

# PERSPECTIVE

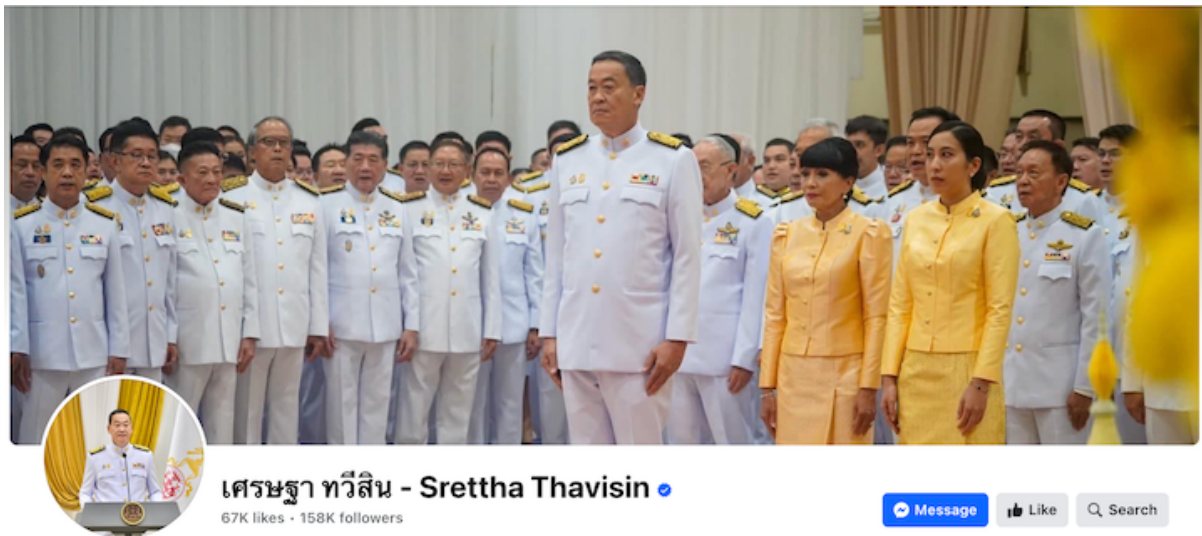
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Singapore | 27 September 2023

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## New Thai PM Faces a Crisis of Confidence

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Facebook Page of Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin at <https://www.facebook.com/Thavisin.Official>, accessed on 25 September 2023.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- As a political novice, Thailand's new Prime Minister, Srettha Thavisin is facing an uphill struggle to prove that he is the right man for the job.
- He has no formal leadership post inside Pheu Thai, the major party in the 11-party coalition government. He also did not take part in the selection of Pheu Thai's election candidates. Neither did he have much say on who would join his cabinet line-up.
- He is in great need of support from his coalition partners. Without that, he will not be able to deliver concrete results. Worse still, he can be unseated in a no-confidence motion in the House of Representatives.
- The volatile political heavyweights from the other parties in his coalition government do not owe him anything – neither allegiance nor gratitude. They would resent his supervision if it limits their manoeuvrability to advance their own political interests.
- The most formidable challenge Srettha is facing is a crisis of confidence: More and more unhappy Thais feel that he lacks what it takes to deliver good concrete results.

## INTRODUCTION

Many challenges await the new Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin. First of all, as a political novice without any power base in Pheu Thai (PT), the largest party in the 11-party government coalition, he faces a crisis of confidence. More and more Thais doubt that he can stop corruption and improve lives and livelihoods – let alone lead Thailand back to genuine democracy.<sup>1</sup>

During the election campaign, as a premiership candidate of the PT, Srettha was less popular than Paetongtarn Shinawatra, another of the party's premiership candidate, who is also the youngest daughter of former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, and Pita Limjaroenrat, leader of Move Forward Party (MFP).

The 60-year-old real estate tycoon used to head Sansiri, the largest real estate public company on the Stock Exchange of Thailand, with an estimated market capitalisation of about 30.147 billion baht (US\$ 840 million). He has been accused of engaging in “unethical” business practices (including tax evasion and price manipulation through mysterious nominees) in some of Sansiri's land purchases.<sup>2</sup>

Both Sansiri and Srettha have denied any wrongdoing. Srettha, who resigned from the CEO post at Sansiri on 3 April, has sued Chuwit Kamolvisit, a former Bangkok MP, for slander and demanded 500 million baht as compensation.<sup>3</sup> Chuwit has responded with a threat to petition the National Anti-Corruption Commission to investigate Srettha.

