

Thai opposition party turns to right after being anti-democratically dissolved

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1 September 2024

Following the anti-democratic dissolution of the Move Forward Party (MFP) last month, Thailand's main opposition party has regrouped in what is now called the People's (Prachachon) Party. It remains the largest, single party in the National Assembly while continuing to posture as a progressive party opposed to the traditional elites centred on the military and the monarchy.

The rebranding of the MFP took place on August 9, two days after the party was formally banned by Thailand's military-appointed Constitutional Court (CC). Eleven leading figures in the party, including members of parliament, are barred from politics for ten years. The remaining 143 MPs then joined the micro Thinkakhao Chaowilai Party, renaming it the People's Party (PP).

The court dissolved the MFP on the phony claims that it was seeking to overthrow the monarchy as part of its campaign pledge to amend the *lèse-majesté* law. Also referred to as Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, the *lèse-majesté* law forbids any criticism of the king with punishments of up to 15 years for each offence. Since large-scale, student-led protests in 2020, it has been used to charge around 272 protesters and government critics, with one individual sentenced to a record 50 years.

The dissolution is bound up with the crisis of bourgeois rule in Thailand. Two days after the ruling, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin of Pheu Thai was also dismissed by the Constitutional Court for supposedly breaching "ethical standards" by appointing as cabinet member a lawyer who was sentenced to six months in prison for corruption in 2008.

The conservative establishment is aware that it sits on a social powder keg due to low economic growth, low wages, exorbitant household debt and growing attacks

on job positions as factories throughout Thailand close. Thailand consistently ranks as one of the most socially unequal countries in the world in terms of wealth inequality with the top 1 percent holding 56 percent of total wealth—a source of immense social tensions.

Having lost the popular vote in the 2023 general election, the layers close to the military and monarchy are opting to eliminate their political opponents through "legal" means to give their anti-democratic manoeuvres a veneer of legitimacy. The MFP garnered more than 14 million votes in last year's election, more than any other party.

The PP is the third iteration of the party, which was originally founded in 2018 as the Future Forward Party (FFP) by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, once the richest member of parliament. The FFP was dissolved in 2020 by the Constitutional Court under another phony pretext that the party violated election law in the manner it accepted donations.

The PP is now led by 37-year-old Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut and is representative of the well-off social layers the party speaks for. Son of wealthy real estate tycoon Suchart Ruengpanyawut, Natthaphong holds declared assets of 397.3 million baht (\$US11.6 million), including a plot of land and four buildings in Bangkok. After graduating as a computer engineer from the prestigious Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, he founded the software development firm, Absolute Management Solutions.

Natthaphong, like his predecessors MFP leader Pita Limjaroenrat and Thanathorn, represents layers of the ruling class dissatisfied with the monopoly control of the economy by conservative sections associated with the military and the monarchy. In 2019, Natthaphong joined the FFP and has been a close political ally of Thanathorn.

Following the MFP dissolution ruling, Natthaphong has worked to prevent mass protests like those that took place in 2020-21 following the FFP's dissolution, by calling on supporters to look towards the 2027 general election. Thanathorn, who now leads an organisation aligned with the PP known as Progressive Movement, urged members and supporters of the MFP to “just shrug and move forward” and to respond to injustice by simply “working harder”.

In little more than two weeks, more than 62,000 people have registered as members of the People's Party and raised over 26 million baht (\$US758,000) in donations, far exceeding its announced goal of 10 million baht by the end of the month. It is aiming to recruit 100,000 new members in a one-month span. Undoubtedly, many have joined the party or supported the party, concerned about the brazen attacks on democratic rights.

The refusal of the MFP, now the PP, to call protests and rallies to defend democratic rights reflects its fear, and that of the ruling class as a whole, that the opposition could spiral out of control, involve the working class and threaten bourgeois rule. The party has confined its opposition to the military-appointed Constitutional Court while tamely accepting its dissolution and reformatting itself to function as a parliamentary opposition.

The newly adopted PP slogan is “liberty, equality, fraternity” of the 1789 French Revolution. However, no section of the bourgeoisie—in Thailand or internationally—bears any resemblance to the rising bourgeoisie in 18th century France which overthrew the feudal monarchy and aristocracy with the support of sections of the middle classes and the oppressed masses.

The PP's stated aim of forming a single party government in the 2027 election is intended to attract votes while attempting to convince workers and youth that democracy can be defended through the thoroughly anti-democratic parliamentary system imposed by the military after the 2014 coup.

Natthaphong stated in parliament that the party aims to fix the “root problems”, being the constitution and the unchecked power of “independent” organisations such as the Constitutional Court. Such comments are deliberately deceiving. The Thai military, which has a long history of coups this century and last, has made

absolutely clear that it will resist any attempt to fundamentally change the constitution it drew up or the Constitutional Court that it appointed.

The root cause of the destruction of basic democratic rights in Thailand and internationally is the profit system. As the global crisis of capitalism worsens and social inequality deepens, the ruling classes are incapable of imposing huge new burdens on working people democratically.

The legal cases against the PP have not ended. Sawang Boonmee, secretary-general of the Election Commission, has responded to accusations that the PP is illegally receiving donations before being formally launched, saying he would look into the claims.

There are also 44 MPs and party members, including Natthaphong, who face possible lifetime bans for supporting a past bill to amend the draconian *lèse-majesté* law. This was specifically cited by the CC in its ruling dissolving the MFP and is being deliberated over by the National Anti-Corruption Commission.

In an interview with Nation TV, Natthaphong stated he was not worried about the investigation, saying that he simply signed the bill, but “did not join any anti-monarchy rallies, seek bail for the activists, or put up stickers showing solidarity with the anti-monarchy activists.”

The Move Forward Party gained substantial support particularly from young people in the mass protests after the 2019 election as a result of its opposition to the military and calls for limited democratic reforms. The comments of Natthaphong disowning any connection to the protest movement are a clear sign that the party is shifting to the right and seeking an accommodation with the Bangkok establishment.



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