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Singapore | 24 July 2020

Impending Cabinet Reshuffle: Prayut's Dilemma

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thai Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha has proved his critics and doubters wrong by surviving unscathed for a full year at the head of his sprawling nineteen-party coalition government.
- However, as his government enters its second year in power this month, Prayut faces daunting challenges from coalition parties clamouring for a comprehensive and prompt revamp of the cabinet.
- The sudden resignation of Deputy Prime Minister Dr Somkid Jatusripitak, Finance Minister Uttama Savanayana, Energy Minister Sonthirat Sonthijirawong, and Higher Education Minister Suwit Maesincee on 16 July will force Prayut to go for a major cabinet reshuffle sooner rather than later.
- The new leadership of the coalition's core Phalang Pracharat Party wants control of the finance and the energy ministries, while other parties are calling for a reallocation of ministerial posts commensurate with their growing strength.
- Since he controls no party, Prayut will try to do what he can to shore up his position.

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INTRODUCTION

Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha has proven his critics and doubters wrong by not only surviving the first year leading his coalition government practically unscathed, but also by gaining new strength to carry on into a second year. This is much to the chagrin of all those who want to see him fail sooner rather than later.

Unruly and unstable at times, Prayut's coalition of 19 parties began last July with a slim majority in Thailand's House of Representatives. But it has gradually gained parliamentary seats through by-election victories and defections from opposition parties.

At the same time, the opposition has grown steadily weaker, above all because of the dissolution of the Future Forward Party, the second largest opposition party, in May. The opposition lost eleven seats in parliament, and members of that party's executive committee were disqualified from serving in the House. Consequently, the full membership of the House dropped from 500 to 489.

As Prayut's ruling coalition enters its second year in power, his government has 277 seats, a comfortable 56.6 per cent majority and an improvement over its precarious majority of 254 seats or 50.8 per cent in the original 500-member House.

The Prayut administration has also gained popular support and international praise for successfully tackling the challenge of COVID-19 during the first half of this year. On 13 July, Thailand's Centre for Administration of the COVID-19 Situation reported no local infection for the forty-ninth consecutive day.¹ This success has given Prayut new confidence and emboldened him to resist growing pressure from Phalang Pracharat, the largest party in the ruling coalition, to yield key ministerial posts to members of its new senior executive committee members in a coming cabinet reshuffle.

THE NEW PHALANG PRACHARAT LEADERSHIP

In late June, the Phalang Pracharat Party revamped its party leadership. Party leader Uttama Savanayana and secretary-general Sonthirat Sonthijirawong were replaced by General Prawit Wongsuwan and Anucha Nakasai, respectively. Uttama, who serves as finance minister, and Sonthirat, the energy minister, subsequently resigned from the party in disgust. Also quitting the party were Higher Education Minister Suwit Maesincee and Kobsak Pootrakul, a political aide to the prime minister. These four were known as "whiz kids" who enjoyed the patronage of Deputy Prime Minister Dr Somkid Jatusripitak, the chief economic advisor to the prime minister.

The four whiz kids held a joint press conference on 9 July to announce their departure from the party, saying that they had accomplished their mission of supporting Prayut as leader of the newly elected coalition government after the March 2019 general election. They also said that they would no longer have any tie to Phalang Pracharat.²

On 16 July, they resigned from their posts in the government. Also quitting on the same day was Dr Somkid, who reportedly cited his poor health as the primary reason for leaving.

The Phalang Pracharat Party's leadership wants the finance and the energy portfolios to go to senior party executives. Moreover, it hopes to see new party leader General Prawit assume a significant ministerial post, instead of remaining as just one of the five deputy prime ministers. During the five years of military rule after the 2014 coup, General Prawit served concurrently as a deputy prime minister and defence minister.

In the cabinet formed after the general election last year, Prime Minister General Prayut took over the defence portfolio. The common assumption was that the change was due to General Prawit's poor health.

However, the 75-year-old former Army chief now seems to be in much better shape, as is evinced by his willingness to accept Phalang Pracharat's top post. Previously he had served as chief party strategist, calling the shots and mediating among different party factions mostly behind the scenes.

