Elite realignment, a populist moment: reflections on Thailand’s 2019 general elections

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At 10.45PM on 23 March this year—or just over 9 hours before polling booths opened in Thailand’s first general election in 8 years—the Royal Household Bureau released a televised announcement. In it, His Majesty the King assigned the Lord Chamberlain with invoking words imparted by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej in 1969, or half a century ago. The message of “supporting good people so they can govern the country” is now one that Thai people are intimately familiar with.

The words, continually iterated by state officials since the political crisis of May 1992, were invoked once again, this time with emphasis on the current King’s reign: “His Majesty desires for the people of the nation, all the way to government officials of every unit, both civil servants, soldiers and police … to reflect on and awaken to the statement imparted by the late King”. It is worth observing that that night, the hashtag #???????????????? (“we’re grown up already and can choose for ourselves”) quickly rose to the number one trending topic on Twitter.

Who voters conceive as “good people” became progressively clearer from the preliminary election results tallied the next day—which showed, rather, that there is no agreement. Voters who selected NCPO leader General Prayut Chan-ocha as “a good person to govern the country” in the capacity as the next prime minister numbered 8.32 million people. Meanwhile, voters who rejected General Prayuth as “a good person to govern the country” numbered 15.49 million. Small- to middle-size parties which had declined to present a clear stance on the continuation of Prayut’s leadership, such as Bhumjaithai, the Democrats and Chartthaipattana, received a combined 7.94 million votes. All this matters whether or not the legislature (sitting with the 250-person senate) ultimately selects Prayut as Thailand’s next prime minister.

Note: These are preliminary figures based on the counting of approximately 94% of ballots, which have been organised according to the announcement on 27 March of a formation of a coalition of parties opposed to Prayut. BBC Thai calculates, “The 6 parties who announced unequivocally today that they are in an alliance collectively received 14.99 votes. If the New Economics Party is to join, this number rises to 15.49 million votes. Meanwhile, parties who have announced their support for Prayut’s bid to be prime minister, such as Palang Pracharat and the Action Coalition for Thailand (but not including the People’s Reform Party which did not receive any seats in the legislature) are collectively supported by 8.32 million votes. Middle- to small-size parties who have yet to present a clear stance, that is Bhumjaithai, the Democrats and Chartthaipattana, received a collective 7.94 million votes”. The New Economics Party has since confirmed its entry into the anti-Prayut coalition.

How are we to make sense of this election and its results? I suggest contextualising the election in what I see as the Prayut–NCPO regime’s two major failures throughout its five years of rule: first, its failure to establish a stable order of power at the level of elites and second, its failure to induce political obedience from the people. Attention to both the shifting order of elite power and the Prayuth–NCPO regime’s relations of power with the people will assist us to holistically picture both the origins and future trajectory of the post-election government.

I begin by discussing the 2019 elections in the context of elite politics, through the framework of drama or spectacle. Rather than the effective performance of a “theatre state”, the election devolved into a “theatre of chaos”. What was intended to be a show of electoral competition, with the winner pre-determined in advance, instead inadvertently made visible the fragmentation of political elites.

I then examine the election and relations of power between the people and the Prayuth–NCPO regime. An important issue is that we are in the midst of a populist moment, which has manifested first and foremost in the successful electoral breakthrough of the Future Forward Party. I should be clear from the outset that I do not use the word “populism” in the pejorative, economic sense, referring to state spending that flouts fiscal discipline in the pursuit of pleasing the public. The populism I speak of is political populism, or the mobilisation of the populace at large. In the 2019 election, populist actors actualised a political opportunity structure which had been made possible

by first, the withdrawal of two previous populist leaders from Thai politics and second, rising discontentment with the extant political order.

Finally, I turn to making predictions about post-election politics. I believe it is possible that voters awakened by forces of political populism will be beset by rising disappointment and disillusionment with the elite-dominated political order which was set in place prior to the elections to steer and constrain political change. Because the NCPO has not succeeded in the two major endeavours described above, even after five years in power, the elections devolved into a "theatre of chaos" at the level of elites and manifested a "populist moment" at the level of the people.

The theatre of chaos

I begin with the following question: who exactly is General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the prime ministerial candidate of the Palang Pracharat party?

One way of getting to the significance of that question is to ask another: is Prayut a state official or not? This question was the subject of debate during campaigning, since the answer affects his right to accept a prime ministerial nomination. The most direct and clear answer that I have encountered came from two sources. First, Somchai Srisutthiyakorn, the former election commissioner, clearly specified on 5 March that the status of General Prayut is not that of a state official, but is one of an above-the-state official. The referral of the issue to the state Ombudsman produced much the same ruling. On 14 March, the Office of the Ombudsman released a unanimous resolution that the head of the NCPO is not a state official, but enjoys even a loftier status: he is "????????????" (the sovereign).

