

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## Shifting Paradigms: The Rise of the Move Forward Party and the Changing Face of Thai Democracy

Napon Jatusripitak  
(Visiting Fellow, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute)

### Introduction

The 2023 general election in Thailand marks a critical juncture in the country's trajectory, carrying significant implications for the prevailing ideological divisions and electoral dynamics that have defined its political landscape for over two decades. The progressive Move Forward Party (MFP) emerged as the largest bloc, capturing 151 seats in the 500-member House of Representatives, closely followed by the Thaksin Shinawatra-aligned Pheu Thai Party with 141 seats. In contrast, parties associated with the military generals involved in the May 2014 coup suffered substantial losses, with the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) and the United Thai Nation Party (UTN) securing only 40 and 36 seats, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

The resounding victory of the MFP not only represents a clear rejection of Thailand's deeply entrenched conservative status quo but also signifies a determination to bring about a broader transformation in Thai politics. This transformation is currently unfolding across two distinct dimensions: (1) a departure from traditional political divisions rooted in urban-rural disparities, giving way to new generational and ideological cleavages centered around reforming the structural foundations of Thailand's established political order; and (2) a decline in the influence of money politics, patronage networks, and political dynasties, as social media and social movements take center stage, becoming the driving mechanisms behind party-building and campaigning. Despite ongoing challenges that cast a shadow over the prospect of the MFP in forming a viable governing coalition, these developments underscore the far-reaching impact that the MFP's dramatic rise has already brought to the political landscape in Thailand.

---

<sup>1</sup> For information on the results of the May 2023 general election in Thailand, see the official website of the Office of the Election Commission at [www.ectreport.com](http://www.ectreport.com).

## Shifting Landscape

The election held on May 14, 2023 was initially anticipated to be another chapter in the power struggle between the Shinawatra family and the conservative establishment in Thailand. This struggle began with the ousting of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in the 2006 coup d'état, leading to a prolonged period of political turmoil marked by color-coded street protests, crackdowns, government changes, and another military takeover in 2014 by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha.

In the post-coup general election of 2019 that was held on a deeply uneven playing field, Prayut emerged as the prime minister with backing from the military-aligned PPRP and coalition partners including the Democrat Party, the Bhumjaithai Party, and other smaller parties. The prime minister also enjoyed support of the NCPO-appointed Senate, which was empowered to jointly select the prime minister alongside the 500-member House of Representatives for the initial five years of Parliament. Referee institutions such as the Election Commission and Constitutional Court, operating under the influence of the NCPO, played a decisive role in shaping the election outcome by dissolving political parties and determining the party-list allocation method, ultimately securing a narrow majority for the pro-military coalition (Ricks 2019).

Over the course of four years, public dissatisfaction with the Prayut administration has grown due to its failure to effectively navigate the economic challenges posed by the Covid-19 crisis and its crackdowns on pro-democracy activists. The mounting difficulties facing Prayut's leadership were further amplified by internal conflicts between him and General Prawit Wongsuwan, his brother-in-arms, deputy prime minister, and leader of the PPRP. The uncertainties surrounding the PPRP's allegiance to Prayut eventually pushed him to sever ties with the party and join the UTN, a splinter party, in order to run as its candidate for prime minister in the 2023 elections.

The stage appeared set for a strong comeback by the Pheu Thai Party, which pledged to win the election by a landslide. It projected to secure as many as 310 seats and put forward Thaksin's youngest daughter, Paetongtarn, as one of its prime ministerial candidates (*The Bangkok Post* 2023). However, contrary to expectations, it was the MFP that emerged victorious, overcoming the challenges posed by a new electoral system that removed the advantages previously enjoyed by its predecessor, the Future Forward Party (FFP), in terms of winning party-list seats. Ultimately, the political landscape was ripe for change, and this change took an unprecedented direction, with the MFP leading the way.

## The Emergence of Generational and Ideological Divides

To a certain extent, the impressive victory of the MFP can be interpreted as an indication that the blueprint, which had consistently delivered successive election victories for Pheu Thai since 2001, is no longer as effective as it once was. Pheu Thai has long established itself as a party dedicated to advocating for the interests of the rural majority, a segment of society that has historically experienced political exclusion and economic marginalization within a system dominated by patronage-ridden politicians and a hyper-centralized bureaucracy accountable solely to itself (Tejapira 2006). In the context of unequal power dynamics and economic disparities between the rural poor and the affluent elites based in Bangkok, Pheu Thai and Thaksin pledged to bridge these divides by establishing a

direct connection with its grassroots supporters through policies that have been labeled as populist (Pongsudhirak 2023). These policies include notable initiatives such as the introduction of the 30-baht universal healthcare program during the Thai Rak Thai (TRT)-led government and the controversial rice-pledging scheme implemented under Pheu Thai in 2011.

