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Thai Politics in Tumult: Will PM Chan-o-Cha Survive?

By Antonio L Rappa

SYNOPSIS

In 2021, PM Chan-o-Cha survived a no-confidence vote in a Parliament stuffed with military MPs and supporters of the ruling Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP)'s nomination of him as its prime ministerial candidate in the next election. What is the latest state of Thai politics and will the PM survive?



Thai demonstration in Bangkok. Unsplash

COMMENTARY

IN FEBRUARY 2022, the founder of a new party disclosed that Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha would be invited to lead the Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party (Thais United in Building the Nation) if the ruling coalition Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) continued to pressure him.

The Ruam Thai founder, who is the prime minister's vice-minister announced that the PM would accept the nomination from Ruam Thai to quell rumours that the PPRP was unhappy with his political performance in the first months of post-COVID 19 Thailand. It looks like PM Chan-o-Cha is gearing up for a tough road ahead as he struggles to survive growing pressures to remove him.

Three Ways Prayuth Will Survive

There are three ways that PM Prayuth and his political party will survive.

Firstly, he and his party control the *Ratthasapha* (National Assembly of Thailand). Between 2014 and 2022 he has packed the National Assembly with like-minded supporters and old political cronies. He has also imprisoned many former Thai Rak Thai MPs (supporters of former prime ministers Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra) while the rest received a life ban from the *Ratthasapha*.

Secondly, he controls the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTAF) and remains the Commander of the Army (in the absence of the King, Rama X, who is usually absent). The RTAF is the most powerful tri-service army that has only functioned in one role, i.e., internal security. This also means that the RTAF has been used to quash and suppress any dissenters such as the Thai-Muslims in Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani in their bid to restore a 14th century sultanate.

Thirdly, he has the support of the wealthy Chinese middle class, mostly former Yellow Shirt supporters. Their fortunes and the future of their children are indelibly tied to the Constitutional Monarchy and descendants of the late King Bhumiphon Adulyadej the Great (Rama IX).

With their wealth and coercive power of the military and the police which he controls little wonder why he is still in power after eight years. In fact one could say that Prayuth is at the pinnacle of his political power.

Stumbling Blocks

There are also several stumbling blocks.

Firstly, age. Prayuth is now 72. That leaves little room for future bids to continue his legacy, even as a dictator. 30 March 2023 is the deadline for the next Thai general election (GE). Prayuth will be too old to make a fourth bid for PM in the 2028 GE.

Secondly, a new generation of middle-class Chinese exists today. These children of ardent Yellow Shirt supporters and supporters from the Democrat Party are unwilling to accept and submit to Thai authoritarianism as imposed by Prayuth; their resistance

against Prayuth's government and that of Rama X was seen in *Rajphrasong* and all major intersections of Bangkok for three months in 2021.

The *Ratchaprasong* intersection rekindled the old antagonism between the Reds and Yellows in 2010. If you do not wish to be part of the problem or get arrested by the Royal Thai Police (RTP) wear pink or purple.

The *third* obstacle to regime survival is the Thai economy. As the global recession continues to loom, and the number of tourists fall short of pre-COVID days, the people are getting restless again. It is very likely that there will be more widespread demonstrations as the summer heat worsens over the next few months.

The only person who could actually remove him is King Vajiralongkorn, the 10th Chakri king of Thailand. Rama X however is unlikely to do so as his own US\$57 billion fortune is tied to the Privy Purse and the immensely powerful Crown Property Bureau (CPB). King Vajiralongkorn needs Prayuth to maintain and secure all that wealth for him and the Royal House.

Turning Point or Melting Point?

The state of politics in the Kingdom today is tense and the future seems vague. The only clarity for the regime's future is the political turning point on 30 March 2023 when the next GE is called.

So, the incumbent PM has about three quarters of a year to get his house in order, pray at the Erawan Shrine for protection and good luck and emerge the winner again. He has more than a 50% chance of becoming PM again as a Thai political scientist from Phitsanulok said recently.

Once Prayuth wins the next election, there will be usual political bloodletting and replacements of certain Opposition MPs in the *Ratthasapha*. And when he does, there will only be old wine in new wineskins again. However, if Prayuth does not win his next bid to become PM, there is very likely to be another coup, sanctioned by Rama X, to prevent any newcomers from upsetting the cart.

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