As sovereign, Prayut is the individual with the highest power in the regime and a ruler who exercises absolute power through Section 44 of the constitution, akin to a Hobbesian Leviathan who seizes power through usurpation. He wields the absolute right to define a state of exception, as theorised by Carl Schmitt, by passing legislation through the force of his will and under arbitrarily-defined "special circumstances" rather than in accordance with the rule of law.

When the above-the-state sovereign accepted a prime ministerial nomination by a political party aligned with the military government, how did this weigh upon the substance of the election? The answer revealed itself in a televised conversation between Khun Paiboon Nititawan (the head of the People's Reform Party which supports General Prayut) and Khun Jatuporn Prompan (a former leader of the red shirt movement and now an opponent of the NCPO government), in which Paiboon stated frankly that there are only two possible post-election paths:

- If there is not enough support in parliament for General Prayut, he will simply continue on as prime minister with the full spectrum of his current powers, including Article 44 in accordance with the current constitution. *(Editor's note: Paiboon's full answer to the question "What happens if after the election only 249 seats in the legislature support*

General Prayut?" was: "Then he won't be selected but will continue on as prime minister with Article 44 too. Simple. The constitution doesn't specify a deadline for when the prime minister has to be selected, so there is no need [for a new one]. If the legislature is not ready, if there are not enough votes yet, there's no need to select [a new prime minister]. And Prayut would not merely be an interim prime minister, but would be "the" prime minister. Under this arrangement, he would also have Article 44 as he currently does. If a new prime minister is not selected, Prayut will simply be the prime minister. It would be equivalent to endorsing Prayut as prime minister in a form where he continues to and indefinitely exercises Article 44").

- If there is enough support in parliament, it can simply select General Prayut as prime minister, whereby he would no longer exercise Article 44.

Paiboon's statement evoked for me the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who proposed in his work *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (1980) that the 20th-century Bali government exhibited the characteristics of a "theatre state"—a state that seeks to sustain its power through the enactment of spectacles, drama and ceremonies. For Paiboon, if the election results were to endorse Prayut, electoral process would be akin to putting on the show or the performance of an election, wherein the prime minister has in reality already been determined in advance.

Yet it is not clear that the performance will necessarily follow the intended script, as there appears to be something askew about this election. That something is awry was apparent in the peculiar statement made last month by General Prayut—the sovereign—that the current situation is like a battlefield: everything depends on whether the commander decides to fight on or retreat. Prayut would be content to obey, he said, if the commander ordered a retreat because the fight was no longer worth the risk.

This statement is noteworthy in that Prayut is speaking as the head of the NCPO, as prime minister and as someone who has risen to the status of sovereign. The question is: who is the commander of the sovereign of whom Prayut speaks? Does he mean his wife, Ajarn Naraphorn Chan-ocha? We are unlikely to know for certain, because Prayut did not specify his commander's identity. Still, if the sovereign has a commander, it is enough to raise the prospect that the script which we regarded as neatly prepared may not be so set in stone.

What then if we consider the prospect of a commander above the sovereign alongside the various incidents that took place in the two months prior to the election—events that could not have been predicted, including the dissolution of Thai Raksa Chart and the announcement of then Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva that he would not support Prayut's bid to be prime minister? These events have made visible the reality that discord over the election is currently emerging among Thailand's political elite. Over the past five years, for all that it has done, the NCPO has at least failed to install a stable order of power among elites.

What ruses and strategies are being pursued in this elite game of power? Certainly, as the elites involved negotiate the rationing, allocation and distribution of power between themselves, their bargaining is not on show before the public. The bargaining takes place, rather, behind closed doors, and is rarely privy to the public. We should not be surprised then that elite political negotiations have not been subsumed under written constitutions, not even the current iteration. Instead, they fall under what Nidhi Eoseewong conceptualised in 1992 as the Thai cultural constitution: because elites have long engaged in political negotiations behind closed doors and in spaces impenetrable to outsiders, they continue to do. The trouble is Thai political culture has been rapidly changing during the past decade, especially among the grassroots and younger generation. I will have more to say about this below.

When seen from below, Thailand's political elites appear unified. But I believe that they are currently fragmenting and realigning in new arrangements that have yet to settle. Prayuth's statement has made me think that the actors involved in the election are not limited to political parties or those individuals who were nominated as prime ministerial candidates. To make sense of the election, we must look to a broader spectrum of both elected and unelected elites—both elites who openly participate in electoral competition and those who do not.