The PT was in disarray after it failed to score a “landslide” victory in the May general election. At first, it had to play second fiddle to the MFP, the election winner, in haphazardly attempting to win the premiership for MFP's Pita. After Pita's failure due to lack of support from senators, the PT seized the opportunity to “divorce” the MFP and decided instead to work with parties in the previous Prayut Administration, which many PT supporters disdain as vestiges of authoritarianism.

Srettha's premiership will practically be held hostage by its four major coalition partners, all of which are former opponents of the PT: Bhumjaithai (BJT, 71 MPs), Palang Pracharath (PPRP, 40 MPs) and United Thai Nation (UTN, 36 MPs), and Chartthai Pattana (10 MPs). The PT alone has only 141 MPs in the 11-party coalition of 314 MPs.<sup>4</sup>

Without the support of these four parties, which were part of the Prayut Administration, the current PT-led coalition would lose control of the majority in the 500-member House of Representatives; Srettha would then risk being toppled in a no-confidence motion.

In addition to the above predicament, Srettha also has to deal with another “political hot potato” – Thaksin, who has been undergoing some unspecified emergency treatment in the Police Hospital after surrendering himself on 22 August to face an 8-year jail term upon his return from 17 years of overseas exile. About one week after his return, Thaksin quietly submitted a personal request for royal clemency. On 1 September, the Royal Gazette published a decision of the King to reduce the jail term of Thaksin from eight years to one.

How will Thaksin serve this remaining one-year jail term, and under what extraordinary arrangements during the Srettha Administration will be a closely watched issue. The Corrections Department on 21 September approved Thaksin's request to extend his stay in hospital by 30 more days.

It will be a remarkable achievement if the Srettha premiership lasts till its mid-term in May 2025, when his administration is expected to deliver a new and democratic "people's constitution".<sup>5</sup>

### **POLITICAL NOVICE'S DISADVANTAGES**

So far, it remains a mystery who invited Srettha to join the PT prior to the May general election. One speculation has it that it was Yingluck, former prime minister and younger sister of Thaksin, who recommended him. Srettha was a known critic of the Prayut Administration.

At first, Srettha was given merely an informal role as chief advisor to the head of the "Pheu Thai Family," Paetongtarn. He subsequently emerged as one of the PT's three premiership candidates. The two other candidates are Paetongtarn, and Chaikasem Nitisiri, a former justice minister in the Yingluck Administration.

Srettha's most memorable feat during the election campaign was to unveil on 5 April the PT's ambitious pledge to give every Thai who is 16 years old and above a "digital wallet" containing (the right to use) 10,000 baht for spending within their neighbourhoods.<sup>6</sup>

Not having any formal post in the PT leadership, Srettha played no role in the selection of election candidates. Neither did he have much say on who would join his cabinet. The cabinet list was submitted to the King on 1 September, ten days after Srettha had won the premiership on 22 August. The Royal Gazette published the King's approval on 2 September.<sup>7</sup>

Key ministerial posts went to senior politicians who are influential leaders of factions within the PT, and to Thaksin's lieutenants. One of them, Dr Prommin Lertsuridej, will be the chief-of-staff to Prime Minister Srettha. In all probability, few of them will be willing to obey Srettha, to whom they owe neither gratitude nor allegiance.

Interestingly, Srettha is concurrently the finance minister.<sup>8</sup> This will enable him to push the implementation of the "digital wallet" plan. More importantly, he can control the purse strings and keep an eye on spending and decide on new budget requests from all ministers. He will be assisted by a deputy finance minister from the UTN, Krisada Chinavicharana, who on 31 August resigned as permanent secretary of the Ministry of Finance.

Not being an MP has both advantages and disadvantages. Srettha will have more time to travel overseas, which he wants to do every month in order to negotiate free trade agreements with Thailand's key trading partners.<sup>9</sup> Srettha reportedly secured a deputy foreign minister of his choice, Jakkapong Sangmanee, the PT's registrar, to assist him in this endeavour.

However, one huge disadvantage in not being a legislator is a tendency to lose touch with MPs and senators, whose support he needs in order to push through in a timely manner key legislations – especially constitutional amendments.

