



The Legitimacy of Pheu Thai Party as 'People's Champion' Now in Question

Long Sovitou

Pheu Thai Party, formerly known as Thai Rak Thai Party during its early years, has built its legitimacy based on strong economic performance and populist policies that appeal to rural farmers. Much of this political success is owed to Thaksin Sinawatra who has historically been an influential figure in Thai politics. As Thaksin has been absent from Thailand for nearly 17 years since being ousted in a coup, a whole generation of young and middle-class voters have grown up in this time with no attachment to these past achievements. The declining popularity of Pheu Thai is strongly apparent during the May elections as they lost to the progressive-oriented Move Forward Party.¹

The recent swearing in of Thailand's new cabinet marks a highly questionable turn for the Pheu Thai Party. Despite initially making promises of progressive policies during the then coalition led by Move Forward Party, Pheu Thai has formed an unlikely alliance with parties from the previous military-led government to break the political deadlock and secure the prime minister position for its candidate Srettha Thavisin.²

This ironic coalition with members of the same armies-linked parties that ousted its influential backers, the Shinawatras, casts serious doubt on Pheu Thai's legitimacy as the supposed 'people's champion'. The inclusion of parties like Palang Pracharath and Ruam Thai Sang Chart, once vocal critics of Thaksin Shinawatra, appears to be a marriage of convenience rather than shared ideology.

The appointment of Thailand's new cabinet ministers has further caused controversies for the Pheu Thai-led government as some key positions were allotted to figures with concerning backgrounds.³ As part of the coalition deal, the deputy prime minister and natural resources minister roles went to Police General Patcharawat Wongsuwan, the younger brother of Palang Pracharath party leader General Prawith Wongsunwan, who was previously found guilty of malfeasance over a deadly protest crackdown. Meanwhile, the agriculture and cooperatives minister is Thamanat Prompow, who has faced allegations of past heroin smuggling in Australia and a murder conviction in

¹ Pichayada Promchertchoo. 07 September 2023. "Analysis: Thaksin could walk free sooner than expected, but his future is likely as a backseat driver in Thai politics". Channel News Asia. Available at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/thailand-politics-thaksin-shinawatra-jail-3750631>

² Jintamas Saksornchai. 21 August 2023. "Thailand's Pheu Thai party joins with pro-military parties in coalition to form new government". AP News. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/thailand-pheu-thai-coalition-military-parties-b6d3076f3b237fade491bc6c7ba32856>

³ Thai PBS World. 05 September 2023. "New Cabinet shines light on the dark side of Thai politics". Available at <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/new-cabinet-shines-light-on-the-dark-side-of-thai-politics/>

Thailand. The assortment of these compromised ministers, allocated as apparent rewards among coalition parties, raises questions about Pheu Thai's integrity and ability as the leader to inspire public confidence.

According to a leaked 52-page document believed to be the upcoming policy statement, there are glaring omissions of Pheu Thai's headline electoral pledges.⁴ Gone are promises to nearly double the minimum wage without specifying the exact increase, lower train fares to a flat 20 baht fare, and elect a charter-drafting committee - reforms that gained Pheu Thai overwhelming public support.

Instead, the document reportedly focuses on vague goals like a 'modern economy' and 'resolving conflicts of opinions regarding the constitution'. This gives the impression that the policy agenda was, to a certain degree, dictated by the conservative coalition members rather than Pheu Thai despite its public mandate. It is noteworthy to mention that the 10,000-Baht digital wallet policy is also evident in the document, an ambitious policy that requires approximately 560 billion baht to implement. When Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin brought forward the subject to Bank of Thailand Governor Sethaput Suthiwartnarueput, the governor expressed worries about its long-term implications on the country's financial structure, notably the public debt movement, despite showing support for the policy.⁵

It remains highly uncertain if Pheu Thai can deliver its promised progressive policies under this administration heavily shaped by military-royalist parties. Likewise, a poll conducted by the National Institute of Development Administration (Nida) from August 30 to September 1 found that approximately half of the respondents expressed doubts that the Pheu Thai Party would not successfully deliver on its 10 major campaign promises made before the election.⁶ These findings hint at early indications that the new government will likely be more aligned with the interests of the establishment elites than the masses who voted with the optimism of much needed changes.

To this end, Pheu Thai faces an uphill battle to convince voters its original policies remain intact and ensure successful implementation of policies aim to make a difference to a stagnant economy that is still recovering from the post-pandemic slump. Failure to implement promised policies and reforms will likely see its popularity plunge as the public loses trust in its motivations. This could open the door for progressive parties to tap into public dissatisfaction and lead the charge for an alternative progressive vision for Thailand's future.

Progressive rivals like the Move Forward Party have ample ammunition to position themselves as the true representative of public interests. Having won the most seats despite electoral mechanisms weighted against reformist parties, Move Forward is expected to retain its credible image as an agent of change that Pheu Thai now risks losing.

⁴ Thai Enquirer. 07 September 2023. "Thai Enquirer News Summary—September 7, 2023". Available at <https://www.thaienquirer.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Thai-Enquirer-News-Summary-September7-2023.pdf>

⁵ Thai Enquirer. 07 September 2023. Available at <https://twitter.com/ThaiEnquirer/status/1699657761645330456>

⁶ The Nation Thailand. 03 September 2023. "Pheu Thai pledge to nearly double the minimum wage has many sceptics, survey finds". Available at <https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/politics/40030746>

The coming months will be telling on whether Pheu Thai stays true to its campaign promises and successfully put those policies into action. If not, the party could be heading toward a downward trajectory and face public condemnations. This could fuel public discontent and demands for the kind of bold reforms that parties like Move Forward have long advocated for.

Long Sovitou is a Junior Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not represent the views of his affiliations.

Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) of the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP) aims to be a highly reliable and advanced hub of knowledge on Southeast Asian affairs to catalyze progress and advance prospects of positive integration, peace, and development. With its pool of high-caliber researchers, IISPP's CSEAS aims to be an alternative to ad-hoc research, training, and policy dialogue arrangements with limited or short-lived national and regional impacts.