



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

HOW THAILAND'S MOVE FORWARD PARTY'S FANDOM STRATEGY SHAPED THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTION

Alexandra Colombier

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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How Thailand's Move Forward Party's Fandom Strategy Shaped the 2023 General Election

By Alexandra Colombier

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The concept of political fandom, the state of being fans of a politician or of a political party, played a crucial role during Thailand's General Election in 2023. Fandom contributed to the popularity on social media of politicians, such as Pita Limjaroenrat, the Move Forward Party's leader and prime ministerial candidate.
- The strategies involved in achieving celebrity status for politicians are varied. This paper provides a case study of the factors behind the success of Pita and the Move Forward Party and contrasts these with reasons why Pita's key political opponents were less effective.
- It argues that the digital age and the transcendence of politics into pop culture, where celebrity status and fandom can drive electoral outcomes, signify a profound shift in democratic participation, political engagement and the very fabric of Thai politics.
- While fandom has become a stream in participatory democracy, it also highlights the polarized and temperamental nature of Thailand's contemporary hyper-partisan political scene.

How Thailand's Move Forward Party's Fandom Strategy Shaped the 2023 General Election

By Alexandra Colombier¹

INTRODUCTION

On 14 May 2023, the Move Forward Party won the General Election in Thailand with 151 seats and the votes of over 14 million Thais.² This was an unexpected victory, even to the party's leadership.³

Key to the Move Forward Party's victory was political fandom, in the manifestation of *Dom Som*. This term refers to the supporters attached to the Move Forward Party and its leader Pita Limjaroenrat. "Dom" is the abbreviation of "Fandom" and "Som" is orange, the colour of the Move Forward Party. The fandom phenomenon has long existed in different industries such as music, movies and sports; political fandom is however relatively new to Thailand. In the same way as sports fans engage with

¹ Alexandra Colombier is a French Social Science researcher, specializing in political communication, digital media, social groups and identities in Thailand. She holds a Master's degree in Political and Cultural Sociology from the Institute of Political Studies, University of Toulouse (France). She is currently a PhD student at the University of Le Havre (Normandy).

² Nonetheless, due to backdoor political manoeuvring and a constitutional clause that allows 250 unelected senators the power to choose the prime minister along with the 500 elected MPs, the Move Forward Party was not able to form a government. However, the focus of this paper is not post-election political games but the game of fandom and social media during the election.

³ *Nation Thailand*, "With Support Rising, Move Forward Party Now Targets 'At Least 100 House Seats'", 16 April 2023, <https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/politics/40026708>

their teams or pop-culture fans engage with celebrities, political fans have a strong emotional attachment to a politician or a political party (Erikson 2008).⁴ It includes aspects of affection and activities on an individual or community level (Dean 2017).⁵

Thailand's political fans actively participated in offline and online activities, beyond the conventional form of political support. The *Dom Som* promoted the Move Forward Party by creating hashtags, editing viral videos, liking and sharing content and casting Pita as the protagonist of a fictional narrative. They also discredited other parties or candidates by creating memes, finding digital footprints or trolling on social media. Election campaigning turned into a pop-culture battle, as illustrated by the social buzz over a particular choc mint drink endorsed by Paetongtarn Shinawatra versus the orange-black coffee endorsed by Pita.⁶

This transcendence of politics into pop culture, where celebrity status and fandom can capture the popular imagination led virtually all political parties to pursue it in order to increase their popularity during the 2023 General Election. Nonetheless, it was the Move Forward Party's political fandom strategy that proved most effective. This research addresses how Move Forward Party's leader and prime minister candidate Pita Limjaroenrat was able to achieve celebrity status, while the party itself managed to establish a strong fandom that helped clinch the elections. From policy formulation to communication and marketing of candidates, the Move Forward Party was able to affect the perception and behaviour of voters through its fandom strategy. Furthermore, this research investigates how fandom impacts the substance of Thai democracy and in turn, affects the behaviour of the Move Forward Party itself.

⁴ Erikson Edward, "‘Hillary Is My Friend’: MySpace and Political Fandom", *Rocky Mountain Communication Review* 5 (2008).

