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Thailand's Springtime of the People

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The Dissolution of the Future Forward Party

Thailand had undergone two military coups within just eight years. The 2014 coup, led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, then Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army and now the Prime Minister of Thailand, overthrew the democratically elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra. It has been a lost decade, a time of despair for the Thai people who dream of a democratic society.

Before 2019, after five years of military rule, most Thais lost interest in civic participation and only a few trusted the existing political parties. None of our leaders dared to offer any hopeful alternative based on transparent politics or pledged to rebuild political consensus and restore democracy. The situation began to change with the formation of the Future Forward Party, which later on became the Move Forward Party.



Image: www.hrw.org

“Move Forward Party has given back hope and has inspired the people that democracy is the solution and that an 'alternative' political model is possible in Thailand.

Image: www.thaipbsworld.com



It reassured the Thai people that they are entitled to greater well-being and deserve to live in a more equitable society. Move Forward has given back hope and has inspired the people that democracy is the solution and that an “alternative” political model is possible in Thailand.

The Party never fails to emphasize this statement: “We must break free from our country's lost decade and restore hope and prosperity for the next decade. It is now or never.”

Future Forward's main agenda was to transform Thailand's political landscape. We wanted to encourage public participation in our brainstorming sessions, decision-making processes, fundraising, and operations through an inclusive bottom-up model.

6.3 million voters made the Future Forward Party win 81 seats in our first election in March 2019. Our voters saw the Future Forward Party as the change agent to push Thailand towards full-fledged democracy. Nonetheless, our party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court by what an international observer called “a flawed legal process premised on spurious charges.”¹ The incident aroused protests all over Thailand. Spring had finally begun.

Earlier last year, initially, the protests were led by university students and high-schoolers, who resolved to make Thailand a country where they can again dream for the future. As time went by, citizens of all backgrounds, ages, and occupations, came together to demand the end of political monopoly, the reform of the monarchy, universal pensions, expansion of labor rights and maternity leave, an LGBTQ rights bill, and an end to the military coup cycle, among other things. This movement has sparked a new path in Thailand's democracy.

¹ From the US Senate's draft resolution on Thailand. Retrieved from: <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/DAV20G50%20-%20Thailan.pdf>.

Carrying on the Future Forward Spirit: Move Forward Party's Vision and Actions

As the successor of the dissolved Future Forward Party, the Move Forward Party aspires to take Thailand towards meaningful democracy and create a fair economic system. We resolve to untangle the protracted problems that have plagued our country for generations. We strive to make all Thai people equal and bring the country together to face the challenges that define our generation: the retreat of democracy, the rise of extreme inequality, and the hopelessness young people face when they look at the dwindling opportunities to have a better life.

To combat the rise of authoritarianism, address extreme inequality and bring hope back to the lives of our fellow Thais, we believe that social democracy and progressive economic policies are the way forward. Based on this vision, we have codified more than a dozen policy agenda including but not limited to: (1) advancing human rights and civil liberties, (2) introducing universal welfare, (3) expanding labor rights, (4) expanding social safety nets, and (5) breaking down monopolies, etc.

The values of our Party are defined, not only by words, but also by actions. As an opposition party, we have submitted — on the issue of civil and political rights — a set of five landmark bills to reform the lèse-majesté laws and expand freedom of expression, and we have pushed for constitutional amendments that will erase the legal legacies of the junta. On welfare and social democracy, we have submitted bills to create universal pensions, expand labor rights and maternity leaves, and continuously raise the minimum wage along with the consumer price

index. On economic opportunities, we have submitted a bill to break down regulatory barriers-to-entry for local liquor and craft beer producers. The bill, if enacted, would undermine the monopoly over the Thai alcoholic beverage industry. On social progressivism, we have submitted bills to legalize abortion and gender-neutral marriages.

Although official legislative processes have been blocked by the Prayuth government, Thailand's social movements continuously move forward. Our Party works closely with several social welfare networks, in developing and advocating for progressive policy programs. The Move Forward Party has recently set up a team called Think Forward Center to take care of social democratic policy

development and advocacy, both through the existing parliamentary process and the next general election.

We fight for the common people and for common sense. Our Party continues to be the voice for the voiceless and the hope for the hopeless. We are driven, not only by a social democratic vision for Thailand, but also by common sense. It is common sense that a minimum wage should earn enough to make a decent living. It is common sense that the wealthiest corporations should compete in fairer competition with small farmers and enterprises. We believe that our country should return to these common sense ideas in order to make our people equal and bring the country together to face the challenges of this generation.

