

# Thailand's Upcoming Elections: More of the Same or a New Hope?

Thailand will return to the ballot box on May 14, the country's second election since the most recent coup in 2014. As the elections approach, we look at Thailand's political quandary and the key figures in the political arena.

## Press Play-Pause-Rewind: Thailand's Governmental 8-Track

Since the 1932 revolution, Thailand has transformed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with an occasionally democratic government. The path to democracy has been rocky. In the 91 years since the revolution, the military has dominated Thai politics and ruled for over 60 years, with support from the monarchy and the ultrawealthy urban elites. These three groups form the ultra-royalist and pro-military camp while the pro-democracy camp largely comprises of the urban middle class and rural population.

Since the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–2006) who led with populist policies that changed Thai politics, the division between the two camps has largely manifested as an ongoing tug of war between Thaksin and his proxies, and the military and its allies. The latter staged two successful coups to unseat Thaksin and his sister's governments in 2006 and 2014, respectively.



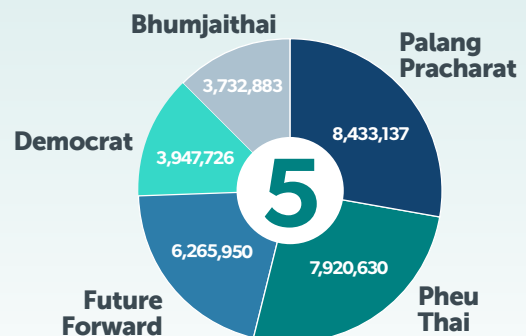
**Population**

**71.6M**

**GDP Per Capita**

USD **7,066**

**2019 Election**  
(as of March 2019)



**Parties with the most popular votes**

## With a Little Help from My Friends: Exploring Thai Senate Design

Following the latest coup in 2014 led by Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the constitution was amended by military appointees and passed in a controversial referendum in 2017. The 2017 constitution redesigned the electoral system by stipulating that the 250-member Senate, 194 of whom were hand-picked by the Prayuth government, jointly selects a prime minister with the 500 elected members of the House of Representatives. For most of its existence, Thailand’s Senate consisted of royal appointees and the current iteration of the constitution, by its very design, favours military-linked parties.

Unsurprisingly, this has been detrimental to the pro-Thaksin camp. In the 2019 election, Prayuth

received almost all the Senate’s votes and nearly 500 votes in total. He became the Prime Minister even though Thaksin-linked Pheu Thai won the most seats in the House of Representatives. This arrangement will also be applied to the upcoming elections, as the current members of the Senate are in place until 2024.

New electoral rules have also been introduced to change how members of the House of Representative are selected in May 2023. Thailand will return to a dual ballot system in which the electorate will cast one vote for their district candidate, which contributes to the make-up of 400 constituency seats, and another vote for the political party of their choice, which will be used to allocate 100 party-list seats. The new rules will benefit larger parties, such as Pheu Thai, which can meet the higher threshold required to win party-list seats.

