9-2019

Thailand's 2019 Vote: The General's Election

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Abstract

Thailand's March 2019 ballot was the first for the country since 2011, and for many it signaled the potential end of the military junta's five-year rule. But was it truly a return to democracy? This essay argues that the election was far from a democratization event. Instead, it was a highly orchestrated exercise to ensure authoritarian longevity. The junta employed techniques of institutional engineering as well as managing the election's outcomes in an effort to extend the premiership of Prayuth Chan-ocha despite increasing pressure for a return to civilian rule. The results of the election suggest that Thai society continues to exhibit deep divisions between those who support and those who oppose military interventions in politics. I further contend that the election should be seen as part of the continuing struggle by conservative forces in society to maintain their dominance in politics despite demands from other segments of the population for equal representation, a contest which is far from over.

Keywords: Thailand, Thailand party system, elections, military junta, democracy, constitutional engineering

DOI: 10.5509/2019923443

After seizing power on May 22, 2014, General Prayuth Chan-ocha promised elections the following year, describing his coup as a temporary solution to achieve peace and correct flaws in the democratic system. He assured Thais that "genuine democracy (*prachathipatai thi sombun*)" would arrive shortly. Elections failed to occur, though, and it became clear that the military junta, using the moniker of National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), had settled in for the long haul.[1] Prayuth announced, and postponed, at least five election dates over the next four years.

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Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Aim Sinpeng and the anonymous reviewer and the editor of *Pacific Affairs* for providing useful feedback on this essay. I alone am responsible for any mistakes.

[1] Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat, "The Prayuth regime: Embedded military and hierarchical capitalism in Thailand," *TRaNS* 6, no. 2 (2018): 279–280.

Consequently, anticipation ran high when the NCPO finally loosened restrictions on political activity on December 11, 2018 and determined March 24, 2019 as the date of the long-awaited poll. Would this election return democracy to Thai soil? Although the campaign saw a relaxation of the stringent political and social controls exerted on the country during military rule, the junta was never committed to returning to a representative democracy. When official results were finally announced almost six weeks after the vote, it became clear that the outcome, a government headed by General Prayuth as prime minister, was according to design. The election was less a step toward democracy and more a tool to ensure authoritarian longevity.

Non-democratic regimes around the world frequently avail themselves of such institutional techniques to preserve their rule.[2] Seemingly democratic institutions, like elections, can provide multiple benefits to dictators, allowing them to gauge public support, co-opt potential opponents, as well as facilitate power-sharing among political elites.[3] In this essay, I treat the 2019 Thai election as an authoritarian survival mechanism. Rather than a return to democracy, I contend that the election was designed and orchestrated to allow Prayuth and his allies to continue their rule through the foreseeable future. I do this by highlighting the junta's efforts to manage the election by engaging in constitutional engineering and shaping electoral outcomes before I turn to a discussion of the electoral results. The essay's conclusion suggests that Thailand's 2019 polls should be understood as part of an ongoing effort by conservative forces to resist growing demands from alternative societal groups for political representation.[4]

Managing the Election

Among authoritarian regimes, military juntas are particularly short-lived.[5] Coup leaders world over struggle to prolong their rule due to threats from alternate elites, the specter of opposition factions within their own military who might displace them, as well as demands from the population. The safest option is to transition from direct military rule to a system of power-sharing among elites, a process that is most effective when accompanied by the creation of an institutionalized political party.[6] Indeed, authoritarian regimes

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[2] Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions Under Dictatorship*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008), xix-xxi; Milan Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 116–117.

[3] Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, "Elections under authoritarianism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 405–406.

[4] Kevin Hewison, "Thailand: Contestation over elections, sovereignty, and representation." *Representation* 51, no. 1 (2015): 51–62.

[5] Barbara Geddes, "What do we know about democratization after twenty years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 133.

[6] Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work* (Cambridge University Press, 2018): 196–201.

that at least partially rely on nominally democratic institutions and political parties for support are among the longest-lasting and most stable, seen in Southeast Asian examples like Singapore (1965–present), Malaysia (1957–2018), and Suharto's Indonesia (1967–1998).[7]

Thailand's NCPO experienced increasing pressure during its five years in office, arising from a sluggish economy, the rise of potentially dangerous military factions, accusations of corruption, and demands for the long-awaited election.[8] As threats grew, Prayuth could not rely on direct military rule indefinitely. To transition to an alternative arrangement while still holding the reins of power, however, posed a monumental challenge due to the continued popularity of the Pheu Thai political party, which the military had deposed. Pheu Thai, the third incarnation of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's party, Thai Rak Thai (TRT), had won an outright majority of parliamentary seats in the 2011 election, and its previous manifestation, the People's Power Party (PPP), had come close to the feat in 2007. Indeed, Thaksin-affiliated parties had won the most seats in every electoral contest since 2001 and were likely to do so again when the junta allowed elections. Thus, for Prayuth's regime to transition from military dictatorship to an alternative ruling arrangement, the junta and their supporters would need to nullify Pheu Thai's electoral capacity. The NCPO also desired that its chosen vessel, the newly-formed Phalang Pracharat Party (PPRP) should receive sufficient backing to consolidate rule in parliament. The junta and its allies aimed to do this via two mechanisms: (1) Crafting a new constitution, and (2) Influencing electoral outcomes to reflect junta preferences.

