AGLOS: Journal of Area-Based Global Studies
vol.12 (2025): 1-21
ISSN 1884-8052

The Decline of the Authoritarian Regime in Thailand in 2023?

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Abstract: This article examines the trajectory of authoritarian decline in Thailand following the 2023 general election, which resulted in significant electoral victories for the Move Forward Party and the Pheu Thai Party. This led to the formation of a civilian government under Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin after nearly a decade of junta rule. Despite this electoral victory, the influence of the 2014 junta remains deeply entrenched in Thailand's political system. Key mechanisms, such as the Election Commission of Thailand, the 20-Year National Strategy, and the military-appointed Senate, which retains substantial influence over parliamentary decisions, continue to restrict democratic progress. These structures ensure that, regardless of a more competitive electoral process, Thailand operates under a system that is semi-democratic at best, where aspirations for change coexist with persistent authoritarian practices. The post-election period further accentuates this dynamic since the new coalition government comprises junta-affiliated parties and prioritizes compromise over reform. This article argues that while the 2023 election represents a symbolic step toward democratization, the junta-era legal frameworks and institutional barriers persist, limiting Thailand's transition to full democracy. Achieving genuine democratic progress requires dismantling deeply entrenched authoritarian legacies and fostering a more inclusive political system.

Keywords: Thai politics, semi-democracy, pseudodemocracy, junta legacies, authoritarianism

Introduction

The victory of the Move Forward Party (MFP) and the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) in the 2023 general election in Thailand raises the question of whether this indicates a decline in the authoritarian regime established after the 2014 coup d'état. The election has led to a civilian-led government under Srettha Thavisin, the 30th Prime Minister of Thailand, from the PTP. After nearly a decade of military rule, this transition signals a possible shift in the Thai political landscape. With junta leaders such as General Prayuth Chan-o-cha and General Prawit Wongsuwan no longer in key positions, Thailand appears to

have taken a step away from authoritarianism. However, the legacies of the junta remain firmly embedded in the Thai political system, indicating that remnants of the previous regime are still intact.

This article examines the enduring legacies of the junta in Thailand and how they have influenced the 2023 general election and its aftermath. Although a decline in authoritarianism is discernible, elements from the previous regime continue to function seamlessly within the framework of the new civilian-led government. As a result, Thailand still operates within the structures established by the authoritarian rule. Key mechanisms, such as the 2017 Constitution drafted by the junta, the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), the 20-Year National Strategy, and the junta-appointed Senate, persist as obstacles to a full democratic transition. This article, thus, argues that while Thailand's 2023 political outlook appears more democratic, its inner substance suggests otherwise. Until these legacies are completely dismantled, the shadow of authoritarianism will continue to loom over Thailand's political landscape.

This article is structured to analyze Thailand's post-2023 election political landscape and its ongoing struggle between democratic progress and authoritarian legacies. It begins with a concise review of existing literature, outlining key theoretical frameworks to assess where Thailand stands on the spectrum between democracy and authoritarianism. This is followed by a brief historical and political overview, focusing on the 2014 coup d'état, the establishment of the junta-led government, and its long-term influence on Thailand's political environment. Next, the article traces the political developments leading to the 2023 general election, looking into the factors that fueled the rise of the MFP and its shifting relationship with the PTP. This section also highlights the deep-rooted legacies of the junta, particularly in regard to the appointed Senate, which exerts substantive authority over legislative decisions. These entrenched mechanisms underline the difficulties the new government faces in breaking free from authoritarian structures. The following section delves into the post-election dynamics, covering key events during the official election results, the first parliamentary session, and the appointment of Srettha Thavisin as prime minister. While the election results suggest a growing demand for democratic change, this section illustrates how the junta's leverage remains intact through legal and institutional frameworks, affecting political negotiations, coalition-building, and the overall transition to civilian governance. Finally, this article analyzes the political landscape under the new coalition government, assessing whether the initial policies implemented align with electoral hopes for fundamental changes and a transition away from the authoritarian regime. The concluding section also explores the long-term implications of the junta's rule and the challenges Thailand faces in achieving full democratic reform.

Is Thailand Still an Authoritarian Regime or Not?

What defines an authoritarian regime? Before evaluating whether Thailand has retreated from authoritarianism, it is essential to understand its defining characteristics. According to political scientist Juan J. Linz (2000, 159–79), authoritarian regimes are characterized by highly concentrated and centralized power, limited political pluralism, and an absence of meaningful political competition. Authoritarianism exists in various forms, even encompassing totalitarianism. Linz also discussed the concept of "sultanism," where power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader, unchecked by political institutions. In this regard, however, Thailand no longer operates under direct military control as it did between 2014 and 2019. The pivot to a hybrid junta-civilian government

from 2019 to 2023 suggests a more mixed political system. These theoretical frameworks may not fully capture the nuances of Thailand's regime in 2023, indicating the need for a more context-specific analysis.

Thailand's current regime is perhaps best described as "semi-democratic" or "pseudodemocratic," as outlined by scholars such as Diamond, Linz, and Lipset (1989, ix–xviii, 1–52). Other related terms, including "illiberal democracies," "hybrid regimes," and "competitive authoritarianism," further capture the nuanced nature of such systems (Diamond 2002, 21–34; Levitsky and Way 2010, 3–37). Though each denotes distinct forms of governance, they share common traits: elections take place, but are often neither free nor fair and subject to heavy manipulation. Civil liberties and political freedoms are restricted and periodically violated. Key political institutions such as the judiciary, security forces, and electoral commissions are controlled to support those in power. This creates a political environment where the ruling party enjoys a structural advantage, placing Thailand in a gray zone that is neither fully democratic nor entirely authoritarian.