⁵ Dean Jonathan, "Politicising Fandom", *British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2017): 408–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117701754>

⁶ Bunnag Nad, "Pheu Thai's Mint-Chocolate Drink – Yay or Nay?", *Thai PBS World*, 8 June 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/pheu-thais-mint-chocolate-drink-yay-or-nay/>

THE MAKING OF *DOM SOM*

To understand today's *Dom Som*, this paper traces its way back to the General Election of 2019 and the emergence of the Future Forward Party, the predecessor to the Move Forward Party.

In the 2019 General Election, Future Forward Party presented itself as a young-generation and pro-democracy party during an era of military rule, headed by charismatic young leaders such as Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit (a pro-democracy activist and business tycoon), Piyabutr Saengkanokkul (a political activist and academic) and Pannika Wanich (a broadcast journalist). The Future Forward Party, like other political parties,⁷ used social media for their campaign during the 2019 General Election. However, the party adopted an effective and innovative social media approach; it engaged with community groups all over Thailand, notably with the young and tech-savvy generation.

A significant breakthrough in Future Forward Party's popularity was the #FahRakPo phenomenon; this was not related to politics and was instead heavily influenced by pop culture. On 21 February 2019, Thanathorn and other party candidates walked up the street to attend the 73rd Thammasat-Chula Traditional Football Match, an annual rival match-up between Thailand's two oldest universities. A fan shouted to Thanathorn, "Sky loves father. Sky loves father. Sky loves father the most."⁸ Thanathorn turned to the person with a big smile. This moment of connection went viral on social media. The hashtag #ฟ้ารักพ่อ (#FahRakPo or Sky loves father) was widely shared. Importantly, Thanathorn⁹ engaged with the phenomenon by sharing it on his platform. #FahRakPo is in

⁷ Aim Sinpeng, "Pheu Thai Won the Facebook Election in Thailand", *New Mandala*, 29 March 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/pheu-thai-won-the-facebook-election-in-thailand/>

⁸ earthanaphat TikTok, 30 April 2020, <https://www.tiktok.com/@earthanaphat/video/6821411263826955522>

⁹ Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit Twitter, 9 February 2019, https://twitter.com/Thanathorn_FWP/status/1094204873644490752

reference to the popular Thai soap opera *Golden Orange Blossoms*¹⁰ and demonstrates the linkage between pop culture and politics; the young generation and fandom. This phenomenon took Thanathorn and the Future Forward Party beyond political boundaries and into pop culture and towards celebrity status.

Future Forward Party's quick rise in popularity earned it eighty-one seats in the 2019 General Election, and it became Thailand's third-largest political party. However, its leadership received a ten-year ban from politics and the party was dissolved in February 2020.¹¹ Those who remained then formed the Move Forward Party, with fifty-one seats in parliament. The Move Forward Party took up the community dynamic and continued to encourage the public to become party members and participate in important decisions.¹² They created more space for members; an example is the Think Forward Center.¹³ Members took part in policy formulation, as well as designed and created merchandise and memorabilia. The inclusive strategy went beyond the norm of traditional political parties viewing voters as supporters and treating them as members of the community instead.

In mobilizing the community through its fandom strategy, the Move Forward Party capitalized on the youth protests of 2020–21. For instance, Pita¹⁴ went to observe a protest and was hit by tear gas. The Move Forward

¹⁰ In a famous scene of the series, the main character ฟ้า (Fah or Sky) confessed her love to พ่อ (Por or Father), the nickname she gave to the man she has a relationship with.

¹¹ BBC, "Future Forward: Thai Pro-democracy Party Dissolved Over Loan", 21 February 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51585347>

¹² Facebook Move Forward Party, 17 March 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/MoveForwardPartyThailand/posts/108020510829978/>

¹³ <https://think.moveforwardparty.org/>

¹⁴ YouTube ThaiRath, "'พิธา'คุยตำรวจ สัญญาไม่ใช้แก๊สน้ำตา-กระสุนยาง" ["Pitha" talks to the police, promising not to use tear gas or rubber bullets], *ThaiRath Online*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gh4jXnr4SHc>

