

**Thailand's UDD Leader Elevated to Cabinet**  
**January 20, 2012**  
**By Richard S. Ehrlich**

*Ang Pao for the Red Shirts?*

The cabinet changes announced late this week by Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra tread a careful path in seeking to deflect swelling dismay among some of her Red Shirt supporters who suspect they are being sidelined now that she is in power, and that they may have been used as a stepping-stone by her authoritarian brother Thaksin.

As with the original cabinet announced last August, most analysts regard the changes as more a reflection of Thaksin's leadership rather than Yingluck's. Thaksin has been a fugitive outside the country to avoid a two-year prison sentence resulting from corruption during his five-year administration. However, with massive support he was able to help orchestrate a decisive Pheu Thai Party electoral victory in national elections last July that brought Yingluck the premiership.

"In all, I think this is an ang pao (a traditional red packet money gift, known as a *lai see* in Cantonese) from Thaksin to his supporters in Pheu Thai on the eve of the Chinese New Year," said a political analyst. "It is time to pay back to his loyalists. Beyond that, I think overall there is nothing unusual about the cabinet reshuffle. At the end of the day, the government's policy remains the same--which is, leaning more and more toward the elite."

Ten new people have been brought in to become ministers as part of the cabinet shakeup and six ministers were transferred within the cabinet. King Bhumibol Adulyadej signed a royal command on Wednesday (January 18) to endorse the list, Cabinet Secretary-General Ampol Kittiampol said.

In addition to the elevation of Red Shirt leader Natthawut Saikua to the agriculture ministry, perhaps most notable change is the elevation of Kittiratt Na Ranong, a close Thaksin ally and the former president of the Stock Exchange, who was expected to become finance minister at the onset of the Yingluck government last July but was named Deputy Prime Minister and Commerce Minister instead. He has now been moved up to the finance post. He is well known in the business community at home and on the global stage.

While the placement of Natthawut in the cabinet goes some way to alleviating the growing dismay of the Red Shirts, it also antagonizes the Yellow Shirt royalists who were on the other side of the barricades against the Red Shirt protesters in 2010.

"For Natthawut, his promotion is important," the political analyst said. "He is a brilliant core leader of the Red Shirts. Yingluck didn't promote him to minister after the election because analysts thought this would be too obvious (to reward the Reds), but it has been six months, and it's time to give Natthawut what he deserved."

Natthawut's new role as deputy agriculture and cooperatives minister makes him the first Red Shirt protest leader to gain a cabinet post. Natthawut was briefly imprisoned in 2007 for making allegations about who was behind a 2006 military coup, and jailed again in 2011 pending trial for helping to lead pro-democracy insurrections by the Red Shirts in Bangkok.

A firebrand speaker, Natthawut rallied the Red Shirts with speeches about how aristocrats rule while the poor and working class are exploited like feudal serfs. He is a newly elected Member of Parliament, and has yet to go to trial for various charges resulting from his role as a Red Shirt leader. The nine-week insurrection by the Red Shirts, officially known as the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), resulted in scattered bloody clashes with security forces which left 91 people dead, mostly civilians.

Natthawut's placement within the agriculture ministry, even though he has little or no experience with Thailand's extensive farm problems concerning rice, sugar and palm oil, may allow him to use the post to network among his Red Shirt supporters, including many who work the land or are based in the countryside. If he becomes a conduit for their voices, the government may be able to better respond to their needs, especially after the devastating floods in October made land use an urgent focus, along with other agricultural issues including deforestation, pollution, seed development, crop pricing, and irrigation.

The upgrade of Air Chief Marshal Sukumpol Suwanatat, a fierce critic of the 2006 coup that capsized Thaksin, to be defense minister, may toughen Yingluck's government against her perceived foes in the armed forces, or could spark an unwanted rivalry against coupmakers still in uniform, particularly Army Chief Prayuth Chan-ocha, who also led the crackdown against the Red Shirts in May 2010.

At the very least, Sukumpol comes with extensive hands-on experience of the personalities and factions which have riddled Thailand's military, which relies on promoting officers often based on connections, pressure, and other non-military reasons rather than on merit.

One of the most controversial appointments was of Nalinee "Joy" Taveesin, a Thai businesswoman who is banned by the US Treasury Department from doing business with Americans because she allegedly facilitated financial transactions for Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's wife.

It was unclear if the prime minister was aware of the decision, made on Nov.25, 2008 by the Treasury's Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) which designated Ms. Nalinee among several others for helping Mr. Mugabe's regime.

"OFAC is designating Nalinee Joy Taveesin, a Thai businesswoman who has facilitated a number of financial, real-estate, and gem-related transactions on behalf of Grace Mugabe, Gideon Gono, and a number of other Zimbabwean Specially Designated Nationals (SDNs)," the U.S. Treasury statement said in 2008.

Nalinee said the allegations were "completely untrue."

"I have never traded in gemstones," she said. "I have never brought diamonds in for sale. I am friends with the presidents of many countries. This is a case of guilt by association," she told the Bangkok Post. "It was not a charge, but an accusation with a judgment already made. Even though I would like to have it redressed, I have no idea how to go about undoing it," Ms. Nalinee said.

When earlier appointed Nalinee as Thailand's trade representative in 2011, there was no public mention of the U.S. Treasury's ban. In her new post as prime minister's office minister

-- joining two other people who also hold that title -- Nalinee could now be hobbled in her work by the US decision and her allegations about her reputation.

Copyright © 2005 - 2012 Asia Sentinel.

Source: [http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=4155&Itemid=185](http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4155&Itemid=185)