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PERSPECTIVE

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Thailand's Changing Party Landscape

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- More than four years after the military coup of May 2014, Thailand has yet to set a firm date for an election. Speculation is mounting that current premier General Prayut Chan-ocha hopes to remain in office for some time to come.

- New election and party laws introduced in the wake of the 2017 constitution have created a hyper-regulated and extremely difficult context for politicians of all stripes.

- The ruling National Council for Peace and Order recently permitted the formation of new political parties. Of these, Phalang Pracharat and the Action Coalition for Thailand have close connections with the ruling junta. Future Forward has more in common with the pro-Thaksin camp.

- The two dominant political parties of the past twenty years, the Democrats and Phuea Thai, both face challenges in maintaining their support base. Longstanding Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva may be past his political prime. Phuea Thai has been struggling to agree on a new leader.

- There is every possibility that a post-election parliament will endorse General Prayut or another military figure to serve as prime minister. This would produce considerable frustration and fuel regional tensions, especially among voters from the populous North and Northeast.

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INTRODUCTION

After four years during which political activity was largely suppressed in the wake of the May 2014 coup, Thailand's ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) permitted the formation of new political parties from early 2018, and began signalling that an oft-postponed election may now be on the cards for 2019. The 2014 coup was staged following months of mass 'Bangkok shutdown' anti-government street protests that paralysed the Thai capital. A general election called in February 2014 by then-Prime Minister and Phuea Party Thai leader Yingluck Shinawatra was boycotted by the opposition Democrats, disrupted by protestors, and later annulled by the courts. The junta seized power on the basis that political polarization had proved calamitous for the nation, and proclaimed a goal of 'restoring national happiness'.

However, the evidence so far is that Thailand remains deeply divided between supporters of Yingluck and her still hugely influential brother Thaksin Shinawatra—ousted in the September 2006 military coup, and long in exile from the country—and conservatives who are broadly sympathetic towards the military, the Democrat Party, and the anti-Thaksin movement. The results of the 2016 referendum on the eventually adopted constitution mirrored the pattern of previous general elections: anti-government and implicitly pro-Thaksin sentiment was strongest in the populous North and Northeast, while pro-government strongholds included greater Bangkok and the Upper South.[1] Under these circumstances, General Prayut and the NCPO must be concerned that the next election will produce the 'wrong' result: the return of a pro-Thaksin government and a hostile backlash against that government in Bangkok. In order to avert this calamity, the NCPO has been trying to realign the Thai party system in order to generate a more favourable electoral outcome.

This paper draws on interviews conducted by the author with leading figures from all the political parties discussed, other than Phalang Pracharat, in July and August 2018. It argues that recent realignments of the party system do not yet offer a clear way forward from the longstanding pro- and anti-Thaksin divides that have polarized the country. There is a very real possibility that the new parliament will endorse General Prayut or another figure close to the military to serve as prime minister following the election, a scenario that could fuel popular frustrations and lead to another round of political crisis in Thailand.

RE-ENGINEERING THE PARTY SYSTEM

During the 1980s and 1990s, Thailand was governed by fractious multi-party coalitions, and characterised by rowdy no-confidence debates, rotating-door cabinets and frequently-called elections. No elected government ever completed a full four-year term, and prime ministers struggled to establish their authority. All this changed after the promulgation of the reformist 1997 Constitution, which strengthened executive authority and favoured the consolidation of larger parties. Since then, Thailand's politics has been dominated by two major parties, the Democrats and a pro-Thaksin party that has twice been banned and so has operated under three different names: Thai Rak Thai, Phalang Prachachon, and latterly Phuea Thai. Pro-Thaksin parties have decisively won every election since 2001. When the Democrats assumed power, between 1997 and 2001 and then from late 2008 to 2011, they did so only via backroom deals involving parliamentary defections. The Democrats have not convincingly won an election since 1986.

