

Political Fragmentation and the Reconfiguration of Thailand's Political Camps After the 2023 General Election

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Abstract

A number of studies point to a shift in Thailand's political landscape in the 2023 general election, in which relations among political factions are no longer simply divided between pro-democracy and pro-conservative camps, but have moved toward a more fragmented configuration. However, existing discussions still focus on the dynamics of compromise among political elites, without much attention to how the structure of the political arena itself is shaped. Stemming from this, this study employs Andreas Schedler's (2002) concept of "manipulating the actor space" to analyse how post-coup institutional engineering influences changes in the relation patterns among political factions in Thailand. The analysis is conducted qualitatively by situating these changes within the context of a restructured political arena. This study contributes to the literature on hybrid politics by showing how the manipulation of actor space can reshape both the structure of competition and inter-factional relations within a fragmented political arena.

Keywords: political fragmentation, MMA system, manipulating the actor space, Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

The formation of the governing coalition following the 2023 general election has brought a major change to Thailand's political landscape. Particularly, after the Pheu Thai Party decided to join conservative parties previously associated with the post-2014 coup regime to form a new government. Initially, Pheu Thai joined the eight-party coalition alongside the Move Forward Party (MFP) which collectively held 313 seats in the House of Representatives (Nation Thailand, 2023). This coalition nominated Pita Limjaroenrat as their Prime Minister candidate and was projected to be the leading force in forming a new government. However, they failed because the majority of senators appointed by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) regime refused to support the motion in a joint vote of the House and Senate (The Diplomat, 2023). Pheu Thai has decided to shift its political strategy by forming a coalition with conservatives and military-backed parties. This decision stands in sharp contrast to their historical identity as the main opposition to the military regime for nearly a decade.

As the successor to the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) and People's Power Party (PPP), Pheu Thai has often been thwarted by military and monarchy-affiliated forces. Pheu Thai even became a direct victim of a military coup led by figures who now lead its coalition parties the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) and the United Thai Nation Party (UTN). The coup occurred after Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra was removed from her position on charges of power abuse (Satrusayang, 2021). In addition, this crisis was triggered by controversy over the amnesty bill, which was seen as an attempt to bring Thaksin back from exile with a clean legal record (Al Jazeera, 2013). The political situation at the time worsened due to objections from opposition groups and segments of the public against the electoral process that was underway (Kongkirati, 2017). The increasingly sharp political polarization subsequently led to parliamentary deadlock and paved the way for General Prayuth Chan-ocha to seize power through a military coup. Following the coup, the military elite established the National Council of Peace and Order (NCPO) as an interim government. Elections were subsequently held again in 2019, and Pheu Thai won the most seats once more, securing 136 seats (IFES, 2019). However, this victory was not enough to form a government because their PM candidate failed to obtain a majority in the Senate, allowing the military faction, through PPRP, to retain Prayuth Chan-ocha as Thai prime minister.

Against this background, Pheu Thai's decision to form a coalition with conservative and pro-military parties following the 2023 election appears contradictory. Some analysis interpreted this decision as a strategic compromise and generally focused more on the dynamics of post-election political negotiations. Hence, the explanations of how the political arena that underlies the negotiation process was previously shaped are relatively limited and remain outside the main focus. In fact, the political configuration that emerged after the 2023 elections was not formed in a neutral competitive arena, but rather in a political arena that had been restructured since the post-2014 coup regime. The NCPO regime introduced various institutional reforms, including the implementation of the Mixed Member Apportionment (MMA) system in the 2019 elections, which led to a massive proliferation of small parties and the weakening of dominant parties, particularly Pheu Thai (Nethipo, Kuhonta, & Horatanakun, 2023). Furthermore, the political choices available to opposition parties,

including Pheu Thai, became limited due to the competition arena that had been shaped by fragmentation and realignment of political actors.

Research by Lohatepanont & Jatusripitak (2024) reveals the emergence of a 'strategic triangle' in Thai politics post-2023 elections which consist of progressives, thaksinites, and conservative factions. Lohatepanont & Jatusripitak analysis indicate the formation of triangular relations among these three factions. This configuration reflects a shift in Thailand's post-election political landscape, where relations among political factions are no longer simply divided between pro-democracy and pro-conservative camps. However, discussions regarding this strategic triangle generally remain focused on post-election political dynamics and compromises among political elites. In fact, the emergence of this configuration raises further questions about how the engineering of the political arena has contributed to shaping the patterns of relations among political forces in the post-2023 election.