General Prayut is known to respect General Prawit as his "big brother" in the Burapha Phayak or "Eastern Tigers" clique in the Army. But he has little patience for dealing with demanding politicians such as those in the new leadership of the Phalang Pracharat Party. Prayut is not a member of the party; he merely permitted it to nominate him for the premiership.

THE OPPOSITION FALLING APART

While the Phalang Pracharat Party's position of leadership in the ruling coalition is now more secure, Phuea Thai, Thailand's largest party and the core of the seven-party parliamentary opposition, has been weakened by infighting. A group of disgruntled senior party figures led by former secretary-general Phumtham Wechayachai has set up a political movement called "CARE"³ as a platform to demonstrate their political prowess. None of them is a member of parliament, and those in the group have been given little to do inside Phuea Thai. Any impact that CARE has will come outside the House.

CARE will concentrate on keeping the Thai public informed and holding the government accountable, according to one of its founders, Dr Surapong Seubwonglee. He does not rule out the possibility of developing CARE into a new full-fledged party later on.⁴

The Phuea Thai Party under the leadership of Sompong Amornvivat and secretary-general Anudith Nakornthap failed to make any significant impact during the no-confidence debate against Prayut and five of his ministers last February. Sompong and Anudith were also blamed for the party's failures in the past five by-elections, in which the party suffered a net loss of three House seats.⁵

While Phuea Thai was floundering in disarray, its main ally in the opposition, the Future Forward Party, was struggling through a far worse ordeal. Its flamboyant leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit was barred from attending the House from day one of the current parliament, his membership suspended pending a probe into an allegation that he had failed to properly dispose of all his shares in a media-related firm before standing for election as a party-list candidate.

On 20 November 2019, the Constitutional Court ruled that Thanathorn was guilty and thus cancelled his parliamentary membership. Then, in mid-December, the party expelled four of its members of parliament for crossing party lines to vote with the government. All four quickly joined government parties.⁶ Their defections from the opposition increased the ruling coalition's majority in the House and thus relieved considerable pressure on the government.

Finally, on 21 February 2020, the Future Forward Party suffered a fatal blow. The Constitutional Court ruled against the two-year-old party in a case involving unlawful borrowing of 191.2 million baht from Thanathorn. As a result, Thanathorn and his colleagues on the party executive committee were banned from politics for 10 years. This decision meant that 11 members of the executive committee also lost their parliamentary seats. As these were party-list seats, they were not filled through by-elections. Consequently, the membership of the House decreased from 500 members to 489, much to the political advantage of the ruling coalition.

Two weeks after their party was dissolved, 54 Future Forward members of parliament joined the Move Forward Party under the leadership of 39-year-old Pita Limcharoenrut, the chief executive officer of a palm oil concern who holds a master's degree in public policy from the Harvard Kennedy School. The new party is still the second largest in the opposition, but it is considerably smaller than Thanathorn's ill-fated party, which began the session with 80 members of parliament in its ranks.

The decline of the opposition continued with the defection of five of the New Economics Party's six members of parliament to the government side. They are likely to join the Phalang Pracharat Party. These defections left former party leader Mingkwan Sangsuwan as the only remaining New Economics member of parliament.

The ruling coalition now has 277 members of parliament, giving it a comfortable majority of 56.6 per cent in the 489-member House. The seat for Samut Prakan's Constituency 5 is up for grabs in a 9 August by-election, in which Phalang Pracharat candidate Krung Srivilai will be the strong front-runner.

On the other hand, with only 211 votes and diminished firepower in the House, the weakened opposition can now hardly threaten, let alone defeat, the ruling coalition in parliament. Prayut has one fewer political problem to worry about as his ruling coalition sails into its second year in power.

CABINET RESHUFFLE DILEMMA

In mid-June, Labour Minister Chatumonggol Sonakul stepped down as leader of the Action Coalition for Thailand (ACT), and soon also left the small government party. His departure from ACT will require him to relinquish his ministerial post. ACT founder Suthep Thuagsuban quickly nominated his protégé Anek Laothamatas to be the new labour minister, while Taweesak Na Takuathung will serve as the party's leader.

