

THAKSIN

THE BUSINESS OF POLITICS IN THAILAND

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Chris Baker



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“A company is a country. A country is a company.
They’re the same. The management is the same.”

—Thaksin Shinawatra, November 1997

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PREFACE

He won the country's biggest ever election victory under a new constitution hailed as the most democratic in the country's history. Then his government controlled the media, harassed civil society, and used state violence in ways that recalled Thailand's past military dictators. He launched "populist" economic policies that critics predicted would roll back IMF-imposed reforms and bring a "second crisis." Yet the economy revived without a "lost decade" and the IMF became an admirer. He claims to be "beyond ideology," and yet constantly lectures the Cabinet, officials, and people at large on his ideas for transforming everything. He prioritizes a "war on poverty," while his family business delivers an annual profit equivalent to the total income of a moderate Thai provincial city.

Thaksin Shinawatra's impact on Thailand is not simple to understand, but it is important to do so. He has put back money in many people's pockets but also broken a lot of rice bowls. He has raised people's expectations but also stifled dissent and debate. He aspires to create a new, cleaner politics but is accused of conflict of interest over his business empire. We have heard him described by two long-standing observers of Thai affairs as "the best premier Thailand has ever had" and "another grubby businessman."

This book is an attempt to explain where he comes from, and what he is trying to do. We make no claim to neutrality, but suspect we will disappoint his fierce critics just as much as his fervent fans. We look

at him as both politician and businessman, because in Thaksin's Thailand these two spheres are joined at the hip, like Siamese twins.

The first three chapters are about where he comes from—the political and economic background, his family history, the growth of his business, and his rise to power. The next three are about what he is trying to do—to the economy, to the society, and to the political system. The final chapter looks at the family business. The appendices include his Cabinets, his statutory asset statement upon becoming prime minister, and our translation in full of his speech launching the war on drugs. Many of his important speeches are available in English but not this one, which is among the most passionate and revealing.

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PREFACE

For English spelling of Thai personal names, we have used the person's own version where known, or else the version used in the Bangkok English-language press where consistent, or else a transcription by the RI system.

All the quotations introducing chapter sections are from Thaksin. The sources for these are listed on pages 273–4.