

Red, Orange, and Reaction: Thailand's Electoral Crossroads

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Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of **Tricontinental Asia**.

As the people of Thailand go to the polls this February, voters are offered three competing visions of progress: one that builds power from the village up, one that critiques from the seminar room, and one that pays to keep the countryside quiet. Amid the ongoing border war with Cambodia, Thailand is a microcosm of the Global South's political laboratory.

The Phue Thai Party (PTP), often known to outsiders as the 'Red Shirt Party', has defined Thai politics for over two decades but has somehow itself defied definition – a peasant-backed populist movement in alliance with urban capitalists; privatising state assets while investing in public welfare; nationalist yet socially progressive. By every rule of 21st-century political science, the PTP should not exist. Yet for over two decades, the PTP has delivered a paradigm shift that baffles the literate classes while tangibly transforming Thai society.



Pratuang Emjaroen (Thailand), *Red Morning Glory and Rotten Gun*, 1976.

As the Global South shifts towards new models – that of regionalism, multilateralism, and economic sovereignty – states like Burkina Faso, Mexico, and China are also breaking from western political science textbooks. In many ways, PTP’s vision was ahead of its time.

Today, Thailand’s political landscape is defined by a three-way struggle between PTP’s disruptive populism, the liberal Peoples Party’s westernised idealism, and Bhumjaithai Party’s reactionary clientelism. The February elections are also a direct outcome of a **judicial coup** against the PTP’s coalition government, leading to the outbreak of **war with Cambodia** and the subsequent coalition of the liberal Peoples Party and the ultra-conservative Bhumjaithai. February’s election will decide which paradigm prevails.

Rainbow Agrarian Populism

Since the 1957 Royalist military coup, power in Thailand has been conserved by a narrow elite: the military, monarchy, and old-money families aligned to Washington. This Cold War relic is a bloated, clientelist bureaucracy incapable of modernisation, leaving outer provinces impoverished while a narrow core in Bangkok prospers. This **‘deep state’ alliance** has been the constant ambient, often lethal, background of Thai politics, with 11 successful coups since 1957.

The 1997 financial crash exposed this elite's incompetent state management and created an opening. A new post-Cold War cohort of domestic capitalists, led by outer-province telecom billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, forged an unprecedented class collaboration. Thaksin was able to unite military officers, national capitalists, former communist insurgents, and western-educated academics under the Thai Rak Thai (later Phue Thai) banner. Their economic imperative was to modernise the state and develop the periphery, which aligned with the material needs of the rural masses.

Their manifesto delivered universal healthcare, a farmer debt moratorium, and a million-baht local village fund. For the first time, the poor were addressed in terms of class interest rather than moralism. Thaksin's communications empire broadcast this message nationwide and, in 2001, they won by a landslide.

Policies like the 30-baht universal healthcare scheme and direct village funds scheme began the process of structural change that bypassed the old bureaucracy and patronage networks, establishing a direct relationship between government and masses. Communities could decide how to use funds – for school buses, clinics, or markets – redistributing not just wealth but decision making. This broke down semi-feudal rural relations in the countryside, integrating peasants into the national market and providing them with political agency.

PTP's rural empowerment also benefitted urban workers. For example, rural migrants, who make up 30–40% of Bangkok's population, are often forced to urbanise under economic coercion. By making rural life viable, PTP reduced that coercion, giving urban workers the leverage to quit and go home. This indirectly improved conditions for all lower classes.

Thaksin was ousted by a military coup in 2006, resulting in the famous Red Shirt (Phue Thai) versus Yellow Shirt (Royalist) street battles and the military massacres of Red Shirt protesters (2008–2014). But the PTP machine continued to hold on and periodically regain parliamentary presence despite persecution from reactionary elites.



Damrong Wong-Uparaj (Thailand),
Monks, 1961.

