

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Thaksin to Return to Thailand? An Old Dream or New Hope for National Reconciliation?**

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This picture taken on 25 March 2019, shows exiled former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra being interviewed by Agence France-Presse in Hong Kong. Photo: Isaac Lawrence, AFP.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is once again talking about ending his self-imposed exile overseas and returning to Thailand “soon!”
- He marked his seventy-second birthday at the end of July, and may just be musing over a fading dream after nearly 13 years away from his homeland.
- This is not the first time that he has talked about an imminent triumphant homecoming. Does he really have some secret deal up his sleeve? Or is he putting on a confident face to boost the sagging morale of his followers in Phuea Thai, the main opposition party?
- Some observers speculate that Thaksin might have brokered a deal for Phuea Thai to collaborate with Phalang Pracharat, the lead party in the government coalition, after Thailand’s next general election.
- Should such as thing happen, the Phuea Thai leadership, as part of a new governing coalition, could initiate a public petition for a grand national reconciliation and a pardon for all “victims of politics” – including Thaksin and his youngest sister, former Prime Minister Yingluck.
- Thaksin can request a royal pardon, but may first have to return to the country to begin serving a combined jail term of 10 years resulting from three convictions.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has dropped a new bombshell from his exile hideout in Dubai. He is returning home, coming through the “front door, not the back door, soon!”

Calling himself “Tony Woodsome” on social media, Thaksin revealed his intention during his bimonthly CARE Talk on Clubhouse on 13 July. “I definitely am returning. I will say when later. And, for sure, I am going through the front door, not the back door ... When it’s time, I will not hide anything”, he said.<sup>1</sup>

Thaksin’s claim that his home-coming is impending adds to the pressure on Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-ocha. On the day that Thaksin made that claim, General Prayut was just ending a 14-day self-quarantine. On 1 July, during the launch of the “Phuket Sandbox” initiative to reopen the tourist island to international visitors, the prime minister came into contact with a business leader who turned out to have been infected with the COVID-19 virus. Fortunately, he subsequently tested negative for coronavirus.

What must particularly upset General Prayut was Thaksin’s criticism of his administration’s alleged failure to cope with the “third wave” of COVID-19 infections striking the country.<sup>2</sup> Thaksin, who contracted COVID-19 earlier this year, even offered in his CARE Talk “to work from Dubai” if General Prayut just called him to ask for help.<sup>3</sup>

During the talk, Thaksin looked well-informed, cheerful and confident. Does he really have some secret deal up his sleeve? Whatever the case, Thaksin’s words triggered much speculation in the Thai media.

## **YET ANOTHER RERUN OF A FADING DREAM**

Sceptics point out that this is not the first time that Thaksin has said that he will “return home”. After he was toppled in the coup of 19 September 2006, Thaksin sought sanctuary in the United Kingdom, where he even bought the Manchester City football club. He travelled the world, reportedly with Montenegrin and Nicaraguan passports, after his Thai passport was cancelled.

On 28 February 2008, Thaksin returned to a media frenzy in Thailand, where a large crowd of cheering supporters welcomed him at Suvarnabhumi International Airport outside of Bangkok. Photos showing him kissing the ground soon after disembarkation were splashed on the front pages of Thai newspapers.

Thaksin was confident that he had the upper hand in his contest with his political enemies. Then-Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej was after all, leader of Phalang Prachachon, a successor party to Thaksin’s dissolved Thai Rak Thai Party. The party had edged out the Democrat Party of incumbent Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva in the general election held on 23 December 2007.<sup>4</sup>

Following his return to Thailand, however, Thaksin and his wife Potjaman were tried on charges relating to the latter’s attempt to bid for a plot of government’s land. While serving

as prime minister, Thaksin had signed a letter of consent for his wife to enter the bidding process. The prosecutors argued that that act constituted a conflict of interest, because the bidding was conducted by an *ad hoc* official body under the supervision of the Bank of Thailand, over which Thaksin had oversight power in his capacity as head of government.<sup>5</sup>

With the verdict initially scheduled to come down on 11 August 2008, Thaksin and his wife received government permission to leave the country to attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. Departing in late July, they travelled to Britain instead of China. When the court did finally announce a guilty verdict against Thaksin on 21 October and sentenced him to a two-year jail term, he was in London with his wife, whom the court acquitted. Thaksin has remained in exile overseas, mostly in Dubai, ever since. In November 2008, he suddenly divorced his wife after 32 years of marriage.

