Introduction: Making Sense of Thailand's Seismic Elections

ALLEN HICKEN AND NAPON JATUSRIPITAK

Thailand's general elections on 14 May 2023 marked a seismic shift in its political landscape. The progressive Move Forward Party (MFP) secured first place, winning 151 seats in the 500-member House of Representatives and narrowly eclipsing the Thaksin Shinawatra-aligned Pheu Thai Party (PTP), which won 141 seats. Conversely, parties associated with the military and conservative establishment, the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) and the United Thai Nation Party (UTN), won only 40 and 36 seats, respectively.

The elections were historic, marking a decisive rejection of the military leaders—General Prayut Chan-ocha, the leader and prime ministerial candidate of UTN, and General Prawit Wongsuwan, the leader and prime ministerial candidate of PPRP—who had previously run the country under the veneer of democratic legitimacy. Both generals had orchestrated the 2014 coup that toppled the government of now-exiled Yingluck Shinawatra, established a military regime, and cemented their power via skewed conditions in the 2019 general elections. The 2023 polls also represented a break in the electoral hegemony that Thaksin-aligned parties had maintained since 2001.

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This disruptive outcome was grounded in two key transformations in the political landscape: longstanding regional and political divisions, often driven by economic concerns and polarizing views on Thaksin, were transcended by ideological rifts over structural reforms related to the monarchy and the military; and traditional local power dynamics—underpinned by money politics, patronage networks and political dynasties—were challenged by social media and social movements which have become driving forces in shaping political discourse, party-building and campaigning.

Yet, old politics die hard. Despite the MFP's victory, the party and its prime ministerial candidate, Pita Limjaroenrat, were excluded from power. Pita's attempts to become prime minister were twice rejected by joint parliamentary sessions that included 250 military-appointed senators and the party was subsequently sidelined by the PTP, which brokered a new alliance with military and conservative elites to support its prime ministerial candidate, Srettha Thavisin. On 22 August—100 days after the election and within hours of Thaksin's return to Thailand from exile—Srettha was elected prime minister with the support of 11 parties, 152 senators and 16 Democrat Party (DP) parliamentarians who defied their party's directives. Ten days later, a royal pardon reduced Thaksin's prison sentence—imposed when he was in exile—from eight years to one year.

Despite the formation of a government that did not reflect the will of voters, the elections revealed ongoing transformations within Thailand's political landscape. This Roundtable in *Contemporary Southeast Asia* represents a collective effort to explore the nature and implications of these transformations. Scholars from diverse backgrounds each conducted fieldwork before or during the elections and have come together to share their analyses. A set of pivotal questions emerged during this process. To what extent did the authoritarian legacies established by the 2014 coup still shape political outcomes? How has the political landscape changed following the pro-democracy movements of 2020–21? What role did the ideology surrounding the monarchy play in policy debates and party stances? What were the effects of innovative campaign strategies, including the use of social media? What became of the once-influential political dynasties, and how have these dynasties and their methods for winning elections been impacted by these developments? How were longstanding regional and political divisions upended or transformed in the wake of these evolving dynamics?

Each article in this Roundtable engages with one or more of these questions. The major themes that emerge encapsulate a shared narrative of disruption: the unravelling of traditional political divides; the reconfiguration of party-voter linkage mechanisms; the strategic adaptation of party-building strategies; the evolving affective ties between parties and voters; and the decline of some parties' fortunes. Before delving into a discussion of these themes, we first describe the key events and milestones leading up to the elections. We then explore the themes and provide an outline of this Roundtable. Finally, we conclude with some reflections on the future of Thai democracy.

Context

As the 2023 elections drew near, Prayut, the prime minister since 2014, confronted a multitude of challenges that jeopardized his control over the government and his re-election prospects. His administration was supported by a PPRP-led coalition, which was kept afloat by a tenuous alliance with demanding but indispensable partners such as the Bhumjaithai Party (BJP) and the DP. The government faced an economy still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the political fallout from the unprecedented wave of street protests in 2020 and 2021, primarily led by young activists who demanded broad structural changes, including reform of the monarchy.

Amid this turbulent backdrop, amendments to the junta-drafted 2017 Constitution yielded only one notable change: a shift from the single-ballot, mixed-member apportionment system employed in general elections in 2019 back to a dual-ballot parallel voting system similar to that used in the 2001, 2005 and 2011 general elections.[1] The reformatted rules favoured larger parties at the expense of smaller ones, particularly those lacking a well-defined, geographically concentrated electoral base.

While the return of the two-ballot system was widely seen as an effort to undercut support for the MFP, it also increased the likelihood of a PTP victory.[2] The changes meant that the "divide and rule" strategy employed in the 2019 polls—which focused on fragmenting the PTP while garnering support from smaller and micro-parties—was unlikely to succeed. Furthermore, after 2019, Prayut no longer wielded the sweeping authority granted to him by Article 44, which had given him considerable power as head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the formal name for the junta that took power in 2014 but which was dissolved after the

2019 elections. Nevertheless, Prayut maintained a disproportionate influence over the formation of the next government after the 2023 polls because of the junta-appointed 250-member Senate, which (until May 2024) has the power to select the prime minister, alongside the 500-member House of Representatives.

Against this backdrop, the PTP claimed that it would win a landslide—a promise that seemed credible given its strong track record and its recent victories in provincial administration organization (PAO) by-elections.[3] Bolstering this promise, Thaksin's youngest daughter, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, was groomed as the party's prospective prime ministerial candidate. Officially, she was positioned as the head of the Pheu Thai Family, an organizational umbrella aimed at reuniting former party leaders and the Red Shirt grassroots communities.

This external challenge to Prayut was compounded by internal strife between him and Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan. Tensions between the two generals fuelled speculation about Prawit's own prime ministerial ambitions and desire to sideline Prayut. The situation reached a tipping point when the Constitutional Court suspended Prayut as premier in August 2022, pending a verdict on the duration of his tenure as prime minister. The court eventually ruled that he could serve only two additional years if he won another term in office. This verdict deepened the divide within the PPRP, splitting members into factions that supported either Prayut or Prawit as the party's next prime ministerial candidate. In January, Prayut joined the newly formed UTN, thereby officially parting ways with the PPRP and Prawit. This development led to the emergence of two military-backed parties in Thailand.

Similar to the situation in the 2019 polls, parties generally aligned themselves along the pro-military—pro-democracy axis. However, pinpointing a party's place on this spectrum became harder amid rumours of a potential deal between the PTP and PPRP.[4] The political landscape had also evolved due to the pro-democracy movements of 2020–21. Spurred by protesters' demands, parties found themselves compelled to publicly declare their stance on sensitive issues pertaining to the military and monarchy.

Consequently, policy debates moved beyond largely indistin-guishable economic platforms to focus more on structural reform and ideological differences concerning the roles of the monarchy and the military. While the MFP was not the only party open to amending the lèse-majesté law, it stood out as the only party with a

credible commitment to do so. This stance was strengthened by the MFP's efforts to convert the lingering demands of the pro-democracy movements into a concrete legislative agenda, as well as its efforts to secure the release of detained activists, even running some of these activists as its parliamentary candidates. During the campaign, the public was particularly receptive to the MFP's promises, especially its vow not to form alliances with military-backed parties—a stance that the PTP failed to credibly commit to from the beginning. In the final stages of the election campaign, both the MFP and its leader, Pita, experienced a surge in the polls and ultimately surpassed PTP and Paetongtarn in terms of popularity, revealing a shift in public sentiment in favour of clear and decisive change.[5]

Outcomes and Discussion

Of the approximately 52 million eligible voters nationwide, some 75.71 per cent turned out to vote.[6] Unlike in the 2019 general elections, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups closely monitored the ballot counting process in 2023. The Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), which had faced criticism for its handling of the results in 2019, quickly announced that the MFP had secured the most seats. The aggregate election results (see Table 1) illustrate several compelling features. (1) The MFP and PTP were neck-and-neck on the number of constituency seats won (112), but the MFP pulled ahead in the party-list election—winning three million more votes than the PTP—giving it an edge in the overall seat count (151 against 141). (2) Despite their military backing, the PPRP and the newly formed UTN struggled in the election, securing only 40 and 36 seats, respectively, which suggests the waning influence of military-affiliated parties. (3) The difference in constituency votes and party-list votes for many parties demonstrated the prevalence of ballot splitting, where voters chose candidates from one party for the constituency vote but opted for a different party when casting their party-list vote. (4) The number of parties that secured only a small number of seats decreased significantly compared to the 2019 elections, consistent with the changes to the electoral system. (5) The MFP overwhelmingly dominated in Bangkok, winning all but one seat in the capital (see Table 2). The party's stronghold is unquestionably in the Central Region, where it won 82 seats. However, it also performed well in the North, including in areas such as Chiang Mai Province, which have traditionally

been considered strongholds of the PTP. (6) The BJP emerged as the third largest party, winning 71 seats, with a notable presence in the Northeast and South regions. (7) Once a significant player in Thai politics, the DP won only 25 seats. This suggests that the party is struggling to maintain its support base, even in its traditional stronghold in the South.

Table 1
Thailand's 14 May 2023 General Election Results

Party	Constituency Seats	Party List Seats	Total Seats	Per cent of Seat Share	Per cent of Constituency Vote Share	Per cent of Party List Vote Share
Move Forward	112	39	151	30.2	25.99	38.49
Pheu Thai	112	29	141	28.2	25.12	29.22
Bhumjaithai	68	3	71	14.2	13.8	3.03
Palang Pracharath	39	1	40	8	11.26	1.43
United Thai Nation	23	13	36	7.2	9.7	12.7
Democrat	22	3	25	5	6.13	2.47
Chart Thai Pattana	9	1	10	2	1.57	0.51
Prachachart	7	2	9	1.8	0.9	1.61
Thai Sang Thai	5	1	6	1.2	2.35	0.91
Chart Pattana Kla	1	1	2	0.4	0.8	0.57
Pheu Thai Ruam Palang	2	0	2	0.4	0.25	0.18
Thai Liberal	0	1	1	0.2	0.74	0.94
Social Power	0	1	1	0.2	0.05	0.47
Fair Party	0	1	1	0.2	0.03	0.49
Teachers for People	0	1	1	0.2	0.01	0.47
Thai Counties	0	1	1	0.2	0	0.54
New Party	0	1	1	0.2	0	0.67
New Democracy	0	1	1	0.2	0.04	0.73

Source: Authors' dataset compiled based on data obtained from the Election Commission of Thailand.

Table 2
Party's Seat Distribution by Region

Party	Central	Northeast	North	South	Total
Move Forward	82	8	19	3	112
Pheu Thai	15	73	24	0	112
Bhumjaithai	16	35	5	12	68
Palang Pracharath	9	7	16	7	39
United Thai Nation	7	0	2	14	23
Democrat	2	2	1	17	22
Chart Thai Pattana	8	1	0	0	9
Prachachart	0	0	0	7	7
Thai Sang Thai	0	5	0	0	5
Pheu Thai Ruam Palang	0	2	0	0	2
Chart Pattana Kla	0	0	1	0	1
Total	139	133	68	60	400

Source: Authors' dataset

The contributors to this Roundtable identify several emerging themes and transformative dynamics related to the elections. One such transformation pertains to the reconfiguration of traditional political divides in Thailand, most notably the urban-rural divide. Allen Hicken, Napon Jatusripitak and Mathis Lohatepanont argue that the interpretations of urban-rural dynamics, as framed by Anek Laothamatas, are due for an update. While this divide continues to be a salient factor in shaping party preferences, it no longer exclusively represents a dichotomy between Bangkok and the rest of the country. Instead, their analysis suggests this divide is now more nuanced and extends throughout Thailand.

A second pivotal shift involved the transformation of party-voter linkages. Using original survey data, Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee identifies three distinct patterns of party-voter linkages adopted by Thailand's leading political parties. Her research suggests that the electoral landscape is becoming increasingly complex as parties evolve in divergent directions and appeal to a varied electorate using different linkage mechanisms. Siripan highlights how traditional

voter-party linkages, often built on political brokerage or policy alignment, are being challenged by new methods facilitated by the rise of social media.

Shedding more light on this dynamic, Viengrat Nethipo, Noppon Phon-amnuai and Hatchakorn Vongsayan examine the electoral defeats of the political dynasties as a reflection of broader shifts in party-voter bonds. They argue that the decline of these dynasties is linked to the rise of innovative campaign strategies, particularly those enabled by social media platforms such as TikTok, which has proven disruptive to traditional vote-mobilization methods such as vote-canvassing and patronage networks.

Adding another layer to the discussion, Jakkrit Sangkhamanee investigates the role of emotional connections between parties and voters, conveyed through tangible and intangible forms of "political intimacy". By contrasting the PTP and MFP's campaign rallies, Jakkrit argues that new forms of political intimacy—facilitated by social media and defined by the concept of political fandom—are gradually displacing older, more traditional connections based on imagined family ties or kinship.

Akanit Horatanakun redirects the discussion from campaign strategies to the underlying organizational roots that gave rise to these new forms of voter engagement, using the MFP and its predecessor, the Future Forward Party (FFP), as case studies. Akanit traces the origins of these parties and argues that their strategies of articulation—parliamentary operations, political education and electoral mobilization—were significantly influenced by their origins as movement-based parties within the unique context of a military-dominated political landscape.

Other contributors take a different approach, shifting their focus towards the decline and challenges faced by specific political parties. Suthikarn Meechan investigates the declining electoral supremacy of the PTP in Thailand's Northeast region—known as Isan—and analyses three key challenges: resistance from entrenched political dynasties; limited opportunities for local network building in the post-2014 coup context; and the growing significance of new ideologies among both PTP supporters and younger voters. These factors collectively undermined the PTP's influence, especially in the face of competition from parties adept at traditional vote-canvassing methods, such as the PPRP and BJP, and from newer parties, including the MFP, that offered a more compelling ideology and had a stronger social media presence.

Kritdikorn Wongswangpanich examines the structural challenges stemming from the 2017 Constitution which confronted the PTP. Drawing on fieldwork, particularly in Ubon Ratchathani Province, he argues that the party's electoral loss can be attributed to its inability to fulfil its role as an opposition party when addressing the needs of constituents, its failure to adapt its money politics strategy in light of the transition to a two-ballot system and its overreliance on an outdated electoral blueprint—all of which are consequences of alterations to the electoral rules of the game and the PTP's shortcomings in learning from past experiences amid these changes.

Examining the 2023 electoral performances of the military-backed PPRP and UTN, Prajak Kongkirati explores the shortcomings of these parties as indicative of broader failures of authoritarian regimes in Thailand when it comes to retaining power through elections. These failures are influenced by three key factors: the historical legacy of past military coups; ineffective electoral strategies; and elite-level conflicts within the regime's inner circle.

Collectively, these contributions paint a picture of a political landscape undergoing significant transformation. While this presents challenges and opportunities for democratic consolidation in Thailand, it is crucial to understand that the link between electoral politics and the selection of leaders has been severed or distorted through a prime ministerial selection process influenced by appointed representatives, interventions by referee bodies and negotiations among elite actors operating outside of the electoral sphere. This suggests that remnants of the post-2014 coup era, and the entrenched power structures that evolved from it, continue to exert considerable influence over the trajectory of Thai democracy.

Yet, on closer examination, a significant shift is underway within the ruling structures that uphold the current conservative order, representing one of the most substantial realignments among the Thai elite in the past two decades. The PTP has now come to serve as a protective buffer for the conservative establishment against calls for sweeping reforms from parties such as MFP and the broader pro-democracy movements. These developments suggest that a new political fault line, primarily centred around the role and status of the monarchy and military, is becoming increasingly prominent.

NOTES

[1]   The revised electoral framework reduced the number of party-list seats and reintroduced a system allowing voters to cast one ballot for a constituency candidate and another for a political party. Voters cast two ballots at the May 2023 general elections. The first was for candidates running in the 400 constituencies, elected using the first-past-the-post system. The second ballot was for one of the 67 parties competing in the election. These votes were aggregated at the national level to determine the proportional allocation of 100 party-list seats among the political parties.

[2]   "ธนาธร ชี้สูตรหาร 100 พรรคก้าวไกลเสียเปรียบ" [Thanathorn Points Out New Election Rule Puts the Move Forward Party at a Disadvantage], *Thai PBS News*, 30 November 2022, https://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/322095.

[3]   "Pheu Thai Win at Roi Et Polls Fuels Party's Landslide Hopes", *Bangkok Post*, 26 September 2022, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2400638/pheu-thai-win-at-roi-et-polls-fuels-partys-landslide-hopes.

[4]   "Report of Pheu Thai-PPRP 'Secret Deal' Denied", *Bangkok Post*, 23 March 2023, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2537054/report-of-pheu-thai-pprp-secret-deal-denied.

