

Former Thai prime minister Thaksin to be released on parole

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Former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who has ostensibly been jailed since returning to Thailand last year, is to be granted parole this weekend. After a 15-year, self-imposed exile abroad, he has served only six months of what had originally been an eight-year sentence on trumped-up charges. This is part of an unstable truce between Thaksin's Pheu Thai party and the military that twice ousted it in coups in 2006 and 2014.

The 74-year-old Thaksin is among 930 who have been granted early release by a parole committee. The justice minister in the Pheu Thai-led government, Police Colonel Tawee Sodsong, confirmed Thaksin's upcoming parole on Tuesday after weeks of speculation. He pointed to Thaksin's advanced age and declining health.

Immediately after returning to Thailand, Thaksin began serving his eight-year prison term, to which he had been sentenced in absentia. This took place on August 22, not coincidentally the same day the new Pheu Thai government—a coalition including military-backed parties—was formed. However, he has been held in the comfort of the Police General Hospital in Bangkok, reportedly being treated for hypertension, narrowed blood vessels, and hepatitis B. On September 1, Thaksin was granted a royal pardon that reduced his sentence to one year. He has therefore served half of his prison term, another requirement for parole.

The government of current Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin is at pains to claim that Thaksin, who is also a billionaire and former police lieutenant colonel, is being treated like an average person. Srettha stated on Tuesday, "Thaksin was prime minister for many years and did many good things for the country for a long time. After he comes out, he would be a normal citizen."

However, he added significantly, "Everything went according to the law... I believe that Thaksin can give good advice to his daughter to serve the country." Thaksin's daughter, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, is the current head of Pheu Thai.

Whatever the government's claims, Thaksin is not a "normal citizen." Nor is he preparing for a quiet retirement while occasionally giving "fatherly advice" to the leader of Thailand's ruling party. He is in reality the de facto head of Pheu Thai, having exercised his influence from behind the scenes while living abroad. The party was founded as Thai Rak Thai by Thaksin in 1998.

Furthermore, Thaksin served as prime minister from 2001 to 2006, garnering popularity among poor and rural sections of Thailand through programs like state-funded healthcare and other hand-outs to villages. He represents sections of the bourgeoisie sidelined by the traditional sections of the ruling elite grouped around the military, monarchy, and state bureaucracy.

Fearing that his government cut across their interests, the military ousted Thaksin in a 2006 coup, which opened up years of political instability including another coup in 2014 that removed Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, from power. Following this, the military rewrote the constitution and installed coup leader General Prayut Chan-o-cha as prime minister. He remained in office until last year.

Thaksin's return was clearly part of a carefully prepared deal between Pheu Thai and the military establishment following last May's general election. In that contest, the Move Forward Party (MFP) unexpectedly came in first. The MFP appealed to young people and progressive layers declaring it would carry out democratic reforms of the Thai state following large-scale protests against Prayut's

government in 2020 and 2021.

Despite the limited nature of these pledges, they proved a step too far and the military-appointed Senate blocked the MFP from taking power. Instead, Pheu Thai formed a coalition government that included two military-aligned parties—the Palang Pracharath Party and the United Thai Nation Party—allowing the military to keep hold of key levers of power. Nine officials in Srettha’s 34-member cabinet also served in Prayut’s cabinet.

That the military did not simply scrap the election results, as it did in 2019, is a sign of the nervousness the ruling establishment feels over declining economic conditions and the potential for mass unrest in the working class.

Last year, household debt grew to 16.2 trillion baht (\$US448.3 billion), or 90.9 percent of Thailand’s GDP. That figure is expected to grow to 91.4 percent by the end of 2024, according to TMBThanachart Bank. The finance ministry also reported in January that the economy grew by only 1.8 percent last year, compared to 2.6 percent in 2022. The ministry has already revised predicted growth for 2024 down to 2.8 percent from 3.2 percent.

In this context, Thaksin’s return to Thailand and his quick release brings bitter political enemies together as the ruling class confronts the growing opposition. The government will impose the burden of the economic crisis on the working class and the poor and will be ruthless in crushing strikes and protests. In office, Thaksin was notorious for his suppression of media critics and waged a bloody “war on drugs” involving thousands of extrajudicial killings by police.

Thaksin will no doubt use his influence to try to bolster the tattered image of Pheu Thai, which for years postured as a progressive and democratic alternative to the military. Leading party members repeatedly claimed ahead of the May election they would not form a coalition government with the military-aligned parties. When Pheu Thai reneged on this pledge, it generated widespread disgust among young people and workers, who voted for the party believing its promises.

The opposition MFP is playing a role as well with limited criticisms, including asserting that Thaksin has been receiving special treatment. This is simply stating the obvious. MFP leader Chaithawat Tulathon on Thursday advised Thaksin not to take on too public a

role immediately after his release to avoid the impression that there were “two prime ministers”—an acknowledgment of his influence.

However, the MFP is consciously avoiding any discussion of the issues that led to Thaksin’s return and the economic crisis facing Thailand’s workers and poor. Instead, it is playing the role of loyal opposition to promote the fraud that democratic reforms can still take place through parliament. This includes promoting a limited bill to grant amnesty to protesters charged over the nearly 20 years of unrest that began when Thaksin was ousted from power.

All of this is to obscure the fact that no section of the bourgeoisie has any progressive solution to the current crisis of capitalism.



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