

THAILAND'S NEW POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: HYBRID REGIMES AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

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Abstract: The 2023 general election in Thailand with its unexpected results has revealed the weakness and instability of the competitive authoritarian regime in Thailand. The two pro-military parties, the United Thai Nation (UTN) led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha and Palang Pracharat (PPRP) headed by general Prawit Wongsuwan failed to win hearts and minds of Thai electorate. The ruling party PPRP won only 40 MP (from a total 500) seats from the constituency and party list system, down 76% from the previous general election in 2019 when it secured 116 seats. The ultra-royalist UTN, shortly found prior to this election, gained only 36 House seats, mostly from the southern region, making them the small-sized region-based party with no national standing.

Building upon research on the competitive authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and party and electoral politics in Thailand, my argument points to three explanatory factors that explain the characteristics of Thailand's hybrid regime and its failure to win elections: the historical institutional legacy of the past military coup regimes, the lack of skillful and adaptive electoral mobilization, and the disunity of the anti-democratic elites. By depending disproportionately on coups as a political tool, Thai military have neglected to accumulate experience in building strong party, developing policy platforms, and establishing voter bases. With the changing political landscape and voter's political aspiration, the conservative elites still largely resort to the same old strategies for drawing votes: the co-optation of vote canvassers; the seeking of support from local bosses; the exploitation of patronage systems; and the distribution of goods and money. The split between junta leaders-Prayut and Prawit- also reduced their capacity to win the electoral competitions. However, with the undemocratic structure and mechanisms embedded in the current constitution, the transition to democracy in Thailand remained difficult.

Dr Prajak Kongkirati is Associate Professor, and former Associate Dean for Research and Academic Services and former Head of the Government Department at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University. He was formerly Head of the Southeast Asian Studies Center, East Asian Institute, Thammasat University, and Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. He has published widely in the fields of Thai politics, political conflict and violence, party and electoral politics, democratization, and social movements. His latest publications are "Thailand's Failed 2014 Election: The Anti-election Movement, Violence and Democratic Breakdown," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (2016); "The Prayuth Regime: Embedded Military and Hierarchical Capitalism in Thailand," *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* (2018), co-authored with Veerayooth Kanchoochat; "From Illiberal Democracy to Military Authoritarianism: Intra-Elite Struggle and Mass-Based Conflict in Deeply Polarized Thailand," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2019); "Overview: Political Earthquakes," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 41: 2 (2019): 163-169; "Two Mainland Southeast Asian Militaries in Comparative Perspective," co-authored with Michael J Montesano and Terence Chong, in *Praetorians, Profiteers or Professionals? Studies on the Militaries of Myanmar and Thailand*, edited by Michael J Montesano, Terence Chong, and Prajak Kongkirati (Singapore: ISEAS, 2020); and the award-winning book by the National Research Council of Thailand, *When We Vote: Dynamics of Electoral Politics and Democracy in ASEAN* (Matichon, 2019).



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Room P4703 (YEUNG)

4/F, Yeung Kin Man Academic Building (AC1)

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