[5]   "Thailand's Pita Tops PM Poll as Opposition Leads Opinion Surveys", Reuters, 5 May 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailands-pita-tops-pm-poll-opposition-leads-opinion-surveys-2023-05-05/.

[6]   Election Commission of Thailand, "ผลการเลือกตั้ง สส. ทั่วไป 14 พฤษภาคม 2566" [General Election Results, 14 May 2023], https://ectreport66.ect.go.th/overview.

A New Tale of Two Democracies? The Changing Urban-Rural Dynamics at Thailand's 2023 General Elections

ALLEN HICKEN, NAPON JATUSRIPITAK AND MATHIS LOHATEPANONT

On the campaign trail in rural Thailand in the run-up to the May 2023 general elections, candidates frequently turned to the metaphor of a fried egg to describe the political landscape of their constituencies. According to this analogy, the "egg yolk" represents urban areas, where voters often base their voting decisions on programmatic appeals and party labels. This urban core is surrounded by the "egg

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whites"—rural areas where voters are generally less susceptible to national sentiments (*krasae*) and are more inclined to vote based on the localized appeal of individual candidates.

This dichotomy employed by legislative contenders mirrors the broader analytical framework commonly used by scholars of Thai politics which emphasizes the urban-rural divide—or more specifically pits Bangkok against the provinces (*tang changwat*). In an influential essay published in 1996 titled "A Tale of Two Democracies", Anek Laothamathas depicted rural voters as focused on supporting their local patrons while Bangkok-based, middle-class voters yearned for honest, clean government.[1] But is this framing accurate and adequate, especially in the wake of the general elections in 2023? This article contends that there is now a significant degree of convergence in party preferences between Bangkok and the provinces, yet a distinct divide remains between densely populated urban areas and sparsely populated rural areas. In other words, Thailand is experiencing the emergence of *multiple* "fried eggs", each corresponding to the country's numerous urban centres, rather than a single Bangkok-centric "egg yolk".

A Tale of Two Democracies

According to much of the existing literature on Thai politics, the urban-rural divide is one of the most significant factors shaping social cleavages and political outcomes. Most notably, Anek Laothamathas argued that rural voters typically place greater emphasis on tangible, immediate benefits, which are often facilitated by patronage networks associated with politicians seeking electoral support. In contrast, urban voters tend to prioritize ideological principles and programmatic platforms.[2]

The divide outlined by Anek Laothamathas in 1996 set the stage for the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) in the early 2000s. Indeed, the popularity of Thaksin, a billionaire businessman-turned-politician, can be interpreted as a response to historic political and economic marginalization experienced by the rural population.[3] The TRT was widely supported by the rural majority and Thaksin's spell as prime minister (2001–6) intensified tensions between urban and rural populations, consistent with Anek Laothamathas's predictions. However, that framing does not fully capture the motivations of the rural electorate who supported

the TRT. Rather than simply succumbing to the influence of local patronage networks, rural voters were also drawn to the TRT because the party's policies addressed their needs and aspirations.

Economic development over the past 40 years has resulted in enormous structural changes to the economy, some of which run counter to Anek Laothamathas's clear-cut divisions between urban and rural politics. Andrew Walker, for instance, has written about the rise of "middle-income peasants", those who continue to reside in the countryside but have experienced rising incomes and engage with the state and economy in increasingly complex ways.[4] As a result of their changing, often precarious, circumstances these middle-income peasants make new and different demands on the state. Duncan McCargo, meanwhile, has conceptualized "urbanized villagers", those who reside in urban areas but maintain their voter registration in their rural home provinces.[5]

As such, the traditional urban-rural divide in Thai politics has become increasingly complex since Anek Laothamathas's article was published. This raises two important questions. First, have rural voters moved away from a reliance on patronage networks? Second, has economic development and migration within the country blurred the distinctions between urban and rural political preferences?

Convergence and Divergence

We contend that urban-rural divisions continue to remain a significant driver of variations in party strategies and election results but not in the way originally proposed by Anek Laothamathas. Although most parties—with the notable exception of the Move Forward Party (MFP)—continue to tailor their strategies to urban and rural settings, there is a growing convergence in party preferences. Continuing a pattern that began in 2001, Thailand has seen the formation of large national political parties that have managed to partially bridge the urban-rural divide by effectively competing for and securing support from voters across that divide. As a result, the sharp distinction between Bangkok and the countryside is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain analytically.

The 2023 general elections illustrate this phenomenon. Except in the Northeast region of the country, known as Isan, where it came second to the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), a successor of Thaksin's original TRT, the MFP emerged as the largest party in party-list

votes in nearly every region, including Bangkok (see Figure 1). This pattern holds when we disaggregate the data and focus on the provincial and constituency-level voting patterns. In all of Thailand's 77 provinces and 400 constituencies, the MFP finished first or second in terms of party-list vote share. It accomplished this primarily by maintaining a unified campaign platform nationwide. It campaigned on the message that "where there are uncles, there is no us" (*mee rao mai mee loong, mee loong mai mee rao*),[6] which echoed as strongly in the countryside as it did in Bangkok. This stands in contrast to the common practice of political parties running separate campaigns for urban and rural demographics, such as employing programmatic strategies in urban areas and patronage-based tactics in the countryside.

According to the results of the 2023 polls, geographic distinctions have become less pronounced. Although regional variations persisted, as evidenced by the fact that the MFP's share of the votes differed noticeably across regions, support for the party was crosscutting and transcended the stark regional divides that are sometimes assumed to be fundamental in Thai politics.

Figure 1
Party Preferences across Regions in Thailand (Party List)
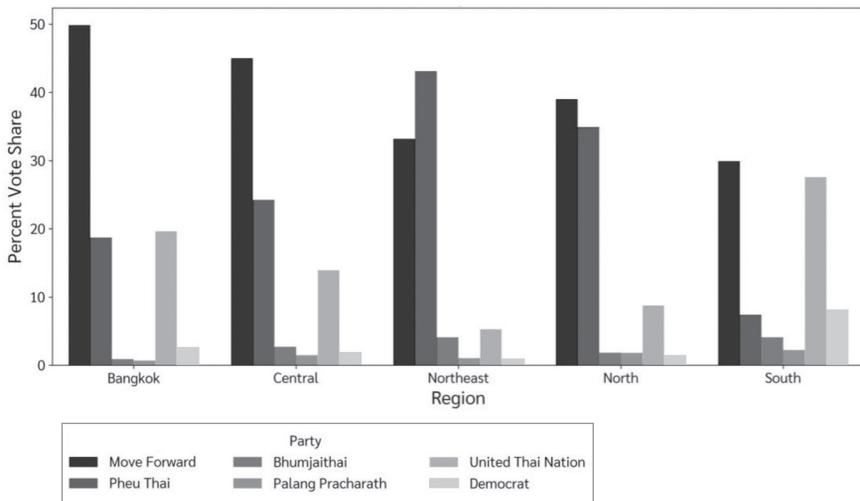
Source: Authors' dataset

However, even though there are some signs of convergence, it is important to avoid interpreting this as conclusive evidence that the urban and rural electorates have become fully aligned in their preferences. In fact, when looking at constituency-seat votes, rather than party-list votes, the contrast between Bangkok and other areas persists.[7] For instance, the MFP's candidates came first or second in only 216 of the 400 constituency seats up for grabs, and in only 45 of the 77 provinces. Moreover, the difference between the MFP's constituency-seat votes in Bangkok and those in other regions is more noticeable (see Figure 2). In addition, trying to explain convergences of preference based solely on similar voting patterns is questionable since it is possible that voters in urban and rural areas aligned with candidates from the same party, yet their decisions were grounded in distinct criteria or because of divergent campaign strategies.

According to our fieldwork in Kamphaeng Phet, a province in central Thailand, a candidate affiliated with the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) adopted a constituency service approach (tackling the problem of mosquitoes) in more urban areas, emulating the practices of Bangkok parliamentarians. Conversely, in the more rural part of the constituency, this candidate placed a stronger emphasis

Figure 2
Party Preferences across Regions in Thailand (Constituency)
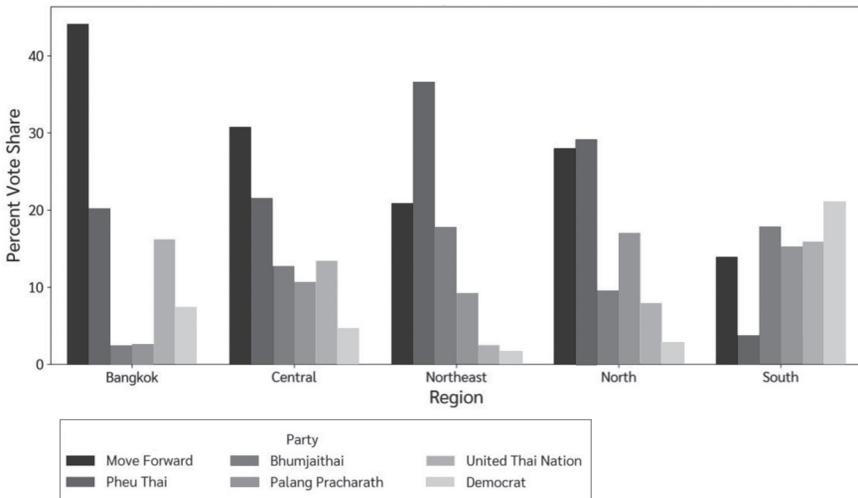
Source: Authors' dataset

on cultivating support through intricate networks of local leaders, so much so that he stated, "even if a pin were to drop, I could hear it".[8] In Ubon Ratchathani, a city in the Isan region, an MFP candidate took a different approach. Whereas the PPRP candidate in Kamphaeng Phet Province adopted distinct mobilizational strategies for urban and rural areas, the MFP candidate in Ubon Ratchathani pursued a programmatic approach in both contexts while adapting the issues to align with the interests of rural or urban voters. In the urban centre of this area, the candidate appealed to voters by leveraging the party's commitment to military conscription reform. In the rural area of the constituency, they spoke of more help for farmers and pensions for the elderly. These examples illustrate the persistence of the urban-rural divide, which may no longer be as apparent at the national level but which is still discernable across constituencies or even within a single constituency.

To further explore the extent of convergence, we extended our analysis of voting patterns to the subnational level. Rather than solely comparing voters in Bangkok with those in the provinces, we compared voters residing in more urban areas of the country with those in less urban areas. If the distinction between urban and rural is truly withering away, it should no longer serve as a reliable predictor of voting behaviour. To achieve this, we used population density as a proxy for urbanization and integrated this with the results of the 2023 general elections to explore the spatial dynamics of electoral politics. First, we obtained population data at the subdistrict level for the year 2022 from the Bureau of Registration Administration.[9] We merged this data with a "shapefile"—a file format commonly used for geospatial analysis—containing constituency boundary data corresponding to the Election Commission's announcement[10] and sourced from the Government Big Data Institute.[11] We then tallied the population of every subdistrict within each constituency, thereby calculating the total population for each electoral constituency. To determine the size of each constituency, we calculated its area in square kilometres, relying on the European Petroleum Survey Group (EPSG) coordinate reference system. Finally, we estimated the population density of each constituency by dividing its estimated total population by its calculated area.[12] Figure 3 displays density by subdistrict and constituency.

Using this dataset, we examined whether a party's vote share correlates with the level of urbanization in a constituency, as

Figure 3
Estimated Population Density in Thailand
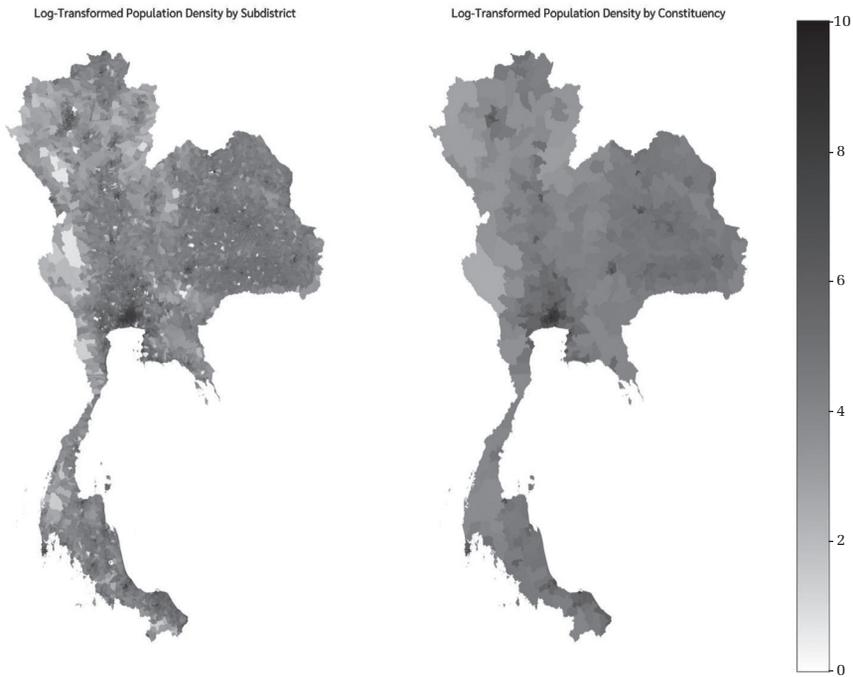
Source: Authors' dataset

measured by population density. Figure 4 charts the relationship between population density and party vote share (measured using constituency-seat votes) of the six largest parties in the 2023 general elections. If urban-rural distinctions have lost salience we would expect to see a flat line. A positive slope, meanwhile, would suggest greater support for a party in urban than rural areas and a negative slope would indicate the opposite.

Our results indicate that voting patterns, specifically support for candidates affiliated with different parties, are strongly correlated with the degree of urbanization at the constituency level for most parties. This correlation remains even if we exclude Bangkok from the analysis. Specifically, voters in more densely populated urban areas were much more likely to support the MFP compared to voters in rural areas. By contrast, support for the PTP and the Bhumjaithai Party (BJP) was strongest in more rural constituencies

Figure 4
Party Vote Shares by Population Density (Constituency Votes)
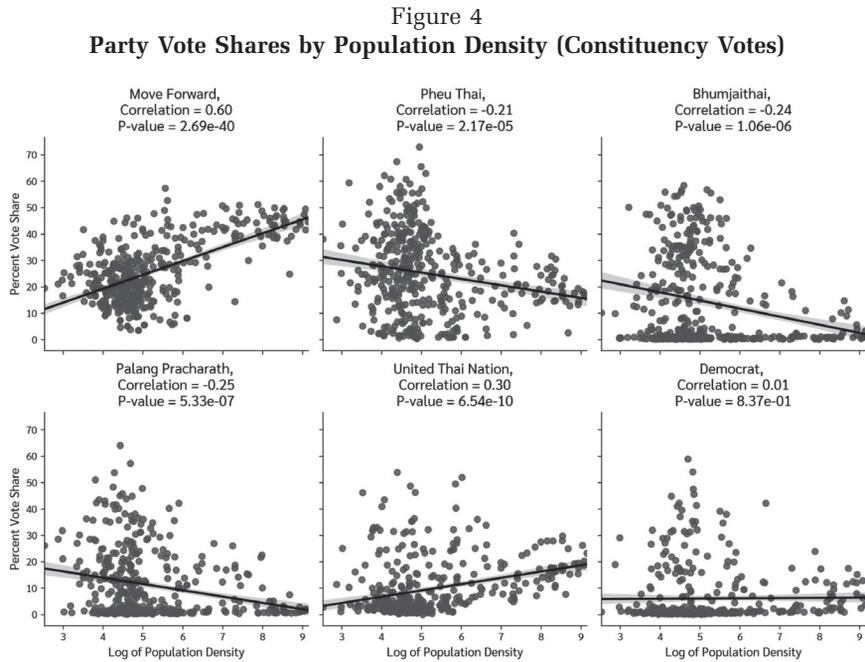
Source: Authors' dataset

and weaker in more urban constituencies. Interestingly, the PPRP and the United Thai Nation Party (UTN) were mirror images of each other—the PPRP held an advantage in more rural constituencies, while the UTN performed better in more urban constituencies. In short, there are still clear differences in voting behaviour between voters in denser urban areas and those in more sparsely populated rural areas.

Conclusion

There are signs of increasing convergence between urban and rural voters, particularly evidenced by the widespread crosscutting support for the MFP at the 2023 polls. At the same time, however, this article finds that the rate of support each party received varied between densely populated urban areas and less populated rural areas. Our research suggests that instead of a "single fried egg", we are seeing the emergence of "multiple fried eggs".

