

# Thailand's Conservative Old Guard Has Snuffed Out the Popular Demand for Change

Sunday 3 September 2023, by [TEERAKOWITKAJORN Kriangsak](#) (Date first published: 29 August 2023).

**May's election in Thailand was a crushing defeat for its conservative bloc and a triumph for the progressive Move Forward Party. But the conservatives have used an undemocratic political framework to exclude the party and maintain their grip on power.**

This year's general election in Thailand resulted in victory for the Move Forward Party (MFP), an avowedly progressive, left-of-center force that advocates for comprehensive reforms and curbs on the Thai monarchy's political influence. The MFP took 38 percent of the vote and won 151 of the 500 seats in Thailand's House of Representatives. The surprising electoral outcome ignited optimism among the Thai public, with the MFP becoming a beacon of hope for those yearning for meaningful social change.

But the MFP's efforts to form a government after the election were successfully blocked thanks to a political framework that Thailand's military government put in place as a check on democracy. The MFP's former ally, the Pheu Thai Party, broke ranks to nominate its own candidate for prime minister, the property tycoon Srettha Thavisin. Srettha has now taken office with conservative support, while the MFP remains locked out of power.

This turn of events raises a fundamental question: Can Thailand's progressive movement genuinely place its trust in the idea of working through the existing political system? While developments in Thai politics will continue to unfold, it is now natural to suspect that conservative groups may have strategically shaped the election process in order to portray the results as a reflection of public desires. In reality, however, the outcome, which is now slipping from the grasp of the MFP, has ended up serving as an endorsement of the party's preconceived agenda.

The postelection fallout has served to reinforce the conviction of Thai progressive activists that the transformation championed by the MFP is badly needed. However, an exclusive focus on parliamentary politics and legislation will not be enough to overcome the obstacles and achieve transformative change. In the wake of the MFP's setback, there is a need for self-reflection and internal work within Thailand's progressive movement, with counterhegemonic struggles to challenge the dominance of both traditional and liberal elites.

## A New Political Force

The MFP and its predecessor, the Future Forward Party (FFP), have followed a distinct approach in articulating the grievances of those yearning for genuine change in Thailand. This has won them support from segments of the Thai population who feel marginalized or underrepresented in the current political landscape.

The MFP's triumph in the general election expressed a resounding call for political transformation. The party's platform strongly resonated with popular movements and activist groups of young people, driven by three key points. To begin with, the MFP advocated for the reform of Thailand's

social welfare system to address long-standing issues of inequality that have been fueling public discontent and protests.

**Table 1: Thailand general election, 2019**

<i>Party</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Seats</i>
Palang Pracharath	23.34	116
Pheu Thai	21.92	136
Future Forward	17.34	81
Democrat Party	10.92	53
Bhumjaithai	10.33	51
Thai Liberal	2.29	10
Chart Thai Pattana	2.16	10

*500 seats in the House of Representatives, 251 needed for majority; 19 other parties won at least one seat.*

**Table 2: Thailand general election, 2023**

<i>Party</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Seats</i>
Move Forward	38.01	151
Pheu Thai	28.86	141
United Thai Nation	12.55	36
Bhumjaithai	3	71
Democrat Party	2.44	25
Prachachart	1.59	9
Palang Pracharath	1.42	40

*500 seats in the House of Representatives, 251 needed for majority; 11 other parties won at least one seat.*

Secondly, its call for the dismantling of monopolies, such as those in the brewing industry, aligned with the demands of grassroots activists for a fairer and more dynamic economic landscape. There was a strong focus on confronting the influence of capitalists who use access to royal patronage to wield economic power, such as the handful of tycoons who control the Thai beer industry. Lastly and most notably, the MFP took a vocal stance against the remnants of authoritarian rule, which have historically been buttressed by the military and the monarchy.

The MFP's policy agenda set it apart from other parties. Reforms that the party calls for include the elimination of mandatory conscription, the decentralization of provincial administrations, and the legalization of same-sex marriage. The MFP's radical stance toward the monarchy and the military also distinguishes it from parties like Pheu Thai, formed by supporters of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The success of the MFP in an electoral system that was designed to hinder the success of democratic forces is particularly significant. Those who support a similar agenda to the MFP in other Asian countries have thus been following developments in Thailand very closely.

