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Thai PM Must Act Sooner To Defend His Fragile Premiership

*Termsak Chalermphanupap**



Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha gestures as he attends a groundbreaking ceremony for a monument of Thailand's late king Bhumibol Adulyadej at a memorial park in Bangkok on 5 December 2021. Picture: Jack TAYLOR, AFP.

** Termsak Chalermphanupap is Visiting Fellow in the Thailand Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thai Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha has until the third week of May to decide how to defend his fragile premiership.
- Once the parliament re-opens on 22 May, the opposition plans to submit a no-confidence motion to try once again to oust General Prayut.
- The ruling coalition shoring up General Prayut’s premiership is falling apart, with each government party trying to score political points in anticipation of an early general election.
- If General Prayut wishes only to complete his four-year term until March 2023, he can strengthen that possibility by reshuffling the cabinet in the near future to pacify and shore up the ruling coalition.
- But if he entertains thoughts of staying in power for another term after the next general election, he will have to do much more—including assuming the leadership of a political party.
- General Prayut cannot continue his precarious reliance on his “Big Brother” General Prawit Wongsuwan, leader of the Phalang Pracharat Party. This is partly because Prawit’s influence is waning and because his party, the largest in the governing coalition, is growing weaker.

INTRODUCTION

General Prayut Chan-ocha's days as Thailand's prime minister are clearly numbered. The premier has until the third week of May to decide what to do. Inaction is not a viable option—especially if he hopes to complete his four-year term until March 2023. And if he really wishes to stay in power after the country's next general election, his options are diminishing and his time is running out.

By 22 May, the Thai parliament will re-open for its 2022-2023 session. At the first opportunity, the opposition plans to submit a motion of no-confidence against General Prayut.¹

Once this is done, the prime minister cannot avoid a no-confidence debate by dissolving the House and calling an early general election. He could resign instead, but he has persistently ruled that out as an option.

RULING COALITION IN DISARRAY

When the parliament went into recess at the end of February, the 17 parties in the ruling coalition still had a comfortable majority of 257 MPs in the 487-member House of Representatives.² The seven parties in the opposition had only 212 MPs. In order to defeat General Prayut in a no-confidence vote, the opposition needs at least 244 MPs.

The Thai Economic Party accounts for 18 seats in the House. It is now under the leadership of Captain Thammanat Prompao, the former secretary-general of the Phalang Pracharat Party (PPP), the leading component of the coalition. Thammanat was expelled from the PPP on 19 January. As *de facto* leader of the Thai Economic Party, he has maintained that he and his party colleagues will stand for the people's interest. And he has cautioned that nobody can assume that all of his new party's MPs will blindly support General Prayut's premiership.³

Captain Thammanat remains a serious threat to the prime minister. He has strong ties to a large number of MPs in the PPP and to the eight micro-parties, each with a single MP, in the ruling coalition. If he wishes to, the flamboyant MP from Phayao can try to instigate government MPs to join him in voting with the opposition to topple General Prayut in the next no-confidence debate, as he did last September. The secret scheme that he undertook at that time fell apart after his plans were leaked and General Prayut responded forcefully to save his premiership. Captain Thammanat, who was also a deputy agriculture minister, was quickly fired from the cabinet.⁴

Since the expulsion of Captain Thammanat and his faction from the PPP, the largest government party has suffered another serious setback in the unexpected defeat of Paiboon Nittitawan, its nominee for the chairmanship of the parliamentary *ad hoc* committee on amendment of the election law and the political party law. At first, there was a tacit

agreement in the ruling coalition that Paiboon, a deputy leader of the PPP and a man well-versed in constitutional law, would be elected to chair the committee.⁵

However, when the committee convened for its first meeting on 1 March, an MP from the Bhumjaithai Party, the second largest in the ruling coalition, unexpectedly nominated Deputy Health Minister Satit Pitutacha, a deputy leader of the Democrat Party, to contest its chairmanship with Paiboon. The Democrats are the third largest party in the ruling coalition. While Satit failed to attend the committee's meeting because he was at a cabinet meeting, he won the chairmanship with a vote of 22 versus 21. Although the voting was conducted in secret, it is widely believed that several opposition MPs voted for Satit.

