

PERSPECTIVE

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Singapore | 27 February 2023

An End to the Three Generals Era and a New Beginning for Thai Democracy

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Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha (C) addresses supporters of the Ruam Thai Sang Chart (United Thai Nation) Party, as the party members rallied for the first time before upcoming elections, at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Center in Bangkok on 9 January 2023. After breaking up with Prawit Wongsuwan, Prayut joined United Thai Nation. (Photo: Lillian SUWANRUMPHA/AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The “Three ‘Por’ Group” of three former army chiefs, which seized power in the 2014 coup, is falling apart.
- Two of the three, Palang Pracharat party leader General Prawit Wongsuwan and Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha, are vying for the premiership in a cut-throat competition.
- The rivalry between the two generals is intensifying, and this will make the upcoming general election in Thailand more tenacious, and its outcome less predictable.
- General Prawit has the political edge because his party, the largest in the ruling coalition, has many experienced MPs who can win re-election with their strong political networks. He also has more powerful allies and fewer political enemies.
- General Prawit’s new selling point is to move Thailand beyond the existing political polarisation. He has tried to distance himself from the 2014 coup and from General Prayut, whom his party successfully nominated to capture the premiership after the last general election.
- After breaking up with General Prawit, General Prayut joined a new party, United Thai Nation. That party is trying to woo MPs from other parties, but lacks a clear potent selling point to attract support.
- The end of the political domination of the “Three ‘Por’ Group” augurs well for Thai democracy. Now, two of the three strongmen from this group are appealing for support from Thai voters, instead of holding onto power through political machinations.

INTRODUCTION

Political dominance by the group of three former army chiefs – the so-called “Three ‘Por’ Brothers”¹ – in Thailand is coming to an end. This augurs well for the political future of the country where parliamentary democracy has been faltering since the end of the Siamese absolute monarchy in 1932.

The main cause of the continuing failure of Thai democracy was and still is the delusion entertained by a handful number of army generals who think that they can run a government administration better than their civilian compatriots. The Thai military has little tolerance for the chaos of parliamentary politics, and no respect for most politicians, whom they see as mostly corrupt and self-serving.

Big Brother General Prawit Wongsuwan, a deputy prime minister and the leader of Palang Pracharat Party (PPRP), the largest government party, now wants the premiership for himself. He and his PPRP will no longer support Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha in the upcoming general election.

However, General Prayut feels he still has some significant unfinished business to finish, and thus he wishes to stay in power for at least another two years, until the end of his 8-year eligibility to hold the premiership, in mid-2025. Therefore, he has joined a new party, United Thai Nation (UTN), as its chief strategist, and will be its No.1 candidate for the premiership.

The rivalry between these two former army chiefs is a crucial change for the better in Thai politics. The two strongmen are now courting voters’ support to return to power, instead of seizing it with military force and holding onto power through political machinations.

Meanwhile, the middle brother in this triumvirate, Interior Minister General Anupong Paojinda has claimed that he has had enough of Thai politics, and intends to retire to a quiet peaceful life when his time in the current Prayut Administration is over. He has dismissed speculations of him joining the UTN, saying that he considers himself “unsuitable” to continue in Thai politics.²

Whether or not General Anupong will actually wash his hands of politics remains to be seen. He has accepted his recent appointment to the 5-member Committee on National Strategy, which is led by Deputy Prime Minister Dr Wissanu Krea-ngam.³

THE MAY 2014 COUP

General Prayut, when the army chief, led the coup on 22 May 2014 to seize power from the civilian government of the Pheu Thai-led coalition.⁴ Fifteen days prior to the coup, Prime Minister Yingluck Sinawatra had to step down following a decision against her in the Constitutional Court for abuse of power.⁵ Yingluck is a younger sister of exiled former prime

minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who had also been toppled in another coup on 19 September 2006.⁶

The coup in 2014 saw the emergence of the Three “Por” Generals to control both the Thai polity and the Thai military. They established the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), with General Prayut as the head of the junta, and General Prawit as the deputy head.