Constitutional Engineering

Re-writing constitutional rules to shape electoral outcomes has a long history in Thailand;[9] the 1978 Constitution, a product of military intervention, restructured the party system and implemented block vote electoral rules.[10] Block voting caused electoral candidates to compete within multiple-seat districts, effectively pitting internal factions of political parties against one

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[7] See Netina Tan, "Manipulating electoral laws in Singapore," *Electoral Studies* 32 (2013): 632–643; Kai Ostwald, "How to win a lost election: Malapportionment and Malaysia's 2013 General Election," *The Round Table* 102, no 6 (2013): 521–532; Dwight King, *Half-hearted Reform: Electoral Institutions and the Struggle for Democracy in Indonesia* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), chapter 2.

[8] Paul Chambers, "What if Thailand's Junta can't control the Military?" *New Mandala* (blog), 14 March 2019, https://tinyurl.com/y6ng84gg; Joshua Kurlantzick, "Thailand's junta faces mounting pressure," *Asia Unbound* (blog), Council on Foreign Relations, 12 February 2018, https://tinyurl.com/y3bacfkz.

[9] Bjorn Dressel, "Thailand's Elusive Quest for a Workable Constitution, 1997–2007," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 31, no. 2 (2009): 300–307.

[10] James Ockey, "Variations on a theme: Societal cleavages and party orientation through multiple transitions in Thailand," *Party Politics*, 11, no. 6 (2005): 737–740.

another, which encouraged weak multi-party coalition governments filled with fragmented and factionalized political parties.[11] The 1997 Constitution, written independent of the military, replaced block voting with a mixed electoral system, in which voters cast two ballots: one single-member district vote and one national party-list vote. These reforms were designed to strengthen political parties and stabilize the party system, which they did, reducing both the number of political parties as well as the impact of party factions.[12] This contributed to the ability of Thaksin Shinawatra and his TRT party to control parliament and enjoy a full four-year term as an elected prime minister, a first in Thai history. Thaksin's prowess, though, upset traditional power holders, including the military and its allies, and after being re-elected with an absolute majority of parliamentary seats in 2005, Thaksin's second term was cut short by a coup in 2006. The military abolished the 1997 Constitution and appointed a government tasked with crafting a new constitution designed to block Thaksin's ability to return to power. The 2007 Constitution re-instated the pre-1997 block vote system combined with a region-based party-list in hopes of filling parliament with multiple relatively weak political parties. The Thai electorate, though, demonstrated strong party identification in the 2007 election, returning a bifurcated parliament split between the TRT's successor, the PPP, and the opposition Democrat Party.[13] Conservative forces, acting through the judiciary, disqualified two PPP premiers and dissolved the party before propping up a Democrat Party government in its place.[14] In 2011, the Democrat-led government amended the 2007 Constitution to return to electoral rules similar to those in the 1997 Constitution, which facilitated the ability of two large parties to dominate the 2011 election, wherein Pheu Thai won over half of parliamentary seats while the Democrats captured approximately one-third.

Thus Thailand's party system, shaped by electoral rules, had transitioned from a history of weak, multi-party governments to one overshadowed by two large parties. The 2014 coup leaders, however, were determined to succeed where the 2007 Constitution had failed. They hoped to see a parliament filled with smaller parties[15] and weakened coalitions, which would

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[11] Joel Sawat Selway, *Coalitions of the Well-being* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 95–99.

[12] Allen Hicken, *Building Party Systems in Developing Democracies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 127–133, 136–139.

[13] Allen Hicken and Joel Sawat Selway, "Forcing the genie back in the bottle: Sociological change, institutional reform, and health policy in Thailand," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 12 (2012): 69–77.

[14] Paul Chambers and Napisa Waitoolkiat, "The resilience of monarchised military in Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (2016): 433–434; Eugenie Merieau, "Thailand's deep state, royal power, and the Constitutional Court (1997–2015)," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46, no. 3 (2016): 458–459.

