

PERSPECTIVE

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The 2022 Gubernatorial Election in Bangkok: Party Support Will Matter

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Bangkok Governor Aswin Kwanmuang watches as a health worker administers the Pfizer vaccine for the Covid-19 coronavirus to a high school student at Prachaniwet Secondary School in Bangkok on October 4, 2021. Picture: Lillian SUWANRUMPHA / AFP

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Under the Local Elections Act of 2019, passed during the administration of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta, the military government was given the power to determine the appropriate time for holding sub-national elections, including Bangkok's gubernatorial election. If the military government lapses, the power to approve such elections would rest with the cabinet.
- Bangkok elections frequently reflect trends in national politics. The uncertainty of Bangkok politics has led the pro-military government or Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha that replaced the NCPO to postpone Bangkok's gubernatorial election until 2022.
- Political party affiliation matters and has an influence on voters' choices.
- Candidates from parties that are unpopular in Bangkok prefer therefore to run as independents. At the same time, there are also candidates who rely on their affiliation to a major party in order to win votes.
- The 2022 race for the Bangkok governor's race will be a major struggle between core political parties. Losing the election will represent a major setback for any party, while victory for a party's candidate will potentially signal the results of the national polls expected to be held by the first half of 2023.

INTRODUCTION

Thai law requires that an election for Bangkok's governor be held every four years. However, the most recent polls were held as far back as in March 2013, eight years ago. The 2014-2019 National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta led by General Prayut Chan-ocha (2014-2019) froze all subnational elections; after seizing power, the junta abrogated the 2007 Constitution and appointed a new drafting committee to redesign the country's charter.¹ In 2016, the NCPO also replaced elected Bangkok Governor Sukhumbhand Paribatra of the Democrat Party with Police General (retired) Aswin Kwanmung, who continues to hold this position.

Following the 2019 general election and provincial elections in 2021, Bangkok voters began demanding a gubernatorial election in the capital. In September, the Ministry of Interior along with the Election Commission of Thailand proposed that gubernatorial and council elections be held in the capital in November.² After a cabinet meeting in late September, however, those elections were postponed until early next year so as not to interfere with the provincial Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO) elections scheduled for 28 November. This plan has not resolved Bangkokians' dissatisfaction with the current administration. According to the Superpoll, more than 85 per cent of respondents in Bangkok favoured holding the election sooner because of the failure of the incumbent governor to solve many of Bangkok's problems, such as flooding, traffic congestion, and problematic COVID-19 vaccine distribution.³

Why then does General Prayut's government continue to delay the Bangkok gubernatorial election? What can we expect from political parties as the election approaches? The answers to these questions can provide clues as to the ways in which national politics are reflected at the local level in Thailand, and especially in the country's capital.

THE 2019 LAW ON THE BANGKOK METROPOLITAN ADMINISTRATION

The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration Act of 2019 was promulgated in April of that year.⁴ It revised sections of the 1985 version of the Act relating to the election of Bangkok's governor, members of the Bangkok Metropolitan Council (BMC) and members of Bangkok District Councils (BDC). Amendments concerned the qualifications of candidates for the post of Bangkok governor, the reduction of the number of BMC members from 60 to 50, and the postponement of BDC elections. More importantly, the Act's Section 53 was amended to give more power to the Ministry of Interior in determining the qualifications of candidates for governor and membership of the BMC. In the previous Act, this power rested in the hands of the courts and the chairman of the BMC, respectively. The 2019 law, however, allows the Ministry of Interior to intervene directly in Bangkok's leadership structure. The incumbent interior minister is General Anupong Paochinda, a former NCPO leader.

Candidates for the BMC will be elected under a first-past-the-post system, and are not required to be affiliated with political parties. Nevertheless, candidates in BMC elections strategically choose to run with party backing, as political parties may attract some Bangkok

voters, particularly members of the educated middle class. At the same time, candidates also rely upon their personal appeal and popularity in their districts to gain votes from the lower middle class.

The BMC is the city's legislative organ, with responsibility for adopting municipal laws, approving official announcements, issuing municipal regulations and scrutinizing and endorsing the allocation of the annual budget. Council members also represent Bangkok's population in that they monitor the performance of the city administration. Beyond these legal responsibilities, BMC members also play a vital role in both Bangkok gubernatorial elections and national legislative elections. Many act as vote canvassers and have close ties with national-level politicians.