Party's Rangsiman Rome put up his MP salary as bail surety for protest leader Jatupat Boonpattaraksa.¹⁵ In March 2021, the Move Forward Party's MPs staged a protest over the jailing of pro-democracy activists during a parliamentary session.¹⁶ Pita and some Move Forward Party MPs also adopted the three-finger salute¹⁷ of the youth protests, a symbolic pop culture gesture of defiance against the establishment, taken from the franchise series, *Hunger Games*. Furthermore, two further factors that demonstrated the effective fandom strategy were the inclusion of protest leaders and protest demands. Popular democracy activists Ruchanok Srinork, Lookkate Chonthicha and Piyarat Chongthep became party candidates for the 2023 General Election. These were individuals who had earned celebrity status in the eyes of the protestors and the public; they had their own personal fandom. In addition, key protest demands such as amending/abolishing Article 112, Thailand's *lèse majesté* law, establishing a welfare state, ensuring the safety and rights of dissidents, and ending military conscription, and others were included in the Move Forward Party's 312 policies for the 2023 electoral campaign.

Thus, in the making of *Dom Som*, the Move Forward Party created a growing and active community, where voters became members and protestors became candidates. Integral to the community was the young generation, with tech-savvy skills and reformative political demands that the party recognized and could capitalize on.

¹⁵ *The Nation*, "Rangsiman Offers His MP Salary as Bail Surety for Protest Leader Jatupat", 8 October 2020, <https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/30396317>

¹⁶ *The Nation*, "Move Forward MPs Stage Protest over Jailing of Pro-democracy Activists", 17 March 2021, <https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/30403816>

¹⁷ *The Truth*, เปิดภาพพินานำก้าวไกลชู3นิ้วในมือบขสกา แล้วใครหน้าไหนบอกปชช. ไม่มี [Revealing pictures of Pitha leading the way, raising 3 fingers in the mob that invaded the House of Representatives. And who will tell the people that there isn't any?], 16 November 2020, <https://truthforyou.co/17268/>

INVESTING IN TIKTOK

The Move Forward Party appeals to the young generation,¹⁸ which represents 39.19 per cent of users on TikTok.¹⁹ This generation grew up under a military establishment after the 2014 coup, and is armed with social media, is well-versed in Internet references (e.g., memes), is able to create online content, knows how to make content go viral and is skilled in dictating social media interests.

The Move Forward Party had a clear fandom strategy on social media, specifically with regard to TikTok. Pannika Wanich, who served as a campaign helper in Move Forward Party's 2023 campaign, stated that the party heavily promoted their activities and policies on TikTok, in a way that made the voters not only feel included, but also feel that "politics belongs to the people" and "the Move Forward Party belongs to the people".²⁰ She explained how party activities and policies would only exist in a "bubble" without organic canvassers, who were party supporters who campaigned on behalf of the party without monetary compensation. This is in contrast to traditional canvassers whom political parties pay. These organic canvassers are *Dom Som*, who engage, repost and create their own content to support the party. The strategy raised the appeal of the party and its candidates among the casual TikTok users who otherwise may not be interested in politics, thus expanding their fandom.

A case study of *Dom Som*'s organic canvassing is the TikTok channel @Thailanddebate,²¹ which edited and published rousing moments from

¹⁸ Thai PBS, "Generation Gaps Could Have Decisive Influence on Thai General Election", 5 April 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/generation-gaps-could-have-decisive-influence-on-thai-general-election/>

¹⁹ TikTok has 40.28 million users in 2023.

²⁰ *The Matter*, "ชอ พรรณิการ์ : 'ก้าวไกล' ใช้ TikTok สร้างหัวคะแนนธรรมชาติได้อย่างไร?" [Chor Pannika: How can 'Move Forward' use TikTok to create natural canvassers?], June 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jY0EisII2PA>

²¹ การเมืองไม่ตกเทรนด์, Thailand Debate TikTok, https://www.tiktok.com/@thailanddebate?_t=8g8Uhp61k1s&_r=1

debate stages. The page published its first video on 29 March 2023.²² The most viewed (5 million views) showed the Move Forward Party representative lecturing the Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party representative on the legitimacy of the youth protests of 2020 and 2021.²³ Another video (3.2 million views) saw a Move Forward Party representative correcting a Palang Pracharat Party representative on unemployment data and workers' wages.²⁴ Both videos were from heated debates, and the channel used the term “thrashed” in both titles, passing the verdict that Move Forward Party's representatives had verbally “thrashed” their rivals during the debates and emerged victorious. The channel @Thailanddebate is just one of the numerous *Dom Som* channels on TikTok that provide positive coverage of the Move Forward Party and its candidates.

