

Thai-Cambodian tensions escalate over Thaksin appointment

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A diplomatic row between Bangkok and Phnom Penh over Cambodia's appointment of former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra as economic adviser intensified last week. On Thursday, Thaksin flew to the Cambodian capital from Dubai, where he is living in exile, to deliver a lecture to 300 government officials and economists.

Asked by a reporter about the Thai government's portrayal of him as betraying Thailand, Thaksin snapped back: "Their domestic political compulsions force them to false patriotism." If the claims over rising popularity were true, Thaksin said, then Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva should call a general election and would at last have some legitimacy if he won.

A formal request by Thailand to extradite Thaksin over his 2008 corruption conviction was turned down by the Cambodian government. Prime Minister Hun Sen read out the rejection letter on state-run television, which declared that Thaksin's conviction was "logically the consequence of the military coup d'état in September 2006" that removed him, even though he "was overwhelmingly and democratically elected by the Thai people."

The letter will only inflame tensions between the two countries, which have steadily worsened since border clashes over the disputed eleventh century Preah Vihear temple last year. Thaksin's opponents in Thailand have exploited the issue to brand him as unpatriotic. In July 2008, the Constitutional Court ruled that Thaksin, when prime minister, had violated the constitution by failing to consult parliament over a joint communiqué with Cambodia. Right-wing Thai nationalists claimed that the communiqué effectively endorsed a 1962 International Court ruling recognising Cambodian sovereignty over the temple.

Since being ousted in a military coup in 2006, Thaksin has spent most of the past three years in exile. The political instability in Thailand has only continued. After the military stepped aside and held fresh elections in late 2007, pro-Thaksin politicians won and formed two short-lived governments that were undermined by opposition protests and removed in

partisan rulings by the Constitutional Court. Democratic Party leader Abhisit was installed as prime minister last December with the backing of the country's conservative elites—the military, the monarchy and state bureaucracy.

Tensions with Cambodia flared again at last month's summit of the Association of South East Asian (ASEAN) in Thailand. On arrival, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen declared that Thaksin would be welcome in Cambodia. "If Sam Rainsy can come to Thailand as he did recently to make statements against the Cambodian government, why can my good friend Thaksin not come to Cambodia?" he pointedly asked.

Cambodian opposition leader Rainsy spoke in Bangkok at the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Thailand in September, criticising the Hun Sen regime over its record on democratic rights and economic management. He insinuated that Hun Sen had provoked frictions with Thailand to divert attention from economic troubles. "Allowing Sam Rainsy to speak out in Bangkok against Hun Sen and not doing enough to rein in right-wing groups who demonstrated at Preah Vihear areas certainly irked Hun Sen and rubbed Cambodians the wrong way," Thai academic Thitinam Pongsudhirak told the *Asia Times* web site.

Following the ASEAN summit, Cambodian state television announced on November 5 that head of state King Norodom Sihamoni had formally approved the appointment of Thaksin as an adviser. The Abhisit government responded by recalling its ambassador in Phnom Penh and announcing it would "review all of the agreements" between the two countries, including a memorandum of understanding to enable oil exploration and development in disputed offshore areas. Cambodia recalled its ambassador from Bangkok.

Both governments are exploiting the dispute to divert attention from political troubles at home. Abhisit rests on an unstable six-party coalition that includes coalition partners and a former faction of the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party, whose members were bribed and bullied to support the Democratic Party.

The divisions in Thai ruling circles reflect sharp differences over economic policy. Thaksin, a billionaire and right-wing populist, won the 2001 election by promising to protect Thai businesses and carry out limited welfare measures for the rural and urban poor. He came into conflict with the country's conservative elites, which had initially backed him, when he continued to encourage foreign investors, undermining less competitive local businesses.

Abhisit has refused to call fresh elections—a major demand of large, continuing pro-Thaksin protests. He has launched a 700 billion baht (\$US21 billion) stimulus package, hoping to stem popular discontent. The export-dependent economy shed one million jobs in the second half of 2008 and is expected to contract by 2.5 to 3.5 percent in 2009. His government has been plagued by corruption scandals over the misappropriation of funds.

The political crisis has been compounded by the ill health of King Bhumibol Adulyadej Bhumibol, who is a lynch pin of bourgeois rule in Thailand. When the Thai stock market fell 8 percent on October 15, commentators attributed the drop to concerns about the king's health and fears that his demise would lead to intense political infighting.

The pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) held a major demonstration last month calling for a royal pardon for Thaksin and new elections. Thaksin also launched a Thai language book *Tackling Poverty (A Pity It Was Robbed)* defending in detail the policies of his 2001-2006 administration. He appointed former prime minister and ex-army commander General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh to head the Puea Thai party, an indication that significant sections of the ruling elite back Thaksin's return.

Under political siege, Abhisit has exploited Thaksin's involvement with the Cambodian government to paint the former prime minister as unpatriotic. According to one poll, Abhisit's popularity jumped last week from 23.6 percent to 68.8 percent. He is also using the standoff with Cambodia to undermine the New Politics Party, recently formed by the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which has been in the forefront of whipping up anti-Cambodian sentiment.

At the same time, the Cambodian regime is using the dispute for its own purposes. The economy has been badly affected by the global recession and slump in trade. A World Bank report this month predicted that Cambodia would experience a 2 percent contraction in 2009, down from its April forecast of negative 1 percent. It estimated that poverty levels could rise by between 1 and 4 percent. "Cambodia has been very hard hit," Ivailo Izvorski, the report's lead author, told the media.

By focussing on Thailand, Hun Sen is also distracting attention from Vietnam. The Vietnamese first installed Hun Sen as premier in 1985, following the 1979 invasion that toppled the Pol Pot regime. Opposition leader Sam Rainsy has been deliberately stoking border tensions with Vietnam and accusing Hun Sen of being subservient of Hanoi.

The tensions between Cambodia and Thailand may have broader ramifications.

The US has longstanding diplomatic and strategic ties with Thailand, particularly the military. Washington backed the Thai military dictatorships that ruled for much of the post-World War II period. Following the end of the Cold War and the economic rise of China, South East Asia has increasingly become an arena of rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

The previous Bush administration made only muted protests when Thaksin was ousted in September 2006 and may well have viewed him as moving toward China. In an article in August 2008, *Asia Times* correspondent Shawn Crispin noted that while Thaksin had fully backed Bush's "war on terror", "he had simultaneously moved to put Thailand's relations with the US and China on a more equal footing." The article pointed to "strategic overtures", including a joint naval exercise in 2005 and increased arms purchases from China.

Cambodia, on the other hand, has moved closer into China's orbit. Hun Sen has distanced his government from Vietnam through bilateral and ASEAN trade and aid deals with China, as well as Japan and South Korea. China recently announced loans and grants of \$US853 million for infrastructure projects in Cambodia on top of \$880 million in grants since 2006. The Chinese Embassy noted that Chinese investments up to 2009 totalled \$4.5 billion. One of Thaksin's economic proposals for Cambodia is to develop the southern western province of Koh Kong as a port facility—a move that would mesh with a growing trade in resources with China.

While the tensions between Thailand and Cambodia are clearly being driven by domestic economic and political turmoil in both countries, the rivalry between the US and China for influence in the region threatens to exacerbate the conflict.



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