

## **The Political Parties' Communication during the 2019 General Election in Thailand**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Political parties are important political institutions functioning as a link between the state and the people in a democratic system. For this reason, it is crucial to build a strong political party in which political communication plays an important role. To create a long-term relationship with the voters which will lead to the sustained and increased popularity needed in future elections, each political party and its electoral candidates need to communicate before, during, and after the election. Political marketing is a strategy that helps political parties understand people's needs and create an image that will stay at the top of minds of the voters and win their votes. For Thailand, the 28th general election on 24 March 2019 was the first general election after the 2014 coup d'état, amidst intense political polarization and economic recession. This study, therefore, intends to contrastively describe the competitive election campaigns of the Thai political parties, particularly the three parties with distinctive characteristics: one was a 20-year champion overthrown twice by a coup; one was a newly-founded party supported by the military; and, one was a brand-new party founded by new-generation politicians whose most candidates had no experience in the electoral arena.

**Keywords:** political communication; political marketing; election campaign; Thai politics

### **Introduction**

An election is a competition among political parties who proposed their policies to persuade voters, who are the holders of sovereignty, to cast their votes so that the majority party will form a government. The winning parties will subsequently revise and make the campaign proposals become government policies to be announced to the parliament, a continuing commitment to be fulfilled as people's representatives. Therefore, a number of political communication approaches to be made before, during and after the election were significant in order to fulfill the people's right to know and right to receive public services according to the campaign proposals, which helps to maintain or even increase popularity in the next election.

From 1932 to 2021, Thailand has been declared as a democratic nation for 89 years, but it has undergone more military coups d'état than most countries in modern political history—13 successful coups, once every 6-7 years on average. The two recent coups toppled the government of Yingluck Shinawatra of The Pheu Thai Party in 2014 and the government of

Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's elder brother in 2006. From a scholastic analytical perspective, the two main factors that trigger coups d'état in Thailand are the semi-democratic system and the normalization of coups. A military coup has become a tolerable solution to a political crisis as there are still some groups of people requesting that the military take part in political solutions (Chitty, 2019).

Thailand's 28th general election on 24 March 2019 was the first election of members of the House of Representatives, also called members of parliament (MPs) after Thai people had been governed by a military junta under the name of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) for nearly five years following the coup d'état on 22 February 2014. It was held under the 2017 Constitution of Thailand which has been criticized for its undemocratic cause and content. The constitution drafted by a junta-appointed commission legitimizes power prolongation mechanisms, particularly the Transitory Provisions which stipulate that an approval of a person suitable to be appointed as Prime Minister during the initial period of 5 years shall be done by a joint sitting of the National Assembly (iLaw, 2017). In other words, the 250 NCPO-appointed senators shall cast their votes together with the 500 elected MPs of the House of Representatives to approve Prime Minister.

Looking back at the elections in the 20 preceding years, from The Thai Rak Thai Party to The People's Power Party and The Pheu Thai Party, they totally won 4 out of the latest 6 elections in 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2011. It was indicated in academic papers that the success of The Thai Rak Thai Party was led by their use of political marketing to create interaction between the government and the people. People's problems were perceived and transformed into policies in response to people's needs. People were consistently informed of what the party had accomplished for them. The party, therefore, retained its popularity even after it was dissolved in 2007 (Nanthawaropas, 2015). In the 2011 election campaign, The Pheu Thai Party's restatement of the Thai Rak Thai government's policies regained confidence in the party's products (Phanthongrak & Sawasdee, 2013).

An election serves several key functions namely, giving people an opportunity to evaluate the previous government's performance, selecting the next government to administer the country, and selecting a set of public policies. It is also a tool for managing social and political conflicts in a democratic system, as well as a monitor showing the nation's electoral system which mirrors distinctive political party organizational systems, the cause of advantages and disadvantages in a political arena (Pankaew, 2021). Therefore, with an interest in seeing how political parties as organizations, in this election, communicated their policies to convince people and used the media to bring about victories under a forked road situation—the transition to democracy or the preservation of the junta's prolonged power through electoral mechanisms and the 2017 Constitution, the researchers aimed at studying the election campaign communication and the use of the media by political parties during the 2019 Thailand general election.

