

# Anatomy: Future Backward

---

---

DUNCAN McCARGO

*The most popular man in Thailand appears out of the bushes on Thammasat University campus, dripping with sweat and with no staff in sight: Future Forward leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit is promptly mobbed by fans clamouring for selfies and autographs. Voters on Bangkok's Charoenkrung Road look delighted to see a former prime minister out on the campaign trail: eager to show off his fitness, Abhisit Vejjajiva practically runs up some footbridge steps, leaving the local candidate panting behind. A Pheu Thai candidate asks a village crowd in Ubon Ratchathani to raise their hands if they are better off now than they were five years ago: everyone roars with laughter at a woman who puts her hand up by mistake, since nobody could possibly be better off. In Pattani, thousands of people stay until midnight at a football ground to hear prominent speakers from the Prachachart Party. No big outdoor rallies like this have been held after dark in the three insurgency-affected southern border provinces since 2004.*

The weeks leading up to the 24 March 2019 elections were a time of excitement; after almost five years of military rule following the 22 May 2014 coup d'état, Thais were finally free to express themselves politically. Around 51 million people were eligible to vote, while a record total of 80 political parties and 13,310 candidates from across the ideological spectrum were listed on their ballot papers. The polls, which generated immense enthusiasm among Thai voters, were full of sudden twists and dramatic surprises.

---

DUNCAN McCARGO is Director of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and Professor of Political Science, University of Copenhagen. Postal address: Øster Farimagsgade 5, DK-1353 Copenhagen K, Denmark; email: duncan@nias.ku.dk.

The campaign excitement and sense of freedom that preceded the elections proved entirely illusory. The ruling junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), had no real intention of handing over power to an elected parliament: their plan was to craft malleable rules of the electoral game; to create a well-funded political machine that could become a major vote-winner around which to craft a ruling coalition; and to use a range of legal and judicial mechanisms to thwart the aspirations of opposition parties. The NCPO's goal was a new mode of electoral authoritarian rule, in the guise of restoring Thailand to parliamentary democracy.

These elections need to be viewed as three phases: the extensive stage-setting undertaken between May 2014 and March 2019; the February-March election campaign itself; and the convoluted electoral aftermath, culminating in the declarations of the results in May, the re-appointment of General Prayut as prime minister in June, followed finally by the formation of the new cabinet in July.

The main focus of this Roundtable is on the election campaign, but some context on the pre-election phase is required. Both the 1991 and 2006 military coups were accompanied by early promises of elections within a year, and elections did indeed take place after 13 and 15 months respectively. In contrast, the NCPO disdained legal niceties—initially ruling without even announcing an interim constitution, a prime minister or a government—and was distinctly reluctant to specify a timeline for a return to parliamentary governance. Promised elections were delayed six times, and only finally held almost five years after the NCPO seized power.<sup>1</sup> When the junta did agree to set up a constitution-drafting assembly under distinguished jurist Bowornsak Uwanno, the generals were unhappy with the resulting 2015 charter—with its emphasis on conservative notions of citizens' empowerment—and promptly killed it off.<sup>2</sup> The subsequent 2017 Constitution deployed the rarely-used and confusing Multi-Member Apportionment (MMA) electoral system. As Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit explained:

Instead of voters casting two separate votes, one for a candidate and one for a party list, under MMA voters will cast a single, fused ballot for a candidate (Section 80). That vote will count as both a vote for the candidate, and simultaneously a vote for that candidate's party for purposes of the party list seats. The total number of votes a party receives nationwide via this single

vote will determine the total share of seats a party is entitled to (Section 86). Party list seats will be added to a party's constituency seats until this total is reached (Section 86).<sup>3</sup>

In practice, the main effects of MMA were to curb the dominance of large parties and to favour medium-sized ones. Under an additional interim provision, the prime minister was to be selected jointly by the elected lower house and an appointed Senate.

These two changes together had been deliberately crafted to block the long dominant Pheu Thai Party from winning future elections, or determining the premiership. From the outset, the NCPO had been intent upon "restoring national happiness" by ending the decade of political polarization that had culminated in the Shutdown Bangkok anti-government protests of 2013–14. Since 2005, Thais had been caught up in colour-coded antagonisms: the yellow side (pro-military, pro-monarchy, pro-Democrat Party) had repeatedly clashed with the red side (pro-Thaksin, anti-military, pro-Pheu Thai), both on the streets and at the ballot box; there had been two military coups, five general elections (two of them later annulled) and five rounds of massive demonstrations. The junta's approach to curbing polarization focused on ending the political influence of controversial former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who had been ousted from power in 2006 but even in exile continued to dominate the country's politics. Just how difficult life would become for the anti-military side, very few people realized.

What became the 2017 Constitution was ratified in a popular referendum that took place on 7 August 2016. The referendum was troubling in various ways: the junta suppressed critical arguments and debate about the draft constitution; the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) worked to promote a yes vote, rather than acting as a neutral arbiter; and many voters simply assented to the new Constitution, knowing it was flawed, but blindly assuming it would pave the way for a return to representative politics as usual.<sup>4</sup> Compared with the referendum on the military-drafted 2007 Constitution, 2016 saw a marked decline in the "no" vote in parts of the North and Northeast, while the "yes" vote dropped by around 10 per cent even in the largely pro-junta Upper South—testifying to a subtle fall in levels of polarization, or perhaps simply to a growing weariness with Thailand's colour-coded political antagonisms.

The 2016 referendum was a dry run for the elections that followed two and a half years later. Again, the NCPO viewed the polls as a distasteful necessity: Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha expressed constant irritation when pressed for an election date. Restrictions on political activity—including the ban on gatherings of five or more individuals—were only lifted in December 2018, and opposition parties continued to face harassment during the campaign period. The ECT was consistently partisan, always making decisions that favoured the junta, such as failing promptly to address allegations that state agencies had sponsored a massive fund-raising dinner for the junta-aligned Palang Pracharat Party.<sup>5</sup>

A number of new parties emerged during the year-long run-up to the polls, hoping to take advantage of the MMA system.<sup>6</sup> Both the pro- and anti-military sides recognized that their best hope of forming a government was to line up a number of potential coalition partners.

Thaksin Shinawatra adopted a deliberate policy of diversification, backing the creation of the Thai Raksa Chart Party, which was tactically deployed to run candidates in constituencies where Pheu Thai had less chance of winning.<sup>7</sup> As well as winning some constituencies, Thai Raksa Chart—sporting a logo containing Thaksin’s initials—aimed to pick up enough party list votes to help an anti-military alliance form a winning coalition. The formation of an anti-military coalition had already been boosted by the launch of the new Future Forward Party in March 2018. Led by 40-year-old autoparts billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, Future Forward quickly positioned itself as the most progressive major contender in the election, building up a strong following among younger voters for its harsh criticisms of the military and ruling establishment.

The junta’s plan was to create a large, catch-all party—shades of the pro-military Sammakhi Tham Party created in advance of the March 1992 elections—and recruit electoral candidates with well-established canvasser networks by giving them financial incentives to switch party. It was an open secret that the resulting Palang Pracharat Party was backed by state agencies and local officials; and campaigned on the basis of the junta’s patronage-based “Pracharat” policies, which the well-funded party pledged to continue and expand.<sup>8</sup> Palang Pracharat planned to nominate General Prayut to continue as prime minister with the help of the

appointed Senate, enticing small and medium-sized parties to join the ruling coalition.

The biggest surprises of the 2019 elections involved the monarchy. The upstart Thai Raksa Chart imploded with unprecedented drama on 8 February 2019, after announcing that the party's candidate for the post of prime minister was none other than Princess Ubolratana Mahidol, the eldest child of the late King Bhumibol. Accepting the premiership nomination, Ubolratana insisted that she was a commoner: she officially lost her royal status on marrying an American in 1972, though in practice she continued to be widely regarded as a member of the royal family. Controversially, Ubolratana is closely linked to Thaksin Shinawatra. Ubolratana's nomination was initially hailed by Thaksin supporters as a masterstroke—how could General Prayut run against her?—but was ridiculed on social media by furious royalists. Both red euphoria and yellow outrage faded by nightfall, when the King issued an unprecedented royal proclamation declaring that his sister's candidacy was inappropriate. Thai Raksa Chart was dissolved shortly afterwards by the Constitutional Court, citing “customary law”, thus upending Thaksin's game plan to create an anti-Prayut coalition. The dissolution was a huge blow to the anti-military parties.

Unfazed by this royal rebuke, Thaksin organized a spectacular wedding reception for his daughter in Hong Kong on 22 March—just two days before the election—and invited Ubolratana to preside over the ceremony. Apparently unhappy at the continuing Thaksin–Ubolratana connection, the King issued another late-night statement the following day, this time calling on Thais to vote for “good people”—an implicit reference to candidates aligned with the ruling junta. Thaksin's double Ubolratana *faux pas*—the premiership nomination and the wedding reception—did not win Pheu Thai any votes, and helped drive many erstwhile Democrat supporters into the arms of Palang Pracharat. For Thais intent on blocking Thaksin's political rehabilitation and return to Thailand, voting for Palang Pracharat seemed the most surefire way of achieving this goal.

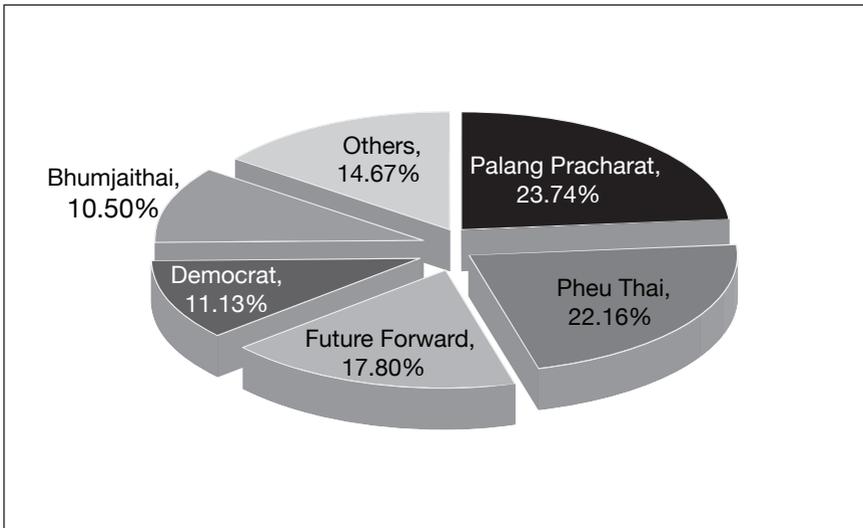
The elections saw a good turnout of 74.69 per cent. Results were expected shortly after the polls closed, but the ECT called an abrupt halt to counting on election night after it became clear that Pheu Thai would be the largest single party in the new parliament (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

Table 1  
**Results of Thailand's 24 March 2019 General Election (main parties)**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>% Vote Share</i>	<i>Constituency Seats</i>	<i>Party List Seats</i>	<i>Total Seats</i>
Palang Pracharat	8,441,274	23.74	97	19	116
Pheu Thai	7,881,006	22.16	136	0	136
Future Forward	6,330,617	17.80	31	50	81
Democrats	3,959,358	11.13	33	20	53
Bhumjaithai	3,734,459	10.50	39	12	51
Seri Ruam Thai	824,284	2.32	0	10	10
Chart Thai Pattana	783,689	2.20	6	4	10
New Economics	486,273	1.37	0	6	6
Prachachart	481,490	1.35	6	1	7
Pheu Chat	421,412	1.19	0	5	5
Action Coalition	415,585	1.17	1	4	5
Chart Pattana	244,770	0.69	1	2	3

*Source:* Election Commission of Thailand, Election Results, 28 May 2019, [https://www.ect.go.th/ect\\_th/download/article/article\\_20190528140635.pdf](https://www.ect.go.th/ect_th/download/article/article_20190528140635.pdf).

Figure 1  
**Thailand's 24 March 2019 General Election: Vote Share by Major Parties**



Source: Election Commission of Thailand, Election Results, 28 May 2019, [https://www.ect.go.th/ect\\_th/download/article/article\\_20190528140635.pdf](https://www.ect.go.th/ect_th/download/article/article_20190528140635.pdf).

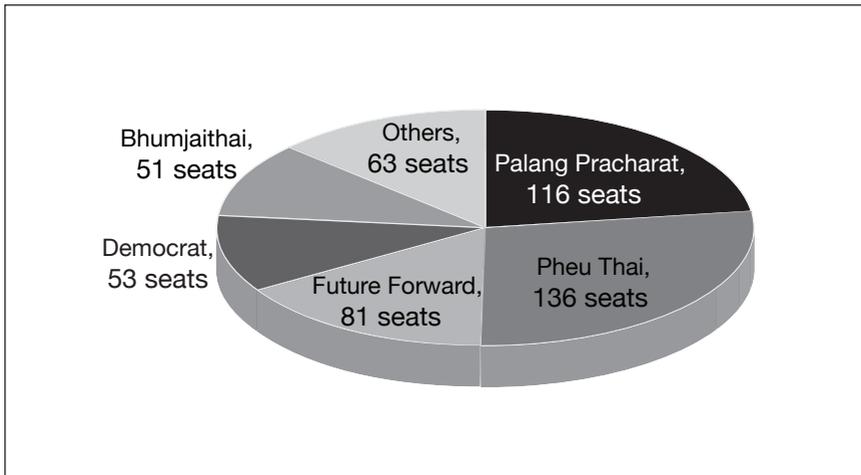
The ECT declined to announce the official results until 8 May as King Vajiralongkorn's royal coronation took place from 4 to 6 May. The initial results suggested that a "pro-democratic alliance" based on Pheu Thai and Future Forward would command the majority of house seats, but during the six-week coronation-related hiatus the ECT came up with a different method of calculating the allocation of party list seats (see Figure 2), which had the twin effects of reducing Future Forward's footprint by seven seats and awarding several party list seats to obscure "microparties".

The election results contained a number of important features:

- The reduced number of constituencies won by Pheu Thai: just 136, as against 204 in 2011.
- Pheu Thai's failure to win a single party list seat, a direct result of the bias against large parties built into MMA.
- The remarkable success of junta-affiliated Palang Pracharat in securing the largest percentage of the vote.
- Future Forward's astonishing vote-tally and resulting status as the third largest party in the new parliament.

- The partial demolition of the Democrat Party, down from 159 seats in 2011, representing a loss of nearly 5 million votes altogether.
- Bhumjaithai's success in achieving a similar vote share to 2011.
- Other new parties such as Prachachart and Action Coalition for Thailand (ACT) failed to make much of a breakthrough.

Figure 2  
**Thailand's 24 March 2019 General Election:  
 Lower House Seats by Major Parties**



Source: Election Commission of Thailand, Election Results, 28 May 2019, [https://www.ect.go.th/ect\\_th/download/article/article\\_20190528140635.pdf](https://www.ect.go.th/ect_th/download/article/article_20190528140635.pdf).

The combined votes of parties pledged to block General Prayut's return to Government House exceeded those of parties committed to supporting him. Yet Pheu Thai and Future Forward's hopes of forging an anti-military coalition soon unraveled. Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva—whose pledge to oppose General Prayut's continuing premiership backfired badly with many Democrat voters—resigned on election night, soon to be replaced by the more pragmatic Jurin Laksanawisit. Bhumjaithai and the Democrats promptly joined forces with Palang Pracharat to form the core of the new administration, along with a number of very small parties. Meanwhile, a series of tendentious legal challenges threatened the

political hopes of Thanathorn and Future Forward, only to be quickly taken up by the ECT and the courts: on 25 May, Thanathorn was suspended as a Member of Parliament (MP) right after being sworn in.<sup>9</sup> It seems only a matter of time before Future Forward, Thanathorn himself or other leading members of his party face serious legal problems that could include party dissolution or lengthy bans from holding office.

The contributors to this Roundtable offer a range of insights into what transpired during the campaign. Prajak Kongkirati's starting point is that these elections were not just about the various political parties, but were overshadowed by the constant presence of both the military and the monarchy. Anyarat Chattharakul explores another dimension of the polls: the migration of election campaigning to the realm of social media, which was widely credited with mobilizing the youth vote and engaging the interest of millions of first time voters. We then move into the close scrutiny of different regions of Thailand, starting with Petra Desatova's discussion of the duality of the Bangkok electorate, which was torn asunder between the conservative allure of Palang Pracharat and the progressive image of Future Forward. Saowanee Alexander examines how the populous, ever-pivotal Isan region continued to serve as the focal point for opposition to military rule, with Pheu Thai largely able to preserve its constituency dominance there. Chanintorn Pensute reviews developments in the North: even in the Upper North, support for parties aligned with Chiang Mai native and former premier Thaksin Shinawatra suffered a decline. Michael Montesano explores how and why longstanding support for the Democrat Party in their Upper Southern heartlands declined sharply in the 2019 elections. Daungyewa Utarasint describes a comeback for the Wadah group—largely incorporated into the new Prachachart Party—in the Deep South, where the Democrats also lost badly. Finally, Dipendra K.C., an election observer from the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) discusses his experiences of monitoring polling in the Northeast.

On the night of 24 March, the polls seemed like progress: a slim majority of voters had rejected the NCPO, and an anti-military administration looked poised to assume office. This was not to be: despite all the excitement generated by the election, the country's political establishment, closely linked to the monarchy, was determined to ensure the *de facto* continuation of the ruling junta, albeit cloaked in a new form of electoral authoritarianism. Thailand's future was not forward, but backward.

