

Thailand's Political Crisis: Issues for Congress

July 28, 2025

On July 1, Thailand's Constitutional Court—a powerful force in Thai politics that has historically favored the military, the monarchy, and traditional elites—[suspended the prime minister](#), Paetongtarn Shinawatra, while it deliberates on a petition to remove her from office. Paetongtarn, daughter of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, has led Thailand since August 2024, heading a coalition formed in part to prevent the reformist Move Forward Party (which won a plurality of votes in 2023 elections) from taking office. If Paetongtarn is removed, it is unclear what type of government might succeed hers, raising uncertainty in a long-time U.S. military ally and economic partner.

The suspension stems from a reignited border dispute with Cambodia and a leaked call between Paetongtarn and former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, during which local observers say Paetongtarn adopted a deferential tone towards the Cambodian leader and criticized a royally appointed Thai military commander. On May 28, 2025, Thai and Cambodian military forces [exchanged fire over a section of their shared border](#). The clash reportedly left one Cambodian soldier dead and prompted troop build-ups, escalatory rhetoric, and retaliatory economic measures on both sides. During the June 15 call, Paetongtarn [referred to](#) Hun Sen as “uncle” (an honorific) and to a Thai military commander as “from the opposite side.” Following the leak, large-scale protests in Bangkok called for her resignation, and 36 members of the Thai Senate, which is dominated by allies of the royal establishment and the military, filed ethics charges and petitioned the Constitutional Court for her removal. Polling indicated Paetongtarn's approval rating, which was 30% in the first quarter of 2025, [dropped below 10% in June](#).

On July 24, Thai and Cambodian forces [clashed in multiple locations](#) along their disputed border. Both sides have blamed the other for [provoking the escalation](#) in the conflict, which has included cross-border artillery shelling by both sides and attacks by Thai F-16 fighter jets on Cambodian military targets. At least 36 people have been killed in the fighting, and as many as 300,000 civilians have fled on both sides of the border. On July 28, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and Thai Interim Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai met in Malaysia, this year's chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and [agreed to](#) an “immediate and unconditional” ceasefire. President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio [spoke with their counterparts](#) in each country prior to the agreement, and U.S. officials were present at the ceasefire negotiations.

Thailand's troubled democracy has been an issue of congressional interest at least since military coups d'état in 2006 and 2014. Several popularly elected leaders have been ousted for [charges of corruption](#) or [electoral fraud](#), moves seen by some independent analysts as politically motivated, and some observers

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have assessed that Thailand's political instability has distracted it from the role it has played as a leader in Southeast Asia. The ongoing situation presents several considerations for Congress in its oversight of U.S. policy towards Thailand and of broader policy in Southeast Asia. Thailand offers access and cooperation to U.S. military, law enforcement, and intelligence organizations. Prolonged political turmoil could limit the Thai government's ability to make decisions, and ultimately could prompt Thai conservatives to call for a military takeover. Such a move would trigger congressionally mandated restrictions on U.S. diplomatic and military programs and could cause tensions in the U.S.-Thailand relationship, as it did in the fallout from a military coup d'état in 2014.

Congress over the past decade has worked through statements, resolutions, legislation, and hearings to shape U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia, strengthen U.S. ties with Thailand and the region, and promote democracy and human rights in Thailand. Thailand has received U.S. funding for International Military Education and Training (IMET), maritime domain awareness, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) efforts. Going forward, Congress could investigate and conduct oversight of administration efforts to manage tensions and Thailand's political instability, particularly in light of the close U.S.-Thai security relationship.

Paetongtarn's Suspension

Paetongtarn defended her deferential tone in her call with Hun Sen, a long-time friend of the Shinawatra family, as a negotiating tactic, but nationalist criticism has grown. The conservative Bhumjaithai Party, the second largest in the government, left her ruling coalition and called for a vote of no-confidence. Thousands of nationalist demonstrators took to the streets to demand Paetongtarn's resignation.

Thailand's Constitutional Court has become increasingly politicized over the past two decades, and has dissolved 34 political parties—many of them led by the Shinawatras and their allies—since 2006. The court gave the prime minister 15 days to mount her defense; she requested an extension, and the court has not indicated when it might rule on the charges. In the interim, a deputy prime minister is serving in her stead, and Paetongtarn remains in the cabinet as culture minister following a cabinet reshuffle. With a reduced majority in the House of Representatives following the departure of the Bhumjaithai Party, Paetongtarn's government does not have the parliamentary majority necessary to pass legislation, and observers say her primary options are to resign or call snap elections. Some observers have assessed that the military could more directly involve itself in resolving the crisis or choosing the next government.

Thailand's Political Fissures

The current political crisis is the latest in a series of confrontations in which traditional power centers, including military and royalist factions, have sought to restrict the political power of populists and younger reformists seeking to challenge the role of the military and monarchy in politics. Former Prime Minister Thaksin (2001-2006) pioneered using appeals to historically politically disenfranchised and disengaged populations, including rural and working-class voters, to win elections. In 2005 elections, Thaksin became the first Thai prime minister to complete a full four-year term in office, and the first to lead his party to win an absolute majority in the House of Representatives. He was ousted by the military in 2006. The ongoing power struggle has resulted in two decades of political deadlock, periodic mass protests, and a violent military crackdown in 2010.

Reformist opposition parties grew in stature during and after 2019 elections, in which the Future Forward Party won an unexpected 80 seats in the House of Representatives. The party was banned in 2020 by Thailand's Constitutional Court, but Future Forward's successor party, the Move Forward Party, topped the 2023 elections. Polling by Thailand's National Institute of Development Administration (Nida) indicates that the People's Party—formed after the court disbanded Move Forward—

remains Thailand's most popular party. These parties have sought, among other goals, to restrict the role of the military in politics and challenge Thailand's strict lèse-majesté law, which criminalizes criticism of the monarchy and is applied broadly to silence critics of the military and government. Seeking to limit the reformist opposition, Thaksin loyalists and military-backed parties in 2023 agreed to form the governing coalition now led by Paetongtarn.

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