

Commentary

Burmese Generals Probably Happy with Thailand's New Government

Tuesday 29 January 2008, by [Kyaw Zwa Moe](#) (Date first published: 29 January 2008).

Burma's ruling generals in the isolated capital of Naypyidaw are probably smiling over the election of Thailand's 25th prime minister on Monday.

The junta no doubt views the new prime minister, Samak Sundaravej, as a proxy for deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Sinawatra, as does most of the Thai public.

Thaksin, who makes many of the decisions for the newly formed government, was widely regarded as a Burma supporter who saw the country as a potential business partner.

But in terms of the two countries political systems, Burma and Thailand are no longer the same, following Thailand's recent democratic election and the end of rule for Thailand's military junta, which governed the country for more than one year.

From September 2006 until December 2008, the two governments were the same—generals ruled.

Thailand's new Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej is the ostensible leader of the People Power Party. He admitted to being a "proxy" for Thaksin, who is currently residing in exile in Hong Kong. Samak was nominated by Thaksin to lead the People Power Party, which was founded after Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party was dissolved by Thailand's coup leaders.

Burmese generals probably anticipate much smoother—and more supportive—relations with Thailand's new government.

Thaksin was a friend of Burma's military regime when he was prime minister from 2001 to 2006. He was criticized for courting the junta by supporting business concessions and defending the military leaders.

Thailand is one of Burma's biggest investors, and state-owned industries such as PTT and EGAT (the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand) are still the largest purchaser of gas from Burma, contributing almost US \$2 billion a year to the military regime.

Business relations under Thaksin's government were better than ever for the Burmese government. In 2003, Shin Corp, the telecom company once owned by Thaksin's family, signed a deal with Bagan Cybertech, the Burmese internet service provider, owned by Ye Naing Win, the son of the deposed Prime Minister Gen Khin Nyunt.

In 2004, Thaksin traveled to the ancient capital of Pagan, Burma, to sell his "Economic Cooperation Strategy," and he promised the Burmese junta aid and support worth \$45 million.

In December 2003, Thaksin's government hosted the "Bangkok Process" to advance democracy in Burma. In addition to two foreign ministers from the host country and Burma, the meeting included representatives from Australia, Austria, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan and Singapore. The meeting yielded nothing even though Thai Foreign Minister Surakiat Sathirathai heralded it a "breakthrough."

After the junta's harsh crack down on the monk-led demonstrations last September, the generals have faced growing international pressure. Even the regime's traditional supporters such as China, India and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have become more vocally critical even as they stick to their noninterference policies, saying Burmese politics is an "internal affair."

Burma needs more friends to support its policies internationally. But the generals are always skeptical and reserved when they deal with foreign countries. They like to say they have no "always friends" or "always enemies." They focus on their own interest based on the present.

However, it's likely they see the new Thai government as an old friend. And they will probably benefit from it.

P.S.

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