During the Red Shirts' protest rallies against the Abhisit Vejjajiva administration in 2009-2010, Thaksin occasionally appeared live on large screens at protest sites to voice support for his followers. During one such live video call on 30 March 2009, Thaksin made a daring promise. "Should there be gunfire, if soldiers start shooting at people, I will return immediately to personally lead my brothers into Bangkok ...".<sup>6</sup>

Eventually, the Red Shirts' protests did escalate to culminate in the "Bloody Black May" crackdown of 7-19 May 2010, and at least 87 people were killed — eight of them policemen or soldiers. But Thaksin never returned to lead his followers.

Now, after nearly 13 years in exile, does Thaksin really mean what he says this time? Or is he just toying with his fading dream as he turned 72 years old on 26 July?

### **TRYING TO BOOST THE MORALE OF PHUEA THAI?**

Even though the Phuea Thai (PT) Party won the largest number of House seats, 136 out of 500, in Thailand's 2019 general election, it was overtaken by the Phalang Pracharat Party (PPP) with its 116 seats in the race to set up a new government coalition.<sup>7</sup> After that setback, PT fell into decline with no prospects of returning to power, as when it led the coalition government of Thaksin's sister, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, from August 2011 until the May 2014 coup.

Dissent and breakaways have weakened the party. Former Transport Minister Chadchart Sitthipun, PT's No. 2 nominee for the premiership in the 2019 general election, left in November 2019 to pursue the Bangkok governorship as an independent candidate.<sup>8</sup>

A more serious setback to PT came when Sudarat Keyuraphan resigned from the party in November 2020 under acrimonious circumstances.<sup>9</sup> She was the party's No.1 nominee for the premiership, and a potential new leader of the party. She held the public health and agriculture posts in two Thaksin cabinets between February 2001 and September 2006.

Sudarat lost out in a power struggle within PT in early October 2020. The rather uninspiring Sompong Amornvivat was re-elected party leader unopposed, while Prasert Chanruangthong, a veteran MP from Nakhon Ratchasima in Northeast Thailand, replaced

Anudith Nakornthap as PT's secretary-general. Anudith is a Bangkok MP and a close ally of Sudarat, whose political stronghold is in the Thai capital.

Sudarat founded and now leads a new party, called "Thai Sang Thai" or "Thais build Thailand". She will undoubtedly try to persuade former colleagues in PT to join this party.

The sudden recent defection from PT of one of Thaksin's lieutenants, Ruerngrai Leekitwattana, did in fact hit the headlines. But instead of joining Sudarat's party, he joined the PPP. His immediate reward was an assignment as one of the PPP's representatives on the *ad hoc* House committee responsible for the second reading of the draft budget bill for the 2022 fiscal year.

Ruerngrai also disclosed that "a highly influential elder" had given him a new Mercedes Benz S560 sedan, valued at about 5 million baht, as his birthday gift. He proudly showed off the new car on his Facebook page and bragged in a live TV interview that he had actually mentioned to his benefactor his wish to receive 10 to 30 million baht in cash, but was instead given the sedan.<sup>10</sup>

Undoubtedly, Ruerngrai was trying to entice former PT colleagues to defect to the PPP. But his seemingly careless ploy might backfire, because PT will now demand that the National Anti-Corruption Commission investigate whether Ruerngrai had admitted to asking for and accepting a bribe.

"Sucking" MPs from PT is one of the key tactics of the PPP's new secretary-general, Captain Thammanat Prompao, in his mission to ensure that the PPP is the largest party in parliament after the next general election.

Another of Thammanat's tactics is to erode PT's domination in the Northeast. He organised the PPP's recent party leadership meeting in Khon Kaen, the second largest Northeastern province after Nakhon Ratchasima, in order to highlight the PPP's plan to make electoral inroads into this populous but poor region. In the last general election, the PPP won only 11 of the 116 House seats in the Northeast's 20 provinces; PT won 84.