## PERILS OF COALITION GOVERNMENT

Perils of the Srettha coalition government could already be seen in the tedious “horse-trading” for cabinet posts. The commotion began as soon as the PT announced its decision in early August to part ways with the MFP. Pol Gen Sereepisuth Temeeyaves, leader of Thai Liberal, one of the coalition partners with only one MP, compared the infighting to “dogs fighting over a rice bowl”.<sup>10</sup>

Many MPs in the PT were surprised and upset to see the interior minister post go to BJT leader Anutin Charnvirakul,<sup>11</sup> and the agriculture minister post to PPRP secretary-general Thammanat Prompao. The former post controls all provincial governors and local government administrations; the latter is in a position to help farmers nationwide. Both are crucial in winning the hearts and minds of the provincial poor.

The PT also sacrificed the energy minister post and let it go to UTN leader Pirapan Salirathavibhaga in exchange for the defence minister post which the UTN had earlier wanted. The energy minister will have a crucial role to play in bringing down prices of electricity, diesel, gasoline, and cooking gas to curb the rising cost of living. This is crucial in winning urban votes.

The defence minister post went to Sutin Klungsang, one of the PT’s deputy party leaders. He has recruited General Nipat Thonglek, a former permanent secretary of defence with a reputation for being a “Democracy General”, to be his chief assistant. Sutin has become the first civilian in modern times to head the Ministry of Defence without concurrently holding the premiership.<sup>12</sup> But Sutin’s appointment came too late to change the annual military reshuffle. Under the careful watch of outgoing PM General Prayut Chan-o-cha, who was concurrently the defence minister, appointments of the new Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Army Commander, Air Force Commander, and Navy Commander were swiftly done. Announced on 30 August, the appointments take effect on 1 October 2023, at the start of the new fiscal year.<sup>13</sup>

The PT had to yield – some PT negotiators said they had to “swallow blood!” – in order to secure support from these former “enemy parties” to help Srettha win the premiership. And they are cognizant of the fact that crucial support for Srettha will continue to come only at a price. The PT as well as Srettha must allow ministers from coalition partners some leeway to advance their respective parties’ agendas without unnecessary intervention from the head of government.

One serious risk that Srettha cannot avoid is to be held responsible for whatever corruption and other wrongdoings in the government under his watch. He can learn from the example of former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, who had to flee the country to avoid a 5-year jail term for failing to stop massive corruption in the infamous paddy pledging scheme of her administration.<sup>14</sup>

Srettha's dilemma lies in his need for support from these coalition partners to stay in power long enough to deliver concrete results. At the same time, his dependency on them can be mistaken by ministers as a licence to abuse power with impunity. In such a situation, corruption in the Srettha Administration may thrive and spread faster than the Thai economy can recover.

## HOW TO PLACATE UNHAPPY THAIS?

When asked what kind of prime minister he wants to be, Srettha has responded: "People's prime minister"; he has pleaded repeatedly through the mass media to give his "people's government" a chance to prove its worthiness.

Following his formal acceptance of the royal command to serve as prime minister on 23 August, Srettha announced his conviction that the next four years of his premiership would be "four years of changes". He also reaffirmed the pledge of the PT-led coalition government to work "tirelessly" to make Thailand a land of hope for the younger generation and a land of happiness for all, and to "once again win honour and dignity for Thailand in the international arena".<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, in his first cabinet meeting on 13 September, Srettha secured quick decisions on lowering prices of electricity and diesel; suspending repayment of debts of farmers and SMEs for three years; and introducing new visa-free entry for more foreign tourists.<sup>16</sup> Also high on his to-do-list are cutting prices of gasoline and cooking gas, and providing new financial support for distressed SMEs.

Another high priority for Srettha is to put in place by 1 February the digital wallet to stimulate nationwide spending during the Songkran water festival in mid-April. It is still unclear how he is to raise the 560 billion baht needed to give 56 million adults 10,000 baht each. This huge special stimulus injection was not included in the new fiscal budget of 2024, which starts on 1 October 2023.

The Srettha Administration will also push for legal recognition of same-sex marriages, development of a new volunteer military, and drafting a new constitution.

However, what the actual policy of the Srettha Administration towards marijuana and hemp will be, remains unclear. The PT promised during the election campaign to return marijuana and hemp back to the list of banned narcotics. But the BJT, now the second largest party in the coalition government, vowed to defend "free" cultivation and the sale and use of marijuana and hemp for medicinal purposes.