Although a lengthy analysis of the factors driving these results is beyond the scope of this article, we can offer some preliminary explanations. The interaction between technology and youth participation in politics appears to be a transformative factor, blurring traditional urban-rural divides. During our fieldwork, we often encountered stories of how young voters active on social media served as "organic canvassers" who engaged with their preferred party—usually the MFP—online while also encouraging friends and relatives offline to vote for that party rather than parties that had traditionally been locally dominant. We also found that the strength of local political machines also varied greatly from constituency to constituency. In areas where local political machines were less dominant, voters were more susceptible to being influenced by national political currents, such as anti-military sentiments.

In 1996, Anek Laothamathas argued that democracy would endure only if urban middle-class and rural voters converged. He wrote, "Such an alliance is only conceivable, however, only if the middle class becomes reconciled to the democratic understanding and aspirations of the rural voters rather than trying to remake them."[13] The image of the urbanite MFP expanding its appeal to more rural constituencies suggests that a more complicated picture may be emerging, one where both the urban and rural electorate are adopting a more ideological style of politics.

NOTES

[1]   Anek Laothamatas, "A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand", in *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, edited by Robert H. Taylor (New York City, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 201–23.

[2]   Ibid. Subsequent scholars have focused on the class divisions that undergird or crosscuts this regional divide. See, for example, James Glassman, "The Provinces Elect Governments, Bangkok Overthrows Them: Urbanity, Class and Post-democracy in Thailand", *Urban Studies* 47, no. 6 (2010): 1301–23; Kevin Hewison, "Thailand: The Lessons of Protest", *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia* 50, no. 1 (2014): 1–15; Naruenmon Thabchumpon and Duncan McCargo, "Urbanized Villagers in the 2010 Thai Redshirt Protests", *Asian Survey* 51, no. 6 (2011): 993–1018; Andrew Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

[3]   Tejapira Kasian, "Toppling Thaksin", *New Left Review* 39, no. 5 (2006): 5–37.

[4]   Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants*, p. 6.

5   Duncan McCargo, "Thailand's Urbanized Villagers and Political Polarization", *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 365–78.

6   This phrase was a regular part of MFP candidates' election communication. General Prayut Chan-ocha, who became prime minister after the military takeover in 2014 and served until 2023, and General Prawit Wongsuwon, the first deputy prime minister between 2014 and 2023, were widely referred to as "uncles" by the Thai media. In this context, the MFP's message represents a firm rejection of the possibility of forming alliances with these generals when attempting to form a government.

7   For more information on the ballot system for the 2023 general elections, see endnote 1 in Allen Hicken and Napon Jatusripitak, "Introduction: Making Sense of Thailand's Seismic Election", of this Roundtable.

8   Authors' interview with a PPRP candidate, Kamphaeng Phet, May 2023.

9   Bureau of Registration Administration, "Population Data", distributed by the Bureau of Registration Administration, https://stat.bora.dopa.go.th/new_stat/file/65/stat_t65.xls.

10   The Election Commission of Thailand, "Announcement of the Election Commission", distributed by the Election Commission of Thailand, https://ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/documents/140A023N0000000000500.pdf.

11   Government Big Data Institute, distributed by Kittapat Ratanaphupha, https://github.com/KittapatR/Thai-ECT-election-map-66.

12   This methodology rests on two core assumptions. First, population density was assumed to be a suitable measure of urbanization as urban areas are typically characterized by higher population densities than rural areas. However, this may have introduced discrepancies in the population density estimates since Thai citizens do not need to reside where they are officially registered to vote. Second, the analysis of voting patterns was conducted at the constituency level and did not account for variations within individual constituencies. Although this assumption of uniform population density within each constituency might lead to a loss of granularity, it served a practical purpose by facilitating a broader analysis of spatial trends without overcomplicating the analysis. For a visualization of actual within-constituency variations in population density, see Figure 1.

13   Anek, "A Tale of Two Democracies", p. 222.

Breaking Bonds: Voter-Party Linkages in Thailand's 2023 General Elections

SIRIPAN NOGSUAN SAWASDEE

Some 270 first-time lawmakers were elected to parliament in Thailand's 2023 general elections.[1] Of those, 121 ran for the Move Forward Party (MFP), which emerged as the largest party in the polls, a pivotal moment in Thailand's political conjunctures. Dissatisfaction with the military government that had run the country since it had seized power in a coup in 2014, and the perceived failure of the pro-junta parties to effectively represent the interests of the people, have resulted in new, complex party-voter bonds.

Across the world, the ties between voters and political parties are becoming increasingly diverse.[2] Building upon the existing literature that categorizes linkage mechanisms into three major types—charismatic, clientelistic and programmatic[3]—this article seeks to conceptualize Thailand's voter-party bonds. It argues that in the 2023 elections, we saw more variety in the ways parties connect with voters. Some parties now depend less on patronage and more on the power of social media. This new type of linkage, driven by media engagement, poses a major challenge to the country's historic political power brokers and has resulted in new policies gaining traction among the electorate.

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Decoding Voter Priorities

To understand public priorities and preferences, the author conducted a post-election, face-to-face survey between 1 July and 31 July 2023. With 1,947 respondents selected to broadly represent Thailand's electorate, the survey sought to interrogate voters' decision-making as well as their policy preferences and media consumption patterns based on four survey questions: What factors influence your choice of a constituency candidate? What factors influence your choice of a party-list candidate? Which policies do you prefer the most? Where do you mainly obtain your information about political campaigns and elections? Each respondent was asked to select two choices from a list of possible answers that they deemed most important and relevant for each of these questions. The survey's results (see Table 1) suggest that the MFP's electoral success predominantly reflected the public's desire for change following nearly a decade of military and military-influenced governments. Additionally, voters' choices for constituency members of parliament (MPs) were influenced by past constituency work, with a notably high percentage of support for the Bhumjaithai Party (BJP) in this respect. Party affiliations also played a significant role, with ties to the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) ranked first, closely followed by the MFP. Other factors included perceived honesty, connections to political dynasties and the provision of financial incentives to voters. In terms of party-list votes (see Table 2), the electorate prioritized a party's prime ministerial candidate over its policies

Table 1
Factors That Influenced Your Choice of a Constituency MP (Percentage)

	Lead to changes	Perform constituency services	Preferred party	Honesty	Connection to political dynasties	Rewards and incentives	Others
MFP	62.2	32.0	40.8	17.7	3.1	–	–
PTP	28.6	56.1	42.9	20.0	8.2	–	–
BJP	18.2	86.4	36.4	9.1	9.1	–	–
PPRP	22.6	32.3	34.8	N/A	6.5	–	–
All voters	47.2	42.2	42.0	23.1	4.4	1.1	17.2

Source: Author's own survey

Table 2
Factors That Influenced Your Choice of a Party-List MP (Percentage)

	Lead to changes	**Nominate preferred PM candidate**	**Favour party's policies**	**Trust party's experience**	**The party's anti-coup stance**	**The party's royalist stance**	**No answer**
MFP	59.5	36.4	30.6	8.7	32.7	5.1	–
PTP	27.5	28.9	27.9	45.7	13.9	15.7	–
BJP	21.8	13.6	11.4	22.7	0	40.9	–
PPRP	9.7	22.5	12.3	29.0	0	61.3	–
All voters	45.4	32.2	29.8	22.2	20.9	17.3	5.1

Source: Author's own survey

and confidence in its experience. The MFP outperformed the PTP in both the preference for the prime ministerial candidate and policy platform. The survey results also indicate the growing importance of digital media over traditional sources of information. The contrast between the MFP's supporters, who primarily used social media as their source of information, and the supporters of the BJP and Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP), who relied on traditional media, was striking (see Table 3).

Table 3
Main Sources of Information by Party (Percentage)

	Social media	**Television**	**Friends and family**	**Political parties**	**Election Commission**	**Local administration**	**Village head**
MFP	79.7	38.4	36.4	16.2	6.2	4.2	3.2
PTP	50.0	57.4	28.9	7.1	7.9	8.2	6.4
BJP	26.0	62.3	13.6	3.8	6.5	–	9.4
PPRP	21.3	65.2	22.5	2.2	4.5	6.5	13.0
All voters	62.4	50.8	12.0	10.5	8.7	8.1	6.5

Source: Author's own survey

Conceptualizing Voter-Party Linkages in Thailand

Given the priorities of voters outlined above, this article identifies three logically distinct modes of voter-party bonds employed by the four largest parties at the May 2023 general elections: the MFP, the PTP, the BJP and the PPRP. These bonds are not mutually exclusive as each party used a combination of them to garner political support.

Political Brokerage

In Thailand, the practice of patron-clientelism runs deep in the country's social fabric and is the oldest and most widespread method through which voters connect with political parties.[4] In essence, local "political brokers" provide incentives, benefits, favours and services to individual voters or groups of voters in exchange for their votes. Political brokers, such as village headmen, local political officials and state officials, are informal networks of influential individuals and their patronage circles. In addition to local authorities and provincial political families, even village health volunteers, who played a significant role in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, acted as important political brokers. For instance, in the run-up to the latest election, Anutin Charnvirakul, then-Minister of Public Health and the leader of the BJP, approved a budget increase, raising the payment for local volunteers from 1,000 baht (US$30) to 2,000 baht (US$60) per month.[5] Besides the BJP, the PPRP is also well known for using political brokers to secure electoral support at the constituency level.[6]

This linkage thrives in rural social structures where voters' expressions are restricted and where interest aggregations are fragile. Thus, party candidates focus on local constituency concerns rather than their party's national programmes. In other words, this traditional brokerage model does not prioritize ideology, while loyalty to a party stems from personal connections and kinship or from exchanges of money or services. As a result, supporters are not expected to go beyond merely turning up at the polling stations and voting. These parties are vertically operated. Party meetings often lack precise guidance and agendas tend to be constrained by hierarchical instructions.[7]

Importantly, parties that use brokerage bonds can attract voters by offering both clientelistic and programmatic policies that are tailored to different societal groups to broaden their support base, especially

with low-income voters. For example, the BJP has campaigned on student loans and marijuana legalization while the PPRP promoted improvements to welfare card schemes for the poor.

Programmatic Policy

Policy bonds occur when voters establish an allegiance to a particular party based on its policy promises. The PTP, for instance, has gained support by focusing on tangible policies such as affordable medical care and increased village funding.[8] Ahead of the 2023 general elections, it expanded its manifesto to include promises to raise the minimum daily wage, to distribute 10,000 baht (US$300) through digital wallets to all Thais aged 16 years and above, and to boost tourism income. While the PTP focused on economic rejuvenation, the MFP advocated progressive views such as military reform, the abolition of conglomerate monopolies and the repeal of Section 112 of the Criminal Code, which limits criticism of the monarchy. Based on the survey's results displayed above, the MFP was perceived as better reflecting voters' interests compared to the PTP, partly because the MFP has increasingly made Thai politics an ideological battleground.

To sustain programmatic bonds, parties must maintain reliable and clear political stances by which they can be recognized by the public and distinguished from their opponents. Policies are the main differentiating factor in how parties recruit and engage their members, and party structures play a critical role in developing popular policies and ensuring the parties remain committed to them. However, these bonds can be problematic as parties are expected to follow through with their policy pledges once in power. The PTP, for instance, lost some support as many voters were unsure about its commitment to democracy.[9] Party structures are vital for policy commitment. The PTP incorporated the Red Shirt movement for mobilization. However, if media-induced engagement is more effective, the influence of the Red Shirts may decline or be abandoned.

Media-Induced Engagement

Urbanization and increased mobility in Thailand have created new segments of society no longer receptive to traditional brokerage bonds. Meanwhile, social media has become a mainstream media platform, reaching 85 per cent of the population. On average, Thai

people spend around eight hours per day on social media.[10] This shift was a game changer at the 2023 general elections and was one of the primary reasons for the MFP's victory.

Social media incorporates voters into political life, providing avenues for participation and fostering allegiances. User-generated content, including party material and addictive TikTok videos, as well as "natural" canvassers (individuals who convince others to support their preferred parties), played a pivotal role in the 2023 polls.[11] Contentious content, such as the MFP's narrative of being an anti-establishment party fighting against corrupt elites, became crucial in amplifying distinct voter voices. However, the prominence of social media does not necessarily imply a clear ideological underpinning. The MFP, for instance, set itself apart by rejecting any form of alliance with pro-military parties while appealing to young voters with a long list of progressive policy pledges, including reforming lèse-majesté laws, liberalizing the alcohol industry and ending military conscription. It also emphasized legislative performance to reflect its focus on certain issues,[12] and cultivated relationships with various groups, including youth movements, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).[13]

To effectively engage with public opinions through mass media channels, the MFP utilized specialists in campaign advertising and media relations. These teams were active throughout 2023, shaping social issues based on voter sentiments, advancing the party's achievements and criticizing other parties' shortcomings. Social media enabled the MFP to actively involve the masses in the political process beyond merely voting on election day. Despite having a centralized leadership structure, the MFP accommodated enthusiasts who wished to express their concerns,[14] trained candidates to address public demands and recruited like-minded activists.[15] The MFP's leader and prime ministerial candidate, Pita Limjaroenrat, appealed to supporters in a manner highly reminiscent of fandom, exemplifying personalistic links between himself and the masses through social media.[16]

Conclusion

Evolving voter-party bonds have impacted Thailand's political landscape. The importance of political brokerage is being challenged

by new methods of information consumption, which in turn are changing voter perspectives. The BJP and PPRP, reliant on political brokers, were perceived by many voters as traditional and unresponsive. The weakening of the PTP's policy linkage for some voters stems from the party's ambiguity on whether they would collaborate with military-aligned parties. Meanwhile, new policies from other parties gained prominence.

It is important to recognize that these different forms of voter-party bonds are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, political brokerage is a common feature of all political parties and in the age of social media proliferation, any party hoping to win an election must participate on these platforms. The novelty of media-induced engagement has substantial implications for Thailand's voter-party dynamics and democratic representation moving forward. By its nature, it is contingent and fluid. Social media platforms enable candidates to reach voters directly, soliciting their support in a personal manner. However, it relies on sensational storytelling and immediacy to capture people's attention at particular moments, rather than allowing time for deliberative participation in the democratic process. It also tends to emphasize a political opponent's flaws and mistakes, using rhetoric to draw a line between "good" and "evil"; us and them.

On the one hand, social media, with its interactive peer-to-peer structure, has the potential to amplify and broaden political engagement, providing individuals and groups with avenues of participation that bypass traditional political gatekeepers: the local power brokers and conventional media. On the other hand, it does not unequivocally have a positive impact on the democratic process. The nuanced nature of social media communication channels needs to be acknowledged as the evolving political landscape presents challenges and opportunities that require careful consideration.

NOTES

[1]   Author calculation based on the electoral results presented by the Election Commission of Thailand, https://ectreport66.ect.go.th/overview.

[2]   Juan Pablo Luna, "Segmented Party–Voter Linkages: The Success of Chile's Independent Democratic Union and Uruguay's Broad Front", in *Challenges*

of Party-Building in Latin America, edited by Steven Levitsky, James Loxton, Brandon Van Dyck and Jorge I. Domínguez (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 100–130; Staffan Kumlin and Achim Goerres, Election Campaigns and Welfare State Change: Democratic Linkage and Leadership Under Pressure (Oxford, UK: Oxford Academic, 2022), pp. 21–37.

3   See, for example, Kay Lawson, Political Parties and Linkage: A Comparative Perspective (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1980); Herbert Kitschelt, "Linkages between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities", Comparative Political Studies 33, no. 6–7 (2000): 845–79; Susan C. Stokes, "Perverse Accountability: A Formal Model of Machine Politics with Evidence from Argentina", American Political Science Review 99, no. 3 (2005): 315–25.

4   Viengrat Nethipo, "Dynamic of (In)Formal Power under Political Changes of the Thai State" (PhD dissertation, Kyoto University, 2023), p. 11.

5   Apinya Wipatayotin, "Health Volunteers' Allowance to Double", Bangkok Post, 7 March 2023, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2522286/health-volunteers-allowance-to-double.

6   The disparities in the BJP's and PPRP's constituency seat votes (5,133,44 and 4,186,441, respectively) and party-list votes (1,138,202 and 537,625, respectively) suggest that while their abilities to capture national votes were shaky, their local party machines were relatively strong.

7   Author interview with Siripong Angkasakulkiat, a former parliamentarian for the BJP, Bangkok, 22 June 2023.

8   The PTP—specifically its predecessor party, the Thai Rak Thai Party—was not Thailand's first party to campaign for such welfarist and social policies that benefitted voters. The Social Action Party sponsored similar village-based funding in the 1970s. See James Ockey, "Change and Continuity in the Thai Political Party System", Asian Survey 43 (2003): 663–80.

9   Author interview with Theerarat Samrejvanich, a parliamentarian for the PTP, Bangkok, 23 June 2023.

10 Suchit Leesanguansuk, "Social Media Plays Key Role in Election", Bangkok Post, 16 May 2023, https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/general/2571277.

