

Thailand

Role of monarchy at heart of battle for Thailand's future

Senators appointed by former military junta have kept Pita Limjaroenrat out of government



Supporters hold a picture of prime ministerial candidate Pita Limjaroenrat after he was blocked from power by Thailand's national assembly © Narong Sangnak/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Robin Harding in Bangkok YESTERDAY

The conservative establishment in Thailand has many reasons to make sure Pita Limjaroenrat, the winner of May's general election, does not become prime minister. His policies include military reform, elimination of monopolies and decentralisation of power from Bangkok: collectively, an existential threat to the generals and oligarchs who run the country.

But as unelected senators [voted down Pita](#) in the national assembly last week they used only one line of attack. The senators rejected his pledge to reform Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, the lèse majesté law, which imposes a prison sentence of three to fifteen years on anybody who insults the [Thai](#) monarchy.

A taboo topic for politics until street protesters put it on the agenda in 2020, the sudden debate over lèse majesté highlights the extent to which the Thai monarchy — led by King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who spends most of [his time in Germany](#) — is now at the heart of a decades-long struggle between liberal democracy and traditional conservative rule.

“The role of the monarchy is now front and centre,” said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a professor of political science at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. “It’s never been so politicised before.”

Pita's Move Forward party won a clear majority in the general election along with its ally, Pheu Thai, a successor to the movement of populist former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

However, the national assembly vote to select a prime minister includes 250 senators chosen by the military junta that took power after a coup in 2014. Almost all of them refused to back the election winner, leaving the assembly deadlocked, and nobody able to form a new government.

"You are bringing down the monarchy, which is united with the nation's security," said senator Kamnoon Sidhisamarn during Thursday's debate. "Please give us a clear answer on how you are going to show your loyalty to the monarchy," added another senator, Somchai Sawangkarn.

A clean-cut, Harvard-educated businessman who peppers his speeches with technocratic jargon in English, Pita has criticised the establishment for using the monarchy as a tool to shut down its political opponents.

"There are many groups who want to stop me from becoming prime minister . . . because they are about to lose their interests, whether it be a concession or business. So they intentionally bring in the institution of the monarchy to protect their interests," he said before the assembly vote.

"I believe if nobody used the motto 'we will fight for the King' to overthrow the government, if nobody staged coups in the name of the monarchy . . . if we didn't use Section 112 to destroy each other, then the conflicts in Thai society wouldn't have come to this point."

Pita's desire to [reform lèse majesté](#) resonates with his supporters, who extend beyond the young and the urban middle class, with Move Forward winning an unexpectedly large number of votes in the countryside.

In a park opposite the assembly building, Somphop Chamsri, a 40-year-old office worker, came out to support Pita with a handwritten placard telling the senators: "If you abstain from voting, you should abstain from breathing as well".

Somphop said he wanted change in Thailand. "I want to see the lèse majesté law amended. For me, I occasionally posted criticism respectfully about the monarchy on my Facebook. I once got a phone call and a visit from the Metropolitan Police [Bureau]. They told me to stop and they threatened to charge me."

But even though Thailand has many functioning democratic institutions — Pita dominates television news and citizens such as Somphop have the freedom to protest — analysts say the chances of change are low.

The next step will be another assembly vote to nominate a prime minister, but the gulf Pita must cross to win “seems unbridgeable”, said Ken Lohatepanont, a political analyst.

With the senators likely to reject any role for Move Forward in government, Pheu Thai will have to decide whether to trade its popularity for power by cutting a deal with parties aligned to the military.

In the meantime, the political deadlock means there is no chance of reforms to raise Thailand's sluggish rate of economic growth and move it beyond middle-income status.

The establishment is likely to keep up a barrage of legal challenges to weaken and discredit Move Forward without any overt oppression. So far, they include one constitutional court case against reform of *lèse majesté* and another seeking to disqualify Pita from parliament over an alleged shareholding in a media company.

“Legal instruments will be used as a safeguard to prevent challenges to the established order in Thailand,” said Napon Jatusripitak, a research fellow at the Iseas-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore. “Democracy in Thailand is allowed to thrive only when it aligns with the status quo.”

Additional reporting by Ryn Jirenuwat in Bangkok

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