The MFP's relationship with its supporters is more dynamic and interactive than the traditional patron-client dynamic established between Thai parties and their electorates. We can attribute the party's success in urban areas, particularly in Bangkok, to its appeal to young and educated urbanites and its effective use of social media mobilization.

The MFP leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, is forty-two years old and comes from an elite background: some of his relatives have worked as government advisers in the past, including his father, and he was educated in the United States at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government and MIT's Sloan School of Management. A [profile](#) in the *New York Times* that was published after May's general election captured some of Pita's political and cultural reference points:

He said he admires José Alberto “Pepe” Mujica Cordano, the former president of Uruguay, who was tortured and imprisoned during the country's military dictatorship. He is reading “It's OK to Be Angry About Capitalism” by Senator Bernie Sanders. Some of his favorite bands are Metallica, The Strokes, and Rage Against the Machine.

## **Two Camps**

During the 2023 general election, analysts classified Thai political parties in terms of two overarching categories: the prodemocracy camp and the promilitary camp. The prodemocracy camp encompassed parties that positioned themselves in stark opposition to the military-backed government. Prominent groups within this camp included the MFP as well as Pheu Thai and its spin-off party, Thai Sang Thai. These parties asserted their unequivocal refusal to collaborate with the civil-military factions led by Palang Pracharath and Ruam Thai Sang Chart.

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From an ideological standpoint, it is fair to say that the majority of parties based their campaign strategies on free-market principles and paternalist populism. When it came to the monarchy and the *lèse-majesté* law that protects it from scrutiny, however, the MFP emerged as a distinct anomaly.

As well as being the only party to explicitly champion reforms to the *lèse-majesté* law, the MFP also called for the reshaping of the political landscape through the drafting of a new constitution following the elections. The MFP's stance on these issues isolated it from other parties, the majority of which upheld conservative positions that perpetuate the existing status quo.

MFP candidates and members represent a wide spectrum of backgrounds, ranging from those who are affiliated with broader movements like the We Fair Network, which calls for social democratic policies, to independent trade unionists as well as influencers and social entrepreneurs. What brings them together is their collective discontent toward the military-backed government.

## **The Progressive Movement**

The MFP has roots in the youth activism of the New Democracy Movement (NDM), which challenged the Thai system of government in the [protests of 2020-21](#). This was an unprecedented series of demonstrations that were sparked off when the Constitutional Court ordered the dissolution of the MFP's predecessor, the FFP, in 2019.

The protesters saw the court's ruling as politically motivated and called for the removal of Prayuth Chan-o-cha from his position as prime minister. Their core demands revolved around three main issues: the ousting of Prayuth, the drafting of a new constitution, and an end to the prosecution of activists.

The [big rally](#) on September 19, 2020 at Thammasat University's Rangsit campus played a vital role in developing momentum for the protests, intensifying calls for reforms of the monarchical system. Criticisms of the monarchy grew increasingly audacious, while the government responded by deploying riot police and using forceful tactics, with arrests that primarily targeted young protesters.

As the prodemocracy movement expanded, its decentralized nature led to a divergence in terms of demands and strategies. While the core groups remained dedicated to removing Prayuth and upholding the three primary demands, other, more peripheral factions focused on more radical objectives, aiming to curtail the king's authority and abolish the *lèse-majesté* laws.

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Despite the movement's sustained energy and growth, the varying emphasis placed on demands resulted in a lack of consensus about the next steps to be taken. Although the protests concluded without having achieved any of the movement's demands, they resulted in a radical change of perspective toward the nation's most influential institution, the monarchy, and its intricate connection with the political landscape. This was reflected in the MFP's election results and the ongoing countermovement that followed.