In a similar fashion, "Asian-style democracy," also called "soft authoritarianism," is another framework to describe Thailand. This framework blends government control with democratic practices to preserve cultural values and maintain social harmony. It is argued that this approach helps prevent issues often seen in Western democracies, such as political gridlock and social unrest. Rooted in cultural perspectives like communitarianism and Confucian traditions, it prioritizes the collective good over individual rights, sometimes curtailing freedoms like free speech and open political competition. This model of democracy may feature elections and limited pluralism, but is often dominated by a single leader or ruling group (Hood 1998, 854–57).

However, Thailand manifests this Asian-style democracy through its distinct model, termed "Thai-style democracy." This is a concept that emerged in Thailand as a critique of Western-style democracy, asserting that the Thai political system should reflect the country's unique cultural and historical context. The term has been used primarily by those supporting the monarchy and the military, who argue that traditional Thai values and institutions are incompatible with Western democratic norms. The concept traces back to the military regime of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1957–1963), who promoted Thai-style democracy to justify a pro-monarchy, paternalistic rule (Chaloemtiarana 2007, vii–xxiii, 1–12). This notion was later revived by pro-monarchy groups (often referred to as "yellow shirts") during political protests against Thaksin Shinawatra and his government starting in 2005 (Thompson 2015, 880–84). Proponents of this framework argue that Western democratic principles, such as majority rule and individual freedoms, are ill-matched for Thailand's hierarchical social structure and deep-seated reverence for the monarchy. Instead, they emphasize "good governance" by a coalition of capable elites, including the monarchy, military, business leaders, officials, and bureaucrats, while downplaying the role of grassroot civic engagement. This view portrays Thailand's elites as the rightful leaders who can guide the nation toward stability and reform, sidelining the participatory elements of democracy (Connors 2020, 55–64; Hewison and Kittirianglarp 2010, 179–97; Winichakul 2008, 1–3). The 2014 military coup, which ushered in one of the most repressive regimes since the mid-1970s, was an example of how Thai-style democracy could be employed to justify undemocratic measures. The military framed its actions as a necessary step to uphold Thai values and prevent the "tyranny of the majority." Through interim constitutions and electoral reforms, the military sought to establish an authoritarian system dominated by unelected bodies while promoting this model as uniquely suited to Thai society (Bamrungsuk 2019, 89–99; Hewison 2019, 125–27; Winichakul 2017). In short, Thai-style democracy serves as both a critique and alternative to Western democratic ideals. Its focus on hierarchy, traditional

institutions, and elite-led governance stresses a culturally specific approach to stability and reform. However, it has also been used to justify centralized power and suppress democratic movements, illustrating the difficulty of reconciling cultural distinctiveness with broader democratic principles.

Thailand's 2023 political system aligns with both the semi-democracy and Thai-style democracy frameworks. While the former provides a broader classification within global political contexts, the latter offers a more localized interpretation rooted in Thailand's unique historical and cultural dynamics. Despite their differences, both frameworks position Thailand within a hybrid spectrum—neither fully authoritarian nor entirely democratic. The subsequent sections will gradually substantiate this argument by examining the institutional and structural mechanisms that sustain the political equilibrium.

Characteristics of Thai Authoritarianism

The 1997 Constitution of Thailand, widely regarded as the most democratic in Southeast Asia, was praised for its emphasis on decentralization, human rights, and mechanisms to prevent corruption through checks and balances (Kanchoochat and Hewison 2017, 1–14). However, its demise following the 2006 military coup marked a turning point, as conservative elites and the military viewed its democratic provisions as enabling populist leaders like Thaksin Shinawatra to consolidate power (Chachavalpongpun 2014, 1–15; Ferrara 2014, 17–39). In addition to other "independent organizations" established by the 1997 Constitution, the judiciary played a role in taking apart the rule of law, paving the way for the disassembly of existing democratic frameworks and their replacement by a "rule by law" that aligned with military interests (Mérieau 2016, 450–61). In this context, the MFP, following the dissolution of its predecessor, the Future Forward Party, emerged as a progressive force advocating democratic ideals reminiscent of the 1997 Constitution, such as decentralization, transparency, and grassroots empowerment. Its bold stance, championing reforms like amending the lèse-majesté law (Section 112), breaking up monopolies, and legalizing same-sex marriage, resonated strongly with voters, earning it the largest number of seats in the 2023 general election. In this respect, the MFP's policies reflect a renewed effort to bring back the democratic spirit envisioned by the 1997 Constitution (Chachavalpongpun 2020, 1–12; Strangio 2023).

Thailand's political terrain can also be defined by a disparity between economic stability and political volatility, a characteristic that has persisted since the 1990s. Despite frequent political upheavals, including military coups and judicial activism, the country's economy and economic policies have remained relatively stable and investor-friendly, enabling it to thrive as a regional hub. This resilience is supported by cooperation among politicians, the military, elite officials, business conglomerates, and the royal household (Chachavalpongpun 2019, 3–12; Kongkirati 2024, 1–39). Following the 2014 coup, the junta government centralized authority and enacted constitutional changes while insulating economic institutions from political turbulence to preserve investor confidence (Phongpaichit 2017, 35–51). This approach sustained foreign capital inflows into key sectors like manufacturing and tourism, securing Thailand's reputation as an attractive destination for investors. The current administration, led by Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, has further emphasized this stability through economic reforms and strengthened international relations during its first 100 days in office (Jones and Rhein, 2023). In contrast, Myanmar's economy under military rule has suffered a grave

recession, including a 10 percent GDP contraction in 2021 and currency depreciation, which have crippled households and undermined investor confidence (*The Irrawaddy* 2021; *Reuters* 2024; Kurtenbach 2024). Thailand's ability to maintain economic continuity amid political changes allows its political elites, together with the military and monarchy, to focus on internal dynamics without pressure from the business sector. This unique decoupling of politics and economics not only distinguishes Thailand from other Southeast Asian nations but also demonstrates its continuing appeal to foreign investors.