With Thammanat as its campaign manager, the PPP did manage to wrestle a House seat from PT in a December 2019 by-election in Khon Kaen. Thammanat and the PPP have potent means of getting experienced politicians from other parties to join their ranks.<sup>11</sup> Professional politicians in the Northeast can win elections in their strongholds regardless of party affiliation. Hence, they may join the party that offers them the best "deal", and later defect to another party when the grass there appears greener. This is part of the vicious cycle of Thailand's money politics.

The growing challenges facing the PPP must be a cause for real concern to Thaksin, who himself followed a similar playbook in building up his Thai Rak Thai Party from scratch in the late 1990s and early 2000s; he wooed into his new party veterans from other parties, including all 36 MPs of the New Aspiration Party of former Prime Minister General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh after the general election in 2001.

During the 2011 general election campaign, Thaksin played a decisive role in helping PT topple the incumbent Democrat Party with the battle cry: “Thaksin thinks, Yingluck delivers!”<sup>12</sup> But now Thaksin’s hands are virtually tied. The current political party law forbids outsiders from influencing or interfering in the internal affairs of political parties. The most that Thaksin can try to do in order to boost the sagging morale of PT members now is to put on a confident face and promise yet again an imminent triumphant return to Thailand.

### **A SECRET DEAL WITH PHALANG PRACHARAT?**

Non-partisan political observers would not immediately dismiss Thaksin’s brave words as empty boasting. Thaksin has money, political clout, connections in high places, charisma and the will to succeed.<sup>13</sup>

It seems probable that he has made a secret deal with General Prawit Wongsuwan, leader of the PPP and a deputy premier, for PT to collaborate with the PPP after the next general election. In October 2004, when Thaksin was premier, he chose to promote General Prawit to head the Royal Thai Army, even though the general was not the most senior candidate.<sup>14</sup> Further, Thaksin has seldom criticised General Prawit or Captain Thammanat, even though the latter was imprisoned in Australia in the mid-1990s on charges related to drug smuggling cases.<sup>15</sup>

PT and the PPP share a common interest in amending the 2017 Constitution to change Thailand’s electoral system by replacing single-ballot voting with two-ballot voting. Voters would again cast one ballot to elect a candidate to represent their constituency and another for a party; votes collected by parties would determine the allocation of party-list House seats. This system tends to advantage large parties, and small parties may not get any share of the party-list seats.<sup>16</sup>

The PPP has been at odds with its three main partners in the current coalition — Bhumjaithai, the Democrats, and the Chat Thai Phattana — over delays in amending the 2017 Constitution. The three parties teamed up to support one another’s proposed constitutional amendments and withheld their support for the PPP’s proposals. In the end, only the Democrat Party’s proposal to change the voting system passed its first reading.

As the pandemic has worsened, working relations among General Prayut, Bhumjaithai Party leader and Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, and Democrat Party leader and Commerce Minister Jurin Laksanawisit have become more difficult. On 27 April, Prayut issued an order transferring all administrative powers under 31 laws to himself, in order to make his “single command” more effective in coping with the “third wave” of the COVID-10 crisis. This decision apparently reflected his dissatisfaction with his ministers’ performance.

General Prayut has also threatened to sack ministers who had criticised him behind his back, and to punish their parties by reducing their quotas of ministerial posts. Tensions inside the cabinet flared up on 20 July. During a video-conference meeting, the prime minister abruptly gave his startled ministers a piece of his mind. While going over written questions from the media about calls for his immediate resignation to take responsibility for failing to prevent the “third wave” of COVID-19 infections, he reportedly blurted out, “Look at these



questions ... What can I say? ... I am not working here alone. Every one of us [in the cabinet] has to help. I think this is not the time to politicise the pandemic... I will continue working. I will not desert you. But if you want to desert me, let it be...”<sup>17</sup>

Should General Prayut suddenly call it quits, then General Prawit could be his successor. The 76-year-old PPP leader has never dismissed this possibility completely. General Prawit knows many of the 250 senators and should be able to get their support if and when he wants the premiership.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Prayut’s stepping down would open up the possibility of a PPP-PT deal to form a new government. This might be what Thaksin has been scheming in recent months.

### **A NEW GENERAL AMNESTY?**

Should PT become part of a new coalition government, it could launch a petition campaign for legislation on a new general amnesty for all “victims of politics” – including not only Thaksin and Yingluck, but also arrested or imprisoned protest leaders from all sides.

