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Anutin Charnvirakul : Strongest Contender for the Thai Premiership

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Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Public Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul greets people during a visit to meet village health volunteers in Mueang district in Thailand's southern province of Narathiwat on October 1, 2022. Madaree TOHLALA/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Health Anutin Charnvirakul is the strongest contender for the next Thai premiership.
- His Bhumjaithai Party has been growing from strength to strength, with more MPs from other parties jumping onto its bandwagon heading into the next general election.
- He and his party are presenting themselves as a credible and constructive third choice to move Thailand forward, out of the damaging power struggle between pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party and pro-military Palang Pracharath Party.
- Anutin's non-confrontational style and pro-monarchy orientation will win crucial support from a majority of the 250 senators who shall participate in the premiership selection after the next general election.
- Victory for Anutin will be the best outcome for Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha and his "Big Brother" General Prawit Wongsuwan, leader of the Palang Pracharath Party, if the two ageing leaders of the May 2014 coup want to call it quits and need protection from political reprisal.

INTRODUCTION

Since Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha's eligibility to hold the premiership will end in about two years, his electability in the next general election has greatly diminished. Consequently, several contenders for the next premiership have emerged, and their manoeuvrings for public attention have intensified.

One of the front-runners is Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Health, Anutin Charnvirakul, leader of Bhumjaithai Party (BJT). At least nine reasons/factors make Anutin the most promising and strongest contender.

INFLUENTIAL POWER BROKER

Anutin's BJT has been growing from strength to strength.

In the 2019 general election, the BJT won only 51 House seats.¹ It then joined the coalition led by Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) as the third largest party in the 19-party government coalition in support of General Prayut, behind the PPRP (136 MPs) and Democrat Party (53 MPs).

By 9 September 2022, the BJT's strength had grown to 65 MPs because of defections from other parties, while the number of MPs from PPRP and the Democrat Party had dropped to 100 and 51, respectively.²

The BJT now expects to see more MPs from other parties joining it before the general election. About 30 MPs from other parties attended a recent birthday party held in honour of Anutin's mentor, Newin Chidchob. Many of them openly declared their intention to join the BJT in the near future.³ This has led Newin to state his "birthday wish" of seeing the BJT win at least 120 House seats and leading a strong coalition to form the next government.⁴

One weakness that BJT has is its lack of political presence in Bangkok; it did not contest the Bangkok elections held last May. Now, to address this shortcoming, Anutin has approached Buddhiponges Punnakanta, a former minister of Digital Economy and Society, for support in Bangkok in the coming general election.⁵

Newin, Anutin's major backer, is a resourceful veteran politician with good connections to political parties and the military. He used to be one of the deputy party leaders of Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai Party, and was one of Thaksin's most trusted lieutenants and confidantes.

In the general election in October 2007, Abhisit Vejjajiva's Democrat Party won only 164 House seats, and was beaten by the People Power Party, a successor party to Thaksin's dissolved Thai Rak Thai Party. The premiership went to Somchai Wongsawat, a brother-in-law of exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin.

Newin eventually broke with Thaksin, however, and turned to support Abhisit to win the premiership in early December 2008, after the disqualification of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat of People Power Party.⁶ In the race to find a successor to Somchai, the defection of Newin's friends and MPs in the People Power Party⁷ to side with the Democrat Party was crucial in helping Abhisit win the premiership. Abhisit appointed former army chief General Prawit Wongsuwan, who is now the PPRP leader, as defence minister. That was a calculated move widely deemed as an appeasement of the military.

POLITICAL PEDIGREE AND EXPERIENCE

Anutin's father Chavarat was an influential veteran politician who had held several ministerial posts. He was caretaker prime minister after Somchai was disqualified following the dissolution of the People Power Party in early December 2008. In the subsequent Abhisit Administration, Chavarat became the minister of interior.

Anutin made his political debut by joining Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party. He quickly earned Thaksin's support and rose to join the party's executive committee and was given ministerial posts in Thaksin administrations. The dissolution of the Thai Rak Thai Party in May 2007 also resulted in a ban from politics for five years for Anutin for his role as an executive committee member of the party.

After the end of the five-year ban, Anutin joined the BJT and was elected party leader on 14 October 2012. The BJT, which won only 34 House seats in the 2011 general election, stayed in the opposition along with Democrat Party which had 159 MPs. The winner in that poll was Pheu Thai (PT), a successor party to the dissolved People Power Party. The PT then put Thaksin's younger sister Yingluck in the premiership, under the slogan: "Thaksin thinks, Yingluck executes." (ทักษิณคิด ยิ่งลักษณ์ทำ)

STRONG PARTY LEADERSHIP

Under Anutin's leadership, the BJT has been a consistent government party firmly backing General Prayut's premiership. One small exception took place on the premiership selection day on 5 June 2019 when one BJT MP voted abstention, instead of voting for General Prayut, for the premiership.⁸

Party discipline among BJT MPs has been excellent. BJT MPs have regularly attended House meetings and voted along the party line. Party infighting or factionalism is unheard of in the BJT, unlike in the troubled PPRP and Democrat Party.

