

Springtime for Thai Democracy?

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After years of mass mobilizations, Sunday will put the country's electoral system to the test

The last few years have been turbulent in Thai politics. Following the period of relative calm after the 2014 coup that overthrew popular social reformer Yingluck Shinawatra, a massive youth movement for democracy and social reform began popping up around the country, before the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown provided the government with a pretext to shut it down.

Yet even if the protests have disappeared, the deeper questions raised have not. Now, with the Thai general elections scheduled for 14 May, political observers and citizens alike are asking: will they lead the country out of its ongoing political strife and establish a functioning democracy, or extend the backslide into authoritarianism and political patronage?

Two Decades of Political Strife

Thailand's election takes place against the backdrop of over 20 years of political reform and counter-reform flanked by mass mobilizations from left and right.

In 2014, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Commander in Chief of the Thai Royal Army, seized power from the civilian government of Yingluck Shinawatra. Thailand's thirteenth coup d'état since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, its proponents claimed their mission was to resolve political conflicts raging among the Thai people and bring peace back to the country. Some political scholars viewed the coup as an attempt by the Thai elite to assume power in time to [manage the dynastic transition](#) from King Rama IX to Rama X and deal with the so-called "[Thaksin regime](#)".

The "Thaksin regime" refers to populist politician Thaksin Shinawatra, leader of the banned Thai Rak Thai Party and Prime Minister of Thailand from 2001–2006, before being deposed in a military coup on 19 September 2006. The coup failed to weaken his popularity, however, and the successor to the Thai Rak Thai Party, the People's Power Party, was elected in 2007, sparking counter-mobilizations by the so-called "Yellow Shirts" led by Sondhi Limthongkul, who occupied Thailand's main airport and the parliament to prevent the government from running the country.

The Thai Constitutional Court subsequently ordered the dissolution of the People's Power Party, and the Democrat Party led by Abhisit Vejjajiva established a new government, widely seen as supported by the military and the Thai elite. As a result, [massive rallies sprang up](#) organized by the so-called "Red Shirts", in support of new elections and against what they viewed as Vejjajiva's illegitimate government. Nevertheless, his government ordered the dispersal of the Red Shirts, leaving more than 90 people dead — reflecting a general [culture of impunity](#) in Thai politics, as it was by no means the first time that the government had used violence the silence political dissidents.

The next election saw the Pheu Thai Party led by Shinawatra's sister Yingluck Shinawatra win a majority and enter government in 2011. Yet, the government's plan to pass an amnesty bill for political prisoners was seen as opening the door to Thaksin Shinawatra's return to Thai politics, and sparked another round of protests, this time driven by the People's Democratic Reform Committee

(PDRC) led by Suthep Thaugsuban, a former leader of the Democrat Party.

The committee aimed to eliminate Shinawatra's influence from Thai politics by deposing the incumbent Pheu Thai government and forming an unelected "People's Council" to oversee political reforms. The protest was also seen as paving the way for General Prayut Chan-o-cha to seize power, which he has now held for eight years.

Democracy under the Junta

During his first five years as prime minister and leader of the NCPO, Prayut centralized power and expanded the bureaucracy to push through his policies. The junta also favoured big Thai capital and helped to insulate it from competition.

The junta exercised its power under section 44 of the interim constitution, drafted by the junta itself, to dismiss elected local mayors and appoint full-time civil servants to replace them. Later, those local mayors were re-appointed and local elections were not allowed. Consequently, Thai local politics were frozen and democracy at the local level was destroyed. Local politicians became civil servants who had to [listen to the junta's orders](#) rather than the voices of local residents.

The NCPO forced a referendum in 2017 to back a draft constitution written by an army-appointed committee. The 2017 constitution has had a significant influence on Thai politics ever since, granting senators nominated by the NCPO the authority to appoint the prime minister. It also instituted a new voting method, which was used for the first time in the 2019 election.

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Military and government security officers monitored the polls despite the existence of an independent Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) tasked with conducting the elections. Political activists and dissidents hostile to the NCPO were intimidated and arrested. Most importantly, the NCPO used its power to intimidate many politicians into joining their party, the Palang Pracharath Party, created to lend the military junta a parliamentary face.

Ultimately, the Pheu Thai Party won the most votes and gained 137 seats in the lower house of the National Assembly, but did not form a government. Instead, the Palang Pracharath Party, which inherited power from the NCPO, received 97 seats in the lower house and successfully established a government by nominating Prayut Chan-o-cha as prime minister, supported by the 250 senators appointed by the junta.

Both of the parties that campaigned against the junta before the 2019 general election ultimately chose to cooperate with the Palang Pracharath Party, turning its government into a coalition with 17 parties.

Future Forward, the Youth Movement, and COVID-19

Perhaps the most significant event of the election, however, was the emergence of the Future Forward Party. Uniting progressives and political activists, the Future Forward Party's main goal was to offer Thai society a political alternative and restore parliamentary democracy. The party received 81 seats in the House of Representatives, most of which came from party-list votes.

However, the Constitutional Court ordered the dissolution of the party soon thereafter, on 21 February 2020, claiming that party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit had violated electoral

laws by lending money to the party.

The ruling stoked dissatisfaction among many young people who supported Future Forward, and mass mobilizations calling for the government's resignation soon popped up around the country. Thailand saw a revival of the ideology of the People's Party, which staged a peaceful revolution against the absolute monarchy in 1932, and widespread criticism of the role of the monarchy in Thai society today. According to [Mob Data Thailand](#), 1,516 protests were held, not only in Bangkok but all over the country, especially in large provinces in the North and Northeast.