Satit is considered a flexible politician, and his Democrat Party is an advocate for the amendment of Thailand's 2017 Constitution to allow voters to cast separate ballots for constituency candidates and for party lists. In fact, the only one of 13 proposed draft bills on constitutional amendment to be adopted by the parliament last September was proposed by the Democrat Party, with the support of the Bhumjaithai Party and the Chatthai Phattana Party—the fourth largest party in the ruling coalition.

On the other hand, the PPP leadership seems to have second thoughts on restoring the two-ballot voting system. Paiboon was intended to serve as the “fixer”, whom the PPP leadership wanted to put in place to control the *ad hoc* committee in amending the election law. His mission was to steer the process to prevent Phuea Thai (PT), the largest opposition party, from winning a “landslide victory” in the next general election.⁶ That election will see parties being allocated the 100 party-list House seats in proportion to the number of second ballot votes that each party wins. One of the crucial tasks of the *ad hoc* committee is to propose the formula to be used in the allocation of those seats.⁷

GEARING UP FOR AN EARLY ELECTION

The unexpected defeat of the PPP's Paiboon can be considered a direct affront to PPP leader General Prawit, a deputy prime minister and the much-respected “Big Brother” of the prime minister. One conclusion is that without Captain Thammanat at his side, General Prawit's influence is waning. This would explain the fact that the PPP's three key allies in the ruling coalition dared to upset General Prawit by supporting the Democrat Party's Satit in edging out Paiboon as the *ad hoc* committee's chairman.

These government parties are already gearing up for an early general election. One of the Democrat Party's key election promises in 2019 was to amend the 2017 Constitution. It therefore had no qualms about nominating Satit to compete with the PPP's Paiboon. Unlike the latter party, the Democrats do not wish to sabotage amendment of the election law just to thwart a possible political windfall for the PT.

A more serious rift in the ruling coalition involves the Bhumjaithai Party. All of its seven ministers boycotted a cabinet meeting on 8 February to emphasise the party's opposition to

a proposal from Interior Minister General Anupong Paochinda to extend by 30 years the operating concession for the problematic “Green Line” of Bangkok’s mass transit rail service.⁸ Consequently, the prime minister postponed further consideration of the proposal.

The Bhumjaithai Party dropped another bombshell on 20 February. A senior MP of the party, Second Deputy House Speaker Supachai Posu, openly threatened the party’s withdrawal from the ruling coalition if the prime minister did not more actively support the party’s draft bill to decriminalise marijuana.⁹ The party had campaigned during the 2019 general election to remove marijuana from the coverage of the narcotic control law, and to allow households to grow up to six marijuana plants for medicinal and personal use.

Without support of the second largest government party, which has 64 MPs, the ruling coalition will lose its majority control of the House. Supachai’s threat thus worked like magic. Within two days, General Prayut gave his approval for formal submission to the House of the Bhumjaithai Party’s draft bill as a proposed new law from the cabinet.¹⁰

Consequently, Bhumjaithai party leader Anutin Charnvirakul quickly offered a climb-down from Supachai’s threat that the party would leave the ruling coalition, explaining that it reflected only a personal opinion offered in the heat of a public speech to the MP’s supporters.¹¹

Nevertheless, Anutin offered a cryptic remark, saying that the most formidable threat to General Prayut’s premiership came from “those inside the government” – but not from his Bhumjaithai Party. His party, he said, wants to help General Prayut complete his four-year term.¹²

RESHUFFLING THE CABINET

How much longer can the prime minister rely on support from his “Big Brother”, whose influence seems to be waning, and from the ruling coalition, which seems to be falling apart?

If General Prayut just hopes to host the APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting, bringing together heads of member governments in Thailand in November and to complete his four-year term ending in March 2023, he can reshuffle his cabinet by offering one or two ministerial posts to Captain Thammanat’s Thai Economic Party. This is a risk-free option for General Prayut to defend his premiership.

Captain Thammanat has dismissed any thought of rejoining the Prayut cabinet himself, but his party-mates, especially incoming party leader General Wich Thephassadin, may welcome the political advantage of belonging to the government side as the next general election approaches.

General Wich was the PPP's chief strategist before his resignation to join Captain Thammanat's Thai Economic Party. His close ties to General Prawit convinced the latter that Thai Economic Party will support General Prayut's premiership.

