

Thailand's Constitutional Court dissolves main opposition party

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Thailand's Constitutional Court ruled Wednesday to dissolve the main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) based on trumped-up charges, while banning 11 party leaders from participating in politics for 10 years. The anti-democratic decision exposes the fact that sections of the ruling elite grouped around the military and monarchy continue to exert control over politics despite claims of a "return to democracy."

The MFP had previously campaigned for reforming Thailand's draconian *lèse-majesté* law, known as Section 112 of the Criminal Code. This included during last year's general election, which the party won with more than 14 million votes. After months of deliberation, the nine-member court ruled unanimously that its proposed reform amounted to an attempt to overthrow Thailand's monarchy through unconstitutional means. It also voted 8-1 that the MFP had taken actions that were hostile to the monarchy.

The court, appointed by the military following the 2014 coup, claimed: "Expressions of opinion toward legal amendments (of the *lèse-majesté* law) and the vote campaigns posed significant threats to national security."

The ruling expresses the military's determination to block any discussion of reforms as the country faces a growing economic crisis. The monarchy serves as the linchpin of Thailand's capitalist establishment, amid sharp tensions among the different factions of the bourgeoisie.

The proposed reforms were quite limited. They included an amendment that would allow only the Bureau of the Royal Household to file accusations of *lèse-majesté*. Presently, anyone may file such an accusation. The MFP also called for reducing sentences for those convicted under the law. Nearly 300 people have been charged with violating the law since the 2020 student-led protests that called for an end to military-dominated rule and reform of the monarchy. Conviction comes with a maximum

15-year jail sentence for each charge.

The Constitutional Court opened up the possibility for the MFP's dissolution in January, when it characterised these calls for reform as violating the 2017 constitution written by the military. Wednesday's ruling relied on Section 92 of the Political Parties Act, which states any party supposedly conducting itself in an unconstitutional manner "must" be dissolved.

Among the party leaders banned from politics are *de facto* MFP leader and member of parliament Pita Limjaroenrat, who stated after the dissolution order was announced: "We have no intention of treason, insurrection, or separating the monarchy from the country."

After his party's election victory last year, Pita was blocked from forming a government by the military-appointed Senate and faced phony charges of ethics violations that led to a temporary suspension as an MP. Formal party leader Chaithawat Tulathon and other executive committee members are now also barred from politics.

The bans cut the number of MFP members in parliament to 142, though it remains the largest single-party bloc in the National Assembly. The remaining members now have 60 days to join another party or face ejection from parliament. While some MPs could defect, a new party is set to be unveiled on Friday with MFP deputy leader Sirikanya Tansakun slated to be the new head.

This is not the first time the party has been dissolved. In 2020, the MFP's predecessor, the Future Forward Party, was similarly banned by the Constitutional Court on phony charges of violating the election law on political donations. The ruling helped fuel the student-led protests that year directed against the government of then Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, the leader of the 2014 military coup.

Calls for the MFP's dissolution were raised after the party emerged as the surprise winner of the 2023 general election. This victory demonstrated the hostility to the military felt by millions across Thailand after nearly two decades of coups, party dissolutions and violent attacks on protesters. Significantly, the Election Commission, another military-appointed body, last year called the accusations of *lèse-majesté* "groundless".

Unable to win an election, the right-wing sections grouped around the military have responded to the electoral success of so-called "progressive" parties by simply having them declared illegal.

This also extends to parties with which the military has joined in the ruling coalition led by the Pheu Thai Party (PTP). Current Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin from the PTP faces removal from office next week in a separate case over bogus ethics violations. The former prime minister and *de facto* head of the party, Thaksin Shinawatra, a long-time adversary of the military, has also been charged with *lèse-majesté*.

Neither the MFP nor the PTP are genuine defenders of democracy. Srettha has refused to comment on the MFP case, saying on Tuesday, "The executive branch is in no position to interfere with the justice process."

Furthermore, the MFP's reform campaign was an attempt to put a progressive face on a thoroughly bourgeois party, in order to corral the votes of people looking for an alternative to the military-backed parties. The latter speak for right-wing and traditional layers of the state, including the bureaucracy and monarchy, with their significant business interests, opposed to competition from newer and emerging sections of the bourgeoisie.

The MFP's reform agenda was not about democracy for the working class, but was meant to decentralise control of the economy that is centered around these traditional layers and thus open up more opportunities for weaker and newer sections of the bourgeoisie.

In the lead up to Wednesday's dissolution, the MFP did everything possible to downplay the significant attacks on democratic rights in Thailand. Claiming little would change if a new party had to be set up, Pita, doing the rounds of the Western media, stated in an interview published August 5 in the *Washington Post*, "Our politics is about substance and not so much about form."

Pita also met on August 2 with diplomats from 18 countries at the German embassy in an appeal for their support, speaking with representatives from the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Germany, Japan, and France. Pita no doubt presented

himself as a more reliable defender of imperialism's interests. In his *Washington Post* interview, he declared, "It's very hard for the Thai government to have legitimacy to engage Americans and Europeans."

The meeting prompted Prime Minister Srettha to warn against interference, claiming, "Thailand's judicial process is independent and is in line with international standards." Srettha's response demonstrates the nervousness that exists among the ruling elite that the court case could impact the balancing act Bangkok is conducting between Washington and Beijing.

In fact, there are sharp differences within the ruling class over whether Bangkok orients to China or the US. Washington is placing pressure on countries like Thailand to join in its war drive against Beijing.

The US State Department issued a short statement after Wednesday's ruling, saying Washington was "deeply concerned" by the decision, which "jeopardises Thailand's democratic progress and runs counter to the aspirations of the Thai people for a strong, democratic future."

US imperialism has no interest in democracy in Thailand or anywhere else. It has stoked a bloody war against Russia in Ukraine, while enabling Israel through political support and arms to conduct its barbaric war in Gaza. At home, the Biden administration has overseen the smashing of peaceful protests against Israeli genocide with police violence.

The MFP's dissolution is a warning to the working class and genuinely progressive youth. As economic conditions continue to deteriorate and the crisis of capitalism grows, the military will once again increasingly rely more openly on repression. Democratic rights cannot be defended through the Thai state or appeals to imperialism, but only through the fight to abolish capitalism on the basis of a socialist perspective.



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