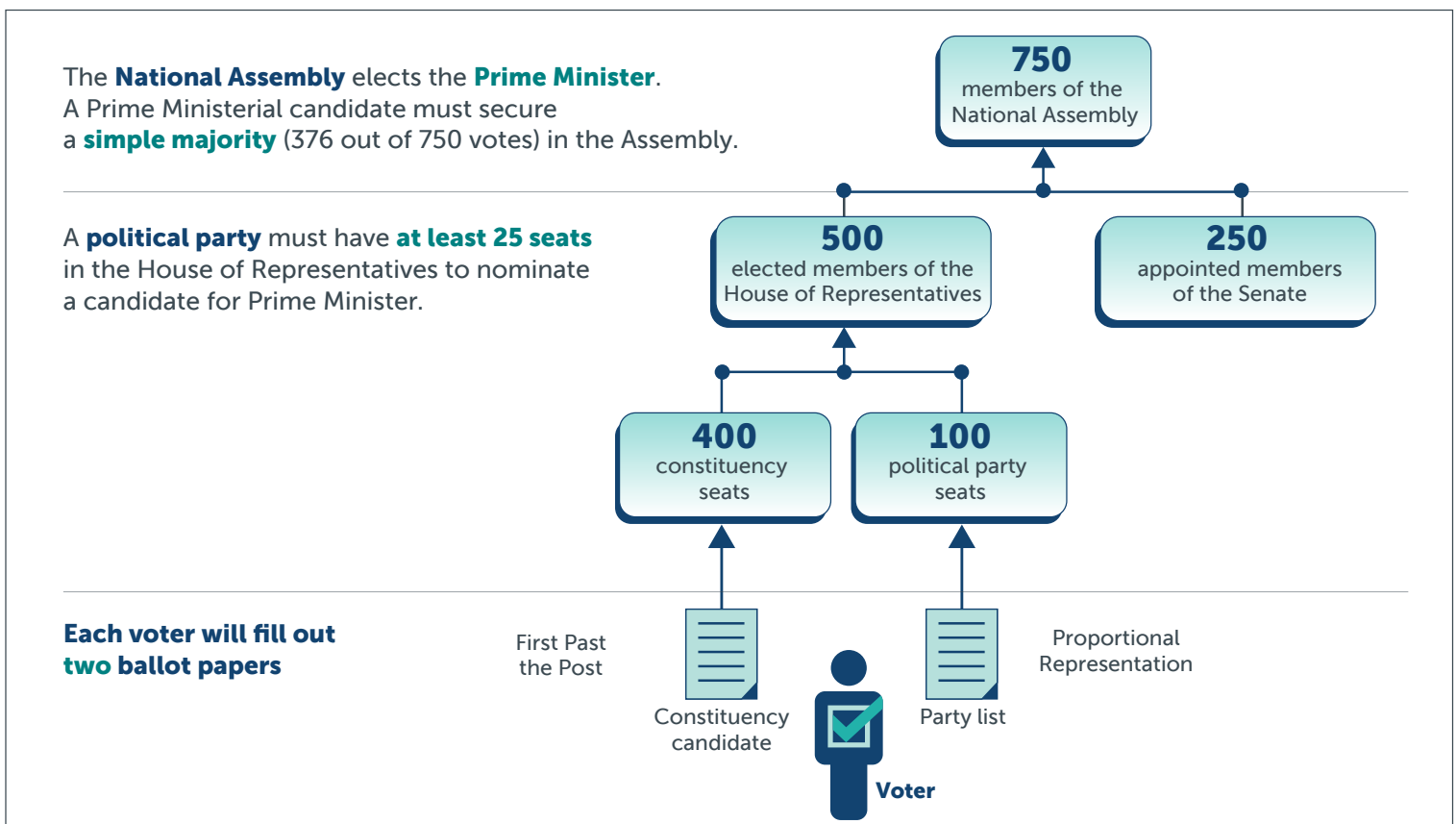


Figure 1: Electoral System for Thailand’s 2023 Election

## (Old and) New Kids on the Block: Political Evolutions

Prior to the 2014 coup, political contestation was mainly between the Democrat Party (the oldest and more conservative party founded by royalists and the old elite) and Thaksin's populist Thai Rak Thai Party or its successor Pheu Thai. However, the political landscape is evolving with more diverse ideologies, greater youth participation in politics, and deeper divisions among parties.