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Having initially supported the political aspirations of maverick police officer turned telecoms tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's monarchical network turned against the prime minister following his second landslide election victory in 2005. Since then, the royalist establishment has used a variety of means to block pro-Thaksin forces. Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in 2006, and Yingluck in 2014; and Thaksinite parties were abolished by the courts in 2007 and 2008. Both Thaksin and Yingluck went into exile to escape jail terms on controversial corruption-related charges. Protests held in Bangkok in 2010 by the Thaksin-aligned Red Shirt movement were violently suppressed by the military, whose soldiers shot dead dozens of unarmed civilians. None of these interventions did much to dent the popularity of the Thaksin side — especially amongst diehard supporters, many of them 'urbanized villagers' who typically live and work in and around Bangkok, but are registered to vote in the populous North and Northeast.[2]

Following the 2014 coup, the NCPO wanted not only to establish an electoral system that would reduce the dominance of Phuea Thai, but also to curtail the power of elected politicians more generally. The regime's legal advisors finally hit upon the rarely-used Mixed Member Apportionment (MMA) electoral system, whose adoption was expected to reduce the number of seats won by large parties and give an added boost to medium-sized parties.[3] The aim was to return to a pre-1997 system of weak multi-party coalitions. Such a system could be readily manipulated by the military and its conservative allies. The problem was that, apart from the well-worn and rather lacklustre Chart Thai Pattana and Bhumjaithai parties, there were really no medium-sized parties for MMA to boost. Hence the NCPO's open call for the formation of new parties in early 2018.

At the same time, as possible elections approach, all Thai political parties find themselves very tightly constrained by a host of restrictions and regulations. The NCPO's longstanding ban on political activity means that until now parties remain forbidden from engaging in campaigning or even holding meetings. Nor have they been able to select leaders or candidates. The junta has been preparing to lift some of these restrictions now that election-related legislation has received royal assent. Nevertheless, parties will be subject to a range of regulations concerning matters such as the number of members they must recruit, and the means by which membership is determined; party members will now need to pay dues. Any party that violates these regulations can be banned by the courts. The stakes are thus extremely high.

NEW PARTIES

Phalang Pracharat

Backed by current deputy prime minister and economic czar Dr Somkid Jatusripitak, one of the so-called 'Three Allies' (*Sam Mitr*),[4] Phalang Pracharat apparently aims to re-install Prayut as premier after the election. The party's main strategy is to buy up electable candidates, especially those from pro-Thaksin parties. Key party figures have travelled the country in concert with Prayut's mobile cabinet meetings, inviting former politicians to welcome the prime minister at high-profile events in Thaksin heartland locations such as Ubon Ratchathani in the Northeast. So far, only a handful of these potential candidates have come forward, many of them lacklustre figures whose political careers have failed to flourish. Some of them have been offered financial inducements to switch to the new party, whilst others have been

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allegedly promised unspecified 'assistance' in dealing with politically-related court cases. Despite its links with Somkid – a former Thaksin minister who is among the most credible figures in Prayut's government – the party feels like a throwback to the pre-Thaksin era, epitomising the culture of 'sucking up' well-worn politicians into new alliances that symbolises all the shortcomings of the Thai political system. The party's modus operandi appears to rely on allegedly gullible provincial voters backing recycled candidates on the basis of patronage rather than policies or principles. Even observers who are sympathetic to the NCPO and potentially willing to support Prayut's continuation in the premiership after the election find the predatory antics of the *Sam Mitr* distasteful. The party has been operating largely in the shadows, and leading Phalang Pracharat figures have given few interviews.

The Action Coalition for Thailand (ACT) [5]

This new party is backed by long-time Southern strongman Suthep Theuksuban, the former secretary general of the Democrat Party and powerful deputy prime minister during the Abhisit government of 2008-2011. Suthep officially broke with the party when he assumed the role of 'Lung Kamnan', the celebrated *de facto* leader of the 2013-14 protests mounted by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) that helped create the conditions for the 2014 coup. More than any other civilian, Suthep bears considerable responsibility for the way Thailand's politics have unfolded over the past five years.

