Thai coup leader installed as prime minister

Tom Peters
23 August 2014

General Prayuth Chan-ocha, Thailand's coup leader, was unanimously chosen as the country's new prime minister on Thursday, by a National Legislative Assembly (NLA) he had hand-picked. The NLA, which is stacked with military figures and a handful of business leaders, was installed last month by the ruling junta, which seized power on May 22, ousting the elected Pheu Thai Party government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

Prayuth, who was due to retire as army chief in September, has now entrenched himself as the country's de facto dictator. His appointment will undoubtedly receive the seal of approval from King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who endorsed the coup and has close relations with the military.

The installation of Prayuth indicates that the junta, known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), intends to rule directly, rather than by appointing a quasi-civilian government as it did following the 2006 coup against Yingluck's brother, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The NCPO—with the support of the state bureaucracy, the monarchy and sections of big business—is re-writing the constitution to ensure that politicians linked to the Shinawatras can never return to power. Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire, was despised by the Bangkok-based elites for cutting across their own interests by opening the economy to more foreign investment, and by enacting limited social reforms, which won the Shinawatras a base of support among the rural and urban poor.

Business figures generally welcomed Prayuth's appointment as a sign that the junta would take further steps to impose the country's economic crisis on the working class and poor. Thai Chamber of Commerce chairman Isara Vongkusolkit told the *Bangkok Post* he hoped "the new interim government will build up more confidence among foreign investors." Leigh Scott-Kemmis, president of the Australian-Thai Chamber of Commerce, said: "I don't think anyone is surprised by the choice and ... I think it is the safest option."

The NCPO has appointed a "super board," with representatives from the stock market and finance sector, who will advise on cost-cutting at 56 state-owned enterprises and make recommendations on privatising them.

The junta has begun to axe subsidy schemes implemented by Yingluck and Thaksin that have been denounced by big business as "populist" and "vote buying." It has scrapped a government rice buying scheme that supported millions of farming families.

In a budget passed this week, a further 10 billion baht ($313 million) worth of programs targeted at rural areas was axed, including funds for small villages and "community enterprises." The budget also increased funding for the military by 5 percent, to total more than $6 billion (double what it was a decade ago). Prayuth bluntly told reporters: "If we don't ... purchase new weapons, then nobody will fear us."

Concerned about a popular backlash, Prayuth used a televised address on August 15 to urge farmers not to protest over declining prices. As well as rice farmers, rubber planters are facing a crisis due to over-supply on the world market. Rubber prices are down 27 percent this year and 60 percent compared with three years ago.

The junta is also maintaining martial law, including a ban on public gatherings. The media and web sites are subject to strict censorship, which according to a Reuters report is "more heavy-handed now than after the 2006 coup." The military is also harshly enforcing draconian lèse majesté laws (which prohibit any criticism of the monarchy).

According to Reuters, on August 14 "Bangkok taxi-driver Yuthasak Kangwanwongsakul, 43, was sentenced to two years and six months in jail for talking about social inequality with a passenger." On the same

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day, two students at Khon Kaen University were arrested for being involved in a play featuring a fictional monarch.

Since the coup, at least 300 people have been detained by the army—most of them Pheu Thai members or supporters, but also journalists, academics, students and protesters. Most of them have been released after a few days but the junta has not released any figures on the number still detained. Kritsuda Khunasen, an activist with the Pheu Thai-aligned United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) or Red Shirts, claims that she was tortured when the army detained her for nearly a month following the coup.

The junta has cracked down on undocumented migrant workers, resulting in 200,000 Cambodians fleeing the country out of fear. Refugees from Myanmar have also been threatened with deportation. Thailand's largest refugee camp, Mae La, with a population of 40,000, is being guarded by soldiers and, since the coup, residents have been banned from leaving to seek work. Rations in the camp have decreased. One refugee, Mary, told Al Jazeera: "In [Myanmar], we were oppressed by the military government. Now here, we feel the same, oppressed by the Thai military."

The junta's consolidation of its grip on power has met with token criticism from Washington. Following Prayuth's installation as Prime Minister, US State Department spokesperson Marie Harf merely called on the "interim government ... to institute an inclusive reform process" and move towards elections.

In a speech on August 13, Secretary of State John Kerry emphasised that the US still regarded Thailand as "a close friend and ally." He described the coup as "a temporary bump in the road" and a "setback to democracy."

As such comments indicate, the US fully supports the dictatorship. It has cancelled $4.7 million in aid and suspended some joint military training—actions it was required to take under US law. Washington sees the Thai military as a vital ally in its "pivot" to Asia—a strategy to encircle China militarily and ensure US dominance in the region.

For their part, the Pheu Thai Party and the UDD have completely capitulated to military rule. The *Nation* reported yesterday that Thaksin told supporters in Pheu Thai "to support the government and give it a chance to run the country." According to the paper, one Pheu Thai member and Red Shirt leader Korkaew Pikulthong even "offered his congratulations to Prayuth" on becoming prime minister.

The UDD and Pheu Thai, both capitalist organisations, are far more afraid of sparking mass opposition by mobilizing their own supporters, drawn from the rural and urban poor, than of military dictatorship.

For months leading up to the May coup, as Prayuth plotted with right-wing protest leaders to remove the government, the UDD repeatedly declared it would mount mass protests of its Red Shirt supporters if the army tried to seize power.

But when the army announced the coup, the UDD and Pheu Thai leaders did nothing. Most of them have signed agreements with the junta to cease their political activity. Some have gone into hiding or left the country, telling their supporters to wait, or to collaborate with the junta's so-called "reconciliation" process.

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