

## Kamnan Poh Convicted

Somchai Kunplome, Thailand's best-known "influential figure", has been sentenced to 25 years in jail for putting out a contract on the life of rival Prayoon Sitichote, who was killed by an unidentified gunman in March last year.

Also convicted was Somchai's accomplice Passakorn Homhuan, who was also handed a 25-year sentence.

Somchai, known as Kamnan Poh and regarded as the Godfather of Chon Buri, is in the midst of a high-stakes legal battle that could spell the end of his political and business domination of the eastern seaboard. In addition to the Prayoon murder case, he is appealing his five-year, four-month graft sentence for land procurement irregularities.

The judge summed up the events leading to the arrest and eventual conviction of Somchai.

Between October 2002 and March 2003, Somchai and Passakorn had conspired to hire Thanawut Koedkiartkul, one of the two star prosecution witnesses, to contract gunmen to kill Prayoon, the judge said. The co-defendants also contracted Thanaphol Boonsri-uthai, another star witness, to assist Thanawut.

The contract on Prayoon's life was worth Bt3 million.

Thanawut and Thanaphol four times arranged for assassins to shoot Prayoon dead but they failed. An unknown gunman who remains at large eventually killed

Prayoon.

With regard to the contract put out by the co-defendants, the motivation was reprisal after Somchai's aide Police Lt-Colonel Chaiyan Wichaidit was gunned down by Prayoon's supporters, the judge said.

Backed by Somchai, Chaiyan allegedly abducted and killed Prayoon's younger brother Prayuth Sithichote and his business associate Chamnien Huyweng.

Chaiyan had siphoned Bt12 million from a cigarette-smuggling operation that he ran with Prayuth and Chamnien.

In retaliation, two of Prayoon's relatives, Lertchai Karakit and Yothin Sithichote, shot Chaiyan dead.

"The Chaiyan murder prompted Somchai to seek revenge and pre-empt Prayoon, killing him first," the judge said.

"Even though the contract lapsed because the victim was killed before it could be executed, the hiring of gunmen and plotting the murder had already been committed," he said.

Somchai has been released on 10 million baht bail so he can appeal the decision. But whether his remaining influence and connections with powerful people will be able to shield him from legal punishment remains to be seen.

One of his sons - Sontaya - is Tourism and Sports minister while another, Ittiphol, is a Chon Buri MP. Somchai's protégé, Niran Wattanasartsathorn, recently won a landslide election for the post of Pattaya mayor.

### Royal Thai Consulate Office In Perth Western Australia

#### Jamiesons Lawyers

Level 8, International House  
26 St George's Terrace  
Perth WA 6000

Telephone: (08) 9221 1633

Facsimile: (08) 9221 1635

Thai Consulate Tel: (08) 9221 3237

E-mail: jamieson@jamlaw.net.au

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