



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXV / 2024

Asia in 2024: Fragile democracies amid global turmoil

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano
Elena Valdameri

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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ISBN 979-12-5469-972-0 (Paper) ISBN 979-12-5469-973-7 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXXV, 2024

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli Extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia

Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover.

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	abbonamenti@viella.it www.viella.it			

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libreria editrice

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THAILAND 2023-2024: A GENERAL ELECTION AND ITS CONTESTED AFTERMATH

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The Thai biennium 2023-2024 opened with the prospect of democratic change, as in 2023 citizens were able to vote in a general election. While the outcome spelled the end of military rule after the two consecutive premierships of retired General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the Army-drafted constitution of 2017 inhibited the smooth functioning of participatory politics. Move Forward, a recently established party with a progressive outlook and a defiant stance toward military and élite groups, won, but was prevented from forming a government. Lengthy negotiations relegated it to the opposition, favouring instead the Pheu Thai Party, which represented the legacy of the charismatic ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra. Less ideologically committed, the Pheu Thai Government proved willing to compromise with the status quo – a strategy deemed pragmatic by supporters, and self-serving by critics. The new administration additionally took a controversial approach with regard to foreign policy, showing openness to the governments of Myanmar and Russia, in continuity with previous military administrations. Economic recovery under the Pheu Thai Government remained slow, also hindered by an alarming rise in household debt and massive floods in 2024.

KEYWORDS – Thailand General Election of 2023; Pheu Thai; Thaksin Shinawatra; Paetongtarn Shinawatra; Srettha Thavisin; Vacharaesorn Vivacharawongse; Thailand-Myanmar relations; Thailand-Russia relations; Thailand-U.S. relations; Thailand-China relations; Thailand economy.

1. Introduction

This essay offers a critical overview of the Thai biennium 2023-2024 with reference to domestic politics, foreign policy, and economy. The first five sections examine the defining event of this period: the general election of 2023. They focus respectively on: the background to the election, showing how different parties positioned themselves with regards to the Military and broader processes of democratization (2.1); the electoral outcome, also exploring how changing political sensitivities possibly affected the results (2.2); the aftermaths, which saw the marginalization of the winning party, Move Forward, relegated to the opposition, and the formation of two consecutive Governments under Pheu Thai (2.3); and, finally, the Pheu Thai Administrations' ambiguous engagement with civil and political rights (2.4). Concluding the focus on domestic politics, section 2.5. looks at the

unexpected return of Vacharaesorn Vivacharawongse, an estranged son of King Maha Vajiralongkorn (r. 2016), to the Kingdom after a long exile.

Moving on to foreign relations, the next two sections explore the two Pheu Thai Governments' unexpectedly cordial approach to the illiberal Governments of Myanmar and Russia (3.1.), and their refusal to commit to either the USA or China in the face of the two superpowers' competition in the region, which was in line with previous administrations (3.2.). The final part of the essay considers the economic situation, characterised by a slow recovery after the COVID-19 crisis, and further penalized by a severe household debt problem and major floods that affected several provincial areas in 2024 (4.1.).

2. *Domestic politics*

2.1. *Preparing for the election*

The general election of 2023 represented a pivotal moment in Thailand's process of democratization, pitting progressive forces that sought to curb the powers of the military and the nobility against conservative elements intent on preserving more traditional power structures. Held on 14 May 2023, it determined the numeric victory of Move Forward, a recently established party deemed progressive within the local political context. The Move Forward Party had campaigned with a platform aimed at limiting the influence of the Military and the Monarchy – traditional powerholders in the Kingdom – also via the abolishment of military conscription and amendments of Thailand's notoriously draconian law on *lèse-majesté* [PPTV HD 36 2023, 12 July]. Move Forward was the *de-facto* successor of Future Forward, a liberal party, especially popular among the youth, which was disbanded in a divisive court ruling in 2020 [Siani 2021, p. 242].

Significantly, the electoral result came after two consecutive governments led by the royalist retired Army General Prayuth Chan-ocha (2014-2019 and 2019-2023), indicating widespread frustration with the Military's interference in politics, and increasingly dominant democratic sensitivities. This outcome notwithstanding, convoluted electoral rules prevented Move Forward from forming a government, enabling Pheu Thai Party to do so in their place. The latter Party represented the legacy of the charismatic Thaksin Shinawatra, an ex-premier famously ousted by a military coup d'état in 2006, and in self-imposed exile to escape a set of legal charges.