Political parties were banned from undertaking any political activity. Critics and protest leaders were either arrested, or summoned to army barracks to listen to NCPO’s reasons for the coup and its promises of an early return of happiness to the Thai people.

Under the 2014 Interim Constitution, a new National Legislative Assembly (NLA) was set up with 250 members handpicked by the NCPO. It was chaired by Dr Pornpetch Wichitcholachai, a law professor, who in 2019 became president of the new Senate.

General Prayut also assumed the post of prime minister in September 2014. General Prawit became a deputy prime minister and defence minister; and General Anupong took over the post of interior (home affairs) minister, which supervises all of Thailand’s provincial governors.

Before long, the three generals realised they would need much more time to create real “happiness” for the Thai people. Thus, a new constitution had to be designed to enable them to continue holding onto power by constitutional means.

NEW CONSTITUTIONAL FOR POWER SUCCESSION

At first, a new comprehensive draft constitution was formulated by a group led by Dr Borwornsak Uwanno, a respected jurist and a deputy president of the NLA. Unfortunately, the NCPO disliked the draft and signalled the NLA leadership to scuttle it in September 2015. Dr Borwornsak later lamented that his draft constitution could not ensure a “long stay” of those in power, and thus it was rejected.⁷

A new smaller group was formed to draft a new constitution. Led by Dr Meechai Ruchupan, another senior jurist and a former acting-prime minister, its new draft was finally accepted by the NLA on 7 April 2016.

For a national referendum on the new draft constitution on 7 August 2016, the NLD laid down a set of guidelines, which included banning public rallying to oppose the draft constitution. The NLA also included for the national referendum a subsidiary question on whether or not 250 senators appointed to the Senate should be empowered to join elected MPs in the House to vote for a new prime minister after each general election during the Senate’s first five-year term.

The NPCO urged voters to accept the draft constitution as it was only a temporary measure, so that a general election could be held sooner. After that, the new elected civilian government could amend the constitution to make it more palatable to all parties concerned.

The national referendum approved the draft constitution with a vote of 61.35% (from about 16.8 million voters); and agreed with a vote of 58.07% (from about 15.1 million voters) to let the 250 appointed senators join MPs in voting for a new prime minister.

However, after the draft constitution went into force on 6 April 2017, it quickly became clear that amending the new constitution would be more difficult than previously assumed. In order to approve a proposed constitutional amendment, the support of at least a majority of the combined membership of the House and the Senate is required; and the majority vote must include at least one-third of the existing senators, as well as 20% of MPs from parties whose members do not hold any cabinet posts or the posts of House Speaker and Deputy House Speaker.⁸

2019 GENERAL ELECTION

Pheu Thai (PT) Party came first in the general election on 24 March 2019, but it failed to win the subsequent premiership race in parliament. The PT was handicapped by the NCPO's two political innovations: the single ballot election designed to hobble large popular parties, and the involvement of the 250 senators in the premiership selection.

In the 2019 general election, each voter cast only one ballot to elect a constituency candidate. All votes collected by all candidates of a party went to determining the party's share of the 150 party-list seats in the House of Representatives. Crucially, the allocation also took into account how many House seats a party "deserved" to have, based on the total of its candidates' collected votes as a percentage of the total votes cast in the general election.

The PT's candidates won 136 constituency seats with a total of about 7.88 million votes – which constituted about 22.16% of the grand total of votes. Based on this number, the PT "deserved" to have only 110 MPs in the House (22% of 500 House seats). Since its candidates had already won altogether 136 Houses seats – 26 more than the party deserved to have – the PT did not get any share of the 150 party-list House seats.

One dire consequence of this unexpected outcome was the failure of the entire PT top leadership on the party-list to enter the House as MPs.

