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The Promise and Peril of Patronage Politics for Authoritarian Party-Building in Thailand

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In the face of a looming threat posed by the Pheu Thai Party and an ongoing factional strife stemming from a rift between the party leader, General Prawit Wongsuwan, and Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha, the Palang Pracharath Party may be vulnerable to a mass exodus by its factions and MPs to other parties. In this picture, Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan arriving for a meeting at Princess of Naradhiwas University (PNU) in Thailand's southern province of Narathiwat on 19 September 2022. Photo: Madaree TOHLALA/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Palang Pracharath Party's (PPRP's) decision to mobilise support through patronage politics in the 2019 general election has resulted in its failure to develop a strong and coherent party organisation with effective control over its MPs and durable ties to its local electoral base.
- This outcome is best understood as an enduring consequence of how the PPRP's tacit alliance with the military regime both empowered and encouraged the party to co-opt leaders of vote-canvassing networks at the subnational level to substitute for party-building.
- The PPRP's use of candidate selection to share power with its factions, and these factions' capacity to leverage their party affiliation to consolidate power locally saw the emergence of an anarchy of factions with growing autonomy from the party.
- In the face of a looming threat posed by the Pheu Thai Party and an ongoing factional strife stemming from a rift between the party leader, General Prawit Wongsuwan, and Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the PPRP may be vulnerable to a mass exodus by its factions and MPs to other parties.

INTRODUCTION

Despite significant changes in Thailand's political landscape since 1997, many Thai political parties and candidates continue to compete for votes in general elections by offering money, favours, jobs, and preferential access to government resources to their constituents.¹ This practice, called patronage politics, has long been organised in Thailand through vote-canvassing networks (*rabob huakhanaen*) made up of local government officials, politicians, and influential leaders.² Reaching deep and wide, these networks are typically entrusted to deliver selective benefits to voters who may be expected, or persuaded, to vote for candidates preferred by the networks in return.³

The prevalence and persistence of patronage politics and vote-canvassing networks in Thailand may be interpreted in several ways: as a result of longstanding inequality and extreme concentration of resources; as a symptom of weak parties and ineffective institutions, or as a pattern set in motion by contingent historical events related to the country's uneven and interrupted democratisation. Nonetheless, the ills of Thailand's patronage democracy—corruption, nepotism, factionalism, and money politics—have largely been blamed on provincial politicians who appear to have bought their way into power, and on the recipients of their handouts, primarily the rural poor, who have come to be viewed as victims of these vote buyers or, worse, their accomplices.⁴

This point of view, shared by many Bangkok-based and reform-minded elites and widely publicised in the mainstream media and anti-vote-buying campaigns, served as the moral underpinning for the design of the 1997 Constitution.⁵ In 2006 and 2014, this viewpoint became part of the rhetoric used to justify the overthrow of democratically elected governments.⁶ Democratic failure in Thailand was once again pinned on patronage politics—but with a sleight of hand. The quintessential patron deemed responsible for hijacking democracy in Thailand had now taken the form of the former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his party, despite evidence that their electoral dominance was built on a new kind of party-voter linkages fostered through populist leadership and policies rather than through traditional vote-canvassing networks alone.

Given this background, the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP)'s heavy reliance on vote-canvassing networks in the 2019 general election marked the comeback of old strategies for sharing and consolidating power.⁷ At the risk of alienating urban and conservative supporters who had previously expressed discontent with patronage tactics, the party was unabashed in its attempt to co-opt old-style politicians, families, and factions, many of them former allies of Thaksin and the Pheu Thai Party. The party exploited its links to the military regime, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), to secure the backing of these individuals, promising them assistance and protection in return for their support. Taking advantage of an uneven institutional playing field and the regime's influence over the state apparatus, it empowered these individuals' vote-canvassing networks. In short, rather than curtailing patronage politics, the PPRP took it to new heights, fostering the kind of democracy whose dysfunction provided the rationale for authoritarian solutions in the first place.

