Thai Generals Get a Second Chance to Govern — in Mufti

By Marwaan Macan-Markar

Thailand’s elections in March this year, after nearly five years of military rule since a coup in 2014 ousted the democratically elected government, hardly represented a return to democracy.

Prayuth Chan-ocha, the general who staged that coup and later served as the junta’s prime minister, ensured that there was almost no chance that opponents of the military and its allies in the bureaucracy and among the country’s ultra-conservatives would lead the government after these latest elections.

In that sense, they guaranteed an outcome in their favor. But the strong showing of anti-military forces ensures that Prayuth’s future ability to rule will be contested, writes Marwaan Macan-Markar.
and political scientists concluded that the agenda of the junta and its backers among Thailand’s ultra-conservative and entrenched elite was to rewrite the election rules with one intent: bury their nemesis, Thaksin Shinawatra, the former prime minister and patron of the country’s most influential political clan.

It was a formidable straitjacket imposed on the voting public to avoid a repeat of the Thaksin juggernaut, which had won all previous elections since 2001 — even after a previous military coup in 2006, which overthrew the then Thaksin-led elected government. Consequently, more weight was given to small- and medium-sized parties to benefit at the polls than bigger ones, such as Pheu Thai, the latest avatar of a pro-Thaksin party, which had headed the government Prayuth overthrew. Constituencies were gerrymandered to favor Palang Pracharath and its allies over Pheu Thai. Campaign laws were toughened and censorship enforced. Legal cases were filed to intimidate candidates lining up behind a broad, pro-democracy front with Pheu Thai as the standard bearer. And finally, after the elections were held, the elections commission announced a new formula to grant one seat each to 11 small parties that failed to meet the minimum threshold. The intent was clear: bolster the pro-junta coalition in the lower house.

These measures brought to focus questions about the credibility of the election as an exit strategy for the junta. While the poll was relatively free and fair on election day, the verdicts about the process were anything but. Critics weighed in with telling commentary. The March polls were a “master class in how to steal an election at every level,” remarked Zachary Abuza, a US academic who specializes in Southeast Asian security affairs, in an article for The Diplomat. Others were as trenchant, such as Sunai Phasuk, the lead Thai researcher for Human Rights Watch. But Thai voters revealed other truths about the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Pheu Thai’s record of pro-poor rewarding for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Pheu Thai’s record of pro-poor rewards for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Pheu Thai’s record of pro-poor rewards for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Pheu Thai’s record of pro-poor rewards for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Pheu Thai’s record of pro-poor rewards for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Pheu Thai’s record of pro-poor rewards for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Pheu Thai’s record of pro-poor rewards for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Pheu Thai’s record of pro-poor rewards for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Pheu Thai’s record of pro-poor rewards for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Pheu Thai’s record of pro-poor rewards for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta.

Even as they sulk at the junta’s achievement in an uneven political field, the pro-democracy camp can take comfort from some of the significant electoral spoils in their favor. There were rewards for pressing home such issues as the rise of inequality and the suppression of democracy under the junta. Prayuth’s camp also made inroads into the traditional ultra-royalist and well-heeled voters. The democrats were vanquished in the House. But it was a modest showing by previous standards. The same was the case for...
The votes Pheu Thai received, 7.4 million, a nearly 50 percent drop from the 15.7 million votes it received in the 2011 general elections.

This shift in voter sentiment was partly the result of Thaksin’s own doing. He took an unprecedented political gamble by having Thai Raksa Chart, a newly-formed pro-Thaksin party, nominate Princess Ubolratana, elder sister of the Thai monarch, as its prime ministerial candidate for the polls. It had the effect of a political earthquake.

But to what end? If anything, it only revealed poor judgment on Thaksin’s part, or perhaps arrogance. His political bombshell barely lasted a few hours; the palace rebuked it; Ubolratana withdrew; and the new party he had backed was banned. It was another case of pride before a fall for Thaksin’s latest attempt to influence Thai politics from exile, where he lives as a fugitive from justice.

But little of that seems to matter to the junta’s backers. They are unable to stomach what this youth vote represents. They are clearly averse to what democracy offers: an inclusive diversity of views, political pluralism and space for differences. It is betrayed by their rush to turn their guns on Thanathorn through legal cases, because of the threat he represents to their order of privilege. And the rise of his youth vote, armed with the power of social media, even got under the skin of the hawkish military commander, Gen. Apirat Kongsompong. “Social media is more powerful than the armed forces,” he warned after the elections. It was a tacit admission that conventional tools of suppression are unable to silence a changing political landscape.

Yet, while Thanathorn’s entry was not factored into the junta’s calculations (hence the panic), its legal minds devised measures to ensure the legacy of military authoritarianism and its economic vision will prevail for years to come. The template of the 20-year national strategy, flagged in the 2017 constitution drafted by the unelected guardians, will not be able to insulate him and his coalition. It appears to be the restoration of almost pre-modern, ultra-conservative values over the one shaped by modern, democratic aspirations. The tension between these two poles has shaped Thai politics over the past two decades.

But the unelected guardians will not be able to protect Prayuth all the time in the well of the parliament. There are already signs afoot that the slender majority his 19-party coalition enjoys is brittle. The Palang Pracharath coalition has also seen bold challenges that could unfold when the opposition benches use their electoral legitimacy to shred polices and laws Prayuth may table for a vote. And it will be a far cry from the obsequious years of the NLA, which considered 509 bills, of which 412 became law, often with near unanimous votes, during Prayuth’s first term as junta leader. He will also be deprived of the weapon he wielded to goad Thais across the spectrum: Section 44, dubbed the “dictator’s law,” for its sweep from the 1980s was window-dressing. By that reckoning, the country may have had elections since democracy took root in the early 1970s, but the actual shots were called by unelected generals pulling the strings from behind.

Little of this is surprising given the trajectory of Thai politics since 1997. A constitution drafted that year, dubbed the “people’s constitution,” emerged a few years after a bloody showdown on the streets of Bangkok against the attempt by a military strongman at the time to extend his stay in power after a parliamentary election. The case for political authority being decentralized for local bodies to share in this spirit was advanced as well. But two military coups later, those democratic aspirations are being reined in by the troika of ultra-conservatives from the military, the bureaucracy and the entrenched elite. They sit at the top of the social and political pyramid and draw their authority by claiming to be “good people.” It also implies legitimacy by being close to the monarchy, the repository of moral authority. Prayuth’s second term is an attempt to restore that old order through a strongman in mufti.

On the face of it, Prayuth stands to benefit from the political fortress that has been built to insulate him and his coalition. It appears to be the restoration of almost pre-modern, ultra-conservative values over the one shaped by modern, democratic aspirations. The tension between these two poles has shaped Thai politics over the past two decades.

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