Ex-PT leader Dr Cholnan Sri-kaew, in his capacity as the new public health minister, will now have the unenviable task of finding a new compromise. Dr Cholnan on 31 August stepped down as PT leader to take responsibility for his failed pledge not to let the PT embrace the two parties of the two ageing generals—the PPRP of General Prawit Wongsuwan,<sup>17</sup> and the UTN of General Prayut.<sup>18</sup>

One sensitive omission that all in the PT-led coalition government can readily agree upon is to leave untouched the controversial Section 112 of the Criminal Code, the so-called *lese-majeste* law. This was in fact one of the crucial preconditions of many senators who voted for Srettha on 22 August.

Another play-safe move for Srettha is to avoid offending the Thai military and their conservative allies in the Senate by not advocating “reforms” of the armed forces. Instead, Srettha’s softer approach is to go for “joint development”<sup>19</sup> in full consultation with all relevant stakeholders in the military and in the general public.

Yet, another sensitive and pressing issue confronting Srettha is how to deal with Thaksin, who now has a one-year jail term to serve following the King’s commutation of his sentences from altogether eight years down to one. Any new preferential treatment for Thaksin will only confirm the widespread public suspicion that Thaksin is wielding actual power behind the PT and is secretly manipulating the Srettha premiership.

### **NEW CONSTITUTION NOT THE PANACEA**

One of the old and continuing challenges confronting Srettha is the polarisation between conservatives who want to preserve the status quo, and the young who want more rapid changes. A large majority of the latter voted for the MFP because of its clear agenda for change – including reform of the military and the monarchy.

Nevertheless, most political parties inside the coalition government as well as the MFP (149 MPs) and the Democrat Party (25 MPs) tend to see eye to eye on the need to give Thailand a new and genuinely democratic constitution. A civil society movement on 30 August submitted to the Election Commission a list of 212,139 signatures calling for a new constitution.<sup>20</sup> Such a petition normally needs only 50,000 signatures.

However, every proposal to amend the 2017 Constitution requires support of at least one-third of senators (83 senators). At the premiership voting on 22 August, 152 of 249 senators voted for Srettha.

It is unclear how many senators will support the drafting of a new constitution. Several senators have voiced their opposition to such a move, which they consider to be of low national priority.

The current batch of senators will leave in May 2024, at the end of their five-year transitional period during which they had had the authority to join MPs in selecting a new prime minister. After their departure, the Senate will be filled by a new batch of 200 senators selected from professional groups through own-peer voting who however will no longer have the authority to join in the premiership selection.

A majority of MPs in the lower House will then be in a position to approve the drafting of a new constitution. One key decision to be made is whether to choose drafters in a national election; or to handpick them through a search committee. PT’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Commerce Phumtham Wechayachai has been appointed to be in charge of setting



up a committee to study ways and means of holding a national referendum and drafting a new constitution.

If the drafters come from a national election, what will happen if a majority of them are supporters of the MFP, and what if they produce a far-reaching reform-oriented new constitution? The Srettha Administration will face a deadly dilemma: either block such a progressive new constitution, or fall apart with the resignation of Srettha from the premiership and his calling of an early general election.

Such a dreadful scenario is plausible, considering the fact that the MFP has gained a great deal of public sympathy in the wake of Pita's failure to win the premiership, and the subsequent rejection of the resubmission of his name for another round of premiership selection. Pita on 16 September resigned as leader of the MFP. Secretary-general Chaitawat Tulathon is expected to succeed Pita.

One recent survey found that the MFP's popularity rose from 30.20% in the May general election to 49.04% in late August; whereas the PT's popularity dropped from 28.20% to only 10.65%.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, MFP's candidate Pongsathorn Sornpetnarin easily captured a House seat in the by-election in Rayong's Constituency 3 on 10 September, with 39,296 votes. In the second place was Democrat Party's Dr Banyat Jatnachan, who received only 26,466 votes.

It is therefore pragmatic for Srettha to concentrate first on tackling economic woes besetting the Thai people. He needs to deliver quick good results, so that he has more bargaining power in dealing with his coalition partners as well as in keeping the MFP at bay. The latter objective is important if he is to secure continued endorsement of the influential conservative establishment for Srettha's premiership.

## CONCLUSION

The new Thai prime minister is facing an uphill struggle. His lack of a political power base inside the lead government party is a serious handicap.

