

2023 Thai General Election: The Rise of the Opposition

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Abstract

Thailand's general election will be held on May 14. It is time for the Thai people to decide whether they want to stay with the pro-military government led by coup maker General Prayut Chan-o-cha or go for a different way. Despite the undemocratic constitution that favors pro-military parties, the recent trends suggest that the two main opposition parties, the Pheu Thai Party and the Move Forward Party, are likely to win by a landslide, which could result in a pro-democracy coalition government. For the Pheu Thai Party, past records and recent polls have proven that the party is invincible as it wins the most parliamentary seats in every general election and is likely to win again in the upcoming election. On the other hand, the popularity of the Move Forward Party and its leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, has skyrocketed thanks to a clear political stance, impressive policies that hope to bring about change, and great performance in policy debates. For these reasons, we could see a new government from the pro-democracy opposition, which would save Thailand from the legacy of the military regime.

The general election in Thailand is starting soon. The faith of Thailand will be decided on May 14 whether the country will escape the pro-military government. The Thai constitution which grants military-appointed senators a right to elect the Prime Minister has left little room for the current main opposition parties, the Pheu Thai Party and the Move Forward Party, to become the new government. However, the current trend suggests that the Thai people's will could overcome such quagmire as the expected votes toward the pro-democracy opposition in the upcoming election have significantly risen compared to the previous general election. This paper articulates the major opposition parties in the upcoming election and presents the situation during the election campaign in Thailand.

Observing today's trend

A recent poll by NIDA (National Institute of Development Administration)¹ shows that the two biggest opposition parties, the Pheu Thai Party and the Move Forward Party, are on the rise in terms of popularity. They are currently holding a strong lead over pro-military parties – PM General Prayut's United Thai Nation Party and General Prawit's Palang Pracharat Party – as well as other major current government parties such as the Democrat Party and the Bhumjaithai Party. The result of NIDA poll is also supported by Matchon Group Daily News online poll² and Nation poll,³ in which the Pheu Thai Party and the Move Forward Party are dominating the race. The 70:30 ratio of rating between the opposition and the government sides hints a high possibility that the new government will come from the opposition side.

Regarding individual popularity, the public support of coup maker General Prayut today is not the same compared to his boom in the 2019 general election when his political campaign “Want peace,

¹ NIDA Poll, “โพลแห่งแรกในประเทศไทย (Election 2023, 3rd NIDA poll),” (May 3, 2023).

https://nidapoll.nida.ac.th/survey_detail?survey_id=630

² “วิเคราะห์โพลเลือกตั้ง “มติชนXเดลินิวส์” ครั้งที่ 2 คาด “ก้าวไกล+เพื่อไทย” ได้ “แลนด์สไลด์” (Analyzing the second Matchon x Dailynews election poll, Move Forward + Pheu Thai get landslide votes),” Matchon Online (May 3, 2023).

https://www.matchon.co.th/politics/news_3956685

³ Nation-TV, “ผลสำรวจความคิดเห็น - เลือกตั้ง 66 อนาคตประเทศไทย (Poll – Election 2023).”

<https://election66.nationtv.tv/poll/?tab=2&zone=all>

choose Uncle Tu”⁴ was successful. The campaign displayed his aspiration to end long-lasting political conflicts in Thailand. His outstanding popularity at the time was also reflected by the highest popular votes of his former party, the Palang Pachatrat Party. Nevertheless, his individual popularity today is only 14.84%, a significant drop from 26.06% in the pre-2019 election.⁵

On the other hand, the popularity of his contenders from the opposition has been rising. According to NIDA poll, the popularity score of Pita Limjaroenrat, the PM candidate and leader of the Move Forward Party, has skyrocketed from 15.75% in March to 35.44% in early May. Meanwhile, the youngest daughter of former PM Thaksin Shinawatra and one of the three PM candidates of the Pheu Thai Party, Paethongtarn Shinawatra, is ranked second in the list with 29.20%. As young politicians, not only do they bring innovative ideas but also fresh vibes to Thai politics in which people are fed up with old-style political practices. The poll also indicates that the Thai public want change after the enduring nine-year reign under General Prayut since the coup in 2014.

