

Thai constitutional referendum entrenches military dictatorship

Tom Peters
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A referendum in Thailand on Sunday formally endorsed a new anti-democratic constitution, which effectively enshrines military rule, even if elections are held.

The document was written by the military junta, known as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), which seized power in May 2014. The country has had 20 constitutions and more than a dozen coups since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. The new charter allows the prime minister to be an unelected official, such as a general, appointed by the two houses of parliament. It will make the senate 100 percent appointed by the military, while weakening the powers of the lower house. Elected MPs can be removed easily by powerful “anti-corruption” bodies.

According to the Election Commission, with 94 percent of votes counted on Sunday, 61.4 percent voted for the constitution, while 37.9 percent rejected it. Turnout was low, however, at just over half Thailand’s 50 million eligible voters.

Big business welcomed the result, which sent the Thai stock exchange up 1.55 percent on Monday to its highest level since April 2015. Carl Berrisford, an analyst at UBS CIO Wealth Management in Hong Kong, told Reuters the outcome “might be a vote of confidence in the junta.” Tsutomu Soma from Tokyo-based SBI Securities said: “Stability in Thailand is likely to remain, which should encourage inflows to continue for now.”

Claims that the result represents a democratic endorsement of the constitution are a sham. Self-appointed prime minister and coup leader Prayuth Chan-Ocha had threatened that if voters rejected the constitution, the military would simply draft another. Elections promised for next year would then likely be delayed again.

The junta is determined to maintain its grip on power and prevent the return of parties linked to the Shinawatra family, which have won every election since 2001. The military ousted the billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra’s government in a coup in 2006. A Thaksin-linked government elected in 2007 was removed in what amounted to a judicial coup in 2008. The Pheu Thai Party government of Yingluck Shinawatra, elected in 2011, was overthrown by the military in 2014.

The military and royalist elites were bitterly hostile to Thaksin’s attempts to open the economy to more foreign investment, cutting across entrenched interests. The Pheu Thai Party won a base of support among the urban and rural poor through its limited reforms, including a subsidy scheme for rice farmers. The NCPO intends to permanently outlaw such policies, which it labels “corrupt” and “vote buying,” and impose the full burden of the country’s economic crisis on the workers and farmers.

In the lead-up to the referendum, the NCPO banned public criticism of its draft constitution. At least 120 people have been arrested for activities such as distributing leaflets calling for a No vote. If found guilty, they could be jailed for up to 10 years.

The number of people detained could be higher. Since the coup, more than 500 people have been arrested and 68 charged *lèse majesté*, that is, insulting the monarchy. According to the group Fortify Rights, a further 1,300 people, including some No campaigners, have been taken to military-run camps for “attitude adjustment” courses.

Media censorship was strengthened ahead of the vote. Peace TV, run by supporters of the Pheu Thai Party, was shut down. At the same time, army cadets were mobilised throughout the country to encourage a Yes vote.

On polling day, 200,000 police were deployed in anticipation of protests. At least 10 bomb blasts targeting power lines in the southern Narathiwat province over the weekend were used as a further pretext for the security clamp-down. On polling day, the *Nation* reported “a schoolteacher was killed and two policemen injured when their convoy transporting referendum ballot boxes was hit by a roadside bomb.” No suspects have been identified.

In the impoverished northeast region, police launched a major anti-crime operation over the weekend, which may well have been timed to intimidate opposition in the referendum. According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), police arrested 240 people for possessing weapons, 1,908 on drugs charges and a further 1,488 people for gambling. A majority of voters in the northeast, a base of support for the Pheu Thai Party, voted against the proposed charter.

According to the *Nation*, several people are being investigated for tearing up their ballots at 30 polling booths in 18 different provinces. One activist, Piyarat Chongthep, was arrested in Bangkok for tearing his ballot and shouting: “May dictatorship fall, may democracy prosper.”

Last month, ambassadors from the US, Canada and European Union countries issued a letter criticising the “prohibitions on the peaceful public expression of views” ahead of the referendum. However, they did not criticise the anti-democratic character of the new constitution. The US considers the Thai military an important regional ally.

The NCPO’s crackdown reflects fears in the Thai ruling elite that the escalating social crisis caused by its policies will spark unrest. In 2010, tens of thousands of pro-Thaksin protesters, drawn mostly from the urban and rural poor and led by the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), marched on Bangkok against the unelected military-backed government led by the Democrat Party. On May 19 2010, soldiers opened fire, killing more than 80 unarmed protesters and injured 2,100.

In 2014, thousands of people again protested against the preparations for a coup. The UDD leaders, however, subordinated the movement to the Pheu Thai government as it desperately tried to reach a deal with the armed forces to stay in power. At every point, the UDD promoted illusions that the military would not

carry out a coup, even after it declared martial law.

Underscoring their prostration before the junta, Pheu Thai and the UDD accepted the legitimacy of the referendum, making only muted criticisms of the NCPO’s crackdown. Acting Pheu Thai leader Wirot Pao-in told the media: “The reason most Thais accepted the constitution is because they want to see a general election quickly. All sides must now help move the country forward.” According to AFP, leading UDD member Thida Thavornseth blamed the masses for the result, saying: “It seems that right now people trust the military more than politicians.”

Such statements underline the fact that the UDD and Pheu Thai represent rival factions of the ruling class that are just as fearful as the military of any independent movement of the working class in defence of living standards and democratic rights.



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