## NOTES

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of: the PhD programme at the School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds (where Anyarat, Chanintorn and Desatova studied under his supervision); United States Institute of Peace research grant SG-477-15 (which funded election fieldwork in Thailand by Desatova, McCargo and Saowanee); and the Fifth Annual Thailand Update at Columbia University sponsored by WEAI and NYSEAN (where Daungyeewa, McCargo and Prajak presented their first versions of these papers).

- <sup>1</sup> “All You Need to Know about Thai General Election 2019”, *Prachatai*, 13 February 2019, <https://prachatai.com/english/node/7927>.
- <sup>2</sup> Duncan McCargo, “Peopling Thailand’s 2015 Draft Constitution”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 37, no. 3 (December 2015): 329–54.
- <sup>3</sup> See Allen Hicken and Bangkok Pundit, “Thailand’s New Electoral System”, *Thai Data Points*, 20 March 2019, <https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/thai-election-pending-5>.
- <sup>4</sup> Duncan McCargo, Saowanee Alexander and Petra Desatova, “Ordering Peace: Thailand’s 2016 Constitutional Referendum”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, no. 1 (April 2017): 65–95.
- <sup>5</sup> See “Thailand: Structural Flaws Subvert Election”, *Human Rights Watch*, 19 March 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/19/thailand-structural-flaws-subvert-election>.
- <sup>6</sup> Duncan McCargo, “Thailand’s Changing Party Landscape”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2018/63, 12 October 2018, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2018\\_63@50.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_63@50.pdf).
- <sup>7</sup> Other Thaksin-aligned new parties included Pheu Tham and Pheu Chart: Pheu Chart won 419,121 votes and gained five party list MPs.
- <sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the meaning of “Pracharath”, see “Pracharath versus Prachaniyom: 50 Shades of Popularism”, *The Nation*, 1 October 2015, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/Pracharath-versus-prachaniyom-50-shades-of-popular-30269906.html>.
- <sup>9</sup> “Thanathorn Officially Ceases Duty After Being Sworn In”, *Bangkok Post*, 25 May 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/1683728/thanathorn-steps-aside>.

# Overview: Political Earthquakes

---

---

*PRAJAK KONGKIRATI*

Thailand's March 2019 general election was not a normal poll that involved only contesting political parties: other significant actors on the country's political scene helped shape the electoral outcome. These actors include the monarchy and the army, whose strong alliance has become the most formidable force in Thai politics.

The 8 February “political earthquake”—which saw the announcement of Princess Ubolratana's prime ministerial candidacy and its rapid retraction after the intervention of the King—showed that the so-called “network monarchy”—an influential political network of unelected members of the elite centred on the monarch—has undergone a significant transformation.<sup>1</sup> On 8 February, Thai Raksa Chart, a party allied with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, nominated former Princess Ubolratana Mahidol, daughter of the late King Bhumibol, as its prime ministerial candidate. However, that night, the King issued a proclamation stating that her candidacy was “highly inappropriate” and “violated the royal tradition” since members of the royal family were supposed to remain above politics.<sup>2</sup> The proclamation was followed by the Election Commission of Thailand's (ECT) decision to deny Ubolratana permission to run and the Constitutional Court's controversial ruling to dissolve Thai Raksa Chart over its selection of the former princess for the premiership. This shocking political deal made between Ubolratana and Thaksin—who was ousted by the military in 2006 and remains in self-imposed exile overseas—revealed the continuing influence of the former

---

PRAJAK KONGKIRATI, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, Bangkok. Postal address: Tha Prachan, Bangkok, 10200, Thailand; email: prajak@yahoo.com.

prime minister as well as the fractured condition of the network monarchy. It further indicated the new terrain of Thai politics, both institutionally and ideologically. The direct involvement of members of the royal family in electoral contests was unprecedented in Thai history. This political earthquake stirred intense public discussion on the place of the monarchy in Thai politics and the inner workings of the royal family.

The military also exerted a strong influence during the election campaign. General Apirat Kongsompong, the arch-royalist Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army (RTA), made no attempt to hide his political bias against the anti-junta political parties. When questioned about Pheu Thai's campaign pledge to cut the country's defence budget, Apirat responded by saying that "they [Pheu Thai] should listen to the song *Nak Paen Din* [burden of the land]".<sup>3</sup> *Nak Paen Din* was a propaganda song popular with Thailand's right-wing movement in the 1970s which incited violence against the student-labour-farmer progressive movement. Furthermore, at the height of the campaign, General Apirat ordered 800 senior military officials to attend a publicized oath swearing ceremony where they vowed only to "serve a government that is loyal to the monarchy".<sup>4</sup> A week after the elections, he warned that "those who graduated from abroad shouldn't bring extreme leftist ideology to topple the Thai democratic regime with the monarchy as head of state".<sup>5</sup> Although General Apirat did not single out any political party, his remarks were clearly directed at the Future Forward Party, which had campaigned strongly on an anti-military and anti-establishment platform.

Two days prior to the election, Thaksin orchestrated another symbolic political move. On 22 March, he invited Princess Ubolratana to preside over his daughter's high-profile wedding in Hong Kong, and then released photos of himself and the princess embracing each other. This so-called "Hong Kong effect" angered the establishment and conservative Thais who viewed the relationship between the exiled former prime minister and the princess as unacceptable and a deliberate provocation. A day later, and just hours before the polls opened, the King issued a rare statement urging Thai voters to elect "good people" to rule the country. Subsequently, the election commission president and RTA chief urged voters to carefully consider the King's words and follow his advice in order to maintain peace and stability.<sup>6</sup> In Thailand, "good people" is understood as code for anti-Thaksin groups and politicians. The

involvement of the monarchy, princess, military and Thaksin turned this election into a form of ideological contestation rather than a competition between alternative policy platforms.

The parties which participated in the elections can be roughly divided into three camps: pro-regime, led by the Palang Pracharat Party; anti-regime, led by Pheu Thai and Future Forward; and fence-sitting, led by the Democrat Party and Bhumjaithai. The Future Forward Party, led by the young charismatic businessman Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, is an emerging new player that has gained popularity among younger voters.

None of the three camps won a clear majority in the elections. Old parties like Pheu Thai and the Democrats struggled to retain support, whereas the new parties, Palang Pracharat and Future Forward, performed better than expected. Contradictory patterns emerged in voting behaviour and electioneering. Old methods such as vote-buying and vote canvassing were still employed, but a new mode of campaigning which relied heavily on online and social media was widely used. The regional patterns of voting witnessed in previous elections also changed: the Democrats lost many seats in the Upper South and were completely eradicated in Bangkok, while Pheu Thai lost their absolute control in the North and Northeast. Overall, the 2019 elections demonstrated that Thailand's political landscape has become much more fragmented.

The 2019 results also showed that Thai elections were no longer a two-party contest between a Thaksin-affiliated party (successively, Thai Rak Thai, Palang Prachachon and Pheu Thai) and the Democrats, as witnessed from 2001 to 2011. Elections during that decade saw these two major parties together gain over 80 per cent of parliamentary seats. This current election was more competitive: five parties (Pheu Thai, Palang Pracharat, Future Forward, the Democrats and Bhumjaithai) gained a significant number of Members of Parliament (MPs), but there was no overall winner. The seats of these five parties combined accounted for 86.8 per cent of the lower house. With 136 seats in 2019 compared to 265 seats in 2011, Pheu Thai remained the largest party but lost its hegemonic position. Overall, support for Pheu Thai decreased in almost every constituency nationwide, but the party managed to maintain firm bases of support in the North and Northeast. It is also interesting to note that the success rate of Pheu Thai was unchanged from the 2011 election: in 2011 it won 204 of the 375 constituency seats (a 54.4 per cent success rate), while in 2019 the

party won 136 of the 250 seats it contested (a 54.4 per cent success rate).<sup>7</sup> Given the uneven playing field of the election under the junta and the dissolution of Pheu Thai's sister party, Thai Raksa Chart, it is premature to conclude that Pheu Thai is a spent force.

By almost every measure, the Democrat Party was the biggest loser in this election. The party's share of the votes and seats plummeted significantly in every region, including their strongholds in the Upper South and Bangkok. The party dropped from being the second-largest party to the fourth largest for the first time in 20 years. The Democrats' equivocation as to whether they were pro- or anti-junta cost them dearly. The weak leadership of former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, together with the party's internal conflicts, caused a further decline in support for the Democrats. The results show that the Democrats lost support to both the new major parties, Palang Pracharat and Future Forward. Former conservative supporters of the Democrats found a new alternative in Palang Pracharat, while moderate and progressive supporters opted for Future Forward. The Democrats faced a serious identity crisis in this election, and it will take time for the party to reinvent itself.

The junta's proxy party, Palang Pracharat, and the vibrant Future Forward emerged as the clear winners in this election. Palang Pracharat brought on board old-style provincial bosses (*chao pho*) to establish an ad-hoc party, which stuck with well-worn strategies and tactics for gaining votes. These included the cooptation of former MPs from other political parties (Palang Pracharat succeeded in roping in 62 former MPs, 19 former ministers and one former senator from other parties); the utilization of a network of vote canvassers that relied on people of influence at the local level; the exploitation of patronage systems; and the distribution of goods and money.<sup>8</sup> Even though the party fell short of achieving its goal of 150 seats, it emerged as the largest receiver of votes and second largest receiver of seats, with 116 seats. Of the former MPs that Palang Pracharat recruited from other parties, slightly over half were re-elected.<sup>9</sup> This performance illustrated that local networks of influence, systems of patronage and state interference continue to play an important role in Thai elections. Nevertheless, Palang Pracharat comprised several rival political factions with no shared vision, and risks serious infighting during negotiations over coveted cabinet positions in the aftermath of the elections.<sup>10</sup>

The highly polarizing environment of this election benefited both Palang Pracharat and Future Forward. The campaigns of these

two newly-created parties centred primarily on their pro- and anti-regime platforms respectively. While Palang Pracharat gained support from voters who felt that the junta could provide stability and continuity, Future Forward attracted voters who wanted change. Future Forward promised to push for military reform, the elimination of business monopolies, radical decentralization and political restructuring through constitutional amendments.

Electoral results show that Future Forward performed well in Bangkok, the Central plains and the East, three of Thailand's most affluent and urbanized regions. By contrast, the party performed relatively poorly in rural constituencies for two main reasons: first, Future Forward declined to use conventional vote canvassing networks, which remain influential in rural areas; second, and related, its campaign relied heavily on social media, which was not the main communication channel in rural districts. Future Forward leaders admitted that they had not been able to penetrate lower-income and outlying areas in this election.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, their campaign strategy based on online and social media paid off. The party earned overwhelming support from younger, first-time voters, who were active users of social media and accounted for 14 per cent of eligible voters. Voting patterns and political debates during the campaign demonstrated that a new social cleavage had emerged in this election: there is now a generational divide between younger and older voters, which partially displaced the traditional rural/urban divide as the primary voter cleavage. Ironically, the repeated postponement of the general election by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) increased the number of first-time voters to the point that youth became a much more significant voting bloc, and Thai millennials found their voice and representation in Future Forward. When the King issued a statement on the eve of the election urging Thais to "vote for good people", millennials swiftly responded with a Twitter hashtag that became the top trend overnight: "We are grown-up now and can choose for ourselves."<sup>12</sup> Generational cleavages look likely to remain a crucial factor in future elections; Future Forward and Thanathorn will have the demographic advantage as conservative voters slowly age.

Looking at the new electoral map and voting patterns, the establishment and the military are fighting a two-front electoral war. In rural areas, the old elites already had to compete with Pheu Thai, which remains dominant in the North and especially the Northeast. Now they face a new political threat posed by Thanathorn, whose

Future Forward Party is immensely popular in urban areas and among the younger generation.

In combination, the effects of the new electoral system, the partisan ECT, the emergence of new parties with new ideological orientations, the electoral debut of millennials, the Thaksin–Ubolratana deal, and the involvement of the palace, army and Constitutional Court, made the 2019 elections highly volatile and convoluted.

Thai politics after the elections remains highly uncertain and unstable, which could lead to another election within a year or two, or else to street protests or another military coup. The 2019 elections mark another turning point for Thailand. Comparatively speaking, post-election Thai politics did not emulate the “Malaysia model”, where a strong coalition of opposition parties succeeded in unseating a government that had been in power for decades. But nor did Thailand emulate the “Cambodia model”, where the government of Prime Minister Hun Sen has successfully suppressed opposition parties and established an electoral authoritarian regime in which his Cambodian People’s Party is guaranteed to win elections. Thailand’s 2019 elections therefore signalled the beginning of a new round of struggles that will determine the country’s future political order under a new and untested monarch. This election did not bring about the return to a stable, democratic system, but nor did the establishment and the NCPO succeed in establishing a robust electoral authoritarian regime either.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Andrew Johnson, “New Networks in Thai Royal Politics”, *New Mandala*, 21 February 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/new-networks-in-thai-royal-politics/>.
- <sup>2</sup> See “King’s Royal Statement Says the Princess Has To Stay Above Politics”, *Matichon*, 8 February 2019, [https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news\\_1355421](https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_1355421).
- <sup>3</sup> “Decoding the Nak Pan Din song”, *Thai PBS News*, 18 February 2018, <https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/27781>.
- <sup>4</sup> “Apirat Presides Over the Oath Swearing Ceremony in Front of Rama 5 Statute”, *Thairath Online*, 7 March 2019, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/1513050>.
- <sup>5</sup> “Army Chief’s Comments A Threat to Democracy: Scholars”, *The Nation*, 3 April 2019, <https://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/politics/30367023>.
- <sup>6</sup> “King Urges Voters to Elect ‘Good People’”, *The Nation*, 24 March 2019, <https://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/national/30366391>.
- <sup>7</sup> Joel Selway and Allen Hicken, “The Fate of Pheu Thai in the 2019 Elections”, *Thai Data Points*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.thaيداتاپoints.com/post/the-fate-of-pheu-thai-in-the-2019-elections>.

- <sup>8</sup> See Prajak Kongkirati, “Palang Pracharat Party: Can Old Tricks Win in a New Political Landscape?”, *New Mandala*, 23 March 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/palang-pracharat-party-can-old-tricks-win-in-a-new-political-landscape/>.
- <sup>9</sup> Thirty-five Palang Pracharat candidates who defected from other parties won elections, while 32 failed and 15 defectors decided not to run. The author acknowledges Hataikarn Treesuwan for compiling this information.
- <sup>10</sup> Prajak Kongkirati, “Haunted Past, Uncertain Future: The Fragile Transition to Military-Guided Semi-Authoritarianism in Thailand”, in *Southeast Asian Affairs*, edited by Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), pp. 363–76.
- <sup>11</sup> Author interviews with Future Forward Party members, 18 April and 10 May 2019. The party allocated most of their time and resources to campaign in Bangkok and urban districts. As a result, they won nine seats in Bangkok with the highest number of popular votes and secured electoral success in Constituency 1 (the urban district) in almost every province, except in the South.
- <sup>12</sup> See Duncan McCargo, “We Are Grown-Up Now and Can Choose for Ourselves”, *New York Times*, 29 March 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/opinion/thailand-election-thanathorn-future-forward-youth-vote.html>.

# Social Media: Hashtag #Futurista

---

---

ANYARAT CHATTHARAKUL

The Thai elections on 24 March 2019 witnessed two new game-changing factors: first-time voters and the impact of social media. Approximately 7.4 million people aged between 18 and 25 were eligible to cast their ballot for the first time; many of them felt no loyalty to existing political parties.<sup>1</sup> These first-time voters had grown up in a period of political turmoil and societal conflicts, including the 2006 and 2014 coups and five rounds of major street protests. The turbulence of 2006–14 was followed by five tightly-controlled years under the junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). Moreover, the NCPO era was overshadowed by collective social uncertainty during the *fin-de-siècle* years of His Majesty King Rama IX and the onset of King Rama X's reign from late 2016. Against the backdrop of Thailand's political turmoil, social media and online communications become ubiquitous. Although a large urban–rural divide in the use of computers and tablets remains, smartphone usage is popular in both urban and rural areas.<sup>2</sup> This provides an environment for direct communications between politicians and voters, as well as among voters, via social media platforms, without the complication of middlemen and physical locations.

The electoral success of the newly-established Future Forward Party surprised political practitioners and observers alike. Future Forward won 31 constituencies and 50 party-list seats, as well as 6,330,617 votes nationwide, making them the third most popular party in the elections.<sup>3</sup> The Future Forward campaign team, the Thai media and political observers broadly agree that the party owed its electoral success to the youthful image of its leader, Thanathorn

---

ANYARAT CHATTHARAKUL, PhD, is an independent scholar based in Amsterdam. Email: [achattharakul@gmail.com](mailto:achattharakul@gmail.com).

Juangroongruangkit, combined with the effective use of social media and virtual campaigning, allowing it to draw votes from the younger generation and first-time voters. This article is a preliminary attempt to give the reader a flavour of the social media campaign during the 2019 Thai elections, with a focus on Future Forward's phenomenal success. More in-depth field research is needed, however, to understand the effect of social media campaigns on Thailand's political evolution.