Under the 2017 Constitution, Thai voters have the right to take the initiative as part of direct democracy to propose a draft bill for consideration, so long as it does not concern fiscal matters. Section 133 of the charter stipulates that such a proposal needs the support of just 10,000 voters.<sup>19</sup>

During the wee hours of 1 November 2013, Yingluck’s PT-led coalition government, which had firm majority control of the House, rammed through a controversial draft general amnesty bill that would have benefited Thaksin. MP Suthep Thaugsuban, a deputy leader of the Democrat Party, quit the House in disgust and started a protest movement known later as the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). The PDRC’s protracted protests, involving massive chaos in Bangkok and sporadic violence, eventually led to the coup of 22 May 2014. The coup leader was General Prayut, who was the Army chief at that time.

Today, public sentiments towards the military are turning negative, partly because of its continuing implicit backing for Prime Minister General Prayut, who is concurrently the defence minister. Public outcry against alleged wasteful military spending recently prompted the Royal Thai Navy to withdraw its requests for new funds to pay for two more Chinese submarines.<sup>20</sup> Not least to counter these sentiments, the military has been providing assistance to victims of COVID-19, including setting up emergency field hospitals. Military leaders would welcome other opportunities to improve the armed forces’ image and reputation. It is highly likely that most of them would support and welcome national reconciliation as fostered by a general amnesty.

### **A DIRECT PARDON FOR THAKSIN?**

Another possibility for Thaksin is to return to Thailand and accept his sentences amounting to ten years of imprisonment.<sup>21</sup> Beyond the charges leading to those sentences, Thaksin has also been implicated in the allegedly massive corruption in the Yingluck administration’s troubled programme to buy paddy at a high guaranteed price. Yingluck’s Minister of Commerce, Boonsong Teriyaphirom, was convicted and sentenced to 48 years of imprisonment for his role in that programme. Yingluck herself was also found guilty of

dereliction of duty, and sentenced to five years for failing to stop the massive corruption. One study has estimated that the losses due to corruption in the programme amounted to 540 billion baht.<sup>22</sup>

Yingluck secretly fled Thailand on 23 August 2017, just one day before a ruling on her case was due. On 27 September 2017, a guilty verdict was read and Yingluck, was sentenced in absentia to five years of imprisonment.

Under Section 179 of the 2017 Constitution, the king has the prerogative to grant a pardon, but such a pardon can be requested only after a person has actually been imprisoned and all of his or her appeals have been exhausted. A pardon can either end or shorten a convict's imprisonment, but it will not bring about the return of confiscated assets.

Thaksin lost about 46 billion baht in confiscated assets after he was found guilty of tax evasion in selling his family's shares in Shin Corporation to Singapore's Temasek Holding in early 2006. But, facing possible guilty verdicts, both Thaksin and Yingluck fled. While each was found guilty, neither has gone to prison.

In order to qualify for a royal pardon, Thaksin must first go to jail in Thailand. In fact he has never been officially barred from returning to the country. But a jail term of 10 years awaits him, should he return.

He was convicted for what are considered "serious offences". On 5 September 2015, his police rank of lieutenant colonel was revoked, under an order of General Prayut in his capacity then as the head of the National Council for Peace and Order junta.<sup>23</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Thailand urgently needs a grand national conciliation to end political bickering, or at least to set aside differences and conflicting interests for the time being. Undoubtedly Thaksin can play a significant role in ending this miserable situation, but does he really want to do so, and can he really help bring about genuine national reconciliation?

Some deal may have been arranged for him and Yingluck to return to Thailand. But at what price? Perhaps the government can return the money confiscated from Thaksin, and he can use the money to buy mRNA vaccines as his home-coming present to Thailand—a win-win move for all.

Many questions remain, and there are as yet no clear answers. And so people continue to follow "Uncle Tony Woodsome" on his Clubhouse talks, hoping to hear something interesting before anyone else.



