

The Fragile Roots of Political Dynasties in Thailand: Historical and Institutional Perspectives

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Background

- Most political dynasties in Thailand have their roots in provincial business families. These families typically emerged from local commercial elites who converted economic resources into electoral influence, often building strong patron–client networks within their constituencies.
- Weak party institutionalization, combined with persistent economic disparities and uneven regional development, created fertile conditions for such families to enter politics.

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Core argument

- Yet, despite these enabling conditions, political dynasties in Thailand have remained fragile.
- This weakness is rooted in the broader historical and political structures of the Thai state.
- The combination of historical and structural constraints explains why dynastic politics in Thailand, though periodically visible, has never achieved the entrenched dominance seen in the Philippines or other cases.

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Political Dynasties within Thailand's Power Structure

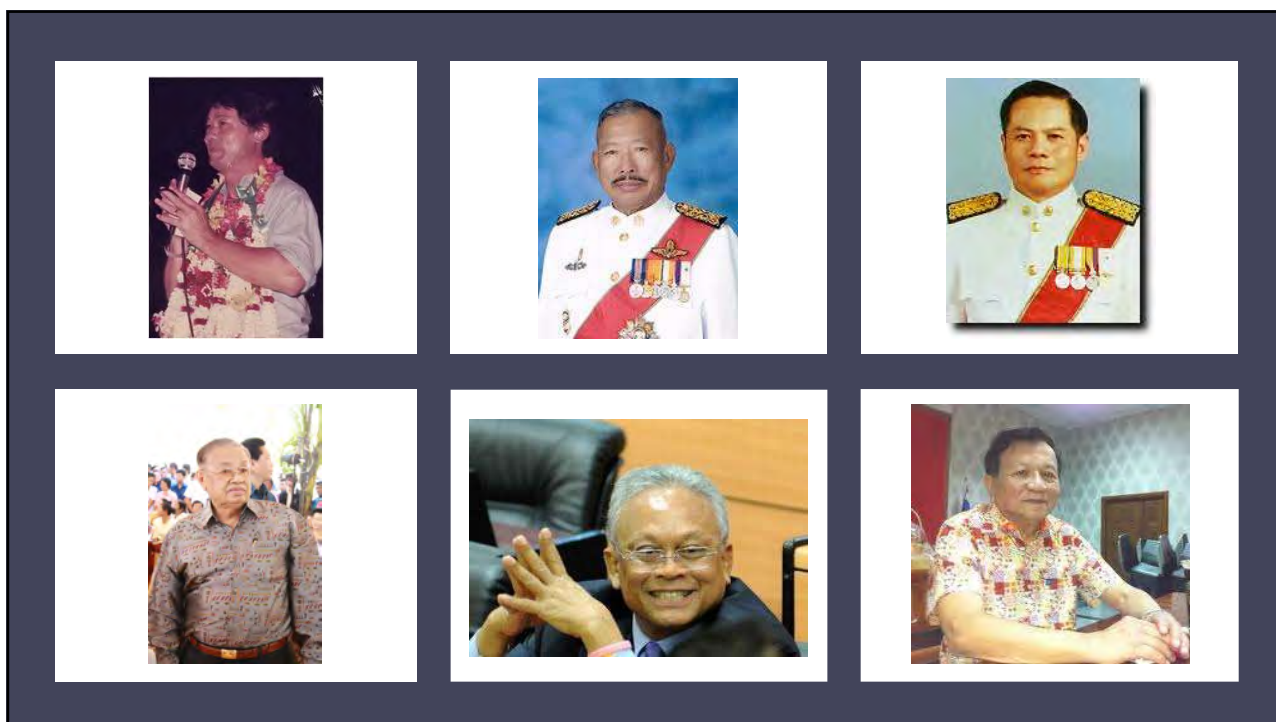
- Provincial political families are neither all-powerful nor irrelevant.
- They are key actors in Thailand's political network, yet remain constrained by the enduring power of traditional unelected elites.
- Political families are vulnerable to co-optation by the conservative elite, as they rely on state resources, legal protection, and political opportunity for survival.
- Lacking strong party structures to anchor their influence, these families are frequently drawn into alliances with the military–monarchy network, especially during the military rule.

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Origin: Patronage politics and political families under military-bureaucratic dominance

- Although the democratic revolution and electoral politics began since 1932, civilian politicians and political families became influential much later, in the 1970s, within a centralized state structure dominated by military, royal, and bureaucratic elites.
- Unlike the period of tight military control in the 1950s-1960s, the brief democratic opening of the 1970s and the semi-democratic regime of the 1980s allowed elected institutions to create new pathways for provincial elites to convert their economic capital into political office.

