

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8180>



Thailand

Thai elections without democracy

- IV Online magazine - 2023 - IV582 - July 2023 -

Publication date: Friday 21 July 2023

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Although it may come across as dramatic and unprecedented, Move Forward Party (MFP) leader Pita Limjaroenrat's ordeal in trying to take office as prime minister after winning the May 14 election is par for the course in Thai politics over the past two decades.

Every time a party wins convincingly at the polls and its leader appears charismatic and capable, conservative forces push back resolutely to stymie and negate the election outcome. At issue in view of Mr Pita's case is thus whether Thailand's elections are perfunctory and pro forma, whereas real political power to call the shots lies with the established centres of power, from the military and monarchy to the judiciary and bureaucracy.

The conservative establishment's tried and tested method to supervise and shape outcomes is to deploy legal instruments and constitutional tools as interpreted by the judiciary, particularly the Constitutional Court but also including in the past the Supreme Administrative Court and the Supreme Court Division for Political Office Holders. After a given poll, a handful of saboteurs typically launch a slew of charges against parties and politicians deemed as a threat.

These charges are duly accepted and become options to exercise as the judicial authorities deem fit. Charges can be filed from different sides but only those that go after establishment enemies are pursued. This process has been likened to the "judicialisation" of Thai politics — a judicial putsch of sorts — where judges can set political directions and shape outcomes without having to resort to a hard military coup which attracts international attention and criticism.

This is what happened earlier to Thaksin Shinawatra and his political machinery. At first, he was not deemed an enemy, and was allowed to take office and run the country after winning a near-majority poll victory in January 2001. Although charged for failing to fully declare his assets and hiding them under his assistants' names, the Constitutional Court let him off the hook in a close call of 8-7. He was useful to the established regime at the time because of his pro-growth policies to pull Thailand out of the 1997-98 economic crisis beyond the IMF rescue programme.

But after triumphing in a landslide re-election four years later, Thaksin grew too strong for the conservative establishment. One big irony in Thai politics is that he was not at all anti-establishment but merely wanted to be a preferred part of it among the highest echelons. Ultimately, Thaksin was kicked out by competitors in the highest corridors of power, his massive voter base coming into conflict with the traditional patronage network of incumbent power holders.

The September 2006 coup that ejected and exiled him was complemented by a fusillade of legal charges that have lingered until today, including the dissolution of his Thai Rak Thai Party and a five-year ban on its executive board members from running for office in May 2007. When his Palang Prachachon (People's Power) Party returned to power after again winning the election in December 2007, it was also dissolved and its executives banned. While in office, Thaksin's ally and prime minister Samak Sundaravej was expelled from office by the Constitutional Court for emceeing a cooking show and receiving 5,000 baht for miscellaneous expenses.

Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, faced a similar fate but in a different way after the Pheu Thai Party again won the election in July 2011. As prime minister, she faced a number of malfeasance and conflicts of interest charges. But this time, the military took the decisive action by seizing power in May 2014 after a crippling protest movement, backed by judicial decisions as the record shows, failed to oust her government over seven months.

It then came to Thanathorn Juang- roongruangkit, the deposed leader of the Future Forward Party. Formed just a

year prior to the March 2019 election, Future Forward garnered 6.3 million votes and 80 seats in parliament. While the party's showing was well behind that of Pheu Thai and the pro-military Palang Pracharath, its reform agenda of traditional institutions of political power raised alarm bells in establishment circles. The Thaksin-led machinery was just competition for the masses but Future Forward's reform programme was a clear and present threat.

A series of charges were duly hurled at Mr Thanathorn, featuring his ownership of media shares. In fact, the constitutional prohibition of media ownership harks back to Thaksin whose conglomerate bought a TV company and turned it into a government mouthpiece. Mr Thanathorn's small shareholdings did not allow him to influence the company in question, and he explained that the shares had been transferred to his mother. Nonetheless he was disqualified and banned from office for ten years while his party was dismantled in February 2020.

When these major political parties were dissolved, the people who voted for them became simultaneously disenfranchised. The Constitutional Court getting rid of Thai Rak Thai and Palang Prachachon begot the red-shirt protests in 2009-10, culminating with an armed suppression by security forces. Future Forward's disbandment led to younger Thais' street demonstrations in 2020-21 in the face of water cannons and rubber bullets. Established power holders have had no qualms shutting down political parties and quashing anger and frustration of their voters and supporters.

Mr Pita is next in the establishment's sight. But this time, apart from the usual hazy media ownership infraction, he and Move Forward are deemed as a threat for calling for an amendment of the lese majeste law, or Section 112 of the Criminal Code. What Future Forward started, Move Forward has continued by spotlighting institutional reforms of traditional institutions for Thailand to move forward. These institutions underpin an entrenched system and network of powerful personalities, connections, and vested interests that have held Thailand back for years. Reform could unlock and unleash productive forces and talents to enable Thailand to reach its potential.

But their seeming denial of Mr Pita from the premiership and Move Forward from government suggests that conservative forces are having to strike back harder than ever, looking outwardly strong but perhaps internally weak. Despite repeated polls that have not led to truly democratic outcomes, Thailand's centres of power are essentially saying "this is the authoritarian way we are going to have it, do you have a problem with that?"

Source: [Bangkok Post](#)

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.