In many ways, it seems natural that Suthep would create a new party to help General Prayut become prime minister. Yet the position of ACT is a tricky one. This hardline 'PDRC party' has virtually no appeal to former Thaksin voters or to swing voters. It can only hope to take votes away from conservative Democrats who feel alienated from the more pragmatic direction that their party has taken under Abhisit's leadership. The original anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy movement, founded in 2006, made an unsuccessful attempt to rebrand itself as the New Politics Party (NPP) in 2009. The party failed to win a single seat in the 2011 election, after gaining only just over 2000 votes nationwide.[6] While ACT looks sure to outperform the NPP, it is difficult to see where the party can gain parliamentary seats, except perhaps in Suthep's home province of Surat Thani and one or two other traditional Democrat strongholds in the Upper South. As with Phalang Pracharat, leading figures associated with the ACT have not been very keen to grant interviews.

Future Forward[7]

Of the various new parties to have emerged in Thailand this year, Future Forward has generated the greatest interest and the most positive media coverage. Led by charismatic young auto-parts tycoon Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the party has a progressive brand, holds a powerful appeal to youthful voters, and has aroused considerable interest from a range of minorities including the Muslim and LBGTQ communities.[8] The party's secretary-general is former Thammasat University law academic Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, a founding member of the Nitirat group of critical legal scholars who have pushed the envelope on a range of controversial issues including the *lèse majesté* law and the need for judicial reforms.[9] Future Forward is clearly opposed to military influence in politics and would try to block General Prayut's return to the premiership after any election. In this sense, the party looks like a natural ally for Phuea Thai.

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Despite all the social media hype, Future Forward faces considerable challenges. The party singularly lacks local organization – including networks of the vote canvassers (*hua khanaen*) who play a crucial role in mobilizing the electorate at the constituency level. The MMA system makes it hard for parties to gain seats without a strong constituency performance, since — unlike under the previous electoral system — voters will not cast separate ballots in support of party lists. Nor does Future Forward yet have many prominent figures, other than Thanathorn and Piyabutr themselves, with enough name recognition to stand a good chance of being elected at the constituency level. Many observers are skeptical about the party's chances of winning many seats, partly because the youth vote is notoriously difficult to mobilize: 'likes' on Facebook do not readily translate into ballots cast at physical polling stations. Another problem for Future Forward is that while the party's political base is closely tied to progressive-minded activists, broadening voter support would involve moving to the centre ground – and risk disappointing core enthusiasts.

OLD PARTIES

The Democrats

The Democrat Party finds itself in a delicate situation as fresh elections grow more and more likely. Thailand's oldest and most storied political party gradually became a hotbed of anti-Thaksin sentiment over the past decade or so. The Democrats were closely aligned with the PDRC and thus implicated in inciting the 2014 coup. Most Democrat voters were initially sympathetic to the military's seizure of power, making it difficult for the party to contest the election on an anti-junta, anti-Prayut platform. In interviews, senior party figures strongly disputed the view that the new electoral system favoured smaller parties, and claimed that they were confident of coming in at least second in the next polls.[10] But if the Democrats did well electorally in 2019, they would come under strong pressure from the junta to endorse General Prayut for the position of prime minister, rather than their own longstanding leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, or indeed an elected politician from any other party. As a non-Southerner, Abhisit has struggled to establish his authority over a party that is strongest in that region. To his credit, in 2016 he called upon party supporters to reject the military-drafted constitution, but most of them ignored him and the draft charter was strongly endorsed in all Democrat heartland provinces in the referendum held to approve it.

Despite Abhisit's recent attempts to distance himself from the NCPO, under his leadership the Democrats hold little appeal for former pro-Thaksin voters: he remains widely reviled among Red Shirts as a result of the violent suppression of their 2010 protests. Given their disappointing performance in recent elections, the Democrats are unlikely to emerge from the next election as the strongest party, and could easily find themselves part of a Prayut-aligned coalition. That outcome would somewhat resemble the party's endorsement of General Prem Tinsulanond for the premiership during the 1980s. Nevertheless, the party is working hard to reshape its image and to broaden its appeal to younger voters, both in Bangkok and the provinces.

