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SOUTHEAST ASIA

Srettha's fisheries approach exposes broader policy failures

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IN BRIEF

Former Thai prime minister Srettha Thavisin's attempts to balance competing interests in the fisheries sector have stalled while drawing criticism from businesses and civil society organisations. His successor Paetongtarn Shinawatra faces the same complex task of balancing domestic interests, international obligations and economic aspirations. It remains to be seen how Paetongtarn's approach will differ and whether she can avoid the pitfalls of her predecessor.

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In September 2023, embattled former Thai prime minister Srettha Thavisin and a cadre of ministers visited [Siripairoj Ice Pier](#), a fishing port in southwest Thailand. While eating green fish ball curry, local fishermen explained to the politicians how stringent regulations on illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing created in 2015 to comply with EU export demands had decreased wages and efficiency while levying ruinous fines.

To assuage their concerns, Srettha established a new [cabinet committee](#) to address industry stagnation and expressed confidence that 13 laws in the Fisheries Act would be amended in the near future.

But several months earlier, Srettha had been at the Elysee Palace with French President Emmanuel Macron, proudly proclaiming that an [EU-Thailand free trade agreement](#) would be finalised [within 18 months](#). This timeline was almost undoubtedly contingent on Thailand continuing to uphold the comprehensive reforms it enacted to its fishing industry in response to EU pressure.

In August 2024, Srettha was [dismissed from office](#) by Thailand's constitutional court for what it found to be a [gross breach of ethical standards](#) amid [plummeting approval ratings](#) and a stagnant Thai economy. The now-former prime minister's inability to act decisively on the future of Thailand's commercial fishing industry has proved a bellwether issue. It illustrates why Srettha's economically liberal and internationalist agenda for Thailand broadly failed for reasons inside and outside of his control.

Thailand cracked down on IUU fishing in 2015 to avoid facing a total export ban from the European Union — the [world's largest trader of fishery and aquaculture products](#). While this has improved labour and sustainability protections, compliance issues and labour shortages have drastically reduced the number of operational fishing vessels. Out of Thailand's 15,000 seaworthy fishing vessels, [only 4000-5000](#) are legally operable.

Before implementing IUU regulations, Thailand exported seafood worth 350 billion baht (US\$10.4 billion) annually. But after these statutes were implemented, the local industry began to be outcompeted by less-regulated neighbouring states. The decrease in domestic supply has also increased annual seafood imports to 150 billion baht (US\$4.4 billion).

It's crucial to note that these statistics primarily reflect the situation for commercial fishery businesses. While the initial reforms were implemented as blanket regulations across the sector, subsequent amendments have aimed to provide remedies specifically for local fishermen.

The Thai parliament unanimously voted to loosen fishing regulations in February 2024 to address pressure on the industry. Draft bills have proposed removing minimum penalty thresholds for IUU violations and allowing vessels to fish endangered species beyond Thailand's oceanic borders provided they comply with international maritime law. Other recommendations include removing restrictions on the number of licences per person and expanding the Provincial Fisheries Committee.

This near-universal clamour for a Fisheries Act amendment provoked gripes from business owners. Critics have decried the suggested exclusion of labour management, fearing it could impact Thailand's evaluation in the Trafficking In Persons Report and weaken monitoring and protection mechanisms. Others have objected to the proposed import duty increase to 20 baht (US\$0.58) per kilogram of seafood as protectionist.

There has also been sustained campaigning against deregulation from local and international NGOs. An open letter delivered to Srettha Thavisin's government on behalf of 84 civil society organisations requested intervention to halt deregulation they say would return Thai fisheries to a culture of economic and sexual exploitation.

The key theme of this debate has been comprehensive deliberation and consultation, coupled with demands for patience from the fisheries sector. Srettha's parliamentary coalition came into power on a mandate to revive the economy, boost trade and tourism and decrease bureaucratic hurdles. But his collaborative and comprehensive approach, emphasising the formation of joint public-private partnerships, has backfired.

Slow and steady progress has not led to substantial reforms of the Thai economy or clear objectives for Thai trade negotiators to follow in their crucial negotiations with the European Union. The World Bank projects that Thailand's economy will grow just 2.8 per cent in 2024, lagging well behind its Southeast Asian neighbours. Rather than building political capital to finalise legislation, Srettha burnt it through his request for forbearance.

Amending the Fisheries Act without alienating any significant domestic interests or losing the EU market takes more time than Srettha, as the leader of a re-emerging but fragile democracy, was ever afforded. In addressing the issue through a measured and inclusive approach, Srettha sacrificed flawed but swift and comprehensive solutions, a trade-off replicated in other areas under his government.

Srettha's approach to fisheries reform exemplifies his administration's broader predicament. His policies aimed to please all parties whilst satisfying none — caught between local industry demands, international obligations and economic aspirations.

The transition from Srettha to new prime minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra is unlikely to significantly alter the country's fisheries reform policy given their shared Pheu Thai party affiliation. Paetongtarn's administration still faces the complex challenge of balancing local industry demands with international commitments, particularly EU requirements. The new leadership must also address concerns about labour protections and environmental sustainability while pursuing economic liberalisation.

As Paetongtarn's tenure begins, her approach to prioritising and navigating these challenges remains to be seen. What is clear is that Srettha's balancing act was unsuccessful, leaving key fisheries issues unresolved in the middle of a vital trade negotiation and putting Thailand's economic revival in limbo.

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