

Former Thai prime minister Thaksin jailed for a year

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17 September 2025

Thailand's former prime minister and de facto leader of the Pheu Thai Party, Thaksin Shinawatra, was sentenced by the country's Supreme Court last week to serve a one-year prison term. Ostensibly related to longstanding corruption charges, the ruling is a move by right-wing factions aligned with the military and monarchy to sideline Thaksin and his party.

The trumped-up charges against Thaksin stem from his five years as prime minister which the military used as part of its pretext to oust him in the 2006 coup. He fled into a self-imposed exile for 15 years, during which time he was sentenced to eight years in prison in absentia.

Following the general election in 2023, Thaksin returned to Thailand as part of a sordid bargain between Pheu Thai on one hand and the military and monarchy on the other to prevent the Move Forward Party (MFP) from coming to power. The MFP, which had won the most seats, was later dissolved on bogus grounds and is now the People's Party.

Pheu Thai, which once claimed to be the party of "democracy," entered into a coalition with the military-backed parties to form a government while Thaksin received a royal pardon, reducing his prison sentence to one year. He ultimately served only six months, staying in a suite at the Police General Hospital in Bangkok on the basis of "life-threatening" health issues before being paroled.

The traditional ruling elites centred on the military and monarchy have always been intensely hostile to Thaksin, himself a billionaire, and Pheu Thai, and have effectively reneged on the deal.

The court ruled on September 9 that Thaksin's health concerns were in fact "non-urgent" and insufficient to override standard incarceration rules under the Corrections Act. This meant he still had to serve his

one-year sentence in prison. Thaksin was immediately transferred to the elderly wing of the high security Khlong Prem Central Prison in Bangkok.

The jailing of Thaksin took place shortly after the Constitutional Court removed his daughter Paetongtarn Shinawatra as prime minister in a judicial coup based on phoney ethics charges. Her Pheu Thai-led ruling coalition collapsed afterwards, allowing the pro-military and pro-monarchy Bhumjaithai Party (BJT) to take power with its leader Anutin Charnvirakul becoming prime minister. Paetongtarn was the second Pheu Thai prime minister removed in a year on spurious grounds.

Thaksin came to power in 2001 in the wake of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis on a populist platform that included moderate relief for poor farmers. His popularity and that of Thai Rak Thai, the predecessor of Pheu Thai grew, particularly in the impoverished north and northeast parts of the country.

Though initially backed by the political establishment around the military, monarchy, and state bureaucracy, Thaksin's agenda began to cut across their interests. He represented an emerging section of the bourgeoisie in sectors such as telecommunications, the media, automotive, and transportation. Thaksin was the founder of Shin Corporation, which became one of the largest telecom conglomerates in Thailand.

Thaksin would come to clash with the Thai military, which has its own extensive business operations. These include, but are by no means limited to, construction, agriculture, television and radio, restaurants and convenience stores, golf courses, and hotels.

The monarchy, one of the largest capitalists in Thailand, also has its own massive economic interests. King Vajiralongkorn is the largest shareholder in the Siam Commercial Bank and the Siam Cement Group.

Royal assets in the Privy Purse Bureau (formerly the Crown Property Bureau) are personally owned by the king and are estimated to be valued at as much as \$70 billion.

Increasingly bitter rivalry developed in the 1990s as the big businesses associated with the globalisation of production found their interests constrained by the political domination of the military and monarchy and associated businesses. The revision of the country's constitution in 1997 opened the door for the entry of Thaksin into politics.

The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which significantly impacted the businesses of the traditional elites in finance, construction, and real estate, greatly exacerbated the conflict. Newer businesses, however, such as Thaksin's telecommunications conglomerate, were able to recover far more quickly. As prime minister, Thaksin also began to open up the Thai economy to international capital, further cutting across the business interests of the military and monarchy.

Thaksin's removal from power in 2006 has only resulted in nearly two decades of political turmoil and upheavals as the traditional elites have proven incapable of winning an election and have repeatedly resorted to the military and the courts to oust or block their rivals.

Another threat to the traditional elites, the Future Forward Party, the predecessor of the People's Party, came to prominence in the wake of mass protests in 2020 against the monarchy and military, after the latter blatantly rigged the 2019 election. The party, established by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the nephew of the founder of auto parts manufacturer Thai Summit Group, was able to attract significant support among younger people who had supported the protest.

The new government of Anutin is no more stable than previous ones. It has been brought to power as a minority government with only 146 seats out of 500 in the lower house of the National Assembly. The People's Party with 151 seats has supported the pro-military and pro-monarchy Anutin by pledging to block no-confidence motions and support the budget. In return, Anutin says he will dissolve parliament in four months and hold a new general election, which will resolve nothing.

Thaksin and his party have accepted his imprisonment and the party's removal from power.

Whatever their economic and political disputes, the entire Thai ruling class is aware that it sits on a social powder keg. Its fears have no doubt been heightened by the recent mass protests in Indonesia and Nepal.

Thailand's cost of living has grown rapidly. Food prices have surged by 106.5 percent over the past 13 years while the minimum wage has risen by only 33 percent in the same period, according to Thailand's Agency for Real Estate Affairs. Household debt stands at approximately 87.4 percent of GDP.

The economic situation has been exacerbated by geopolitical tensions driven by accelerating US-led preparations for war against China. Trump tariffs are negatively impacting Thailand's export-driven economy. For 2025, the World Bank has forecast only 1.8 percent economic growth, down from 2.5 percent in 2024.

Significantly, while Thaksin has been jailed, no moves, at present, have been made in the courts against Pheu Thai. As it faces the prospect of further political upheaval and opposition, the ruling class may yet require its services to prop up increasingly unstable bourgeois rule.



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