The protests reminded many Thai political scientists of the student uprising on 14 October 1973 against the military dictatorship of anti-communist Thanom Kittikachorn. Indeed, the Thai youth movement was not limited to the country, but saw itself in solidarity with the mobilizations in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Myanmar, leading to the popularization of the phrase "Milk Tea Alliance".

Nevertheless, Prayut's government soon cracked down, using security forces to disperse the demonstrations and intimidate the leaders and their family members. Soon thereafter, the government implemented emergency decrees to curb the spread of COVID-19. Later, however, after the pandemic was resolved and the government announced the opening of the country, this decree was continuously renewed. The government claimed it was to control the outbreak of COVID-19, but in fact, it served as a pretext to control the youth.

The pandemic lockdowns also had severe economic consequences and forced many businesses to shut down. Many unemployed workers returned to their hometowns outside Bangkok. Despite the government's immense power during the pandemic, many Thai citizens viewed the provision of COVID-19 treatment as inadequate and ineffective. People with money and connections to the authorities received good medical care and access to high-quality vaccines and medicines.

This blatant disparity added more fuel to the protest movement's fire, but the mobilizations failed to force the government to step down. Nevertheless, it did [broaden the space in Thai society](#) to talk more freely about the monarchy, discuss the rights and freedoms of citizens in politics including dreaming the welfare state, and the rights of the growing LGBTQ community.

Can the Opposition Stage a Comeback?

These developments make up the backdrop for the major election scheduled for 14 March 2023. Unlike the 2019 election, which used a form of mixed-member proportional representation with 350 constituency seats and the remaining 150 levelling seats, the electoral system was changed in a 2021 constitutional amendment, restoring the pre-2017 parallel voting system and removing the proportional representation mechanism.

Now, 400 out of 500 House of Representatives seats will be elected by first-past-the-post voting from single-member constituencies, while 100 party-list seats will be filled separately. Smaller parties have criticized the change because it benefits larger parties such as the ruling Palang Pracharath Party and the main opposition party, Pheu Thai, both of which supported the reform.

"No matter what happens on Sunday, Thai politics will never be the same."

The 2017 constitution stipulates that the 250 senators appointed by the junta still have the right to elect the prime minister, together with the 500 elected MPs. Thus, even if the Pheu Thai party elects the most MPs, its prime minister candidate may still fail to win more than half of 750 votes in the parliament — unless it can win enough votes to overrule the 250 senators.

The Pheu Thai Party is campaigning on a populist platform focused on solving poverty and

agricultural problems, such as giving 10,000 Thai baht to all citizens aged 16 and over, financial grants to low-income families, and a 3-year moratorium on farmers' debts. These policies aim at the party's rural electoral base, which is absolutely crucial to its success.

With the Future Forward Party banned, many of its MPs and politicians have switched to the Move Forward party. The party has nominated a number of candidates to compete in local elections in hopes of building up a local base. In the recent elections to the Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO), 57 of its candidates were elected PAO council. In municipal elections, Move Forward elected 16 mayors.

The party has done an outstanding job investigating corruption and the work of the government, while many Move Forward members have also focused on human rights issues, gender diversity, decentralization, the welfare state, political prisoners, and assisting students facing government repression. The party has refused to cooperate with the government, and has consequently become very popular among young Thai voters, the middle class in Bangkok, and many voters who support democracy and the welfare state. Current polling suggests party leader Phitha Limjaroenrat may even overtake the Pheu Thai Party's candidates.

Meanwhile, the ruling Palang Pracharath Party has changed dramatically. General Prawit Wongsuwan rose to the leadership of the party and was nominated as its candidate for prime minister. General Prayut, nominated by the party in the last round of elections, split to join a new party, the Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party, where he is again running for prime minister. The two parties seem to have divided their votes in the first round of pre-elections. However, his new party must have more than 25 MPs in order for him to be eligible for the nomination. Should it fail to meet that threshold, his political career may be over.

Pre-Election Anxieties

These days in Thailand, all eyes are on the work of the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT). A number of concerns have been raised regarding the commission's independence and fairness, especially after it announced that it would not display real-time vote counting results. More than 7 million ballots have been printed, but the pre-election registration system collapsed, robbing many people of the ability to register. In pre-election voting on 7 May, there were serious questions about whether ballots cast in advance would be safely stored until vote counting begins.

These incidents have made many voters in Thailand very concerned that the work of the ECT will could be undermined in the upcoming election.

It is difficult to predict what Thailand's next government will look like. For that, we will have to wait for the election results. Thailand may get a minority government if the current ruling party gains less than 250 MPs, but manages to appoint a prime minister with the support of the 250 senators. Alternatively, the opposition parties may get more than 376 seats, allowing them to appoint the prime minister and become an effective majority government. The big question, however, is: will the elite allow that to happen?

No matter what happens on Sunday, Thai politics will never be the same. This election will bring to the fore the fierce clash between the conservative forces, who want to maintain their power, and the democrats who want to lead the country forward. It will either show how strong the status quo system of political patronage is, or prove that the majority of Thai people want to break out of the old way of doing things. Either way, these forces will shape the future of Thailand and ultimately determine the class nature of the new government.

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