Thai electoral politics has been heavily based on networks of vote-canvassers who have acted as middle men between politicians and voters during and outside of election campaigns, fostering reciprocal patronage relationships.<sup>4</sup> From the outset, Future Forward indicated that it would not rely on vote-canvassers, vote-buying or patronage to gain votes. Rejecting the use of vote-canvassing networks for ideological reasons, the party opted to use social media and online communication as its main campaign tools. Throughout the campaign, Future Forward recruited core supporters—dubbed “Futuristas”—to act as their canvassers. These Futuristas shared Future Forward's manifesto and leader's speeches online, as well as engaged their parents, relatives and friends offline to vote for the party.

A quick glance at the 2019 election statistics seems to suggest that Future Forward is a youth party whose 6.33 million votes nationwide came largely from the 7.3 million first-time voters.<sup>5</sup> Future Forward, however, insists that its members and supporters are drawn from various age groups.<sup>6</sup> To verify this claim, the author conducted post-election voice call interviews with 56 persons drawn from 20 families from various constituencies in Bangkok. The 20 families are composed of a father and/or mother who are older than 50, and their children aged between 19 and 32. Nine of these families had voted for the Pheu Thai Party in the 2014 elections. The other 11 families would have voted for the Democrat Party in the 2014 elections, but abstained when the Democrats decided to boycott the polls.

For the families that had previously voted for Pheu Thai, all nine sets of children voted for Future Forward, with five sets being first-time voters. Out of the remaining four sets of children who were not first-time voters, two sets had previously voted for Pheu Thai in 2014 and one had boycotted the elections because of the Democrat Party's decision not to run. The fourth set did not vote in the 2014 elections because they were studying overseas at the time. Furthermore, among the nine sets of parents, four voted again for

Pheu Thai in 2019, although the remaining five followed the lead of their children and shifted their allegiance to Future Forward.

Of the eleven families that were Democrat supporters in 2014, only one set of parents continued to vote for the Democrat Party. Their two sons—who were first-time voters—also voted for the Democrats. Seven sets of parents shifted their allegiance and voted for the pro-military party, Palang Pracharat, as did their children, including the first-time voters. Two sets of parents and their children voted for Future Forward. One set of parents chose not to vote due to their disappointment with Thai politics in general, while their children voted for Future Forward.<sup>7</sup>

While this sample is far from representative, it suggests that while Future Forward voters were indeed drawn from various age groups, they mainly comprised former Pheu Thai supporters and young or first-time voters. In addition, however, some Future Forward voters were disillusioned with former Democrats. In some cases, children were able to persuade their parents to switch to Future Forward. Most Democrat supporters shifted their vote to Palang Pracharat because they did not want former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's proxies to regain power, preferring instead to see General Prayut Chan-ocha continue as prime minister. The sample suggests that ideological polarization persists within Thai society: conservatives versus liberals, the rich versus the poor, and Red Shirts versus Yellow Shirts.

Future Forward used Facebook as its key platform to communicate with voters, while Twitter provided a platform for candidates and voters to build a sense of collective identity and establish virtual relationships. While Instagram was used largely for personal communication, first-time voters mainly turned to Twitter to speak their minds and react to social and political issues that were “trending” at the time.<sup>8</sup> Viral Twitter hashtags reflected the spontaneous reactions of the collective users. Some famous hashtags for the 2019 elections included “#Futurista”, “#SaveThanathorn”, “#Not your child” and “#Grown up now, can choose (by) ourselves”. The hashtag “#Fah Rak Pho”—which went viral in the second week of February—suggests that most of Future Forward's online supporters were much younger than the 40-year-old Thanathorn. Fah Rak Pho literally means “Fah Loves (sugar) Daddy”. The phrase is borrowed from a well-known Thai soap opera in which Fah, the lead female character, is in a relationship with an older businessman. Fah calls her lover “Pho”, which means sugar daddy. When young voters use “#Fah Rak Pho”, it captures the vibe of

their uncritical adoration of Thanathorn. The hashtag Fah Rak Pho grew in popularity after Thanathorn responded with “#Pho ko Rak Pha” [Daddy also loves Fah].<sup>9</sup>

Social media was a crucial tool in the party’s campaigning, but it involved much more than attention-grabbing hashtags: it was a systematic hybrid election campaign that embraced recent changes in Thai society. Fundamental elements of old-style election campaigning in Thailand continued to play an important role in the success of Future Forward. The charismatic character of its leader answered to the need for a hero in Thai society. The interactions between Thanathorn and his supporters were not much different from that of Thaksin and his voters, but utilized a more modern communication channel. Future Forward did not have vote-canvassers, but it cultivated volunteers to become “Fururistas” to campaign for the party in their social circles.

The case of Somchai is illustrative of the way that Future Forward was able to leverage on social media to attract supporters and voters during the election campaign. Somchai is a Future Forward member from northern Thailand, and an entrepreneur in his mid-thirties.<sup>10</sup> His father voted for the pro-military Palang Pracharat Party in the 2019 election. Meanwhile, Somchai not only voted for Future Forward himself, he also managed to convince his mother to vote for it as well. Somchai was not involved in electoral politics before: he described himself as ambivalent, having lost hope and faith in Thai politics for more than a decade, bored with the discourse of Red versus Yellow and was not opposed to the post-2014 military dictatorship. His interest in Future Forward started when he watched an interview with Thanathorn on NationTV (Kom Chad Luek) on 15 August 2018. Thanathorn came across as a determined and forward-looking leader who was able to successfully debate with the interviewers.

Somchai’s curiosity about Thanathorn and Future Forward led him to look at the party’s Facebook page. The next evening, he left his details and email address on Future Forward’s website. A week later, a Future Forward member from his province invited Somchai to join the private local party chat group on Line, the most popular chat application in Thailand. He then started to attend local Future Forward meetings and joined the campaign. He watched Thanathorn’s Facebook Live broadcasts in real time and he shared the live feed on his Facebook page several times per viewing, in the hope that the algorithm would respond by showing the live video on the feeds of as many Facebook users as possible. He also

reposted and retweeted positive news about Future Forward, with party members on the private Line group encouraging each other to share, repost and retweet those pieces on their personal platforms. Frequently, the clips, memes, hashtags or messages that are posted on Line come as ready-made content that participants can immediately disseminate via their respective social media accounts.

The lively interactions between Future Forward supporters suggests that the party's social media campaign evolved organically without any central strategy dictated by the party leadership. According to Somchai, there are hundreds of closed-group chats in support of Future Forward, and the content made available through these channels are often the work of students and ordinary voters. Somchai believes that such materials were the result of spontaneous participation by Future Forward supporters, rather than content released from the party headquarters in Bangkok.

Experts are still debating the effects of selective exposure to social media and online segregation, especially as it pertains to political polarization.<sup>11</sup> There is a risk that online communication and social media usage in Thailand have evolved into an echo chamber and filter bubble environment. When Thais seek out online information about political issues, they choose to read and listen to news, critics and reviews that reflect their political viewpoints. To conduct research for this article, the author set up two Facebook accounts. One was used to follow Future Forward and related Facebook pages, while the other was used to follow the equivalent Democrat and Palang Pracharat pages. The feeds of information received from the two accounts were completely different. The more the author liked and shared contents for Future Forward, the more positive news about Future Forward was received—and vice versa. The social media algorithm did indeed create the possibility of a filter bubble environment.

Future Forward's campaign in the 2019 elections demonstrated that social media has become a significant transformative factor in Thai electoral politics, giving rise to a hybrid form of campaigning in which a new type of vote-canvasser network has emerged organically. At the same time, old-style vote-canvasser networks remain an effective channel to mobilize voters. Both Pheu Thai and Palang Pracharat relied heavily on their traditional vote-canvasser networks to achieve their electoral success. Nevertheless, the unexpected success of Future Forward proves that an increasing number of Thai voters are ready to move beyond patronage-based

politicians when offered an alternative. Future Forward and its leader have brought about a higher level of political engagement among Thai voters, while raising awareness of issue-based politics, particularly gender and ethnicity. The hybrid form of Thai electoral campaigning is evolving alongside changes in the values of Thai society. Future Forward together with its Futuristas is a phenomenon that challenged the power relations between politicians and voters, and will therefore have a lasting impact on the dynamics of Thai electoral politics.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Lueak Tang 2562: Check Chue 51.4 Lan Khon Troud Sit Lueak Tang” [Elections 2019: Name Count 51.4 Million People Check Their Voting Rights], *Thai PBS News*, 1 March 2019, <https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/278084>.
- <sup>2</sup> Deloitte Global Mobile Consumer Survey 2018, Thailand Edition, July 2018, <https://www2.deloitte.com/bn/en/pages/consumer-industrial-products/articles/thailand-consumer-survey-2018.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> Official results of the 24 March 2019 elections, Election Commission of Thailand, [https://www.ect.go.th/ewt/ewt/ect\\_th/download/article/article\\_20190508184334.pdf](https://www.ect.go.th/ewt/ewt/ect_th/download/article/article_20190508184334.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> See Anyarat Chattharakul, “Thai Electoral Campaigning: Vote-Canvassing Networks and Hybrid Voting”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asia Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2010): 67–95.
- <sup>5</sup> Supatsak Pobsuk, “Observations on the Thai Election 2019”, *Focus on the Global South*, 1 April 2019, <https://focusweb.org/observations-on-the-thai-election-2019/>.
- <sup>6</sup> Karoonporn Chetpayark, “Plien Karn Mueng Kao Kap Hua Na Phak A-Na Kot Mai Samphat Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit” [Change the Old Politics with the Future Forward Party’s Leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit], *The Matter*, 27 January 2019, <https://thematter.co/pulse/interview-with-thanathorn/69515>.
- <sup>7</sup> Interviews conducted by the author, 22 April–2 May 2019.
- <sup>8</sup> Anna Lawattanatrakul, “A Country for the Young: First-Time Voters in the 2019 General Election and How They Can Change the Face of Thai Politics”, *Prachathai English*, 23 March 2019, <https://prachatai.com/english/node/7984>.
- <sup>9</sup> Phanicha Sasukjit, “Thanathorn kap Hashtag #Fah Rak Pho lae #Pho Kor Rak Fah Ma Jak Nai?” [Thanathorn with Hashtag #Fah Rak Pho and #Pho Kor Rak Fah Where Do They Come From?], *The Bangkok Insight*, 10 February 2019, <https://www.thebangkokinsight.com/102305/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Somchai is a pseudonym. Author interview by voice call, 11 May 2019.
- <sup>11</sup> Wolfram Schaffar, “New Social Media and Politics in Thailand: The Emergence of Fascist Vigilante Groups on Facebook”, *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 218–19.

# Bangkok: Two Cities

---

---

*PETRA DESATOVA*

Bangkok delivered one of the biggest surprises of Thailand's March 2019 election, with the capital's fickle voters amplifying larger national trends. Though popularly viewed as a stronghold for the storied Democrat Party, the history of Bangkok's elections over the past 40 years has been distinctly mixed. Bangkok voters have shown an unparalleled willingness to embrace new parties—hence the landslide wins by Prachakorn Thai in 1979, Palang Dharma in 1992 and Thai Rak Thai in 2001. It was the Democrats that secured the majority of Bangkok seats in 2007 and 2011, on the strength of backing both from more affluent middle-class voters and low-income inner city communities in districts such as Bang Rak and Khlong Toei. In the 2011 elections, the Democrat Party won 23 out of the capital's 33 constituency seats. Its main rival, Pheu Thai, secured the remaining ten seats.

By contrast, in the March 2019 elections, the Democrat Party failed to secure even a single constituency seat in the capital. Out of 30 seats available, Pheu Thai won nine. The rest were split between two new parties: the pro-military Palang Pracharat Party (12) and the progressive Future Forward Party (9). Only ten of the 30 Democrat candidates polled in the top three positions in their respective constituencies. The remaining constituencies were a three-way battle between Palang Pracharat, Future Forward and Pheu Thai party candidates. Not only did big-name Democrat

---

PETRA DESATOVA, PhD, is a researcher on the US Institute of Peace project into Thailand's 2019 elections at the School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds. Postal address: School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom; email: [petra.desatova@gmail.com](mailto:petra.desatova@gmail.com).

candidates such as Huwaideeya Pitsuwan Useng (the younger sister of the late Surin Pitsuwan, a Thai politician who also served as ASEAN secretary-general from 2008 to 2013) and Parit Wacharasindhu (the Oxford-educated nephew of Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva) fail to get elected, they failed to even place third in their respective constituencies.

In terms of actual votes, the Democrat Party did not fare any better. It came in fourth across the capital with 474,820 votes.<sup>1</sup> This was an underwhelming performance for a party that had hitherto dominated Bangkok. Future Forward won the popular vote with 804,272 votes, while Palang Pracharat came a close second with 791,893 votes. The pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party secured a total of 604,699 votes. The fact that two new political parties—formed just over a year before the 2019 elections—were able to defeat established political juggernauts shows that many Bangkok residents wanted change. There was definitely a strong sense of “old” versus “new” politics in Bangkok in the run up to the 2019 election. A number of informants across the Thai political spectrum whom the author talked to prior to the election confirmed that many Thais were tired of the politically turbulent 2000s and 2010s.<sup>2</sup> For these informants, voting for the Democrats or Pheu Thai would mean a return to the “old” politics characterized by parliamentary bickering, public discontent and street protests. Both Palang Pracharat and Future Forward were aware of these public sentiments and used them to their advantage in the 2019 elections. For example, three of my informants knew or had heard of people who were going to vote for Palang Pracharat because they appreciated the junta-imposed values of peace and order.<sup>3</sup> Less than a week before the election, fresh stickers started to appear on Palang Pracharat campaign posters all over Bangkok urging voters to vote for Prime Minister General (retired) Prayut Chan-ocha—the party’s sole prime ministerial candidate—if they wanted peace.<sup>4</sup> Peace effectively became part of Palang Pracharat’s electoral platform.

The Democrats’ poor electoral performance in Bangkok can be partly explained in terms of the party’s brand identity crisis that coincided with the rise of new political parties.<sup>5</sup> Following the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra in the early 2000s, the Democrats rolled back on their liberal democratic values and joined Thailand’s traditional elites—the monarchy, military and senior bureaucrats—in the fight against Thaksin. By the time of the 2014 military coup, the Democrats were one of the two major parties dominating Thai politics—the other one being Thaksin’s Pheu Thai Party (2008–present) and its

two precursors, the People Power Party (2007–8) and Thai Rak Thai (1998–2007)—and the only credible anti-Thaksin option at the polls. But as the 2019 elections approached, several new anti-Thaksin parties emerged, splitting the old Democrat vote. Talking to a group of locals in the Democrat stronghold of Bang Rak district three days before the election, the author could feel that voters' loyalties were shifting. Although one market vendor in his thirties affirmed in no uncertain terms that he was going to vote for the Democrats, others were still unsure.<sup>6</sup> In the 2011 election, the local constituency was won by Onanong Kanjanachusak, the Democrat candidate, defeating her Pheu Thai counterpart by a margin of more than 25,000 votes—its largest in Bangkok during the 2011 elections.<sup>7</sup> Yet in the 2019 election, Onanong came in third, losing significantly to the candidates of both Palang Pracharat and Future Forward.<sup>8</sup>

During the 2019 election campaign, Abhisit Vejjajiva, the leader of the Democrat Party for 13 years, sought to re-brand himself and his party as a “third” alternative to the pro-military, anti-Thaksin camp led by Palang Pracharat, and to the anti-military camp led by Pheu Thai. He publicly refused to support Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, but did not rule out the possibility of joining hands with either the pro-military or anti-military camp.<sup>9</sup> Given the Democrats' chequered history and strong anti-Thaksin stance, this ambiguous branding satisfied virtually nobody.<sup>10</sup> In Bangkok, more conservative Democrat voters shifted their support to Palang Pracharat, while more liberal Democrat voters opted for Future Forward. As a local community leader in Bang Rak explained, she used to vote for the Democrats but grew disillusioned with them because they were no longer democratic—the party supported the often-violent anti-Thaksin movements of 2005–6, 2008 and 2013–14, boycotted the 2006 and 2014 snap elections called respectively by Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra, and endorsed the 2006 and 2014 military coups that ousted Thaksin, Yingluck and their respective governments. Still unsure as to who to vote for even as she was queuing at the local polling station to receive her ballot paper, she shared that she was considering Future Forward.

The Bangkok results show that only the most loyal Democrat supporters stuck with the party's candidates. Even for these voters, it was not that Abhisit's “third way” alternative struck a chord; they appeared to have stayed with the party mainly because of the economy. As the Bang Rak market vendor explained, he was voting for the Democrats because he felt that he had been better off under the last Democrat-led government (2008–11) than any other

government since. This sentiment was also echoed by a retired academic, who used to advise the Democrats on economic policy.<sup>11</sup> The academic believed that the Democrats had struggled electorally due to an ineffective campaign, but he continued to support them because of their perceived economic competence. The 2019 election was far from a single-issue election: almost all Bangkok voters the author talked to during the final week of the campaign based their electoral choices on a mixture of factors, notably their stances on the military and Thaksin and the state of the economy.

