

## **Exiled Thaksin inches closer to return to Thailand**

**Reuters**

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VIENTIANE, April 11 — Thailand's fugitive former premier Thaksin Shinawatra took some small but symbolic steps towards the fringes of his homeland today after five years in self-exile and at the heart of a bitter and bloody power struggle.

The tycoon arrived on his personal jet in the Lao capital Vientiane and waited seven hours before greeting a crowd of 1,000 of his cheering "red shirt" supporters, who crossed the nearby border to greet the populist hero as legal moves to bring him home a free man gather steam in Thailand's parliament.

"I think about home all the time," a smiling Thaksin told a scrum of Thai reporters, photographers and TV cameramen.

"I'm here because there are so many people I haven't seen for a long time. I will come back home, but in a smooth way."

With his 44-year-old sister Yingluck Shinawatra installed as prime minister and backed by three-fifths of parliament, Thaksin's return, whitewashed of his graft conviction, is looking increasingly likely, but could be anything but smooth.

But while his homecoming might unnerve his powerful and uncompromising enemies among the military and establishment elite who might try to thwart him, those who elected him in 2001 and 2005 landslides are counting down the days.

"This is the most exciting moment of my life. When I see him, I want to tell him to fight, fight and to hurry back home," said red shirt Somboon Chaiyasuth, wearing a T-shirt and necklace bearing pictures of a smiling Thaksin.

Thaksin's visit to Vientiane, just 20km from Thai soil, is the closest he has been to home since fleeing into exile for a second time in August 2008 to evade a two-year jail term for a conflict of interest case levelled by graft-busters appointed by the military junta that toppled him in a 2006 coup.

He pleads innocence and insists he wants to stay out of the limelight and has no political ambitions.

His chief aide, Kwanchai Praipana, a radio deejay who commands Thaksin's vast network of northeastern red shirts and led bloody confrontations with the army in 2009 and 2010, insists Thaksin has officially retired.

"If Thaksin returns it won't be as prime minister," he told Reuters yesterday, dressed in red bath towel at his radio station in Udon Thani, a city he calls the "red shirt capital" an hour's drive across the border from Laos.

"Yingluck is the best replacement for Thaksin."

Thaksin, 62, met politicians, businessmen and loyalists in Vientiane on Wednesday, adding fuel to opposition claims he is a "remote-control premier", running a government from his Dubai mansion via his proxy, the politically inexperienced Yingluck.

#### Divisive figure

While Yingluck has utilised her charisma to uphold an unspoken truce with Thaksin's enemies since coming to power last July in the third Shinawatra election landslide in a decade, her elder brother remains an divisive figure seen by many Thais as capable of derailing the fragile peace.

To the rural and urban working classes, Thaksin was a mould-breaking premier who prioritised millions of downtrodden poor, but for the army top brass and the elite in faraway Bangkok, he is crony capitalist who manipulated the masses and orchestrated the violent red shirt uprisings to try to re-take power.

Thaksin is racing to consolidate power and shore-up allegiances with big business and politicians as Yingluck's government pursues changes to the constitution and a reconciliation programme to strengthen democracy and heal rifts.

The current parliament session has been extended to allow debates over the formation of a 99-member Constitution Drafting Assembly and a peace bill that has sparked widespread anger, with the opposition warning of an imminent "reconciliation war".

A house reconciliation committee, chaired by retired General Sonthi Boonyaratakalin, who led the coup against Thaksin, has selectively picked out two recommendations by an independent research body to put to debate: an amnesty for political offenders since 2005 and the nullification of probes by the now-defunct Assets Scrutiny Committee, appointed by the army to investigate alleged graft by Thaksin and his Cabinet.

Commentators see trouble brewing and warn of a return of devastating "yellow shirt" street protests or even a coup if Yingluck's "parliamentary dictatorship" — as the anti-Thaksin camp calls it — moves to rescue the multi-millionaire. — Reuters

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