This article provides an overview of the PPRP's engagement in patronage politics, and how its strategy of co-opting provincial and local elites unfolded and with what consequences for the party and democracy in Thailand. Based on this analysis, it makes the case that the resurgence of patronage politics under the current electoral-authoritarian framework may destabilise the regime's capacity to maintain power through elections.⁸

DOMINANCE THROUGH CO-OPTATION

In parallel to building its party brand on policies already implemented by the NCPO government and on the personal appeal of the NCPO leader-cum-prime minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the PPRP formed strategic alliances with provincial and local political elites, factions and families.⁹ These individuals' networks laid the groundwork for building support for the party at the local level, notably in regions such as the North and the Northeast, where the party could not campaign on its overt pro-military stance, or in constituencies where awareness of the newly-formed party was lacking.

Tapping Provincial and Local Constellations of Power

Actual recruitment occurred long before formal candidate selection and, in many cases, even before the party was officially launched. Sontaya Khunpluem, leader of the Phalang Chon Party and Chon Buri's dominant Khunpluem family, was the first of many big names to join the alliance that eventually became the PPRP. Sontaya was appointed as a political advisor to the prime minister and Mayor of Pattaya in 2018 under the authority of Section 44 of the Interim Constitution. The move was designed to signal that the NCPO was eager to work with politicians and that a military-backed party was in the works.¹⁰ Sontaya's group eventually joined the PPRP and fielded candidates under the PPRP's banner in Chon Buri.

At around the same time, former TRT cabinet ministers and Wang Nam Yom faction leaders Somsak Thepsutin and Suriya Juangroongruangkit, along with Anucha Nakasai and Pirom Pholwiset, formed the Sam Mitr ("Three Allies") faction. The Sam Mitr faction's deal-making and recruiting activities made national news on a regular basis, sending shockwaves across Pheu Thai, whose MPs, particularly in the upper-Central, lower-Northern, and Northeastern provinces, had personal links to Sam Mitr's leaders. The group also succeeded in bringing on board Preecha Rengsomboonsuk, former Pheu Thai cabinet minister and MP, and his faction in Loei Province, demonstrating the strength of Sam Mitr's connections as well as Pheu Thai's failure to stop its political heavyweights from defecting.¹¹

By September 2018, the PPRP had secured the backing of over a hundred former MPs from various political parties, drawn from more than a dozen factions and influential families. Beyond the factions already mentioned, the PPRP recruited Varathep Rattanakorn's faction in Kamphaeng Phet, Virat Rattanaset's faction in Nakhon Ratchasima, Supol Fongngam's faction in Ubon Ratchathani, Santi Prompat's faction in Petchabun, Pinit Jarusombat's Wang Phayanak faction, Suchart Tancharoen's Ban Rim Nam faction, Aekkarat Changlao's faction in Khon Kaen, the Thianthong family in Sa Kaeo, the Asavahame family in Samut Prakan, and the Teekananond family in Udon Thani.¹²

This patchwork of factions and families, spanning laterally across Northern, Northeastern, and Central Thailand and extending down to the local level, was put together in a relatively short period of time—less than one year before the March 2019 election. Substituting for the party infrastructure, it served as a “political power grid” for the party that not only attracted former MP candidates and local politicians from the region and neighbouring provinces, but also filled the gap between the party and voters.¹³

An Unholy Alliance

From the party’s perspective, mobilising support through vote-canvassing networks appeared vital for success.¹⁴ Despite its attempt to create a party brand in advance by adopting the name *pracharat* (ประชาชาติ a civil state) from policies implemented long before the party’s founding, the PPRP had no local roots. Worse, in a landscape marked by a sharp ideological divide between pro-Thaksin and pro-military parties, the PPRP could not count on the ebbs and flows of voter sentiments (*krasae*) to work in its favour, especially in areas where Thaksin’s popularity remained strong.

Against this backdrop, reliance on factions controlling vote-canvassing networks conveyed a sense of assurance and predictability, comparable to “pushing a button,” in terms of producing a favourable election outcome or at least one that was acceptable to the junta. Accordingly, relying on polling instruments and intelligence from military officers, police officers, and bureaucrats, the party checked for the popularity of prospective candidates as well as the credibility of their vote-canvassing networks, which were treated as metrics for determining the amount of informal financial support promised to each candidate or faction.¹⁵

The incentives for joining the PPRP, on the other hand, ranged from a general desire to be part of the future governing coalition, and thereby secure access to patronage, to protection and legal assistance from the military regime. First, the PPRP was situated as a party backed by the NCPO, which oversaw the appointment of the 250-member Senate, which would participate in the selection of the prime minister in a joint session involving both Houses. This generated an air of certainty that the PPRP would be in the lead in terms of approving a prime minister of its own choosing and forming the government. Second, the NCPO was widely associated with “total and exclusive access to state power,” wielding influence over the courts, regulatory agencies, and the bureaucracy—an impression that the PPRP capitalised on in order to “to persuade, coerce or offer protection to targeted individuals that had potential.”¹⁶ Therefore, no matter how diverse the incentives for joining the PPRP were, they were inextricably tied to the PPRP’s tacit alliance with the military regime.¹⁷

THE ROOTS OF PARTY FRAGMENTATION

A grand coalition large enough to ensure that no defection by any single faction can jeopardise the coalition as a whole may, in principle, bring stability to a party’s organisation.¹⁸ In the case of the PPRP, however, the amalgamation of factions, political dynasties, and provincial elites

that formed the party produced splinters and infighting so intense that the party leadership had to be reshuffled on three occasions.¹⁹ Individual faction leaders' ambition to attain cabinet positions served as the impetus for intra-party struggles, something that was characteristic of most Thai political parties. Yet, these struggles could not have resulted in large-scale party overhaul unless the party structure was fragile to begin with.²⁰ This fragility is best understood as a long-term by-product of how the PPRP empowered itself using patronage and military backing. The use of candidate selection as a power-sharing arrangement, combined with a campaign strategy that allowed factions to entrench themselves locally, saw the emergence of an anarchy of factions with growing autonomy from the party.

An Anarchy of Factions

The PPRP delegated candidate selection in several provinces to the leaders of the faction recruited by the party.²¹ This arrangement shared power among the factions who had made an early investment in the party—in a start-up like fashion—allowing the party to be built quickly. However, where factions had overlapping claims and interests, this strategy produced tensions and disputes that were settled, not through party channels but through internal competition and shifting alliances involving the PPRP's factions and the party's stakeholders.

This dynamic is best illustrated using the case of Kamphaeng Phet Province. One of the Sam Mitr's leaders, Somsak Thepsuthin, advocated for his own team of candidates to run in all four constituencies in the province. This raised concerns among members of Varathep Rattanakorn's faction, many of whom were incumbent MPs in the province, and had already deserted Pheu Thai to run as PPRP candidates. The faction requested that party leaders intercede on its behalf, but no agreement was reached. Finally, the conflict was resolved in favour of Varathep's faction via bargaining with a third faction in the region, balancing out Sam Mitr's influence in the process.²²

This seemingly isolated dispute between factions reflects a broader trend in which the party distanced itself from intraparty struggles in order to divide and rule. This pattern is not uncommon for larger parties in Thailand, but the situation was even more complicated in the case of the PPRP since affiliates of the NCPO and the military were also actively pulling the strings behind the scenes, in some cases to determine which individuals should be the party's nominees.²³ As a result, each faction competed for nominations and candidate selection not only by balancing power amongst themselves but also by leveraging ties to influential figures in the party and, in many cases, above the party. These informal adaptations bolstered the impression that real power in the PPRP was vested not in the party executive committee but in elite settlements involving factions in the party and influential party stakeholders operating from the shadows. Ultimately, the party was but a hollow shell designed to give the illusion of a robust party organisation; in reality, accommodating factional differences and interests often meant undermining or bypassing the party.