He can count on support from his coalition partners only as long as they are happy to work with him in this rather shaky coalition government.

A growing number of unhappy Thais are rather sceptical that he has what it takes to succeed.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In a NIDA Poll survey released on 3 September, nearly 60% of respondents doubted that Pheu Thai could deliver on its policy to bring about a "people's constitution". See survey results at [www.nidapoll.nida.ac.th/survey\\_detail?survey\\_id=648](http://www.nidapoll.nida.ac.th/survey_detail?survey_id=648), accessed 5 September 2023.

<sup>2</sup> "'ชูวิท' ร่อนจดหมายเจ้าหน้าที่ของถึง สว. สส. พิจารณาคุณสมบัติ 'เศรษฐา'" [ 'Chuwit' mails all senators and MPs (to raise questions) about Srettha's qualifications ], Thai Rath Online, 22 August 2023,



[www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/2719090](http://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/2719090), accessed 1 September 2023. Chuwit Kamolvisit is a former Bangkok MP.

<sup>3</sup> “ ‘เศรษฐา’ ส่งทนายฟ้อง ‘ชูวิทซ์’ หมิ่นประมาท เรียกค่าเสียหาย 500 ล้านบาท” [ ‘Srettha’ sends his lawyer to sue ‘Chuwit’ for slander, and to demand 500 million (baht) in compensation], Thai PBS Online, 7 August 2023, [www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/330376](http://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/330376), accessed 1 September 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Composition of the Pheu Thai-led coalition:

Party	Number of MPs	Previous Role During 2019 – 2023
Pheu Thai	141	Chief opposition party
Bhumjaithai	71	Second largest government party in the Prayut Administration
Palang Pracharath	40	Largest government party in the Prayut Administration
United Thai Nation	36	New party, but General Prayut Chan-o-cha used to belong to this party
Chartthai Pattana	10	Was in the Prayut Administration
Prachachat	9	Ally of Pheu Thai in the Opposition
Pheuthai Ruam Palang	2	New party
Chartpattana Kla	2	Was in the Prayut Administration
Thai Liberal	1	Ally of Pheu Thai in the Opposition
Palang Sangkom Mai	1	New party
Local Counties	1	New Party
Total	314	= 62.80 majority in the lower House
Ex-Prayut Govt Parties	159	= 50.64 majority in the government coalition

<sup>5</sup> The “people’s constitution” is first on the priority list of Pheu Thai’s political manifesto. See details at the party’s website at [www.ptp.or.th](http://www.ptp.or.th), accessed 5 September 2023.

<sup>6</sup> See details of the announcement on Work Point Today, 11 April 2023, at [www.workpointtoday.com/election-digital-currency](http://www.workpointtoday.com/election-digital-currency), accessed 1 September 2023.

<sup>7</sup> See the list of the Srettha cabinet members in The Nation, 2 September 2023, [www.nationthailand.com/thailand/politics/40030726](http://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/politics/40030726), accessed 5 September 2023. Nine of the 35 ministers used to serve in the Prayuth Administration.

<sup>8</sup> Srettha holds a master’s degree in business administration and finance from Claremont Graduate School in California.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, Srettha was unable to attend the ASEAN Summit and summits with ASEAN’s Dialogue Partners in Jakarta, which started on 4 September. His premiership would become fully formal only after he has led his cabinet members to take an oath of allegiance in front of the King (on 5 September), followed by his announcement of the policy of his administration in the Thai parliament on 11 September. Nevertheless, Srettha plans to address the opening session of the UN General Assembly in New York in the third week of September. During the past decade, Thailand has lagged behind Viet Nam in the race to conclude free trade agreements (FTAs). Thailand and Viet Nam, both ASEAN member states, have similar FTAs with key trading partners such as China, Japan, India, South Korea, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand, as well as common regional agreements such as the RCEP. But on top of these deals, Viet Nam also has FTAs with Chile (2014), the Eurasian Economic Union which includes Russia (2016), the CP-TTP (2018), the EU (2020), and the UK (2021). Foreign Minister Dr Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara was Thailand’s Trade Representative during the Thaksin Administration, 2005-2006.

<sup>10</sup> Watch his interview on TV Channel 8 on 30 August 2023 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MaNvS3I4JQ&t=10s&ab>, accessed 2 September 2023. After the interview Sereepisuth, an outspoken former national police chief, announced his resignation as a

party-list MP, saying that if the Thai voters did not want his party, he would rather not stay in the House of Representatives.

