

Unstable right-wing government formed in Thailand

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2 September 2024

A new ruling coalition led by Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and the Pheu Thai Party has taken shape in Thailand, nearly three weeks after the Constitutional Court removed previous prime minister Srettha Thavisin. The formation of a new government, however, will not resolve any of the issues facing the Thai ruling class amid ongoing factional conflict within its ranks.

Paetongtarn was elected by the lower house of the National Assembly on August 16, two days after Srettha was forced from office, on bogus ethics violations. Pheu Thai intends to finalize Paetongtarn's administration this week by sending its list of 35 cabinet ministers to King Vajiralongkorn for royal endorsement.

The Pheu Thai-led coalition is comprised of 10 parties, down from 11 under Srettha. The military-aligned Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) was forced out of the coalition and in its place is the Democrat Party, a long-time opponent of Pheu Thai and its de facto leader Thaksin Shinawatra, the father of the prime minister. In addition, a faction has split from the PPRP, joining the new government. It is led by Thamanat Prompow who supposedly broke with the party out of anger at being excluded from the PPRP's list of cabinet minister nominees.

This ungainly coalition gives the new government 322 seats in the lower house of the National Assembly while the opposition holds 171 seats, 143 of which are controlled by the so-called People's Party, the latest iteration of the now-dissolved Move Forward Party (MFP). Six seats are vacant.

The conflicts and shuffling of parties in the coalition point to the highly unstable nature of the alliance formed between Pheu Thai and the traditional sections of the ruling class associated with the military and

monarchy. In fact, while the new government has not even been formally established, the Thai media has reported that petitions are being filed with the Election Commission (EC) to dissolve Pheu Thai. The party is charged with being under the influence of Thaksin, who is not formally a party member which is illegal under the Political Parties Act. EC Chairman Ittiporn Boonpracong has denied seeing any petitions.

This continuing political instability followed the 2023 general election. The military used its control of the Senate at the time to block the election-winning MFP from taking power. Conscious that outright election rigging coupled with declining social conditions could set off protests bringing in the working class, the military chose to reach a deal with Pheu Thai. The latter formed a government that prominently included the PPRP as well as the United Thai Nation Party (UTN) associated with 2014 coup leader and then-outgoing Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha.

The removal of the PPRP from the government coalition does not represent a move away from the military. In reality, Pheu Thai which was ousted in military coups in 2006 and 2014, remains at the beck and call of the military within the government represented by the UTN.

Pheu Thai is simply engaged in maneuver to isolate PPRP leader Prawit Wongsuwan, another of the 2014 coup leaders, after he did not participate in the vote to approve Paetongtarn as prime minister. Pheu Thai has also accused Prawit of orchestrating the removal of Srettha by being the driving force behind the 40 former senators who filed the ethics complaint leading to his removal from office.

Coup leader Prayut is no longer officially a member of the party, but he remains a highly influential figure. He is currently a Privy Councillor to the king. The

inclusion of Thamanat's breakaway faction from the PPRP is another sign that Pheu Thai is determined to maintain its connections to the military and the right-wing sections of the ruling class they represent.

Furthermore, as with Srettha's cabinet, a significant number of posts in Paetongtarn's government have been allotted to former ministers in Prayut's military junta. Of the 35 ministers, nine served in Prayut's cabinet, including two newcomers to the cabinet: Narumon Pinyosinwat, who has been appointed minister of agriculture and cooperatives and Chalermchai Sri-on, appointed as natural resources and environment minister.

Significantly, Natthapon Nakpanich, who has been appointed deputy defense minister, has close links to Prayut and is regarded as his protégé. Natthapon also served as secretary to outgoing Defense Minister Sutin Klungsang where he used his power to obstruct attempts to reform the military. Pheu Thai has proposed minor and largely symbolic reforms that powerful sections of the military have rejected, fearing any changes will impact their wide-ranging business interests.

The inclusion of the Democrats also demonstrates that Pheu Thai is attempting to court the most right-wing layers. The Democrats have been a longtime opposition party and were elevated to power against the People's Power Party, the predecessor of Pheu Thai. After the military removed Thaksin in a coup in 2006, his party returned to power only to be removed from office by the Constitutional Court in 2008 and replaced with the Democrats. This culminated in mass protests in 2010 against the Democrats that were violently suppressed by the military killing 99 people.

These are the very political forces that Pheu Thai relies upon to stay in power. Paetongtarn claimed that the Democrats' inclusion was necessary to form "a stable government" and to pass laws "to address people's problems." In reality, the new government will address the country's deepening economic problems by imposing new burdens on working people.

The ruling class is conscious that it sits atop a social powder keg. Thailand is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with the top one percent alone holding 56 percent of total wealth, a source of great tensions. Workers and the poor face huge levels of household debt and low wages.

The economy grew by only 1.9 percent last year. While it is projected to expand by 2.4 percent in 2024, this is nowhere near the 5 percent promised by previous Prime Minister Srettha. The economy is suffering in part due to the US-led trade war against China that is affecting countries throughout the region. Since July 2023, the working class has faced huge job cuts, with more than 2,000 factories closing and approximately 51,500 workers sacked.

The government is incapable of addressing let alone resolving the worsening social and economic crisis facing workers and the poor, and will turn to increasingly repressive measures as social tensions and political opposition grow.



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