- <sup>1</sup> “ล็อกดาวน์ แล้วยังไงต่อ?” [Lockdown and what’s next?], *Voice TV*, 13 July 2021 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edWtwARwBQs&t=2308s>, accessed 18 July 2021). CARE is a social movement organised by a group of senior Phuea Thai Party veterans led by Phumtham Wechayachai, a former acting party leader who is now an adviser to the leader of the parliamentary opposition, Sompong Amornwiwat. Thaksin’s family owns the *Voice TV*, whose webcasting of Thaksin’s talk on 13 July registered more than 725,000 views.
- <sup>2</sup> Based on the daily update of 22 July 2021, Thailand’s Centre for Administration of the COVID-19 Situation reported a new record high of 13,655 new cases of infection and 87 deaths. This brought the toll in the “third wave” since 1 April 2021 to 424,269 cases and 3,603 deaths. Thailand ranked fifty-fifth among the countries worst affected by the pandemic. From early 2020 until the end of March 2021, before the onset of the “third wave”, Thailand saw only 28,863 infection cases and 94 deaths. Details are available at the Centre’s Facebook page ([www.Facebook.com/informationcovid19](http://www.Facebook.com/informationcovid19), accessed 22 July 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> “ล็อกดาวน์ แล้วยังไงต่อ?” [Lockdown and what’s next?], *op cit*.
- <sup>4</sup> In the general election held on 23 December 2007, the Phalang Prachachon Party polled 12.338 million votes, or about 41.08 per cent of the total, and won altogether 233 seats (199 constituency seats plus 34 party-list seats) in the 480-member House of Representatives. It teamed up with Chat Thai, Phuea Phaendin and three small parties to form a coalition government. The Democrat Party polled 12.148 million votes, or about 40.45 per cent, but won only 164 House seats (33 of them party-list seats). Samak Sundaravej assumed the premiership with the votes of 310 MPs, beating Abhisit leader of the Democrat Party who received only 163 votes. The full report on the official outcome of the 2007 general election is available at the website of the Office of the Election Commission ([https://www.ect.go.th/ect\\_th/download/article/article\\_20170509150020.pdf](https://www.ect.go.th/ect_th/download/article/article_20170509150020.pdf), accessed 19 July 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> One day during the months-long trial, Thaksin’s lawyer Pichit Chuern-barn and his two assistants left a sealed paper bag containing 2 million baht in cash inside one office inside the Criminal Court. Pichit and his assistants were subsequently found guilty of contempt of court in what the judges considered as attempted bribery. They were each jailed for six months; “ถูก 6 เดือน ทนาย แม้ว ไม่รอลงอาญา คดีถุงขม 2 ล้าน ละเมิดอำนาจศาล” [Six months of immediate imprisonment on contempt of court for Thaksin’s lawyer in the case involving a bag containing 2 million baht cash], *Prachathai*, 26 June 2008 ([www.prachathai.com/journal/2008/06/17184](http://www.prachathai.com/journal/2008/06/17184), accessed 19 July 2021).
- <sup>6</sup> “‘ทักษิณ’ จะกลับบ้าน!?” [Thaksin to return home!?!], *Manager Online*, 2 July 2021 ([www.mgsonline.com/politics/detail/9640000063993](http://www.mgsonline.com/politics/detail/9640000063993), accessed 19 July 2021).
- <sup>7</sup> The PPP-led coalition of 19 parties, with a slim majority of only 254 MPs in the 500-member House, won the premiership for General Prayut Chan-ocha with 500 votes, 249 of them from senators. Only one senator, Senate President Dr Pornpetch Wichitcholchai abstained. The PT-led opposition’s nominee for the premiership, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leader of the Future Forward Party, received only 244 votes, all from members of seven opposition parties and none from senators. Under the current constitution’s transitory provisions, the 250 senators chosen during General Prayut’s previous military regime shall take part in the selection of the prime minister during their five-year non-renewable term ending in May 2024.
- <sup>8</sup> See the author’s “Major Parties Lacking Candidates with a Winning Chance in Bangkok’s Gubernatorial Election,” *ISEAS Perspective*, 22 June 2021 (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-84-major-parties-lacking-candidates-with-a-winning-chance-in-bangkoks-gubernatorial-election-by-termsak-chalermpanupap/>, accessed 20 July 2021).
- <sup>9</sup> “คุณหญิงสุดารัตน์ เปิด 3 เหตุผล ลาออกจากพรรคเพื่อไทย ทุกตำแหน่ง” [Khunying Sudarat discloses three reasons for her resignation from all positions in the Phuea Thai Party], *Prachachat*, 30 November 2020 ([www.prachachat.net/politics/news-565204](http://www.prachachat.net/politics/news-565204), accessed 20 July 2021). “Khunying” is an honorific

title conferred by the king in recognition of outstanding social contributions on the part of Thai women Thaksin's wife, Khunying Potjaman, has a similar title.