Another case study is the Move Forward Party's candidate Rukchanok Srinork.²⁵ Rukchanok was one of several individuals who started as a pro-democracy activist during the youth protests and became a Move Forward Party candidate for the 2023 elections. During the youth protests, Rukchanok gathered a following through her ClubHouse activities. Heading into the General Election, she used TikTok as one of her main social media platforms. Currently, she has 776,400 followers and more than 15 million likes.²⁶

During the lead-up to the elections, two types of videos about Rukchanok were highly popular. The first was her commentary on political debates. As a junior candidate, Rukchanok did not receive

²² The elector campaigning officially started after the Dissolution of the Parliament on 20 March.

²³ การเมืองไม่ตกเทรนด์, Thailand Debate TikTok, 26 April 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@thailanddebate/video/7226087680856083717?_r=1&_t=8g8IT1WJb9u

²⁴ การเมืองไม่ตกเทรนด์, Thailand Debate TikTok, 8 April 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@thailanddebate/video/7219690740564217115?_r=1&_t=8g8IVAPQWuo

²⁵ Also known as Ice.

²⁶ Nanaicez TikTok, <https://www.tiktok.com/@nanaicez?lang=fr>

much chance to be on stage for debates, but she made videos commenting on speeches and debates of candidates from other parties. For example, a 29 March debate pitted a Move Forward Party candidate against a Bhumjaithai Party candidate over the COVID-19 pandemic. With the Health Ministry in its portfolio, the Bhumjaithai Party candidate argued that the party had managed the COVID-19 crisis well. Ruckchanok first filmed her facial expressions of confusion and bewilderment at the Bhumjaithai Party candidate's claim that the party's handling of the crisis was "flawless". She then went on to list the flaws including the lack of hospital beds, people lying dead in the streets and the inefficiency of vaccines, among others. At the same time, she accused the Bhumjaithai Party of gaining personal benefits from purchasing the Sinovac vaccines from China. The video received more than 6 million views and 780,800 likes on her TikTok channel.²⁷

The second type showcased her on the campaign trail, such as riding a bicycle around the Bang Bon District, her constituency. These videos were mostly filmed and posted by *Dom Som*. The fandom created the hashtag #ด้อมรังนก (Dom Bird Nest), which shared videos from her campaign trail and received more than 40 million views on TikTok. Meanwhile, the hashtag #ไอซ์ริคชนก (Ice Ruckchanok) garnered more than 400 million views. These examples demonstrate how an offline activity witnessed by a handful of people could become social media content viewed by tens of millions. It is an integration of offline and online campaigns boosted by a political candidate with pop culture appeal. In the eyes of the young, Ruckchanok has the right appeal in terms of looks, age and ideology to become a popular political celebrity.

ACHIEVING CELEBRITY STATUS

All political parties have recognized the importance of social media and utilized it in their campaigns to communicate and engage with

²⁷ Nanaicez TikTok, 29 March 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/@nanaicez/video/7216012844209409307>

voters, resorting in the process to gimmicks that make them more approachable and personable. Each prime minister candidate pursued a strategy to achieve celebrity status beyond political boundaries. Thai Sang Thai Party's Sudarat Keyuraphan attended political, fashion and cultural events with her beautiful young daughter;²⁸ Chart Thai Pattana Party's Varawut Silpa-Archa shared videos showcasing his posh English accent;²⁹ Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party's Prayut Chan-o-cha joined annual Songkran activities carrying a water gun instead of a real gun;³⁰ and Palang Pracharat Party's 78-year-old General Prawit Wongsuwan displayed his fashion sense by wearing jeans, sneakers and brand-name shirts everywhere he went, doing activities with the younger generation.³¹

However, no prime minister candidate was able to achieve celebrity status as well as the Move Forward Party's Pita did, which was a significant factor in the party's electoral victory. Figure 1 shows the current number of combined followers from Facebook, X and Instagram of Pita, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Srettha Thavisin and Prayut.