The Democrat Party, which was once a source of hope for democracy in Thailand, is in crisis and has found it challenging to attract members and voters. In 2019, its ambiguous stance on whether it supports the military government contributed to major losses by the party in its traditional strongholds. The party appears to have lost ground to army-linked Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP), and Bhumjaithai Party, which were the two largest parties in the ruling coalition before parliament was dissolved in March. A recent poll suggested that the party has the least support among the major parties, with only 4.58% of those polled supporting the Democrats.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, Pheu Thai, which had won every election between 2001 and 2014, has once again been leading in recent polls and surveys. The party is expected to win the most seats in the House of Representatives, especially in the north and northeast part of Thailand where support for Thaksin remains strong. Thaksin's youngest daughter, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, also appears to be the most popular choice for Prime Minister, based on a survey conducted in March 2023.<sup>2</sup> The party hopes to win at least 310 seats to form a single-party government, although given the division of voters between various parties, this will be an uphill battle and a coalition government is more probable.<sup>3</sup>

Pheu Thai will continue to be challenged by military-backed parties, including the PPRP and Ruam Thai Sang Chart (or United Thai Nation, UTN), and the

### Thaksin's Enduring Influence on Thai Politics

*Thaksin, a former police officer and telecom magnate, is seen as a controversial and divisive figure in Thai politics. The conservative camp accuses him of amassing too much power and resources during his premiership.*

Despite that, Thaksin's economic policies, dubbed **Thaksinomics**, were widely popular with the middle class and the rural and urban poor, and he remains popular over a decade after he was ousted. Following the influence of Thaksin's leadership and two years of pandemic-induced economic slowdown, almost all political parties, are pursuing similar strategies, promising better welfare policies, economic handouts, and more jobs.

appointed Senate. The UTN, while a relatively new and small party, includes several members of the now-defunct People's Democratic Reform Committee, a pro-monarchy political pressure group which led the bloody anti-Thaksin protests that paved the way for the 2014 coup. The party's main contender is Prayuth, who is backed by the royalists and the palace. The odds of UTN engineering a big electoral upset are slim, but the party may garner enough votes to nominate Prayuth as a PM candidate.

The PPRP, Prayuth's previous party, has put forward Deputy PM and former army chief Prawit Wongsuwan as its candidate for the prime ministership. Prawit and PPRP have positioned themselves as reconciliatory figures who could bring about unity and end decades of polarization by working with both the conservative parties and their opponents.

It is worth noting here: Prayuth and Prawit, who were long-time allies and key figures in the 2014 coup, appear to now be at odds, which might be a disadvantage to the pro-military camp as votes could be split between the two parties. However, this division between the two former allies does not eliminate the possibility of post-election maneuvers that would favour military-backed parties to the detriment of Pheu Thai.

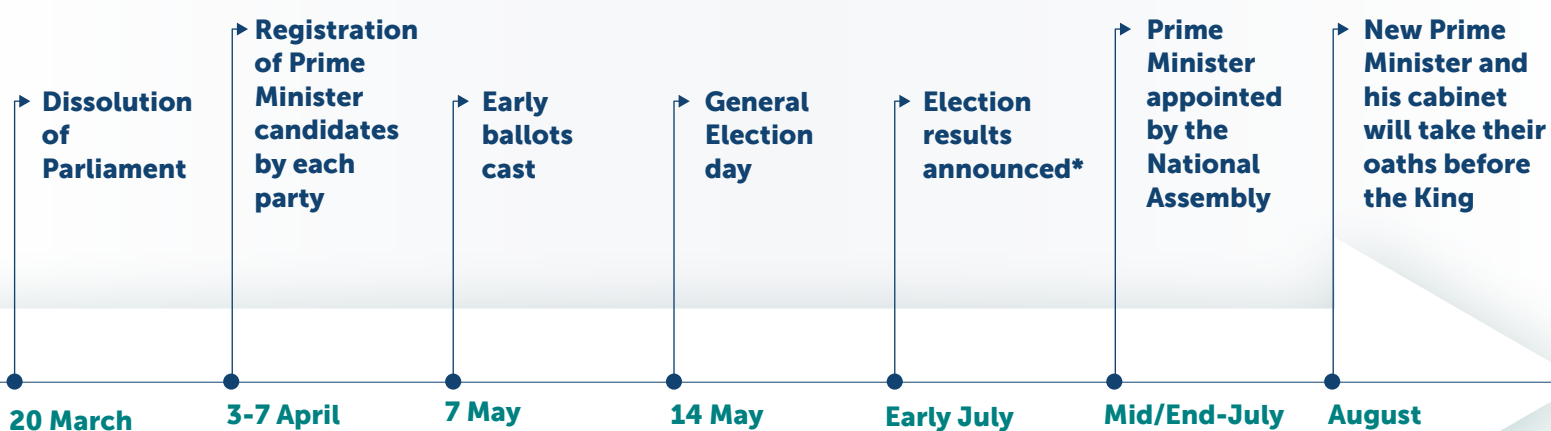
The freshest face in Thai politics is the Move Forward party, consisting of a young and progressive base, that placed third in 2019 via its predecessor. Its party leader recently declared that the party would not form a coalition government with any military-linked parties and would work with Pheu Thai after the election. Move Forward is known for its pro-democracy and anti-establishment stance and the party appeals to urban voters and the industrial provinces. Its leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, is the top choice for PM among Bangkok voters. However, one of Move Forward's policy platforms calls for amendments to Thailand's lèse-majesté law and the party is closely associated with the 2020-2021 youth protests that sought to reform the monarchy. Thailand has one of the world's strictest lèse-majesté laws, and the party's stance on the lèse-majesté laws may be too radical for other parties, including Pheu Thai, to be associated with.

