with the ruling Pheu Thai-led government while a similar number are close to the so-called "progressive" MFP, which won nearly 40 per cent of the vote and 151 seats in last year's general election compared to the BJT, which took a distant third with its 71 seats. Pheu Thai took 141 seats last year.

The Senate election was highly anti-democratic. The election certification process itself was delayed for a week by around 800 complaints citing electoral fraud and collusion, an expression of the internecine warfare in the ruling class and the corrupt character of the election overall.

In certifying the results on July 10, Sawang Boonmee, the Election Commission secretary-general,

brushed aside these complaints, absurdly stating, “We still cannot say that the election was not honest and fair.”

However, the process was specifically designed to bar workers, the poor and youths from participating. Applications to run cost over a week’s minimum wage in Thailand and were only open to those over 40 years of age with at least 10 years of experience in certain occupational fields.

Senate candidates were required to not be members of any political party, the spouses or children of party members, and could not discuss any of their potential political plans during the election process if they won office.

Applicants were then screened by the military-appointed Election Commission. According to the *Bangkok Post*, the applications of 1,917 people were rejected before voting started, while another 600 were disqualified for supposedly failing to meet qualification requirements.

Rather than being open to the entire electorate, three rounds of voting took place in which 45,753 candidates vied among themselves, resulting in a starkly unrepresentative Senate chosen by less than one-thousandth of the voting population. In addition, only around 44 out of 76 provinces are represented.

The entire process was opaque as far as the public was concerned. Yet for the right-wing, pro-military establishment, it provided the ideal cover for vote buying, bloc-vote rigging, and other anti-democratic manipulations behind the scenes.

The rightwing which now dominates the Senate will not only have the power to vote on prime ministerial candidates, but to endorse key bills, amendments to the constitution, and candidates to state agencies, including the Election Commission, the Constitutional Court, and the National Anti-Corruption Commission. Following the 2014 coup, the military used these nominally independent bodies to strengthen their rule and that of the traditional conservative elites.

Far from criticizing the Senate elections, the MFP and its supporters, which posture as left-wing, were preoccupied with sowing democratic illusions in the Thai establishment. Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, an advisor to the MFP and leader of the “Progressive Movement” organisation, promoted a campaign to secure 70 “People’s Senators” to give the Senate a

phony “progressive” veneer.

Thanathorn previously led the MFP’s predecessor, the Future Forward Party, before its dissolution by the military-appointed Constitutional Court on trumped-up ethics violations in 2020. Thanathorn was barred from official politics for 10 years.

The MFP now faces similar threats of dissolution over its campaign to reform the *lèse-majesté* law. However, party leader Chaithawat Tulathon backed the Senate election when certification was initially delayed, insisting on endorsement first and disqualifications later, pending evidence of any poll fraud. “Any delay in the endorsement process means the caretaker Senate will stay in office longer,” he stated.

While the outgoing caretaker Senate was appointed in toto by the military, the entire fraudulent election process itself was also drawn up and codified in the 2017 constitution by the military to ensure the conservative and right-wing bourgeois representatives remained in the National Assembly. In effect, the MFP is putting its stamp of approval on the junta’s laws.

Rather than waging a genuine fight for democracy, the MFP is acting to prop up a political system—and the capitalist economic framework it defends—that is increasingly seen as illegitimate in the eyes of millions of workers and poor across Thailand.



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