Previous military administrations had created an electoral system deliberately designed to maintain influence even after democratic elections. Understanding how Pheu Thai ultimately formed a government requires an excursus into the electoral rules as established by the Military-drafted Constitution of 2017. These enable voters to elect the 500 members of the House of Representatives (which comprises 400 open-constituency seats and 100

party-list seats), but not the 250 members of the Senate, who were appointed by the military government of the time. Crucially, in this system, a democratically chosen prime minister would need to secure the endorsement of at least 376 members of Parliament in order to be able to form a government. Some scholars have argued that this caveat was likely devised for the Military to retain a degree of control over the electoral process via complacent senators [Khemthong and Aua-aree 2023; Nethipo *et al.* 2023, 274-5].

An extraordinary 67 Parties ran for the 2023 election [Thairath 2023, 12 May]. The most prominent had a reputation for either supporting democratization [BBC Thai 2020, 21 February] or advocating military rule [Work Point Today 2019, 7 June]. Among the former was Move Forward as well as the above-mentioned Pheu Thai. On the pro-military side was the Palang Pracharath Party, led by Army General Prawit Wongsuwon, a historic associate of Prayuth Chan-ocha who held important positions in the Prayuth Governments, and Bhujjai Thai Party, led by Anutin Charnvirakul, a former of Minister of Public Health.

As per the 2017 Constitution, parties were also required to propose up to three candidate premiers to the Office of the Election Commission in order for them to be eligible [iLaw 2019, 5 February]. The Pheu Thai Party put forward three candidates: Srettha Thavisin, a real estate developer; Paetongtarn Shinawatra, the youngest daughter of Thaksin Shinawatra; and Chaikasem Nitisiri a former attorney general and minister of Justice. Move Forward, however, proposed only one: Pita Limjaroenrat, a businessman.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-O-cha dissolved the House of Representatives on 20 March 2023 [iLaw 2023, 20 March], three days before the regular end of its term [iLaw 2023, 9 May]. Analysts have suggested that the early dissolution might have represented a strategic measure, necessary for the premier to quit the Phalang Pracharat Party, of which he was a member, and join the United Thai Nation Party (UTN) within a window of time prescribed by the law [iLaw 2023, 9 May]. Some further speculated that Prayuth's need to leave the Phalang Pracharat Party was motivated by internal conflicts.

2.2. Electoral results and changing political sensitivities

The general election marked a turning point in Thai politics, with unprecedented voter turnout and a clear shift toward progressive parties, especially among young voters. According to the Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, 39,293,867 voters, or 75.22% of the adult population, cast a ballot in the election, recording the highest voter turnout in history [Siamrath 2023, 15 May]. The result sealed a victory of the main pro-democracy Parties, with Move Forward winning 151 seats (112 open-constituency seats, 39 party-list seats), and Pheu Thai 141 seats (112 constituency and 29 party-list). Pro-military parties followed, with Bhujjai Thai winning 71 seats (68 constituency and 3 party-list); Palang Pracharat, 40 seats (39 consti-

cy and 1 party-list); and United Thai Nation, 36 seats (23 constituency and 13 party-list) [*BBC Thai* 2023, 19 June].

The success of Move Forward was especially striking given the low profile of its leader, Pita Limjaroenrat; the progressiveness – if not the perceived taboo quality – of its agenda; as well as the fierce competition of Pheu Thai, a Party with a long history of landslide electoral victories. A widespread narrative stressed the role played by younger voters – assumed to be exceptionally liberal [*Insight Era* 2023, 17 April] – in determining the victory of Move Forward. BBC Thai highlighted the prominence of young constituencies in the overall breakdown of the eligible voters, pointing out that individuals belonging to the so-called Generation Z (those, that is, born between 1997 and 2005), and Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1996), amounted respectively to a solid 12.78 % and 28.87 % of the electorate [Watchiranon 2023, 24 March].

Ethnographic data collected by the author in the Northeastern city of Udon Thani, traditionally a Phue Thai stronghold, before, during and after the election, suggests that the very discourse of generational change may have influenced the preferences of some urban voters. Middle-aged individuals (aged 40 to 65) who in this election had switched from Pheu Thai to Move Forward explained their choice in terms of having to align with the presumed preference of the youth, assumed to be best equipped to sense the best future of Thailand. Some among the interviewees even claimed neither to fully «understand» (*khaojai*), nor to «agree» (*hen duay*) with Move Forward's more radical agenda. They added that they «trusted» (*wai jai*) the youth, depicting the advent of liberalism as inevitable. Some also described the Move Forward Party leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, as young, inexperienced, and therefore «pure» (*borisut*) within an political arena that they perceived to be otherwise corrupted.

If an aura of idealism therefore connoted the image of Move Forward, that of Pheu Thai may have suffered from the impression of political ambiguity. Contributing to the latter was the rumour that the Party was prepared to form a coalition with the Military-backed Palang Pracharat in exchange for favours. Controversially, only few days before the election, ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra used social media to announce, out of the blue, that his return from exile was imminent [*Thai Post* 2023, 9 May]. Given that the former Premier had been overthrown by the Army in 2006, and had next been targeted by legal charges including corruption and contempt of royalty [*BBC Thai* 2023, 10 August; *Prachatai* 2023, 22 August], many understood the announcement to imply that he had secured a deal with once-unamiable powerful actors in exchange for the ability to come back to the Kingdom on favourable conditions [*AEC 10 News* 2023, 21 May]. To voters with a genuine hope for democratic change, this suggested Pheu Thai's readiness to sacrifice the will of the people on the altar of Thaksin's personal interests.

2.3. *Forming the government(s)*

Despite Move Forward's electoral success, conservative forces effectively restrained the rise of the progressive party through judicial interventions and constitutional mechanisms, ultimately enabling Pheu Thai to form a government through compromises with military-aligned parties.

Shortly after its surprise victory, the Move Forward Party formed a coalition with Pheu Thai and other smaller, pro-democracy Parties. On 13 July 2023, the Parliament nevertheless refused to endorse Move Forward's candidate prime minister, Pita Limjaroenrat, who secured only 324 votes [*BBC Thai* 2023, 13 July]. In July 2023, before his second attempt to gain support, the Constitutional Court suspended him from the House of Parliament, questioning his eligibility as premier [*Thai PBS* 2023, 19 July]. According to an allegation, Pita Limjaroenrat held some shares in the media company ITV, while the 2017 Constitution forbids MPs from owning media-related businesses [*Prachachat* 2023, 13 May]. The Constitutional Court would dismiss the case only six months later, in January 2024, on the basis that ITV had not been operative since 2007 – that is, well before the beginning of Pita Limjaroenrat's political career [*BBC Thai* 2024, 24 January].

Pita Limjaroenrat's suspension nevertheless prevented Move Forward, which, as anticipated earlier, had named no other candidate premier, from forming a government. The episode paved the way for the second most voted Party, Pheu Thai, to do so instead. Given the widespread opposition toward Move Forward, Pheu Thai entered into talks only with other parties to form a government [*Channel 7* 2023, 22 July]. They eventually announced their intention to form a coalition with parties that included the pro-military Bhunjaithai, Palang Pracharat, and United Thai Nation, but excluded Move Forward [*Work Point Today* 2023, 21 August]. The first Pheu Thai candidate, Srettha Thavisin, became prime minister on 22 August 2023 with 482 votes from the lower and the upper house, relegating Move Forward to the opposition [*Thai PBS* 2023, 22 August]. Shockingly, in the morning of the same day, Thaksin Shinawatra landed at Bangkok's Don Mueang Airport.

Upon his arrival, Thaksin was taken to the Supreme Court, which sentenced him to a total of eight years in prison for three different charges [*Thairath* 2023, 22 August]. A few hours after being held at the Bangkok Remand Prison, Thaksin complained of chest pain, and was transferred to the Police Hospital for an examination [*Thai PBS* 2023, 23 August]. Mr. Sithi Suthiwong, the deputy director general of the Department of Corrections, explained that the ex-premier suffered from insomnia, high blood pressure, chest tightness, low fingertip oxygen levels, as well as other congenital diseases [*Thairath* 2024, 22 August]. He claimed that the situation warranted that the former Prime Minister be detained at the Police Hospital instead of the prison. According to hearsay, the ex-Premier was given a highly comfortable room at the Hospital – a rumour that the Police strongly denied

[*Tnews* 2023, 23 August]. On 31 August 2023, Thaksin requested a royal pardon from King Vajiralongkorn [Phaisan 2023, 8 December]. The next day, the Monarch reduced his eight-year sentence to only one year [*BBC Thai* 2023, 1 September]. The ex-Premier was eventually released on parole on 18 February 2024, after having spent 6 months at the Police Hospital [*BBC Thai* 2024, 16 February]. He completed his one-year term on 31 August 2024.