The Democrats were not the only party to lose support to Palang Pracharat and Future Forward in Bangkok. Pheu Thai's voter base, strongest in the outlying areas of the capital, was also significantly eroded. Talking to Bangkok taxi drivers, one of Pheu Thai's longstanding support bases in Bangkok, this author was surprised to discover that one driver had already given his support to Future Forward and another one was planning to vote for them on election day.<sup>12</sup> Both taxi drivers declared themselves tired of the "old" politics and politicians and wanted to vote for someone new. They both liked the young Future Forward leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, and hoped that he would take care of ordinary people like them. As one of the drivers explained, he was well aware that those in government would always find ways to enrich themselves, but at the same time hoped that Thanathorn would also look after others as he already had enough money. The driver's reasoning was strikingly reminiscent of Thaksin's campaign narrative in the run up to the 2001 election, when he claimed he was entering politics to help people, and not to enrich himself as he was already rich enough.<sup>13</sup> For these two taxi drivers, Thanathorn resembled another Thaksin but with less political baggage. Just like Thaksin, Thanathorn was a billionaire and was entering politics with the promise of a better and brighter future for all Thais. However, unlike Thaksin, Thanathorn was not locked in an almost two-decade long power battle with Thailand's traditional elites, thus making him a more attractive electoral choice. Some traditionally pro-Thaksin voters were becoming increasingly concerned that voting for Thaksin-aligned parties would only prolong the "old" politics and its vicious cycle of elections, violent street protests, biased court rulings and crippling military coups.

With his progressive rhetoric, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the young, charismatic billionaire leader of Future Forward, has managed to morph into Thailand's celebrity politician in the space of less than a year. For many Bangkok voters, Thanathorn was

more than a politician; he had become, as Duncan McCargo aptly describes, “a combination of heartthrob and giant-slaying hero”.<sup>14</sup> The author had a first-hand opportunity to experience the extent of Bangkok’s “Thanathorn-mania” when attending the closing campaign rallies of Future Forward and Pheu Thai on 22 March 2019. While Sudarat Keyuraphan, the Pheu Thai leader and prime ministerial candidate, received her fair share of cheers, Thanathorn received an ovation worthy of a rock star. He was greeted by the loudest cheers of the night, which lasted more than four minutes and were only interrupted once by a short official party video, a standing ovation and thousands of smartphone lights, a strong indication of the immense support Thanathorn enjoyed in Bangkok.

Although direct comparisons between the 2011 and 2019 elections are problematic due to the redistricting of electoral boundaries, six out of the nine Bangkok seats won by Pheu Thai in the 2019 elections had retained their constituency boundaries from 2011.<sup>15</sup> In five of these constituencies, Pheu Thai successfully defended its seats but with a considerably reduced number of votes. In constituency 26, Pheu Thai gained a seat from the Democrats as a result of Palang Pracharat and Future Forward splitting the Democrat vote. Ironically, Pheu Thai won this constituency despite securing far fewer votes than in 2011, when it came in second. There were two other constituencies with unchanged boundaries that Pheu Thai, having won in 2011, failed to defend in 2019.<sup>16</sup> Both of these constituencies went to Palang Pracharat, with Pheu Thai coming in a close second: these defeats to a pro-military, anti-Thaksin party in former Pheu Thai strongholds constitute a significant blow to the strongly anti-junta Thaksinite party. The remaining three constituency seats won by Pheu Thai in 2019 came from newly-drawn constituencies. One of those seats represented two former separate Pheu Thai strongholds that were redistricted into a single constituency, while the other two seats were composed of former Democrat strongholds. Once again, Pheu Thai’s victory here was a result of the Democrats losing their supporters to Palang Pracharat and Future Forward rather than Pheu Thai gaining in popularity. Compared to their 2011 performance, the Pheu Thai’s average vote share in 2019 fell by almost 20 per cent in Bangkok.<sup>17</sup>

More than 1.59 million voters in Bangkok chose Palang Pracharat and Future Forward over the Democrats and Pheu Thai. This indicates a considerable appetite among Bangkok voters for “new” politics and demonstrates that longstanding party loyalties are shifting. However, the fact that these 1.59 million voters chose

two parties with essentially opposing ideologies implies that the 2019 election in Bangkok was very much a tale of two cities. On the one hand was the future-oriented, young and liberally-minded Bangkok that voted for Future Forward and its vision of a progressive, liberal and democratic country administered by elected politicians and representatives. On the other was the backward-looking, old conservative Bangkok that voted for Palang Pracharat and its vision of a socially traditional and conservative country administered by often-unelected core elites. Since these two visions are effectively irreconcilable, Bangkok will remain divided. While party loyalties held up much better outside Bangkok, Palang Pracharat and Future Forward did make some inroads across the provinces. This was especially the case for Palang Pracharat, which performed strongly across Thailand's Central region, Lower North and some parts of the South.<sup>18</sup> Future Forward also performed well in the East and even gained a few seats in the North, a core stronghold of Pheu Thai. Almost five years of military rule failed to resolve any of the deep-seated socio-political cleavages that had beset Thailand since the mid-2000s. Instead, they seemed to have added another layer to Thailand's political conflict: a generational clash that manifested itself most clearly in Bangkok's tale of two cities.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Figures based on unofficial election results published by the Election Commission on 28 March 2019. See “รายชื่อผู้สมัครรับเลือกตั้ง ส.ส. แบบแบ่งเขตเลือกตั้งที่ได้รับคะแนนสูงสุดรายจังหวัด (ข้อมูล ณ วันที่ 28 มีนาคม 2562)” [A list of constituency MP candidates, who received the highest votes arranged by province (data from 28 March 2019)], Election Commission, 28 March 2019, [https://www.ect.go.th/ewt/ewt/ect\\_th/download/article/article\\_20190328165029.pdf](https://www.ect.go.th/ewt/ewt/ect_th/download/article/article_20190328165029.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> Author interview with a political journalist working at *Khaosod English*, 21 March 2019; author interview with an informant working for a regional international organization, 21 March 2019; author interview with a retired academic and his wife, 23 March 2019; author interview with Bangkok taxi driver A, 23 March 2019.
- <sup>3</sup> Author interview, *Khaosod English*; author interview, regional international organization; author interview with a group of Bang Rak locals, 21 March 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> Field notes, 20 March 2019.
- <sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this, see Petra Desatova, “What Happened to Thailand's Democrat Party?”, *Thai Data Points*, 15 April 2019, <https://www.thaidatapoints.com/post/what-happened-to-thailand-s-democrat-party>.
- <sup>6</sup> Author interview, Bang Rak locals.

- <sup>7</sup> Bang Rak belongs to District (*khet*) 2 that also includes the neighbouring districts of Pathum Wan and Sathorn.
- <sup>8</sup> Pheu Thai did not field any candidates in this constituency in the 2019 election, as part of an electoral deal with the Thai Raksa Chart Party, which was later dissolved by the courts.
- <sup>9</sup> Pravit Rojanaphruk, “Abhisit Coalition Waffling Draws Fresh Flak”, *Khaosod English*, 12 March 2019, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2019/03/12/abhisit-coalition-waffling-draws-fresh-flak/>.
- <sup>10</sup> See Desatova, “What Happened?”.
- <sup>11</sup> Author interview, academic and wife.
- <sup>12</sup> Author interview, Bangkok taxi driver A; author interview with Bangkok taxi driver B, 22 March 2019.
- <sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of Thaksin, see Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2005), pp. 70–120.
- <sup>14</sup> Duncan McCargo, “We Are Grown-Up Now and Can Choose for Ourselves”, *New York Times*, 29 March 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/opinion/thailand-election-thanathorn-future-forward-youth-vote.html>.
- <sup>15</sup> These were Sai Mai (*khet* 11 in 2019/*khet* 13 in 2011); Bang Khen (*khet* 12 in 2019/*khet* 14 in 2011); Bueng Khum and Khana Yao (*khet* 14 in 2019/*khet* 16 in 2011); Khlong Sam Wa (*khet* 16 in 2019/*khet* 18 in 2011), Lat Kra Bang (*khet* 18 in 2019/*khet* 20 in 2011) and Bang Bon and Nong Khaem (*khet* 26 in 2019/*khet* 28 in 2011).
- <sup>16</sup> Min Buri and Khana Yao (*khet* 15 in 2019/*khet* 17 in 2011) and Nong Chok (*khet* 17 in 2019/*khet* 19 in 2011).
- <sup>17</sup> Joel Selway and Allen Hicken, “The Fate of Pheu Thai in the 2019 Elections”, *Thai Data Points*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.thaيداتاپoints.com/post/the-fate-of-pheu-thai-in-the-2019-elections>.
- <sup>18</sup> For a good regional comparison of voting patterns, see Joel Selway, “Regional Voting: Comparing 2019 to 2011”, *Thai Data Points*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.thaيداتاپoints.com/post/regional-voting-comparing-2019-to-2011>.

# Isan: Double Trouble

---

---

*SAOWANEE T. ALEXANDER*

“Khao ao ngoen phai, ka lueak Pheu Thai khue kao” [It doesn’t matter whose money they take, they will vote for Pheu Thai like before], a concession stand owner on campus told the author two days after the Palang Pracharat Party had held a mass rally at Ubon Ratchathani University—an unprecedented opportunity for any Thai political party. She had attended the rally, for which village-level coordinators had arranged transportation and collated the names of attendees. Upon being asked by the author whether the attendees would get paid, the concession stand owner merely smiled and said that she did not know. Instead of pressing for an answer, the author decided to wait anxiously for election day to find out whether the lady was right about Pheu Thai’s prospects.

For almost 20 years, Thailand’s Northeast region (Isan) has strongly supported the Pheu Thai Party and its precursor parties closely associated with former prime ministers Thaksin Shinawatra and Yingluck Shinawatra. The region is also the bastion of the Red Shirt movement, a loose-knit, self-proclaimed “pro-democracy” alliance which staged large mass protests against the unelected government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva in 2009 and 2010. Since the Shinawatras and the Red Shirt movement were closely linked, the Northeast is viewed by the military and the Bangkok elite as “double trouble”. Following the 2014 military coup, the region was a major focus for the suppression of dissidents: some were

---

SAOWANEE T. ALEXANDER is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University. Postal address: Warin Chamrap District, Ubon Ratchathani, 34190, Thailand; email: saowanee.alexander@gmail.com.

jailed, some were forced into exile and some died mysteriously.<sup>1</sup> Isan remains a dangerous political hotbed—very much as it was during the Cold War, when it was a stronghold of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT).

On 17 and 24 March 2019, the author observed Thailand's much-anticipated general elections. On 17 March, the advance voting day, nearly 7,000 voters braved the scorching heat and queued for two to three hours at the polling stations in Warin Chamrap District Office.<sup>2</sup> The majority of them were young and enthusiastic. However, on 24 March, the main voting day, the mood had turned much gloomier. Few locals showed up to witness the votes being counted. Unlike in previous elections when vote counting was an adrenaline-filled episode, this time the witnesses' emotions were subdued. The unsettled atmosphere foreshadowed a troubled aftermath.

From the outset of the 2019 election campaign, the author found it quite difficult to get a sense of the possible outcome as people in Isan were extremely reluctant to talk. We now know why. As it turns out, nearly half of Isan's voters voted for anti-junta parties, with Pheu Thai and Future Forward together garnering 49 per cent of the total vote in the entire region.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the pro-junta Palang Pracharat Party only gained 21 per cent of the popular vote. The results reflect the region's resistance to the ruling junta and its refusal to be co-opted by the junta's handouts. But did the junta's small margin of success in securing the popular vote suggest that anti-military sentiment was on the decline in Isan? This question is not easy to answer, especially given that these elections were far from free and fair: the junta not only created a proxy party but also exploited state resources to its own electoral advantage and intimidated anti-junta opponents.

In November 2018, the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) redrew the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies across the whole country, reducing the total number of constituencies from 375 to 350.<sup>4</sup> While the ECT claimed to have used fair criteria in dividing the constituencies, anti-junta candidates complained of gerrymandering, especially since the pro-Thaksin region of Isan lost ten constituencies, reducing its total from 126 seats to 116.<sup>5</sup>

In Isan, Pheu Thai fielded candidates in 112 out of the 116 constituencies, while its sister party, Thai Raksa Chart, ran 52 candidates.<sup>6</sup> It was the first time Pheu Thai did not run in every Isan constituency. Thai Raksa Chart generally ran in constituencies where Pheu Thai candidates were either not the favourites to win, or could expect to win by a large margin. This is confirmed by

the fact that Thai Raksa Chart constituency candidates were new faces but its party-list candidates comprised veteran Pheu Thai MPs or former Red Shirt leaders. The plan was for Thai Raksa Chart to gain sufficient non-winning constituency votes to get its key figures elected as party-list MPs. However, the electoral life of Thai Raksa Chart was short-lived. After nominating former Princess Ubonratana as its prime ministerial candidate on 8 February, the party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court. The dissolution of Thai Raksa Chart, however, allowed the anti-junta Future Forward Party, which competed for all 116 seats in Isan, to pick up votes that might otherwise have gone to Thai Raksa Chart.

In the run-up to the elections, Palang Pracharat aggressively co-opted former MPs from different parties—largely from Pheu Thai—along with some former prominent Red Shirt leaders and should have been well-placed to make major electoral gains. In Isan, campaign activities were stifled, especially for Pheu Thai candidates who were often barred from using government compounds as rally sites, while their campaigning was closely monitored by security officials and subject to extra scrutiny by the ECT.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Palang Pracharat candidates were allowed to campaign freely, and were helped by state officials such as village heads and healthcare volunteers, who operated as vote canvassers. In Isan, Palang Pracharat's platform claimed that the junta's policies had helped the region's poor people, promised more handouts and attacked Thaksin and his associates. While the first two strategies proved relatively effective, the third did not. Palang Pracharat learned quickly that attacking Thaksin was counter-productive. At one party rally in Maha Sarakham Province, when a speaker criticized Thaksin, attendees walked away.<sup>8</sup> Attacking the Red Shirts was also ineffective.<sup>9</sup> Despite video evidence of vote-buying efforts in Ubon Ratchathani and Yasothon going viral on social media, Palang Pracharat continued to campaign freely. Voters in Amnat Charoen and Ubon Ratchathani reported receiving cash from Bhumjaithai vote canvassers, but such incidents were never reported in the national media.<sup>10</sup>

The traditional campaign strategy of holding large rallies persisted, but to a lesser degree than in previous elections. Large parties such as Palang Pracharat and Pheu Thai managed to mobilize crowds of 7,000 to 8,000 people—a typical bluffing strategy in Thai electoral politics. But it was the sentiments at the rallies that mattered. Large crowds at rallies did not always accurately predict the outcome of the elections.<sup>11</sup> Gauging the preferences of ordinary voters proved difficult, given their reluctance to reveal which

parties they favoured. People attended rallies for different reasons: to show support for the party they liked, or because they were paid or dragooned into showing up. But under the watchful eye of the junta, even rally participants generally stayed silent about their voting intentions.

While Palang Pracharat relied on giving speeches at large rallies, Pheu Thai, Future Forward and Bhumjaithai depended on door-to-door canvassing and small-scale rally speeches. Palang Pracharat did not even feature Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha on their campaign signs in Isan as the coup leader was not an electoral asset in the region. Prayut's last public appearances in Isan were on 6 February in Mukdahan and Yasothon, two days before his candidacy for prime minister was announced. Security was tight, and he did not risk mingling with the crowd.<sup>12</sup>

Electoral turnouts in Isan have been relatively high—72 per cent in 2007 and 2011—and this continued in 2019 with 71 per cent of voters participating.<sup>13</sup> Of the 116 seats in Isan, Pheu Thai came first with 84 seats, followed by Bhumjaithai with 16 seats, Palang Pracharat with 11 and the Democrats with two. Future Forward, Chart Pattana and Chart Thai Pattana secured one seat each. Palang Pracharat's campaign strategies were not successful.<sup>14</sup> Leaving aside the question of ballot rigging—which may well have taken place in some constituencies—the election results show some interesting phenomena. Margins of victory shrank in the 2019 elections, partly because the new electoral system forced voters to choose only one candidate. Some voters the author talked to after the elections did not know exactly how party-list MP seats were calculated.

Bhumjaithai improved its performance in the Northeast, going up from 11 seats in the 2011 elections to 16 in 2019. Most of its candidates were veteran politicians with their own voter bases. Some of the successful candidates were former MPs, such as Aphicha Lertpatcharakamon from Nakhon Ratchasima, who had defected from Pheu Thai. The same applied to Palang Pracharat. Most of its candidates already had an existing voter base, while the supposed “new faces” were actually related to former politicians. For instance, Yothakan Fong-ngam from Ubon Ratchathani was the daughter of Suphon Fong-ngam, a longtime Pheu Thai MP who had defected to the pro-junta party. Because of their candidates' established voting base, both Palang Pracharat and Bhumjaithai benefitted greatly from party-list MP calculations despite not winning any seats.

Pheu Thai had a victory rate of 76 per cent in the 112 constituencies it contested, while Palang Pracharat, Bhumjaithai, the

Democrats and Future Forward, each having contended in all 116 constituencies, had victory rates of 14, 9, 3 and 1 per cent respectively. In the 2011 elections, Pheu Thai contested all 126 constituencies in Isan and its margin of victory was 82 per cent. The 6 per cent drop in victories is not entirely surprising given the pre-election challenges outlined earlier. Raw voting numbers show that support for Pheu Thai has declined somewhat—though to some extent this reflects competition on the anti-junta side from Future Forward. Those voters who stuck with Pheu Thai were typically deeply attached to the party's flagship economic policies, as well as those who had previously supported the Red Shirt movement.

