



Center for Asian Democracy

Thailand General Election 2023 Pre-Election Report

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Toree Doll, Graduate Research Assistant
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Cover Image: [CNN, Han 2020](#)

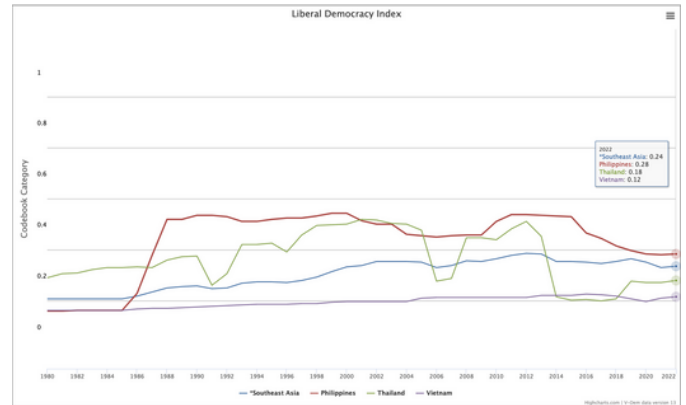
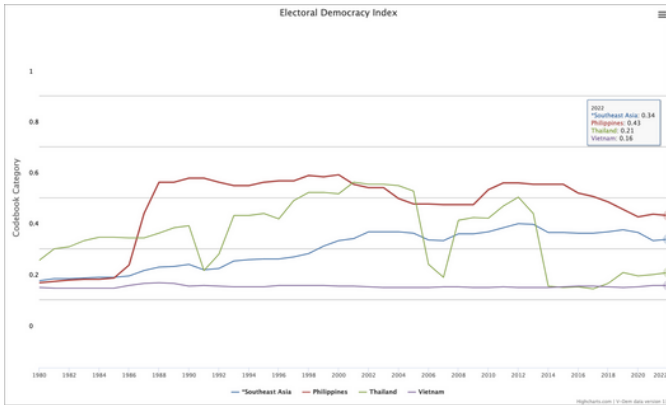
Country Profile

Overview

The Kingdom of Thailand is constitutional monarchy in Southeast Asia with a population of nearly 64.1 million. The Kingdom is governed by a 2017 Constitution that was drafted under significant military influence. It has a bi-cameral legislature, with the prime minister elected through an open vote by members of the House of Representatives and Senate. The King acts as the Head of State, and retains significant influence in the country's politics.

Measures of Democracy

In the past twenty years, Thailand's liberal and electoral democracy rating has been highly volatile. Decreases on each indicator around 2006 and 2014 reflect coups that will be discussed later in this briefing. V-Dem's electoral democracy index of 0.21 for Thailand is lower than Southeast Asia's rating of 0.34 and the Philippines' rating of 0.43, and comparable to Vietnam's rating of 0.16. Thailand's liberal democracy index score of 0.18, ranking lower than the Southeast Asian region, and the Philippines, but higher than Vietnam. For both indexes, it is clear that liberal and electoral democracy is unstable in Thailand. This report will explain this instability and the nature of obstacles to more fully consolidated democracy in the country.



Media Freedom

Thailand is ranked 115/180 on the Reporters Without Borders' Media Freedom Rankings. Ranking at 115 places Thailand close to the category labeled "No Media Freedom." Thailand ranked the second best out of Southeast Asian countries, trailing two slots behind Malaysia. While Thailand's ranking is better than in 2021, there are concerning legislative, security, and social media freedom indicators. The future remains uncertain, as Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha stated that journalists should, "play a major role in supporting the government's affairs"

INDEX 2022

115 /180

Score : 50.15

INDEX 2021

137 /180

Score : 54.78

(Reporters without Borders, 2022)