To understand more about contemporary Thai politics and its historical development, it is necessary to trace its development over the past decade. The 2014 coup marked another turning point towards authoritarianism, orchestrated not only by the military but also by the bureaucratic and official elites. After the coup in 2006, this 2014 coup aimed to uproot Thaksin Shinawatra's clout and fundamentally alter the political landscape. Unlike in 2006, it retained direct military control and employed repressive measures to silence dissent. The resilience of Thailand's old establishment, involving the monarchy, military, and bureaucracy, ultimately played an important role in opposing democratic forces (Ferrara 2020, 40–5). Middle-class activism, driven by fear of the rural masses and their political aspirations, also influenced these political dynamics (Sinpeng 2021, 3–21). The 2014 coup reflected profound societal conflicts and the long-lasting power of conservative forces.

On 22 May 2014, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, staged a coup that ousted the elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister. The military justified its actions by claiming the need to restore stability after months of political unrest. Once in control, the NCPO clamped down on freedoms, censoring the media, arresting dissidents, and banning political gatherings to silence opposition voices. They also set out political and economic reforms aimed at restoring democracy, but domestic critics saw these moves as a strategy to secure prolonged military dominion. A key part of this strategy was the 2017 Constitution, which handed immense power to the Senate, whose members were carefully selected by the military. This Senate, combined with the House of Representatives, played a central role in approving the prime minister, ensuring that General Prayuth stayed in power after the 2019 election. Beyond that, the NCPO introduced the 20-Year National Strategy that legally bound future governments to follow its policies, while the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) expanded its role in surveillance and internal security (Baker 2017, 18–32; Bamrungsuk 2019, 86–99; Chachavalpongpun 2014, 3–15; 2019, 3–13; 2020, 1–25). Although the 2019 election was presented as a step toward democracy, it was widely criticized for being anything but fair. Gerrymandering, disqualification of opposition candidates, and restrictions on political activities heavily tilted the playing field in favor of the military. International observers also saw the election as a façade for successive military rule (Asian Network for Free Elections 2019, 12–6). Instead of bridging Thailand's deep political divides, the 2019 election reinforced the domination of the military and conservative elites, leaving democracy as an aspiration rather than a reality.

Lastly, Thailand and Myanmar share striking similarities in how their constitutional frameworks embed military influence in politics. While Thailand's 2017 Constitution, introduced under the NCPO, endorses the military's long-term presence in governance, essentially through the unelected Senate (Pongsudhirak, 2017), Myanmar's 2008 Constitution takes this a step further by reserving 25 percent of parliamentary seats for military officials and granting them veto power over constitutional amendments, making substantive reform almost impossible (Kumbun 2021). The Tatmadaw armed forces' hegemony in Myanmar extends to control over key ministries, such as Defense, Home

Affairs, and Border Affairs. This framework ensures the military's ability to shield itself from civilian oversight and reinforces its long-standing role as the guardian of the state, a position it has maintained since independence (Steinberg 2021, 1–3, 28–37). Both constitutions exemplify how military regimes craft legal frameworks to protect their interests while presenting an image of civilian rule. These parallels reflect decades of shared military strategies between the two nations and highlight the challenges of disassembling well-established power structures.

2023 Thai Election

After eight years under the junta rule (2014–19) and the subsequent hybrid junta-civilian government (2019–23), Thailand's political landscape has encountered a major shift. The results of the 2023 Thai general election spotlighted this transformation, with a record-breaking voter turnout of 75.51 percent. Of 52,195,920 eligible voters, 39,514,964 cast their ballots—the highest participation rate in the country's history. Notably, the newly founded MFP garnered the most votes, 14.4 million votes. Out of the 500 seats in the House of Representatives, it won 151 seats (from 112 constituencies and 39 party-list candidates). The long-established PTP came in second with 10.9 million votes, earning 141 seats (from 112 constituencies and 29 party-list members). In stark contrast, political parties closely affiliated with former junta members performed poorly. The Bhumjaithai Party secured 71 seats, while the Palang Pracharath Party and the United Thai Nation Party obtained 40 and 36 seats, respectively. The Democrat Party, one of Thailand's oldest political factions, won just 25 seats (Election Commission of Thailand 2023).

There is a growing desire for change among Thai voters, indicated by the poor outcome for junta-aligned parties. Since the 2023 election took place on 14 May, the Thai constitution required the ECT to declare official results within 60 days, making 13 July 2023 the deadline for ratification. Although this period allowed the ECT to function at maximum efficiency, it also provided plenty of time for lobbyists to engage in closed-door negotiations among the political parties, which were reflected in the post-election outcomes. Following this, the first session of the parliamentary assembly was mandated to convene within 15 days, with the condition that by August the parliament would vote to elect a prime minister (iLaw 2023a; National Assembly Library of Thailand 2023; *The Standard* 2023b). While this timeline may seem procedural, the 2023 election represented a critical junction for those advocating for greater democracy, directly challenging the junta's influence after eight years of dominance. To understand the full implications of this election, it is crucial to briefly review the junta's legacy and how its remnants continue to shape Thailand's evolving political landscape.

The 2014 Junta and Its Enduring Legacies

Lawfare

The last coup in Thailand was staged in 2014, led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, who later became prime minister. The military regime lasted until the previous election in 2019. During this regime, human rights were relentlessly violated under the guise of "law and order" sanctioned by the junta's National Council for Peace and Order. Section 44, which grants legal immunity to the junta to suppress citizens under charges of national security, Section 112 (lèse-majesté law), and Section 116 (sedition law) were particularly utilized. Media freedom was heavily restricted, political dissidents faced

severe crackdowns, and activists were often arrested, charged, and tried in military courts (*BBC Thai* 2018; iLaw 2018).