Eight candidates had margins of victory of more than 36,000 votes: all were Pheu Thai candidates in Khon Kaen, Yasothon, Roi Et, Udon Thani and Si Saket Provinces.<sup>15</sup> Jiraporn Sinthuprai from Roi Et had the largest margin of victory, beating the second-placed Future Forward candidate by 47,670 votes. Jiraporn is the daughter of Nisit Sinthuprai, a prominent Red Shirt leader and former Pheu Thai MP. Another large margin of victory was secured by Wanniwat Somboon, a young and politically inexperienced Pheu Thai candidate. He is a relative of Preechapol Pongpanich, the Thai Raksa Chart party leader and a former Pheu Thai MP for that constituency. Wanniwat's margin of victory was 40,629 votes. After the Thai Raksa Chart candidate was disqualified from the race, it appeared that Preechapol's voting base gave landslide support to Pheu Thai as an expression of solidarity.

Despite winning only one seat in Isan, Future Forward earned a large number of votes for its party-list MPs. In 16 of Isan's 20 provinces, Future Forward performed better in Constituency 1, which invariably consisted primarily of urban and suburban areas, than in other constituencies. In Khon Kaen, the party won Constituency 1 with 34 per cent of the votes, the strongest Future Forward performance of all the constituencies in the region. In Udon Thani and Ubon Ratchathani, Future Forward also did well, gaining 27 per cent and 22 per cent of the votes, respectively. Support for Future Forward was strongest in the provinces that used to be CPT strongholds during the Cold War, including Kalasin, Mukdahan, Bueng Kan, Nong Khai, Udon Thani, Sakon Nakhon and Nong Bua Lamphu, where the party gained at least 15 per cent of the votes. While it would be simplistic to say there is a link between the communist-era dissidents and present-day voters, this pattern warrants further examination. In general, Isan voters continued to

support Pheu Thai while opening their hearts to Future Forward. This shows their bond with Pheu Thai as well as a growing desire for a bolder move against the junta.

Throughout the political history of Siam and Thailand, Isan has been marked by its “otherness”. Historically speaking, the region is best described as “the others within”—the people belonged to Siam, but were not exactly as Siamese and certainly not equal to the Siamese elites.<sup>16</sup> Today, Isan people see themselves as stakeholders in Thai politics, ones whose voices have not been heard and whose rights as citizens have not been respected. Since the 2001 elections, people have repeatedly stressed this point at the ballot box by supporting pro-Thaksin parties.

Isan is home to dissenting voices. The people of Isan want to show the Bangkok-based establishment how they want the country to be, and what they want as citizens of the country. The elites’ political agenda and that of voters in Isan are diametrically opposed. Most of the voters in Isan have adopted an anti-junta stance in the 2019 elections, and anti-junta parties won the majority of seats, though with a smaller majority of the popular vote. If the junta-backed Palang Pracharat had won decisively, things would have been much easier for the elites. But because Isan voters chose to be disobedient and secured an important electoral victory over the junta, political contestation in this troubled region is almost certain to continue.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For details of these cases, see the iLaw database, <https://freedom.ilaw.or.th/en/content/charges-against-individuals-after-2014-coup>.
- <sup>2</sup> Author’s field observation notes, Ubon Ratchathani, 17 and 24 March 2019.
- <sup>3</sup> When Pheu Chart and Seri Ruam Thai votes are included, the anti-junta, pro-democracy coalition secured 53 per cent of the votes.
- <sup>4</sup> See “Election Commission Begins Drawing New Boundaries”, *Bangkok Post*, 20 September 2018, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/1543070/election-commission-begins-drawing-new-boundaries>.
- <sup>5</sup> Author interview with a candidate’s assistant, Ubon Ratchathani, 23 March 2019.
- <sup>6</sup> See “เปิด 108 รายชื่อผู้สมัครส.ส.ปาร์ตี้ลิสต์ ไทยรักชาติ ติดบ่วงยุบพรรค” [Thai Raksa Chart Party-list Candidate List Disclosed, Entrapped by Party Dissolution], *Thai Rath*, 7 March 2019, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/1513295>.
- <sup>7</sup> Author field notes between February and March 2019.
- <sup>8</sup> See Saowanee T. Alexander, “Cooptation Doesn’t Work: How Redshirts Voted in Isan”, *New Mandala*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/cooptation-doesnt-work-how-redshirts-voted-in-isan/>.

- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Author interviews with informants, 26 March 2019.
- <sup>11</sup> On Palang Pracharat losses, see Alexander, “Cooptation Doesn’t Work”.
- <sup>12</sup> Author field notes, Nong Sung District, Mukdahan Province, 6 February 2019.
- <sup>13</sup> The 2007 and 2011 voter turnouts in Isan are calculated from the official ECT files, but for 2019 the figures are derived from unofficial results obtained from materials on the Internet and printouts collected from provincial ECT offices. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing there were no figures for Buriram, Amnat Charoen and Kalasin Provinces. The 2019 turnout figure was thus based on results from the remaining 17 provinces.
- <sup>14</sup> See “‘วิรัช’ยกทีมโคราชขบพลังประชารัฐ ‘สุภรณ์’ โวยึด 116 ที่นั่งในอีสาน” [Wirat Moves Entire Korat Team to Palang Pracharat, Suporn Brags About Winning 116 Isan Seats], *Than Settakij*, 14 November 2018, <http://www.thansettakij.com/content/347428>.
- <sup>15</sup> See Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “Thai Parties Cry Foul After Election Results Favour Military Junta”, *The Guardian*, 8 May 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/08/thai-parties-cry-foul-after-election-results-favour-military-junta>.
- <sup>16</sup> See Thongchai Winichakul, “The Others Within: Travels and Ethno-spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects, 1885–1910”, in *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, edited by Andrew Turton (London, UK: Curzon, 2000), pp. 38–62.

# The North: Thaksin-lite?

---

---

*CHANINTORN PENSUTE*

The March 2019 elections saw Pheu Thai's longstanding dominance of constituency seats in the Upper North decline somewhat, while the Lower North saw a very strong showing by the pro-military Palang Pracharat Party—which had only been formed in 2018—demonstrating that a well-funded newcomer could make dramatic electoral inroads in the region.

Northern Thailand is culturally and geographically divided into two zones of eight provinces: the Upper North (comprising Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lampang, Lamphun, Mae Hong Son, Nan, Phayao and Phrae) and the Lower North (comprising Kamphaeng Phet, Nakhon Sawan, Phetchabun, Phichit, Phitsanulok, Sukhothai, Tak and Uttaradit). The 16 provinces in the northern region contain 62 parliamentary constituencies. As shown in Figure 1, Pheu Thai gained 29 seats (receiving 46.77 per cent of the votes), while 25 seats (40.32 per cent) went to the Palang Pracharat Party, five (8.06 per cent) to the Future Forward Party, two (3.23 per cent) to the Bhumjaithai Party and one (1.61 per cent) to the Democrat Party.<sup>1</sup>

There are two main groups of Northern voters: those who voted for Pheu Thai and those who supported Palang Pracharat. However, if the northern region is divided into the Upper North and the Lower North, it becomes clear that the two areas voted very differently. Pheu Thai won in 24 of the 31 constituencies in the Upper North (with 77.42 per cent of the votes), giving them a clear majority of

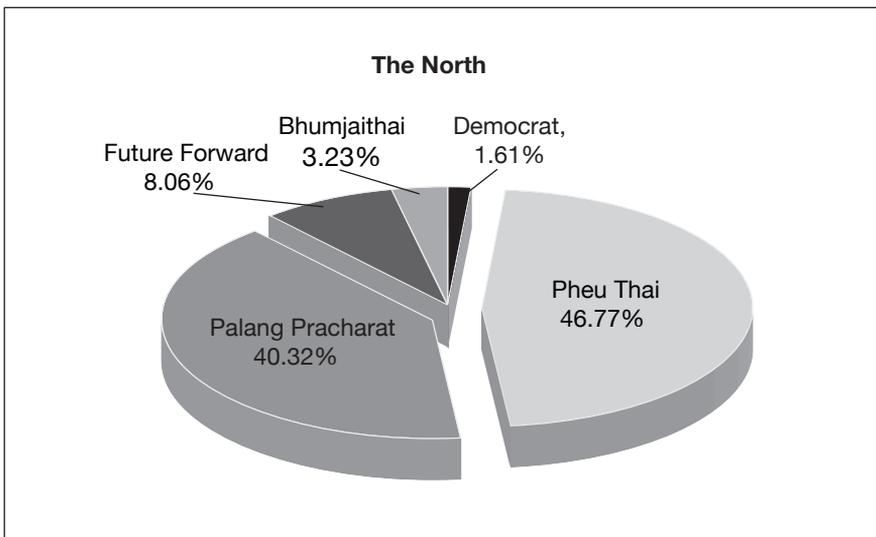
---

CHANINTORN PENSUTE, PhD, is a Lecturer in the School of Politics and Government, Chiang Mai University, Thailand. Postal address: Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Huay Kaew Road, Muang District, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 50200; email: chanintornpens@gmail.com.

seats, while Future Forward won in four constituencies (12.9 per cent) and Palang Pracharat won in three constituencies (9.68 per cent) (see Figure 2). In contrast, in the Lower North, Pheu Thai won only five of the 31 constituency seats (16.13 per cent), while Palang Pracharat won 22 seats (70.96 per cent), Bhumjaithai two seats (6.45 per cent) and both Future Forward and the Democrat Party secured one seat each (3.23 per cent) (see Figure 3).

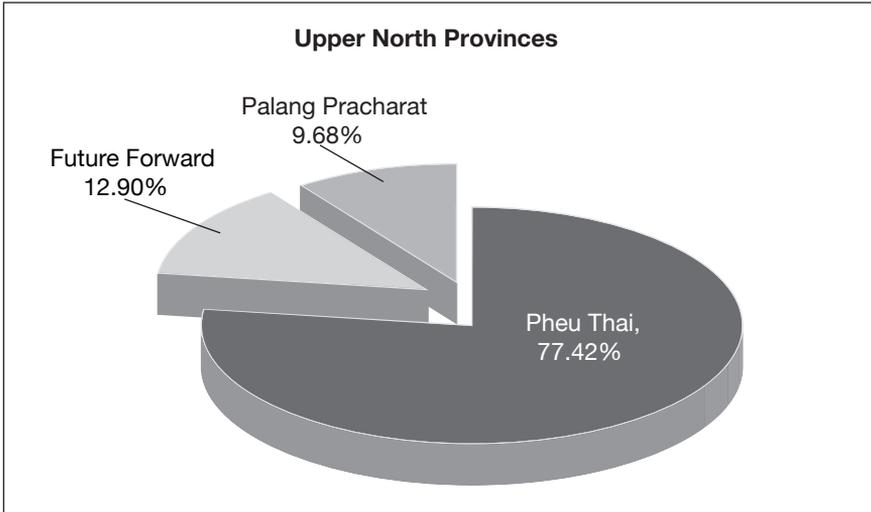
As can be seen in Figures 2 and 3, most voters in the Upper North chose Pheu Thai, while Lower North voters preferred Palang Pracharat. The Pheu Thai Party did not field candidates in Phrae, so as not to compete with the Thai Raksa Chart Party, a pro-Thaksin party created in late 2018, and which was backed by a local political clan. The secretary-general of Thai Raksa Chart was northerner Mitti Tiyapairat, owner of a football club in Chiang Rai Province, and also son of Yongyuth Tiyapairat, who was a former minister, regional powerbroker and a key figure in the Thai Rak Thai Party (the precursor to Pheu Thai, and Thaksin's original party vehicle prior to its dissolution by the Constitutional Tribunal in 2007). The executive committee of Thai Raksa Chart was also staffed by relatives of Thaksin Shinawatra, Reupob Shinawatra and Chayika Wongnabhachan.

Figure 1  
Votes for Constituency Seats in the North



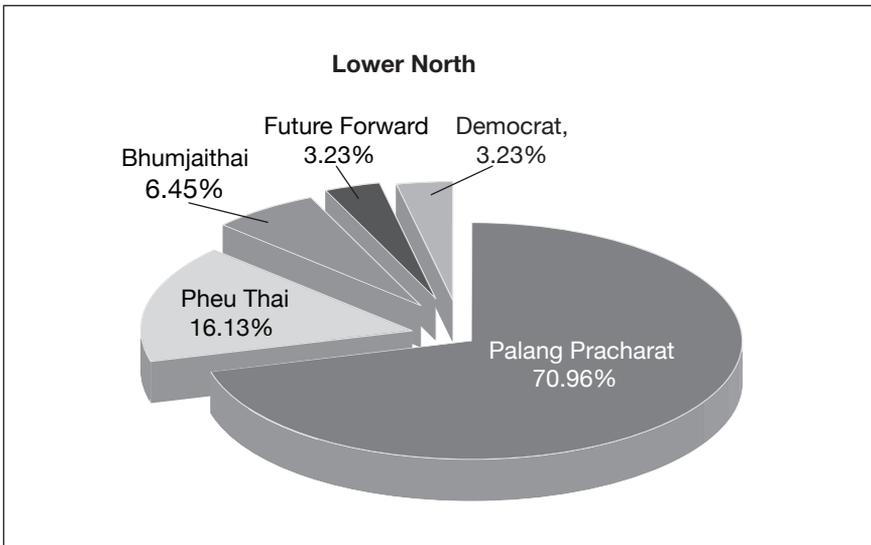
Source: Election results, <https://elect.thematter.co/filters/northern>.

Figure 2  
Votes for Constituency Seats in the Upper North



Source: Election results, <https://elect.thematter.co/filters/northern>.

Figure 3  
Votes for Constituency Seats in the Lower North



Source: Election results, <https://elect.thematter.co/filters/northern>.

However, the unexpected last-minute dissolution of Thai Raksa Chart on 7 March led anti-military voters to switch their support to the upstart Future Forward Party, which won both Phrae constituencies by huge margins. If Thai Raksa Chart had not been dissolved by the Constitutional Court for illegally nominating Princess Ubolratana as its prime ministerial candidate, it is likely that Pheu Thai and Thai Raksa Chart would together have won 26 out of the 31 available seats (83.87 per cent) in the Upper North.

A clear divide between the Upper and Lower North was evident: voters in upper northern Thailand demonstrated their continuing loyalty to parties aligned with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a Chiang Mai native who still commands a huge personal following in the region. In interviews conducted by the author, voters from the Upper North consistently asserted that the local economy performed better when Thaksin or his proxies were in power.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, in the Lower North, which is closer to central Thailand, loyalty to Pheu Thai was significantly weaker. Some voters who spoke with the author said that they had decided to vote for the military-aligned Palang Pracharat due to the welfare benefits they had received under the junta's "Pracharat" policies.<sup>3</sup> Other voters argued that since it is unlikely that the military would permit Pheu Thai to take power after the election, thus prolonging the political conflict, a vote for Palang Pracharat was a more prudent choice for the sake of peace and stability.

After more than five years without a general election, the 2019 campaign was very different from that of the ill-fated February 2014 election, which was boycotted by the Democrat Party and ultimately annulled by the courts. In 2019, online tools, such as Twitter and especially Facebook, became crucial campaign tools for the political parties. However, standard campaign techniques—such as meeting face-to-face with voters, hosting public talks and gatherings, distributing posters, banners and name cards, and hiring trucks to drive around and play audio recordings that promoted the candidates—were still crucial. Face-to-face meetings and public talks and gatherings remained particularly important.

Future Forward was one of the first political parties to begin campaigning in the North. Party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit first visited Chiang Mai in April 2018. By early August, Thanathorn had travelled to 37 provinces, while Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, the party's secretary-general, had visited 33. Rather than simply pitching their party's platform to the locals, one of Future Forward's strategies was to visit communities and key stakeholders in the provinces and

listen to their stories and problems. The first few visits to Chiang Mai by Future Forward were closed-door sessions: less than 50 people, which included groups of academics, businesspeople and university students, attended each meeting.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, Future Forward had high hopes for electoral success in the North. On their official Facebook page, party spokesperson Pannika Wanich claimed that Future Forward had more engagement with voters than any other party, and that 5 per cent of their Facebook-based engagement came from users in Chiang Mai.<sup>5</sup> Online content was crucial for Future Forward: during private meetings in Chiang Mai, Pannika mentioned that regional content, and content related to the North, attracted higher levels of user engagement.<sup>6</sup> Overall, while Future Forward emphasized meeting locals face-to-face in every province, the party also focused on reaching potential voters via online tools, such as Facebook.

Although the Bhumjaithai and Chart Thai Pattana parties did not expect to win many seats in the north, both parties fielded numerous candidates in the hope of benefitting from party list allocations. Bhumjaithai succeeded in running candidates in all 62 constituencies,<sup>7</sup> while the Chart Thai Pattana Party put up candidates in every northern province except Phrae and Phayao.<sup>8</sup> Under the Mixed Member Apportionment System (MMA), every vote counted.

In northern Thailand, the authorities carefully monitored political activities. Police officers and military personnel were assigned to observe public events, including those organized by universities. Political candidates giving speeches or participating in debates had to think carefully before speaking. With regard to the strict rules and regulations, Johnnopadon Vasinsunthorn, one of the candidates from the small Thai Local Power Party (TLPP) who competed in Constituency 1 of Chiang Mai, mentioned that there were positives and negatives during the election campaigning period.<sup>9</sup> On the positive side, the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) limited the number of posters or banners each candidate could display, which ensured that everyone received equal opportunities and that small parties did not need to spend too much on campaign materials. On the negative side, these strict regulations meant that candidates faced the possibility of being banned from competing in an election for ten years or even jail time if they failed to abide by the rules, many of which were unnecessarily restrictive and opaque. Johnnopadon often had to consult his party colleagues about the various rules and regulations.