11 Stephanie Adair, "TikTok Sweeps Wave of Change over Thailand's Election Campaigns", The Nation, 29 May 2023, https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/politics/40028083.

12 Author interview with Sirikanya Tansakul, the MFP's deputy leader, Bangkok, 25 February 2023.

13 Nattakant Akarapongpisak, "From 'Street' to 'Parliament': Why Thai NGOs and Activists Forming the Commoners' Party and Running as the Future Forward Party's Electoral Candidates", Journal of Social Sciences Naresuan University 18, no. 2 (2022): 73–106.

14 A good example was when the MFP reversed its decision to include the Chart Pattana Kla Party (CPKP) in the coalition government after receiving criticism from its supporters via social media platforms because the CPKP was part of the pro-military government. The trending hashtag was #มีกรณ์ไม่มีกู ("if there

is Korn, there is no us"). See "Move Forward Reverses Decision to Include Chatpattanakla", *Bangkok Post*, 20 May 2023, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2574657.

15   Author interview with Chaitawat Tulathon, the MFP's secretary-general, Bangkok, 20 February 2023.

16   A personalistic linkage as electoral vehicles for notable figures was evident in the United Thai Nation Party, which was established in 2021 to foster General Prayuth Chan-ocha's bid to remain in power.

Disrupting the Grip: Political Dynasties and Thailand's 2023 General Elections

VIENGRAT NETHIPO, NOPPON PHON-AMNUAI AND HATCHAKORN VONGSAYAN

The victory of the Move Forward Party (MFP) in Thailand at the May 2023 general elections, contrary to almost all pre-election polling predictions,[1] signalled a significant departure in Thai politics away from the traditional strategies of mobilizing voters. This shift occurred rapidly over one election cycle and is especially noteworthy because of the substantial influence that political networks, known as "*Ban yai*" (literally, big house), and provincial dynasties have wielded for decades, consistently securing victories in parliamentary and local elections within their respective provinces.[2] These dynasties also posed significant challenges to political newcomers unaffiliated with their established power structures.

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However, in the 2023 elections, MFP candidates prevailed over rivals from these provincial dynasties in several constituencies. This article explores the strategies of those candidates. At the 2019 general elections, the Future Forward Party (FFP) won 50 party-list seats and 31 constituency seats.[3] After the party was dissolved in February 2020—for allegedly violating electoral laws on donations—its members, who were not disqualified, regrouped to form the MFP, becoming the most vocal of the opposition parties in parliament. Between 2020 and 2022, the MFP gained popularity, particularly among the younger generation, and aligned itself with anti-government movements and advocated for political reforms favoured by student activists. However, established political parties and provincial dynasties continued to dominate local elections nationwide. This trend was evident in the Provincial Administrative Organization elections in late 2020 and the municipal elections in 2021, in which the MFP performed poorly.[4] As such, the MFP's triumph in the 2023 elections was a remarkable upswing in its electoral fortunes within a relatively short timeframe. The party won 112 constituency seats and 39 party-list seats, while 104 of its elected members of parliament (MPs) were running for office for the first time. In several constituencies, MFP candidates unseated entrenched political dynasties. We argue that many of these candidates were successful because they paid attention to local policy issues and adopted new ways of using social media, particularly TikTok, allowing them to circumvent established political networks and appeal directly to voters.

Provincial Dynasties and Network Politics

Much of the existing literature on Thailand's political landscape highlights the pivotal role of provincial dynasties that rose to power through network-based relationships, often linked to patronage politics.[5] This practice, while evolving, remains predominant. Its origins can be traced back to the 1970s, when political parties were relatively weak[6] and the electorate lacked clearly separable identities, making it difficult for parties to mobilize voters based on policies, ideology or class. As a result, individual candidates were primarily responsible for creating the networks, relationships and patron-client connections necessary for mobilization.[7]

However, with the adoption of the 1997 Constitution and the rise of the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) in the early 2000s, Thai politics evolved into a party-centric system.[8] Parties became

dominant entities and voters aligned themselves with specific parties. This shift allowed parties and politicians to identify target groups, differentiate between core and swing voters and allocate resources more efficiently.[9] The TRT epitomized this trend.[10] Decentralization from 1999 onwards further solidified the connections between national parties, constituency MPs and local politicians.[11] However, parties continued to rely on local political networks for voter mobilization.[12]

Indeed, it was widely accepted that the success of constituency candidates hinged on their ability to establish strong ties with the local population, engage in local politics and build relationships with community leaders. Yet, many of the MFP's candidates diverged from these conventional practices in their campaigns ahead of the 2023 polls.

Disruptive Strategies

MFP candidates, most of whom were political newcomers, embraced a "disruption" campaign strategy, characterized by eschewing established political networks and refraining from creating new ones. Instead, they capitalized on unresolved local issues as focal points in their electoral campaigns. Notably, they also harnessed the power of social media to reach voters within and beyond established networks. This phenomenon is exemplified by the relatively unknown and inexperienced constituency-based MFP candidates who triumphed in areas of the country where well-defined provincial dynasties had been dominant. The provinces studied in this analysis are recognized for having provincial dynasties that have held parliamentary positions for multiple terms, control all levels of local government and primarily mobilize voters through candidate-centred strategies.

We conducted participatory observations during the election campaign and in-depth interviews with the candidates. To account for regional variations and development levels, we focused on provinces in the east of the country, specifically Prachin Buri, Samut Prakan and Rayong. These areas are characterized by traditional communities whose leaders and local political positions are closely tied to networks of provincial dynasties. However, these are also areas with industrial zones and growing populations, including labourers and middle-class residents who have relocated to the area. Many of these newcomers are not constrained by traditional community structures.

Prachin Buri Province, for instance, is known for its deeply entrenched political networks dominated by powerful dynasties,

both affiliated with the Bhumjaithai Party (BJP). The Wilawan family has long controlled the local Provincial Administrative Organization and Sunthorn Wilawan, the patriarch, was an MP for decades, a position now occupied by his nephew, Am-nart Wilawan. The other dynasty, the Pummakanjana family, rose to power in 1979 and is currently represented by the second-generation Chayut Pummakanjana, an MP in Prachin Buri Province from 2001 until 2023 when he was defeated by the MFP candidate Wuttiphong Thonglour (who secured 35,451 votes against Chayut's 31,194, out of a total of 110,472).[13] Wuttiphong, a former systems engineer who worked for a Japanese factory in his district, had no prior experience in politics.[14] In 2020, he joined the Progressive Movement—a group led by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the leader of the now-dissolved FFP—to support a candidate in a local election. Despite being relatively unknown, Wuttiphong was nominated as the MFP's candidate for the 2023 polls because he engaged with local environmental issues, particularly air pollution.

Wuttiphong's journey to becoming an MFP candidate is similar to that of Sawangjit Laoharojanaphan, who competed in Rayong Province. After her defeat in the Provincial Administrative Organization election in 2020, she collaborated with civil society groups to address environmental issues stemming from the junta government's Eastern Economic Corridor development plan.[15] Similarly, Weerapat Kantha, an MFP candidate in Samut Prakan Province, joined the party in 2021 and was invited the same year to serve (in an unelected capacity) on the National Assembly's Committee for Natural and Public Disasters Prevention and Mitigation, thereby playing a role in resolving issues related to the explosion of an oil tanker in Samut Prakan Province. This enabled him to connect with affected communities outside of political networks.[16]

None of these candidates were linked to provincial political elites, and they addressed issues that primarily affected local groups. However, they regularly publicized their activities on social media, reaching voters within and outside their constituencies. Many also adopted unconventional approaches to voter mobilization. Instead of relying on community leaders or politically powerful figures to campaign alongside him, Wuttiphong assembled a team of around ten staff members who worked closely with him. While he used traditional campaign methods such as election posters and rallies, his events were often sparsely attended due to his lack of name recognition. Meanwhile, his campaign slogan, "Not a new generation,

but a worker", contrasted with the MFP's emphasis on attracting younger voters. His primary strategy was home visits, carefully planning the time and distance to maximize efficiency. He travelled using electric scooters to enable his team to move swiftly between homes and reach more residents. His daily routine included morning visits, afternoon social media content creation and evening house-to-house calls.[17]

Social Media Amplification: TikTok's Impact

At the beginning of his campaign, Wuttiphong primarily used Facebook, on which he had 12,000 followers, as a social media tool for publicity. However, he began using TikTok on 19 April. His TikTok following surged to 30,000 during the final stages of the campaign a few weeks later. TikTok distinguishes itself from other social media platforms by its focus on evoking shared emotions through concise and easily digestible content. This includes clips from memorable campaign events, custom lyrics to popular songs and informative short videos.[18] A viral video he posted just one week before the election garnered over a million views within a few days.[19] It showed Wuttiphong's emotional encounter with a young boy who had expressed a desire to meet him. When they finally met, they shared a hug, bringing both to tears, set to the tune of Bird Thongchai's classic song "With Love and Attachment". The millions of views of this TikTok video far exceeded the number of eligible voters in his constituency (136,167).

MFP candidates in Samut Prakan Province also effectively utilized TikTok to create content that surpassed the number of eligible voters in their respective constituencies. Although Sawangjit did not use TikTok, she acknowledged its importance during the final stages of the campaign and attributed her victory to the popularity of the MFP leader Pita Limjaroenrat, whose celebrity-like status became known as "Pita fever".

Because TikTok stands out for its ability to engage users of all age groups—including those using Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as those not active on social media but who consume content on YouTube—it bridges generational divides and transcends traditional networks. Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government implemented smartphone applications for economic relief and vaccination promotion, meaning that smartphone usage increased across all age groups, not just among the young.[20] TikTok,

known for its addictive nature, allowed politicians to engage with their audience in a unique and intimate manner, distinct from other social media platforms devoid of conventional networks.

By the end of the election campaign, TikTok had amassed 40 million users in Thailand. Nevertheless, only the MFP effectively harnessed the platform for voter mobilization, amassing 2.6 million followers and 37 million "likes" on its official account alone.[21] In contrast, the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), the political party with the second largest TikTok audience, had a mere 260,000 followers. The MFP's campaign videos featuring the "#*kaoklai*" (#MFP) hashtag garnered a staggering four billion views.[22] The MFP's campaign team and organic supporters recognized the platform's importance, consistently producing content. The use of TikTok for voter mobilization became a crucial factor contributing to the MFP's success. While TikTok alone did not secure the MFP's victory, it undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the campaign's final stages.

Conclusion

The MFP's victory in the 2023 general elections signifies the emergence of a "new politics". This goes beyond anti-junta sentiments—the MFP garnered more votes than the PTP—and represents a genuine shift in politics. We have observed that this new politics fundamentally differs from traditional network-based approaches to electoral mobilization. It relies on a strategy that eschews the traditional link between parties and local elites and instead leverages online media and local issues to mobilize voters. In this approach, short video clips distributed via platforms such as YouTube and TikTok have effectively intruded community networks and transcended generational and social divides. Where this new type of politics—underpinned by algorithm-driven social media—will lead and how it may evolve in the long term remains an intriguing question that we must continue to contemplate and study.

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15   Authors' interview with Sawangjit Laoharojanaphan, an MFP parliamentarian for Rayong Province, Rayong, 13 August 2023.

16   Authors' interview with Weerapat Kantha, an MFP parliamentarian for Samut Prakan Province, Bangkok, 27 July 2023.

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Assembling Electoral Intimacy: Political Affects and Affection in Thailand's 2023 General Elections

JAKKRIT SANGKHAMANEE

One of the most common sayings in Thailand during an election season is "Choose the candidate for whom you feel affectionate; nominate the party you feel is right" (เลือกคนที่รัก เลือกพรรคที่ใช่). Thai elections are heavily influenced by emotion yet "affect" and "affection" have been only marginally studied in the existing literature.[1] Drawing on field data collected during and after Thailand's general elections in 2023, this article argues that sociocultural affection and material affect, as visible during campaigning, were important factors in determining voters' decisions. Affection and affect are encouraged through candidates' banners, songs and pamphlets; through political parties' campaign narratives, kinship and clientelist networks; and through canvasser mobilization strategies, money distribution and discursive information on digital media. The 2023 general elections were a transformative example of the changing forms and fashions of electoral intimacy. Indeed, a new type of intimacy has emerged through digital media and is gradually replacing the spatially situated relations on which local clientelist and dynastic political influences relied.

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The author closely observed two political campaign events: one by the Move Forward Party (MFP) at Samyan Mitrtown, a trendy shopping mall located in the heart of Bangkok; and the other by the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) at a local school in a rural district of Ubon Ratchathani Province, in the northeast of the country. Additionally, I analysed roadside campaign banners, pamphlets distributed in local communities by vote canvassers and other campaign rally material.

There have been very few, if any, studies on political intimacy in Thailand. Nonetheless, I will demonstrate that the 2023 polls show how this intimacy is changing in the country and how historically important clientelist connections are gradually giving way to a new intimacy, which is associated with social media platforms and an atmosphere of hope for political change, both of which are a departure from the old style of clientelist and dynastic politics.

Intimacy in Political Election: A Brief Review

Political intimacy, especially between the electorate and politicians, has largely been investigated within the field of political emotion studies. George E. Marcus, for instance, has explored the significance of emotion in politics, particularly as it relates to political leaders' personalities and as an explanation for how the public evaluates those leaders.[2] He argues that emotion plays a substantial role in politics because it enables a rapid assessment of the current situation and the encoding of past events in an evaluative context.

Building on this work, I argue that intimacy goes beyond proximity; it also includes values or viewpoints that are dear to voters' hearts. It has a certain level of intensity and desirability. In this regard, intimacy includes, but is not limited to, clientelist and dynastic relationships. Intimacy extends beyond human relationships in politics; it also refers to close relationships with material inducements (money or material goods, for instance) and non-material factors such as the feeling of belonging, language and acknowledgement. Therefore, emotion encompasses both the feelings of affection for a person and the effect of being stimulated by your environment, including both human and non-human elements.

According to Isabel Airas, these intimate relationships form "hotspots" where "the affective atmospheres of political movement often originate, and where they tend to be most intense".[3] For instance, in her study of the "Corbyn phenomenon" in the United

Kingdom, a reference to the groundswell of support for the former leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, Airas argued that these hotspots played a significant role in galvanizing support for Corbyn by generating hope, optimism and excitement.

Similarly, Sam Page analysed the 2015 general elections in the United Kingdom by investigating the connections, associations and physical elements of the Labour Party's local campaigns. He argued that the elections were imbued with different intensities and understanding, and that a political party should be conceptualized as an "assemblage that are always-becoming multiplicities created through relations between the components".[4] In this sense, a political party is never static. Instead, it is a dynamic operation and through the production of affection and affect, intimacy is formed between the party and voters.

Assembling Intimacy

On a sunny afternoon in early May 2023, a large school football field in a rural district in Ubon Ratchathani Province was filled with almost 1,000 people, mostly farmers who came to support a PTP campaign rally. The hundreds of pick-up trucks parked on the lawn or streets nearby suggested that many attendees had travelled from other districts. They wore the party's red-coloured T-shirts. Banners, flags and posters burnishing the image of the party's prime ministerial candidate, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, were eagerly held aloft by the crowd. On the large stage, local candidates, party representatives and vote canvassers sat in front of a huge backdrop displaying photos of the party's candidates and the slogan "Choose Pheu Thai, Landside, Thailand will change immediately" (เลือกเพื่อไทยแลนด์สไลด์ ประเทศไทยเปลี่ยนทันที). Held just six days before the 2023 general elections, it was likely the last PTP rally in the province.

Sutin Klangsang, the deputy party leader, was speaking to the amassed supporters in the local dialect, reminding them of how good life was during the prime ministership of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–6), the founder of the political movement associated with the PTP and its predecessor parties. Sutin emphasized that the party needed to win by a landslide to install Paetongtarn, Thaksin's daughter, as prime minister. In contrast to other parties' widespread use of vote buying, the speaker highlighted the party's campaign policy to give away a million cows and a 10,000-baht digital wallet to each

citizen if it won the elections.[5] Another important party official, Chaturon Chaisang, then tediously elaborated on the PTP's main policy platform. The final speaker, Nattawut Saikua, then-director of Pheu Thai Family,[6] gave a humorous speech about how the election process had been highly competitive but with dubious actions by the electoral authorities, necessitating the party's success on the ground. Before leaving the stage, he exclaimed that everyone needed to vote for the party's local candidate, Chuwit Kui Phithakphallop, who stood grinning, basking in the support offered to him by the party's leaders, local canvassers and influencers.

