

Thailand plans bill to legalize casinos, spokesman says

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Thailand will press ahead with plans to legalize casinos as part of large entertainment zones to be set up to generate more state revenue and burnish its image as a major tourism hub, according to government spokesman Chai Wacharonke.

Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin has ordered the finance ministry to draft a comprehensive bill that will lay the legal foundation for establishing entertainment complexes, Chai told a briefing after a weekly cabinet meeting. Deputy Finance Minister Julapun Amornvivat will lead the preparation of the bill, he said.

A majority of the country's 500-member House of Representatives in March backed a study by a panel of lawmakers that favored the setting up of legalized casinos within large entertainment venues to attract high-spending tourists. It is estimated that the integrated entertainment complexes, which comprise of casinos and other services, will help generate tax revenue of 12 billion baht (\$328 million) in the first year of their operations, Chai said.

Thailand is the latest nation to consider competing for a pie of the global casino industry, which IBIS World estimates generated \$263.3 billion in revenue last year. The United Arab Emirates set up a framework for legalized gaming in September, with the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Ras Al Khaimah seen as frontrunners to introduce casinos.

Though most types of betting is illegal in Thailand — a majority Buddhist and conservative society — any opening of casinos will be in line with its recent embrace of a more liberal landscape to revive its tourism industry from the pandemic blow. In 2022, Thailand became the first country in Asia to decriminalize cannabis though it's now moving to ban its recreational use, and is set to become the first in Southeast Asia to legalize same-sex marriages.