## **Research Framework and Methodology**

### ***Review of Literature***

To answer the research question of what communication strategy the political parties used and how they collaborate with the media to achieve their political goals, the researchers applied a combination of communication concepts and the political marketing concept of Jennifer Lees-Marshment (2001) to analyze what political parties proposed to obtain people's votes in return. The marketing concept was applied to discover people's needs, fulfill people's

needs, and communicate to present the products, which were the candidates and the party's policies in this case, towards winning the election.

Such concept suggested that political parties be classified into 3 types according to their objectives as follows. 1) A product-oriented party consistently focused on the proposed directions at all levels including the party's policies, leadership, MPs, candidates, members, symbols, and all activities, with insistence and confidence that voters would vote for the party after realizing the virtue of its directions. This type of party would never change its concept or policy despite election failure. 2) A sales-oriented party focused on selling the party's presumed policies. With awareness that the proposals might not be presently needed by the voters, the party used marketing data in seeking to understand the voters, and used advertising techniques and persuasive communication to convince the voters to believe that the party's directions were right. The party would not change the policy to meet the voters' demand but try to generate the voters' desire for the party's proposals. And, 3) A market-oriented party focused on designing its policies to provide voter satisfaction. After using marketing data to search for and analyze the voters' needs, the party then selected the candidates and made the policies that would satisfy the voter's needs. It would not try to change what people thought but deliver what people wanted. However, not only the voter's needs but also the feasibility of the proposals should be taken into account. The party must ensure that those proposals could be implemented if it became the government, or it might risk losing long-term support. Besides, the proposals also required the party's consensus (Lees-Marshment, 2001). Such different characteristics, therefore, resulted in the 3 political parties having distinctive marketing processes and political communication strategies. The concept of how the news and information about the party was distributed was also applied. When the content is distributed by a candidate through the party-owned media to party members and local supporters, it is called push marketing; when it is distributed through the mass media, it is called pull marketing (Newman, 1994). The analysis also included image theory which is related to agenda setting theory and communicating through the new media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Political marketing is, therefore, an essential tool in helping political parties to understand people's needs, specify the target groups and communication strategies, and create a political brand to attract voters. It also influences the party's policy development and leaders' decision-making. Therefore, the process of employing political communication methods before, during and after the election is very important for building a long-term relationship with the voters in order to retain or increase popularity in the next elections.

However, the use of political marketing has been a disputable issue as it has deep and wide impacts on democracy. It has been viewed as having a hidden agenda after big data were used in marketing research in the cases of the USA's 2016 presidential election and the UK's 2016 Brexit referendum. The pros and cons probably depend on how political marketing is used by politicians. It might lead to a destructive political operation like the spinning and obscuring of scandals in the movie *Wag the Dog* (1997) Nevertheless, the modern-day politics is unable to operate without political marketing (Lees-Marshment, 2019). The Malaysia's 14th general election in 2018 is an interesting example. The opposition coalition known as *Pakatan Harapan* used big data to focus its campaign on analyzing and targeting specific groups of voters. It particularly attracted young voters and used the social media to launch sensational election campaigns. With the country in the midst of political polarization, the increased number of government haters, and the economic problems, the governmental coalition *BN* led by *UMNO* was finally defeated by the opposition coalition after it had been in power for 61 years. However, the victory was viewed as the destruction of the past rather than the acceptance of democracy (Welsh, (2018).

### ***Research Design***

This qualitative research studied the campaign communication and the use of the media of the political parties in the 2019 Thailand general election. The sample consisted of 3 main political parties namely, The Pheu Thai Party, The Palang Pracharath Party, and The Future Forward Party. Data were collected through a study of the relevant documents and in-depth interviews with the heads of communication of the three parties and the executives or the editors of the party-owned media conducted between 30 September 2018 and 15 May 2019 on the 4 main topics of 1) the party's policy design, 2) the party's communication strategy, 3) the party's election campaign, and 4) the party's use of the media.

