

# [***Thai court orders election-winning party to end its royal reform campaign in blow to voters who backed change***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B77-0GN1-JBSS-S001-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

January 31, 2024 Wednesday 8:23 AM GMT

Copyright 2024 Cable News Network All Rights Reserved

**Length:** 1339 words

**Byline:** By Helen Regan and Kocha Olarn, CNN

**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

Bangkok, Thailand (CNN) &#8212; A [*Thai*](https://www.cnn.com/world/asia/thailand) court on Wednesday ordered the kingdom's most popular political party to end its campaign to amend the country's notoriously strict royal defamation law, dashing its supporters hopes for reform of the powerful monarchy.

The Constitutional Court in Bangkok ruled the progressive Move Forward Party, which won the most seats in last year's election, violated the constitution through its campaign to amend the lese majeste law.

It ruled Move Forward and its leaders, including former prime ministerial hopeful Pita Limjaroenrat, sought to overthrow the constitutional monarchy through their actions.

The ruling is considered a blow to the Southeast Asian country's reform movement and the millions of young people who delivered a crushing defeat to the conservative, military-backed establishment by voting for change.

And analysts say it opens the door for further prosecutions to be brought, which could ultimately see Thailand's most successful party at the last election dissolved, and bans and criminal charges levied at its leaders.

In its ruling, the court said many Move Forward lawmakers had campaigned to abolish the lese majeste law, face charges under the royal defamation legislation, or used their position to bail out others charged under it.

The court ordered the party to "stop any act, opinion expression via speech, writing, publishing or advertisement or conveying any message in other forms" with the aim to abolish or amend the law.

The ruling could now ensure that no party or person would legally be able to push for amendments to lese majeste, known as Section 112, without violating the constitution.

"This would effectively mean that the lese majeste law would become untouchable," said Munin Pongsapan, associate professor at Thammasat University's Faculty of Law. "The only way to amend it would be to get rid of the current constitution and draft a new one that reduces the Constitutional Court's power and jurisdiction."

Munin added that such a ruling "would severely violate the constitution itself that it meddles with the parliament's sovereign legislative power."

Ahead of the verdict, Move Forward spokesperson Parit Wacharasindhu told CNN the ruling could have "far-reaching implications or place potential restrictions on the actions of parliamentarians and political actors going into the future."

But Move Forward lawmaker Wiroj Lakkhanaadisorn said on social media platform X that the reform movement would continue whatever happened to the party.

"Regarding party dissolution, I have never been worried, I would say, I simply shrug my shoulders since in my heart the word 'party' has already become an ideology. Dissolved or not, we will continue," he said.

[*Thailand*](https://www.cnn.com/world/asia/thailand) has some of the world's strictest lese majeste laws, and criticizing the king, queen, or heir apparent can lead to a maximum 15-year prison sentence for each offense - which makes even talking about the royal family [*fraught with risk*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/19/asia/thailand-king-son-lese-majeste-exhibit-intl-hnk/index.html).

Sentences for those convicted under lese majeste can be decades long and hundreds of people have been [*prosecuted in recent years*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/14/asia/thailand-lese-majeste-rukchanok-srinok-intl-hnk/index.html).

Earlier this month, a Thai appeal court extended a man's prison sentence [*to a record 50 years*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/19/asia/thailand-man-sentenced-50-years-lese-majeste-record-intl-hnk/index.html) for insulting the monarchy, in what is believed to be the toughest penalty ever imposed under the lese majeste law.

Move Forward pledged to reduce lese majeste sentences and limit who can bring forward a case. Anyone - including ordinary citizens - can bring lese majeste charges on behalf of the king, even if they are not directly involved with the case.

For years, [*human rights organizations*](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/02/thailand-un-experts-alarmed-rise-use-lese-majeste-laws) and free speech campaigners have said the lese majeste law has been used as a [*political tool*](https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/17/asia/thailand-democracy-protests-monarchy-intl-hnk/index.html) to silence critics of the Thai government.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a political scientist from Chulalongkorn University, said Wednesday's verdict "raises questions about the monarchy's role in Thailand's constitutional order."

