

Thai court removes prime minister from office

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Thailand's Constitutional Court on Friday removed Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra from office on trumped-up ethics violations. Her removal, after being suspended from her position since July 1, is an anti-democratic judicial coup carried out by the conservative political establishment connected to the military and monarchy.

The accusations against Paetongtarn stem from her June 15 phone call with Cambodia's former leader Hun Sen following a military skirmish between the two countries on May 28. A long-running border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia led to the fighting that month and then another five days of fighting at the end of July.

In a 6 to 3 decision, the court ruled against Paetongtarn, stating she had violated sections 160 and 170 of the constitution, which require a prime minister to show "integrity" and "ethical standards." The constitution written by the military following its 2014 coup was designed to maintain its power and influence over politics. The military first appointed the court and retains significant influence over it.

The nine-member court accepted the claims that Paetongtarn appeared deferential to Hun Sen in the phone call that the latter leaked to the public. She referred to him as "uncle" while supposedly disparaging Thailand's Second Army Area commander, Lieutenant General Boonsin Padklang, saying he was just "playing tough" following the May fighting.

The court claimed in its ruling that Paetongtarn's remarks represented a "lack of unity" with the military and that she had exposed internal divisions to Cambodia and weakened Thailand.

Paetongtarn is the fifth prime minister to be removed by the Constitutional Court over the last two decades

and the second from the ruling Pheu Thai Party just in the last year. In August 2024, the court removed Srettha Thavisin as prime minister also on trumped-up ethics violations.

Paetongtarn is also the latest Shinawatra to be forced from office, after her father Thaksin and aunt Yingluck were removed in the 2006 and 2014 military coups respectively. Paetongtarn's uncle, Somchai Wongsawat, also served as prime minister and was removed by the Constitutional Court in 2008.

Paetongtarn's anti-democratic removal from office is not due to a supposedly politically embarrassing phone call. The court's declaration that Paetongtarn "lacked unity" with the military points to the fact that the military, the monarchy and their allies will brook no opposition.

The military knows that it has nothing to fear from Paetongtarn or Pheu Thai. Their concern rather is that under worsening economic conditions and growing social inequality, Pheu Thai's promises of very limited reforms could touch off a working-class movement that Pheu Thai would be unable to contain.

The World Bank predicts that Thailand's export-driven economy will grow only 1.8 percent this year and 1.7 percent in 2026, lower than other countries in the region. Bangkok also faces tensions in the region due to the US-led war drive against China and the international economic turmoil caused by Trump's tariffs. Thailand itself faces a 19 percent tariff on exports to the US, its largest export market which last year accounted for 18.3 percent of all exports.

Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Council has noted that businesses are increasingly shifting from full-time employment to part-time and contract work. Bank of Thailand Governor Sethaput Suthiwartnarueput stated recently that issues

like inequality and household debt are a “chronic disease” impacting the Thai economy.

In removing Paetongtarn, the conservative political establishment is again making clear who is in charge. For the past two decades, the military has attempted to game the system, through coups, stacking the courts with its supporters to dissolve political parties, and rigging elections. Yet throughout, the military and its allies have never won an election even though it has repeatedly reset the rules in its favour.

Neither Paetongtarn nor any of the political parties have spoken out against this latest anti-democratic maneuver. The former prime minister placidly stated that she accepted the court’s ruling.

The ruling class as a whole fears that any opposition would lead to a movement of workers and youth amid rising social tensions as has erupted in protests in Indonesia over the past week. Large student-led protests broke out in 2020 in Thailand as a result of attacks on democratic rights, including the military’s outright rigging of the 2019 election and the dissolving of the Future Forward Party, the predecessor of the so-called “progressive” People’s Party (PP).

The PP has also backed the judicial coup, echoing the claims of the court that Paetongtarn’s phone call with Hun Sen had led to a “loss of trust with the public.” The PP is now engaging in backroom horse-trading with Pheu Thai and the right-wing populist Bhumjaithai Party (BJT) to choose the next prime minister.

The BJT, which holds 69 seats in parliament, has become the standard-bearer for the pro-military sections of the ruling class. Its leader, Anutin Charnvirakul, claimed on Friday that he had gathered the necessary votes to become prime minister, including from the 142-seats of the PP, the largest party in parliament.

The PP has denied the claim, saying it would decide on Monday which party to back. Due to anti-democratic electoral and parliamentary laws, the PP, then called the Move Forward Party (MFP), was blocked from forming government after it won the 2023 general election. The Constitutional Court then dissolved the MFP in August 2024.

The PP is attempting to distance itself from both the Bhumjaithai Party and Pheu Thai by claiming it will not join any government. It has said it would only back a candidate who agrees to dissolve parliament within

four months for a new general election and to hold a referendum on constitutional revision.

Yet it is entirely unclear what the military will allow, making such pledges worthless. None of the issues facing the political establishment or the working class will be resolved through new elections or a new constitution. The real purpose of the PP’s proposals is to keep widespread discontent confined to the dead-end of parliamentary politics.



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