In many Bangkok districts, the elected BMC members are the relatives of members of parliament. For, example, in Pom Prap Sattruphai District, Ake Jeunglertsiri, a district councilor from the Democrat Party, is the husband of Jermart Jeunglertsiri, a long-time Democrat MP for the same district. Other ties also link BMC members to political parties. Man Chalernwon, a long-time district councilor in Bueng Kum District, is the head of the local vote-canvassing team of the Democrat Party.⁵ He is also the head of the Democrat Party branch in the district. Man has a close relationship with Suthep Thaugsuban, the former secretary general of the Democrat Party, and he is now a member of Suthep's new party, the Action Coalition for Thailand. The Muangsiri family is another group that has played an important role in Bangkok politics. Sakon Muangsiri is a long-time Democrat MP for the Bang Bon and Bang Khun Thian constituencies on the Thonburi side of the Chao Phraya River, and members of his family have been elected as councilors for both districts for more than a decade.⁶

Democrat politicians in Bangkok are not alone in their close linkages with national politicians. MPs belonging to the Phuea Thai and other major parties also have close connections with the district councilors in the constituencies in which they compete. For example, Wichan Minchainan has been elected to parliament by voters in Minburi District since 2011. His brother, Wirat Minchainan, has, likewise, been the district's elected councilor since 2006. In Bang Sue District, the Khongudom family has controlled the BMC seat for more than a decade. In the 2019 election, the family set up a new political party called the Thai Local Power Party under the leadership of Chatchaval Khongudom, the prominent politician known as Chat Taopoon. His daughter, Phimorn Khongudom, competed under the party's banner in Bang Sue but failed to take the seat.⁷

Prior to 2001, candidates for BMC seats usually contested elections independently. This pattern gradually changed, however, as candidates began increasingly to campaign under a party banner. The last BMC election, held in September 2010, saw 60 seats captured by candidates representing major parties, with the Democrats obtaining 46 seats and Phuea Thai gaining 14 seats. Victories in BMC elections are strategically important for the parties, as they facilitate the execution of national and gubernatorial election strategies. BMC members typically work as vote canvassers for their parties, as they can access disadvantaged areas of Bangkok and have close connections with community leaders in each area of the capital. With these relationships, BMC members provide important

information and local knowledge about Bangkok's districts. Different districts exhibit varying characteristics, with voters ranging from the extremely wealthy to impoverished slum-dwellers.

Social media and leaflets may broadcast policy platforms to wealthy and upper middle-class voters, but to secure support from lower income voters, candidates must utilize BMC members' electoral networks. Apparently, Thailand's Phalang Pracharat Party-led coalition government has postponed the impending gubernatorial election in Bangkok until early next year in order to use the results of the BMC elections of early 2022 to gauge the sentiments of the electorate.⁸

CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

Prior to the 2014 coup, most Bangkok gubernatorial candidates preferred to contest elections under a party banner.⁹ In 2009 election, for instance, the candidate from the Democrat Party, Sukhumbhand Paribatra, ran against Yuranunt Pamornmontri, a famous Thai soap opera actor who represented Phuea Thai. In 2013, the incumbent Sukhumbhand again ran under the Democrat banner against General Pongsapat Pongcharoen, the former Deputy Commissioner General of the Royal Thai Police, representing Phuea Thai. Party identification helped these candidates garner support since many Bangkokians vote along party lines. For example, Sukhumbhand's second election came after most polls had shown him trailing far behind Phuea Thai's Pongsapat in popularity.¹⁰ The Democrat Party's campaign to support Sukhumbhand used the slogan, "if you don't vote for us, they would win", suggesting the threat of a Phuea Thai and thus Thaksinite victory in the capital.¹¹ On election day, Sukhumbhand prevailed, winning a second term with 1.25 million votes. His was the narrowest victory in the history of Bangkok elections; General Pongsapat garnered more than one million votes, losing by only 178,000 votes. Party identity salvaged Sukhumbhand's candidacy. Even though he was unpopular, Bangkok voters preferred the Democrats to the pro-Thaksin Shinawatra Phuea Thai party.¹²