On 20 July, Tewan Liptapanlop of the Chat Phatthana Party resigned his post as minister in the Prime Minister's Office. He said that his small party, with only three members of parliament, would not stand in the way of a speedy cabinet reshuffle.

The new leadership of the Phalang Pracharat Party is, however, clamouring for a major cabinet reshuffle, going well beyond the appointment of just a few ministers. The sudden resignation of Dr Somkid and his whiz kids has created a good opportunity for Prayut to act without being seen as succumbing to pressure from the Phalang Pracharat Party.

Nevertheless, the prime minister is facing a tough dilemma. Should he yield to pressure and permit the Phalang Pracharat Party to grab key ministerial posts, notably the finance and the energy ministerial posts? Or should he put his foot down and exert his prerogative of choosing competent candidates – who need not be senior politicians from government parties? Prayut clearly needs a more credible and dynamic cabinet, capable of attracting international support and reviving a Thai economy battered by the pandemic.

All signs indicate that Prayut is not surrendering his prerogative just yet. But he also seems prepared to listen to leaders of all government parties.

“Today you all have to have confidence in our national government administration. Have confidence in me. I am going to lead our nation through this period. Reshuffling the cabinet is another matter; it is political ... we have to discuss with all government parties. Just be patient”, Prayut told the media on 9 July.⁷

He also noted that he had never set a September deadline for any cabinet reshuffle. “It can happen any time from now on”.⁸

Changes in the number of members of parliament belonging to government parties will have a direct impact on the new quota of ministerial posts to which each of them is entitled.

The Phalang Pracharat Party began with 115 members of parliament, but it now has 120,⁹ with the possibility of gaining one more seat in the coming Samut Prakan by-election. The parliamentary strength of the Bhumjai Thai Party has grown from 51 members to 61.¹⁰ It has become the second largest party in the ruling coalition, surpassing the Democrat Party with its 52 seats.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, Bhumjai Thai now wants a larger number of cabinet posts than those held by the Democrat Party.

Also claiming a share of cabinet posts is the Local Power Party, which started with three members of parliament and was overlooked in the allocation of portfolios. Now it has five members of parliament¹² and hopes to assume at least one cabinet post.

The 11 mini-parties in the ruling coalition, each with only one member of parliament, have joined forces with the Thai Forest Conservation Party, which has two members of parliament, to demand representation in a reshuffled cabinet. Their combined strength of 13 votes is more than enough to rock the boat.

Two of the prime movers in this new caucus are Mongkolkit Suksintharanon, leader of the Thai Civilised Party, and Pichate Satirachaval, leader of the Thai People’s Justice Party. The two created quite a media sensation last August when they formed an “independent opposition” faction to protest the lack of a more meaningful role for them in the coalition government.

MAKE-OR-BREAK DECISION AHEAD

The quality of Prayut's new cabinet may well determine how successful Thailand's governing coalition will be during its second year in power. The prime minister seems very much aware of the pressing need to save and create jobs, to support failing SMEs, and to revive the devastated tourism sector. The latter contributed about 16 per cent to Thailand's GDP in 2019.

In April, Prayut appointed a diverse new group of advisors, led by the secretary-general of the National Economic and Social Development Council and consisting of leaders of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, the Board of Trade, the Thai Bankers Association, the Federation of Thai Industries, the National Farmers Council, the Digital Council of Thailand, the Thailand Tourism Council, the Federation of Thai Capital Market Organisations, and other bodies. The new group was tasked with recommending solutions to help the business sector cope with challenges resulting from the pandemic.¹³

In an unprecedented move, Prayut has reached out and received support from Thailand's top 20 billionaires, led by CP Group founder Dhanin Cheavaranont. He has also visited offices of major print media outlets to listen to their views, and perhaps seek their support. Prayut definitely needs all the help that he can get.