Pita has mainstream pop culture appeal, not only to *Dom Som*, but also to casual voters who might otherwise not have voted for the Move Forward Party. He is young and liberal and has degrees from Harvard and MIT. He is handsome, well-dressed and well-spoken, and he is fluent in English; he sings and plays the guitar.³² These qualities coupled with an

²⁸ Sudaratofficial Instagram, 10 May 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CsCnQImPtaf/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==>

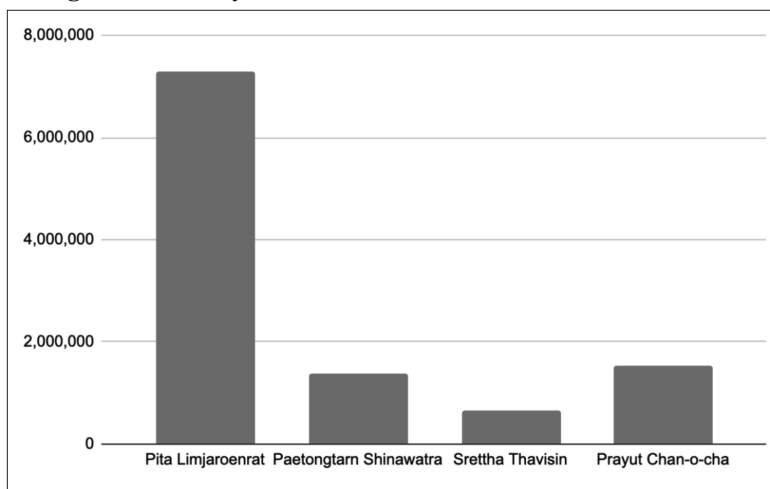
²⁹ ถกถกถก, "Global Citizens | Politics | Everything Everywhere All At Once" [Warawut/Pita/Voranai/Pokin], May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMIRte7CbWo>

³⁰ Aaj TV Official, "Surprise Water Fight Appearance: Thai PM Gets Soaked at Songkran Festival", April 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EblIPeMZcw>

³¹ *Thai PBS World*, "Gucci Coup: Gen Prawit Gets Trendy to Woo Army of Young Voters", 1 March 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/gucci-coup-gen-prawit-gets-trendy-to-woo-army-of-young-voters/>

³² Twitter Pita Limjaroenrat, 28 August 2023, https://twitter.com/Pita_MFP/status/1563889707242496000?lang=en

Figure 1: Combined Number of Followers on Facebook, X and Instagram, January 2024



effective social media campaign opened Pita up to a demographic that is less interested in politics but more interested in Pita himself, even to the point of obsession. For example, one particular fan created a romantic fiction with his poster and posted it on social media.³³ Some were more interested in his love life with the superstar Taksaorn Paksukcharern; while preferring to remain silent about past accusations of domestic abuse against his ex-wife, actress Chutima Teepanat.³⁴ Similar to the phenomenon with Thanathorn in 2019, the hashtag #ส้มรักพ่อ (Orange

³³ *Line Today*, ส้มรักพ่อ! คลิปไวรัลสาวแต่งงานกับหนุ่มหน้าคุ้น | ข่าวเวิร์ค [Som loves his father! Viral clip of a young woman marrying a familiar face | Work News], 7 May 2023, <https://today.line.me/th/v2/article/LXDIGwj>

³⁴ *TODAY*, สรุปกรณีศึกษา ทิม พิธา เส้นแบ่งนักการเมืองกับเรื่องส่วนตัว [Summary of the case study of Tim Pitha: the line between politicians and personal matters], 31 July 2019, <https://workpointtoday.com/pita-limjaroenrat/>

loves daddy) has been widely shared, referencing him as a single father, loved by *Dom Som*³⁵ and showing the power of fan fiction.

Pita also effectively harnesses the power of Instagram in ways that his opponents did not. A comparison of the number of followers on Pita's³⁶ and Pheu Thai's prime minister candidate Srettha Thavasin's official Instagram pages is telling. Pita has 2.7 million followers³⁷ while Srettha has 111,000 followers.³⁸ During the elections, Pita's 205 posts averaged 98,630 likes, while Srettha's 124 posts averaged 1,373 likes. Pita's posts revealed more emotional investment, sharing videos and pictures, sometimes taken by him,³⁹ among the people, and with the people,⁴⁰ or pictures taken with his young daughter,⁴¹ and so sharing his private life. According to studies, sharing posts about personal life addresses a strong desire among fans to exchange knowledge and information about the object of fandom (Jenkins 2006).⁴² The multi-layered approach of Pita's Instagram positively affected intimacy and created a strong parasocial relationship among fans (Kim and Song 2016).⁴³

In contrast, Srettha's posts were of regular campaign trails, mainly taken by his staff. He did not share private moments and favour pictures

³⁵ Bkba12bkba13, 7 May 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/@bkba12bkba13/video/7230439000211983621>

³⁶ pita.ig

³⁷ January 2024.