## **The Parties' Communication and Election Campaign**

### ***The Pheu Thai Party***

The Pheu Thai Party is the same political group as The Thai Rak Thai Party and The People's Power Party that were dissolved by the Constitutional Court in 2007 and 2008 respectively. Newly-founded in 1997, The Thai Rak Thai Party was the first party to use political marketing in an election campaign, through which it won the election in 2011. It operated using a market-oriented party's approaches as follows. Step 1, Conduct market intelligence—Pol.Lt.Col. Thaksin Shinawatra, party leader meeting with people, academics and SME entrepreneurs to recognize their needs. Step 2, Based on the data, design a product—a policy focusing on local economy. Step 3, adjust the policy to suit a large group of voters, the new middle class—coming up with the main campaign slogan of “Reduce expenses, Increase income, Expand opportunities.” Step 4, Implement the policy. Step 5, Communicate the policy directly to the target groups by creating a communication network within the party—the party membership system. Step 6, Campaign—knocking door to door, rally speeches, using the mainstream media. Step 7, Win a general election. And, Step 8, Deliver the implementation of the policy when becoming a government. In addition, the party came up with more campaign slogans in the following years such as “30-baht Universal Healthcare” in 2002 and “SML funds, Drop state's force, Boost people's power” in 2004, communicated its performance through party members and the state media, bought commercial time in cinemas and on TV and radio consistently for a long period of time, and built a good relationship with the mainstream media through which the party's exclusive news was distributed (P. Wechayachai, personal communication, September 6, 2018). By fulfilling the proposed commitments and consistently communicating its performance, the party won 3 out of the latest 5 elections in 2005, 2007 and 2011 (the 2006 and the 2014 ones were disrupted by a coup).

The condition of the 28th election was different from those of the past. The military government had scripted some rules that did not favor policy competition as follows. 1) Political parties shall commence their political activities 6 months prior to the election (Khaosod Online, 2018). 2) Sections 64-65 of the 2017 Constitution stipulate that the government shall comply with the National Strategy. 3) Section 57 of the 2017 Organic Act on Political Parties requires that the source of the budget spent on the proposed policies be declared. 4) Section 140 of the Transitory Provisions of the 2017 Organic Act on Political Parties requires members of a previous party to have an updated membership confirmation letter. And 5) It is a political fact that an election is a combat between the transition to democracy and the preservation of the junta's prolonged power by means of electoral mechanisms and the 2017 Constitution drafted by a junta-appointed commission (Treesuwan, 2019). Motivated by such condition, The Pheu Thai Party decided to use the approaches of a product-oriented party. Step 1, Design the products—being a successful party of the past and presenting itself as a leader of “the democratic parties”. However, market-oriented approaches were integrated with the use of big data to analyze the voters' needs individually, resulting in

the proposed products—the party’s former MPs being allocated to the small parties it set up namely, The Thai Raksa Chart Party, The Puea Chat Party, and The Prachachat Party to deal with the new election rule called the “mixed member proportional representation system”<sup>1</sup> (Nanthawaropas & Saengpong, 2019).

Step 2, Communicate and Step 3, Campaign—the policies were proposed through the former Thai Rak Thai Party’s member base. The MP candidates, the prime ministerial candidates, and the campaign team went knocking door to door, deliver campaign speeches in all the areas, and communicated through the mainstream media. It consistently maintained a good relationship with the media like it had before, openly had private and group meetings with news reporters, editors, columnists and the owners to discuss and understand the issue, explain, sell the policy, listen to political echoes and movements, and provide exclusive news for every media house’s exclusive space as required (P. Wechayachai, personal communication, September 6, 2018). The party also obtained a media space from Voice TV, a party’s medium owned by the Shinawatra family. The TV station hosted news analysis programs, stood for democratic principles and liberalism, clearly and progressively exposed social issues, criticized the work of the Election Commission and the government, and opened space for the prime ministerial candidates and the leading figures from The Pheu Thai Party. The station added a 30-min program at 2.30 p.m. for daily news updates and organized a debate program for the prime ministerial candidates (P. Kongsip, personal communication, March 12, 2019). The party created and managed its political image by sending the party’s prime ministerial candidates namely, Sudarat Keyuraphan, Chadchart Sittipunt and Chaikasem Nitisiri to participate and share their visions in the debate programs on TV channels and public stages totally 16 times, the second in number after the candidate from The Future Forward Party (The Matter, 2019).