If and when more economic portfolios fall into the hands of veteran politicians, Prayut's room for manoeuvring his new policy for economic recovery will be limited by political exigencies and the self-interest of the new ministers.

The Phalang Pracharat Party has appointed Dr Narumon Pinyosinwat leader of its economic policy team. And it is touting her, a 46-year-old who earned her doctorate in finance and risk management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, as a potential replacement for Dr Somkid. Dr Narumon is the current spokesperson for the Prayut administration. She previously taught at the National Institute of Development Administration.

Prayut has extended until the end of July the emergency decree giving him the authority to bypass ministers and issue executive orders for action under various laws. Drastic timely actions, including night curfews and shutting down provinces and businesses, have saved the Thai populace from a much worse health crisis and mitigated the deadly impact of the pandemic.

Success in reviving the Thai economy will further boost Prayut's confidence, as will continuing success in tackling the coronavirus. Conversely, failure in the critical economic mission will erode Prayut's legitimacy and render him dispensable under the "new normal" Thai political setting.

CONCLUSION

Prayut looks determined to soldier on in spite of the mounting pressure from the new Phalang Pracharat leadership and the demands from other government parties for a bigger share of political rewards.

He is, however, facing mounting difficulties in maintaining a balance between protecting the national interest and tolerating government politicians' pursuit of self-interest.

Should worse come to worst, Prayut can threaten dissolution of the House and a new general election. This is Prayut's trump card in his ongoing bargaining with General Prawit and other big party bosses in the ruling coalition. Few of them will want to face another general election so soon.

All in all, Prayut seems in control as his ruling coalition enters the second year in power.

¹ As of 13 July, Thailand had diagnosed 3,220 cases of COVID-19 infection; 3,090 of the patients had been discharged after treatment, while 72 were still in hospital, and 58 had died. See further details at the Centre's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/ThaiCovidCenter/> (accessed 13 July 2020).

² See a report of the press conference at “สี่กุมาร แกล้งขาลาออกจาก พปชร. ย้ำยังพร้อมทำหน้าที่รมต. ยังไม่คิดตั้งพรรคใหม่” [The four ‘whiz kids’ hold a press conference to announce their resignation from the Phalang Pracharat Party, insisting they are still ready for ministerial duties, but not thinking about forming a new party], *Manager Online* (www.mgsonline.com/politics/detail/9630000070317, accessed 14 July 2020”).

³ CARE stands for “Creative Action for Revival & People Empowerment”.

⁴ See “กลุ่ม CARE ปลูก ‘ก้าวข้ามความกลัว’ “ [CARE group volunteers ‘to overcome fear’], *BBC Thai*, 17 June 2020 (www.bbc.com/thai/53032653, accessed 13 July 2020).

⁵ Results of these by-elections are as follows.

Chiang Mai's Constituency 8, 26 May 2019

Seven-time election victor Surapol Kiatchaiyakorn of the Phuea Thai Party was disqualified, after he was found guilty of having made an illegal political donation. His party was barred from fielding any candidate in the by-election. Mrs Srinuan Bounlue of the Future Forward Party won, partly thanks to support from the Phuea Thai Party. Subsequently, however, she was expelled from the party on 16 December 2019. She has moved on to join the Bhumjai Thai Party in the ruling coalition. The by-election outcome also led to a re-allocation of party-list seats in the House of Representatives. The Phalang Pracharat Party and the Democrat Party, both on the government side, each gained one party-list seat. The Thai Rak Tham Party (in the government coalition) lost its only seat in the re-allocation. Previously, one of the 150 party-list seat had not been filled. Re-allocation of party-list seats stopped one year after the general election of 24 March 2019.

Nakhon Pathom's Constituency 5, 23 October 2019

Incumbent Mrs Jumpita Chankajorn of the Future Forward Party resigned because of ill health. Padermchai Sasomsdap of the Chat Thai Pattana Party (a government party) won, beating Jumpita's husband Pairatchote, who entered the race under the Future Forward Party's banner. His loss was a huge disappointment to the Future Forward Party.