Election Profile: Thailand's 2023 General Election

Election Credibility

On March 20, 2023, Thailand's Parliament was dissolved by a government decree, bringing general elections May 14. Since 2001, when Thaksin Shinawatra entered the political scene and challenged the Thai establishment, the military has been in and out of politics. In 2011, the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) was elected in a landslide, with Yingluck, Thaksin's sister, Prime Minister. She served from 2011 to 2014; however, protests continued and the Constitutional Court removed her from office. The military launched a coup, then held a snap election, which the opposition rejected. Despite the instability, the Thai people are mobilized and active participants in politics. Voter turnout is high, although not consistent. On the surface, participation seems to be flourishing, but there is consistent turbulence. This election presents an opportunity to strengthen Thai democracy; however, there are doubts about the potential for lasting democratic change. Because the Prime Minister is elected by the entire legislature, including 250 members in the Senate appointed under heavy military influence, even an electoral victory for non-military parties may lead to an inconclusive prime ministerial result.

Leading Candidates

Move Forward Party: Pita Limjaroenrat

The MFP is a progressive, social democratic party that places itself at direct opposition to the military influence in Thai politics. Pita Limjaroenrat is the leader of the MFP, and if elected into Parliament, the MFP has stated that it will not form a coalition with the Palang Pracharath Party, or the United Thai Nation Party. MFP has strongest support among younger Thai voters.

Pheu Thai Party: Paetongtarn Shinawatra

Pheu Thai, still backed by the Shinawatra family, is leading at the polls under the leadership of Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Thaksin's daughter. Shinawatra-backed parties are popular in rural areas of the north and north-east. If elected, The Pheu Thai Party is rumored to be open to forming a coalition with parties aligned with the military. However, Shinawatra has denied those claims.

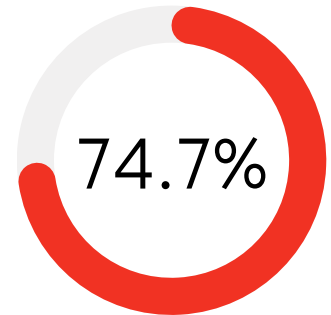
United Thai Nation Party: Prayut Chan-o-cha

Prayut Chan-o-cha is the current Prime Minister and had led the country since 2014 under the military-backed political party, the Palang Pracharath Party. To be able to run again, Prayut Chan-o-cha has split his party in favor of the United Thai Nation Party. This fragmentation is likely to shape post-election negotiations among parties.

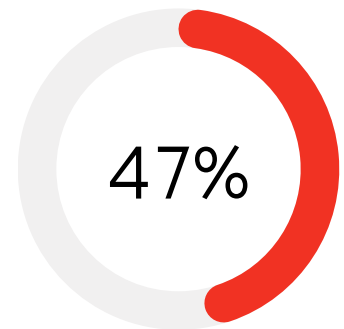
Palang Pracharath Party: Prawit Wongsuwan

Prawit Wongsuwan is the current Deputy Prime Minister. The Palang Pracharath Party is a Thai civil-military political party that is closely associated with the National Council for Peace and Order, the military junta that ruled the country after the 2014 coup until the 2019 general elections were held.

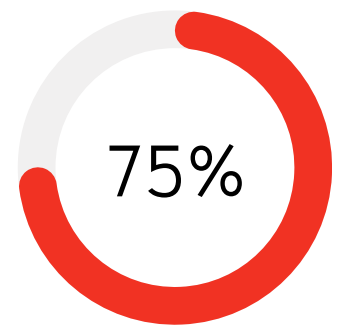
Recent Voter Turnout



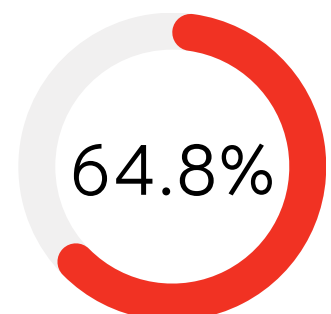
2019 General Election



2014 General Election



2011 General Election



2014 General Election

Polarization and "Thai-Style Democracy"

In 2001, after a period of military-royalist rule and a short period of democracy, billionaire businessman Thaksin Shinawatra was elected prime minister on a populist platform. This increased polarization, causing two factions to emerge: Thaksin's Red Shirt supporters and Yellow Shirt opponents who are loyal to the monarchy and the military. In 2014, the Thai military formed a coup, and has since heavily increased their influence over government. Both sides of the political spectrum claim to be upholding democratic values, and claim the other as illegitimate. How is the term democracy contested by these polarized groups?