Faction-building, not Party-building

On the surface, the PPRP's aggressive recruitment activities reflect its overwhelming bargaining power over politicians. At the local level, however, the factions that joined the PPRP were adept at using the party's association with the military regime to strengthen their

political base under the guise of building support for the party. During the election campaign, this affiliation played to many factions' advantages, including turning former foes—the military's Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC)—into powerful allies, overcoming local rivals, and unifying previously divergent loyalties among local officials and vote canvassers. These manoeuvres were, of course, aligned with the party's immediate interests and priorities in 2019. Yet, the factions' success in consolidating power locally also signifies the PPRP's failure to establish local roots independent of these factions' support in the long run.

To revisit the case of Kamphaeng Phet, the faction that joined the PPRP from Pheu Thai was contesting in areas populated by Pheu Thai's supporters. Campaigning for a party associated with the junta that deposed Pheu Thai was political suicide. To address this challenge, the faction selectively played up and downplayed its connection to the military. To its vote canvassers and local leaders in the province, the faction warned that those who failed to support the PPRP could be targeted by security officials or even removed from office.²⁴ However, when appealing to voters, the faction emphasised local unity and continuity of the faction's leadership and contribution to Kamphaeng Phet, making little to no mention of General Prayut, the PPRP's prime ministerial candidate, throughout the campaign.²⁵ With this two-pronged strategy, the faction was able to offset the PPRP's negative image of being a military-backed party while also exploiting the party's ties to the military to cement its own influence over local government officials, politicians, and community leaders in the province.²⁶ In short, the faction used its alliance with the PPRP to ensure its political survival without necessarily developing a genuine local support base for the party.²⁷

IMPLICATIONS

Despite its military backing, the PPRP has not been able to avoid the usual pitfalls of garnering support through reliance on patronage politics and vote-canvassing networks. Its co-optation strategy, unmatched both in ambition and scale, produced yet another under-institutionalised and incoherent electoral vehicle, reminiscent of numerous Thai parties in the past. Neither did the strategy translate consistently into strong electoral performance in regions where the party was most successful at recruiting political heavyweights.²⁸ Furthermore, the party was plagued by continual struggles among factions to obtain or buy the support of nearly half of elected PPRP MPs who had no strict factional allegiance from the beginning—a practice known as “fishing in each other's pond.”²⁹ Ultimately, in the case of the PPRP, the long-run trajectory of party development was shaped more by the party's initial organisational contour than the immediate results of the election.

While the PPRP has remarkably survived the symptoms of its ill-fated party-building strategy for four long years, these symptoms have visibly worsened due to a crisis of leadership emanating from an ongoing rift between the party leader, General Prawit Wongsuwan, and General Prayut. After General Prawit's takeover of the party and former secretary-general Captain Thammanat Prompao's attempt to unseat Prayut in a no-confidence debate, the PPRP's allegiance to General Prayut has become questionable. Furthermore, since Prayut is eligible to

serve for only two additional years into the next term, the PPRP may or may not nominate him as its candidate for prime minister.³⁰

The Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party (รวมไทยสร้างชาติ United Thai Nation), formed by former Democrat and PPRP member Pirapan Salirathavibhaga and former Democrat MP and PDRC leader Akanat Promphan, has emerged as Prayut's new electoral vehicle. While it remains unclear whether Ruam Thai Sang Chart will be able to muster enough support to propel Prayut back to power under the new electoral rules,³¹ the party is well-poised to attract MPs from other parties, including those in the PPRP who remain loyal to Prayut or have feuds in the past with Captain Thammant's faction, which is expected to re-join the PPRP.³²

Meanwhile, the Pheu Thai Party, which many factions in the PPRP were originally part of, has vowed to deliver a landslide victory in the next general election, doubling down on its promise by revamping the party image and placing the party under a more centralised, though informal, leadership by members of the Shinawatra family. The new set of electoral rules is also expected to work in the party's favour and against smaller parties seeking to gain seats primarily by winning party-list votes. This combination of internal strife and external pressure has created a high level of uncertainty that has left the PPRP vulnerable to a mass exodus by its factions and MPs to other parties.³³

Ultimately, the PPRP's faltering struggle to maintain unity reflects a failure to forge enduring loyalties either to voters, or to the military regime and the conservative establishment. While the party succeeded in co-opting the regional, provincial, and factional leaders of vote-canvassing networks, this success was accomplished only by empowering and giving autonomy to such leaders which have long-term ramifications for party development.

