

Why Thailand Election result is significant for ASEAN and beyond

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The rise of the MFP in Thailand underscores the growing impatience in young voters for greater transparency and freedoms.

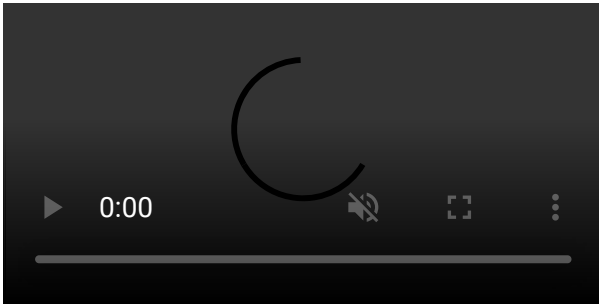
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Pita Limjaroenrat, the prime minister candidate from the Move Forward Party of Thailand | Photo: IANS

The results of May 14 Thailand general elections are important for several reasons. The Move Forward Party (MFP) which has secured maximum seats has promised a radical overhaul of the system. It also sought to challenge the military's domination of the country's politics. The MFP secured 152 seats and emerged as the single largest party in the House of Representatives. It is likely to form a coalition with Pheu Thai Party (PTP), led by Paetongtarn Shinawatra and some smaller parties. The MFP is the de-facto successor to the Future Forward Party (FFP) which was dissolved in 2020.

The rise of the MFP in Thailand underscores the growing impatience in young voters for greater transparency and freedoms. For very long, it was believed that ASEAN countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia which are democracies have not progressed due to instability, while Singapore a de-facto one party system, run by the People's Action Party (PAP), had performed much better economically (Singapore's per capita in 2022 was \$82,000 in 2022).



Singapore has also witnessed a rise in the number of seats and vote share of the Workers' Party, a left of centre political outfit in the 2020 elections. While PAP had won the 2020 election comfortably, the number of seats secured by the Workers' Party rose from 6 to 10. The Workers' Party has been seeking greater transparency and a more inclusive economic agenda.

Secondly, the economic vision of political outfits like the MFP, dubbed as populist, have a particular appeal amongst younger voters. MFP is headed by 42-year-old leader Pita Limjaroenrat.

With the growing economic inequalities, there is a greater resonance for economic policies with a strong welfare thrust globally – Thailand has proven to be no exception. Here it would be pertinent to point out that post-pandemic even mainstream political outfits which by no stretch of imagination are left of centre have tried to re-orient their economic policies in order to give the impression of being sensitive to those who are not economically privileged.

At the same time, there is a growing awareness that globally a section of the rich has grown even richer during the pandemic and this is beginning to emerge as an important issue which political outfits can only reject at their own peril. It remains to be seen if the MFP which is in coalition with the more traditional PTP does go ahead not only with its agenda pertaining to reform of institutions, but also on going ahead with its economic agenda. The 250-member senate consists of members of traditional parties – many of them pro-military – and may also try to scuttle the implementation of policies which are considered too radical.

Third, MFP made efficient use of social media to increase awareness about its policies. Populist political parties globally compensate for lack of resources with effective social media campaigns. The effective use of social media played an important role in MFP's stellar performance.

Fourth, one of the reasons why MFP was able to capture the imagination of younger voters was its opposition to Thailand army's interference in its politics. For very long, this went unchallenged but with younger citizens becoming more impatient it is no longer possible.

Fifth, while there is a talk of globalisation being in reversal it is interesting to note that leaders of many new political outfits in ASEAN, which are pro-democracy, such as MFP are educated overseas. A lot of the ideas pertaining to greater transparency, political

freedoms and liberties can be attributed to interactions with individuals from other parts of the world.

In conclusion, the results of the Thai election have ramifications not just for the country's politics, but for the ASEAN region and beyond. The results highlight how globally younger voters are willing to experiment and are disenchanted with traditional political parties. There is a growing space for new political outfits which promise change and can deliver. The earlier binary of efficiency vs political freedoms which was used to highlight the success of non-democratic countries, especially in East Asia and South-East Asia, will not hold. In a changing economic landscape, more attention will also be paid to the aspect of economic inequality.

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