³⁸ January 2024.

³⁹ Pita.ig, 25 April 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CrdUau9Pw71/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D>

⁴⁰ Pita.ig, 12 May 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CrqdpXssEws/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D>

⁴¹ Pita.ig, 30 April 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CrqdpXssEws/?igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D>

⁴² Henry Jenkins, "Interactive Audiences: The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans", in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, pp. 134–51 (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006).

⁴³ Jihyun Kim and Aveon Song, "Celebrity's Self-Disclosure on Twitter and Parasocial Relationships: A Mediating Role of Social Presence", *Computers in Human Behavior* 62 (2016): 570–77, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.03.083>

instead of videos with an important *mise en scène*. Srettha appeared less available and less emotionally invested in his Instagram posts. The emotional detachment was also displayed during the campaign, and became a weapon for anti-fans, editing several videos showing how Srettha rejected a hug from an elderly lady, while Pita embraced a hug from a different elderly lady.⁴⁴ Paetongtarn Shinawatra, who was also Pheu Thai Party's prime minister candidate and the daughter of Thaksin Shinawatra, has 691,000 Instagram followers.⁴⁵ During the elections, she had only forty-two posts with an average engagement of 35,679 likes. The posts were mainly personal and lifestyle-like, with little political content. Nonetheless, it must be noted that Pita has been a politician since 2019, while Srettha and Paetongtarn entered politics only months ahead of the 2023 elections, with the latter having to take a month off from campaigning to give birth. Hence, Pita's celebrity status has been much longer in the making. Meanwhile, Prayut, a politician since his 2014 coup, has 138,000 followers, with posts mainly reflective of an old-fashioned campaign.

Another important differentiation is that Pita's celebritydom strategy was a complete package—online, offline and on debate stages. Meanwhile, other major prime minister candidates, from Srettha to Paetongtarn, and Prayut to Prawit, were absent from the debates. Pita took centre stage in all the major debates, such as those hosted by media outlets, for example, *The Standard*,⁴⁶ *Thai Rath*⁴⁷ and *CH7HD News*.⁴⁸ On 22 April,

⁴⁴ *Thainewsonline*, 29 August 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@thainewsonline/video/7272619408273558785?_r=1&_t=8hqLzPzZBIY

⁴⁵ January 2024.

⁴⁶ *The Standard* YouTube, “คลิปเต็ม #TheStandardDebate ตีเบตใหญ่เลือกตั้ง 2566 1 END GAME เกมที่แพ้ไม่ได้ 1”, April 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvnJp4yVxFO>

⁴⁷ *Thai Rath Online* YouTube, “Live : ไทยรัฐตีเบต เลือกตั้ง '66 ประชันวิสัยทัศน์ และจุดยืนทางการเมือง | 18 เม.ย. 66 |”. *ThairathTV*, 18 April 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZafpnYUAKy4&t=4844s>

⁴⁸ *CH7HD News* YouTube, “เลือกตั้ง 66 #วาระคนไทย BIG DEBATE เวทีกรุงเทพมหานคร | 9 พ.ค. 66 |”, 9 May 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDYmpmALK1s>

Pita Limjaroenrat was featured on the popular talk show *คนดั่งนั่งเคลียร์* on Channel 8,⁴⁹ where he highlighted the buzzer “With uncles, no us. With us, no uncles”.⁵⁰ On the same day, #ก้าวไกล (Move Forward) and #พิธา (Pita) were two of the most shared hashtags on X, with 314,100 for #ก้าวไกล and 330,300 for #พิธา.⁵¹ One week later, election polls showed Pita ahead of all prime minister candidates,⁵² including Paetongtarn, who led the polls early in the campaign. Debate stages and media interviews remain a prominent fixture of Thailand’s elections.

