

Former Thai prime minister Thaksin faces new criminal charges

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Thailand's Office of the Attorney-General (OAG) announced on May 29 that former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra will be charged under the country's draconian *lèse-majesté* law for statements made nearly 10 years ago. The decision is another indication of the breakdown of the unstable alliance between the current ruling party, Pheu Thai, and the traditional elites including the military, which continues to exercise considerable political power.

The OAG has accused Thaksin of *lèse-majesté* based on a 2015 interview conducted with South Korea's *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper during which he stated that members of the king's privy council were involved in the 2014 military coup that overthrew the government of Thaksin's sister, Yingluck. Thaksin is scheduled to be formally indicted on June 18. He reportedly has contracted COVID and is being given time to recover.

Thaksin served as prime minister from 2001 to 2006 before the military ousted him in a coup, accusing him of corruption as a means of justifying his removal. Facing significant jail time, Thaksin spent 15 years in self-imposed exile before returning to Thailand last August as part of a deal worked out between Pheu Thai and the military. That agreement allowed Pheu Thai to form a government in a coalition with military-backed parties, in which the latter would exercise control through the appointment of its officials in the cabinet of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin.

Thaksin, the *de facto* leader of Pheu Thai, had an eight-year prison sentence reduced to one year by King Vajiralongkorn. Claiming illness, he then spent six months in the Police General Hospital in Bangkok before being granted parole.

Despite claims to the contrary, Thaksin has engaged in political activity since leaving the hospital in February. That month, he met with Hun Sen, Cambodia's former long-time prime minister and current president of the country's Senate. Thaksin also met with Malaysia's

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim early last month during which the two reportedly discussed conflict involving Thai Muslims near the Thailand-Malaysia border and fighting in Myanmar between the government and rebel groups. Thaksin held talks with these groups in March and April, reportedly to play a mediating role.

The military and other layers of the traditional elites, including the courts, the bureaucracy and the monarchy, are now moving against Thaksin and Pheu Thai. Prime Minister Srettha faces accusations of ethics violations from military-aligned senators that could result in being removed from office. Furthermore, the largest party in the National Assembly, the Move Forward Party (MFP), faces dissolution by the Constitutional Court for advocating reforms of Thailand's *lèse-majesté* law.

Academics and political commentators have stated that the charges against Thaksin and Srettha are "warnings." Stithorn Thananithichot, director of the Office of Innovation for Democracy at King Prajadhipok's Institute told the *Bangkok Post*, "The *lèse-majesté* case is meant to be a warning to Thaksin not to step out of line. The (Pheu Thai-military) deal must be honored."

However, Pheu Thai's opportunist deal with the military last year to form a government created a highly unstable alliance between the two. In a country that has experienced two coups, mass protests and political violence over the last twenty years and the breakdown of the power-sharing deal nine months after it was reached, cannot be dismissed as simply "warnings."

The military and other sections of the traditional elite are making clear that they, not Pheu Thai or any civilian government, are the real power in Thailand. The military allowed Pheu Thai to take office last year believing it would be preferable to rigging the results of the May general election, as it did in 2019, and risk the renewal of mass, student-led protests that broke out as a result. The

MFP took the most seats in last year's election but was sidelined by legal moves against it.

These right-wing layers are unsatisfied with Srettha's government and Thaksin's influence. Srettha is now highly unpopular as a result of declining economic conditions, with Pita Limjaroenrat, the de facto leader of the MFP, the most popular candidate for prime minister with 46.9 percent support according to a poll released in May. Srettha garnered only 8.7 percent of support.

The military fears that social discontent could bring the working class into open struggle. Economic growth is slowing. The World Bank estimates that Thailand's GDP will grow at only 2.8 percent this year, a trend which is predicted to continue over the next 20 years and give Thailand one of the slowest growth rates in ASEAN.

Part of the economic difficulties Thailand faces is a result of the United States' trade war measures aimed at China, Bangkok's largest trading partner. The military cultivated closer relations with Beijing while in power. Srettha has attempted to look for other economic opportunities for attracting investment while still maintaining a balancing act between Beijing and Washington.

As the prices of goods grow, wages remain low, with the average daily minimum wage at just 350 baht (\$US9.52). Pheu Thai has pledged to raise the minimum wage to 400 baht (\$US10.88) in October, but this has been criticized by big business, which capitalizes on low labor costs. Household debt is also high, predicted to reach 91.4 percent of GDP this year.

Thailand is also experiencing a surge in COVID-19 cases, driven by the new KP variants of the virus. Between May 12 to 18, for example, there were 1,882 cases requiring hospitalization and 16 deaths. These figures are a serious under reporting of the true state of the pandemic as the government does not track the total number of cases.

However, the dispute now unfolding is not limited to the poor economy and social conditions. General Jaroenchai Hintao, the commander-in-chief of the Army, is set to retire from his post, the most powerful in the military, on September 30. Srettha has supported Assistant Army Commander General Ukrit Buntanon to take over from Jaroenchai, while Assistant Army Commander General Tharapong Malakam and Army Chief of Staff General Pana Klauplaudtu are also vying for the promotion.

The latter two generals belong to the Red Rim faction, a group of officers noted for their loyalty to King Vajiralongkorn, who created the faction in 2018. Given its

close relationship to the king, it is currently the most powerful faction in the military and far less inclined to accept civilian rule or its influence in the armed forces.

The Srettha government has also proposed a number of military reforms: reducing the number of active-duty generals from 1,700 to approximately 300; reducing military spending and establishing government limits on spending; and allowing conscripted soldiers time away to pursue education. These reforms have faced opposition from the military, which no doubt wants to make clear that even minor or symbolic attempts to limit its influence will not be tolerated.

The military also wants to guarantee that its economic interests are not threatened. The proposed reforms would also prevent the appointments of active-duty generals who previously engaged in criminal activity or who are under investigation for crimes, as well as a ban on doing business with the Defense Ministry.

The military has wide-ranging business interests throughout the country through which it enriches itself. In January, the lower house of the National Assembly created a committee to explore these business connections, which are shrouded in secrecy. These enterprises include golf courses, boxing stadiums, construction, hotels, and television and radio stations.

Whatever the exact reasons for the moves against Thaksin and Srettha, the court cases against them will only compound the bitter rivalry within Thai ruling circles that has wracked the country for more than two decades.



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