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- Political families operated in a system defined by strong patronage and weak parties. They established informal local networks and mobilized voters in their constituencies on behalf of political parties.
- Political dynasties hold significant power at the local level but remain vulnerable in national political arenas.

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Military intervention and politics of control and co-optation

- Thailand's modern political history has been dominated by military interventions (more than twenty coups since 1932) that have repeatedly disrupted electoral politics and broken the continuity needed for dynastic consolidation.
- The monarchy's enduring political influence has further constrained the rise of alternative, family-based centers of legitimacy, as royalist ideology positions the monarchy as the primary source of national unity and authority.

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- Coup leaders established their own political parties and co-opted influential political brokers and political dynasties to side with them.
- 1991 coup, 2006 coup, and 2014 coup.

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The Palang Pracharath Party



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The Expanding Judiciary and the Contraction of elected politicians and political families

- Constitutional provisions (the 1997 constitution weaken political boss and political families).
- Empowering the Constitutional Court and “watchdog” organizations (anti-corruption commission, election commission etc.)
- Frequent dissolution of parties.

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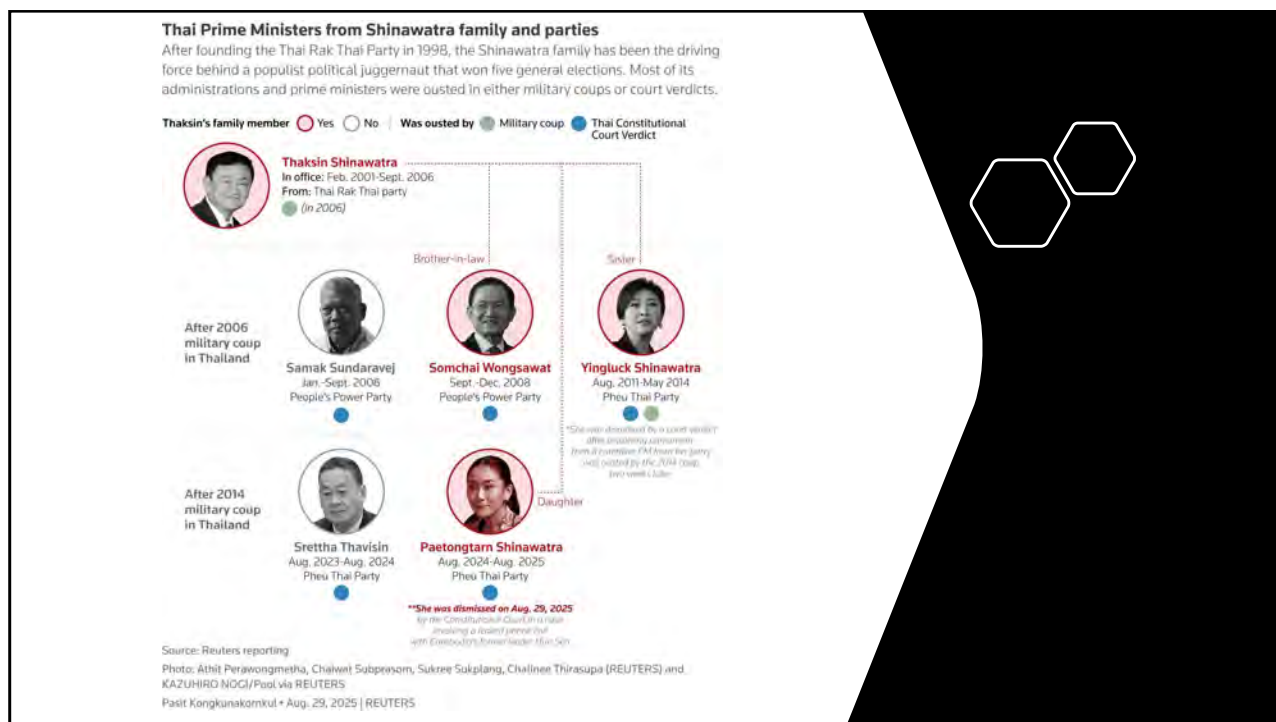


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- The Court can remove elected officials from office with relative ease.
- Paetongtarn is the 5th Thai premier in 17 years to be removed by the constitutional court.
- Judicial intervention combined with electoral rules and constitutional design have served to limit the staying power of major political families.

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Prominent cases

1. The Chidchob family
2. The Shinawatra family

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The Chidchobs: adaptive political families

- Buriram was often known as “Chidchob-buri”.
- In the 2005 elections, Newin’s faction decided to move to the Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party.
- After the 2005 election, the Chidchobs became one of the most successful political dynasties. Newin became a right-hand man of Thaksin.
- Following the Red Shirt crackdown and mounting military pressure, Newin broke with Thaksin, founded the Bhumjaithai Party, and switched sides.
- In post-2014 coup politics, Newin and the Bhumjaithai Party lent their support to Prayut Chan-o-cha.