<sup>10</sup> *Inside Thailand*, 19 July 2021 ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=v\\_lzXIGBIEY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_lzXIGBIEY), accessed 19 July 2021).

<sup>11</sup> In the Khon Kaen by-election, the PPP's candidate was Dr Somsak Khun-ngern, a former member of the executive committee of Thaksin's dissolved Thai Rak Thai Party. Somsak was at first going to be the Phuea Thai Party's candidate, but he changed his mind and joined the PPP and won a coveted House seat from a Northeastern province for the PPP.

<sup>12</sup> That was “ทักษิณคิด ชั่งชัยชนะท่า!” PT won 265 House seats, 61 of them party-list seats, in the 2011 general election, beating the incumbent government party the Democrats, who won only 159 seats including 44 party-list seats. PT led in the formation of a coalition of six parties, with a combined strength of 300 MPs in the 500-member House, and made Thaksin's 44-year-old sister and political newcomer Yingluck Shinawatra the first female prime minister of Thailand. She concurrently held the portfolio of defence minister, a first in Thailand too.

<sup>13</sup> Thaksin was the first elected civilian Thai premier who served a full four-year term (February 2001 – March 2005). His Thai Rak Thai Party won a landslide victory over the Democrat Party in the general election of 6 February 2005, sweeping 377 seats in the 500-member House, leaving the Democrat Party in the dust with just 96 seats. Not long after having been toppled in a coup on 19 September 2006, Thaksin rebuilt his political fortunes through the Phalang Prachachon and PT, putting in power three prime ministers — Samak Sundaravej, Somchai Wongsawat and Yingluck — through his “remote control” manoeuvring from his base in Dubai. Thaksin might also have played a part in persuading the king's elder sister former Princess Ubolratana to accept the nomination of the Thai Raksa Chat Party to be its candidate for the premiership in the 2019 general election. The new party was an offshoot of the Phuea Thai Party, set up to attract younger voters. But the controversial “princess gambit” failed because King Vajiralongkorn quickly and officially rebuked his elder sister for inappropriately attempting to enter national politics and exposing the royal family to the risk of public criticism. See the author's article on “The Princess Gambit Debacle in Thailand” in the *ISEAS Commentary*, 13 February 2019 (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/the-princess-gambit-debacle-in-thailand-by-termsak-chalernmpalanupap/>, accessed 21 July 2021).

<sup>14</sup> To clear the way for General Prawit's promotion to head the Army in October 2004, Thaksin had to move his cousin, incumbent Army chief General Chaisith Shinawatra, out of the way by sending him to head the powerless post of Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Thaksin wanted to win support of General Prawit's “Eastern Tigers” faction of the Army, which was reputed to be under Queen Sirikit's patronage. Thaksin later chose to promote General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, a Muslim, to the post of Army chief on 1 October 2005. Succeeding General Prawit, who had retired, General Sonthi eventually led the coup on 19 September 2006 to oust Thaksin.

<sup>15</sup> The Constitutional Court on 5 May 2021 ruled that the conviction of Captain Thammanat by a New South Wales court in 1994 did not disqualify him from holding public office in Thailand. Apart from Thammanat, at least two other PPP senior party executives, Energy Minister Suriya Juangroongruangkit and Justice Minister Somsak Thepsutin, also formerly served Thaksin in Thai Rak Thai Party-led governments.

<sup>16</sup> In the existing one-ballot voting system, 12 micro-parties each won one party-list House seat. Eleven of them joined the ruling coalition and helped it edge out the PT-led opposition with 254 votes against 246 in the 500-member House. These micro-parties face imminent extinction because the number of party-list House seats will be reduced from 150 to 100 as part of the proposed return to the two-ballot voting system in which the number of election constituencies will be increased from 350 to 400.

