

Thai junta installs military-dominated assembly

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The Thai military junta's hand-picked National Legislative Assembly (NLA) was announced on July 31 after being endorsed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Out of 200 members, 105 are serving or retired military officers and another 10 are police officers. The rest are university executives, business leaders and a handful of unelected members of the previous senate—all opponents of the elected Pheu Thai Party government that was ousted in a coup on May 22.

The composition of the NLA, a body dominated by and completely subservient to the military, is a further indication that the ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) intends to hold on to power for a lengthy period. The participation of several corporate leaders demonstrates that big business largely supports the military dictatorship as the means to shore up their profits by imposing the country's deep economic crisis on working people.

The NLA includes Kobkarn Suriyasat Wattanavrangkul, chairperson of Toshiba Thailand; Boonchai Chokwatana, chairman of Saha Pathanapibul, the country's biggest consumer products conglomerate; Lieutenant General Pongchai Warachit, chairman of Liberty Insurance; and Suwannee Sirivejchapun, executive director of Colgate-Palmolive (Thailand) Limited.

An interim constitution adopted on July 22 by the NCPO gives sweeping powers to coup leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha "to order, suspend or do any actions he sees necessary for the benefits of the reforms, the unity and reconciliation of people in the country, or to prevent, suspend or suppress any actions that will destroy the peace and order, the national security and monarchy, the country's economy or the country's governance, no matter if such actions are taking place in or outside the kingdom."

The NCPO has previously announced that it plans to hold elections in October 2015, after implementing sweeping pro-market "reforms" designed to appeal to international investors. A permanent constitution will be drafted, which will impose strict restrictions on government spending and is expected to outlaw the "populist" measures enacted by ousted prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra and her brother Thaksin Shinawatra, who was overthrown in a previous coup in 2006.

Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire who was elected in 2001, cut across the entrenched interests of Thailand's traditional ruling elites—the military, the monarchy and the state bureaucracy—by opening the economy to further foreign investment. He also gained the support of sections of the rural and urban poor, through a series of limited reforms such as cheap healthcare and subsidies for rice farmers.

Yingluck's government was overthrown, following seven months of protests by the so-called People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), and a series of trumped-up court cases. The PDRC, backed by the opposition Democrat Party, conspired with General Prayuth to destabilise the government in order to create the conditions for the coup. The junta is now determined to prevent the Shinawatras and their supporters from ever regaining power.

More than 500 people have been summoned by the junta, and about 300 detained, the majority of them Pheu Thai Party members and supporters. Thaksin supporters have been purged from government departments and the police. Yingluck and several of her ministers face bogus charges of corruption and abuse of power for failure to prevent financial losses linked to the rice subsidy scheme, and for using state funds to campaign in February's election—which was disrupted

by the PDRC and annulled by the courts.

Public gatherings are banned and strict media censorship remains in place.

Deep attacks on living standards are being prepared. Already the military has scrapped the rice subsidy scheme, which millions of farming families relied on. The Thai Rice Packers Association predicts that rice production will fall to a five-year low as a result.

Piyasvasti Amranand, appointed by the junta as chairman of the state-run oil company PTT Pcl, has called for the scrapping of fuel subsidies, which have cost \$15.6 billion over the past three years. Piyasvasti, who was made energy minister following the 2006 coup, told *Bloomberg News* on July 17: “If it’s not done at this time, it will be first coup d’état that we do not see price reform.”

A report leaked to the media on July 12 showed that Public Health Ministry officials had met the NCPO on May 31 and suggested scrapping subsidies for medical care. Thaksin introduced a scheme under which Thais could be treated at a state hospital or clinic for 30 baht (about 93 cents) per visit. According to the *Bangkok Post* this brought “20 million people who had in the past not been covered by any healthcare scheme into the social safety net.”

The *Post* reported that ministry officials recommended a patient “co-payment” of 30 to 50 percent of the cost of treatment. One official said: “Previously, co-payments couldn’t be adopted because it [the 30 baht scheme] is linked to votes, so this is a chance to change the system to be fairer.”

Following the leak, Health Ministry Permanent Secretary Narong Sahametapat told the *Post* there was no *current* plan to raise fees, but added that the NCPO had instructed officials to “study the problem and long-term budget burden” and find a solution.

In order to divert attention from its regressive measures, the junta has attempted to whip up xenophobia towards foreign migrants. Following a crackdown on undocumented Cambodian workers in June, as many as 200,000 fled across the border. The government is also planning to send back more than 100,000 refugees from Myanmar. All foreigners living in Thailand are being required to inform police when they change address.

More than two months after the coup, the Pheu Thai Party and its protest arm, the United Front for

Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), have not organised any opposition to the military dictatorship—despite the UDD repeatedly declaring it would mobilize in the event of a coup. Both organisations have suspended all political activity and demobilised their Red Shirt supporters, drawn from the urban and rural poor.

Suda Rungkupan, a former UDD spokesperson now in hiding, told the *Bangkok Post* on August 3 that the Red Shirts “just have to stay quiet and wait for the right time to speak out, probably next year.”

Surapong Tovichakchaikul, former deputy prime minister and leading Pheu Thai member, said the party was “waiting for the processes to draft a new constitution to finish and also for the election, for which we are always ready.” Asked about the party’s attitude to the National Legislative Assembly, he said he hoped it would “pass laws that are fair to all sides.”

Pheu Thai and the UDD represent sections of the Thai ruling classes whose interests are obstructed by the country’s traditional elites. They are far more afraid of their own supporters among the urban and rural poor than they are of the military. Prior to the coup Yingluck repeatedly appealed to the ruling elite to support her re-election as the best means to impose austerity measures and keep a lid on popular discontent.



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