The PT-led coalition⁹ of seven parties had only 246 MPs, five seats short of a simple majority in the House, while the PPRP-led coalition of 19 parties had 254 MPs.¹⁰ When it came to the premiership race, the PT-led coalition could muster only 244 votes¹¹ for the opposition's candidate Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. General Prayut, who was nominated by the PPRP, easily won with 500 votes – including 249 of the 250 senators'.¹²

The Three "Por" Generals came up with a new division of power-sharing among them: General Prawit would manage the PPRP and control MPs in the ruling coalition; General Anupong would, from his post as the interior minister, supervise all provincial governors and local government administrations; and General Prayut would do the heavy-lifting of running the

government administration, including choosing his own appointees to the defence, the home affairs, the finance, and the energy ministries.

However, two crucial flaws in this new arrangement soon soured ties between General Prawit and General Prayut. General Prawit lost to General Prayut both the defence minister post and the job of supervising the national police force.

Moreover, politicians in the PPRP have been griping about their party not getting a fair share of plum cabinet posts despite being the largest in the ruling coalition.¹³ And they also resented the alleged indifference of General Prayut to their tedious and thankless job in parliament. Indeed, General Prayut has kept at arm's length all government MPs, since he himself is neither a member of the PPRP nor an MP.

WIDENING RIFT LED TO MUTUAL DISTRUST

The widening rift between General Prayut and General Prawit's PPRP came to a head in early September 2021. PPRP secretary-general Captain Thammanat Prompao and his followers were caught planning to join opposition parties in voting out General Prayut from the premiership in a no-confidence debate.

However, Captain Thammanat's secret plan was leaked, and General Prayut managed to foil the conspiracy and prevail in the no-confidence vote. He quickly retaliated by removing Captain Thammanat from the post of deputy agriculture minister.

Subsequently, in January 2022, Captain Thammanat was "expelled" from the PPRP, together with 20 MPs who chose to join him in a new party, Thai Economic, and to serve as an "independent opposition". The main charge for the expulsion was a serious breach of the party's regulations in creating internal disunity.¹⁴

The expulsion was apparently done by mutual consent between Captain Thammanat and party leader General Prawit. It allowed Captain Thammanat and his followers to leave the PPRP to join a new party without losing their House membership. If they simply resigned from the PPRP, they would have automatically lost their House membership in the process.

Under mysterious circumstances, the PPRP joined the PT to change the election system to increase the number of election constituencies from 350 to 400, and to reduce the number of party-list House seats from 150 to 100. Another crucial change was the return to using two ballots: one for electing a constituency candidate, and another for choosing a party. Second ballot votes will go to determining the allocation of the party-list House seats, but this time the allocation will be by way of a simple direct proportion, i.e. if a party receives 10% of all second ballot votes in the next general election, then the party will get 10 party-list House seats, regardless of how many constituency seats it has won.

These changes will benefit large and well-funded parties like the PPRP and the PT which have resources to field competitive candidates in all the 400 constituencies in the next general election.

One explanation gaining attention in the Thai media is that General Prawit and Thaksin have struck a “secret deal”. After its “landslide victory” in the next general election, the PT will team up with the PPRP to support General Prawit for the next premiership. In return, General Prawit will, for the sake of national reconciliation, help Thaksin return to Thailand after 15 years in exile overseas.¹⁵

The talks about the “secret deal” sometimes also included Bhumjaithai, the second largest government party. But its leader, Deputy Prime Minister and Public Health Anutin Charnvirakul, has denied having any deal with any other parties. He intends to lead the next government coalition with himself as the prime minister if his party wins 120 House seats or more.¹⁶

Likewise, leaders of the PPRP and the PT all have publicly denied any such “secret deal”. Nevertheless, it is common knowledge that many senior politicians in the PPRP, the PT, and Bhumjaithai (including Anutin) all used to belong to Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai Party,¹⁷ until the coup in September 2006.

By early January 2023, the widening rift between General Prawit and General Prayut worsened beyond repair. General Prawit announced in an “open letter” posted on his Facebook on 13 January confirming that General Prayut would separate from the PPRP, and join a new party, the UTN.