<sup>17</sup> “จะทิ้งผมก็ตามใจ! ‘บิ๊กตู’ โพล่งกลาง ครม. เอื้อมพรรคร่วมเล่นโควิดการเมือง” [Let it be if you want to desert me! “Big Tu” bursts out in a cabinet meeting, fed up with ruling coalition partners’ politicising the COVID-19 pandemic], *Thai Post Online*, 20 July 2021 ([www.thaipost.net/main/detail/110488](http://www.thaipost.net/main/detail/110488), accessed 21 July 2021). “Big Tu” is the nickname of General Prayut.

<sup>18</sup> All 250 senators can join their counterparts in the House of Representatives in voting to select a prime minister. In the selection of a new prime minister on 6 June 2019, 249 senators voted for General Prayut and helped him win the premiership with a total of 500 votes, 251 of them from MPs of the 19 parties in the PPP-led coalition. Of the 250 senators, 194 were hand-picked in 2018 by a secretive search committee headed by General Prawit Wongsuwan in his capacity as the deputy head of the National Council for Peace and Order junta; 50 came from 10 major professions and were chosen by their peers; and six are holders of the following posts who are members of the Senate on an *ex officio* basis: the Defence Permanent Secretary, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, the Army Commander, the Air Force Commander, the Navy Commander, and the National Police Chief.

<sup>19</sup> Ordinarily, a draft bill has to pass both the House and the Senate before it is submitted to the king for his approval and signature. However, if such a general amnesty bill is also going to include absolving those arrested or imprisoned for *lèse majesté*, it may run into strong objection in the Senate, which is known as a formidable stronghold of conservatives and royalists. But without letting off the hook those who have violated the *lèse majesté* law (Criminal Code Section 112, which specifies jail terms ranging from 3 to 15 years), there can be no social harmony and healing in the Thai nation.

<sup>20</sup> See the author’s “To Deter Malaysia: Thai Navy’s Submarine Acquisition Faces New Opposition,” *ISEAS Perspective*, 9 September 2020 ([https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2020\\_101.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_101.pdf), accessed 20 July 2021).

<sup>21</sup> “บทสรุปหรือ 5 คดี ‘ทักษิณ’ – ศาลฎีกาสั่งคุกกรวม 10 ปี – เหลือคดีข้าวจีทูจีใน ป.ป.ช.?” [Summary of five cases against ‘Thaksin’ – Supreme Court has handed down altogether 10 years of jail – still one more case concerning a G-to-G rice deal in the National Anti-Corruption Commission?], *Isra News*, 31 July 2020 ([www.isranews.org/article/isranews-scoop/90809-israwnews-56.html](http://www.isranews.org/article/isranews-scoop/90809-israwnews-56.html), accessed 22 July 2021). The combined sentence of 10 years from three convictions included two years from a case of attempting to introduce online two-digit and three-digit numbers betting to compete with the existing highly lucrative government-owned lottery; three years for unlawfully arranging a loan of four billion baht from the government’s Export-Import Bank for the Government of Myanmar to buy satellite equipment from Shin Satellite Corps, which was set up by Thaksin’s family; and 5 years for conflict of interest in changing telecommunication policy to benefit Shin Corporation, which was also a business firm set up by Thaksin’s family.

<sup>22</sup> Thailand Development Research Institute, “การทุจริตกรณีการศึกษา โครงการรับจำนำข้าวทุกเมล็ด” [Case study: Programme to accept every grain of rice for pawning], February 2016 ([www.tdri.or.th/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/โครงการรับจำนำข้าวทุกเมล็ด\\_Finalpaper](http://www.tdri.or.th/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/โครงการรับจำนำข้าวทุกเมล็ด_Finalpaper), accessed 22 July 2021). Technically, farmers pawned their paddy with the government at a guaranteed price higher than the prevailing market price, but no farmers actually repaid the money they received to retrieve their paddy.

<sup>23</sup> “คำสั่งหัวหน้าคณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ ที่ ๒๖/๒๕๕๘” [Order of the Head of the National Council for Peace and Order, 26/2015], *Royal Gazette*, 5 September 2015 ([www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2558/E/207/1.PDF](http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2558/E/207/1.PDF), accessed 22 July 2021).

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