As the military prepared to transition out of direct control in 2019, it implemented legal mechanisms to ensure its unabating preeminence. The junta restructured the political system to facilitate its preferred candidates in the upcoming election. This included creating a convoluted electoral system that was later implemented in the junta's favor, aided by the ECT. To solidify its position, the junta also founded its own political party, Palang Pracharath, which allowed key military figures to transition into civilian politics. The party recruited experienced politicians from other factions, often leveraging financial incentives or resolving pending legal cases for those who agreed to join. By aligning legal and political frameworks with its interests, the junta successfully ensconced itself in the civilian political landscape, guaranteeing its influence would endure beyond the military regime (iLaw 2019a; iLaw 2019b; iLaw 2019c).

20-Year National Strategy

The 20-Year National Strategy stands as one of the junta's most lasting legacies, effectively restricting future governments by imposing penalties for noncompliance. Drafted by the NCPO and covering the period from 2018 to 2038, this strategy makes it certain that Thailand's development policies will stay in line with the military's and monopoly capitalism's interests for another two decades. The composition of the National Strategy Committee, dominated by military personnel and NCPO-connected capitalists, ensures this control. Even if opposing political parties were to form a government, policy-making and annual budget planning must adhere to the National Strategy, guaranteeing the ascendancy of junta influence (iLaw 2017; 2019c; 2020).

Additionally, the junta-drafted constitution makes amendments nearly impossible, requiring approval at multiple stages, including more than 84 votes from the appointed senators. This design makes sure that even if the junta loses power and becomes the opposition, it can still wield considerable influence over future governments. The constitution further empowers these senators to monitor the strategy's implementation and grants them authority to refer cases of non-compliance to the Constitutional Court. If the court rules against the government, the matter is passed to the National Anti-Corruption Commission, potentially leading to the removal of an elected government by NCPO-linked bodies (iLaw 2017; 2019c; 2020).

According to an analysis by iLaw,[1] the National Strategy has proven ineffective at addressing Thailand's pressing challenges. Issues like PM 2.5 air pollution and the COVID-19 pandemic remain unresolved. The National Strategy's ambition to raise Thai incomes to developed-nation levels within 20 years clashes with the current economic downturn and growing inequality. Moreover, the strategy's creation lacked meaningful public participation. The drafting process was controlled entirely by the NCPO, with its chosen drafters requiring NCPO approval. Public consultations were conducted quietly, leaving most citizens uninformed, with the result that the process appeared more ceremonial than substantive. Consequently, the National Strategy has become less of a roadmap for progress and more of a political tool to ingrain the NCPO's influence while obstructing democratic governance (iLaw 2020). In a word, the 20-Year National Strategy is nothing more than a straitjacket for the next government, even if led by an

[1] iLaw is a nongovernmental organization that focuses on democracy and freedom of expression. It conducts research, disseminates information, and utilizes digital media and open-source data to inform the public and analyze legal and political developments.

opposition party, to comply with the junta's command.

Senators

The junta's influence over the political system extended beyond the creation of a military-aligned party and the 20-Year National Strategy. It also controlled the Senate. In spite of the portrayal of a "recruitment process," the plain fact was that the junta handpicked all 250 senators. They were given significant power to approve the cabinet and legislative resolutions in the parliament. According to the 2017 Constitution, a political party or coalition needs more than half of the parliament's votes—at least 376 out of 750 members of parliament (MPs)—to form a government. With the parliament comprising 500 members of the House of Representatives (lower house) and 250 senators (upper house), this arrangement overwhelmingly benefited the junta's party, Palang Pracharath. Since all 250 senators were guaranteed to vote for the junta's preferred candidate, Palang Pracharath only needed to secure 126 seats in the lower house to claim majority support. This advantage became evident when every senator voted in favour of General Prayuth Chan-o-cha as prime minister, solidifying the junta's steady dominance over the political landscape (iLaw 2019c; *WorkPoint Today* 2019).

Subsequently, these repressive mechanisms and institutional biases in favor of the junta fueled public discontent, driving support for a new political party that could offer a platform to challenge military dominance and push for democratic reform in Thailand.

Post-Election Dynamics in Thailand after the 2023 General Election

When the official results of the 2023 general election were announced, the two leading political parties were the MFP and the PTP. As the winner with 151 out of 500 seats, the MFP reached out to other parties to form a coalition cabinet, including the PTP, its ally in opposing the Palang Pracharath Party (the junta's political arm) during the 2019–23 government. On 22 May 2023, exactly nine years after the 2014 coup, eight political parties (Move Forward, Pheu Thai, Prachachart, Thai Sang Thai, Seri Ruam Thai, Pheu Thai Ruam Palang, Pen Tham, and Palang Sangkhom Mai) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish a coalition government with their combined 310 seats in the lower house.

The MoU outlined several key priorities across a wide range of agenda areas. These included drafting a new constitution, which these political parties claimed would genuinely represent the people, and implementing reforms across the bureaucracy, police, military, and justice system. It also emphasized decentralization, demonopolization, fostering economic growth, and addressing inequality. Furthermore, the parties agreed to prioritize the respect and protection of civil and political rights, place the people's interests above political parties, uphold honesty and mutual respect, and punish corruption. The coalition also committed to combating corruption and assuring transparency while allowing each party to pursue its individual policies, provided they did not contradict the MoU's core principles (*Thai PBS* 2023c; *ThaiPublica* 2023; *The Standard* 2023c). Essentially, the eight political parties aimed to establish a new benchmark in Thai politics by advocating for greater accountability, transparency, inclusivity, and adherence to the rule of law.