Amidst the extremes, a party that might be able to offer neutral ground is Bhumjaithai. In the past it showed that it was able to work with both the conservatives and their opponents, and its current leader, Anutin Charnvirakul, is open to talks with any parties for the May election. Bhumjaithai has a big budget, less in-party "drama", and is less controversial with its pro-monarchy stance. Anutin is seen as a strong contender for the premiership with both political experience as a former executive in Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai as well as parliamentary experience as a serving Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Health. The party, which is behind Thailand's recent cannabis liberalisation policy, is seen as a dark horse in the upcoming election.

## The X Factor: Monarchy's Influence

Observers of Thai politics are also keeping an eye on potential signals from the palace. While the monarchy is nominally above politics, King Maha Vajiralongkorn's father, King Bhumibol (1946 – 2016) occasionally intervened at critical junctures in Thailand's history through proxies. Enthroned in 2016, King Maha Vajiralongkorn has been more direct than his father in his involvement in politics.

## Timeline of Thailand's 2023 General Election



\* Preliminary results can be announced on the same day of the election

## Did you know?

### The official name of Thailand's capital is **Krung Thep Maha Nakhon (City of Angels)** and colloquially as **Krung Thep?**

The name's full version is comprised of **168 letters** (Krungthepmahanakhon Amonrattanakosin Mahintharayutthaya Mahadilokphop Noppharatchathani-burirom Udomratchaniwetmahasathan Amonphimanawatansathit Sakkathattiyawitsanukamprasit) and hence is recorded as **the longest place name** in the *Guinness World Records*.



Notably, in the run up to the 2019 elections, he prohibited his sister, who renounced her royal title after marrying a commoner, from running as a Prime Minister candidate for a Thaksin-linked party.<sup>4</sup> Thus far, the King has steered clear of the political arena, but it is too early to rule out a royal move.

### As the 2023 elections approach, we pose the following questions:

- Will Pheu Thai be able to dominate the House of Representatives or will Thailand see another Prime Minister from the military?
- Which parties will form the ruling coalition and how will they work together?

### Notes

- 1 <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2463470/democrats-on-the-brink>
- 2 <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thaksin-s-daughter-paetongtarn-widens-lead-over-prayut-in-new-opinion-poll-on-next-thai-premier>
- 3 Political coalitions in Thailand are not fixed and appears to be formed based on negotiations among the parties rather than on similarities in ideologies.
- 4 Thaksin founded Thai Rak Thai in 1998 and the party was dissolved in 2007. Its incarnations include the now-dissolved People's Power Party, and the current Pheu Thai Party. Thai Raksa Chart Party, founded in 2009 and dissolved in 2019, was a Pheu Thai sister party.

## Leaving no stone unturned.

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