The Pheu Thai Party, the invincible

History shows that the Pheu Thai Party is invincible when it comes to general elections. Since its foundation from antecedent Thaksin-established Thai Rak Thai Party to today’s incarnation under the name of the Pheu Thai Party, the party has never lost in any general election. In 2001, the Thai Rak Thai Party led by former PM Thaksin debuted with a dominant win of 248 MP seats out of 500. In its second run in the 2005 general election, the Thai Rak Thai Party achieved a landslide win of 377 seats resulting in the establishment of Thailand’s first ever single-party government. After the 2006 coup against PM Thaksin, the party was dissolved, but the new incarnation of the Thai Rak Thai Party under the name of the People’s Power Party won again in the 2007 general election. Later, the party was dissolved once again. Nevertheless, in the 2011 general election, Thaksin’s youngest sister Yingluck Shinawatra led the Pheu Thai Party to win a majority of 265

⁴ Uncle Tu is General Prayut’s nickname.

⁵ NIDA Poll, “โพลแห่งแรกในประเทศไทย (Election 2019),” (March 26, 2023).
https://nidapoll.nida.ac.th/survey_detail?survey_id=125

seats. The 2014 coup against her by General Prayut made the party inactive again under the military regime.

Ahead of the 2019 general election, many of Pheu Thai's distinguished members and former representatives were either forced or convinced to move to pro-military Palang Pracharat Party, making the Pheu Thai Party become weaker.⁶ Moreover, the introduction of a mixed member apportionment system (MMA) as a new electorate system in 2019 crippled the Pheu Thai Party's chance to win due to its weird parliamentary seat calculation and decreasing number of constituency seats from 400 to 350. In the new system, a big party like the Pheu Thai Party was at a significant disadvantage. Because of the possibility of the party's constituency seats exceeding the party's entitled seats, the Pheu Thai Party split into two parties: the main Pheu Thai Party and a minor party named the Thai Save the Nation Party, and competed in different constituencies. However, the latter was dissolved by the Constitutional Court who ruled that the party's nomination of Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya as the PM candidate was "hostile to the monarchy institution."⁷ Despite the new election rule and the loss of the Thai Save the Nation Party, the Pheu Thai Party still won the most seats in the House of Representatives in the 2019 general election with a total of 137 seats by constituencies alone. The constitutional amendment in 2021 has resulted in the change of the electorate system from MMA to a mixed member majoritarian system (MMM), which brings back the 400 constituency and 100 party-list seats in the upcoming election. Having been familiar with this rule, the Pheu Thai Party has a great chance to win more seats than in the previous election.

Albeit the nonstop repression and state-sponsored information operations against the Pheu Thai Party,⁸ the party remains popular

⁶ “เลือกตั้ง 2562: เพื่อไทย-ประชาธิปัตย์ เผชิญอดีตส.ส. แหกค่าย-ย้ายพรรคนับร้อย (Election 2019: Pheu Thai-Democrat face over a hundred of former MPs moving out),” BBC (November 27, 2018). <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-46353749>

⁷ Kocha Olarn and Helen Regan, “Thai party that nominated a princess for PM has been dissolved,” CNN (March 7, 2019). <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/07/asia/thailand-party-dissolved-intl/index.html>

⁸ Asia Centre, “State-Sponsored Online Disinformation: Impact on Electoral Integrity in Thailand,” (2023). <https://asiacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Sponsored-Online-Disinformation-Impact-on-Electoral-Integrity-in-Thailand.pdf>

among the Thais which can be seen by its consecutive wins in the general election. One of the reasons for the Pheu Thai Party's success is the focus on grassroots voters through populist policies such as the Universal Healthcare Coverage scheme (30-baht scheme) since the era of the Thai Rak Thai Party. Around 10 million poor Thai people at the time could not afford health insurance. However, thanks to the scheme, 96% of Thai citizens could access public healthcare.⁹ Other prominent policies are One Tambon, One Product (OTOP) and Village Fund. Some of the Thai Rak Thai Party's legacies are even implemented today. Toward the upcoming election, the Pheu Thai Party has tried to attract voters by announcing the brand-new "10,000 baht digital wallet" scheme which will give 10,000 baht digital vouchers to all Thai citizens aged 16 and above.¹⁰ With a high rating presented by the polls as well as their previous records, the Pheu Thai Party will likely win the upcoming general election and have the privilege to form the new government before any other parties.

The Move Forward Party, the rising star

The Move Forward Party, formerly the Future Forward Party, is another potential contender full of young new politicians and experienced experts hoping for a change in Thai politics through new policies and institutional reforms. This ambition as well as revolutionary political campaigns via social media had bought them success with a total of 81 seats in their first general election run in 2019. Economically, the party aims to stimulate the Thai economy through the Taiwan-inspired receipt lottery policy in the first 100 days. Politically, the party campaigns for revising the Article 112 lèse-majesté law as well as abolishing military conscription. Such policies really catch the attention of voters who want change for Thailand.