Over the past three years, no BJT MPs defected to join any other party. In fact, the stability and strong leadership of Anutin has attracted 14 defectors from other parties.

At 56, Anutin’s rich and diverse political experience makes him an outstanding contender for the premiership. Such precious experience is lacking in the potential top two candidates of the PT: Thaksin’s youngest daughter Paethongtarn Shinawatra, 36, and real estate tycoon Srettha Thavasin, 57. Srettha is the CEO and a major shareholder of Sansiri public company with 19 billion baht of market capitalisation in the Stock Exchange of Thailand. Neither Paethongtarn nor Srettha have ever been an MP or leader of a party.

Another contender for the premiership, PPRP leader General Prawit, also lacks parliamentary experience, just like Prime Minister General Prayut. The 77-year-old former army chief and former defence minister, has never served as an MP either, although he is now leading the largest government party.

CREDIBLE THIRD CHOICE

Anutin and his BJT are presenting themselves as a credible third choice, capable of delivering what they have promised – including decriminalisation of marijuana and hemp. Their rally slogan now is “Doing what has been said!” (พูดแล้วทำ)

BJT now emphasises moving Thailand beyond the damaging struggle between the PT and the coup leaders led by General Prayut and General Prawit.

Its policy framework is “Reducing government power for the people’s livelihood.” (ลดอำนาจรัฐ เพื่อปากท้องของประชาชน) This is music to the ears of poor rural voters, especially those in Thailand’s northeastern (*Isan*) region, where its 20 provinces will elect 132 of 400 constituency MPs in the next general election. The BJT’s political stronghold is in Buriram, in lower *Isan*.

Several new parties have similarly advertised themselves as new choices to overcome the old power struggle. They include Thai Sang Thai Party (พรรคไทยสร้างไทย), Sarng Anakot Thai (Futurise Thailand) Party (พรรคสร้างอนาคตไทย), Chart Pattana Kla Party(พรรคชาติพัฒนาก้าวหน้า), and United Thai Nation Party (พรรครวมไทยสร้างชาติ). They are potential allies of Anutin and the BJT in forming the next government.

AGEING GENERALS’ SAFE CHOICE

If both Generals Prayut and Prawit are planning to call it quits, helping Anutin win the next premiership appears a safe choice for them.

Anutin certainly would not entertain any thought of punishing the two generals for staging the 2014 coup and for their authoritarian rule from May 2014 to June 2019.

A prime minister from the PT, on the other hand, would not let these two generals off the hook easily. Such fear of political reprisal is what has convinced both these ageing generals to soldier on, trying to thwart a return to power of the PT after the next general election.

While he was army chief, General Prayut led a bloodless coup to topple the PT-led government on 22 May 2014. Subsequently, in the March 2019 general election, he was nominated by the PPRP, which is now headed by his “Big Brother” General Prawit, to be its sole candidate for the premiership.

However, General Prawit’s PPRP has been weakened by party infighting and defections. It is now doubtful whether the party will be able to win more votes and gain more House seats by renominating General Prayut for the premiership.

It is also uncertain whether General Prayut wants to accept the PPRP’s renomination, because, if the PPRP is successful in the next general election, he will be able to serve only two more years before his eight-year premiership eligibility runs out in mid-2025.

Moreover, by mid-2025, General Prawit will be 80. It is doubtful that he will be healthy enough to take over the premiership after General Prayut.

Amid these uncertainties, Anutin appears a safe bet for the two generals to be allowed to ride peacefully into their political sunset.

ACCEPTABLE TO MOST SENATORS

Anutin is also an acceptable choice for most of the 250 senators who shall take part in selecting a new prime minister after the general election.

The senators constituted the largest voting bloc in parliament in the premiership selection on 5 June 2019. General Prayut won the race with 500 votes, from 251 MPs and 249 senators.⁹ His rival from the opposition, Future Forward party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, received only 244 votes, all from MPs in the PT and six other parties.

In theory, a minority coalition led by the PPRP or the BJT can still succeed in selecting General Prayut or Anutin as the next prime minister with support of a large majority of senators. The winner needs endorsement of a simple majority of the combined memberships of the House of Representatives (500 MPs) and the Senate (250 senators), or 376 votes. But in practice, however, such a minority prime minister can be easily voted out of office in a no-confidence debate, in which the senators shall have no role.