As we travelled from the campaign event back to the city of Ubon, we passed hundreds of roadside banners displaying images of the candidates and their affiliated parties, election card numbers and main policies. Such information seems to be prevalent in all elections across the world. Nevertheless, they were tailored to showcase the candidates' close association with a significant entity. For instance, Kui, the PTP candidate, included the image of Paetongtarn next to his own on his banners. However, on the banner for a candidate for the Bhumjaithai Party (BJP), in a constituency where the party was unpopular, the party's logo was made (presumably) intentionally small. By contrast, in a constituency where there were rumours that BJP had spent a lot of money on vote-buying, banners prominently displayed the image of the party's leader, Anutin Charnvirakul, along with an oversized party logo. On banners, some candidates included photos of parents or relatives who were already politicians, highlighting their dynastic legitimacy. If there was nothing easily at hand to relate to, some candidates simply displayed a large icon of their ballot number, seemingly in the hope that people would just remember it.

The atmosphere at the PTP rally in Ubon Ratchathani Province was very different to an MFP campaign event in Bangkok two weeks earlier. The stage was a small, floating, orange-coloured circle on which speakers could stand or sit. A temporary backdrop read "Change Thailand, straightforwardly" (เปลี่ยนประเทศไทย อย่างตรงไปตรงมา). The event was indeed straightforward, with each party-list candidate taking turns to speak about the party's policies in front of an audience mostly in their twenties and thirties. Such policies ranged from legislation on e-sport and labour market regulations to reforms to education and mass transit. As night fell, the party's popular leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, ascended onto the stage to idol-like screams, and hundreds of phones were raised in the air to record and photograph the exact moment.

Overall, when I attended political campaign events in Ubon and Bangkok, I felt—and presumably so too did other spectators—a feeling of effervescence: the standing in a large crowd of like-minded people; the waving of flags and mobile phone lights; the sounds of admiring screams, vivacious songs and joyful laughter. In other words, we became what George Marcus called a "sentimental citizen",[7] through which political intimacy was expressed and confirmed.

These brief accounts of the material and non-material arrangements in political rallies, campaigning activities and material suggest more than just staged performances and the enactment of symbolic acts. On a deeper level, they represented the proximity of intimacy, where various political figures and parties attempted to assemble unique actors, networks, material symbols, rhetoric and atmospheres to draw supporters close into their political arena. This phenomenon is part of an ongoing symbiotic relationship between political candidates' aspirations to win an election and the expectation of the electorate to affect politics. I contend that, alongside other factors, political intimacy played a significant role in influencing the outcome of the 2023 general elections.

Electoral Affect and Affection: Material-Semiotics of Political Campaigns

What constitutes political intimacy? Besides the campaign events already mentioned, I followed a walking rally of various candidates and vote canvassers to local markets and communities, in which one could observe several moments that represented the production, enactment and confirmation of intimacy.

When the candidates visited markets in the city of Ubon, it was clear that they did not know everyone there. In fact, they likely knew almost no one at all. However, a smiling greeting, a tight handshake, an intimate embrace—these were common during the walking rallies and an obvious example of intimacy. Indeed, these were common expressions of the candidates' supporters who accompanied them. These supporters included influential local leaders, well-known village health volunteers, successful businesspeople and even a famous singer of the traditional northeastern *mor lam* style. They engaged in conversations with voters about their lives before presenting a pamphlet introducing their respective candidates. This is a form of clientelist intimacy, and to be effective it requires a locally situated network of sociocultural connections.

The pamphlets they handed out presented personal information about the candidates, including their educational backgrounds and family ties, as well as dedications about the candidate's close relationships with local events and organizations. However, more appealing were the policies proposed by the parties and the candidates. A closer look at the pamphlets revealed that not all policies were mentioned—only those that might be persuasive in linking and affirming the party's national policies with local needs and desires. This signifies policy intimacy. Whether it was Sutin mentioning digital wallets and a million cows at a campaign event, or candidates seeking personal and policy connections with constituents at the market, intimacy was front and centre.

What about the rumour that the BJP's leader Anutin had engaged in vote-buying? Even this is another instance of intimacy. Money given to voters is not merely a "bribe" devoid of any sociocultural significance. Instead, it is an "affirmation", signifying that politicians, canvassers or candidates acknowledge the recipient's existence, especially when considering that election campaigning only lasted for a short period of time. Indeed, it is an act of political recognition.[8]

From Family to Fandom: A Wind of Change?

After witnessing the campaign events and rallies in Ubon Ratchathani Province, one might have forecast an electoral victory by the PTP or BJP because of their strong, intimate ties with local constituencies. But this did not happen; the MFP won the largest share of the vote. While the PTP's digital wallet policy was appealing, the party lost because of a newer form of political intimacy that was made possible by online platform sharing among youths, those who most likely attended the MFP's event at Samyan Mitrtown.

In recent decades, Thai politics has been influenced by family-oriented political networks that were highly dependent on locally arranged intimacy and past acts of reciprocity.[9] In conjunction with vote-buying and populist policies, these familial ties in the political arena proved effective in elections. However, this is now changing. With the emergence of a new form of political intimacy, resembling that of pop star fans, intimacy now lies in the hope and expectation of future change, made possible by the virtual community of digital-savvy politicians.

In recent years, digital platforms have created a new kind of affect and affection in Thai politics. It was an important part of

anti-government protests of 2020 and 2021, which Aim Sinpeng referred to as "hashtag activism".[10] Social media platforms have brought people together in both the virtual and physical worlds. As youths share news about politics and their peers' experiences with protest or political violence, they are able (and encouraged) to become not only informed and active citizens but also sentimental citizens. Through sharing their hopes and plights, they have grown closer as a movement. The MFP's victory in the 2023 general elections was the result of such digital intimacy built primarily by youths and maintained across online and offline platforms.[11]

While familial and "fandom" forms of intimacy coexisted during the campaigns for the 2023 elections, they did so in distinctive geographical and virtual spaces. However, the new form of intimacy between young voters and candidates, each with their own set of hopes and plights, is gradually developing and replacing the old form of clientelist and dynastic relationships that sustained Thai politics for several decades. Additionally, the "fandom" craze around Pita, the MFP leader, and other politicians, who are viewed as idols, has gone viral on social media. Of course, to a certain extent, the old clientelist system still performs its function. But the wind of change has begun to blow. This new intimacy will be dynamic, with political parties, politicians and constituencies constantly engaged in the process of becoming intimate.

NOTES

[1]   "Affect" relates to a person's emotional state or how their emotions are expressed. I use the term "affect" to refer to ways material things can bring emotions to a person, while "affection" is about the feeling of love, warmth or fondness one has for someone or something.

[2]   George E. Marcus, "Emotion in Politics", *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (2000): 221–50.

[3]   Isabel Airas, "Hotspot: The Affective Politics of Hope in the 'Corbyn Phenomenon'", *Area* 51 (2019): 443–50.

[4]   Sam Page, "'A Machine Masquerading as a Movement': The 2015 UK General Election Labour Campaign Investigated through Assemblage and Affect", *Political Geography* 70 (2019): 92–101. See also Sam Page and Jason Dittmer, "Assembling Political Parties", *Geography Compass* 9, no. 5 (2015): 251–61.

[5]   One of the PTP's 25 policies is to distribute 10,000 baht (around US$275) to every Thai aged 16 or older in the form of a digital currency, from a budget of 560 billion baht (around US$15.4 billion), within six months of the new government taking office. Another was to distribute one million cows to farmers to use in rice farming.

6   Those who support the party but are not yet ready to apply to become members can join the Pheu Thai family. It differs from party membership in that there are fewer restrictions on participant eligibility, such as having no age limit or an application fee.

7   George E. Macus, *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), p. 133.

8   Jakkrit Sangkhamanee, "Democracy of the Desired: Everyday Politics and Political Aspiration of Contemporary Thai Countryside", *Asian Democracy Review* 2 (2013): 5–37.

9   Yoshinori Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy: Political Families in Thailand* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), pp. 3–29.

10   Aim Sinpeng, "Hashtag Activism: Social Media and the #FreeYouth Protests in Thailand", *Critical Asian Studies* 53, no. 2 (2021): 192–205.

11   Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, "The May 2023 Elections and the Triumph of Thai Youth Social Movements", *Critical Asian Studies Commentary Board*, 30 May 2023, https://criticalasianstudies.org/commentary/2023/5/29/commentary-kanokrat-lertchoosakul-the-may-2023-elections-and-the-triumph-of-thai-youth-social-movements.

Articulation Weapons: How The Move Forward Party Won Thailand's 2023 General Elections

AKANIT HORATANAKUN

The victory of the Move Forward Party (MFP) in Thailand's 2023 general elections—after winning 14.2 million votes and 151 of the 500 seats in the House of Representatives—came as a surprise to most political analysts who had expected the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) to win the majority of seats. The MFP's proposal to amend the lèse-majesté law was highly controversial, another reason for the surprise after its victory. However, it was unable to form a government after months of post-election negotiations because of constitutional changes made in 2016 by a military-led government that were designed to de-institutionalize party systems.

What were the reasons for the MFP's electoral triumph? According to many scholars and journalists, the party's impressive performance can be attributed to its savvy use of social media.[1] It earned a reputation for leveraging these platforms to effectively mobilize volunteers and voters.[2] TikTok, in particular, proved to be crucial in connecting the party with voters in urban and rural areas, even in provinces previously considered inaccessible.[3] But it alone is not a sufficient explanation for the MFP's shock victory. Without

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the support of political organizations and ideological foundations, social media cannot mobilize voters.

Instead, the MFP's success can be traced back to the organizational achievements of another youth-focused political party, the Future Forward Party (FFP), which finished in third place in the 2019 general elections but was forcibly dissolved the following year. As this article explains, the MFP is not just the de facto successor to the FFP, it is also its ideological and operational offspring. Moreover, because it was formed under a repressive political atmosphere created by the military-run government, the MFP did not have sufficient time to build what Philip Selznick described as "organizational weapons", meaning strong organizational structures and ideological foundations.[4] Instead, it had to rely on the articulation weapons already established by the FFP for electoral mobilization. This article defines political "articulation" as "the process by which political parties or social movements suture together coherent blocs and cleavages from a disparate set of constituencies and individuals".[5] In extraordinary times, parties and movements can take centre stage in democratization processes by mobilizing differing groups of citizens around a new idea of social division. This article argues that the FFP and then the MFP articulated a specific political division—"the establishment" versus "the rest"—that created a partisan bloc of supporters which sought to reshape the Thai state and society.

Cleavages and Articulation

How do political groups mobilize cleavages to facilitate/advance democratization? Ever since the publication of Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan's seminal work in 1967, political scientists have frequently portrayed political parties as the mirrors of societal cleavages, such as between classes or religions.[6] According to this traditional school of thought, once these divisions become institutionalized within a country's party system, they become the parameters for which political issues gain traction.

The FFP's historical origins can be traced back to one political crossroads in Thailand's recent history. The party's co-founders were leaders and members of the Student Federation of Thailand who joined a coalition of social movements that mobilized for the promulgation of the "People's Constitution" in 1997, which

was drafted after extensive public consultation. At the time, the FFP's founders were students of the "political economy" school, which was rooted in leftist intellectuals and social movements in Isan, a regional hotbed of anti-military politics in the northeast of Thailand. Many Isan-based political activists held the belief that the region's villages grappled with politico-economic structures beyond their control. They argued that addressing these issues required political struggles and mobilization that extended beyond the confines of the village. These political economists fervently advocated for "structural change" and opposed the royalist ideology of "communitarian culture", particularly the royalist's sufficiency economy approach that was prevalent among popular intellectuals and activists of the time. They asserted that villagers must gain bargaining power by establishing political organizations with broad mass support.[7] One of the party's co-founders, Chaithawat Tulathon, initiated this intellectual resistance by establishing a publishing house, Same Sky Books, that challenged ideas of communitarian culture and royalist ideologies. Activists associated with Same Sky Books supported many of the era's progressive social and political campaigns, including against constitutional referendums in 2006 and 2016 by military-run governments, as well as support for Red Shirt demonstrations and the anti-junta student movement in 2014.[8] These political campaigns laid the groundwork for what would eventually form the FFP's ideological and mobilizational resources.

Another of the FFP's ideological pillars was Gramscianism,[9] which was championed by the legal scholar and the party's first secretary general, Piyabutr Saengkanokkul. He integrated the Gramscian approach into the party's foundational strategies and campaign tactics. Influenced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and sensing Thai society's fatigue after a decade of Yellow Shirt versus Red Shirt street protests as well as repression by military-run governments, Piyabutr saw the potential of a political party as a vehicle for establishing "a new hegemony". He also believed there was an opportunity to form a new political party following the breakdown in 2016 of the "Bhumibol Consensus", a reference to the former king who passed away that year.[10] According to Piyabutr,

> The Bhumibol Consensus was gone. It disappeared while a new one hasn't yet emerged … The old perception of the monarchy institution was gone … We are still searching for something that can be a shared consensus and that can become the collective

> hegemony of society, but we haven't found it. However, in such times, it becomes an opportunity to determine what the new hegemony should be.[11]

After a failed campaign against the military-run government's referendum on a new constitution in August 2016, the party's co-founders travelled to Isan and other northern regions to reconnect with the "political economy" and Red Shirt movement networks. Out of these interactions emerged the idea of creating a new progressive party, and structural change became the cornerstone of the party's articulation strategy.[12]

The new party's mission would be to create a "chain of equivalence" from a set of disparate political demands and isolated blocs of supporters, and then articulate new political divisions against the military-royalist clique that dominated political power. This strategy gave rise to new political cleavages in Thailand—"pro-coup" versus "anti-coup" or the "1 per cent" versus "the 99 per cent"—that transcended previous ideological divisions that were determined by shirt colours.[13] The party subsequently became a melting pot of supporters of various democratic hues, from those who opposed military coups for political reasons to those who advocated for more radical and progressive social change, such as royal and military reforms, welfare state reforms or marriage equality. The party then sought to "articulate" these disparate voices and demands into a new partisan bloc, mobilizing voters and politicizing them so that they would participate in party politics.

With two branches of Marxism forming its ideological background, the FFP saw itself as a mass-based ideological party, seeking to incorporate a broad cohort of citizens into its activities.[14] Even though it was formed less than a year before the 2019 general elections, with a fledgling organizational structure and rushed party recruitment, the FFP secured third place at the polls with 81 seats. This outcome came as a surprise to the establishment.

On 21 February 2020, the Constitutional Court banned the FFP after ruling that it had broken election laws by taking a loan from its founder, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, who was suspended from parliament. The party's remaining 55 lawmakers quickly joined a small party that had previously held no seats in parliament and was rebranded in March 2020 as the Move Forward Party. However, the FFP's ban triggered internal upheavals. During the transition period from FFP to MFP, the party director had to allocate a

significant portion of the secretariat's resources to relocating all of
the party infrastructure from the old to the new party platform, as
required by Thai electoral law. This hurdle caused all the party
branches and networks to temporarily halt their formal operations
during the transition phase. It also compelled the party, which had
limited resources, to shift its focus more towards activities within
parliament rather than those on the ground. This transition led to
a shift in the party's model, pushing it towards a more electoralist
programmatic approach.[15]

The Articulation Weapons

With a mission to engage and politicize citizens *en masse*, the FFP
and MFP employed its multifaceted platforms—its parliamentary
caucus, its party secretariat and its grassroots base—for the purpose
of articulation. It did so by three main mechanisms: parliamentary
operations, political education and electoral mobilization.

Parliamentary Operations

In parliamentary proceedings, particularly during debates and
committee sessions, the FFP strategically utilized these platforms
as pivotal spaces of articulation. Its parliamentarians emphasized
progressive economic, social and political issues, touching on subjects
such as reforming the military and the monarchy. Their goal was
not only to elevate the salience of these issues but also to change
public perceptions of them, fostering a more detailed and structural
perspective on how these issues impacted the electorate.