In the 2022 Bangkok gubernatorial election, party affiliation may affect the voters' decision once again. Chadchart Sittipunt, a former transport minister in the Yingluck Shinawatra administration, is currently leading over other possible candidates in popularity polls.¹³ Chadchart worked closely with Thaksin Shinawatra in the past, and he joined the Phuea Thai Party in 2012. His relations with the party were deemed to be robust, and probably too strongly so for the taste of his political supporters in Bangkok. And so he decided to contest in this gubernatorial race as an independent candidate. With his campaign motto "Better Bangkok", Chadchart argues that the city's people no longer need political infighting between major parties, and they prefer a candidate who is not affiliated with any political party. He has also said that he does not want to prolong political conflicts, and that he wants to solve the city's problems.¹⁴ Running independently will allow him to attract more allies if he is elected. Chadchart's popularity among Bangkok voters would in itself be a better draw for voters than if he runs under the Phuea Thai banner since that party has been unpopular among Bangkokians. Some opinion polls have also confirmed that Chadchart's decision to contest independently was correct, in that it also allows him to distance himself from

national politics. Connections with national politics would, it appears, only undercut his political support.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the Democrat Party, the oldest party in Thailand, has announced Suchatchavee Suwansawas, the president of King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, as its candidate in the upcoming gubernatorial election in Bangkok. Suchatchavee is a young academic and popular for his innovative promotion of educational development in Thailand. Although his education and background will appeal to many middle-class Bangkok voters, he does not control any political base in the capital. The Democrat Party has also lost much of its strength in Bangkok, partly because of the departure of many prominent MPs from the party. They included members of the People's Democratic Reform Council (PDRC), which under the leadership of former Democrat Party member Natthapon Thipasuwan participated in the 2013-2014 political movement against Yingluck Shinawatra's administration. The PDRC group left the Democrats for the Phalang Pracharat Party in the 2019 election, a major factor in that party's success in garnering votes throughout Bangkok. The PDRC has close connections with many politicians in the city, however, and the group's departure from the Democrat Party contributed to the losses suffered by Democrat candidates in the 2019 parliamentary election; it is likely to spell doom for Suchatchavee's campaign as well.¹⁶

The Phalang Pracharat Party has had difficulty naming a candidate for the 2022 Bangkok gubernatorial election. At the beginning of this year, PPRP leader General Prawit Wongsuwon threw his support behind former national police chief Police General Chakthip Chaijinda as the party's candidate. Chakthip campaigned and introduced himself to Bangkok voters, even though it was not clear that he would run. However, nominating Chakthip presented the PPRP with a difficult problem. The incumbent governor, Police General Aswin Kwanmuang, signaled to the party that he wished to run as a candidate for the post to which he had been appointed by the junta. Subsequently, late October saw Chakthip announce his withdrawal from the race.¹⁷

The Phuea Thai Party and Move Forward Party have not yet announced their candidates so far. Phuea Thai has lost Sudarat Keyuraphan, a key member of the party in Bangkok and the former chairwoman of its strategy committee. Sudarat left to form a new party, the Thai Sang Thai Party. Phuea Thai is thus with no strong candidate who can control votes in Bangkok districts, and is therefore not likely to field its own candidate for governor, but rather quietly to support Chadchart. To increase its chances to win in Bangkok, both in the BMC and in the gubernatorial elections, the party has turned to Phonphum Wiphatphumiprathet, a long-time BMC councilor who was elected as a Phuea Thai MP in 2011. Phonphum and his team of vote canvassers, most of whom are former BMC or BDC members, will play a significant role in garnering votes for Phuea Thai candidates, particularly in the outer districts of Bangkok.