[15] Punchada Sirivunnabood, "Thailand's puzzling 2019 election: How the NCPO junta has embedded itself in Thai politics," *ISEAS perspective,* no. 44 (2019): 3–5.

allow unelected officials greater sway in governing the country.[16] As such, the junta deliberately appointed a set of constitutional drafters, headed by the conservative septuagenarian Meechai Ruchuphan, to ensure that the charter reflected junta preferences.

The resultant 2017 Constitution, the junta's second attempt at constitutional engineering after the aborted 2015 draft, introduced a new electoral system as well as a powerful appointed senate, both of which were institutions designed to maintain the junta's control over politics. The new electoral system, called Mixed Member Apportionment, divides parliament into 350 single-member districts based on majoritarian rules as well as 150 party-list seats appointed through proportional representation at the national level. Each citizen's single vote on a fused ballot counts toward their district seat as well as contributes to the representative's party in the national tally, preventing voters from splitting their ballots between a favorite local political figure and their preferred party. All votes are counted at the national level to determine the total number of parliamentary seats that any party should obtain based on the total proportion of the national vote received. The party-list seat allocation is then calculated using this number, taking into account the district-based seats the party won. Thus parties that perform well in constituency seats would not necessarily receive any party-list seats. For example, a hypothetical party that won 20 percent of the vote nation-wide would be allocated the rights to 20 percent of the 500 seats in parliament, or 100 seats in total. The party's constituency seats would then be subtracted from that number to arrive at the number of party-list seats the party should be allocated. If the party had won 100 or more district seats, it would therefore receive no party-list seats. If, however, it had received fewer than its allocation, then the Election Commission would use a formula to determine how many party-list seats the party would receive. The system was thus devised to boost parties that failed to win constituency seats but still garnered votes nation-wide while reducing the impact of parties that performed well in district-based contests.

Pheu Thai Party claimed that the new scheme was designed to disadvantage them and push Thailand toward a system of small, factional parties and weak coalition governments as existed prior to 2001, which would benefit the pro-junta PPRP.[17] The constitutional drafters disputed this interpretation,[18] but the data supported Pheu Thai's claims. Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit

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[16] Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, "A year after referendum, only bad news about Thailand's Constitution," *New Mandala* (blog), 29 August 2017, https://tinyurl.com/y6kxozj2; Jacob Ricks, "Agents, Principals, or Something in Between? Bureaucrats and Policy Control in Thailand," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 18 (2018): 337.

[17] See Duncan McCargo, "Thailand's changing party landscape," *ISEAS Perspectives*, no. 63 (2018): 2–3.

[18] Khanittha Thepphajorn, "New voting system good for parties," *The Nation*, 7 November 2015. See also Punchada, "Thailand's," 5.

demonstrated the impact of the 2017 electoral rules by applying them to the 2011 election returns, showing that they benefit medium-sized parties while punishing larger parties, especially Pheu Thai, which would have lost 40 parliamentary seats had the new rules been applied to the 2011 results.[19] Medium-sized parties would be the main beneficiaries, including new parties like PPRP. Indeed, while speaking to the PPRP, Somsak Thepsuthin, a pro-junta leader, blatantly stated, "This constitution was designed for us."[20]

Furthermore, the constitution and ensuing legislation provided vague advice on the actual calculation of party-list seat allocations, granting the junta-appointed Election Commission (EC) discretion in determining how national results would translate into party-list seats. During the weeks following the election, voters were left in the lurch as the EC waffled between different calculations, eventually deciding to reduce the minimum threshold for a parliamentary seat from approximately 71,000 votes to just over 35,000 votes (approximately 0.10 percent of the total vote), paving the way for a record 26 parties in parliament[21] despite questions about the formula's constitutionality.[22]

This decision served as a fatal blow to Pheu Thai's hopes to form a government. On March 27, seven parties led by Pheu Thai announced their intention to form a coalition government, expecting to gain over 250 parliamentary seats based on a party-list threshold of 71,000 votes. The change in the party-list seat calculation, though, decreased their seat count to no more than 246 by reallocating seats from anti-junta coalition parties to 10 minor parties, all of which declared themselves as Prayuth supporters. The EC's decision was seen by many as a last-ditch effort to use electoral rules to eviscerate Pheu Thai's chances at filling the Prime Minister's office.[23] The electoral system was thus designed and implemented specifically to hinder the ability of Pheu Thai to gain a majority in parliament.

Additionally, the constitution empowered the appointed senate. The charter outlined a series of temporary transitional provisions, including the establishment of a 250-member appointed senate, which would share responsibility for choosing prime ministers during the senate's initial five-year term. As the House of Representatives' tenure is no longer than four years, the junta-chosen senate will take part in picking the prime minister at least

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[19] Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, "The effects of Thailand's proposed electoral system," *Thai Data Points* (blog), 10 February 2016, https://tinyurl.com/y2zefl47.