One of the party's primary ambitions was to transform the
character of Thai parliamentary dialogues by reframing how
lawmakers spoke about local issues in their constituencies and
relating these localized concerns with broader, more national
campaigns for structural change.[16] For instance, Rangsiman Rome,
an activist who became an FFP parliamentarian in 2019 and then
the MFP's deputy secretary-general, sought to foster closer ties
between political parties, social movements and society at large
using his parliamentary position. Drawing from his experience
debating subjects such as corruption and patronage links between
the monarchy and the military, he used televised debates and
social media. In an interview with the author, Rome spoke of the
cascading effect of this work. As the public grew increasingly aware

of corruption within the police and military, they made increasing demands for systemic reforms.[17]

The FFP also harnessed the power of parliamentary debates and various committees, notably the Committee on Law, Justice and Human Rights, to introduce and elevate progressive initiatives inside the House of Representatives. The party tabled draft bills such as the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Bill and the Marriage Equality Bill. One trailblazing move by the Committee on Law, Justice and Human Rights was the decision to publicly broadcast all their meetings, thereby enhancing the committee's transparency and accountability.[18]

Political Education

Because the FFP/MFP followed the mass party model, it established an extra-parliamentary unit, known as the "Common School", to shape ideology. It was tasked with providing political education to voters across various mediums, such as reading groups, party libraries and video lectures, as well as camping trips and workshops for politically engaged youths. The primary focus was the younger generation, which constituted the party's main voter base. Its founding members envisioned cultivating these young individuals into future political pioneers who would enter various businesses, social groups and organizations to instigate a democratic shift from within.[19]

One of the Common School's flagship initiatives was its youth camps.[20] These gave politically active youths from different provinces a venue to meet, form connections and engage in party-sponsored political education. The crux of this education revolved around connecting localized problems to broader structural ones. It also challenged state-driven ideologies, such as conventional notions of nationalism and "Thai-ness". It introduced an alternative understanding of Thai political history and regional dynamics, all the while advocating democratic tenets such as gender equality, decentralization, rule of law and human rights. These camps also offered young participants an opportunity to connect with party leaders and staff, and to understand the inner workings of the party structure. As a result, many attendees became party activists. After the FFP's ban by the Constitutional Court in 2020, many emerged as prominent youth movement leaders in their home provinces and played a major role in mobilizing the nationwide street protests that took place in 2020 and 2021. These youth protesters voiced three

demands that aimed to fundamentally reshape Thailand's political structure: the resignation of General Prayut Chan-ocha as prime minister; constitutional amendments; and reforms to the monarchy.[21] In doing so, they became prominent articulators of the new political cleavage: "the establishment" versus "the rest".

Electoral Mobilization

As movement-based parties formed under the repressive atmosphere created by the military-run government, the FFP/MFP constantly navigated existential threats, such as judicial harassment or an outright ban (as would befall the FFP in 2020). It also meant that state resources and access to traditional media were off-limits, so the FFP/MFP relied heavily on cost-effective social media strategies for campaigning and voter mobilization.[22]

In the run-up to the 2023 general elections, the MFP's media team focused on shaping voter ideologies and creating and maintaining new voting blocs. They targeted an eclectic mix of voter bases, including Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt supporters. The latter, who might have accepted the 2014 coup, by now opposed the military-run government that they had helped put into power. With the slogan, "Have Uncles, Don't Have Us" (*Mee Lung, Mai Mee Rao*),[23] they delineated a clear divide between those who sided with the "establishment" and those who did not. The media team also recognized the power of televised debates and TikTok as more direct and widespread platforms for party activities. They crafted simple campaigns tailored for local micro-influencers, amplifying the party's reach and message.[24] These targeted yet highly relatable campaigns enabled the MFP to harness and dominate the TikTok algorithm, reaching voters across a broad spectrum of social strata.

Conclusion

This article delved into the origins of FFP/MFP and the "articulation" strategies it used for electoral mobilization. The party sutured different demands and blocs of supporters by articulating the new political cleavage: "the establishment" versus "the rest". This was achieved through the party's parliamentary operations, political school and electoral mobilization, all of which endowed the party's social media campaigns, especially on TikTok, with a potent ideological underpinning. While social media was crucial in bolstering support during the election season, the party's consistent

efforts to articulate political divisions and consolidate disparate voter blocs were paramount to the MFP's electoral success, which was all the more surprising given its fledgling party structure and because it was operating under intense repression from a military-run government. However, the longevity of these articulation strategies remains uncertain due to the party's organizational vulnerabilities and resistance from the "establishment" it campaigned against.

NOTES

[1]   For example, see Nethipo, Vonsayan and Phon-amnuai; and Sawasdee in this Roundtable.

[2]   Anyarat Chattharakul, "Social Media: Hashtag #Futurista", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 170–75.

[3]   See Jatusripitak, Hicken and Lohatepanont in this Roundtable.

[4]   Philip Selznick, *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation* (New York City, New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

[5]   See the original definition in Cedric De Leon, Manali Desai and Cihan Tuğal, *Building Blocs: How Parties Organize Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 2.

[6]   Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (New York City, New York: Free Press, 1967).

[7]   Somchai Phatharathananunth, *Civil Society and Democratization: Social Movements in Northeast Thailand* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS, 2006), pp. 65–66.

[8]   Author interview with Chaithawat Tulathon, Bangkok, 20 September 2021.

[9]   Gramscianism refers to the political and social theories of Antonio Gramsci which emphasize the role of culture, ideology and power in shaping society. Gramsci introduced the concept of hegemony, which refers to the dominance of one social group over others using ideas, beliefs and values rather than just coercive force. See James Martin, "Antonio Gramsci", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford, California: Stanford University, Press, 2023).

[10]   Kasian Tejapira, "The Irony of Democratization and the Decline of Royal Hegemony in Thailand", *Southeast Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016): 219–37.

[11]   Author interview with Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, Bangkok, 10 September 2021.

[12]   Author interview with Chaithawat, Bangkok, 20 September 2021.

[13]   Author interview with Piyabutr, Bangkok, 10 September 2021.

[14]   Author interview with Chaithawat, Bangkok, 20 September 2021; author interview with Piyabutr, Bangkok, 10 September 2021.

[15]   Author interview with Sarayoot Jailak, Bangkok, 2 September 2021.

[16]   Author interview with Piyabutr, Bangkok, 10 September 2021.

17   Author interviews with Rangsiman Rome, Bangkok, 11 and 13 June 2021.

18   Author interview with Pannika Wanich, Bangkok, 3 March 2022; author interview with Piyabutr, Bangkok, 10 September 2021; author interviews with Rangsiman, Bangkok, 11 and 13 June 2021.

19   Author interview with Somchai Rakdee, Bangkok, 21 November 2021.

20   See, for example, the *Awaken Land* camps, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWir_OznBP8.

21   Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, "The May 2023 Elections and the Triumph of Thai Youth Social Movements", *Critical Asian Studies*, 29 May 2023, https://criticalasianstudies.org/commentary/2023/5/29/commentary-kanokrat-lertchoosakul-the-may-2023-elections-and-the-triumph-of-thai-youth-social-movements.

22   Author interview with Pannika, Bangkok, 3 March 2022.

23   The term "uncles" refers to General Prayut Chan-ocha and General Prawit Wongsuwon. The slogan signified that the MFP would not align itself with the military-aligned parties, the United Thai Nation Party and Palang Pracharat Party.

24   For instance, see this YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jY0EislI2PA.

Becoming a Multi-Colour Region: Northeast Thailand and the 2023 General Elections

SUTHIKARN MEECHAN

The unexpected victory of the Move Forward Party (MFP) at Thailand's general elections in May 2023 was a clear demonstration of the electorate's discontent with the military-backed government that came to power through a coup in 2014. It was also an indication of the declining popularity of the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), which trailed behind the MFP in second place despite most pre-election opinion polls forecasting a massive majority for the party.[1] No region demonstrated the PTP's waning fortunes more than Isan, in the northeast of the country. It has been a party stronghold and a bastion for the Red Shirt movement for decades, and although the PTP party still took the largest share (54.8 per cent) of constituency votes at the 2023 polls, it was markedly down from the 72 per cent of votes it received at the 2019 general elections. The PTP is now the second largest party in parliament and the main entity in the governing coalition—and Thailand's new prime minister, Srettha Thavisin, is from the PTP—but the failure of the party's self-proclaimed "Pheu Thai Landslide" campaign raises questions about its political momentum in the coming years.[2]

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The Northeast's Electoral Landscape

Isan is composed of 20 provinces which, combined, have the largest number of constituency seats of any region of Thailand—it accounted for 133 of the 400 seats up for grabs at the 2023 general elections. Winning in the Northeast region, therefore, is a prerequisite to becoming the largest party in parliament and leading the talks over the formation of the next government. Before the 2014 military coup, Isan was predominantly identified with the "red" side of the country's colour-coded political divide, a split between the Red Shirts—who opposed the military coups of 2006 and 2014 and the subsequent military governments—and the Yellow Shirts—those associated with the monarchy, military, judiciary and bureaucracy.[3] The Red Shirts were allied to political parties associated with Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire turned politician who became prime minister in 2001 as the head of the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT). Thaksin was ousted by a military coup in 2006 and his party was dissolved, although it went on to form de-facto successor parties, including the PTP (led by Thaksin's daughter, Paetongtarn Shinawatra). The majority of the votes against the military-backed referenda on constitutional changes in 2007 and 2016 were cast in Isan.[4]

The number of constituency seats in Isan increased from 116 to 133 in the 2023 general elections. Voters were asked to return two ballots: one for a constituency member of parliament (MP) and another for the party-list. The constituency-seat option gives voters a more straightforward choice when picking candidates based on their qualifications and perceived commitment to their constituencies, while the party-list ballot provides voters with the opportunity to articulate their support for the political party they favour. Nonetheless, it has been the case in Thai politics for some time that candidates with a powerful, personal base of support are likely to have an advantage regardless of which party they are affiliated with.

As a result, there was intense competition during the PTP's candidate selection process in several provinces, including Khon Kaen, Kalasin and Roi Et,[5] and most candidates continued to prioritize their own constituency-seat campaigns rather than generating support for their parties for the party-list ballots.[6]

In Isan, although the PTP dominated the party-list votes, its performance in the constituency-seat count was weaker in 2023 than in previous general elections. It won 73 of the 133 constituency seats up for grabs in 2023 (see Table 1), compared to 84 out of

Table 1
2023 Elections Results in Isan

	Constituency Seats	Party-list Votes
Pheu Thai	73	5,113,609
Bhumjaithai	35	485,840
Move Forward	8	3,935,834
Palang Pracharath	7	122,545
Thai Sang Thai	5	174,525
Pheu Thai Ruam Palang	2	36,349
Democrat	2	105,377
Chart Thai Pattana	1	21,459
Other Parties	0	1,869,517
Total	**133**	**11,865,055**

Table 2
Electoral Outcomes for Constituency Seats in Isan (2005–23)

Political Parties	2005	2011	2019	2023
Pheu Thai (The party succeeded the Thai Rak Thai Party, which was dissolved in 2007, and the People's Power Party, which was dissolved in 2008.)	126	104	84	73
Bhumjaithai		13	16	35
Move Forward (The successor party of the Future Forward Party, which was dissolved in 2020.)			1	8
Palang Pracharath			11	7
Democrat	2	4	2	2
Mahachon (The party ceased in 2020.)	2	0	0	
Chat Thai Pattana (The successor party of the Chat Thai Party, which was dissolved in 2008.)	6	1	1	1
Chat Pattana (Chart Pattana Puea Pandin simplified its party name in 2011.)	0	4	1	0
Thai Sang Thai				5
Pheu Thai Ruam Palang				2

116 constituency seats at the 2019 general elections (see Table 2). In 2005, its predecessor, the TRT, won all but 10 of the available 136 seats. Although it saw a notable increase in the number of seats obtained in Nakhon Ratchasima, one of Isan's four main cities, it failed to win all of the constituency seats in Amnat Charoen and Mukdahan. Notably, it won all seats in just one province (Nong Bua Lam Phu). At the same time, the MFP gained a substantial number of votes and increased its representation in Nakhon Ratchasima, Khon Kaen and Mukdahan provinces, solidifying its position as the second largest party by party-list votes in the region.[7] "Red" Isan, known for its strong support of Thaksin-associated parties such as the PTP, has become more politically open with the presence of multiple political parties and diverse influences that impact voters' choices.

Securing "Red" Isan

The results of the 2023 general elections demonstrated that the PTP could not deliver on its "landslide" victory promise nor sustain its regional support base. Three main reasons account for this: it lacked opportunities to maintain local networks and electoral machines due to being out of power for an extended period, as well as being the target of the post-coup security apparatus; it faced resistance from some political families whose loyalty to the PTP was questionable; and because there was a greater emphasis on ideology among new and first-time voters in 2023, many gravitated towards the more ideological and outspoken MFP and were perhaps put off by the PTP's more conventional, economic-focused policies.

Local networks

Effective local networks are vital when the popularity of a party and loyalty to it are insufficient to elect a candidate.[8] Because most Thai political parties do not maintain active party branches in all parts of the country, they rely on local constituency parliamentarians and prospective candidates for much of the campaigning and party-related groundwork. As a result, prospective candidates depend on the support of the heads of local patronage networks, government agencies and politicians, who can either endorse or rebuff candidates.

Because the PTP and its candidates have been excluded from holding governmental positions since the 2014 coup, it proved difficult for them to sustain these relationships, particularly with local officials and governmental agencies. PTP candidates rely on

financial support from either the party or their own resources, but the party's loss of influence over budget allocations—a result of being in opposition—meant its candidates had more limited resources to recruit and pay political operatives who serve as vote canvassers and cultivate local connections.

By contrast, lawmakers and candidates affiliated with pro-government parties, such as the Bhumjaithai Party (BJP), used their access to power to acquire resources from key ministerial offices responsible for rural areas, such as public health and transportation. This, in turn, facilitated the development of new political networks while also carefully cultivating existing alliances.[9] The military junta and the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) have implemented their own social welfare schemes to enhance their popularity and diminish the public's memory of the welfarist policies and social development achievements of Thaksin's government.[10] In addition, various actors, including senators and military officials, exerted influence at the local level to mobilize votes for pro-junta parties, specifically for the United Thai Nation Party and the PPRP. These actors actively engaged with local networks and campaigned for some constituency candidates, as well as for certain parties in a bid to increase their party-list votes.[11]

Political Families

In certain areas of Isan, the PTP's candidates were unable to compete with local strongmen who were once associated with Thaksin and his political movement. Newin Chidchob, for instance, is a political icon in Buriram Province, a stronghold for the BJP, and was a cabinet minister in Thaksin's government. In 2023, he supported his son, Chaichanok Chidchob, to become a parliamentarian for the first time. Newin also supported BJP candidates in several neighbouring provinces, including Maha Sarakham and Khon Kaen.[12] Another example is Anurak Jureemas, a lawmaker for the Chart Thai Pattana Party and a former member of Thaksin's cabinet, who has significant influence over the Roi Et city municipality, over which his family has extensive control. He campaigns for and supports large-scale infrastructure projects aligned with his party and serves on the House of Representatives' budget committee, enhancing his ability to support public services for his constituents and his political allies.[13]

Consequently, PTP candidates, particularly those who were new to their constituencies and lacked a substantial support base,

encountered challenges when campaigning in areas where influential political dynasties and their formidable patronage networks continued to exert dominance.

Ideological Opponents

The two-ballot system increased competition between the informally allied anti-junta parties, such as the PTP, MFP and the Thai Sang Thai Party (TST), the latter of which was founded in 2021 by former PTP politicians. Compared to the PTP, the MFP is more progressive and appeals to younger voters, in both urban and rural areas, who are swayed by appeals to social equity and more democratic governance. Additionally, younger voters perhaps do not remember the accomplishments of the PTP when its predecessor parties were in government—during the premierships of Thaksin (2001–6) and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra (2011–14)—and are disconnected from the party's historical significance because of the period of military rule since 2014. Some 27 of the PTP's lawmakers from Isan who were elected to parliament at the 2019 general elections lost their seats at the 2023 ballots. Interestingly, three of these former PTP parliamentarians—from Udon Thani, Khon Kaen and Mukdahan provinces—lost their seats to MFP candidates running for office for the first time.

The PTP's declining fortunes also reflect the weakening of bonds between the party and grassroots Red Shirt activists. In part, this was because the party decided to select some of its candidates from rival political parties or former opponents of the Red Shirt movement.[14] Moreover, the TST, a splinter party from the PTP, was an alternative for Red Shirt activists frustrated with the PTP's current policies and structure, and at the 2023 general elections, it was the strongest party in several provinces, including Udon Thani, Yasothorn, Ubon Ratchathani and Roi Et. The Pheu Thai Ruam Palang (PTRP), a small, newly formed party dominated by local tycoons, won two seats in Ubon Ratchathani, a major city in Isan.

Conclusion

Since the 2014 military coup, the electoral landscape in Isan has changed: there has been an increase in the number of political parties and a diversification of political narratives, as well as more complexity in competition between the parties and the "Red" movement's influence over them. Political parties are becoming de-

institutionalized in the region, which is shifting towards a new, more diverse political landscape of a multitude of parties with diverse voices and competitive dynamics. The coup created particular difficulties for the PTP. It was increasingly under pressure to compete with pro-junta parties, particularly the BJP, on the traditional campaign methods of patronage, vote buying and paying vote canvassers. At the same time, it faced stiffer challenges from other anti-junta parties, especially the MFP, which were increasingly capturing the attention of young and ideological voters.

