

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 30 May 2023

Headline: Commentary: Though the Thai election's done and dusted, political uncertainty remains

Commentary: Though the Thai election's done and dusted, political uncertainty remains

Pita Limjaroenrat's Move Forward Party may have won the Thai general election, but the party still faces several hurdles that threaten Pita's chance at the prime minister's chair, says Associate Professor Jacob Ricks.



There's a Thai proverb - "flee a tiger only to find a crocodile" - that describes a situation in Thai politics in the aftermath of this month's elections aptly. After the progressive anti-junta Move Forward Party's electoral victory on May 14, tigers and crocodiles abound.

In Thailand's second general election since the 2014 coup, Move Forward captured the largest number of parliamentary seats (152) based on unofficial Election Commission numbers, edging out its opposition ally Pheu Thai (141 seats).

The two parties' combined 293 seats dominate the seats won by parties supporting the former junta chief-turned-prime minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha and his ally General Prawit Wongsuwan. Their parties received much weaker support than expected, with only 36 and 40 seats respectively. For fans of Thai democracy, this was a long-overdue win.

On May 18, Pita Limjaroenrat, leader of Move Forward and its sole prime ministerial candidate, announced an agreement between eight parties to form a coalition government encompassing 313 parliamentarians. In most countries, this clear and convincing majority in the 500-seat lower house would provide an obvious mandate for Move Forward to form a government.

But not in Thailand.

THE BATTLE IS NOT OVER

Under the 2017 Constitution, which was designed by the 2014 coup group to ensure its continued control in determining the country's leadership, both the 500-seat House of

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 30 May 2023

Headline: Commentary: Though the Thai election's done and dusted, political uncertainty remains

Representatives and the 250-seat junta-appointed Senate vote for prime minister - meaning that Pita must assemble an overwhelming 376 votes.

This is a difficult task. Despite winning the largest share of parliamentary seats and initially announcing a coalition in the 2019 election, the Pheu Thai party was unable to form a government.

Instead, Prayut became prime minister after the junta-appointed Election Commission allocated party list seats away from large parties to a series of small parties that supported the coup-maker.

While circumstances are different today, multiple dangers abound for Move Forward, threatening Pita's chance at the prime minister's chair. Before any vote for prime minister occurs, the Election Commission has 60 days to verify the election's official results. During the coming weeks, the Election Commission expects to receive more than 2,000 complaints of potential electoral violations.

If the Election Commission determines electoral rules were broken, new elections could be held in some districts. A shift in seat numbers could reduce or erase Move Forward's narrow lead over Pheu Thai or weaken the coalition.

ADDITIONAL HINDRANCE

The Election Commission is also considering a complaint against Pita over ownership of shares in the now-defunct iTV broadcasting corporation, which he inherited from his father. Holding shares in a media company could violate electoral laws, which would mean Pita would be ineligible to hold political office.

A similar charge brought down Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit in 2019, who led the Future Forward party, Move Forward's predecessor.

The Election Commission will likely decide in the coming weeks whether to forward Pita's case to the conservative Constitutional Court, which could result in a conviction and ban from political office. As Move Forward nominated only Pita for the prime minister's seat, this result could dash hopes that the party would be able to head the government.

Pheu Thai, the second-place party which nominated three candidates for prime minister, could potentially step in and lead the coalition, provided it does not run afoul of the Election Commission.

INSUFFICIENT SUPPORT FROM THE SENATE

These considerations aside, obtaining 376 votes in the combined legislature remains elusive. As the Senate was hand-picked by a committee headed by General Prawit, most senators are expected to only support a prime ministerial candidate approved by the former junta chiefs.

While the Move Forward coalition will enjoy a strong majority in the lower house, the party does not have sufficient support to bypass the Senate.

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 30 May 2023

Headline: Commentary: Though the Thai election's done and dusted, political uncertainty remains

Many senators have expressed opposition to Move Forward's progressive stance on reforming Section 112 of the penal code, or the lese-majeste law. Move Forward's coalition partners have demanded that the party moderate its policy goals, and potential extra-coalition votes are also reportedly contingent on Move Forward abandoning its plans on Section 112.

If Pita is unable to gather sufficient support, the prime ministership could fall into the hands of Pheu Thai - and Thai media has speculated that a Pheu Thai government may be willing to drop Move Forward from its coalition to secure senate support.

If Pita becomes prime minister, he would still face extreme antagonism from conservative sectors of Thai society who are infuriated by Move Forward's commitments to reform the military and repeal Section 112.



At a United Thai Nation rally in Bangkok on May 12, former deputy prime minister Trairong Suwankiri declared to cheers from the crowd that Thailand's true enemies are Thais who don't respect the three institutions of nation, religion and monarchy - a thinly veiled reference to Move Forward.

Accusations that Move Forward is too progressive or a threat to the military and monarchic institutions feed speculation of another coup. Though army chief General Narongpan Jitkaewthae publicly declared there would be no coup prior to the election, Prayut made the exact same promise when he was Army chief in 2014.

Even if Pita successfully survives these threats, it will likely be quite some time before he is able to breathe easily in this political scene.

Jacob Ricks is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Singapore Management University (SMU). This commentary first appeared on East Asia Forum.

Publication: CNA Online

Date: 30 May 2023

Headline: Commentary: Though the Thai election's done and dusted, political uncertainty remains

Source: Others/fl