To succeed, Anutin and his BJT will need to build a broad-based coalition. This in turn will stimulate greater support from the senators in the premiership selection after the general election.

PRO-MONARCHY ORIENTATION

Another reason that many conservative senators find Anutin agreeable is his non-confrontational style and his pro-monarchy orientation. BJT opposes ideas of reforming the monarchy, especially the demand to scrap the controversial Section 112 in the Criminal Code. Section 112, which its critics consider as an obsolete *lèse-majesté* law, includes a jail term of up to 15 years for anyone defaming, insulting, or threatening the monarch of the Thai kingdom, including the king, the queen, the heir-apparent, and the regent.

Anutin has recently reiterated that he and his BJT found nothing wrong about Section 112, and would not work with any political parties, politicians, and political movements that are trying to change Section 112.¹⁰ Anutin apparently had in mind Move Forward Party, which on 15 October unveiled its new political platform, which included revising Section 112.¹¹

In addition to the BJT, the PPRP, Democrat Party, and Charthai Pattana Party in the ruling coalition have also declared their opposition to any attempt to revise or to remove Section 112. Their common pro-monarchy stance will enable these parties to stay together in forming the next government.

PRIVATE SECTOR CONNECTIONS

Anutin has an engineering degree from Hofstra University in New York, and a Mini MBA degree from Thammasat University, and during his five-year timeout from politics, he supervised his family's construction business at Sino-Thai Engineering and Construction Co. Now, as a deputy prime minister, Anutin supervises three key ministries: public health, transport, and tourism and sports. He and his BJT ministers have spearheaded the revitalisation of Thai tourism, and the establishment of Thailand as the region's medical hub for wellness and medical tourism.

Anutin's cabinet duties have led him to work closely with the private sector in hospitals, hotels, and tourism-related businesses. His emphasis on tackling issues concerning life and livelihood, as well as speeding up infrastructure projects will attract crucial support from the private sector. One of Anutin's weaknesses is the negative image of him being an old-style politician deeply mired in money politics, and he has never been ranked higher than fifth place in popularity surveys.¹² Support from the private sector, therefore, will be crucial in improving his image among urban middle-class voters.

INTERESTING USEFUL HOBBY

Anutin is known as an avid collector of Buddha amulets. He is also very fond of praying and meditation. For recreation, he does flying. His flying skill has enabled him to support the Thai Red Cross Society in airlifting human organs for emergency transplants.

On 18 October, Anutin flew a medical team to Udon Thani to pick up donated human organs. That was his 40th flight under the “Heart With Wings Operation” since 2014.¹³

His ability to operate a small private aircraft indicates that he is technologically savvy, dexterous, in good health, has good eyesight and a methodical mind. These personal traits will be very useful if he pilots the next government.

CONCLUSION

Anutin has what it takes to be the next prime minister of Thailand. None of the other contenders come close to rivalling his qualifications and political experience.

His BJT is gaining strength as more and more seasoned politicians jump onto its bandwagon heading into the general election.

If Prime Minister General Prayut and PPRP leader General Prawit want to call it quits, supporting Anutin for the next premiership will be their best bet. Anutin can help protect the two ageing generals, so that they can ride safely into their political sunset.

ENDNOTES

¹ The BJT won 39 House seats in the direct constituency election, and received 12 party-list House seats from winning about 3.73 million votes or about 10.5% of the grand total of 38.268 million votes cast in the general election on 24 March 2019.

² Ten MPs from the dissolved Future Forward Party, three MPs from the PPRP, and one MP from the PT have joined the BJT. See details of 86 political parties in operation as of 9 September 2022 on the website of the Office of the Election Commission, www.ect.go.th/ect_th/download/article/article_20220912135547.pdf, accessed 21 October 2022. MPs expelled from a party have 30 days to join another party without losing their House membership. MPs whose party has been dissolved, like in the case of Future Forward Party, have 60 days to join another party. But MPs who voluntarily resign from a party shall immediately lose their House membership, and may be held responsible for the expenses of the Election Commission if it has to hold by-elections to fill House seats arising from their resignation.