Prominent NDM activists have assumed important positions within the FFP and the MFP. However, the MFP's links with social movements are still haphazard and rely on personal connections. The same point holds true for the party's relationship with trade unions. The [labor movement](#) in Thailand has traditionally had a tendency toward undemocratic practices in its organizational culture, and its leaders have had close ties with Thai conservative parties. While some trade unionists have joined the progressive movement, they have mainly contributed as individuals.

## **Barriers to Change**

The MFP's surprising performance in the general election encouraged a wave of optimism, even among those who had previously been skeptical about the party's chances of success. But despite its victory, the MFP still faced staunch opposition from entrenched conservative forces that are resistant to change. Those forces vehemently uphold the position of the monarchy against those calling for a more egalitarian society.

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In theory, the MFP and Pheu Thai should have possessed a clear majority after the election, with a combined vote share of almost 67 percent and 292 out of 500 seats in the House of Representatives, allowing them to nominate their preferred candidate as prime minister. However, they also had to reckon with the power of the unelected Senate, whose members were appointed by the military government. Under the framework established by the military, a prime minister needs 376 votes from the two houses of parliament, and only a handful of senators were willing to support the MFP leader, Pita.

A considerable portion of Thai society appears willing to sacrifice democracy in defense of the

monarchy it cherishes. The MFP wants to encourage open discussion on the lèse-majesté law, while the conservatives are determined to preserve the existing constraints. The fear of change runs much deeper than concerns about protecting the monarchy. Conservative factions saw Pita's candidacy for the role of prime minister as a challenge not only to the authority of the monarchy but also to deeply ingrained social norms and traditions within families and workplaces.

In a bid to overcome the parliamentary roadblocks, MFP supporters tried to mobilize in the streets. But the urban progressive movement as a whole seemed to have been perplexed and largely demobilized, putting faith in the political process, and trusting that Thailand would return to a state of normality after the elections. This raises the issue of how effective that movement can be if it relies solely on parliamentary politics and legislation.

Since the election was held on May 14, Thai politics has undergone significant shifts. The MFP not only struggled to form a governing coalition, but also appeared to be inadvertently implicated in the orchestrated plans of both conservative and liberal elites.

### **Pheu Thai's Conservative Turn**

After two unsuccessful attempts to secure approval for Pita as prime minister, Pheu Thai distanced itself from the MFP and opted instead to align with promilitary parties. This strategic realignment, which Pheu Thai leaders have presented as an attempt to resolve the nation's political deadlock, once again underscores the deeply ingrained resistance to change within the sphere of Thai parliamentary politics.

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There have been sporadic rallies and demonstrations intended to pressure Pheu Thai's course of action. Yet Thailand's politicians have remained firm in their refusal to heed the calls from the streets.

A recent development has brought one of the most momentous twists in Thai politics for decades with the return of Thaksin Shinawatra from exile. This move coincided with the approval of Pheu Thai's candidate Srettha Thavisin as prime minister and dealt a significant blow even to Thaksin's Red Shirt supporters. Although Thaksin was taken into custody, it is widely suspected that there has been a private deal between Pheu Thai and the conservative establishment, with a reduced prison sentence for the former prime minister in return for helping see off the challenge from the MFP.

Thaksin's recent actions, along with those of Pheu Thai and the entire political apparatus, have once more underlined the significance of the MFP's existence in the political arena. However, the inability of the MFP to overcome the resistance of the conservative bloc underlines the limitations of its approach.

While the party may indeed give voice to emerging political and social currents in Thailand, it is still largely grounded in the perspectives of the urban, educated middle class and lacks meaningful representation of organic intellectuals who come directly from the Thai working class. Moreover, electoral victories alone cannot bring about lasting social change when the existing institutions are designed to block such change.

The wider movement needs to engage more seriously with an approach based on community organizing, which would create more space for leaders to emerge from working-class communities

and move away from the domination of middle-class urbanites. The work of challenging authoritarianism should also involve questioning and subverting the underlying ideologies that perpetuate inequality and the concentration of power — even if that means scrutinizing the role of liberal elites within the MFP itself, as well as reconsidering our deeply ingrained faith in the transformative potential of electoral democracy.

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