

PERSPECTIVE

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Singapore | 3 April 2023

What's Interesting about the Thai General Election is not Who Wins but What Comes After

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Pheu Thai Party candidate Paetongtarn Shinawatra, youngest daughter of former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, gestures while addressing the party's general election campaign event in Ayutthaya on 23 March 2023. Photo: MANAN VATSYAYANA/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Pheu Thai (PT), Thailand's chief opposition party, looks certain to win the largest number of House seats in the upcoming general election on 14 May.
- But coming first in the poll does not guarantee PT the lead in forming a new government. Neither will the party automatically land the next premiership for one of the three premiership candidates of the PT.
- Those 250 senators appointed during the military rule of coup leader General Prayut Chan-o-cha will have a big say on who the next prime minister will be.
- The PT leadership has been clamouring for a larger "landslide" victory of winning at least 310 seats in the 500-member House of Representatives.
- With 310 MPs, the PT will be able to attract support from a few parties to secure at least 376 votes to win the premiership for its candidate in a race to be conducted in a joint parliamentary session of the 500 MPs and 250 senators.
- If such a huge "landslide" victory fails to materialise, the PT faces different extraordinary scenarios, one of which is for it to give up its quest for the next premiership, and to support some other party's candidate who can win the support of a majority of senators.
- In the latter case, the PT will at least be in the new government; and more importantly, General Prayut, the incumbent premier, will be side-lined for good.

INTRODUCTION

In Thailand's upcoming general election on 14 May, Pheu Thai (PT), the chief opposition party, looks certain to win the largest number of seats in the House of Representatives. But it does not necessarily follow that the party will definitely land the next premiership for its candidate.

Also uncertain is whether the PT will be able to score a "landslide" victory and win at least 250 seats to control the 500-member House. Without a "landslide" victory, the PT will face difficulties in finding enough support from other parties to secure the next premiership for its candidate. In order to win the premiership, a candidate needs at least 376 votes of support in a joint parliamentary session of the House's 500 MPs and the Senate's 250 members. Not many senators would vote for anyone from the PT.¹

If it wants to join a victorious coalition, one pragmatic concession is for the PT to forego vying for the premiership, and instead support another party's candidate who is more acceptable to a majority of the senators. Deputy Prime Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan, leader of Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP), the largest in the current government coalition, is one such candidate.

On the other hand, the PPRP and four of its ally parties² from the government coalition shoring up General Prayut's premiership (June 2019 – March 2023) may form a rival minority coalition. This group can win the premiership for its candidate, presumably General Prawit, with strong support of senators.

However, such a minority government is doomed to fail in governing because it will not be able to pass any significant bill in the House where the PT-led opposition controls the majority vote. It may be able to induce opposition MPs to defect to join government parties, or bribe opposition MPs to cross party lines to vote for government bills, but both strategies will be costly and unsustainable.

One conceivable quick fix is the forced dissolution of one or two parties – including the PT – for allegedly violating election law.³ MPs from a dissolved party can join another party within 60 days. Many of them may join parties in a PPRP-led coalition and help transform it into a viable ruling coalition.

These peculiarities in Thai politics will make the aftermath of the upcoming general election more interesting and intriguing than the poll itself.

Moreover, if exiled former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra returns to Thailand after the general election,⁴ his presence will raise tensions and make all political deal-making talks about coalition formation even more complicated.

PHEU THAI WILL WIN BIG AGAIN

In the NIDA Poll survey outcome publicised on 19 March, the PT topped the survey conducted in early March with 49.85%. Coming second and third were respectively Move Forward, the second largest opposition party, with 17.15%, and incumbent Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha's United Thai Nation (UTN), with 12.15%.⁵

Suan Dusit Poll published on 26 March confirmed that the PT was most popular with 46.16%. In second place was still Move Forward with 15.43%. In third place, however, was Bhumjaithai (BJT) Party with 11.12%; the UTN had dropped to fourth place with only 8.73%.⁶

Few in Thailand would be surprised by the prediction that the PT will once again win the largest number of House seats. After all, in the previous general election, on 24 March 2019, the PT came first by winning 136 House seats, having contested 250 of 350 constituencies.⁷ But it did not get any share of the party-list House seats, because it was deemed to have won more House seats than it deserved to have.⁸

However, the upcoming general election will come under a new election system where two ballots are used,⁹ and without the old rule regarding how many MPs a party "deserves" to have. The number of election constituencies (all single seats) has also been increased from 350 to 400. This will benefit large well-known and well-funded parties which can field competitive candidates in all 400 constituencies.