Against this backdrop, this study employs the concept of 'manipulating the actor space' proposed by Andreas Schedler (2002) to address the following question: How did the 2019 Mixed Member Apportionment (MMA) system contribute to political fragmentation and reshape coalition patterns and the formation of the strategic triangle in Thailand following the 2023 general election? This study argues that the institutional restructuring of the political arena through the MMA system contributed to the fragmentation of political actors and weakened the dominance of established parties, thereby reshaping the political space within which parties could formulate their strategies and alliances. This altered actor space subsequently influenced patterns of interaction among political factions, contributing to the emergence of the 'strategic triangle' configuration following the 2023 election.

Through this focus, this study contributes to the literature on hybrid regimes by demonstrating how the manipulation of actors' space can influence not only the constraints faced by the opposition, but also the configuration of political competition itself. The Thai case is therefore relevant to International Relations scholarship because it illustrates how hybrid regimes can adapt authoritarian practices through electoral and institutional mechanisms, reshaping democratic competition without necessarily eliminating electoral institutions altogether.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship on Thailand's 2023 election has highlighted the emergence of a new pattern of party competition that cannot be adequately understood through the older binary lens of Thaksinite versus anti-Thaksinite conflict. Lohatepanont and Jatusripitak (2024) argue that the post-election political landscape is better understood as a strategic triangle among three major camps—progressives, conservatives, and Thaksinites. Political camps refer to broad groupings of political actors that share similar political alignments and positions within the post-2023 competitive arena, rather than formally established party coalitions. The progressive camp is represented primarily by the Move Forward Party (MFP), which advocated political and institutional reforms; the Thaksinite camp centers on the Pheu Thai Party and actors aligned with Thaksin Shinawatra; while the conservative camp comprises primarily conservative and military-linked parties associated with the post-coup political order such as United Thai Nation Party (UTN) and Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP).

In this triangular configuration, the progressive camp held strong electoral legitimacy following the MFP's electoral success, while conservative and military-

linked actors retained institutional leverage inherited from the post-coup order. Pheu Thai occupied a pivotal position between these camps, allowing it to negotiate with either side and ultimately form a coalition with conservative forces. Thus, the “strategic triangle” identified by Lohatepanont and Jatusripitak (2024) refers to a configuration in which political power and alliances are shaped by the interaction among three competing camps, rather than by a stable two-sided division between pro-democracy and pro-conservative forces. This perspective is useful because it shows that the formation of the Pheu Thai–conservative coalition after the 2023 election was not merely the result of individual party preference or short-term opportunism, but reflected a broader reconfiguration of political competition in which no single camp could dominate the post-election order on its own.

However, while the strategic triangle captures the immediate configuration of post-2023 party competition, it does not by itself explain how such a configuration became possible. The triangular structure emerged within a political arena that had already been reshaped by years of authoritarian adaptation, institutional engineering, and restrictions on political competition. In this regard, broader literature on post-Cold War authoritarian adaptation provides a useful framework for understanding how electoral competition can be preserved formally while being substantively constrained. The third wave of democratization spread widely after the Cold War. Most countries in the third wave of democratization failed to develop into established democracies; in fact, some regressed to authoritarian regimes (Carothers, 2002). Some of them have also adapted by maintaining democratic procedures while retaining political control. According to Wiesner and Harfst (2024) democracy helps strengthen the legitimacy of a regime both internally, through increased public trust and support, and externally, through adherence to universal norms such as human rights and the rule of law, which enhance recognition from the international community. This makes democracy a crucial instrument for a post-Cold War state.

Thus, this type of regime requires democratic elements as its source of legitimacy. At the same time, it does not want to lose control over its dominant position. Consequently, this regime continues to hold multiparty elections, but the process is systematically controlled by those in power, thereby losing its democratic substance (Schedler, 2006). Schedler (2006:8) adds that while the institutions appear clearly formally, the practice of political manipulation takes place less accessible to public inspection. In other words, political competition remains formally in place, but it occurs within an arena that has been restricted and modified to yield structural advantages for those in power.

Within this framework, political competition cannot be understood as a completely free process, but rather as the result of deliberate shaping of the political arena. Andreas Schedler’s (2002) concept of “manipulating the actor space” is particularly useful for explaining how rulers shape the political arena, which ultimately influences patterns of competition and relations among political factions. The concept of actor space refers to the political arena in which parties and political factions compete, coordinate, and negotiate for political power. Manipulation of actor space is therefore identified not simply by the existence of institutional restrictions, but by changes in the number, relative strength, and strategic positioning of political actors within that arena. According to Schedler (2002), the two main strategies for manipulating the actor space are exclusion and fragmentation. While both mechanisms are relevant to understanding authoritarian control over political competition, this study focuses primarily on fragmentation. Exclusion is treated as a

contextual condition that helps explain the broader restrictions placed on political actors following the 2014 coup, rather than as a mechanism directly examined in the empirical analysis.

Exclusion refers to various methods of eliminating figures or groups considered to be potentially strong competitors. Exclusionary practices can take the form of direct violence or more subtle institutional measures. In the most extreme cases, opposition candidates are physically eliminated; however, according to Schedler (2002), a more common form involves legal restrictions, such as banning political parties, disqualifying candidates, or enforcing laws designed to eliminate specific opponents. For example, in some countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, or Algeria, restrictions and exclusion of radical Islamic groups are carried out through legal regulations (Sivan, 2000, cited in Schedler, 2002). In the context of this study, these forms of exclusion are not treated as the primary empirical indicator of actor-space manipulation. Rather, the discussion of exclusion establishes the broader context in which political competition was constrained following the 2014 coup.

Schedler (2002) points out that fragmentation can be achieved in various ways. Fragmentation can be produced through institutional arrangements, or informal political practices that increase the number of political actors and weaken their ability to coordinate. Electoral-system design can therefore be used to divide opposition forces and prevent the consolidation of political power, for example, the use of an extreme proportional system in Nicaragua that split the anti-Sandinista camp (Santiuste, 2000, cited in Schedler, 2002). In this study, fragmentation refers to the restructuring of the political arena through institutional arrangements that increase the number and dispersion of political actors while weakening dominant parties. The 2019 Mixed Member Apportionment (MMA) system is treated as the primary institutional mechanism driving this fragmentation and reshaping the actor space in post-coup Thailand.

Seen from this perspective, the strategic triangle identified by Lohatepanont and Jatusripitak (2024) can be understood not merely as an electoral outcome of the 2023 election, but as the product of a political arena that had long been shaped through institutional fragmentation. In other words, the triangular configuration of progressives, conservatives, and Thaksinites emerged within a field of competition that had already been restructured in ways that constrained opposition coordination, limited the range of viable alliances, and strengthened the bargaining position of conservative actors. This makes the concept of manipulating the actor space particularly relevant for explaining why coalition formation in post-2023 Thailand cannot be understood solely through electoral arithmetic or party preference, but must also be situated within the longer-term restructuring of political competition.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To analyze the research question, this study employs a qualitative case study approach. The case study approach was selected because it allows researchers to examine contemporary phenomena in depth and within a real-world context. As Yin (2003) argues the case study method is generally used in research that aims to answer “how” and “why” questions, particularly when researchers have no control over the events under study and the focus of the study is directed toward contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts. Through this approach, the study examines how the restructuring of Thailand’s political arena affected political competition and coalition

formation among three major political camps: progressives, Thaksinites, and conservatives.

Research data were collected through a literature review of various secondary sources, such as the Thai Constitution, academic journal articles, and online media reports relevant to Thailand's political dynamics following the 2019 and 2023 elections. These sources serve different purposes in tracing the causal process. The 2017 Constitution is used to identify the institutional framework underlying the restructuring of political competition, while election results are used to examine changes in party representation and the degree of political fragmentation. Academic studies provide theoretical and contextual interpretations, while credible media reports are used to establish the sequence of political events, including coalition negotiations and the Senate's role in the prime ministerial selection process. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the issues of political fragmentation, the restructuring of the party system, and the formation of post-election governing coalitions.