Despite widespread discontent over nine years of a military government, the PTP failed to capitalize on this in Isan at the 2023 general elections. Although it was the most popular party in the region, the PTP came second nationwide to the MFP. However, the progressive party was unable to form a coalition government after failing to secure the necessary backing of military-appointed senators. Instead, the PTP formed a coalition government with several military-backed parties, raising further concerns about the party's popularity in the future, especially among the Red Shirt base in Isan. Additionally, the PTP will likely face significant difficulties in implementing its policy agenda as part of a coalition government supported by parties that are opposed to its agenda. Disputes between the party's lawmakers and its grassroots activists are inevitable.

NOTES

[1] "First Nation Poll Survey Finds Pheu Thai Ahead, but Still Short of a Landslide Victory", *The Nation*, 18 April 2023, https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/politics/40026755.

[2] The "Pheu Thai Landslide" campaign was launched in 2022 for the re-election of Chief Provincial Administrative Organizations in the provinces of Kalasin and Roi Et in Isan. This campaign then became a significant strategy to enhance the leading role of Paetongtarn Shinawatra as the head of the "Pheu Thai Family", an organizational umbrella aimed at reuniting former party leaders and the Red Shirt grassroots communities, and to consolidate the party's voter base as it aimed to win 310 out of 400 seats up for grabs at the 2023 general elections. Such a landslide victory was deemed necessary to overcome the challenge of the Senate, which consists of 250 delegates appointed by the military, and which would also vote to appoint the prime minister after the elections.

3   Naruemon Thabchumpon, "Contending Political Networks: A Study of the 'Yellow Shirts' and 'Red Shirts' in Thailand's Politics", *Southeast Asian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2016): 93–113.

4   See Saowanee T. Alexander, "Isan: Double Trouble", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 183–89.

5   Author interviews with parliamentary candidates from the PTP, Kalasin, 23 January 2023, and Mahasakham, 22 April 2023.

6   Author group discussion with local politicians, Roi Et, 26 January 2023; author interview with a PTP parliamentary candidate, Roi Et, 13 May 2023.

7   "ผลเลือกตั้ง 2566" [Election 2023], *Thairath Online*, 26 May 2023, https://www.thairath.co.th/election66/compare.

8   Suthikarn Meechan, "Power and Local Networks in Northeast Thailand after the 2006 Military Coup" (PhD dissertation, University of Canterbury, 2023), pp. 261–77.

9   Author interview with a BJP parliamentarian, Buriram, 27 January 2023.

10 See Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat, "The Prayuth Regime: Embedded Military and Hierarchical Capitalism in Thailand", *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 6, no. 2 (2018): 279–305.

11 Author fieldnotes, Roi Et, 17 May 2023.

12 Author interview with local politician, Mahasarakham, 22 April 2023.

13 Author group discussion with a parliamentarian and local politicians, Roi Et, 20 April 2023.

14 Author group discussion with a PTP parliamentary candidate and PTP campaign managers, Kalasin, 23 January 2023.

The Unexpected Defeat of an Electoral Champion: The Pheu Thai Party in Thailand's 2023 General Elections

KRITDIKORN WONGSWANGPANICH

The results of Thailand's 2023 general elections came as a shock. The Pheu Thai Party (PTP), which had won the five previous ballots, came second to a relative newcomer, the Move Forward Party (MFP). As soon as the polls closed, local and international media was saturated with articles that tried to make sense of the defeat,[1] while condemnations of the party's campaign were penned by high-profile PTP members or associates, such as Noppadon Pattama,[2] a former foreign minister, and Thaksin Shinawatra,[3] a former prime minister and the founder of the movement from which the PTP hails. Yet, there has been little academic or systematic analysis of what caused the PTP's failure to deliver on its promise of a landslide victory. This article seeks to address this gap by providing structural reasons behind its loss, focusing on the way the junta-drafted 2017 Constitution imposed an inorganic structure on the PTP and how this impacted the party's electoral campaign in 2023.

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Inorganic Structure: Mechanism, Money and Manual

This article uses the term "inorganic structure" to refer to the intentionally designed political and legal structures which influenced the PTP's electoral campaign and popularity, and which gave it a competitive disadvantage. Electoral politics in Thailand are perennially subject to the shifting influences of the political and legal structures, particularly when the rules of the game, such as the constitution, are changed. This article focuses on three main elements of the inorganic structure: mechanism, money and manual.[4]

Mechanism

"Mechanism" refers to the political and legal structures that stemmed from the 2017 Constitution, which was written by the military government that had seized power in a coup three years earlier. The 2017 Constitution established new rules of the game for the 2023 elections.[5] According to Viengrat Nethipo, the redrafted Constitution restored the old system of dynastic politics.[6] Indeed, it marked what could be called a "dynastic" or "charismatic" turn in Thai politics, in contrast to the argument made by Yoshinori Nishizaki in 2022 that dynastic politics and political families are static regardless of structural changes.[7] Two general elections have now been held since the promulgation of the 2017 Constitution, and the PTP has suffered a decline in the number of seats in both ballots: from 265 seats in the 2011 general elections to just 136 in 2019, and 141 seats in 2023.[8]

When considering the political and legal structures created by the 2017 Constitution, most people would probably point to the new ballot system as having had the biggest impact. For the 2023 polls, the system was changed from a one-ballot system (as used in the 2019 general elections) to a two-ballot system, in which voters cast two choices—one for constituency and one for party list MPs.[9] The two-ballot system had been used since 2001, but for the 2019 elections a mixed single vote, which apportioned constituency and party-list parliamentarians, was used. In 2019, although the PTP was the largest party in terms of overall seats, it received no party-list seats since its constituency seats exceeded its parliamentary quota. As a result, its representation in parliament between 2019 and 2023 consisted solely of constituency members of parliamentary (MPs). In contrast, the newly formed Future Forward Party (FFP), which later

became the MFP, benefitted greatly from this system since it had been the runner-up in many constituencies in the 2019 elections, thereby securing much of the party-list quota within this system—it won 31 constituency seats but 50 party-list seats—and became one of the three largest parties.

Party-list MPs are typically leaders of political parties or their most experienced lawmakers, and the PTP is no exception. However, because such politicians were on the PTP's party list—and the PTP won none of these seats—few of its "parliament magnets"[10] entered the House of Representatives in 2019. As a result, the party found itself without seasoned politicians and the intellectual firepower which would have been necessary to robustly oppose the government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha in parliament, especially when compared to the MFP, whose more experienced politicians were elected via the party list. This also impacted the public's perception of the PTP's activities during this period, thereby weakening its image. During the peak of the 2023 election campaign, the author interviewed several PTP voters as well as former supporters who had switched allegiance to the MFP—many of whom were in the Northeast region of the country, a PTP stronghold—because they thought that the MFP's lawmakers had performed better than the PTP's representatives in parliament in previous years.[11]

According to high-ranking PTP parliamentarians[12], the party's lack of experienced party-list lawmakers in parliament also resulted in deeper fragmentation within the PTP. Many of its elected MPs—all from constituency seats—often came into conflict with unelected party bosses over party policy. This was also the case when debates turned to who would be the party's candidate for the 2023 elections since the constituency and party list quota remained the same, yet older party bosses and newly recognized national level members also wanted to compete. In October 2021,[13] the splinter Pheu Thai Ruam Palang Party (PTRP) was formed after several candidates, many with years of experience in their local areas, sought to run for the PTP ticket but were rejected due to a limited number of slots. For instance, the Wangsuppakijkosol family, a PTP political dynasty in Nakorn Ratchasrima Province, funded the rejected candidates under the new PTRP banner, one of whom defeated a long-standing PTP constituency lawmaker, Chuvit Pitakpornpanlop, in the 2023 elections.[14]

Because of the lack of any PTP party-list candidates in parliament after 2019, its constituency lawmakers all had to become jack-of-

all-trades. As well as their constituency work, they also had to engage in the sort of national political work—such as critiquing government policy, debating bills in parliament and responding to national emergencies—that is ordinarily performed by party-list parliamentarians. Most of them were new to this role and were ultimately outperformed by the MFP's parliamentarians. It also reduced the time available to them to maintain their popularity within their constituencies. For instance, one reason for Chuvit's defeat by a PTRP newcomer was because his constituents felt he had spent less time in his constituency between 2019 and 2023 compared to before the 2019 elections.[15] Somkid Chuekong, another popular and experienced PTP lawmaker from Ubon Ratchathani Province, was also forced to play a more national political role and faced the same fate as Chuvit, losing to a newcomer from the PTRP.

The return of the two-ballot system in the 2023 elections, initially believed to be advantageous for the PTP, was a double-edged sword. While the party's most experienced MPs struggled to maintain their popularity within their constituencies—partly because of the time they had to spend engaged in more national political issues after 2019—their political rivals had ample time and resources to build up their own appeal. Moreover, voters' ability to split their ballots between a local MP (on the constituency list) and the national party (on the party list) dealt a catastrophic blow to the PTP as many voters who might have been expected to vote for it on both ballots instead voted in the constituency ballot for rivals who had the time to visit their local areas more frequently after 2019. Although the PPT remained very popular in the 2023 elections, it lost its long-established advantage in the constituency ballot.

Money

Whereas supporters of the MFP mainly backed the party because of its ideology, many of the PTP's supporters expected material benefits.[16] But the PTP faced a more challenging environment in the 2023 elections than in previous polls because most of the government-linked parties, such as the Bhumjaithai Party (BJP), were also playing the money game—some even more extensively than the PTP. According to several PTP constituency candidates, the Election Commission scrutinized the financial activity of opposition

parties more closely than the coalition parties allied with Prayut's government.[17] The PTP's campaign budget was also smaller than its competitors.[18] Moreover, because the two-ballot system allowed voters to split their ballots—one for the party that paid the most money and the other for the voter's favourite party—the PTP's rivals could pick up seats by outspending it. Despite running against one of the PTP's most popular candidates in Ubon Ratchathani Province, the PTRP's candidate was victorious, almost entirely due to the extensive use of money. The PTRP, for instance, spent between US$54 and US$81 on each potential voter in the 2023 elections, compared to the US$15–27 that parties typically spent in previous polls.[19]

Manual

The PTP was too attached to the campaign strategies and practices it had developed over previous decades. Given that this "manual" had propelled the PTP and its predecessor parties to victory in the previous five general elections, its reluctance to deviate from the script was somewhat understandable. However, the numerous structural changes imposed on the political landscape by the 2017 Constitution rendered this manual inadequate in 2023, while the significant reduction in the number of PTP lawmakers after the 2019 general elections—from 265 to 136—should have served as a sign that its strategies needed updating. Yet, this reality was obscured by the use of the one-ballot system in 2019 and the dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chart Party (TRC), a sister party to the PTP, ahead of that year's polls. Because the one-ballot system compelled the PTP to split its resources and personnel between itself and the TRC, when the latter was unjustly dissolved just months before the 2019 elections, it weakened the party's overall efforts.[20] Moreover, the dissolution of the TRC masked the decline of the PTP's electoral manual. After all, the PTP blamed the reduced number of seats it won in 2019 on the TRC's dissolution rather than on its outdated tactics and strategies. Driven by the firm but mistaken belief in its manual, the PTP failed to learn from its past mistakes and wholeheartedly supported the change to the two-ballot system for the 2023 general elections.

What some leaders in the PTP seemingly failed to realize was that the party's past electoral successes, mainly in the 2007 and 2011 elections, had been a direct result of the popular economic policies enacted by governments associated with the PTP—the governments

of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–6) and Yingluck Shinawatra (2011–14). However, people's memory fade over time. According to Jack Bailey, who conducted research on social memories of economic policy during elections, the electorate's attachment to the past economic success of a particular party usually lasts for about one and a half years.[21] Bailey argues that it has almost no impact, in terms of future voting patterns, after five years. As such, the nine years that the PTP spent out of office after the 2014 military coup was seemingly enough to dim the electorate's memories of its previous accomplishments.

The PTP is renowned for its systematic use of opinion polling. Usually, party constituency candidates depend on regional coordinators—usually experienced MPs—who monopolize the polling data and rarely share the results with lower-ranking party members. But this strategy is ill-equipped to handle sudden swings in voter sentiment. Trusting its own manual, the PTP presumably felt secure heading into the 2023 general elections as the clear frontrunner, with internal party polling giving it a significant lead (as much as 15 per cent) in every province except Ubon Ratchathani. Unfortunately, for the PTP, many of these pollsters failed to comprehend the surge in popularity of the MFP. Simply put, overconfidence in its manual meant that the PTP became far too unaware of changes to its own popularity and to the broader political structure.

Conclusion

This article has detailed how the inorganic structure of Thai politics—specifically, mechanisms, money and manual (see Figure 1)—put the PTP at a disadvantage going into the 2023 general elections. The 2017 Constitution fundamentally reduced the number of seats available to the PTP, particularly from the party-list ballot, which changed the composition of the party in parliament and forced its constituency MPs to split their time between attending to national concerns and their constituents. As an opposition party, the PTP was also starved of access to government resources which could have been used to cultivate and maintain support for the party. Without those resources, the PTP found itself competing in a money game against parties that were equally or better resourced—in other words, parties that could spend more than the PTP per vote. Finally, the standard operating procedures and strategies—its "manual"—which had led the party to victory in every election since 2001, no longer

Figure 1
Inorganic Structure and the PTP in the 2023 General Elections
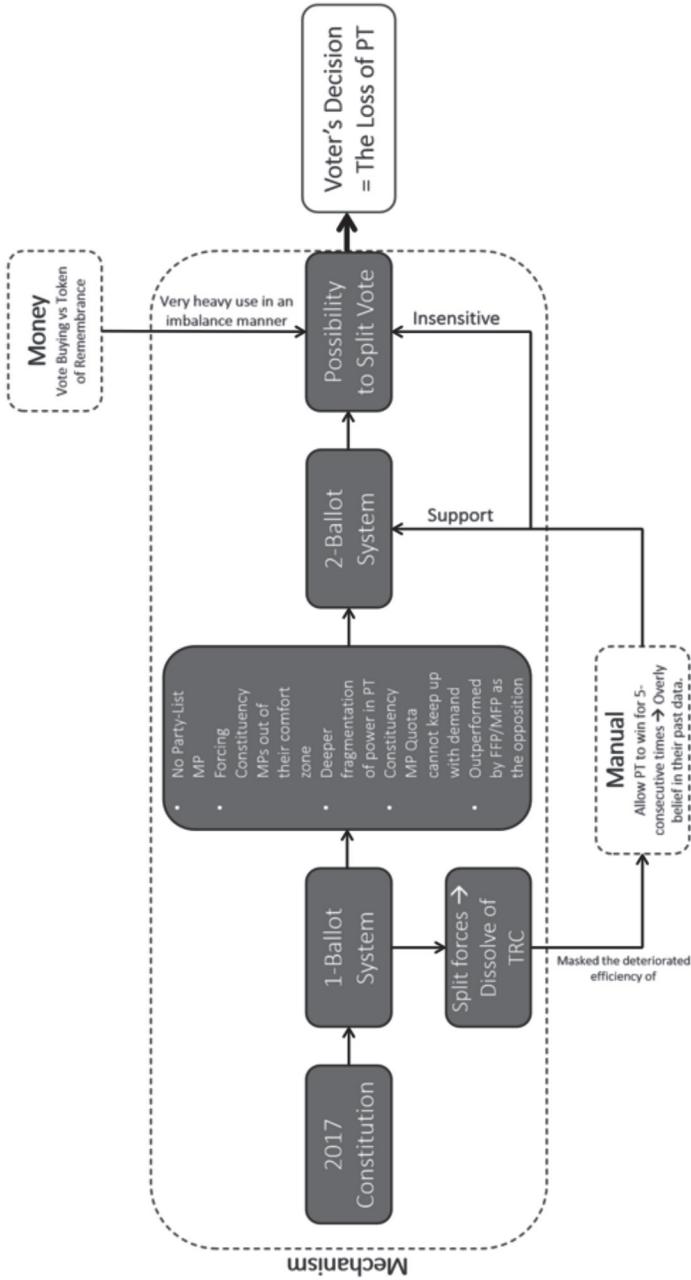
suited the electoral environment in 2023. However, party leaders were slow to adapt their strategies to the new electoral dynamics, in particular the threat from the MFP. As a result, the PTP found itself in the unfamiliar position of coming in second place in a free and fair election.

NOTES

[1]   "Luektang Hok-Hok Mee Lai Hed-Padjai Tee Tam Hai Puetai Pai Mai Tueng Duang Dao" [Many Factors in 2023 Election That Made Phue Thai Defeated], *Komchadluek*, 15 May 2023, https://www.komchadluek.net/news/politics/549018; "Jood Orn Puetai-Kaoklai Yoo Tee Wara Tang Karnmuang" [Pheu Thai and Moving Forward Parties' Weakness Lie in Hidden Political Agenda], *Bangkokbiznews*, 25 February 2023, https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/blogs/politics/1055015; "Prakodtrakarn Kaoklai Tornado Haeng Kwam Pleanplang" [Moving Forward Phenomenon: A Tornado of Change], *The101World*, 18 May 2023, https://www.the101.world/victory-of-move-forward/; "Kui Kab Nakwichakarn Jor Puen Tee Chiang Mai Muang Luang Puetai Took Kaoklai Tee Tak" [Interviewing with Scholar; Focusing on Chiang Mai, When This Capital of Phue Thai Had Fallen to Moving Forward Party], *Matichon*, 18 May 2023, https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_3985992.

