



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Might leaked calls and protests lead to another coup in Thailand?



Thailand is again undergoing a reshuffle of the stock staples of Bangkok politics, featuring family dynasties, the monarchy, the military, street protests, and thousand-year-old temples straight out of Indiana Jones.

The leading **character** at present is Paetongtarn Shinawatra, 38, daughter of billionaire former leader Thaksin, who was ousted in a coup in 2006. She was suspended as prime minister this week by Thailand's constitutional court over alleged ethical violations, and she has until 15 July to submit a written defence. The deputy prime minister is now acting leader.

In the eyes of many angry Thais, her crime was kowtowing to Cambodia in a 15 June telephone **call** with its former leader Hun Sen, who is still seen to be directing the country. During the call, she calls him "uncle", promises to "take care" of any problems relating to a border dispute between the two countries, and appears to criticise her country's military.

Her father was also in court this week over **charges** he breached lèse-majesty laws in a 2015 media interview. Criticism of the Thai royal family can lead to up to 15 years in prison. In April, Paul Chambers, a US citizen and renowned academic, was **jailed** for his apparently insulting writing. He ultimately fled the country, and the incident damaged US-Thai trade talks.

Last weekend, around 10,000 people **protested** in Bangkok and called for Paetongtarn's resignation. Few believe she will be leading Thailand within weeks if not months, and the Shinawatra brand may be irretrievably marked after having dominated Thai politics for the last couple of decades.

The open question is whether the military will return to the fore or whether it will find new political puppets behind which it can pull the strings. What is certain is that army and palace politics will continue to dominate and play out before the generals take a decision on military intervention.

Disputes over land and identity

This latest **crisis** was sparked on 28 May when Thai and Cambodian troops clashed along a disputed part of their 817-kilometre land border and a Cambodian soldier was killed. Since then, Thailand and Cambodia have ratcheted up tensions with trade and border restrictions and angry rhetoric.

Cambodia wants the International Court of Justice to rule on parts of the border still undefined, but Thailand rejects its jurisdiction and seeks a bilateral agreement.

Thailand and Cambodia dispute the true source of cultural icons, and the stone temples that dot the landscape of both countries

In the last major conflict between the two sides, at least 34 people were killed and thousands displaced in 2008-2011. In 2003, the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh was burnt after a Thai actress was falsely claimed to have said that the Angkor Wat temple complex belonged to Thailand.

Just as Israel and its Arab neighbours bicker over the origin of hummus and falafel, Thailand and Cambodia dispute the true source of cultural icons, such as Muay Thai and Kun Khmer boxing, Thai Khon and Cambodian Lakhon Khol masked dancing, and the stone temples that dot the landscape of both countries.

Pawns in the battle

More recent innovations are also used as pawns in the battle between the two countries. Last month, an Amnesty International **report** gave a detailed account of human rights violations, including forced labour, human trafficking, and torture, in at least 53 scam compounds operating across Cambodia.

Scam operations in Southeast Asia have dented Chinese tourism to the region because

of fears of kidnapping and cross-border crime. Earlier this year, Chinese media widely **reported** the disappearance of Chinese actor Wang Xing, who was lured to Thailand under the guise of an audition and then trafficked to a scam centre in Myanmar.

A recent report by Thailand's Centre for Gambling Problem Studies alleged close ties between casinos on Cambodia's border and its political elite, still dominated by Hun Sen although his son Hun Manet succeeded him as prime minister in 2003.

Sam Rainsy, the exiled former leader of Cambodia's opposition party, has **accused** Hun Sen of exacerbating the conflict with Thailand because of its crackdown on the cyber scam operations as well as the criminal networks that run the casinos mostly for Thai visitors in Cambodia.



Hun Sen purposely shared his recording of the phone call with Paetongtarn with around 80 officials

"Hun Sen's outburst has nothing to do with protecting Cambodia's sovereignty. It is about preserving the corrupt financial networks that keep his regime afloat," Rainsy said on Facebook.

Hun Sen purposely **shared** his recording of the phone call with Paetongtarn with around 80 officials under a Cambodian media law, knowing it would be further disseminated. He also said on Facebook that she would not last more than three months as prime minister and that he already knew who would be the next leader, although he declined to give a name.

He has also threatened to release evidence of Thaksin insulting the Thai king, leading to

speculation that he has cut a deal with Thai conservatives to drop his previous support for Thaksin in a bid for refreshed domination over Thai politics.

Another coup in the making?

Many analysts fear events could lead to another coup in Thailand, which has had 13 successful ones since the 1930s.

The military, along with the monarchy, are viewed by Thai generals as the country's necessary stabilising forces and it would seem that many Thais do too, while a younger generation remains frustrated in their calls for reform.

Jostling within Thailand's coalition parties is likely to remain at fever pitch

The current king, Vajiralongkorn, has little personal affection and is reported to be personally unstable, but he is much more openly involved in politics than his father, says the Council on Foreign Relations.

Jostling within Thailand's coalition parties is likely to remain at fever pitch. Hopes for tackling youth unemployment or resolving the US tariff dispute, let alone greater democratic reform, may take a back seat as the manoeuvring and protests continue.