Thailand’s draft constitution enshrines dictatorship

Tom Peters
6 May 2015

A draft constitution drawn up by Thailand’s military junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), was released to the media last month. It confirms that the US-backed regime, which seized power in a coup in May 2014, intends to stay in control indefinitely, despite proposing to hold elections next year.

Since the coup, the NCPO has imprisoned or detained hundreds of political opponents, censored media outlets and banned all political gatherings and protests. The dictator, former general Prayuth Chan-ocha, has assumed unlimited powers to suspend and alter the country’s laws.

The aim of the new constitution is to strip elected politicians of any power. In the words of the Constitution Drafting Committee, it seeks to “end the parliamentary dictatorship.” The draft expands the anti-democratic provisions of the 2007 constitution, drawn up after the earlier coup that ousted prime minister and telecommunications billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra.

The Bangkok-based ruling elites—the military, the monarchy and their supporters in the state bureaucracy—want to ensure that the Pheu Thai Party, led by Thaksin’s sister Yingluck Shinawatra, never regains office. Yingluck was removed in last year’s coup and faces trumped-up charges of “negligence” relating to her government’s loss-making price subsidy scheme for rice farmers.

Parties linked to the Shinawatras have won every election since 2001. Their populist policies—limited reforms such as cheap loans, a higher minimum wage and various subsidies—gained them support from the country’s rural poor and the enmity of the monarchist and military establishment. Thaksin further alienated these elites by opening up the economy to more foreign investment, cutting across existing networks of patronage.

Under the draft constitution, 123 of the 200 Senate seats would be filled by appointees close to the military and the bureaucracy. The remaining 77 seats would be elected, but all candidates would be vetted in advance to exclude opponents of the junta.

The lower house of parliament would be policed by a new National Ethics Assembly, authorised to remove MPs from office for “moral” or “ethical” reasons. According to the *Financial Times*, politicians would be “banned from passing laws that ‘establish political popularity’ that could prove ‘detrimental to national economic [interests] or the public in the long run’.”

The junta aims to prevent any challenge to its agenda of austerity and pro-market restructuring, which is designed to force the working class and rural poor to pay for the worsening economic crisis.

The generals will continue to wield power through a National Reform Steering Committee, which will set the legislative agenda for parliament to rubber-stamp. The committee will have 120 members, mostly drawn from the current National Legislative Assembly and National Reform Council, which were appointed by the NCPO after the coup and are stacked with military figures.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Institute of Security and International Studies, wrote in the *Bangkok Post* that the judiciary and the bureaucracy would also gain more powers. The Constitutional Court, which paved the way for last year’s coup by removing Yingluck from office, will become “the final arbiter of issues and claims made by other relevant state agencies” in the event of renewed street protests or other “extenuating circumstances that lead to political paralysis.”

The blatantly anti-democratic character of the draft

© World Socialist Web Site

constitution has prompted warnings from the media, academics and politicians of a public backlash. A *Bangkok Post* columnist wrote on April 28 that "opposing sentiment has become so strong there are fears the draft could trigger another round of conflict in a society still jittery by recent clashes."

In 2010, thousands of people protested in Bangkok and throughout the country, demanding a return to democracy and an end to social inequality. These "Red Shirt" protests, made up of rural and urban poor people, were violently suppressed by the army, which killed almost 100 people and injured 2,000.

Both the Shinawatras' Pheu Thai Party and the Democrat Party, which supported the coup, have called for a referendum on the draft, in order to give it a veneer of legitimacy. Pheu Thai and its protest wing, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD, also known as the Red Shirts) have reconciled themselves to the NCPO. All sections of the capitalist class, including those represented by Pheu Thai and the UDD, share an organic hostility to any independent movement of the working class and rural poor.

At a "reconciliation" forum organised by the army on April 23, Democrat and Pheu Thai leaders, as well as UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan, all recommended delaying elections for two to three years while a constitutional referendum is held. Jatuporn told Reuters that two more years of military rule was "better than moving forward to where problems will be waiting."

Washington has so far made no public comment on the draft constitution and continues to support the coup leaders.

US deputy assistant state secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Scot Marciel, visited Bangkok last month as part of a three-country trip that included the Philippines and Indonesia. According to the *Nation*, he assured the NCPO that the annual Cobra Gold military exercises involving Thailand and the US will go ahead next year. The US Pacific Command previously postponed planning discussions for the exercises, which are the largest annual US-led war games in the region.

The Obama administration supported the 2006 putsch against Thaksin and was undoubtedly informed in advance of the 2014 coup. The Thai military remains a key ally in the US "pivot to Asia"—a strategy to militarily encircle and prepare for war against China.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site