[2]   "Noppadon Saroob Boat Rian Puetai Pae Luektang Lan Triam Plik Chome Pak" [Noppadol Reviewed Phue Thai Reasons of Electoral Defeat; Promised to Transform the Party], *Matichon*, 25 June 2023, https://www.posttoday.com/politics/696301.

[3]   "Election 2023: Thaksin Analyzed Why Phue Thai Defeated to Moving Forward Party", *BBC*, 17 May 2023, https://www.bbc.com/thai/articles/cyey13wjn80o.

[4]   There were other factors that influenced the PTP's defeat. In future work, I intend to explore the interaction of eight factors—mechanism, money, mind, manual, monarchy, mobility, material and media—that contributed to its electoral loss.

[5]   "Panha Rattatammanoon Song-Ha-Hok-Soon Tee Mai Pen Kod Mai Soong Sood Eek Tor Pai Rai Chantamati Lae Lod Amnaj Prachachon" [2017 Constitutional Problems: The Supreme Law That Is No Longer Supreme, Dissensus, and Decrease People's Power], *iLaw*, 8 October 2019, https://ilaw.or.th/node/5415.

[6]   Viengrat Nethipo, "*Uppatham Khamkhrai: Lueaktangthai kab Prachathippatai Kaothoilang*" [Who Does Clientelism Support? Thai Elections and Backward Democracy] (Bangkok, Thailand: Matichon Press, 2022).

[7]   Yoshinori Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy: Political Families in Thailand* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2022).

[8]   In this article, the PTP's victories in general elections are referenced as also including the victories of its predecessor parties, the Thai Rak Thai Party and People's Power Party.

9   For more information on the ballot system for the 2023 general elections, see endnote 1 in Allen Hicken and Napon Jatusripitak, "Introduction: Making Sense of Thailand's Seismic Election", of this Roundtable.

10 A term used by MPs to refer to party leaders and experienced politicians. Those who failed to win seats in the 2019 general elections include, for example, Sudarat Keyurapan, Chaikasem Nitisiri, Poomtam Vejjayachai, Chalerm Yoobamrung, Pokin Polakul, Kittirat Na Ranong and Noppadol Pattama.

11 Author interview with potential PTP and ex-PTP voters, Ubon Ratchathani, Amnat Charoen and Sri Saket provinces, 8–16 May 2023.

12 Author interview with Kriang Kaltinan and Chuvit Pitakponpalop, Ubon Ratchathani, 9–11 May 2023.

13 This is the date that the PTRP was established but the party was active after its committee met on 15 May 2022.

14 "Luektang Song-Ha-Hok-Hok: Baan Yai Pue Tai Korat Prakard Ard Mee Song Kaoyi Rattamontri" [2023 Election: Pheu Thai's Nakornratchasrima Boss' Family Claimed the Possibility for a Quota of Two Cabinet Seats], *Thairath*, 18 May 2023, https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/northeast/2694947.

15 Author interview with potential PTP and ex-PTP voters, Ubon Ratchathani, 8–16 May 2023.

16 Kritdikorn Wongswangpanich, "Sick Kingdom: The Role and Politics of Thai Healthcare in the Domination of Bhumibol's Narrative" (PhD dissertation, University of Kyoto, 2022).

17 Author interview with Kriang Kantinan, Chuvit Pitakpornpalop and Rattakit Paleerat, Ubon Ratchathani, 8–16 May 2023.

18 Author interview with Rattakit Paleerat, Ubon Ratchathani, 10–11 May 2023.

19 Author fieldwork and interviews with voters between 2019 and 2023.

20 The TRC had invited the royal princess to be its prime ministerial candidate, followed all the required legal conditions and even received authorization by the Election Commission of Thailand. However, the party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court, which did not provide any reasonable justification.

21 Jack Bailey, "What's the Half-Life of the Economic Vote? (About a Year and a Half)", *APSA Preprints* (2021).

Power without the Polls: Thai-Style Authoritarian Fragility amid the Defeat of Military-Backed Parties

PRAJAK KONGKIRATI

The 2023 general elections in Thailand exposed the vulnerabilities and instability of the military-run, authoritarian regime that had controlled the country since a coup in 2014. The two pro-military parties—the United Thai Nation Party (UTN) and Palang Pracharat Party (PPRP)—failed to secure the support of the Thai electorate. Combined, they won just 76 seats. Three key factors explain their electoral setback: the legacy of past military coups; ineffective and inflexible electoral mobilization efforts; and internal conflicts among anti-democratic elites. Nonetheless, the post-election road to democracy has been impeded by mechanisms embedded in the 2017 Constitution that was rewritten by the military government after the coup. Notably, the authority of military-appointed senators in choosing the prime minister and the co-optation of a major opposition party by royal-military elites have proven significant hindrances to democratic transition.

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A Tale of Two Defeated Military-Allied Parties

Two pro-military parties competed in the 2023 general elections: the PPRP, led by General Prawit Wongsuwan, an influential former army commander who served as first deputy prime minister (2014–23) and defence minister (2014–19); and the UTN, led by outgoing Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha, the instigator of the 2014 coup. Both parties had disappointing results due to lacklustre campaigns and a failure to engage voters effectively. The PPRP came in fourth position with only 40 seats while the UTN won just 36 seats. Ahead of the 2019 general elections, the two military leaders had united to form the PPRP. It employed traditional political tactics such as co-opting provincial power brokers and using patronage networks, while also attracting former parliamentarians from other parties and enlisting the support of influential figures in local politics. While falling short of its 150-seat target, the PPRP emerged as the party with the largest share of the popular vote and the second-largest holder of seats (115) in parliament. This emphasized the significance of patronage politics and state intervention in Thai elections. The PPRP's success can also be attributed to its ideological position and the appeal of Prayut as a resolutely conservative leader.

Ahead of the 2023 polls, however, Prawit and Prayut's ambitions to lead the government created a rift between the two generals and conflict among their supporters. After assisting Prayut during his nine years as prime minister, Prawit, who holds seniority in age and rank, aspired to take the helm himself. Because of this, Prayut and his backers split from the PPRP and formed the UTN, using Prayut's royalist image to court conservative voters. Prayut, like many in the military, is steeped in the notion that generals are supposed to be defenders of the monarchy. Some PPRP members and politicians from other parties defected to the UTN. However, due to Prayut's waning popularity, stemming from his prolonged tenure as prime minister and his government's lacklustre handling of the economy, the UTN struggled to attract first-rate politicians.[1] Meanwhile, the PPRP remained under the control of Prawit's faction and relied heavily on the same strategies that contributed to its relatively successful performance in the 2019 elections.

The division between Prawit and Prayut had significant repercussions for their respective parties. Essentially, they found themselves in competition for votes from the same pool of conservative

constituents, a pool that had been shrinking over time due to Thailand's sluggish economy. This rivalry became particularly intense in the south of the country, traditionally a stronghold of conservative voters, where both parties fought bitterly for support.

High-ranking bureaucrats, government officials, business groups and provincial leaders who had supported the PPRP in the previous election faced a dilemma ahead of the 2023 polls. They were reluctant to appear as though they were taking sides between Prawit and Prayut in case they were punished if either one of the generals returned to power. As a result, some opted to remain neutral while others refrained from actively participating in election campaigns. A few even chose to support both parties to avoid alienating either faction. Consequently, due to the political schism between Prawit and Prayut, the PPRP and UTN had access to diminished resources and weakened support from their business and bureaucratic allies.[2]

On the surface, the PPRP and UTN may appear similar, but they represent two distinct categories of pro-military parties. The PPRP exemplifies the patronage politics model. It consists of various factions hailing from diverse backgrounds, including technocrats, local politicians, businessmen, political bosses and politicians previously aligned with the parties of Thaksin Shinawatra, the former prime minister who was overthrown by a military coup in 2006. The most pivotal faction within the party, responsible for planning and executing election campaigns, is that of the provincial political bosses.

Because Prawit was tainted by corruption allegations and unpopular with voters, including conservative constituents, the PPRP faced a challenge.[3] Without Prayut, it could no longer tap into support from royalists. Instead, the party's strategists made a desperate but unsuccessful attempt to transform Prawit's image into that of a reconciliatory figure capable of bridging political divides.[4] Consequently, the PPRP entered the election race without a charismatic leader or a robust policy platform, and it had to rely on the local networks of vote canvassers and the influence of political families in specific provinces.[5]

In the end, the PPRP won only 39 constituency seats and one party-list seat. Most of these seats were secured in Thailand's Central region where patronage politics and influential political bosses still wield considerable influence. It won all of the seats in Kamphaeng Phet, Phetchabun and Payao, provinces which

were under the influence of the party's faction leaders (Varathep Ratanakorn, Santi Promphat and Thamanat Prompow, respectively). However, the PPRP struggled in the party-list ballot, receiving only 537,625 votes (or 1.43 per cent of the overall share) nationwide, an indication of the unpopularity of Prawit and the party brand. Indeed, many PPRP candidates opted not to feature the party logo, party name or Prawit's photo in their campaign material. Instead, they emphasized their individual qualifications. Some candidates even employed a vote-splitting strategy, encouraging voters who disliked the party to cast their constituency ballot for them while telling voters to have a free choice of party on the party-list ballot.[6]

In contrast, the UTN pursued a very different campaign strategy. The party was hastily formed just a few months before the election, primarily to fulfil Prayut's aspiration to retain power. After nine years in office, during which time the economy stagnated and the cost of living increased, Prayut was unpopular among the general public.[7] His administration also failed to deliver on key policy promises. As a result, the UTN struggled to attract high-profile politicians or influential political families as candidates because these seasoned politicians viewed the PPRP and the well-funded Bhumjaithai Party (BJP) as more attractive options.[8] Unable to mobilize voters through patronage or policy-based campaigning, the UTN turned to a more ideological, hardline political approach. It positioned itself as ultraconservative and staunchly pro-monarchy and as a bulwark against perceived threats from radical youths and progressive political parties—such as the Move Forward Party (MFP), which came first in the elections—that were critical of the monarchy. Just days before the polls, it released a campaign video suggesting that if the progressive parties were to win, it could lead to the erosion of religion and monarchy.[9]

The UTN's ideology-driven campaign proved effective in the party-list ballot, resulting in the party securing more party-list seats (13) than its pro-military rival, the PPRP. Prayut's credentials as a royalist, military leader who has consistently defended the monarchy throughout his career resonated with the senior and conservative demographic, particularly in the south of the country. The majority of the constituency seats it won (14 out of 23) were in the south. Notably, the party was defeated in Thailand's Northeast region (known as Isan), a stronghold of the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) and the Red Shirts, solidifying the UTN's identity as an ultra-royalist party with its roots firmly in the south.

The poor electoral performance of the PPRP and UTN signals a transformation of Thai politics. The results underscore that while local networks of influence, patronage systems and state involvement still hold some sway in elections, they alone are insufficient to secure a victory for the political parties that are reliant on these traditional campaign methods. Furthermore, the adoption of an ultra-royalist and militarist ideology, albeit without a robust policy platform, may appeal to a small segment of voters but was met with rejection by the majority of the electorate. The defeat of these two parties demonstrates the inability of Thailand's royalist and conservative elites to maintain their grip on power through electoral processes and adapt to the demands of democratic political competition. In historical terms, however, the deficiencies of both parties are not exceptional; they align with the recurring weaknesses of pro-junta governments in Thailand. Indeed, the country's authoritarian leaders have never managed to establish a party-based regime.

An Authoritarian Regime Without a Dominant Party

Why does the Thai establishment continually falter in the realm of electoral politics? I posit three explanations. Firstly, Thai elites have increasingly relied on coups as their primary political instrument. While honing their proficiency in orchestrating putsches, they have neglected to amass the necessary skills and abilities for governing through democratic mechanisms. Furthermore, their success at frequently instigating coups—Thailand has experienced 13 successful and nine unsuccessful coups since the turn of the twentieth century— has resulted in their limited experience and motivation when it comes to building resilient party organizations. This includes critical tasks such as formulating policy agendas, garnering voter support and establishing grassroots political networks. As such, coups have been seen by Thai elites as the easier and less resource-intensive route to power.[10]

Secondly, the inability of traditional elites to establish a strong political party makes them weak in elections. Thailand's conservative elite class has failed to construct the essential underpinnings of a pro-regime political party that possesses a lasting organizational framework. Such a party should ordinarily be equipped to formulate policies, uphold an ideology and rule. The Democrat Party, established by royalists during the 1940s, once served this function. However, since 1992, the party has been in a state of decline and has been

unable to win any elections. In the absence of their own competitive political parties, Thailand's traditional elites have historically sought to influence elections through two distinct approaches: the blatant manipulation of the electoral process; and the utilization of proxy political parties, where the military exerts pressure on civilian politicians to participate in the formation of "nominee" parties.[11] These methods serve as shortcuts for conservative elites to secure swift victories at the polls. However, they do not ensure the long-term sustainability of power, which necessitates diligent and sustained efforts.

The persistent failure of royalist-conservative elites at the ballot box underpins their disregard for democratic processes and institutions as well as contributing to the fragility of democracy in Thailand. This historical pattern is exemplified by the failure of military-backed parties, such as Seri Manangkhasila in 1957, Saha Pracha Thai in 1969 and Samakheetham in 1992, to extend the rule of respective military juntas. When these parties could not secure power for their junta leaders, they disintegrated and faded away.[12]

It is worth noting that Prayut and Prawit held power for nine years, a longer period than any other junta leader since the 1973 uprising. Yet, they have not effectively utilized their resources to establish the foundations of a pro-regime political party. The PPRP was hastily formed just a year before the 2019 general elections and UTN emerged only a few months before the 2023 polls. Both also lacked a robust campaign strategy or a policy platform. Instead, these "ad hoc parties" relied on co-opting faction leaders and candidates from other political parties, with the expectation that the personal reputation of junta leaders, financial support from major business groups and the exploitation of state mechanisms for electoral interference would compensate for their shortcomings.

Thirdly, the persistent failures of Thai conservative elites at the polls stem from their inherent lack of unity. Since 1957, palace institutions, the military and leading business groups have formed ever-shifting and often temporary alliances, which have primarily arisen in response to immediate threats to the existing order, such as the challenges posed by the popularity of Thaksin and his political network or, more recently, the youth protests critical of the monarchy and the rapid ascent of the progressive, anti-establishment Future Forward Party (FFP) and its successor, the MFP. These temporary alliances among conservative elites have proven fragile and prone to internal conflicts.[13] Therefore, the rivalry between Prawit and

Prayut, which ultimately resulted in the weakening of pro-military parties and their electoral defeat at the 2023 polls, conforms with historical patterns.

Conclusion

The defeat of both the PPRP and UTN in the 2023 general elections hindered the chances of the leaders of the 2014 military coup retaining power. However, undemocratic aspects of the junta-drafted 2017 Constitution enabled military-aligned parties to join the new coalition government. Initially, the MFP, which won the largest number of seats, led a coalition of eight parties which controlled 312 seats in parliament, combined. However, the MFP's leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, failed in his bid to become prime minister after junta-appointed senators voted against his appointment during a post-election parliamentary vote. The senators cited concerns about the MFP's perceived threat to the nation, religion and monarchy—Thailand's three sacred pillars. Major political parties, including the PPRP and UTN, publicly criticized the MFP on the same grounds, declaring their refusal to join a coalition in which it was included.[14] Consequently, the party found itself isolated from mainstream political society.

Despite securing 151 seats and 14 million votes, the MFP could not form a government. Instead, a controversial coalition between pro-military parties and Thaksin-backed Pheu Thai Party (PTP), which came in second place in the polls, was formed with the backing of conservative elites, exposing a new political rift. This alliance demonstrated the ability of royal-military elites to retain power despite election losses, aided by political mechanisms established after the 2014 military coup and a junta-designed constitution. The military-appointed Senate, Election Commission and Constitutional Court acted as gatekeepers for the traditional elites, while those elites co-opted the PTP into collaboration by offering Thaksin—who had been in exile since 2008—a safe return to the country with a royal pardon as well as by endorsing a PTP candidate as prime minister. By aligning itself with those elites, the PTP faces the possibility of encountering the same issues that undermined pro-regime parties in the past. Moreover, the 2023 elections highlight how royal-military elites obstruct democratic mechanisms and maintain power through undemocratic institutions without the need for an electoral victory.

NOTES

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