PTP's seemingly left-wing programme has relied on ugly alliances with the national bourgeoisie and security-state hardliners. The party oversaw a brutal drug war and violent suppression in the Muslim-majority deep south (likely concessions to the police state as a buffer against the military). Conversely, in recent years, the party has pivoted to becoming extremely socially progressive, introducing the legalisation of same-sex marriage as early as 2013, as well as making trans-affirming healthcare accessible on the universal healthcare scheme and officially participating in pride parades. Again, this breaks the political science textbook; while agrarian populist movements are too often known for undercurrents of social conservatism, PTP has turned that on its head. The same goes for foreign policy, while the party was initially Islamophobic and aligned to the US bloc in the early 2000s, they have since recognised Palestinian statehood, joined BRICS, and cooperated with Iran and Hamas (rather than Israel) to secure the release of the Thai citizens accidentally taken prisoner in Gaza.

PTP governments were boom eras for most: living standards rose and political consciousness grew. It was a deal: the poor gained agency and material improvement and the new elites gained a mandate without a violent revolution. Socialist outcomes, without the capital S Socialism, what we have called '**Rainbow Agrarian Populism**'.

Orange Westernised Idealism

In 2018, a new electoral force emerged: what is referred to as the **Orange movement** (Future Forward/Peoples Party). Founded by disaffected Red elites, academics, NGO leaders, and younger capitalists like Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. It positioned itself as the modern, progressive alternative. Its leaders were clean, western-educated, and articulate, mastering social media and popular leftist theory (from Antonio Gramsci to David Harvey). Their base was young, urban, middle-class, and deeply anti-military and anti-monarchy. Yet their critique was always ideological rather than material. They championed abstract ideals: democracy, freedom and a western-style welfare state; often speaking as if PTP's foundational programme didn't exist.

Orange politics often revolves around vague social progressivism and generational angst. They see the PTP, military, and monarchy as functionally the same power bloc. This attracted a voter base that would have historically supported PTP and developed a leadership that has been historically ultra-conservative. In recent years, this new leadership have flocked into the burgeoning Orange tent, where they were welcomed with open arms. While these arch-conservatives-turned-supposed-progressives would describe their switch as 'seeing the light' and **apologising** for their previous positions, it was clear that they were merely following the political winds, bringing with them a significant voter demographic.



Sinsawat Yodbangtoey (Thailand), *Untitled*, 2009.

PTP supporters often say, ‘Som are the new Salim’ (Orange are the new ultra-right). The leadership of the Orange movement is ultimately a vehicle for a different faction of the urban elite, the ‘3%’, not the ‘1%’, seeking to supplant the old monopolists while leaving class hierarchies relatively intact. Their supporter’s angst is directed not at capitalism, but at its ‘bad people’ (like Thaksin, the monarch, etc), whom they paint as corrupt dinosaurs deceiving the ignorant peasantry.

This idealistic crusade has real consequences. By splitting the anti-military vote, Orange victories in urban districts handed parliament to the military-backed right in 2019. In 2023, they won the popular vote but failed to form a government, forcing PTP into a ‘painful bargain’ – a coalition with its former military persecutors to prevent total reactionary rule. In 2025, after the judicial coup against PTP, the Orange party went into a temporary coalition with the ultra-nationalist Bhumjaithai, handing them the keys to parliament and not accepting any ministerial positions out of principle. For many, this was the moment the Orange movement showed its true face; a politics of aesthetics and moral critique, not structural economic transformation.

Bhumjaithai Machine’s Reactionary Clientelism

If PTP seeks to mobilise peasant agency, and Orange offers liberal idealism, then **Bhumjaithai** offers the establishment’s perfected antidote: patronage disguised as politics. Its function is to protect agrarian inequality by neutralising class consciousness through elite alliances, performative welfare, ethnonationalist sentiment,

and localised division.

Founded by Newin Chidchob, a trucking magnate who defected from Thaksin after the 2006 coup, Bhumjaithai harnesses PTP-esque tactics – the populist policies and rural appeal – to serve reactionary ends. It is the intermediary between Bangkok’s aforementioned deep state and the restive rural population. Under billionaire frontman Anutin Charnvirakul, it rebranded its patronage network as a policy of ‘localist development’, using personal wealth and state contracts to finance an illusion of grassroots generosity.