To examine the causal processes underlying this phenomenon, the study applies process tracing as the analytical method. According to George & Bennett (2005), "process tracing attempts to trace the links between possible causes and observed outcomes". In this method, researchers examine the sequence of causal processes through documents, archives, and other historical sources to determine whether the mechanism assumed in the theory actually emerges in the cases under study (George & Bennett, 2005). Thus, this analytical method is relevant for analyzing the causal mechanisms linking the post-2019 manipulation of actor space, political fragmentation, and party system restructuring to the emergence of the strategic triangle.

In this article, process tracing is organized into three analytical stages. First, the study traces the institutional restructuring introduced by the 2017 Constitution and the implementation of the 2019 Mixed Member Apportionment (MMA) system. Second, it examines how the MMA system contributed to political fragmentation by creating greater opportunities for small and newly established parties to gain parliamentary representation, such as The Future Forward Party (FFP), the predecessor of the MFP. The increased representation and dispersion of political actors contributed to the weakening of established parties, particularly Pheu Thai, and consequently altered the actor space in which political actors competed and formulated strategies. Third, the study traces how this altered political arena shaped the 2023 coalition-building process, including the emergence of the three-camp configuration, the Senate's rejection of Pita Limjaroenrat, the resulting constraints on Pheu Thai's coalition options, and its subsequent alliance with conservative parties. This process allows the study to assess whether the empirical evidence supports the proposed causal mechanism linking institutional restructuring, political fragmentation, an altered actor space, and the formation of the strategic triangle.

DISCUSSION

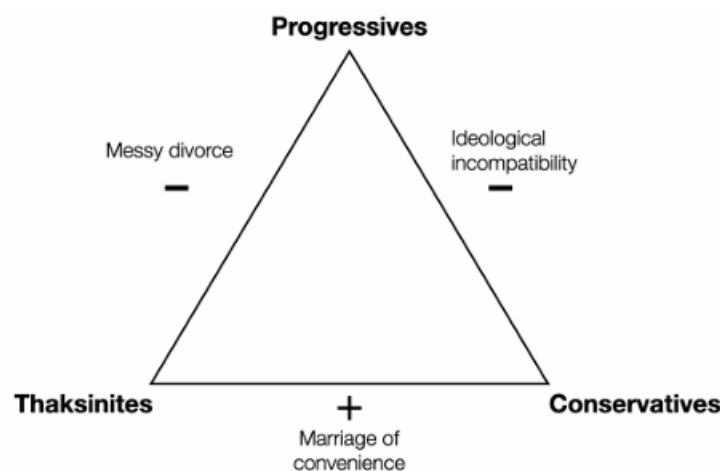
4.1 Reconfiguration of Thailand's Political Camps

Before explaining how post-coup institutional manipulation has influenced the patterns of relations among political factions in Thailand, it is important initially to understand the shifts in the political configuration that emerged post-2023 election. This election not only resulted in a shift in the distribution of political power but also revealed the emergence of more complex patterns of political relations among Thailand's major political factions. In this context, the emergence of the strategic

triangle reflects the shift in the patterns of political relations among the major political forces following the 2023 general election.

Lohatepanont & Jatusripitak (2024) map Thailand's post-2023 election political landscape around three dominant factions: progressives, thaksinites, and conservatives. The progressives are represented by MFP as the key parties, the Thaksinites camp by Pheu Thai, and the conservatives camp by PPRP, UTN, Bhumjaithai, and the elite supporters of the established order. Furthermore, Lohatepanont & Jatusripitak (2024) found a triangular relationship formed among these three power camps which is analyzed with Lowell Dittmer's (1981) strategic triangle framework. These findings are illustrated as below.

FIGURE 1 Strategic Triangle Configuration in Thailand



Source: Lohatepanont & Jatusripitak (2024)

Dittmer (1981) explains that in a three-party relationship, two actors with cooperative relations tend to align with one another while opposing the third actor. Dittmer refers to this configuration as a “stable marriage.” This pattern is also visible in the post-2023 election coalition. As shown in the figure above, the Thaksinites (Pheu Thai) and conservatives have become political partners, while the progressives find themselves in the position of the excluded party. The Thaksinites and conservatives chose to compromise because both felt they would benefit more if the MFP were not involved. Thus, Pheu Thai chose the option most likely to grant access to power within the existing structure. Thus, the results of Lohatepanont & Jatusripitak (2024) study, indicate that a distinct three-pole political configuration has emerged. While Thailand's political contestation was previously understood primarily as a bipolar competition between the Thaksinite and conservative camps, the emergence of the MFP as the leading progressive force has altered this pattern.

The dynamics of inter-factional political relations following the 2023 elections have been formed in a political arena governed by the 2017 Constitution. While this constitution was drafted under the NCPO regime, it was indeed designed to give the military a strong say in the political arena (Deutsche Welle, 2017). This indicates the changing patterns of relations among political factions in Thailand likely did not emerge within a completely neutral political arena. In this context, to understand how the manipulation of the post-coup political arena influences the patterns of inter-factional political relations in Thailand, it is necessary to analyze how this institutional

reconstruction works in shaping the arena of political competition. Therefore, the implementation of the MMA system is a primary focus of this analysis as a key instrument in the post-coup restructuring of Thailand's political arena. Although the MMA system was no longer used in the 2023 general election, the impact of the political system's restructuring remained obvious in the political dynamics that followed. In fact, Nethipo et al. (2023) state that the 2023 general election serves as evidence that the changes to the political system implemented since the 2019 general election continue to influence Thai politics.

4.2 2019 MMA System and The Weakening of Dominant Parties

Following the 2014 military coup, the NCPO carried out sweeping political restructuring to maintain the military's influence in Thailand post-coup political order. The NCPO not only seized power but also established a new legal and institutional framework through the constitution, political institutions, and the enactment of various decrees and laws that fundamentally transformed Thailand's political landscape (The International Commission of Jurists, 2015). One of the key instruments in this process is the 2017 Constitution, which was drafted by institutions and committees established by the NCPO itself. The constitution was designed not only to guide the transition to an elected government, but also to institutionalize various mechanisms that would allow the military to retain its influence even after the elections. Several articles in the 2017 Constitution were also designed to weaken the opposition, such as Article 272, which authorized the NCPO-appointed Senate to take part in the election of the Prime Minister candidates, as well as the MMA provisions, which are the primary focus of this study (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2560 (2017), Sec. 272).

The MMA system is a mixed electoral system that combines the election of the House of Representatives members through single-member districts and party lists. In Thailand, a voter's single vote is used both to elect a candidate in a single-member district and to calculate the number of seats allocated to the party list (Sirivunnabood, 2019). Thailand regulates this system through the 2017 Constitution, specifically Chapter VII, Part 2 (The House of Representatives), Sections 83-91, which set out the composition of the House of Representatives and the mechanisms for allocating constituency and party-list seats.

A total of 350 members elected on a constituency basis, while the remaining 150 are allocated through the party-list system. Voters are given only one ballot, which is used both to elect district candidates and to determine the allocation of party-list seats. The candidate who receives the most votes in each district wins the district seat. Meanwhile, party-list seats are calculated based on the total of national votes a party receives, then reduced by the number of district seats already won to determine the number of party-list seats the party will receive (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2560 [2017], arts. 83–91). As a result, a party that has won many district seats may receive fewer party-list seats or even no additional seats at all.

However, the shift in seat distribution and the weakening of the major parties' dominance due to the implementation of the MMA did not only affect electoral outcomes. As part of post-coup institutional manipulation, the implementation of the MMA contributed to a more fragmented distribution of political representation by creating opportunities for smaller and newly established parties while weakening the dominance of established parties such as Pheu Thai. Although the MMA system was no longer used in the 2023 election, its effects persisted through the party structures

and political actors that emerged under the 2019 electoral arrangement. The emergence of the Future Forward Party (FFP), which later continued through the Move Forward Party (MFP), illustrates how the 2019 electoral system contributed to the institutionalization of a new political force that challenged Pheu Thai's previous dominance. These changes reshaped the actor space in which political actors competed and formulated their strategies. Fragmentation alone, however, does not explain how the altered actor space subsequently affected political relations and coalition formation after the 2023 election. The next section therefore applies Schedler's concept of "manipulating the actor space" to examine how this fragmented political arena shaped the strategic options available to political actors and contributed to subsequent patterns of coalition-building.

