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Thailand: 2019 Elections, Issues, and Outlook for Congress

In March 2019, Thailand held its first elections since a 2014 coup installed a military government. Through an electoral system weighted in favor of the military and a process fraught with allegations of irregularities, junta chief Prayuth Chan-ocha and his military proxy party emerged victorious (although with a narrower margin than expected), with Prayuth remaining in the position of prime minister. The U.S. Department of State certified in July 2019 that a democratically elected government had taken office in Thailand, allowing for the restoration of the military assistance that had been proscribed since the 2014 coup.

U.S. officials welcomed the March election and subsequent reopening of military assistance as positive steps towards rekindling the bilateral ties that have frayed over more than a decade of political turmoil in Thailand. Many observers note, however, that the new government was elected through a system that many view as created by the junta to preserve its rule. Given Thailand's new political climate, some analysts have raised questions about how the United States will balance its democracy-promotion goals with its strategic interests with Thailand and the region.

Election Day: Issues and Controversies

The March 24 elections were described by a number of independent monitoring groups as “deeply flawed” and “heavily tilted” to favor the military junta. Thailand's military-drafted constitution gave structural advantages to the military, and a series of draconian laws passed by the junta in 2016 allowed it to tighten censorship over media outlets and silence critics, purportedly in the interest of national security and public safety. Additionally, Thailand's sole election management body, the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), did not grant approvals for international observer groups in time to allow for adequate election oversight. Some independent election monitoring groups, such as the Asian Network for Free Elections International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), were able to monitor and assess pre-election activities and election-day operations at polling stations in every province.

“ANFREL saw a campaign environment which is heavily tilted to benefit the incumbent military junta and the candidates that it supports.”

—The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)

On election day, roughly 75% of Thailand's 51 million registered voters took to the polls. Although voting ran smoothly overall, reports of irregularities—such as incorrect ballot tallying and conflicting reports of voter turnout—drew extensive criticism from Thailand's pro-democracy parties and international observers. The irregularities triggered a 45-day delay in releasing the official results, which were announced on May 8. Some experts assert that the delay was manufactured by the junta

to discourage civil unrest prior to the coronation of King Rama X in early May 2019.

Thailand's New Government

On June 5, 2019, Prayuth was elected prime minister with the full support of a 250-seat Senate of military appointees and a coalition of neutral and pro-military parties in parliament. Prayuth and his cabinet of 35 ministers were sworn into office on July 16, 2019, and the junta—officially known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)—was subsequently dissolved. The cabinet includes a number of key members from the NCPO, and also a network of politicians whose parties were pivotal for the pro-military alliance to clinch its parliamentary majority. The entrenchment of junta personnel in the Thai government's most powerful positions—Prayuth is also defense minister, and three former military officers hold deputy prime minister positions—has led many analysts to believe that Thailand's new civilian government is a continuation of military rule.

Potential Challenges for Prayuth

Since forming a new civilian government, Prayuth encountered a number of obstacles, which led many experts to question his effectiveness as prime minister and his ability to win greater legitimacy at home and abroad:

- **Lack of Absolute Power.** As leader of a civilian government, Prayuth no longer enjoys the powers and protections that came along with “Article 44” under the military government, a controversial provision that granted absolute powers to the junta chief. With the loss of such powers, Prayuth's military tendencies have garnered increased scrutiny. His arguably quick-tempered disposition and visible frustration with criticism have led many experts to question his ability to cooperate with lawmakers across the political spectrum.
- **Unstable Coalition.** Prayuth's coalition in parliament commands a four-seat majority. His capacity to pass legislation will therefore rely heavily on his ability to keep his coalition intact. Prayuth could risk losing unsatisfied members in his camp to the opposition bloc, the Democratic Front. Comprised of a number of anti-junta parties, the Democratic Front is headed by the populist Pheu Thai party, which was founded by exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Safeguarding Military Prerogatives

Prayuth's policy agenda hews to a long-term national strategy passed by the junta in 2018, which serves as a blueprint to facilitate Thailand's long-term development and national security. The national strategy authorizes the removal of any future government that fails to adhere to the outlined policies. The strategy additionally grants insurrection immunity to generals who stage coups in the

interest of peacekeeping. While supporters claim that the law is necessary to maintain stability, others have raised concerns that it grants sweeping powers to the military. Some experts also have warned that the policy signals challenges for Thailand's human rights climate. Violent attacks, forced disappearances, and killings targeting political opposition activists—namely anti-junta journalists and critics—have increased in frequency since 2018.

Economic Reform

Thailand's economy—driven largely by tourism and foreign direct investment—has lagged over the last several years, with 2019 marking its slowest growth in over five years. Ongoing Sino-U.S. trade frictions, combined with a strengthening Thai currency, have further strained the country's economy. Much of Prayuth's policy agenda is geared towards revitalizing Thailand's stagnating economy.

The junta promulgated the “Thailand 4.0” economic initiative in 2016, a policy designed to turn Thailand into a high-income nation within five years. While the plan seeks to spur innovation and increase support for green technologies, some analysts say that the policy faces both short- and long-term challenges. In particular, Thai companies could struggle to adopt advanced technologies given the nation's shortage of highly-skilled workers.

Regional Connectivity

Thailand's geostrategic position offers many opportunities for investment and infrastructure development along rail, land, air, and shipping corridors, and has long attracted the attention of external actors.

In early 2018, Thailand approved a \$45 billion initiative designed to optimize and accelerate infrastructure and economic growth along the country's eastern seaboard, a developing economic zone vital to the Thai economy known as the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). Prayuth's government has also acknowledged China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a potential avenue to attract investment through a number of economic corridors that span Thailand.

“Thailand plans to articulate our vision to drive forward the BRI among countries participating in the BRI cooperation to achieve sustainable funding for projects, to promote public private partnerships and to develop human resources.”

—Prayuth Chan-ocha

Outlook for Congress

Thailand's period of prolonged political instability strained the U.S.-Thai bilateral relationship. Under Section 508 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (P.L. 87-195; 22 U.S.C. 2151 et seq.), certain categories of military assistance may not be used to “finance directly any assistance to any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree,” and as a result the United States suspended most military assistance after the coup. The State Department's certification of Thailand's return to democracy has opened the way for the full resumption of ties. Now the United States faces the challenge of balancing its pursuit of strategic interests with promoting U.S. values. Some analysts and experts believe that the Thai military's dominant role in politics will pose challenges for promoting democratic practices in Thailand in the near term.

Figure 1. Thailand's Regional Connectivity



Source: CRS

The U.S.-Thai bilateral defense relationship has been one of the strongest pillars of cooperation. The two countries have been treaty allies since signing the 1954 Manila Pact. Military-to-military exercises and counterterrorism cooperation remain robust areas of the bilateral relationship.

Thailand has historically been a significant purchaser of U.S. military equipment, and arms sales provide an avenue for renewed engagement. In August 2019, the Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army announced that the military had begun purchasing American-made armored vehicles. The Thai military announced its plans to acquire a total of 120 such vehicles by 2020.

Thailand's record on human rights and democracy has been a long-standing concern for many human rights groups, U.S. officials, and some Members of Congress. In light of the continued crackdown on pro-democracy advocates and civilians, Congress may wish to consider what role, if any, the United States can play in supporting human rights protections in Thailand. The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 (ARIA; P.L. 115-409), signed into law in December 2018, stresses the commitment of the United States to promote “human rights and respect for democratic values” in countries throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

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