In that case, the Thai Economic Party, with 18 MPs, deserves to have at least two cabinet posts in return for its support. After all, Chatthai Phattana, with only 12 MPs, has two cabinet posts.¹³ Granting posts to the Thai Economic Party will allow General Prayut and his ministers to face the next no-confidence debate without any fear of scheming on the part of Captain Thammanat.

Another advantage to this option is that it will enable the Prayut cabinet to pass the next budget bill in the new parliamentary session without much trouble.

THE EIGHT-YEAR LIMIT

If General Prayut entertains thoughts of continuing his premiership beyond the next general election, he will have to do much more to improve his political standing. And crucially, he needs a favourable ruling from Thailand's Constitutional Court that he can hold on to his premiership beyond 23 August.

On 24 August 2014, three months after seizing power in a coup, General Prayut became prime minister at the head of a military government. Under Section 158 of the 2017 Constitution drafted under the auspices of that government, no one can serve as Thailand's premier for more than eight years in total, whether holding the office continuously or not.

Several opposition parties intend to request a Constitutional Court ruling on when General Prayut will have reached the eight-year limit.

Constitutional law experts in Thailand have different opinions on this question. Those who are close to General Prayut believe that the 2017 Constitution has no retroactive effect, and that General Prayut's premiership under the current constitution started only in June 2019; this means he can serve a second four-year term after the next general election.¹⁴

TAKING OVER THE PPP

If the Constitutional Court clears General Prayut to move on, he can become a full-fledged politician by taking the leadership of a political party, the PPP, and actively leading it into the next general election. This will require the consent of his "Big Brother" General Prawit.

The 77-year-old incumbent PPP leader is frail and seems to have some health issues. He may welcome passing on the political baton to his beloved younger "brother", General Prayut.

How successful General Prayut would be in managing MPs and other veteran politicians in the PPP's different factions remains in doubt. He would not take kindly to being held hostage by self-centred politicians over whom he has little or no control. Moreover, he will have to compete head on with his nemesis Captain Thammanat in wooing veteran politicians whose support he will need to win the next general election.

Since the expulsion of Captain Thammanat, the PPP appears to have grown considerably weaker. Infighting has damaged its reputation. It failed to defend its House seat in the by-election in Bangkok's Constituency No. 9, covering Laksi and Chatujak districts, on 30 January. And now even the influence of its leader, General Prawit, is waning.

Will General Prayut be able to do better than his "Big Brother" in rebranding and rebuilding the PPP? The thought of dealing with greedy and unruly politicians, which Captain Thammanat once compared to feeding monkeys with bananas, cannot fill General Prayut with enthusiasm. He has, after all, tried to stay away from MPs, including those in government parties.¹⁵

The PPP is scheduled to hold a party congress in Nakhon Ratchasima on 3 April. All eyes will be on the new leadership line-up. If it includes those who are pro-General Prayut, such as the influential Pirapan Salirathaviphag,¹⁶ the likelihood that General Prayut helms the PPP as party leader will be strong.

GOING FOR A NEW PARTY

If he really wants to try his hand in parliamentary politics, another option for General Prayut is to head a new party of like-minded supporters. One such party, Ruamthai Sangchat (Uniting Thais in Nation Building), has been set up by one of General Prayut's political aides in the Prime Minister's Office, Dr Seksakon Atthawong.

With a professed mission to support General Prayut's premiership, the new party has been recruiting members to join its growing ranks. Two notable new recruits are Porapol Adireksarn and his 80-year-old father Pongpol, who both formerly belonged to the PPP. Pongpol is a famous veteran politician whose father Pol Gen Pramarn Adireksarn was a brother-in-law of the late Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan and once led the now-defunct Chat Thai Party. The Adireksarn family is influential in Saraburi, a central province about 100 kms north of Bangkok.

However, Ruamthai Sangchat's membership drive is facing stiff competition from several other new parties, notably the Thai Economic Party of Captain Thammanat; the Kla (Courage) Party of Korn Chatikavanij, a former finance minister and former deputy leader of the Democrat Party; the Thai Sang Thai (Thais Build Thailand) Party of Sudarat Keyuraphan, a former health minister who was PT's lead nominee for the premiership in the 2019 general election; and the Sang Anakot Thai (Build the Thai Future) Party of Uttama Saowanayon and Sonthirat Sonthijirawong. Uttama is a former finance minister and a

former leader of the PPP; while Sonthirat is a former energy minister and a former secretary-general of the PPP.