The Move Forward Party, a reincarnation of the Future Forward Party that captured the third highest total of seats in parliament in the 2019 general election, may face a hard time in the races for both BCM seats and the Bangkok governor's post.¹⁸ Although the

party won 804,272 votes in Bangkok, the largest number of any party, in the 2019 national elections, local elections in the capital city are another story. The trend in national politics may not apply to Bangkok elections. The losses suffered by the Progressive Movement, another successor to the Future Forward party, in provincial elections last year offered evidence of the differences in voting behaviour between national and sub-national elections.¹⁹ While the former Future Forward Party focused its 2019 campaign on the reform of the monarchy and on the role of the military in politics, voters in sub-national elections—including those in Bangkok—have a keen interest in policies relating to the improvement of their daily lives rather than in concerns such as constitutional amendments. The results of last year's sub-national elections suggested the maintenance of the status quo in Thai politics, in which winning policy platforms in sub-national elections must have a different emphasis from those in national ones. To win elections in Bangkok, the Move Forward Party may need to adjust its policy and campaign techniques.

CONCLUSION

Bangkok's gubernatorial elections frequently reflect trends in national politics. Political parties do matter and have an influence on voters' choice, and, although the popularity of candidates and the role of BMC members as vote canvassers will play a role in the upcoming election, party banners are still important.

The 2022 Bangkok governor race will be a major power struggle between Thailand's core political parties. Losing this election will be a major setback for any party. The results will portend similar dynamics in national elections, expected by the first half of 2023. According to a poll taken in April 2021, more than 32 per cent of voters are still undecided about their choice for Bangkok governor. Chadchart is the front runner in all polls, with a level of support of approximately 28 per cent as late as October 2021.²⁰

The PPRP, of course, wants to win this race. But, uncertainty about the party's candidate, along with factional infighting will damage the party's chances.²¹ The Phuea Thai and Move Forward Parties have not selected their candidates yet.

The Democrats have been weakened in Bangkok after the defection of the party's core Bangkok faction to the PPRP. In this complex political environment, things can change drastically before election day. To win the Bangkok governor's post, it is thus inevitable that parties will employ any campaign method available to garner support from undecided voters.

¹ See Duncan McCargo and Anyarat Chattharakul, *Future Forward: The Rise and Fall of a Thai Political Party* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2020).

² “‘มท.’เตรียมขงครม.เลือกตั้ง‘อบต.-ผู้ว่าฯกทม.-นายกเมืองพัทยา’” [MoI” prepared to encourage the Cabinet to conduct the elections for ‘SAO chairmen, governor of Bangkok, and Mmayor of Pattaya], *Thai Post*, 5 September 2021 (<https://www.thaipost.net/main/detail/115665>, downloaded 23 October 2021).

³ “โพลชี้คนอยากเลือกตั้งผู้ว่าฯกทม.ใหม่ ชัดระบบช่วยเหลือล้มเหลว” [Poll indicates that people wanted to elect the governor of Bangkok again, claiming that the support system has failed], *Post Today*, 1 August 2021 (<https://www.posttoday.com/politic/news/659470>, downloaded 23 October 2021).

⁴ “พระราชบัญญัติระเบียบบริหารราชการกรุงเทพมหานคร (ฉบับที่ ๖) พ.ศ. ๒๕๖๒” [Bangkok Metropolitan Administrative Organization Act (6th Revision) B.E. 2562], *Royal Gazette* 136(50a), 16 April 2019 (<http://wiki.kpi.ac.th/images/b/bd/BANGKOK6.pdf>, downloaded 23 October 2021).

⁵ Author’s interview, 1 May 2021, Bangkok.

⁶ The Muangsiri family set up its own Facebook page, for the so-called Muangsiri Team. People may use the page to report any problems that occur in these districts. The page is at <https://www.facebook.com/teammuangsiri/>.

⁷ “‘ซัช เต่าปูน’ชวนคนไทยออกมาใช้สิทธิเลือกตั้งเดินหน้าประเทศ” [“Chat Taopoon” asking Thais to vote for the progress of the country], *Siam Rat*, 24 March 2019 (<https://siamrath.co.th/n/71114/>, downloaded 2 November 2021).

⁸ “‘สิระ’เผยปชช.เตรียมถกส่งผู้สมัคร ส.ก.หรือไม่ แต่ไม่ส่งชิงผู้ว่าฯกทม.” [“Sira” reveal PPRP is discussing whether to prepare a candidate for Bangkok municipal council election or not, but they won’t compete for the governor of Bangkok position], *Thai Post*, 15 October 2021 (<https://www.thaipost.net/main/detail/119822>, downloaded 24 October 2021).