General Prawit described his mixed feelings as follows: “I had stated [the slogan] “3 ‘Por’ Forever”. I still have the same old feeling without change. ...But I just cannot describe my current feeling into words now, except to congratulate him for his decision and to wish him success in his new political path which he has chosen. ...”¹⁸

Nevertheless, General Prawit dropped one bomb shell in his “open letter”. He stated that it was General Prayut who wished to continue doing political work in order to finish what he had started after staging the 2014 coup. Therefore General Prawit had to set up the PPRP to support General Prayut and to nominate him for the premiership.¹⁹

Earlier, General Prawit had also claimed during a no-confidence debate on 22 July 2022 that the 2014 coup was the brainchild of General Prayut. Neither he nor General Anupong were involved.²⁰

TWO GENERALS, ONE PREMIERSHIP

The rivalry between General Prawit and General Prayut for the next premiership will intensify in the upcoming general election. For the time being, General Prawit has the clear advantage of having more MPs in his PPRP, while General Prayut’s UTN is new and untested.

The UTN is frantically trying to woo MPs from other parties, including those in the PPRP – much to the chagrin of the PPRP leadership. So far, Labour Minister Suchart Chom-klin and PM's Office Minister Anucha Nakasai of the PPRP have shown clear intention to join the UTN.

At the same time, the PPRP has welcomed the return of Captain Thammanat and 10 MPs from his group. Also returning to the PPRP are Dr Uttama Saowanayon and Sonthirat Sonthijirawong. Dr Uttama was the first PPRP leader and a former finance minister while Sonthirat was the first PPRP secretary-general and a former energy minister.

These two political heavyweights had given up on their two-year-old Sarng Anakot Thai Party, partly because of their failure to work out a merger with Thai Sarng Thai (TST) Party led by Khunying Sudarat Keyurapan.

Khunying Sudarat was the PT's No.1 candidate for the premiership in the 2019 general election. When it was clear that there was no chance of beating General Prayut, the PT turned to endorse the nomination of Future Forward party leader Thanatorn to enter the race for the premiership.

Subsequent power struggles inside the PT eventually forced Khunying Sudarat and her followers to quit the PT, and to join the TST. Khunying Sudarat has had some success in attracting support, especially in north-eastern provinces, at the expense of the PT. One of her potent selling points is to offer the TST as an open-minded new party to overcome the old political polarisation between the PT's pro-Thaksin camp versus the pro-General Prayut conservative establishment.

Undoubtedly, the PPRP is also going with the same selling point. This was why General Prawit has tried to distance himself from the 2014 coup and coup leader General Prayut, as well as from the feud between General Prayut and Thaksin. Now, General Prawit is avoiding dismissing the possibility of his PPRP collaborating with the PT in forming the next government coalition.

On the other hand, the mutual distain between General Prayut and Thaksin is well-known. General Prayut finds it hard to tolerate the PT's pro-Thaksin inclination, whereas Thaksin and the PT have ridiculed General Prayut as a usurper and as the enemy of Thai democracy. The possibility of General Prayut's UTN working with the PT in a new government coalition is nil.

For many politicians who are looking for a sure winning bet, jumping on the political bandwagon of General Prawit and his PPRP is a no-brainer choice. General Prawit clearly has more friends than enemies, unlike General Prayut who has many enemies and few friends.

Worse still, at the UTN, it is still doubtful whether the new party will be able to win up to 25 House seats in order to qualify for putting forth General Prayut's name in the race for the premiership in parliament after the general election. The party has no new selling point beyond maintaining the status quo of political polarisation and continuity.

It is also unclear how most of the 250 senators will vote, knowing that General Prayut's eligibility to hold the premiership will end in mid-2025.

CONCLUSION

The end of the “Three ‘Por’ Group” is a welcome change for the better in Thai politics.

The rivalry between General Prawit and General Prayut for the premiership will make the next general election a crucial turning point in Thailand. The outcome of the election will be less predictable, and the formation of the new government coalition will be more complicated.

