

International

'Buddhism under threat': Thailand election gives platform to radicals

Politics marks a new trend in traditionally tolerant Thailand

PATHUM THANI: A clothing and cosmetics model and a former monk are campaigning together for Thailand's election at a market outside Bangkok. The message: Buddhism is under threat. Their politics marks a new trend in traditionally tolerant Thailand, where Buddhist nationalist movements have never taken root in the same way as in countries such as Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

Buddhism is one of the traditional pillars of Thai society and underpins many aspects of Thai life, but monks have little influence over the state compared to the monarchy and military. The emergence of the Pandin Dharma Party to contest the March 24 election points to the rise of a fringe of Thai society that is at odds with the royalist-military establishment over religion and expresses growing antipathy to Islam.

"I joined this party because of its policy to protect the religion," said Sirima "Grace" Sarakul, 36, the model, who is contesting a seat in parliament as a Pandin Dharma Party candidate. The threat to Buddhism, Pandin Dharma's supporters believe, is from secular authorities they accuse of harassing monks and of caring more about Thailand's tiny Muslim minority than the religion followed by more than 90 percent of Thais.

"Monks have been dealt with heavy-handedly by the state," complains former monk Korn Medee, 47, leader of the party whose name means Land of Buddhist Teaching. "The government has overtly favored the other religion over Buddhism," he told Reuters. The government's

National Office of Buddhism declined to comment on the allegations or the rise of Buddhist nationalism - saying it was a matter of national security.

Two other avowedly Buddhist parties in the election are aligned with the junta, which has imposed measures to bring Thailand's 40,000 temples under control in the name of tackling scandals ranging from corruption to sex to murder. Paiboon Nititawan, 65, of the pro-military People's Reform Party, dismissed Pandin Dharma as "not real Buddhists." "Our party is not even talking about religion per se, but rather about applying the teaching of the Buddha," he said.

Division

Thailand's longstanding political fracture between the establishment and the populism of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra is mirrored in religion. Thai Buddhism itself is divided into two fraternities: the Mahanikaya of the masses and the more conservative Thammayut, bound to the establishment and more influential since its founding by a 19th century king.

"There has been a conflict of interests between factions within the monkhood and the military government," said Buddhist scholar Somrit Luechai. "As long as the monkhood remains under the centralized control of the state, this conflict will not end and could even intensify." Religion has not been among the top issues ahead of a ballot which is largely shaping



BANGKOK: Royal Thai Army Commander in Chief Apirat Kongsompong (center) with other senior officers kneels before the statue of the late King Chulalongkorn, during an oath ceremony at the army headquarters in Bangkok yesterday ahead of the March 24 general election. —AFP

up as a contest between parties that support establishment-backed junta leader Prayuth Chan-ocha and allies of Thaksin.

But an electoral system designed to help smaller parties - 81 are standing for election - has given greater room for interest groups. Dressed in white to mark themselves out as de-

vout lay followers of Buddhism, Sirima and another former monk, Boonyatilert Sara, 45, found a ready reception in Pathum Thani province, where northern Bangkok's sprawl gives way to rice fields. "Buddhism has been decaying in this country," said Yuttana Suksa-ard, 66. "A party like this can help purify the religion." —Reuters

Thailand court dissolves Shinawatra-linked party

BANGKOK: A key party linked to Thailand's powerful Shinawatra clan was dissolved yesterday by a court, just weeks before a general election, over its ill-starred bid to front a princess as a candidate for premier. Thai Raksa Chart, which is tied to ex-premiers Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra, proposed Princess Ubolratana as its prime ministerial candidate if its bloc emerged with a lower house majority after the March 24 election. It was an unprecedented move in a constitutional monarchy where royals are officially above the political fray, and prompted a rare public rebuke by her younger brother, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who issued a royal command declaring the party's move "inappropriate".

Thai Raksa Chart was found guilty of committing an act "hostile to the constitutional monarchy" by the nine-member Constitutional Court, which unanimously voted to dissolve the party. Party executives—including two Shinawatra family members—were also banned from politics for a decade. "The monarchy is above politics and to maintain political neutrality, the king, the queen and princesses can never exercise political rights by casting votes," judge Nakharin Mektrairat said at the end of an extensive ruling.

Dissolution is a hammer blow to the prospects of the powerful Shinawatras winning a parliamentary majority at the polls. Thai Raksa Chart was established to back up the Shinawatras' main political vehicle Pheu Thai, which won the 2011 elections

with a landslide. Conversely, its downfall—the party lasted for just four months—is a major fillip to its army-allied rivals who are fielding current junta leader Prayut Chan-O-Cha as their candidate for premier.

Thai Raksa Chart was set to compete in 174 constituencies with 108 candidates vying for seats through the party list—a system to allocate extra parliamentary seats according to the proportion of votes they scoop up. Grim-faced party executives, all dressed in black suits and led by party leader Preechapol Pongpanich, filed out of the Constitutional Court through the ranks of media. Fighting back tears, Preechapol told reporters the party was "extremely saddened" by the dissolution, a ruling which "will affect the rights and freedoms" of candidates and voters.

'Deja vu'

The same court has disbanded two other parties linked to the Shinawatra dynasty—and toppled two of its prime ministers—in the last 13 years of political turmoil since Thaksin was booted from office by a coup in 2006. The legal moves were "deja vu", said political analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak of Chulalongkorn University, in a country trapped in a spin-dryer of short-lived civilian governments, bloody street protests and coups.

The last army power grab toppled Thaksin's sister Yingluck in 2014. There were tears among the smattering of die-hard Shinawatra supporters gathered near the court. "Can we have democracy? We have fought for it for more than 10 years," Oye, 51, told AFP, giving only one name. Thais have powered Shinawatra-linked parties to government at every poll since 2001 only to be knocked down by the courts and coups. —AFP

Ambush kills 6 Iraqi paramilitary forces

MAKHMUR: Six Iraqi paramilitary forces were killed and more than 30 others wounded in an ambush on a desolate road south of Mosul, a local official and security forces said yesterday. Unidentified assailants on Wednesday night attacked a convoy of Hashed al-Shaabi fighters who were going on leave and therefore unarmed, the security forces' media centre said. "Six fighters were killed and 31 more were wounded and transferred to the Qayyarah hospital," the statement said.

The attack took place on the road between Mosul and the town of Makhmur, areas that Iraqi troops and allied paramilitary units recaptured from the Islamic State group in 2017. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the killings. "It's the first attack of its kind after the liberation," Rezkar Mohammad, a local official in Makhmur said. "The area is vast and open, and we already warned forces here that it hadn't been totally cleared," he said.

Iraqi forces had deployed in the area in pursuit of the attackers, Mohammad said. Baghdad declared victory against IS in late 2017 but jihadist sleeper cells still mount hit-and-run attacks against military positions, particularly in Iraq's north and west. Security forces have also warned that IS fighters could slip across the porous border from neighboring Syria to escape a blistering US-backed assault on their final redoubt there. — AFP