Out of the nine constituencies in Chiang Mai, Pheu Thai only introduced one new candidate: Jakkaphon Tangsutthitham, the

son of a well-known Chiang Mai businessman, in Constituency 3. Jakkaphon's family had been doing business in Chiang Mai for almost 40 years. Their company's business activities provided Jakkaphon's family with political connections, which led him to enter politics himself. In 2008, Jakkaphon assisted then Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat, becoming head of the Chiang Mai branch of the Pheu Thai Party. The other eight candidates were a combination of former Pheu Thai Members of Parliament (MPs) and members of local dynastic families, such as the Buranupakorns and the Amornwiwats. For instance, the father-and-son team of Sompong Amornwiwat and Julapan Amornwiwat ran under Pheu Thai's banners in Chiang Mai's Constituencies 5 and 6. Sompong was a former minister and deputy prime minister, while Julapan was a former MP from Thai Rak Thai. In another example, Tasanee Buranupakorn competed in Chiang Mai's Constituency 1, having previously won the seat in 2011 for Pheu Thai. The Buranupakorn family has long held political positions in Chiang Mai, with family members having assumed roles as the head of the Provincial Administration Organization and the municipality head as well as serving as a Thai Rak Thai parliamentarian for Chiang Mai.

Palang Pracharat also recruited candidates who came from established political dynasties, such as Duentemduang and Kingkarn Na Chiang Mai, a daughter-and-mother pairing who competed on behalf of Palang Pracharat in Constituencies 4 and 5 of Chiang Mai. In general, Palang Pracharat's recruitment process in the North sought candidates from established political parties and political dynasties, and people who had previously been involved in local politics and small-scale political parties.

Table 1 shows the political backgrounds of Palang Pracharat candidates that ran in the North. Some political candidates belong to more than one category. For example, both Eiam Thongjaisod and Wanpen Promphat came from prominent political families, and were former MPs who had represented the Pheu Thai Party in previous elections. Both Eiam Thongjaisod and Wanpen Promphat did not reveal why they switched allegiance from Pheu Thai. However, Santi Promphat, Wanpen's husband and a former prominent figure of Pheu Thai, claimed that he wanted to bring back permanent democracy.<sup>10</sup>

Palang Pracharat won every constituency in the provinces of Kamphaeng Phet, Phetchabun and Phichit, all located in the Lower North.<sup>11</sup> In Kamphaeng Phet, all the four candidates who represented Palang Pracharat were former MPs from Pheu Thai. Similarly, in

Table 1  
**Candidates for the Palang Pracharat Party**

<i>Palang Pracharat Political Candidates in the North</i>	<i>Number of Candidates</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Candidates from other established political parties	27	43.55
Candidates who were previously involved in local politics	30	48.39
Candidates from small-scale political parties	2	3.23
Candidates from the political dynasties	12	19.35

Source: Palang Pracharat political candidate lists in the northern region, <https://pprp.or.th/>.

Phetchabun, three of the four candidates who represented Palang Pracharat were former MPs from Pheu Thai. The fourth candidate came from a political dynasty and had served as the deputy chairman of the Provincial Council. The case of Phichit was, however, different from the others: no candidate there had served as an MP prior to the 2019 general election. Out of the three constituencies in Phichit, two candidates were members of the Provincial Council, while the remaining candidate had previously stood under the banner of the minor Cooperative Party.

Furthermore, the candidates who represented the Chartthaipattana Party, the Democrat Party and the Ruamchart Pattana Party in Phichit were veteran politicians who had previously won in the general elections of 2007 and 2011. In Tak Province, the Democrat Party had swept every seat in the 2007 and 2011 general elections. In Sukhothai Province, candidates from the Bhumjaithai Party and the Democrat Party had each won two seats during the 2011 general election. In Phitsanulok, Pheu Thai candidates had won two out of five constituencies in the 2011 general elections, with the three remaining seats going to candidates from the Democrat Party. The results show a similar trend in the 2019 general election, where Pheu Thai won two seats; however, the Democrat Party lost their seats as two seats went to Palang Pracharat and one to Future Forward.<sup>12</sup>

The results of the 2019 general election in the North allow several conclusions to be drawn. First, some former elected MPs

from Pheu Thai attracted votes, which meant that a candidate's personality, previous achievements and political dynasty affiliation mattered. However, ex-MPs from the Democrat Party did not achieve the same results as former MPs from Pheu Thai. The Democrat Party clearly underperformed in the Lower North during the 2019 general election. Voters shifted from the Democrat Party to Palang Pracharat. Voters in the Lower North who formerly supported the Democrat Party may have voted strategically. In the weeks prior to the election, Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva commented publicly on his Facebook page that he would not support Prime Minister General (retired) Prayut Chan-ocha.<sup>13</sup> Abhisit's statement caused controversy over the position of the Democrat Party and whether it would choose to be allied with Palang Pracharat or Pheu Thai. As a result, many former Democrat voters switched to Palang Pracharat.

Second, the elections present a complicated picture, in which voting behaviours varied. Voters in the Upper North were more predictable than those in the Lower North. Voting patterns in the Upper North remained similar to those of the previous elections but reflected the rise in popularity of the Future Forward Party. In the Lower North, provinces such as Phichit, Tak and Nakhon Sawan became swing provinces, while Kamphaeng Phet and Phetchabun clearly reflected the power of the previous incumbents.

Finally, the elections demonstrated a clear divide between the Upper North—which remained a Pheu Thai stronghold—and the Lower North, which was dominated by Palang Pracharat. These results continued the same broad pattern as shown by the July 2011 elections, and indeed the August 2016 constitutional referendum: the pro-Thaksin vote had hollowed out since the high-water mark of Thai Rak Thai's landslide win in 2005. This was due to corruption allegations against Thaksin Shinawatra and his proxies, ideological divisions due to colour-coded politics (Red Shirts versus Yellow Shirts) and the demonstrations in 2013 which resulted in the ousting of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra (Thaksin's sister) because her government wanted to pardon Thaksin. As elsewhere in the country, the two most remarkable features of the election in the North were the strong performance of the new military-aligned Palang Pracharat Party, especially in the Lower North, and a surprising degree of success achieved by the anti-military Future Forward Party.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All election results cited in this article are available at <https://elect.thematter.co/filters/northern>.
- <sup>2</sup> Author interviews with voters in Lamphun Province, 21 March 2019.
- <sup>3</sup> Author interview with a village headman, and an interview with voters who currently live in Phrao, Chiang Mai, 14–15 March 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> The author went to several meetings organized by the Future Forward Party in Chiang Mai.
- <sup>5</sup> A talk by Pannika Wanich at a private meeting organized by the Future Forward Party in Chiang Mai Province, 4 August 2018.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> “พรรคชาติไทยพัฒนา, ภาคเหนือ” [Chartthaipattana Party, Northern Region], <http://cdn.matichon.co.th/files/matichon/vote4.pdf>.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Author interview with Johnnopadon Vasinsunthorn, 30 March 2019.
- <sup>10</sup> “สันติ พร้อมพัฒน์” นำอดีต ส.ส.เพชรบูรณ์ ยกกัวนชบพรรค พปชร” [Santi Promphat takes former Phetchabun MPs to the Palang Pracharat Party], *77 Kaoded*, <https://www.77kaoded.com/content/227026>.
- <sup>11</sup> “ผลการเลือกตั้งรายจังหวัด, กำแพงเพชร” [Election Results by Province, Kamphaeng Phet], <https://election.pptvhd36.com/region/1/49>.
- <sup>12</sup> “ผลการเลือกตั้งรายจังหวัด, พิษณุโลก” [Election Results by Province, Phitsanulok], <https://election.pptvhd36.com/region/1/52>.
- <sup>13</sup> “Abhisit ‘won’t back’ Prayut return as PM”, *Bangkok Post*, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/1642184/abhisit-wont-back-prayut-return-as-pm>.

# Upper South: Toppling Poles

---

---

MICHAEL J. MONTESANO

A time-tested truism holds that, even if the Democrat Party put electricity poles up for office, the voters in the Upper South of Thailand would still elect them.<sup>1</sup> The 24 March 2019 polls called that truism into question. As the Upper South has represented a crucial Democrat electoral bailiwick, the results of those polls have implications that transcend the region. They force us to confront the possibility of a significant change in the way that the provinces of Thailand's Upper South figure on the national political landscape.<sup>2</sup>

In the Thai elections of July 2011—the last successfully completed national polls before those of March 2019—voters in the region's 11 provinces chose members of the lower house of parliament to represent 42 constituencies.<sup>3</sup> In apparent confirmation of loyalty to the party among voters in the Upper South, especially during the past three decades, Democrat Party candidates took 41 of these seats. This result, and the record of deeply entrenched regional loyalty to the party, meant that the Democrats, rather than the ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta or its Palang Pracharat Party, entered the 2019 campaign season as the *de facto* incumbents in the region.

On 24 March—with a total of 3,690,782 votes cast in the region, 10.39 per cent of the nationwide total—the Democrats only managed to hold onto 21 of the 39 constituencies in those same 11 provinces. Out of the remaining 18 seats, the Action Coalition for Thailand Party (ACT) captured one, Bhumjaithai seven and Palang Pracharat ten.<sup>4</sup> Electricity poles had fallen. But how, and why?

---

MICHAEL J. MONTESANO is the Coordinator of the Thailand Studies Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. Postal address: 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore, 119614; email: Michael\_Montesano@iseas.edu.sg.

Table 1  
**Results of the 24 March 2019 Elections in Eleven Provinces of the Upper South, Selected Parties**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Constituencies Won in Upper South</i>	<i>Total Votes in Upper South</i>	<i>Percentage of Total Votes in Upper South Won</i>	<i>Percentage of Party's National Vote Won in Upper South</i>
Democrat Party	21	1,293,041	35.03	32.75
Palang Pracharat Party	10	891,233	24.15	10.57
Bhumjaithai Party	7	484,864	13.14	12.99
Action Coalition for Thailand Party	1	121,144	3.28	29.10
Future Forward Party	0	461,927	12.52	7.37
Pheu Thai Party	0	28,834	0.78	0.36

*Source:* Election Commission of Thailand, "Raichue phu samak raplueaktang so so baep baeng khetlueaktang thi dairap khanaen sungsut raichangwat (yangmaipenthangkan)" [List of constituency candidates for parliament according to votes won, by province (unofficial)], 28 March 2019, [https://www.ect.go.th/ewt/ewt/ect\\_th/download/article/article\\_20190328165029.pdf](https://www.ect.go.th/ewt/ewt/ect_th/download/article/article_20190328165029.pdf).

The ACT did not prove the threat to the Democrats in the Upper South that outside observers had anticipated. The party's *de facto* founder and leader, former Democrat secretary-general and Surat Thani Member of Parliament (MP) Suthep Thaugsuban, had led the protests of the People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State (PDRC) against the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in Bangkok during the tumultuous 2013–14 period. The presence of demonstrators from the Upper South was one of the defining features of those protests. But neither Suthep's network of contacts, nor his success in mobilizing Southern protestors half a decade earlier, was of much consequence by 2019. Although the ACT came in second to the Democrats in three constituencies of Surat Thani Province and one constituency of Chumphon Province, the margins of its losses in those races were significant.

The ACT bested the Democrats only in Constituency 3 of Chumphon, where the chairman of the provincial administrative organization, Suphon Junsai, was its candidate. Suphon was the older brother and political client of a former Democrat MP and leading PDRC figure, Chumpol Junsai.<sup>5</sup> Running again as a Democrat, Chumpol held Constituency 1 on 24 March. As an exception that proved the rule, the older brother's triumph highlighted the absence of a broader pattern in the Upper South of damaging defections from the Democrats to the ACT. Likewise, that the ACT proved a flop in a region that had previously shown such strong support for the ouster of Yingluck underlined the reality of a new political moment in Thailand.

Another feature of that moment is related to the status of the Democrats as the effective incumbent party in the Upper South, noted above. The relative wealth of the still largely agricultural region has historically rested on the production of commodities such as Pará rubber. In 2019, however, the depressed prices for rubber—which have declined over the past decade because of the sector's extreme dependence on the Chinese market and competition from cultivators in Northeast Thailand and Laos—left some Southern voters impatient with the prevailing economic order in the region and ready to vote for change.

Among the three prime beneficiaries of that impatience was the Bhumjaithai Party, which captured seven Upper Southern constituencies. Even at the outset of the campaign, observers of politics in the region recognized the importance of the local pockets

of support for the party and accompanying electoral networks. They noted the potential for success that these factors gave Bhumjaithai.

The elections bore this observation out. Bhumjaithai's victorious candidates in Constituency 1 of Phatthalung and Constituency 7 of Songkhla, for example, were established local politicians. Each ran on economic issues, the first explicitly stressing a lack of development in his province and the latter building on a record of advocacy for higher rubber prices.<sup>6</sup>

Bhumjaithai epitomized the medium-sized parties that the NCPO's 2017 Constitution was designed to privilege. However, that design did not account for the party's success in the Upper South and its consequent emergence from the 24 March polls as a party with national reach. Rather, each of those developments resulted from the competitive electoral environment of the Upper South in 2019.

Both in the region and nationally, Palang Pracharat emerged as one of two newly established parties to score major breakthroughs on 24 March. In securing nearly a quarter of the votes cast in the region, the party trailed only the Democrats. It won both seats in booming Phuket, three out of eight seats in the Southern Thai heartland province of Nakhon Si Thammarat and four of Songkhla's eight seats. Underlining the punishment that it inflicted on the Democrats, Palang Pracharat's candidate in Constituency 1 of Trang felled Sukit Atthopakon, an extremely well-regarded veteran Democrat politician and close associate of former premier and native son Chuan Leekpai.<sup>7</sup>

The party's victorious pole-toppling candidate in Trang was Niphan Sirithon, a similarly well-regarded retired official of the interior ministry who had long served in the province and had reached the rank of deputy governor there.<sup>8</sup> His profile as a former state official was not, however, typical of successful Palang Pracharat candidates in the region, many of whom also toppled established Democrats. They included veteran provincial politicians, former teachers, independent businessmen, an organizer of people who rented beach-beds and a university lecturer with a long record of research on politics and society in the Upper South. One of the businessmen had run for governor of Bangkok in 2013. Several of the others were admittedly unknown figures.<sup>9</sup>

While the retired official in Trang and the former chairmen of the councils of the Songkhla and Nakhon Si Thammarat provincial administrative organizations brought stature to their campaigns, the backgrounds of the seven other successful Palang

Pracharat candidates in the Upper South suggest that the party played a yield game in the region. It took advantage of the traditional willingness of some Southerners—whether out of conviction, opportunism or personal animosity—to oppose the Democrats. Palang Pracharat ran candidates in all constituencies, utilized whatever networks those candidates had, stressed the quasi-populist policies of the NCPO government and pledged to address voters' economic concerns. It is unclear how important the effective support of the state was in propelling a certain percentage of Palang Pracharat's motley collection of candidates to victory. Clearer is the fact that the party relied minimally, if at all, on appeals to hatred of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his supporters, or to the need for continued authoritarian rule to keep Thailand safe from them.

The Pheu Thai Party contested five of the 39 constituencies in the Upper South in the 24 March elections; in none of these races did its candidate prove a factor. The plan, after all, had been for the Thai Raksa Chart Party to serve as the principal Thaksinite political vehicle in the region, appealing to the critical mass of Southern voters prepared to vote for a party aligned with the former prime minister. Until it was banned in early March, Thai Raksa Chart fielded candidates, a number of them formidable, in every constituency in the region.

It is impossible to say with certainty how much the dissolution of Thai Raksa Chart benefitted the Future Forward Party, whose platform often sounded distinctly Thaksinite, in the Upper South. While Future Forward won no seats there, its breakthrough at the national level in the March 2019 polls differed from that of Palang Pracharat in one crucial respect, one that demands attention to its performance in the region. Alone among the five major parties to emerge from those polls, Future Forward won more party-list seats than constituency seats. This outcome means that understanding the party's electoral success requires scrutiny of where it accumulated votes, even without winning constituency races.

Future Forward Party candidates polled second in Constituency 1 of Surat Thani and Constituency 2 of Songkhla. The party ran third in a further 19 Upper Southern constituencies, including Surat Thani's remaining five constituencies. Candidates drawing the highest levels of support included a sometime university lecturer and campaigner for equality of access to education in Hat Yai, a Trang lawyer, a satellite-dish entrepreneur in Phang Nga who had graduated from the Faculty of Political Science at Chulalongkorn

University, a veteran of provincial politics in Surat Thani, a small-businessman in Phuket and a man involved in educational and—under the auspices of the local Ramkhamhaeng University club—sporting activities in the same province.<sup>10</sup> Both in the Upper South and across Thailand, networks grounded in their participants' earlier involvement in the Students Federation of Thailand helped give the Future Forward Party organizational coherence and reach.<sup>11</sup> That factor notwithstanding, the general profile of the party's candidates in the Upper South did not differ markedly from those of the candidates fielded in provincial Thailand by innumerable other new parties contesting the 24 March elections.

Future Forward's success in winning 12.52 per cent of the vote in the Upper South as a whole meant that it trailed the Democrats, Palang Pracharat and Bhumjaithai in the region. In comparison, it took 17.63 per cent of the national vote and 25.92 per cent of the Bangkok vote. The party's relative underperformance in the Upper South, even after the dissolution of Thai Raksa Chart, meant that voters in the region accounted for 7.37 per cent of votes cast in favour of the party across Thailand, as against the 12.84 per cent of Future Forward's nationwide support for which voters in Bangkok accounted. In the face of persistent charges that the party's leadership was less than loyal to the monarchy, did the matter-of-fact royalism of many Upper Southern voters lead them to reject it? Was the much heralded youth vote less of a factor here than elsewhere?