Meanwhile, as a final blow to Move Forward, on 7 August 2024 the Constitutional Court ordered the Party to be dissolved, banning its executive board, Pita Limjaroenrat included, from politics for 10 years. The Court deemed the Party's proposal to amend the *lèse-majesté* law unconstitutional [*The Standard* 2024, 12 March]. People close to the disbanded party reacted by announcing the formation of a new party, the name of which, Phak Pra-chachon, officially translates into English as People's Party [*BBC Thai* 2024, 9 August]. The latter name is a direct reference to the collective that in 1932 overthrew absolutism, known in Thai as Khana Ratsadon and translated into English, indeed, as People's Party.

Even the Pheu Thai Government was not immune from attacks, however. On 14 August 2024, the Court forced PM Srettha Thavisin out of office for breaching «ethic rules and moral standards» [*The Matter* 2024, 14 August]. The PM was accused of appointing to his cabinet Thaksin Shinawatra's former lawyer, Pichit Chuenban, who had previously served a 6-month jail term for bribery [*The Matter* 2024, 14 August]. The removal of Srettha made it necessary for Pheu Thai to start new negotiations for forming a new Government. They put forward the name of Paetongtarn Shinawatra as candidate premier, gaining parliamentary endorsement.

The composition of the Paetongtarn Cabinet did not differ significantly from the previous one, but, in an apparent act of reconciliation, it welcomed Pheu Thai's longstanding rival Party, the Democrats, by appointing its leader, Chalermchai Sri-on, minister of Natural Resources [*Thai PBS* 2024, 28 August]. Commenting on the entire incident, the legal scholar Prinya Thaewanarumitkul suggested that the Constitutional Court acted on a complaint by somebody displeased with Pheu Thai [Napat Kongsawad 2024, 4 September].

2.4. *Civil and political rights under the Pheu Thai Government(s)*

Despite its longstanding commitment to democratic values, the Pheu Thai administrations failed to meaningfully improve Thailand's human rights situation. Political dissidents continued to face significant challenges after the 2023 elections, largely unchecked by the new government. In fact, the use of *lèse-majesté* laws intensified, the number of prosecutions rose, and prominent activists and politicians faced harsh sentences for perceived insults against the royal family. As reported by Thai Lawyers for Human Rights,

2023 saw the highest number of political detainees in recent years. At least 56 citizens and activists were jailed in 2023, outnumbering last year's figure of at least 46 detainees. Adding the 19 individuals who were detained continuously since 2022 brings the total of at least 67 detainees in 2023. Out of the 67 detainees, at least 37 have not been released and have spent the new year behind bars. This figure surpasses the detainee count for 2021-2022 (22) and 2022-2023 (19) [TLHR 2024, 16 February].

The situation did not improve in 2024, with the figures of lawsuits increasing further [TLHR 2024, 8 November]. 2024 was also marked by the tragic death of the young political prisoner Netiporn Sanesangkhom, and the Government's failure to identify and punish those responsible for a massacre that had taken place twenty years before in the Southern city of Tak Bai. These two cases underscored further the limitations of Thailand's democratic progress.

On 21 May 2024, the 28-year-old female activist Netiporn Sanesangkhom, better known by her nickname, Bung, died in custody after a prolonged hunger strike with which she was protesting her detention for *lèse majesté* and sedition. Her shocking death raised numerous questions about the treatment of political prisoners under the new civilian government [DW 2024, 21 May]. In October of the same year, the Pheu Thai Government failed to complete satisfactorily the investigation into the deaths of Muslim protesters that had taken place in Tak Bai during the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra. On 25 October 2004, state authorities had used tear gas, water cannons and live ammunition to disperse 2,000 protesters, causing the death of seven people [Amnesty International 2024, 18 October]. After the crackdown, an additional 78 protesters had died while being transported to a distant military camp, stuck inside military trucks [Amnesty International 2024, 18 October]. On 25 October 2024, the case legally expired as the defendants did not report, and the accused did not show up at court [Bangkok Post 2024, 28 October].

On a brighter note, in 2024 Thailand legalized same-sex marriage as put forward by a draft law approved the previous year. The provision grants full legal, financial and medical rights to spouses regardless of gender, making Thailand the first country in Southeast Asia and the third in Asia, after Taiwan and Nepal, to recognize same-sex unions [Thairath 2024, 15 November]. The bill was set to come into effect on 22 January 2025 [Jiraphon Srijaem 2024, 25 September].

