

New Thai prime minister: Daughter of former PM Thaksin Shinawatra

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On Friday, Thailand's National Assembly elected Paetongtarn Shinawatra as the new prime minister, two days after the military-appointed Constitutional Court in a 5-4 decision removed Srettha Thavisin from the post on the pretext of ethics violations. The ruling is part of the dispute within the ruling class over how to manage rising social tensions caused by the crisis of capitalism in Thailand and internationally.

Paetongtarn leads the ruling Pheu Thai Party (PTP), which stands at the head of an eleven-party coalition in parliament. She is the youngest daughter of party founder and its de facto head Thaksin Shinawatra, who served as prime minister from 2001 to 2006 before being ousted in a military coup. The party was formed in 1998 as Thai Rak Thai.

With the backing of the ruling bloc, which includes right-wing and military-aligned parties, Paetongtarn was elected by 319 votes to 145 in the parliament. The vast majority voting against were from the main opposition People's Party, the latest iteration of the Move Forward Party (MFP), which was dissolved by the Constitutional Court on August 7 for advocating reforms to the country's draconian lèse-majesté law. Another 27 MPs abstained, mostly from the Democrat Party, a longtime adversary of Pheu Thai.

By contrast to last year's installation when Srettha was chosen as prime minister, the Senate took no part in the selection of Paetongtarn. According to the constitution written by the military following its 2014 coup, the Senate, which was previously appointed by the military, will no longer participate in choosing the prime minister.

Paetongtarn, 37, is the fourth member of the Shinawatra family to become prime minister, following her aunt Yingluck Shinawatra, who was overthrown in the 2014 coup, and Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's

brother-in-law, who was removed by the Constitutional Court in 2008. In her bland comments on Friday, she did not oppose what was essentially a judicial coup to oust Srettha.

The Shinawatras are immensely wealthy, with Thaksin himself a billionaire. Paetongtarn is involved in numerous businesses controlled by the family, including in the hotel, real estate, and telecommunications industries. She only joined Pheu Thai in 2021 and was quickly elevated to positions of power thanks to her family connections.

While Paetongtarn received the support of the military-backed parties in the ruling coalition, there is no guarantee that she will fare any better than her immediate predecessor or other family members. In fact, her selection will only deepen the deep political crisis in Thailand.

Significant sections of the Thai ruling class grouped around the military, monarchy, and more conservative layers of big business regard Thaksin and his influence in politics as a threat to their interests. He currently faces lèse-majesté charges over comments in 2015 after he was allowed to return last year from a 15-year self-imposed exile abroad as part of a deal between the military and Pheu Thai. He had faced years in prison on trumped-up corruption charges after his removal from power in 2006. On his return, he served just six months in the Police General Hospital in Bangkok.

The traditional Thai establishment is working to roll back the results of the 2023 general election, which proved a disaster for the military-backed parties. It led to the formation of Srettha's coalition government and relegated the MFP, which won the most seats, to opposition. The military agreed to an unstable ruling alliance with Pheu Thai, conscious that outright vote rigging could trigger renewed mass protests, as had

occurred after the 2019 general election.

The Constitutional Court first accepted the case against Srettha in May, when a complaint was lodged by 40 members of the outgoing Senate, accusing him of ethics violations by appointing Pichit Chueban to a cabinet-level position. Pichit previously served six months in prison for attempting to bribe the Supreme Court in 2008 while working as a lawyer for Thaksin. The military-appointed senators accused Srettha of violating sections 160 and 170 of the constitution, which state that cabinet ministers must “be of evident integrity.”

In his year in office, Srettha became highly unpopular, raising fears in ruling circles that his government would be unable to keep a lid on social discontent. A June poll conducted by the National Institute of Development Administration found Srettha had only a 12.85 percent approval rating. He had promised to improve economic growth by five percent after it grew by only 1.9 percent last year. The World Bank predicts the economy will only improve by 2.4 percent this year, down from earlier projections of 2.8.

The anti-democratic rollback of the 2023 election began last year when the Senate blocked the MFP from forming a government while phony legal challenges were filed against the party and its leaders that ultimately led to its dissolution and the banning of politicians like Pita Limjaroenrat from politics for 10 years.

Like Pheu Thai, the MFP (now People’s Party) represents weaker sections of the bourgeoisie whose interests have been blocked by the conservative establishment. Its progressive posturing raised fears in ruling circles that it would be unable to prevent social unrest. Workers, poor farmers, and young people face growing inequality marked by low wages, household debt, high youth unemployment, a housing crisis, and broader demands for social reforms that the conservative elites are unwilling to meet.

Since July 2023, the Thai working class has faced huge job cuts, with more than 2,000 factories closing and approximately 51,500 workers being sacked. More factories also face closure, including in Thailand’s automobile industry, one of the largest in the world. In June, Japan’s Suzuki Motor announced it would close its Thai plant by the end of 2025, laying off 800 workers. The previous month Subaru also announced it

would close its Thai factory by the end of this year.

That Pheu Thai and the MFP/People’s Party have meekly accepted the Constitutional Court’s rulings to remove Srettha and dissolve Move Forward reflects the fact that these parties and the big business interests they represent are just as fearful of a social explosion as their conservative rivals. Neither have any intention of defending democratic rights of those of workers, poor farmers, and young people who voted for them believing they were alternatives to the military.



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