What then if we consider what lies behind the performance of the 2019 election, to consider the deep state as has been proposed by the French academic Eugénie Mérieau? The deep state is likely not a unitary state at all; perhaps once it was but it is not anymore. The present situation resembles instead a confederate deep state of still unsettled networks of power. Several groups are loosely aligning themselves and it remains unclear who is affiliated with who, as well as in what kinds of relationships. But I believe the various miracles and earthquakes which have visibly involved political elites over the past few months were the product of this fragmentation and realignment.

A populist moment

Herein lies the problem: I believe that the Thai cultural constitution has been undergoing extensive change over the past decade of intense political conflict, particularly as it is conceived by the grassroots masses and new generation youth. Political changes, which are constantly deepening and cannot be reined in by elites, are inevitably reflected in the Thai cultural constitution.

If we are to look at relationship of power between the people and the Prayuth–NCPO regime, the change brought about by the elections which will matter most during this transitional period is the emergence of a political populist moment—manifest first and foremost in the successful breakthrough of the Future Forward Party. The conditions which have converged to create a political opportunity structure open to the emergence of a populist political force are:

- The withdrawal from Thai politics and society of two populist leaders—Thaksin and King Bhumibol—during the transition between reigns and due to self-imposed political exile

- The NCPO order and its “five rivers” (the NCPO, the cabinet, the National Legislative Assembly the Constitutional Drafting Committee, the National Reform Steering Assembly), which are beyond scrutiny despite persistent suspicions of corruption and malpractice, and who exercise absolute power without accountability while ignoring the demands and desires of the people
- Feelings among the grassroots classes that the economy is plummeting
- The election, which provided an opportunity for the emergence of a new political populist leader, for whom the election represents an entry-point into the political system

On one level, Thai politics has throughout history seen the continuous emergence of populist leaders and populist forms of social mobilisation, both in support of elites and in support of resistance. Examples include:

- A populist king during the previous reign
- The student movement from 14 October 1973–6 October 1976, which upheld the slogan, “The people must be sovereigns of the land”, quoted from the poem of Visa Khanthap
- The Assembly of the Poor
- Thaksin Shinawatra

A populist political tradition has been both the political-cultural heritage and legacy of Thai politics since the beginning, albeit dormant in recent years until a contemporary political force remembered, reproduced and drew upon it to campaign and mobilise.

Over the course of not even a year, populist political forces passed through the stages of political party establishment and electoral campaigning, and manifested most effectively in Future Forward. The party’s accomplishments have included:

- Political agenda setting and the expansion of the borders of permissible public political discourse, to the point other political parties were compelled to engage in debate about issues such as opposition to dictatorship, dismantling the legacy of the NCPO, constitutional reform, military reform and partisanship in the justice system
- The rapid rise in popularity, especially among urban and university youth, of the party and some of its leaders, which was effectively converted into electoral strength
- Policy impact that will be visible in the aftermath of the election

In this election, Future Forward appears already to have achieved an electoral breakthrough. The challenge now is one of electoral persistence, or the problem of building a sustainable populist party or social movement, whether in terms of establishing territorial roots and reliable voter bases, converting electoral success to policy direction, or nurturing political cadre and staff to maintain day-to-day operations.

Under the political opportunity structure (the "demand" side of populism) which has ushered in a populist moment, the challenge facing Future Forward (the "supply" side) are:

- Not to merely to present a temporarily or ad hoc popular leader, but a charismatic (in sense of *barami*) populist leader
- Not to merely be a programmatic electoralist party/personalist electoral vehicle, but to expand into a fully-fledged, mass-based populist party

If Future Forward is able to lay down both broad and deep foundations accordingly, it will be a constructive factor in the ongoing process of transforming Thailand into a democracy.

Post-election predictions

I conclude with some preliminary predictions on Thailand's post-election political landscape:

- The demands of political populist forces for reform, which were awakened by Future Forward's campaigning and legitimised in the election results, will soon collide with the constraints placed by the NCPO on the possibilities for democratic change. Those constraints are most exemplified in the structure of power established by the 2017 Constitution (the appointed senate, the 20-year National Strategy, the power of an unelected minority which dominate and are above various independent regulatory institutions), and which is supported by the conservative-authoritarian side.
- If there is resistance and obstructions to the process of initiating political reform, there is serious risk that rising disappointment and disillusionment with the establishment will fuel political conflict until it spills outside of elected political institutions, taking on the characteristics of political movements that are an expression of the rights and liberties of the people under the law.
- An exit out of conflict is the opening and expansion of elected political institutions (parliament, government, parties and so on) as stages for substantive political negotiations, which are responsive to the demands of a public mobilising outside of political institutions. Elected institutions should contribute to the seeking of points of consensus on the building of a new political order, so that transformations take place through the convergence of wills to reform both from the elite above and the grassroots below.

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