

Thailand parliament elects pro-army Chuan Leekpai as house speaker

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Former prime minister Chuan Leekpai, 80, was named speaker after the House of Representatives voted 258-235 in his favor in the first working session of the lower chamber.

Former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai came up against another candidate who was backed by more liberal parties. (AP Photo/Sakchai LaLit)

Bangkok: A military-aligned candidate won majority support to become Thailand's house speaker Saturday, signaling further dominance of the army in the next government, five years after it staged a coup.

Former prime minister Chuan Leekpai, 80, was named speaker after the House of Representatives voted 258-235 in his favor in the first working session of the lower chamber. Chuan came up against another candidate who was backed by more liberal parties.

The pro-military Palang Pracharath Party, which nominated Chuan, is tipped to lead the new government expected to be formed in the next few weeks and headed by the junta leader, Prayuth Chan-ocha, who staged the coup and has served as prime minister since then.

The vote for prime minister is jointly taken by the 500-member House and the 250-member Senate, where Prayuth already has the solid support because he helped appoint the lawmakers for the upper chamber.

Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leader of the anti-military Future Forward Party, was earlier ordered out of the Saturday session after a court suspended him for allegedly breaking election rules.

He spoke briefly to acknowledge his expulsion but his attempt to address the assembly drew loud and vehement protests from pro-military lawmakers.

Thanathorn pressed on before leaving to a sustained standing ovation from his party members. The applause continued despite the acting speaker telling them to stop.

“Enough,” said Acting House Speaker Chai Chidchob. “This isn't a theater. Stop.”

The suspension of Thanathorn was widely seen as a further move to weaken anti-military opposition. The newly formed Future Forward party came from nowhere to become the third largest in the lower house. Its progressive agenda, which includes ending conscription and curbing the military's role in politics, has rattled Thailand's traditional ruling elite.

In the coming weeks, the Constitutional Court is expected to decide whether to turn Thanathorn's suspension into a disqualification. The court, like the army, is widely seen as being close to the country's conservative power brokers.

- AP