The first session of the parliamentary assembly following the 2023 election took place on 4 July, almost two months after election day. The main agenda was to appoint the speaker of the parliament, who would also serve as the president of the National Assembly. Both the MFP and the PTP vied for this key position because the speaker

has much influence over parliamentary proceedings and the political agenda settings. It is traditional that the election winner would nominate the speaker, which suggested that the MFP should propose its candidate. However, the PTP argued that this approach might not be ideal since the MFP did not secure a decisive win. The PTP contended that the speaker should act as a neutral figure, representing all political parties. Moreover, according to their loose agreement at the time, the MFP's leader was already positioned to become prime minister. It was argued that it would be "inappropriate" also to have an MFP lawmaker as speaker, which might potentially lead to over-consolidation of power in a single party (iLaw 2023b; *Thairath* 2023a). After negotiations on 4 July, Wan Muhamad Noor Matha from the Prachachart Party, which is closely related to the PTP, was proposed and voted in as the speaker of the parliament. Padipat Suntiphada from the MFP became first deputy speaker, and Phichet Chueamuangpan from the PTP became second deputy speaker (*Thairath* 2023b). In the end, the MFP lost its initial bid for this important position.

In a related event, several senators openly stated that they would abstain from voting and even oppose any party proposing amendments to Section 112. They argued that such actions would not only risk "upsetting" the monarchy but could also lead to major societal discord (*BBC Thai* 2023a). Some of the senators emphasized that to secure the prime ministerial vote, a party or a coalition must achieve the constitutional threshold of more than 376 of the 750 total votes.[2] With the coalition of eight parties holding only about 310 seats, the senators made it clear they would not provide the additional votes required. This position stood in stark contrast to their earlier promise to support any party that secured a majority in the lower house. The MFP, led by Pita Limjaroenrat, faced explicit opposition from these senators, who announced they would not vote for him as prime minister, further complicating the coalition's efforts to form a government (*BBC Thai* 2023a; 2023b; *Thai Post* 2023a; *The Standard* 2023a).

This complication was later confirmed during the first joint session to approve the prime minister on 13 July 2023. Before the vote, all members of parliament from both houses engaged in heated debates about the approval of Pita Limjaroenrat as prime minister. The discussions primarily focused on the contentious issue of amending the lèse-majesté law and the argument that the MFP's 14 million votes, constituting less than 20 percent of the total, did not represent a decisive mandate. When the vote was cast, Pita received 311 votes from his eight political allies but secured only 13 votes from the senators. Meanwhile, 34 senators voted against him, and 154 abstained, with abstentions effectively counting as votes against. Consequently, the MFP and its coalition fell short by more than 50 votes, leaving Pita unable to secure the prime ministership (*BBC Thai* 2023c; *Thai PBS* 2023b).

The MFP made a second attempt to secure votes for Pita Limjaroenrat during the joint parliamentary session on 19 July 2023. However, Speaker Wan Muhamad Noor Matha introduced a motion to interpret Regulation No. 41, which would determine whether Pita's nomination as prime minister could be reconsidered.[3] After a seven-hour session of debates and discussions, a majority of the parliament (395 out of 750 votes)

[2] The total of 750 parliamentary members comprises 500 elected representatives and 250 appointed senators. According to the 2017 Thai Constitution, the approval of a prime minister requires a majority vote from the entire parliament, including the appointed senators. Consequently, the majority threshold is 376 votes, not 250.

[3] The essence of this "technical" regulation is to prevent redundancy by prohibiting the reintroduction of motions that have already been voted on and failed to secure sufficient support in subsequent parliamentary sessions.

decided that the agenda to approve Pita as prime minister could not be reinstated. The speaker concluded that the assembly resolved not to vote for Pita again since the motion had already failed and been dismissed in the previous session (*Thai PBS* 2023a; *The Standard* 2023d). This parliamentary session seemed more politically motivated than a purely procedural or technical motion. In a separate development, the Constitutional Court ordered Pita Limjaroenrat to suspend his duties after accepting a petition alleging that his holding stocks in a media company violated the eligibility criteria for serving as an MP (*The Standard* 2023d).

Following Pita Limjaroenrat's disqualification, the MFP then announced that they would pass the baton to the PTP, the runner-up in the 2023 election, to lead the formation of the government. This decision reflected the collective intention of the eight-party coalition to establish a government capable of curbing the junta's lingering political influence and guiding Thailand back toward genuine democracy (*Thai PBS* 2023d; *The Standard* 2023d). However, the next joint parliamentary session to vote on a prime ministerial candidate was delayed until 22 August 2023, due to legal proceedings initiated by the ombudsman. The ombudsman petitioned the Constitutional Court to rule on whether the parliamentary resolution regarding Pita's eligibility was constitutional, further prolonging the process (*BBC Thai* 2023d).

Nevertheless, on 2 August 2023, a new development emerged. The PTP parted ways with the MFP and formed a new alliance with the Bhumjaithai Party and several other political parties, securing a total of 228 votes. This new coalition excluded the MFP (151 votes), Thai Sang Thai (six votes), and Pen Tham (one vote) (*WorkPoint Today* 2023a). Later, on 21 August, a day before the third joint session to vote for a prime minister, the PTP announced the inclusion of additional political parties in its alliance. The new coalition now included Pheu Thai (141 seats), Bhumjaithai (71 seats), Palang Pracharath (40 seats), United Thai Nation (36 seats), Chart Thai Pattana (ten seats), Prachachart (nine seats), Chartpattana Kla (two seats), Pheu Thai Ruam Palang (two seats), Seri Ruam Thai (one seat), Palang Sangkom Mai (one seat), and Thongthin Thai (one seat), totaling 314 votes in the lower house. In essence, the PTP ditched the MoU signed with its original allies and shook hands with junta-affiliated political parties, including those from the 2019 junta cabinet. This realignment relegated the remaining parties (the MFP, Thai Sang Thai, Pen Tham, Prachatippatai Mai, Kruthai, and Democrat) to the opposition (*BBC Thai* 2023e; *WorkPoint Today* 2023a).