In the run-up to the 2023 general election, Pheu Thai reaffirmed its commitment to its longstanding tradition of crafting policies that directly benefit the economic well-being of the people. One of the policy initiatives at the forefront of its campaign was the ambitious promise to distribute 10,000 baht to all Thai citizens above the age of 16 through a digital wallet. Building on a sense of nostalgia, the party adopted the slogan “Think Big, Act Smart, For All Thais,” reminiscent of the TRT’s original slogan, and reassembled its team of policy architects, advisors, and leaders from the TRT era. These carefully orchestrated efforts aimed to project a sense of continuity and bolster Pheu Thai’s credibility, particularly in the realm of economic management. However, these efforts no longer guaranteed election victories. The desire for change in Thailand’s 2023 election extended beyond economic concerns, indicating a deeper shift in public sentiment.

The dissolution of the FFP and the subsequent crackdowns on pro-democracy activists advocating for monarchy reform from 2020 to 2022 have served as a wake-up call for a significant portion of Thai society, revealing the structural barriers that hinder meaningful participation in the democratic process (Unno 2022). This awareness is particularly strong among first-time and younger voters who grew up under a regime that systematically stifled freedom of expression, suppressed the power of elected representatives, and prioritized the interests of oligarchic elites over broader societal welfare.

The MFP adeptly tapped into the prevailing disillusionment and deep yearning for structural change among these voters. With its pledge to reduce the military’s influence and amend Article 112, the *lèse-majesté* law, the party took a resolute stance in challenging the traditional centers of power in Thailand. Additionally, the MFP distinguished itself by refusing to form a coalition government with parties associated with the generals involved in the May 2014 coup. This set the MFP apart from Pheu Thai, which struggled to adopt a decisive or convincing stance from the beginning. As a result, the MFP secured the mandate of 14 million voters out of 41 million in the popular vote. This reflects a burgeoning yet substantial political base that is coalescing around issues that transcend the traditional urban-rural divisions. Such divisions have historically culminated in vicious cycle of power struggles between forces allied with Thaksin and those representing the conservative establishment. A broader aspiration for a more inclusive and accountable political system – a vision that the MFP has come to represent – now constitutes the new paradigm.

### **New Electoral Dynamics in the Age of Social Media and Social Movements**

In addition to bringing an end to Pheu Thai’s winning streak and giving rise to new ideological divisions, the MFP’s remarkable success in toppling established factions and influential political dynasties poses an intriguing puzzle. The party successfully ousted entrenched families like the Asavahames in Samut Prakan, the Khunpluems in Chon Buri, and the Pitutechas in Rayong. In Thailand, constituency elections, especially outside Bangkok, have traditionally been dominated by candidates associated with political dynasties or factions that wield control over local patronage networks. These networks consist of local government officials, elected representatives, and

community leaders who mobilize support for candidates by campaigning door-to-door, attending communal events, and offering personal favors or material benefits in return for votes (Chattharakul 2011). It is widely recognized that only large and well-funded parties can effectively sustain these candidate-network structures.

In contrast, the MFP has charted a different course by openly rejecting traditional campaign tactics. Yet, the party has successfully garnered support not only from urban voters, who often base their decisions on party labels and policies, but also from rural voters. These rural voters have long been characterized as either clients of patronage networks or beneficiaries of populist policies (Kongkirati 2012). The MFP's success in gaining traction among these segments of the population is a significant achievement, challenging prevailing assumptions and narratives concerning rural voting behavior, as outlined in Anek Laothamatas' influential work, "A Tale of Two Democracies" (Laothamatas 1996). This shift signifies not only a change in voter sentiments but also the emergence of new electoral dynamics that blur conventional urban-rural divisions.

This transformation can be attributed to two key factors: (1) the MFP's reliance on social media as a campaigning strategy and (2) its connection to social movements that generate momentum in support of the party's ideology. First, The MFP embraced a robust digital strategy to connect with and mobilize supporters. Leveraging platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, the party effectively disseminated its message, engaged with the public, and organized campaign rallies. This approach allowed the MFP to circumvent traditional vote-canvassing networks and build its own network of "organic" vote canvassers. These canvassers voluntarily and actively created content for the party online, engaged with its activities, and interacted with its candidates. Offline, these followers function as a reserve army of rally attendees, mobilizing quickly to fill MFP rallies, documenting the events, and taking selfies with the party's candidates. Mostly through the efforts of the party's followers rather than its candidates or campaign teams, the party successfully established a strong presence both in the digital realm and in the physical world, with the influence of social media shaping real-world dynamics in profound ways.