The party's popularity has sharply increased from 17.40% (constituency seats) and 17.15% (party-list seats) in March to 33.96% (constituency seats) and 35.36% (party-list seats) at the beginning of

⁹ “ปรากฏการณ์ “รัฐบาลพรรคเดียว” ไทยรักไทย ทำไมชนะถล่มทลาย 14 ปีก่อน (“one-party government,” how Thai Rak Thai won a landslide 14 years ago),” Thairath (March 14, 2019) <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/1519081>

¹⁰ “Pheu Thai pledges B10,000 handout for New Year,” Bangkok Post (April 7, 2023). <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2545245/pheu-thai-pledges-b10-000-handout-for-new-year>

May which puts the Move Forward Party second most popular party in the poll behind the invincible the Pheu Thai Party.¹¹ As mentioned earlier, the party's leader Pita is also doing great in terms of his individual popularity. Assistant Professor Suvicha Pouaree, Director of NIDA poll, points out one reason that makes the rise of Pita as well as the Move Forward Party is his excellent performance in the policy debates featured on television and other online platforms.¹² He has been able to explain what the party's key policies are, when they will be implemented, and where the budget is from. It seems that the Thai public are impressed with his skills in presenting key policies and answering questions on the stage. This corresponds with Thai political analyst Professor Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee who contends that Pita's debate appearance has greatly contributed to the boost of his own and the party's popularity.¹³

In addition, both analysts agree that a clear political standpoint of the Move Forward Party gains a lot of trust from liberal voters, especially amidst the severe political polarization between pro-military and anti-military supporters. During the election campaign, there is a rumor that the Pheu Thai Party would form a coalition government with General Prawit-led Palang Pracharat Party, hoping that General Prawit would help them reach 376 votes through military-appointed senate votes. As the Thai constitution requires the PM candidate to receive a majority vote from both 500 House of Representatives and 250 Senate, 376 becomes the magic number. When asked about the possibility to form a coalition with other parties, Pita announces clearly: "If there are Uncles, there won't be us," affirming that his party will remain in the opposition if the Pheu Thai Party coalesces with either General Prayut's United Thai Nation Party or General Prawit's Palang Pracharat Party. Since the sentence was announced, Pita's and his party's popularity have skyrocketed in most

¹¹ NIDA Poll, "โพลแห่งแรกในประเทศไทย (Election 2023, 3rd NIDA poll)," (May 3, 2023)

https://nidapoll.nida.ac.th/survey_detail?survey_id=630

¹² Thai PBS, "เปิดผลโพล เช็กคะแนนนิยม "โค้งสุดท้าย" เลือกตั้ง 2566 | คอบใจไทย | 3 พ.ค. 66 (Open the poll result, check popularity "the final stretch" Election 2023)," YouTube (May 3, 2023). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaVCLkrpq7w>

¹³ The Standard, "อ่านเกมจัดตั้งรัฐบาล หลังฝั่งเสรีนิยม เพื่อไทย-ก้าวไกล คะแนนโพลรวมทะลุ 70% (Analyzing the new government after the liberal side by Pheu Thai-Move Forward scores over 70% in the poll)," YouTube (May 4, 2023).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9xDWZzWalw&t=282s>

recent polls.

Assistant Professor Suvicha also finds that more than 75% of young Thai voters aged between 18-25 will vote for the Move Forward Party. Plus, in the upcoming election, there will be around 4 million first-time voters accounting for 7.64% of the total number of voters.¹⁴ As the Move Forward Party is popular among the youth because of its aspiration to bring change to the country, the growing number of first-time voters in the upcoming election will increase the party's odds of success.

Conclusion

If there is not any unexpected event like the dissolution of either the Pheu Thai Party or the Move Forward Party, we will likely see a new government from the opposition. Despite the undemocratic constitution and the Pheu Thai-Palang Pracharat rumor, recent polls and previous records suggest that the main opposition parties could possibly form a coalition government. There is also a scenario where the senate would refuse to vote for a PM candidate from the opposition, causing a deadlock in Thai politics. However, if the Pheu Thai Party, the Move Forward Party, and other pro-democracy parties combined can win as close as 376 parliamentary seats, the pressure will be on the senators whose term only remains a year. If things turn out according to the polls, the collaboration between the Pheu Thai Party and the Move Forward Party will prevent pro-military parties from having a majority of votes in the lower house, and hence save Thailand from the legacy of the military regime.

¹⁴ “10 จังหวัด First Time Voter สัดส่วนมากที่สุด ในการเลือกตั้ง 2566 (Top 10 provinces with most first-time voters in the 2023 election),” Voice TV (May 2, 2023).
<https://voicetv.co.th/read/yM13OUAF1>

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