One must, however, keep these possibilities in perspective, as the iconoclastic new party did win nearly half a million votes in the Upper South. Its message evidently resonated with enough of the region's inhabitants that the Upper South contributed almost six votes towards Future Forward's crucial haul of party-list seats for every ten votes that Bangkok contributed. This was not a trivial outcome.

By any normal measure, the 24 March elections affirmed the Democrat Party's dominance of Thailand's Upper South. The party outpaced its nearest challenger by more than 10 per cent of the total vote in the region. But normal measures had not appeared to apply to Democrat hegemony in Upper Southern Thailand over the past three decades, grounded as it was in myths about the region's distinct political culture and the party's fabled *udomkan* or "principles".<sup>12</sup> While both sworn enemies of the party and opportunists willing to challenge it on other parties' tickets had resolved in the past to topple its electricity poles, much of their

previous effort had been in vain. Not so in March 2019: the election saw the emergence of a politically competitive Upper South and thus seemed to recast the region's place in national politics.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Marc Askew, *Performing Political Identity: The Democrat Party in Southern Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2008).
- <sup>2</sup> This article addresses the national-level implications of the outcome of the 2019 elections in the Upper South. For a focus on provincial-level dynamics in the region on the eve of the campaign for those elections, see Michael J. Montesano, "The Approach of Elections in Trang, South Thailand, 2019 — Part I: Context and Competition", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2019/13, 13 March 2019, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2019\\_13.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_13.pdf); and "The Approach of Elections in Trang, South Thailand — Part II: Economic Worries, Social Issues, and the Question of National Integration", *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2019/16, 22 March 2019, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2019\\_16.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_16.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Thailand, *Ratchakitchanubeksa* (Royal Gazette), July 2011, Volume 128, various sections. The provinces under study here are Chumphon, Krabi, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phang Nga, Phatthalung, Phuket, Ranong, Satun, Songkhla, Surat Thani and Trang.
- <sup>4</sup> Election Commission of Thailand, "Raichue phu samak raplueaktang so so baep baeng khetlueaktang thi dairap khanaen sungsut raichangwat (yangmaipenthangkan)" [List of constituency candidates for parliament according to votes won, by province (unofficial)], 28 March 2019, [https://www.ect.go.th/ewt/ewt/ect\\_th/download/article/article\\_20190328165029.pdf](https://www.ect.go.th/ewt/ewt/ect_th/download/article/article_20190328165029.pdf). All quantitative data on the results of the March 2019 elections presented in this article come from this same source or are calculated from data therein.
- <sup>5</sup> "Lueaktang chumphon dueat 'luk mi' long po cho po dan pichai 'luk chang' nayok o bo cho long khet 3 sangkat phak 'lung kamnan' chon chaem kao" [Chumphon elections on the boil: 'Bear Cub' runs as Democrat while older brother 'Elephant Cub', chairman of provincial administrative organization, runs in Constituency 3 for party of 'Uncle Kamnan', challenges old champ], *MGR Online*, 4 February 2019, <https://mgronlinedetail.com/south//9620000012333>, and "Luelan chumphon 'luk chang' lueak khang kamnan?" [Rumoured in Chumphon: will 'Elephant Cub' take the kamnan's side?], *Khom chat luek*, 18 December 2018, <http://www.komchadluek.net/news/scoop/356038>.
- <sup>6</sup> Considerations of space make it impossible to include citations to biographical data for the Bhumjaithai candidates discussed here; those citations are available from the author.
- <sup>7</sup> Montesano, "The Approach of Elections in Trang, South Thailand, 2019 — Part I", p. 5.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- <sup>9</sup> Citations to biographical data for the Palang Pracharat Party candidates discussed here are available from the author.

- <sup>10</sup> Citations to biographical data for the Future Forward Party candidates mentioned here are available from the author; considerations of space preclude their inclusion in these notes.
- <sup>11</sup> Author interview with a member of the Trang provincial leadership of the Future Forward Party, Trang, 12 January 2019. Note that this is not to suggest that the candidates whom the party ran for office were themselves former participants in the Students Federation of Thailand.
- <sup>12</sup> See Askew, *Performing Political Identity*, pp. 221, 239–40, 295.

# The Deep South: Changing Times?

---

---

*DAUNGYEWA UTARASINT*

The 2019 general election in Thailand's Deep South—comprising the three southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, where an armed insurgency has been raging since 2004—was primarily a contest between two newly-created parties: the Palang Pracharat Party, a pro-military political party, and the Prachachart Party, which positioned itself as a pro-democracy party. Prachachart was the biggest winner in the Deep South, winning six of the 11 constituency seats. While the Democrat Party won ten of the 11 seats in the 2011 general election, it only managed to hold on to one in 2019 through Anwar Salae, a former Democrat MP who defeated prominent former senator Worawit Baru of Prachachart by just 4.83 per cent in Pattani's Constituency 1.

The Future Forward Party, which made waves elsewhere in the country, fared less well in the Deep South. Though popular among university students in Pattani Constituency 1, Future Forward only came in fifth place, and failed to win any seats in the region. However, considering Future Forward's avowed rejection of money politics, their fourth or fifth placings in every constituency in the Deep South—with an average share of 6–7 per cent of the vote—was a significant achievement.<sup>1</sup> One village chief in Yala Constituency 1 claimed that Future Forward took significant numbers of votes away from the Democrat Party.<sup>2</sup>

As shown in Table 1, Palang Pracharat won three seats: Yala Constituency 1, Narathiwat Constituency 1 and Narathiwat Constituency 2. The pro-military party could be considered to have

---

DAUNGYEWA UTARASINT, PhD, is an affiliated researcher at the Center for Conflict Studies and Cultural Diversity, Prince of Songkhla University, Thailand. Postal address: 2 Washington Square Village, Apt. 5J, New York, 10012, United States; email: daungyewa@gmail.com.

Table 1  
**2019 Election Results for Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat**

<i>Province</i>	<i>Constituency</i>	<i>Winner</i>	<i>Political Party</i>	<i>Votes Received</i>
Pattani	1	Anwar Salae	Democrat	19,883 (20.63%)
	2	Abdul Asim-Abu	Bhumjaithai	17,652 (20.73%)
	3	Anumat Susaro	Prachachart	36,799 (40.57%)
	4	Sommut Benjaluck	Prachachart	29,323 (34.62%)
Yala	1	Adilan Ali-is-hoh	Palang Pracharat	23,745 (26.86%)
	2	Sukarno Matha	Prachachart	37,368 (40.58%)
	3	Abdul Ayi-sameng	Prachachart	38,666 (43.91%)
Narathiwat	1	Watchara Yaworhasan	Palang Pracharat	32,268 (32.61%)
	2	Sampan Mayusoh	Palang Pracharat	34,211 (37.74%)
	3	Kuheng Yaworhasan	Prachachart	39,438 (40.23%)
	4	Kamonsak Leewamoh	Prachachart	40,807 (36.57%)

Source: "2019 General Election Results", Office of the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) website [in Thai], [https://www.ect.go.th/ect\\_th/](https://www.ect.go.th/ect_th/).

achieved a partial victory given the unpopularity of the armed forces among the Malay Muslim population in the insurgency-racked Deep South.

In fact, the three constituencies that Palang Pracharat won were previously Democrat Party strongholds (see Table 2). The result in Yala Constituency 1 was especially significant: it was won by Adilan Ali-is-hoh, a well-known lawyer from the Muslim Attorney Center Foundation which provides legal aid to villagers accused of insurgent-related activities by the security services. In 2011, Adilan had failed to win a seat under the Pheu Thai banner in Pattani Constituency 1. However, in 2019, he ran successfully for Palang Pracharat in Yala Constituency 1, albeit with a narrow margin of victory of only 1.4 per cent. It is unclear why Adilan ran as a candidate for a pro-military party given poor perceptions of the military in the Deep South. Many of Adilan's close friends and colleagues were disappointed by his decision, and some of them even suggested that his loyalty had been bought by Palang Prachachart. This seat was previously held by long-time Democrat MP Prasert Pongsuwansiri, who won with comfortable margins of 18.6 per cent and 48.69 per cent in 2005 and 2011, respectively. The Democrats could probably have won Yala Constituency 1 had it not been for Future Forward which lured away some Democrat supporters, as the combined tally of the Democrats (22.29 per cent), Future Forward (14.97 per cent) and the Action Coalition for Thailand (ACT) (3.39 per cent) amounted to 40.65 per cent of the votes in the constituency.

An important player in the Deep South is the Prachachart Party, which was formed in 2018 when key members of the Wadah group—such as former interior minister Wan Muhamad Noor Matha, Areepen Utarasint, Najmuddin Umar and Muk Sulaiman—teamed up with Police Colonel Tawee Sodsong, former chief of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC). The Wadah group, which has dominated parliamentary elections in the Deep South since the mid-1980s, is a faction of Malay Muslim politicians who have found a home in a succession of different political parties. Wan Nor, the Prachachart Party leader, and Tawee Sodsong, the party's secretary-general, both have close ties to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Despite Wan Nor's claim that the Prachachart Party would present a genuine alternative for voters across the country,<sup>3</sup> Prachachart is still perceived as a regionally-based Malay Muslim nationalist party. Voters in the Deep South, especially Thai Buddhists, also view the Prachachart Party as a proxy of the Pheu Thai Party. At the same time, another co-founder of Wadah, Den Tohmeena, joined the Bhumjaithai Party. The split between the two most senior Wadah leaders caused Wadah

Table 2  
**Winners and Runners-up, 2005, 2011, and 2019 Parliamentary Elections, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat<sup>4</sup>**

<i>Province &amp; Constituency</i>	<i>General Election</i>					
	<i>2005</i>		<i>2011</i>		<i>2019</i>	
	<i>Winners and Runners-up</i>	<i>Margin of Victory</i>	<i>Winners and Runners-up</i>	<i>Margin of Victory</i>	<i>Winners and Runners-up</i>	<i>Margin of Victory</i>
Yala (1)	1. Prasert Pongsuwansiri (33,393 – DEM) 2. Phairoj Chaleowsak (20,336 – TRT)	18.6%	1. Prasert Pongsuwansiri (40,190 – DEM) 2. Irfan Sulong (12,202 – Pheu Thai)	48.69%	1. Adilan Ali-is-hoh (23,745 – PRRP) 2. Sampan Suwannapho (22,515 – Prachachart)	1.39%
Yala (2)	1. Abdulkarim Tengkarina (23,212 – DEM) 2. Phaisan Yingsaman (19,314 – TRT)	5.24%	1. Abdulkarim Tengkarina (28,385 – DEM) 2. Sukarno Matha (28,337 – Pheu Thai)	0.06%	1. Sukarno Matha (37,368 – Prachachart) 2. Ridwan Mateh (26,638 – BJT)	11.65%
Yala (3)	1. Narong Duding (38,040 – DEM) 2. Burahanuddin Useng (22,162 – TRT)	20.48%	1. Narong Duding (33,433 – DEM) 2. Burahanuddin Useng (21,498 – Pheu Thai)	14.07%	1. Abdul Ayi-sameng (38,666 – Prachachart) 2. Narong Duding (16,816 – DEM)	24.81%
Pattani (1)	1. Anwar Salae (28,554 – DEM) 2. Sommut Benjaluck (21,194 – Mahachon)	9.87%	1. Anwar Salae (28,733 – DEM) 2. Arun Benjaluck (24,301 – BJT)	5.15%	1. Anwar Salae (19,883 – DEM) 2. Worawit Baru (15,233 – Prachachart)	4.83%
Pattani (2)	1. Ismail Yeedorormae (41,968 – DEM) 2. Jeh-is-maee Jehmong (8,532 – TRT)	42.93%	1. Ismail Benja-ibroheem (38,164 – DEM) 2. Muhammad Arifin Japakiya (20,152 – Matubhum)	23.54%	1. Abdul Asim-Abu (17,652 – BJT) 2. Muhammad Arifin Japakiyan (17,218 – Prachachart)	0.51%

Pattani (3)	1. Mohamadyasari Yusong (33,385 – DEM) 2. Sommat Jehna (20,763 – TRT)	16.58%	1. Anumat Susaro (27,142 – Matubhum) 2. Nimukta Waba (25,865 – BJT)	1.48%	1. Anumat Susaro (36,799 – Prachachart) 2. Abdul Korha Waeputeh (18,109 – BJT)	20.61%
Pattani (4)	1. Sata Awaekueji (28,769 – DEM) 2. Muk Sulaiman (13,921 – TRT)	22.41%	1. Sommut Benjaluck (21,510 – BJT) 2. Sata Awaekueji (19,735 – DEM) 3. Muk Sulaiman (19,718 – Matubhum)	2.32%	1. Sommut Benjaluck (29,323 – Prachachart) 2. Anwar Sama-ae (15,718 – PPRP)	16.06%
Narathiwat (1)	1. Jeh-aming Tohtayong (33,927 – DEM) 2. Dr. Pornpitch (16,329 – TRT)	21.41%	1. Ku-aseem Kujinaming (37,903 – DEM) 2. Phaisan Toryib (24,286 – Matubhum)	14.68%	1. Watchara Yaworhasan (32,268 – PPRP) 2. Maha-ma-ropee (22,555 – Prachachart)	9.82%
Narathiwat (2)	1. Surachet Wae-asaee (36,653 – DEM) 2. Samad Walong (24,717 – TRT)	15.45%	1. Surachet Wae-asaee (26,638 – DEM) 2. Hamdan Asaee (21,770 – BJT)	5.62%	1. Sampan Mayusoh (34,211 – PPRP) 2. Saree Sama-ae (21,825 – Prachachart)	13.67%
Narathiwat (3)	1. Kuheng Yaworhasan (23,858 – Chart Thai) 2. Najmuddeen Uma (22,189 – TRT)	1.83%	1. Ramree Mama (24,647 – DEM) 2. Niaris Jetaphiwat (22,880 – Chart Thai Pattana)	1.94%	1. Kuheng Yaworhasan (39,438 – Prachachart) 2. Ramree Mama (19,525 – ACT)	20.31%
Narathiwat (4)	1. Adul Saheebatu (39,497 – DEM) 2. Saudee Bhumibhut (22,801 – TRT)	18.60%	1. Jeh-Ahming Tohtayong (28,498 – DEM) 2. Kamonsak Leewamoh (28,019 – Matubhum)	0.46%	1. Kamonsak Leewamoh (40,807 – Prachachart) 2. Sukree Mataee (34,451 – BJT)	5.7%

Key: DEM: Democrat Party; TRT: Thai Rak Thai Party; PPRP: Palang Pracharat Party; BJT: Bhumjaithai Party.

Source: Office of the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) website [in Thai], [https://www.ect.go.th/ect\\_th/](https://www.ect.go.th/ect_th/).

supporters to split. The election results show that six winners and five runners-up came from Prachachart, and one winner and three runners-up from Bhumjaithai (see Table 2). Several prominent Wadah members, including Areepen, Muk and Najmuddin, also switched from being Den's allies in the 2011 election to campaigning under Wan Nor's wing in 2019.

Between 1986 and 2001, Wadah consistently gained between five and seven parliamentary seats. Soon after the upsurge of violence in 2004, considerable friction arose between Den Tohmeena (Pattani) and Wan Nor (Yala).<sup>5</sup> Wan Nor, a minister of the interior at the time, failed to defend Den when he was alleged to have masterminded an attack on an army base on 4 January 2004 in Narathiwat. Because of this internal conflict, in 2011 Wadah members split into four different political parties. Some Wadah members formed short-lived political parties (including the Matubhum Party and the Prachatham Party), while others joined existing national political parties such as Pheu Thai and Bhumjaithai. This fracturing of Wadah produced vote splitting that ultimately led to Wadah's poor performance in the 2011 general election. A similar fracturing doomed the Democrat Party in 2019. In the 2019 election, some former Democrat Party candidates and supporters switched their support to Palang Pracharat and ACT. Former Democrat incumbents such as Jeh Ahming Tohtayong, Abdulkarim Tengkarina and Surachet Wae-asae joined ACT, which is controlled by former deputy premier Suthep Thaugsuban. Jeh Ahming's son, Jeh Ilyas, ran for a seat in Narathiwat Constituency 4, placing third with 10.34 per cent of the votes. Abdulkarim ranked fourth in Yala Constituency 2 with 7.74 per cent. Surachet came in fourth in Narathiwat Constituency 3 with 9.59 per cent of the votes. Not only did the Democrat Party lose heavily in the Deep South, but ex-Democrats who had switched to ACT also lost.

Eight interviewees, including both Malay Muslims and Thai Buddhists, thought that vote-buying in 2019 was more prevalent than in previous elections. Another interviewee claimed that a front-line cabinet minister played a significant role in manipulating the election. According to this source, the minister threatened a wide range of government officials, ranging from provincial governors down to village headmen, to get them to engage in electoral actions that favoured Palang Pracharat. A district deputy alleged that a large amount of money intended to buy votes was transferred from Bangkok to Pattani two days prior to election day. One cabinet minister was alleged to have travelled personally to the Deep South to manage

the vote-buying operations.

