

Bringing Thaksin Home
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What are the conditions that would get the former premier home free?

With the fugitive former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra forecasting his return to Thailand sooner rather than later, what are the conditions that would stop the assassins whom he says are hunting him and possibly allow him to dodge imprisonment?

That newest scenario apparently would include a fresh trial on charges of the conflict of interest deal that enabled his wealthy, politically savvy ex-wife to purchase government-owned real estate in Bangkok in 2003. Those charges would have sent him to prison for two years if he hadn't fled into exile in 2008. The new trial would be under different judges amid speculation that even a guilty verdict should result merely in a fine, and not imprisonment.

"He has already told the media that he is willing to return, to go through the judicial process," said Defense Minister Sukumpol Suwanatat Wednesday. "The process must be really fair, especially the appointment of people in charge of the process. If things were fair, he would return."

Ultimately Thaksin wants the government to twist the constitution, the judicial system or other loopholes to cancel the prison sentence. That is not unlikely. Thailand's courts have already dismissed a claim for nearly Bt12 billion in back taxes from Panthongtae and Pinthongta Shinawatra, the former prime minister's son and daughter.

A rapidly changing, possible backroom deal may see Thaksin abandoning his effort to retrieve US\$1.2 billion worth of his assets, which Thailand's highest court seized in February 2010 in connection to his personally profitable stock market deals after he was driven from power.

"Thaksin may have to give in, and not reclaim" the US1.2 billion, said a supportive parliamentarian Sanoh Thienthong on April 17. "Better to think of the money as a donation to charity."

If he forfeits that cash, Mr. Thaksin may probably still be a billionaire based on his family's holdings, so such a deal could be his ticket home from his five-star exile in Dubai. He has not returned to Thailand since fleeing the 2008 prison sentence.

To test the mood, he has been probing Thailand's northern and eastern borders. During an April 11-15 trip, he landed his private plane just across the Mekong River in Laos, then celebrated Buddhism's joyous New Year in Cambodia near the ancient Angkor Wat temple complex.

"This is as close as I can get to my homeland," Mr. Thaksin told a crowd near Vientiane. "It will not be long before I will go back to my brothers and sisters."

In a private video broadcast from Laos, he said, "With your support, I am likely to return home this year."

Ditching his hard-line reputation for announcing crackdowns and confronting his opponents, he instead waxed coy and crooned Frank Sinatra's "My Way" and the Beatles' "Let It Be" on April 14 to more than 10,000 eager supporters, including many of his activist Red Shirts who traveled to Cambodia from Thailand to welcome him.

"I managed to escape four assassination attempts, thanks to my good luck and a good amulet," which he believes can protect him, Thaksin said without elaborating on the murderous attempts. "I have not harmed anyone or done anything wrong. I want to return home when I will be able to freely walk its streets, not drive around in an armored car."

Gone are the glory days when Thaksin was thrice voted to be prime minister during his authoritarian 2001-2006 administration.

Thailand's military toppled Thaksin in a royalist-backed 2006 coup amid unhappiness by generals frustrated over expected promotions and fears that Thaksin was installing cronies in powerful positions within the military, political and economic structure.

Today, Washington maintains close relations with Thaksin's youngest sister Yingluck, who was elected prime minister in August 2011 after Thaksin hailed her as his "clone." The two rule the country together but Thaksin, 62, manipulates her from abroad.

Apparently learning a lesson from her brother's fate, Mrs. Yingluck is giving the military a freer rein in deciding their promotions, budgets, weapons procurements and other requests. The duo however are meanwhile having a tough time orchestrating other aspects of their "amnesty" -- also dubbed "reconciliation" -- for Thaksin so he can return without being jailed.

To sweeten the deal, their coalition government suggested a blanket amnesty for groups of people charged or convicted of "political" crimes since 2005. This would include generals who staged the coup, even though the military awarded itself immunity immediately after establishing a lackluster junta, and have never faced prosecution.

The amnesty would also include the generals and opposition politicians perceived as responsible for 91 deaths -- mostly civilian protesters -- during nine weeks of street fights between security forces and thousands of Red Shirt supporters who barricaded Bangkok's streets in 2010 while demanding an immediate election.

Critics warn that any widespread amnesty would destroy Thailand's judicial system. Some opponents of the amnesty have threatened to take to the streets or call on the military to stage a fresh coup.

Thaksin, however, relishes the day when he can return.

"When I return to Thailand, I would rather take up teaching duties, apart from acting as an adviser to the prime minister," he told a reporter on April 12. "I am willing to teach at any institutions," Mr. Thaksin said.

"You get things done, Il Duce," wrote the Bangkok Post's respected columnist Voranai Vanijaka on April 15) under the headline: "Il Duce, Come Home Now" -- mocking Thaksin by using the nickname of the Fascist Party leader Benito Mussolini who led Italy to defeat in World War II.

"Your body counts are second to none in this kingdom," Mr. Voranai said, referring to the 2,600 people killed in murky circumstances during Mr. Thaksin's war on drugs in 2003.

Shortly after the military seized power in the 2006 coup, it issued a White Paper which said "the narcotic suppression campaign of the previous [Thaksin] government had led to a large number of extra-judicial killings -- approximately 2,500 deaths. Such action not only caused grave losses to the families of those who died, but also constituted a serious violation of human rights, of a scale unprecedented in a Buddhist society like Thailand."

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