Right-wing prime minister installed in Thailand

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Anutin Charnvirakul, from the right-wing Bhumjaithai Party (BJT), was officially appointed last Sunday as Thailand's new prime minister following his election by the House of Representatives on September 5.

The appointment of the third prime minister in just two years is an expression of the growing instability of the Thai political system. The two previous prime ministers were removed by the Constitutional Court on the bogus grounds of "ethical violations."

Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra was removed from office in late August on the basis that she had shown a "lack of unity" with the military over remarks she made in a leaked phone call with former Cambodian leader Hun Sen following a border skirmish.

The collapse of Thailand's unstable Pheu Thai-led coalition government quickly followed after several parties broke away. The coalition was formed after months of horse-trading in the wake of the 2023 election after the party that had won the most seats—the Move Forward Party—was blocked from forming government and later dissolved by the Constitutional Court.

In August last year, the court ousted Pheu Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin on trumped-up ethics violations. The Constitutional Court, which was stacked by the military following its 2014 coup, has routinely been used by the country's conservative elites to remove governments and dissolve parties on spurious grounds.

The BJT was founded in 2008 after a right-wing faction representing the rural bourgeoisie split from the Thai Rak Thai—the forerunner of Pheu Thai led by the multi-billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra. It has consistently aligned itself with military and royalist forces to prop up capitalist rule. It maintains its presence in parliament primarily through networks of brokers, vote buying and construction contracts.

Anutin is one of the wealthiest politicians in parliament, with declared assets of more than 4.3 billion baht ($US115 million) that include three private jets, two speed boats and a luxury residence in Bangkok.

He is the son of wealthy construction tycoon and ex-Prime Minister Chavarat Charnvirakul, who founded Sino-Thai Engineering & Construction (STECON) in 1952. Despite the BJT's close ties to the company, it obtained the Transport Ministry between 2019–2023, which oversaw the control of highways, rail and airports.

Anutin's previous ministerial posts include deputy prime minister and public health minister in the military-led government of Prayut Chan-o-cha, the 2014 coup leader, formed after the 2019 election. The election—the first since the coup—took place on the basis of a constitution and rules written by the military, and amid widespread allegations of vote rigging.

As health minister, Anutin oversaw the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. He scapegoated "dirty" tourists while delaying the rollout of vaccines, rejecting early offers from Pfizer and Moderna in favour of those of Siam Bioscience, a company owned by the monarchy. Only 10 percent of the population had been fully vaccinated in August 2021 at the height of the Delta surge, resulting in 300 deaths a day.

Anutin now heads a minority government lacking in popular support. Even after gathering the support of 11 other minor parties, his coalition can only muster 146 seats in the 500-seat lower house of parliament. These parties include Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) and United Thai Nation (UTN), which both derive from the

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2014 military junta and the party it established.

Anutin and his BJT have only been able to form government with the backing of the People's Party (PP)—the reincarnation of the dissolved Move Forward Party—which holds 151 seats and had pledged to block no-confidence motions and support the budget. In return, the BJT has promised to dissolve parliament within four months for a new general election, and to initiate the tortured process to revise the military-written constitution.

The Move Forward Party came to prominence amid the mass protests in 2020–21, particularly by young people, against the military junta, the 2019 rigged elections and the monarchy. Protesters demanded major democratic reforms, including the abolition of the draconian lèse majesté law, under which anyone deemed to be insulting the monarchy can be jailed for up to 15 years. Anutin was a particular target over his handling of the pandemic, with the hashtag #????????? (Oust Anutin) trending on Twitter.

Now the People's Party has helped the right-wing, pro-military and pro-monarchy BJT into office on vague promises of fresh elections and constitutional revision. The PP has embraced the BJT for the same reason that its predecessor meekly accepted being blocked from office in 2023 and then dissolved—it is terrified of mobilising mass opposition that would inevitably draw in support from workers and threaten the basis of bourgeois rule.

The People's Party, like Pheu Thai, is a capitalist party representing sections of big business whose interests are impeded by the political and economic domination of conservative layers of the ruling class centred on the military and monarchy. The PP traces its roots to the Future Forward Party (FFP)—also dissolved by the Constitutional Court—founded by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, a top executive of the Thai Summit Group, established by his father and the largest auto parts manufacturer in the country.

In explaining the decision to back the BJT, PP leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut said, "The party fears that if we abstain, no one will secure a majority, opening the door for someone outside the system to take power"—an obvious reference to another military coup.

In reality, by blocking the emergence of an oppositional movement of workers and youth, the PP is making another military coup *more* likely, not less. The collapse of the Pheu Thai coalition government, followed by the installation of the weak minority BJT government, only highlights the deep divisions in the ruling class amid a slowing economy, growing social crisis and the potential for major class struggles.

As has already been demonstrated over the past two years, the so-called progressive parties will quickly join hands with the right-wing parties of the military and monarchies to prop up capitalism and the tawdry façade of parliament amid rising social tensions. Their real fear is not of a military coup, which they will passively embrace, but the eruption of opposition in the working class.

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