At the same time, the number of party-list House seats has been cut from 150 to 100. The author's own initial estimate indicates that about 392,150 second ballot votes will be required to get one party-list House seat.¹⁰ This will significantly disadvantage small parties. In the previous general election, one party-list House seat went to the New Palangdharma Party which garnered only 35,099 votes.¹¹

The PT is confident it will be more successful than in the previous general election, because the biggest winner will this time also get the lion's share of the 100 party-list seats, regardless of how many seats its candidates have won in election constituencies. Therefore, the PT leadership is now clamouring for a bigger "landslide" of winning at least 310 House seats, not just 250 as it initially aimed for. Its goal is to win 260 of the 400 constituency seats, and 50 of the 100 party-list House seats.

With 310 House seats, the PT leadership believes it will be able to attract support from several parties to reach or exceed 376 votes – and win the race for the premiership, even without any support from senators. With such a success, some fair-minded senators may even turn to vote for the PT's premiership candidate. They would not want to disregard voters' clear mandate for the PT to lead the next government.

POTENTIAL RIVAL COALITION

It is debatable how big the PT's "landslide" victory will turn out to be. Winning up to 250 House seats is already very difficult; and reaching 310 is highly unlikely.

NIDA Poll Director Dr Suvicha Pou-aree has predicted that the PT could win 240 to 260 House seats, based on survey data as of early March 2023.¹² A "secret poll" conducted by security authorities (presumably from the Internal Security Operations Command or ISOC) estimated that the PT could win around 170 House seats (including 25 of the 100 party-list House seats, from 10 million second ballots).¹³

The PT is facing stiff competition from well-funded government parties, notably the UTN, the PPRP, and the BJT whose senior leaders enjoy the advantage of incumbency and can exercise enormous government influence during the election campaign.

Moreover, the PT also has to compete with fellow opposition allies, notably Move Forward, and Thai Liberal, whose support bases are stable and solid. The PT is also troubled by Thai Sarng Thai Party led by a popular former PT veteran, Khunying Sudarat Keyurapan, who was one of the PT's premiership candidates in the 2019 general election.

After years of political polarisation, Thai voters have remained divided between those who support the status quo (pro-government, pro-military, pro-monarchy, and anti-Thaksin parties) and those who want change and a new government to stop General Prayut's return to power.

The polarisation can be seen in the declining number of "Undecided" in NIDA Poll's surveys, which dropped from 28.66% in January 2022 down to 8.30% in December 2022, and 2.35% in March 2023.¹⁴

The struggle for votes will take place within each of the two opposing camps. Consequently, a big gain for the PT will mean a big loss for its allies, Move Forward, and Thai Liberal.

Likewise, in order to do well, General Prayut's UTN will have to "fish in its neighbours' ponds", wooing veteran politicians from the PPRP and other government parties to join the UTN,¹⁵ or convincing their supporters to defect and vote for his UTN's candidates.

In response, the PPRP appears to have reached an alliance agreement with Bhumjaithai (BJT), the second largest government party of Deputy Prime Minister and Public Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul. Anutin and two of his senior colleagues had lunch with General Prawit twice in March, most probably to discuss and to conclude the alliance deal.¹⁶

In the 2019 general election, the PPRP won 116 House seats (19 of them party-list seats), and the BJT won 51 House seats (12 party-list seats). Over the past four years, the BJT's strength grew to 65 House seats due to defections from other parties.

The PPRP and the BJT are confident that their alliance will attract the support of other government parties, notably Democrat, Chartthaipattana, and Chartpattanakla. Together they

hope to have enough House seats to wrest the majority control in the House from a PT-led coalition.

NO ETERNAL ALLIES OR PERPETUAL ENEMIES

What will happen should a coalition led by the PPRP and the BJT fail to secure majority control in the House? Neither PPRP leader General Prawit nor BJT leader Anutin would want to venture into forming a minority government and face inevitable defeat in the House.

To avoid such a predicament, both General Prawit and Anutin have not ruled out the possibility of working with the PT in forming a new government and ending the political polarisation.

However, such a cross-over coalition will most likely exclude General Prayut's UTN and Move Forward. General Prayut has long been at odds¹⁷ with Thaksin, whose youngest daughter is going to be one of the PT's candidates for the next premiership. Move Forward, on the other hand, will not work with General Prawit and the PPRP, because it considers them a "vestige of military dictatorship".