"The court decision to uphold the lese majeste law as sacrosanct beyond accountability may suggest that Thailand functions within a monarchical order rather than under a constitution with popular legitimacy."

Thitinan added that the prosecution of Move Forward "will likely heighten tensions and put the royalist establishment on a collision course with growing demands for reform and progress."

Protests ignited over similar ruling by same court

Once a taboo subject, the issue of royal reform and amendments to lese majeste has seen a turning point in Thailand since huge youth-led protests in 2020, [*with people increasingly speaking*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/11/asia/thailand-election-move-forward-youth-intl-hnk/index.html) about the monarchy openly and publicly, despite the legal risks.

Hundreds of thousands of predominantly young people took to the streets in towns and cities across the country, demanding democratic, military and constitutional reforms, as well as [*reforms to the powerful monarchy*](https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/13/asia/thailand-protest-panusaya-king-intl-hnk/index.html).

For the first time, the idea of a sacrosanct monarchy and a king shielded from public scrutiny was openly challenged by a new generation of young Thais.

[*King Maha Vajiralongkorn*](https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/01/asia/thailand-king-vajiralongkorn-protests-intl-hnk/index.html) ascended to the throne in 2016 after the death of his father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who had reigned for seven decades.

Protesters demanding royal reform wanted to abolish the lese majeste law, and to ensure the king is answerable to the constitution, with protesters scrutinizing Vajiralongkorn's immense wealth and power.

The catalyst for those protests was a similar ruling made by the same court four years ago.

Move Forward's predecessor, the Future Forward Party, came out of nowhere to win the third most seats in the 2019 election.

But shortly afterward, several of the party's leaders were [*banned from* ***politics***](https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/06/asia/thailand-election-thanathorn-sedition-charges-intl/index.html) and the party was later dissolved after the Constitutional Court ruled it had violated electoral finance rules.

Many of those who took part in the protests now face lese majeste charges and long jail sentences and rights groups say the right to freedom of expression in Thailand has come under increased attack since 2020.

Legal Rights group Thai Lawyers for Human Rights said that since the start of those protests in July 2020, at least 1,938 people have been prosecuted for their participation in political assemblies, with at least 262 people charged with lese majeste during that time.

Little hope of change for 'lost generation'

Move Forward won the most seats and the largest share of the popular vote in the May, 2023 election.

The result was a decisive victory for progressive parties and delivered a crushing blow to the conservative, military-backed establishment that has ruled on and off for decades, often by turfing out popularly elected governments in coups.

But Move Forward was [*prevented from forming a government*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/23/asia/thailand-explainer-election-prime-minister-intl-hnk/index.html) because it failed to win enough [*support for its royal reform agenda in parliament,*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/12/asia/thailand-parliament-prime-ministerial-vote-intl-hnk/index.html) which heavily favors the establishment under a political system implemented by the previous ruling military junta.

Pita then resigned as leader of the party, which is now in opposition.

Thailand's turbulent political history has previously seen parties that have pushed for change run afoul of the powerful establishment - a nexus of the military, monarchy and influential elites.

Lawmakers have faced bans, [*parties have been dissolved*](https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/09/asia/thanathorn-thailand-democracy-intl-hnk/index.html), and governments have been overthrown. Thailand has witnessed a dozen successful coups since 1932, including two in the past two decades.

The purportedly independent election commission, anti-corruption commission and the Constitutional Court are all dominated by members in favor of the establishment.

During the election, young people told CNN they felt they were the [*"forgotten generation"*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/11/asia/thailand-election-move-forward-youth-intl-hnk/index.html) living under military-backed rule for nine years, while they struggled to find work or buy a home. "We just can't see our future in this country," one young lawmaker said.

Wednesday's ruling will likely only further entrench that feeling for many young supporters that there is little hope for change within Thailand's political system.

By Helen Regan and Kocha Olarn, CNN

TM & © 2024 Cable News Network, Inc., a Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

**Load-Date:** January 31, 2024

**End of Document**