The result of combining patronage politics with authoritarian legacies and an uneven playing field is this: an electoral vehicle with no real connection to the populace other than through factions whose devotion to the party is only as strong as the backing the party receives from the regime, and that regime's hold on power. The upcoming general election will determine whether Thailand's military regime can continue to count on the PPRP, or some other parties, to maintain the status quo. If not, the military/conservative establishment will be backed into a corner which may prompt it to withdraw from politics or, more likely, seek to dominate the political system through other means, including, quite possibly, another *coup d'état*.

ENDNOTES

¹ In political science, this phenomenon has been studied through different conceptual lenses such as patron-client system, patronage, and clientelism. See Simona Piattoni, "Clientelism in Historical and Comparative Perspective," in *Clientelism, Interests, and Democratic Representation: The European Experience in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, ed. Simona Piattoni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson, eds., *Patrons, Clients, and Policies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Susan C. Stokes, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco, *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

² Thai political parties frequently seek and compete for candidates who command vote-canvassing networks, offering financial backing and lucrative positions in exchange for their allegiance, however temporary that may be. As a result, vote-canvassing networks have formed the organisational backbone of many of these parties, ensuring that patronage tactics remain integral to campaign strategies.

³ On vote-canvassing networks, see Anyarat Chattharakul, “Thai Electoral Campaigning: Vote-Canvassing Networks and Hybrid Voting,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 29, no. 4 (24 February 2011): 67–95.

⁴ Prajak Kongkirati, ed., *การเมืองว่าด้วยการเลือกตั้ง : วาทกรรม อำนาจ และพลวัตชนบทไทย [Electoral Politics: The Discourse of Power and the Dynamics in Rural Thailand]* (Bangkok: Faadiawkan Press, 2012); and Jakkrit Sangkhamanee, “Democracy of the Desired: Everyday Politics and Political Aspiration in the Contemporary Thai Countryside,” *Asian Democracy Review* 2 (2013): 5–37.

⁵ William A. Callahan, “The Discourse of Vote Buying and Political Reform in Thailand,” *Pacific Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2005): 96.

⁶ In particular, the rice-pledging scheme implemented under the Yingluck Shinawatra administration in 2011 has been regarded by some of its critics to be an instance of vote buying through policy.

⁷ Specifically, the PPRP marked a return to the kind of unholy alliance between military-bureaucratic elites and provincial bosses demonstrated by the Samakheetham Party in the March 1992 general election held one year after the coup in 1991.

⁸ On electoral-authoritarianism in Thailand, see Duncan McCargo, “Anatomy: Future Backward,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 153–62. See also Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, “Electoral Integrity and the Repercussions of Institutional Manipulations: The 2019 General Election in Thailand,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 1 (1 March 2020): 52–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891119892321>.

⁹ On factions in the PPRP, see Paul Chambers, “Thailand’s Elected Junta: The Pluralistic Poverty of Phalang Pracharat,” *ISEAS Perspective*, 2021/29, 12 March 2021; and Punchada Sirivunnabood, “The Rules Change but the Players Don’t: Factional Politics and Thailand’s March 2019 Elections,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 3 (2019): 390–417.

¹⁰ A technocrat who worked with the PPRP, interview with the author, Bangkok, 20 July 2021.

¹¹ Preecha and his faction members did not win seats in the 2019 elections. According to a party insider, the faction purposely withdrew from campaigning in the election. After the election, Preecha’s faction left the PPRP and formed a new political party under the name Pheu Prachachon.

