

# Thailand: The overwhelming opposition victory at elections might lead to renewed political instability | **Credendo**

## Event

On 14 May, democratic opposition parties overwhelmingly won the general elections and came in well ahead of the ruling military-affiliated parties. The Move Forward Party (MFP) won 151 seats (out of a total of 500 in the House of Representatives), i.e. more than – what was until now – the dominant opposition party, the Pheu Thai party (PTP), led by ex-PM Shinawatra's daughter (Paetongtarn Shinawatra), which got 141 seats. Incumbent PM Prayuth's United Thai Nation Party, humiliatingly only came in fifth with 36 seats. Coalition talks are underway under MFP leader Pita Limjaroenrat's impulse.

## Impact

Though an opposition victory was expected, the success of the progressive MFP has been a big surprise as the party came in first and overtook the popular PTP, which had been expected to remain the top contender against the military-affiliated parties. This stunning result in Thailand's recent political history finds its source in the 2020 anti-elite protests and reflects the broad aspirations for structural change within the young and urban population – as shown in Bangkok where MFP won 31 out of 32 seats – which the MFP exploited best. The MFP indeed campaigned for economic and constitutional reforms and laid particular stress on reducing the military role in politics and the monarch's privileges and on amending the harsh *lèse-majesté* law.

Since the last military coup in 2014, which was justified to quell prolonged political instability, Thailand has been governed by parties close to the army. During the past nine years, military rule had roughly allowed to contain opposition movements, but nevertheless major pro-democracy protests took place in 2020. The current risk lies in the possibility that the latest electoral outcome might take the country back into a too well-known polarised situation where reformists (and populists) and conservative royalists are opposed, which could lead to protests and protracted unrest. Today's situation is more complex as the military-drafted constitution from 2017 requires a very broad government coalition to prevail over the military in the Senate. Hence, the MFP and PTP need to build a coalition with small parties, including conservative parties with strong ties to the army, which could prove to be a difficult task. However, ignoring the landslide democratic victory and call for change within the large majority of the population would be risky for the establishment parties and

for the army, which might be tempted again to stage a new coup if necessary. Moreover, the Election Commission still has several weeks to approve the official results and could use this period to bring about legal obstacles (e.g. electoral irregularities, a party ban) for the opposition's victory. The MFP could initiate a potential political compromise if it opted to restrain its campaign pledge to rein in royal privileges and ease lèse-majesté laws, as this could help convince smaller conservative parties to enter the government coalition. Still, whatever the options on the table, a lasting MFP-led government will be hard to put in place. This means that the political outlook in Thailand is likely to be very uncertain in the coming months and might lead to high instability. Meanwhile, Credendo's political violence risk rating (in category 4/7) as well as the ST and MLT political risk ratings (in category 2/7 and 3/7 respectively) are expected to remain stable in the near term.

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