

Thai junta puts off elections for at least 15 months

Ben McGrath**3 June 2014**

The Thai military, which seized power in a coup on May 22, is consolidating its rule, clamping down on sporadic protests, arresting opponents and critics and ruling out any elections for at least 15 months.

In his first public address last Friday, coup leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha defended the coup, claiming the military's actions were necessary to restore order after months of political upheaval. In reality, the military has tacitly supported the months of intrigue and protests that were aimed at destabilising the elected Pheu Thai government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

Prayuth outlined a three-phase process with "a timeframe of one year and three months to move towards elections." According to this agenda, the military would spend three months to press Pheu Thai to, in Prayuth's words, "find a way to cooperate," with the opposition Democrat Party. The next year would be spent drawing up a temporary constitution and choosing an interim prime minister and cabinet. Elections have been consigned to the indefinite future after those processes are complete.

In reality, the military has no intention of relinquishing power unless it can ensure that Pheu Thai will not win an election. The army ousted Yingluck's brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, as prime minister in 2006 and rewrote the constitution to marginalise the pro-Thaksin faction of the ruling elites. However, the Thaksin-aligned party won the 2007 election leading to renewed factional infighting and repeated political upheavals.

The traditional ruling elites—the monarchy, military and state bureaucracy—initially supported the election of telecom billionaire Thaksin in 2001, but turned on him when he cut across their economic interests by further opening up Thailand to foreign investment. They were

also deeply hostile to his populist measures, including cheap health care and loans through which he built an electoral base of support among the urban and rural poor.

Prayuth declared last Friday that a return to civilian rule "will not happen if there are still protests without a true understanding of democracy." The military junta—the National Peace and Order Maintaining Council—has ordered more than 250 political leaders, academics, journalists and other potential opponents to report to army camps. The army has not only removed the government but provincial governors as well.

The media remains heavily censored. The junta has blocked access to approximately 200 websites deemed counter to the coup, including the Thai page of US-based Human Rights Watch and, for brief period last Wednesday, Facebook.

On Sunday, the military deployed 6,000 heavily-armed troops, including rapid response units, throughout Bangkok to crack down on anti-coup protesters. Military authorities ordered the closure of the Terminal 21 shopping complex after a group of protesters appeared holding signs that read "Democracy" and "Junta, get out." Thousands of customers were ordered out of the centre. Several protesters were arrested.

On the same day, according to Reuters, a group of protesters gathered on the elevated walkway leading to the Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre. "Hundreds of troops with riot gear arrived and suddenly stormed the walkway, sending protesters and onlookers fleeing," the report stated.

Those who have been detained are to be tried by military courts, without due process, defence counsel or the right of appeal. The junta has simply shut down the appellate courts.

No large scale protests have taken place. Pheu Thai and its associated United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) or “Red Shirts” have bowed to military demands to cease all political activity. The capitulation of the pro-Thaksin wing reflects the fear throughout the Thai ruling class that protests could lead to an eruption of the working class and rural masses.

Amnuay Boontee, a Red Shirt coordinator, stated last week: “The Red Shirts do not know what to do... we have to wait and see what the army does and what our leaders in other provinces and districts say.” Prior to the coup, UDD leaders deliberately limited protests, especially in Bangkok, while making empty promises to “resist” a coup.

Late on Sunday, Air Chief Marshal Prajin Juntong held a meeting with senior officials of the country’s economic ministries and outlined a series of economic proposals. The junta is planned to replace the Yingluck government’s rice subsidy scheme for farmers with its own form of price insurance and to offer low-cost home loans.

These proposals are window dressing for the austerity program demanded by big business which was opposed to what it regarded as Pheu Thai’s extravagant rice subsidies as well as higher minimum wages. The Thai economy has been stagnant in the lead up to the coup. In the first quarter in 2014, GDP growth fell by 2.1 percent. The junta claims it can achieve 6.3 percent growth in 2015.

On Saturday, the junta gave the heads of Thailand’s state enterprises, many of whom are affiliated with the ousted government, two days to provide a review of their businesses. At the same time it suggested that they resign. Any restructuring of the state-run enterprises would lead to widespread job losses.

While issuing mild criticisms of the coup and calling for immediate elections, the Obama administration has effectively backed the military takeover. The US has longstanding connections to the Thai military which it has been strengthening as part of Obama’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at militarily encircling China.

Speaking on Saturday at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel called for the junta to release detainees and “move immediately to restore power to the people of Thailand, through free and fair elections.” Washington has imposed cosmetic sanctions, to meet the requirements

of US law, cutting a token \$3.5 million in military aid and cutting short joint naval exercises.

The US response parallels its reaction to the 2006 coup. While nominally downgrading relations, the US military proceeded with the 2007 Cobra Gold military exercise, the largest war games in Asia.

The Australian government—a key supporter of the US pivot—has followed suit. A joint statement by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Defense Minister David Johnstone last weekend in Singapore called for early elections. Its sanctions include the cancellation of trips to plan joint counter-terrorism exercises, and ending “a military operations law training course for Thai military officers.”



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