Yellow Shirts and Thai Democracy

The Yellow Shirts are those who are sympathetic and supportive of Thailand's traditional values and military influence. A cornerstone of the Yellow Shirts' vision of democracy is protecting the monarchy. This is most apparent in a series of judicial rulings that protect the lese majeste law, making it illegal to defame, insult, or threaten the monarch of Thailand. Since 2014 there have been harsh sentences under the law, especially for those who support alternative visions of democracy. Since 2014 the military has created barriers to the creation of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), including the proposed "Operation of Not-for-Profit Organizations Act." Experts say that the broad wording of the Act opens doors for strict control on CSOs. The 2017 Constitution facilitated such legislation, by removing two achievements of Thailand's democratic reforms of the 1990s: the elected Senate and the requirement that the Prime Minister be an elected member of parliament. It is widely understood among scholars and observers of Thai politics that this procedure allowed the military-appointed Senate to pick the prime minister after the 2019 general elections. The Yellow Shirts vision of democracy is a semi-authoritarian one, with control over institutions, elections, and legislation.

Red Shirts' Vision of Democracy

The Red Shirts overwhelmingly support Thaksin, and Thaksin-aligned populist political parties, such as the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), currently led by Thaksin's daughter, Paetongtarn Shinawatra. Developing from socioeconomic changes in Northeast Thailand, the Red Shirts campaign for transparency, an end to corruption in government, and political and economic reforms to address inequalities. While Prime Minister, Thaksin aimed to address the widening wealth gap in Thailand. In this election, the Pheu Thai Party outlined policies focused on democracy as a means of economic change, improving labor conditions, guaranteeing a higher minimum wage, reducing pollution, and turning Thailand into a financial technology hub. The PTP has also condemned military control of the judiciary, election meddling and constitutional changes. In these ways, the Red Shirt vision of democracy is closer to traditional procedural understandings. However, opponents criticize Thaksin, including via accusations of corruption and weaponizing the police against innocent Thai people via a "drug war." Experts state that roughly three thousand suspected drug dealers were arrested without trial.



Photo via Stanley Weiss

Beyond Red-Yellow Polarization?

The Move Forward Party (MFP) in Thailand has called for the abolition of the lese-majeste law, which some see as a step towards disconnecting the monarchy from politics altogether. The MFP similarly advocates strong steps to remove military control of government, such as amending the Public Assembly Act, changing voting laws, and drafting an entirely new constitution if the people vote to do so. It accuses the PTP of being too willing to work with the military if elected into parliament, although both parties share a desire to take back parliamentary control from the military. The MFP's alternative is especially popular with younger, urbanized Thai voters who are not satisfied by the options offered through Red-Yellow polarization.

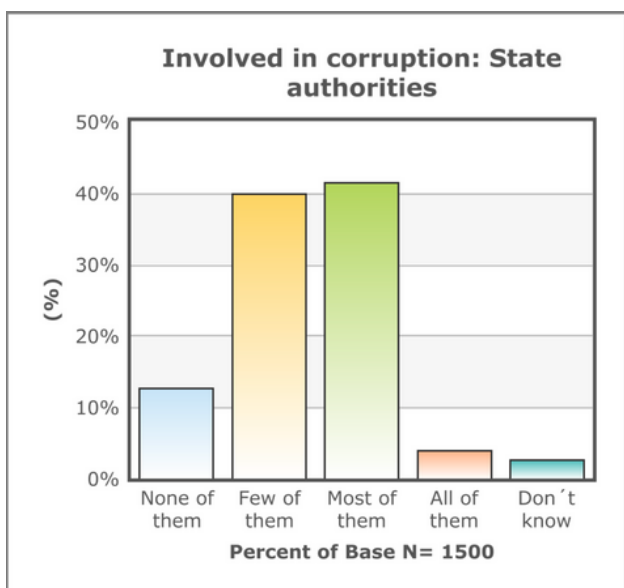
Public Attitudes Regarding Democracy

The 2018 [World Values Survey](#) (WVS) captures Thailand's attitudes about democratic institutions. This brief section highlights representative indicators from the most recent WVS polling on attitudes toward liberal rights, corruption, and the Thai Royal Military.

