

Thailand's coup leaders suppress democratic rights

John Roberts, Peter Symonds
25 September 2006

It is less than a week since Thai military leaders ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and installed themselves as the Council for Democratic Reform under Constitutional Monarchy (CDRM). While the media have emphasised the coup's bloodless character and featured pictures of smiling soldiers with young children, the junta backed by the monarchy is no more benevolent than the repressive Thai military regimes of the past.

The CDRM, which seized power on September 19, has already imposed measures that drastically curtail democratic rights. The generals have imposed martial law, abrogated the constitution, dissolved both houses of the national parliament and shut down the Constitutional Court. All political activities and any public gatherings of more than five people have been banned.

Army chief and CDRM head General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin called a meeting of all newspaper and television executives last Thursday to impose censorship regulations. Military spokesman Lieutenant-General Palanggoon Klaharn confirmed the extensive character of the measures, stating that the military "would like to urge those who have different political opinions to halt their activities for the time being."

In addition to banning radio stations from taking phone calls from listeners and TV stations publishing text messages, Internet webmasters will be held responsible for any messages posted on their sites. All references to the king are to be removed. According to the *Nation* newspaper, the military has banned anything considered "detrimental to peace and morality".

Ministry of Information and Communications Technology official Thaneerat Siritachana warned: "We have asked for cooperation, but violators... could face a shut down of their businesses." The ministry has already closed down 300 community radio stations in the country's north, where ousted Prime Minister Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai (TKT) party had their strongest electoral support. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists has warned that Thailand's 2,000 community radio stations are under threat.

On Friday morning, the website "19 September Network against Coup d'Etat", set up the previous day, was taken off the air. Publisher Sombat Boongnam-among told the media: "We had nearly 5,000 hits on our first day. The ISP [Internet Service Provider] said our information was too dangerous."

Nevertheless, about 100 students from the newly-established network defied martial law and gathered outside the Siam Paragon shopping mall last Friday to protest against the junta. Dressed in

black, the protesters carried placards declaring "No to Thaksin, No to coup". Some wore symbolic gags over their mouths. Police arrested a female student who tried to read out a statement.

Chulalongkorn University academic Giles Ungpakorn, who supported the protest, told the press: "I never supported the Thaksin government. We were protesting against Thaksin's human rights abuses long before the anti-corruption protests began." But the situation is worse now, he said. "We were allowed to protest under Thaksin. There was no ban on demonstrations. The media weren't completely clamped down the way they are now."

Making clear that it will tolerate no opposition, the junta announced on Sunday that anyone participating in political gatherings will face "tough and swift penalties" of up to five years jail and fines of 100,000 baht [\$US2,700]. The televised announcement called for all district and provincial level organisations to halt their activities "until the situation returns to normal". An army spokesman told Associated Press that opposition politicians had held meetings in the northern city of Chang Mai, where they "criticised the coup as wrong".

Military spokesman Palanggoon Klaharn announced on Saturday that the country's foreign ministry had been ordered to take "proactive action" to correct "misreporting" in the international media. He complained in particular that some foreign journalists had presented news that insulted King Bhumibol Adulyadej. At one point, CNN and BBC reportage of the coup was blacked out.

The junta is particularly sensitive to any mention of the king's involvement in the coup because, in the first instance, the military's claims to legitimacy derive from his support. The CDRM and its backers in ruling circles are relying on the king's authority to stifle opposition, particularly among Thaksin's supporters in rural areas.

There is no doubt, however, that the royal palace was intimately involved in the coup. A picture has been released showing the king meeting with the military plotters on the night of the takeover. The following day, the palace issued a decree ordering the public service and population to obey the orders of the CDRM. Last Friday, at a ceremony at army headquarters, the king formally endorsed Sonthi as interim head of the military government.

The monarchy is closely intertwined with the military, which ruled Thailand for much of the twentieth century through direct and often brutal dictatorships. In key crises, the king's authority as a "revered" and neutral arbiter has been critical in containing

opposition and propping up the state apparatus. In 1992, King Bhumibol stepped in to defuse mounting mass protests against the military junta headed by General Suchinda Kraprayoon after soldiers fired on and killed hundreds of unarmed protesters.