4.3 Manipulating the Actor Space Through Political Fragmentation

The changes in the patterns of relations among political factions following the 2023 elections in Thailand cannot be separated from the changes in the arena of political competition in the post-coup era. According to Nethipo, et al., (2023) the MMA is part of a constitutional engineering strategy used to restructure the electoral system. This indicates that Thailand's political arena is not formed under fully neutral conditions, but rather through various institutional arrangements that influence the distribution of political power and the scope of action for political actors. In this context, the concept of "manipulating the actor space" is employed as an analytical tool to understand how the formation of the post-coup political arena has influenced the patterns of relations among political factions in Thailand following the 2023 elections.

According to Schedler (2002: 106), the primary strategies in this manipulation are exclusion and fragmentation. In the Thai case, the military regime needs the opposition to maintain its legitimacy and ensure that the government appears formally democratic. Thus, rather than eliminating the opposition, the military regime merely restricts and weakens it through exclusions. In addition to exclusion, the military also employs fragmentation so that no single political force is strong enough to challenge the regime. In this way, the military regime can maintain its power without completely eliminating the opposition. Fragmentation is the primary focus of this study. Fragmentation has caused political power in parliament to become increasingly dispersed, so that no single party is able to fully dominate Thai politics. This situation subsequently drove changes in the patterns of relations and bargaining among political factions following the 2023 elections. Therefore, fragmentation can be understood as one of the key mechanisms in the restructuring of Thailand's political arena.

Fragmentation serves as a mechanism to maintain formal pluralism while simultaneously countering the threat posed by the regime's political opponents. In this context, the emergence of the PPRP and UTN as pro-regime political vehicles has further expanded fragmentation within Thailand's political arena. This situation has caused the political support base of the conservative-military faction to spread across several political parties, thereby making the political competition arena increasingly fragmented. The split between the two Ps (Prayuth and Prawit) was even described as having resulted in a fractured conservative bloc. (Sattaburuth, 2025).

In addition, since the 2019 general election, Thai politics has also become increasingly fragmented as a result of constitutional restructuring carried out by the NCPO regime in 2017. Chambers & Waitoolkiat (2020: 162) note that the 2017 constitution and various related organic laws have allowed factionalism to persist, in

which party back-benchers have a voice in seeking to influence the making of public policy. Consequently, parties have become less cohesive, more prone to splitting, and less able to develop into a strong opposition force. In other words, factionalism is maintained as a means of keeping the party system weak and fragmented. Chambers & Waitookiat (2020) also noted that this fragmented party system is likely to persist for the next few years. Thus, although several provisions of the 2017 Constitution—particularly those related to the electoral system—have been amended, the political dynamics that emerged from their implementation in the 2019 general election continue to shape Thailand's political landscape.

A number of studies indicate that the MMA system was deliberately designed to weaken dominant parties such as Pheu Thai. On the other hand, this system opens up greater opportunities for smaller parties to secure seats in the House of Representatives through the party-list seat allocation formula. As noted by Nethipo et al. (2023), The party-list calculation formula used by the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) in the 2019 election led to a massive proliferation of small parties. This formula allows small parties to secure party-list seats, while large parties such as Pheu Thai do not (Nethipo, Kuhonta, & Horatanakun, 2023). The 2019 and 2023 election results illustrate changes in parliamentary seat distribution among established and newly emerged political actors, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Electoral and Coalition Configuration, 2019 & 2023

Key Political Party	2019 Election	2023 Election
Pheu Thai Party	136 constituency seats, 0 party-list seats	112 constituency seats, 29 party-list seats
Future Forward Party	31 constituency seats, 50 party-list seats	Dissolved in 2020
Palang Pracharath Party	97 constituency seats, 19 party-list seats	39 constituency seats, 1 party-list seats
United Thai Nation Party	Not yet established	23 constituency seats, 13 party-list seats
Move Forward Party	Not yet established	112 constituency seats, 39 party-list seats
Coalition Composition	PPRP-led coalition government	Pheu Thai-led coalition including conservative bloc

Source: Author's synthesis of data from Merten and Sawasdee (2022), Thai PBS World (2023), Jatusripitak (2022), and Thai Newsroom (2023).

As shown in table 1, Pheu Thai's strong constituency performance did not result in additional party-list seats, Pheu Thai won approximately 136 constituency seats but none on the party-list (Merten & Sawasdee, 2022). Meanwhile, parties that

won fewer constituency seats still secured party-list seats, for example the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) who won fewer constituency seats—97 seats—received an additional 19 party-list seats. Another example is the Future Forward Party (FFP), the predecessor to the MFP, which actually won more party-list seats than constituency seats—31 constituency seats and 50 party-list seats (Merten & Sawasdee, 2022). These results show that the party-list formula was indeed designed to weaken the dominant party.