[20] Teeranai Charuvastra, "'Three friends' join pro-junta party, say charter favors them," *Khaosod English*, 19 November 2018.

[21] Initially 27 parties were seated before a by-election in Chiang Mai caused a revision in calculations.

[22] Mongkol Bangprapa and Aekarach Sattaburuth, "EC to push ahead with formula," *Bangkok Post*, 26 April 2019. The Constitutional Court refused to make a ruling on the formula for seat allocation, leaving the decision to the EC.

[23] Aekarach Sattaburuth and Mongkol Bangprapa, "Pheu Thai govt hope on ropes," *Bangkok Post*, 9 May 2019. See also *Bangkok Post,* "EC seat move is hijacking," 10 May 2019.

twice. Its role means that a winning prime ministerial candidate needs at least 376 out of 750 votes from the combined houses rather than only a majority of 251 out of 500 votes from the lower house. Most observers presumed that the 250 senators would support Prayuth, meaning he would only need support from 126 elected parliamentarians to become prime minister. Beyond this responsibility, the first senate is also given special charge to oversee parliamentary behaviour, laws, and to pursue the junta's reform agenda.

Senators were chosen under the direction of retired General Prawit Wongsuwan, who served as both deputy prime minister and deputy chief of the NCPO; shortly before the election, he spoke to the media expressing confidence that the junta could control (*khum*) the senate.[24] The selection process was secretive, and many of the senators were drawn from retired members of the military, with at least 105 holding military or police rank. Six seats were reserved for head of the defence ministry, the military supreme commander, and the chiefs of the army, navy, air force, and police. The senate, then, provides the military junta a clear opportunity to regulate the political process even after the election. Combined with the electoral system designed to fragment the power of the Pheu Thai party, the constitution provided ample opportunity to avoid a truly democratic transition.

Shaping Outcomes

Political parties adapted to the changed electoral rules. This was most obvious in the anti-junta camp, dominated by the Pheu Thai and Future Forward parties, who campaigned vigorously against the junta throughout the election. Pheu Thai remained popular among voters in the north and northeast, but party leaders knew that electoral rules were stacked against them. They decided to split the party, spawning the Thai Raksa Chart (TRC) party to increase their chances of scoring party-list seats.[25] Pheu Thai would campaign in most constituencies, especially among districts where it was strongest, but it ceded 100 constituencies where it had not performed as well in 2011 to the TRC, which housed some of Pheu Thai's well-known leaders, such as Preechapol Pongpanich and Chaturon Chaisang. By picking up votes in these districts while not winning as many district seats, the TRC would thus have a better chance at qualifying for party-list seats without being penalized for the constituency seats won by Pheu Thai. The two parties hoped that by coordinating campaigns, they would be able to overcome the institutional hurdles in the new constitution.

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[24] *Post Today*, "'Muea rao tang ma laeo ko tong khum hai dai' Bik Bom manchai khum SW. dai ['When we have appointed them we must be able to control them' Big Bom confident he can control the senate]," 13 March 2019.

[25] Two additional smaller parties, Pheu Chart and Pheu Tham, were linked to Pheu Thai. These parties also served as a safety mechanism in case the government or courts dissolved Pheu Thai as happened to PPP in 2008. Teeranai Charuvastra, "Pheu Thai readies backup party in case it's dissolved," *Khao Sod English*, 27 September 2018.

More surprising for the junta was the rapid growth and popularity of the staunchly anti-junta Future Forward party (FFP), whose strategy focused on obtaining party-list seats. Headed by the auto-parts scion Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, it espoused liberal democratic ideas with a special emphasis on opposing military rule. The party became particularly popular among younger Thais, and its social media presence quickly eclipsed most other parties, allowing it to capture a great deal of anti-junta feeling as well as antipathy toward traditional clientelistic politics despite limited political networks.[26]

While the junta found a few friends among the new political parties, such as Suthep Thaugsuban's Action Coalition for Thailand, these were relatively small in number. Many alternative political parties adopted a wait-and-see approach, refusing to openly declare themselves pro- or anti-junta until after the election in order to maximize their bargaining power during cabinet formation. These included regionally-based Bhumjai Thai and Chartthaipattana. The Democrat party, traditionally conservative and more than willing to work with military governments in the past, had both pro-Prayuth and anti-Prayuth factions, but its leader, Abhisit Vejjajjiva, indicated that the party would neither support a Prayuth government nor would it join an alliance with Pheu Thai. However he left the door open to joining a coalition with PPRP.[27] Thus, a significant block of parties were noncommittal about how they would behave after the election; if PPRP did well, it could expect their support, but if the tides were against it, it would likely struggle to build a coalition.

With few parties explicitly on their side and the opposition adapting to their institutional engineering, the junta and its allies felt the need to ensure that the PPRP would receive sufficient parliamentary support to retain Prayuth as prime minister.[28] In 2017, Prayuth began a series of mobile cabinet meetings that bore eerie resemblance to political rallies. During these meetings, which occurred at least monthly, Prayuth traveled to locations around the country and staged gatherings with local leaders as well as the public. The general would observe development projects and speak to people about his government's policy efforts in the area, frequently engaging in public relations antics and photo opportunities, such as riding on tractors, taking part in the rice harvest, or talking to farm animals. Opposition politicians complained that these mobile cabinet meetings served the same purpose as campaigning and thus granted the general an unfair advantage, especially since political parties were under a strict prohibition against

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[26] Aim Sinpeng, "Campaigning without vote canvassers," *Thai Data Points* (blog), 19 June 2019, https://tinyurl.com/yycb8mjw.

[27] Teeranai Charuvastra, "Abhisit rules out voting for Prayuth," *Khao Sod English*, 11 March 2019.

[28] Thaikanot Trisuwan, "Luak tang 2562: chak "phaendinwaikanmuang" thung "ratprahangprasatsai" [2019 Election: From "political earthquake" to "sand castle coup"], *BBC Thai,* 6 March 2019.

politicking. Even the junta's sympathizers, like the *Thai Post*, struggled to make the distinction between Prayuth's behaviour and campaigning; on August 16, 2018, four months before campaigning was allowed, the paper ran a headline declaring, "Prayuth Campaigns in the Capital (*Prayuth Hasiang Mueangkrung*)." The EC vindicated the government, arguing that the mobile cabinet meetings were part of Prayuth's administrative duties as prime minister and thus were justified.

Beyond Prayuth, supporters of the PPRP were allowed to engage in de facto political activities in the months prior to the end of the ban on political activities. The "Three Friends (*sammit*)" group, a set of core junta supporters, maintained themselves independent from the PPRP until November 2018, despite obviously acting to support the PPRP and the junta. Throughout 2018, the group visited many Pheu Thai politicians encouraging them to abandon the party and run on the PPRP ticket. They also conducted what many construed to be campaign activities, which the junta sanctioned, explaining that the Three Friends were not members of a political party.[29] In other words, Prayuth and his supporters were actively courting voters long before the junta's ban on political activity was lifted, giving them a strong head start in the campaign.

Another important factor shaping outcomes was the behaviour of the EC, whose members were appointed to seven-year terms by the junta in 2018. The commission has been accused of both political bias as well as incompetence in handling the election, including complaints over inconsistent announcements about results, repeated delays, poll manipulation, and potentially miscounting ballots.[30] Beyond its decision regarding party-list seat allocation discussed above, the EC took actions that further disadvantaged the anti-junta camp, such as disqualifying a winning Pheu Thai candidate for vote-buying after he donated 2,000 baht (63 USD) to a monk during the campaign, even though monks are not allowed to vote.[31] Additionally, the commission successfully sought to block FFP's Thanathorn from being seated in parliament over concerns he had not divested his ownership of media shares in sufficient time before the election.[32]

More damaging to the anti-junta coalition was the EC's decision to seek the dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chart (TRC) party. When the TRC nominated Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya as their sole prime ministerial candidate on February 8, it set off a political earthquake. For many, the TRC's

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[29] Teeranai Charuvastra, "Pro-Junta politicians can campaign because they are not politicians: Junta," *Khaosod English,* 14 August 2018.

[30] *Bangkok Post*, "Petition to impeach EC hits 660,000 names," 26 March 2019; Jintamas Saksornchai, "Poll observers not confident election free or fair," *Khaosod English*, 24 March 2019.

[31] Jintamas Saksornchai, "By-election ordered in Chiang Mai as Pheu Thai winner disqualified," *Khaosod English*, 24 April 2019.

[32] Teeranai Charuvastra, "Court accepts case against Thanathorn, suspends MP status," *Khaosod English,* 23 May 2019.

actions signaled a move by the absent Thaksin to circumvent restrictions placed on politicians in the new constitution, as both law and custom prevent criticism of a royal, even one that had forsaken her title over 40 years prior. The attempt backfired, and that evening King Vajiralongkorn issued a public statement that Princess Ubolratana's nomination was inappropriate. All actors involved quickly aligned themselves with the king's statement, and the TRC withdrew their nomination. With unusual speed, and without providing the party an opportunity to defend itself, the EC recommend that the Constitutional Court disband the TRC. The court obliged, leaving 100 constituencies without a Pheu Thai-allied candidate, severely damaging the party's electoral strategy.

Finally, the military remained an important force throughout the run-up to the election. At the outset of his role as military dictator, Prayuth wore three hats: prime minister, head of the NCPO, as well as Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army. He stepped down as army chief during the annual reshuffle in October 2014, appointing a successor from his military faction to support him.[33] Since that time, he has retained both the prime minister's seat as well as his place as head of the NCPO. Even though he publicly declared himself no longer a soldier,[34] Prayuth continued to rely on the armed forces for political backing. The NCPO was staffed primarily by military officials and retired generals, notably two former army chiefs, General Prawit Wongsuwan and General Anupong Paochinda, who maintain strong ties throughout the armed forces. The fate of the NCPO and Prayuth have been intimately tied to the military, which remains one of the most important political actors in Thai politics.

The military's strength in politics is based in both the willingness of the top brass to engage in politics[35] as well as the army's maintenance of a power structure independent of control by politicians.[36] This degree of military independence from civilian control allows for active military officials to make public their disdain for politicians as well as act in ways that might potentially influence electoral behaviour. The current army chief General Apirat Kongsompong, himself the son of a coup-maker, made very public statements criticizing policy platforms floated by Pheu Thai and the FFP proposing cuts to military budgets and an end to conscription. Apirat further stirred controversy in the campaign by suggesting politicians and civilians should revive the nationalist and anti-communist song "*nak phaendin* (scum of the earth)" in opposition to the policy proposals; the song has long been

[33] Prayuth's faction dominated held the army chief position until late 2016. See Chambers, "What if."

[34] Mongkol Bangprapa, "Prayuth 'no longer a soldier,'" *Bangkok Post,* 4 January 2018.

[35] Punchada Sirivunnabood and Jacob Ricks, "Professionals and soldiers: Measuring professionalism in the Thai military," *Pacific Affairs* 89, no. 1 (2016): 23–24, 26–28.

[36] Chambers and Napisa "The resilience," 426–430; Ricks, "Agents, principals," 334–336.

recognized as a propaganda tool to dehumanize opponents of the military.[37] A few weeks later, Apirat led a publicized ceremony wherein almost 800 military officers pledged themselves to the institution of the monarchy, suggesting that the military would remain independent from civilian control. After the pledge, the army chief passed a certificate of appreciation to a soldier who had been chastised by an anti-military politician for shadowing him during electioneering.[38] Apirat also filed a defamation charge against the politician. Multiple politicians further complained that soldiers had raided their homes during the campaign.[39]

The military's behaviour fueled speculation that it would not accept a loss for the PPRP at the polls. A candidate for the pro-military Action Coalition of Thailand party publicly stated via Facebook only four days before the election that if the anti-military parties were successful during the vote, another coup would follow.[40] Combined with the actions of the generals, such statements appear credible, and General Apirat, who will be in his position until retirement in late 2020, has refused to rule out staging another coup.[41]

In sum, the military junta rewrote Thailand's electoral system to disadvantage the Pheu Thai party and favor Prayuth's return as prime minister. The junta also included the insurance mechanism of an appointed senate to guarantee that elected politicians would be unable to form a government without extensive oversight. Not trusting the institutions alone, Prayuth and his supporters spent at least a year before the ballot drumming up electoral support. The junta-appointed EC additionally made multiple decisions that constrained the prospects of anti-junta parties. Furthermore, the military expressed its support for the junta repeatedly, raising the specter of another coup before voters. Despite the open space for political competition relative to the previous four years, the outcome of the election was prescribed by the regime and was designed to facilitate a transition from direct military rule to a government headed by Prayuth and supported by the PPRP.

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[37] Wassana Nanuam and Aekarach Sattaburuth, "Apirat attacks Pheu Thai's call to cut defense budget," *Bangkok Post*, 19 February 2019; See Thongchai Winichakul, "Remembering/Silencing the traumatic past," in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos,* eds. Charles F. Keyes and Shigeharu Tanabe (New York: Routledge, 2002), 243–244.

[38] Thai PBS, "Khrang raek! PB.TB. Nam 796 Naithahan Patiyan Pokpong Chat-Kiat Thahan," 7 March 2019.

[39] Teeranai Charuvastra, "Army has sent soldiers to raid election candidate's homes," *Khaosod English*, 21 March 2019.

[40] Teeranai Charuvastra, "Pro-junta politico says coup awaits opposition win," *Khaosod English*, 20 March 2019.

[41] Pravit Rojanaphruk, "New army chief open to staging another coup," *Khaosod English*, 18 October 2018.

