

Thai junta replaces martial law with absolute powers

Tom Peters
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Last month Thailand's dictator, former general Prayuth Chan-ocha, announced the lifting of martial law, which was imposed in May 2014 shortly before the army seized power in a coup. Far from restoring democratic rights, however, the US-backed junta has activated article 44 of its interim constitution, which gives unlimited powers to Prayuth.

Conditions of martial law remain in place. The military regime can detain anyone without charge, political gatherings are banned, and Prayuth has the power to "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."

Veteran journalist Richard S. Ehrlich noted the Thai media have compared the powers with those wielded by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, another US-backed dictator who ruled from 1957 to 1963 and carried out a reign of terror against the Communist Party of Thailand.

The *New York Times* reported on April 10 that since seizing power the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) has imprisoned or detained more than 1,000 political opponents, mostly members and supporters of the ousted Pheu Thai Party, as well as academics, journalists and protesters. On March 25 Prayuth told the media he would "probably just execute" any journalist who did not "report the truth" about his regime.

Eleven months after the coup, the NCPO has no intention of loosening its grip on power. Last year Prayuth stated that elections could be held in October 2015, but the junta now says they will not be held until 2016 or even later. Prayuth told reporters last month: "If the situation remains like this, I can tell you that I will hold onto power for a long time ... Why is there all

this fuss about elections?"

The junta seized power after months of right-wing protests linked to the opposition Democrat Party, which disrupted elections and destabilized the Pheu Thai government, led by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Thailand's traditional ruling elites—the military, the monarchy and the state bureaucracy—are deeply hostile to Yingluck and her brother, former prime minister and billionaire businessman Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin was ousted in a military putsch in 2006 and now lives in exile.

Parties linked to the Shinawatras have won every election in the last 15 years, having gained widespread support among the rural and urban poor due to their limited populist measures. These included government subsidies for rice farmers, cheap loans and a higher minimum wage, along with Thaksin's efforts to open the country to increased foreign investment, were seen as a threat by the traditional elites to their privileged position.

The NCPO has abolished the Yingluck government's rice subsidies, ended a subsidy for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), and frozen the minimum wage. It is rewriting the constitution in order to ban Pheu Thai's "populist" policies and ensure that the party and its allies do not return to power.

Yingluck has been impeached and banned from politics for five years. She will stand trial in May on trumped up charges of "negligence" over the rice subsidy scheme, which the regime claims led to \$16 billion in losses.

The junta is determined to impose the burden of the country's economic crisis on the working class and rural poor. The economy expanded by just 0.7 percent last year due to a collapse in global prices for rubber and rice, Thailand's main exports, combined with the

country's political turmoil.

Leaders of Pheu Thai and its protest wing, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD, also known as the Red Shirts), have accepted the dictatorship and ended their political activity. UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan, whose talk show at Peace TV was recently shut down by the NCPO, told the *Washington Post* on April 13: "I've been trying to tell people to be patient ... We should give Prayuth time until his road map has been carried out."

The UDD and Pheu Thai represent factions of the ruling elite and, like their rivals, are deeply hostile to any mass movement by the working class and rural poor. In 2013 and 2014 the UDD paved the way for the army to seize power by refusing to hold mass demonstrations in Bangkok and downplaying the risk of a coup.

While making occasional criticisms of the NCPO, the Obama administration maintains close ties with the Thai military.

On March 29, Prayuth told the media that he had met former US president Bill Clinton, along with the leaders of "Japan, South Korea, everyone," during the funeral for Singapore's founding leader Lee Kuan Yew. Prayuth boasted that they "expressed congratulations that Thailand is peaceful. None of them criticised me."

On April 11 the US military publication *Stars and Stripes* noted that some strategic analysts were concerned that "America's alliance with Thailand—its oldest treaty partner in Asia—is splintering as a result of blinkered diplomacy... [and] China is quickly filling the void."

Kerry Gershaneck from the East-West Centre declared that US criticisms of the NCPO's crackdown on free speech risked alienating the regime. He pointed to the recent visit by Thailand's defence minister to Beijing, where he agreed to increased military training from China. Gershaneck said ties between Bangkok and Beijing could jeopardise the US "rebalance" to Asia—Washington's strategy to militarily encircle and prepare for war against China.

However, Joshua Kurlantzick from the US Council on Foreign Relations, said "in reality most of [the Thai military's] equipment is provided by Sweden and the US, and their training programs with China are really not on a par with the training programs they've had

with us in the past." He saw the junta's strengthening of relations with China as "a tool of leverage for them to sort of prod the US to come around."

Similarly, Thitinan Pongsudhirak, from the Bangkok-based Institute for Security and International Studies, told the *Bangkok Post* that the junta's "recent embrace of China and warm welcome of [Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who visited Bangkok this month] are likely to be short-term, expedient moves" to gain "leverage" against "Western posturing." In other words the junta is seeking more open recognition from the US.

For its part, Washington is committed to supporting the NCPO. Last month the US Air Force trained with Thai and Singaporean troops in Thailand. This followed the annual Thai-based Cobra Gold joint training exercises in February, which are the largest US-led war games in Asia.



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