However, in Step 4, regardless of being the top winner in the election and obtaining 136 seats in constituencies, The Thai Raksa Chart Party, one of the products, was dissolved by the Constitutional Court on 7 March 2019 for nominating Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya Sirivadhana Barnavadi as its prime ministerial candidate from the party list on 8 February 2019. The Constitutional Court justified that such action would undermine the fundamental value of the Thai constitutional monarchy by which the monarchs are to reign but not to rule<sup>2</sup> (BBC Thai, 2019). Despite primarily obtaining a total of 255 MP seats with those of the other 6 parties included, the Election Commission’s calculation formula entitled the parties that obtained a score below the average of 71,168 points to have 1 MP seat, resulting in each of 11 parties having 1 party-list member (with scores of 33 thousand - 68 thousand) sitting in the House of Representatives. That cut the preceding gathered seats exceeding one half of the house down to 245, which included 80 from The Future Forward Party, 10 from The Thai Liberal Party, 7 from The Prachachat Party, 6 from The New Economics Party, 5 from The Puea Chat Party, and 1 from The Thai People Power Party (BBC Thai, 2019). And, without any supporting vote from the 250 NCPO-appointed senators, the party was unable to form a government.

### ***The Palang Pracharath Party***

Regardless of being a newly founded party, The Palang Pracharath Party was led by the junta’s high position figures. It invited candidates who were former MPs from several parties

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<sup>1</sup> An electoral system created to incapacitate The Pheu Thai Party providing that the House of Representatives shall consist of the 350 winning seats from a one-constituency-one-vote contest and the 150 seats from party lists. Voters shall cast their votes for both a candidate and a party all at once on one ballot card. The scores shall be subject to the proportional allocation of the MPs nationwide. A party whose number of seats from constituencies has reached the maximum allocated proportion shall not have additional seats from the party list (Sections 83, 86 and 91 of the 2017 Constitution of Thailand).

<sup>2</sup> On the night of 8 February, there was an announcement on the Thai constitutional monarchy which partly stated that the monarchs including all the royal family members, being apolitical and politically neutral by the constitutional provisions, may not hold any political position for it is contrary to the intent of the Constitution (Matichon Online, 2019).

to join the party. It nominated Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, the coup leader as its prime ministerial candidate. With its name resonating the NCPO junta's policy—"civil state (pracha-rath) policy" and its leading figures being one flesh with the present government, the party was considered having been in the position regardless of being founded on 2 March 2018. In this election, it operated using a sales-oriented party's approaches. Step 1, Design the products—proposing the sustained policies from the junta such as the state welfare cards and the agricultural produce prices monitoring (Nanthawaropas & Saengpong, 2019). This step also featured the discourse of "Looking for peace, you need Uncle Too" and featured Gen. Prayuth's creating a political fact that the nation had enjoyed the past 4 years of peace and harmony under the junta (BBC Thai, 2019). Step 2, Conduct market intelligence—specifying the target groups to suit the party's policies, which were the grassroots and government officers. And, Step 4, Campaign—the pro-NCPO party leaders led by Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, Prime Minister (party's non-member) made field visits to meet people as a duty of the operating government, and communicated through radio and The Television Pool of Thailand every evening after 6 p.m. and every Friday night with TV5 being the server.

The party had actually been communicating with the public following the coup d'état in 2014 through special programs where the government's achievements were presented. Shortly before the election, the NBT (Ch11) of The National Broadcasting Services of Thailand, one of the state media, was used to broadcast programs such as interviews with ministers or governmental agencies and the government's field visits to acknowledge people's concerns. The programs were meant to refute other parties' policies and motivate the audience to cast their votes for moral candidates and not for vote buyers. The government also released Lieutenant General Sansern Kaewkamnerd from the Government Spokesman and appointed him Director-General of the Public Relations Department in October 2018 to supervise the distribution of information towards civilians' better acknowledgment and understanding of the government. Therefore, one role of the station was to present short video clips on the social media spotlighting the Prime Minister and the government crew visiting people on a field trip. Moreover, extra programs such as morning news talk and evening conversation were added to the schedule to proactively present facts to refute the rivals' discourse (S. Kaewkamnerd, personal communication, May 10, 2019).