¹² This list is not exhaustive and is based on clearly identifiable factions recruited by the PPRP. In Bangkok, the party recruited former leaders of the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), Nataphol Teepsuwan and Buddhpongse Punnakanta. Yet, the PDRC faction did not organise vote-canvassing networks in the same manner as the other factions mentioned did, largely due to differences in the characteristics of the electorate and metropolitan-provincial divides. Elsewhere, in the South and a few provinces in the North, where the party did not or could not recruit dominant families or factions, it designated its own set of regional heads such as Captain Thammanat Prompao in the North, Colonel Suchart Chantarachotikul in the South, and Anumat Amat in the Deep South. These individuals became the *de facto* leaders of their factions.

¹³ A PPRP MP and faction leader, interview with the author, Bangkok, 5 February 2020.

¹⁴ Thanks to the single-ballot system, votes casted in single-member constituencies would also count for determining the national party-list proportional representation seats, ensuring that every vote counts. This meant that vote-canvassing networks were not an all-or-nothing investment but, rather, one that kills two birds with one stone.

¹⁵ A PPRP insider, interview with the author, Bangkok, 24 September 2020. The amount of informal financial support ranged from 5 million to 35 million baht per candidate. It was mostly left to the discretion of faction leaders how the funds would be distributed. As a result, individual candidates who lacked close ties to their faction leaders, designated or otherwise, were sometimes left to fend for

themselves in terms of securing the full amount of financial support to fund their campaign. In some cases, the party also failed to ensure that the funds were spent for electoral purposes.

¹⁶ A PPRP executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, 17 September 2020.

¹⁷ The impression that the NCPO had the capacity to make credible threats of punishment or offer protection was bolstered by its use of Section 44 and influence over the courts and other regulatory bodies, including the Election Commission of Thailand and the National Anti-Corruption Commission, whose president was a former advisor to General Prawit Wongsuwan, the NCPO's deputy chairman. At least five faction leaders who lent support to the PPRP in 2019, including Santi Prompat, Virat Ratanaset, Sontaya Khunpluem, Varathep Rattanakorn, and Anucha Nakasai, had family members or were themselves facing charges and investigation or suspension from local administration organisation. In addition to these prominent faction leaders, there were others who switched their allegiances on a more individual basis, for example, Dejnattawit Teriyapirom, son of Boonsong Teriyapirom, former commerce minister under Yingluck Shinawatra who took the fall for the rice pledging scandal, Boonlert Buranupakorn, a former ally of Pheu Thai who was suspended as Chief Executive of Provincial Administration in Chiang Mai for criticising the draft of the constitution in the runup to the 2016 Referendum on the draft constitution, and Suporn Utthawong, a former Red Shirt leader nicknamed "Rambo Isan" who faced charges for disrupting the ASEAN Summit in 2009.

¹⁸ The notion of grand coalition was once applied to the case of the Thai Rak Thai Party. See James Ockey, "Change and Continuity in the Thai Political Party System," *Asian Survey* 43, no. 4 (2003): 663–80.