<sup>11</sup> Interior Minister Anutin will be assisted by two deputy ministers from his own party: Dr Songsak Thongsri, and Chada Thaiset. The third deputy minister is from Pheu Thai—Kriang Kalpatinan, one of Thaksin's lieutenants. Anutin's father, Chawarat, had served as interior minister in the Abhisit Administration, December 2008 – August 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Other civilians who were the defence minister were all concurrently the prime minister, starting with Mom Rajchawong Seni Pramoj in 1976, Chuan Leek Pai in 1997-2001, Samak Sundaravej in 2008, Somchai Wongsawat in 2008, and Yingluck Shinawatra in 2011 – 2014.

<sup>13</sup> “โปรดเกล้าฯ แต่งตั้งนายทหารจำนวน 762 ตำแหน่ง” [Royal appointment of 762 senior military posts ], Post Today, 30 August 2023, [www.posttoday.com/politics/domestic/698929](http://www.posttoday.com/politics/domestic/698929), accessed 3 September 2023. Only the appointment of a new National Police Chief has been postponed, pending the arrival of Srettha to chair the National Police Board.

<sup>14</sup> The Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) estimated in a study released in November 2014 that the paddy pledging scheme had resulted in a loss to the government of between 645 billion baht and 960 billion baht. Yingluck fled the country in August 2017 shortly before the verdict against her for dereliction of duty under Section 175 of the Criminal Code. She was sentenced *in absentia* to five years in jail. Subsequently, her commerce minister, Boonsong Teriyapirom, was sentenced to 42 years in jail.

<sup>15</sup> Watch Srettha's speech at

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApURygTDrE0&ab\\_channel=CH7HDNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApURygTDrE0&ab_channel=CH7HDNews), accessed 3 September 2023.

<sup>16</sup> “ครม. เศรษฐา นัดแรก เห็นชอบแพ็คเกจชุดใหญ่ ลดค่าไฟ น้ำมันดีเซล ส่วนน้ำมันเบนซินรอหารือ – สํารวจผู้เดือดร้อนตัวจริงก่อน” [First Srettha cabinet meeting approves a large package of price cuts for electricity and diesel; price cut for benzine gasoline will have to wait for further surveys of those really affected] The Standard, 13 September 2023, [www.thestandard.co/first-srettha-cabinet-meeting-2/](http://www.thestandard.co/first-srettha-cabinet-meeting-2/) accessed 22 September 2023. Visa-free privilege will be granted to tourists from China and Kazakstan from 25 September 2023 until 29 February 2024.

<sup>17</sup> General Prawit, 78, announced his resignation as the PPRP's party-list MP on 31 August, saying that he had had enough of politics. He is now expected to also step down as leader of the PPRP. The PPRP, which was the largest in the Prayut Administration, won only 40 House seats in 39 constituencies, and only 1 seat from party-list votes.

<sup>18</sup> General Prayut, 69, was one of the two UTN's premiership candidates; the other candidate was UTN leader Pirapan. General Prayut quit the UTN on 11 July. The UTN came fifth in the May general election, winning only 36 House seats, 23 of them from constituencies and 13 from party-list votes. General Prayut, while he was the army chief, seized power in a bloodless coup on 22 May 2014, toppling the Pheu Thai-led coalition government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

<sup>19</sup> This includes speeding up the implementation of the existing plan to reduce the number of inactive generals from 768 to 384; reduce the number of annual military draftees from 90,000 to 45,000; and promote barter trade in arms acquisition to make better use of Thailand's food surplus. Details discussed in Inside Thailand on 4 September 2023, at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1M87Pt510vM&t=2450s&ab\\_channel=InsideThailand](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1M87Pt510vM&t=2450s&ab_channel=InsideThailand) , accessed 4 September 2023.

<sup>20</sup> See details on Prachatai Online, 30 August 2023, [www.prachatai.com/journal/2023/08/105688](http://www.prachatai.com/journal/2023/08/105688), accessed 1 September 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Opinion survey by Sripatham University and D-Vote, conducted between 21 – 24 August 2023. See details at Bangkok Business Online, 26 August 2023, [www.thebangkokinsight.com/news/politics-general/politics/1165290](http://www.thebangkokinsight.com/news/politics-general/politics/1165290), accessed 1 September 2023. Popularity of other major parties saw insignificant changes.

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