Bhumjaithai’s power flows through the *baanyai* (local elites), landowning dynasties, and provincial power brokers. By controlling the Interior Ministry (2019–2026), it turned budget allocations and infrastructure projects into tools to pre-empt mass mobilisation. Its model – showcased in its stronghold of Buriram province, which boasts world-class sports stadiums and broad highways alongside persistent land inequality – swaps class-conscious politics for provincial pride.

Figures like deputy leader Chada Thaiseth, often described as a mafia godfather with alleged ties to organised crime and a history of unsolved family assassinations, embody this system. His political survival, despite countless assassination and corruption accusations, demonstrates Bhumjaithai’s reliance on such operators to deliver votes and enforce control.

Bhumjaithai’s supposed welfare schemes, its healthcare subsidies and debt relief, are deliberately fragmented and distributed through local elites rather than as universal rights (as with PTP). This ensures dependence rather than mobilisation and empowerment.

Beneath its folksy veneer lies hardcore reaction: anti-immigrant fervour, ultranationalism (massively benefiting from and stoking the border war with Cambodia), as well as their disdain for LGBTQ+ rights. The party frames rural poverty as a cultural failing rather than structural exploitation.

Symbiosis, Sabotage, and February’s Choice

Thai politics is often misunderstood by outsiders due to the country’s history of censorship and political oppression. However, local voters are fluent in interpreting the national meta-language, as almost all parties make lavish spending promises during election campaigns (even the ultra-conservatives) blurring outside perception of left and right. To give a brief example of this meta-language, the Orange Peoples Party addresses crowds as *prachachon* (the people) or *polamueng* (citizens), terms derived from western academia. Bhumjaithai will often use *khon Thai* (Thai people). Meanwhile, Phue Thai activists speak of *samanchon* (commoners) or *por mae pee nong* (fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters) – terms rooted in class and communality.

PTP’s successes have always provoked relentless sabotage. Every elected government has been overthrown by military coup (in 2006 and 2014) or dissolved by judicial coup (in 2008, 2009, 2024, and 2025). The 2017 constitution, with its military-appointed senate, was designed to permanently cripple the progressive movement. Yet the symbiotic relationship between party and poor endured. Through Red Shirt mobilisations and bloody street battles, the base remained loyal because the deal delivered.



United Artists' Front of Thailand (Thailand), *Untitled*, 1976.

Despite the hostile coalition forced upon it since the elections in 2023, PTP has pushed through a stunning array of policies: universal dental care, mass social housing, same-sex marriage, cash handouts to the poorest 20%, and even community-owned agricultural drones. Rainbow Agrarian Populism persists.

The February elections present a stark three-way choice: PTP's radical pragmatism, The Orange movement's westernised idealism or Bhumjaithai's reactionary clientelism.

Class Alliances and Political Experimentation

The poor of Thailand have won historic gains under PTP; gains dismissed by the opposition movement as corrupt vote buying. PTP's ceiling, however, will always be its bourgeois leadership – it seeks inclusive capitalism, not the abolition of class distinctions. Yet, it fundamentally differs from Global North social democrats as it depends on a mobilised base engaged in economic realignment, not just welfare provisions.

This rare class alliance (usually seen on the political right) is an experiment in leveraging cross-class alliances to achieve material victories for the poor. Socialism in the 21st century requires such experimentation. PTP's alternative model, compromised but effective, is a stepping stone for mass mobilisation that puts food on worker's plates.

As the Global South asserts new models, this Thai triad illuminates a broader struggle: between indigenous, material-based populism; westernised liberal idealism; and adaptive reactionary control. The February vote is about which paradigm will define Thailand's future, or, potentially, what new class coalitions could be made.

Warmly,

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P.S. Please read our recently published bimonthly, **TICAA**, titled '**Contemporary Challenges for the Malaysian Left**' by Jeyakumar Devaraj, Chairperson, Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM).