

Thai government turns to war and nationalism ahead of general elections

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A fragile ceasefire between Thailand and Cambodia commenced on Saturday following weeks of intense border fighting that displaced large numbers of civilians and brought the two countries to the brink of a wider military confrontation.

Under the terms announced by Bangkok, the two countries will observe a 72-hour ceasefire period, after which—if Thailand judges the truce to be holding—it will return 18 Cambodian soldiers captured during clashes in July.

Troops on both sides, however, remain deployed in forward positions, and none of the underlying territorial or political disputes that fuelled the conflict have been resolved.

The ceasefire comes amid preparations for Thailand's snap general election, scheduled for February 8, 2026, following the dissolution of parliament weeks earlier. While the truce has temporarily halted large-scale exchanges, it is highly likely hostilities will be renewed.

Yesterday the Thai army accused Cambodia of flying some 250 drones into Thai territory near the border in a possible breach of the ceasefire.

Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul confirmed Thailand's acceptance of the ceasefire while emphasising its conditional and provisional character. Thailand, he insisted, had acted only in "retaliation" and would resume military operations should it deem its "sovereignty" threatened. "We are not the aggressor," Anutin declared, underscoring that the military remains on high alert and that the truce rests entirely on Thailand's assessment of Cambodian actions.

The ceasefire has brought to a pause what had become the most sustained escalation of border fighting between the two countries in more than a decade. The

clashes involved artillery exchanges, air strikes and armoured deployments across multiple sections of the disputed frontier. Casualty figures remain contested, but at least several dozen civilians and soldiers have been killed on both sides, with many more wounded. The number of civilians forced to flee are estimated at around 700,000 to over one million people, far exceeding the scale seen during the 2008–2011 Preah Vihear conflict and creating a humanitarian emergency that remains unresolved despite the truce.

The snap election was triggered by Anutin's dissolution of parliament in mid-December. His administration has been from the outset an unstable, minority government with the border conflict sharpening contradictions within parliament. Elections had previously been touted for March, but the dissolution reset the constitutional timetable, allowing the poll to be brought forward to early February under conditions chosen by the state.

Throughout the escalation with Cambodia, the Thai military played a central role. Key decisions on troop deployments, air operations and security measures were taken outside parliamentary channels. There were no votes authorising military action, no public hearings on civilian casualties or displacement and no sustained opposition challenge over costs or objectives.

Thailand's defence budget—already among the largest in Southeast Asia at approximately \$US5.7 billion annually, compared to Cambodia's roughly \$US1.3 billion—has been supplemented by at least 5 billion baht (around \$US135 million) in discretionary spending. This was approved with minimal scrutiny even as social spending remains tightly constrained and living conditions deteriorate for broad layers of the population.

The ceasefire was announced without any confirmed

role played by external powers. Despite public claims by Donald Trump, neither Thailand nor Cambodia credited the United States with mediating the truce. Posting on Truth Social, Trump declared he was “proud to help,” echoing earlier boasts in which he ludicrously claimed to have “ended eight wars.” His previous claims of having brokered a ceasefire between Thailand and Cambodia in October collapsed within weeks as fighting resumed, exposing the hollowness of his self-promotion as a global peacemaker.

China likewise played no role in brokering the current ceasefire but has begun hosting diplomatic talks with both governments in Yunnan province on Monday. The absence of decisive involvement by either Washington or Beijing underscores the unstable and ad hoc character of the ceasefire, which reflects immediate military calculations by Bangkok and Phnom Penh rather than a durable diplomatic settlement.

The February election will be conducted amid a campaign of nationalist and militarist agitation. Anutin leads the conservative Bhumjaithai Party, which has emerged as a major supporter of the military and monarchy.

Bhumjaithai backed the 2014 military coup and played a central role in entrenching the junta-drafted 2017 constitution, designed to insulate the armed forces and palace from popular opposition. Through its domination of the unelected Senate—installed via an opaque and widely criticised selection process—the party wields decisive influence over legislation and the selection of the prime minister, irrespective of the popular vote.

The Pheu Thai Party, long promoted as a democratic alternative, bears direct responsibility for the present crisis. After the 2023 election, in which the Move Forward Party won the largest share of the vote, Pheu Thai entered into an alliance with pro-military parties to form a government, blocking the popular mandate and legitimising the military-monarchist apparatus. This betrayal paved the way for Anutin’s rise and confirmed that Pheu Thai is a party of the ruling class, committed to preserving capitalist stability above all else.

The People’s Party, successor to Move Forward, is also contesting the election, seeking to exploit the anger of youth and workers who rejected military rule and corruption in 2023. Despite its reformist rhetoric, the

party has aligned itself with the government on the border conflict, endorsing military actions as acts of “self-defence.” At the same time, its own MPs continue to face the threat of disqualification or lifetime bans from parliament over their advocacy of reform to the lèse-majesté laws, underscoring the profoundly anti-democratic conditions under which the election is being held.

The election is unfolding amid a deepening social and economic crisis. Thailand’s export-dependent economy—exports account for roughly 65 percent of GDP—has been hit by the global slowdown and intensifying trade tensions. Manufacturing sectors such as electronics and automotive production have shed jobs, household debt has climbed to nearly 90 percent of GDP and real wages have stagnated for years. Youth unemployment remains elevated, particularly among university graduates.

The ceasefire with Cambodia has not altered the fundamental character of the border dispute. As previous analysis has shown, the conflict has nothing to do with defending the interests of ordinary people, but is a political instrument used by both regimes to divert attention from austerity, repression and economic decline, while manoeuvring within the sharpening confrontation between the United States and China across the Indo-Pacific.

None of the parties contesting the February poll offers a way forward for working people. All accept the capitalist framework, the authority of the monarchy and the dominance of the military. All have endorsed, explicitly or implicitly, the resort to militarism. The election is designed to absorb social opposition into a controlled parliamentary process while preparations continue for intensified repression and, if required, the suspension of democratic forms altogether.



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