Liberal Rights

Thai respondents are divided when asked about the necessity of protecting civil rights as a characteristic of democracy. Only 12.7% of respondents agreed protecting civil rights is a characteristic of democracy, while over 1 in 3 fall in the lowest three categories on the scale. The country's average score on this indicator (5.13) is much lower than other democracies in the region, such as the Philippines (6.39), Indonesia (7.92) and South Korea (7.2).

Civil Rights Protect people's liberty against oppression		
Rating	% / Total	
Not an essential characteristic of democracy	219	14.6
2	118	7.9
3	166	11.1
4	107	7.1
5	262	17.5
6	93	6.2
7	110	7.3
8	116	7.7
9	60	4.0
An essential characteristic of democracy	190	12.7
Other missing: Multiple answers Mail (EVS)	59	4.0
Base mean	1,441	
Mean	5.13	
Std Dev.	2.96	
(N)	(1,500)	100%



Corruption

A plurality of respondents believes that most state authorities are involved in corruption. This indicates low levels of public trust in state officials, but also shows that Thailand's voters are aware of the corruption taking place. [Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index](#) ranks Thailand 36/100, 0 being highly corrupt. The Philippines (33/100) and Indonesia (34/100) rank similarly, while Malaysia (47/100) is rated more highly. [Transparency International's 2020 Global Corruption Barometer](#) found that 24% of public service users paid a bribe in the previous 12 months.

Military in Politics

According to the 2018 WVS, less than 10% view the army taking over when government is incompetent to be an essential characteristic of democracy. Thailand's average score (4.61) is lower than The Philippines (5.82), Indonesia (6.14), and Malaysia (5.95). This indicates that, compared to surrounding democracies, respondents in Thailand are more likely to view military intervention as an action against democracy. In another question asked by the WVS, 60.1% respondents view the junta as a good political system. These responses highlight the complexity of the civil-military relationship in Thailand.

Democracy: The army takes over when government is incompetent		
Rating	% / Total	
Not an essential characteristic of democracy	278	18.5
2	111	7.4
3	194	12.9
4	134	8.9
5	255	17.0
6	107	7.1
7	94	6.3
8	113	7.5
9	31	2.1
An essential characteristic of democracy	128	8.5
Other missing: Multiple answers Mail (EVS)	55	3.7
Base mean	1,445	
Mean	4.61	
Std Dev.	2.80	
(N)	(1,500)	100%

All tables and graph via [World Values Survey Online Analysis](#)

Democracy: Challenges and Backsliding

The Political Role of the Military

Since the coup that ended the absolute monarchy in Thailand in 1932, the military has maintained its influence on Thai politics in partnership with the monarchy. Experts say that the connection between the military and the monarchy allows the military to remain a powerful influence in Thai politics. The military has significant economic influence, directly providing services through or holding shares in companies in banking and asset management, civilian facilities, real estate and hotels, and radio and television broadcasting. Banking, radio, and television broadcasting regulations also provide barriers to civilian entry. These laws have been spearheaded by the military-backed political party, the Palang Pracharath Party (PPP), and has produced what experts call "khaki capital," enabling the military to diminish civilian control over the military, as well as harden their control.