The latest coup took place as social and political tensions were again reaching breaking point amid a bitter feud in ruling circles over the Thaksin government's policies. Thaksin initially came to power in 2001 by capitalising on popular disaffection with the pro-market reforms of the Democratic Party-led ruling coalition that took office following the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. His populist pledges won significant support among the rural poor as well as layers of business hard hit by the economic turmoil.

Under pressure from international markets, however, Thaksin alienated his former backers among the ruling elite by continuing economic restructuring, including privatisations and a free trade deal with the US. He also provoked opposition through increasingly autocratic methods, a ruthless anti-drugs campaign and attempts to suppress separatist opposition in the Muslim south of the country.

Protests began last year and mushroomed into mass rallies in February after the Thaksin family avoided paying taxes on the \$1.9 billion sale of its share in the Shin Corp communications conglomerate to the Singapore government's investment arm Temasek. Thaksin attempted to shore up his government by holding a snap national election in April, but an opposition boycott provoked a constitutional crisis after not all seats were filled. Under pressure from the king, Thaksin became a caretaker prime minister and promised to step aside completely after fresh elections under a new electoral commission.

As the standoff dragged on, it became increasingly evident that Thaksin and his TRT would be reelected in any new vote, leading to a new round of political turmoil. The anti-Thaksin opposition was due to restart mass rallies on September 20, that is the day after the coup. The military, with the backing of the king, took control above all to preempt a protest movement involving ordinary working people that threatened to slip out of the control of the existing political parties.

Academic Giles Ungpakorn told the *Independent*: "It's a tale of two countries. You have the urban middle classes and the rural poor. Thaksin was the first to really provide political programs for the poor. There is this argument that he won elections fraudulently, but there's no real evidence for that. I think the rural poor voted for him because he provided policies for them. That's democracy and if you don't like it you have to set up a political party and offer something better. In this country, it's the rural poor who respect democracy—and it's the educated elite who don't."

Thaksin's populist pledges for the poor were very limited, designed to gather support for an economic agenda that was inimical to their interests. The opposition faced exactly the same political problem: how to obtain popular support for a program that would inevitably undermine living standards. Moreover it was divided. While key opposition figures backed more protectionist measures, the Democrats advocated more aggressive economic restructuring.

Openly contemptuous of the poor, leading Democratic Party member Surin Pitsuwan told the *Washington Post*: "The problem

is that in Thailand, Thaksin created a class of people dependent on state handouts. We need to teach these people that there are no such things as free gifts in a real democracy and that it does them more harm than good to live off the largesse of corrupt leaders."

The junta has announced that it will draw up a new constitution and hold elections next year. It is already clear, however, that the military intends to break up the TRT and ensure that Thaksin does not return to the political stage. That is the purpose of its new "anti-corruption" drive, which has already resulted in the arrest of four leading TRT members, including Deputy Prime Minister Chitchai Wannasathit.

A newly-appointed National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC) has been charged with investigating Thaksin and 15 former cabinet ministers over corruption and other charges, such as electoral fraud. The auditor-general is to investigate other alleged corruption cases, including those associated with the construction of the new Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport.

What broad economic policies the CDRM will implement is unclear. A civilian prime minister is due to be installed this week. The leading contenders include former World Trade Organisation head Supachai Panitchpakdi, Bank of Thailand governor Pridyathorn Devakula and two top judges, Charnchai Likhitchittha and Akkharathorn Chularat. It cannot be ruled out that someone close to the military and the palace, such as former prime minister and general Prem Tinsulonda, might be chosen.

Whoever is installed will face exactly the same dilemma as Thaksin: how to ram through economic policies that inevitably produce popular discontent. The draconian measures already in place are a warning that the military will brook no opposition and will not hesitate to use the violent methods of the past to suppress protests and dissent.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact