

# Military crackdown ahead of Thai constitutional referendum

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Thailand's military rulers have launched a crackdown on opposition in the lead-up to a referendum, scheduled for August 7, on the junta's draft constitution.

The ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) insists that its new constitution must be accepted before elections are held next year. Self-appointed prime minister and former army chief, Prayuth Chan-Ocha, who seized power in a May 2014 coup, declared that if the constitution is rejected, the NCPO will draft another. Elections could be postponed indefinitely.

The draft constitution enshrines rule by the military, the judiciary and state bureaucracy. The 250-seat Senate would be entirely appointed by the NCPO. Six seats would be reserved for the army, navy, air force and national police heads, the military's supreme commander and defence permanent secretary.

The 500-member Lower House would be elected, but the Senate could veto its laws. The draft also gives the Constitutional Court and "anti-corruption" bodies, which supported the coup, greater powers to remove politicians from the Lower House if they are deemed "corrupt."

A second referendum question asks whether senators should have a say in the appointment of the prime minister, who could be an unelected official, such as a general.

The proposed charter is so blatantly anti-democratic that both major political parties, the Pheu Thai Party and the Democrat Party, have opposed it. The Democrat-aligned group, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), paved the way for the 2014 coup by mobilising sections of Bangkok's upper middle classes to destabilise the Pheu Thai government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The PDRC

leaders secretly coordinated their actions, including the disruption of the 2014 election, with the military coup plotters.

The country's traditional elites, grouped around the monarchy, the military and the state bureaucracy, are bitterly hostile to Yingluck and her billionaire brother Thaksin Shinawatra, whose parties have won every election since 2001. The Shinawatras built a base of support among the urban and rural poor through limited reforms, such as cheap loans and various subsidies. Thaksin further alienated the Bangkok-based elites by opening up the economy to more foreign investment, cutting across existing networks of patronage. In 2006 the military removed Thaksin in an earlier coup.

Elected in 2011, Yingluck made every effort to bring about a reconciliation with the military. However, as the country's economic downturn deepened, the ruling elite demanded the elimination of subsidies and other attacks on living standards and turned to the military to suppress opposition from the working class and rural poor. Since taking power the NCPO has eliminated Yingluck's subsidies for rice farmers and is seeking to cut fuel subsidies, on which millions of people rely. The junta has also increased tax incentives for domestic and foreign companies.

The NCPO has banned all public campaigning on the August 7 referendum. Since coming to power it has maintained a police state, outlawing public gatherings and any criticism of the regime. According to human rights groups, more than 113 people have been arrested in the past three months alone for activities related to the referendum.

Last month, a group of 13 people was arrested for handing out leaflets calling for a "no" vote. The *Wall Street Journal* reported: "In prison, they said guards shaved their hair down to the scalp and shackled their

feet during visits to a military court. Seven of the group refused to seek bail and spent 12 days in detention before a court released them ahead of a trial.” They face maximum sentences of 10 years in prison.

On July 10, journalist Taweesak Kerdpoka was arrested for alleged “No Vote” activities. Two days later, soldiers raided the office of his online newspaper *Prachatai*. Taweesak was arrested alongside three members of the New Democracy Movement, a student-led group that has organised protests against the dictatorship.

Former members of the ousted Pheu Thai government have also been charged. On 28 July, Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan announced that eight politicians would be tried in a military court for spreading “false information” about the draft charter. The Pheu Thai Party and its protest organisation, the Red Shirts, helped pave the way for the coup by encouraging illusions in the military, and have refused to mobilise opposition against the junta.

Those who expose the crimes of the military also face extreme penalties. Three Amnesty International officials based in Thailand, Somchai Homla-or, Anchana Heemmina and Porpen Khongkaonkiet, were charged on July 26 for criminal defamation and violating the Computer Crimes Act by releasing a report documenting 54 cases of alleged torture carried out by the army and police in southern Thailand. They face up to five years in jail if found guilty.

On the same day, police arrested 25-year-old Naritsarawan Kaewnopparat on similar charges of “defaming” the army. Naritsarawan is the niece of Wichian Puaksom, an army conscript who was tortured to death by the military in 2011. Last year Wichian’s family won \$200,000 in compensation after suing the defence ministry, the army and the prime minister’s office over his death.

The recent crackdown on dissent prompted a letter to Thai authorities signed by the ambassadors of the United States, Canada, Britain, France, Germany and several other European countries. The letter, published on July 15 by the *Bangkok Post*, expressed “concern” over “troubling actions, including the arrest of activists, the shutdown of opposition media, and restrictions on freedom of expression.”

The ambassadors called for Thailand to “emerge quickly from the current period of political transition

with a sustainable democracy.”

In reality, the imperialist powers have no concern for democracy in Thailand. The ambassadors share the NCPO’s anxiety about a resurgence of popular opposition around the referendum. They warned that the NCPO’s actions could “increase tensions.” The letter did not criticise the draft constitution, which effectively enshrines military dictatorship, but merely called for “open dialogue.” It stated: “Thailand has traditionally played an important role in strengthening regional cooperation, boosting international trade, and promoting shared global values.”

Washington considers the Thai military a valuable ally in the region, where the US has greatly boosted its military presence in preparation for war against China. Undoubtedly, US officials were informed in advance of the 2014 coup, as they were in 2006, and gave tacit support. Since the coup the US has imposed only token sanctions and continued its annual Cobra Gold military training exercises with Thai forces.



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