¹⁹ Soon after the 2019 election, conflicts emerged when Anucha Nakasai, a leading member of the Sam Mitr faction, was denied a cabinet seat which was promised to the faction. Allegedly, there were not enough seats to go around since the prime minister, Prayut, had granted a seat to Chart Pattana's Tewan Liptapanlop. Suriya Juangroongruangkit, the faction's co-leader, also ended up with the Ministry of Industry, failing to capture the Ministry of Energy, a ministerial portfolio which the faction had been eyeing from the start. In July 2019, the Sam Mitr faction held a press conference, threatening to file a motion to remove from the PPRP's secretary-general post Energy Minister Sontirat Sontijirawong; this was an attempt to free up the Energy Ministry portfolio and put pressure on General Prayut to reshuffle the cabinet. This attempt was not successful. The Sam Mitr faction made its second attempt a year later by appealing to General Prawit Wongsuwan, the real powerholder in the party, at a time when he was being sidelined from overseeing the Ministry of Interior, and the police. In June 2020, with support from Sam Mitr and other factions in the PPRP, Prawit ordered the members of the PPRP executive committee to hand in their resignation letters, forcing an executive committee election that resulted in Prawit becoming the leader of the PPRP and Anucha becoming the party secretary general. Anucha was appointed the Prime Minister's Office Minister, yet the faction once again failed to win the Ministry of Energy post which, along with a post in the Ministry of Finance, was treated as Prayut's quota. In June 2021, Prawit resigned from his post as party leader, forcing yet another round of executive committee election which returned him to party leadership. Anucha was replaced as secretary-general by the controversial Deputy Agriculture Minister Captain Thammanat Prompao. On paper, the party had become more centralised, as deputy party leaders were reduced in number from 10 to 4, filled by Suriya Juangroongruangkit, Santi Prompat, Virat Rattanaset, and Paiboon Nititawan. Finally, in January 2022, Captain Thammanat was ousted from the party after attempting to unseat General Prayut in a no-confidence debate in September 2021. This resulted in 20 MPs defecting from the PPRP. 16 of them joined Captain Thammanat's Thai Economic Party. At the time of writing, the party is allegedly considering moving back to the PPRP rather than joining the Pheu Thai Party. See "เด็กพรรคเศรษฐกิจไทย ร่วมรับ "บ๊องบวม" - "ไอศ" เผย จ้อกลับ พปชร." [Thai Economic Party's members welcomed General Prawit and Pai Lik, signaling a return to the PPRP], *Thai Rath*, 21 November 2022, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/2558815>, accessed 5 December 2022.

²⁰ The fact that General Prayut, the PPRP's candidate for prime minister in the 2019 general election, never assumed a direct leadership role in the PPRP, leaving Uttama Savanayana as a leader in name only, was a major contributing factor. Prayut made public appearance as a PPRP candidate for prime minister only once, at a rally in Bangkok on the final day of the 2019 election campaign. After the election, he was rarely involved with the party directly. This distance between the prime minister and party MPs, and the absence of a real power centre in the party, that is, before General Prawit became the party leader, reinforced the need for factions to out-manoeuvre one another in order to pursue their own interests.

²¹ Originally, according to the Organic Act on Political Parties, candidates were to be chosen, via primary caucus elections, from among individuals nominated by committees consisting of party executives, leaders of party branches and representatives of the party at the provincial level. This requirement was amended for all parties by the NCPO, using the power of Section 44, allowing candidates to be chosen directly by the party executive committee from among the nominees proposed by committees which included four party executives and seven representatives of the party at the provincial level. For the PPRP, this was a relatively mundane process done mostly to fulfil legal requirements. In practice, the party simply screened and approved the list of names sent by the committees, which were formed by the prospective candidates themselves or by members of the factions recruited by the party.

²² Fieldnotes compiled during a visit to Kamphaeng Phet province, 7 November 2020. The higher-ups within the party were alerted of the conflict. Yet, the party could not offer a solution acceptable to the factions involved.

²³ A PPRP MP and member of the Sam Mitr faction, interview with the author, Bangkok, 24 February 2020. This individual complained that the Sam Mitr faction had already recruited many promising candidates in the Northeast but influential military officers outside the party insisted on fielding their own candidates.

²⁴ Members of the Kamphaeng Phet faction, interview with the author, Bangkok, 30 January 2020.

²⁵ According to an interview with a member of the Kamphaeng Phet faction, Prayut's face did not appear on the campaign posters. Out of 200 posters put up sequentially, the first 50 was a picture of all Kamphaeng Phet's former MPs appearing together, the next 50 featured the candidate running in the constituency, and the final 100 concerned the policies of the PPRP.

²⁶ After the election, the faction was also granted a quota in highly coveted parliamentary committees overseeing the national budget, safeguarding the faction's capacity to steer government resources towards spending on local projects in the province.

²⁷ The case of Kamphaeng Phet is not meant to be broadly generalisable. However, it serves to illustrate the point that factional and local dynamics were developing in parallel and in response to the PPRP's co-optation strategy at the national level, often in quite unexpected ways.