These new parties face an uphill struggle to find viable candidates to contest in 400 single-seat constituencies nationwide in the next general election. Moreover, their candidates will run into fierce competition from veteran incumbents from wealthy and well-established parties.

The chances of new parties winning sizeable numbers of House seats in the next general election are not good, especially if they cannot recruit veteran politicians. Will General Prayut take the risk of heading a new party and relying mostly on political greenhorns to combat influential veteran MPs at the polls?

DOING NOTHING?

General Prayut has so far maintained that he will neither reshuffle his cabinet nor call it quits any time soon. However, by doing nothing new or proactive, he remains on the defensive, waiting for his opponents to make their move and then respond. This is not a sustainable strategy. Sooner or later, some of his day-to-day responses will be ineffective, and his premiership will begin to crumble.

Without a political party of his own, General Prayut precariously relies on the goodwill of General Prawit and the PPP, and on the leaders of other government parties, to shore up his premiership and to defend him in the House.

Among those leaders, to date only General Prawit has pledged the PPP's continuing support for General Prayut remaining in office not only until the end of his four-year term but also after in the next general election.¹⁷

The other parties in the ruling coalition have remained non-committal. By keeping their options open, they will have more room for manoeuvring after the next general election.

CONCLUSION

The PPP's weakening has a direct adverse impact on the prime minister's grip on power. If his ambition is merely to complete his four-year term in March 2023, then he can choose the easy solution of reshuffling the cabinet and offering two ministerial posts to the Thai Economic Party of his nemesis Captain Thammanat.

However, if he chooses to do nothing, then he will face yet another ordeal of a no-confidence debate in the House soon after the parliament reconvenes on 22 May. The position of

Thammanat, his party and MPs over whom he has influence in the vote following that debate will be uncertain.

Even if General Prayut survives the no-confidence vote, he will still need to defend and pass the next budget bill. After that, he will in August face the Constitutional Court's ruling on whether he is approaching the eight-year constitutional limit on holding the premiership.

Before he gets to host APEC leaders in Thailand in November, General Prayut will have to decide on his political future. If he wants to serve a second term after the next general election, he will need a party of his own. He cannot continue to rely on his "Big Brother" General Prawit and the weakened PPP much longer.

ENDNOTES

¹ This will be the fourth time that General Prayut faces grilling by the opposition in a no-confidence debate. He survived three earlier such ordeals during 31 August–3 September 2021 by winning with 264 votes versus 208 votes; 16-19 February 2021 by winning with 272 votes versus 206 votes; and 24-27 February 2020 by winning with 272 votes versus 49 votes.

² The House of Representatives originally had 500 MPs. But 13 MPs were subsequently disqualified from House membership, and their vacancies remain unfilled. The vacancies include those due to the disqualification of 11 MPs on the executive committee of the Future Forward Party, including party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, as a result of the dissolution of their party in February 2020.

³ “‘บรรณนัด’ เย้ย 260 เสียงหนุน ‘บิ๊กตู’ ฝันไปหรือเปล่า ลั่นไม่มีเศรษฐกิจไทยอยู่นั่นแน่” [“Thammanat” questions whether it is a dream that there are 260 votes in support of “Big Tu”, he insists that Thai Economic Party MPs are not part of that number], *Thai Post*, 1 March 2022 (www.thaipost.net/politics-news/95049, accessed 3 March 2022). “Big Tu” is the nickname of General Prayut used in the Thai media.

⁴ See the author's “Thai PM Remains Vulnerable Without a Party of His Own”, *ISEAS Perspective* 2021/127, 28 September 2021 (https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_127.pdf).

⁵ The 49-member *ad hoc* committee consists of 14 MPs from government parties, 13 MPs from opposition parties, 14 senators, and 8 cabinet members. Selection of its chairman is done through a secret ballot.

⁶ The Thai parliament already agreed in last September to increase the number of electoral constituencies from 350 to 400, and to reduce the number of party-list House seats from 150 to 100. In addition, it agreed to revert to using the two-ballot voting system in which each voter casts one ballot to choose a constituency candidate and another to choose a political party. The second ballot vote will go towards determining how many of the 100 party-list House seats a party shall have. The parliamentary *ad hoc* committee will propose a formula for the allocation of party-list House seats.