2.5. *The return of the King's estranged son*

The biennium 2023-2024 also featured an interesting development for what concerns the Royal Family. On 8 August 2023, Vacharaesorn Vivacharawongse, the estranged second son of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, published

photographs on social media that portrayed him carrying out touristy as well as more highbrow activities in Thailand. The post suggested his unexpected, unannounced and unofficial return to the Kingdom after 27 years of exile in the United States [BBC Thai 2023, 8 August], sparking rumours of a possible reconciliation with the Palace.

Vacharaesorn made other visits to the Kingdom since, where he also obtained a Thai ID card and a passport [Matichon 2023, 15 December]. Although he appeared not to have received any royal titles [BBC Thai 2023, 15 August], his ability to meet prominent figures, including the head of the Thai Buddhist clergy, the Supreme Patriarch [Manager Online 2023, 8 August], led some to speculate that these visits may prelude an important role in the royal affairs.

3. *Foreign Policy*

3.1. *Always cordial relations with Myanmar and Russia*

Despite transitioning to civilian leadership, Thailand maintained pragmatic relationships with authoritarian regimes in Myanmar and Russia, prioritizing economic interests over human rights concerns.

Observers wondered indeed whether the passage from a military-led to a civilian government would result in a less compromising approach to the Burmese Junta. Shortly after Srettha Thavisin took office, however, Thailand supported Myanmar's National Ceasefire Agreement, a pact signed eight months before between the Burmese generals and insurgent groups, and now useful for the former to rein in the gains made by guerrillas in the territory [Thai PBS World 2023, 16 October]. In December 2024, Bangkok hosted an informal consultation in which representative of the Burmese Government discussed the conflict with representatives of their neighbouring countries (India, Bangladesh, China, Laos, and Thailand). According to a well-known analyst, the meeting «marks the beginning of a more conciliatory regional approach toward Myanmar's military administration» [Strangio 2024, 20 December]. Crucially, Thailand has important economic interests in Myanmar. Data of 2023 shows that the Kingdom was the third largest investor in the country, also importing from Myanmar 15% of its natural gas and 15% of electric power [Chambers and Chotisut 2024, 8 July].

The Phue Thai administration also displayed a certain openness toward Russia. In October 2024, PM Srettha Thavisin met Vladimir Putin in Beijing, where they discussed economic matters [DW 2023, 21 October]. The talks enraged groups within civil society who think that Thailand should not support Russia for its involvement in Ukraine. While preserving cordial rapports with Moscow, however, the Kingdom has become a haven for Russian long-term tourists and expats – including critics of Putin, de-

serters and men avoiding military conscription. As of November 2024, a record-breaking 1.5 million Russian citizens had entered Thailand [*The Nation* 2024, 13 December]. Ending the biennium with the prospect of further cooperation, in late 2024, Russia invited Thailand to join BRICS [Fenbert 2025, 2 January].

3.2. *Mediating between the US and China*

As for what concerns Thailand's self-positioning with regard to the US-China competition in the region, the Pheu Thai administration continued to keep good relations with both superpowers without feeling pressured to commit to either. Thailand therefore maintained its traditional non-aligned stance, apparently emerging as a neutral ground where the two superpowers could engage in diplomatic discussions. In January 2024, Bangkok hosted a meeting between the US Advisor for National Security and the Chinese Foreign Minister, where they discussed issues including the Taiwan crisis and the conflict in the South China Sea. According to analyst Benjamin Zawacki of The Asia Foundation, the actors' choice of Bangkok as the location for the talks implied «that both the US and China are comfortable and secure enough in their relations to Thailand vis-à-vis one another» [DW 2024, 30 January].

More complicated, and less negotiable, was the declining environmental situation in the Greater Mekong Region, which is partly linked to China's management of the water flows upriver. In late August, Thaksin Shinawatra commented that the devastating floods that affected the Northern province of Chiang Rai in that period were possibly «caused by an unusually high volume of water from upstream in the Mekong River». And added: «We may need to discuss this with other countries, particularly China, which is also experiencing floodings» [*Thai PBS World* 2024, 29 August]. If carefully formulated, the words of the ex-Premier seemed to point toward a degree of Chinese responsibility in the floods. Receptive to the message, China's Embassy in Bangkok responded that Beijing had operated its dams and water reservoirs as usual, thus denying any responsibility [*Thai PBS World* 2024, 29 August]. The incident may suggest that Thailand's approach to foreign policy operates also via informal channels and on multiple levels, enabling the Kingdom to defend its interests effectively, also from the very superpowers that it would otherwise seem to court.

4. *The economy in 2023-2024*

4.1. *Slow recovery and new challenges*

Thailand's economic recovery during 2023-2024 faced multiple interconnected challenges, from sluggish post-pandemic growth to a crippling

household debt crisis that undermined consumer spending power. These factors impacted an economy that already suffered from structural problems, such as the country's rapidly aging population (20% of Thais were over 60 in 2023 [Srawooth Paitoonpong 2023]). This situation created labor shortages in key sectors; skill mismatches vis-à-vis other countries in Southeast Asia; and a chronic political instability deterring long-term foreign investments.

According to the World Bank, the Kingdom registered an average annual growth of 2% in 2023 [World Bank 2024, no date] with an expected 2.4% growth for 2024, supported by «private consumption as well as tourism and goods exports recovery» [World Bank 2024, 3 July]. Government policies additionally contained the inflation rate [Praewpan Sirilurt, 2023], reduced the cost of electricity and fuel, and kept the prices of pork and chicken, both of which are main staples in Thai cuisine, low [Ministry of Commerce 2023, 8 December].

Private debt was alarming. Data shows that «in 2023, Thai household debt rose to 91.3% of GDP, led by the expansion of consumer loans and housing debt» [Klinthanom 2024, 17 May]. The same research finds that private debt rose by an extraordinary 91% toward the end of the year. Confirming the trend, as of September 2024, the average household debt increased by another 8.4% [Orathai and Satawasin 2024, 10 September]. A study by Chulalongkorn University, which took into account informal loans as well, estimated debt at 104% of the GDP in the fourth quarter of the same year [Somruedi 2025, 9 January].

Also impacting the economy was a burgeoning crisis involving Thailand's car manufacturing industry. In 2024, production dropped by over 20% compared to the previous year, forcing several producers to close permanently [Lamonphet 2024, 25 December]. The crisis featured both a domestic and an international dimension, as it was caused, on the one hand, by prospective Thai buyers' inability to secure auto loans (a consequence of the debt crisis discussed above), and, on the other, by the competition of Chinese manufacturers [Apornrath 2024, 26 July].

Compounding an already unstable economic situation, there were the massive floods that interested 30 provinces in the second half of 2024. In the above-mentioned province of Chiang Rai, the worst flood registered in the past eight decades required costly rescue operations, evacuations of residents and tourists, and caused disruptions in business and commerce [Kom Chad Luek 2024, 11 September]. In September 2024, a research unit of Krungsri Bank assessed that the losses, which remain yet to be fully evaluated, were around 46.5 billion baht, or 0.27% of GDP [Chaiwat 2024, 13 September]. The World Bank emphasizes the imperative for Thailand to devise new strategies of water management and adequate responses to the climate crisis, lest the risk of losses of up to 10% of the GDP [Bangkok Post 2024, 21 October].

5. Conclusion

Inaugurated with a general election in which citizens voted the Army Generals out of power, the 2023-2024 biennium showed the continued detrimental effect of two consecutive military administrations on processes of democratization. The electoral system put in place by the Military-drafted Constitution of 2017 proved indeed effective at inhibiting the formation of a government deemed unacceptable to the powers that be. Acting with what some call pragmatism, and others self-interest, the Pheu Thai Party took advantage of the situation by forming a coalition, while the Move Forward Party, the actual winner, was forced into opposition.

Its immediate gains aside, by the end of the period under review, the Phue Thai Government was tasked with securing back the trust of pro-democracy constituencies, including previous supporters who had lost faith in their leaders and become suspicious [*Manager Online* 2024, 16 August]. To reach that goal, PM Paetongtarn Shinawatra had to manage a multiplicity of critics, some of whom accused her of allowing her father, Thaksin, to exert excessive influence over her administration. She additionally had to face legal petitions and social media campaigns aimed to undermine her leadership [Strangio 2024, 27 August; *The Nation* 2024, 12 October]. Thaksin himself still awaited a court ruling for a controversial comment toward the Monarchy he allegedly made in a 2015 media interview, which landed him a charge of *lèse majesté* [Thairath 2024, 22 August].

While Thaksin's return from exile – along with that of the King's son, Vacharaesorn – had occasionally stolen the scene, the end of the biennium showed that the most immediate concerns for many citizens were financial. With the figures of household debt in the open, the Pheu Thai administration was left with the opportunity as well as the challenge to demonstrate the extent to which its pragmatism can address people's most concrete problems in the realm of the economy.

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