

Thai prime minister suspended from office

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Thailand's Constitutional Court suspended Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra of the Pheu Thai Party (PT) from office on Tuesday pending a final ruling on a petition claiming she is unfit for office. The nine-member court ruled unanimously to review the petition while voting seven to two in favor of suspending her from office.

A final ruling on Paetongtarn's case could take one to three months. If the accusations against her are accepted, she would be the second Pheu Thai prime minister deposed by the court in the last two years. Srettha Thavisin was removed on trumped-up ethics charges last August.

The claims against Paetongtarn stem from a phone call with Cambodia's former long-time prime minister Hun Sen, leaked on June 18. The two discussed a border dispute that led to a military clash between Thailand and Cambodia on May 28 that led to the death of a Cambodian soldier. Paetongtarn's opponents claimed she had made Thailand look weak and moved against her to carry out what is in essence a judicial coup.

Thirty-six senators led by Thai senate president Mongkol Surasajja submitted the petition to the Constitutional Court, a body appointed by the military after it seized power in 2014. Mongkol is part of the leading section of the National Assembly's upper house known as the "blue faction," which has close ties with the right-wing Bhumjaithai Party (BJT). The BJT left the ruling coalition, taking 69 seats and leaving the Pheu Thai-led government, with a slim majority in the 500-seat lower house of the National Assembly.

The political stage for the court ruling was set by a large right-wing patriotic protest in Bangkok by the so-called Yellow Shirts—supporters of the country's traditional elites, the monarchy, the army and state bureaucracy, including the courts. The protesters demanded Paetongtarn's resignation and for all

coalition partners to abandon the government.

Yellow Shirt leader, and media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul openly suggested that the armed forces seize power, telling those assembled that while he did not want to see another coup, he "won't object if the military does something." Limthongkul and the Yellow Shirts were instrumental in whipping up protests that preceded the 2006 military coup against Thaksin Shinawatra, Paetongtarn's father and Pheu Thai leader.

The political crisis unfolding in Thailand is not the result of a phone call. Rather the bitter factional infighting reflects sharp tensions within the ruling class, amid declining economic growth and worsening geo-political conflict. Thailand faces the prospect that Trump will next week impose his threatened 36 percent tariff on Thai exports to the US.

Pheu Thai came to power through an unstable coalition of right-wing parties following the May 2023 general election, only the second since the 2014 coup that ousted the Pheu Thai government of Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra. While the military outright rigged the 2019 election, it took a more cautious approach two years ago, not wanting to spark a renewal of the mass student-led protests that began in 2020.

Through its control of the senate and in alliance with parties like the BJT, the military blocked the election winner, the so-called "progressive" Move Forward Party (MFP). While this party offered very limited reforms, even this was too much for the military. The Constitutional Court barred the MFP leader from standing for prime minister.

Pheu Thai formed an inherently unstable coalition government with military-aligned parties—the United Thai Nation Party and the junta's Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP)—as well as the right-wing BJT. The PPRP was replaced in the coalition by another right-wing party, the Democrat Party, last August.

As part of this deal, Thaksin Shinawatra, was also

allowed to return to Thailand in 2023 after years of self-imposed exile. The ruling class intended to keep Thaksin on a short leash while hoping he would use his influence to mollify anger among Thailand's rural poor.

With the prospect of being jailed on bogus corruption charges, Thaksin fled the country after the 2006 coup. This sentence was reduced to one year, of which Thaksin served six months while staying in a hospital after his return.

Thaksin currently faces additional criminal charges and investigations, including charges of lèse-majesté stemming from comments he made in a 2015 interview with the South Korean newspaper, *Chosun Ilbo*. He appeared in court for a hearing on the charges the same day Paetongtarn was suspended from office. Conviction of lèse-majesté carries penalties of up to 15 years in jail.

Pheu Thai has not opposed any of these anti-democratic measures. It is far more fearful of triggering mass opposition, particularly in the working class, than it is of the military and its political allies.

Similarly the MFP refused to defend itself when the Constitutional Court dissolved the party last August. The party's founder, wealthy businessman Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, who had appealed to young people in particular on the basis of defending democratic rights, simply told party members and supporters to "just shrug and move forward." The party was reestablished as the People's Party (PP), which is currently the main parliamentary opposition party.

Far from opposing suspension of Paetongtarn, the PP openly supports it on the basis of the same reactionary patriotic basis as the Yellow Shirts. Party leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut declared on June 19 that Paetongtarn's phone call with Hun Sen "has completely destroyed public trust in the government."

While calling for new elections, the PP is openly colluding with the right-wing Bhumjaithai Party, having entered into negotiations to support its head Anutin Charnvirakul for prime minister if the latter backs constitutional reforms. The BJT, the very party now at the forefront of the latest judicial coup in alliance with the military, also played a crucial role in blocking the MFP from forming a government in 2023.

The cringing subservience of the PP and Pheu Thai—the so-called advocates of democracy and social

justice—to the military, the monarchy and their allies is a graphic demonstration that there is no constituency for the defence of basic democratic and social rights with the ruling class. Those tasks fall to the working class as part of the struggle for socialism.



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