General Prayut can certainly see the manoeuvrings to side-line him and to isolate his UTN. If the UTN fails to win at least 25 House seats, the new and untested party cannot put forth his name in the premiership race in parliament after the general election.

There is not much that General Prayut can do now to improve his situation. He virtually has nothing new to offer Thai voters. In fact, his campaign slogan reads: "ทำแล้ว ทำอยู่ ทำต่อ" [Done that, still doing, and (will) continue to do].¹⁸ He offers political continuity; but more and more Thai voters want change.

General Prayut is also handicapped by the short duration of his remaining eligibility to hold the premiership, which will reach the constitutional limit of eight years in mid-2025.¹⁹ In other words, even if he somehow succeeds in returning to power, he will have to step down when his eight-year eligibility ends. And another big problem looming ahead in this scenario is that his UTN does not have any well known politician to succeed him in the premiership, except party leader Pirapan Salirathavibhaga.

On 25 March, at a media event to introduce the UTN's 400 candidates for the upcoming general election, General Prayut officially accepted the party's nomination of him as the No.1 premiership candidate. Pirapan was appointed the No.2 premiership candidate.²⁰

Pirapan (64) used to be one of Democrat Party's deputy leaders; he is now secretary-general of the prime minister. Being a low-profile operator who is more comfortable working with senior bureaucrats, he lacks firepower when dealing with political heavyweights such as Thaksin, General Prawit, and Anutin.

CONCEIVABLE BUT EXTRAORDINARY SCENARIOS

Deadlock in the selection of a new prime minister will occur if a PT-led coalition fails to secure 376 votes in a joint parliamentary session of MPs and senators, and a rival minority coalition led by the PPRP and the BJT along with a majority of senators stay firm in blocking all of PT's three premierships candidates.²¹

The deadlock can end in a few scenarios: Either PPRP leader General Prawit or BJT leader Anutin wins the premierships with the support of a majority of senators, and forms a minority government. Then the incumbent prime minister dissolves the House and calls an early general election.

Alternatively, in order to avoid wasting time and resources in another general election so soon, the PT may give in and join the minority coalition, and let either General Prawit or Anutin become the new prime minister. The PT will then be in government. And more importantly, General Prayut will be side-lined for good.

If there is no collusion between the PT and the PPRP & BJT team, then parliamentarians can look for candidates from small parties (those with fewer than 25 MPs), or outsiders not nominated by any party.²² While the premierships selection stays pending in parliament, General Prayut will continue to head the interim government.

In the meantime, the Election Commission will continue to quietly go over complaints of alleged wrongdoings of several major parties, including the PT, the PPRP, the BJT, and Move Forward. At least 19 cases are active and require further probing.²³ If some of these parties are dissolved, their MPs would need to find new homes. General Prayut's UTN will be a safe place for these party-less MPs to run to. If this happens, General Prayut may become a more viable option in the premierships race in parliament.

Yet another more dreadful scenario will have a PT-led coalition in power with a PT candidate as new prime minister. Before long, such a new government might want to help Thaksin (73) return to spend his twilight years at home with his family in Thailand. For 16 years, Thaksin has been living in exile overseas, mostly in Dubai. He faces 10 years' jail from three criminal convictions.²⁴

If Thaksin is somehow able to return scot-free, his old enemies from the conservative side of Thai society may instigate a new round of violent protests. This will inevitably lead to bloody clashes and chaos. Before long, some army generals might step in and seize power again under the pretext of restoring peace and order. General Prayut did just that after nearly seven months of anti-Yingluck protests in Bangkok from November 2013 – May 2014. If so, Thailand will then return to square one, wasting a whole decade to the unending struggle between Thaksin and General Prayut.

CONCLUSION

The future of Thailand will be in the hands of Thai voters when they go to cast their ballots on 14 May.

Most voters may have already made up their minds.

In any case, voting for candidates and parties which support a national conciliation should be an option to keep in view.

Thailand needs all the help it can get from forward-looking Thai voters.

The country cannot count on any sacrifice from most of the political old-timers. They have neither eternal allies nor perpetual enemies; they only have permanent self-interests.

ENDNOTES

¹ In the premiership race on 5 June 2019, 249 senators voted for General Prayut Chan-o-cha, who was a candidate of Palang Pracharat Party (PPRP). Only Dr Pornpetch Wichitcholchai voted abstention out of political correctness due to him being Senate President. General Prayut won the premiership with 500 votes, including 251 votes from MPs in 19 government parties. Most of the senators were chosen in early 2019 by the military regime headed by General Prayut, who was the army commander when he led a coup to topple the Pheu Thai-led coalition on 22 May 2014.