Khon Kaen's Constituency 7, 22 December 2019

Incumbent Nawat Taohcharoensuk of the Phuea Thai Party was dismissed from the House after the guilty verdict against him in a murder case was upheld in the Court of Appeals. Somsak Khun-ngern of the Phalang Pracharat Party won the by-election, edging out the

Phuea Thai Party's candidate Thanik Masipitak. Thanik's surprise defeat in the Northeastern province was a serious setback for the Phuea Thai Party, particularly to Sudarat Keyuraphan, the party's chief strategist and its top candidate for the premiership. Kamphaengphet's Constituency 2, 23 February 2020

Incumbent Pol Lt Col Vaipote Arpornrat of the Phalang Pracharat Party was dismissed from the House after a guilty verdict against him for engaging in a violent anti-government protest in April 2009 was upheld in the Court of Appeals. His eldest son Petchpoom succeeded in defending the seat for the Phalang Pracharat Party. Lampang's Constituency 4, 20 June 2020

Incumbent Itthirat Chansurin of the Phuea Thai Party passed away on 7 May. But the chief opposition party failed to field anyone to defend its seat in the Northern province. The deceased parliamentarian's father, Pinit, pulled out at the last minute for unknown reasons. The House seat went to Wattana Sitthiwang of the Phalang Pracharat Party. But the Election Commission was investigating vote-buying allegations against Wattana. Samut Prakan's Constituency 5 (by-election date not yet announced)

Incumbent Krung Srivilai of the Phalang Pracharat Party was stripped of his parliamentary membership after he was held responsible for an unlawful donation to a Buddhist temple by one of his aides. However, the actor-turned-politician is permitted to run in the by-election.

⁶ Mrs Srinuan Boonlue (Chiang Mai's Constituency 8) joined the Bhumjai Thai Party; Ms Kawinnart Takee (Chonburi's Constituency 7) and Jaruk Sri-on (Chanthaburi's Constituency 2) joined the Thai Local Power Party; and Pol Lt Col Thanapat Kittiwongsa joined the Phalang Pracharat Party.

⁷ “ ‘ประยุทธ์’ ประกาศปรับ ครม. โละ 4 กุมาร รื้อโควต้าทีมเศรษฐกิจพรรคร่วม“ [‘Prayut’ announces cabinet reshuffle, removing the four whiz kids, and rearranging government parties' quota in economic team], *Prachachat Business News*, 9 July 2020 (www.prachachat.net/politics/news-488969), (accessed 14 July 2020).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The party gained one party-list seat in the re-allocation after the by-election in Chiang Mai's Constituency 8; it won two by-elections in Khon Kaen's Constituency 7 and Lampang's Constituency 4 (the latter result not yet certified by the Election Commission); embraced one of the four ex-Future Forward members of parliament expelled from the opposition party; and welcomed Paiboon Nititawan into its fold after he dissolved his People's Reform Party early last September.

¹⁰ One of the four Future Forward members of parliament joined the Bhumjai Thai Party after his expulsion from the opposition party in December. After the dissolution of the Future Forward Party, nine Future Forward members of parliament joined this government party in March 2020.

¹¹ Although the Democrat Party gained one party-list seat following the by-election in Chiang Mai, it lost one party-list seat in January 2020 after its candidate in Chanthaburi's Constituency 2, Chatchai Worapipat, was found guilty of defaming his opponents during the election campaign early last year. All 19,711 votes that he polled in the March 2019 general election were deducted from the Democrat Party's total, resulting in a loss of one party-list seat. Hence, the party's number of members of parliament remains at 52.

¹² Two of the four Future Forward members of parliament expelled from their party joined the Bangkok-based Local Power Party in early January 2020.

¹³ See the prime ministerial order of 8 April 2020 setting up the new advisory group at “นายกตั้งคณะที่ปรึกษาด้านธุรกิจเอกชน 16 คน รับมือผลกระทบโควิด 19“ [Prime minister sets up a 16-member advisory group on the private business sector to cope with the COVID-19], *Thai Post*, 10 April 2020 (www.thaipost.net/main/detail/62722), (accessed 14 July 2020).

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