⁷ Under the existing “mixed member proportional system”, the total number of votes that all constituency candidates of a party receive determines how many MPs the party “deserves” to have in the House of Representatives. In the March 2019 general election, the Phuea Thai Party's candidates received about 7.881 million votes, or about 22.16 per cent of the total. With about 22

per cent of the votes, the PT “deserved” to have 111 MPs in the 500-member House. But, since the PT’s candidates had won in 136 constituencies, the party did not get any share of the 150 party-list House seats on top of its 136 elected House seats. If the next general election uses the two-ballot system, then the PT stands to gain the lion’s share of the party-list House seats – if the allocation is based on simple proportion, without taking into account how many MPs a party “deserves” to have.

⁸ “ส.ส. ภูมิใจไทยหนุน 7 รมต. ของพรรคลาประชุม ครม. ค้านขยายสัมปทานรถไฟฟ้าสีเขียว รับไม่ได้ค่าโดยสารมหาโหด” [Bhumjaithai MPs support the party’s seven ministers in not attending a cabinet meeting to show opposition to any extension of the operating concession of the MRT Green Line, cannot accept cruel fare], *Manager Online*, 8 February 2022 (www.mgsonline.com/politics/detail/9650000012861, accessed 5 March 2022).

⁹ “ฟังชัดๆ ‘สหายแสง’ ประกาศภูมิใจไทยพร้อมถอนตัวออกจากร่วมรัฐบาล...” [Listen clearly to “Comrade Saeng” declare: Bhumjaithai is ready to withdraw from the ruling coalition ...]. *Youtube*, 20 February 2022, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTp3hniXsgY>). “Comrade Saeng” was the code name of Supachai Posu, a senior MP of the Bhumjaithai Party from Nakhon Phanom, when he was a communist activist in the 1970s.

¹⁰ “‘บิ๊กตู’ เซ็นลงนามร่าง พ.ร.บ. ัญชา กัญชง ที่ ‘อนุทิน’ ก้มคดะ เสนอแล้ว” [“Big Tu” has already signed the draft bill on marijuana and hemp proposed by “Anutin” and his group], *Thai Rat Online*, 22 February 2022 (www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/2322715, accessed 5 March 2022). Anutin Charnvirakul is leader of the Bhumjaithai Party as well as deputy prime minister and minister of health.

¹¹ “อย่าคิดมาก! อนุทิน ลั่นท่าที่ร่วมรัฐบาล ให้ฟังหัวหน้าพรรค ...” [Don’t think too much! Anutin says just listen to party leader on its stance in the ruling coalition ...], *Khaosod Online*, 22 February 2022 (www.khaosod.co.th/politics/news_6902144, accessed 5 March 2022).

¹² “‘อนุทิน’ ให้ข้อคิด คนทำร้ายรัฐบาลที่หนักอึ้งที่สุด ก็คือ ‘คนในรัฐบาล’” [“Anutin” offers his view that the ones who can hurt the government the most are “those inside the government”], *Thai Post*, 6 March 2022 (www.thaipost.net/hi-light/98450, accessed 6 March 2022).

¹³ The two cabinet posts held by the Chatthai Phattana Party are those of minister of natural resources (Varawut Silapa-archa) and deputy minister of agriculture (Praphat Phothon). The number of Thai cabinet members is limited to 36, including the prime minister. At present two seats are vacant following the dismissals last September of Captain Thammanat from the post of deputy minister of agriculture and Dr Narumon Pinyosinwat from the post of deputy labour minister.

¹⁴ See author’s article “How Much Longer can Thailand’s Prime Minister Rule Before Reaching the Eight-Year Limit”, *ISEAS Perspective* 2021/139, 27 October 2021 (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-139>, accessed 5 March 2022).

¹⁵ One rare exception happened on 2 September 2021 in the parliament building, where General Prayut received a number of government MPs in person to accept their pledges of support before the vote in the no-confidence debate.

¹⁶ Pirapan is officially an advisor to the prime minister. But he has joined the PPP and been given the titular post of an advisor to the party leader. One of his close friends is former Army chief General Apirat Kongsompong, who is now a deputy director of the Crown Property Bureau. During the Abhisit Vejjajiva premiership of 2011-2014, Pirapan—then a senior Democrat MP—served as justice minister.

¹⁷ In the 2019 general election, the PPP nominated General Prayut for the premiership. Each party can nominate up to three individuals for the post, but each individual can be nominated by only one party.

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