² They may include Bhumjaithai, Democrat, Chartthaipattana, and Chartpattanakla parties. Whether or not General Prayut's United Thai Nation Party will join such a coalition remains to be seen.

³ Prior to the March 2019 general election, Thai Raksa Chart, an ally party of the PT, was dissolved for trying to field Princess Ubol Ratana – the King's elder sister – as its premiership candidate. The King immediately raised his strong objection, announcing that it was wrong and improper to involve anyone in the Thai royal family in politics. After the general election, Future Forward, the second largest opposition party with 81 MPs, was dissolved for accepting unlawful loans of 191.2 million baht from party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit.

⁴ “Ex-PM Thaksin vows to return to Thailand post-election, face jail term”, **Kyodo News**, 24 March 2023, www.english.kyodonews.net/news/2023/03/86b301c0f581, accessed 24 March 2023. Thaksin was interviewed by Kyodo News at a hotel in Tokyo. He faces a total of 10 years in jail for three corruption convictions. There are also a few other criminal charges against him pending in court. However, he can apply for a release on bail while appealing against the convictions and fighting the other cases in court. PT party leader Dr Chonlanan Srikaew has clarified that Thaksin's talk about returning from overseas exile was his own personal affairs – which had nothing to do with the PT. “‘หมอชลอนาน’ ออกตัว ‘ทักษิณ’ ออกจากกลับไทย เป็นเรื่องส่วนตัว ไม่เกี่ยวพรรค” [‘Doctor Chonlanan’ clarifies: Thaksin's wish to return to Thailand is his personal affairs, nothing to do with the party], **Manager Online**, 25 March 2023, www.mgonline.com/local/detail/9660000028059, accessed 25 March 2023. Chonlanan Srikaew, a medical doctor, made the clarification during a rally in Saraburi on 25 March evening.

⁵ Details at https://nidapoll.nida.ac.th/survey_detail?survey_id=620. NIDA is the National Institute for Development Administration, a public higher learning institute, and Thailand's first pollster.

⁶ See details at **Suan Dusit Poll**'s website at <https://suandusitpoll.dusit.ac.th/> , accessed 26 March 2023. Its survey was conducted on 1–17 March 2023 involving field interviews of 10,614 voters nationwide.

⁷ Pheu Thai fielded only 250 candidates in the previous general election, staying out of 100 other constituencies where its ally Thai Raksa Chart was entering its candidates. After its sudden dissolution, all Thai Raksa Chart's candidates were disqualified. If Pheu Thai were also to compete in these 100 other constituencies, it could have won many more House seats than 136. Pheu Thai's election's prowess has been outstanding, and another "landslide" victory in the upcoming general election should be within its reach.

⁸ All the PT's candidates collected 7,881,006 votes, which constituted about 22.16% of the grand total of all votes cast. This percentage meant that the PT deserved to have only 111 House seats (22.16% of 500). Since its candidates already won in 136 (single seat) constituencies, or 25 seats more than it deserved to have, the party did not get any of the 150 party-list House seats.

⁹ One ballot to elect a candidate, another ballot to vote for a party. The total of second ballot votes collected by a party determines how many party-list House seats it should get. The calculation is based on direct proportioning: If 40 million second ballot votes are cast in the upcoming general election, and a party's second ballot votes total 10 million, the party's share of the party-list House seats shall be 25, in addition to the number of House seats its candidates have won in election constituencies.

¹⁰ This estimate is based on a 75% voter turnout (from the total of 52.287 million eligible voters) casting a grand total of 39.215 million second ballot votes. In the 2019 general election, there were about 51.239 eligible voters; and the voter turnout was 74.69%.

¹¹ See the Election Commission's certified official results of the 2019 general election at https://www.ect.go.th/ect_th/news_all.php?cid=26 . Altogether 12 micro-parties, each winning one party-list House seat, emerged from the general election, each collecting between 35,099 and 80,186 votes.

¹² “เจาะลึก ‘นิด้าโพล’ เปิดโฉมรัฐบาลใหม่” [Digging deep into ‘NIDA Poll’ to see the new government], Kom Chad Luek Programme on **Nation TV**, 21 March 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72Wj2AG1fUY> , accessed 25 March 2023.