Election Results

Even with the advantages it had built into the constitution as well as the uneven campaign, the junta came dangerously close to losing the election. Without the EC's last-minute recalculation of the party-list seats, the anti-junta camp would have held over 250 seats in the legislature; not nearly enough to overcome the power of the senate's votes, but sufficient to force Prayuth into a situation where he would have ruled via a minority coalition. Nevertheless, the general emerged victorious. Within a few weeks after results were finalized, the fence-sitting Bhumjai Thai, Chartthaipattana, and Democrat parties joined the PPRP-led coalition of 19 parties, and Prayuth was appointed prime minister on June 11. While the outcome was as expected, electoral results in table 1 provide additional insights on the Thai electorate.

First, the PPRP did much better with voters than most observers had predicted; the party won over 8 million votes, making it the largest vote-getter in the contest. Its declared allies, however, did quite poorly, with the largest alternate pro-junta party (Action Coalition for Thailand) winning barely over 1 percent of the vote. Even so, these results mean that approximately one-quarter of Thai voters chose parties whose explicit purpose was to retain the junta. While troubling for pro-democracy advocates, this is consistent with opinion surveys that find a significant minority of the Thai population is supportive of military rule.[42] PPRP was able to capitalize on this segment of the population.

Second, as with every election since 2001, a Thaksin-linked party won the most parliamentary seats of any party. Due to the new electoral system, however, all of Pheu Thai's seats came from single-member districts, meaning it failed to garner any party-list seats, which precluded its prime ministerial candidates, Sudarat Keyuraphan and Chaikasem Nitisiri, from obtaining parliamentary seats.[43] The party lost a significant number of votes compared to its 2011 showing, resulting in 129 fewer parliamentary seats. Some of this could be explained by the change in electoral rules as well as Pheu Thai's arrangement ceding 100 constituencies to the disbanded TRC,[44] but it also reflected the fact that five years of military rule and the self-imposed exiles of Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra left the party less influential than it once was. Even so, controlling 27 percent of parliamentary seats, despite the disadvantages the party faced, is a testament to its appeal to large swaths of the Thai population.

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[42] Jacob Ricks, "The PPRP's shock victory: Public support for military governance in Thailand," *Thai Data Points* (blog), 21 March 2019, https://tinyurl.com/y4xb7dly; See also Erik Martinez Kuhonta and Aim Sinpeng, "Democratic regression in Thailand: The ambivalent role of civil society and political institutions," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36, no. 3 (2014): 338–339.

[43] A third candidate, Chatchart Sitthiphan, declined to run for a parliamentary seat. Candidates for the premiership did not need to be members of parliament, a provision presumably to make way for Prayuth.

[44] Joel Selway and Allen Hicken, "The Thai Raksa Chart penalty," *Thai Data Points* (blog), 29 May 2019, https://tinyurl.com/y3oo7vuz.

Table 1
Thailand's 2019 electoral results and parliamentary seat counts

Political Party	Total Vote Count	Vote share	District Seats	Party-List Seats	Total Seat Count
Phalang Pracharat	8,441,274	23.74	97	19	116
Pheu Thai*	7,881,006	22.16	136	-	136
Future Forward*	6,330,619	17.80	31	50	81
Democrat	3,959,358	11.13	33	20	53
Bhumjai Thai	3,734,459	10.50	39	12	51
Seri Ruam Thai*	824,284	2.32	-	10	10
Chartthaipattana	783,689	2.20	6	4	10
New Economics*	486,273	1.37	-	6	6
Prachachart *	481,490	1.35	6	1	7
Pheu Chart*	421,412	1.19	-	5	5
Action Coalition for Thailand	415,585	1.17	1	4	5
Chart Pattana	244,990	0.69	1	2	3
Phalang Thongthin Thai	214,189	0.60	-	3	3
Forest Conservation Party	134,816	0.38	-	2	2
Thai People Power Party*	80,186	0.23	-	1	1
Thai Nation Power Party	73,421	0.21	-	1	1
Pracha Piwat	69,431	0.19	-	1	1
Phalang Thai Rak Thai	60,434	0.17	-	1	1
Thai Civilization	60,354	0.17	-	1	1
Thai Teachers for People	56,633	0.16	-	1	1
Pracha Niyom	56,264	0.16	-	1	1
Prachatham Thai	48,037	0.14	-	1	1
People Reform	45,420	0.13	-	1	1
Thai Citizen Party	44,961	0.13	-	1	1
New Democracy	39,260	0.11	-	1	1
New Palang Dharma	35,099	0.10	-	1	1
Total	**35,561,556**		**350**	**150**	**500**

Note: Parties in the anti-junta opposition are marked with an asterisk; the remaining 19 parties joined the PPRP coalition.
Source: Election Commission of Thailand.

