

After Thai elections, it is time for Taiwan to change its diplomatic approach

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IN A RECENT [interview with Taiwan's Central News Agency](#), Thailand's Move Forward party leader Pita Limjaroenrat stated that Taiwan inspired a number of his policy platforms.

Move Forward was the clear winner of Thai elections earlier this month. The election proved a powerful rebuke to the military junta and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, in that pro-democracy parties such as Move Forward and Pheu Thai won the majority of seats in the Thai legislature. To this extent, it proved a further surprise that Move Forward, the more progressive of the two major pro-democracy parties, was the strongest performer in Thai elections.

Nevertheless, the dust has not yet settled for the Thai elections. Pro-democracy parties in Thailand clearly have the popular mandate, showing that the public at large is tired of rule by the Thai military government that took power in a coup in 2014. Although the military junta claimed to hand power to a civilian government in 2019, this was still ultimately led by military leaders such as Prayut.



PITA LIMJAROENRAT. PHOTO CREDIT: SIRAKORN LAMYAI/WIKICOMMONS/CC BY-SA 4.0

Public dissatisfaction previously took the form of protests that broke out in 2020. The protests were, to a large extent, youth-led and expressed open dissatisfaction with the institution of the monarchy. Given strong lese majeste laws in Thailand enforced by the military government, criticizing the monarchy or arguing against its existence has historically been taboo.

After the election results, Pita is in a position to become prime minister. However, what government emerges from the elections may be a coalition government. Moreover, it is feared that the military government may simply launch another coup to try and overturn the election results, rather than share power. Either way, the upper house of the Senate remains controlled by military-appointed

politicians, and this could still result in Pita not being able to become prime minister

In the interview, Pita praised Taiwan's democratic successes, including pioneering the use of digital platforms for democracy. Pita also praised Taiwan's tax lottery system, though this was actually instituted in authoritarian times by the KMT. Pita likewise expressed interest in cooperation with Taiwan on semiconductors and stated that he hoped to navigate US-China tensions in a way that ultimately benefited Thailand.

Pita and the MFP have clearly made outreach to Taiwan in this way. The ball is in Taiwan's court, then, how to respond.

In past years, the Tsai administration has been hesitant to express support for pro-democracy political forces that take power in Southeast Asia. This occurs despite the fact that one of the signature initiatives of the Tsai administration, particularly during its first term, was the New Southbound Policy (NSP). The NSP called for building stronger political and economic ties between Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries in order to reduce Taiwan's economic dependency on China.

Nevertheless, despite that Taiwan has staked out a claim for itself as an Asian democracy, in contrast to China, many of the countries that Taiwan would seek to strengthen ties with under the NSP are countries led by authoritarian military juntas. And, even when pro-democracy actors that have common values with Taiwan come to power, the Tsai administration may be reluctant to throw its weight behind them for fear of offending military regimes that may eventually come back to power. Just today, for example, [the Tsai administration congratulated Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) on a re-election victory that meant more than twenty years in office.

Of course, even if Thailand is the major regional exception, military governments in the region tend to favor China because of the greater similarity in political systems versus western powers. But this hesitancy to openly support pro-democracy political parties reflects cautiousness on the part of the Tsai administration, returning to Taiwan's marginalization as unacknowledged by the majority of the world's countries. As such, Taiwan has historically further been cautious of anything that might damage relations with other countries—even with those controlled by military regimes.



TSAI ING-WEN. PHOTO CREDIT: TSAI ING-WEN/FACEBOOK

Yet one notes that relations between Taiwan and the international world have strengthened in past years, with Taiwan's lack of formal recognition no longer proving to be an obstacle to relations with world powers. In fact, as seen with visits by former US and UK government officials, [such as former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, former US National Security Advisor John Bolton, or former UK Prime Minister Liz Truss, visiting Taiwan is seen as a way to keep in the international limelight.](#)

This illustrates the heft that Taiwan currently has in international political discourse. This also explains why politicians of a variety of stripes are currently in such a rush to visit Taiwan.

In this way, Taiwan commands a presence on the international stage now that could make weighing in on Thai elections significant. Indeed, this is not only political, but also economic, seeing as the world is newly cognizant of its significant reliance on Taiwanese semiconductors.

Time seems overdue for a change in Taiwan's diplomatic outreach then. With the Move Forward Party having made the first move, Taiwan could affirm ties-building ties with certainly a more reliable ally than the Thai military government, rather than putting all one's eggs in the basket of authoritarian political actors that one shares little in common with in terms of values. And, in this way, while Taiwan would stand to solidify ties with a new ally, this could also have a positive effect in using Taiwan's diplomatic heft to pressure the Thai military government to avoid drastic courses of action that would lead to bloodshed and the overturning of democratic freedoms.

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P.S.

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