Even if Pheu Thai secured 314 votes, it still needed more than 60 additional votes to get its candidate approved as the 30th prime minister of Thailand. The senators, hence, proved a decisive factor, particularly since gaining support from parties outside the PTP's new alliance seemed unlikely (*Thai Post* 2023b). However, the third round of voting on 22 August 2023 proved decisive. Over 100 senators voted in favor of the Pheu Thai candidate, Srettha Thavisin, making him the 30th prime minister of Thailand. Srettha secured 482 out of 750 votes in parliament, with 330 votes from the lower house and 152 votes from the upper house. This outcome was achieved regardless of widespread criticism of Srettha's integrity, as he faced allegations of involvement in tax evasion scandals (*BBC Thai* 2023e; *PPTV* 2023b; *Springnews* 2023a; *Thairath* 2023c).

An intriguing aspect highlighted in the news is evident in the headline "Senators under General Prayuth gave the green light for Srettha but not General Prawit Wongsuwan" (*Thai Post* 2023c; 2023d). This gestured toward an underlying power struggle between Srettha's PTP, Prayuth's United Thai Nation Party, and Prawit's Palang Pracharath Party. If the PTP had failed to secure support from senators influenced by Generals Prayuth and Prawit, the political deadlock would have persisted, stalling the approval of a prime minister and delaying the formation of a cabinet. Both General

Prayuth and General Prawit were themselves prime ministerial candidates from their respective parties. Had Srettha not been approved, another candidate—potentially one of the two generals—might have been considered, as parliamentary precedent allowed each candidate to be proposed only once, following the case of Pita Limjaroenrat. Analysts have suggested that the tensions among Pheu Thai, Palang Pracharath, and United Thai Nation partly stemmed from General Prawit's dissatisfaction with the number of ministries and positions allocated to Palang Pracharath. Speculations also indicated that General Prawit may have aspired to the prime ministerial position himself, further complicating the political situation (*PPTVHD36* 2023).

Another dynamic in Thailand's evolving political landscape, though still unfolding, is the return of Thaksin Shinawatra.[4] After 17 years of self-exile, Thaksin came back to face his sentence on 22 August 2023, the same day as the third round of the prime ministerial vote and the day that Srettha was made head of cabinet. Shortly after, on 1 September, the government gazette announced that Thaksin's sentence for active cases had been reduced from eight years and three months to one year due to a royal pardon. Speculation remained that his sentence could be further reduced under certain legal provisions. However, since his return, Thaksin has not served time in prison. Instead, he was transferred to the Royal Police Hospital due to reported medical conditions (*BBC Thai* 2023e; 2023f; *Thai Post* 2023b; *Thairath* 2023d).

Lastly, before the joint session, Srettha Thavisin emphasized the need to move past the "two-uncle discourse," referring to General Prayuth and General Prawit, the symbolic figures of the junta era. This statement signaled the PTP's willingness to compromise and gain support from the junta to secure the prime ministerial position (*BBC Thai* 2023e). After more than eight years of rivalry between the PTP and the junta, represented by General Prayuth's United Thai Nation Party and General Prawit's Palang Pracharath Party, the handshake between these factions conveyed an attempt to resolve lingering conflicts and create an interim political truce. The former hostility between the PTP and the junta appeared over, at least for now, as both sides now needed to collaborate in the new cabinet. The new point of conflict, then, has shifted to the MFP and their ambition for political reform. The focus was no longer on Thaksin Shinawatra and his scandals, the PTP and its political dynasty created by Thaksin, or the junta and their legacies. After 17 years of intense political battles between Thaksin and the junta, their conflicts appeared to have been temporarily set aside in light of a new rival: the MFP.

Thai Politics in the Aftermath of Srettha Thavisin's Appointment as Prime Minister

Srettha Thavisin was elected as Thailand's 30th prime minister on 22 August 2023, and his cabinet began to take shape soon after. The PTP led the coalition, which mainly combined Bhumjaithai and two other parties closely associated with the junta: Palang Pracharath (General Prawit Wongsuwan) and United Thai Nation (General

[4] Thaksin Shinawatra is widely regarded as a key figure in Thailand's contemporary political landscape. As the founder of the Thai Rak Thai Party, his influence persisted despite the party's dissolution. Its successor, the Palang Prachachon Party, was also disbanded, yet Thaksin's political presence remained significant. The Pheu Thai Party, currently associated with his political legacy, was initially led by his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra. After her political challenges and subsequent exile, the party continued to be managed by individuals closely connected to Thaksin. Today, Pheu Thai is led by his daughter, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, reflecting the continued prominence of the Shinawatra family in Thai politics.

Prayuth Chan-o-cha). Several familiar names from General Prayuth Chan-o-cha's previous cabinet resurfaced among the ministers and deputy ministers, not least Anutin Charnvirakul, Thammanat Prompow, Varawut Silpa-archa, Suriya Juangroongruangkit, Somsak Thepsuthin, Pipat Ratchakitprakarn, Santi Prompat, Peerapan Salirathavibhaga, and Songsak Thongsri. Police General Patcharawat Wongsuwan, the brother of General Prawit, was nominated as deputy prime minister, while Sudawan Wangsuppakijkosol, the daughter of the former deputy minister of transport, assumed the role of minister of tourism and sports (*Springnews* 2023b; *WorkPoint Today* 2023b). Regardless of any upgrades, downgrades, and changes in ministerial position, the overarching theme remains unmistakable: individuals who worked under or closely with the junta continue to play key roles in the cabinet under Srettha Thavisin's premiership.