THE CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITATIONS OF *DOM SOM*

Traditionally, Thailand’s elections are based on the patronage system and are dominated by powerful families who can deliver the votes of entire provinces. This system is hierarchical and based on the principles of favour and gratitude, where the people owe loyalty and services to the boss (*jaonai*), including their votes. Patronage was still relevant in 2023’s elections, for example, the Chidchob family of Buriram Province for the Bhumjaithai Party and the Silpa-Archa family of Suphanburi Province for the Chart Thai Pattana Party. Nonetheless, the 2023 general election results proved that this system has lost its dominance to a more participatory approach, specifically the political fandom community that

⁴⁹ ช่อง8: Thai Ch8 YouTube Channel, “พิธา” โชว์ไหวพริบการตอบคำถาม!! | คนดั่งนั่งเคลียร์ ช่อง 8” [“Pitha” shows his wit in answering questions!! | Famous people sat and cleared Channel 8], April 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2nuYvXTxCw>

⁵⁰ มีลุง ไม่มีเรา, มีเรา ไม่มีลุง.

⁵¹ Source Getdaytrends.

⁵² *Matichon*, “‘พิธา’ ย้ำที่ 1 นายกฯ ผลโพล ‘มตชนเดลินิวส์’ รอบ 2 ซีก้าวไกลแรงแซงเพื่อไทย [Poll Results Confirm Pita First Place Prime Minister Candidate. *MatichonxDailyNews*, Round 2, Move Forward Party Overtakes Pheu Thai Party], 29 April 2023, https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_3950707

engages to expand participative democracy beyond merely casting the ballot, notably online. Rather than powerful families dictating to society, it is now the active public that asserts influence over society and political organizations. Instead of the people being held accountable to the patron, it is the politician who is accountable to the people.

The Move Forward Party was successful in creating and expanding *Dom Som* during the 2023 General Election; therewith, they became accountable to their own fandom. This was best illustrated in the aftermath of the elections. On 19 May, as the Move Forward Party attempted to form a coalition government, the party extended an invitation to the conservative Chart Pattana Kla Party. The party leader, Korn Chatikavanij, was formerly a deputy leader of the conservative Democrat Party. The Internet left two digital footprints: a photo of Korn joining the 2014 pro-establishment protests that led to the military coup and a video of him in parliament voting for Prayut as prime minister in 2019. By the evening, the news leaked on X and *Dom Som* responded by flooding the platform with the two digital footprints, and #มีกอร์นไม่มีกู (If you have Korn, you will no longer have us) top trended. The backlash was such that in the middle of the night, the Move Forward Party's official account published an apology and rescinded its invitation to the Chart Pattana Kla Party. Hence, the fandom shaped the political party's actions through social media. *Dom Som* reminded the Move Forward Party of one of the party's slogans: "The party is bigger than the people. The people are bigger than the party."⁵³ The following morning, Pita shared a photo on his personal Instagram page with his celebrity love interest, Taksaoon; in the picture were also his daughter and her daughter.⁵⁴ The photo received more than 1 million likes, while the hashtag #มีกอร์นไม่มีกู received 563,800 tweets.⁵⁵

⁵³ Twitter Pita Limjaroenrat, https://x.com/pita_mfp/status/1659603101580660736?s=46&t=LHmZa616HUbprDrJSRNGBg

⁵⁴ Tim_pita, 20 May 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CseG9MFvKaW/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D>

⁵⁵ Source Get Day Trends.

Pita was effective in using his celebrity status to distract the *Dom Som*. He was able to shift the focus from #มีการณ์ไม่มิกู to the alleged affair. This alleged affair had come to the fore after the elections, and the narrative appealed to people less invested in politics but invested in the personal lives of Pita and Taksaoorn. The two protagonists maintained the mystery by taking photos together and leaving comments under each other's photos. This narrative served the idea that Taksaoorn would be the perfect first lady of Thailand, as could be seen in the comments: ชัดเจนไปเลยจะพอ อนุญาตให้พี่แอฟ เป็นสตรีหมายเลข 1 ค้าา♥ (It's clear, Dad. Allow Phi Af She's the number 1 woman ♥) or สตรีหมายเลข 1 มาแล้ว (the first lady is here).⁵⁶ Pita was effective in using his celebrity status to shift the focus of people, making his personal life more important than his political life.

