

Thai junta maintains firm grip on power

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More than six months after Thailand's military seized power in a coup on May 22, the junta, known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), is keeping a firm grip on power. Martial law remains in place, including a ban on political gatherings of more than five people and strict censorship of the media. Critics of the regime, including academics, journalists and protesters, have been hauled before military courts. Meanwhile the junta continues to enjoy the support of Washington, Thailand's main military ally.

Finance Minister Sommai Phasi and Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan last month announced that fresh elections might be postponed until 2016, instead of October 2015 as previously suggested by the self-appointed prime minister and former army chief, General Prayuth Chan-ocha.

No date has been announced and the NCPO clearly has no intention of giving up power. On November 21, Prayuth told the media: "Don't ask me to give you democracy and elections. This is not the right time."

A report released by the New York-based Human Rights Watch last month declared that "[r]espect for fundamental freedoms and democracy in Thailand under military rule has fallen into an apparently bottomless pit." The report, which has been suppressed in Thailand, cites several instances of the junta's repression.

Five Khon Kaen University students were arrested on November 19 for staging a silent protest during Prayuth's visit to the region by wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the words "We don't want a coup." They were released the next day after a public outcry. Other people have been arrested for protesting at screenings of the new *Hunger Games* movie and for reading copies of George Orwell's *1984* in public.

Several opponents of the junta have been charged with *lèse majesté* (insulting the monarchy). On November 18 radio host Kathawut Bunpitak was

sentenced to five years in prison. Nut Rungwong, editor of the Thai E-News web site, was sentenced on November 24 to four-and-a-half years in jail for publishing an article five years ago that was deemed offensive to the monarchy. Thai E-News has been suppressed.

Patiwat Saraiyaem and Pornthip Munkong remain in prison after being arrested in August for taking part in an October 2013 production of the play *The Wolf Bride*, which was deemed insulting to the monarchy.

Last week former Pheu Thai Party MP Prasit Chaisrisa received a two-and-a-half year prison sentence. He was arrested shortly after the coup and charged with *lèse majesté* for giving a speech titled "Stop Overthrowing Democracy."

On November 28, the military-controlled legislative assembly began impeachment proceedings against ousted Prime Minister and Pheu Thai leader Yingluck Shinawatra. Yingluck was removed by a court shortly before the military coup, on bogus charges of "abuse of office" for failing to prevent financial losses from a subsidy scheme for rice farmers.

The junta is currently re-writing the constitution, in order to entrench the military's power in any future government and to ensure that Yingluck and her allies can never return to office. A previous coup in 2006 toppled the government of billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's brother, who now lives in exile.

Thaksin's government cut across the entrenched interests of Thailand's traditional elites, monarchists and the military, when it sought to open the country to more foreign investment. These powerful ruling factions of the ruling class were also bitterly hostile toward the Shinawatras' minimal reforms—including subsidised health care and subsidies for rice farmers—which won their Pheu Thai Party a base of support among the urban and rural poor.

The NCPO is seeking to permanently abolish Pheu Thai's reforms and implement austerity measures to make workers and farmers pay for the country's deep economic crisis. According to the *Financial Times*, Thai economic growth remains the weakest out of the "ASEAN five" (Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam), with growth of just 0.4 and 0.6 percent in the second and third quarters.

Yingluck's government ended the rice subsidy scheme, on which millions of farming families relied, prior to the coup. The NCPO, like governments in Malaysia and Indonesia, is beginning to axe fuel subsidies. A seven-year long subsidy for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG, which is used for cooking and in some vehicles) ended this month, pushing up retail prices by 4 percent.

The junta has also announced plans to increase the value added tax (VAT) next October, potentially from 7 to 9 percent.

Prices for rubber, a major export, have collapsed, leading to desperation in some rural areas. About 50 rubber planters rallied in Surat Thani province on Tuesday, following another protest last month, in defiance of martial law, to demand state subsidies. Soontorn Rakrong, a spokesman for 14 farmers' groups based in the south, told Reuters that if prices did not increase, farmers would rally in Bangkok.

In a speech on November 15 following the G20 summit in Brisbane, Australia, US President Barack Obama declared that "in Thailand ... we are urging a quick return to inclusive, civilian rule."

Notwithstanding such occasional and essentially meaningless criticisms, Washington is supporting the military junta. Joshua Kurlantzick from the Council on Foreign Relations noted on October 21 that "US policy toward the kingdom remains largely the same as before the coup." The US approved the 2006 putsch and was undoubtedly informed in advance of this year's coup.

In May, Washington suspended a mere \$10.5 million in aid to Thailand's military and cancelled some joint exercises, in order to conform to US law whenever a coup is announced. However, strong ties have remained in place and in October the US embassy in Bangkok confirmed that the annual Cobra Gold exercise will go ahead in Thailand next year.

Anthony Davis, an analyst from the think tank IHS Jane's, told the US Army publication *Stars and Stripes*

in October that Cobra Gold was "the jewel in the crown in terms of America's strategic image in the region." This year's exercise, held in February, involved 13,000 troops from Thailand, the US, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, Japan and Singapore.

On December 8, *Stars and Stripes* stated the exercise was "part of the Army's effort to develop a semi-permanent presence in the region, adding to the large forces already stationed in South Korea and Japan." Washington views Thailand as a critical ally in its strategic "pivot" to Asia—aimed at encircling and preparing for war against China.



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