However, who is in the cabinet may be less important than what policies are actually implemented. A good index of whether authoritarianism in Thailand has declined comes from observing how political policies are processed. The political agenda from the PTP included drafting a new constitution through the Constitution Drafting Assembly of Thailand and a national referendum. Their campaign also emphasized bureaucratic reform, justice system reform, and military reform (Pheu Thai Party 2023).

After the new coalition cabinet was formed, Prime Minister Srettha declared that five policies would be prioritized. Four of them were economic: debt relief, living cost reduction, revenue generation through promoting travel, and a digital wallet initiative. The fifth policy was political, focusing on constitutional amendment. Nevertheless, this amendment would not address sections related to the monarchy (*BBC Thai* 2023g; *PPTV* 2023a). In contrast, the political policies proposed by the MFP more explicitly tackled sensitive issues related to the monarchy and the military, such as reforming Section 112 and the military services (*BBC Thai* 2023g). The MFP tended to leave little room for compromise when dealing with political controversies. What's more, it defied the army by advocating for the abolition of conscription, making it voluntary. The party also insisted on scrapping the 20-Year National Strategy and demanded sweeping reforms of the military, embracing the dissolution of the ISOC.[5] The MFP explicitly called for the revision of Section 112 and Section 116, arguing that these laws had been frequently used to silence political dissidents, thereby curbing freedom of speech and expression as well as the autonomy of the media. Furthermore, drafting a new constitution through a public referendum was another key policy for the MFP, aimed at preventing the emergence of a new dictatorship (*BBC T*hai 2023g; *PPTV* 2023a; *The Nation* 2023).

For the PTP, it appeared that there was a greater degree of willingness to compromise with both the military and monarchy. The party stated that it would not "reform" the army but rather "develop the army together" through discussions and consultations with top-ranked officers (*BBC Thai* 2023h; *The Active Thai PBS* 2023). Regarding the ISOC, the PTP made it clear that dissolving the ISOC was not part of their agenda, dismissing the MFP's claim of a separate MoU with them. This alleged MoU suggested that PTP would address four specific bills: 1) ISOC dissolution, 2) army reform, 3) internal restructuring within the Ministry of Defense, and 4) an amnesty bill

[5] The Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC) was established during the Cold War to monitor potential communist threats but continues to function as the army's sociopolitical arm. Its broad scope of operations, ranging from rural development programs and mass mobilization campaigns to psychological operations, enables the military to maintain a deep presence within local communities. The ISOC has faced criticism regarding its budget allocation, transparency, and personnel management practices.

(*MGROnlin*e 2023; *The Standard* 2023e). Additionally, the PTP did not provide a clear stance or explanation on how it would handle the lèse-majesté law and other sensitive controversial issues. The matter of constitutional amendment also appeared to be at a standstill as the government had no concrete plan for initiating the process, such as holding a referendum. Since forming the cabinet, they have focused more on economic policies rather than social or political reform (Jones and Rhein 2023).

Another measure to gauge the degree of authoritarianism in Thailand is to consider political freedoms and freedom of expression. One barometer is the number of charges against political dissidents and activists. According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, from July 2020 to 31 October 2023, at least 1,930 people were prosecuted for political gatherings and expression. Of these, at least 259 were charged under the lèse-majesté law, 130 under the incitement law, and 1,469 under the Emergency Decree. Out of 1,253 cases, more than 812 are still active (Thai Lawyers for Human Rights 2023). Despite these eyebrow-raising numbers, there appeared to be no clear direction from the Pheu Thai cabinet on how to address this issue.

The Wind of Change?

While the authoritarian regime in Thailand has weakened, its legacies remain deeply entrenched. On the surface, Thailand might appear to meet the criteria of a democratic country, featuring free and open elections, political competition, a multiparty system, and civilian governance. These indicators indeed suggest progress toward a more participatory political system where voters have a stronger voice and political expression when casting their ballots. And yet, a closer look paints a more complex and less optimistic picture.

One of the most glaring remnants of the authoritarian era on this matter is the deep-set role of senators appointed under junta rule. These senators, many of whom owe their positions to the former military regime, exercise substantial power, particularly in the legislative process and approving the prime minister. This structural holdover continues to tilt the political balance in their favor, and often undermines the democratic will of the voters expressed through elections. This analysis aligns with the MFP's characterization of the post-2023 election period as an "extension of Prayuth's regime," highlighting the incomplete and restrained transition to full democracy (*BBC Thai* 2023h).

Scrutinizing the PTP's current stance on political controversies, the military, and the monarchy suggests that significant changes are unlikely in the immediate future. Pheu Thai, while advocating for certain democratic reforms, has shown a fair degree of propensity to compromise with the old establishment to maintain political stability and avoid direct confrontation. This approach, while pragmatic, often results in half-measures that fall short of the profound systemic and fundamental changes necessary to fully dismantle the remnants of authoritarianism. Furthermore, the party's cautious stance on highly sensitive issues such as the lèse-majesté law indicates a reluctance to take a stand against deep-seated institutions and norms. This disinclination hampers efforts to promote full political freedoms and human rights, essential components of a robust democracy. The complex interplay between seeking reform and maintaining stability often leads to policy stagnation, where meaningful democratic advancements are slow and incremental at best.

Irrespective of these challenges, the PTP's participation in the coalition government and its leadership role provide a platform from which gradual reforms can be initiated. The success of these efforts will largely depend on the party's ability to navigate the

embedded power structures and build consensus among diverse political factions. Civil society, grassroots movements, and international support will also be crucial in sustaining the momentum for democratic change and holding the government accountable.