³ “เบิร์ดเดย์ ‘เนวิน’ 64 ปี ดึกดึก ส.ส. ‘พท. - พปชร. - ปชป. - สท.’ กว่า 30 คนพริบ! สอชบ ภท. ‘บิ๊กเน’ ขอ 120 ที่นั่ง” [Newin’s 64th birthday party rocking with attendance of over 30 MPs from the PT, the PPRP, Democrat Party, and Thai Economics Party who want to join the BJT. ‘Big Nay’ (Newin Chidchob) wishes for 120 House seats], *Thai Post*, 4 October 2022, www.thaipost.net/hi-light/235437, accessed 21 October 2022. For additional details of those non-BJT MPs who attended the birthday party, see “เช็ชชื่อ ส.ส. ต่างพรรคร่วมงานวันเกิด ‘เน

วิน’ ” [Checking names of non-BJT MPs who attended Newin’s birthday party], *Nation T.V. News*, 4 October 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZF3OREKXM7M, accessed 21 October 2022.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ “ ‘อนุทิน’ รับคุย ‘พุทธพงษ์’ เข้า กท.หวังได้ ส.ส. กทม.” [‘Anutin’ admits talking to ‘Buddhipongse’ to woo him to join the BJT in hope of winning House seats in Bangkok] *Siam Rath*, 18 October 2022, www.siamrath.co.th/n/391875, accessed 22 October 2022. Buddhipongse was a former party-list MP of the PPRP. Buddhipongse was one of the prime movers of the People’s Democratic Reform Committee in protesting against the PT-led government that ruled from November 2013 to May 2014. He lost his cabinet post and House membership in February 2021 following a criminal conviction against him for his role in the protest. Another MP of the PPRP, Dr Pacharin Samsiripong (Bangkok Constituency 2: Pathum Wan, Bang Rak, and Sathorn) is reportedly intending to join the BJT. She is the spokesperson for the PPRP.

⁶ “ตำนานงูเห่าการเมือง ภาค 2 เนวิน - อนุทิน - สุเทพ ชู ‘อภิสิทธิ์’ เป็นนายกฯ ” [Legend of political cobras Part 2: Newin – Anutin – Suthep supporting Abhisit for the premiership], *Work Point Today*, 26 March 2019, www.workpointtoday.com/ตำนานงูเห่าการเมืองภาค2, accessed 21 October 2022.

⁷ People Power’s MPs who defected include Chai Chidchob, Newin’s father, and Chavarat Charnvirakul, Anutin’s father. Both Newin and Anutin were serving their five-year ban from politics and thus were not MPs at that time. Newin, one of the deputy leaders of Thai Rak Thai Party, and Anutin, a member of the party’s executive committee suffered the restriction after Thai Rak Thai Party was dissolved on 30 May 2007.

⁸ MP Siripong Angkasakulkiat, BJT – Si Sa Ket (Constituency 1), later clarified that he abstained because he had promised his constituency that he would vote only for BJT party leader Anutin for the premiership.

⁹ Senate President Dr Pornpetch Wichitcholchai voted to abstain out of political correctness.

¹⁰ “ ‘ภูมิใจไทย’ ชูจุดยืนค้านแก้ ม.112 ปิดประตูร่วมจัดตั้งรัฐบาลกับพรรคก้าวไกล” [‘Bhumjaithai’ emphasises its opposition to amending Section 112, closing the door to work with Move Forward Party in setting up a new government], *Thai Post*, 19 October 2022, www.thaipost.net/hi-light/234649, accessed 21 October 2022.

¹¹ “ ‘ก้าวไกล’ เปิดหน้าตันนิรโทษกรรมคดีการเมือง แก่ ม. 112 พระเลือกตั้งได้ ลงนามศาลอาญาระหว่างประเทศ” [‘Move Forward’ unveils its push for political amnesty, amending Section 112, allowing monks to vote, and signing (the Rome Statue of) the International Criminal Court], *Manager Online*, 15 October 2022, www.mgonline.com/politics/detail/0650000098796, accessed 21 October 2022.

¹² In its survey in the third quarter of 2022, Anutin came in eighth place with support of only 2.40% in the NIDA Poll conducted on 15-21 September 2022. “No one is suitable” to be the next prime minister was the most popular response, 24.16%. Coming second in the survey was Thaksin’s youngest daughter Paethongtarn Shinawatra with 21.60% support. Move Forward party leader Pita Limjaroenrat came third with 10.56%. And Prime Minister General Prayut came fourth with 10.12%. See details at

www.nidapoll.nida.ac.th/survey_detail?survey_id=595, 25 September 2022, accessed 25 October 2022. In a survey report released on 23 October 2022, Anutin came ninth with only 4.00% of support among respondents in the southern region. Surprisingly, General Prayut came first with 23.94% of support. Coming second was Ms Paethogtarn. See details at www.nidapoll.nida.ac.th/survey_detail?survey_id=599.

¹³ “ ‘อนุทิน’ นำคณะแพทย์บินด่วนรับอวัยวะจากโรงพยาบาลอุดรธานี สนับสนุนปฏิบัติการหัวใจติดปีก” [‘Anutin’ led a medical team to receive donated human organs at Udon Thani Hospital, in support of the Heart With Wings Operation], *Thai Post*, 18 October 2022, www.thaipost.net/general-news/244582, accessed 21 October 2022.

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