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Image: www.nationthailand.com





Image: www.bangkokpost.com

“Planting the seeds of New Politics means that the way we engage in politics is as important as the ends that we are fighting for.”

Fighting for the common people and for common sense has evoked considerable resistance. Our spirit has been hindered at every turn. The Prime Minister terminated our bills to end military conscription, expand labor rights and maternity leave, and introduce universal pension, without providing any reason. The Constitutional Court took away our subpoena power in October 2020. Even if we can get anything through the lower house, the 250 junta-appointed senators would step in to block all the meaningful change.

Worse, the Prayuth government has been waging an information operation (IO) perpetrating blatant falsehoods against our Party. Because the government cannot challenge our policy-based

progressivism on either moral or rational ground, it resorts to falsely accusing our Party of trying to overthrow the monarchy and pitting two generations of Thais against each other in order to maintain its power. That is why our fight cannot be waged on the floor of the parliament alone. It has to be done in the hearts and minds of our people as well.

Winning Hearts and Minds: The Long Game for the Future of Thailand

When we started this journey, as members of the Future Forward Party, we knew that changing Thailand was going to be a generational endeavor. Wherever we look, authoritarian culture lurks in every corner of our country. The

patron-client system seeps into every fabric of our society. That is why our Party aims to seed Thailand with “New Politics,” a transformational politics based on policy facts and philosophical ideals, as we face an uphill battle against “Old Politics”—i.e., transactional politics based on corruption and patron-client relationships, which is the current *modus operandi* of Thai politics.

Planting the seeds of “New Politics” means that the way we engage in politics is as important as the ends that we are fighting for. At first glance, fighting political battles with facts and ideals seems unforgivably naive against opponents who are loaded with massive war chests and networks of vote-buying election canvassers. However, if we are led astray from our ideals with shortsightedness, we may secure more power with transactional politics in the short term, but we will never be able to transform our country. If we take power with “Old Politics,” we will become an embodiment of the problem we are fighting against right now and the vicious cycle of corruption and military coups goes on.

“New Politics” requires us to win hearts and minds in a war of ideas. We believe that our values of advancing political rights, elevating economic equality, and embracing human diversity are what most hearts and minds already agree to as common decency. However, the war of ideas is never just about facts and philosophies. It is also a war against falsehood and smear campaigns conducted by those in power who have depleted all moral and rational justifications for legitimacy. Yet, it is such depletion of legitimacy that makes us believe that the momentum is on our side in this long game for the future of Thailand.

The March of History and the Coming of Spring

The outlook of Thai politics, as of now, is undeniably bleak. All the institutions and machinations that the junta placed to retain its power in civilian clothing, remain strong. Everywhere we look on the streets of Thailand, people cannot express their minds freely, there is no opportunity for a better life, and there is no hope to be found.

Nevertheless, the parliament, weakened and kneecapped, and the protest movement, bloodied and battered, are still a beacon of hope that can lead this country out of despair. As the parliamentary opposition, we believe that parliament can be a safe space where an inconvenient truth can be debated with maturity, and meaningful changes can be realized through legislation.

Still, looking back at the start of our journey more than two years ago, we knew that we would face an uphill battle. We knew that this would be a long-term struggle. Yet, if someone were to tell us, back then, where Thai society would be today in terms of societal discourse, we would all be surprised. Voices from the new generation are demanding to be heard. The new wave of change is coming, and it will sweep those who stand on the wrong side into the dustbin of history.

That is why we dare to hope in the face of great adversities. We know progress is not a straight line, that is why we have to move forward, despite all the odds. We know that the arc of the moral universe is long and that it will never bend toward justice on its own. That is why we need to reach up and bend it. We know hope and history only rhyme once in a lifetime, that is why we have to rise up and make it so, now.

Heeding to a historic calling, young protesters have risen up and suffered persecution. As Pablo



Image: www.thetimes.co.uk

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Neruda, a Chilean Nobel Prize winner once said, “you can cut all the flowers but you cannot keep spring from coming.” The Prayuth regime cannot halt the march of history and keep spring from blooming.

We will never stop fighting for what is right in this era of despair. We believe that the new dawn will eventually arrive, whereupon Thailand will be democratic and the Thai people will have equitable lives.📍

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