Third, the FFP outpaced expectations, winning over 6 million votes and becoming the third-largest party in parliament. Pheu Thai's misfortunes likely helped boost the FFP's results. Some of its constituency wins came in locations where the TRC's dissolution shifted anti-junta votes to the FFP, but the FFP also captured a groundswell of disaffection with Prayuth and the status quo. Conservative forces quickly targeted the FFP as dangerous, piling multiple court cases up against party members,[45] including the accusation that led to Thanathorn being disqualified from sitting in parliament.[46] Nevertheless, the party's strong showing is one of the election's major success stories.

Finally, the Democrat party became the election's biggest loser. Despite the party's history of close ties with the military, Abhisit Vejjajjiva had tried to steer the Democrats away from the PPRP, and in the final days of the election declared himself opposed to Prayuth's continued role as prime minister.[47] Abhisit was unable, though, to completely turn to the anti-junta camp, as many Democrats favoured military intervention and any alliance with Pheu Thai was unacceptable to both sides. The party haemorrhaged voters, leaving it with one-third of its 2011 parliamentary seats. After the election, the heavily-diminished Democrats chose to join the pro-junta coalition, and Abhisit, who had survived as party leader despite losing elections in 2007 and 2011 and presiding over a bloody crackdown against protestors in 2010, resigned his position as party leader and his parliamentary seat in ignominious defeat.

In sum, the results show that the junta's constitutional engineering combined with its five years in power has successfully diminished the two parties, Pheu Thai and Democrat, who had dominated parliament from 2001 to 2014.[48] At the same time, the election served as a referendum on the military's rule, with the population sharply divided.[49] On the one hand, the pro-military forces represent at least one-quarter of Thai voters; on the other, the anti-military camp obtained almost half of all votes. The remaining votes were claimed by regionally-based and opportunistic parties, who were poised to choose whichever side could grant them cabinet positions.

Conclusion

General Prayuth now heads a coalition of 19 political parties as he continues his role as Thailand's leader. The junta's constitutional engineering and

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[45] Patpicah Tanakasempipat, "Thailand's rising political star charged with sedition," *Reuters*, 6 April 2019; Kas Chanwanpen, "Another Future Forward MP comes under scrutiny," *The Nation*, 11 June 2019.

[46] *Bangkok Post*, "Court suspends Thanathorn from MP," 23 May 2019.

[47] Teeranai, "Abhisit."

[48] By Pheu Thai I also mean its predecessors TRT (2001–2006) and PPP (2007–2008).

[49] Prajak Kongkirati, "From illiberal democracy to military authoritarianism: Intra-elite struggle and mass-based conflict in deeply polarized Thailand," *Annals AAPSS*, 681, no. 1 (2019): 33–37.

efforts to shape the election were successful in achieving the immediate goal of retaining the prime minister's office. Prayuth may even be able to claim some legitimacy in the fact that the PPRP received the largest vote share of any party, and the PPRP's stronger-than-expected showing will likely embolden conservative forces. At the same time, it is certain Prayuth will encounter greater challenges than he faced as junta chief due to his fragmented coalition and strong parliamentary opposition. Indeed, in successfully sidelining Pheu Thai, the junta may have also designed a parliament that could quickly become unmanageable. The win could thus turn out to be ephemeral, requiring the regime to rely more heavily on the appointed senate or even the military for support.

With that in mind, it is important to remember that the election was not a democratization event, nor has it healed the deep divisions in Thai society. Instead, it was part of the continuing effort by conservative forces in Thailand to preserve their position at the top of a historical social hierarchy that has deep roots in the military rule of the 1950s to 1970s. Elements of a pyramidal social order have been embedded in a paternalistic ideal of "Thai-style democracy," wherein certain segments of society, especially "good men (*phu di* or *khon di*)" who are often military officials or government bureaucrats, are believed to provide better governance and have more intrinsic rights to rule than elected politicians.[50] This approach to politics continues to hold sway among conservative Thai elites, evidenced in the NCPO's behaviour.[51] It also runs directly counter to tenets of representative democracy, which have presented a threat to advocates of Thai-style democracy since the brief democratic episode of 1973–1976. Indeed, the reaction by conservative forces to the FFP, pursuing multiple court cases against party leaders based on relatively minor infractions, is in response to this threat.

General Prayuth's election was a victory for advocates of Thai-style democracy thanks to the junta's ability to appoint their allies to important positions and their control over electoral rules. Even so, the contest over the foundations of Thai political society will continue, as the military and its allies struggle to maintain power in light of increasing pressure for equal representation from growing segments of the Thai population. The 2019 election did little to resolve the conflict.

Singapore Management University, Singapore, June 2019

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[50] Kevin Hewison and Kengkij Kitirianglarp, "Thai-Style Democracy: The Royalist Struggle for Thailand's Politics," in *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand,* eds. Soren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010), 186–189; Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 98–109.

[51] Hewison, "Contestation," 57–60.