¹³ Quoted by Sermsuk Kasitipradit in his radio programme on **Smilethailand** on 24 March 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UCLg3khv8, accessed 25 March 2023. But the “secret poll” was reportedly conducted before the defection in mid-March of Justice Minister Somsak Thepsutin and Industry Minister Suriya Juangroongruangkit from the PPRP to the PT. These two political heavyweights can help PT candidates win in areas under their direct influence. This means the PT's number of MPs may reach 200.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ The UTN's notable recruits from the PPRP are Labour Minister Suchart Chom-klin and PM's Office Minister Anucha Nakasai; and from Democrat Party, former deputy prime minister Trirong Suwankiri.

¹⁶ “อนุทิน - สักดิ์สยาม - ชาดา เข้าพบ – กินข้าว กับ ประวิตร” [Anutin, Saksiam, Chada go to meet and have lunch with Prawit], **Thai News Agency**, 15 March 2023, www.tna.mcot.net/politics - 1134426, accessed 25 March 2023; and “บิ๊กป้อม – อนุทิน จับข้าวรัฐบาลบนโต๊ะอาหาร ” [Big Pom – Anutin form government faction on a food table], **Manager Online**, 22 March 2023, www.mgonline.com/politics/detail/9660000027028, accessed 25 March 2023. Photos from both events were released to the media by someone in the PPRP. Saksiam Chidchob is secretary-general of the BJT; he was the transport minister until the Constitutional Court suspended him from cabinet duty on 3 March 2023 while a charge against him for allegedly concealing his wealth is being investigated. Chada Thaisais is a deputy leader of the BJT. “Big Pom” is the media nickname of General Prawit Wongsuwan, leader of the PPRP.

¹⁷ General Prayut was the army chief when Thaksin's younger sister Yingluck – a political novice and 44-year-old divorced mother with one son – rose to the premiership after the general election in 2011.

The PT's campaign slogan then was "Thaksin thinks, Yingluck acts!" Yingluck was Thailand's first female head of government. She held no formal party post in the PT, and was not an MP. She was ousted through a ruling of the Constitutional Court on 7 May 2014 for abuse of power in her wrongful transfer of secretary-general of the National Security Council Thawil Pliensri to an inactive post in the PM's Office. Two weeks later, General Prayut led a coup which toppled the PT-led government coalition.

¹⁸ On 25 March, at a media event to introduce the UTN's 400 candidates for the upcoming general election, General Prayut revised the slogan to "ทำแล้ว ทำอยู่ ทำต่อพลัส" [Done it, still doing, and (will) continue to do plus].

¹⁹ By that time, there would be no senators to help General Prayut choose his successor. All the appointed 250 senators will no longer have the authority to take part in the selection of a new prime minister after their 5-year term ends on 11 May 2014.

²⁰ "กระหึ่ม! เปิดตัว 'บิ๊กตู' แคนดิเดตนายกฯ เบอร์ 1 รทสช. พร้อมผู้สมัคร ส.ส. 400 คน" [Boisterous! Introducing 'Big Tuh' as No.1 premiership candidate of the UTN Party together with its 400 election candidates], **Thai Post**, 25 March 2023, www.thaipost.net/hi-light/348579, accessed 25 March 2023. "Big Tuh" is the media nickname of General Prayut.

²¹ So far, the PT has not officially announced its three premiership candidates. The general assumption, which the PT has never denied, is that Thaksin's daughter Paetongtarn (36) and real estate tycoon Srettha Thavisin (60), CEO of Sansiri Public Company (with market capitalisation of 25.8 billion baht in the Thai Stock Exchange) are potentially two of the three candidates from the party.

²² Under Section 272 of the Constitution, over half of the combined session of MPs and senators (at least 376 votes) can propose inviting "others" (who may or may not be candidates of any party) to enter the premiership race. Such a proposal needs the endorsement of more than two-thirds of parliamentarians (500 votes) to proceed.

²³ "กกต. เปิดข้อมูลร้องยุบพรรค ตั้งยุติแล้ว 61 เรื่อง กำลังพิจารณา 19 เรื่อง 'เพื่อไทย' นำลิ่ว" [Election Commission discloses information on complaints to dissolve parties: 61 cases dismissed, 19 cases under consideration; Pheu Thai leads with the most number of cases], **Thai Post**, 16 March 2023, www.thaipost.net/hi-light/342675, accessed 25 March 2023. The PT still has six pending cases under further consideration in the Election Commission. The PPRP has four.

²⁴ See the author's article "*Thaksin to Return to Thailand? An Old Dream or New Hope for National Reconciliation?*", **ISEAS Perspective 2021** No. 104, published online on 6 August 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-104> , accessed 25 March 2023

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