

## Thaksin picks a fight with press

---

### **Influential business daily the 'Asian Wall Street Journal' calls on the government to adhere to democracy**

Thailand has had a well-earned reputation as a liberal democracy open to the ideas and investment of the world. Which makes it especially regrettable that the Thai government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has been tarnishing that reputation in an attempt to improve his own.

The government has threatened to expel two reporters based in Bangkok for our sister magazine, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. It objects to a short January 10 item in the *Review* that reported tension between Prime Minister Thaksin and the revered Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

The report meant no disrespect to Thailand's Royal family. The King commands our admiration as a symbol of Thai sovereignty and for his many good works and exemplary leadership of the Thai people. To remove any doubts on that point a letter from *Review* editor Michael Vatikiotis will be delivered today to the president of the Thai National Assembly apologising for causing "any adverse commentary concerning Thailand's highest institution". Our hope is that this will settle the matter.

But we should be candid that settling this will also depend on the response of the Thaksin government. It's clear to everyone that the government has picked this fight with foreign reporters as a way to deflect attention from its own troubles. This is a familiar if dreary political tactic, used in Asia by the late Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos and Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, though even the latter hasn't expelled reporters since the mid-1980s. Thai leaders haven't typically resorted to this sort of tinhorn behaviour.

But Thaksin has a thin skin and is quick to blame others, especially foreigners, for his own mistakes. Elected with a huge majority last year, the country's richest man has since seen his popularity erode amid a series of economic-policy blunders.

He's kicked around foreign investors, in particular cancelling a Japanese contract at Bangkok's airport, sending foreign investment into a tailspin. Thaksin has also picked a fight with a reform-minded central-bank governor. The result has been a sharp reduction in economic confidence and growth. King Bhumibol himself issued a pointed public criticism of Thaksin late last year, noting that the country is "in a state of disaster instead of prosperity".

Thaksin's response has been to berate the messengers in the press and public. He's urged businessfolk and economists to stop airing "negative views". And the government subjected leading Thai journalists to a session on "Reforming and Improving the Efficiency of the Media",

which seems to mean saying nicer things about Thaksin's policies. Now he's assailing the foreign press.

The dispute here is not between Thais and foreigners but between the Thaksin government and the press. Our mission in Thailand is to report the truth fairly, and the *Review* has been doing so for more than 50 years. Having foreign reporters on the ground in Bangkok is in the interests of the Thai people, not only because these journalists are able to explain the country to the outside world, but also because they offer Thais another perspective that enriches the local debate.

We are gratified that local journalists have sprung to our defence against the government's recent actions. And we hope that the Thaksin government will recognise the damage that media expulsions will do to Thailand's reputation as a modern democracy.

This editorial was carried in yesterday's edition of the Asian Wall Street Journal.



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES *secretary-general Sirilax Punbumrungkij shows the apology letter from the 'Far Eastern Economic Review', which was handed to her by its lawyer [David Lyman](#), right.*