General Prawit may be enjoying a clear political edge, but it is still premature to jump to the conclusion that he will be the next Thai prime minister.

Uncertainties remain in Thai politics, because General Prayut is determined to soldier on, both in the general election and in the Senate, to hold onto the premiership.

ENDNOTES

¹ The three are: Deputy Prime Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan, 78, leader of Palang Pracharat Party, who was the army commander from 2004 – 2005; Interior Minister General Anupong (“Pok”) Paojinda, 74, who was the army commander from 2007 -2010; and Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha, 69, chief strategist of the United Thai Nation Party, who was the army commander from 2010 – 2014. General Prayut is concurrently the defence minister. The group is called “Three ‘Por’” because the names of both General Prawit and General Prayut start with the Thai alphabet “*por pla*” (fish), and General Anupong’s nickname is “Pok”, which also starts with the same alphabet “*por pla*”.

² “จ้อเหลือ 2! ‘บิกป็อก’ เมินไป รทช. พิจารณาตัวเอง ไม่เหมาะเล่นการเมืองต่อ ” [Now only 2 ‘Por’ ! ‘Big Pok’ shuns joining the UTN, considering himself unsuitable in politics], Manager Online, 29 December 2022, www.mgronline.com/politics/detail/96500000123569, accessed 14 February 2023. ‘Big Pok’ is the nickname of General Anupong Paojinda

³ The three other members on the Committee are: Kan Trakulhoon, a senior executive of Siam Cement Group and Siam Commercial Bank; Chartsiri Sophonpanich, president of Bangkok Bank; and Bantoon Lamsam, chairman and CEO of Kasikorn Bank. The 20-year National Strategy (2018 -2037) is Prime Minister General Prayut’s brainchild. See details at the Thai Post on 19 January 2023, www.thaipost.net/hi-light/307168, accessed on 6 February 2023.

⁴ Following the general election of 3 July 2011, Pheu Thai Party won 265 of the 500 seats in the House of Representatives – a “landslide victory”. The party led in forming the ruling coalition, which controlled 300 House seats, including 19 from Chartthaipattana Party; 7 from Chartpattana Pheupaendin Party; 7 from Phalang Chon Party; and 1 each from Mahachon Party, and New Democracy Party.

⁵ In September 2011, Prime Minister Yingluck ordered the transfer of Thawil Pliensri, head of the National Security Council, to an inactive advisory post in the Prime Minister’s Office. The controversial move opened the way for a subsequent appointment of national police chief, Pol Gen Vichien Pojposri, to succeed Thawil in heading the National Security Council. And this in turn also opened the way for the promotion of Pol Gen Prieupan Damapong as a new national police chief. Pol Gen Prieupan is the

elder brother of Khunying Pojaman Na Prompetch, the ex-wife of Thaksin. Pojaman and Thaksin divorced in November 2008 after 32 years of marriage as Thaksin continued to live in political exile overseas, mostly in Dubai. The Constitutional Court announced on 7 May 2014 its verdict against Yingluck and thus ended her premiership. Yingluck was Thailand's first female head of government. Without prior political experience, she quickly rose to the premiership under the Pheu Thai Party's slogan "Thaksin thinks, Yingluck acts!". At the time of the coup on 22 May 2014, the Thai government was headed by acting-Prime Minister Niwatthamrong Boonsongpaisan, a deputy prime minister and minister of commerce.

⁶ The 2006 coup was led by army chief Gen Sonthi Boonyaratglin who seized power while Thaksin was in New Year to deliver Thailand's statement at the UN General Assembly.

⁷ “บวรศักดิ์ เปิดใจ รธน. ถูกคว่ำ เสียใจวันเดียว เขาอยากอยู่ยาว” [Borwornsak discloses his regret of only one day when his draft constitution was rejected, because they want to stay long], Matichon T.V., 19 February 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGVIR8DQnZ0, accessed 9 February 2023.