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Phuea Thai

In principle, the next election ought to be won convincingly by the Phuea Thai Party. Despite some erosion at the margins, support for this pro-Thaksin party remains solid in most provinces of the populous North and Northeast. Neither the Democrats nor any of the recently-established parties has yet demonstrated any capacity substantially to undermine Phuea Thai's core vote. But both the party itself and leading figures within Phuea Thai have been the target of ongoing harassment by the junta, and have faced numerous legal challenges and threats. The possibility that Phuea Thai could be banned by the courts before any election cannot be ruled out.

While Phuea Thai still trades heavily on the residual popularity of both Thaksin and Yingluck, the party so far has been unable to identify a figure of comparable standing and popularity to assume the leadership. The party has become increasingly factionalised and is dominated by a core group of old-timers; it is extremely hierarchical and does not offer a welcoming environment for new faces. As such, Phuea Thai may struggle to engage with younger voters. Previous Thaksin-era achievements, such as the extremely popular 30-baht healthcare programme, cannot be trotted out indefinitely to mobilize a fast-changing electorate. Phuea Thai badly needs to adapt, and it remains unclear how successfully it can do so.

CONCLUSION

Thailand's party system stands at a crossroads. The ruling junta would like to see a large number of relatively weak parties contest the election, and to have a fragmented legislature endorse General Prayut or some other figure acceptable to the military as the first post-election prime minister. If they succeed, the messy but gradual progress towards a more open and democratic order seen in Thailand between 1992 and 2014 will be clearly over, and the country will face the prospect of military veto power institutionalized in the political system – with potentially very unfortunate consequences.

A more optimistic scenario is that the Democrats and Phuea Thai will work together with new parties such as Future Forward to block Prayut's ascent to the premiership. But the high level of distrust between the Democrats and Phuea Thai currently makes this scenario appear unlikely.

To date, the leaders of Thailand's political parties have been unable to bury old hatchets and focus on the common threat to their interests created by the ambitions of the ruling junta. The recent proliferation of new parties has clear potential to play into the hands of the military, promoting a culture of divide and rule that allows the NCPO to exercise a continuing veto over Thailand's political future.

Thailand urgently needs as many party leaders as possible to hold a joint press conference at which they express a shared determination to block General Prayut from continuing as prime minister after the election. In an ideal world, such a press conference would proclaim a signed declaration to this effect. That any such declaration currently seems impossible is testimony to the success of the NCPO in hijacking Thailand's political order.

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[1] See Duncan McCargo, Saowanee Alexander and Petra Desatova, 'Ordering Peace: Thailand's 2016 constitutional referendum', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 39, 1, 2017: 65–95.
[2] Duncan McCargo, 'Thailand's Urbanized Villagers and Political Polarization', *Critical Asian Studies*, 49, 3, 2017: 365–78.
[3] Under the MMA system, voters cast a single ballot to select both their constituency MP, and their preference for the party-list component of the parliament. The system makes it impossible for voters to divide their support between different parties. See Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, 'The Effects of Thailand's Proposed Electoral System', *Thai Data Points*, February 10, 2016, http://www.thaidatapoints.com/project-updates/theeffectsofthailandsproposedelectoralsystembyallenhickenandbangkokpundit.
[4] The other two are former ministers Somsak Thepsuthin and Suriya Juangroongruangkit.
[5] In Thai, *Phak ruamphalangprachachatthai*.
[6] For the best discussion of the party, see Michael H. Nelson, "The People's Alliance for Democracy: From 'New Politics' to a 'Real' Political Party", in Marc Askew (ed.) *Legitimacy Crisis in Thailand*, pp. 119-159. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books
[7] In Thai, *Phak Anakhot Mai*.
[8] For a sympathetic interview with Thanathorn, see Nadia Chevroulet, 'The Future Forward Party: Thailand's "New Hope"?', Asia News Network, 11 April 2018, https://asianews.network/2018/04/11/the-future-forward-party-thailands-new-hope/
[9] On Nitirat, see Duncan McCargo and Peeradej Tanruangporn, 'Branding Dissent: *Nitirat*, Thailand's enlightened jurists', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 2015: 419–42.
[10] Author's interview with Abhisit Vejjajiva, 20 July 2018.

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