Thailand's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha attends the coronation procession for King Vajiralongkorn in military uniform in May 2019. [Athit Perawongmetha/Reuters](#)

Corruption

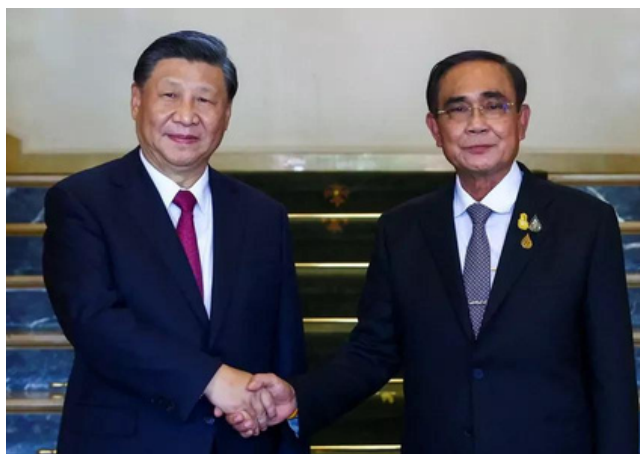
Claims of corruption have repeatedly been used to justify military interventions in politics. Thailand's 2014 military junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), stated that fighting corruption would be one of its main focus points, notwithstanding allegations regarding its own behavior. The intersection between business and government sectors has fueled the widespread use of bribes. There are anti-corruption laws in Thailand; however, enforcement lags. Law enforcement in Thailand faces its own corruption allegations, with reports of civilians having to pay bribes when arrested, migrant abuses, sexual abuses, and torturing of pro-democracy protesters. Corruption in Thailand impacts elections, for instance via reports of widespread voter fraud, vote buying, and election manipulation.



A 2015 anti-corruption law was widely seen to target former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra (seen on the poster). [Photograph: Rufus Cox/Getty Images](#)

China

China has increased its media influence in Thailand by working with the ruling party to allow China's media companies to broadcast in Thailand. Experts say that China supports the Thai military and monarchy, via Chinese media giants such as China Global Television Network, China Radio International, and Xinhua newswire. Thailand has imported aspects of the China internet model, which has resulted in increased online censorship. There are also economic ties between the two countries, including trade and infrastructure plans like the China-Thailand Railway.



Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Bangkok, Thailand, on November 19, 2022. [Athit Perawongmetha/Pool via Reuters](#)

Spotlight on the Campaign Trail

Pita Limjaroenrat, the leader of Thailand's Move Forward Party, holds a campaign rally in Chiang Rai. MFP has polled strongly in the campaign's closing weeks.

Source: [Lewiston Tribute](#), AP



Pita Limjaroenrat, the leader of Thailand's Move Forward Party (center), takes part in a campaign rally in Chiang Rai, Thailand, May 1, 2023.



Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha gestures as he officially announces joining the United Thai Nation Party in Bangkok, Thailand, Monday, Jan. 9, 2023.

Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit

On January 9, 2023, Thailand's long-serving leader Prayut Chan-o-cha broke ties with the country's military-backed ruling party and joined the newly formed United Thai Nation Party (UTNP).

Source: [The Diplomat](#), AP

Paetongtarn Shinawatra, 36, the Pheu Thai Party's leader and inheritor of the Thaksin legacy, greets supporters during the general election campaign at a temple in Ubon Ratchathani province, Thailand, February 17, 2023.

Source: [REUTERS](#)



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[Red Shirt, Pro-Democracy Protests 2010](#)



[Yellow Shirt, Pro-Monarchy Protests, 2020](#)

About the Center for Asian Democracy

The mission of the Center for Asian Democracy, established at the University of Louisville in 2006, is to promote research and teaching about democracy and the prospects for democratization in Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia. Through publications, conferences, workshops, visiting scholars programs, colloquia, and research projects in Asian countries, the Center creates a forum for studying political dynamics in this vital region. The Center is currently led by Dr. David Buckley, Paul Weber Chair of Politics, Science and Religion and Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Louisville.

About the Author

The substantive research for this report was conducted by CAD Graduate Research Assistant, Toree Doll, under the supervision of Dr. David Buckley. Toree Doll is a political science MA student, with interests in US foreign policy, economics, and democratic trends in Asia. Toree is also a UofL undergraduate alumna, where she earned a B.A. in Political Science, a B.A. in Economics, and minored in Chinese language.

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