⁹ With the exception of Bhichit Rattakul and Samak Sundaravej, who ran as independents for governor in Bangkok governor, these candidates included Chamlong Srimuang and Krisda Arunvongse na Ayudhya from the Palang Dharma Party, Apirak Kosayodhin from the Democrat Party, and Sukhumbhand Paribatra, also from the Democrat Party.

¹⁰ “ผลโพลส่วนใหญ่ ระบุจุดชนะคุณชาย” [Most poll results show that Judy will defeat the royal], *Thai Rat Online*, 3 March 2013 (<https://www.thairath.co.th/content/330083>, downloaded 23 October 2021).

¹¹ “ไม่เลือกเราเขามาแน่!?” [If you don’t choose us, he will surely come!?!], *MGR Online*, 4 March 2013 (<https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9560000026664>, downloaded 23 October 2021).

¹² Amy Sawitta Lefevre, “Election for Thailand’s Capital Sees Defeat for Thaksin’s Party”, *Reuters*, 3 March 2013 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-election-idUSBRE92206Q20130303>, downloaded 23 October 2021).

¹³ “‘ซัชชาติ’มาแรง คนกรุงเทพฯอยากให้เป็นผู้ว่า กทม.คนใหม่” [“Chadchart” on the rise; Bangkokians want him to be the new governor of Bangkok], *Thai Post*, 3 October 2021 (<https://www.thaipost.net/main/detail/118572>, downloaded 24 October 2021).

¹⁴ Aekarach Sattaburuth, “Chadchart Announces Bid for Bangkok”, *Bangkok Post*, 30 November 2019 (<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1805639/chadchart-announces-bid-for-bangkok>, downloaded 24 October 2021).

¹⁵ “‘นิต้าโพล’ เสียงข้างมากอยากได้ผู้ว่า กทม.อิสระ แต่ยังไม่ตัดสินใจ ‘ซัชชาติ’ คะแนนนำ ‘จักรทิพย์’” [“NIDA Poll” show majority want an independent governor for Bangkok but remain undecided; “Chadchart” is ahead of “Chakthip”], *MGR Online*, 7 March 2021 (<https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9640000022184>, downloaded 24 October 2021).

¹⁶ Punchada Sirivunnabood, “The Rules Change but the Players Don’t”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, 3 (2019): 390-417.

¹⁷ “‘จักรทิพย์’ ถอนตัวชิงผู้ว่าฯกทม. ปม ‘ธรรมนัส’หนุน ‘อัศวิน’” [Chakthip withdraws from Bangkok governor election because of Thammanat’s support for Aswin], *Matichon*, 2 November 2021 (https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_3021902, downloaded 3 November 2021).

¹⁸ The party was established in 2018 and, buoyed by strong support among young Thais, came in third place in national elections held in March 2019. In February 2020, the party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court on charges that its leader Thanathorn Juangroongrunkit lent his own money to the party in violation of the law. The dissolution of the party catalyzed a public protest movement, which has since expanded its demands to include the highly sensitive question of reform of the Thai monarchy. See also McCargo and Anyarat, *Future Forward*.

¹⁹ Punchada Sirivunnabood, “Thailand’s First Provincial Elections since the 2014 Military Coup: What Has Changed and Not Changed”, *ISEAS Perspective* 24/2021, 5 March 2021 (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/posts/2021-24-thailands-first-provincial-elections-since-the-2014-military-coup-what-has-changed-and-not-changed-by-punchada-sirivunnabood/>), downloaded 23 October 2021).

²⁰ “‘ชัชชาติ ยื่น 1 ‘นั้ด้าโพล’ เปิด 10 อันดับผู้ว่าฯ ที่ชาวกทม. อยากให้เป็นสุด” [Chadchart is No.1; “NIDA Poll” discloses 10 top Bangkok governor candidates in Bangkokians’ opinion], *Khaosod Online*, 3 October 2021 (https://www.khaosod.co.th/politics/news_6655522), downloaded 24 October 2021).

²¹ Punchada Sirivunnabood, “Thailand’s Warring Generals: Different Beds, Same Dream”, *Fulcrum*, 8 October 2021 (<https://fulcrum.sg/thailands-warring-generals-different-beds-same-dream/>), downloaded 24 October 2021).

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