²⁸ In the Northeast, where many members of the Sam Mitr faction were rooted, the PPRP faced much resistance coming from voters with enduring loyalties to other parties, especially Pheu Thai. By contrast, the PPRP outperformed expectations in Bangkok and the South, where the party campaigned mostly on the basis of its ideology and prime ministerial candidate rather than coopting local elites and vote-canvassing networks. Of course, in the 2019 general election, the votes in losing constituencies still contributed to the party's share of party-list seats. However, whether losing candidates were given credit for this is another story.

²⁹ A PPRP executive, interview with the author, Bangkok, 11 October 2021.

³⁰ There is also an ongoing rumour about the possibility of an alliance between the PPRP and the Pheu Thai Party. Should Pheu Thai lead the formation of the next coalition government, one of the conditions for the PPRP to join the coalition could be to say no to Prayut.

³¹ On 30 November 2022, the Constitutional Court ruled that the election draft amendment bill had been passed in a lawful manner and is not in violation of Section 93 and Section 94 of the 2017 Constitution. Once submitted to and approved by the King, the new amended law will in effect impose a new set of electoral rules, requiring party-list seats to be calculated according to a formula

that uses the total number of party-list seats (100) as the divisor. It is anticipated that this set of rules will favour big parties at the expense of smaller ones. First, party-list seats will be allocated in a direct proportion to each party's performance in the party-list competition without constraints imposed by seats already won in single-member constituency elections. In other words, party-list seats are awarded to parties as a top-up bonus rather than as a compensation to make the party's overall share of seats in the House of Representatives proportional to its share of party-list votes. This will tend to work in favour of "big" parties that can field competitive candidates in all 400 constituencies and excel at winning both constituency and party-list votes, assuming that voters do not split the vote by voting for a candidate of one party and voting for another party on the party-list ballot. Second, since the divisor is now 100 as opposed to 500, the amount of party-list votes that a party needs to acquire in order to be awarded one party-list seat will be significantly higher. Assuming that the total amount of votes is the same as in 2019, parties may need to gain as many as 350,000 votes rather than 71,000 votes originally required in 2019 or under the "500" rule—nearly five times more—in order to be awarded one party-list seat. This is expected to work against "small" parties that aim to gain seats by winning party-list votes. These implications must be taken into consideration along with other factors to fully spell out what this will mean for parties competing in the next general election, particularly the Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party. For example, under Section 159 of the 2017 Constitution, a party requires five percent of seats (25 seats) in the House to nominate a prime ministerial candidate from the list of individuals submitted to the Election Commission of Thailand. Furthermore, since the new rules will disadvantage small and micro-parties, a strategy of building a coalition consisting of these parties with the backing of the appointed Senate to balance against a party like Pheu Thai will no longer be as viable as before. Given this institutional landscape, it will likely be challenging for the Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party to secure General Prayut's candidacy, to get him approved as prime minister, and to lead the formation of the coalition government.

³² There is much speculation about who will move from the PPRP to the Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party once it becomes clear that General Prayut will be the Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party's candidate for prime minister. As of this writing, Labour Minister Suchat Chomklin who leads a faction in Chon Buri has resigned as PPRP executive committee member and party director of operations in anticipation of joining the Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party. Other notable factions and politicians who appear to be making plans to switch from the PPRP to the Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party include Deputy Finance Minister Santi Prompat's faction in Petchabun, Digital Economy and Society Minister Chaiwut Thanakamanusorn's faction in Sing Buri, and the newly appointed Prime Minister's Office Minister Thanakorn Wangboonkongchana.

³³ Whether MPs will remain loyal to the PPRP will likely depend on the PPRP's ability to carry out a number of difficult tasks—e.g. credibly tilt the rules of the game in its favour through the courts and regulatory bodies, secure the votes of the appointed Senate, generate a party brand that helps rather than hinders constituency MPs' chances of getting re-elected, provide a steady flow of financial support to fund vote-canvassing networks, leverage military and bureaucratic networks during election campaign, and lead the formation of the next coalition government.

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