⁸ Section 256 of the 2017 Constitution.

⁹ The PT-led coalition of seven parties had only 246 MPs: 136 from the PT, 81 from Future Forward, 10 from Thai Liberal, 7 from Prachachart, 6 from New Economics, 5 from Pheu Chart, and 1 from Thai People Power.

¹⁰ The 254 House seats of the ruling coalition came from the following: 116 from the PPRP, 53 from Democrat, 51 from Bhumjaithai, 10 from Chartthai Pattana, 5 from Action Coalition, 3 from Chatpattana, 3 from Thai Local Power, 2 from Thai Forest Conservation, and 1 each from 11 micro-parties.

¹¹ The opposition side missed two votes: Thanathorn who was on 5 June 2019 disqualified from the House membership, and the absence of one Future Forward MP due to her sickness.

¹² The PPRP-led coalition missed three votes through the sudden resignation of Democrat party leader Abhisit Vejjajina from the House, abstention of House Speaker Chuan Leekpai, and abstention of one Bhumjaithai MP from Si Sa Ket, who insisted he wanted only his party leader Anutin Charnvirakul as the prime minister. The only senator who voted abstention was Dr Pornpetch Wichitcholchai, president of the Senate.

¹³ In the current cabinet of 35 ministerial posts, senior PPRP members are holding only 12 posts: DPM General Prawit, two PM's Office posts, six ministerial posts in the Digital Economic and Society, the Justice, the Labour, the Culture, the Education, and the Industry, and three deputy ministerial posts in the Agriculture, the Transport, and the Finance. General Prayut, on the other hand, held the premiership and concurrently the defence minister post; and he had his choices of appointees to fill three deputy prime minister posts, four ministerial posts in the Finance, the Foreign Affairs, the Energy, and the Interior, plus a deputy minister post in the Defence. PPRP secretary-general Santi Promphat is merely a deputy finance minister, whereas the secretaries-general of Bhumjaithai (second largest government party) and Democrat (third largest government party) are transport minister (Saksiam Chidchob), and agriculture minister (Chalermchai Sri-on), respectively.

¹⁴ “พลังประชารัฐ แตกยับ! ลงมติขับ 21 ส.ส. ‘กลุ่มธรรมนัส’ พันพรรค” [Palang Pracharat broken to pieces! Decision to expel 21 MPs of ‘Thammanat Group’ from the party], Thai Post, 19 January 2022, www.thaipost.net/hi-light/68288, accessed 11 February 2023.

¹⁵ “ดีลลับ พปชร - เพื่อไทย” [Secret deal of the PPRP and Pheu Thai], Sondhi Talk, 5 February 2023, www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1136142970417364, accessed 12 February 2023.

¹⁶ “‘อนุทิน’ ขอ 120 ส.ส. ลั่นไม่ยกเก้าอี้นายกฯ ให้ใคร” [‘Anutin’ asks for 120 MPs and vows not to give the premiership to anyone else], Manager Online, 11 February 2023, www.mgsonline.com/politics/detail/9660000013622, accessed 12 February 2023.

¹⁷ The party was dissolved on 30 May 2007. Its successor, People Power Party won the general election in August 2007 and put Samak Sundaravej in the premiership (29 January – 9 September 2008), and Somchai Wongsawas (18 September – 2 December 2008). Somchai is a brother-in-law of Thaksin. People Power Party was dissolved on 2 December 2008 because of some serious wrongdoings by

deputy party leader Yongyuth Tiyapairatch in Chiang Mai during the August 2007 general election. The current opposition leader Pheu Thai Party is a successor of the dissolved People Power Party.

¹⁸ See details of the “open letter” at https://www.facebook.com/Gen.PrawitWongsuwon/?_rdc=1&_rdr, 13 January 2023, accessed 11 February 2023.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Watch General Prawit’s talk about the 2014 coup in a video clip on Workpoint Today on 22 July 2022 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hLwlkHRy2w>, accessed 11 February 2023.

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