It formed an economic team consisting of the party's leading figures led by a group of economic ministers in the NCPO government such as, Uttama Savanayana, party leader and Minister of Industry; Sonthirat Sonthijirawong, party secretary-general and Minister of Commerce; Suvit Maesincee, deputy party leader and Minister of Science and Technology; Kobsak Pootrakool, Prime Minister's Office Minister and the party's spokesman. They were to communicate and campaign by delivering rally speeches on big stages in big cities and communicate through television. This group of leaders and the pro-NCPO leaders were supposed to go around to explain the party's policies to the owners, the editors and the columnists of the mainstream media and listen to the echoes. Then emerged a group of former MPs led by the happy "Three Friends" consisting of Somsak Thapsutin, a former Sukhothai MP, Anucha Nakasai, a former Chai Nat MP, and Suriya Juangroongruangkit, a former multiple-term minister. These former MPs were to ride on a campaign truck to make themselves known, knock doors to hand out self-introduction, make phone calls, stage small rallies of 200-500 people, conduct Q&A sessions to communicate the policies by interacting with the participants, communicate the policies through a song (composed by Add Carabao), and communicate through the mainstream media by proving news and explain to the field reporters about the policies and the political issues being attacked (S. Thapsutin, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Although the party did not create and manage political image by sending the prime ministerial candidate which was Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha to debate and share vision on any public stage; as well as the economic team who participated in the debates 50% less than the other two parties in the research )The Matter, 2019), in Step 5, Election, the party won the second place, obtaining 116 seats, consisting of 97 seats in constituencies and 19 seats from the party list. Nevertheless, by adding votes from the joint parties and obtaining 250 votes from the NCPO-appointed senators, Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, having received 500 supportive votes against 244 negative votes, became Prime Minister on 5 June 2019 and was entitled to form a government comprised of 19 political parties. Concerning the implementation of the policies in Step 6, the policies had already been announced to the Parliament, but after 2 years, the major campaign proposals namely, a minimum daily wage of 425 baht, a bachelor's degree holder's salary of 20,000 baht, a vocational diploma's holder's salary of 18,000 baht, and a 10% reduction on personal income tax have not been implemented) Bangkok Business Online, 2021).

### ***The Future Forward Party***

The Future Forward Party was a brand-new party in this election, co-founded and led by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, a businessman and Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, an academic. Its MP candidates were from new generations and had diverse professional backgrounds. Almost all of the candidates had never applied for an election. Being a new face and having no popularity or accomplishments, it must present its alternative strengths. The party, therefore, focused on using a product-oriented party's approaches. Step 1, Design the product—the party's ideology of right, liberty and democracy, and Thanathorn, the party leader from a new generation who operated the party by integrating other approaches with a market-oriented party's approaches in analyzing individual needs to specifically communicate the policy. One unique proposal was to abolish conscription, in response to the new generation target groups. Step 2, Communicate—the party built a member base by extending invitations to become the party's volunteers and invitations to become the party's members with a membership fee, holding issue-based activities, and art, music and cultural events to make the party accessible to people. It also arranged to have its fans meet with the party's leading figures, and provide space for public use )C. Tulathon, personal communication, May 15, 2019).

Step 3, Campaign—the party initially staged small rallies of 200 people at some city markets. The size of the stage became larger as the party increased popularity. To gain support, the candidates and the campaign team rode on a campaign truck, handed out flyers, knocked doors to introduce themselves. They were accompanied by the party leader and the leading figures of the party. It had a media production team to create news content, pictures and video clips on the important issues featured in the party's leaders' speeches and campaign activities. It raised issues of making better social changes and modifying power relations towards empowered people. Many interesting insights and ideas from the candidates were heavily distributed on the social media, targeting the large group of 8 million new voters. They went viral and attracted lots of followers as well as the trendy hashtag #FahLovesDaddy on the social media, which formed a fan club called Futurista, consisting of supporters and volunteers who helped promote the party through the shared media so massively that the earned media like TV channels were interested and consistently gave the party a campaign space (P. Wanich, personal communication, May 2, 2019; C. Thuaprakhon, personal communication, May 15, 2019). It kept creating activities to generate a sense of community such as, sitting in a circle with the audience instead of making a speech on stage, appearing at a contemporary place such as Siam Square to attract teenagers to take some selfies, which would later become news on the major media. The party also made its branded merchandise such as T-shirts for the supporters to buy and wear and show their pride (S. Jiu, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