One retired village headman told the author that over the past three decades, vote-buying had increased from 50–100 baht (US\$1.50–US\$3) per person in 1984 to 500 baht in 2011.<sup>6</sup> However, *Projek Sama-Sama*, an ad hoc election monitoring group formed by volunteers and local journalists, reported that the amounts distributed to individual voters in the 2019 elections ranged from 200 to 3,000 baht (US\$6.2–US\$94), the highest amounts ever seen in the region.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, only three months before election day, the ruling junta distributed a New Year's gift of 500 baht (US\$15.65) to all state welfare card holders, all of whom have low incomes. People criticized this gesture as a thinly veiled attempt to buy votes.<sup>8</sup> Yet despite the large sums Palang Pracharat spent on vote-buying, it only won three seats in the region. This result lends support to the idea that no matter how much money vote-buyers distribute, voters generally make their own choices in the end.

Some results were more predictable than others. It is not surprising that Palang Pracharat won Narathiwat Constituency 1 as it has a high population of Thai Buddhists and is home to many government officials. Palang Pracharat's victory in Narathiwat Constituency 2 is more surprising, especially in Sungai Padi district as many insurgent sympathizers live in this area. The election results from all ten polling stations in Sungai Padi are revealing: in every polling station from a Buddhist neighbourhood, Palang Pracharat won more than 50 per cent of the votes. This author was told that Palang Pracharat had convinced Buddhist voters to abandon their traditional allegiance to the Democrat Party by arguing that votes for the Democrats would cause a split in the pro-establishment tally, and thus enable Prachachart to win. An informant shared that a Palang Pracharat broker said that: "We should not let Prachachart win because it is Thaksin's party." However, without conducting further empirical research, it is difficult to know whether voters chose Palang Pracharat due to their fear of Thaksin or animosity against Malay nationalism.

In January 2019, two Buddhist monks were killed by insurgents at Wat Rattananuparb<sup>9</sup> in Ban Khok Ko,<sup>10</sup> Toh Deng, in Sungai Padi district, Narathiwat. Phra Khru Prachote Rattananurak (*Sawang*), the district chief monk and abbot of the temple, was found dead along with another monk at the temple. The abbot was well respected among both Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims in Sungai Padi district. It is possible that some voters in the area chose Palang Pracharat because they believed that a party aligned with the

military junta could best protect them from such acts of violence. This author interviewed two Thai Buddhists actively involved with the peace process in the Deep South, with both claiming that the Democrat Party had nothing new to offer as the party was merely using the same tired style of campaign rallies that involves constantly belittling their opponents. Moreover, the Democrat Party adopted a neutral stance between the pro-military and the pro-democracy factions. This may have backfired as voters perceived the Democrats as opportunists looking to form a ruling coalition with any camp that succeeded in securing a plurality of seats.<sup>11</sup>

The 2019 campaign in the Deep South was just as ugly, if not uglier, than it was in the rest of the country,<sup>12</sup> given the extensive abuse of power by bureaucrats and rampant vote-buying. However, given the absence of elections for eight years, a range of actors including local politicians, civil society organizations and new voters (who accounted for 20 per cent of voters in the region) were eager to engage in the electoral process. The high levels of violence had meant that during the 2005, 2007 and 2011 general elections political candidates avoided holding mass rallies or campaigning in rural areas, especially in the evenings. As violence had decreased by 70 per cent since 2011,<sup>13</sup> the numbers of campaign rallies greatly increased, and some of the campaign rallies went on until the early hours of the morning, creating more incentives and opportunities for villagers to participate in politics. Internet access and social media also stimulated voters to be part of the political process—whether through listening to live campaign rallies from home, monitoring election activities on the election day or taking part in online political discussions. These phenomena increased the political space for voters to access more information from candidates and political parties.

Prachachart won the most seats in the Deep South not solely because of Wadah's clan base, but also because of the formidable networks Tawee had created during his time as SBPAC chief. Apart from Wan Nor who received a Prachachart party-list seat, no other key Wadah members are slated to become MPs in the new parliament. Almost 50 per cent of the 2019 election winners from the Deep South are newcomers, including human rights lawyers, local politicians and relatives of local bosses. Despite the transition to a younger generation of politicians, clientelism still remains central to electoral politics in this region. Electoral politics in Thailand's Deep South still has a long way to go, but the 2019 election did see substantive changes.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See “2019 General Election Results”, Office of the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) website [in Thai], [https://www.ect.go.th/ect\\_th/](https://www.ect.go.th/ect_th/).
- <sup>2</sup> Author interview Ilham Ismail, via Facebook Messenger, 25 March 2019.
- <sup>3</sup> See “Prachachat Party Debuts with Credibility Crisis”, *The Nation*, 4 September 2018, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/opinion/30353664>.
- <sup>4</sup> See ECT website.
- <sup>5</sup> On the politics of Wadah, see Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 63–80.
- <sup>6</sup> Author interview, retired village headman, Saiburi district, 11 May 2017.
- <sup>7</sup> See Projek Sama Sama webpage [in Thai], <https://www.facebook.com/projeksamasama/>.
- <sup>8</sup> See Pravit Rojanaphruk, “Legal Scrutiny over Prayuth’s 86 Billion Baht Handouts”, *Khaosod English*, 22 November 2018, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2018/11/22/legal-scrutiny-over-prayuths-86-billion-baht-handouts/>.
- <sup>9</sup> See Wadeo Harai, “Two Monks Killed at Narathiwat Temple”, 19 January 2019, *Bangkok Post*, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/security/1614082/three-monks-killed-at-narathiwat-temple>.
- <sup>10</sup> The report gave the wrong name for the village where the temple is located, which should be Ban Khok Ko (บ้านโคกโก) in Toh Deng subdistrict (โตะแดง), not Ban Poh Deng.
- <sup>11</sup> Author interview Rukchart Suwan and Lamai Manakan, via Skype.
- <sup>12</sup> See “Thailand’s Bogus Election”, *The Economist*, 14 March 2019, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/03/14/thailands-bogus-election>, and Michael Sullivan, “In Thailand’s First Nationwide Vote since Coup, the Generals Hold Most of the Cards”, NPR.org, 22 March 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/22/705754693/in-thailands-first-nationwide-vote-since-coup-the-generals-hold-most-of-the-card>.
- <sup>13</sup> See, “Violence Falls 70% in Deep South”, *Bangkok Post*, 24 October 2018, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1563278/violence-falls-70-in-deep-south>.

# Poll Watching: International Observer

---

---

*DIPENDRA K.C*<sup>1</sup>

Soon after the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) received accreditation from the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), this author was invited to join the network's election observation mission (EOM) as an official international observer. Coming from Nepal, a country which has experienced significant political upheavals over the past 13 years—including the end of a decades-long insurgency, a popular people's revolution that abolished the monarchy and the promulgation of a new Constitution—it was exciting to observe Thai citizens exercising their democratic rights.

I flew to Ubon Ratchathani province to observe the elections a few days before the polls. While ANFREL was among a number of international organizations that had expressed an interest in observing the elections, the ECT delayed accrediting international observers. As a contingency plan, on 11 March, ANFREL had asked me to contribute to its "Asian Electoral Research Center" as a "researcher" instead of using the term "election observer" to avoid any legal problems. Only on 14 March was ANFREL officially accredited.<sup>2</sup> Initially, I considered the delay natural: official observers would be a low priority for the ECT, given the other preparations for the elections which the Commission had to undertake. When I finally received my official observer's identification card the day before the elections, however, I began to sense that the delay, and the general lack of preparedness, were deliberate.

---

DIPENDRA K.C. is a Lecturer in the School of Global Studies, Thammasat University, Bangkok. Postal address: Khlong Luang District, Pathum Thani 12121, Bangkok, Thailand; email: dipendra@sgs.tu.ac.th.

The role of an international observer was relatively simple: to observe the campaign environment, assess the security situation and understand the views of the voters. In addition, observers are also tasked to monitor the voter registration process and voter lists, the election administration, voter education, the behaviour of government officials (including the military and police), the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) and other domestic election observers, as well as the media. As the only official international observer stationed in Ubon Ratchathani, the author established a three-way communication channel with the provincial coordinators of two prominent domestic election observation groups—We Watch and the Open Forum for Democracy Foundation (P-NET)—within hours of landing in the field.

Over the course of five days during the election week, the author travelled approximately 1,300 kilometres to five out of Ubon Ratchathani's ten constituencies to interview candidates, voters, electoral officers, and representatives from the media and civil society organizations. The observations in this article are drawn from the author's 57 interviews, experience in the field and reports that were shared by other election observers.

Overall, political parties relied on traditional methods of campaigning such as door-to-door canvassing, posters and public rallies. Social media was also extensively used during the campaign. It was interesting to witness political parties such as Pheu Thai and Future Forward framing the constitutional provision of 250 appointed senators as a barrier to democracy and themselves as the guardians of Thai democracy, even at the village level.

The electoral campaign was mostly peaceful and instances of violence were rare. Informants credited the largely peaceful environment to the stringent electoral regulations imposed by the ECT, and to efforts undertaken by political parties and candidates to avoid severe penalties from the authorities. However, while the campaign environment was generally peaceful, the anti-junta parties were subject to intimidation by the security forces. For instance, a Pheu Thai candidate from Ubon Ratchathani's Constituency 7 shared that he had been visited by military officers two days before the polls and continuously followed by plain-clothes military officers. Similar stories were told to other election observers in other parts of the country, with some of these incidents reported in the mainstream media.<sup>3</sup>

In interviews, academics, members of CSOs and voters expressed their concerns about the electoral environment. They often cited the government's sweeping powers during the election period. This included legal provisions which could be used against critics of the junta, such as Section 44 of the 2014 Interim Constitution, the Computer Crime Act and the extension of electoral regulations on social media campaigning. Interviewees often questioned the impartiality of the ECT—especially over the dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chart—and its refusal to investigate the alleged misconduct of pro-junta parties. Nevertheless, despite the climate of fear, voters in Ubon Ratchathani enthusiastically participated in the polls even though they were aware that the elections would be unlikely to yield the political changes that they wanted for the country.

It was apparent that political parties did not compete on a level playing field during the elections. Officially, the observer's mandate was to observe the polls within the law of the land. However, this limited mandate did not blind the author to discriminatory legal provisions that had been designed to benefit a specific political camp. The omnipresence of the all-powerful National Council of Peace and Order (NCPO), and the limited freedom of expression and citizens' right to assembly until a few months before the elections, hindered political parties from organizing their institutional networks down to the village level. Probably one of the most undemocratic constitutional provisions was for the appointment of 250 senators with significant legislative and oversight powers. Throughout my observations, candidates and other stakeholders expressed grave concerns regarding the opacity of the senatorial appointment process as well as the role of the upper house, specifically senators' increased power to join hands with the lower house to vote for Thailand's next prime minister.

Multiple instances of vote buying were reported throughout the country, though the frequency of these reports was lower than in previous elections. There was strong evidence of acts of vote buying during advanced voting in one of the constituencies in Ubon Ratchathani. The provincial ECT director also acknowledged receiving reports of vote buying, but refused to provide further details while stating that the ECT was investigating. Similar reports were also made public by a domestic election watchdog.<sup>4</sup> Voters the author spoke with clearly understood the "politricks" of money. Those taking money declared that they could vote for their preferred party despite having taken money from a different party.

The use of state resources to the benefit of the pro-regime parties was frequently reported, ranging from de facto pro-Prayut campaigns in the guise of mobile cabinet meetings during the period when the NCPO's bans on political activities and gatherings were still in place, rallies that Prime Minister Prayut attended ahead of the elections, or the promotion of government welfare programmes funded from state coffers. A case in point was the Pracharat Welfare Scheme—the name of which was strikingly similar to the pro-junta Palang Pracharat Party—which the cabinet had given additional funds to in the final week of campaigning. Government denials that the welfare scheme was politically motivated were unconvincing.

The author witnessed enthusiastic participation from the Thai election monitoring organizations despite the dual challenges of working under a harsh military-controlled environment and a shortage of time and resources for training and planning. Nevertheless, these election monitoring organizations still managed to deploy observers in polling stations across the country. We Watch and P-NET were the main domestic election observation groups: P-NET deployed 600 observers in 63 provinces,<sup>5</sup> while We Watch organized 2,810 observers in 72 provinces. However, both international and domestic observers at times faced limitations in accessing the electoral process.

Overseas voters exercised their rights between 4 March and 16 March at 94 Thai embassies or consulates around the world. Despite problems, the voter turnout overseas was 84.7 per cent. Overseas voters complained of having to wait in long queues, receiving incorrect candidate information and ballots being delivered late or to the wrong address. Arguably the most disappointing case occurred when 1,500 ballots from New Zealand were not delivered to the respective polling stations for counting before the cutoff time on 24 March, and were therefore declared invalid by the ECT. All these instances clearly indicated a lack of preparedness and mismanagement by the ECT and diplomatic missions to handle the overseas ballots.

Advance voting in Thailand occurred on 17 March, when 87 per cent of 2.2 million registered voters cast their ballots. The high turnout of voters and a limited number of polling stations resulted in long queues, causing some voters to leave the polling stations without having voted in the 385 polling stations across the country. Even though no significant incidents of electoral violence

or violations were reported on the advance voting day, there were instances where voters either had their information wrongly listed at polling stations or were given incorrect ballot papers.

The voting process on election day ran relatively smoothly. International observers deployed across the country reported witnessing a mostly transparent and clean polling process. Polling centres were conveniently located, and voters did not have to wait in long queues. Approximately 50 per cent of votes were cast by midday. Each polling station was manned by seven polling staff who performed their duties efficiently.

Nevertheless, this observer witnessed uneven implementation of rules and procedures particularly during the opening and closing of polling stations. Polling staff were not adequately trained and polling officers referring to the election staff manual during the closing procedures. Also, there were isolated cases where polling officers did not closely check voters' ID cards.

In the author's home country of Nepal, elections are carnivals for political parties, and counting stations are full of vigilant party representatives. I had anticipated similar participation from Thailand's political parties in the electoral process. However, throughout the day, the presence of political party representatives and other domestic observers was infrequent. Political parties were mandated by the ECT to obtain prior approval to field party agents in the polling stations, and most of the parties lacked enough time to organize themselves. The cumbersome process of getting approval, and the lack of party apparatus at the polling station level, seriously undermined the participation of political parties on election day. The presence of political party agents would have enhanced transparency and fostered greater trust in the elections. However, both political parties and the ECT failed to capitalize on this opportunity.

For the most part, international observers were free to access polling stations except in a few places where the observer's ID card issued by the ECT was not sufficient, and clearance from the district level authority was required. In the majority of polling stations visited by the author, election officials wanted to take a picture of the ECT-issued observer's ID.

While the number of invalid ballots amounted to 5.6 per cent of the voter turnout at the national level, the numbers of invalid votes were higher in the localities where this author was stationed. The majority of the votes that were declared invalid was due to

the voters having selected two parties on the ballot. This probably happened because Thai voters received two ballot papers in previous elections—one for the constituency and the other for the party-list candidate. The other type of invalidated votes occurred where voters marked their ballot on the party number itself, instead of the designated marking area. These problems were clear signs that the ECT had failed to adequately educate the voters. From interviews with voters, more than half indicated not having received any instructions from the ECT about the voting procedure. A few received polling-related information through the post. However, relying only on a postal form for voter education in a country where there is huge internal migration was a poor choice by the ECT.

What had seemed a rather credible process became less convincing when the counting began. Several polling stations reported issues during the counting. In the polling station the author observed, polling staff had to recount the ballots as they initially failed to declare the votes cast for Thai Raksa Chart invalid. In a nearby polling station, polling officers had difficulties tallying up the results as the total count fell one ballot short of the votes cast. The whole process of recounting and transporting those ballot papers ended five hours after the election was over.

Several other observers also raised concerns about the vote tabulation and consolidation operations, to which no observers, party agents or the media had access. For instance, the provincial ECT was not able to verify the results from seven polling stations in Ubon Ratchathani, even after 18 hours had passed since the election. As with other desperate voters and candidates, the author had to wait for the ECT to publish the results on 25 March. The debacle surrounding the preliminary result announcement by the ECT strengthened public suspicion about the credibility of the election outcome.

In general, the ECT could have improved the quality of and trust in the electoral process by doing more to disseminate information on polling procedures. The lack of transparency and cooperation between the ECT and other electoral stakeholders severely limited the outflow of information, thereby fuelling further distrust in the process, the outcome and the Commission itself. Nevertheless, while Thailand is far off from becoming a functioning democracy, the election was an essential step for the people to exercise their rights and have their voices represented in the parliament.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of any other organizations.
- <sup>2</sup> See “International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) to the Kingdom of Thailand’s 2019 General Election: Interim Report”, <https://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ANFREL-Thailand-Interim-Report-English-2.0-1.pdf>.
- <sup>3</sup> Teeranai Charuvastra, “Army Has Sent Soldiers to Raid Election Candidates’ Homes”, *Khaosod English*, 21 March 2019, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/featured/2019/03/21/army-has-sent-soldiers-to-raid-election-candidates-homes/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Penchan Charoensuthipan, “Vote-Buying ‘Rampant’, says Election Watchdog”, *Bangkok Post*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/1650512/vote-buying-rampant-says-election-watchdog>.
- <sup>5</sup> Jintamas Saksornchai, “Poll Observers Not Confident Election Free or Fair”, *Khaosod English*, 24 March 2019, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2019/03/24/poll-observers-not-confident-election-free-or-fair/>.