However, today, Pita is no longer the party leader.⁵⁷ In his place is Chaitawat Tulathon, who does not have celebrity status or a personal fandom. Moreover, during October–November 2023, the Move Forward Party was embroiled in controversies over two of its MPs. There were accusations of sexual harassment against MP Wutthipong Thonglao, and of sexual assaults against MP Chaiyamparwaan Manpianjit. While the Move Forward Party voted to expel Wutthipong, it failed to vote out Chaiyamparwaan, and he was only put on probation. This result provoked strong reactions and the hashtags #ปู้ด⁵⁸ (Poo-ud, Chaiyamparwaan's nickname) and #ปู้ดต้องลาออก (Poo-ud must resign) top-trended on X. The backlash forced the Move Forward Party into another vote and

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Pita resigned from party leadership in September 2023, allowing the party secretary general to be voted in as party leader and leader of the opposition. Due to the case about him allegedly holding media shares, Pira was suspended from his MP status in September 2023. On 24 January 2024, the court cleared Pita of any wrongdoing, and hence, he was able to return to parliament.

⁵⁸ His nickname is Poo-ud.

unanimously ousted Chaiyamparwaan.⁵⁹ The accusations damaged the Move Forward Party's image and the failure to oust Chaiyamparwaan in the first voting further dampened the party's popularity. The image of the Move Forward Party has recently suffered, leading to a disappointed fandom and anti-fans campaign against the party. Most notable is the Facebook page and X account *วันนี้ก้าวไกลโกหกอะไร* (What is the Move Forward Party lying about today?)⁶⁰ and the hashtag *#ก้าวไกลการละคร* (Move Forward Party's Drama).

In the meantime, other political fandoms are created surrounding specific Move Forward politicians. One example is Suphanat "Bank" Minchaiynun, whose good looks and educational background draw a comparison to the image of Pita.⁶¹ On his birthday, his fandom flooded X with the hashtags *#แบงค์10* (Bank10) and *#ศุภณัฐมินชัยนันท์* (Suphanath Minchainan). These hashtags top-trended on X.⁶² It is also the case of Srettha, who has a new approach to communication since becoming prime minister, notably on Instagram where he shares pictures and videos of him embracing elderly people,⁶³ playing basketball,⁶⁴ attending celebrations with his wife,⁶⁵ and even showing funny drawings he

⁵⁹ *Thai PBS World*, "Move Forward Party sacks Bangkok MP Chaiyamparwaan", 7 November 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/move-forward-party-sacks-bangkok-mp-chaiyamparwaan/>

⁶⁰ *วันนี้ก้าวไกลโกหกอะไร* Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100089223116737&mibextid=LQQJ4d/>

⁶¹ Also known as Bank.

⁶² Suphanat Minchaiynunt Twitter, 19 July 2023, <https://twitter.com/SuphanatMFP/status/1681696352005390336>

⁶³ Srettha Thavisin Instagram, 4 December 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/C0YnGQcS81a/?img_index=1

⁶⁴ Srettha Thavisin Instagram, 4 December 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/C0Y-YJDyGha/?img_index=1

⁶⁵ Srettha Thavisin Instagram, 28 November 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/COLHltCSdK0/>

made.⁶⁶ This demonstrates the phenomenon of an “always-on fandom” (Hills 2017).⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

The emergence of political fandom has changed the face of Thailand’s general elections, with the Move Forward Party leading this transformation. Notably, its leader Pita has soared to celebrity status transcending politics, showing that the “Fanocracy” phenomenon is more powerful than traditional political campaign methods.

In the digital age, this transcendence of politics into pop culture, where celebrity status and fandom can drive electoral outcomes, signifies a profound shift in democratic participation, political engagement and the very fabric of politics. While political fandom has become a stream of participatory democracy, it also highlights the polarized and temperamental nature of contemporary Thailand’s hyper-partisan political scene.

⁶⁶ Srettha Thavisin Instagram, 17 October 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CyfbozUSkjm/?img_index=2

⁶⁷ Matt Hills, “Always-On Fandom, Waiting and Bingeing: Psychoanalysis as an Engagement with Fans’ ‘Infra-Ordinary’ Experiences”, *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom* (Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315637518-4>

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