The party also created and managed its political image by presenting Thanathorn's image of a person with ideals, persistent standpoint, world-class vision, and attributes of modern generations who participated in every debate available on TV, dared to appear on the programs hosted by the rival parties' media partners, and spoke in domestic and international panel discussions, so as to make the party's image stand out and extensively acknowledged (P. Wanish, personal communication, May 2, 2019). As a result, statistics showed that Thanathorn participated in more debates than any other prime ministerial candidates (The Matter, 2519). For Step 4, Election—the party won the third place, obtaining 81 MP seats—31 in constituencies and 50 from the party list. Even after collaborating with The Pheu Thai Party and 5 other parties and Thanathorn being nominated as a prime ministerial candidate in the National Assembly, the party only obtained 244 votes which was less than half of a total of 747 votes and not enough to form a government.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The political marketing and the election campaign strategies of the 3 parties in the study can be summarized as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Summary of the Political Marketing and the Election Campaign Strategies of the Sample

Party	Type of Political Marketing Orientation				Emphasis
	Product	Sales	Market	Image	
<b>Pheu Thai</b>	/	x	integrated	x	communicating through the member bases from the past, making field visits, knocking doors, highlighting past achievements and democratic standing, spreading policies through the mainstream media, party-owned media and media partners, communicating with social media target audience making field visits as the government, inviting former MPs, staging small campaigns in form of panel discussion, highlighting peace and continuing policies, spreading information through the state media and the mainstream media
<b>Palang Pracharath</b>	x	/	x	x	building a member base, staging small campaigns, highlighting progressive policies, resisting the prolongation of power, highlighting the party leader, creating its own media, communicating through all online social media platforms, targeting new generations of audience
<b>Future Forward</b>	/	x	integrated	integrated	highlighting the party leader, creating its own media, communicating through all online social media platforms, targeting new generations of audience



Overall, the top 3 winning parties in the Thailand's 28th general election typically used similar campaign communication methods which were putting up cut-out signs, handing out introduction cards, making campaign speeches, knocking doors, and using the mass media. However, each party had a distinctive focus according to their different political marketing processes, which was in compliance with political conditions and each party's conditions.

The Pheu Thai Party being ranked number one in the election with majority MP seats highlights the importance of applying political marketing in finding the voters' needs. This was the 5th victory out of the 7 continuing and long-lasting victories of the party in the electoral arena despite barely proposing new policies in this election. In addition, the most vital key to gaining popularity from the voters was using interpersonal communication to build a strong member base.

The Palang Pracharath Party, regardless of being a new party, had the most advantage of being one body with the junta in position and holding the state power mechanisms and all the budgets. Even though the party used the strategy of issuing populist welfare policies, similar to that of the Pheu Thai Party, in an attempt to snatch the votes in the countryside, it failed in this election. The failure was due to its being "an interim party" where politicians from different groups are gathered together, and not having been communicating long enough to build a strong member base.

The Future Forward Party, a new competitor in the electoral arena won the third place mainly because of its understanding of social disruption and the new generations' fashion and mindset which were centered around democracy and being interconnected through modern communication networks. Therefore, the party's communication strategy was employed through the online platforms which resulted in the party gaining its fan clubs and extensive communication networks, hence how to gain popularity in the contemporary communication landscape.

In spite of obtaining majority MP seats, The Pheu Thai Party was automatically barred from success by the electoral mechanisms designed to favor the parties that had the military's support. The conditions of political activities and freedom of speech being restricted, and an elected government with multiple terms of service being repeatedly attacked by the junta's pro-oligarchy discourse reflected the authoritarian's clear recognition of the significance of communication. Such perception resulted in all formats of communication being controlled and limited by the regime's mechanisms, forcing the rivals to compete in an unfamiliar game that benefited the junta the most. However, the authoritarian might not realize how much society had changed dramatically. Being ranked the third top winner through communicating with new voters on the social media platforms, The Future Forward Party did pose a challenge to the existence of oligarchy.

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