Furthermore, by aligning itself with the pro-democracy social movements, the MFP has formed alliances with existing networks and communities of activists across the country that have become increasingly vocal since 2020, particularly in their calls for unprecedented reforms concerning the role of the Thai monarchy (Lertchoosakul 2023). Recognizing the shifting political landscape, the MFP transformed itself into a full-fledged movement-based party, adapting to new political realities and filling the vacuum that existed between the demands voiced by youth activists and the realm of parliamentary politics.

In a demonstration of solidarity, the MFP took action by bailing out detained activists and integrating them into its ranks, effectively giving them a platform to advocate for their causes and translating their agendas into tangible policies and legislative action. The party has been at the forefront of addressing a wide range of issues raised by the youth activists, including LGBTQ rights, anti-monopoly measures, and conscription reforms. By incorporating these agendas, the MFP not only draws strength from the movements but also serves as a vehicle for institutionalizing their goals and aspirations.

This symbiotic relationship between the pro-democracy social movements and MFP holds great significance within the context of Thai politics, where parties that oppose established powers are vulnerable to dissolution at the hands of courts—a pattern known as the judicialization of politics or lawfare (McCargo 2014). However, by firmly anchoring itself in social movements, which are often perceived as transient or short-lived, the MFP has established firm roots that enable the party to withstand legal challenges. This strategic alignment has not only broadened the MFP’s support base but has also contributed to its longevity and solidified its position as a driving force for transformative change in Thai politics. In turn, this alignment allows for the continuation of the movements’ ideological agendas within the framework of an established political entity, ensuring that voices and aspirations of the movements remain influential in shaping the policies and actions of the government.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of the MFP in Thailand reflects a long-fomenting potential to transform Thai politics, moving away from old ideological fault lines and political dynamics. This transformation is marked by a commitment to engage in structural reforms of institutions previously deemed untouchable and the adoption of new avenues for political participation and citizen engagement, such as social media and social movements. However, the realization of this transformative potential remains contingent upon the MFP’s capacity and commitment to translate the momentum that propelled it to victory into tangible action, as well as the willingness of entrenched actors within the conservative establishment to adapt and embrace change. While the stage is set for a new era of Thai democracy, the ultimate outcome and lasting impact of this transformation remain to be seen.

---

## Reference

- Chattharakul, Anyarat. 2010. “Thai Electoral Campaigning: Vote-Canvassing Networks and Hybrid Voting.” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 29, 4: 67–95.
- Kongkirati, Prajak, ed. 2012. การเมืองว่าด้วยการเลือกตั้ง : วาทกรรม อำนาจ และพลวัตชนบทไทย [Electoral Politics: The Discourse of Power and the Dynamics in Rural Thailand]. Bangkok, Thailand: Faadiawkan Press.
- Laothamatas, Anek. 1996. “A Tale of Two Democracies: Conflicting Perceptions of Elections and Democracy in Thailand.” In *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, ed. R.H. Taylor, 201–223. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Lertchoosakul, Kanokrat. 2023. “The May 2023 Elections and the Triumph of Thai Youth Social Movements.” *Critical Asian Studies* 54, 4. <https://doi.org/10.52698/IMCJ3733>.
- McCargo, Duncan. 2014. “Competing Notions of Judicialization in Thailand.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 36, 3: 417–441.
- Pongsudhirak, Thitinan. 2023. “The Tide of History Shifts in Thai Politics.” *Bangkok Post*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2583539/the-tide-of-history-shifts-in-thai-politics>.
- Ricks, Jacob I. 2019. “Thailand’s 2019 Vote: The General’s Election.” *Pacific Affairs* 92, 3: 443–457.
- Sattaburuth, Aekarach and Mongkol Bangprapa. 2023. “Pheu Thai Ups Stakes in Race.” *Bangkok Post*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2532015/pheu-thai-ups-stakes-in-race>.
- Tejapira, Kasian. 2006. “Toppling Thaksin.” *New Left Review* 2, 39: 5–37.
- Unno, Anusorn. 2022. “‘Reform, Not Abolition’: The ‘Thai Youth Movement’ and Its Demands for Reform of the Monarchy.” *ISEAS Perspective* 2022, 3: 1-11.

- **Napon Jatusripitak** is a Visiting Fellow in the Thailand Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, and Postdoctoral Fellow at Chulalongkorn University.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

“Shifting Paradigms: The Rise of the Move Forward Party and the Changing Face of Thai Democracy”

979-11-6617-629-6 95340 Date of Issue: 29 June 2023

Typeset by Jisoo Park

For inquiries:  
Jisoo Park, Research Associate

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 208) [jspark@eai.or.kr](mailto:jspark@eai.or.kr)

The East Asia Institute  
1, Sajik-ro 7-gil, Jongro-gu  
Seoul 03028, South Korea  
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1684  
Email [eai@eai.or.kr](mailto:eai@eai.or.kr) Website [www.eai.or.kr](http://www.eai.or.kr)