



## INSIGHT: SOUTHEAST ASIA

# Inherited media shares complicate frontrunner's path to Thailand's top office

### THE TAKEAWAY

Pita Limjaroenrat's path to becoming Thailand's next prime minister has hit a roadblock. The leader of the Move Forward Party (MFP) — the winner of the country's recent election — faces a legal challenge for allegedly violating the Thai Constitution, which could disqualify him from the prime ministership. While Thailand's Election Commission is gathering evidence to test the allegations, a re-election is possible. Alternatively, the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), which won the second-most votes in the election, may nominate its own candidate for the job.

### IN BRIEF

Before the May 14 election, Ruangkrai Leekitwattana, a former military-backed Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) party-list MP, filed a complaint to Thailand's Election Commission, accusing Pita of failing to disclose ownership of 42,000 shares in iTV, a registered media company, to the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) before assuming office as an MP in 2019. The complaint claims Pita is ineligible to contest elections because, per Section 98(3) of the Thai Constitution,

individuals are barred from running for the House of Representatives if they own shares in mass media companies or newspapers.

Pita and the MFP have stated that the allegations are politically motivated: he [denies](#) breaking any rules, arguing that he does not technically own any shares of iTV. The company shares are listed in his name, he says, because they belonged to his father, and he is executor of his father's will. Pita says he had already informed the NACC of this arrangement.

On June 3, Ittiporn Boonpracong, chief of the Election Commission, said that the collection of facts and evidence regarding Pita's stakes in iTV is underway, and that the Election Commission has not yet initiated a formal "evaluation" process. If the complaints are dismissed, Pita will be absolved of any wrongdoing. However, if there is any uncertainty, the commission can seek a ruling from the Constitutional Court, which would then decide Pita's political fate.

### IMPLICATIONS

The Election Commission is expected to announce the final endorsement of the election results on July 13. If Pita is disqualified, experts say it is plausible

that PTP will nominate Srettha Thavisin as its candidate for prime minister. In stark contrast to the progressive MFP, PTP's centrist policy stances will be much more acceptable to military-backed senators. PTP's potential success with the senate could leave the MFP with two options: remain part of the coalition government and dilute its progressive position or withdraw from the coalition and form a strong opposition in parliament. The latter option would be favourable to the military-backed senate as it would push PTP to align with PPRP (and other military-affiliated parties) to secure more MPs to form the new government.

Pita faces the same legal challenge that doomed [Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit](#), a progressive who led the Future Forward Party (FFP), the MFP's predecessor. Thanathorn was accused of owning shares in a media company while applying to become an MP, prompting the Constitutional Court to eventually disqualify him as an MP in 2019. FFP was a rising pro-democracy party that won 81 seats in the 2019 general election but was [disbanded](#) in 2020 after the party was found guilty of accepting illegal donations from Thanathorn.

On June 6, Pita [announced](#) that he transferred ownership of the stocks in question to his relatives. It is unclear if Pita's latest move will impact the charges against him. Nevertheless, Pita faces an uphill battle

to become prime minister, requiring at least 376 parliamentary votes. Pita's eight-party coalition, commanding 312 seats, will need another 64 votes from the senate, several of whom are undecided. Others are determined to vote against him.

## WHAT'S NEXT

### 1. Another election approaching?

Caretaker Deputy Prime Minister Wissanu Krea-ngam stated on May 31 that if Pita is found guilty, it could make him ineligible to become prime minister. A guilty verdict would also remove him as an MP and potentially revoke the MP status of any MFP members endorsed by Pita. Wissanu also stated that a guilty verdict could lead to the annulment of the 2023 general elections.

### 2. MFP supporters mull protest

The pro-democracy Ratsadon protest group is calling for a protest if the Election Commission disqualifies Pita and annuls the results of the election. The Ratsadon protest group is affiliated with the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration group (UTFD), a pro-democracy and anti-monarchy group that has been active since the [2020-21 Thai protests](#). Members of Ratsadon and the UTFD were major supporters of the FFP.

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