The party-list formula in the 2019 election opened the way for a new opposition party, the FFP. This configuration spurred the emergence of a new force within Thailand's party system, continued by the MFP in the 2023 election. As a result, the opposition's support base became fragmented, narrowing the prospect for a stable opposition coalition. In this context, Pheu Thai is no longer the sole center of power opposing the regime but must share the opposition's support base with the MFP. This is proven in an online survey regarding the 2023 election conducted by the Matichon Group with Daily News, where over 50% of respondents chose the MFP as their preferred party under the party-list system (Khaosod English, 2023). This indicates that the electoral demographic is beginning to shift. This shift in the distribution of votes was also reflected in the results of the 2023 general election, which placed the MFP in first place, while Pheu Thai came in second (Thai PBS World, 2023). These results point to a new competitive landscape that challenges Pheu Thai's historical dominance.

The significance of the 2019 MMA system therefore lies not in its direct application to the 2023 election, but in its longer-term effect on the structure of political competition. By enabling smaller and newly established parties to gain parliamentary representation, the system contributed to the emergence and consolidation of political actors that remained relevant after the electoral rules were changed. The FFP's strong party-list performance in 2019 and the subsequent electoral success of its successor, the MFP, demonstrate this institutional legacy. The MMA therefore altered the actor space beyond a single electoral cycle by contributing to the emergence of new political forces and reducing the extent to which Pheu Thai could function as the dominant opposition pole.

This fragmentation affected Pheu Thai's bargaining position in the formation of the government following the 2023 election. Fujiwara & Sanz (2020) explain that in coalition formation, a party's seat count determines its bargaining power. They added that the status of being the most voted party also provides additional political advantages in the government formation process (Fujiwara & Sanz, 2020). As a result, Pheu Thai no longer occupied the same dominant position within the opposition as it had in previous electoral cycles, reducing its ability to determine the direction of government formation independently. The fragmented political landscape therefore increased Pheu Thai's dependence on bargaining with other political actors.

The situation was further complicated by Pita's failure to secure Senate support for the prime minister's position (The Diplomat, 2023). The Senate's role was particularly important because it further constrained the coalition options available to the MFP and Pheu Thai under the post-coup institutional arrangement. This left Pheu Thai with even fewer political options. In an effort to gain access to government and maintain its position in the political arena, Pheu Thai was ultimately compelled to reach a compromise with the conservative camp, despite having previously held opposing political stances. These changing patterns of relations subsequently formed the "strategic triangle" configuration identified by Lohatepanont & Jatusripitak (2024).

Thus, the restructuring of the post-coup political arena not only affected the distribution of electoral power but also reshaped the patterns of relations and coalition strategies among political factions in Thailand.

However, the formation of the Pheu Thai–conservative coalition cannot be attributed to institutional fragmentation alone. Other political factors also shaped the final coalition outcome. The MFP's position on the reform of Article 112 created significant opposition from conservative and military-aligned actors, making cooperation with the MFP politically more difficult. At the same time, Thaksin Shinawatra's return to Thailand and Pheu Thai's political calculations regarding access to government also influenced the party's strategic choices (Promchertchoo, 2023). These factors do not negate the institutional argument but help explain how the altered actor space was translated into a particular coalition outcome. The MMA is therefore understood in this study as a structural condition that reshaped the range of political actors and strategic options, rather than as a single determinant of coalition formation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the shift in the relation patterns among political factions in Thailand after the 2023 elections occurred through the NCPO regime's manipulation of the post-coup political arena under the 2017 Constitution, particularly the MMA system implemented in the 2019 elections. Through fragmentation, the military regime restructured the party system and the distribution of political power, causing the arena of political competition to become increasingly fragmented and no longer dominated by a single major opposition camp. The Pheu Thai Party is no longer the sole center of opposition power, and their bargaining position in government formation has weakened. When the MFP failed to form a government, Pheu Thai political options became more limited and eventually chose to compromise with conservative-military groups. Thus, the manipulation of the post-coup political arena not only altered the distribution of political power but also reshaped coalition patterns and inter-factional political relations following the 2023 General Election.

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