

Thailand holding antidemocratic Senate election

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Elections for Thailand's Senate, the upper house of the National Assembly, are currently taking place. While they are the first since the 2014 military coup, the selection process is entirely antidemocratic, with the vast majority of the electorate having no say in who is chosen. This once more exposes the fraudulent claims of a return to "democracy" in Thailand after 2014 military coup.

After the previous Senate's term expired on May 10, the election began on June 9 and is slated to take place over two and a half weeks. It is divided into three rounds: district, provincial, and national. In a highly complicated process, 45,753 candidates initially vied among themselves for the 200 seats in the new Senate or 50 less than previously. Provincial voting, the second round, took place on June 16. The final, national round will occur on June 26 with results scheduled to be announced on July 2.

Candidates have been barred from engaging in public political discussion and were only required to submit a two-page résumé outlining their background and professional qualifications.

The new Senate will have the power to endorse bills and candidates to the Election Commission of Thailand, the Constitutional Court, and the National Anti-Corruption Commission previously chosen by the military. It will also vote on constitutional amendment proposals. However, unlike the previous Senate, it will not vote to select a prime minister.

The election began at the district level, where candidates were divided between 20 so-called professional groups. Candidates, the only group eligible to participate, then cast two votes within their own groups. The top five candidates from this process were then placed in supposedly randomized groups and then voted for by candidates in other groups until the top

three candidates from each professional group were chosen to proceed to the provincial level.

At the next stage, the process was then repeated until the top two candidates were selected to advance to the national round. The remaining candidates will have ten votes at the national level in order to select the top ten candidates from each professional group, producing 200 senators.

The ostensible aim of this absurd operation is to establish a "nonpartisan" body through a process in which political parties and other interest groups would not be able to influence. In reality, after the 2014 coup, the Thai military wrote these procedures into the 2017 constitution as a means of maintaining control after it had ostensibly handed power back to a civilian government.

In order to simply stand for election, candidates had to first pass an anti-democratic screening process set by the Election Commission—itsself a military-appointed body. Candidates were not allowed to be public servants or members of any political party. Neither could they be a child or spouse of a current member of the National Assembly. However, candidates who had served in parliament over five years ago were eligible to run.

Additionally, candidates were required to have over 10 years of experience within one of 20 accepted occupational fields, including law and justice, government administration, and security. They had to be over 40 years old and were required to pay an application fee of 2,500 baht (\$US68.20)—approximately a week's minimum wage—preventing youth and workers from applying.

In some districts, it was reported that only one professional group was participating, a reflection of the low candidate registration. This is bound up with these

undemocratic barriers placed on potential candidates. Regardless of who is elected, the Senate will be stuffed with a bureaucratic layer of careerists who are hostile to the Thai working class and poor.

Despite the claims of “nonpartisanship,” four distinct factions have emerged in the election. The first and largest has been dubbed the “Big House.” These candidates have close connections to the political establishment and include people like former Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat, who has moved on to the national round.

The second faction is composed of candidates close to the military and government bureaucracy. The third faction is made up of business leaders.

The last faction comprise so-called “people’s senators,” those with some connection to civics groups typically associated with so-called “progressive” politics and currently grouped around the Move Forward Party (MFP). The MFP seeks to prevent any break from the political establishment while posturing as a democratic alternative to the traditional right-wing elites, including the military.

The election takes place as the Thai political establishment is wracked by a growing crisis. The military and its allies in the conservative bureaucracy and monarchy have allowed the election to go ahead under the assumption they will maintain influence over the Senate.

However, in the past year, the MFP emerged as the largest party in the National Assembly, though the previous Senate blocked it from forming a government after the May 2023 election. Pheu Thai, which the military removed from power through coups in 2006 and 2014, is now the ruling party in an unstable coalition with the military-aligned parties.

As part of the deal to allow Pheu Thai to form a government with military support, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who retains a great deal of influence, was allowed to return to Thailand after 15-years in self-imposed exile. Thaksin was ousted in 2006 though he remains the de facto head of Pheu Thai. He managed to avoid a jail term as part of the deal.

However, sections of the military and the traditional elite are dissatisfied with this unstable political alliance amid declining economic conditions. Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin of Pheu Thai faces being removed from power over charges of violating ethics clauses in

the constitution.

The MFP also faces dissolution for previously advocating for reforming Thailand’s draconian lèse-majesté law. Thaksin faces new criminal charges, accused of lèse-majesté for comments made nearly 10 years ago.

The legal offensive from the military to destabilize its opponents in Pheu Thai and the MFP amounts to a judicial coup now unfolding. Yet throughout this process, Pheu Thai and the MFP have steadfastly encouraged people to keep faith in the parliamentary system and to place their confidence in the new Senate in order to supposedly democratise parliament.

These parties represent sections of big business and the upper middle class, whose differences with the monarchy and the military are centred on the distribution of power within the country’s elite. All factions of the political establishment are fearful of the growing anger in the working class and poor.

As the economic situation worsens, the military may very well decide to carry out another direct coup and dispense with the whole “democratic” façade, particularly if the results of the Senate election do not proceed as it desires.



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