While the authoritarian regime in Thailand has weakened, its legacy persists, obscuring the country's democratic trajectory. The superficial indicators of democracy, such as free elections and multiparty competition, coexist with undemocratic mechanisms that continue to influence political outcomes. The PTP's current policies and approaches reflect the ongoing struggle to balance reform with stability. It foregrounds the complexities of Thailand's political landscape. The future of Thai democracy hinges on the ability to overcome these enduring legacies and foster a more inclusive and democratic political environment.

Conclusion

The 2023 general election marked a critical yet complex juncture in Thailand's political landscape, offering both hope and skepticism about the nation's democratic future. The electoral victories of the MFP and the PTP signaled a potential decline in the authoritarian regime that had dominated Thailand since the 2014 coup d'état. This resulted in the formation of a civilian-led government under Srettha Thavisin, ending nearly a decade of junta rule. However, while authoritarianism may have diminished, its legacies remain evident in Thailand's political system, reflecting the country's ongoing struggle with its authoritarian past.

The success of the MFP and PTP demonstrates the public's strong desire for greater democracy and a reduced role of the junta in politics. The record voter turnout and numbers of parliamentary seats won by these parties indicate robust public support for democratic governance. In spite of that, the continuing role of junta-affiliated parties and the influential senators appointed under authoritarian legacies reveal that democratic progress remains constrained. These dynamics echo the democratic ideals embodied in Thailand's 1997 Constitution, prioritizing decentralization, transparency, and the empowerment of grassroots participation. However, the subsequent dismantling of this constitution by the 2006 and 2014 military coups exposed the fragility of democratic advances in Thailand's political history.

Thailand's political economy adds another nuance to its political dynamics. Despite persistent political upheavals, the country has maintained quite a separation between political volatility and economic stability. Thailand's ability to shield its economic policies from political turbulence has enabled it to remain a destination for foreign investment, in stark contrast to Myanmar's economy, which has faced severe crises under military rule. Myanmar's hardened military supremacy, exemplified by its 2008 Constitution, further stresses the obstacles of transitioning away from authoritarianism. Both countries share structural legacies of military influence, but Thailand's political economy and institutional framework provide it with a comparative advantage in maintaining investor confidence and fostering incremental democratic reform.

The period after the 2023 election revealed the ongoing problems of Thailand's democratic transition. The old coalition, primarily between the MFP and PTP, faced internal power struggles and competing agendas that subsequently led to the new coalition, incorporating junta-affiliated parties. This power struggle reflects the complexity of the 2023 Thai political landscape under the shadow of its authoritarian legacies. The inability of the MFP's candidate, Pita Limjaroenrat, to secure the prime ministership, its sizeable electoral support notwithstanding, reveals how the entrenched

power structures benefit the status quo and impede genuine democratic progress.

The premiership of Srettha Thavisin, which includes figures from the previous junta-led government, reflects the uninterrupted leverage of the military in Thai politics. While the new coalition government prioritizes economic policies, its cautious approach, or outright silence, to political reform raises questions. Key issues like constitutional amendments and the lèse-majesté law have been carefully avoided. This inevitably illustrates a deliberate effort to maintain political stability by sidestepping direct challenges to established power structures. This cautious balancing act stands in stark contrast to the bolder and uncompromising calls for reform from the MFP, which has pushed for ambitious changes, such as abolishing conscription, tearing down the 20-Year National Strategy, and revising restrictive laws like Section 112 and Section 116. The coalition government's confrontational stance not only contrasts with growing public demand for a meaningful change, but also exposes deep divisions within the coalition government. These differences draw attention to the broader problem of addressing authoritarian legacies in a system still shaped by military-appointed senators and undemocratic mechanisms.

Moreover, the persistent legacies of the junta continue to permeate various aspects of Thailand's political framework. Mechanisms such as the 20-Year National Strategy, the 2017 Constitution rigidly designed to resist amendments, the appointed Senate, and the military's dominance over key political institutions like the ECT and the judicial authorities shore up and extend authoritarian rule. These structures have created a political environment that, while outwardly more democratic, continues to function within the junta-established configurations. Consequently, Thailand's current political system is more accurately described as semi-democratic or pseudodemocratic—a hybrid model where democratic forms coexist uneasily with incessant authoritarian practices. A critical measure of democratic progress lies in political freedoms. The ongoing prosecutions and imprisonment of activists and dissidents under restrictive laws reveal the lingering hold of authoritarian practices. While reports from Thai Lawyers for Human Rights corroborate the suppression of dissent, the PTP's lack of a clear strategy to address these human rights issues evinces the difficulty of dismantling deeply rooted structures that continue to suppress opposition voices.

Lastly, although the 2023 election has provided hope for a more democratic Thailand, the journey forward remains fraught with challenges and constraints. The path to a fully democratic state demands sustained effort, political courage, and a collective commitment to addressing difficult issues. With persistence and collaboration, Thailand can overcome its authoritarian past and achieve a more democratic future.

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Acknowledgements: This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Graduate School of Global Studies, Sophia University Symposium and Workshop Series 2023–2024, titled "Situating Democracy in Southeast Asia: Democratic Deficits, Challenges & Perspectives," held on 27 January 2024 at Sophia University, Tokyo. I extend my sincere gratitude to the Graduate School of Global Studies for providing a platform to engage in critical discussions that enriched this work. I am deeply grateful to my academic advisor, Professor Nakano Koichi, for his invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and continuous encouragement throughout the research and revision process. I also wish to express my appreciation to my colleagues, particularly John Contosta, whose insights and support from the initial draft have been instrumental in refining this article. Additionally, I acknowledge the thoughtful comments from the symposium participants, and anonymous reviewers, whose critiques and suggestions have contributed to the improvement of this work. Finally, I am indebted not only to the editorial board and copyeditor of AGLOS, but also to my family and friends for their unwavering support and patience throughout this academic journey. All remaining errors and shortcomings are solely my responsibility.