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- “There is no way we [Newin’s political networks] can fight traditional elites. It is a war that we will never win. The establishment will not permit Thaksin to rule the country. As long as we support Thaksin, the army will put a harsh pressure on us.”

Interview, political henchmen of the
Chidchobs, Bangkok and Buriram, 30 September and 20
October 2010

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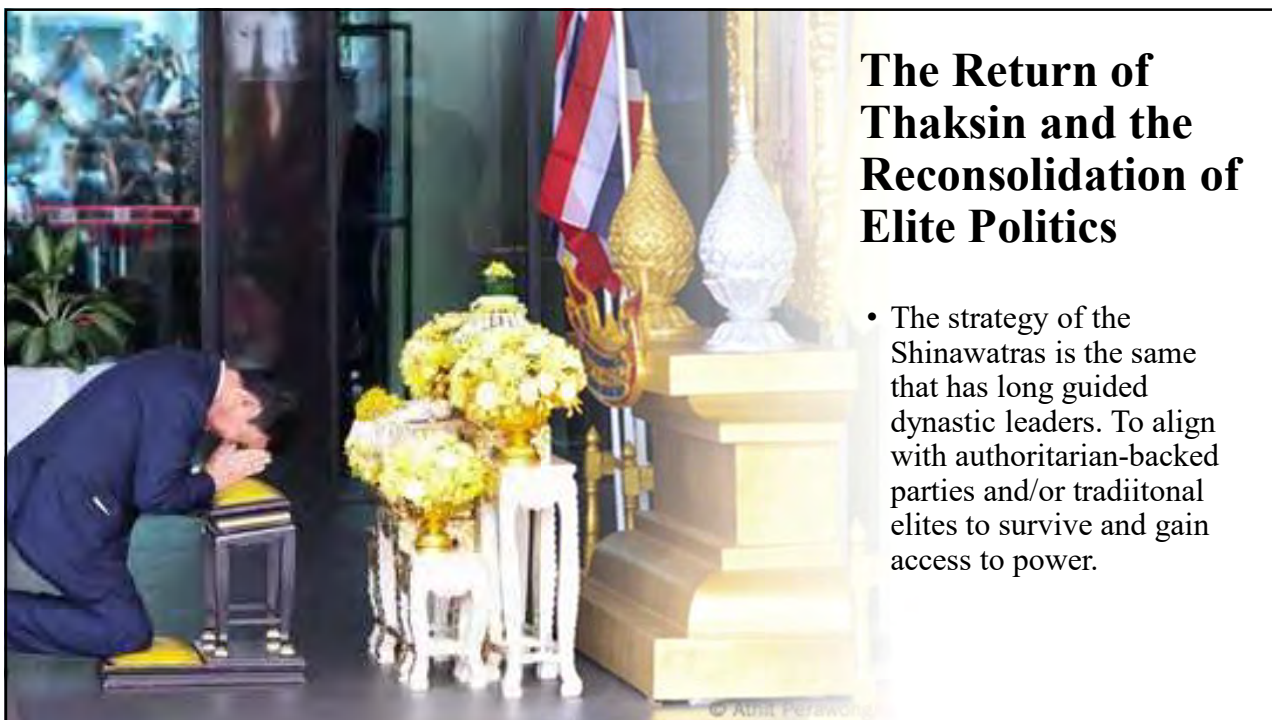
Thaksin and the Shinawatra family

- Thaksin comes from a provincial family in Chaing Mai.
- Unlike earlier political bosses, he has sought to merge family-based politics with institutional party building.
- While capable of mobilizing large popular mandates, they remain exposed to the dominance of the military-royal-bureaucratic elites.
- In a weakened position, Thaksin positioned himself under the terms set by the conservative establishment to ensure his return home and his party's revival in government.

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The Return of Thaksin and the Reconsolidation of Elite Politics

- The strategy of the Shinawatrass is the same that has long guided dynastic leaders. To align with authoritarian-backed parties and/or traditional elites to survive and gain access to power.

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Conclusion: Fragile power of Thai political dynasties

- Power of Thailand's political dynasty is shaped by historical pattern of military and monarchical dominance, weak party institutions, and legal-institutional disruptions.
- The repeated removal of Thaksin, his sister, and recent political fate of Paetongtarn illustrate the vulnerability of political dynasties in Thailand.
- Unable to win elections on their own, military-royalist elites rely on political families to preserve a façade of democracy, integrating them into the state on unequal terms and sidelining them once they become threatening.
- Civilian political families' power is contingent, precarious, and often expendable.

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